

1. BUNDLE B PAPER LINK FIXED:

CHAPTER

The Great Depression in the City

The Housewives' Meat Strike of 1935

Annelise Orleck

The Great Depression was the longest economic collapse in American history. It began with the "crash" in Wall Street stock values on October 29, 1929, and lasted until the onset of American involvement in World War II, in 1941. For more than a decade it looked as though the American version of capitalism was threatened, especially its "free market" aversion to government regulation of the economy. And it seemed that a new vision of government was evolving: many hoped government would insure the basic economic security of all Americans. Neither of these things happened, but for twelve tumultuous years, Americans experienced a "depression" whose impact was as psychological as it was economic, and whose cruelty scarred everyone in its path. Most of the following essay deals with the Depression's impact on industry and cities—the impact on farms is described in Chapter 10.

Numbers tell some of the story. By 1932, the worst year of the Depression, more than 13 million workers were unemployed, about 25 percent of the workforce. That was only part of the employment picture. Millions who did not lose their jobs had their hours and wages reduced. On average, workers earned 40 percent less in 1932 than in 1929. The picture is still not complete: hundreds of thousands worked but did not get paid for extended periods of time. This was especially true of municipal employees like teachers, police, and firefighters, as hundreds of cities flirted with or experienced bankruptcy in the 1930s. For example, Chicago schoolteachers worked but did not receive a dime in wages from November 1932 to March 1933.

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Unemployed, homeless men occupy a New York City "Hooverville." In the center is an undecorated Christmas tree. Was it fair to blame President Hoover for the plight of these men?

It is likely that as much as 40 percent of the industrial and agricultural workforce was unemployed or underemployed during the Great Depression. Put another way, in a population of about 120 million, up to 60 million people experienced poverty and severe deprivation during the 1930s.

Many small businesses closed, and most major corporations cut production. The value of stocks traded on the New York Stock Exchange, which more than doubled in the late 1920s, plunged to 15 percent of their value by 1932. By that year, national income was down by more than 50 percent, as was manufacturing, which employed the majority of nonfarm workers. Banks closed by the thousands: between 1929 and 1931, about 5,000 of the country's 25,000 banks shut their doors. Tens of thousands of depositors lost their savings.

Unemployment and falling wages were only part of the statistical story. Many families, unable to meet payments on their mortgages, lost their homes. In 1930, there were 150,000 foreclosures, and another 200,000 the following year. By 1933, 1,000 families lost their homes *each day*, and more than one-half of the country's mortgages were in foreclosure. Most Americans at the time rented rather than owned their homes or apartments. Evictions for failing to pay rent were epidemic. For instance, in each month of 1930, 12,000 New York City families were forced from their apartments. Most of them had nowhere else to go, and their furniture and other

belongings were placed on sidewalks. In 1932, which included one of the coldest winters recorded to that point, there were 37,000 evictions in New York every month.

But statistics cannot capture what it was like to live through the heartbreak of those years. People starved to death—and not because of food shortages. There was a surplus of food, but many could not afford it. As the Depression deepened in the early 1930s, President Herbert Hoover more than once proclaimed that no one had starved. But they had, though how many will never be known. In 1933, the New York City Children's Welfare Bureau estimated that at least 150,000 children in that city suffered from malnutrition; the Bureau noted that in many African American homes, there was "no food at all." In 1932, thirteen unidentified bodies in the Boston morgue had symptoms of starvation. The following year in Albany, New York a ten-year-old girl collapsed and died of starvation while seated at her desk in school; across the country in San Francisco a four-year-old boy died from starvation after his family was denied public assistance because they were Mexican. A final example (among many) comes from testimony before Congress in 1932 by officials from Philadelphia. They described a pregnant woman and her children whose only nutrition for eleven days, except for two meals, consisted of stale bread.

Under these circumstances it was difficult for families to stay together. Many unraveled under the stresses of unemployment, hunger, and evictions. By 1932 at least 2 million homeless, jobless people roamed the country. Many were married men who, for years, had been the "breadwinners" in their families. Ashamed of their inability to fulfill their primary male gender role, they abandoned their families and rode the rails from state to state. Or they lived as "hobos" in the makeshift shantytowns of splintered wood, bent metal, and broken dreams called "Hoovervilles," in mock honor of the president of the United States. Among these rootless wanderers, there were up to a quarter million young people, most of them boys in their teens whose families could not support them. Women and girls were among the homeless as well. On September 20, 1931, *The New York Times* reported that "several hundred homeless, unemployed women sleep nightly in Chicago's parks."

The impact of the Depression on families went beyond hunger, homelessness, and abandonment. Some couples stayed in unhappy marriages because they could not afford a divorce. From 1929 to 1932, the divorce rate dropped by 25 percent. Other couples, who would have liked to marry, could not because they lacked jobs and money—the marriage rate plunged by more than 20 percent in those years. The birthrate decreased for the same reasons throughout the 1930s.

Of course, not everyone suffered during the Great Depression. Millions kept their jobs and their homes. But some suffered more than others. African Americans living in cities were economically marginal even in the prosperous 1920s. For them, the Depression made a bad situation worse. In New York's Harlem and Chicago's Southside, the two largest

black communities in the North, two-thirds of workers were unemployed. Mexican Americans were targeted by angry whites, who wanted to reserve jobs for "real" Americans. More than 400,000 workers were sent back to Mexico, most against their will, some of them "real" American citizens. Finally, industrial workers of all ethnic backgrounds were hit hard because their wages did not increase enough during the 1920s. By the end of the decade, they could not buy the consumer goods they produced in factories. Their families lived from paycheck to paycheck, they were in debt to installment buying plans, and most had not a dime in savings. A few weeks without a paycheck meant disaster.

During the earliest and worst years of the Depression, from 1929 through 1932, there were no government safety nets to tide people over. Programs designed to provide a modicum of economic security—such as unemployment insurance, Social Security, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Fannie Mae (the Federal National Mortgage Association), and Aid to Families with Dependent Children—were created by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. But even the New Deal failed to end the Depression.

Protests over these conditions were common throughout the 1930s. In the next essay, Annelise Orleck describes protests by housewives over the high price of meat. Protesting the price of food might seem appropriate gender behavior for housewives. But Orleck's article makes it clear that these women understood how the economic system worked: they were convinced that as citizens, as well as women and wives, they had the right to protest against and change that system.

Source: Annelise Orleck, "We Are That Mythical Thing Called the Public: Militant Housewives during the Great Depression," *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 147–172.

Between 1926 and 1933 housewives' self-help groups sprang up across the United States. In cities surrounded by accessible growing areas (such as Dayton, Ohio; Richmond, Virginia; and Seattle, Washington), housewives and their husbands created highly developed barter networks. Unemployed workers, mostly male, exchanged skills such as carpentry, plumbing, barbering, and electrical wiring. Women—some workers' wives, others unemployed workers themselves—organized exchanges of clothing and food. These organizations grew out of small-scale gardening collectives created by housewives during the late 1920s to feed their communities.

In Seattle, unemployed families organized quickly in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash; but then this was an unusually organized city, described by a local paper in 1937 as "the most unionized city in the country." In 1919, Seattle had been the first city in the United States to hold a general strike. During the 1920s, Seattle's labor unions again broke new ground by calling on working-class women and men to organize as consumers. When the Depression hit, Seattle's vast subsistence network

[in which farm and city wives organized bartering to exchange timber and fish from western Washington for fruits and vegetables from the eastern portion of the state] was described in the national press as a model of self-sufficiency, "a republic of the penniless," in the words of the *Atlantic*. By 1931–32, 40,000 Seattle women and men had joined an exchange in which the men farmed, fished, and cut leftover timber from cleared land, while the women gathered food, fuel, and clothing. The women also ran commissaries where members could shop with scrip for household essentials. By 1934, an estimated 80,000 people statewide belonged to exchanges that allowed them to acquire food, clothing, and shelter without any money changing hands.

In larger cities like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit, self-help groups also sprang up during the early years of the Depression, but housewives there had little chance of making direct contact with farmers. Rather than establishing food exchanges, they created neighborhood councils that used boycotts and demonstrations to combat rising food prices. And, rather than rehabilitating abandoned buildings for occupation by the homeless, as the unemployed did in Seattle, housewives in larger cities battled with police to prevent evictions of families unable to pay their rents.

