

Chapter 12

Return Home: White Chauvinism Under Fire

*Put one more "s" in the USA
To make it Soviets;
Put one more "s" in the USA
Oh! We'll live to see it yet!*

*When the land belongs to the farmers
And the factories to the working men,
The USA when we get control
Will be the USSA then!*

Langston Hughes¹

I arrived in New York in early November 1930. After four and a half years in the Soviet Union, everything seemed quite strange. While passing through customs I lit up a cigarette. A cop snarled at me out of the corner of his mouth, "No smoking here, fella." I was so startled by his rude tone that the cigarette dropped from my lips.

Out in the street I caught a taxi to the national office of the Party, which was then located on East 125th Street in Harlem. I looked at the people along the way. Despair seemed written on their faces; I don't believe I saw a smile all the way uptown. What a contrast to the gay and laughing crowds in Moscow and Leningrad! I had arrived in the first year of the Great Depression; my own depression deepened as we drove through Harlem. I was overwhelmed by Harlem's shabbiness and the expression of hopelessness on the faces of the people.

Arriving at the office, I was greeted by Earl Browder and my old friend Bob Minor. They introduced me to Jack Stachel, a Party leader and national organizer for the TUUL; and Ben Amis, a Black comrade who was then in charge of Afro-American work. All four men were discussing last minute plans for the Anti-Lynching Conference called by the American Negro Labor Congress. It was to be held in St. Louis on November 15, a couple days later.

The Party's plan, as I gathered, was to use this occasion to launch a new organization—the League of Struggle for Negro Rights. This new organization was to replace the now practically defunct ANLC which had proved inadequate and sectarian. The

ANLC had been the subject of sharp criticism as early as the Sixth World Congress in 1928.

The idea of the new organization had been discussed at the Party's convention in July. There had also been some discussion at the Negro Commission in the Comintern. The LSNR was conceived as the nucleus of a united front movement around the Party's program for Black liberation. The *Liberator* was to be carried over from the ANLC as the official publication of the new organization.

After greeting me, the comrades continued the discussion. I was just in time to participate in the conference and was given the task of writing a draft manifesto and program for the LSNR. I was asked if I had anything to say. I expressed happiness at being back home after such a long absence, and said that I would do my best to carry out the new responsibility. I was also happy to hear about the expected Southern delegation to the conference, which reflected Party work in the South, and made some remarks about the need for an agrarian program for the Blacks in the South.

I noticed that as I spoke some of the comrades were looking at me curiously, as if puzzled or amused. I wondered about it at the time, but I was to find out why only after the meeting. The YCI representative, a young Russian who had been sitting in on the meeting, said, "Harry, you've got a strong Russian accent in your English! If I'd not been looking directly at you I would have sworn some Russian immigrant was speaking." Of course, I reflected; I had been unconsciously rolling my "r's," a habit that was to stick with me for many years.

I traveled to St. Louis via Detroit and Chicago, in order to see my family—my three aunts, of whom I was very fond, my sister Eppa, and nephew David. I chose to travel by bus in order to get a close up look at the country and the people.

The blight of unemployment and hunger was evident everywhere. It gave the lie to Hoover's slogan of "prosperity is right around the corner." People on the bus were friendly and related their experiences. They seemed hopeless and confused, regarding the Depression as some sort of "natural disaster." They complained about inadequate relief and evictions. From the bus windows I could see Hoovervilles on the outskirts of many towns—vacant lot communities of shacks, made from discarded boards and boxes and inhabited by homeless families.

I stopped over in Detroit to see Clarence Hathaway, my old

Lenin School friend, who was then district organizer. We went into a restaurant downtown on Woodward, a couple of **blocks** from the Party office. We both ordered ham and eggs and after waiting for what seemed an interminable period, our orders were finally brought to the table. I started to eat, but gagged and spit out the first mouthful on my plate.

“What’s the matter?” Clarence asked.

“This stuff is as salty as brine!” I said in amazement.

“Yeah?” he said incredulously. “Mine seems to be all right. He tasted some of mine and immediately spat it out, then called the waiter indignantly.

“What’s the matter?” the waiter asked.

“My friend’s food is so salty it’s inedible.”

The waiter, with an evil leer, said, “Well, that’s the best we can do,” and walked away.

It was only then that it struck me that this was their way of discouraging Black patronage. I’d been out of the country so long that I’d forgotten a lot of these things. Clarence and I stalked out of the restaurant, and there was a silence between us. He said, “Let’s go to another restaurant in the Black neighborhood.”

“I’m not hungry now, I’ve lost my appetite.” I replied. “Clarence, this is your district, you know. You’ve sure got a lot of work to do!”

I got the bus to Chicago, still angry, and in this mood wrote the first draft of the manifesto and program of the conference. I poured all my anger into the resolution and the whole thing came together very quickly.

