

**Multiracial Unionism in an Imperial Context:
CIO Unions in the Panama Canal Zone, 1946-1956**

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On July 4, 1946, six thousand Panama Canal workers packed Panama City's Municipal Gymnasium to inaugurate the Canal Zone Workers Union (CZWU). Another five thousand – with more waiting outside for lack of seats – filled an arena in Colon, on the Atlantic side of the isthmus. Panamanian President Enrique Jimenez, the guest of honor at the Panama City rally, welcomed the new union, which he hoped could help address “...the racial and economic segregation which is repeatedly demonstrated” in the Canal Zone. CZWU Vice President Aston Parchment evoked the “heart-rending procession” of retired Canal Zone workers waiting for the “...meager average of twenty dollars as a reward for thirty years or more of loyal, uncomplaining, efficient service in the employment of the richest, most powerful, the most benevolent, and the most democratic nation on the face of the earth, the United States of America.” Parchment made clear the union believed in the promises of US democracy, attributing the “appalling conditions” in the Canal Zone to a “small ring of anti-democratic, un-American Americans” and pledging not to strike. Instead, the CZWU would “...ring the bell of liberty until its peals reach the halls of Congress... so that the American people will rise in righteous wrath to slash off this evil of Canal Zone exploitation that mars the countenance of America.”¹

The CZWU's partner in that effort was the United Public Workers of America (UPWA) and its parent organization, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).² Chartered in July 1946, Local 713 of UPWA-CIO won unprecedented gains for Canal Zone workers in less than two years. Its base was the canal's “silver” workers – tens of thousands of Black workers, most descendants of the West Indians brought to Panama to dig the canal – who repaired and

¹ “Success without Precedence,” *AcCION*, 12 July 1946, p. 5-8, Rebel Archive, <https://rebelarchive.org/pages/60dbdob7ac23b96f07a19761>.

² United Public Workers of America often used the acronym UPW; I have used UPWA here to avoid confusion with the United Paper Workers, also a CIO union at the time. UPWA can also refer to the United Packinghouse Workers of America.

operated the canal but were paid only a fraction of their white, “gold” counterparts’ wages. The gold and silver designations were relics of the canal’s construction period that gradually hardened into a system of rigidly segregated labor. But almost as soon as Local 713 had been established, it came under attack. Union meetings were monitored by Canal Zone police. Elements of the press - both in the US and Panama - attacked the union as a communist threat in an area vital to US empire.³ Canal Zone officials worried that the new union could cripple the canal, a key artery of US empire.⁴ By early 1948, the political tide had turned decisively against Local 713’s affiliation with the UPWA. One UPWA organizer was expelled from the Canal Zone, while another was jailed on libel charges. Their replacements were denied visas to travel to Panama. In early 1950, Local 713 disaffiliated from the UPWA, which was itself expelled from the CIO amid a larger purge of left-led unions. With help from the CIO’s new anticommunist union for government employees - the Government and Civic Employees Organizing Committee (GCEOC) - Canal Zone workers established Local 900.

But even with an anticommunist negotiating partner, Canal Zone officials remained stubbornly unwilling to concede the workers’ chief goals: the abolition of dual wage scales and the principle of equal pay for equal work. Local 900 officials largely failed to win meaningful concessions until 1955, when a treaty between the US and Panama settled canal labor questions without significant input from the union. Angry with Local 900’s collaboration with Panamanian authorities during the treaty negotiations, Canal Zone authorities undermined the union by blessing a competing local and retaliating personally against Local 900 president Ed Gaskin.⁵ The terms of the treaty eliminated thousands of Canal Zone jobs and diminished the standard of living for those still employed. With membership in Panama and the US dwindling,

³ An early and influential attack came from the American anticommunist journalist Ralph de Toledano, “Stalin’s Hand in Panama Canal,” originally published in *Plain Talk* magazine, republished in *The Panama American*, p. 1 & 6, November 1, 1946, University of Florida Digital Collections, <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00010883/06280/1x>.

⁴ For early official reactions, see John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 218-19.

⁵ Michael L. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985, p. 117-119.

GCEOC never received a charter as an independent union and was incorporated into the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in the late 1950s. Afro-Panamanians either integrated into Panamanian society or emigrated, primarily to the US.

The career of CIO unions in the Canal Zone in this period illustrates both the promises and limits of multiracial unionism in the imperial context of the early Cold War. The Canal Zone's largely Black workforce sought both economic and racial equality on a canal their parents had helped construct. Multiracial unionism through Local 713 seemed to offer a path to achieving that goal by building a union that united Black workers' struggles for racial and economic justice and insisted on their inseparability. Rather than simply request equality from Canal Zone authorities, Local 713 sought to confront US and Canal Zone policymakers, forcing them to meet their demands by building public pressure through alliances with elements of the Black diaspora and left progressives in the US labor movement. Its critics – including those who would go on to found and lead Local 900 – worried that Local 713's confrontational style and alliances with communists would brand the community of West Indian-descended workers as disloyal, endangering their relationship with the US. They advocated an approach that emphasized the community's anticommunism and history of loyal service to the US and built relationships with policymakers to win the concessions denied to its Communist-tainted predecessor.

As Parchment's comments at Local 713's opening rally show, both unions appealed to American ideals of democracy, fairness, and liberty in the service of their cause. But these appeals differed in subtle but revealing ways. Local 713 most often appealed to the spirit of the Popular Front era and the Second World War, when US President Franklin D. Roosevelt advocated self-determination for all peoples and made common cause with all parts of the left in a battle against fascism. Local 713 saw its own fight for equal treatment as an unfinished obligation of that era, and sought to confront US and Canal Zone policymakers with their failure to live up to their stated ideals. Local 900's rhetorical style, by contrast, was grounded in the

defensive politics of Cold War liberalism, which by the late 1940s had become the dominant ideology of the officials it sought to influence.⁶ Instead of an obligation unfulfilled, Local 900 and its allies portrayed Canal Zone segregation as a potential weakness for the US in the reputational battles of the Cold War. Segregation on the Canal Zone fed the US' reputation as a racist country, undermining its image as a democratic power in Latin America and creating openings that could be exploited by Soviet propaganda. This later approach ultimately did influence US policymakers, but the result was a treaty that largely excluded the concerns of local-rate workers.

Ultimately, neither Local 713's confrontational multiracial unionism nor Local 900's efforts to build trust with policymakers delivered the equality that canal workers sought, largely because of the imperial context in which they labored.⁷ From 1903 to 1979, the Panama Canal Zone existed as a curious imperial concession, a ten-mile strip of Panama in which the US held full sovereignty. US citizens living in the Canal Zone did not have democratic rights, and non-citizens residing there became non-citizen nationals, generally without access to birthright citizenship for their children. The territory was ruled directly by a Governor appointed by the Secretary of War - later the Secretary of the Army - who also served as president of the government-owned Panama Canal and Panama Railroad Companies. Canal Zone authorities operated their own police force and court system. A 1950 Army department report characterized the Canal Zone as "of necessity... a paternalistic dictatorship."⁸ Canal officials relied on an annual appropriation from Congress, but were not directly accountable to the president or Secretary of State.

⁶ On Cold War liberalism and its relationship to claims for racial equality, see Daniel Bessner, Michael Brenes, and Michael Franczak, "A Brief History of Cold War Liberalism," *Cold War History* 24, no. 2, (March 2024): p. 299-308.

⁷ In analyzing US labor policy in the Canal Zone through an imperial lens, I am inspired by Paul Kramer, who defines the imperial as "...referr[ing] to a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation." See Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1348-91.

⁸ Major, *Prize Possession*, p. 197.

Canal authorities saw their primary responsibility as protecting US imperial interests, chiefly the continuous operation of the canal as an artery for military and commercial shipping. The military importance of the canal declined in the period of this study as the Cold War prompted the US to maintain strong fleets in both the Pacific and Atlantic, but the canal remained vital for commercial shipping. This imperial context distinguished the problems of canal workers from those of their fellow CIO members who worked for private sector firms in the US. Canal workers worked for the US government, either directly for the armed services or indirectly through the wholly-owned Panama Canal and Panama Railroad Companies. They were not US citizens, and thus did not enjoy access to federal courts or the National Labor Relations Board. Furthermore, the vital importance of the canal limited their options for building leverage against their employers: strikes were effectively off-limits, since the federal government required no-strike pledges for canal workers and had repeatedly shown its willingness to destroy any union that violated them. In place of strike threats, canal workers unions had to either persuade Canal Zone authorities to meet their demands, or build pressure they could not ignore through lobbying and public campaigning. Local 713 and Local 900 tried both tactics, but the imperial context of canal workers remained a key impediment.