Tenant and consumer councils took hold in neighborhoods where housewives had organized rent strikes and meat boycotts in 1902, 1904, 1907, 1908, and 1917. They organized in the same way as earlier housewife activists had done—primarily through door-to-door canvassing. Boycotts were sustained in the latter period, as in the earlier one, with picket lines and street-corner meetings. Even their angry outbursts echoed the earlier housewives' uprisings: meat was destroyed with kerosene or taken off trucks and thrown to the ground. Flour was spilled in the streets, and milk ran in the gutters.

But although its links to earlier housewives' and labor union struggles are important, the 1930s' housewives' revolt was far more widespread and sustained, encompassing a far wider range of ethnic and racial groups than any tenant or consumer uprising before it. The earlier outbursts were limited to East Coast Jewish immigrant communities, but the housewives' uprising of the 1930s was nationwide and involved rural as well as urban women. It drew Polish and native-born housewives in Detroit, Finnish and Scandinavian women in Washington State, and Scandinavian farm wives in Minnesota. Jewish and Black housewives were particularly militant in New York, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

The 1930s' housewives' movement can also be distinguished from earlier housewives' actions by the sophistication and longevity of the organizations it generated. Depression-era housewives moved quickly from self-help to lobbying state capitals and Washington, D.C. Leaders like the "diminutive but fiery" Mary Zuk of Detroit displayed considerable skill in their use of radio and print media. Their demands of government—regulation of staple food prices; establishment of publicly owned farmer-consumer cooperatives—reflected a complex understanding of the marketplace and the potential uses of the government bureaucracy.

Leaders of these groups also demonstrated considerable sophistication about forming alliances. Shortly after [Franklin] Roosevelt was elected president, hostilities between Communist and non-Communist women in the labor movement was temporarily set aside. AFL [American Federation of Labor]-affiliated women's auxiliaries and CP [Communist Party]-affiliated women's neighborhood councils worked together to organize consumer protests and lobby for regulation of food and housing costs. This happened in 1933, well before the CP initiated its Popular Front policy urging members to join with "progressive" non-Communist groups and well before the Congress of Industrial Organizations extended its hand to Communists to rejoin the labor movement.

This rapprochement highlighted the desperation that gripped so many working-class communities during the Depression. Although anti-Communist charges were leveled against housewife organizers throughout the Depression, such accusations did not dampen the enthusiasm of rank-and-file council members. To many non-Communists in the movement, the question of who was Communist and who wasn't did not seem terribly relevant at a time when millions faced hunger and homelessness. Detroit housewife leader Catherine Mudra responded this way to charges of Communist involvement in the Detroit meat strike of 1935: "There may be some Communists among us. There are a lot of Republicans and Democrats too. We do not ask the politics of those who join. . . . All we want is to get prices down to where we can feed our families." . . .

Depression-era organizing against high food prices reached its peak during the summer of 1935. Working-class women activists from Communist and non-Communist organizations convened two regional conferences the previous winter, one for the East Coast, another for the Midwest, to coordinate protests against the sales tax and high cost of living. Representatives from AFL women's union auxiliaries, parents' associations, church groups, farm women's and Black women's groups attended. By that summer, they had laid plans for the most ambitious women's consumer protest to that time.

It began when the Chicago Committee against the High Cost of Living, headed by Dina Ginsberg, organized massive street meetings near the stockyards to let the meat packers know how unhappy they were with rising meat prices. New York housewives in the UCWCW [the United Council of Working Class Women] quickly raised the ante by organizing a citywide strike against butcher shops.

On May 22 women in Jewish and Black neighborhoods around New York City formed picket lines. In Harlem, according to historian Mark Naison, the meat strike "produced an unprecedented display of coordinated protest by black working-class women." The strike lasted four weeks. More than 4,500 butcher shops were closed down by housewives' picket lines. Scores of women and men around the city were arrested. The New York State Retail Meat Dealers Association threatened to hold Mayor Fiorello

LaGuardia responsible for damage to their business as a result of the strike. The mayor, in an attempt to resolve the strike, asked federal officials to study the possibilities for reducing retail meat prices.

[Rose Nelson] Raynes, citywide coordinator of the meat strike, describes what happened next.

It was successful to a point where we were warned that the gangsters were going to get us. . . . We decided to call the whole thing off but first we organized a mass picket line in front of the wholesale meat distributors. . . . About three, four hundred women came on the picket line. It was supposed to be a final action. But instead of it being the wind-up it became a beginning.

Housewives across the United States promptly joined in. Ten thousand Los Angeles housewives, members of the Joint Council of Women's Auxiliaries, declared a meat strike on June 8th that so completely shut down retail meat sales in the city that butchers cut prices by the next day. In Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston, Paterson, St. Louis, and Kansas City, newly formed housewives' councils echoed the cry of the New York strike: "Stop Buying Meat Until Prices Come Down!"

On June 15, a delegation of housewives from across the country descended on Washington, D.C., demanding that the Department of Agriculture enforce lower meat prices. Clara Lemlich Shavelson described the delegation's meeting with Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace. "The meat packers and the Department of Agriculture in Washington tried to make the strikers' delegation believe that the farmer and the drought are to blame for the high price of food. But the delegation would not fall for this. They knew the truth."

The Polish housewives of Hamtramck, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, did not believe Wallace's explanation either. A month after the end of the New York strike, thirty-two-year-old Mary Zuk addressed a mass demonstration of housewives gathered on the streets of Hamtramck to demand an immediate reduction in meat prices. When the reduction did not come by that evening, Zuk announced a meat boycott to begin the following day.

On July 27, 1935, Polish and Black housewives began to picket Hamtramck butcher shops, carrying signs demanding a 20 percent price cut throughout the city and an end to price gouging in Black neighborhoods. When men, taunted by onlookers who accused them of being "scared of a few women," attempted to cross the lines, they were "seized by the pickets . . . their faces slapped, their hair pulled and their packages confiscated. . . . A few were knocked down and trampled." That night Hamtramck butchers reported unhappily that the boycott had been 95 percent effective.

Within a matter of days the meat boycott spread to other parts of Detroit, as housewives in several different ethnic communities hailed the onset of a "general strike against the cost of living." Jewish women picketed

kosher butcher shops in downtown Detroit neighborhoods. Protestant women in outlying regions such as Lincoln Park and River Rouge declined to picket or march but instead set up card tables on streetcorners to solicit no-meat pledges from passing housewives.

Housewives also sought government intervention. Detroit housewives stormed the city council demanding that it set a ceiling on meat prices in the metropolitan area. "What we can afford to buy isn't fit for a human to eat," Joanna Dinkfeld told the council. "And we can't afford very much of that." Warning the council and the state government that they had better act, Myrtle Hoaglund announced that she was forming a statewide housewives' organization. "We feel that we should have united action," she said. "We think the movement of protest against present meat prices can be spread throughout the state and the nation." As evidence, she showed the city council bags of letters she had received from housewives around the country, asking how to go about organizing consumer boycotts.

Throughout August the meat strikers made front page news in Detroit and received close attention in major New York and Chicago dailies. The women staged mass marches through the streets of Detroit, stormed meat-packing plants, overturned and emptied meat trucks, and poured kerosene on thousands of pounds of meat stored in warehouses. When these actions resulted in the arrest of several Detroit women, hundreds of boycotters marched on the city jails, demanding the release of their friends. Two hours after her arrest, Hattie Krewik, forty-five years old and a mother of five, emerged from her cell unrepentant. A roar went up from the crowd as she immediately began to tell, in Polish, her tale of mistreatment at the hands of police. By the end of the first week in August, retail butchers in Detroit were pleading with the governor to send in state troops to protect their meat.

Although without a doubt the butchers suffered as a result of this boycott, the strikers in Detroit, like the strikers in New York, frequently reiterated that the strike was not aimed at retail butchers or at farmers. It was aimed, in Clara Shavelson's words, at the "meat packer millionaires." To prove that, in the second week of August, a delegation of Detroit housewives traveled to Chicago where they hooked up with their Chicago counterparts for a march on the Union stockyards.

Meeting them at the gates, Armour & Company president R.H. Cabell attempted to mollify the women. "Meat packers," he told them, "are not the arbiters of process, merely the agencies through which economic laws operate." The sudden rise in prices, he explained, was the fault of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration which had recently imposed a processing tax on pork.