I arrived in Chicago. This great industrial center was hard hit by the crisis, with plants and mills partially closed. There was as yet no public welfare, only soup lines and private relief. Blacks were hardest hit of all.

My elderly aunts, respectable law-abiding people and deeply religious, were forced to sell moonshine whiskey in order to make ends meet. They told me this in an apologetic, shamefaced way—“Everybody’s got to do something to get by.” This really got to me.

I called on old friends and they all wanted to know about my experiences in the Soviet Union. I was interviewed by Lucius Harper of the *Chicago Defender* who was an old friend of the family. I don’t remember if the interview was ever published, because I left right afterwards for St. Louis.

I arrived in St. Louis on November 15, the opening day of the conference, and met up with Otto who was a delegate to the meeting. He had been working in the South (probably Atlanta), and he told me of his experiences there and about his near lynching in Gastonia.

I was happy to see so many of my old comrades like Richard B. Moore and Otto Huiswood. Then there was Cyril Briggs. I was anxious to make his acquaintance as I had been in the Chicago post of his African Blood Brotherhood and was a reader of the *Crusader* magazine and his numerous articles in the *Daily Worker*.

There was also Herbert Newton who had been a student at KUTVA and was now back in the thick of the struggle. He was the only Black member of the "Atlanta Six," a group of communist organizers charged under Georgia's Insurrection Act and facing possible electrocution. They had been arrested at an anti-lynching and unemployed demonstration in Atlanta. (The other five defendants were Henry Story, Ann Burlack, Mary Dalton, M.H. Powers and Joe Carr.) Newton and his co-defendants were released on bail as a result of protest all over the country and were now part of the Southern delegation to the conference. Careathers of Pittsburgh, Hathaway, Browder and Baker were some of the Party leaders present among the delegates. But there were many new faces at the conference—comrades with whom I was to work in coming years.

The convention was called by the ANLC as a national conference against lynching. In 1930 alone there were thirty-eight lynchings, thirty-six Blacks and two whites. The conference was to be transformed into the founding convention of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights.

The gathering opened with a small but enthusiastic mass meeting. Its declared purpose as stated in the *Daily Worker* (November 4, 1930) was "to build a powerful fighting mass movement and a militant newspaper to lead the Negro mass in struggle against oppression and for their demands for full political and social equality and the right of self-determination for Negro majorities in the South." In the spirit of working class solidarity which characterized the entire conference, a presidium of Black and Southern white workers was elected at this session.

The first business session opened on November 15 with forty-four Black and thirty-four white delegates in attendance. A rousing welcome was given the sixteen-member Southern delegation which

was led by Mary Dalton—a young white comrade, a National Textile Workers Union organizer and one of the Atlanta Six. Otto Huiswood made the report on the economic and political situation and Herbert Newton reported on organization. The delegates continued to arrive and by November 17, they numbered a hundred-twenty—seventy-three Blacks and forty-seven whites.

The conference then adopted a name for the new organization—the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR). Upon arrival I had submitted my draft of the manifesto for the league to the Resolutions Committee where it was discussed and approved. The manifesto—a popularization of the Party program for full Black liberation—was now dramatically proclaimed by Mary Dalton amid the continuous applause of the delegates. It declared that U.S. Blacks were an oppressed nation struggling against U.S. imperialism and called for unity of Black and white workers in the fight against the common oppressor. It called for complete political equality, an end to oppression and lynching, to be obtained through self-determination of the Black nation in the South, the confiscation of the land in favor of Black and white soil-tillers, and state unity of the Black majority area. This could be achieved fully only through socialism.

The immediate program demanded abolition of all forms of discrimination, disenfranchisement, anti-marriage laws and Jim Crow. It urged the establishment of a united trade union movement to include Black workers on the basis of complete equality as an essential step in cementing real fraternal solidarity between Black and white workers on the basis of common interests. It called for “mass violation of all Jim Crow laws,” and “death to the lynchers,” the banning of the KKK and all extra-legal terrorist organizations, the liquidation of debts and mortgages of the poor farmers. It urged members to organize LSNR chapters in **communities** throughout the country and to build the *Liberator* as the official organ for the new organization.

Mary’s speech was met with rousing cheers and a standing ovation. A national council was elected of which I was a member; Ben Amis was chosen national secretary. The Communist Party, through Earl Browder, pledged support in mobilizing white masses for the Black liberation struggle.

The meeting adjourned late on the night of November 19. We stood around the hall talking until about two in the morning. Ben

Amis, Otto and myself left the hall with a Jewish couple who had put us up during the conference. They lived in a middle class white neighborhood and had driven us to and from the conference. Driving home, the conference successfully completed, we were all top of the world.

