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“Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work:” Protest and Riot in Harlem, 1932 -1935

Christie Anderson
CUNY Hunter College

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**“Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work:”
Protest and Riot in Harlem, 1932 -1935**

by

Christie Anderson

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Thesis Sponsor:

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Date

Jonathan Rosenberg

Signature

May 2, 2019

Date

Daniel Hurewitz

Signature of Second Reader

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Introduction

Since the turn of the twentieth century, the black population of Harlem grew extensively, but even as black residents became the majority in this area, they were economically influenced by outsiders. During the Great Depression, the need to resist economic exploitation grew as poverty intensified. Though in the early twentieth century Harlem had developed into a black metropolis, the majority of landlords and business owners were whites living outside Harlem. Few businesses were owned or managed by black businessmen. Both goods and housing prices were often higher in Harlem than in other areas of New York City. Many companies also limited job opportunities for black workers to menial positions. Residents of Harlem resisted this exploitation by forming organizations and protest movements to combat economic injustice.

New York's African-American community had been marginalized both socially and economically long before the onset of Harlem as a black neighborhood, and this pattern of control was perpetuated with Harlem's creation. Harlem's African-American population frequently fought to gain control of its community during the 1920's and 1930's. African-American residents of Harlem during this period struggled to increase social, political, and economic opportunities. Reform efforts were frequently rebuffed by New York's white community and commonly ignored by local government. Whites, primarily of Central and Eastern European descent, as well as Italians, owned Harlem's businesses, residential developments and held positions in government. In this capacity, whites in these positions increased prices, limited access to employment and ignored attempts to increase legislation to improve conditions in Harlem. Such efforts by black residents included the tenant campaign for lower rent and better housing conditions, which picketed and appealed to landlords, courts, and government officials to improve housing and the New York Urban League's (NYUL) letter-

writing campaign to pressure businesses to hire more black staff. These endeavors failed to improve the quality and cost of housing or secure a meaningful increase in black employment. This inability to effect significant change further divided black residents from white outsiders. White opportunists continued to influence the everyday lives of Harlem's inhabitants, further fueling hostilities. As black attempts to achieve agency were rejected, tensions between black residents and white business owners grew and eventually exploded during the Harlem riot of 1935.

Race riots, such as the Harlem riot of 1935, are not isolated events, but are a reflection of the conflicts that precipitate them. As sociologist Cathy Lisa Schneider purports, "If social movements, courts, or other institutions offer alternative paths to justice, no matter how limited, riots are rare. Riots are the last resort for those who find all other paths to justice blocked."¹ As a marginalized community, Harlem developed efforts to combat injustice but achieved little meaningful change. In the early 1930's, Harlem's community members joined various organizations, led boycotts, picketed stores, led rent strikes, and appealed to local government figures such as Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia. Many of their efforts were focused not just on racial equality but on economic opportunities that were resisted by the white community, ignored by the government, or blocked in court decisions. Tensions increased, police enforced social norms, and this occasionally resulted in open conflict.²

This study seeks to view 1935 Harlem as a case study of how marginalized communities have attempted to address an injustice, sought resolution through peaceful means, and how

¹ Cathy Lisa Schneider, *Police Power and Race Riots: Urban Unrest in Paris and New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 4.

² For more information, see Shannon King, *Whose Harlem is This, Anyway?: Community Politics and Grassroots Activism during the New Negro Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

unfulfilled expectations for change led to rising tensions and riots. Though the people of Harlem planned and instituted many efforts to improve conditions, including establishing rent strikes, letter writing initiatives, and “vote black” movements, this work will focus on the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign that began in 1934. The movement, which began in the North, protested hiring inequality by picketing and boycotting stores with discriminatory hiring practices. The marginal success of the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work Movement” and the eventual reversal of employment gains increased community tensions, which led to riots that targeted Harlem’s business district.

I have chosen Harlem as a case study for four reasons. First, Harlem’s formation as a ghetto is a glaring example of economic exploitation. Harlem, which began as a white community, was designed to appeal to middle-class and upper-class white New Yorkers around the turn of the nineteenth century. As a result, homes were spacious, built on tree-lined streets, and well-maintained. It was a desirable community which provided easy access to the rest of New York. As black New Yorkers began to move in the early twentieth century, however, a stark contrast emerged as homes were subdivided, public spaces became limited, and homes quickly fell into disrepair. Despite the diminishing quality of housing, housing prices soared, lining the pockets of absentee landlords in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Businesses within Harlem also capitalized on black residents, often charging exorbitant prices for basic goods, while refusing to hire members of the black community. This exploitation of residents only intensified as the Great Depression ravaged Harlem.

The second reason Harlem provides an interesting case study is that while members of Harlem represented a diverse black community, they were equally affected by injustice and lacked agency within their community during the first half of the twentieth century. Harlem

drew residents from throughout the city, the country, and the world. Black New Yorkers from all economic backgrounds were pushed out of other residential neighborhoods and forced to make Harlem their home.³ Black residents were denied access to more desirable neighborhoods as a result of discrimination. Subsequently, Harlem became home for black residents from all economic backgrounds in the 1920's and 1930's. Harlem's black professionals and clergymen lived between 138th and 139th Street, while lower class residents were more likely to inhabit 130th to 140th Street. Those who were not native to New York were also driven to Harlem's borders, due to discrimination. Many migrated from the South to New York, seeking to escape political, social, and economic oppression in areas of the country that benefited from the exploitation of black farm workers. Black southerners left those areas to seek new opportunities. Though they saw improved conditions in New York, equal status was still denied to them, despite the illusion of splendor and opportunities during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's.

Thirdly, Harlem provides an example of how black residents sought and developed methods for agency in their community. The zeal for economic, political, and social reform had been present since the creation of Harlem as a black community, but it intensified beginning in the 1930's as economic tensions grew. Evidence of this drive for reform can be seen in the Federal Writers' Project's book on New York City, which states, "Because of its highly sensitive social and political temper, Harlem has been termed the 'focal point in the struggle for the liberation of the Negro people'"⁴ The people of Harlem participated in myriad activities to push for reform. These activities and struggles against injustice are well described by the Federal Writers' Project:

³ Nat Brandt, *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 28-35.

⁴ WPA Federal Writers' Project, *New York Panorama* (New York: Random House, 1938), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015007194833;view=1up;seq=179>.

In the consciousness of this oppressed community, current events are commonly interpreted as gains and set-backs for the Negro people. This social restlessness results in many public demonstrations. Harlemites in increasing numbers attend street meetings protesting evictions; picket stores to compel the hiring of Negroes, or WPA offices to indicate disapproval of cuts in pay or personnel; parade against the subjection of colonial peoples, or to celebrate some new civic improvement and march many miles in May Day demonstrations⁵

In addition to these activities, Harlemites joined in various church-led efforts, joined political organizations such as the Young Communist League, and listened to street corner orators.

Though many of these actions were not unique to Harlem, the activities of Harlem were followed by black communities throughout the country and sometimes emulated.

Finally, the Harlem riot of 1935 was exceptional in that it would create a new pattern of rioting. Though there have been many race riots in American history, the Harlem riot of 1935 is significant because it targeted economic symbols of oppression after efforts to assert agency had failed. Previous violent clashes, such as the riot of 1900 in the Tenderloin District in which gangs of whites attacked black New Yorkers after the death of a white officer, were usually led by the white community and inflicted on black communities.⁶ In Harlem, blacks initiated rioting in response to perceived injustices, which were often sparked by rumors. As historian Paul A. Gilje explains, property was targeted because in a consumer-oriented society, property represented status and privilege. Damaging property was not seen as a destruction of the community of Harlem, but expressed “a rejection of middle-class values that poor urbanites found constantly denied to them...[I]t was the destruction of property of some individual that lived outside the ghetto.”⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, ed., *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970), 258.

⁷ Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 160.

Harlemites also targeted other symbols of oppression and were generally focused on the police. Police were often seen as the enforcers of their oppression. As historian Jules Archers contends, there was “resentment of white patrols in the black community. Blacks saw them not as protectors but as guards confining them to the ghettos.”⁸ Police, like property, represented the oppression of Harlem’s people. Rioters were not specifically attacking police and destroying property, but were responding to tensions that had been lurking beneath the surface after a series of attempts to enact meaningful action had failed, leaving no other channels to vent frustration.

Section one of this study will explore the development of Harlem as a ghetto. It will consider how changes in the late nineteenth century transformed Harlem from a community developed for whites into a black metropolis. I will explore how ghetto conditions formed. These conditions were a result of white exploitation of the black community and discriminatory housing practices, which prevented movement into other areas. This section will also focus on how conditions were exacerbated by the Great Depression, further creating ghetto conditions.

Section two will discuss how community members worked together to bring about economic uplift for their community. It will focus on the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign, which brought together community members of all backgrounds to participate in a singular effort. These efforts were thwarted by business leaders, the courts, and police who enforced restrictions on participants. And such efforts led to increased tensions, which contributed to the riot of 1935.

Finally, I will examine the events that precipitated the riot and the effects of the Harlem riot of 1935. I will consider the factors that ignited the violence and analyze why rioters targeted

⁸ Jules Archer, *Riot! A History of Mob Action in the United States* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1974), 21.

135th Street. This section will also examine how New York City government responded to the crisis and how that affected the Harlem community.

Harlem's Transformation from White Suburb to Black Metropolis:

Beginning in the late 1800's, Harlem was transformed from a rural community into a sprawling, bustling, and prosperous neighborhood, which became more connected to the rest of New York City. Harlem's transition into a fashionable enclave occurred between 1878 and 1881. The metamorphosis of Harlem from a rural retreat to suburban splendor came as a result of a growth in transportation. During this period, three elevated train lines were expanded to reach to 129th Street and Seventh Avenue. Shortly after, in 1886, the elevated train lines were expanded further north.⁹ Newly available transportation created a permanent link between Harlem and the rest of New York City and enticed new residents and developers.

Not long after the expansion of the elevated train lines, developers created an abundance of appealing housing for white residents. Streets were well-planned, tree-lined, and wide, providing a sense of space not available elsewhere in Manhattan. This design, along with the convenience of electric lights and telephones, aimed to attract new tenants.¹⁰ Exclusive apartments and townhouses were erected to lure potential residents. Most apartments in the area were no more than six stories high and included features designed to attract wealthy and upper-middle class residents. Features included elevators, servants' quarters, porches, and driveways. Some homes boasted ten to sixteen rooms.¹¹ These appealing features attracted older and wealthier whites to the area, though lower-class whites lived on the fringes of Harlem's borders.

