

Socialists Organized in the 1950s Civil Rights Movement

In 1950s America, the Cold War was raging, but socialists were playing key roles in the early civil rights movement. We can't afford to let that radical history be sanitized.



African Americans boarding an integrated bus, following Supreme Court ruling ending the Montgomery bus boycott. The boycott inspired many US socialists to throw themselves wholeheartedly into the civil rights struggle. (Don Cravens / Getty Images)

The Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56 opened a new phase in the centuries-long struggle for black freedom and inspired a rebirth of activism and militancy in the United States. Pioneering mass direct action against segregated public accommodations, Montgomery was the forerunner of movement struggles of the early 1960s.

The bus boycott was won by the largest black mobilization since the [March on Washington](#) of 1941. Montgomery's entire black community was organized through the churches, which were packed by protest meetings of thousands every night, and through the construction of alternative transportation — a highly effective carpool system that shuttled over 20,000 black workers to and from their jobs every day for a year. It was a brilliant portrait of the latent genius, determination, and self-organizing capacity unleashed when the working class goes into motion.

The bus boycott created new systems of struggle, strategies, tactics, organizations, leaders, and cadres. The bravery and audacity of ordinary working people was symbolized by Rosa Parks, a seamstress who touched off the boycott by fighting for her rights with unyielding dignity and courage. The mass character and militancy of the black liberation movement made it the model, the dynamic motor force, that influenced all the subsequent movements of the 1960s.

Montgomery was a renaissance, the rebirth of hope overcoming years of desperate quiet, struggle replacing acceptance, and the sense of power that we could change miserable, abusive conditions. Its occurrence at the time of the [Hungarian Revolution](#); the failed imperialist [invasion of Egypt](#) by Britain, France, and Israel; and [national independence](#) for Ghana located Montgomery for the Left as

part of the world-revolutionary drive for liberation. We were still in the reactionary 1950s, but the road was being charted for a new beginning, a new radicalism.

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For revolutionary socialists at the time like me, our political assumptions and horizons changed overnight. We threw ourselves into civil rights activity nonstop, remaining immersed for years in every stage of the movement until its ultimate fading. Despite our small size, we were a significant participant.

Movement histories often ignore socialist involvement, a legacy from the 1950s that typically airbrushes away, minimizes, or derides socialist influence as some embarrassing or subversive secret. During McCarthyism, our role was of necessity frequently forced into the shadows. Truth, historical accuracy, political lessons, stronger bonds in the future, and trust would be better served if the contributions revolutionary socialists made to the struggle for black liberation were not ignored.

Montgomery’s Impact on Socialists

Greater than the contributions we made to the movement was the impact the movement had on us.

The International Socialists (IS), the group I was a member of at the time, were as much a product of the black liberation movement as we were of Trotskyism. Through Trotskyism, we saw our ideas and practices as a continuity of the Russian Revolution and the revolutionary communist tradition. But it was black liberation that defined for us what it meant to be an American revolutionary.

The impact of black self-emancipation changed us personally and politically to be modern-day abolitionists, a link in the chain of the oldest, most heroic, most noble American struggle against oppression — against slavery, white supremacy, Jim Crow, segregation, and the still-intact systemic, institutional racism of US capitalism. Combating this oppression made us unwilling to tolerate discrimination of any kind and toughened us as fighters against all oppressions.

We were shaped anew as participants in the movement’s demonstrations, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, arrests, jail time, debates, militancy, creative radicalism, and self-organization, and by the inspiring guts of its black and white freedom fighters. We were not there just for the big moments, the stirring high points — we were day-to-day combatants, doing the nitty-gritty work to make events happen. Our commitment to black liberation was central to how we thought of ourselves, to our reason for being; our interests were never separate from the movement’s emancipatory goals. Because of this passion, our tendency enjoyed an acceptance by movement activists that most other socialist groups could never achieve.

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Montgomery challenged us to make essential changes. In the grim years of McCarthyite reaction and Cold War liberalism, our influence and numbers were drastically reduced. We became isolated from the working class, ideologically marginalized, at best barely hanging on. We had to rise to this moment, to embrace the movement making history, and to prove, when appropriate, the relevance of socialist politics to the experiences the new movement was going through in real time.

It required a complete makeover, from discussion group to combat organization, from isolation to engagement, from theory to practice, from propaganda to agitation: It was a leap into the future. It involved massive reeducation, learning from and with the movement — through its practices, experiences, narratives, internal life, changing moods, and ideas.

We navigated this transition more easily because of our conviction that Montgomery was the start of an even greater upheaval. The audacity, improvisation, unity, and staying power of the 381-day bus boycott convinced us that it was the opening of a potentially explosive dynamic that could mobilize the black working class and tenant farmers across the South to crack the Jim Crow segregation system, break the hold of the white supremacist Dixiecrats on US politics, and take up the task to complete the “unfinished revolution” of Reconstruction.

It was a perspective that would increasingly be shared by many movement activists. Victory in Montgomery gave millions the hope and belief that change was possible, even if it would take time to flourish.

Montgomery and the Young Socialist League

Aside from the Communist Party's (CP) Labor Youth League, which dissolved in 1956, the Young Socialist League (YSL, the youth section of the Independent Socialist League) was the only socialist youth group at a national level, but with a membership of at most 125 people. Yet the YSL had roots and strengths as a serious cadre organization, with an intense internal political life and a profound appreciation for theoretical training. For years, it had been suffocating, isolated from any living movement — it was dying for fresh air. YSL members were sophisticated, dedicated, tenacious; this small group produced an extraordinarily large talent pool of leading figures across the entire 1960s left spectrum.