The conference had been especially stimulating for me as it was the first I had attended since my return home.

We pulled up in an alley behind their home to put the car in their garage. Otto, Ben and I walked the short distance to the street and waited while they locked up. As we stood talking a squad car cruised by. Its occupants, four white plainclothesmen, were immediately suspicious of three Black guys coming out of an alley in white St. Louis in the middle of the night.

The squad car stopped and the four of them got out. One of them hailed us, "What are you niggers doing here?"

"We're waiting for our friends; we're delegates from a convention. Our friends are putting away their car; we're staying with them," Ben replied.

We were under a big street light and I could see the cops' faces as they stared hostilely at us. Fortunately at that moment our friends came up. They sized up the situation immediately and intervened for us. They explained we were their friends—they even showed the convention badges we all had. "We live just around the corner, they're staying with us," they said.

The cop in charge seemed satisfied with the explanation and turned to his friends, saying, "Okay, let's go."

A little, mean-eyed cop standing next to Otto seemed disappointed at this turn of events, that he would be deprived of the pleasure of shooting or beating up niggers. I figured him as one of those kind that carved notches on his gun for the Blacks he had killed. Looking at Otto he said, "This nigger here seems like bad nigger to me; you're a bad nigger, ain'tcha?"

I was standing right next to Otto and knowing his temper, I kept pulling on his sleeve. Otto muttered something like, "Oh, not so bad."

"Yes, you are, you're a bad nigger," the cop responded, trying to bait him. But the head cop urged his partners to leave. Reluctantly they all turned away and got back in their car.

The incident had a sobering effect, cutting through the euphoria of the evening and bringing us back to solid ground. It would have

been ironic for us to be the first victims of the police brutality against which we had inveighed at the congress!

I returned to New York via Chicago, revisiting my aunts and sister. My Father, now living with a niece in Elgin, Illinois, came into the city to meet me. Age had caught up with him and his hair had grayed. He was still working as a janitor. I was glad to see him but I felt sad too—we had so little in common.

All he saw for Otto and me was trouble. He was still a Booker T. Washington man and he didn't think the issue of freedom could be forced. To fight would only cause us grief.

HARLEM AND YOKINEN: WHITE CHAUVINISM ON TRIAL

Back in New York I was temporarily assigned to the national office of the TUUL and put on its payroll. The position, as I remember, was a nominal one and most of my work was with the Negro Department of the Party's New York District, of which I was soon to become head. My salary was twenty-five dollars a week which, in those days, was quite adequate.

The twenty-five dollars was theoretical, however, for often there was not enough money in the till to pay the national office staff. In **such** cases, we would divide up what there was or if there was nothing, go without. There was no such thing as payment of back wages; if you missed one pay day that was it. It was all fair enough.

No Party functionary went hungry in New York—one could run up a bill at the restaurant on Union Square where the management was friendly to the Party. We were also invited to eat with different comrades. Several of us functionaries stayed for awhile in the town apartment of a comrade who lived in Croton-on-Hudson. We were never bothered by the problem of rent.

My associates in the district included Black comrades like Steve Kingston and Tom Truesdale, as well as Peters, a Hungarian who was organizational secretary, and Alberto Moreau, who was in charge of agit-prop. Jack Stachel was then in charge of the national TUUL office. Foster, the chairman, was still in jail for his part in the unemployment demonstration of March 6, 1930, as was Israel Amter, the district organizer of New York. Jack Johnstone and Alfred Wagenknecht, TUUL board members, were always on hand in the office.

New York was a strange city to me. Before my recent arrival

from Moscow, I had been in the city only once. That was upon my return from France after the First World War. New York's Black community, Harlem, was different from what I had known on Chicago's Southside. Blacks in New York worked largely in service jobs as domestics and janitors, hotel, hospital and laundry workers, as railroad porters and dining car waiters. Some worked in light industry like the needle trades, but there were few Blacks in basic industry as in Chicago.

Harlem's ethnic composition included a large segment of West Indian immigrants. I found them to be the most militant section of the Black population. Racism, American-style, was a sharp contrast to the more subtle racism of the West Indies and the new immigrants reacted strongly. They drew on the West Indies' long tradition of anti-imperialist struggle, and it was no accident that they comprised a large proportion of our first revolutionary cadres.

The world's largest Black community, Harlem was recognized as the cultural capital of Black America. It was the home of the Black renaissance. Harlem was the stronghold of Black reformism and bourgeois nationalism—the NAACP and the Urban League had their national headquarters there. The Garvey movement was born there and remnants still survived all around Harlem.

