

a famous anti-lynching activist and a member of black Chicago's political elite. Wells-Barnett brought respectability and the support of the city's thousands of black clubwomen to the Brotherhood. At the same time, Randolph grew in stature as the foremost black labor leader and became the first head of the National Negro Congress (NNC), a characteristic Popular Front organization that sought to forge alliances among communists, socialists, and liberals organizing against racial and economic inequality. While the BSCP reached out to black leaders and community members, the union also took advantage of the 1934 Railway Labor Act to hold successful union elections among black porters. With mass black support, a new legal foundation, and the potential competition from the emerging CIO in mind, the AFL granted a charter to the BSCP in 1935. Two long years later, the Brotherhood finally signed its first contract with the Pullman Company, the first union contract for black workers with a major corporation.

The New Deal did not bring the country out of the depression, although it did improve the lives of millions of citizens and transformed the foundations of American politics so that future battles would be fought over the nature of organized labor's place in the nation (rather than its mere right to exist) and over broad access to "security." Union membership increased dramatically from just under 3 million in 1933 to approximately 12 million by 1945. President Roosevelt also helped create a fundamentally new national political alignment; success for the Democratic Party (outside the South, where the Democrats remained a conservative party until the rise of the southern wing of the Republican Party in the last third of the 20th century) would depend upon winning the votes of ethnic urban voters, unionized workers, and African Americans. In addition, the success of the CIO and the broad militancy of American workers led to a working-class-based cultural movement that one historian has termed "the laboring of American culture."²⁴ Workers and their worlds as subjects, and working-class artists, reshaped American music and the literary and visual arts, as well as popular culture on the radio, in movies, and in cartoons.

Workers and World War II

When Japan attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the rate of American manufacturing surged, and within about eighteen months the nation's economy was in a state of "full employment." World War II, therefore, marked a profound turning point because it brought the country out of the depression, introduced thousands of women and black workers to the industrial labor force, reinforced the idea that federal government spending was essential to a healthy economy, and established unions as central permanent players in the national economy. The war also revolutionized American workers' expectations. Rather than seeking to survive in what seemed to be an economic crisis without end, American workers entered the postwar world still deeply divided by race, geography, and social class, but expecting to share in a new era of prosperity.

Labor, including the CIO, solidified its place in the nation's economy during the war. Though labor conflict continued as many workers fought for higher wartime wages, often in wildcat strikes, labor leaders gained standing by signing on to a no-strike pledge with the federal government's labor mediation agency, the National War Labor Board. Labor unions also gained thousands of new members as they convinced the NWLB to refuse employers' demands for an "open shop" in wartime industries, and they secured "maintenance of membership clauses" stipulating that workers who became union members during the war would remain members for the length of the contract.