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Cover Page Footnote

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From Outside the Beltway: Minorities in the Early 20th-Century Labor Movement

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Abstract

This paper argues that organized labor's racially discriminatory practices of the early 1900s served to disenfranchise African Americans and immigrants from the political process. Because unions provided labor leaders a rank-and-file membership to mobilize in support of candidates, politicians were receptive to their preferences. Labor unions' exclusion of minorities therefore robbed them of a voice in government. Racism abounded in the United States, but such discrimination in the labor movement served to withhold both economic and political privileges to those barred from membership. The efforts of A. Philip Randolph and David Dubinsky, both presidents of labor unions with national prominence, to exert pressure and influence on Franklin Roosevelt's administration demonstrate this paper's thesis.

Keywords: labor unions, discrimination, Randolph, Dubinsky

Philip Randolph and David Dubinsky both witnessed and participated in a transformational era of United States history. Randolph was a Southern black socialist who moved to Harlem early on in his life. He sought to challenge inequality wherever he saw it, eventually playing a key role in founding the first American Federation of Labor-recognized

union of black workers, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Dubinsky was an Eastern European Jewish political exile who made furthering the goals of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union his chief mission in life. Both came from far outside the traditional beltway of the labor movement, and both men's experiences demonstrate the harsh realities of American society and politics of their time. This paper will argue that racial and ethnic discrimination within the labor movement of the early twentieth century perpetuated the disenfranchisement of African Americans and immigrants from the American political process. An examination of existing scholarly literature will seek to elucidate the dynamics of race in the labor movement from the early 1900s, as well as the significant role played by organized labor upon American public policy. Following the scholarly review, an exploration of the writings of David Dubinsky and A. Philip Randolph will expound this paper's claim that organized labor's exclusion of racial and ethnic minorities by inhibited their ability to exercise influence on the political process. When they successfully secured union membership, however, such barriers were overcome and their interests received attention at the highest levels of government.

Discrimination on the basis of race was no less present in the labor movement as it was in every other segment of American history. "Since the mid 1980s, labor historians have begun to engage issues of race in significant ways," writes Eric Arnesen (1998, p. 147). "What is striking," he continues, "is not only that the scholarship on race and labor is far richer, more nuanced, and diverse than the field's critics admit, but the subject itself has become one of the most dynamic within labor history" (p. 147). Arnesen's article, *Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History*, surveys a broad collection of scholarly work engaging race in the American labor movement. His characterization of the academic debate pits "those who believe that the relationship between race and labor can be reduced to a

narrative of exclusion and subordination” against “those who see the relationship itself as more complex and ask a much broader array of questions” (p. 149). The challenge facing academics in studying race relations in labor, as Arnesen recognizes, is to “integrate more fully African-American...values, perspectives, and behaviors...into their labor history narratives” (p. 150). By doing so, scholars can avoid casting black workers as mere “victims of racism...little more than passive objects manipulated by whites” (p. 150).

Susan Roth Breitzer demonstrates this idea in her article *Race, Immigration, and Contested Americanness: Black Nativism and the American Labor Movement, 1800-1930*. At a time when union organization was on the rise, Breitzer explains, “[m]any unions refused to organize black workers altogether; others restricted them to separate, subordinate, or auxiliary locals, and often denied them the benefits and protections offered to white workers” (2011, p. 271). The American Federation of Labor (AFL) proclaimed nondiscrimination and equal protection for all workers, but for years ignored local union practices to the contrary. By contrast, “European immigrant workers had a lot easier time carving places for themselves in the AFL unions than did their African American counterparts” (Breitzer, p. 271). As a result, leading black voices adopted “nativist” positions against immigration, essentially arguing “African Americans...were born in the United States and knew English and American customs, and therefore should be chosen over ‘foreigners’ for good jobs and union membership” (Breitzer, p. 272).

African American news outlets like the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* advocated this stance and editorialized in support of legislation restricting immigration in the 1920s. During the Depression, however, when “desperate white workers were pushing into traditionally ‘black’ service occupations, anti-immigrant prejudice [began] losing its relevance”

as immigration rates declined (Breitzer, p. 279). In its place, the more inclusive philosophies of black labor leaders like A. Philip Randolph took the helm, “largely [rejecting] anti-foreign prejudice in favor of promoting equal African American citizenship, for which equal labor citizenship was integral” (Breitzer, p. 279). Racial dogma of the early twentieth century was a far cry from the prevailing attitudes of today. Developments within the African American community must be recognized, however, within a broader context. At a time of intense discrimination between races, certain black voices sought to capitalize on anti-immigrant sentiment to advance their own cause. When the Great Depression took the wind out of their sails, more modern notions of race practiced by a new generation of black leaders to gain momentum.