I had always felt building a revolutionary movement, which meant building unity among Blacks and forging alliances with white workers, was more difficult here in New York than in an industrial center such as Chicago. But the crisis of the Depression had been sort of a catalyst. Unemployed Councils were built, uniting Blacks and whites, even in New York. There were marches on city hall and movements against evictions and police brutality. Branches of the LSNR were built in Harlem and Brooklyn. Harlem was soon to become a powerful center of the Black liberation movement.

Throughout the country the communist movement was growing among Blacks. Many hundreds were recruited directly into the Communist Party and thousands into mass organizations influenced by the Party; Unemployed Councils, trade unions, etc. This tremendous advance was accompanied, however, by a wave of racist manifestations and tendencies in the Party and mass organizations. This clearly reflected the stepped-up racist offensive of the employers, aimed directly at halting the growing unity and maintaining the division between Blacks and whites.

The mass entrance of Blacks into the revolutionary movement

flushed out hitherto hidden areas of white chauvinism. For example, there was the situation in the needle trades where over 8,000 Blacks now worked. Some officials of that union—among them Party members—failed to support the special demands of the growing number of Blacks coming into the industry.

In some shops, Black workers received lower wages than whites for the same work. The shop committees in those places resisted pulling a strike on the issue of equal pay for equal work. Maude White, recently returned from three years' study in the Soviet Union, was assigned head of the Needle Trades Union department. She was shocked by this flagrant violation of TUUL principles and even more so by the complacency of union leaders, among whom were a number of comrades.

But white supremacist attitudes in their crudest form had cropped up in a number of the language clubs and cooperatives. These often resulted in outright discrimination against Blacks. The language clubs (ethnic organizations of nationalities in the U.S.) had formerly been part of the language federations affiliated to the Party.

Since the late twenties as part of its bolshevization campaign, the Party had shifted to organizations based on the workplace and street branches and had cut out the language branches entirely.² Party fractions within the language clubs and cooperatives remained, however.

There was an incident at the Lithuanian cooperative restaurant in Chicago where comrades had refused to serve Black delegates to an unemployed conference meeting in the hall above. This was done on the plea that "it would hurt business" if Blacks were served. The restaurant workers suggested other places to eat and gave the Black delegates money for food. There was also a scandal in Gary where the Russian cooperative restaurant refused to hire Black workers.

But most recent was the incident in New York at the Finnish Hall in Harlem itself. The Finnish Hall had been established in an area originally settled by Finns in East Harlem around Fifth Avenue and 126th Street. Now this neighborhood was becoming predominantly Black, and the hall was being engulfed by the Black community. The hall had a pool room and gymnasium, and sponsored many cultural, sports and educational activities. One of its major attractions was the famous Finnish baths.

Several Black workers attended a dance at the Finnish Workers Hall. Instead of receiving the welcome they expected, they were

pushed into a corner and barely escaped being ejected. The caretaker, August Yokinen, was a communist. When faced with the question of why he had not come to the aid of his Black comrades, Yokinen said he agreed with those who wanted to expel the Blacks.

Apart from these flagrant manifestations of white supremacy, the white chauvinist resistance to work among Blacks took a more subtle and dangerous form. It was reflected in a tendency to regard the LSNR branches as a substitute for the Party in the field of Afro-American work. The practice was widespread on the part of local Party organizations to refer all issues concerning Blacks to the LSNR; to regard it as a sort of clearinghouse for this work, thereby absolving the Party from responsibility in this field.

The list of white racist manifestations was long and growing; clearly a crisis in the Party's mass work was building up. Further advance required a renewed drive, a counter-offensive on the question. The Party's very existence as an effective revolutionary force was at stake.

The Party's Negro Commission—comprising the leading comrades in the work—was first to feel the pressure. Harlem was up in arms; complaints poured in from the districts. It was clear that something had to be done.

As a member of the Party's National Negro Commission, I felt much of this first hand, as did the other members of the commission. Our chairman was B.D. Amis, an articulate and aggressive man with considerable organizational ability. But he was relatively new in the Party and perhaps a bit unsure of himself in dealing with older, veteran revolutionaries.

He raised the question for the Politburo to intervene directly and push the districts to take a more aggressive stand against white supremacy. But Amis made no headway with the Politburo. Briggs, Maude White and I then drew up a document listing the serious incidents of white chauvinism; we demanded the Politburo take decisive action. We presented our document at a Politburo meeting in January.

Present at the meeting were Earl Browder, B. D. Amis, Rose Wortis, Clarence Hathaway (then editor of the *Daily Worker*) and others. Briggs and I spoke first. Briggs was sore as hell—so angry that his usual stutter disappeared. Maude spoke last, dealing with the needle trades situation and resistance to the demands of the Black workers. She became so emotionally upset she burst into tears

and asked to be relieved of her responsibilities in the needle trades unless she were given more support.