YSL members had some experience from participating in those few struggles for civil rights that existed during McCarthyism — mostly sporadic picketing, confined to the North, by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) of restaurants and public places that refused to serve black people. The YSL was active in the important left wing of the Chicago National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), fighting to break the control of the William Dawson machine, the black subset of the Richard J. Daley machine, the Democratic Party's vehicle for keeping Chicago segregation intact. YSL publications (*Challenge* and *Anvil*) showed an appreciation of black culture — literature, jazz, history, and the visual arts — notoriously absent outside the black community in that reactionary period.

The YSL's mission statement, *What is the Young Socialist League?*, highlighted the primacy the organization accorded to the fight for black equality:

The rising tide of militant struggle by the Negro people to realize their emancipation . . . is the most important development in our political and social life. This is a battle against all that is rotten and backward in the South and the nation as a whole; it is a struggle for democracy. . . . We will do all in our power to support the struggle. . . . It is the duty of the government to enforce the ruling against segregation in the schools and to make all acts of segregation and discrimination illegal.

This was our guide.

Racism and American Socialism

In addition to activity, we brought to the movement theoretical views that were the distillation of the ideas of American socialism. Many originated in the Communist Party of the 1920s, which attempted to overcome the racial backwardness and mixed record of the US left epitomized by the pre-World War I Socialist Party (SP). The SP had many outstanding anti-racist fighters, from Eugene Debs, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Big Bill Haywood on down, but at its worst it tolerated segregated branches in parts of the South. Even anti-racist SPers were frequently limited by American theoretical primitiveness. They often understood black oppression as a solely economic question, another facet of capitalist exploitation, which would be solved almost automatically by socialism. Meanwhile, in the here and now, they underestimated the importance of immediate or separate struggles against racism.

STOP LYNCHING

DEMAND DEATH PENALTY
FOR THE LYNCHERS

UNITED FRONT

Mass Protest Meeting AGAINST LYNCHING

Tuesday, December 29, 1931

8 P. M.

AT

Pythian Hall, 12th & U Sts. N. W.

DEMAND the Death Penalty for the Lynchers of
Mathew Williams of Salisbury, Md., Sam Jackson
and George Banks of Lewisburg, W. Va.

Prominent Speakers

Admission Free

Free the nine Scottsboro Boys
of Scottsboro, Alabama

Free Orphan Jones
of Snow Hill, Md.

Joint Auspices: League of Struggle for Negro
Rights, International Labor Defense and Scottsboro
Defense Committee.



A flyer advertising a December 29, 1931, meeting in Washington, DC. The sponsoring organizations listed were led or allied with the Communist Party. (Washington Area Spark / Flickr)

Some SPers spurned anti-racist struggles as reformist, others because it could create barriers with prejudiced white workers. Working-class unity would be achieved, they thought, by appealing to the lowest common denominator — economic demands that both white and black workers could agree on — while avoiding demands against racism, which might be a threat to unity. Pre-WWI socialism, with important exceptions, preferred to ignore the problem — in effect, not challenging the racist status quo, white prejudice, and the hold that bourgeois ideology, with its inherent racism, had on white workers and radicals. This political and theoretical crudeness and backwardness was often dressed up as color blindness or class unity, ignoring rather than defining and fighting American racism. In contrast, the revolutionary tradition, under the influence of the world communist movement of the 1920s, stressed that racial oppression was central to American capitalism. The fight for socialism was inseparable from black liberation, a part of the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. The fight to overcome racism was the task of the entire working class, white as well as black workers.

Revolutionaries had to win the working class to fight against all instances of oppression and exploitation. Only through the heightened class consciousness that overcame racist ideology would the working class become capable of making a socialist revolution and fit to rule society.

The CP laid the foundation for our theory that black oppression had a dual character, with blacks being a super-exploited section of the working class, as well as possessing dimensions of a national minority in some ways similar to groups afflicted by national and colonial oppression. Black liberation was a part of the struggle for national liberation; independent organizations and struggles against oppression had to be supported as a democratic demand, a matter of democracy and justice — part of the fight for socialist democracy — and as the only real way to forge working-class unity. Revolutionaries had to sympathetically understand the distinction between the nationalism of the oppressed, as a vehicle to fight against their subjugation, and the nationalism of oppressors, as a vehicle to continue coerced domination and inequality. We were not defined by standard concepts of nationalism, separatism, or integration; our goal was black equality and liberation, whatever was required to advance and achieve it — or as Malcolm X later famously said, “by any means necessary.”

We rejected interracial unity that ignored or subordinated black demands to white prejudice or politics. Only by rising to anti-racism could class consciousness based on class unity become a living reality; without it, no significant US revolutionary movement could be forged. Revolutionaries had to act as a vanguard, fighting all instances of prejudice, initiating struggles against racism, educating and winning the broader labor and radical movements to interracial support for these fights — even when these were highly unpopular minority views.

The 1920s CP was composed almost entirely of immigrant workers, of whom only 10 percent were in English-speaking branches. Yet these immigrant proletarian revolutionaries, under the guidance of the pre-Stalinist Communist International, developed a sophisticated theoretical approach to black liberation that armed them to fight for black equality; to break the color bar and open the trade unions to black workers; and to champion armed self-defense against the murderous pogroms against blacks in East St. Louis, Chicago, Tulsa and other cities. They were the inspiration for us who followed their revolutionary innovations.