⁹ Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890-1930 Second Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 75.

¹⁰ Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto*, 76.

¹¹ Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto*, 78.

Harlem's less lucrative occupants lived in tenements filled with new immigrants, such as Italians, Eastern European Jews, and some black residents.

The change in Harlem from a largely exclusive white area to a predominantly black neighborhood did not begin to occur until the early 1900's as housing speculation failed to meet expectations. Once again, the transformation of Harlem resulted from the expansion of transportation. In 1904, the West Side IRT expansion into Harlem was complete. Prior to the finalization of the new section of the train line, land speculators hurried to acquire land at rapidly increasing prices.¹² Many had assumed that with a new train line connecting Harlem to lower Manhattan, a housing boom would soon follow, as it did with prior extensions of train lines to the region. Land developers quickly built new apartments to meet the anticipated demand. Unfortunately for these property-owners, the expected demand never materialized. During this time, the American economy was experiencing a financial downturn, and the demand for luxury housing declined. Even more moderate housing options failed to attract the projected migration of city residents from other parts of the city as rents were significantly higher in Harlem. Older residents, such as the Jewish population of Harlem, began to move to suburbs, adding more homes to the already saturated housing market.¹³ Consequently, landlords held a glut of empty apartments and extravagant mortgages. In order to entice white occupants, landlords offered incentives such as a few rent-free months of occupancy. In spite of this, apartments remained vacant. Unable to attract white residents, many in the area chose to rent or sell to black residents rather than face financial devastation. This transition did not come easily as white residents resisted this demographic change.

¹² Brandt, *Harlem at War*, 27.

¹³ Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14.

Black New Yorkers pushing into Harlem's borders during the early twentieth century were met with resistance from property owners and fellow residents. Fearful landowners, afraid of declining property values, pressured mortgage brokers to decline loans to black customers.¹⁴ Similarly, restrictive covenants were signed by white proprietors stating they would not sell or rent to black occupants. Neighborhood associations were also formed to create a color barrier in Harlem.¹⁵ Despite these efforts, the overabundance of vacant housing made it futile to maintain an exclusively white Harlem.

Beginning in 1904, Philip Payton opened the doors for large-scale black settlement in Harlem. Payton, a graduate of Livingston College in North Carolina, moved to New York where he worked as a janitor in a local real estate office.¹⁶ Payton saw the deplorable housing available to New York's black community, as well as the excess housing market in Harlem as an opportunity. He purchased land on 134th Street and Fifth Avenue and offered good-quality housing for the first time to black tenants in Harlem. These apartments were rented to black tenants at ten percent above the now deflated market value.¹⁷ Black New Yorkers leapt at the opportunity to acquire quality housing. They were willing to move to Harlem, while others were not because *de facto* segregation limited their housing options. Quality housing was denied to them as a result.

Payton's early success in renting to black tenants led him to expand his enterprise, drawing more investors to his real estate agency, which targeted black customers known as the

¹⁴ Michael Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer: The New York Riots of 1964 and the War on Crime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 31.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1991), 51-53.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Afro-Am Realty Company.¹⁸ Other landlords followed Payton's lead, renting and selling to black lodgers. As black occupants moved in, however, white residents began to move out in greater numbers, leaving a black majority in much of Harlem.

As new inhabitants clustered into Harlem, not only did the number of black people in the area grow, but so, too, did the borders of Harlem itself. Before 1905, the population residing north of 125th Street was less than 4,000; by 1920, the black population in this area alone totaled 84,000.¹⁹ This expansion of Harlem's borders formed the area today known as Central Harlem, from 135th Street, east of Eighth Avenue. Black Harlem, which had once been a restricted community,²⁰ materialized as a dominant section between Park Avenue and Amsterdam Avenue, north from Central Park to 155th Street. Within these borders, two-thirds of New York City's black population was housed, numbering approximately 190,000 black occupants.²¹

Though many black residents moved to Harlem to escape poor living conditions and find better housing, others were forced to move within its borders. Prior to black settlement in Harlem, most of New York's black community resided in low-quality, over-populated housing in the West Fifties and Sixties, as well as the Tenderloin district located from 24th Street to 42nd Street, bordering Fifth and Seventh Avenues. As the population in the Tenderloin District swelled during the first decade of the twentieth century, many were pushed out and displaced as a result of the construction of Pennsylvania Station. Since many areas throughout the city practiced *de facto* segregation, many blacks were forced to live in one of the only areas available

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?*, 15.

²⁰ Many communities, including Harlem, blocked blacks looking to obtain a home in a predominately white area by creating restrictive covenants, agreements between property owners denying property rentals or sales to black home seekers. Though these agreements could not be legally upheld after a 1917 Supreme Court ruling in *Buchanan v. Warley*, they were privately made into the latter half of the twentieth century.

²¹ Ibid.

to them, Harlem. Others seized economic opportunities. As development efforts in the Tenderloin District materialized in response to the building of Pennsylvania Station, many in the area sold their businesses and moved uptown with their profits. Most living in the area of the Tenderloin District had only loose ties to New York. Here most residents had only recently arrived in New York and were primarily single. Beginning in 1900, these individuals willingly moved farther uptown, where for the first time they were offered decent living accommodations in New York City.

Though many migrated from lower sections of Manhattan, a large percentage of Harlem's new residents came as a result of migration from southern cities, driven by the search for economic opportunities and the lure of independent black culture. As America entered World War I, opportunities seemed to increase for black workers. During this time, European immigration was halted, and many black laborers migrated from the South to New York, hoping to replace them. This steady stream of southern migrants increased as America headed into the Great Depression. Between 1920 and 1930, the white population of Manhattan had declined by 18 percent, while the black population of New York increased by 115 percent, 25 percent of whom were born outside New York.²² These migrants were drawn to Harlem because of a lack of job opportunities in the South and limited aid for the growing number of unemployed. Others from the South sought shelter in Harlem because they believed they would experience less discrimination and be able to participate in a truly black community, which offered a wealth of culture due to the Harlem Renaissance.

²² Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto*, 128-9.

Though much of Harlem's expanding non-white population came as a result of segregation and southern migration, others came from more distant locales, but contributed to the changing population of Harlem nonetheless. Those from the West Indies, who were free to immigrate due to a lack of immigration quotas on their home countries, found new dwellings in Harlem. Adding to Harlem's population was the migration of people of Puerto Rican descent, which had grown to 45,000 by 1930.²³

In less than fifty years, Harlem had changed from a suburban white community into a cosmopolitan black community. This shift occurred as a result of land speculation, which offered opportunities for black residents that had not existed before. Blacks migrated to Harlem from various destinations seeking greater opportunity. The prospects of a better life in Harlem were often dashed by the reality of life there, as ghetto conditions emerged and the national economy declined.

Life and Employment in Harlem

After the shift in demographics in Harlem, the once grand homes quickly became overcrowded. By 1914, 50,000 black residents lived in Harlem.²⁴ This growth was in part due to the movement of people from other parts of Manhattan. Many property owners refused to rent or sell to black tenants and prospective buyers outside of Harlem, while real estate agencies steered them toward primarily black communities. Almost 70 percent of black Manhattanites were living in Harlem by the end of World War I.²⁵ This growth in population not only came from black settlers from other parts of Manhattan, but also from migrants from southern states and West Indian immigration.

²³ Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto*, 130.

²⁴ Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto*, 105.

²⁵ Brandt, *Harlem at War*, 28.

Approximately six million southern black migrants came to the north during the Great Migration from 1916 to 1970. They came seeking economic opportunity and to escape discriminatory laws in the south.²⁶ Subsequently, Harlem's population grew 600 percent between 1910 and 1935.²⁷ Although the population expanded, the territory and number of abodes did not grow. Developers built seventy-five percent of the housing in Harlem prior to 1900.²⁸ This concentration of population in such a limited space would soon strain living conditions and help drive up the price of housing.

Residents who could not afford unreasonable rents often took in boarders. Rent for lodgings in Harlem was high, standing at \$14 to \$18 per room, compared to the \$12 to \$15 paid for similar accommodations in other parts of Manhattan. This forced residents to take in other renters.²⁹ As author Claude McKay noted in 1940, "The prohibitive rent makes the unit of private family life the rarest of thing. Almost all families take in lodgers. All available space must be occupied... Adequate clothing and even vital food must be sacrificed to meet the high cost of housing."³⁰ Many of the co-tenants who rented rooms were single people who came because of the Great Migration. This doubling up of inhabitants only worsened as Depression-era economic conditions further strained family resources, leading to two and three families living in apartments designed to accommodate only one. The need to take additional occupants became more essential as employment prospects declined during the Depression.

Job opportunities for those living in Harlem were inadequate, partly due to a shortage of businesses there. Harlem's development as a residential community meant that Harlem had a

²⁶ For more information on the Great Migration see Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1991).

²⁷ Brandt, *Harlem at War*, 39.

²⁸ Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto*, 137.

²⁹ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?*, 29.

³⁰ Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1940), 29.

scant number of businesses. The lack of retailers in Harlem meant fewer open positions were available compared to other parts of the city. Those businesses located in Harlem were not black-owned and discriminated against black applicants.

Adding to the scarcity of work in Harlem was the lack of black-owned establishments. Prior to the Depression, blacks believed a falsehood that three-fourths of Harlem's real estate was owned by blacks and thought they had some control over economic activities there. In reality, blacks held less than 20 percent of all businesses in Harlem.³¹ In 1930, Harlem had twelve thousand retail stores, but only 391 were black-owned and more than half were grocery stores.³² Black business owners, therefore, controlled only a fraction of the economic potential of Harlem.

The negligible number of black-owned places of commerce was a result of several factors. First, white real estate owners refused to rent retail storefronts to black entrepreneurs and those who did charged excessively high rents. Second, these businesses often were costlier to operate and in turn received fewer customers. Since black-owned businesses were small and could not order in bulk like the chain stores in Harlem, prices tended to be higher and many black residents felt they were taken advantage of.³³ Finally, black entrepreneurs found it more difficult to get loans since most banks were white-owned.³⁴ This inability to raise capital made starting businesses more difficult. The lack of black-owned businesses meant that people who did not live in Harlem owned the majority of the businesses there.

³¹ Osofsky, *Harlem the Making of a Ghetto*, 137.

³² Brandt, *Harlem at War*, 37.

³³ King, *Whose Harlem is This, Anyway?*, 26-7.

³⁴ E. Franklin Frazier, "Negro Harlem: An Ecological Study," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 43 No. 1 (July, 1937): 87, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2768234>.