An awkward silence settled over the room at Maude's outburst. After what seemed an interminable time, Browder broke the silence—though I can't recall what he said. Hathaway spoke up, calling for some dramatic action to help resolve the crisis. He proposed a public trial of those involved in the incident at the Finnish Hall. His proposal was seized upon immediately as something concrete. A committee was set up to work with the district in organizing such a trial, including Hathaway, Amis and myself as members.

A renewed campaign throughout the Party against white chauvinism and for unity of Black and white workers got underway as a result of this meeting. A campaign of enlightenment resulted which was tied to organizational and disciplinary measures against those guilty of racist acts. A number of expulsions took place. Resolutions were adopted in all districts summarizing the results of the campaign. For example the February 19, 1931, *Daily Worker* carried a resolution of the New York District Bureau, "Close Ranks Against Chauvinist Influences."

A number of hard-hitting articles were also published in the Party press, including that of the language groups. This was all tied to the mobilization for the Yokinen trial scheduled for March 1; it was also made part of the National Day of Action of Unemployed on February 25, when marches on state capitals were scheduled.

Our committee for the trial held a meeting with the communist fraction of the Finnish Club with Yokinen present. The members were self-critical and agreed that they had acted wrongly in not throwing out the racist elements at the dance. But Yokinen not only justified his position, he even carried it further and argued that if Blacks were allowed to enter the club and pool room, they would soon be coming into the bath. And he for one did not want to bathe with Blacks.

The Yokinen trial took place on Sunday afternoon March 1, 1931, in the New Harlem Casino at 116th Street and Lenox Avenue, the very heart of Harlem.

That morning I attended a meeting of the steering committee responsible to the New York District for the conduct of the trial. Tight organization was required because the entire trial was to take place in less than four hours that afternoon. The trial had received wide publicity in both the bourgeois press and the Black press. Our plans

called for Wagenknecht, national TUUL organizer and unemployed leader, to be chairman and judge. Clarence Hathaway would try the case for the Party. Attorney for the defense would be Richard B. Moore, head of the Negro Department of the ILD.

I arrived at the New Harlem Casino early. It was a large hall where dances were usually held, but it was already crowded. Over two thousand people jammed the hall, most went without seats. Hundreds of Blacks, including women with babies in their arms, were among them. Party workers moved up and down the aisles selling magazines and buttons. Banners around the room read, "Race Inferiority Is a White Ruling Class Lie! Smash Jim Crow Laws and Practices!"

Alfred Wagenknecht, a white-haired veteran revolutionary, called the court to order. Selection of a jury of fourteen, seven whites and seven Blacks, was then begun. Nominations were made and I was one of the jurors elected.

Hathaway, the prosecutor, stepped forward to present the case. He was a forceful speaker, emphasizing his points with his right hand which had several fingers missing, a legacy from his old machinist trade. In a lengthy address, often interrupted by applause, he described Yokinen's crime, outlined the communist position on the Afro-American question, and demanded Yokinen's expulsion for the crime of white chauvinism.

"Comrade Yokinen," declared Hathaway, "not only justified the hostility shown to the Negro workers who attended the dance, but he went even further. He claimed that if they were admitted to the club, they might go further and enter the pool room and even the bath house, and that he did not wish to bathe in the same tub used by Negroes.

"Comrade Yokinen made formal acceptance of the communist principle of equal rights, but he was not willing to accept its substance.

"The view Comrade Yokinen showed," Hathaway pointed out, "is the same view persistently put forth among the workers by capitalists. Everywhere, in church, in the press and in schools, you see this conscious effort to cultivate race prejudice. The capitalists know that if they can develop feeling against the Negro among the white workers they can oppress and exploit the Negroes and weaken the unity of Negro and white workers. The theories expressed by Comrade Yokinen play into the hands of the capitalist class and

make him actually an agent of the bourgeoisie,” Hathaway said.

“The Communist Party,” he emphasized, “is committed to abolishing all customs which prevent Negroes from enjoying full equality with whites in every way.”

The whole courtroom was attentive to Hathaway’s presentation; their attention now turned to Richard Moore who spoke for the defense. The fine Black orator admitted the guilt of his client and that he had committed “a grievous crime.” Moore further contended that Yokinen was not the only guilty person. He had realized the seriousness of his offense and now wanted to correct his errors in practice.

“It is the vicious bourgeois system, the damnable capitalist system which preaches corruption and discrimination which is the real criminal,” Moore shouted. “Middle class opportunism permeated the mind of Yokinen and caused him to object to Negroes using the club for fear white people would stay away and the club would suffer economically.”

Moore continued, “Let us not yell for the blood of Yokinen, but examine ourselves and see how far we have contributed to this thing of which Yokinen was guilty. We must not make a paschal lamb of Yokinen. We must win him back. Expulsion from Communist Party is worse than death at the hands of the bourgeoisie.”