"Fine," Mary Zuk responded. The housewives would return to Washington for another meeting with agricultural secretary Wallace. On August 19, 1935, Zuk and her committee of five housewives marched into Wallace's office and demanded that he end the processing tax, impose a 20 percent cut on meat prices, and order prompt prosecution of profiteering

meat packers. Wallace, perhaps sensing how this would be played in the press, tried to evict reporters from the room, warning that he would not speak to the women if they remained. Zuk did not blink. She replied: "Our people want to know what we say and they want to know what *you* say so the press people are going to stay." The reporters stayed and had a grand time the next day reporting on Wallace's unexplained departure from the room in the middle of the meeting. "Secretary Wallace Beats Retreat from Five Housewives," the *Chicago Daily Tribune* blared. *Newsweek* reported it this way:

The lanky Iowan [Wallace] looked down into Mrs. Zuk's deep-sunken eyes and gulped his Adam's apple.

Mrs. ZUK: Doesn't the government want us to live? Everything in Detroit has gone up except wages.

Wallace fled.

In the aftermath of Zuk's visit to Washington, *Newsweek* reported housewives' demonstrations against the high price of meat in Indianapolis, Denver, and Miami. The *New York Times* reported violent housewives' attacks on meat warehouses in Chicago and in Shenandoah and Frackville, Pennsylvania. And Mary Zuk, the "strong-jawed 100 lb. mother of the meat strike," became a national figure. The Detroit post office announced that it was receiving letters from all over the country addressed only to "Mrs. Zuk—Detroit."

Although boycotts and strikes continued to be used as a tool in the housewives' struggle for lower prices, the movement became more focused on electoral politics as the decade wore on. Both Shavelson and Zuk used the prominence they'd gained through housewife activism to run for elected office. Shavelson ran for New York State Assembly in 1933 and 1938 as a "real mother fighting to maintain an American standard of living for her own family as well as for other families." She did not win but she fared far better than the rest of the CP [Communist Party] ticket.

Zuk ran a successful campaign for the Hamtramck City Council in April of 1936. Although the Hearst-owned paper warned that her election would be a victory for those who advocate "the break-up of the family," Zuk was swept into office by her fellow housewives. She won on a platform calling for the city council to reduce rents, food prices, and utility costs in Hamtramck. After her election she told reporters that she was proof that "a mother can organize and still take care of her family."

In some ways what the Hearst papers sensed was really happening. Zuk's campaign represented an express politicization of motherhood and the family. On Mother's Day, 1936, seven hundred Zuk supporters rallied outside the city council to demand public funding for a women's healthcare clinic, childcare centers, playgrounds, and teen centers in Hamtramck. They also called for an end to evictions and construction of more public housing in

their city. The government owed this to mothers, the demonstrators told reporters.

Two years earlier, in Washington State, the Women's Committee of the Washington Commonwealth Federation (WCF) had successfully elected three of its members to the state senate—Mary Farquharson, a professor's wife; and Marie Keene and Katherine Malstrom, the wives of loggers. Their campaign had been built around a Production-for-Use initiative to prohibit the destruction of food as a way of propping up prices. Such waste, they said, was an outrage to poor mothers in the state, who had been fighting the practice since the beginning of the Depression. The ballot measure also proposed a state distribution system for produce so that farmers could get a fair price and workers' families could buy food directly from farmers. Led by Katherine Smith and Elizabeth Harper, committee members collected 70,000 signatures to put the measure on the 1936 ballot.

The Production-for-Use initiative failed by a narrow margin but it made national news as columnists across the country speculated on the impact it might have on the U.S. economic system. Other WCF campaigns were more successful, however. The most important of these was the campaign to create publicly owned utilities in Washington State. Washington voters were the only ones to approve state ownership of utilities, but voters in localities across the country endorsed the creation of city and county utility companies during the 1930s. . . .

The unique alliance that created a nationwide housewives' uprising during the 1930s and 1940s would not reemerge, but it laid the groundwork for later consumer and tenant organizing. Housewives' militancy politicized consumer issues nationwide. "Never before has there been such a wave of enthusiasm to do something for the consumer," *The Nation* wrote in 1937. Americans have gained "a consumer consciousness," the magazine concluded, as a direct result of the housewives' strikes in New York, Detroit, and other cities. The uprising of working-class housewives also broadened the terms of the class struggle, forcing male union leaders to admit that "the roles of producer and consumer are intimately related."

Housewives' groups alleviated the worst effects of the Depression in many working-class communities by bringing down food prices; rent and utility costs; preventing evictions; and spurring the construction of more public housing, schools, and parks. By the end of World War II, housewives' activism had forced the government to play a regulatory role in food and housing costs. Militant direct action and sustained lobbying put pressure on local and federal politicians to investigate profiteering on staple goods. The meat strikes of 1935 and of 1948 through 1951 resulted in congressional hearings on the structure of the meat industry and in nationwide reductions in prices. The intense anti-eviction struggles led by urban housewives and their years of lobbying for public housing helped to convince New York City and other localities to pass rent-control laws. They also increased support in Congress for federally funded public housing.

Perhaps an equally important legacy of housewives' activism was its impact on the consciousness of the women who participated. "It was an education for the women," Brooklyn activist Dorothy Moser recalls, "that they could not have gotten any other way." Immigrant women, poor native white women, and Black women learned to write and speak effectively, to lobby in state capitals and in Washington, D.C., to challenge men in positions of power, and sometimes to question the power relations in their own homes.

By organizing as consumers, working-class housewives not only demonstrated a keen understanding of their place in local and national economic structures, they also shattered the notion that because homemakers consume rather than produce, they are inherently more passive than their wage-earning husbands. The very act of organizing defied traditional notions of proper behavior for wives and mothers—and organizers were often called upon to explain their actions.

Union husbands supported and sometimes . . . even instigated their wives' community organizing. However, that organizing created logistical problems—namely who was going to watch the children and who was going to cook dinner? Some women managed to do it all. Others could not. Complaining of anarchy in the home, some union husbands ordered their wives to stop marching and return to the kitchen. In November 1934, *Working Women* magazine offered a hamper of canned goods to any woman who could answer the plaint of a housewife whose husband had ordered her to quit her women's council.

First prize went to a Bronx housewife who called on husbands and wives to share childcare as "they share their bread. Perhaps two evenings a week father should go, and two evenings, mother." The same woman noted that struggle keeps a woman "young physically and mentally" and that she shouldn't give it up for anything. Second prize went to a Pennsylvania miner's wife who agreed with that sentiment. "There can't be a revolution without women. . . . No one could convince me to drop out. Rather than leave the Party I would leave him." And an honorable mention went to a Texas farm woman who warned, "If we allow men to tell us what we can and cannot do we will never get our freedom." The prize-winning essays suggest that, like many women reformers before them, Depression-era housewife activists became interested in knocking down the walls that defined behavioral norms for women only after they had personally run up against them.

In defending their right to participate in a struggle that did not ideologically challenge the traditional sexual division of labor, many working-class housewives developed a new sense of pride in their abilities and a taste for political involvement. These women never came to think of themselves as feminists. They did, however, begin to see themselves as legitimate political and economic actors. During this period, poor wives and mothers left their homes in order to preserve them. In so doing, whether they intended to or not, they politicized the home, the family, and motherhood in important and unprecedented ways.

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways did the political activism of housewives reinforce traditional gender roles? In what ways did it challenge them?
2. What demands did the housewife-activists make? How did their demands differ if they lived in cities or rural areas?
3. The author suggests that dire conditions caused by the Great Depression created a sense of unity among housewives from different, and sometimes hostile, ethnic and racial groups. Did you find her argument convincing?
4. What were the major tactics used by housewives to achieve their goals? Did they work during the Depression? According to the author, what were their long-term consequences?
5. In your opinion, if economic difficulties similar to those in the 1930s were to happen today, would there be protests like those described by Orleck?

For Further Reading

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2. BUNDLE A PAPER LINK FIXED: SCROLL

*From Black Protest to Black Power:
Roy Wilkins and Fannie Lou Hamer*

The very thought of Fannie Lou Hamer made Roy Wilkins furious. As executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Wilkins led the largest civil rights organization in the United States. He possessed power and influence and even had the ear of President Lyndon Johnson. In August 1964, Wilkins had come to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City to celebrate Johnson's nomination as the Democrats' candidate for president. The NAACP leader believed that nothing should tarnish the event—or diminish the president's chances in the fall election. He certainly was not going to let an uneducated daughter of a Mississippi sharecropper bring down the president of the United States.