Outsiders tended to own Harlem's stores and hired people not from the community. A majority of businesses were Jewish-owned.³⁵ Jews had settled in Harlem before black occupants moved to the area. Though Jews moved out as blacks moved in, they continued to operate their businesses in the area.³⁶ These businesses tended to hire blacks only in menial positions and rarely hired black retail workers.

In addition to a dearth of accessible retail positions for blacks, Harlemites found it difficult to find positions due to the inaccessibility of union employment. Due to discrimination, vacant positions had always been easier for white immigrants to obtain than for black migrants.³⁷ Unions, for example, often refused to admit black members.³⁸ These organizations often had exclusionary clauses in their constitutions, which barred black workers from gaining employment. Those that did not include such phrases excluded black apprentices or charged exorbitant membership dues, which limited their access to membership and therefore access to union jobs.³⁹ These restrictions to union entry barred black workers from obtaining many positions.

Even in government positions, black jobseekers found openings to be constrained. Though 4.7 percent of New York City's population was black, city employment statistics did not reflect an equal percentage of representation in city jobs. In 1930, black staffers held only 2.7 percent of public sector jobs.⁴⁰ In 1935, laws required state and city contracts to include anti-

³⁵ Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer*, 34.

³⁶ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode*, 127.

³⁷ King, *Whose Harlem is This, Anyway?*, 62.

³⁸ Hofstadter and Wallace, *American Violence*, 259.

³⁹ King, *Whose Harlem is This, Anyway?*, 67.

⁴⁰ Larry A. Green, "Harlem, the Depression Years: Leadership and Social Conditions," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1993: 33, accessed June 29, 2018, *ProQuest*.

discrimination clauses. In spite of this legislation, black public employment did not show any significant increase.⁴¹

Even black professionals found it difficult to obtain employment. Many of the Caribbean migrants that settled in Harlem came as experienced, skilled professionals. Between 1920 and 1930, the number of black professionals had doubled, yet during the Depression the black skilled workforce decreased by 50 percent.⁴² Signs of this decline were evident before the start of the Great Depression. For example, the New York Urban League's Employment Bureau aimed its efforts at increasing white-collar employment and in 1926 was able to place 35 percent of applicants, but by 1928, could only place 19 percent.⁴³ Many middle-class occupations saw significantly higher unemployment levels for black candidates than white. For instance, 25.8 percent of black teachers were seeking employment, while only 5 percent of white teachers were in the same position.⁴⁴ Black medical staff even found it difficult to obtain appointments in city hospitals. In 1929, Harlem hospital had 57 white doctors but only seven black doctors on staff, despite 300 applicants; similarly, black nurses could only attend two all-black training schools in New York City.⁴⁵ With little prospects in white-collar employment, many turned to menial positions.

Black women unable to find other means of employment turned to domestic service. Housework required hard labor and long hours but it was the only position available to many black women during the Depression. Many black women had avoided these positions because of the live-in requirement of many bosses or the long hours, which took them away from their

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ King, *Whose Harlem is This, Anyway?*, 16.

⁴⁴ Green, "Harlem, the Depression Years," 3.

⁴⁵ Roi Ottley & William Weatherby, *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History* (Dobbs Ferry: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1967), 269.

families.⁴⁶ In this capacity, they worked as janitresses, laundresses, chambermaids, pantry maids, and housemaids. A product of the availability of domestic employment for women was that more women held non-relief jobs than men in New York City.

Black men faced discriminatory hiring practices and a significant rise in unemployment. In 1930, black and white male employment rates in New York City were almost equal at less than a 1 percent difference, but this soon changed. By 1940, the white male employment rate had decreased by 5.4 percent since 1930, but black males saw a reduction of 20.5 percent since 1930.⁴⁷ Blacks in New York were “displaced from private employment at twice the rates of whites and were being re-employed at only one-half the rate of whites.”⁴⁸ Frequently, the jobs that blacks were able to secure were at lower occupational levels.

Many black jobseekers could only find lower status work and found the only available occupations for them were as porters or elevator operators. By 1930, porters and elevator operators were the two principal categories of employment for black men. Salaries for these positions were typically low.

Black wage earners consistently grossed below subsistence incomes, but these wages declined further with the onset of the Depression. In the 1920's, President Hoover's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership reported that the average black family household earned \$1300 a year in New York City, about \$25 a week, while the average white family in New York City earned \$1750.⁴⁹ Comparatively, to live on maintenance level in New York City, the average New Yorker needed an income of \$1375 a year.⁵⁰ By 1932, the League of Mothers

⁴⁶ King, *Whose Harlem is This, Anyway?*, 66.

⁴⁷ Green, "Harlem, the Depression Years," 35.

⁴⁸ Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 242.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁰ Greenberg, "The Politics of Disorder: Reexamining Harlem's Riots of 1935 and 1943," *Journal of Urban History* 18, no. 4 (1992): 388, Accessed August 02, 2016, doi:10.1177/009614429201800402.

Club found that the median income for employed black families had dropped to an average of \$1049.⁵¹

Earning an income to meet the cost of living in Harlem became increasingly difficult as wages fell after the onset of the Depression. In 1931, typical wages in fields open to blacks reflected the decreasing wages. Some sample salaries are as followed: factory workers earned \$7-\$12 a week, domestics received a maximum of \$15 a week, and day workers earned between \$2 and \$6 a day.⁵² Earnings in every sector of black employment declined. Black skilled workers received a 50 percent decrease, black laborers' yearly incomes dropped by a third as compared to pre-Depression earnings, a startling reduction considering that 84 percent of black Harlemites fell into the category of laborers.⁵³ Given the high unemployment rates and the substantial decrease in income, it is evident that the people of Harlem required substantial aid for survival.

Private relief agents immediately felt the need for increased aid early in the Depression era. Almost 50 percent of all families in Harlem would rely on relief services by 1933.⁵⁴ Most relief applicants had never applied for aid before. Though Harlem's need for aid was high, resources available were far below what was needed.

Both public and private aid increased significantly, but still lagged behind the needs of the city. Families on Emergency Relief only received \$28.04 a month despite average, expenses totaling \$87.75.⁵⁵ It was not until 1932 that the Home Relief Bureau was established, and still

⁵¹ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode*, 45.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁴ Ottley and Weatherby, *The Negro in New York*, 271.

⁵⁵ Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode*, 51-52.

not all applicants received assistance and funds were slow to be released. Aside from the limitations in funding, whites gained benefits more frequently than did blacks.

Though black Harlemites benefited from aid, for various reasons, they did not obtain enough to meet their needs. First, less aid was available for black New Yorkers. Few private agencies provided services for blacks. Secondly, most agencies, both public and private, had criteria for qualifications in their programs that excluded blacks.⁵⁶ Only one-fourth of black households qualified due to prescriptive criteria for help, while two-thirds of white families were eligible.⁵⁷ One example of this type of exclusionary prerequisite was residency requirements. Though not overly discriminatory toward black New Yorkers, this stopped many from getting aid because many black residents had recently settled in Harlem from the American South or West Indies. With the significant lack of financial support in Harlem, the general welfare of Harlem began to decline.

Harlem's economic despair exacerbated the deteriorating physical and mental health of those living there. A study conducted between October 1930 and May 1931 by the Welfare Council of the City of New York concluded that unemployment led to increased overcrowding, poor health and diet, as well as psychological strain. These conditions bred illness. As a result of these circumstances, Harlem's residents lived without heat in dwellings not designed for habitation, consumed a poor diet, were less likely to seek medical attention, and suffered severe psychological strain.⁵⁸ It is not surprising, then, that Harlem also had the highest tuberculosis rate in New York City and higher than average mortality rates.⁵⁹ Black Harlemites death rates were

⁵⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁸ Welfare Council of the City of New York, *An Impressionistic View of the Winter of 1930-31 in the City of New York: Based on the Statement from Some 900 Social Workers and Public Health Nurses* (New York: The Welfare Council of New York City, 1932), 10-18, [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b360376;view=1up;seq=5](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b360376;view=1up;seq=5).

⁵⁹ Brandt, *Harlem at War*, 42.

forty percent higher than the rest of the city and black Harlemites were two times more likely to die in every age category.⁶⁰

Despite the crushing lack of employment opportunities, appropriate medical access, and financial assistance, the city did little to remedy the suffering of black New Yorkers. Funding was grossly inadequate for aid and discriminatory hiring practices often stripped black Harlemites of the chance to access gainful employment and reduced their status in the community. Black New Yorkers turned to charitable organizations for aid, but when this failed to bring satisfactory relief, they turned to more radical organizing efforts. Their energies focused on gaining employment opportunities in Harlem in order to relieve the communities suffering. Harlem's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign was the product of these efforts.

Origins of the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" Campaign

Though many northern cities during the 1930's participated in "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns, the roots of these movements originated in Chicago. Beginning in 1929, Chicago launched the "Jobs for Negroes" campaign also known as the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign. This movement attempted to address a common concern, the economic advancement of the black community by using mass protests and direct action. The first group to use these methods was the Illinois Civics Association, which attempted to pressure white businesses on the South Side of Chicago to hire black workers by engaging in picket lines in front of their stores. The movement gained much support in the black community to some degree due to the backing of a black weekly known as the *Chicago Whip*. Chicago experienced a few early successes. Small local businesses expanded job opportunities for blacks and a

⁶⁰ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode*, 32.

number of larger companies such as Woolworths and A&P, which had previously resisted hiring blacks changed their stance.⁶¹ These early successes inspired other areas.

Chicago's achievement in securing jobs inspired direct action throughout the country, but failed to create lasting success. This campaign would spread to 35 cities in total (including Harlem), uniting diverse populations previously divided by class. Some examples of participating cities included Washington, D.C., St. Louis, and Baltimore. The NAACP and the National Urban League failed to bring about meaningful change using traditional methods such as interracial cooperative efforts, education, lobbying, legislation, and negotiation. This led to many calling for a more radical approach to achieving equality.⁶²

The "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign provided what seemed to many cities a viable alternative. The shift to direct action was not only inspired by the Chicago gains, but also by the passage of the Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Act in 1932, which permitted picketing in the event of a labor dispute.⁶³ Most of these campaigns failed, however. They frequently led to white backlash and court challenges, which usually sided with white business owners on the basis that businesses should be free to choose their own employees.⁶⁴ Many efforts came to a halt as courts ruled that the Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Act did not apply to picketers since they were neither a business nor a labor union.⁶⁵ The early success of this movement would set the model for Harlem to develop its own "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" movement.

