

Introduction

The formation of the Negro Labor Committee on July 20, 1935, was a major breakthrough in the black man's struggle to involve himself in the labor movement and to bring organized labor to the realization that its aspirations could only be achieved by giving equal consideration to all workers regardless of race, creed, or color. In 1925, Frank R. Crosswaith and a number of other labor leaders had organized the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers, with the goal of encouraging blacks to unionize. Later, in 1934, a number of the same leaders, with the active support of the Socialist party, founded the Harlem Labor Committee with somewhat the same objective.

The First Negro Labor Conference was called together under the auspices of the Harlem Labor Committee and was composed of elected delegates, both blacks and whites, from 110 progressive labor unions. The purpose of the conference was to consider the economic plight of black workers and to develop a program of action calculated to aid them in securing better-paid jobs other than the more-or-less menial jobs (dishwasher, porter, cook), to which tradition had long confined black people following the overthrow of slavery. A second objective of the conference was to remove the serious threat that the unorganized black worker represented to the organized labor movement.

The conference elected a committee of twenty-five members who proceeded to establish the Negro Labor Committee and to map out a program of action; the committee was headed by Frank R. Crosswaith. Other officers were Vice Chairmen A. Philip Randolph (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), Thomas G. Young (Building Service Employees' Union), Julius Hochman (ILGWU), Abraham Miller (Amalgamated Clothing Workers), and Morris Feinstone (United Hebrew Trades); treasurer, Philip Kapp (Joint Board, Dressmakers' Union); financial secretary, Winifred Gittens (ILGWU); and organizer, Noah A. Walter, Jr. (Laundry Workers' Union).

One of the Committee's first projects was the establishment of the Harlem Labor Center—Labor's Home in Harlem—at 312 West 125th Street. The Center was dedicated on December 15, 1935, and its opening was accompanied by an intensive campaign of education and organization. The founders of the Negro Labor Committee did not claim credit for anything original in their action, for

. . . we recall with pride that other minority groups in the world of work when faced with problems similar to the problems the Negro workers now face, adopted identical methods of meeting and solving their problems. . . . The Negro worker has been referred to as the "Scab of America." . . . While the facts do not wholly justify this appellation, nevertheless, it is true that in every major industrial struggle in the U.S. within the last two decades, the Negro worker has played a vital, if not always, complimentary role.

Unfortunately, organized labor in too many instances, both by sins of omission and commission, has driven the Negro worker into the open and welcome arms of the employers with the result that the Negro has developed an unfriendly attitude toward the labor movement and a corresponding affection for the employers of labor.

. . . in spite of some fine resolutions and official pronouncements on the subject there are still unions that either openly bar Negro workers from membership through clauses in their Constitution, bylaws or rituals, and that covertly discriminate against the Negro worker by practices more eloquent and effective than pronouncements, resolutions, or Constitutions can ever be.

In dealing with the double dilemma of the black worker, the Negro Labor Committee sought to organize unorganized black workers and to break down the barriers within the existing labor

movement. It sought the affiliation of additional unions and locals with or without black membership in order to provide for the broadest possible participation in its work and to ensure the maintenance of the Harlem Labor Center as the home of legitimate labor movement among black and white workers in Harlem. The Committee also lent its support to unions engaged in organization and strike activities among black workers, and it established the Negro Labor News Service, which disseminated information on events about or relating to black labor throughout the country.

During the 1930s and 1940s the Negro Labor Committee played a key role in expanding the ranks of organized black labor and in overcoming barriers within the labor movement itself. It sponsored conferences, trained organizers, and carried out highly publicized campaigns against discriminatory practices, both in labor and management. Furthermore, the Committee successfully led the fight against Communist efforts to use black labor problems as vehicles toward its own ends.

At its height the Committee represented over 250,000 black and white workers and was widely acknowledged and respected as the voice of black labor. Time and events have marched on, but we must not forget the contributions that this organization and its leaders have made to the status of the black worker in American labor today.