That, Wilkins feared, was exactly what Hamer and others in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) might end up doing. Along with other southern civil rights activists, Hamer had organized the MFDP only months earlier. They hoped to seat its delegates at the Atlantic City convention as a protest against the exclusion of blacks from primary elections by Mississippi's regular Democratic Party. Like the other MFDP delegates in Atlantic City, Hamer had grown tired of the conditions that African Americans faced in Mississippi. She had been denied the right to vote because of the color of her skin and been beaten for her involvement in civil rights organizing. Now she believed that the Democratic convention should acknowledge that Mississippi's Democratic Party delegates represented only the state's white voters. Wilkins, however, was convinced that such a move would drive southern delegates right out of the convention and into the arms of the Republicans. That would be a stunning setback for the civil rights movement and the position of blacks in American society.

Wilkins was no stranger to racial discrimination, and while working for the NAACP, he had fought numerous civil rights battles. He was well aware of the conditions in Mississippi. During a demonstration in Jackson in 1963, Wilkins had been arrested along with NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers. Less than two weeks later, Evers had been gunned down outside his home. Still, Wilkins was distrustful of the direct-action techniques of some of the younger civil rights activists. He put his faith in legal and political action as the best way to achieve gains for African Americans. That approach, he realized, often involved compromise.



Roy Wilkins



Fannie Lou Hamer

Hamer and the other MFDP delegates saw things differently. They had challenged the South's racial caste system and suffered greatly for it. As one MFDP delegate put it, "We have been treated like beasts in Mississippi. They shot us down like animals." Thus, when Lyndon Johnson offered the MFDP delegation only two seats at the convention as a compromise, Hamer was incensed. "We didn't come all this way for no two seats," she announced. It was not the response Wilkins wanted to hear. "You don't know anything, you're ignorant, you don't know anything about politics," he said as he confronted Hamer on the convention floor. "You people have put your point across, now why don't you pack up and go home?" Hamer and the other MFDP delegates, though, were not going anywhere:

"Never . . . Turn Your Back on a Crumb"

Roy Wilkins was not about to apologize to the MFDP delegates for the power he wielded by 1964. Nor would he listen for long to lectures about Mississippi's virulent racism. In fact, he had only to look to his own father to see its crippling effects. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1901, Wilkins was the son of a college-educated porter who had fled Mississippi after hitting a white man who had called him a "nigger." Fearful that he would be lynched, William Wilkins and his wife, Mayfield, had taken the train north to St. Louis that very night. William soon found work at a brick kiln, and the couple moved into a flat in a black neighborhood, where Roy was born a year later. St. Louis was not Mississippi,

but Jim Crow* was enforced in the city's schools, restaurants, and theaters. When he was old enough, Roy began his education at a segregated school. By then, William and Mayfield had had two more children, a boy and a girl, but they had found little happiness. William was soured by his dirty, low-paying job, and Mayfield soon died of tuberculosis. Realizing that William could not raise his three children alone, Roy's aunt and uncle took six-year-old Roy and his younger brother and sister to live with them in St. Paul, Minnesota.

In the home of Sam and Elizabeth Williams, Roy found a very different environment from the one he had known in St. Louis. Sam was the chief steward on the Great Northern Pacific Railroad president's private car. The Williamses owned a home in an integrated neighborhood, and they shared the middle-class outlook of their Scandinavian and German immigrant neighbors. They also instilled in the Wilkins children the value of thrift and hard work. From Sam, Roy learned "that the world was not the universally hostile place my own father had taken it to be." At the same time, Sam Williams had no illusions about the position of blacks in American society. Like many other members of the small but growing black middle class, he joined the NAACP, which W.E.B. Du Bois and a number of white progressives founded in 1909 to fight racial discrimination. Du Bois's magazine, the *Crisis*, came into the Williams home every month. In it, Du Bois called on an educated black elite—the "talented tenth"—to take the lead in improving the status of African Americans. Not surprisingly, Sam Williams drilled into the Wilkins children the importance of education. "You should go to school," he told Roy, "and be the best."

Wilkins's grammar school and high school in St. Paul were integrated, and he got along easily with white classmates. Originally intent on becoming an engineer, he fell in love with books in high school. He was editor of the school's literary magazine, president of the literary society, and editor of the yearbook. After graduating in 1919, he headed to the nearby University of Minnesota still relatively innocent about race. His innocence was shattered the next year when sixteen black roustabouts attached to a traveling circus were accused of raping a young white woman in Duluth. The day after they were arrested, a mob of five thousand whites descended on the jail, smashed through a thick brick wall with a battering ram, seized three of the suspects, and lynched them on nearby light poles as they pleaded for their lives. No evidence linked any of the roustabouts to the rape. The cases against eleven of them were dismissed, and one was found innocent. The remaining man, found guilty and sentenced to thirty years in prison, was freed after several years of legal work by the NAACP. For the first time in his life, Wilkins found himself thinking of black people "as a very vulnerable us—and white people as an unpredictable them." A little later, he joined Du Bois's organization.

At about the same time, Wilkins decided on a career in journalism. He worked on the college paper as its first black reporter and later became editor of a local black weekly, where he denounced black separatist Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and even Du Bois's growing interest in

**Jim Crow*: The South's rigid system of legal racial segregation of public facilities. Extending from railroad cars to drinking fountains, Jim Crow had been established in the late nineteenth century and upheld by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.

pan-Africanism.* Du Bois, he observed, should "use his time and talents" fighting the "evils" of lynching, disfranchisement, and segregation rather than waste them on promoting the unity of American blacks and Africans. Wilkins had already developed a deep hostility not only toward segregation but also toward self-segregation. Thinking back to his old St. Paul neighborhood, he later said, "For me, integration is not an abstraction."

Segregation still was, but after his graduation in 1923, that quickly changed. Taking a job as managing editor of the *Kansas City Call*, another black weekly, Wilkins got his first full introduction to Jim Crow. Kansas City was, as he later put it, "a Jim Crow town right down to its bootstraps." Neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, theaters, and even the stands in the Kansas City Blues baseball stadium were racially divided. For years, the city's major daily newspaper refused to run any pictures of African Americans. To attend a vaudeville show, Wilkins had to use an alley entrance and climb the stairs leading to the Jim Crow roost—the last row of seats in the highest gallery of the theater. He found such indignities "infuriating." For the next eight years in the pages of the *Call*, he denounced police brutality, neighborhood "improvement" associations that prevented blacks from moving into white areas, a school district that provided dilapidated schools for African-American students, and Jim Crow stores and restaurants.

When not agitating against Kansas City's color line, Wilkins wooed a social worker named Aminda "Minnie" Badeau. She had come to Kansas City in 1928 to work for the local chapter of the National Urban League. Influenced by the self-help philosophy of Booker T. Washington,* the Urban League was dominated by more prosperous middle-class blacks who wished to assist their fellow African-American city dwellers. Badeau was from an old St. Louis family, and like Sam and Elizabeth Williams, her parents owned a home in an integrated neighborhood. Wilkins found her not only beautiful but also well informed and intelligent. The two hit it off immediately and were married in 1929.

By then, Wilkins was more interested in fighting "Jim Crow's hard knocks" than in reporting about them. He also had grown weary of Kansas City's racial atmosphere. His opportunity to leave came in 1931, when the new executive secretary of the New York City-based NAACP asked Wilkins to be his assistant. Walter White had met Wilkins on a trip to Missouri and was impressed by the young editor's campaign against Jim Crow. Under White, Wilkins did "a little bit of everything": lectured, organized new branches, raised money for the organization's "Depression-dry" treasury, and even worked on the NAACP's legal cases. One of them, the 1931 Scottsboro case, involved nine young black men who were convicted of raping two white women on a train near Scottsboro, Alabama. Even though the evidence against them was questionable, eight of the men were sentenced to death, and the ninth was given a life sentence. The case gave Wilkins his first taste of white justice in the South.

*Pan-Africanism: Cultural or political unity or cooperation among African states or people of African descent.

*Booker T. Washington: A black leader who preached self-help, counseled blacks to temporarily accept second-class citizenship, and helped found the Tuskegee Institute, a vocational school for blacks, in the late nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, the NAACP's investigation of black workers employed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers provided Wilkins's first exposure to the economic oppression of southern blacks. In the early 1930s, Wilkins discovered that blacks employed on a levee construction in Mississippi were paid as little as ten cents an hour for a twelve-hour shift. As a result of the investigation, the Corps of Engineers raised black workers' pay by as much as a dime an hour. It was not much, but it doubled what some of the men were earning. The investigation also proved to Wilkins that pressure on the government could result in changes, even if small.