Workers Party Heritage

The theoretical approach pioneered by the CP of the 1920s prior to its Stalinization was transmitted to the Trotskyist movement of the 1930s. We were instructed, in Leon Trotsky’s words, “to view the world through the eyes of the oppressed.” During the upsurge of industrial unions in the 1930s and 1940s, the labor movement, under communist and socialist influence in its finest moments, fought racism on and off the job — convincing many black workers that the labor movement was an essential vehicle to achieve equality.

The Trotskyist movement of the 1930s and 1940s had two outstanding black leaders: C.L.R. James, the West Indian revolutionary, and Ernest Rice McKinney, labor secretary and later national secretary of the Workers Party (WP). In the 1940 split of the Trotskyist movement over World War II, James and McKinney were among the founding leaders of the new Workers Party. C. L. R. James, author of [*The Black Jacobins*](#), the history of the slave rebellion that was the Haitian Revolution, is world-famous as a major Marxist theoretician, an important influence on revolutionaries internationally — including on Martin Luther King Jr, who on his first trip to Europe set up a meeting with James.



Marxist theoretician and Workers Party founder C.L.R. James, photographed in 1988. (Hill123 / Wikimedia Commons)

James was the leader of the WP minority, the Johnson-Forest-Stone (party names for James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs) tendency. This minority tendency agreed with the major programmatic views of the WP on WWII and domestic and international politics, but their analysis was that the Soviet Union was state-capitalist rather than a new form of class society. Additional differences later developed.

Ernest Rice McKinney needs greater introduction: He is one of many black revolutionary figures left out of history. McKinney was born in 1886, not long after Emancipation, to a family of ex-slaves. As a youngster, he was educated in union politics by his grandfather, an ex-slave, who became a leader in the bloody mine workers' class warfare in turn-of-the-century West Virginia. McKinney was a cofounder of the [Niagara Movement](#), an early twentieth-century civil rights organization; joined the CP at its launch; was on the organizing committee of the great 1919 steel strike; and was again on the Steel Workers Organizing Committee in the 1930s Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) drive.

In the 1920s, he was labor editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and secretary of the Pittsburgh NAACP. He drifted out of the CP in the late '20s and became associated with A. J. Muste's Conference for Progressive Labor Action, which during the Depression organized the Unemployed Leagues with McKinney as editor of its newspaper. The Muste organization led the Toledo general strike of 1934 and then merged with the Trotskyists, with McKinney a few years later becoming organizer of the New York City branch of the Socialist Workers Party. McKinney was the architect of the WP's historic rank-and-file caucus strategy against the no-strike pledge during WWII, which provided leadership and program in the wartime strikes and labor actions opposed by the pro-war union officials, social democrats, and Communists.

In the South, McKinney, disguised as a preacher on a mule, successfully organized sharecroppers' strikes and WP sharecropper branches. McKinney also organized underground black workers' groups in industry to break Jim Crow job classifications, particularly in the new CIO unions. He moved rightward in the 1950s but came out of retirement to give classes for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s.

Inside the Workers Party, the emphasis was placed on activity within black working-class communities and on building a multiracial revolutionary organization. A years-long discussion and debate took place internally and in the pages of *Labor Action* and the *New International* on the question of black liberation: James, particularly after the [1943 Harlem rebellion](#), stressed the revolutionary potential of the black community and the importance of independent black struggles and organization, summed up later in his famous document *The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States*.

McKinney, meanwhile, stressed that black liberation could only be successful through the working-class and union movement. The arguments of these two positions bred a lively theoretical and political culture, with a deep appreciation for black history. These were the foundations out of which our outlook developed. We were originally trained in McKinney's position, but under the impact of 1960s black liberation, the IS reassessment of this question brought us into greater agreement with James' views.

Movement Loyalists

In the civil rights movement, we were movement loyalists. We shared its goals. We believed that socialists should join, defend, strengthen, assist, and champion this movement. We also were dedicated to building its militant left wing as a necessity for victory, as well as for renewing socialist organization. While involved in countless struggles to desegregate public accommodations, we emphasized that it was essential to fight for voting rights and jobs, to attack the underpinnings of racist institutions. These ideas became vital in the 1960s, in Southern voting struggles; in the March on Washington, whose main slogan was "For Jobs and Freedom"; and in the Bay Area movement, which under left influence made its major goal the fight to open racist job markets.

We believed all liberation struggles of the oppressed were indispensable parts of the class struggle against capitalism. We were not dismayed by the fact that in the early stages of the movement, the fighters were often Christians who were nonviolent, who had illusions in liberalism and in the government, and who did not start with an anti-capitalist consciousness. Some radical groups were dismissive of this stage of the movement, awaiting a "higher stage" before taking part in the struggle; to their shame and embarrassment, they missed the civil rights movement. We recognized that existing consciousness would change through struggle, as events taught people essential lessons about the real power relations of capitalist society — the role of politicians, the police, the mass media, established institutions and authorities — and radicalized them as they became more self-confident, convinced of their own agency, power, and ability to transform society, particularly if socialists were present to give voice to these radical political lessons. Our guide was Karl Marx's famous formulation in the *Communist Manifesto*: We have no interests apart from the masses of workers and the oppressed, and in the movement of the present we fight for the movement's future.