The audience broke into loud cheers when Moore, with his hands clasped over his head, shouted, “I would rather my head severed by the lynchers than to be expelled from the Communist International! We must not destroy Comrade Yokinen,” pleaded Moore, “We must save him for the communist movement.” Moore’s plea was greeted by prolonged applause.

Yokinen submitted a full confession, reading it in Finnish. He admitted to having been influenced by white chauvinism, the ideology of imperialism.

“I refute and condemn my previous attitude...I want to prove in action that I no more have the slightest white chauvinistic tendencies. I ask this workers’ court not to deprive me of the opportunity to further carry on my activity for the Communist Party and for the working class.”

Our jury then retired to return half an hour later with the verdict. Thomas Mitchell, the Black foreman, announced the verdict. Yokinen was guilty. He should be forthwith expelled from the Party, but might be readmitted after he had expiated his crime and

proved his worthiness by the performance of a number of tasks.

These were as follows: 1) To go immediately to the Finnish Hall, call a mass meeting and give a report of the trial, couched in such terms as to destroy white chauvinistic tendencies in the club; 2) To carry on in the club a persistent struggle for the admittance of Black workers and the granting to them of full privileges, including use of the poolroom, bathhouse and restaurant; 3) To join the LSNR and sell an adequate number of copies of the *Liberator*; 4) To lead a demonstration against a certain Harlem restaurant which barred Blacks; and 5) To take a leading part in all the movements and activities aimed at doing away with discrimination of any sort against Blacks.

After it had all been explained to Yokinen in Finnish, he solemnly nodded his head and said, "I will do it, I did wrong at the Club."

The trial ended with the audience singing the "Internationale," clenched fists held high.

As I watched the crowd swarm from the hall it dawned on me that I had witnessed and participated in a historic event in the battle for Black rights. The impact of the trial was tremendous throughout the country. The most important newspapers carried full stories and photos of the proceedings.³ The trial represented a breakthrough in understanding the importance of the struggle of the Afro-American people. It was the first time the revolutionary movement clearly and openly declared war on this pillar of American imperialism.

As for Yokinen, he conscientiously carried out his pledge made to the workers' court. He became a familiar and popular figure on the streets of Harlem, in demonstrations of the unemployed, for the Scottsboro boys and against the Jim Crow policies of a local cafeteria. After six months, he was readmitted to the Party as one of the staunchest fighters for our program.

These activities of Yokinen, including his attitude at the trial, evoked the wrath of the racist government and its Immigration Department, and finally resulted in his deportation. Although in the country thirteen years, Yokinen had never taken out U.S. citizenship and faced deportation proceedings on charges of belonging to the Communist Party. We were all surprised to hear that he was arrested by immigration inspectors the day after his trial. The International Labor Defense carried on a campaign on his behalf which failed to prevent his deportation several months later.⁴

The Yokinen trial was a significant turning point in the Party's work and came as the culmination of a long period of ideological struggle over the line of the Sixth Congress. I always felt that it had a cleansing effect on the Party—heightened the consciousness of the cadre and cleared the deck, so to speak, of the most blatantly chauvinist practices within the Party. The trial was a living political demonstration of our program on the Afro-American question and had tremendous repercussions on the Black liberation front as a whole—for the first time, the Communist Party was seen by the broad masses of Blacks as a serious contender for hegemony of the movement.

Thus, the basis was laid for our revolutionary leadership in the great battles of the thirties. It was directly as a result of the campaign around the Yokinen trial that the Party was able to take up the case of the Scottsboro Boys and build it into a great international movement. Hundreds of thousands of people were mobilized in a militant struggle against one of the cornerstones of capitalist oppression of Blacks—the institution of lynching.

SCOTTSBORO

I followed the Scottsboro issue closely from the beginning. On March 25, 1931, a freight train crowded with young people hoboing from Chattanooga to Memphis in search of work, passed through Paint Rock, Alabama. Nine Black youths were pulled off by the local sheriff and his deputies, charged with raping two white girls who happened to be riding the same freight train. The nine were: Charles Weems, age twenty; Clarence Norris, nineteen; Haywood Patterson, seventeen; Ozie Powell, fourteen; Eugene Williams, thirteen; Olen Montgomery, seventeen; Andy Wright, eighteen; Willie Roberson, fifteen; and Roy Wright, thirteen.

The situation was made to order for the local henchmen of Alabama's ruling oligarchy. The economic crisis had struck deeply into the entire region of northern Alabama, an area of mainly small, family-size farms and a few textile mills. Many in its largely white population were facing evictions and repossession of tools and livestock by the banks. In the textile mills, lay-offs were throwing many out of work. But the sizable Black population in the area suffered even greater hardships.