Historians of the US labor movement have long recognized the importance of the CIO's mostly failed efforts to organize Black workers in the immediate postwar period. The CIO's southern organizing drive – Operation Dixie – initially represented an ambitious attempt to reshape the politics of the US and the Democratic Party by bringing unionism to the south. But Operation Dixie largely failed, a victim of the anticommunist hysteria of the second red scare and the CIO's own acquiescence to racism and segregation amid its marriage with the southern-dominated Democratic Party.⁹ Scholars have also documented the connections

⁹ The most comprehensive work on Operation Dixie is Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988. A particularly critical appraisal of CIO policy in this period is Mike Davis, "The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party," *New Left Review* Vol. 1, No. 124, November/December 1980, 43-84. See also William P. Jones, "Black Workers and the CIO's Turn toward Racial Liberalism: Operation Dixie and the North Carolina Lumber Industry, 1946-1953," *Labor History* 41, no. 3 (August 2000): 279-306 and

between unionism and civil rights in the early Cold War, and the ways in which civil rights unionism enabled Black workers to unite their demands for racial and economic justice.¹⁰ William Jones has documented the particular role of public employee unions like UPWA in multiracial unionism, including in Panama.¹¹ Historians in these fields have also shown that left-led unions within the CIO - including UPWA - had more success in organizing Black and other minority workers than their right-wing counterparts, and that the CIO's turn from racial liberalism was a casualty of its postwar purges of the left.¹²

But the role of Panama in CIO history is typically marginal; the topic does not appear in Robert Zieger's otherwise comprehensive study of CIO history.¹³ Historians' focus on the CIO's domestic role is understandable, given the impact of its move to the right on labor history and postwar political economy. But Panama provides a crucial opportunity to study how the CIO confronted the issues of a racialized workforce in an imperial context. This research builds on a small literature specifically on CIO organizing in Panama. Michael Conniff traced the history of the canal's Black laborers, drawing on interviews with participants still living in the 1980s.¹⁴ John Major explored US policy towards the canal with a perceptive focus on labor problems.¹⁵ More recently, Joan Flores-Villalobos has documented the vital role of women's labor in making the canal and connecting its workers to broader diasporic communities in the US and the Caribbean.¹⁶ Katherine Zien has documented Local 713's efforts to draw on the cultural

Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹⁰ Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

¹¹ William P. Jones, "The Other Operation Dixie: Public Employees and the Resilience of Urban Liberalism," in *Capitalism Contested: The New Deal and Its Legacies*, Romain Huret, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Jean-Christian Vinel, eds., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.

¹² Michael Goldfield, "Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism During the 1930s and 1940s," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 44 (October 1993): 1–32. See also Gary Gerstle, "Working-Class Racism: Broaden the Focus," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 44 (1993): 33–40.

¹³ Robert Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

¹⁴ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*.

¹⁵ Major, *Prize Possession*.

¹⁶ Joan Flores-Villalobos, *The Silver Women: How Black Women's Labor Made the Panama Canal*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023.

resources of the Black diaspora in her comprehensive study of Paul Robeson's 1947 visit to Panama.¹⁷ Finally, Kaysha Cornealdi has brilliantly traced the "diasporic worldmaking" of West Indian-descended communities in the Canal Zone - and the role of unionism in their struggles for justice - in *Panama in Black*.¹⁸

The story of CIO unions in Panama sheds light on understudied aspects of CIO history and the evolution of Black diasporic thought about the power and limits of unionism as a vehicle for racial and economic justice. First, the differences between Local 713 and Local 900 illustrate two different approaches to unionism and left politics among Black leaders in the midcentury. The two unions represented the same workers, but they embodied very different relationships to authority and attitudes towards white progressive allies. Second, the CIO's career in Panama helps illuminate the group's evolving relationship with race and empire in the early years of the Cold War. By 1948, the CIO had cemented its marriage with a Democratic Party dominated by racial conservatives - especially in Congress - and committed to the Cold War. One of the requirements of that alliance was the CIO's expulsion of the left, in deference to the potent anticommunist politics of the second Red Scare. In return, CIO leaders gained a limited alliance with the state that brought benefits for its existing members, within certain limits. But the history of CIO unions in Panama helps illustrate what was lost in that trade. Among those sacrifices was the inclusive, confrontational style of multiracial unionism embodied by Local 713, which helped create powerful alliances between Black workers and white progressives. Another casualty were the last vestiges of the US labor movement's anti-imperialism, as the CIO joined the AFL as a partner in the US' postwar empire.¹⁹ These developments are mirrored in the

¹⁷ Katherine Zien, "Race and Politics in Concert: Paul Robeson and William Warfield in Panama, 1947-1953", *The Global South* Vol. 6, No. 2, (Fall 2013): 107-129.

¹⁸ Kaysha Cornealdi, *Panama in Black: Afro-Caribbean World Making in the Twentieth Century*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

¹⁹ The labor movement's alliance with the Cold War imperial state is the subject of Jeff Schuhrke's upcoming *Blue Collar Empire: The Untold Story of US Labor's Global Anticommunist Crusade*, New York: Verso Books, 2024. More conservative parts of the labor movement had long been aligned with US foreign policy, particularly in Latin America. See Philip Foner, *U.S. Labor Movement and Latin America: A History of Workers' Response to Intervention*, South Hadley, Mass: Bergin & Garvey, 1988.

CIO's postwar domestic history, but examining them in the context of Panama's racialized imperial workforce provides new insight into how unionists and Black leaders confronted the dynamics of the early Cold War.

I: Labor in the Early Canal, 1904-1945

From the very beginning, the problem of labor was fundamental to the construction, and then operation, of the Panama Canal. A French company had made an early effort at building an isthmian canal in the 1880s, but the concept took on new urgency for policymakers in Washington during the 1898 Spanish American War, which illustrated the importance of quick transit between the Atlantic and Pacific for an aspiring naval power. A US-backed 1903 coup won Panama's independence from Colombia, clearing the way for construction of the canal to begin the next year.

The canal's designers faced formidable engineering challenges and constant struggles with climate and disease, but labor was their toughest problem. The Canal's chief engineer John Stevens remarked at the outset of the project that "[t]he greatest problem in building a canal of any type on the Isthmus... is one of labor. The engineering and constructional difficulties melt into insignificance compared with labor."²⁰ Panama was sparsely populated, so the massive labor force needed to dig the canal – and build the towns, railroads, and port facilities that would support it – would have to be imported. Applying lessons from railroad construction in the US, Stevens and other American officials agreed that the labor force should be multiethnic so that no one group could dominate, and sufficiently large to ensure that strikes could not disrupt construction. Canal authorities preferred European workers, but they proved expensive and difficult to recruit. White Americans would dominate the skilled and supervisory roles, but their susceptibility to disease, high rates of turnover, and penchant for unionization made them

²⁰ Quoted in Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, New York: Penguin Books, 2009, p. 47.

difficult to manage. Chinese and African American workers, for different reasons, raised political protests in Washington.²¹

Lacking other options, canal officials turned to workers from the British West Indies to solve the canal's labor problem. West Indians had formed the bulk of the labor force of the earlier French project, and some remained in Panama. Recruiters fanned out across the British West Indies to recruit more, offering free transportation and housing, which proved attractive to residents of islands whose sugar economies had been decimated by poor harvests and competition from Cuba and Brazil. In all, between 150,000 and 200,000 West Indian men and women migrated to Panama in the construction era (1904-1914), with approximately 20,000 on the canal payroll at any given time; the rest were dependents or worked outside the Canal Zone.²² The largest number of workers came from Jamaica and Barbados, with smaller numbers from Trinidad and the francophone Caribbean islands.²³ It was the largest wave of trans-Caribbean human migration in history.

Early American railroad projects in Panama had paid skilled workers in gold and unskilled labor in less valuable silver currency. During canal construction, those terms came to define the Canal Zone's segregated workforce. Gold workers occupied supervisory roles and worked as skilled tradesmen. They were almost entirely white Americans, and most were members of craft unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) which coordinated their activities in the Canal Zone through the Metal Trades Council (MTC). Gold workers and their families led privileged lives in the Canal Zone. Their pay was tied to their profession's rate in the US, plus a 25% bonus for living overseas. They enjoyed an annual paid vacation, together with privileged access to high-quality schools, hospitals, commissaries, and recreational facilities.²⁴ Beginning in the construction era and continuing throughout the period

²¹ Ibid, 39-53.

²² Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 29. See also Michael Conniff, "Black Labor on a White Canal: West Indians in Panama, 1904-1980," University of New Mexico working paper repository, 1983, p. 1-3.

²³ Trevor O'Reggio, "Between Alienation and Citizenship: The Evolution of Black West Indian Society in Panama, 1914-1964," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1997, p. 67.