We were often subject to red-baiting from political opponents — liberals as well as conservatives — who appealed to the still lingering McCarthyite sensibilities of American "common sense" that reds are an alien element with sinister purposes to impose some nefarious "outside" agenda. We overcame red-baiting attacks by taking them head-on politically, including in our forthright defense of the

relationship of socialism to oppression.

We opposed without qualification all oppression and exploitation — its elimination was what we considered socialism to be. The movements to achieve the end of oppression and exploitation are the process and vehicles for the liberation of humanity. These views, and our practice, became understood by movement activists and gained us respect, comradely feelings, and acceptance. It became impossible to witch-hunt us out of the movement.

Traditional Civil Rights Organization

Before Montgomery, the NAACP was the only organization with a mass black membership. The NAACP focused on court litigation, legislative lobbying, and pressuring political and corporate elites. There were some militant, local-chapter exceptions to this reform-from-above strategy. But the national leadership opposed mass action from below, breaking the law except for court case challenges, and mass arrests as “counterproductive” and a threat to respectable pressure politics. Roy Wilkins, NAACP chief, dismissed protests as “blowing off steam.” Victory in Montgomery opened alternatives to the dominant NAACP strategy.

The NAACP’s crowning achievement was the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the landmark court ruling against segregated schools and the doctrine of “separate but equal.” The Dwight D. Eisenhower administration, however, refused to enforce the decision, and there was no existing movement to make enforcement happen. But *Brown* set off a strong segregationist backlash — the campaign of “Massive Resistance,” spearheaded by Southern Democratic congressmen, with the quiet acquiescence of other Democratic officials. This racist counterattack reinforced McCarthyism, with the NAACP outlawed as subversive in some Southern states, and its members fired from public employment.

Southern business, professionals, and the middle class sponsored the formation of the “respectable” white supremacist Citizens’ Councils. The Citizens’ Councils and police departments across the South provided cover for the reinvigorated Ku Klux Klan to terrorize rural black people. This white racist reaction effectively held back the fledgling movement during three long years between Montgomery and the eruption of the sit-in movement in Greensboro, North Carolina. But it was the ferment of those years, the demonstrations and the fight back, that kept the Montgomery spirit alive — and was laying the basis for the mass upsurge of the 1960s.

Randolph-King Direct Action Forces

Montgomery’s aftermath clarified that traditional national black organizations would not engage in militant, mass actions; new organizations were needed for the fight. Bayard Rustin was pivotal to this development. Rustin conceived the idea for the first new organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He was the agent for creating the relationship between A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King Jr that became the force behind national mass actions.



Socialist and civil rights leader Bayard Rustin. (Warren K. Leffler / Library of Congress)

Randolph and Wilkins were, prior to King, the most prominent black leaders nationally. Randolph was the most successful [black trade unionist](#) in American history. He organized the [Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters](#) (BSCP), the only independent black trade union, and later headed the 1930s mass [National Negro Congress](#). Randolph's greatest success was in forming the all-black [March on Washington Movement](#) (MOWM) in 1941, which demanded racial equality in defense plants and the integration of the armed forces. It threatened demonstrations that could disrupt defense preparations on the eve of World War II. Roosevelt, allied to the Dixiecrats, fought the MOWM and its demands — but was forced to capitulate, and issued an executive order that created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC).

Until the FEPC, racist employers kept most black workers confined to farm, service, menial, and household servant work. The FEPC set off a vast migration, as black workers went from poverty wages in the South to union wages and conditions in Northern war factories.

Randolph's prestige came from his efforts that changed black social conditions to a greater degree