Organized labor’s attitudes towards immigrants is characterized by Brian Burgoon, Janice Fine, Wade Jacoby and Daniel Tichenor as “neither uniformly restrictionist...nor uniformly solidaristic” in their article *Immigration and the Transformation of American Unionism* (2010, p. 937). Generalizations of the entire labor movement are folly, but the policies of the AFL and its leadership in the early 1900s are well-known. Just as many established unions excluded African American workers, so too did they support limits upon immigration. That being said, “the young AFL was deeply divided about European immigrants” who increasingly originated in southern and eastern Europe. It should be noted that exclusion of Chinese immigrants was near uniform, as were bans on contract labor immigration (p. 941). At early conventions, “immigration restriction so polarized union representatives that their leaders chose to table the issue” (p. 941). “Yet,” the authors continue, “[AFL president] Gompers ultimately embraced literacy tests for immigrants because he believed large-scale immigration was fundamentally corrosive to the economic security of American workers” (p. 941). Even if a

sizable number of unions within the AFL opposed immigration quotas, the leadership gave weight to restrictionist policies. Gompers went so far as to tout eugenicist Dillingham Commission studies “on the purported inferiority of southern and eastern European immigrants” (p. 942). It wasn’t until the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1936 that the labor movement gained a firm, national pro-immigrant voice. Consequently, for much of the early 1900s the AFL’s monopoly on organized labor’s voice and its leadership’s own biases meant that immigrants were not welcomed into the fold.

Similar to the dynamics of race in the labor movement, the political activities of unions have for decades generated interest for scholars. Of relevance to this paper is the degree to which labor unions exercised influence on government policy. By mobilizing rank-and-file members to the polls, as well as funding and campaigning for candidates, organized labor secured a substantial position on the American political scene. Nicholas Masters, in his article *The Organized Labor Bureaucracy as a Base of Support for the Democratic Party*, asserts that “[unions] seldom agree on candidates, parties, or issues” beyond the core interest of maintaining their right to organize (1962, p. 253). That being said, certain influential unions, such as the Detroit-based United Auto Workers (UAW), can “become significant bases of support for candidates running for national or congressional offices” where membership is strong (Masters, p. 254). Furthermore, the AFL-CIO at large “turned to national election activity...because they know their economic power can be severely curtailed by political actions” (Masters, p. 256). The result for the American political structure in the 20th-century was a formidable presence by organized labor. “The most fundamental point to emphasize,” Masters stresses, “is the sheer muscle union workers can provide in a campaign” (p. 258). In an era devoid of social media or internet, door-to-door and person-to-person campaigning was the way to run for office. By

providing Democrats the “one thing business interests have been unable to supply for the Republicans,” unions’ mobilization of its rank-and-file helped organized labor forge an important relationship with a national political party (Masters, p. 258).

This political participation by organized labor is important in light of racial and ethnic discrimination practiced by unions. In *Labor in American Politics*, J. David Greenstone delves into the relationship between the Democrats and the labor movement. “The emergence of labor as a Democratic party electoral organization,” he explains, “is likely to alter the political balance among social classes” (1969, p. 16). “But simply because labor functions as a vital element in the Democrats’ entire campaign operation,” Greenstone continues, “party leaders are likely to anticipate the reaction of their labor campaign workers and thus cater to some of their wishes” (p. 16). As such, organized labor’s continued racial discrimination effectively barred African Americans and ethnic minorities from political participation. In their book *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks explain how “[f]ierce and prolonged discrimination against African-Americans produced a distinct underclass that was regarded as a race apart from white workers and their unions, and which, as a result, was excluded from their political projects” (2000, p. 130). Initially, widespread discrimination by organized labor against blacks and immigrants resulted in solely economic exclusion. The higher paying, more secure jobs were secured by white unions for white union members. As a result of labor unions’ foray into politics, that economic exclusion extended to the political sphere.

