"DETROIT IS DYNAMITE": RACE AND LABOR EXPLOSIONS ON THE HOME FRONT DURING WORLD WAR II

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

HISTORY

MAY 2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people I have to thank for helping me along during the thesis-writing process. I would of course like to thank my committee for their expert guidance and editing suggestions. I'd also like to thank the staff at the Walter Reuther Library's Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University for guiding me through the archival research that was so crucial to my thesis.

Many people lent me moral support and have read various parts of my thesis and given extremely useful comments. Thanks to Alan Boyes, Holly Coleman, Erin Cozens, Anna Fodde-Reguer, Mark Fontaine, Drew Gonrowski, Wallan Hashimoto, Mimi Henriksen, Jerome Klena, Dorinda Tsai-Hsiu Liu, John Madinger, RJ Martin, Deissery Medeiros, Josh Mika, Katherine Alvarado Mirarchi, Kelli Nakamura, Julie Riggs Osborn, Rebecca Rose, Mayumi Shibakawa, Linh Vu, LeJenna Wilton, Danielle Young, and others.

Lastly, thanks go to my family. My parents Mel and April instilled in me a drive to excel in everything I do, and along with my sisters Emily and Olivia supported me no matter what my dream. Mahalo nui loa.
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“Detroit can either blow up Hitler, or it can blow up the U.S.”¹ Though at first glance this statement from Life Magazine’s August 1942 article, “Detroit is Dynamite,” seems a little hyperbolic, Detroit during World War II was far from stable. Its reputation for containing a volatile mix of ethnic groups, races, and religions was cemented long before the war. But World War II changed the dynamics of Detroit at the same time that it elevated its importance on the national stage. The resulting struggles and clashes in Detroit shed light on home front problems of migration, race, and labor. The end of the war left Detroit with an opportunity to continue progressive policies imposed by outside forces during wartime and thus emerge as an example of progress and prosperity. The path it took profoundly impacted the city for the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Why study Detroit, as opposed to other communities that experienced similar wartime unrest and change? Several factors came together there during the war years to make it a valuable subject for the historian. Detroit was identified by the government as one of its prime “arsenals of democracy,” or centers of war production, thanks to its existing auto industry infrastructure. Large factories capable of mass production and a corps of skilled workers made the city an ideal target for war production. Detroit would become one of the largest contributors of war materials in the nation, crucial to the war effort. Second, the designation of Detroit as a major industrial center for the war effort required companies to expand their workforces, leading to a mass migration of workers

¹ “Detroit is Dynamite,” Life, August 17, 1942, 15-23.
that changed the social dynamics of the city. These new migrants, mostly from the South, interacted with the existing population, already split among natives, blacks, and recent Eastern European immigrants. The new wartime migration profoundly changed the racial and cultural makeup of the city. Detroit is also an interesting study because of the scale of discord and violence that took place there during the war. No other city seems to have been as volatile as Detroit, with its many strikes, minor and major riots, and other problems, such as housing, that contributed to a general climate of discontent.

Much of this discontent was fueled by racial bias. The pervasive racism found in Detroit can be explained when racism is viewed as the result of not a psychological mindset, but a social system in which definitions of race are at the heart of the social and cultural structure. Racial groups are defined and given varying statuses in a social system, which then becomes incorporated not just in the social system but also in the system’s institutions of power, i.e. the state. The reciprocal relationship of society and the state ensures that the racial structure is insidious. Society can change its definition of race or the social hierarchy, but only with significant support from the government or a social group challenging the government.

Various wartime and postwar measures, such as the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) or the landmark Supreme Court case *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), attempted to change the social hierarchy and give blacks equality, but met with resistance from white citizens in Detroit and the nation in general. The Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s had some successes in challenging the white-dominated power

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structure, but racism remains entrenched in society and in some areas of the government. The continued presence of racism in the social structures of the United States, and in the social structures of Detroit, helps to explain the pervasiveness of bigotry not only during World War II, but also to the present day.

The explosive events in Detroit during World War II were magnified by the important role the city played in the war effort, making what might have been merely local problems matters of national importance. Much has also been made of the gains of women and minority groups in the workplace during the war. But were these changes lasting? Was Detroit a better place for minorities to live and work after the war than it had been before? Did the changes in industry, labor, and racial makeup really change attitudes and ways of life in Detroit, or did the prewar status quo reestablish itself with a return to peace? Did Detroit experience a “social reconversion” to mirror its industrial one?
Since the early twentieth century, Detroit’s economy had been heavily dependent on the auto industry. After Henry Ford introduced the assembly line, auto manufacturers sprang up in Detroit and employed area workers in mass-producing cars. The proliferation of the auto manufacturers resulted in the creation of new businesses catering to the auto industry, providing raw materials, parts, and services necessary for auto production.

Ford was the first major auto manufacturer, and remained the industry’s leading innovator. In 1914, Ford announced a financial innovation to accompany its technological ones: the “$5 Day,” a shockingly generous pay rate ostensibly available to all Ford employees. In reality fully 30% of the workers did not meet the qualifications to receive the wage. But the publicity surrounding the announcement was enough to drive Americans seeking better wages and a better life northward. These migrant workers would prove especially valuable after World War I, when immigration restrictions constricted the flow of foreign workers.

Detroit had long been a city of immigrants. Starting in the 1870s and spiking after the birth of the auto industry, immigration from Eastern Europe and the Middle East added to the existing cultural mix of French, German, and Irish residents. The largest ethnic group was the Poles, who were actively recruited by the state of Michigan to provide cheap labor for Detroit’s factories. As late as 1930, 30% of Detroit’s population was foreign-born, and Detroit’s Polish numbered 350,000 out of a population of 1.5 million.

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Tension and conflict was not uncommon in a population fractured by ethnicity, religion, and language.

New federal immigration measures after World War I meant that the supply of cheap foreign labor for Detroit’s factories effectively dried up, leading auto industry leaders to look for a new source of labor. They found it in the South. To the mix of immigrants was added rural Southerners, and particularly blacks. The black population exploded from less than 6,000 in 1910 to 120,000 in 1930, an increase of 2,000%.6

Though the auto industry was the major employer of the city’s workers, blacks were overwhelming excluded, relegated to only the dirtiest and lowest-paying jobs in the auto plants if they were hired at all. Most worked as janitors, domestics, and foundry workers. The only significant employer of black workers in the auto industry was Ford, which generally employed a percentage of blacks comparable to their percentage of the total population.7 Though blacks occupied the generally “undesirable” jobs, their increased presence in the workforce alarmed nativists and immigrants alike.

In the 1920s, new organizations that capitalized on social turmoil and anxieties rose to prominence in Detroit, notably the Ku Klux Klan and its more fanatical offshoot, the Black Legion. Stridently anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and anti-black, the Klan experienced a meteoric rise in membership — from 3,000 to 22,000 — in the first three years of the decade.8 Its success in a city of largely Catholic immigrants spoke to the deep-seated fears of Detroit’s native-born population, the disorientation of its recent

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7 Widick, 26.
8 Levine, 137.
Southern transplants, and the desire of immigrants to find something in common with the mainstream white population (in this case, their hatred of blacks). The Black Legion was more anti-union than the Klan and probably for that reason did not make as many significant gains. By 1924, the increasingly powerful Klan moved out of the shadows and boldly launched a campaign to control Detroit politics. When an election was held to replace the ailing mayor, the Klan backed a Detroit divorce lawyer, Charles Bowles, to compete against the two major candidates as a write-in candidate. Bowles nearly stole the election. Only after 17,000 votes were invalidated, due to things such as misspelling of the write-in candidate's name, was Bowles defeated. The mayor-elect publicly denounced the Klan but in actuality shared many of its racial opinions. 9

After its failed bid for the mayoral office, the Klan pursued another of its pet projects: residential segregation. The increase in black population and the successes of the black middle class meant that more blacks were attempting to find housing in white areas. Many of these blacks had previously coexisted with whites with few problems, but with Klan pressure, they became targets of protest and violence. April 1925 saw a wave of violent confrontations in which white neighbors hounded black homeowners, sending menacing messages, crowding around their homes, harassing them, and threatening violence if they did not sell. The Klan held rallies to address what they saw as the growing problem. It advocated a residential segregation law, and if the political establishment would not cooperate, it tried to enforce residential segregation on its own. The Klan supported the formation of “neighborhood improvement organizations” to

9 Widick, 3-4.
maintain a neighborhood’s racial and religious characteristics and deny occupancy to anyone deemed undesirable.\textsuperscript{10}

While blacks were being threatened with violence and run out of their homes, they had little hope of protection from city police. The city government recruited officers in the South, resulting in a police force indifferent to blacks at best and menacing at worse. The period between 1924 and 1925 saw not only an increase in Klan violence but police violence as well: that year more than 40 blacks died at the hands of police.\textsuperscript{11} Black homeowners depending on the police for deliverance from the mobs were sorely disappointed.

One of the most notable attempts to break the colorline of white neighborhoods was that of a middle-class doctor, Ossian Sweet. After several years of practicing in a white neighborhood with a white clientele, he decided to move to a house on Garland and Charlevoix in Detroit’s east side in July 1925. Sweet expected trouble from his new neighbors and no help from the police. He enlisted a few friends and family members to help with the move and stay with his family until any imminent danger had passed. They armed themselves for self-defense and started moving into their new home.

Not long after their move, white neighbors formed the Waterworks Improvement Association and sought to force the Sweets to sell. When Sweet refused, whites congregated around his house at all hours. When the crowd attempted to attack two of the occupants returning to the house, chaos broke out and the panicked blacks shot into the crowd. One man was killed and another wounded. All the occupants of Sweet’s

\textsuperscript{10} Levine, 158.
\textsuperscript{11} Widick, 16.
home were arrested and jailed for first-degree murder, and the eleven adults were put up for trial.12

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization that worked to improve the lives of U.S. minority groups, hired lawyer Clarence Darrow for the defense, and the presiding judge in the Wayne County court was the newly appointed Frank Murphy, the future Supreme Court Justice. The potent combination of the famed orator and the progressive judge ensured a relatively fair trial before an all-white jury and a white community that had been calling for a lynching. Darrow’s strategy was simple. The jury would not accept a simple claim of self-defense due to prejudice, so Darrow decided to prove the ineffectiveness of the police to provide protection, the role of the Klan in agitating the neighborhood, and therefore the necessity of Sweet and his family arming themselves for protection. He countered the prosecution by pursuing a line of questioning designed to expose the hypocrisy of the prosecution and many of the witnesses. After heated deliberations, the jury could not reach a verdict and the Sweets were released. Ossian Sweet’s youngest brother, Henry, would later be tried and acquitted.13

Whites turned to more binding forms of enforcement to ensure strict residential segregation. “Whites-only” covenants in deed restrictions designated the racial makeup of a given area by restricting who could legally occupy the land in question. The neighborhood associations enforced these covenants. With this system, whites

12 Levine, 162-165.
13 Ibid., 19.
effectively restricted black residents of Detroit to certain areas of the city and maintained this pattern of residency for the next two decades.

The Great Depression hit Detroit as hard as any other American city. Disgruntled autoworkers led protests of layoffs that often led to armed conflict. The atmosphere was ripe for unionization. Attempts to unionize Detroit's autoworkers had not made much headway in the prosperous 1920s, but the Depression gave organizers the opportunity they needed. The United Automobile Workers, or UAW, formed in 1935 and started the arduous task of unionizing, which would not be finished until Ford finally capitulated in 1941.  

The upswing in unionization coincided with the downfall of the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion. In the early 1930s, a series of violent crimes terrorized the city of Detroit. Murders, arson, beatings, and bombings were tied to the Black Legion, the fanatically anti-union offshoot of the Klan that viciously retaliated against union organizers and labor sympathizers alike. In most of these crimes, no arrests were made. It was not until the murder of Works Progress Administration worker and organizer Charles Poole in May 1936 that Black Legion members were prosecuted and the organization was widely exposed.  

The Poole trial brought about the effective death of the Legion and ended a five-year reign of terror. Open membership in the Klan became

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16 “Stamp Out the Black Legion,” flyer circulated by the Farmer-Labor Party of Wayne County, 1936. UAW President Walter P. Reuther Collection, Box 2, Folder 22, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
less fashionable and the organization faded back into the shadows, severely depleted but not dead.

As Detroit entered the 1940s and left the Great Depression behind, it was at the brink of change. A world war was raging, and as the United States became further involved in the conflict, Detroit assumed a central role that resulted in social upheaval and racial discord unprecedented in its history.
CHAPTER 1
GROWING PAINS: RACE, MIGRATION, AND LABOR

On December 29, 1940, Franklin Roosevelt addressed the nation in one of his trademark “fireside chats.” In his speech, Roosevelt stressed the need for the United States to support Europe and Asia in their efforts to combat fascism in the global war that had been raging for over a year. He identified war production as America’s key contribution to fighting fascism, and called attention to one city in particular – Detroit – a bastion of production he nicknamed the “Arsenal of Democracy.”

Though Detroit had all the tools necessary for war production on a massive scale, the process of production was far from smooth. The mass conversion of civilian industries meant a need for workers that Detroit’s existing labor pool could not meet, so thousands of migrants flooded to the city and severely taxed its infrastructure. This migration also brought many different ethnic and racial groups that had previously remained relatively separated into close contact. As a result, social, religious, and political conflicts aggravated the local housing shortage and generated new labor problems. The federal government expected Detroit to be its “Arsenal of Democracy,” the dependable linchpin in America’s efforts to fight the war abroad. But in many ways Detroit was waging its own internal war, one that often disrupted its supporting role in the larger global conflict.17

17 Several books have examined Detroit in the early war years. The best general work is Alan Clive’s study of Michigan during the war, State at War. The phenomenon of southern out-migration is described in James Gregory’s The Great Migration. While Dominic Capei Jr.’s book is titled Race Relations in Wartime Detroit, it deals not with race relations in general but rather with the Sojourner Truth Project controversy; nonetheless, it is the most thorough study of wartime housing problems. The wartime housing issue is also addressed briefly in Thomas Sugrue’s Origins of the Urban Crisis. Discussions on labor and
Detroit's diverse mix of citizens — native and immigrant, Catholic and Protestant, black and white — was in many ways indicative of America as a whole. Racial tension in Detroit was but one example of a problem that had existed in the U.S. since its inception. Alexis de Tocqueville in his travels in the United States in 1831 noted that there were two nations in America: white and nonwhite, “separate and unequal.” Starting in the late 19th century, the discipline of sociology was institutionalized, and sociologists began wrestling with racial problems. In the 1920s, the influential Robert E. Park of the University of Chicago advanced his idea of a “race relations cycle” which attempted to incorporate observations about immigrants into studies of race relations. After contact, conflict, and accommodation, Park’s cycle achieved its ultimate goal, assimilation. While Park’s cycle worked well when applied to immigrant populations like the Irish who had managed to rise from nonwhite to white status over time, Park’s cycle was more problematic when applied to blacks, who were more physically distinct and difficult to assimilate because of white prejudices. These communities seemed to be stuck in the “conflict” stage of development. Sociologists labeled this the “Negro Problem.” By the 1930s and 1940s, sociologists like Gunnar Myrdal, then working on his masterwork, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, had shown that the “Negro Problem” was actually a “White Man’s Problem;” that is, the racial dichotomy

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noted a century earlier by Tocqueville was the result of white prejudices. Like Park, Myrdal believed that assimilation was the ultimate path to racial harmony and was optimistic that the “Negro Problem” could be solved simply by a shift in white attitudes.²¹

Park and Myrdal both saw the North as being on a fast track to racial progress. To them, racial attitudes were not entrenched as deeply in the North as in the South. But the North still remained largely white, still awaiting Park’s first stage, “contact.” With greater migration northward in the early 20th century, Park’s cycle was set into motion, and sociologists watched Detroit and other cities ready to study the impact of the influx of black migrants.