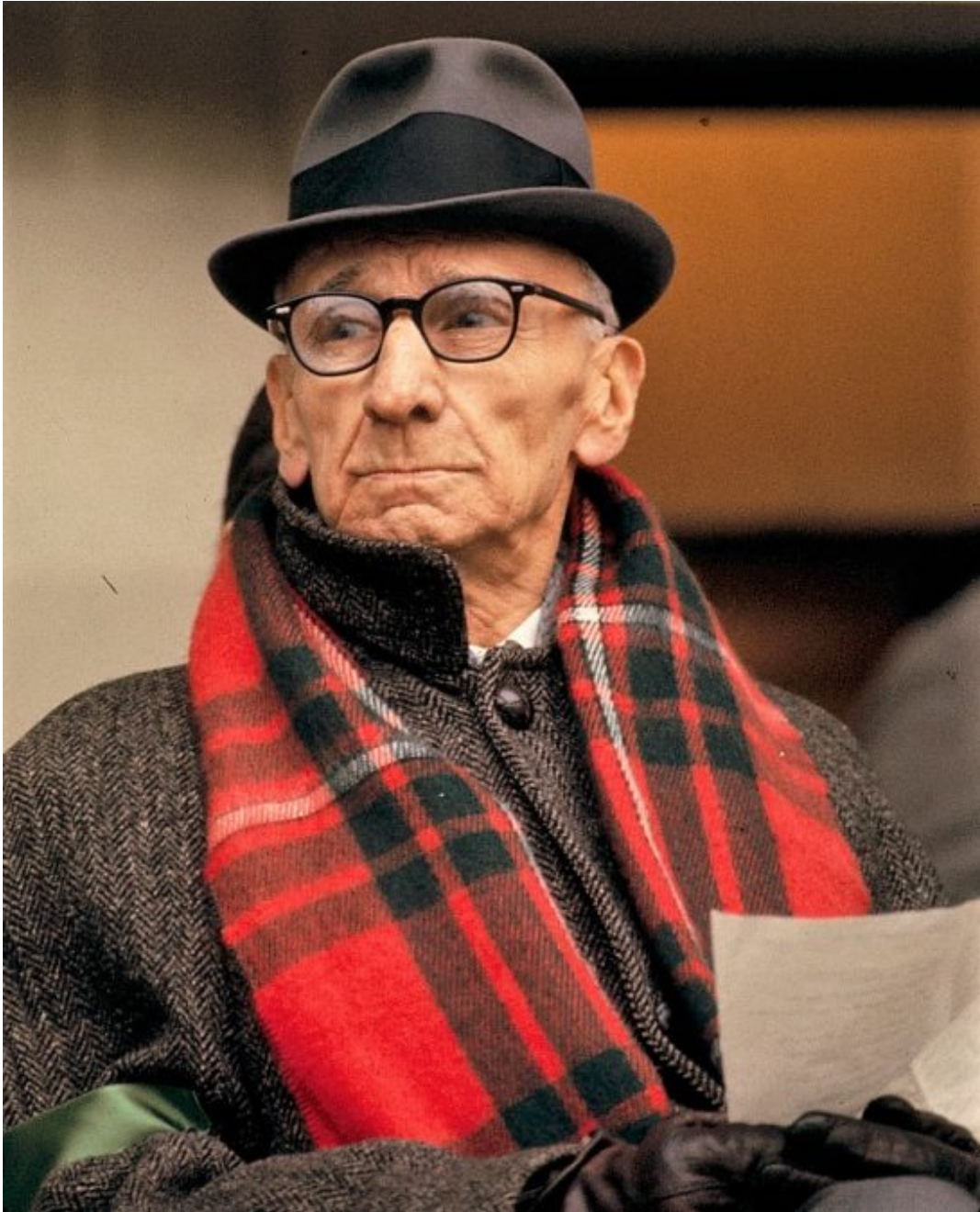
than any of his contemporaries, until King, were able to achieve. [Bayard Rustin](#) became a national figure in the civil rights movement through his position as the coordinator of the Randolph-King forces. These forces began without strong national organization, and Rustin relied heavily upon the YSL and our allies as his troops for mobilizations. Our alliance with Rustin is what gave us a role disproportionate to our size.

Bayard Rustin

Rustin was probably the most talented mass organizer that the US left has produced. His planning genius was connected to his visionary political ideas and tactics. A socialist and radical pacifist, Rustin was an openly gay man, which made him a target for harassment in the homophobic 1950s. Rustin paid the price: arrests, slanders, demotions, firings, being banned for years from civil rights prominence. He repeatedly overcame these setbacks and was restored to leadership because of his unique talents.

Movement histories often overlooked, minimized, or depreciated Rustin's role until gay consciousness restored acknowledgement of his importance. Neither A. J. Muste nor King would defend Rustin from attacks about his sexuality. The YSL, with liberated sexual views unusual in the conservative 1950s, defended his sexuality and sexual rights; it was another bond in our alliance. Rustin's experience of mass organization stretched back to his Young Communist League membership, when he helped organize a successful bus boycott against job discrimination in New York City. He left the CP in opposition to its support for US entry into World War II and became an assistant to Randolph in the MOWM. From the mid-1950s on, he was Randolph's closest political collaborator.

Prior to Montgomery, Rustin was the executive secretary of the War Resisters League, and the primary organizer of the radical pacifist current led by Muste, which dominated a number of interlocking organizations including the WRL, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, CORE, and *Liberation* magazine. The Muste group shared some defining politics with us, to which they gave a pacifist content. *Liberation's* inaugural issue in April 1956 raised as its own the slogan, "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but for the Third Camp," and editorially defined Russian Stalinism as "bureaucratic collectivism." That same issue of *Liberation* included "Our Struggle," King's first article on Montgomery, written in the midst of the conflict, explaining its central lessons as the rise of The New Negro . . . a revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of himself and his destiny . . . the church is becoming militant . . . economics is part of our struggle . . . and we have discovered a new and powerful weapon, non-violent resistance.



Socialist, civil rights, and anti-war activist A.J. Muste. (Bernard Gotfryd / Library of Congress via Wikimedia Commons)

The WP, renamed the Independent Socialist League (ISL) in 1949, had fraternal ties with the radical pacifist, anti-capitalist, and anti-Stalinist Muste current. Muste was the keynote speaker at the founding conference of the YSL. The ISL and the Muste tendency formed a joint organization, the Third Camp Committee, to oppose imperialism and the Cold War. Its activities during the Cold War included demonstrations against the Francisco Franco dictatorship, the US invasion of Guatemala, and other imperialist crimes. Common activity, based on common principles, with the Muste group furthered our acceptance within the civil rights and peace movements, and was our original link to Rustin.

Rustin and Montgomery

Rustin was dispatched to Montgomery by Randolph and Muste in February 1956, when it seemed the bus boycott might weaken. Coretta Scott King was a longtime admirer of Rustin's work, easing his

introduction to Martin Luther King Jr. Rustin had long, deep, imaginative, even transformative discussions with King that began their decade-long creative alliance. Rustin was King's original guide in nonviolent resistance, as well as a political adviser and tactician to King, who was just beginning his political career.