Moving forward, this paper investigates the writings of David Dubinsky and Asa Philip Randolph to explore their backgrounds as well as the unique challenges they faced as leaders in the labor movement. Their experiences advance this paper’s argument that discrimination by

organized labor perpetuated the political disenfranchisement of African Americans and immigrants. Dubinsky's life, told through his autobiography *David Dubinsky: A Life with Labor*, showcases the adversity he faced as an immigrant from Eastern Europe. Randolph's biography and perspectives are provided by *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, a collection edited by Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander. His words as a black labor and civil rights activist serve to expound the realities of discrimination in the United States of his lifetime. Both lives shed light on the stark realities and perceptions of race in the twentieth century American labor movement.

David Dubinsky

Born in 1892 into a Jewish family in Brest-Litovsk, Poland (modern Belarus), David Dubinsky worked from childhood in the family bakery. Under the dominion of Tsarist Russia, he and others who attempted to organize workers faced imprisonment. Unfazed and literate in Russian, Yiddish and Polish, his star rose quickly in the bakers' union. Consequently, when the police came for the union ring leaders, they came for Dubinsky. The Russian government's efforts to keep so-called radicals from organizing ironically quartered them together in prison, as Dubinsky explains: "the Tsar's jails were a kind of labor college where I could learn...from men of great brilliance" (p. 27). Eventually, he was marked for exile to Siberia. Before arriving at his final destination, however, a sympathetic guard and a fellow political exile aided Dubinsky's escape. Once back in Poland, he worked quietly to save enough money to be smuggled out of Russia and sail to New York City. "Those were the days when anyone who wanted to live and work in America was welcome" (p. 37).

Joining a labor union would prove to be just as complicated, however. After working a couple low-wage, unskilled jobs in New York, Dubinsky secured a position as a fabric cutter at a

cloak shop. “The cutters were great exclusionists,” Dubinsky explains (p. 43). “[They did not have] much use for the ‘greenhorns,’ who were pouring into New York from the ghettos of Eastern Europe...In general,” Dubinsky explains, “[the cutters’] pay and conditions were better, and they intended to keep them that way by keeping out the rabble” (p. 44). These “Amerikanski cutters,” as Dubinsky labels them, sought to exclude immigrants from the Cutters Union and keep their hold on the industry’s good jobs. Despite these tensions, and thanks to “a little fakery” on the specifics of his experience as a cutter, Dubinsky managed to gain admission to the Cutters Union, Local 10 (p. 46). By the time he joined, “[t]he leadership of Local 10 had grown increasingly unrepresentative of the new elements in the membership” (p. 48) Not long after the Cutters Union joined the AFL-chartered International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), the old guard’s exclusionist practices were relegating immigrant garment workers to low-pay, low-security jobs. Their “arrogant practices” led to the creation of a Committee of Fifty in 1913 to challenge this old guard for leadership positions (p. 48). They succeeded in electing one of their own to the presidency of Local 10, even though they failed to secure any other executive office.

Emboldened, Dubinsky and the “rebel group” set up the Good and Welfare League “dedicated to a long-range struggle for change in union policies” (p. 48). By the time the League formed, immigrants “outnumbered the old-timers by almost four to one” (p. 49). In 1918, the League made “a clean sweep” of all union executive positions, shirking the exclusionist old guard regime for good (p. 50). Dubinsky himself was elected to executive Local 10 office for the first time in 1919, and by 1921, at the age of 29, he was elected president. Dubinsky’s experience being kept from the advantages of union membership would not be lost in all his years of ILGWU leadership, inspiring his “awareness of the need for an active union policy of

encouraging the broadest involvement in positions of responsibility” (p. 49). As a Jewish Eastern European “greenhorn” immigrant, Dubinsky faced discrimination by the established “Amerikanski” cutters. Though he was able to gain admission to Local 10 after limited difficulty, Dubinsky could not fully reap the benefits until broader developments swept the old guard exclusionists out of office. Once in office he would not forget the adversity he and others faced on account of their origins, instead enacting a policy of inclusive leadership.

Asa Philip Randolph

Asa Philip Randolph’s life from the onset was one of trial and exclusion. Born in 1889 into the Jim Crow South, Randolph grew up hearing stories about “Toussaint L’Overture, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, and others who [embodied] the heroic tradition of black liberation” (Kersten & Lucander, 2014, p. 3). Attending the Cookman Institute of Jacksonville, Florida (today’s Bethune-Cookman University), Randolph “delved into literature, excelled in public speaking, [and] honed his performance skills with drama,” eventually graduating as valedictorian in 1907 (p. 5). His fascination with the likes of L’Overture and Douglass as well as his studies at Cookman laid a critical foundation for a career as an organizer. Not soon after, in 1911, “Randolph...joined the more than sixty thousand African Americans who called Harlem home” as part of the Great Migration of blacks from the South to the North and Midwest regions (p. 5).