In the 1930s and 1940s, in the face of continued white vigilante action against blacks in the South, the NAACP fought unsuccessfully to get the Roosevelt administration to support antilynching legislation. During World War II, Wilkins pressed the administration without success to desegregate the armed services. Yet he remained convinced that working "from on high in the Congress and Supreme Court" would eventually bring an end to discrimination and Jim Crow. In 1954, the year before he was named NAACP executive secretary, the civil rights organization won a huge legal victory. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and that states must move to end it "with all deliberate speed." The case, initiated by the NAACP and argued before the Court by Thurgood Marshall, confirmed Wilkins's faith in working "from on high."

Many blacks, however, were becoming increasingly impatient with the slow progress of civil rights. As whites moved to block desegregation, the Eisenhower administration did little to stop them. At the same time, Congress seemed unwilling to move on civil rights. In 1957, for instance, it gutted a civil rights bill pushed by the NAACP by removing a provision that would have allowed the Justice Department to sue in school desegregation and other civil rights cases. In the face of such resistance, some blacks embraced a new tactic: direct action. In 1955, an NAACP secretary named Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her action sparked a nearly yearlong boycott of the city's segregated buses by black riders. Several years later, members of an NAACP youth council sat down at a number of Oklahoma City segregated lunch counters and demanded to be served. By 1960, college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, and other southern cities also were "sitting in."

Initially, Wilkins supported this kind of direct action. The Montgomery bus boycott's roots had been in black churches, and the boycott had been led by Martin Luther King Jr. and other black ministers, but the NAACP had provided legal assistance. Later, Wilkins directed local NAACP branches to support the sit-ins. All the while, Wilkins preferred to work quietly behind the scenes. Influence in the corridors of power was more important, he believed, than action in the streets. Thus legal battles had to be the NAACP's main focus. Inevitably, he knew, there would be many disappointing compromises. In 1957, for example, as Wilkins had deliberated whether to accept a watered-down version of the civil rights bill, Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota had helped him make up his mind. "Roy," he had said, "if there's one thing I've learned in politics, it's never to turn your back on a crumb." Wilkins had supported the bill. Later, he said, "If I had spurned [the bill], we might have been waiting outside

the bakery for a much longer time." In the 1960s, however, Wilkins realized that many blacks were no longer willing to accept mere "crumbs."

"Now We're Tired of Waitin'"

In 1960, Fannie Lou Hamer knew nothing about Roy Wilkins, the NAACP, or their patient legal work. She was, however, painfully aware of the conditions she faced in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Hamer was born in the hill country of central Mississippi in 1917, the youngest of Jim and Lou Ella Townsend's twenty children. When she was two, her parents moved to a plantation in Sunflower County about twenty-five miles from the Mississippi River. Like most of the other poor blacks in the Mississippi Delta, they picked cotton. Six-year-old Fannie Lou started working in the fields when a plantation owner asked her if she would like to pick cotton so she could buy treats. That week, she picked thirty pounds of cotton. Only later did she realize that she had been trapped. "I never did get out of his debt again," she recalled later. After sixth grade, she left school to work full-time in the fields. She walked between the rows of cotton with a limp, probably from a broken leg that had not been set properly when she was a baby. She would drag a cotton sack behind her for much of her life.

Even with the children's help, the Townsends never got ahead. As sharecroppers, they owed the white landowner half of their crop, plus whatever provisions they had borrowed. The family lived in a wooden shack without heat, electricity, running water, or indoor plumbing. Like other black sharecroppers, they lacked the education to know when the owner had cheated them. As Fannie Lou grew up, Mississippi consistently spent less on educating blacks than any other state. In 1950, Sunflower County did not have one four-year black high school.

As bad as the family's circumstances were, the Townsends' lives differed little from those of other poor blacks in Mississippi. In this notorious stronghold of white supremacy, most blacks worked for low wages in the fields and homes of white people. Meanwhile, they were denied justice in the courts and the right to vote. If need be, they were kept in their place with violence. The year Fannie Lou was born, more than eighty blacks were lynched in Mississippi. Things had changed little by 1955, when the badly beaten body of Emmett Till, an African-American teenager from Chicago who was visiting relatives in Mississippi, was found in the Tallahatchie River. Till had supposedly made a pass at a white woman, and the two men who had abducted him were acquitted.

In 1944, Fannie Lou married a sharecropper named Perry Hamer. The couple moved to a plantation in Ruleville, where they lived in a small house with running water and a broken toilet. Fannie Lou considered the house "decent," until one day, when she was cleaning the boss's house, she saw that the family dog had its own bathroom. "I just couldn't get over that dog having a bathroom," she recalled, "when [the owner] wouldn't even have the toilet fixed for us." Despite their poverty, the Hamers took in two girls to raise as their own.

Fannie Lou Hamer's deep religious faith helped her endure the poverty and racial hatred all around her, as well as the trauma resulting from what she called "a knot on my stomach." Hamer entered a hospital in 1961 for an operation to remove a uterine tumor and discovered later that doctors also had performed a hysterectomy without her permission. When she asked for an explanation, the

doctor "didn't have to say nothing—and he didn't." A decade later, the sterilization of poor black women in the South would be taken up in the courts, but in the early 1960s, legal action was unthinkable. "I would have been taking my hands and screwing tacks in my own casket," Hamer said. The experience left her feeling helpless, angry, and bitter.

When civil rights organizers associated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced "snick") arrived in Sunflower County the next year, Hamer was ready to join their crusade. SNCC had been founded in 1960 by students involved in the early sit-ins in North Carolina and elsewhere in the South. They rejected the policies of Martin Luther King Jr. and other black ministers who had formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 after the Montgomery bus boycott. Instead, SNCC's young activists encouraged local black people to act on their own. By 1962, much of SNCC's grass-roots organizing was devoted to a voter registration drive in Mississippi. The Voter Education Project brought together representatives from a reluctant NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had earlier launched the Freedom Rides to desegregate the South's interstate bus system. It also brought civil rights organizers into a state previously overlooked by the NAACP and other civil rights organizations.

One of the Voter Education Project's targets was Sunflower County, which had a reputation as one of the most antiblack counties in the state. In 1962, virtually all of the county's roughly fifteen thousand voting-age blacks were excluded from the voting booth, and whites there were not about to let them in. When civil rights workers showed up in the delta, the mayor of Ruleville declared that anyone attending a voter registration school "would be given a one-way ticket out of town." If that did not stop potential voters, local authorities "would use whatever [means] they had available." Such threats did not faze the SNCC organizers. SNCC leader James Forman told blacks that they could vote people out of office and get rid of bad police officers if they would only register to vote. As Hamer listened to Forman speak at a meeting in the Williams Chapel Baptist Church in Ruleville, she remembered that one of Ruleville's cops was the brother of a man suspected of killing Emmett Till seven years before. When the SNCC representatives asked who would be willing to register to vote, she raised her hand.

Four days later, Hamer was on a rented bus with seventeen other people headed to the county courthouse. When they arrived, they were greeted by a crowd of gun-toting whites. Inside, Hamer was required to take a literacy test based on the Mississippi Constitution. She flunked. "I knowed as much about [it] as a horse knows about Christmas Day," she said later. When she returned home, the owner of the plantation where she worked told her to take her name off the registration forms if she wanted to stay there. "I didn't go down there to register for you," she replied. "I went down to register for myself." Evicted from the plantation, Hamer packed her bags and headed to town with her two girls, leaving her husband behind. She stayed with friends for several days, then, fearful that she might be killed, moved in with relatives in Tallahatchie County.

By the time she returned to Ruleville later that fall, a black municipal employee had been fired because his wife had attended voter registration classes, the Williams Chapel Baptist Church had lost its tax-exempt status, two black-owned laundries had been shut down, shots had been fired into the house where

Hamer had stayed before leaving town, and her husband had been evicted from the plantation. Hamer had already heard about the sit-ins elsewhere in the South, and she knew that black and white Freedom Riders had been met with fire-bombs and mob violence. She was ready to join SNCC. Voter Education Project director Robert Moses was impressed by Hamer's personal sacrifice and realized that she was exactly the kind of person who could help carry on SNCC's campaign long after its student volunteers had left the community.