⁶¹ Waldo E. Martin Jr. and Patricia Sullivan ed., "'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' Campaigns" In *Civil Rights in the United States*, (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2000), *U.S. History in Context* (accessed August 2, 2016), http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/BT2338230739/UHIC?u=k12_histrc&sid=UHIC&xid=8c8bd1b6.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Michele F. Pacifico, "'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work': The New Negro Alliance of Washington," *Washington History* 6, no. 1 (1994): 68-70, accessed August 2, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40073229>.

⁶⁴ Paul Moreno, "Racial Proportionalism and the Origins of Employment Discrimination Policy, 1933-1950," *Journal of Policy History* 8, no. (1996): 412, accessed August 1, 2018, doi:10.1017/S0898030600005406.

⁶⁵ Pacifico, "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work," 68-70.

Early Jobs Campaigns in Harlem

The few jobs for blacks and a need for black enterprise in Harlem was a subject of concern for residents long before the onset of the Great Depression. As discussed earlier, most retailers in Harlem were white-owned and black entrepreneurs found it difficult to compete. Though Harlem had become a black community, only 29 percent of these white-owned businesses employed blacks, and of these most hired blacks solely in menial positions.⁶⁶ Throughout the 1920's, articles were printed in the *New York Age*, a prominent black newspaper of the era, which expressed concern over the lack of black businesses and discriminatory hiring practices of white-owned establishments. One investigation of these conditions found that in all of the stores in Harlem, only 129 black workers held jobs and almost all in menial positions.⁶⁷ Adding further to inhabitants' fury was the assertion that customers did not feel comfortable making purchases from black employees and that black workers lacked the skills to work as clerks. That same year, the New York Urban League (NYUL) and other organizations began campaigns to compel local businesses to hire black employees.

These mostly middle-class efforts to appoint more blacks in local stores were a failure, due to their conservative approach. The NYUL began its effort in November 1926, but used indirect methods to compel white shopkeepers to employ blacks. The NYUL wrote letters to businesses and conducted a survey of 300 stores on their positions on hiring blacks. In January 1930, the NYUL facilitated the formation of the Harlem Housewives League, which helped collect receipts to show how much business black customers brought to their stores. The Negro

⁶⁶ Winston C. McDowell, "Keeping Them 'In the Same Boat Together?'" Sufi Abdul Hamid, *African Americans Jews and the Harlem Jobs Campaign*, in *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict*, ed. Vincent P. Franklin, (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 218.

⁶⁷ "In 211 Harlem Stores Only 129 Colored Workers Are Employed and Employers Say Patrons Don't Want Negro Clerks," *New York Age*, December 4, 1926, *America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: New York Age, 1*.

League for Equal Political and Civic Rights also tried to persuade a small group of Harlem businesses to employ blacks. Both efforts had failed.⁶⁸ The NYUL efforts only succeeded in placing four employees in non-menial positions, while the Negro League for Equal Political and Civic Rights futile attempts gained no jobs.

The NAACP tried similar methods, to no avail. This organization focused on a “New Economic Program” that attempted to increase jobs for blacks by negotiating with white businesses throughout New York City, which operated in black neighborhoods.⁶⁹ The NAACP wanted an increase in jobs for blacks but did not want to see this happen at the expense of currently employed whites. They urged businesses to hire blacks as part of the National Recovery Administration and even considered initiating a boycott. The local branch of the NAACP, for example, consulted with the national organization in 1932 to discuss the lawfulness of boycotts; though they received approval to boycott, they chose not to and continued with indirect methods of persuasion.⁷⁰ Most businesses ignored or politely turned down their requests, citing little need for change or a lack of skilled candidates. The NAACP still did not advocate street action but took to the courts to challenge segregation and job discrimination.⁷¹ As depression conditions set in and limited gains were achieved using traditional methods, Harlem became more receptive to radical approaches employing direct action.

Black nationalists⁷² were some of the first to call for direct action. They represented members of every class, but included many middle class and professional blacks. Followers of

⁶⁸ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode*, 116.

⁶⁹ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode*, 116-117.

⁷⁰ Green, “Harlem, the Depression Years,” 40.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Black Nationalism is a political and social movement that promoted an independent black community. Followers of Marcus Garvey, who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association, linked this idea to expanding black economic power. Black Nationalism would increase in popularity and take on a new direction in the 1960’s and 1970’s. For more information on the development and shifting focus of Black Nationalist ideas see: Wilson Jeremiah Moses ed., *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (New York,

this philosophy supported a more radical approach to gain jobs for blacks by advancing the policy to “Buy Black.” Black Nationalists believed this would establish a level of economic independence and an increase in black jobs. Black merchants (many of West Indian origin) naturally gravitated to this idea and even launched advertising campaigns and distributed buttons promoting “Race Loyalty.”⁷³ They urged customers to buy only black-owned stores. These efforts benefited the pockets of middle-class merchants but did little to increase jobs, leading others to turn against it.

As early as 1930, some began supporting a “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign in Harlem, but it met with resistance from various groups. In 1930, Joseph Bibb of the *Chicago Whip* spoke before the NYUL, advocating a “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign. Some black business owners resisted this call to action because they feared that if white businesses hired blacks, they would lose business to these stores. Others resisted the movement, but for other reasons. Some objected because they resisted the direct-action approach used in the campaign such as boycotts, soapbox speeches, and picketing. Many feared that direct action would lead to white backlash or disturb other labor efforts. The Socialist Party and the Negro Labor Committee feared it because it might hinder blacks from integration into the AFL. The Communist Party in Harlem battled against it as well. Communists feared it would become racially antagonistic, and tried to redirect efforts that affected all workers. By 1935, successes would ultimately lead them to join in with the efforts.⁷⁴ Even one of the local black newspapers, *The Amsterdam News*, claimed that these actions could lead to an increase in

New York University Press, 1996). For more information on Marcus Garvey and his movement see: John T. McCartney, "Marcus Garvey and the Resurgence of Black Nationalism," In *Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African American Political Thought*, (Temple University Press, 1992), 74-90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt4c9.9>.

⁷³ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode*, 117-118.

⁷⁴ Mark Naison, *Communist in Harlem during the Depression*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 50-52.

discrimination and segregation outside Harlem; even if every business in Harlem hired blacks by the thousands in Harlem, there would still be unemployed, they argued.⁷⁵ This resistance to confronting businesses directly led many to form new organizations. These groups would later join forces in the form of the Citizens' League for Fair Play, and they launched a truly unified "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign that united people of all backgrounds in Harlem by employing direct and highly visible actions on the streets against white-owned businesses.

Harlem Moves to Boycott

The motivation to start the league came from a controversial figure in Harlem, Bishop Amiru Al-Mu-Minin Sufi Abdul Hamid. He had been an active participant in Chicago's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work Movement," helping to secure 300 jobs in two months and 1,800 jobs between 1928 and 1930 through his picketing efforts.⁷⁶ Sufi Abdul Hamid hoped to bring his talents to New York and form a similar movement in Harlem.

Sufi Abdul Hamid was a controversial figure of mysterious origins. It is believed that his given name was Eugene Brown, but he was called "black Hitler" by local Harlem merchants and newspapers who asserted his efforts were motivated by anti-Semitism. He represented the element of Harlem interested in more direct action. Claude McKay described him as a "powerfully built black man" whose slogan was "More Jobs for Negroes: Buy Where You Can Work."⁷⁷ In an interview for the Works Project Administration, he claimed to have traveled at the age of nine to Egypt before moving to Athens, Greece, where he was educated. In 1923, he returned to the US and soon found himself in Chicago, where he led picketing efforts.⁷⁸ Later,

⁷⁵ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode*, 118.

⁷⁶ Imām Al-Hājj Tālib 'Abdur-Rashīd, "A Brief History of the Afro-Islamic Presence in New York," *Souls*, Vol 12: No.1, (2010): 3-12, accessed June 10, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/10999940903571270.

⁷⁷ McKay, *Negro Metropolis*, 185.

⁷⁸ Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, "Bishop Amiru Al-Mu-Minin Sufi A Hamid" New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed June 21, 2018, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/e9c5c760-5e31-0133-cae8-00505686a51c>.

he traveled to Harlem and set out to create a similar effort there. He led the charge through soapbox oratories and the formation of the Negro Industrial and Clerical Alliance (NICA), which led boycotts and picketing throughout Harlem.⁷⁹ Sufi Abdul Hamid, unable to compel conservative leaders at the Baptist Ministerial Conference to join his cause, began his own boycott campaign with members of NICA.

Incapable of gaining support from local community organizations, Hamid, in 1932, began pushing for economic equality on street corners. Hamid enlisted followers by shouting inflammatory messages directed at white proprietors' stores and yelling "share the jobs," and comparing Harlem to Chicago.⁸⁰ His message would later contain anti-Semitic content when it was reported that most businesses along 125th Street were owned by Jews. He was accused of stating that "All Jews are syphilitic and consumptive" and are "spreading their filth and disease all through Harlem."⁸¹ His controversial methods quickly drew the ire of the middle class and the elite. This attitude was reflected in an article printed in the *New York Age*, which described his methods as a "disturbance," though they did not mention him directly by name. Sharing this view was journalist and writer Roi Ottley, who said Hamid "harangued the crowd with some truth and much steam" and that his followers were mere "hoodlums."⁸² Despite this description, Hamid managed to draw support of those who suffered most during the Depression and soon launched picketing along 135th Street.

Once Hamid drew enough followers, he began targeting prominent businesses along 135th Street in the summer of 1933. The center of Harlem's business district originated on 135th

⁷⁹ Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, ed., *African American National Biography Second Edition, Vol. 5* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 317.

⁸⁰ Roi Ottley, *New world A-coming; Inside Black America* (New York: Literary Classics Inc., 1943), 118, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015013966984>.

⁸¹ Lou Layne, "Sufi Abdul Hamid Held in Stormy Court Scene Held without Bail," *The New York Age*; January 19, 1935; America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 2.

⁸² Ottley, *New World*, 117.

Street, though by 1935, it had shifted to 125th Street, as black Harlem expanded. Sufi and members of NICA established their movement from the Hotel Dumas located on 135th Street and Seventh Avenue. From there, they targeted nearly every white-owned business along 135th Street, from drug stores, to grocery stores and department stores. He won no major victories, but did gain some positions for his members along 135th Street. Hamid soon took this experience to a larger audience and wealthier enemies down toward 125th Street. Beginning in May 1934, Hamid shifted his focus to white-owned businesses there, including major chain stores and drew the attention of the black middle class and black elites.

“Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” Moves to 125th Street

Sufi Abdul Hamid wasted no time when he singled out businesses on 125th Street by taking direct action. Hamid’s NICA affiliates met with store owners and management demanding they hire various percentages of black staff. Their efforts were immediately rebuffed and even met with racist messages. Woolworth’s Five & Ten Cent Store manager retorted that he was from the south “where Negroes were not permitted even to buy goods from first class stores and as long as he was manager, ‘not a damned nigger’ would serve anything over his counter, even if the customers were ‘Niggers.’”⁸³ Hamid’s response was to launch a full picketing campaign along 125th Street. These actions would result in his arrest, along with 14 of his followers four months later.⁸⁴ Their methods not only gained the attention of management and the police, but also of the black middle class and elite. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., was part of a father-son duo, which led the largest church in the country, the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Powell quickly renounced Sufi Hamid’s actions from his pulpit.

⁸³ McKay, *Negro Metropolis*, 191.

⁸⁴ August Meir and Elliot Rudwick, “The Origins of Nonviolent Direct Action in Afro-American Protest: A Note on Historical Discontinuities,” in *Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience*, ed. August Meir and Elliot Rudwick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 318.

Hamid rapidly forced the middle- and upper-class into action. Those of means in the community resented the tactics used by Hamid and hoped to bring respectability to the jobs campaign and gain control of the rising campaign.⁸⁵ One of the first attempts to rein in the job's movement was undertaken by Effa Manley. She was a prominent black businesswoman who would become the owner of the black baseball team, the Eagles, earning her a spot in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY. She headed the Harlem Women's Association and directed their efforts to secure jobs for black workers. She petitioned local black ministers to assist her in taking action. Reverend John Johnson of Saint Martin's Protestant Episcopal Church was the first to answer the call. Though he supported developing more jobs for blacks, he believed the movement needed an "element of Christian kindness" which he thought Hamid's NICA lacked.⁸⁶ Enlisting the help of the publisher of the *New York Age*, Fred Moore, Reverend Johnson would host a meeting calling for the start of the Citizens' League for Fair Play. This group would arise from the merging of efforts of eighteen churches and forty-four groups that ranged in interest from women's groups and business organizations to members of Black Nationalist groups such as the African Patriotic League. Together they decided to direct their efforts at Blumstein's Department Store, the largest in Harlem.

Members of the black bourgeoisie, under the direction of Reverend Johnson as president, and Manley, the secretary of the Citizen's League, initially applied conservative methods to exact change from Blumstein's. They appealed to local households to save receipts from purchases at the store. In a short time, they collected \$5,000 in receipts, which they presented to the owner and manager. The proprietors felt that the complaints were unjustified. Shockingly,

⁸⁵ Winston McDowell, "Race and Ethnicity During the Harlem Jobs Campaign, 1932-1935," *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no. 3/4 (1984):139, accessed June 28, 2018, doi:10.2307/2717618.

⁸⁶ McKay, *Negro Metropolis*, 190.

Blumstein's responded by confirming that although seventy-five percent of their sales came from black customers, they saw absolutely no need to hire more black workers since they already had a few black janitors and elevator operators,' one with a Master's degree. They saw no need to hire more since they met their commitment to the community by donating to black charities.⁸⁷ The Citizen's League realized that adhering strictly to traditional methods of persuasion was no longer an option.

The *New York Age* launched the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign on June 2, 1934. The newspaper appealed to its readers to stop buying from Blumstein's until fifty percent of their employees were black. Their arguments were angry in tone and targeted Mrs. L.M. Blumstein directly, saying, "As a Jew she is much concerned with Hitler's oppression of her people, but as that same Jew, she oppresses the hell out of the Negroes." They also presented the fight as representing far more than a squabble with Blumstein's, but reflecting a larger fight for black rights. They professed that black businesses floundered, while discriminatory white businesses flourished, and that if action was not taken now, their children would only suffer, unable to make a decent living in the future.⁸⁸ The Citizens League and the *New York Age* then sponsored a meeting to organize a concerted effort among the community.

The "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign found tremendous support from members of every background in the community. Evidence of this support could be seen at the first official community-wide meeting to expand job opportunities in Harlem. Held in Reverend Johnson's church, it brought together 2,000 people on June 17, 1934. It encompassed representatives of forty-four organizations, including distinguished individuals with connections

⁸⁷ Vere E. John, "Through My Spectacles," *The New York Age*, June 2, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 6. "Carrying the Torch By the Cavaliers," *The New York Age*, June 2, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

to every economic and political group. Some prominent faces in attendance were Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who brought with him the backing of all 14,000 members of his church; Rudolf Smith of the UNIA; Arthur Schomburg, curator of the New York Public Library; and attorney and son of an NAACP executive, William Pickens. Even Sufi Hamid sent representatives to ascertain the course this new effort would take. Within weeks, they had support from over 300 groups who donated their time and money to the cause. These groups included women's and business organizations, as well as members of Black Nationalist groups such as the African Patriotic League. These organizations represented and appealed to a wide assemblage of people from every economic class, social base, and political leaning. Even Hamid and his supporters began picketing in front of Blumstein's, though his presence was rebuked by the league. The onset of this unified movement created conditions that could initiate an effective labor campaign, which until this point had achieved little success because of vastly different approaches and goals.

To achieve their objectives, the Citizens League took a two-front approach comprised of picketing and propaganda. A picketing committee was set up under the direction of Arthur Reid and Ira Kemp. They solicited volunteers and canvased the streets daily. The picketing would last for months with 140 regular attendees (mostly women) picketing. Weekly meetings garnered attendance that ranged from 400 to 1500 attendees. It aimed to rally support, and discuss progress and tactics.⁸⁹ The *New York Age* led the media campaign. It printed weekly articles that praised the group's supporters and successes, while lambasting their enemies. Supporters were rewarded by having their names published each week and articles announced their

⁸⁹ Greenberg, "Politics of Disorder,"405.

successes.⁹⁰ These efforts created a constant visual presence that drew more and more people to the cause.

Though it drew the support of the majority of the community, it faced harsh criticism from Harlem's leading black weekly, the *New York Amsterdam News*. In editorials and articles, the paper openly condemned the effort, arguing that white employers downtown and in other areas outside of black neighborhoods might retaliate against black employees by firing them.⁹¹ Their condemnation of the campaign, however, may have been driven more by economic motives than by concern for black workers. The paper printed the bulk of Blumstein's advertisements and a substantial amount of all of the advertisements for businesses along 125th Street. Supporting the boycott would have meant a huge loss of revenue for the paper.⁹² While the *New York Age* and the *New York Amsterdam News* fought over the value of the jobs campaign, Hamid achieved the first success in gaining black employment on 125th Street.

Hamid achieved the first momentous triumph from an important 125th Street merchant. He won over the new owner of Koch's Department Store. Koch's previous owners closed their 125th Street location rather than cater to black customers, but its new owner Morris Weinstein agreed that his staff would be one-third black by the time of their grand reopening. Though he and his members rejoiced, not all in Harlem shared this excitement. His victory was met with indifference by some and criticism from others. In the *Amsterdam News*, it merited only two

⁹⁰ Donald Hendrick, "Agreement with Store Reached after Several Meetings With the League," *The New York Age*, August 4, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1. St. Claire Borne, "Another 125th Street Store Opens Clerical Positions to Negroes," *The New York Age*, August 4, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

⁹¹ "Boycott and Jobs," *The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938)*, July 21, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Amsterdam News*, 8.

⁹² William Muraskin, "The Harlem Boycott of 1934: Black Nationalism and the Rise of Labor-Union Consciousness," *Labor History*, 13:3 (1972): 364, accessed August 02, 2016, DOI:10.1080/00236567208584212.

sentences, while the *New York Age* asserted that it was Koch's paying "protection money" to Sufi Hamid's followers.⁹³

Though the Citizens League for Fair Play chided Hamid and his followers, the picketing committee under the direction of Ira Kemp and Arthur Reid used questionable methods of their own. Ira Kemp was born in Macon, Georgia, and Arthur Reid in Barbados; they represented a slightly more radical part of Harlem. They were Black Nationalists and founders of the African Patriotic League. Both subscribed to ideas of the Garvey Movement and would later go on to found the Harlem Labor Union.⁹⁴ As they guided the campaign on the streets, they did not hesitate to take more direct action than conservative leaders would have approved. Reports to management of shoppers being verbally and physically harassed were not uncommon. In some instances, picketers were arrested for harassment and intimidation. The *New York Age* blamed such outbursts on Hamid's followers, rather than the league's own members.⁹⁵ Methods may have pushed the boundaries of the conservative leaders of the league, but the possibilities of success pushed mass picketers into daily action and were beginning to affect business.

The *New York Age* also did its part to intimidate people who dared to cross picket lines. Black shoppers who did so were often harassed. For example, shoppers sometimes found their pictures on the cover of the *New York Age*, as one did on July 14, 1934, with the caption, "In the photo to the left is a Harlem 'citizen' who had just made a purchase in Blumstein's."⁹⁶ As a result, shoppers faced public humiliation and embarrassment.

⁹³ "FORTY GET JOBS," *The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938)*, June 09, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Amsterdam News*, 3. "Negro Clerks To Be Employed In New Koch Department Store When Reopens on June 13," *The New York Age*, June 9, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

⁹⁴ Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode*, 120-21.

⁹⁵ . "Picket Weisbecker's Store; Rebel Group Seeks to Confuse Public by Picketing Blumsteins," *The New York Age*, August 25, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

⁹⁶ Fred Moore, ed., "Helping and Hindering the Boycott," *The New York Age*, July 14, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

Blumstein's Department Store was forced to take action and capitulated to the demands of the Citizens' League for Fair Play. After months of picketing, Blumstein's agreed to draft an agreement with the League. Blumstein's would agree to hire 35 new employees for clerical and sales positions. They also vowed that as new positions opened, they would be filled with black workers. This news was heralded in the headlines of the *New York Age* on August 4, 1934. In the *New York Age*, Blumstein's declared that they had never discriminated, but that they were doing it as "recognition of the principles asserted by Rev. Dr. J.H. Johnson."⁹⁷ Though this number was less than the fifty percent they demanded, the league accepted the offer since Blumstein's had agreed to hire more black staff as new openings arose.

Harlem's black community rejoiced in this triumph by hosting a parade through the streets of Harlem. Revelers marched down Lenox Avenue toward 110th Street. That day, approximately 1500 refused to leave Lenox Avenue, even though organizers had tried to postpone the celebratory parade.⁹⁸ Motivated by this success, boycotts and demonstrations rapidly spread to other establishments located around 125th Street, though the league would never officially endorse another boycott and chose to return to the methods of privately negotiating with stores.