Randolph’s rise to prominence began with his editorial leadership at the *Hotel Messenger* magazine in 1917, of which the first issues dealt with “the exploitation of low-skilled laborers” (p. 7). The magazine was re-born into *The Messenger* when Randolph and his fellow editor “through a lack of tact or an unwavering commitment to exposing justice” published an exposé detailing unfair practices of the Headwaiters and Sidewaiters Society of Greater New York, the union that financed the magazine (p. 8). From there, *The Messenger* served as a bulwark of

opposition to US involvement in WWI. President Wilson's rallying cry of "making the world safe for democracy" fell on deaf ears to those unsafe in their own country on account of their skin color. Randolph's *Messenger* would not last, with its final issue appearing in 1928 (p. 11). He did however find another calling, one that culminated with one of the most prominent black-led unions of the 20th-century: the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP).

Whereas Dubinsky faced barriers of entry to an established union, Randolph had the task of organizing an industry from the ground up. Porters "routinely worked...making beds, cleaning bathrooms and spittoons, shining shoes, carrying luggage, and attending to every passenger's whim and wish" (p. 11-12). All the while they earned meager wages subsidized only by the generosity of passengers' tips. In his 1925 article "The Case of the Pullman Porters," which appeared in the AFL publication *American Federationist*, Randolph bombasts the demeaning salaries of porters. "Withal the total income [of porters]," he writes, "including wages and tips, is far below a wage sufficient to maintain a family according to a decent American standard of living" (Kersten & Lucander, 2014, p. 43). Randolph goes on to describe the obstacles faced by the fledgling BSCP, the foremost of which was a Pullman Company-run union. Though providing death and sick benefits, the \$26 dues would increase fifty percent "should a porter leave the service" by joining a union, "the vices of which are amply magnified by Pullman agents" (p. 44). These Pullman agents sought to sow fear within would-be BSCP members, seeking to "frame them for discharge" (p. 46). Thus, the life of a sleeping car porter was hardly fulfilling. Early efforts to organize and improve their situation were stymied by Pullman agents. "What was needed...was a man of unimpeachable character, strong principles, and financial independence that placed him beyond the reach of Pullman's economic sanctions." (p. 12). That man of course was Randolph, who was elected BSCP president in 1925 (p. 12).

Within a year more than half of all porters were enrolled in union membership (p. 13). By 1932, however, unsuccessful strike efforts reduced membership to a mere 771 members (p. 13).

Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal reversed losses in the nick of time to keep the BSCP afloat, eventually reaching a membership of 7,000 porters (p. 13). Had the BSCP failed, Kersten and Lucander posit, “[Randolph] probably would have fallen into obscurity” (p. 11).

Referring back to his article “The Case of the Pullman Porters,” Randolph recounts opposition from leading black publications such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Chicago Whip*, and the *St. Louis Argus* on account of his intention “to put the union into the American Federation of Labor...[despite] that it discriminated against negro workers joining trade unions” (p. 45). Despite incredible opposition, Randolph pressed forward organizing porters and lobbying for admission to the AFL. It was his wish that the BSCP “play a constructive role in the broad stream of American labor,” Randolph writes, “that they may not only help themselves, but all Negro workers in particular and the labor movement in general” (p. 47). In 1935, the Pullman Company began negotiating with the BSCP. Two years later, an agreement was reached that included \$2 million in base pay increases, better overtime pay, and shorter workweeks (p. 13). Though beginning at square one with success far from guaranteed, Randolph succeeded in chartering the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and fulfilling its purpose of better working conditions for its members.

Outlining his vision for the BSCP in his 1931 article “Why a Trade Union?,” Randolph writes “[the] Brotherhood...seeks to remedy the unrest by prescribing a program of reasonably revising wages, working conditions, and hourage” for its membership (p. 55). These gains, he continues, will reflect among the workers “a finer morale and service development” (p. 55).