Migration into Detroit was not an entirely new phenomenon in World War II. It had existed before the war and remained steady until the mobilization of industry. But the pace of migration quickened as a result of the war. Reasons for migration to Detroit after 1940 would not be significantly different from pre-1940 reasons. The main attraction of Detroit, as always, was jobs. In 1940, about 150,000 blacks lived in Detroit, which constituted nearly 10% of the population and almost all of the nonwhite population.²² By the time of a special 1944 census, the nonwhite population in Detroit had jumped to over 200,000, an increase of 30%, compared to a total population increase of 2%.²³ By 1950, Detroit’s population had grown by 225,000 – and black migrants made up more than two-thirds of that number, with a population growth of over

²² UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 21, Folder 2, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. [See Appendix A, pp. 97-98 for population graphs.]
²³ UAW Research Department Collection, Box 15, Housing – Negro 1945-6 Folder, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. [See Appendix A, pp. 97-98 for population graphs.]
150,000.\(^{24}\) The black population of Detroit doubled between 1940 and 1950, with the bulk of this population boom occurring during the war. What was different about the 1940s from earlier migration periods was the dramatic increase in migration rates, and most of the newcomers within this group came from the South.

Black and white southerners made up the largest migratory group to settle in Detroit in the 1940s. Their presence was so pronounced that a popular running joke referred to it. “How many states are there in the Union?” went the opening. “Forty-six – Tennessee and Kentucky are now in Michigan,” came the reply.\(^{25}\) The North, and Detroit especially, had an abundance of industrial jobs as the Great Depression came to a close and industry shifted to production of war materials. These jobs were very attractive to many poor southerners who eked out an existence primarily by farming and sharecropping.

Black southerners were drawn to Detroit not only for work, but also for the opportunity for a better life that it represented. The North was no paradise for blacks and still had forms of segregation not unlike the South, but blacks in the North could vote, a privilege generally denied them in the South. And although the most lucrative jobs, like assembly line work, were generally closed to them, the variety of jobs available was still a significant improvement over those available in the South.\(^{26}\) Many southern blacks, especially those from rural areas, belonged to a sharecropping system that kept them poor.

\(^{24}\) UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 21, Folder 2, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. [See Appendix A, pp. 97-98 for population graphs.]


and economically dependent on white landowners. Many blacks moved north to escape such crushing dependency.

Black newspapers such as the influential Chicago Defender led the call for southern blacks to come north. The editor of the Defender, Robert Abbott, had started the push for northern migration as early as World War I. The Defender gave many reasons to move north. Wages were substantially better, with the hourly wage in the North sometimes equaling a full days’ wage in the South. But in addition to all the economic reasons, the North also provided a comparative safe haven for blacks from the blatantly biased legal system and routine violence to which they were subjected in the South.27 The reasons for migrating north that the Defender first proposed during World War I were still applicable after the end of the Great Depression and the renewal of industry in the North. Blacks heeded the call during the early months of the war.

The sudden influx of workers and their families coming to Detroit for jobs was a shock to the city’s infrastructure. Companies were not required to find lodging for all the people they were hiring, and neglected to give new workers much information about the housing situation. Some migrants came north expecting to find the American Dream, or at least to escape poverty. Many were motivated by patriotism. Detroit manufacturers took out ads in southern newspapers and on the radio advertising steady jobs at good wages, with the added bonus of helping the Allies win the war by producing necessary war materials. Ford even went so far as to stage recruiting rallies in the South.28 Many migrants were bitterly disappointed, however, by the reality they found when they got to

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28 Clive, 172-173.
Detroit, such as shantytowns and racial restrictions in housing and employment. In the face of bleak reality, patriotism lost some of its luster.

Many temporary solutions were proposed to alleviate the housing crunch caused by the sudden flood of migrants. People rented out rooms in their homes to workers. Apartment buildings subdivided existing apartments to allow for more tenants. Some families lived in trailers, shacks, and even tents at the outskirts of town until they were lucky enough to find more permanent housing. Companies like Ford eventually provided some forms of temporary housing, like quarters at their Willow Run plant, but these places were much more like hotels designed for brief stays than homes for new employees.

Rigid residential segregation further aggravated housing problems. Segregation was both informal and formal. Informal segregation took the form of certain groups living together and excluding others, through societal pressure and self-policing. Formalized residential restrictions included “whites only” covenants in property deeds that stipulated that homes could only be sold to whites. Strident neighborhood associations pushed such covenants and actively maintained strict exclusivity in their neighborhoods. The inherent “whiteness” of much of the city neighborhoods and suburbs, coupled with the impracticality of poorer workers being able to afford transport to work from the distant suburbs, meant that blacks were largely confined to specific pockets in the city that had been traditionally occupied by blacks. The best known of

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29 Sugrue, 42.
31 Capeci, 9.
32 Sugrue, 44-46.
these black neighborhoods was Paradise Valley, located near the heart of Detroit and bounded on one side by the main thoroughfare of Woodward Avenue.

Paradise Valley, located on Detroit's northeast side, was the center of black Detroit. Larger in area than its nearby poorer neighbor, the neighborhood of Black Bottom, it was home to a third of all blacks in Detroit through the late 1940s. Paradise Valley was anything but a paradise. Crime, disease, and inadequate city services were perennial problems. Most of the housing was older wood-framed homes that were 50 to 100 years old and prone to fire. Overcrowding was a ubiquitous problem. It was no surprise when federal housing inspectors declared that two-thirds of Paradise Valley was substandard. Old buildings, inadequate facilities, absentee landlords, and rampant subdivision of apartment and motel rooms contributed to the poor quality of life.33

The federal government had a vested interest in a Detroit industry that functioned at full capacity with contented workers. After seeing the housing problems, the government decided to create 700 units of public housing designated specifically for war workers and their families. Like the rest of housing in Detroit, the projects were to be segregated. Despite the more difficult housing situation for blacks, only one project, with 200 units, was designated for black occupancy. The black community eagerly anticipated completion of the project, christened the Sojourner Truth Housing Project. Construction on the project broke ground in September 1941.

The residents of nearby neighborhoods did not receive the project enthusiastically. The site was located on the boundary of two distinctive communities, Polish Hamtramck and black, upper class Conant Gardens. The two groups had

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33 Sugrue, 36-37.
coexisted relatively peacefully. The idea of having more black neighbors in a nearby housing project created by the federal government prompted whites in Hamtramck to protest through an association called the Seven Mile Fenelon Improvement Association (named after major roads in the area). Black homeowners in Conant Gardens also raised concerns about the project, but supported it after receiving assurances that the housing was to be permanent and was not likely to attract a lower, criminal element due to screening of housing applicants.

During a long legal battle, both the white neighborhood association and black community organizations tried to sway the federal housing authorities. Both sides sent delegates to Washington to appeal to the federal government, with the “whites only” side supported by the district’s representative, Rudolph Tenerowicz. On January 15, 1942, the federal government caved and reversed the black occupancy decision, which would have meant that a housing project named for a pioneering black woman would have housed only white workers. However, the ruckus raised by the black community over the fact that one neighborhood association had so easily cowed the federal government caused yet another reversal on February 2, 1942. The government declared that the project was designated for black workers. The white community continued to protest, but as construction on the project neared completion in February 1942, the federal housing authorities stood firm.

February 28, 1942, was move-in day, but white members of the community were not content to let the move-in pass quietly. The actions of a white mob blocking the streets leading to the project resulted in police action. But rather than contain and

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disperse the mob, many of whom had known Ku Klux Klan affiliations, police prevented the black occupants from moving. The black residents of the Sojourner Truth project were attacked and tear-gassed by police. In the ensuing riot, police arrested 220 people—all but 5 of them black.\(^{35}\)

The riot effectively halted occupation of the project. The federal government maintained that it was still in support of black occupancy, but the local government did nothing to provide protection for black families to move into the project.\(^{36}\) Things began to turn around in April when members of the white resistance were indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of conspiracy to prevent blacks from occupying the project.\(^{37}\) On April 29, a full two months after the confrontation, black families were finally able to enter their new homes under armed guard.\(^{38}\)

A full year later, problems with housing projects had still not dissipated, prompting official statements and speeches by the UAW and the Detroit Housing Commission. An official speech by the UAW in March 1943 cited figures from the City Planning and Detroit Housing commissions. They predicted that despite project construction, come July 1943 there would still be a shortage of 12,000 units in Detroit. They also predicted the housing crunch to get worse, pointing out that many people suffering from a vacancy rate of just .04% were single migrant workers who would eventually seek to bring their families north, creating a demand for even more housing. They attributed problems such as high employee turnover and absenteeism to the housing

\(^{35}\) Martin, 113. [See Appendix B, p. 99, for images of the Sojourner Truth Housing riot.]
\(^{36}\) "Sojourner Truth Housing," item in the "Along the NAACP Battlefront" section, _The Crisis_, April 1942, 137-138.
\(^{37}\) "Sojourner Truth," item in the "Along the NAACP Battlefront" section, _The Crisis_, May 1942, 166-167.
\(^{38}\) "Sojourner Truth Homes," item in the "Along the NAACP Battlefront" section, _The Crisis_, June 1942, 199.
situation. The most telling figure that illustrated the low priority of housing was that of federal money earmarked for new plant construction vs. new worker housing. Though the government allocated $17 billion to build war plants, it set aside only a few million dollars to build housing for the workers the new plants would require. 39

In April, Charles Edgecombe, the director of the Detroit Housing Commission, struck a moderate pose, condemning both those who assigned blacks projects in the least desirable locations as well as “idealists” who advocated integrated housing. Edgecombe proposed taking the path of least resistance by carefully selecting locations that satisfied blacks looking for quality areas and whites looking to keep residential areas along existing segregated lines. Edgecombe warned that continued strife associated with Detroit housing projects would only hurt future financial considerations, assuming that the federal government would decide that building projects in Detroit was too much trouble. 40

Housing was not the only front on which citizens of Detroit battled one another. The social climate was fractious and bitter. There was general tension, in various configurations, among established Detroiter s, recent Polish and Czech immigrants, and the newly arrived southern migrants. White supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion warred with black organizations like the NAACP. Churches were not immune from this general discord; Protestant denominations and other groups accused Catholic churches of adding fuel to the fire of racial conflict. Lastly, labor unions and business leaders bickered constantly over a seemingly endless string of issues.

39 UAW Research Department Collection, Box 15, Housing- Detroit Area Folder, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
40 UAW President Walter P. Reuther Collection, Box 6, Folder 8, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
The internal battles in Detroit and their implications for the war effort eventually drew national attention. "If machines could win the war," *Life* magazine said in its 1942 article, "Detroit is Dynamite." "Detroit would have nothing to worry about. But it takes people to run machines and too many of the people of Detroit are confused, embittered and distracted by factional groups that are fighting each other harder than they are willing to fight Hitler." Exploring Detroit's economy and housing problems, *Life* brought attention to the volatile social atmosphere in the city and its negative implications for the war industry. When it came to talking about the lack of a cohesive community in Detroit, the article pointed out that many of Detroit's residents were recent migrants who tended to be less loyal to their new home and instead kept close ties with their respective groups.\(^1\) Ethnicity and race played the largest roles in Detroit life. Poles clustered together in Hamtramck, southern whites lived in disparate areas but kept familial ties to continue their southern culture, and blacks lived segregated from both groups.

Religion and politics also played roles in dividing the citizens of Detroit. Catholic Poles clashed with Protestant southerners; the only thing the two groups had in common was a shared animosity towards blacks. One Polish community newspaper, for example, accused Catholic churches in Hamtramck of promoting racial hatred by such activities as distributing inflammatory flyers during the Sojourner Truth Housing ordeal.\(^2\)

Communists clashed with socialists and the conservative, right-leaning Catholics on union and public issues. Communists were influential in the CIO, with over 800,000 members and control of over one-fifth of the CIO's unions by some estimates. In the

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\(^{1}\) "Detroit is Dynamite," *Life*, August 17, 1942, 15-23.

\(^{2}\) Ibid., 19.
UAW, Communists played an important role as organizers, particularly in the important 1941 strike at Ford's River Rouge plant. But their key presence did not diminish the controversy and ideological conflict with socialist and conservative elements that also constituted the union ranks. The difference was so pronounced within the UAW that president R.J. Thomas often had a difficult task in keeping the two major factions, the socialists led by Walter Reuther and the Communists led by George Addes, from tearing the union apart.

The most controversial group in Detroit was not the Communists but the Ku Klux Klan and its splinter group, the Black Legion. The Klan haunted Detroit, seemingly lurking around every corner and having an invisible hand in every racial conflict. No one was certain how strong the Klan was or how many members it had. Due to the shadowy nature of the Klan in Detroit the extent of its influence will probably never be known. Citizens often made the Klan a scapegoat for the prevalent racism and bigotry as a way of ignoring their own role in the racial problem. Natives blamed the presence of the Klan on the recent southern migrants, saying that they had brought the group northward. But the Klan had been very strong in Detroit in the 1920s, well before the arrival of the southerners. This fact seems to have escaped the collective public memory.

Placing all the blame for the Klan on certain groups such as southern migrants and Polish immigrants assumed that these groups were uniformly racist. Though the Klan was no doubt strengthened by the influx of southern migrants, many of whom harbored racial prejudices, not all Southerners could be easily stereotyped. Claude Williams offers

44 Ibid., 50-51.
45 Clive, 10-11.
but one example of a Southerner who vehemently rejected Klan ideology. A Presbyterian minister, Williams’s condemnations of racism and Klan activity drew attention in the aftermath of the June 1943 riots.46

Like the Southerners, the Polish community had its own motives for supporting Klan activity. As foreigners, Poles directly competed with blacks for low-skilled and low-paying jobs. However, the Polish community was not of one mind when it came to the racism issue. After all, it had been a Polish newspaper in Hamtramck that had criticized what it saw as hate mongering in the community during the Sojourner Truth Project controversy.47 In their attempts to explain the existence of organizations like the Klan, whom they blamed for their racial woes, native Detroiters made southerners and Poles into scapegoats by universally labeling them bigots.

Detroit’s contentious factions would not have created such an explosive situation if it were not for the rapid expansion of Detroit’s industries. Available industrial jobs shot up by 40% between 1940 and 1947.48 Workers of all ethnicities and ideologies came to the city for lucrative factory work. But Detroit manufacturers did not wholeheartedly welcome the source of renewed prosperity, the war industry.

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, the American government sought to increase production of war-related materials. Manufacturers in Detroit were at first reluctant to convert to war production for two reasons. The cost of conversion was high, and war work might be lucrative for a while but would eventually end with the war.