²⁴ Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 62-69.

of CIO organization in the Canal Zone, the AFL and MTC used their considerable influence in Washington and Canal Zone headquarters to oppose efforts to raise wages for silver workers and allow them access to gold-rate jobs.

Silver workers, by contrast, were paid as little as 10 cents per hour in the construction period; minimum wages had risen only slightly, to 26 cents per hour, in 1949.²⁵ Most were employed as unskilled laborers or low-level artisans with little prospect for advancement. Housing conditions were dire, with most silver workers in the construction period living in barracks or improvised shacks near their worksites, or in cramped tenements in the cities; construction of permanent housing for silver workers began only in 1913. Silver workers were also more vulnerable to disease and industrial accidents, which contributed to the estimated 10% mortality rate among West Indian workers in the construction period.²⁶

Initially, the gold and silver systems were not exclusively racial categories, retaining some degree of permeability in the canal's early history. Small numbers of Black employees - both West Indian and African Americans - were gold workers, while a small number of white workers took silver roll construction jobs. But by 1909, the gold-silver distinction had hardened into a rigid system of racial segregation that governed not just the conditions and types of work, but every aspect of life in the Canal Zone, including schools, housings, hospitals, and public accommodations of all kinds. Substantively, the zone's system of racial segregation closely resembled Jim Crow in the US south, so much so that observers often assumed that canal officialdom was disproportionately southern. In fact, most top canal officials and a majority of the white workforce was drawn from the north and midwest.²⁷ Segregation on the Canal Zone remained *de facto* policy, but it was never codified into law, since it was officially prohibited by federal statutes. In Washington, the AFL and its member unions were leading advocates of the

²⁵ Construction-era figure from Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 28. 1949 figure from Robert J. Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Panama and Central America*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008, p. 25.

²⁶ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 30-31.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 34-35.

gold/silver system, successfully pushing the administration of William Howard Taft to limit the gold roll to only white Americans.²⁸ The Republican administrations most responsible for imposing the gold/silver system - those of Taft and Theodore Roosevelt - wanted to court Black voters and so could not admit to allowing segregation in Panama. The use of the gold/silver system - which attributed pay inequalities to a supposed divide between skilled and unskilled workers instead of race - proved a useful obfuscation, allowing US authorities to claim, however implausibly, that they had not imposed racial segregation in the Canal Zone.²⁹

The first ship transited the completed Panama Canal in August 1914. Canal authorities - long worried about labor shortages - now confronted a surplus. They aggressively pushed West Indian workers to repatriate, enforcing the US' agreement with the government of Panama that West Indians would be only temporary workers. Layoffs dramatically reduced the population of silver workers employed by the Canal from 38,000 in 1913 to only 8,000 in 1921. Wages for those who remained were cut across the board, with real incomes reduced further as World War I dramatically raised the cost of living. At the same time, the gap between silver and gold workers continued to expand. Gold workers - whose affiliation with the AFL gave them power in Washington - won rent-free housing via an executive order in 1916. Some silver workers accepted the Canal company's offers of repatriation, but many refused; even their fading prospects in Panama looked better to many West Indians than the prospect of returning home. "They are too proud to return as poor as when they left," wrote a canal personnel officer of the West Indians.³⁰

Under increasing pressure from falling wages and rising costs, and inspired by Marcus Garvey's message of racial uplift, silver workers began to organize. Garvey himself was skeptical that unions could help Black workers, but West Indian workers in Panama were inspired by his message of Black unity, which helped overcome longstanding divisions between the different

²⁸ O'Reggio, "Between Alienation and Citizenship," p. 184-185.

²⁹ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 31-34.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 46-52.

West Indian nationalities in Panama.³¹ 6,000 dredging workers walked off the job in October 1916, eventually winning a 11% wage increase. Another spontaneous action came in May 1919, when more than a thousand longshoremen struck for eleven days, winning only minimal concessions.³² A much larger strike in February 1920 saw between 12,000 and 16,000 workers - nearly the entire Black workforce - walk off the job to demand higher wages, equal pay for women, overtime, notice of termination, and grievance procedures. Canal Governor Chester Harding rejected the strikers' demands and retaliated against them, arresting leaders and evicting the families of strikers from Canal Zone housing. Unlike previous episodes, the 1920 strike was carefully planned with help from a US labor union, the United Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way and Railway Shop Employees, which had sent organizers to the Canal Zone in 1919. But after encouraging the strike, the Detroit union provided little help to the striking silver workers, failing even to return the \$30,000 strike fund it held on their behalf. In material terms, the 1920 strike was a clear failure that created a deep distrust of US labor unions which Local 713 would have to overcome 25 years later. But the strike also united silver workers, helping them reconceptualize their struggle around a shared identity as exploited Black workers, rather than disparate - or even opposed - national groups.³³

The Great Depression hit the Canal Zone hard, prompting the layoffs of 3,400 silver workers between 1929 and 1933, nearly a third of the total.³⁴ Canal authorities stepped up efforts to repatriate workers, but many West Indians and their children became destitute in Panamanian cities. The depression also worsened the relationship between West Indians and mestizo Panamanians, who agitated for their removal in increasingly racist terms.³⁵ The US and Panama agreed to a new treaty governing the canal in 1936 which included an annex prohibiting

³¹ Carla Burnett, "‘Unity Is Strength’: Labor, Race, Garveyism, and the 1920 Panama Canal Strike," *The Global South* 6, no. 2 (2013): 39–64.

³² *Ibid*, 54.

³³ Burnett, "‘Unity Is Strength’", 39–64. See also Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 52–61.

³⁴ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, 75.

³⁵ The term "mestizo Panamanians" will be used to refer to Spanish-speaking Panamanians of Latin American origin, who constituted the vast majority of Panamanians, and to distinguish from Afro-Panamanians, who were largely (though not exclusively) the descended from West Indians.

discrimination and giving mestizo Panamanians equal access to canal jobs. The silver rolls were increasingly Panamanian, since many children of West Indian migrants were Panamanian citizens, even if they were not accepted by the mestizo Panamanian elite. In practice, the provision was never enforced, and the gold and silver rolls remained almost entirely segregated by race.³⁶

The outbreak of the Second World War prompted plans to expand the canal to include a third set of locks, designed to accommodate larger battleships and aircraft carriers. Congressional approval of the plan in 1939 came with stipulations – lobbied for by the AFL – that the project be built only with American labor. Recognizing that such provisions violated the terms of the 1936 treaty, President Franklin D. Roosevelt reassured Panama that they would not be enforced. However, the silver workforce would need to be expanded to carry out the project, reigniting construction-era labor conflicts. Hiring mestizo Panamanians would give one group too much power in the canal's labor force; African Americans were considered too rebellious; Puerto Ricans – non-white but Spanish-speaking – would not easily fit into the Zone's delicate racial hierarchy. Canal authorities' solution, as in the construction era, was to import West Indians. In deference to Panamanian prejudices, US officials pledged the 5,000 new West Indian workers would be limited to the Zone and repatriated as soon as the wartime work was completed.³⁷

The war years also marked the most serious attempt at unionization among the silver workers since the failed strike of 1920. With the help of CIO organizer Harvey Stoudt, silver workers appealed to Canal Zone Governor Clarence Ridley to allow them to form a union affiliated with the CIO. Stoudt was a sailor on a canal steamship who appears to have been acting independently, though he succeeded in winning recognition for the new group from the left-wing, CIO-affiliated National Maritime Union.³⁸ But in July 1939, Stoudt's application to

³⁶ Ibid, 86-88.

³⁷ Major, *Prize Possession*, p. 208-10.

³⁸ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 112.

hold union meetings in the Canal Zone was denied, and Canal Zone authorities continued to oppose unionization efforts.³⁹ Their counterparts in the military saw no need for a silver workers' union: "I don't believe that anywhere in the world men who earn their living are better taken care of, better paid and housed, and whose general welfare is given more liberal consideration than are the employees of the Panama Canal," wrote Major General David Stone, commanding general of the Panama Canal Department.⁴⁰ Silver workers who supported the union were fired from their jobs, and Governor Ridley refused to recognize the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Board to intervene. Despite the Roosevelt administration's alliance with organized labor - and with the CIO in particular - the union received no support from Washington. In May 1940, an executive order prohibited strikes against the government or its contractors, and enabled anyone participating in or inciting such strikes to be immediately deported. When a group of Jamaicans struck at Gatún in September 1941, they were deported within a week; it was the only strike of the war years in the Canal Zone.⁴¹

But the war's rhetorical foundations gave new ammunition to critics of Canal Zone segregation. Racial discrimination violated Panamanian law, and was thus a flagrant violation of the Roosevelt administration's Good Neighbor policy, which promised nonintervention in the domestic affairs of Latin American countries. It also went against the principles of the 1941 Atlantic Charter, which enshrined self-determination as a fundamental Anglo-American war aim. Canal Zone authorities also refused to enforce Roosevelt's 1941 executive order creating the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), which outlawed racial discrimination in defense industries. When pressed, canal officials told Washington that racial equality was infeasible in the Canal Zone, or simply refused to answer. Regional observers increasingly drew attention to the gaps between American rhetoric and practice in the Canal Zone. One was the

³⁹ Canal Zone Gov. C.S. Ridley, "Letter to the Secretary of War", December 1, 1939, New York Public Library, George Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 1.