Fracture Threatens Movements Victory

September 15, 1934, the day the first black clerks of Blumstein's were announced, should have also been a day of celebration for the people of Harlem, but it brought anger and division to the community. Instead, the *New York Age* proudly boasted about the first 15 girls who were

⁹⁷ Fred Moore, ed., "Blumstein's to Hire Negro Clerks," *New York Age*, August 4, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

⁹⁸ Ralph L. Crowder, "'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work': An Investigation of the Political Forces and Social Conflict Within the Harlem Boycott of 1934," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 15, no.2 (July 1991): 7, accessed August 30, 2016, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:bsc:&rft_dat=xri:bsc:ft:iibp:00298851.

hired at Blumstein's.⁹⁹ Readers were quick to note that all the new employees had a light complexion. Kemp was outraged by the selection. He described the girls as "High Yellow," easily passing as Caucasian, and he immediately confronted Fred Moore with accusations of aiding Blumstein's in discriminating against dark-skinned girls.¹⁰⁰ This was particularly egregious to Kemp since most picketing was done by darker-skinned blacks.¹⁰¹ Kemp and Reid felt that black elite agents of the League had used them to improve the conditions of the black upper class and secretly promoted their own candidates, while lower-class and dark-skinned picketers did the work. The deal indeed was agreed upon in Blumstein's offices while Kemp and Reid picketed on the street below. In response, Kemp and Reid terminated their affiliation with the League and resumed protests, creating an independent picketing committee.

Sufi Hamid, always an outsider to the League, was also unwilling to accept the deal and trudged on with NICA members. He argued that the agreement was not enforceable and believed that church members shared the same prejudices as store owners. He continued to send NICA representatives to picket Blumstein's and other stores along 125th Street. In response, local proprietors decided to band together to resist Hamid's picketing and speeches, and formed the Harlem Merchants Association. They appealed to Mayor LaGuardia to intercede, claiming Hamid was promoting anti-Semitism among picketers and pushed for him to be arrested again. He persisted, but without the backing of the community, no gains were made, and the effort quickly fizzled.

Creating further anger and division in Harlem was not just the creation of two rogue picketing committees, but the response of the League and the *New York Age*. Representatives of

⁹⁹ Fred Moore, ed., "Photograph," *New York Age*; September 15, 1934, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Muraskin, "The Harlem Boycott of 1934", 365.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

the League such as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., did not deny that the girls selected by Blumstein were lighter in skin tone than most of the picketers, but they denied this was a result of League bias. They even asserted that it was the quality of the printed picture that projected a complexion that was lighter than reality.¹⁰² The *New York Age*'s editor only added fuel to the anger. In an editorial, he conceded that the girls had fair skin, but argued that people should accept it because lighter skin girls could create a "foothold" for others in time.¹⁰³ This did little to assuage the anger of the community and only pushed people out of the League, thus ending any chance of a unified jobs movement in Harlem.

A.S. Beck Shoe Corporation V John Johnson

As factions developed in the employment campaign, resistance from businesses came in the form of the court case, *A.S. Beck Shoe Corporation v John Johnson*. In October 1934, A.S. Beck Shoe Corporation ran multiple locations in Harlem, and was targeted in the second wave of boycotts and picketing. Management sought an injunction to prevent any further protests. The complaint listed eight charges against them, including impeding business, loitering, using intimidations and threats against customers and staff, and unjustly calling a boycott of their store. The case named several defendants including John Johnson and Arthur Reid (spelled Reed in court transcripts).¹⁰⁴

Testimony reflected both methods used by Ira Kemp's picketing faction and resistance of businesses to hire black staff. Patrons and representatives of picketed businesses, such as Blumstein's and La Gene Shop, confirmed that 50 to 60 picketers appeared daily and made it difficult to enter the stores along 125th Street. Some witnesses, such as customer Mary Cannon,

¹⁰² Adam Clayton Powell Jr., *Marching Blacks* (New York: Dial Press, 1945), 80-81.

¹⁰³ Vere E. John, "Through My Spectacles," *The New York Age*; August 25, 1934; America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ *A.S. Beck Shoe Corporation v John Johnson*, 33689, (1934).

even reported being physically assaulted by participants. Kemp also pressured business owners to hire members of the APL. He insisted that half of local store employees should be members of the APL. A deponent, manager Jack B. Kahn, affirmed these tactics and reflected the typical response of shops in Harlem, insisting that they could not find that many black workers who were qualified and doing so would require firing white staff. When stores did not comply, boycotts were called, picketing commenced, leaflets were distributed, and rallies were held. Documents of these events were offered into evidence and demonstrated a clear pattern of activity.

As testimony and evidence were presented, it was also clear that by the time of the trial the movement was divided. Johnson testified that Kemp and Reid were no longer a part of his League and that the picket committee had been disbanded. Kemp and Reid denied any knowledge of being removed from their association with the League. A divide over skin color was also reflected in the testimony. Violet Dewey was a light-skinned black woman. She testified that she and her employers were harassed by Kemp and his supporters. They spoke to her manager and demanded her removal and replacement with a sales girl of their choosing; when asked why, they stated that she was “too light.” She was eventually let go as a result of this repeated harassment. Such demands were supported by Kemp, but not by conservative League members such as Johnson.

A.S. Beck’s lawyers also presented into evidence an article printed in the *New York Age* to demonstrate the lack of support for the campaign. The paper, which had once extolled picketing, was now condemning it. The plaintiff’s lawyer claimed it showed the community did not support picketing in the area. When the court finally ruled on the case, it would serve as the death knell to a movement that was already divided.

The “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” movement would lose all leveraging power as an outcome of the case, and with that any hope of gaining future success evaporated. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiff. The defendants would have to reimburse A.S. Beck \$500 as a result, but the true loss came when the judge declared all picketing and boycotts had to end permanently. The “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns tactics were declared illegal since this dispute, according to the court, was not a labor dispute. The court ruled that organizers and participants were not a union and therefore had no right to protest, picket, or boycott. Judge Samuel Rosenman further explained why he believed such efforts needed to be quelled. His explanation foreshadowed events to come. He stated “their acts are contrary to public policy in that they tend to incite race riots...foster racial strife and to foment racial dispute.”¹⁰⁵ This would serve a fatal blow to the movement.

The effects of the court’s decisions were felt rapidly. Newspapers printed the outcome on the front page and by early 1935, all picketing had ended.¹⁰⁶ Arrests were quickly made when picketers appeared. Sufi Hamid, after being arrested again, dissolved his organization. The disappearance of jobs soon followed. Jobs gained through the movement were being lost as early as January 1935.¹⁰⁷ The impact of the case was not felt immediately as the decision came at the start of the holiday season and merchants feared a loss of sales. Members of the Harlem Merchants Association, confident in their victory, met with League members at a banquet, boasting that they had hired black employees for the holiday. This statement irked listeners who were quick to point out that, just as swiftly as they hired these seasonal employees, they had fired

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ "STORE PICKETING BANNED," *The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938)*, November 3, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Amsterdam News*, 1.

¹⁰⁷ “Dewey 125th ST Store Salesgirls were Fired Because of Prejudice,” *New York Age*, January 5, 1935, America’s Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

them once the season was over.¹⁰⁸ Efforts of all groups were called off and within a month's time, 400 of the newly hired black clerks would lose their jobs.¹⁰⁹

Reid and Kemp responded to the decision by forming their own labor union, the Harlem Labor Union, but government and business efforts thwarted its success. Their efforts to unionize would be blocked until after the riot, and the union would be permanently dissolved after they began to advocate more radical activities, alarming merchants, black elites, and government officials. They were asked to resign by the District Attorney of New York County.¹¹⁰ With no avenues left to express their frustrations, Harlem was ripe with exasperation that would soon lead to conflict.

Harlem's Riot of 1935

On March 19, 1935, a small occurrence at Kress Variety Store would evolve into a full-blown riot. The precipitating incident concerned a petty theft. Lino Rivera, described as a sixteen-year-old "Puerto Rican Negro" went into a local variety store on 125th Street, where he attempted to steal a small penknife and was caught by store employees who held him.¹¹¹ Rivera was held by an employee who began pushing him toward the exit when people began to observe the exchange. At this point, Rivera stated that one of the workers said, "Let's take him down to the cellar and beat him up."¹¹² A woman observing the situation began to scream. Others began to stop and watch. Another clerk stepped in to assist, and both men began arguing with and dragging the boy who was clinging to a pillar, shouting and kicking, before biting both men.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ "Citizens' League for fair Play Inaugurates Program for 1935," *New York Age*, February 2, 1935, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Greenberg, "Politics of Disorder", 406.

¹¹⁰ Muraskin, "The Harlem Boycott of 1934," 372-373.

¹¹¹ Hamilton Basso, "The Riot of 1935," in *Urban Racial Violence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Joseph Boskin (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1969), 52.

¹¹² Mayors Commission, "Testimony of Lino Rivera," 1935, # 08 1935 *Public Hearings*, Outbreak, Roll 194.

¹¹³ New York Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935, "The Complete Report of the Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935," in *Mass Violence in America: The*

This minor incident would spark rumors and increase tensions. Rivera was taken to the basement and a local police officer spoke with him. The boy was released and left out the back door and returned home. Meanwhile, the crowd that had seen the exchange became incensed, and one of the witnesses insisted the boy was being beaten to death in the basement. This statement quickly spread. In response, angry crowds began to gather inside and outside the store, waiting for the boy to reappear. The police were called. They tried to disperse the crowd, further agitating participants and leading police to call for reinforcements. When the boy did not come out from the basement, the crowd became alarmed and angry.

Exacerbating the situation were a series of unfortunate events. An ambulance was called to address the wounds of the bitten employee. When the ambulance left empty, it appeared to prove the woman's claim. Lending further evidence to the rumor of the boy's death was the presence of a hearse which was parked in front of the store. The hearse was normally stored at a garage on 124th Street, but had been parked there by the driver who was visiting his brother-in-law at the store. This confirmed to some that the boy was dead.

Street orators began to arrive at the scene and further stirred the crowd's anger. Pamphlets began to circulate, reading: "One hour ago a twelve-year-old Negro boy was brutally beaten by the management at Kress's Five and Ten Cent Store. Boy is near death... Don't buy at Kress! Stop police brutality in Harlem!"¹¹⁴ Other rumors had spread that he was twelve and had stolen jellybeans and was beaten as a result.¹¹⁵ A riot participant acknowledged the rumors, but believed parts of the rumors four years later. This witness stated, "Sure, the kid swiped a fist a

Complete Report of the Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935, ed. Robert M. Folgelson and Richard E. Rubenstein (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 7.

