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Figure 8. “Striker and His Fiancée (Sitdown Strike Romance) in the Women’s Auxiliary Room in Pengally Hall.”

Photo by Dick Sheldon for the Farm Security Administration, Flint, Michigan, 1937. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (LC-USF34-040019-D), digital ID: LC-DIG-fsa-8c28661.

CIO leaders also clashed over the CIO unions’ willingness to work with a broad range of organizers. Between 1935 and 1939, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) pursued a “popular front” strategy, allying with organizations working for broad democratic change, rather than adhering to a narrow communist ideological line. CPUSA members became perhaps the most energetic and persistent of union organizers. Dubinsky grew unhappy with the prevalence of communist organizers in CIO unions and brought the ILGWU back into the AFL fold. Finally, in November 1938, the CIO held a national convention and created an independent confederation of industrial unions, now known as the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Though the Roosevelt Recession nearly halted the CIO’s growth, the industrial unions took advantage of industrial recovery during World War II to build on their gains in the 1930s. After the war, these CIO unions, along with the growing building trades and teamsters unions in the AFL, would become known as “Big Labor” and play central roles in the economy and politics.

African Americans’ relationship to labor changed dramatically in the 1930s. During the first years of the decade, the CPUSA emerged as an ally for black workers and for the cause of civil rights. Communist Party organizers, for example, led many of the unemployed organizations, fighting to bring government resources to black neighborhoods and to prevent the eviction of black tenants. The party’s legal arm, the International Labor Defense Fund, came to the assistance of the “Scottsboro Boys,” nine African American teenagers falsely accused of raping a white woman on a train and wrongly convicted in Scottsboro, Alabama. Black Americans pragmatically took advantage of such alliances. They were never members of the Communist Party in large numbers, but some black organizers and radicals joined the party at least for a short time, and many were generally willing to work with it to fight racial inequality through the labor movement. Party organizers energized the CIO’s efforts to organize interracial unions. CIO leaders, including the important group of left-wing organizers, understood that for practical or idealistic reasons, or both, the new industrial unions could challenge the AFL and their employers only if they built a culture of interracialism. Nonetheless, as the CIO grew, according to the historian Bruce Nelson, “it was constrained by a membership majority that had little or no commitment to a broad-gauged social-democratic agenda.”²² Racial discrimination in unions and working-class racial tensions remained key factors in American workplaces, and, indeed, have yet to be fully resolved.

For all the interracial organizing of radical activists and the CIO, black workers forged their own paths into the labor movement. Most notably, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) became the first national African American union to win a charter from the AFL in 1935. African American men had long worked as porters for the Pullman Palace Car Company. They acted as the servants of white customers on Pullman trains, providing first-class service in return for tips. They earned meager wages, which meant that they needed to play to the racist stereotype of