⁴⁰ Maj. Gen. David L. Stone, U.S. Army, "Letter to The Governor, The Panama Canal", December 5, 1939, New York Public Library, George Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 1.

⁴¹ Major, *Prize Possession*, p. 210.

leftist Mexican labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano, who visited Panama in September 1943 to encourage the local labor movement. Another came at a meeting of the International Labor Organization in April 1944 when a Panamanian union delegate publicized complaints about segregation in the Canal Zone and appealed to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins to investigate the situation.⁴² Roosevelt's sporadic efforts to press Canal Zone officials on the issue had little impact, but wartime concerns with the reputational impacts of Canal Zone segregation presaged the debates that would emerge once the war ended.

II: Local 713's Multiracial Unionism, 1946-48

Local 713 existed for less than four years, but in that brief period, silver workers gained more than they had in the previous four decades combined. Most all of that progress came in a period of less than two years, between July 1946 and February 1948, when the political tide turned against Local 713. Between 1946 and 1948, silver workers made significant gains in wages, sick leave, paid vacation, maternity leave, pensions, and overtime. They won a higher minimum wage, advance notice of layoffs, access (at least in theory) to the civil service exams used to fill the Zone's best jobs, a forty-hour work week, and the removal of some of the Zone's most humiliating public markers of segregation.⁴³ These goals had been sought by silver workers and their allies since the construction period, but were consistently refused by Canal authorities. Why was Local 713 able to achieve them in less than two years?

In part, Local 713's successes can be attributed to political dynamics of the early Cold War. US officials both in Balboa Heights and Washington saw a CIO affiliate as preferable to the alternative of a union aligned with the Confederación de Trabajadores Latino Americanos

⁴² Ibid, p. 211-217.

⁴³ These gains are detailed in Joseph Sachs' unpublished history "History of the First Three Years of Local 713," Box 2, Folder 9, Abram Flaxer Papers, WAG.073, Series I. Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, NY, NY.

(CTAL) and its Marxist leader, Toledano. Though US officials had tolerated the CTAL in the war years, its opposition to US influence in Latin America and support for Soviet foreign policy made it unacceptable as a representative for Canal Zone workers.⁴⁴ Local 713's affiliation with the CIO gave it credibility with officials in Washington, since the group was a key ally of the Truman administration, and ensured that Local 713's parent could be accountable to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), if necessary. Silver workers also benefited from US concerns about the reputational impacts of segregation in the Canal Zone, which were increasingly expressed in terms of communist subversion. Local 713 also forged a close relationship with the Panamanian government of President Enrique Adolfo Jimenez, a liberal who saw political gain in courting the Afro-Panamanian community. But the most important factor in Local 713's success - and the element that separated it from its successor - was its willingness to embrace a form of multiracial unionism that forthrightly connected silver workers' workplace demands to their subservient place in the Canal Zone's racial hierarchy. Through the UPWA, Local 713 drew on the larger Black diaspora and connected its struggles to those of African Americans. This brand of multiracial unionism helps explain both Local 713's successes and the intense opposition it attracted as the Cold War intensified. Connecting the struggles for Black freedom in the US and the Canal Zone in the political context of the early Cold War comprised what John Munro has termed an "especially subversive form of solidarity."⁴⁵

Local 713 made its public debut through its headline-grabbing rallies on the 4th of July 1946, but quiet preparations for the union's unveiling had been underway for more than a year. Two key organizations helped lay the groundwork for Local 713. In August 1945 a group of Panamanian trade unionists created the *Federación Sindical de Trabajadores de Panamá*

⁴⁴ The US attitude towards the CTAL is captured by Serafino Romualdi, the AFL's staunchly anticommunist representative in Latin America, in "Labor and Democracy in Latin America," *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 3 (1947): 477-89.

⁴⁵ John Munro, "Imperial Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement in the Early Cold War," *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (April 1, 2015), p. 54.

(FSTP), which attempted to organize a Panama Canal Zone Workers' Union (PCZWU). But the PCZWU was denied bargaining rights by Canal Zone authorities, who required that workers employed by the US government be represented only by an American union. In April 1946, the PCZWU appealed to the CIO for help organizing silver workers.⁴⁶ Equally important was the support of the Panama Canal West Indian Employees' Association (PCWIEA), the community's largely pliant interlocutor with Canal Zone authorities since the 1920 strike. The PCWIEA had opposed the 1939 CIO effort to organize silver workers, but a leadership change in 1945 and the community's frustration with canal authorities' refusal to meet their demands prompted the PCWIEA to give its public blessing to Local 713. The PCWIEA's approval gave the new union a toehold with the close-knit West Indian community and endorsed unionism as a legitimate way for the community to press its grievances with canal authorities.⁴⁷

West Indian community leaders – especially the older generation closely associated with PCWIEA – were at pains to show that their embrace of unionism had not weakened their loyalty to the US. In his speech at the Local 713's opening rally, CZWU Vice President Aston Parchment ascribed Canal Zone segregation to American ignorance, not malice. The policy was the work of a “small ring of un-democratic, un-American Americans” who had managed to mislead the president, Congress, and the American people. The silver workers, he promised, retained their faith in Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, and were certain their oppressors would soon be defeated by the real Americans, “the true disciples of world democracy.” To drive the point home, both the American and Panamanian national anthems were played to close the rally.⁴⁸

Such invocations of American values were commonplace among West Indian community leaders, especially those of the generation associated with the PCWIEA. They point to the complex and divided national loyalties of West Indian silver workers. The first generation had been born in the West Indies, nominally British imperial subjects but enjoying little protection

⁴⁶ Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Panama and Central America*, 12, 26-27.

⁴⁷ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 112.

⁴⁸ Success without Precedence,” *AcCION*, 12 July 1946, p. 5-8, Rebel Archive, <https://rebelarchive.org/pages/60dbd0b7ac23b96f07a19761>.

from – or loyalty to – the crown. By the 1940s, most had lived in Panama for far longer than on their native islands, but they were not accepted by mestizo Panamanians, who looked down on their Black skin and native English. Even the second generation, Panamanian citizens by birth and many Spanish-speaking, were not seen as fully Panamanian. Exclusion from the national family in Panama sharpened West Indians' allegiance to the US, the nation they saw themselves as having served loyally since the construction period.⁴⁹ Many hoped they, or their children, might gain US citizenship and proudly pointed out their avoidance of strikes, subversion, and other disruptions to canal operations. Many older West Indians frequently shared Parchment's view of the US as a fundamentally fair and democratic country whose mistreatment of silver workers was a mistake that would be rectified if they petitioned the right officials in the right way. To some extent, the West Indian community's embrace of unionism in 1946 represented a repudiation of this approach in favor of building leverage that would allow silver workers to demand better treatment instead of requesting it. That their partner in that effort would be an American union also required overcoming memories of the betrayal of the Brotherhood of Railway Employees during the 1920 strike.

Local 713's founding also represented a realization that any effort to press Canal Zone officials would need to include mestizo Panamanians as well as West Indians. Since construction, canal officials had successfully played the two groups against each other, never having to confront the demands of a unified labor force. Though West Indians and their descendants still composed a majority of silver workers, mestizo Panamanians made up an increasing portion of the workforce by the mid-1940s. To succeed, Local 713 would have to bring both groups into a coherent union, rather than narrowly representing the West Indians. The union newspaper *AcCION* was published in both English and Spanish.⁵⁰ Local 713's leadership drew from both communities, with mestizo Panamanians Francisco "Pancho" Arauz and

⁴⁹ Michael E. Donoghue, *Borderland on the Isthmus: Race, Culture, and the Struggle for the Canal Zone*, New York: Duke University Press, 2014, p. 101.

⁵⁰ *AcCION* (Spanish title)/*ActiOn* (English title) was published monthly from July 1946 to October 1949 in both languages. See the Rebel Archive, <https://rebelarchive.org/documents?name=Acci%C3%B3n>.