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47 “Detroit is Dynamite,” Life, August 17, 1942, 19.
48 Sugrue, 19.
After nearly a year of accepting limited government contracts and waffling about total commitment, industry in Detroit slowly started to mobilize for war production. Existing factories retooled, and new ones, such as the massive bomber plant of Willow Run located outside of Detroit, were built specifically to meet new military production contracts.49

The transition was not a smooth one. Until direct U.S. involvement in the war, automakers fiercely resisted "mobilization," preferring to fill government contracts on the side while still focusing on auto production. The intense competition among auto manufacturers led to actual supply shortages that affected military production, which resulted in government curtailment of auto production. The auto industry in Detroit initially expressed concerns that limits on production of non-military goods would cause widespread unemployment. But the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into the war changed the production dynamic in Detroit. The government no longer had to coerce industry into shifting to production of war materials, and concerns about unemployment were exchanged for concerns over a labor shortage.50

Detroit was the subject of intense government attention because of a combination of factors that made it ideal as a base for war production. The auto industry had the most advanced mass-production factories in the nation, controlled a full one-third of the nation’s metalworking business, and had a substantial workforce of skilled workers.51

Because of the existing facilities and labor force, Detroit was a prime target for

49 Meier and Rudwick, 136.
50 Clive, 18-25.
51 Letter from John H. Tolan, Chairman of the House Committee Investigating National Defense Migration, to Henry A. Wallace, Chairman of Supply, Priorities, and Allocation Board, December 17, 1941. UAW President Walter P. Reuther Collection, Box 5, Folder 18, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
conversion. While America played the role of the largely neutral supplier to other countries at war, the government had difficulty getting the auto companies to comply with all but the most limited of defense orders. Corporate executives such as GM’s Alfred P. Sloan Jr. stated in 1940 that “automobile plants are not adaptable to the manufacture of other products.” Sloan and his colleagues pursued this line of reasoning to protect profits, assuming that their companies would have to build costly new factories to meet large-scale defense orders if ordered to convert to war production.

The corporate representatives were directly opposed by the UAW-CIO, whose officials testified before Congress that auto plants could be retooled without much trouble. While Sloan argued that only 10-15% of existing plant machinery could be adapted, UAW-CIO President R.J. Thomas said that union investigations had concluded that the number was significantly higher, around 50%. When the U.S. entered the war with the mindset of “total war,” the complete mobilization of military and domestic forces, the auto companies had less leverage to resist defense conversion. The government eagerly embraced the outlook of the UAW-CIO and, emboldened by greater government control of the industry, began to enforce compliance that they could not independently coerce.

Though active U.S. participation meant more government pressure on the auto industry to convert, it did not mean that the process went off without problems. Achieving the full capacity of Detroit’s industry proved to be a problem. One survey conducted by the Detroit and Wayne County Tool, Die and Engineering Council early in

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52 “Automobile Industry Capacity for Defense Production,” statement of UAW-CIO President R.J. Thomas before House Committee Investigating National Defense Migration. UAW President Walter P. Reuther Collection, Box 29, Folder 1, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. 29
the war found that machinery in 34 auto plants that were capable of running 252,320
machine hours weekly was only operating at 87,296, or 35% capacity. Such
discrepancies between projections and realities were common during the early conversion
period.

While not everyone worked within its confines, the war industry was without
question the heart and soul of Detroit's economy. It was the promise of industrial jobs
that lured so many people to Detroit, and factories and shops making war materials were
the major employers of labor. There were two major divisions in the local manufacturing
economy: the major automotive manufacturers and the smaller companies that made the
base components for them. The wartime experience for workers differed depending upon
the division in which they were working.

Unionization was in its infancy in Detroit in the early years of the war. The Great
Depression had hit Detroit hard as many Americans eschewed expensive goods like
automobiles in favor of stretching their budgets in a time of high unemployment rates and
few new jobs. Union organizers found the economic climate inhospitable. It was not
until the auto industry started to recover from the Depression that the UAW was able to
gain recognition as the safe bargaining agent for Detroit's autoworkers.

Founded in 1935, the UAW had used tactics such as the sit-down strike to begin
an intense drive to unionize the auto industry in late 1936. In 1937 General Motors was
the first of the Big Three auto companies — GM, Chrysler, and Ford — to unionize

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before House Committee Investigating National Defense Migration. UAW President Walter P. Reuther
Collection, Box 29, Folder 1, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
following a strike in Flint, Michigan. The UAW organized Chrysler soon afterward. In a few short months, the UAW had managed to unionize two of the three major auto manufacturers. Slowly, organizers worked toward the final holdout: Ford, the most influential auto manufacturer in the city and the biggest employer of black workers in the industry.

The UAW had been trying to unionize Ford since at least 1937 and had met with fierce resistance by the company. Ford utilized racial politics to complicate unionization efforts at every opportunity. Companies had long used blacks as strikebreakers, with the implicit threat that since black workers were willing to accept lower wages and did not as a group demand unionization, they might replace white workers entirely. Racist views on the part of management always prevented that from becoming a reality, but companies did not hesitate to play the “race card” to keep white workers in check. Ford went one step further and hired many black workers in segregated positions at a time other companies did not hire them at all, and cemented its esteem in the black community by supporting various philanthropic efforts. This fostered a sense of loyalty among blacks that was difficult for union organizers to overcome. Traditionally, black workers saw the UAW as a white man’s union and were reluctant to join. They did not believe that it would adequately address discrimination in hiring and firing, restriction to certain jobs, and poorer wages and working conditions. Ford had made excellent use of the race issue and black skepticism to undermine labor organizing drives. By conditioning white workers to negatively respond to employing blacks in large numbers, and cultivating

54 Meier and Rudwick, 35.
55 Ibid., 14-15.
56 Ibid., 34-35.
favor among the black community, Ford successfully played workers against each other and delayed unionization.

A strike in 1941 at the massive River Rouge plant was the turning point in the UAW's drive to unionize Ford. When workers who supported the union walked off the job on April 1, the UAW was unsure how the 17,000 black employees of Ford would respond. UAW officials worked hand in hand with the NAACP leadership and prominent members of the black community to try to convince blacks that unionization would ultimately benefit everyone. The NAACP attempted to persuade black autoworkers to back the union by refusing to work at the plant during the strike. However, on the morning of April 2, around 2,000 workers, mostly black, still remained inside the plant. After much discussion with the NAACP one third of them left voluntarily, convinced that by identifying first as a worker they might be able to benefit from membership in the UAW.57 That was enough to sway the sentiment of the black community and end the strike in the union's favor. Due to support for unionization from both black and white workers, the NLRB ruled that Ford had to hold a collective bargaining election in forty-five days, and the strikers went back to work on April 14, nearly two weeks after the strike had first begun.58 When the election took place in late May, the UAW won recognition as Ford's representational union. Ford went one step further and declared a closed shop agreement, where the company would only employ

57 Geschwender, 30-31.
58 Meier and Rudwick, 101-103.
union members. Initially reluctant black workers then joined the union to keep their jobs.\(^5^9\)

The success of the UAW in organizing directly benefited workers in the war industry, and in turn the war industry proved a boon to the union. The biggest employers, and those most heavily unionized, were the large auto manufacturers such as the Big Three. Massive plants like Ford’s River Rouge facility converted to production of bombers and engines to fill government orders and employed thousands of new workers, fresh recruits for the union, to maximize production. The presence of strong unions ensured that the companies addressed worker concerns. Under a watchful union eye, companies practiced policies like seniority and promotions requirements uniformly. The federal War Labor Board tightly regulated manufacturers to ensure that the conditions and policies the companies agreed to in exchange for lucrative federal contracts were enforced.

Manufacturers across the metropolitan area, with the exception of Ford, continued to slot black workers into low-paid job, like janitorial jobs or foundry work. Black workers at the Ford Company were among the best-paid black workers in the community. There were also limited opportunities at Ford for blacks to work in areas like assembly line production. But black workers got bad deals when it came to seniority and promotion, policies that tended to favor skilled workers. Nonetheless, blacks still had relatively good job security at Ford.\(^6^0\)

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\(^5^9\) Geschwender, 32.

\(^6^0\) Meier and Rudwick, 83-85.
Blacks had difficulty attaining and maintaining jobs with the smaller manufacturers that made component parts for Ford and other auto companies. These companies generally embraced hiring practices that put blacks at a distinct disadvantage compared to their white counterparts.\textsuperscript{61} These smaller companies typically hired on reference, and Detroit's strict social and residential racial segregation made it difficult for blacks to get the necessary references. The nature of the workplace also discouraged blacks from being hired. Many white workers still refused to work with or come into close proximity to blacks, and these companies were on a small enough physical scale to make separating the two groups difficult and impractical.\textsuperscript{62} For the blacks that did manage to get jobs with these companies, the minimal presence of unions in the companies meant less protection from arbitrary dismissal.

The presence of unions in Detroit industry was a source of tension between management and workers. Despite no-strike pledges in labor contracts, union workers still struck with the same or greater frequency as in the years leading up to the war, to the consternation of management and the government. These issues between management and labor also resulted in less than optimal production results, idle departments or factories, and the occasional outburst of violence.

Even though black workers made up a relatively small portion of the Detroit factory labor force overall, their numbers still increased as the labor market became ravaged by the draft. With increased employment of minorities came an urge to end job discrimination. Under pressure from civil rights activists like A. Philip Randolph,

\textsuperscript{61} Sugrue, 27.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 108-109
President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 in June 1941 to address the diversifying workforce. Forbidding job discrimination based on a person’s “race, creed, color, or national origin,” the order also established the Fair Employment Practice Committee to enforce its mandate. At first, the FEPC had little effect on job discrimination. It was not until late 1942, when complaints from minority workers began to pile up, that the FEPC finally conducted in-depth investigations of job practices at major industrial centers. Unsurprisingly Detroit was the area receiving the most complaints and was targeted for the first wave of investigations in early 1943.

At about the same time the FEPC began to examine job discrimination in Detroit more closely, the UAW’s Research Department was doing its own assessment of black employment patterns and problems. In September 1942, the union sent out a questionnaire on black employment to its locals. These questionnaires asked for the employment numbers at the plants both then and the year before, allowing the union to gauge overall plant growth and whether hiring of blacks had kept pace. The questionnaire also asked about “upgrading,” or promotion, of black workers and whether such actions had generated friction among local membership.

Such questionnaires not only help us to see the growth of plants due to war mobilization, but also the attitudes of the rank-and-file union members in their own words. Some questionnaires indicated success at enforcing FEPC policies to change the makeup and nature of the workforce. “They [management] transferred [blacks] because the government said they must do so,” stated the representative from Detroit Lubricator.

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The union representative at DeSoto stated that “on or about September 15, 1942, the first Negroes in the history of the DeSoto Plant were employed.” But other questionnaires showed the stubbornness of management in discrimination against blacks. The representative at Brabant Brass Manufacturing Co., a smaller plant, stated that he did not “think the management are hiring Negro employee as he should.” Management at Hudson Motor Car Company was seen as giving “reluctant cooperation,” which was unsurprising given the work stoppages at that plant tied to upgrading of blacks. Management was described as “indifferent” at Dodge Truck, and “very reluctant and non-cooperative,” but “showing a little more progressive attitude lately” at Plymouth Motors. Occasionally management had good intentions but was hampered by the attitudes of its workers, as in the case of Vellumoid Company, where the union representative reported that “management seemed inclined to hire Negroes – but employees talked it down. Several southern employees working here and claimed they would quit.”

Renewed efforts to enforce FEPC guidelines on fair employment following the investigation in February 1943 resulted in several hate strikes. This phenomenon, initially a curious anomaly in the normal pattern of labor relations, began in the early war period but intensified in 1943. While typical strikes were precipitated by organizational disputes and demands for better pay and carried out with the union’s blessing, hate strikes were without union approval and without obvious economic reasons. These wildcat strikes were carried out by white workers protesting the presence of blacks in their workplace and protesting the promotion of blacks to jobs traditionally held only by white workers.

65 UAW Research Department Collection, Box 19, Folders 6-7, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
The increasingly common wildcat strikes reflected the level of resistance of white workers to progressive FEPC policies. White workers were entrenched in their racism after decades of being conditioned by companies to regard black workers as their economic competitors during strikes or times of depression. Suddenly faced with working side-by-side with blacks, whites protested in an attempt to restore the old order.

These strikes plagued Detroit in the spring of 1943, culminating in the memorable and inflammatory Packard strike in early June. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor, white workers struck to protest employment or promotion of blacks at least five times from March to June 1943, and these strikes resulted in 2,446,920 man-hours lost, the equivalent of 101,955 days of labor. These were just the major, officially reported hate strikes; it was widely acknowledged that much activity went undocumented. Many smaller, shorter work stoppages escaped widespread publicity. One such stoppage was at the Briggs' Mack Avenue plant, where workers ceased production when black women were given spots on the production line. Union officials brought the stoppage to a screeching end in a mere ten minutes when they informed the workers that they would support the company in firing them.

Although the motivating incidents behind hate strikes appear to be varied - hiring black plant guards, refusal to work with a black toolmaker, and demand for separate bathrooms – they all shared a common theme: desire on the part of whites to limit direct

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67 Meier and Rudwick, 162-163.
contact with black workers. A hate strike at U.S. Rubber in March was one of the largest of these conflicts, involving over a thousand workers. The Hudson Navy Arsenal strike saw an estimated 750 workers walk off the job for one day to protest working with one black toolmaker. The unorganized, vehemently antiunion Vickers plant, which had previously used racial tension as a tool to prevent unionization, actually supported black workers during the March strike and instead of caving in to the protest of 800 striking white workers they hired more blacks. Management responded to hate strikes by either using the race card to their advantage – as in the case of Vickers hiring blacks to destabilize the workforce and prevent unionization – or by tacitly supporting the striking workers, hoping that they would be able to effectively protest FEPC policies that the companies were obliged to follow but did not always support in spirit.

The Packard Motor Car Company was one of the companies who did not enthusiastically support FEPC policies. A wildcat strike in November 1941 over the hiring of two black metal polishers ended after the company dismissed the black workers. When another wildcat strike occurred at the company’s Airplane Motor Plant in late May 1943 after three blacks were upgraded, the company initially followed the same policy: they downgraded the black workers, ostensibly until the situation could be resolved. But this time Packard’s black employees responded with a walkout of their own, in which about 1,500 workers, or 60% of the plant’s black workers protested the company’s decision. Added to the protest of the black workers was increasing pressure

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68 These strikes occurred at the Hudson Motor Car Co., Hudson Navy Arsenal, and U.S. Rubber Company, respectively.
69 Moore, chart on 14. Numbers are an estimate and may be inaccurate, as the numbers involved in some strikes differ by source.
70 Meier and Rudwick, 163 (footnote).
71 Geschwender, 34-35.
from federal regulators, such as the FEPC, to enforce regulations concerning equal and fair hiring and promotion practices that until this point had been largely ignored. The company reinstated the workers a few days later. But the troubles at the Packard plant had just begun.

On June 3, white workers at Packard initiated another wildcat strike over the reinstatement of the black workers. By some reports, nearly 90% of the white workforce participated, bringing production to a complete halt. Workers struck in the early hours of Thursday June 3, and the plant was not up to full operational speed again until Monday June 7. The UAW was quick to issue a statement declaring the stoppage an unsanctioned, wildcat strike, and it took steps to reason with the workers and urge them to get back to work. Union-run sound cars drove outside the plant in an attempt to convince the idle men to go back to work, but the cars were withdrawn when it seemed that the hostile workers would resort to tipping over the vehicles.