"Martin Luther King Jr had tremendous respect and admiration for both A. Philip Randolph and A.J. Muste, and Bayard Rustin was his first link to them and their world."

King had tremendous respect and admiration for both Randolph and Muste, and Rustin was his first link to them and their world. This relationship would allow Rustin to construct the Randolph-King alliance as the mass action alternative to the existing civil rights strategy.

Rustin's Montgomery experience led him to formulate some key ideas. The first was that, at this historic juncture, the black church was the only independent institution capable of mass black mobilization. Rustin insisted that whatever its conservative limitations, the black church could be neither ignored nor circumvented; no successful effort to advance the struggle was possible without it. As the *Young Socialist Challenge* reported, Rustin said in a May 6, 1957, speech at a YSL meeting: In Montgomery . . . throughout the South and in the North, the Negro churches have been the rallying point of a gigantic mass movement . . . The church is the one representative institution which is universal to the Negro community.

Rustin drew the conclusion, and convinced King, to form the SCLC, comprising those black churches and ministers committed to direct action and mass mobilization. Rustin was King's nominee to be executive director of the SCLC, until vetoed by other ministers because of Rustin's homosexuality and radicalism.

YSL members were convinced of Rustin's view that the black church was essential to organizing the civil rights movement at this opening stage. It was the key lever to set in motion the mass struggle from below, which would later take other, more militant organizational forms in SNCC, CORE, the Deacons for Defense and Justice, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and black power organizations.



Rosa Parks sits in the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956 after the US Supreme Court ruled segregation illegal on the city's buses. (US Department of State / Flickr)

Another strategic Rustin contribution that influenced the early movement was his theory of “social dislocation.” Social dislocation argues that mass civil disobedience could impose upon the racist white power structure a situation of social chaos, forcing it to respond. The disruption of US life could “dislocate” the racist functioning of “normal American society” by shifting the burden and consequences of racism onto the upholders of the status quo.

The Montgomery bus boycott was victorious when the carpool system bankrupted the bus company, strategically changing the balance of power by placing the costs of segregation onto the municipal authorities. The pain and humiliation of segregation and racism could be shifted so that not just black people suffered, which the United States tolerated, but racists were forced by inconvenience or loss to share the burdens and costs of institutionalized racism — or make changes.

Rustin Brings Montgomery North

Rustin was a profound source in making the boycott a national story. He had an intense impact on us as the boycott was happening. Shortly after he returned from Montgomery, in April 1956 there was an all-day Philadelphia Third Camp Conference, sponsored by the ISL, the YSL, and the WRL. The speakers were Rustin, Muste, and [Michael Harrington](#), national chairman of the YSL.

In his speech, “The Meaning of Montgomery,” Rustin interpreted the bus boycott as a triad of significance: a watershed event in black history, a labor upsurge in the South, and a part of the revolt against colonial domination. The United States, Rustin held, had brought its colonial subjects from Africa home, and this revolt was similar to the ongoing international struggles for national liberation. The concept that black people represented an internal colony inside the United States had previously been advanced by the CP and was popularized a decade later by the Black Panther Party.

Rustin ended his remarks by saying that third-camp socialists had a duty to take part in this movement for racial equality and anti-colonialism. He continued this message with a speaking tour of college campuses that included YSL forums.

It was in building Northern solidarity for Montgomery that our active collaboration with Rustin was cemented. Rustin cofounded a new, small organization, In Friendship, with civil rights veterans Ella Baker, later godmother of SNCC, and Stanley Levison, later King’s fundraising and political adviser. In Friendship’s purpose was to provide “economic assistance to those suffering economic reprisals in the efforts to secure civil rights.” In Friendship’s first major event was a Madison Square Garden 20,000-strong rally, the largest such event since the March on Washington Movement. It was held a month after the Philadelphia conference, and for the first time, considerable on-the-ground organizing was provided by YSL and ISL members, who showed their competency, professionalism, and nonsectarianism.

It was a role that might have been precluded in previous years by the Communist Party’s hegemony on the Left. A second fundraiser was held in December 1956, featuring Duke Ellington, Harry Belafonte, and Coretta Scott King. These events were the start of the ongoing working relationship between Rustin and the YSL, two of whose members — Tom Kahn and Rachelle Horowitz — became his main assistants.