William Rojas serving as the first presidents of its Panama City and Colon chapters, respectively.⁵¹ The union also drew on workers who could bridge the gap between the two communities, like Pascal Ampudia, a bilingual Black worker who was selected as the first field representative of UPWA's international organizers. Most of the remaining elected positions were filled by West Indians who had long been leaders in their communities, including Parchment, Edward Gaskin, Teodoro Nolan, and Cespedes Burke.⁵² Local 713's efforts to unite silver workers into a single union reflected lessons learned from the 1920 strike, which was concentrated among West Indians.

The new union's approach also reflected the influence of UPWA, a left-led union deeply committed to multiracial organizing.⁵³ The silver workers' assignment to UPWA by CIO officials was largely accidental, driven by the fact that Canal Zone workers were employed by the federal government. But the choice proved fortuitous for both sides, given the racial makeup of silver workers. UPWA's commitment to multiracial unionism was evident in its contemporaneous organizing among Black workers in the US. Beginning in 1945, UPWA's Secretary-Treasurer Ewart Guinier – born in Panama to West Indian parents – led a successful campaign to organize the largely African-American low-wage workforce in New York City's municipal hospitals. In Washington DC, the UPWA organized the largely Black workforces of federal cafeterias. The union challenged segregation at the Treasury Department's Bureau of Engraving and Printing, filing a complaint to the Fair Employment Practices Commission and continuing the fight even after UPWA was ejected from the CIO.⁵⁴ Within the CIO, UPWA President Abram Flaxer repeatedly - and with little success - urged Murray and other CIO leaders to support silver workers in the Canal Zone and fight against discrimination at home.⁵⁵

⁵¹ "7,000 Workers Enroll in New Canal Zone Union," *Panama American*, July 19, 1946, from University of Florida Digital Collections, <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00010883/06148/zoom/0>.

⁵² Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, p. 82.

⁵³ William P. Jones, "The Other Operation Dixie", p. 226-231.

⁵⁴ Thomas Richardson, "FEPC Complaint Re: Bureau of Engraving," January 6, 1949, United Federal Workers Records, Box 1, Folder 2, Cornell Kheel Center.

⁵⁵ Abram Flaxer, "Letter to Phillip Murray", September 8, 1947, Philip Murray Papers, Box 106, Folder 5, Catholic University of America.

This approach contrasted with that of the CIO, which did not embrace multiracial unionism in Operation Dixie, its failed postwar effort to organize the south. CIO leaders avoided any association of their organizing efforts with demands for racial equality, which they feared would alienate white workers. Instead, they relied on a purely economic argument to win support: “They [CIO officials] believe that the question, ‘You want your pay raised, don’t you?’ is a more effective gambit than a long talk about human equality and human rights,” as the *Saturday Evening Post* summarized.⁵⁶ But the drive was doomed to failure by the CIO’s refusal to address racism head on. In some cases, CIO officials appealed to the racial prejudice of white workers to win internecine battles against left-wing unions. Operation Dixie’s leaders - especially Organizing Committee Director Van Bittner - were committed anticommunists who isolated left-wing organizers and unions even before the CIO’s formal break with the left began in 1948. CIO encouraged the creation of segregated locals and did not object to rampant discrimination by employers against Black workers.⁵⁷ The United Steelworkers - CIO President Murray’s own union - used red-baiting and racist appeals to white workers during an effort to break a left-wing local representing Black ironworkers in Birmingham, Alabama. Though Operation Dixie began with the ambitious goal of undercutting the power of Dixiecrats within the Democratic party, its failure illustrated the hollowness of CIO leadership’s public support for racial liberalism.⁵⁸

The UPWA’s willingness to address racism forthrightly allowed it to succeed in the south where the CIO had failed. The union supported Ruby Jackson, an African American teacher in Alabama who was fired for demanding equal pay from her school district. UPWA helped mobilize progressive allies on Jackson’s behalf, eventually winning her reinstatement and Alabama’s compliance with a federal court decision mandating equal pay. That victory boosted

⁵⁶ Jones, “The Other Operation Dixie”, p. 227.

⁵⁷ Michael Honey, “Operation Dixie: Labor and Civil Rights in the Postwar South”, *The Mississippi Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1992): 439–52. See also Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO*, 62–87. Temple University Press, 1988.

⁵⁸ Davis, “The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party,” p. 77.

UPWA's efforts to unionize other groups of low-wage, largely Black workers across the south, including teachers, sanitation workers, VA hospital staff, and professors at historically Black universities.⁵⁹ This success in multiracial unionism was typical of left-led CIO unions in the 1930s and 1940s, which drew on the personal bravery of their leaders and an ideological commitment to solidaristic organizing.⁶⁰

In contrast with the CIO's myopic focus on wages, the UPWA consistently argued that the economic subjugation of Black workers could not be isolated from their political inequality. UPWA was thus uniquely suited to the challenge of multiracial unionism in the Canal Zone, where Black workers saw their fights for racial and economic justice as inseparable. Its campaigns in the south and Panama were mutually reinforcing, bolstering the union's reputation by demonstrating its willingness to fight on behalf of Black workers. Successes in the south formed a key part of UPWA's initial pitch to Black workers in Panama. In an early speech to Local 713 in July 1946, Len Goldsmith referenced the gains UPWA had helped win for Black teachers in Alabama as evidence it could do the same for Black workers in Panama.⁶¹ The union leveraged these connections in the opposite direction as well, as southern organizers referenced the union's support for Black workers in Panama as they attempted to organize Black public workers in the south. In both places, UPWA's organizers and leaders saw the union's role as fighting against discrimination, not just raising wages; that capacious conception of unionism, in turn, helped enhance its credibility with Black workers who had long been abandoned or ignored by white-led unions. As UPWA's southern organizers wrote in 1949, the union's organizing efforts in the south could not be evaluated "...solely in terms of the number of dues paying members" but must include "the prestige and strength" UPWA had won with Black

⁵⁹ Jones, "The Other Operation Dixie", p. 228-229.

⁶⁰ Michael Goldfield, "Race and the CIO," p. 1-32. See also Gerstle, "Working-Class Racism: Broaden the Focus," p. 33-40.

⁶¹ Chief, Civil Intelligence Section, Canal Zone Police, "Memorandum", July 1946, New York Public Library, George Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 2.

workers - in the US and in Panama - because of “its consistent fight against discrimination and Jim Crow.”⁶²

Local 713 also forged an important alliance with the Panamanian government. The Panamanian state had long been hostile to West Indian workers and their descendants. The 1928 constitution limited access to citizenship for those with foreign-born parents. These restrictions expanded under President Arnulfo Arias, who campaigned on “Panama for the Panamanians” and incorporated an article into the 1940 constitution that blocked citizenship for the children of “prohibited immigrants,” a group specifically defined to include “those of the black race whose native language is not Spanish.”⁶³ Arias’ was overthrown by a US-supported coup in 1941 and exiled because of his reluctance to allow expansion of US military bases and his fascist sympathies. In his absence, a series of liberal governments allowed increasing political participation by Afro-Panamanians, though the discriminatory provisions of the 1940 constitution were not explicitly repealed until 1952. Afro-Panamanians voted in large numbers in the 1946 elections, giving most of their support to the Renovador Party of Don Pancho Arias. Arias (no relation to Arnulfo) died suddenly in 1946 before he could form a government, but the 1946 campaign demonstrated the political power of Afro-Panamanians and established them as an important bloc of support for the new liberal government of President Enrique Adolfo Jimenez.⁶⁴ Jimenez supported the creation of Local 713, seeing the union as a way to win Afro-Panamanian votes while strengthening the popular nationalist challenge to US control of the canal. Speaking to Local 713’s opening rally, he told the new union it could expect “the whole-hearted cooperation of my government in bringing about the disappearance of racial discrimination that has no possible justification or reasonable explanation in a true

⁶² Irvin S. Daniel and Bill Stafford, “Report on UPW Work in the South,” March 9, 1949, New York Public Library, Ewart Guinier Papers, Box 9, Folder 2.

⁶³ Quoted in Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, p. 61.

⁶⁴ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 127-129. See also Lester D. Langley, “U. S.-Panamanian Relations Since 1941,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1970): 339–66.

democracy.”⁶⁵ Local 713 established contacts with Panama’s Ministry of Labor and labor unions outside the Canal Zone, bolstering Panamanian criticism of Canal Zone labor practices at the United Nations, International Labor Organization, and other international bodies.⁶⁶ Alliance with Panama’s leadership was a notable divergence from the 1920 strike, when Panamanian police helped Canal Zone officials repress strikers.