Union efforts to stop the strike through formal channels failed. In meetings with the shop stewards and other officials of the union, the union stressed the official policy of abiding by the guidelines of the FEPC and the no-strike pledge, but several stewards agreed to these ideals in meetings only to continue encouraging their workers to hold out. The reaction in the company followed the same lines. Though official company policy mandated following federal guidelines, many company officials were biased against black workers and hoped that a white wildcat strike would accomplish what they could not do with company policy. Manager C.E. Weiss was one of the major renegade officials and was singled out by UAW-CIO president R.J. Thomas as playing a

particularly divisive role in the strike. Unable to secure the full cooperation of company officials, the union called in Army Colonel George Strong, the Army Air Force’s industrial relations officer for Detroit, to take over running the plant. With the Army involved and the union backing the company, the strike came to an end with the ouster of 29 workers accused of leading the strike.

Shortly after the Packard strike, allegations surfaced of possible Ku Klux Klan involvement in the strike. R.J. Thomas led the demands that the Klan be investigated to determine if it had instigated the strike. Earlier concerns about Klan influence in Detroit had led the FBI to conduct a general investigation of the Klan. Thomas’s perception of the Klan elaborately plotting dissension behind the scenes was largely ruled out after the investigation found only a small fraction of the population, 3,000 at most, to be active Klan members. But though no one found any damning connections between the Klan and the Packard strike, the public considered the Klan to have had at least some influence at Packard, where the majority of white workers were recent Southern migrants. To many Detroiters, the Packard problem was directly related to the maladjustment of southern migrants. Blaming the Klan was an easy solution. Detroit prosecutor William Dowling, in a speech in 1944, alleged that attempts to blame the Klan were part of a Communist plot to disrupt war production. He also suggested that white workers had

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struck to protest the black workers’ attentions toward white women, a typical white racist fear. Such rhetoric and innuendo only served to show that the Klan did not hold a monopoly on bigotry in Detroit. Characterizations of blacks as economic competition or sexual predators illustrated the institutionalization of racism as a way of asserting and maintaining white unity and dominance in the structures of power.

The wildcat strikes carried out during the spring of 1943 illustrated the disconnect between union officials and rank-and-file workers. Union officials were very progressive, wholeheartedly supporting measures like the FEPC policies and integration of union locals. They recognized that worker solidarity was more important than race; without a united front, companies could and did use race to divide workers among themselves and stifle union efforts. The typical white union worker, however, recognized only that blacks had traditionally been used as strike breakers and had accepted lower wages, posing a threat to white job security. The white workforce in Detroit was very diverse: Polish, Czech, Italian, Slavic, and Irish workers, Catholics and Protestants, southerners and natives were often at odds. But on one thing most seemed to agree: they did not want to work with blacks. After all, the press had reported that during the Packard strike a Southerner at the plant had shouted, “I’d rather see Hitler and Hirohito win than

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77 William Dowling, “Speech on ‘The Race Riot’.” Delivered to the Kiwanis Club on June 27, 1944. Transcript of the speech was included in the NAACP National Office’s general office files on the 1943 Detroit riots after being forwarded to the Detroit branch from the East Side Merchant’s Association and the Jewish Community Council. Dowling, along with Detroit’s police commissioner Witherspoon, were both regarded as being less-than-progressive members of the city government.

work next to a nigger!” over a megaphone. The unions could preach racial tolerance and solidarity all they wanted, but there was no way they could control the attitudes of their workers. The hate strikes exposed a problem within the unions that had no clear solution.

After the Packard strike, the UAW Research Department sent out another questionnaire on black employment and upgrading to locals. Unsurprisingly, the Packard representative responded that “this management had been very reluctant to upgrade as requested by union because stoppages have occurred in every instance.” Bohn Aluminum & Brass Corp. reported that it had experienced problems at one of its plants and had called in the FEPC as a result. Some companies still maintained a voluntary segregation of workers, such as Ditzler Color Unit and Hupp Motor Car Corp. More blacks were listed as having skilled jobs than in the 1942 surveys, but less than 50% of the black workers held these positions, and evidence of racial problems in the workplace was still undeniably prominent.

By the summer of 1943, Detroit had experienced tremendous change. Antagonistic ethnic and racial groups had come into contact with each other for the first time. Native Detroiters generally resented the influx of migrants, while southerners, particularly blacks, found that the North was not exactly the paradise they had imagined. Intense overcrowding led to heated conflicts over housing, and attempts to alleviate the crunch


80 UAW Research Department Collection, Box 19, Folder 8, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
with federally sponsored housing met with widespread protest over which groups were
given priority to occupy specific projects.

The conversion of industry to war production and the creation of the FEPC to
enforce greater hiring and promotion opportunities for minorities led to an increase in
minority employment. But with those opportunities came conflict. White workers,
against the official union policy of equality, struck against local companies to protest the
hiring and promotion of black workers. The largest of these strikes, the Packard strike,
would kick off an explosive summer for America’s Arsenal of Democracy.
Summer 1943 got off to a sweltering start in June as record heat waves swept through the major cities. People tried to escape the heat the only way they knew how – by going outside. People in Detroit flocked to public parks such as Belle Isle, located in the Detroit River, for relief and recreation. Unfortunately, public areas were by no means able to comfortably handle the number of people then living in Detroit. The parks became crowded, and the heat and crowds meant hot tempers.

A growing alarm about the state of race relations in Detroit started to become evident. The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists declared in its paper The Wage Earner that “there is a growing subterranean race war going on in the city of Detroit, which can have no other ultimate result than an explosion of violence, unless something is done to stop it.” The perpetual housing shortages, closer social proximity of blacks and whites, and the recent hate strikes had escalated racial conflict significantly. City officials, aware of the tense situation, met in an attempt to outline a plan for military and police cooperation in the event of a riot; however, these planning meetings were not conclusive.

As the month progressed, small disturbances broke out that should have been an early warning sign. In nearby Inkster on June 13, a brawl started in Inkster Park between blacks and whites spilled over into the streets and into neighboring Romulus Township before the police restored order. Fighting broke out at East Detroit’s Eastwood Amusement Park on June 15 when whites attempted to chase blacks out of the park.

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82 Meier and Rudwick, 100.
These clashes, along with several smaller altercations, slowly escalated. In all these instances, the violence was caught early on and curbed by police.

June 20 began like any other hot summer Sunday. Many people headed to parks for an afternoon of recreation, and many of them drove to Belle Isle, one of the largest public recreational areas in the city. The park was an entire island in the river that was connected to Detroit proper by a single bridge. The large crowds resulted in traffic jams and scuffles over areas as blacks and whites came into closer contact and jockeyed for space in the overcrowded environment. By nightfall, fistfights had broken out on the island and the bridge. Police attempted to maintain order and succeeded in dispersing the Belle Isle crowds, but the groups simply roamed elsewhere downtown. Specifics remain hard to pinpoint, since different versions of the early events of the riots exist in newspapers, organizational reports, and even the official government account.

Rumors began to spread that further agitated people in downtown Detroit in the early hours of June 21. Two rumors used the Belle Isle disturbances as their starting point, and since they cannot be corroborated with any known events they are most likely apocryphal. The rumor spread among whites was that a black man had raped and murdered a white woman on the Belle Isle Bridge. A similar rumor, spread among

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85 Earl Brown, "The Story Behind A Race Riot" first draft. Copy obtained from the NAACP Legal Files, Detroit Riot 1943 Affidavits and Reports.
86 The official government report on the riot was widely regarded as inaccurate and inadequate by a number of organizations, including the NAACP.
blacks, was that whites had thrown a black woman and her baby off the same bridge.\textsuperscript{87} These rumors played on the same deep-seated racial fears, and used arbitrary violence as a means to assert power, in the same manner as lynching had for the past several decades in the South.\textsuperscript{88} True or not, these rumors emboldened angry roving crowds to begin rioting and drew more people into the violence. As the violence escalated, it became clear that there were actually two separate but related riots going on: one black and one white. Neither group could reach the initial point of contention, Belle Isle, because the bridge was still cordoned off by police. Instead, the violence would be centered in two different but adjoining areas.

The white half of the rioting centered on Woodward Avenue, a main artery in Detroit. The rioters initially sought out and attacked black patrons of nighttime establishments bordering Woodward, such as an all-night theater catering to war workers on the swing shift. Word of the violence had not spread sufficiently by the next morning, and the result was the direct clash of unsuspecting commuters heading to work along Woodward with the increasingly bold rioters.\textsuperscript{89}

By morning the small roving hordes had increased in numbers to sizeable mobs, all roaming along Woodward looking for victims. Hapless black pedestrians were chased and savagely beaten. Black motorists were forcibly stopped, pulled out of their cars, and beaten as more mob members overturned and set fire to their vehicles. Streetcars carrying commuters were stopped and surrounded with people who demanded all black

\textsuperscript{87} Shogan and Craig, 42-44.  
\textsuperscript{88} Lewis, 1261-1264.  
riders exit the car to be surrendered to the whims of the crowd.\textsuperscript{90} The simple morning commute in Detroit turned into scenes right out of Hell itself, as blacks were robbed, chased, beaten, and stabbed.

The story of one man's encounter with the Woodward Ave mob is typical of the experiences of riot victims:

One Negro who had been an employee of a bank in Detroit for the past eighteen years was on his way to work on a Woodward avenue streetcar when he was seized by one of the white mobs. In the presence of at least four policemen he was beaten and stabbed in the side. He also heard several shots fired from the back of the mob. He managed to run to two of the policemen who proceeded to "protect" him from the mob. The two policemen, followed by two mounted policemen, proceeded down Woodward Avenue. While these policemen were escorting him, the man was struck in the face by at least eight of the mob, and at no time was any effort made to prevent him from being struck. After a short distance this man noticed a squad car parked on the other side of the street. In sheer desperation, he broke away from the two policemen who claimed to be protecting him and ran to the squad car, begging for protection. The officer in the squad car put him in the back seat and drove off, thereby saving his life.

During all this time, the fact that the man was either shot or stabbed was evident because of the fact that blood was spurting from his side. Despite this obvious felony, committed in the presence of at least four policemen, no effort was made at that time either to protect the victim or to arrest the persons guilty of the felony.\textsuperscript{91}

The man in question was at the center of one of the most memorable photographs from the riot, circulated in many different national publications.\textsuperscript{92} His deposition is a particularly damning account of Detroit police conduct during the riots.

Why were the police unwilling to disperse or control the rioting mobs when they had been able to deal with the disturbance at Belle Isle the previous evening? Detroit police had been called out in full force to deal with the riot. The first, and probably the only sensible, action they took was to barricade the side of Woodward Avenue that was

\textsuperscript{90} Various articles from the \textit{Detroit Free Press} Extra edition, 22 June 1943.
\textsuperscript{91} Thurgood Marshall, "The Gestapo in Detroit." \textit{The Crisis}, August 1943.
\textsuperscript{92} See Appendix B, p. 107 for the image.
the border to Paradise Valley, the nerve center of black Detroit. This action prevented the separate mobs from directly clashing and potentially prevented an even higher death toll. Unfortunately, the rest of police action was not in line with this move. Police were dispatched by car, on horseback, and on foot to contain the riot. Some officers attempted to maintain order and defend black victims, and in turn became targets of the mob themselves. But the vast majority of the police sent to restore order were passive bystanders to the violence, in some cases standing directly amidst the mob and watching blacks being beaten. Even when police did intervene, they mostly did so halfheartedly and were unwilling to prevent rioters from continuing attacks on blacks supposedly safe in police custody. Many police targeted and arrested the black victims instead of the white attackers. As the day wore on and the mob got even more out of control, police resorted to using tear gas to break up crowds.

While police were dealing with white mobs on Woodward, a parallel riot was going on in Paradise Valley. Blacks were rioting in their own section of town, which may at first glance seem odd. But except for a few isolated incidents, their rioting did not follow the Woodward Avenue riot pattern of attacking victims of the opposite race – since few whites went into Paradise Valley. Instead, by and large black rioters targeted property owned by white merchants, either torching the store, looting, or both. The destruction of white-owned property located in a black neighborhood was a symbolic protest against racial structures in the U.S. that gave capitalism a decidedly racist bent when it came to property and business ownership.

93 Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, Race Riot (Detroit, 1943) (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), 33. This book was written in 1943 by two professors of sociology at Wayne University (today Wayne State University) in downtown Detroit, both of who were eyewitnesses to the riots.
Police response to the Paradise Valley rioting was considerably harsher and more forceful than the Woodward Avenue efforts. Police were given license to shoot any suspected looters on sight. They targeted blacks suspected of looting as well as innocent passersby. The police commissioner attempted to deputize black citizens to help control rioting, but these newly minted deputies were given no guns or nightsticks to protect themselves, and received no police support. Instead of policing rioters, these deputies spent most of their time policing the police. One of these deputized officers, Johnny Jackson, gave an account of his experiences during the riot. He told of one of his fellow deputies persuading white police not to shoot two fourteen-year-old girls, only to be hauled away himself in the police car, beaten, and turned over to white rioters on Woodward Avenue. Another incident he related was witnessing a police car pull up to a curb and shoot a black boy, no questions asked. By the time the deputized officers were finally able to get help, the boy was dead. Police attempted to justify shooting him by saying he had possibly been a looter the day before. The seemingly random patterns of police brutality seemed designed to provoke fear in the black community and reinforce white police power.

*The Crisis* illustrated the extent of police brutality toward blacks when it published an article titled “The Gestapo in Detroit,” written by attorney Thurgood Marshall, who co-authored the official NAACP report of the riots with Walter White. Marshall used two compelling elements in the article - statistics and personal stories

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95 Deposition of Johnny Jackson, deputized officer. Copy obtained from NAACP Legal Files, Detroit Riot 1943, Affidavits and Reports.
gathered from affidavits - and framed them with strong language. Seventeen of the twenty-five dead blacks were killed by police. The police claimed that the blacks had been shot while engaged in looting, but two of the deaths were confirmed cases of innocent bystanders being targeted. Marshall argued that the sworn affidavits showed a pattern of police behavior: in many instances, squad cars patrolling black neighborhoods pulled up to a corner, the policemen got out of their vehicles and ordered blacks to disperse, and they beat or shot anyone who did not. Even fleeing with the supposed guarantee the police offered of escaping injury was not a sure bet, since several people were shot in the back while evidently doing so.

The individual stories drawn from the affidavits were often shocking. One account told of a black soldier, still in his Army uniform and walking peaceably by on his way to a theater, being savagely beaten and left for dead by a group of policemen. A woman who witnessed the beating took the man to the hospital. Other stories drawn from affidavits included the police seizure, shooting up, and general ransacking of a YMCA after no clear provocation. Taken together, these individual incidents combined to give one plausible explanation for why the populace distrusted its police force and why the riots required federal troops to restore order.

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96 These affidavits were gathered by the NAACP in support of a planned grand jury investigation of the riot, and most of the affidavits center on black victims of police brutality. Several letters on file seem to suggest that the NAACP did not simply go “hunting for witnesses” but may have followed through these individual complaints with formal interviews and the creation of affidavits. Most witnesses interviewed seem to belong to long-term, “respectable” black Detroiters, such as Johnny Jackson, who was chosen as a temporary police deputy based on his solid middle class standing in the community as a Ford worker, or John Lewis, who was a longtime resident and loyal worker (nearly 20 years) at a downtown bank.