Randolph understood intimately the broader benefits of independent union membership, and his

success organizing and maintaining the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters serves as a testament to his leadership. He writes:

The will to self-organization without interference, coercion or intimidation may be stifled, crushed for a while; and delayed, but it cannot be permanently destroyed—nor can it be killed by a mere increase in wages and better working conditions apparently secured through a company union. (p. 55)

An independent union in an overwhelmingly black industry would have appeared unthinkable to his contemporaries. However, Randolph overcame discrimination and adversity from within and without, pressing forward and providing a predominantly black industry a seat at the table in the labor movement.

Their Impact

Where these two men's positions of leadership come into play is with the political influence their respective labor unions allowed them to exercise. Randolph and Dubinsky were not individuals of any particular political ambition; they were instead driven by a mission to safeguard and when possible expand the privileges of those they were responsible for. When the conditions proved ripe, both leaders exercised their influence as labor leaders upon the Roosevelt Administration. Neither Dubinsky's status as an immigrant nor Randolph's skin color kept them from pursuing their goals after they had secured prominence in the labor movement.

For Randolph, the political clout granted by his position as president of the BSCP allowed him, in 1941, to pressure FDR into enacting Executive Order 8802. "While traveling on an organizing and speaking tour for the BSCP," Randolph expressed and received enthusiasm for a march on Washington (Kersten & Lucander, p. 14). Collaborating with other black leaders, the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) garnered national attention to such an extent that

“estimates of expected marchers ballooned from 10,000 to 100,000” (p. 15). Though there were doubts as to whether it could be pulled-off, the possibility of such an event forced FDR’s hand. E.O. 8802 established the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), to root-out discrimination of employment in defense industries and the federal government on the basis of race, religion, or national origin (p. 15). Randolph and the BSCP were not alone in coaxing the Roosevelt Administration into creating the FEPC, but the example demonstrates the political power that organized labor can exercise on elected officials, even the president of the United States.

On the part of Dubinsky, his prominence as president of the ILGWU entailed a more amiable rapport with the Roosevelt Administration. Dubinsky writes:

The N.R.A. [*sic*] had been killed by the Supreme Court; the Wagner Act had just been passed, but nobody could be sure the Court wouldn’t kill that too. The Liberty League had been brought into being by Big Business to murder every part of the New Deal.
(p. 262)

Though Roosevelt had accomplished meaningful reform in his first term, the presidential election of 1936 was cause for uncertainty. “Labor,” he explains, “could not afford to let F.D.R. [*sic*] lose” (p. 262). Living in Tammany Hall’s New York City, Dubinsky was disenchanted with Democratic politics, to say the least. A member of the Socialist Party, he recognized that attempting to garner support for FDR through the Socialists was a divisive endeavor. Instead, Dubinsky “arranged a meeting...with some of the Socialist leaders known to be sympathetic to Roosevelt” (p. 265). From that meeting sprang the American Labor Party (ALP), an independent third party to ally with the New York Democrats. “In the end, of course,” Dubinsky writes, “Roosevelt won by a landslide” (p. 268). However, the ALP drew more than a quarter million

votes for FDR. Roosevelt's margin of victory in New York was large enough to have not needed the AFL votes, but they did make the difference in electing Robert Lehman governor. "That was a great blessing for us," Dubinsky believes (p. 268). An immigrant from Poland, Dubinsky might never have imagined playing such a large part on the American political scene. As president of the ILGWU, a labor union with national membership, he was afforded the opportunity to play such a role.

Racial and ethnic discrimination abounded in the United States of the early twentieth century. Social, economic, and political dominance by whites continued unabated as modern notions of race were not yet in place. This dominance extended of course to the labor movement, where unions sought to maintain the status quo by barring blacks and immigrants from membership. By doing so, such racial discrimination perpetuated the political disenfranchisement of non-white Americans. Both A. Philip Randolph and David Dubinsky had monumental careers in the labor movement. Randolph served as BSCP president from 1925 until his resignation in 1968 (Kersten & Lucander, p. 12). Dubinsky's time with the Cutters Union and the ILGWU spanned from 1919 to 1966 (Dubinsky, p. 8). The United States they left in the 1960s stood in sharp contrast to the United States as it was at the dawn of their tenures. Their examples, however extraordinary, exemplify the importance of organized labor's influence on American public policy. Randolph's skin color and Dubinsky's ethnicity by and large relegated those like them to second-class labor citizenship. Racial and ethnic discrimination in the labor movement served to disenfranchise African Americans and immigrants from the political process. Upon securing positions of leadership, with a stable rank-and-file behind them, Randolph and Dubinsky entered the beltway of American politics. As a result, they changed and influenced the United States for the better.

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