The prospect of a union that combined silver workers of all races with the Panamanian state represented the most significant challenge yet to the Canal Zone’s segregated labor system. Canal Zone Governor Joseph Mehauffey saw the CIO as the lesser of two evils compared with the explicitly Marxist CTAL; he agreed only reluctantly to recognize a CIO-affiliated Canal Zone union. Still, he insisted on restrictive ground rules based on the rules canal officials had imposed on CIO organizers in 1939:

- All officers and members must be employees of the United States government or its agencies;
- All members must be residents of the Canal Zone or citizens of the United States;
- Only members can attend union meetings;
- And the union must commit not to strike, threaten to strike, and promise to renounce anyone who advocated a strike.⁶⁷

Accepting these restrictions was the price Local 713’s leaders had to pay for recognition, without which they could do nothing to improve the situation of the silver workers. Unlike private sector workers in the US, silver workers were not US citizens and did not enjoy the rights to strike or organize under the National Labor Relations Act. As such, the union’s position was weakened from the beginning by the foreclosure of its most important source of potential leverage: disrupting the canal’s operation as a commercial and military artery. To do so would be to invite

⁶⁵ “Translation of the President’s Message,” *AcCION*, July 4, 1946, p.1, Rebel Archive, https://rebelarchive.org/pages/60dbd0b2ac23b96f07a1975b?page=3&search%5Btags_op%5D=and.

⁶⁶ Conniff, “Black Labor on a White Canal: West Indians in Panama, 1904-1980,” 20-21. Panama’s Minister of Foreign Relations, Dr. Ricardo Alfaro, was a particularly prominent critic of Canal Zone segregation; see “The Racial Differential Serves as the Basis for the Gold and Silver Rolls - Alfaro,” *The Star and Herald*, September 3, 1946, Westerman Papers, Box 49, Folder 9, New York Public Library.

⁶⁷ Quoted in O’Reggio, “Between Alienation and Citizenship”, p. 251. See also C. A. McIlvaine, “Letter to Mr. Lionel Moore, Panama Canal Workers’ Organizing Committee,” September 11, 1939, New York Public Library, George Westerman papers, Box 47, Folder 16.

the wholesale destruction of the union; for the rest of its short life, Local 713 would operate with this implicit threat hanging over its head. Mehaffey also hoped the union would be undone by its internal racial divisions: “The CIO union is made up of two essentially incompatible elements - Latin Americans and West Indian Negroes - and I believe that if it is allowed to go its way unmolested it will soon begin to lose strength and eventually perhaps fall apart.”⁶⁸

Local 713 aroused immediate opposition from the AFL unions that represented gold workers in the Canal Zone. W.G. Hushing, a former Canal employee serving as an AFL legislative representative in Washington, notified AFL President William Green about the formation of Local 713 in July 1946. AFL unions had not previously organized silver workers, Hushing explained, because of the large pay differentials between the two groups, an explanation that ignored silver workers’ repeated requests for AFL representation and the AFL’s decades of lobbying to maintain the differential pay and deny Black workers access to gold jobs. The new CIO union, he warned, would seek to wipe out the gold and silver rolls, giving “aliens” access to skilled jobs.⁶⁹ A memo the next month reflected increasing concern: Local 713 organizers were rapidly signing up silver workers and had already won concessions from the governor. Rather than simply a threat to the privileged position of gold workers, Hushing now saw the new CIO union as part of the emerging Cold War. Len Goldsmith - the UPWA’s director of publicity and the union’s first representative in the Canal Zone - was a communist, and the Panama Canal might be the first in a series of strategic locations where the CIO sought to use unions to undermine US military strength.⁷⁰ Hushing advised AFL leaders to notify the State Department and key congressional committees, which may have helped prompt the House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC) to open an investigation into Local 713 in October 1946.⁷¹ Hushing’s quick rhetorical shift - from the need to protect the interests of gold workers to

⁶⁸ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 113.

⁶⁹ W.G. Hushing, “Memorandum” July 16, 1946, AFL Records on microfilm, pt. 2, reel 4, Cornell Kheel Center.

⁷⁰ W.G. Hushing, “Memorandum” August 15, 1946, AFL Records on microfilm, pt. 2, reel 4, Cornell Kheel Center.

⁷¹ Jones, “The Other Operation Dixie”, p. 230.

using red-baiting to mobilize government allies - succinctly previewed the AFL's tactics in opposing Local 713.

In contrast to previous organizations representing silver workers, Local 713's tactics were consistently confrontational. For more than twenty years, the PCWIEA had unsuccessfully appealed to canal authorities to raise their wages by emphasizing their loyalty and record of service to the US. They shied away from forthright criticism of racial segregation in the Canal Zone workforce. Local 713, encouraged by their UPWA international representatives, was much more aggressive, taking on complaints about racial segregation along with demands for economic justice. The union produced a pamphlet in mid-1946 that connected silver workers' low wages with "...the color line [that] still forms the basis for a pattern of discrimination that permeates every facet of life."⁷² Editorials in *AcCIÓN* directly attacked the gold workers and their AFL representatives, "...whose only interests have been to live at ease and luxury at the same time reducing others to economic slavery."⁷³ At a rally in Colón in early 1947, workers' placards included "We Can't Eat Sympathy", "Jim Crow Has Got to Go", "Cut Out Discrimination", and "Equal Pay for Equal Work". The union forged increasing connections with the Panamanian government and labor unions, which were increasingly attacking the US for its discriminatory policies in the Canal Zone.⁷⁴ Silver workers were no longer merely asking for better treatment, but building alliances to enable them to demand it.

These tactics put canal officials on the back foot, enabling Local 713 to make rapid gains in the second half of 1946. The new local boasted 17,000 members, representing more than half of eligible silver workers.⁷⁵ Gov. Mehaffey agreed to a wage increase of 6 cents per hour for silver workers, and limited the work week to 40 hours. Workers also received additional vacation time,

⁷² Quoted in Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 113.

⁷³ "A Word of Advice", *AcCIÓN*, August 21, 1946, p. 2, Rebel Archive, *Acción*, 21 August, 1946, p. 6. <https://rebelarchive.org/pages/60dbdoc7ac23b96f07a19786>.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 113.

⁷⁵ UPWA cited the 17,000 figure as early as late August 1946; see "17,000 in Canal Zone Join UPWA," *DC Federal Reporter*, August 31, 1946, United Federal Workers Records, Box 1, Folder 2, Cornell Kheel Center. Others cite 15,000 members by mid-1947, such as Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, p.83.

and Mehaffey agreed to create a grievance procedure overseen by the union. Most significantly, Canal Zone authorities agreed to remove gold and silver signage from public facilities, including post offices, drinking fountains, and toilets. The removal of these signs certainly did not end segregation in the Canal Zone, nor did they equalize the yawning gaps in pay between gold and silver workers.⁷⁶ But their removal represented an important symbolic victory for silver workers, demonstrating the power of unionism to win not only economic gains, but to chip away at the racial segregation that reinforced their economic inferiority.

On January 19, 1947, Local 713 commemorated its six-month anniversary, defying Gov. Mehaffey's prediction that the union wouldn't last that long. The union celebrated the milestone with twin unity parades: 11,800 workers marched on the Pacific side and another 5,800 on the Atlantic side. Speaking to his fellow workers at the Atlantic side parade, Local 713 Vice President Graham Lewis connected their struggle to that of Black Americans, arguing the union had achieved the "real day of emancipation for the silver employee." Referring to UPWA efforts to establish a 40-cent minimum wage for silver workers in Congress, Lewis took pride in the fact that the union was led by "...representatives of the oppressed peoples themselves, who will present their own bill before Congress on behalf of men already free."⁷⁷ The union also took time to recognize its new allies in the Panamanian government and to thank Gov. Mehaffey and his secretary Col. Frank Wang for their sincerity in "...their efforts to inject changes into the status quo."⁷⁸

Local 713 enjoyed another period of significant gains in early 1947. In January, UPWA international representative Jack Strobel completed a report documenting wage differentials between gold and silver workers and discrimination against non-white workers in the Canal

⁷⁶ Joseph Sachs, "History of the First Three Years of Local 713," Box 2, Folder 9, Abram Flaxer Papers, WAG.073, Series I. Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, NY, NY.

⁷⁷ Editorial "AcCION, 25 January 1947, p. 2, Rebel Archive, <https://rebelarchive.org/pages/60dbdob7ac23b96f07a19761>.

⁷⁸ "Men of Influence in Our Lives," *AcCION*, 25 January 1947, p. 4, Rebel Archive, <https://rebelarchive.org/pages/60dbdof3ac23b974f9ceb2cd>.