97 Deposition of John Lewis, soldier. Copy obtained from NAACP Legal Files, Detroit Riot 1943, Affidavits and Reports.

One incident in the Paradise Valley rioting that garnered national attention was police seizure and shootings in a black-occupied apartment building. While the story was not mentioned in the *Detroit Free Press*, the leading local newspaper, it made the *New York Times* front page, which detailed a “Two Hour Battle With Snipers.” According to the *Times*, several blacks armed with shotguns ran into an apartment complex and commenced sniping from its upper floors. In response, “local and state police pumped more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition and dozens of tear gas bombs” into the complex to drive them out. The incident reportedly ended with the surrender of the surviving black shooters; two of them had died.\(^9^9\)

The same story was told in a very different light in the pages of the *Crisis*. A policeman had been shot in a vacant lot nearby the apartment building, but the shooter had already been identified and killed. Then, the police had turned on the apartment building:

> Searchlights were thrown on the building and machine guns, revolvers, rifles, and deer guns were fired indiscriminately into all of the occupied apartments facing the outside. Tenants of the building were forced to fall to the floor and remain there in order to save their lives. Later slugs from machine guns, revolvers, and deer guns were dug from the inside walls of many of the apartments. Tear gas was shot into the building and all the tenants were forced out into the streets with their hands up in the air at the point of drawn guns...

> While the tenants were lined up in the street, the apartments were forcibly entered. Locks and doors were broken. All the apartments were ransacked. Clothing and other articles were thrown around on the floor. All of these acts were committed by policemen. Most of the tenants reported that money, jewelry, whiskey, and other items of personal property were missing when they were permitted to return to their apartments after midnight. State and city police had been in possession of the building in the meantime.\(^10^0\)

A slew of affidavits supported the *Crisis*’s version of the incident. If that was the case, then the incident was a glaring incident of rampant police misconduct during the riots.

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Chaos reigned on what came to be known afterwards as “Bloody Monday.” The local police proved, in a case similar to the earlier riots at the Sojourner Truth Housing Project the year before, that they were unable to bring peace to the warring city. At 10 a.m. Detroit Mayor Edward J. Jeffries, Jr. finally called Michigan Governor Harry F. Kelly for reinforcements. Kelly agreed to send Michigan state police and troops, and also requested federal troops. It would be twelve whole hours before a combination of state and federal troops came in and were able to halt the riots.101

By the time the rioting quieted on the evening of June 21, thirty-four people had been killed. Twenty-three were black. Governor Kelly had declared a modified state of martial law, calling in federal troops to occupy the city.102 A 10 p.m. curfew was enforced, and large events such as the double-header baseball game between Detroit and Cleveland and high school graduations were attended by troops to prevent further violence.103 Property losses from the riot totaled about $2 million, and an estimated one million man-hours were lost in the defense plants, more than during all the labor problems in the U.S. in both January and February that year.104 Detroit, with its damaged streets patrolled by soldiers who enforced the law and a strict curfew, bore more resemblance to a war zone than a city at the heart of America's war industry.

The story of the Detroit riots broke on June 22, 1943. It was one of many incidents jockeying for position on the front pages of the nation’s newspapers. Due to the war

101 Capeci and Wilkerson, 9-10.
102 Woodford and Woodford, 347.
104 Shogan and Craig, 89.
effort and a possible major coal strike that threatened to cripple the nation, the Detroit riot did not get significant front-page space, but was discussed in the interior pages.105

Most national newspaper coverage of the riots labeled the blacks as victims. Not everyone agreed with that line of reasoning. In a letter to Martin S. Hayden dated July 12, 1943, Mayor Jeffries revealed his views on the riots:

The newspapers, either by accident or deliberately, did not handle the early stages well... No daily news reporter or photographer dared to enter the Negro section. Therefore, all the pictures were of white groups pursuing... Negroes, and no pictures were taken where Negroes were the aggressors... I repeat, the newspaper accounts, especially those carried by newspapers in other communities and national magazines, pictures this as happening as a persecution of the Negroes by the whites. The exact antithesis would be more accurate.106

What Jeffries apparently forgot was that police barred the entrance to “the Negro section,” Paradise Valley, to prevent further violence. The press, like everyone else, was unable to get through to cover black rioting.

Photographs thus became the focal point of the Detroit riot coverage. The images captured the horror, brutality, and ugliness of racial conflict within America. But the photos selected by different print media revealed what the publications wanted to emphasize. In this case the absence of certain scenes speaks just as loudly as the presence of others.

The only print media in which riot photos made the cover or front page were the local newspapers the Detroit News and Detroit Free Press. Photos of the riots were put in the interior pages of major newspapers like The New York Times, The Washington Post, or The Chicago Tribune. Major black weeklies like the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender either placed the riots in the context of other recent disturbances or

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105 See Appendix B, pp. 100-101, 108-109 for images of front pages and photo spreads from national media coverage.

focused, in the case of the *Defender*, on riot prevention, and did not feature riot images prominently. In no major magazine did riot photos make the cover, yet *Life* and the NAACP's monthly publication *The Crisis* contained articles with large photo spreads. Considering the limited impact the story had in the headlines, the lack of photos in prominent places is not surprising. The amount of space devoted to photos varied from none in the National Urban League's publication, *Opportunity*, to eight and a half pages in *Life*.

It was no surprise that the riot story and images featured more prominently in local newspapers, but the way in which the two major local papers -- the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* -- used riot photos spoke volumes about the political and social orientation of each publication. *The News* was known as the more conservative of Detroit's papers. Unsurprisingly, the majority of images it showed from the riot were of various individuals maintaining law and order, and the aftermath of looting. Only a few days into its coverage did it start to show images from the riot itself, and then it only focused on mob actions to set fire to cars. *The News*'s choice of these types of images showed a reluctance to tackle the racialized violence in the riots.107 The more progressive *Free Press* made liberal use of the many pictures of brutality and violence from the riot. While the images splashed on the front page were those of policeman rescuing blacks from attack, a two-page photo spread in the interior showed a full range of riot scenes. Burning autos, jammed hospitals, white mobs attacking black victims, and police attempts to maintain order made up a collage of destruction. By selecting images

107 See Appendix B, p. 102 for images from the *Detroit News*'s coverage.
of violence, the *Free Press* made a statement against race hatred. As progressive as the *Free Press* was, however, it still did not use its photos to critique police actions in the riots as *Life* and the *Crisis* did, since allegations of police brutality did not make an appearance until after the first few days of riot coverage.

A few images ran in multiple publications and became fixed in the public consciousness. The most notable image from the riots was perhaps that of a white rioter striking a black man being escorted by four policemen. The image ran in *The Crisis*, *Life*, and *The Chicago Tribune*, and was the only image of the riot in *Time*’s coverage. A truncated version of it also ran in *The New York Times*. The captions given to this photo are illuminating. *Time*’s simple caption, “Detroit police and rioters: the dynamite exploded,” referenced a well-known article, titled “Detroit Is Dynamite,” that ran in *Life* the previous year. The conservative *Chicago Tribune* used the photo to give information on the number of police called in to duty. Only *The Crisis* and *Life* — both progressive magazines published a few weeks after the rioting — used the picture to critique the role of police in the riots. *The Crisis* commented:

> The very best photo of the Detroit, Mich., race riot, June 20-22, is shown at the top. Two mounted police and two foot policemen fail to prevent a Negro from being struck by a white rioter. This picture bears out the wide criticism of the role of the police in the riot; they killed 20 of the 25 dead Negroses, shot not a single white person.

*Life* reported:

> Rioter slaps a Negro who is being held by two policemen, while a large group of white hoodlums surges in from behind. Throughout the riot the Detroit police were tougher on Negroes than whites. They used tear gas and (sometimes) nightsticks on white mobs, Tommy guns and pistols on Negroes. They killed 15 Negroes, most of who were said to be “looting,” and no whites,

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108 See Appendix B, pp. 103-106 for images from the *Detroit Free Press*’s coverage.

109 See Appendix B, p. 107 for the image.

110 “Detroit is Dynamite,” *Life*, 17 August 1942.


although white gangs overturned police cars and beat up policemen in rescuing rioters who had been arrested...113

These captions are only two instances of the way in which the media used photos and captions together to shape their coverage of the riots.

Aside from the occurrence of a handful of images in multiple newspapers and magazines, national publications were not as likely to have the huge photo spreads of local papers like the Detroit Free Press. The Pittsburgh Courier was the exception to this, publishing a full page of riot images.114 The Chicago Defender only published one photo, that of white rioters overturning a black man’s car.115 The Chicago Daily Tribune devoted half its back page to riot images; The New York Times gave about half of an interior page to photographic coverage.116 Perhaps the most stunningly emphatic in its use of images was Life’s coverage in its July 5 issue.

Life’s article, “Race War in Detroit: Americans maul and murder each other as Hitler wins a battle in the nation’s most explosive city,” took up a mere half page; its title reinforced the popular belief that any sign of disunity on the home front directly aided the Axis powers. Eight-and-a-half pages of its riot coverage were devoted to twenty images. Half of the photos were of attacks on blacks in the streets or on black property. Only one image even hinted at the black side of the riot, that of a distraught storeowner looking at her looted property.117

113 “Race War in Detroit,” Life, 5 July 1943. Notice that the numbers of dead are different depending on publications. This is because of the nature of reporting on a riot – very confused numbers, some riot casualties initially surviving but dying of their injuries in the hospital, etc.

114 See Appendix B, p. 109 for images.

115 “Scene During Monday’s Rioting in Detroit,” The Chicago Defender, 26 June 1943.


117 “Race War in Detroit,” Life, 5 July 1943. [See Appendix B, pp. 110-111 for images.]
Why were there no pictures, in any publication, of blacks rioting? Black rioting was clearly documented in reports and in the pictures of looted and burned stores that cropped up a few days later in media coverage of the riot aftermath. The lack of images showing the black half of the riot did not go unnoticed. In the July 26 issue, two *Life* readers called the magazine out on its omission. But the editor’s note gave a valid reason for the selection of images. Police trying to keep the white and black mobs apart restricted entrance to the black section of town, Paradise Valley. As a result, nearly all images of black rioting were confined to the aftermath of looting. *Life* had been careful to mention this in captions of its article, but not all news sources were as prudent. Lack of images from the black segment of the rioting, however minor it was, meant that coverage of the riots was slightly lopsided, especially if readers focused mainly on the pictures. In some cases newspapers had a fairly balanced article on both parts of the riot, but aside from the photos of white aggression, they only had pictures of the aftermath of property damage to work with. Images of mob violence were, unsurprisingly, more memorable and eye-catching than images of burned-out buildings because of the stronger emotional response and empathy generated by bodily violence.

*Life* ran images that boldly showed the barbarity and brutality that other publications like *The Crisis* only hinted at in words and captions. One *Life* image showed a black man being menaced by white policemen; the beginning of the caption reads, “Negro ‘suspect’ is cornered by police who seem ready to use their clubs.” Brutality of whites toward other whites helping blacks was also emphasized. In two images, white soldiers or policemen aiding blacks are menaced by other whites. One major image, and the only one taking up a whole page, showed a white police officer, knocked unconscious
by a pop bottle to the head, falling into the arms of another policemen as they are
surrounded by a white crowd. The caption sought to impress the reader with the
perversity of the white rioter’s stance:

Policeman falls into the arms of another officer, knocked cold by a pop bottle. By a weird trick of
mob psychology, the white rioters raised the cry of “Hitlerism” when the police tried to stop their
abuse of Negroes. They yelled “Just like Germany,” when police turned tear gas on them. One
white youth snarled, “Yah, you damn Gestapo” at the policemen who seized him for beating a
Negro. Apparently, they did not realize that they were the ones who looked and acted like Nazis.118

Comparing white rioters to Nazis did not so much indicate a desire to condemn American
racism, but rather a desire to distance Americans from their infamously prejudiced
enemies and to enforce home front unity. Racial violence perpetrated by Americans only
gave ammunition to their enemies and damaged America’s credibility with its nonwhite
allies. The riots were indeed exploited in Axis propaganda in Berlin and Tokyo,
confirming American fears.119

The photographic coverage of the riots had a more profound impact on the public
than the most eloquent prose. They could read the text of articles and argue the
legitimacy of the claims of racial strife and social problems, but they could not make such
arguments about the photos. How could fellow Americans turn on each other and exhibit
the same sort of hatred they were fighting against overseas? The images were
inescapable proof to naysayers that such discordant sentiments did exist in a supposedly
unified, wartime society. The photos of lawlessness and hatred, combined with captions
bemoaning the resemblance in rioters’ behavior to the very forces they supposedly stood
against, seemed designed to shame Americans and serve as a reminder that racial conflict
could not be ignored.

118 “Race War in Detroit,” Life, 5 July 1943. [See Appendix B, p. 111 for image.]
Letters to the editor in *Life* indicated that its photographic coverage of the riots had achieved the intended result. "As a native Detroiter," said one, "please let me take this opportunity to express our feeling of deep humility and shame at what has befallen our city." A serviceman from Brooklyn commented on the abilities and loyalty of many blacks he had met while attending the University of Michigan and in the service, and added, "Pictures of Detroit's riots do not leave a very pleasant thought in the minds of many of us in the service." Even white Southerners, supposedly the most racist group in the nation, responded with anger and horror. One Virginia man wrote, "...I'd like to take one of those nice lead pipes and bend it over the head of every one of the poor white trash and the Yankee hoodlums who contributed such a nice set of pictures from Detroit." He added in closing, "Those pictures made me so damned mad I'd even shake Abe Lincoln's hand right now!"\(^{120}\)

It did not take long for the public to latch on to potential causes of the riots. While some did blame "agitators" and "subversives," echoing the "Bolshevik" claims of 1919 Chicago, Detroit's closest comparison in scale, far more people pointed to rapid migration to satisfy defense industry labor needs and the subsequent lack of housing as the root causes. The emphasis on migration in particular was the result of the contemporary strong interest in sociological explanations. The conclusions reached by the national media were far different from those of the formal committee established by Mayor Edward J. Jeffries and Governor Harry F. Kelly. The discrepancy between media explanations and committee explanations especially rankled *The Crisis*. Even though the

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\(^{120}\) "Letters to the Editors," *Life*, 16 July 1943.
twin factors of housing and migration were identified early, they still held up to scrutiny months after the general public derided the official report.

On June 25, the *New York Times* published an article, “Michigan Inquiry Seeks Riot Causes,” which first hinted at a strong sociological approach to determining the causes of the riot. “This whole thing is sociological and we’ve got to establish, by scientific investigation, what sort of maladjustments bring about such a situation,” Governor Kelly was quoted as saying. Kelly invited Dr. Charles F. Ramsay of the Department of Social Welfare to conduct interviews of the people detained in the riots to determine their backgrounds.121 Detroit provided a two-fold interest for sociologists. First, both the general population and academic sociologists had become interested in what they termed “hoodlumism,” or juvenile delinquency, which they worried was on the rise. Such worries had fed into the “zoot suit” riots in Los Angeles a few weeks before the Detroit incident, and the fact that many of the Detroit rioters were youths strengthened the case for juvenile delinquency.122 But more unique to Detroit was the large influx of black and white Southern migrants who had come to Detroit for war work. Largely from a poor rural background, the transplanted Southerners had to make certain adjustments to city living and Northern culture. It was the degree of success in making that transition that the sociologists were interested in, and whether any potential maladjustments could have contributed to the riots.