Frank R. Crosswaith, founder and longtime chairman of the Negro Labor Committee, was born in Fredericksted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands, on July 16, 1892. While still in his teens, he moved to New York City. His aspiration was to become a lawyer; however, his involvement in the labor and socialist movements in Harlem cost him his job. Instead, with the aid of a scholarship, he enrolled at the Rand School of Social Sciences. After graduation his work in both movements increased. He became a lecturer for the school, a socialist organizer and lecturer for the League for Industrial Democracy, and a national organizer for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.

Contending that the problems of black people were kindred to those of all working people, and that the aspiration of labor could only be achieved by giving equal consideration to all workers regardless of race, creed, or color, Crosswaith soon gained widespread recognition as an outstanding speaker and proponent of the cause of all oppressed people. His stance as an uncompromising foe of communism earned him the proud distinction of being its number one target. He argued quite effectively that communism was merely using the grievances of black people for cheap political propaganda. Furthermore, the Ku Klux Klan openly threatened Crosswaith for charging it with the infamous race riot among the sharecroppers in Elaine, Arkansas. He was likewise attacked by antilabor employers for his opposition to their attempts to use black workers as pawns to thwart the efforts of organized labor.

Nevertheless, even those who disagreed with Crosswaith's bitter, although eloquent, criticisms of the blemishes of American democracy respected him for his ideals and unswerving devotion to his people and working peoples everywhere. He brought to the surface the ugly sores of racial prejudice, political opportunism, and economic barbarism, all of which hampered the achievement of constructive progress of Negro civil rights.

Frank Crosswaith also was an effective labor organizer, who cofounded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and helped to organize unions for elevator operators and constructors, mechanics, barbers, laundry workers, motion picture operators, grocery clerks, dining car employees, drug clerks, and many other labor groups. He also wrote a regular column, "Looking around and Beyond," which discussed problems relating to black labor and appeared in several black newspapers from 1939 to 1943. Furthermore, he served as the first labor member of the New York City Housing Authority, a post to which he was appointed by Mayor Fiorello

Henry LaGuardia. At a testimonial dinner in honor of his seventieth birthday, Crosswaith was cited as “the pioneer veteran, champion of labor and loyal public servant who has devoted his life to the economic and social welfare of all workers. Male and female workers of America—Negro, white and all races—have drawn strength and inspiration from the fervor and passion of Frank R. Crosswaith’s lifelong devotion to the cause of labor.”

Chronology

July 16, 1892	Born in Fredericksted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands
1915	Married Alma E. Besard of Charleston, South Carolina
1925	Cofounded the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers
August 25, 1925	Cofounder and general organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
1934	Candidate for Congress, 21st Congressional District, New York
1935	Established the Negro Labor News Service
July 20, 1935	Cofounder and chairman of the Negro Labor Committee
1936	Coauthored, with Alfred Baker Lewis, “True Freedom for Negro and White Labor”
1937	Cofounded the Negro Labor Assembly
1938	Candidate for Congress, 21st Congressional District, New York
1939	Candidate for City Council, New York
1939–43	Authored column “Looking around and Beyond”
1941	Appointed to Selective Service Board #76 Member of A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Committee Broadcast one-half hour regular radio program on WEVD
1942	Appointed to the New York City Housing Authority by Mayor Fiorello Henry LaGuardia
1945	Cofounded the Liberal Party
1946	Reappointed to New York City Housing Authority (served until 1956)
1951	Testimonial dinner given in Crosswaith’s honor (proceeds turned over to Frank R. Crosswaith Labor Education Fund)
1952	Cofounded the Negro Labor Committee, U.S.A.
March 1, 1952	Chairman, Conference on Problems of the Negro Worker and the Community
May 18, 1957	Chairman, Conference on Labor’s Responsibility towards Integration in the New York City Public Schools
July 16, 1957	Testimonial dinner honoring sixty-fifth birthday
October 25, 1958	Coorganized Youth March on Washington for Integrated Schools
December 8, 1962	Seventieth birthday reception
1963	Helped organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom
June 18, 1965	Died