Zone. The union distributed it to every member of Congress and journalists, winning new publicity in the US for the silver workers' struggles. The report also put pressure on Canal Zone authorities ahead of another round of negotiations that spring. Local 713 again won significant concessions, headlined by new wage gains totaling nearly \$250,000 annually across the silver workforce. Vacation time was again increased, and advance notice was required ahead of layoffs. Maternity leave was made available to expectant mothers, and cash relief payments for retired workers were increased from \$17.50 to \$25 per month. Canal Zone authorities pledged to build new lodging and repair the crowded and dilapidated apartment blocks in which most silver workers resided, partially addressing longstanding complaints about inadequate housing. In Washington, UPWA representatives won access to the civil service examination for Panamanians.⁷⁹ The test was the gateway to the best jobs on the canal, but it had long been restricted to Americans in violation of the 1936 treaty. The first Panamanians were able to sit for the exam in February 1947, though AFL opposition meant that very few of those who passed were actually hired.

Local 713 also drew on the cultural power of the Black diaspora to bring public attention to the struggles of silver workers. The union helped bring the celebrated African American baritone Paul Robeson to Panama for a series of concerts in May 1947. In addition to his powerful voice and acting roles, Robeson was well-known for his leftist politics and activism for progressive causes, including trade unions and anti-lynching legislation, which had made him the target of HUAC and the FBI. In Panama, Robeson refused to perform in the segregated Canal Zone, vowing never to "...sing as long as I live in places where my people are segregated in the audience."⁸⁰ Canal Zone officials boycotted Robeson's concerts in turn, with the governor and top military officials refusing to attend despite previous promises. By contrast, the Panamanian government led by President Jimenez – courting Afro-Panamanian votes ahead of

⁷⁹ Sachs, "History of the First Three Years," p. 8-14.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Katherine Zien, "Race and Politics in Concert: Paul Robeson and William Warfield in Panama, 1947–1953," *The Global South* 6, no. 2 (2012), p. 115.

the 1948 elections – gave Robeson a hero’s welcome, attending his concerts and escorting him on a tour of Colón. For Afro-Panamanians, Robeson was a Black hero and a symbol of their connection to the transnational Black struggle. *Panama Tribune* columnist Hector Connor called him “a genuine patriot of our race, an excellent American, and a gentleman.”⁸¹ Even George Westerman – the *Tribune* columnist and shortly to be a major figure in the red-baiting campaigns against Local 713 – rejected attempts to dismiss Robeson because of his politics: “Because... Mr. Robeson, like many liberal-minded Americans, has been speaking out fearlessly against the oppression of under-privileged peoples all over the world, and against the denial of civic rights to members of his own race in his own country... he has been branded a Communist and a ‘Red’. It is a strange sort of democracy this world is having, when men may not freely express their beliefs under a democratic regime.”⁸²

Through the UPWA, silver workers were also able to forge alliances with progressive forces in the US. Led by Ewart Guinier, the union helped found the Citizens Committee to End Silver-Gold Jim Crow in Panama. The committee brought together prominent Black leaders including Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois, Charlotta Bass, and Max Yergan.⁸³ Through circular letters and petitions, the committee mobilized African Americans, their progressive white allies, and elements of the labor movement to pressure the Truman administration to address discrimination in the Canal Zone.⁸⁴ UPWA produced a pamphlet entitled “Jim Crow Discrimination Against US Employees in the Canal Zone” that detailed the pay differentials between gold and silver workers (see Figures 1 and 2). Notably, it also drew explicit parallels between Jim Crow segregation in the US south and the Canal Zone, and pointed out that Canal Zone segregation was a flagrant violation of the Good Neighbor Policy.

⁸¹ Zien, “Race and Politics in Concert”, p. 117.

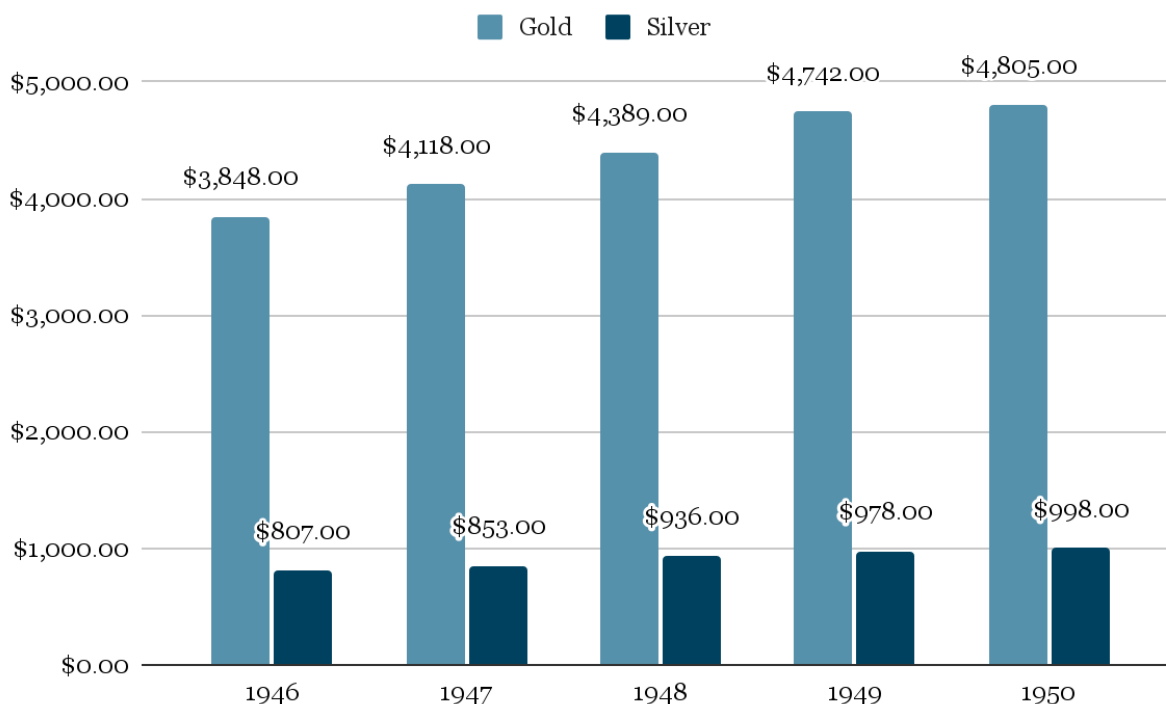
⁸² *Ibid*, p. 119.

⁸³ Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, p. 83.

⁸⁴ Committee to End the Jim Crow Silver-Gold System in the Panama Canal Zone, Circular letter from Committee to End the Jim Crow 'Silver-Gold' System in the Panama Canal Zone, August 31, 1948. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b117-i413>

Figure 1: Gold and silver wage differentials in certain occupations, 1948⁸⁵

Occupation	Gold rate per hour	Silver rate per hour
Blacksmith	\$2.04	62¢
Bricklayer	\$2.19	62¢
Cabinetmaker	\$2.09	74¢
Carpenter	\$2.09	62¢
Cable splicer	\$2.20	56¢
Painter	\$2.19	56¢
Clubhouse manager	\$2.25	\$1.28

Figure 2: Average annual wages for gold and silver employees, 1946-1950⁸⁶

⁸⁵ United Public Workers, "Jim Crow Discrimination Against US Employees in the Canal Zone," New York Public Library, Ewart Guinier Papers, Box 9, Folder 9. Note that the gold and silver designations were replaced by local- and US-rate after November 1948.

⁸⁶ O'Reggio, "Between Alienation and Citizenship", p. 239. Note that the gold and silver designations were replaced by local- and US-rate after November 1948.

These complaints were largely ignored by the Truman administration, despite the efforts of Local 713's allies in the Democratic Party's embattled liberal wing. Recognizing the increasing importance of African Americans to the Democratic Party, Truman made some gestures towards racial liberalism, creating the President's Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR) in late 1946 and becoming the first president to address the NAACP in June 1947. The same month, PCCR staff compiled a report on "Civil Rights in Our Dependencies," which recognized segregation in the Canal Zone, the unequal working and living conditions of silver workers, and correctly diagnosed the role of the AFL's congressional lobbying in preserving the gold-silver system.⁸⁷ The PCCR included in its final report, submitted in October 1947, a recommendation that Truman support legislation to end Canal Zone segregation. But the administration took no action, more concerned with maintaining the support in Congress of key southern Democratic committee chairmen who supported segregation, both at home and in the Canal Zone. With the influence of the party's liberals waning since Roosevelt's death and the left embattled inside the CIO, Truman could safely ignore his left flank.⁸⁸

In less than two years - between the summer of 1946 and early 1948 - Local 713 won gains for silver workers that had eluded them for decades, including higher wages, more generous benefits, and improved housing. By forging connections with allies including African Americans, progressive elements of the labor movement, and Democratic Party liberals, the union had won unprecedented visibility for the silver workers' cause in Washington. Through a new alliance with the Jimenez government, it had built new leverage with Canal Zone authorities and reduced the isolation of Afro-Panamanians from mainstream Panamanian politics. Through multiracial unionism, it brought together silver workers of all races and national origins,

⁸⁷ Milton D. Stewart and Rachel Sady, Memorandum from Robert K. Carr to the President's Committee on Civil Rights, "Civil Rights in Our Dependencies," June 19, 1947, Record Group 220, National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/239790470?objectPage=16>.