Faith in sociology to provide a rational, scientific explanation of society’s ills was at least partly a consequence of New Deal progressivism. During the Great Depression,

the government had turned to experts to aid in solving the country’s monetary and social problems in a rational manner. This faith in reason had helped to create the vogue in sociology, and many people outside of the academic sphere familiarized themselves with its terms and research. The public interest in sociology is very evident in newspaper articles of the time and is especially true of the Detroit riot coverage.

Ramsay’s study of the arrested rioters, almost all black, gave no concrete conclusions for riot causes but discounted the Southern influence. Most of those questioned had lived in Detroit for a number of years, were well established, and described their previous experiences with discrimination as negligible. While Ramsay’s study was a valid scientific attempt to determine the extent of Southern influence in the riots, it would have been less biased if he had broadened his survey base. Limiting it to people arrested meant that he missed out on the large white participant base. Other papers also addressed the sociological causes of the riots. The Chicago Tribune published a lengthy article by reporter Frank Hughes discussing the sociological angle in detail.

In “Experts Trace Race Conflicts to Dixie Exodus,” Hughes interviewed two men he identified as “sociologists,” Claude Williams and Walter White. He gave no academic affiliation for either man; Williams was identified as a Presbyterian minister and Southerner and Walter White as the executive secretary of the NAACP. The article focuses mainly on transplanted Southern prejudice as the root cause of racial conflict in the North, and gave special attention to the role of religion in fostering these hatreds. Dr. Williams attempted to give a scientific explanation for the intertwining of religion and

prejudice. He argued that many of the white Southern migrants came from rural areas, where they had been isolated and had developed a distrust of the outside world, encouraged by “working preachers,” laymen who were their de facto religious leaders. These poor Southerners, Williams posited, brought these prejudiced worldviews with them when they migrated north, a view which feeds into and supports the stereotype of the bigoted Southern hick as the source of racial woes, to the horror of more sophisticated Northern urbanites. Only as an afterthought did the article briefly address allegations of police ineffectiveness, and even then the tone was not critical of police actions. Hughes came down strongly on the side of Southern migration as a leading factor, despite knowing of and citing the Ramsay study.124 This type of “armchair sociology” engaged in by Hughes and others reflected the impact of New Deal progressivism on public discourse.

Professional sociologists shared the fixation on the relation of migration to Detroit’s woes, but differed in other interpretations. Juvenile delinquency, although studied in academia, was largely sensationalized in the public discourse. Sociologists did share the public’s concern about entrenched racism, but the solutions they posited - the widespread change in white attitudes and eventual assimilation of blacks into society - were optimistic and impractical given the level of institutionalized racism.

Although the official Detroit inquiry largely ruled out Southern influence, the fact of rapid migration and its influence on the housing situation still remained as sources of discontent. The housing problems described by Life in 1942 were still unsolved in 1943. A study by the National Urban League pinpointed housing, made worse for blacks due to

residential segregation, as a major problem and contributor to a climate of racial tension. There were talks of attempting to stem migration in an attempt to help ease the housing situation, a plan Attorney General Francis Biddle denied, though he had contemplated migration’s relation to Detroit’s ills. Today, the housing problems in Detroit in 1943 are still regarded as one of the leading factors contributing to the tensions that caused the riots.

There were few serious allegations of “subversive” causes of the riots in the national media. The more conservative Chicago Tribune played it up more than other papers, but it was still muted. The FBI quickly ruled out Axis plotting as a cause. However, Martin Dies, a congressman from Texas and the head of the Dies Committee examining racial hatred in Detroit and elsewhere, was convinced that a “fifth column” of Japanese agents had fomented the Detroit riots and proposed to include the city’s unrest in his study. Various domestic hate groups, such as the Black Legion and the Ku Klux Klan, were blamed as having had an influence on the general discontent, even if they had not directed the rioting. Calls for investigation of Ku Klux Klan activities in Detroit intensified, and such a task was proposed for inclusion in Representative Dies’ investigation of racial discord. In reality, an FBI investigation of the Klan conducted shortly after the riot concluded that there was no direct link. John S. Bugas, the head of the FBI in Detroit, was emphatic in his belief that foreign spies or homegrown racial

126 “Biddle Denies Migration Ban,” The Crisis, September 1943.
127 For more discussion of housing in Detroit, see the work of Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Thomas J. Sugrue, cited above.
129 “Riots to Be Probed by Dies Committee,” The Detroit Free Press, 24 June 1943.
subversives did not influence the riot. "Do you think that the 200 kids, boys between the ages of 14 and 18, who stopped a streetcar, pulled off Negroes, and pummeled them, were acting on orders?" Bugas asked, adding, "I don't." The likelihood of foreign or domestic groups orchestrating the Detroit riots was viewed in law enforcement circles as absurd. But the willingness of some white citizens to seize on the idea of outside influences causing the riots reflected their denial of their own complicity in supporting the racism that spurred the violence.

A final potential cause, and one suggested by the final official report, was the alleged contribution of black advocacy organizations to unrest. The official report alleged that black groups such as the NAACP and the National Urban League had fostered discontent among blacks that had made them more aggressive and prone to violence. This finding caused an indignant uproar in the pages of The Crisis:

"Violence of whites against Negroes is dismissed summarily in a short paragraph, despite the fact it is asserted this violence extended over a period of twenty hours, from 4 a.m. June 21, until 11 p.m. that same day. During this period more than 1,500 persons were arrested [of] whom 85% were Negroes. Seventeen of the twenty five slain Negroes were killed by the police." Mainstream white publications also found fault with the official report. Scapegoating black organizations was the easy way out for Detroit city officials who had committed serious errors in their handling of the riots. Given that many of the people on the investigating committee were the same officials, the results were hardly surprising.

133 "Riot Report Blames Negroes," The Crisis, September 1943.
Detroit remained under martial law for a week. As the troops left and the city began to rebuild damaged structures and return to business as usual, the people of Detroit were determined to prevent a repeat of such violence. Defense migration that taxed both the physical and cultural infrastructures of Detroit was a major factor in creating the tense racial climate that spawned the riots. Overcrowding and lack of housing caused by mass recruitment of labor for defense plants, cultural disagreements and misunderstandings arising from closer proximity of previously segregated groups, and the maladjustment of recent migrants and youth contributed to the explosive climate in which the riots occurred. As the nation watched warily, the citizens of Detroit took their first tentative steps toward ensuring that such a violent and disruptive event would not occur again.

134 "Detroit Back to Normal; Martial Law Lifted," The Detroit Free Press, 29 June 1943.
Immediately following the 1943 riots, the tone of race relations in Detroit experienced a decisive shift. Certain organizations sought to improve race relations in the community through endeavors like reiteration of official antidiscrimination policies in the unions and an interracial committee promoting multicultural education in the schools. These efforts for change met with mixed results. It became evident that the people of Detroit wanted to avoid further violence and repair a tarnished national reputation more than they wanted true racial understanding and harmony. Beginning in 1944, the city saw a gradual "social reconversion" to mirror its impending industrial one as Detroit slid back into old patterns of racial discrimination. As the war drew to a close, housing problems, equal employment legislation, and job security issues demonstrated that white Detroiters had not altered its attitudes towards race so much as the blatant nature of pre-riot racism.

In the immediate aftermath of the riots, the UAW took a proactive stance to correct unrest in Detroit. The union had long been a supporter of equal employment, and through its Research and Fair Practices departments it had worked to end job discrimination and help lobbied the government to build more housing to help alleviate the shortage for thousands of war workers. Fearing a negative impact on war production and the union, UAW President R.J. Thomas issued a statement immediately following the riots. Thomas
proposed investigations of the riots, the construction of more black housing and public recreational space, and continued nondiscriminatory employment practices.\(^{135}\)

After the riots the UAW's Education Department began working on ways to better educate its workforce and promote the union's antidiscrimination policy. In late 1943 it published "To Stamp Out Discrimination: A Handbook." The pamphlet was widely distributed among union locals and underwent at least one reprint before the end of the war. "To Stamp Out Discrimination" encouraged rank-and-file workers to support the union's antidiscrimination policies of fair hiring and promoting practices, with the argument that these policies benefited all workers, not just minorities. It also urged workers to strive for racial tolerance not just in their workplaces, but also in their homes and communities. "Seventeen year olds did much of the rioting in Detroit," the pamphlet asserted, reminding workers of their "own duty as parents to instill ideas of unionism and democracy in their own children, to immunize them against doctrines of hate."\(^{136}\) The idea that democracy, represented by the union, could "immunize" people against "doctrines of hate" reflected the beliefs of sociologists such as Gunnar Myrdal who avowed that racism could be overcome simply through educating white people on tolerance and diversity.\(^{137}\)

This notion of simply overcoming prejudice through education was supported not just by the union, but also by city-sponsored community organizations. Mayor Jeffries had established the City of Detroit Interracial Committee to help foster communication

\(^{135}\) "Statement of UAW President R.J. Thomas, 22 June 1943," UAW Research Department Collection, Box 17, Folder: Migration 1941, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

\(^{136}\) "To Stamp Out Discrimination: A Handbook," pamphlet prepared by the UAW-CIO Education Department. UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

\(^{137}\) Myrdal, xii-iv.
and understanding between the various ethnic and racial groups in the city. Under
direction of the mayor, the committee was made up of representatives of five city
departments and five leaders in the community.\textsuperscript{138} Two important subcommittees were
tasked with tackling the issue of multicultural education: the Committee on Interracial
and Intercultural Understanding in the Schools and the Administrative Committee on
Intercultural Education.\textsuperscript{139} These two committees worked hand-in-hand to promote
tolerance among Detroit’s youth, hoping that if schoolchildren were taught about
different ethnicities and races, they would be less likely to participate in the sort of
racially charged violent behavior exhibited by so many young men during the rioting.
They believed that multicultural education would prevent the next generation of students
from being racially ignorant and engaging in "hoodlumism."

The ambitious plans of the committees entailed such efforts as educational radio
programs, teacher workshops, round table forums, and unit studies emphasizing
understanding of different cultures.\textsuperscript{140} One ambitious concept introduced was “trouble
shooting,” in which instances of unrest were addressed by dispatching a team composed
of both black and white individuals to diffuse the situation.\textsuperscript{141} The program saw some
successes by the spring of 1945, but still had some major unmet goals. Despite being in
existence for nearly two years, the Committee on Intercultural Education had been unable

\textsuperscript{138} “Committee on Interracial and Intercultural Understanding in the Schools Minutes, January 21, 1944.”
UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 1, Folder 35, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs,
Wayne State University.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{140} “Progress Report on Intercultural Education in the Detroit Public Schools 1944-1945.”
UAW Fair Practices Department, Box 1, Folder 35, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

\textsuperscript{141} “Committee on Interracial and Intercultural Understanding in the Schools Minutes, January 21, 1944.”
UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 1, Folder 35, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs,
Wayne State University.
to solidify support for its programs at the neighborhood and even school levels. Broader community involvement, through initiatives like adult education, and one of the most promising early proposals, “teacher exchange,” had yet to materialize. Uneven acceptance of the program by administrators and the general lack of funding hampered adoption of these multicultural education measures.\textsuperscript{142}

The mayor’s interracial council as a whole was notably ineffective. The committee was a largely ceremonial organization with limited enforcement powers and monetary resources, unable to reform areas in major need of change and able to exert only limited, voluntary efforts in other areas like intercultural education. In addition, some members of the community saw the organization as a thinly veiled attempt by Mayor Jeffries to save his political image and secure his reelection. Underfunded and politically stigmatized, the council fought an uphill battle in the community, and in the end achieved limited results.

Another problem Detroit faced was the perpetually dire housing situation. While everyone agreed that overcrowding, especially for blacks, was an issue, no one agreed on how to fix the problem. Instead, neighborhood bickering, official grumbling, and questions of blame dogged every attempt to alleviate the housing shortage.

A December 1944 report by the Special Committee on Housing for Metropolitan Detroit illustrated the continued severity of the housing problem for blacks, and implied that the housing crisis was hampering war production. While the vacancy rate of just one percent was problematic for whites, the black vacancy rate stood at zero. The records of

\textsuperscript{142} “Progress Report on Intercultural Education in the Detroit Public Schools 1944-1945.” UAW Fair Practices Department, Box 1, Folder 35, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
the Detroit Housing Commission showed that it had received 14,466 applications for black housing between November 1943 and November 1944 and had been able to accommodate only 1,731, or 12%, of the requests. The unsuccessful applicants were forced to continue living in overcrowded and substandard housing. To alleviate the problem, the Committee advocated construction of more housing units and the cooperation and support of all Detroit area communities in locating federal projects within their borders. Dearborn, a major production center for Ford and a natural location for housing projects, was singled out as having shirked its responsibilities, since 13,600 blacks worked at Dearborn plants and only 89 lived in the area at the time of the study as the result of restrictive covenants.¹⁴³

The location of black housing continued to be a point of contention as the federal government attempted to build more housing projects in Detroit. White residents of Dearborn steadfastly resisted the construction of federal projects within the community. Other areas proved similarly resistant. In March 1945, local housing authorities soundly rejected a proposal to construct 1,000 units for black occupation in southwestern Detroit.¹⁴⁴ At the same time another conflict arose in nearby Oakwood when the city attempted to zone the neighborhood for interracial occupation and make room for more black housing after some black families had moved into the surrounding area. Similar controversy erupted in July 1945 over the attempt to designate an existing housing

¹⁴³ "Special Committee on Housing for Metropolitan Detroit Release, 8 December 1944." UAW Research Department Collection, Box 15, Housing—Detroit Area Folder, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
project in Hamtramck biracial. Everyone acknowledged the housing crisis, but no one wanted to help fix it by locating black housing in their all-white communities. Racially restrictive covenants and the lack of housing agencies in the suburbs meant that blacks who were able to get federal support lived in housing projects in limited areas in the city and did not have the option to live in suburbs on loans like their poor white counterparts.

White citizens of Detroit nursed a growing resentment of the federal government, blaming them for their housing woes. Edward Thal, secretary of the Building Trades Council, represented the business community and voiced the concerns of white Detroit citizens at large in a March 1945 interview. "The [housing] problem is acute – there's no question of that," Thal admitted. "Much of the problem, however, can be traced directly to the damnable actions of the War Manpower Commission in blatantly running around the country recruiting labor for Detroit as a 'critical' area." Thal denied that there was a critical need to bring more workers into Detroit, maintaining that the city had a sufficient supply of workers to meet increased demand. According to most white citizens, successful recruitment of labor for the war industry had caused Detroit's housing crunch, and the people of Detroit were not afraid to complain about government interference in the life of their city.

As the war drew to a close, various groups, including the NAACP, sought ways to preserve minorities’ wartime gains for peacetime. One strategy they pursued was to make the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) permanent. Such a measure would help secure wartime employment gains among minorities, at least in theory, by continuing government enforcement of nondiscriminatory hiring practices. The NAACP was particularly vocal in support of a permanent FEPC. It lobbied for both state and federal versions of the FEPC to provide maximum coverage for minority workers. While FEPC legislation would prove successful in some states, efforts to pass the legislation in Michigan and at a national level failed at first.