¹¹⁴ Basso, "The Riot of 1935," 54.

¹¹⁵ Fred Moore, ed., "12 Year Old Lad Starts Riot Along 125th Street," *New York Age*; March 23, 1935, America's Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, 1.

candy. I guess he musta been hungry. That wuz the startin' point. Hell came after that. Word got aroun' the kid wuz murdered. That's all they needed t'know."¹¹⁶ Indeed, these rumors fomented the crowd.

After the store had closed, crowds refused to leave, and became destructive. They numbered in the thousands and began to smash windows and loot white-owned stores along 125th Street from Fifth to Eighth Avenue. More police were called. The violence seemed to stem from outside of Kress's as onlookers listened to fiery speeches. Objects were launched from the crowd shattering Kress's windows. Looters quickly flooded into the store and ransacked it. Rioting soon spread to other stores along 125th Street. More than 500 police officers responded to the scene on foot and mounted on horses. Nightsticks and gun butts were used on rioters, as people on rooftops threw bricks, bottles, and bats on the officers. In an attempt to end the riot, police located Rivera and brought him back to Kress to prove he was alive. The riotous mass continued, however, spreading south to 120th Street and North to 138th Street.

The rioters did not represent any single group and were not hoodlums or communists, as people speculated afterward. Thousands had participated in the riots. Poor, middle-class, and prominent had all partaken, including a minister's daughter who allegedly hurled bricks through windows.¹¹⁷ Various age groups were also represented in the crowd, though not in equal numbers. Though communist members were present, giving speeches at the start of the riots, they were calling for boycotts, not riots.

Many tried to minimize the damage during the riot, to no avail. Store owners posted signs in the window, touting that they hired blacks or were black-owned. Radio stations and

¹¹⁶ Vivian, Morris, *Harlem Riot*, New York City, New York, 193, Manuscript/Mixed Material, <https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh001488/>.

¹¹⁷ Flamm, *In the Heat of the Summer*, 35.

sound trucks blared messages, calling on rioters to stop. Police blocked street traffic and tried to track the crowd. All efforts failed to bring order. Seven police and fifty-seven civilians were injured, while 626 windows were broken and seventy-five (mostly black) people were arrested for crimes that ranged from felonious mischief to inciting a riot.¹¹⁸

Though Rivera had not died that night, another sixteen-year-old boy had tragically perished. Lloyd Hobbs, who was returning home from a movie, had been fatally shot by a police officer. Hobbs was caught in a crowd when an officer opened fire, striking the boy. Despite this incident, police efforts were not excessively violent, according to Claude McKay who described their actions: “The actions of the police was commendable to the highest degree. The looting was brazen and daring, but the police were restrained. In the extreme cases, when they fired, it was into the air. Their restraint saved Harlem from becoming a shambles.”¹¹⁹ Less than twenty-four hours later, the riot had come to an end, leaving behind approximately \$2,000,000 in damages.¹²⁰ The riot forced the government and the community to respond.

The Response to the Riot of 1935

Some of the first to respond to the riots were the people of Harlem themselves who saw it as a result of economic oppression and the failure of the jobs movement. Local leaders and ordinary citizens of Harlem reacted to the incident by declaring it not a race riot but a clear retort to the demise of the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work Movement.” Heads of the community condemned the actions of the race riot and yet justified it. Claude McKay claimed the “alleged beating of a kid caught stealing a trifle in one of the stores merely served to explode the

¹¹⁸ Greenberg, “Politics of Disorder,” 408.

¹¹⁹ Claude McKay, “Harlem Runs Wild” in David Levering Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Viking, 1994), 190.

¹²⁰ Hofstadter and Wallace, ed., *American Violence*, 259.

smoldering discontent of the colored people against the Harlem merchants.”¹²¹ McKay further blamed agitators who had organized picketing, specifically naming Sufi Hamid. Reverend John Johnson, blamed the actions solely on the merchants themselves for antagonizing the communities by declaring false promises and then continuing to practice discrimination. He asserted that what happened was “an economic revolt. A revolt against the prejudice, exploitation and unfair practices of many of the stores on 125th Street...Some have **PRETENDED TO ACCEPT THE SUGGESTIONS MADE**, but have lied and cheated.”¹²² The riots were not spontaneous, but a response to businesses that refused opportunities to the people of Harlem.

Even some local merchants found that the true issue was stores’ refusal to heed the demands for jobs for black workers. The head of Koch’s Department Store asserted that they received “the finest compliment” when their store was “unmolested” during the riots and attributed this (along with improved sales) to the hiring of black workers.¹²³ Similarly, Blumstein’s was not attacked and was one of the only stores that had maintained newly hired black clerks following the holiday season. Letters and telegrams, which poured into the mayor’s office, demanded the release of “workers.” Some directly stated that “**THE WORKERS OF HARLEM HAVE A RIGHT TO PROTEST DISCRIMINATION AGAINST NEGRO WORKERS...**” while others wrote to offer aid to the mayor and to join the committee to investigate problems in Harlem.¹²⁴

¹²¹ McKay, “Harlem Runs Wild”, 191.

¹²² Fred Moore, ed., “Leaders Comment on Riot” *New York Age*, March 30, 1935, America’s Historical Newspapers Readex: A Division of NewsBank: *New York Age*, I.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Telegram to Mayor LaGuardia from American Youth Club, March 20, 1935, Mayor LaGuardia Papers of the New York City Municipal Archives, Office of the Mayor (Fiorello H. LaGuardia) Guinier, Ewerts (7) to Harlem-Crimes (13) Subject Files 1934-1945, reel 0076.

Other organizations and events cited jobs as the root of Harlem's frustration. Rallies held later in response to the riots and accusations of police brutality all indicated job concerns.¹²⁵ The NAACP also blamed the actions on "economic distress" and called for the formation of a biracial committee on the Harlem riots, which would explore conditions in Harlem.¹²⁶ Mayor LaGuardia was quick to form a committee.

Mayor LaGuardia, who had once been touted as a "friend to the Negro," quickly took action both during and after the riot.¹²⁷ LaGuardia went to Harlem in the following days to address the community, but had police riding through the streets during the riot with photos of the boy, unharmed. Approximately 700 officers were held on duty during the riot and extra police guarded stores in the area afterward. The officers were directed to use minimal force. On March 20, 1935, LaGuardia wrote an address to the people of New York City, which assured the public that the vast majority of Harlem residents were "splendid, decent, law-abiding American citizens." He promised a full inquiry. As part of the investigative process, he created a committee representing all citizens to investigate the riot and recommend ways to address the community's grievances.

This committee was known as The Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem. The committee featured prominent members of the black community, including civil rights leader and labor organizer A. Philip Randolph and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. The committee was divided into six subcommittees and investigated the following: unemployment discrimination,

¹²⁵ Rally Posters, June 1935, Mayor LaGuardia Papers of the New York City Municipal Archives, Office of the Mayor (Fiorello H. LaGuardia) Guinier, Ewerts (7) to Harlem-Crimes (13) Subject Files 1934-1945, reel 0076.

¹²⁶ NAACP telegram to Hon F H LaGuardia, March 20, 1935, Mayor LaGuardia Papers of the New York City Municipal Archives, Office of the Mayor (Fiorello H. LaGuardia) Guinier, Ewerts (7) to Harlem-Crimes (13) Subject Files 1934-1945, reel 0076.

¹²⁷ Address delivered by Hon. Ferdinand Q. Morton at the Meeting to Organize the Colored Citizens' Non-Partisan Committee for the Re-election of Mayor James J. Walker, 1929, Mayor LaGuardia Papers of the New York City Municipal Archives, Office of the Mayor (Fiorello H. LaGuardia) Guinier, Ewerts (7) to Harlem-Crimes (13) Subject Files 1934-1945, reel 0076.

inequality in relief, housing conditions, poor educational and recreational facilities, problems in healthcare, police abuse, and crime, among other things.

The report found many injustices, particularly in unemployment and housing. It noted discrimination in employment in all sectors. According to the committee, this discrimination created conditions that would guarantee “perpetual unemployment and dependence upon welfare agencies.”¹²⁸ They also charged that though it did not discriminate when issuing relief aid, the agency discriminated against hiring black employees and failed to appoint blacks to works projects even when qualified.¹²⁹ They recommended an unpaid black individual be appointed to oversee discrimination in the Home Relief Bureau. Regarding housing, they found poor conditions that led to overcrowding, and learned that most families paid half their income in rent as a result of discrimination. They recommended increased enforcement of city housing codes. The committee additionally recommended that the New York Housing Authority should develop a program specific to Harlem, and it encouraged rent strikes if landlords refused to address occupants’ protests regarding rents and poor conditions.¹³⁰

The state of education in Harlem and recreational facilities were also addressed. The committee found inadequate access to recreational facilities. Schools were found to be dilapidated and inadequately supplied. They also suspected that teachers viewed being placed in these schools as a form of “punishment,” and that most of the teachers were old white females, which showed less concern for students’ needs.¹³¹ Testimony before the committee revealed repeated discrimination in schools.¹³² The group found that the physical conditions of Harlem

¹²⁸ The Mayor’s Commission on Conditions in Harlem, 44.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 46-62.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 130.

¹³¹ Ibid., 81-82.

¹³² Ibid., 88.

schools did not match those offered to children in other parts of the city. In order to remedy these problems, the committee recommended that the city tear down and replace PS 89, appeal to Washington, D.C., for emergency funding to build more facilities, and hire more teachers to reduce class size. They also recommended building new parks and expanding park hours to allow people more access.¹³³ Similarly, the committee recommended hiring soldiers to supervise parks. Additionally, they suggested hiring a black individual to the board of education, when possible.

Healthcare was also an area of serious concern. The committee asserted that residents in Harlem were in worse health than in other parts of the city, due to overcrowding and poverty. The findings revealed hospitals lacked proper supervision and were overcrowded. The kitchens in hospitals lacked proper refrigeration.¹³⁴ The committee also noted that black doctors and nurses were blocked from jobs. They recommended that black doctors and nurses be hired in all municipal hospitals and that employment discrimination in city-funded facilities be prohibited. Likewise, the panel recommended increasing the number of students in the training program at Harlem Hospital and demanded nurses at this location receive comparable training.¹³⁵

With respect to police and crime, a number of issues were observed. According to the study, the increased crime in the area was the result of the other issues. The report found that contributing conditions such as chronic unemployment, poor living conditions, and lack of educational and recreational facilities led to increased crime. The committee mentioned examples of excessive force and instances of killings, which helped create the negative attitude of community members against law enforcement.¹³⁶ Recommendations to alleviate these issues

¹³³ Ibid., 121.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 95-100.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 131-33.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 106-119.

included creating a biracial committee of community members to review complaints of mistreatment, closing institutions that refused to admit blacks, and instructing officers not to interfere with “the association of whites and Negroes” or otherwise be subjected to disciplinary actions.¹³⁷

The report would never be released publicly by the mayor’s office, as promised, in part, because of its findings and recommendations. Public knowledge of the report’s content resulted when the *Amsterdam News* obtained a copy and reprinted it.