Moving with lightning speed, the local authorities of Pant Rock lost no time in exploiting the case. The boys were taken to Scottsbo-

ro (the county seat), where they were arraigned, indicted, tried and found guilty of rape in a period of less than three weeks. The trial began on April sixth and ended on the tenth, with the sentencing of eight boys to death in the electric chair. The case of the ninth victim, Roy Wright, was declared a mistrial. The prosecution had requested life imprisonment in view of his youth (he was thirteen), but the jury returned deadlocked with seven jurors insisting on the death penalty.⁵

The trial was carried through in a lynch atmosphere. On the day it opened, mobs of white natives from the surrounding countryside and towns surged around the courthouse. A band was playing "There'll Be A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." The National Guard had been called out, ostensibly to preserve order and prevent the mob from attacking the boys. One of the youths, however, was bayoneted by a guardsman.

It was the new style, legal lynching carried through with the cooperation of the courts and law enforcement agencies. It was intended to guarantee to the mob the same results as would be obtained in an old-fashioned burning and hanging in a public square—the death of the victims.

The courtroom farce at Scottsboro was a part of a wave of racist terror sweeping the South which had resulted in ten known lynchings in the past three months. Clearly its purpose was to "keep the nigger in his place," to prevent unity of Blacks and poor whites; in other words, to divert the unrest of Black and white workers into channels of interracial strife.

This aim received open and brutal expression by the governor of Texas, Ross Sterling, an arrogant spokesman of the racist rulers of the South. Speaking of a case in his state, he stated, "It may be that this boy is innocent. But it is sometimes necessary to burn down a house in order to save a village."⁶

The Chattanooga Negro Ministers' Alliance retained Stephen R. Roddy, reportedly a member of the Ku Klux Klan, as defense attorney. His defense amounted to little more than pleading for life imprisonment instead of the death penalty. The NAACP kept a low profile on the case as they were not sure the boys were innocent and they wanted to avoid the possibility of the association being identified with mass rapists. This was their official justification for holding back from the case.

The N.A.A.C.P. is not an organization to defend Black

*criminals. We are not in the field to condone rape, murder and theft because it is done by Black men...*When we hear that eight colored men have raped two white girls in Alabama, we are not first in the field to defend them. If they are guilty and have a fair trial the case is none of our business.⁷

It was only when confronted with the dispatch of the ILD and the communists in taking up the case, and with the widespread outcry against the legal lynching in all sections of the Black population, that the NAACP belatedly tried to enter the case and force the communists out.

We communists viewed the case in much broader, class terms. First, we assumed the boys were innocent—victims of a typical racist frame-up. Second, it was a lynchers' court—no one, innocent or guilty, could have a fair trial in such a situation.

From the beginning we called for mass protest against the social crime being acted out by Wall Street's Bourbon henchmen in the South. On April 2, the *Daily Worker* called for protests to free the Boys. Again on April 4, the *Southern Worker* carried an article that characterized the case as a crude frame-up.

I remember distinctly how I became involved in the case. I was sitting in the Party's district office on Twelfth Street. I had been reading the newspapers which were filled with stories of the trial in Scottsboro. It seemed things were going badly there. The first group of boys had already been sentenced to death in the electric chair. I was trying to figure out what our next step should be. It was clear that if we did not take over the defense of at least some of the boys, they were doomed. Suddenly Sol Harper burst in on me.

If there was one person who, before anyone else, understood the significance of the Scottsboro case and what the role of the Party should be, it was Sol. Sol Harper was a tall, rangy, stoop-shouldered Black comrade about thirty-five at the time, with prematurely graying hair. He combined the qualities of a dedicated communist with the skills of an expert investigative reporter. He seemed to have an inexhaustible store of information about current issues and knew everything that was happening or was about to happen on the Black rights front. He always carried a brief case stuffed with clippings from current newspapers and magazines. When I first arrived in New York it was Sol who guided me through Harlem, explaining what was happening on the streets and introducing me to countless

people. One always felt that Sol had his finger on the pulse of the people. He knew what they were thinking and how they would respond to any event.

I had never seen him so agitated as he was that morning. "What's the Party going to do?" he demanded. The NAACP was selling these boys out, they were going to the chair, and the Black community was up in arms. "We have to step in now," Sol declared, "We must take over the legal defense. Send our lawyers down and get them to line up the boys and their parents."

Sol got through to me that it was time for a decision. As soon as he left I went up to the national office on the ninth floor of the building to talk with Amis and enlisted his support. Together we went to see Bob Minor in the next office. Bob had just been released from prison after serving one year for his leadership in the March 6 Union Square demonstration against unemployment and for relief.