By mid-April 1945, an FEPC bill was law in New York, and pending in Michigan and seventeen other states. The many labor issues in Detroit demonstrated a need for a permanent state-level FEPC. Support for the pending legislation was strengthened by the existence of the wartime program, which demonstrated both the necessity of such a law and the practicality of enforcing it. Also giving the legislation serious clout was its support from labor unions, especially the CIO, which had long advocated against discrimination in employment. The most vocal attacks came over whether “morals” could be legislated. Opponents argued that education, not legislation, should be the path toward employment without discrimination. But supporters of the state FEPC legislation pointed out that while educational efforts, like that of Detroit’s Interracial Committee, were in place, relying on education alone would result in a much longer process than one established by legislation.\footnote{148 “Fair Job Practices of National Concern,” \textit{Detroit News}, 2 April 1945. Copy obtained from the NAACP and Labor collection, FEPC file.}
The NAACP consciously patterned its efforts to lobby for an FEPC bill in Michigan after the New York campaign and urged the community to take action in support of the legislation. NAACP leaders urged local branches to recruit as many organizations as possible to flood the state Senate’s offices with telegrams and letters in support of the bill. They also advocated sending delegations to visit their representatives and personally appeal to them for passage of legislation to create a state-level FEPC.149 The measure that gained the most success was enlisting citizens to make statements at hearings on the bill.

The mix of community organizations, religious groups, sociologists, labor representatives, and wartime FEPC administrators all agreed that Michigan, and the U.S. as a whole, badly needed a permanent FEPC to guarantee nondiscrimination in employment, and that such a program was feasible. “When an employer says to me: ‘You can’t employ without discrimination so far as race, color, creed, or sex is concerned,’ I know he is wrong, because I’ve done it,” former industrial manager Franklin Wallin stated. Others invoked the experiences of veterans from earlier conflicts who were decorated for their valor on the battlefield and yet denied a job at home, as in the case of a Jewish Medal of Honor recipient in World War I.150

Many people testified that guaranteeing fair employment was a religious and moral obligation, and that denial of equal opportunities could lead to domestic discontent and crisis. “The roots of race riots and similar disturbances are economic; no person can

149 “FEPC Bulletin #6: FEPC Bill Still in Committee,” issued by the state branch of the NAACP, 14 April 1945. Copy obtained from the NAACP and Labor collection, FEPC file.
150 Statement of Harry J. Schaeffer, Michigan Commander, Jewish War Veterans [name of Medal of Honor recipient is not mentioned]. From “Excerpts From Statements in Support of Senate Bill 134.” Copy obtained from the NAACP and Labor collection, FEPC file.
be expected to be a good citizen who, despite his qualifications, has to accept low-rate or service industry jobs,” President John Gibson of the Michigan CIO testified. William Valentine of the Detroit Urban League asserted the need to legislate nondiscrimination in employment, pointing out that twenty-seven years of educational efforts to improve black employment had proved “fruitless” in Detroit and that “only legislation can destroy the continuing patterns of discrimination.”

When appeals to common sense and morals failed, citizens were not afraid to exert political pressure, as exhibited by Gerson Chertoff of the Jewish Community Council of Detroit:

“The Republican Party in the State of Michigan stated in its platform of last summer: ‘We pledge the establishment of State and Federal legislation of a Permanent Fair Employment Practice Commission.’ . . . Michigan’s Senior Senator, Arthur Vandenburg, said in a recent letter: ‘I think the greatest field for progress . . . is in State legislation, through State laws, as is being done, for example, in New York State.’ . . . Governor Dewey kept the Republican Party pledge in New York. Michigan voters expect Michigan Republicans to keep their pledge.”

Unfortunately Michigan Republicans found that pledge a difficult one to keep. The Michigan FEPC legislation, despite all the grassroots campaigning and testimony, remained embattled and would not pass for another decade.

Efforts to enact a permanent, federal-level FEPC were complicated by regional politics. The FEPC had endured attacks from Southern politicians almost since its inception. Resistance to the FEPC became more vocal in late 1943. Representative John Rankin of Mississippi stated in December 1943 that the FEPC seemed to be “doing everything they possibly can to . . . to force [whites] to accept Negroes on terms of social

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151 “Excerpts From Statements in Support of Senate Bill 134.” Copy obtained from the NAACP and Labor collection, FEPC file.
152 Ibid.
equality” and believed that if successful in their efforts, the FEPC would bring “race trouble” like the riots in Detroit and Harlem. The same month, Representative Howard Smith of Virginia began an investigation of the FEPC in an effort to eliminate it. His investigation failed to make a direct impact, but in the spirit of his efforts a coalition led by Southern congressmen launched a series of attempts in 1944 and 1945 to deprive the FEPC of funding and thus kill it. The FEPC was kept afloat by the strong support of President Roosevelt, but with his death in April 1945 the committee’s future seemed uncertain. Though Truman continued to support the FEPC he could not save it. Led by Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, Southern political leaders mounted an all-out effort to break up the FEPC, and it was formally dismantled in June 1946. Federal antidiscrimination legislation would not pass until 1964 as part of the Civil Rights Act, which established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to fulfill the same functions that the FEPC had twenty years earlier.

As the war was coming to a close, serious concerns were raised about the seniority of women and minority workers. These workers were afraid of losing all the gains they had made in winning better jobs and terms of employment at the end of the war because, based on the traditional system of seniority supported by the unions, their wartime employment was often shorter than the tenure of returning troops who had been workers before the war. Also, there was great public pressure to make the transition into civilian life as smooth as possible for these soldiers and sailors by offering them their jobs back, even if they had only had minimal experience before the war. Inevitably, the

155 Ibid., 127-134.
reconversion of industry to peacetime production also meant the downsizing of the workforce. Preference for soldiers and the downsizing of reconversion were the twin specters haunting minority workers. Without government support in the form of the FEPC, workers hoped that the union would be able to fill the void and represent their best interests.

The system of seniority that had been in place since the founding of the union mandated that workers who were “the first to be hired” were “the last to be fired” or laid off. The system was designed to reward longtime workers with a measure of job security in times of fluctuating market conditions, and to combat high turnover that plagued the auto industry in its earlier years. During the war, the FEPC changed hiring and promotion practices and enabled minority workers to take advantage of expanded employment opportunities. With the economy in full swing due to the war effort, low standing in the seniority system was not a problem for most newcomers.

As the end of the war loomed, however, it became evident that the current seniority system would not work to the advantage of minority workers. Reconversion meant both a short-term reduction in industry jobs and the return of large numbers of veterans, some of whom were former autoworkers who had more seniority than the recently hired minority workers. With the future of the FEPC legislation unclear after Roosevelt’s death, employment was likely to revert back to prewar hiring patterns – that is, to an all-white workforce in the highly skilled positions. Despite the large numbers of minority workers who had acquired the training for these jobs during the war, when it came down to hiring, most Detroit company managers still preferred a largely white
workforce, due either to their own racial views or the desire to avoid white worker discontent of the kind that prompted hate strikes during the war.

To prevent this backslide into prewar hiring and retention practices, a modified system of seniority, dubbed "proportional seniority," was suggested. Under this proposed system, the racial balance of the workforce during the war would be maintained in peacetime by favoring black workers over white workers with more seniority because more black workers needed to be retained to keep wartime ratios. These white workers would essentially be denied the job security they were promised, in the name of equal employment. The UAW did not support this system because it violated the basic principles of the UAW's seniority policy, and instead preferred to continue lobbying for FEPC legislation as a better method to fix the skewed racial representation in industry.156

As it became clear that the seniority system was not going to change and minority workers were going to wind up demoted or jobless, the National Urban League, an organization similar to the NAACP, studied the impact of reconversion on minority workers throughout the nation. In the study presented to President Truman on August 27, 1945, the League broke down into sections like Employment, Housing, Education, Health, and Race Relations. It highlighted the universality of some problems and the unique dilemmas facing major industrial centers like Detroit. Overcrowded black housing was a shared concern among Northern cities, but it noted Detroit’s strict residential segregation policies made the housing problem especially severe. Dismal reemployment prospects haunted these same communities, but again Detroit seemed to be

156 R.J. Thomas, "Negroes and the Seniority Question," pamphlet prepared by the UAW-CIO Education Department. UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 2, Folder 48, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
the most severe case because of the concentration of black skilled workers in plants built specifically for the war. The Urban League study expressed optimism over the inclusive policies of the CIO and other unions but did not expect these unions to change their seniority policies and backed the union line of supporting FEPC legislation. The league urged action by the government to prevent postwar conditions that would lead to conflict and race riots like those that followed World War I. It ended the study with a list of recommendations to improve the reconversion process for minorities. It was an ambitious wish list, but in the end many of these suggestions did not come to fruition.157

As soon as the war ended, industry started the process of reconversion, laying off workers in high numbers. The largest union in Detroit, the UAW, was unwavering in support of the traditional seniority system but was still concerned about the plight of the city’s minority workers. The union kept close tabs on the numbers and types of workers being released from employment. In one study conducted by the UAW’s Research Department in August 1945, the total number of workers laid off since the surrender of Japan – a period of only eleven days – was carefully calculated with special attention to the numbers of blacks and women laid off. The study concluded that 44% of workers at the plants surveyed had been laid off, and blacks represented 20% of that total (women represented 42%). However, those numbers may be deceptively low, since the study failed to note how many blacks worked at the plants before the layoffs. Also, the plants that laid off the most blacks also had the most uncertain reemployment prospect – a chief example was the Chrysler Bomber plant, built specifically for the war and slated for total

closure. It had the second highest black layoffs in the study.\textsuperscript{158} Just as minority workers feared, they were victims of the rigid seniority system and were among the first cut.

While displaced workers were left to find other jobs or wait on the chance that they would be rehired to their old jobs, those still employed felt it was time to address wartime grievances and reassert the power of the union. The ending of hostilities with Germany began a yearlong wave of strikes across the nation as workers struggled to maintain their wartime gains and status during reconversion. After victory over Japan in August 1945, strikes escalated; between August 1945 and January 1946, 28 million man-days of labor were lost, double the number of man-days lost in all of 1943.\textsuperscript{159} Workers struck primarily for wage increases and to preserve union power as the reconversion process continued to layoff workers in large numbers. The Detroit area alone saw the layoff of more than 300,000 workers in the weeks after the Japanese defeat.\textsuperscript{160}

One of the first major postwar strikes in Detroit was a wildcat strike at the Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company, started on August 25, 1945, and spurred on by unaddressed wartime grievances. The strike not only idled production at Kelsey-Hayes, but also at several large Ford plants like River Rouge and Highland Park that the company supplied. The unsanctioned actions of a UAW local of nearly 5,000 members affected tens of thousands of workers citywide. Despite efforts by the UAW to remove rebellious local leaders and replace them, the rank-and-file steadfastly refused all orders to end the strike. Many company injunctions, union threats, and police actions

\textsuperscript{158} "Layoffs in Representative UAW-CIO Plants-Detroit Area Since the Surrender of Japan," UAW-CIO Research Department, 24 August 1945. UAW Fair Practices Department Collection, Box 2, Folder 51, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.


later, the wildcat strike came to an end in October 1945, leaving the UAW and its parent union, the CIO, with a public relations fiasco.\textsuperscript{161}

The larger process of reconversion meant a drastic reduction in the industrial labor force, and UAW membership plummeted to less than half the wartime number. The government’s role in peacetime labor relations was uncertain, and the UAW wanted to capitalize on this uncertainty by asserting the union’s dominance. The Kelsey-Hayes strike exposed problems within the union, and UAW leaders like Walter Reuther knew that the union needed an opportunity to take a strong stand and demonstrate that they could remain powerful and relevant in the postwar era. With this in mind, Reuther decided to target one of the major auto companies, GM, to test the union’s power and position.

The General Motors strike was one of the largest and longest postwar strikes. Stretching over several months, from November 1945 to March 1946, the GM strike was born out of workers’ job concerns and the union’s desire to maintain wartime gains. To counteract the impending inflation when wartime price controls were lifted, the UAW requested that GM negotiate a new contract in which workers received a 30\% increase with no increase in product price, to preserve their buying power. A key element in winning such a concession was to prove that GM had the funds, so Walter Reuther requested that the company open its accounting records for inspection, a radical and inventive tactic. The company refused but offered a 10\% increase in wages. With the bulk of workers behind him, Reuther insisted on the full 30\% raise and called a strike.\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{161} Lichtenstein, 223-224.
\textsuperscript{162} Clive, 229-232.
The strike’s timing and tactics were political in nature. The GM strike gave workers a UAW-sanctioned outlet for their grievances that was more useful and less embarrassing to union leaders than wildcat strikes and was a tactic to prove to workers that the union was still powerful and relevant. Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein convincingly argues that the “opening the books” tactic was Reuther’s way of challenging the way the capitalist system distributed profits.163 Whatever Reuther’s reasoning, workers rallied behind the union leader and his demands.

During the GM strike, the UAW negotiated contracts with the other major automakers, Ford and Chrysler, and sister unions under the umbrella of the CIO, like the USWA and the UE, struck against their employers in January 1946.164 Within a month these other negotiations and strikes were all settled for slightly smaller wage increases than the UAW was demanding at GM – 18.5 cents per hour, as opposed to the UAW’s demands of 19.5 cents per hour. These settlements, and Reuther’s insistence on continuing the strike for a penny more per hour, seriously undermined the UAW’s negotiating power. Despite strikers’ tactics like manning the picket lines with uniformed veterans, the public remained largely indifferent. The strike was finally settled in March 1946 when the UAW and Reuther, nudged by the findings of President Truman’s fact-finding board, agreed upon an 18.5 cents per hour wage increase, a decent settlement.165

While the GM strike won workers an increase in wages, the more idealistic aim of the strike was short-lived. Reuther’s goal of sharing more of the profits with workers by obtaining wage increases without a rise in product prices seemed within reach initially,
but as the reconversion period ended and the government lifted price controls, GM and other companies increased their product prices. The GM strike is important for being one of the first and longest of the immediate postwar strikes and for Reuther’s innovative tactics, but his struggle to challenge the capitalist system’s distribution of profits illustrated the limits of union power in the postwar period. 166

Detroit in 1946 was in the last throes not only of an industrial reconversion, but a social one. The calls for positive changes in race relations – investigation and reform of city government and the police force’s actions in the riots, multicultural education in the schools, strengthening of union antidiscrimination policies, improvements in housing for blacks, and equal employment legislation – became muted as public indignation over the conditions that led to the riots faded. Instead of using the outrage over the riots to create real racial progress, the city lapsed back into the prewar status quo as efforts to change repeatedly lacked the support or funding to be effective as the problems in Detroit slipped out of the public eye.

After a temporary slump due to reconversion, the U.S. economy began to boom. Auto manufacturers capitalized on the emphasis on consumerism and cranked out more vehicles than ever. Prospects for Detroit’s workers never seemed better. But even though the industry was humming, Detroit’s economic time in the sun was rapidly coming to an end.