The Board of Education responded by denying any form of discrimination. It postulated that problems found in Harlem schools were present throughout the school system. It contended that schools were not particularly overcrowded in Harlem, but that schools there had fewer pupils as a result of children moving due to the Depression. They also declared teachers had not been placed there for punitive reasons and that issues related to discipline and learning were a result of broken homes and poverty.¹³⁸

The relief administration also denied any form of discrimination. It emphasized that the low number of black employees was not evidence of discrimination. They insisted that the number of blacks in New York represented a smaller percentage of the population than whites, which is why the relief administration had fewer black employees. Addressing an allegation of discrimination in promotions within the administration, it claimed that a qualified black employee was never denied a promotion based on color. The administration did, however, admit to denying a promotion to one black employee because the candidate would be placed in a position in a predominantly Italian community. Supervisors felt the appointment might stir

¹³⁷ Ibid., 133-134.

¹³⁸ “In Reply to Chapter Six The Problem in Education and Recreation,” May 5, 1936, Mayor LaGuardia Papers of the New York City Municipal Archives, Office of the Mayor (Fiorello H. LaGuardia) Guinier, Ewarts (7) to Harlem-Crimes (13) Subject Files 1934-1945, reel 0076.

tensions due to the outbreak of the Italian-Ethiopian War.¹³⁹ Despite these objections to the report, however, the city and state took steps to assuage the suffering of Harlem.

The Mayor and other officials took actions even before the full report was released. The state set up its own temporary group to explore conditions for blacks. In order to address issues of discrimination, the Emergency Relief Board established an Advisory Committee on the Negro Problem. It successfully increased the number of jobs for blacks in positions with higher responsibilities and the head of the Works Projects Administration took similar action.¹⁴⁰ Healthcare in Harlem received a boost with the launch of a new health center. Moreover, Harlem Hospital received a new wing called the Women's Pavilion at Harlem Hospital, and city hospitals agreed to accept black nurses.¹⁴¹ Educational needs were addressed by the city, as well. The government would propose four new schools in Harlem. They failed to meet these promises, however, by only building two.¹⁴²

Housing projects were also launched as a result of the riots, though not without controversy. The first black housing project would be created in the form of the Harlem River Houses just two months after the riot.¹⁴³ It was launched as a twin project of the Williamsburg Houses, which was already being designed for whites. Designing this project proved to be difficult for the city, since whites did not want blacks in their communities or to enter the Williamsburg Housing project already underway. The cost of land in black areas was higher, however, due to higher rents.¹⁴⁴ The city felt that the cost of buying land in black areas would

¹³⁹ "City of New York Emergency Relief Bureau Home Relief Division Memorandum," May 7, 1936, Mayor LaGuardia Papers of the New York City Municipal Archives, Office of the Mayor (Fiorello H. LaGuardia) Guinier, Ewerts (7) to Harlem-Crimes (13) Subject Files 1934-1945, reel 0076.

¹⁴⁰ Greenberg, "Politics of Disorder," 418.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Peter Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 12, no. 4 (1986): 365, Accessed August 02, 2016, doi:10.1177/009614428601200403.

¹⁴⁴ Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York," 369.

betoo exorbitant for the city's budget. This issue was rectified when they found a plot of vacant land adjacent to the Harlem River. The projects provided better housing for some, but still did little to reduce the demand for adequate housing in Harlem, which remained a major concern for residents nearly a decade later.

The "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" Movement also saw a boost as a result of the riots. It renewed activism in the community, and by 1938, the Supreme Court had ruled picketing to address racial inequalities was constitutional. The movement next won an important agreement with Harlem store owners, who agreed to hire blacks in white-collar and clerk positions until they reached one-third of their staff.¹⁴⁵ Stores were held to these promises this time and even launched advertising campaigns promoting their inclusive hiring practices. Blacks later won victories as telephone operators, bus drivers, and white-collar positions in Consolidated Edison as a result of renewed black activism.¹⁴⁶ The campaign had come full circle and began addressing unifying issues of concern for Harlem's black residents.

As a result of the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign, Harlem had launched itself into a riot and had created a greater political consciousness of its needs. The conditions of the Depression had increased the awareness of the need for all of Harlem's black residents to secure jobs, whether white-collar or otherwise. Unified under the Citizens' for Fair Play, Harlem's residents of varying skin colors, backgrounds, and economic classes had presented a campaign that focused all of Harlem on a joint concern over employment opportunities. When these efforts failed due to internal conflict and governmental road blocks, citizens' anger resulted in a riot. This uprising of citizens finally brought government and business attention to the challenges faced by Harlem. Though they failed to institute all the recommendations of the

¹⁴⁵ Greenberg, "Politics of Disorder," 418.

¹⁴⁶ Greenberg, "Politics of Disorder," 419.

committee, some needed changes, including increased employment, came about as a result of the riot.

Conclusion

The people of Harlem grew increasingly frustrated in 1935. They had pursued peaceable methods of enacting change in their community and addressed the injustice of discrimination in employment. The initial limited success of their efforts managed to raise expectations. When the actions of businesses and government halted and reversed progress, however, the exasperation of the people of Harlem led individuals to unleash their anger by targeting businesses.

Harlem in 1935 was an ostracized and exploited community. Businesses thrived on account of black customers, while unemployment rates for black Harlemites were disproportionally high. Moreover, shopkeepers charged higher than average prices for necessities. Additionally, black residents paid oppressively high rents for poor housing, which helped line the wallets of white absentee landlords. Though the Harlem community needed more assistance than any other area in New York City during the Depression, its marginalized status prevented it from obtaining assistance from government agencies and employers.

Harlemites attempted to use conventional methods to improve their status. The community formed and joined organizations such as the Harlem Housewife's League, the New York Urban League, the NAACP, and even the Communist Party, in an attempt to gain agency in their community. Such groups endeavored to speak with proprietors, collected receipts, and attempted to appeal not only to owners' goodwill, but also to businesses' bottom line by highlighting black residents' contribution to these establishments. But these conventional means were unsuccessful at overcoming management's discriminatory practices. With no signs of change, the people of Harlem turned to a more drastic course of action, pursuing the "Don't Buy

Where You Can't Work" campaign. Chicago not only served as an example for Harlem but furnished it with a radical leader that drove moderates to action. Sufi Abdul Hamid, of the Chicago jobs campaign, had forced the hand and pocketbook of Harlem to take action.

Hamid galvanized people of every social class, economic class, and race to respond to the community's demands for equitable employment opportunities. He applied the methods he had learned in Chicago to the streets of Harlem. He led street corner speeches and excited people toward direct action. He enlisted followers to his organizations and led some of the earliest boycotts and picket lines on the streets of Harlem. His forceful, angry and sometimes anti-Semitic message forced the community to take notice. Some were compelled to join the cause. Businesses, in response, banded together to form the Harlem Merchants Association to eliminate Hamid and his followers, while conservatives responded to his call by starting their own campaign to regain control of their environment.

The outcome was a merging of radical and moderate forces into an umbrella organization known as the Citizens' League for Fair Play, which would align the poor to the elite in a singular effort to receive access to jobs in Harlem. The League would once again turn to Chicago's model to achieve its goals. Harlem would consolidate its resources to attack 125th Street's bottom line. It did this by forming a picketing committee and starting a propaganda campaign with the assistance of the *New York Age*. The organization successfully brought together the majority of the community to exact pressure on the businesses of Harlem.

Though Harlem's alliance was fragile, it managed to succeed. The League's first success brought together a diverse populace to target a singular goal. It worked to drive down sales for Blumstein's and (later) other stores on 125th Street. As a result, the League saw initial gains that

brought 400 new positions to blacks in Harlem. After this initial success, this tentative union of competing interests soon fell apart.

Some of the most important dividing issues revolved around continued boycotts and perceived discrimination against blacks of darker complexion. Elite leaders of the Citizens' League for Fair Play wanted to negotiate with employers. These leaders accepted deals with businesses that agreed to hire only a small number of black workers. More radical elements preferred to push for continued boycotts until proprietors consented to employ a larger percentage of black staff. The contradictory approaches and interests of conservative and radical leaders rendered the movement irreparable when the first black clerks at Blumstein's appeared on the pages of the *New York Age*. Many of the daily picketers were lower-class women of dark complexion, yet those hired for targeted stores were light-skinned people from middle-class backgrounds. Picketers felt betrayed by their own organization. The discontent among participants splintered the group into competing factions.

Though job gains never reached the desired number of new positions, Harlem gained access to jobs that were never held before by black workers, though they were soon eliminated. Blacks gained jobs beyond those of menial labor. Some of these new positions were in places that had never hired black employees for such tasks. This accomplishment, which had come to fruition in the summer and early fall of 1934, was all but eliminated by the winter of 1934. Though management held onto staff until early the following year, once the holiday rush subsided, black staff was terminated.

With no outlet left to vent frustrations, angry residents came together to riot as a result of a minor transgression between white management and a young boy of dark complexion. When Lino Rivera stole a pocket knife, he inadvertently set off a chain of events that fed into Harlem's

bubbling resentment. As the Commission on the Harlem Riot would find in its report, in normal circumstances this incident would have quickly faded. But it did not “due to the feeling of insecurity produced by years of unemployment and deep-seated resentment against the many forms of discrimination which they [black Harlemites] had suffered as a racial minority.”¹⁴⁷

Indeed, the people of Harlem had been denied any outlet to convey their dissatisfaction and gain resolution. They had sought to use peaceful methods for exacting change in employment practices by using the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” movement. The court’s injunction cut off access to the only successful medium that could force businesses to listen and act on community concerns. When no means for change were left for the people of Harlem, their anger was directed at the stores on 125th Street. This action forced New York City and its people to pay attention to the conditions and needs of Harlem, and to take minimal measures to bring about some resolution to Harlem’s problems.

¹⁴⁷ Mayor’s Commission on Harlem, 12.

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