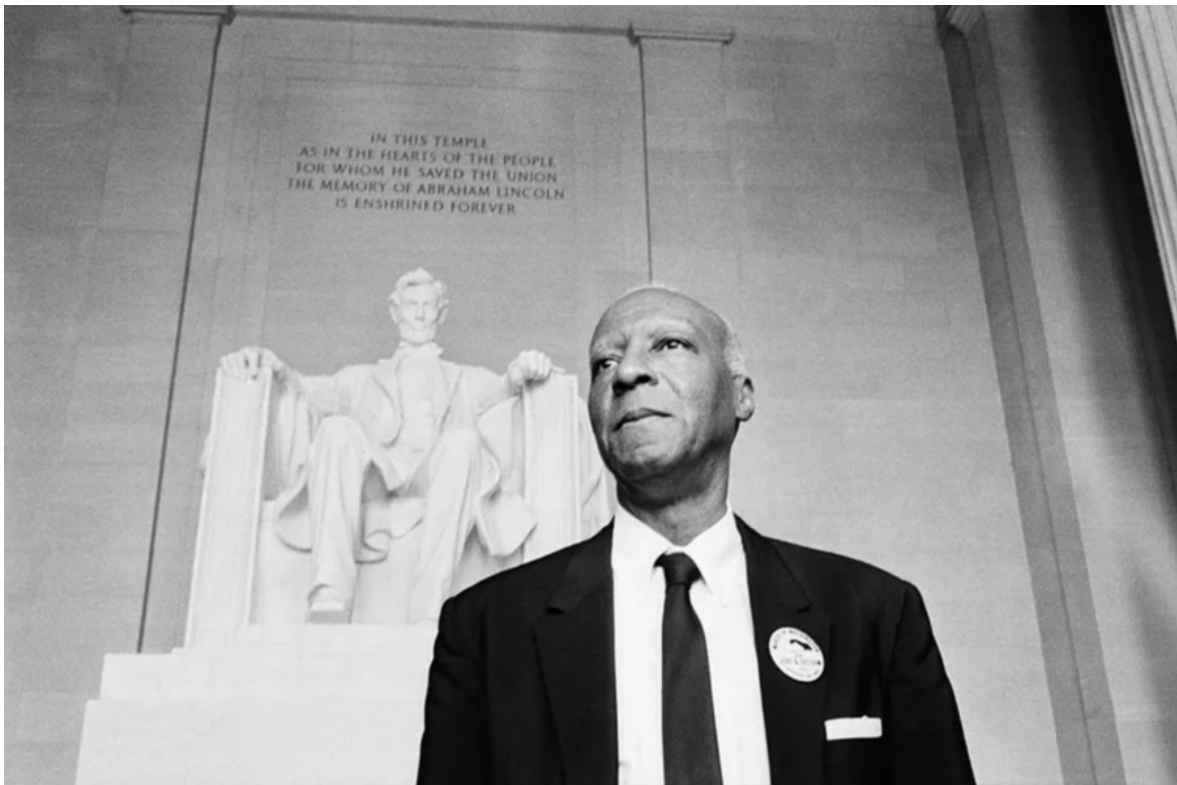
The partnership with Rustin was our entry into collaboration with Randolph and King. The only downside of this relationship developed years later, when Rustin became the main spokesman in the civil rights movement for the rightward-moving Max Shachtman group.

Mass Demonstrations

Three mass demonstrations took place in Washington, DC, in the years between Montgomery and the 1960 sit-in movement. They were the first large-scale protests at the nation’s capital since the 1940s. Each demonstration showed the determination to sustain the fight for civil rights in the face of the Southern racist backlash and federal government stonewalling. During the years when there was no ongoing national mass movement, these marches were stepping-stones to the 1960s and dress rehearsals for the March on Washington of 1963. The organizing center for the marches was on 125th Street in Harlem, at the BSCP or other union offices.

Randolph and King were the cochairmen who coopted other luminaries as cosponsors. Rustin was organizer, Kahn and Horowitz his chief assistants. The YSL and its allies were the cadres responsible

for the “[Jimmie Higgins](#)” work of building the marches, publicizing them, getting the endorsements, confirming speakers, and mobilizing people through carpools and buses.



Socialist, labor organizer, and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph. (Getty Images)

The first march, the Prayer Pilgrimage, was named after a one-day demonstration in Montgomery in which, to show their resolve, people walked to work as opposed to using the carpools. The following two events were the Youth Marches for Integrated Schools. The political backdrop to all three marches was that, despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, the federal government had done nothing to implement school desegregation in the South.

In the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the board of education was that of Topeka, Kansas. Schools were segregated in a number of Northern and Border states, including Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky, as well as southern areas of Illinois, Indiana, and Kansas. Schools in those regions were integrated between 1954 and the early 1960s, but in the Deep South, 99 percent of schools remained segregated in 1963. The courts and the federal government were not enforcing the law; for *Brown* to become reality, movement pressure was necessary.

Action to force the government to implement the supposedly established “law of the land” was the core function of the marches. The Prayer Pilgrimage was held on the third anniversary of the *Brown* decision, in May 1957. *Labor Action* reported on a YSL meeting where Rustin insisted that the Pilgrimage was

not going to pray and wait for the heavens to open up. . . . It will confront a congress which is doing nothing in the area of civil rights. . . . The issue is not confined to civil rights. . . . Every political question in America today . . . schools, health, labor — is becoming inextricably tied up with the issue of emancipation posed by the developments in the South.

The Prayer Pilgrimage, which more than 25,000 attended, was the first mass protest in years, the largest civil rights demonstration until that time. Its overwhelming religious character was fortunately interspersed with overtones of militancy. It was the first demonstration sponsored by the SCLC and gave the organization a sense of the broad support it could build nationally.

At the pilgrimage, King gave his first major speech in the North, placing him on the national stage; in the black media, for the first time, King was heralded as the nation’s most important black leader.

King’s theme was an electrifying call to “give us the ballot,” a demand for the federal government to

protect black voter registration; if blacks could vote in the South, King maintained, desegregation, including of the schools, would follow.

King's speech foreshadowed the Southern voter registration drives of the 1960s. King's speech castigated both political parties for betraying justice:

The Democrats have betrayed it by capitulating to the prejudices and undemocratic practices of the Southern Dixiecrats. The Republicans have betrayed it by capitulating to the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing, reactionary northerners. These men so often have a high blood pressure of words and an anemia of deeds.