Living on a ten-dollar monthly stipend, Hamer served as a SNCC field secretary, worked on voter registration, and taught citizenship classes. After spending long hours studying the Mississippi Constitution, she finally passed the literacy test. Meanwhile, the harassment of Hamer and other civil rights workers continued. After attending a civil rights workshop in 1963, she and six other participants were arrested in Winona, Mississippi, for going into the "whites only" section of a bus terminal. Thrown into jail for four days, Hamer was brutally beaten by two black prisoners who were threatened by the white guards. Bruised and swollen, she left the jail with a permanent loss of feeling in her arms and an even greater desire to fight the oppression of African Americans.

Increasing numbers of African Americans now shared her determination. By 1963, a growing civil rights movement was sweeping the South. Earlier, the Kennedy administration had intervened with force to protect black protesters from violence. About the same time Hamer was released from jail, President John Kennedy called on Congress to pass a sweeping civil rights bill that would end segregation in public accommodations and discrimination in employment. Two months later, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington. These events led to a growing awareness of the civil rights movement, but conditions in Mississippi remained unchanged. By the end of 1963, SNCC's voter education campaign had little to show for its efforts. Given the state's brutal record, Roy Wilkins and many other civil rights leaders believed that SNCC's focus on Mississippi was folly. In 1964, however, Hamer and SNCC would turn the spotlight on the state.

First, Robert Moses and other SNCC members launched Mississippi Freedom Summer, which called for recruiting a thousand white college students to work on voter registration in the state. Violence directed against affluent white civil rights workers, they reasoned, would capture the attention of a nation that had generally ignored atrocities committed against blacks. Despite a death threat against her, Hamer served as a Freedom Summer organizer, and in the end, the program had exactly the effect that SNCC organizers had anticipated: The press began to pay more attention to conditions in Mississippi, especially after the murders of three civil rights workers, two of whom were white.

Meanwhile, Hamer and other SNCC activists had already made plans to get the nation's attention in another way. Earlier in 1964, they had formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the state's white Democratic Party. Hamer was among its first political candidates. Running for Congress against an incumbent, she was determined to demonstrate that blacks could participate in politics. "We've been waiting all our lives, and still gettin' killed, still gettin' hung, still gettin' beat to death," she told a reporter in June. "Now we're tired of waitin'." Although she and the other MFDP candidates were trounced

in the Democratic primary, she and other party organizers had already set their sights on another goal: unseating the segregationist Democratic Party delegates at the party's national convention later that summer in Atlantic City. Doing so would force the nation to acknowledge the horrible conditions in Mississippi.

"Cause They're Not Leading Us"

When Roy Wilkins arrived in Atlantic City in late August 1964, he knew that the election of Lyndon Johnson later that fall represented the best hope for achieving progress in civil rights. Despite being a Texan with a long segregationist voting record, Johnson had quickly taken up the cause of civil rights after the assassination of President Kennedy in late 1963. LBJ, who had succeeded Kennedy, had called on Congress to pass the sweeping civil rights act proposed by the late president. While Wilkins had lobbied on Capitol Hill, Johnson had cajoled and threatened enough reluctant members of Congress into passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 just weeks before the Democratic National Convention. Calling for an end to discrimination in employment and public accommodations, the act was a huge blow to Jim Crow. An elated Wilkins called it the "Magna Carta for the race."

Meanwhile, the Republicans had already nominated Barry Goldwater as their presidential candidate. An outspoken conservative, Goldwater opposed the Civil Rights Act. He was also in favor of states' rights, the very position that white southerners battling desegregation had embraced to prevent federal action on civil rights. For the first time since the end of Reconstruction, a Republican presidential candidate threatened to steal the Democratic Party's base in the South. By appealing to pro-segregation voters, he might even win the election. In 1964, the NAACP broke a long tradition of nonpartisanship by opposing Goldwater. For Wilkins, the decision to endorse LBJ was easy. Deciding what to do about the MFDP's challenge to Mississippi's regular Democrats was much more difficult. The regular Mississippi Democratic delegation represented everything that his organization opposed. The state's blacks had no hand in choosing any of its delegates, and it was led by a governor who described the NAACP as "niggers, alligators, apes, coons, and possums." At the same time, a floor fight over the seating of MFDP delegates at the convention would embarrass the party and LBJ. It would also drive southern Democrats right into Goldwater's arms. Yet an outright rejection of the MFDP was politically risky. Race riots had recently erupted in several cities, and demonstrators from nearby Philadelphia and New York, angry over the treatment of the MFDP at the convention, could embarrass Johnson and fuel a white backlash against civil rights.

Wilkins was in a difficult spot. How could he reconcile the MFDP's moral high ground with the practical necessities of politics? The situation called for a moderate course, one that would appease both sides. Wilkins would offer his support to the MFDP before the Democratic National Committee's Credentials Committee, which certified the legitimacy of the convention's delegates. At the same time, he would work for a compromise with the MFDP over the seating of their sixty-eight delegates. He hoped that would keep peace on the convention floor and in the streets.

Wilkins's calculations did not account for the influence of Fannie Lou Hamer. Also called to testify before the Credentials Committee, Hamer was the star

witness. Sitting at a table in front of more than a hundred committee members, reporters, and television cameras that carried her message nationwide, Hamer told an electrifying tale of beatings and oppression. [See Source 1.] Johnson's forces finally offered the MFDP two at-large seats* and the rest of the biracial delegation the status of nonvoting "honorary guests." Wilkins and Martin Luther King Jr. told the delegates to accept the offer, but Hamer was unyielding. Some of the delegates agreed with Wilkins and King, arguing that they should take the offer and claim a "moral victory." In response to those calling for compromise, Hamer retorted, "What do you mean, moral victory? We ain't got nothin'." One of the two delegates who had been offered an at-large seat suggested that the delegates listen to leaders who knew more about politics than Hamer. "Tell me what leaders you talking about," she demanded. "... But now don't go telling me about somebody that ain't been in Mississippi for two weeks ... 'cause they're not leading us."

Hamer "carried the delegation," and the MFDP delegates voted to reject the compromise. As Wilkins had hoped, the white Mississippi delegation was officially seated, and the Democrats avoided a nasty fight on the convention floor. Yet that did not prevent most of the state's regular delegation from walking out of the convention anyway. Nor did it prevent LBJ from losing Mississippi and six other Deep South states in the November election—a development that marked the beginning of the end of the solidly Democratic South. The fight over the MFDP at the convention had other long-lasting consequences as well. By the time Hamer and some of the other MFDP delegates left Atlantic City, they were thoroughly disillusioned with the traditional black leaders who seemed so eager to accept compromises. Hamer referred to them as "tom" teachers and chicken-eating ministers." She was particularly disgusted with Wilkins and the NAACP. "There ain't nothing I respect less than the NAACP," she declared. After the Democratic convention, Hamer took a brief trip to West Africa that was sponsored by the black entertainer Harry Belafonte. In Africa, she saw blacks running their own businesses and even their own countries. When she returned to Mississippi, she began to talk less about civil rights and more about the need to build institutions at the local level to help blacks help themselves.

Hamer's new attitude paralleled that of many civil rights workers. SNCC members were especially disillusioned with the slow pace of economic and social change for blacks, and they were embittered by political compromises. Despite the passage of major civil rights legislation, most African Americans continued to live in poverty and suffer from discrimination. Rejecting appeals to the goodwill of whites as the best way to gain civil rights, they began to call for black control of their own institutions. In 1966, a disillusioned MFDP member and SNCC activist named Stokely Carmichael gave this new approach a name. "We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'," he declared. "What we gonna start saying now is 'Black Power!'"

*At-large seats: Seats not connected to a particular state, district, or delegation. By offering at-large seats, Johnson refused to acknowledge the MFDP's claims that its delegates were legitimate representatives of the state party.

*Tom: A reference to a patient and humble slave named Tom, the main character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

"Black Power" meant different things to different people. For many blacks, it clearly involved the rejection of Lyndon Johnson, the liberal white allies of the civil rights movement, and traditional civil rights leaders such as Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King Jr. Both Hamer and Carmichael accused Wilkins of selling out blacks. For a growing number of increasingly militant blacks, however, Black Power involved a rejection of nonviolence. That idea had special appeal in northern ghettos, where many residents also began to demand community control of neighborhoods and businesses in the late 1960s. The growing frustration with peaceful protests and police brutality helps explain the appeal of organizations such as the Black Panthers. Founded in Oakland, California, in 1966 by two college-educated activists named Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panthers symbolized growing black militance in the minds of many whites. Conspicuously displaying their weapons, Seale and Newton spoke frequently about the need for armed revolt.