The process of deindustrialization began in the 1950s with astonishing speed. The very same technological innovation that had made Detroit a haven for workers in the

166 Lichtenstein, 228-232; Zieger, 212-213.
early 20th century now was its undoing. Automation resulted in the reduction of jobs, the closure of outdated plants, and the end of smaller independent auto manufacturers like Packard and Studebaker. The auto companies chose to build their new plants farther south, where the land and labor were cheaper. The exodus of the auto companies negatively impacted the smaller supply companies, resulting in a skyrocketing unemployment rate and deepening depression in Detroit. In addition to overall job loss due to automation and plant relocation, deindustrialization also resulted in fewer new entry-level jobs, which deprived young men and women of work experience in Detroit’s industries. Lack of job opportunities worsened conditions in inner city Detroit and resulted in widespread poverty.167 In a little over a decade, the city had become a “ghost arsenal.”168

Deindustrialization was even more disastrous for black workers than for the general population. Blacks suffered losses in employment due to reconversion, but had gained experience in highly skilled positions during the war and theoretically had much better job prospects. But hiring policies were still too uneven, and with no federal antidiscrimination legislation employers were able to hire -- or shut out -- whomever they chose. The major auto companies still hired workers at the plant level, which resulted in widely varying policies even within the same company. Plant employment offices were not required to follow the union’s antidiscrimination policies, and regularly turned away black workers seeking employment, claiming that there were no positions available.

Historian Thomas Sugrue relates the story of a typical black worker, Joseph Mays, who had extensive experience as a welder thanks to defense work during the war. Laid off

167 Sugrue, 91-124.
168 Ibid., 125-152.
due to downsizing at Fruehauf Trailer Company, Mays sought employment at the prosperous Dodge Main plant in 1948, but was repeatedly turned away and told there were no openings; white workers in line behind him were given applications and interviews for the supposedly “closed” positions. Smaller industrial companies continued to use the reference system to hire workers, which effectively shut out black workers due to limited social contact between white and black communities. Discrimination made the deindustrialization era even worse for Detroit’s black community than for the general population.

The postwar economic explosion and the accompanying “baby boom” created a new housing crunch in Detroit. The city rapidly expanded its suburbs as more white workers took advantage of steady work by becoming homeowners. The suburbs were not the only changes to Detroit’s geography. In addition to suburbanization, another major housing change in the postwar period was the end of “whites only” housing covenants, which changed the city’s racial geography.

In May 1945, a Wayne County court heard *Sipes v. McGhee*. The suit was brought by members of the Northwest Civic Association, a homeowner’s association, against the McGhees, a black family that had moved to a white neighborhood. Despite rulings for the neighborhood association at the Wayne County and Michigan Supreme courts, the NAACP appealed the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. The case was heard in 1948 in support of an appeal out of St. Louis, *Shelley v. Kraemer*.  

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169 Sugrue, 91-92.  
171 Sugrue, 181-182.
Sipes v. McGhee and Shelley v. Kraemer were not the first cases to challenge racially restrictive housing covenants. According to legal scholar David Delaney, the first known case, Gandolfo v. Hartman, came out of California in 1892 and concerned covenants restricting occupation by "Chinamen." While that case, as well as Buchanan v. Warley in 1917, found racially restrictive covenants against the 14th Amendment, Corrigan v. Buckley in 1926 changed the court's ruling on such matters. Stemming from a case in Washington, D.C., Corrigan was actually dismissed as being outside the Supreme Court's jurisdiction. But the justices noted that the Constitutional amendments in question (5th, 13th, and 14th) applied to the actions of government, not private individuals. By the court's reasoning, defendants could only claim an "unconstitutional" argument if the government was the discriminatory power in the case; the actions of private individuals could not be so construed. The Corrigan decision became the de facto policy for the next twenty years for restrictive covenant cases.

In an attempt to challenge Corrigan, the NAACP and other civil rights organizations switched from labeling these covenants "unconstitutional" to arguing that changes in the neighborhoods in question proved the invalidity of restrictive covenants, also known as "changed conditions." Under this argument, if a neighborhood's racial composition had significantly changed since the covenants were first in place, then there would be possible grounds for overturning the restrictive covenants. This line of reasoning was tried in numerous cases, including Clark v. Vaughn (1930), Grady v.

173 Ibid., 150-151.
175 Delaney, 155-157.
Garland (1937), Fairchild v. Raines (1944), Hundley v. Gorewitz (1942), and Mays v. Burgess (1945). The term “changed conditions” was problematically nebulous; there were no hard population percentages or other qualifiers to empirically identify a sufficient level of change. The Hundley case attempted to establish some guidelines for “changed conditions,” called the “Hundley rule,” but it was open to wide interpretation.177

In 1948, the Supreme Court heard arguments for Shelley, along with Sipes and Hurd v. Hodge, a Washington, D.C. case. By this time, several factors combined to influence the court’s decision against racially restrictive covenants. Due to the wide geographic spread of the cases, the judges shifted from the purely regional focus of previous decisions to a broader, national focus. Also influential was the 1944 publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s An American Dilemma, which among other things contained statistics on black housing nationwide and was widely read.178 The Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Frederick Vinson, contained liberally-inclined judges like Frank Murphy, the very same judge who had presided over the Ossian Sweet case in Detroit two decades earlier; and leading the defense was the NAACP’s pre-eminent lawyer – and future Supreme Court justice – Thurgood Marshall.179

In the final opinion, written by Chief Justice Vinson, the court stated that “in granting judicial enforcement of the restrictive agreements in these cases, the States have denied petitioners the equal protection of the laws and that, therefore, the action of the

176 Delaney, 161-168.
177 Ibid., 167-68.
178 Ibid., 176.
state courts cannot stand."\textsuperscript{180} The unanimous ruling thus found racially restrictive covenants unjust and unenforceable by the state.\textsuperscript{181} The \textit{Shelley} verdict smashed existing racial boundaries nationwide. In Detroit, the decision gave the black community mobility and much-needed access to better housing outside of traditionally black neighborhoods, many of which had become ghettos in the wake of economic recessions.

But as blacks expanded into new areas of the city, whites responded by packing up and moving to the new suburbs, encouraged by their own prejudices and the alarmist rhetoric of realtors, who capitalized on racial fears to turn tidy profits in the changing real estate market. So called “blockbusters” would sell one house on a block to a black family, then use their presence to get the white neighbors to sell for low prices. The realtors would then charge other black families top dollar for these homes.\textsuperscript{182} Blockbusting left both white homeowners and black buyers at a disadvantage and drove home prices upward for blacks looking to expand beyond traditionally black neighborhoods. But these homes were still less expensive than the suburbs, which remained out of financial reach for most blacks.

In addition to suburban housing being priced higher than urban housing, another major disadvantage to blacks pursuing a dream of home ownership was the practice of “redlining.” This practice came out of the policies of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), a federal entity that determined a residential area’s “risk” and thus how much loan money a person would receive. The four-tiered rating system gave preference to new construction and areas of homogenous, white population. Older areas

\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Shelley v. Kraemer}, 334 U.S. 1 (1948).  
\textsuperscript{182} Sugrue, 194-197.
with a dense, lower class or mixed racial population were given the lowest rating, known as Fourth Tier and color-coded red on maps. HOLC also considered home property values in their calculations, further enforcing the racial patterns of redlining since local real estate evaluators tended to undervalue properties occupied by minorities. Consumers in redlined areas received less loan money than those in better-rated neighborhoods.

Although federal measures like the G.I. Bill (1944) ostensibly provided loans to veterans of all colors, the HOLC continued to grant loans based on racially based “risk” areas, effectively canceling out the G.I. Bill’s potentially progressive nature.183

“White flight” and “redlining” resulted in a distinctive population shift in Detroit. The 1960 census indicated that both immigrant and native white populations had dropped significantly in the city since the previous census, with a 27% decrease in immigrant population and nearly 23% decrease in native white population, which dipped to pre-1930 levels. The city’s black population increased 60% in the same time period.184 By the 1960s, the core of Detroit became dominated by blacks while the outer suburbs were solidly white, a pattern that still exists today.

183 Jackson, 195-203.
184 Donald R. Deskins, Jr., Residential Mobility of Negroes in Detroit 1837-1965 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Department of Geography, 1972), 264. [See Appendix A, pp. 97-98 for population graphs.]
CONCLUSION

Detroit experienced phenomenal change from the 1920s to the 1950s. The city had weathered the Great Depression and emerged from World War II as a mighty industrial center, but the changing economic climate soon resulted in a precipitous decline from which the city still struggles to recover. In the continuous boom-and-bust cycle, the one constant that seemed to be present in the city was the enduring racism that permeated everyday life in Detroit, from the workplace to social interactions to home life.

The 1920s saw the start of a two-decades-long process of migration from the South as people sought work in Detroit’s booming factories. This migration changed the demographic makeup of the city, especially increasing the black population. White citizens responded to the increasing numbers of blacks by turning to organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and creating racially restrictive housing covenants to enforce strict residential segregation. The Great Depression shifted people’s focuses to the city’s economy, and the creation of the UAW in the 1930s led to the downfall of the anti-union Ku Klux Klan as the UAW rapidly gained strength and succeeded by 1941 in reaching agreements with all the major auto companies.

World War II pulled Detroit out of the Depression and catapulted the city to prominence. Detroit’s role as America’s “Arsenal of Democracy” attracted a new wave of migration to fill demand for workers at factories converted to war production. This rapid migration shocked the city’s infrastructure and resulted in chronic housing shortages, made even worse thanks to residential segregation. Black and white community organizations clashed over federal housing projects built to relieve the
housing crisis in the city, and were more than willing to take the matter straight to the nation’s capital. The expansion of industry and the draft’s role in depleting the city’s workforce led to the employment of increasing numbers of blacks, many in areas of work previously closed to them. Despite support from the progressive UAW and the creation of the FEPC to aid minority workers, black workers faced militant hostility from their white coworkers, who often struck to protest black employment and promotion.

The bitter nature of race relations in Detroit came to a head in June 1943 when fights at Belle Isle recreation areas mushroomed into two full-blown race riots centered in downtown Detroit and in the heart of Paradise Valley, the city’s largest black neighborhood. The riots killed thirty-four people and wounded hundreds of others, and resulted in millions of dollars of property damage and millions of man-hours of labor lost. Stories of the riots were splashed on front pages across the nation, and the images of destruction in the pages of publications such as *Life* garnered national outrage and gave Detroit a public relations black eye. Detroit was indeed “dynamite,” as racial violence caused the city to temporarily implode on itself.

Calls for racial tolerance and progress came in the immediate aftermath of the rioting, but by the end of the war very little had changed. Efforts like multicultural education and interracial committees were without broad community support and funding, and remained largely ineffective. Union antidiscrimination policy did not significantly change the racial attitudes of the rank-and-file workers or management. The process of reconversion brought a reversion to pre-war discriminatory hiring practices as masses of black workers lacking seniority were laid off and, despite their experience, largely shut out of employment when the economy recovered. The city’s postwar
economic boom was short-lived, as deindustrialization made Detroit a “ghost arsenal.” Plants were increasingly mechanized or relocated to the South with its abundance of cheap labor. Detroit’s workers struggled to cope with the economic downturn.

While *Shelley v. Kraemer* struck down restricted housing covenants in 1948 and erased the previous boundaries of black residential areas, white flight and deindustrialization combined to create a new segregation pattern in Detroit that still exists today: one based on income, which, since blacks are the most economically disadvantaged as the result of their status at the bottom of society’s hierarchy, is effectively a racial system as well. These patterns of ghettoization and poverty are unlikely to change, given the reluctance of investors to revitalize the decaying infrastructure and introduce economic endeavors that would provide new jobs to offset existing high unemployment. Urban Detroit is a testament to the lingering racism that pervades the social consciousness in the greater metropolitan area. The same structures that supported this racism during World War II are largely unchanged.

Did the war provide significant change and really improve everyday life for blacks? Advances in industrial employment were initially promising with the immediate postwar economic boom, but the continuation of discriminatory hiring practices and the decline of entry-level positions due to deindustrialization destroyed any gains. The housing situation, initially improved by the *Shelley* decision, changed for the worse with white flight, redlining, and high black unemployment after the war and the creation of new ghettos and residential segregation based on income. In other words, suburbanization and deindustrialization combined to snatch away possible victories in employment and housing almost immediately after they were achieved.
The deteriorating conditions for blacks in Detroit could only have been ameliorated by a drastic change in social structure. But as the 1967 Detroit riot showed, the structure remained unchanged and many of the problems and attitudes that plagued the city before and during the war were still present. Despite the UAW's efforts to stamp out discriminatory practices, black workers still faced widespread prejudices in the workplace that limited their opportunities and kept them disadvantaged. The lack of success in the union's antidiscrimination efforts, along with the brief life of the Detroit Interracial Committee's subcommittee for multicultural education immediately after the 1943 riots, demonstrated that traditional racial structures remained in place at all levels of society; the racist rhetoric merely went underground in the postwar period. Citizens' attitudes and the racial dynamic of the local economy were largely unchanged; the only thing that really changed was the racial geography of the city.
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APPENDIX A: POPULATION FIGURES

Population Trends in Detroit (numerical)

Population numbers obtained from *Residential Mobility of Negroes in Detroit 1837-1965* by Donald R. Deskins, Jr. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Department of Geography, 1972).
Population Trends in Detroit (percentage)

Population numbers obtained from *Residential Mobility of Negroes in Detroit 1837-1965* by Donald R. Deskins, Jr. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Department of Geography, 1972).
Sojourner Truth Housing Project Dispute, February 1942

Crowd gathers to protest Sojourner Truth Housing Project

Riot breaks out as police attack black families moving into their homes

Federal troops called in to restore order

Sign protesting the Sojourner Truth Project in Hamtramck
The Riots Break: Front Pages, June 1943

Detroit Free Press

Pittsburgh Courier

Detroit News

Washington Post
The Riots Break: Front Pages, June 1943

New York Times

Chicago Daily Tribune
Detroit News Coverage
Detroit Free Press Coverage

Victims Jam Receiving Hospital as Rioting Mob Sweeps Negroes Off Woodward
Detroit Free Press Coverage

Cars Overturned and Burned, Negroes Beaten by Rioting Crowd on Woodward
"In the democracy of the dead, all men at last are equal." - John J. Ingalls
The very best photo of the Detroit, Mich., race riot, June 20-22, is shown at the top. Two mounted police and two foot policemen fail to prevent a Negro from being struck by a white rioter. This picture bears out the wide criticism of the role of the police in the riot; they killed 20 of the 25 dead Negroes, shot not a single white person.

- The Crisis, July 1943

Rioter slaps a Negro who is being held by two policemen, while a large group of white hoodlums surges in from behind. Throughout the riot the Detroit police were tougher on Negroes than whites. They used tear gas and (sometimes) night sticks on white mobs, tommy guns and pistols on Negroes. They killed 15 Negroes, most of whom were said to be "looting," and no whites, although white gangs overturned police cars and beat up policemen in rescuing rioters who had been arrested...

- Life, 5 July 1943
National Media Coverage

New York Times

Chicago Daily Tribune
National Media Coverage
Life, 5 July 1943

RACE WAR IN DETROIT

Massacres took place in scenes such as this and in the city's most exclusive clubs.
Policeman falls into the arms of another officer, knocked cold by a pop bottle. By a weird trick of mob psychology, the white rioters raised the cry of “Hitlerism” when the police tried to stop their abuse of Negroes. They yelled “Just like Germany,” when police turned tear gas on them. One white youth snarled “Yah, you damn Gestapo” at the policemen who seized him for beating a Negro. Apparently, they did not realize that they were the ones who looked and acted like Nazis...

- Life, 5 July 1943