Labor Action celebrated the spirit of resistance the pilgrimage represented, but slammed the absence of leading union officials and liberals:

Many moods and many tendencies came together in Washington. . . . But if one element stands out above all others it is this: the Negro movement expresses its determination to press forward for democracy — against the old parties, if need be; in the face of the labor officialdom, if need be; without the public support of hypocritical liberals, if need be.

King's speech at the Prayer Pilgrimage signaled the new movement's defiant refusal to allow the white liberal establishment to set the pace of change. Against calls to revert to passivity, King argued that "Southern Negroes . . . will not and cannot retreat."

The first Youth March for Integrated Schools occurred the next year, in October 1958, focused on trying to force the federal government to intervene in Little Rock, Arkansas, against governor Orval Faubus, who violently obstructed school integration, eventually closing the high schools for a year. Some 12,000 students demonstrated for integration, in what was seen as the start of the student civil rights movement.

Rustin toured college campuses in New York City with Jackie Robinson to build the march, and King spoke at NYC churches. As historian Daniel Levine writes, "The whole thing was a shoestring operation. . . . Most of the support came from labor unions, primarily those unions in which black workers were an important part of the membership."

"King's speech at the Prayer Pilgrimage signaled the new movement's defiant refusal to allow the white liberal establishment to set the pace of change."

The march was organized along lines that Michael Harrington outlined in his instructions to Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) branches, into which the YSL had just merged. Rustin would speak only on campuses with YPSL branches, who were the force organizing for the march. Two meetings would occur. First, a large public meeting would mobilize for the demonstration, for which the YPSL was to seek broad sponsorships from the NAACP Youth Council, the student government, and campus progressive groups. The second meeting would be a YPSL internal membership meeting, in which Rustin would speak on the role of socialists in the civil rights movement, and on the strategy and tactics socialists should employ in building the movement's next steps. King was the featured speaker at the Youth March, but after he was stabbed and hospitalized, Coretta Scott King filled in as primary speaker.

A second Youth March followed six months later, in April 1959, attended by 25,000 people and accompanied by petitions signed by hundreds of thousands of students demanding federal support for school integration. "More than three hundred buses, half of them from outside New York," historian Maurice Isserman writes, arrived in DC. King, Harry Belafonte, Jackie Robinson, and Tom Mboya, chairman of the All-African People's Conference, all spoke.

The structure of the demonstration was similar to the first. Randolph and King called the march and received cosponsorship from the NAACP, while Rustin organized it, with the YPSL the major organizing force on the ground across the country. As Isserman writes, "New recruits helped out at the Youth March headquarters in Harlem and elsewhere around the country; these recruits included Bob Moses, then a New York City high school teacher, and Eleanor Holmes . . . then a student at Antioch College."

In Chicago, the YPSL was able to use its influence within the NAACP, the United Auto Workers, and the United Packinghouse Workers of America to mobilize buses for the April 18 march. King linked the campaign to a broader effort to "advance democracy in the South."

The three marches demonstrated the potential national scope of the movement, but the demand for federal intervention in the South was ignored by President Eisenhower, met with silence by the liberal

establishment, and not covered by most of the white press. As an editorial in *Labor Action* succinctly declared, “White liberals talk, Southern reaction acts.”

But a new generation of young black people felt that they could not wait for court rulings or for the federal government to confront the apartheid system. *Labor Action* captured the mood of frustration and anger simmering among segregation’s opponents at the inaction of the establishment:

The responsibility for the fact that there has been no break in the defiance of the Supreme Court’s integration order in the Deep South rests to no small degree on the shoulders on the national leadership of both political parties. Their shameless capitulation to the Southern racists has actually encouraged the latter’s defiance of the court order.

Brown v. Board of Education appeared to mean little more than the paper it was written on.

The years between 1956 and 1960 were a period of racist backlash and also of ideological ferment preparing the next great wave of struggle. Revolutionary socialists’ experience in building solidarity with Montgomery, organizing the three Washington marches, and forging close alliances with key movement leaders solidified us as a part of the activist core preparing movement revival. Some activists of the ’60s began their political life as organizers for the marches — among them, Bob Moses of SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and Ezell Blair, one of the four students who began the Greensboro lunch counter sit-in.

In these years of ferment, a civil rights subculture was created, developing a new generation of fighters who emerged, to the surprise of the world, seemingly overnight in the 1960 sit-ins and solidarity picketing. The YSL/YPSL was a visible part of this subculture that fused activism with education, in a renewal of the tradition of abolitionism — a “new abolitionism,” as Howard Zinn [called it](#).

“Revolutionary socialists’ experience in building solidarity with Montgomery, organizing the Washington marches, and forging close alliances with key movement leaders solidified us as a part of the activist core.”

Our contribution was not only as movement fighters, but also in political education in the movement subculture. YPSL held classes and reading groups on Reconstruction, the populist movement, Scottsboro, the CIO upsurge. We read Du Bois, C.L.R. James, C. Vann Woodward, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, a [one-time YPSL member](#) who would occasionally speak for us. These classes and discussions were part of the intellectual culture in which activists for the 1960s civil rights movement were being formed. To be taken seriously in movement discussions, people needed to know the Harlem Renaissance, Scottsboro, Reconstruction, populism. A dynamic political culture, of which we were an essential part, developed in the late 1950s, as the gathering momentum for social justice broke conformity and prefigured the 1960s. We established a strong position in the formative years of the movement; the test would be how we used these positions in the mass upsurge of the 1960s.