Though no Black Panther, Fannie Lou Hamer had been converted to the cause of Black Power even before Carmichael had coined the term. After the 1964 Democratic National Convention, she was thoroughly disillusioned with the white-dominated power structure. In 1966, she began to express support for Carmichael and speak at rallies that promoted black separatism. She was never able to go as far as Robert Moses, however, who declared that he would not have anything to do with white people again. Nor did she agree with SNCC when it decided in 1968 to kick whites out of the organization. Although she agreed with Black Power advocates about the need for black self-determination, she did not believe that separating themselves from whites was the best way for blacks to achieve a larger voice in government. African-American communities needed to control their own educational, economic, and political institutions. Appealing to whites in positions of power to help blacks did not work. [See Source 2.]

For Hamer, Black Power was a practical guide for action in her own community. As the civil rights movement fragmented in the face of growing black militance, Hamer was promoting alternative institutions that would further black economic self-reliance. By 1965, she was devoting much of her energy to the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU). A union of domestic workers, truck drivers, and laborers, the MFLU promoted black ownership of homes, businesses, and land before falling victim to internal squabbling and shaky finances in 1966. Several years later, she helped found the Freedom Farm Cooperative to provide poor blacks and whites in Sunflower County with food and homes. The cooperative lasted for only five years, but during that time, it purchased nearly seven hundred acres and built seventy low-cost homes.

As Hamer's focus narrowed on helping what she called the "everyday" people of her county, her political concerns broadened. While Roy Wilkins and many other civil rights leaders continued to defend LBJ's policies in the Vietnam War, she criticized the war, in which blacks were fighting and dying in numbers disproportionate to those for whites. She also began to address the plight of black women. In 1971, she joined National Organization for Women founder Betty Friedan and feminist Gloria Steinem in establishing the National Women's Political Caucus. (See Chapter 13.) All the while, she continued to work on voter registration, building the MFDP, and getting blacks elected to office. Despite her harsh words for the NAACP, in 1968 she joined with it and other liberal,

pro-integration groups to challenge the regular Mississippi Democrats once again. This time, the insurgents were successful. When Hamer addressed the Democratic National Convention in 1968, she was greeted with a standing ovation. She also continued to speak around the country on her understanding of Black Power. "I am not fighting for an all black world," she told a Seattle audience in 1969, "just like I am not going to tolerate an all white world." Two years later, she ran for a seat in the Mississippi state senate on a platform that reflected her broadened concerns. [See Source 3.] Although she lost the election, Hamer lived long enough to see more black elected officials in Mississippi than in any other state in the South and nearly 60 percent of eligible blacks registered to vote. She died in 1977.

"'Black Power' . . . Mean[s] . . . Black Death"

If the 1964 Democratic convention was a turning point for Fannie Lou Hamer, it was a preview of difficult times ahead for Roy Wilkins. To be sure, his loyalty to LBJ was vindicated again in 1965, when the president signed the Voting Rights Act, which provided new guarantees and protections for black voters. Only days later, however, Wilkins watched helplessly as the Watts section of Los Angeles erupted in a race riot that lasted for six days and claimed thirty-four lives. The race riots in Watts and other cities in the late 1960s were an indication that desegregating the South was not the only civil rights battle. Millions of blacks still faced inadequate housing, low incomes, and poor job opportunities—problems unlikely to be solved by getting rid of Jim Crow and opening up the voting booth. "Suddenly," Wilkins said, "we found ourselves in the middle of a two-front war."

Wilkins would confront the war on this second "front" for the rest of his career. Unfortunately, he was not adequately prepared to fight it. As race riots and Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968 brought an end to the civil rights era, the NAACP's program seemed to offer little hope to poor blacks. Caught off guard, Wilkins confessed that "no one was really prepared with a strategy or workable program" for dealing with the dire economic and social conditions among the nation's blacks. [See Source 4.] Nor was he prepared for the challenge to his leadership posed by many young blacks impatient with the slow progress of achieving equality. By 1966, Wilkins's main battle was not with white segregationists but with blacks who were increasingly alienated from the NAACP. Attacked as an "Uncle Tom," Wilkins was convinced that "Black Power" was an empty, dangerous slogan that would provoke a white backlash against civil rights. The "rhetorical excesses of the black power people," he charged, had made it easier for Congress to kill additional civil rights legislation. "Black power," he said in an address at the NAACP's annual convention in 1966, "can mean in the end only black death." [See Source 5.]

After the speech, Wilkins was a marked man. In 1967, members of a small group called the Revolutionary Action Movement were arrested for plotting to assassinate him. The following year, a faction of younger NAACP members revolted against his leadership, charging that he was out of touch with the concerns of most African Americans. When they called for the organization to come out against the Vietnam War, Wilkins countered that "mingling" the civil rights

and antiwar movements would only weaken the cause. Although he faced numerous challenges, in the end he won the battle and held on to his position for another decade. Until he stepped down in 1979, he continued to wage his "two-front war." One front was against growing white opposition to desegregation; the other was against Black Power advocates who promoted what he called "reverse Jim Crow." [See Source 6.] He never lost faith in the NAACP's goal of integration and legal equality for blacks, and after his retirement he noted with pride, "The NAACP is still with us." The same could not be said of some of the other civil rights organizations. Nor did Wilkins ever lose faith in the American legal system. "We have believed in our Constitution," he wrote in his autobiography, completed just before his death in 1981. "We have believed that the Declaration of Independence meant what it said."

PRIMARY SOURCES

SOURCE 1: Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer Before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention (1964)

As part of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's effort to get recognition at the Democratic National Convention in 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer offered the Credentials Committee moving testimony based on her experience in Mississippi. As LBJ watched Hamer on television, according to one witness, he "went right up the wall." Then he hastily called a news conference that preempted the live broadcast of her testimony. What does Hamer's testimony reveal about conditions in Mississippi? About the reasons for her influence in the MFDP?

Mr. Chairman, and the Credentials Committee, my name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County, the home of Senator James O. Eastland, and Senator Stennis.

It was the 31st of August in 1962 that 18 of us traveled 26 miles to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register to try to become first-class citizens. We was met in Indianola by Mississippi men, Highway Patrolmen and they allowed two of us in to take the literacy test at the time. After we had taken the test and started back to Ruleville, we was held up by the City Police and the State Highway Patrolmen and carried back to Indianola where the bus driver was charged that day with driving a bus the wrong color.

After we paid the fine among us, we continued on to Ruleville, and Reverend Jeff Sunny carried me the four miles in the rural area where I had worked as a time-keeper and sharecropper for 18 years. I was met there by my children,

SOURCE: Reprinted in Peter B. Levy, ed., *Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 139–141.

who told me the plantation owner was angry because I had gone down to try to register.

After they told me, my husband came, and said the plantation owner was raising Cain because I had tried to register and before he quit talking the plantation owner came, and said, "Fannie Lou, do you know—did Pap* tell you what I said?" And I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "I mean that. . . . If you don't go down and withdraw . . . well—you might have to go because we are not ready for that." . . .

And I addressed him and told him and said, "I didn't try to register for you. I tried to register for myself."

I had to leave that same night.

On the 10th of September, 1962, 16 bullets were fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker for me. That same night two girls were shot in Ruleville, Mississippi. Also Mr. Joe McDonald's house was shot in.

And in June, the 9th, 1963, I had attended a voter registration workshop, was returning back to Mississippi. Ten of us was traveling by the Continental Trailways bus. When we got to Winona, Mississippi, which is Montgomery County, four of the people got off to use the washroom. . . . I stepped off the bus to see what was happening and somebody screamed from the car that four workers was in and said, "Get that one there," and when I went to get in the car, when the man told me I was under arrest, he kicked me.

I was carried to the county jail and put in the holding room. They left some of the people in the booking room and began to place us in cells. I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Euvester Simpson. After I was placed in the cell I began to hear sounds of licks and screams. I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams, and I could hear somebody say, "Can you say, yes, sir, nigger?" "Can you say yes, sir?"