Bob was keenly sensitive on the Afro-American question and saw "the great mass of Negro people" as one of the greatest and most effective forces for the revolutionary overturn in the United States. He had just finished reading the accounts of the trial and had arrived at the same conclusion we had: the Party had to move in on the legal defense.

The three of us went to speak with Browder. He too had been reading about the trial and had just received a first hand report from Scottsboro where the legal lynching was taking place. Browder agreed that we must act quickly.

We immediately called a meeting with the ILD and the decision to enter the case was made, the ILD moved with dispatch. Joseph Brodsky, chief lawyer for the organization, and his associate, Irving Schwab, went immediately to Birmingham and Chattanooga where they got the consent of the parents and boys to enter the defense. Allen Taub, another ILD attorney who was already in Chattanooga, engaged the services of a local lawyer, George W. Chamlee.

The ILD had now gained control of the case. On April 10, 1933, the day of the sentencing, the Central Committee issued a statement in the *Daily Worker* exposing the case as a "court house lynching" being carried out by the "Southern white ruling class." It called upon "all working class and Negro organizations to adopt strong resolutions of protest and to wire these to the Governor of Alabama." But wires to such capitalist officials alone, it went on to

say, “will do no good; you must organize such at greatest possible speed mass meetings and militant mass demonstrations against this crime.”

The statement concluded with the call to build a united front of “all working people and farming masses of this country” and put forward the slogans, “Death penalty for lynchers!” and “Stop the legal lynching at Scottsboro!”

On May 23, Bob Minor, Amis and I left New York to attend the All-Southern Scottsboro Defense Conference which was to meet on May 24 in Chattanooga. Minor represented the Communist Party, Amis spoke as Secretary of the LSNR, and I represented the TUUL.

Upon arrival in Chattanooga, we met with local comrades and Tom Johnson, the Party’s Southern organizer. The four of us formed a steering committee for the conference and set up a command post in the home of a local Black comrade. Tom gave us the run down on preparations and expectations for the conference.

The atmosphere was tense. Local newspapers had sought to whip up hostility against the meeting, screaming with protests against the new carpetbag invasion from the north. The chief of police assured the white community that his forces were alerted and would take action against any attempt to disrupt the racist status quo.

Tom was not even sure that the conference would be allowed to meet. We learned that police harassment had prevented the arrival of the Alabama delegation; most of them had been picked up by Birmingham police as they were getting into assembled cars to drive to the conference. Since it was early morning, before sunrise, they were charged with a violation of the Birmingham curfew laws. They were later released without fines, but too late to attend the conference. I was disappointed for I had expected my brother Otto would be part of the Alabama delegation.

Our fear that the police might try to disrupt the conference by arresting its leaders was well grounded. We adopted security measures to prevent this. All of us on the steering committee took turns going to the conference hall one person at a time. When one returned another would go. We adhered to this plan throughout the conference so that the whole steering committee was never present in the hall at any one time.

It was at this conference that I met Angelo Herndon for the first time. Herndon was to become the victim of a frame-up in Atlanta

just a year later. I remember the enthusiasm and militancy of the two hundred delegates, especially of the local people. Other delegates told me that when Amis spoke he brought people to their feet as he called on Blacks everywhere to fight for the lives of the nine Scottsboro Boys. In this spirit, he invoked the memory of Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass and other heroes in the days of slavery. Bob Minor, as I understand, also gave an impressive speech. I too spoke, delivering greetings and support from the TUUL.

The conference ended without incident. We were all enthusiastic—it was the first conference against lynching to be held in the South. Bob, Ben, Tom and I were exhilarated and dropped our security precautions prematurely. We walked down to the conference hall and stood talking on the sidewalk, less than a block away from the conference. As we stood watching the delegates leave we congratulated each other on the success of the conference. A patrol wagon swooped down upon us and the four of us were arrested and charged with “blocking the sidewalk.” We spent the night in jail and next morning Chamlee, our Scottsboro attorney, got us out with a ten dollar fine each.

NOTES:

1. *The Daily Worker*, April 2, 1934.
2. The Comintern had called on all communist parties to bolshevize themselves by cleansing their organizations of the remnants of the old socialist parties. One aspect of this was building a centralized organization based on shop nuclei in place of a loosely federated organization based on election districts and language federations.
3. *The New York Times*, March 2, 1931.
4. The day after the trial, Yokinen was arrested and soon released on bail. The government continued its efforts to deport him and was ultimately successful after the Supreme Court upheld the deportation order on March 11, 1932.
5. See Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Oxford University Press, 1969), for a detailed account of the trial.
6. As quoted in Harry Haywood and Milton Howard, *Lynching* (New York: *Daily Worker*, 1932), p. 13.
7. “Is the N.A.A.C.P. Lying Down On Its Job?” *The Crisis*, October 1931, p. 354.