And they would say horrible names. She would say, "Yes, I can say yes, sir." . . . They beat her, I don't know how long, and after a while she began to pray and asked God to have Mercy on those people. And it wasn't too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he asked me where I was from, and I told him Ruleville; he said, "We are going to check this."

And they left my cell and it wasn't too long before they came back. He said, "You are from Ruleville all right," and he used a curse word, he said, "We are going to beat you until you wish you was dead."

I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack. The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolmen, for me to lay down on a bunk bed on my face, and I laid on my face.

The first Negro began to beat, and I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted, and I was holding my hands behind at this time on my left side because I suffered polio when I was six years old. After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted the state Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack. The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro who had beat to

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set on my feet to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush.

One white man—my dress had worked up high, he walked over and pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back, back up. . . .

All of this on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?

SOURCE 2: *Fannie Lou Hamer on the Lessons of the Democratic National Convention* (1967)

In her autobiography, Fannie Lou Hamer discusses what she learned from her experiences at the Democratic National Convention in 1964. How do her conclusions put her at odds with Roy Wilkins and the approach of the NAACP in achieving civil rights?

In 1964 we registered 63,000 black people from Mississippi into the Freedom Democratic Party. We formed our own party because the whites wouldn't even let us register. We decided to challenge the white Mississippi Democratic Party at the National Convention. We followed all the laws that the white people themselves made. We tried to attend the precinct meetings and they locked the doors on us or moved the meetings and that's against the laws they made for their own selves. So we were the ones that held the real precinct meetings. At all these meetings across the state we elected our representatives to go to the National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. But we learned the hard way that even though we had all the law and all the righteousness on our side—that white man is not going to give up his power to us.

We have to build our own power. We have to win every single political office we can, where we have a majority of black people. . . .

The question for black people is not, when is the white man going to give us our rights, or when is he going to give us good education for our children, or when is he going to give us jobs—if the white man gives you anything—just remember when he gets ready he will take it right back. We have to take for ourselves.

SOURCE: Reprinted in Clayborne Carson et al., *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle, 1954–1990* (New York: Viking Press, 1991), pp. 178–179; originally from *To Praise Our Bridges: An Autobiography of Mrs. Fannie [sic] Lou Hamer* (Jackson, Miss.: KIPCO, 1967).

No matter how endlessly they try to explain it, the term "black power" means anti-white power. In a racially pluralistic society, the concept, the formation and the exercise of an ethnically-tagged power, means opposition to other ethnic powers, just as the term, "white supremacy" means subjection of all non-white people. In the black-white relationship, it has to mean that every other ethnic power is the rival and the antagonist of "black power." It has to mean "going-it-alone." It has to mean separatism.

Now separatism, whether on the rarefied debate level of "black power" or on the wishful level of a secessionist Freedom City in Watts, offers a disadvantaged minority little except the chance to shrivel and die.

The only possible dividend of "black power" is embodied in its offer to millions of frustrated and deprived and persecuted black people of a solace, . . . quite apart from its political and economic implications.

Ideologically it dictates "up with black and down with white." In precisely the same fashion that South Africa reverses that slogan.

It is a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan.

If these were evil in our judgment, what virtue can be claimed for black over white? If, as some proponents claim, this concept instills pride of race, cannot this pride be taught without preaching hatred or supremacy based upon race?

Though it be clarified and clarified again, "black power" in the quick, uncritical and highly emotional adoption it has received from some segments of a beleaguered people can mean in the end only black death. Even if, through some miracle, it should be enthroned briefly in an isolated area, the human spirit, which knows no color or geography or time, would die a little, leaving for wiser and stronger and more compassionate men the painful beating back to the upward trail.

We of the N.A.A.C.P. will have none of this. We have fought it too long. It is the ranging of race against race on the irrelevant basis of skin color. It is the father of hatred and the mother of violence.

It is the wicked fanaticism which has swelled our tears, broken our bodies, squeezed our hearts and taken the blood of our black and white loved ones. It shall not now poison our forward march.

We seek, therefore, as we have sought these many years, the inclusion of Negro Americans in the nation's life, not their exclusion. This is our land, as much as it is any American's—every square foot of every city and town and village. The task of winning our share is not the easy one of disengagement and flight, but the hard one of work, of short as well as long jumps, of disappointments and of sweet successes.

SOURCE 6: Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast* (1982)

Roy Wilkins continued to battle black separatism until the end of his tenure as head of the NAACP. In this excerpt from his autobiography, he decries what he sees as the harmful consequences of embracing black separatism. Does this source also hint at why Wilkins reacted to Fannie Lou Hamer and other grass-roots participants in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as he did?

I had one last battle of my own with a new form of black power. This time the issue was separate dormitories, dining halls, and black-studies programs for Negro college students. The issue presented a terrible problem. I had been against black apartheid all of my life, and I welcomed activism on campus. I was completely in favor of the study of black history and culture, for racial pride, for reconstructing a history that had been left to die from ignorance or outright hostility. But I also thought the call for separateness, for isolation, for retreating from the rest of the campus was a sign of weakness, not strength. Just when white America thought it must at last give in and open the doors of opportunity and equality in education wider and wider, a small group of vociferous young Negroes—including, of all people, some Negro college students—began chanting, "We want to be alone."

I saw the whole business as a shameful, self-inflicted form of reverse Jim Crow, and I fought it. Common sense dictated that if black college kids were going to have to go out and make it in white America, they had better learn what the white kids learned. The pretentiousness of some of those early black-studies programs was ridiculous. I'm no stuffed shirt, but I do believe that all Americans should be able to speak English properly. One day I was standing in a line and a young professor walked up and shook my hand. He said he was head of the black-studies department of a university not far away. "Mr. Wilkins," he said, "I want to ask you a question."

I couldn't believe my ears. I stopped him right there. "You're teaching our children black history and you don't even know how to pronounce a simple three-letter word?" I asked.

"That's just the way I talk," he told me, an edge coming into his voice.

"Well, you talk *wrong*," I snapped.

I still feel that way. It is not "axing" anyone too much to know how to pronounce "ask." What I said about reverse Jim Crow in those days probably cost me more than anything else I had said since my black-power-black-death speech in Los Angeles in 1966, but it had to be done. By all means let us have black studies, but as a strengthening supplement, as a means toward, not as a substitute for, understanding the world around us. I didn't want black children to become mesmerized by dashikis while the white kids were thinking about space suits.

SOURCE: Roy Wilkins and Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), p. 335. Copyright © 1982 by Amanda Wilkins, executrix of the Estate of Roy Wilkins. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Putnam Inc., p. 424.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How would you compare Roy Wilkins's and Fannie Lou Hamer's approaches to achieving civil rights for blacks? In what ways did their methods and goals reflect their backgrounds and experiences?
2. By the middle of the 1960s, Hamer and other advocates of Black Power had denounced the moderation and compromises of Wilkins and the NAACP. Years later, however, Wilkins could declare that the NAACP "is still with us." What were the achievements and limitations of Hamer's and Wilkins's methods? Which leader do you think was more effective? Why?
3. If you had been a member of the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Convention in 1964, what would your position have been regarding the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation at the convention? If you had been a MFDP delegate, what would your position have been regarding Lyndon Johnson's offer of only two at-large seats at the convention? Was Wilkins right in encouraging the delegates to accept the offer, or was Hamer right in urging them to reject it?
4. What do this chapter's essay and sources reveal about the reasons for the popularity of Black Power among many African Americans by the late 1960s? How do you think Hamer would have responded to Wilkins's assertion that Black Power was merely a slogan rather than a program? Do you agree with Wilkins?
5. If Wilkins and Hamer had the opportunity to examine American society and race relations today, do you think either of them would feel vindicated? What circumstances or problems do you think each would point to as signs of progress or failure?

FOR FURTHER READING

Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), is an overview of Hamer's life and a useful discussion of her local organizing efforts after the 1964 Democratic convention.

Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), provides a gripping account of the conditions that Hamer confronted in her battle for black equality in Mississippi.

Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), examines the fight for black equality in Mississippi by focusing on the role of Fannie Lou Hamer and other grass-roots organizers.

John A. Salmond, *"My Mind Set on Freedom": A History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1968* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), is a concise treatment of the civil rights struggle from the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), is an overview of the modern civil rights movement, including grass-roots struggles and the efforts of national civil rights organizations.

Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), details Wilkins's rise as the leader of the nation's largest civil rights organization and offers a defense of his policies.

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