⁸⁸ On Truman's approach to race and foreign policy, see Thomas Borstelmann, "Jim Crow's Coming Out: Race Relations and American Foreign Policy in the Truman Years," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (1999): 549-69. On the eclipse of New Deal liberalism, see Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

presenting a united front that defied decades of deliberate efforts to divide the canal's workforce by race. But these same qualities exposed Local 713 to increasing political pressure as the Cold War transformed US politics and prioritized imperial security. By making common cause with forces increasingly seen as subversive - including communists and African Americans fighting for racial equality - Local 713 exposed itself to a backlash that would lead to its destruction.

III: The Backlash Against Local 713, 1948-1950

The backlash against Local 713 and the UPWA began in February 1948. In the space of two years, Local 713 would disaffiliate from its US parent union and the UPWA would be expelled from the CIO. These developments played out both in Panama and in the US, driven by causes that were related but distinct. In the US, the UPWA was a casualty of the CIO's broader turn against left-wing unions, which saw the federation expel eleven unions representing nearly a million members. The purges capped years of tensions within the CIO between conservatives and the left, but the final breach came over how to respond to the June 1947 passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, which limited union power and required union leaders to sign non-communist affidavits. The CIO also divided over whether to support the Marshall Plan and Henry Wallace's 1948 Progressive Party campaign for president.⁸⁹ As the Cold War came to dominate US politics, CIO leaders like the United Automobile Workers' Walter Reuther demonstrated the efficacy of anticommunism as a strategy in internal union politics.⁹⁰ The UPWA's leadership was especially vulnerable to the CIO's turn against the left. Several officials - including Abram Flaxer, Ewart Guinier, Thomas Richardson, and Len Goldsmith - had been associated with the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) at various points, though their ongoing relationships with the Party in

⁸⁹ Robert Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995, p. 253-293.

⁹⁰ See Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, New York: HarperCollins, 1995. P. 248-255.

the postwar period were not always clear.⁹¹ Regardless, UPWA was consistently on the left in internal CIO politics, taking largely pro-Soviet foreign policy positions and leading the fight against Taft-Hartley's loyalty oath provisions. Opposition from locals to the UPWA's leftist leadership began in 1946, and accelerated with the creation of an anticommunist splinter group representing 10,000 members in mid-1948.⁹²

In Panama, the backlash against Local 713 was driven by local factors, related to but distinct from those animating the move against UPWA in the US. First, founding Local 713 member Teodoro Nolan was imprisoned in February 1948 on accusations of embezzling union funds. These charges emboldened media critics of Local 713, especially Brodie Burnham, the editor of *The Nation*, an English-language paper aimed at residents of the Canal Zone which featured a series of red-baiting articles accusing Local 713 of communist subversion. Second, House Un-American Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. J. Parnell Thomas visited the Canal Zone in January 1948. Despite spending most of his trip in the hospital after a severe hemorrhage on the ship journey, Thomas detected a "Soviet spy net operating on the Isthmus." His visit played into preexisting worries about UPWA's communist affiliations, emboldening critics who charged that continued affiliation with the UPWA would hurt Local 713's reputation in Washington. Third, gold workers represented by the AFL Metal Trades Council increasingly used concerns about Local 713's ideological affiliations to encourage Canal Zone officials to rein in the union, driven in part by concerns that silver workers could take jobs previously reserved for white Americans. Fourth, Panamanian President Jimenez left office in mid-1948; though his successor was also a liberal, he was less friendly to Local 713 and increasingly allied with Canal Zone officials. Fifth, the union faced a concerted campaign by Canal Zone officials, who expelled and imprisoned their international representatives and worked with Panamanian authorities to

⁹¹ Flaxer's own history is illustrative: his Party membership in the 1930s is clear, but his relationship to CPUSA in later years is less so. Mike Quill, President of the Transport Workers' Union of America and himself a former communist, alleged in UPWA's expulsion trial that Flaxer had coordinated with CPUSA officials throughout the 1940s, including with respect to the Canal Zone. See Zieger, *The CIO*, p. 288-89.

⁹² A.H. Raskin, "Federal Employees May Get Own Union", *The New York Times*, May 21, 1948, p. 13. <https://nyti.ms/43BkVyU>.

block attempts to replace them. Finally, and most importantly, Local 713 lost the support of key figures in the West Indian community, led by George Westerman. The influential columnist and his *Panama Tribune* turned against the union in February 1948, driven by concerns that Local 713's affiliation with UPWA – and its confrontational brand of racial unionism – would undermine the West Indian community's reputation for loyalty to the US that leaders of his generation had worked so hard to cultivate. As the leader of the campaign against the UPWA, Westerman consistently argued that affiliation with a non-communist CIO union would afford silver workers better representation than the politically tainted UPWA.⁹³

The first blow against Local 713 grew out of the embezzlement case against Nolan. Accused of forging a \$125 check from union accounts, Nolan was tried and convicted in February 1948. Edward Cheresch, a white American pharmacist who had helped Local 713 seek a CIO charter and had since left Panama, built on those charges when he told Burnham that UPWA's international representatives in Panama had also embezzled union funds, charges that were seized on by newspapers hostile to the union, especially the *Panama Tribune* and *The Nation*. Canal Zone District Attorney McGrath told reporters that his office had evidence supporting Cheresch's allegations. Responding to those charges on a radio broadcast, UPWA's Panama representative Joseph Sachs challenged McGrath to "put up or shut up" regarding allegations of embezzlement.⁹⁴ Though authorities never produced any evidence of embezzlement, Sachs was arrested on charges of criminal libel for his radio statement; McGrath also filed a civil suit seeking \$25,000 in damages from Local 713. At trial, Canal Zone prosecutors were supplemented by prosecutors detailed from the Justice Department in Washington, helping ensure Sachs' conviction by a jury of Zone residents (likely including members of rival AFL unions). McGrath offered to withdraw his civil suit against Local 713 if it

⁹³ Westerman's anticommunist turn is well-documented in his post facto collection of his columns beginning in February 1948. See George Westerman, "Blocking Them at the Canal: Failure of the Red Attempt to Control Local Workers in the Vital Panama Canal Area," May 1952, Westerman Papers, Box 45, Folder 1, New York Public Library.

⁹⁴ Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, p. 84-85.

would repudiate Sachs's statement, an offer the union refused.⁹⁵ After an appeal to the US Court of Appeals in New Orleans was denied, Sachs was sentenced to nine months' hard labor in the Gamboa penitentiary.⁹⁶ McGrath even went so far as to charge eight Sachs' supporters with criminal obstruction, including some who had never set foot in Panama. Among them was Harold Ickes, a leading New Deal liberal, who had merely written newspaper columns criticizing Sachs' prosecution.⁹⁷

The charges against Sachs accelerated some West Indian community leaders' turn against Local 713's affiliation with the UPWA. The union's most prominent critics came from the generation of West Indians associated with the PCWIEA, including Westerman, his fellow *Tribune* writer Sidney Young, and teachers in the Canal Zone schools like Aston Parchment and Edward Gaskin. They were joined by former leaders of Local 713 like Cespedes Burke, who cited concerns that the West Indian community's association with "...this vicious International leadership [would] brand the community as potentially disloyal, and make us the object of suspicion and distrust."⁹⁸ In March 1948, dissidents in Local 713 offered a resolution denouncing communist influence in the union, which failed.⁹⁹ West Indian critics of Local 713 attempted to appeal to anticommunists in the CIO as potential allies in their fight to expel the UPWA. Burke wrote to CIO President Phillip Murray in March 1948, complaining of communist domination of the UPWA and asking him to consider granting a direct CIO charter to Local 713.¹⁰⁰ The letter was duly reprinted in *The Nation*. An anonymous former member of Local 713 even wrote to UAW President Walter Reuther seeking his assistance in fighting communist

⁹⁵ Sachs, "History of the First Three Years of Local 713," p. 17-24.

⁹⁶ Sachs v. Government of the Canal Zone, Opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, October 24, 1949.

⁹⁷ "Ickes Accused with 7 in Canal Zone Court", *The New York Times*, August 31, 1948, p. 4. <https://nyti.ms/3THblpw>.

⁹⁸ Cespedes Burke, Letter to Sidney Young, March 31, 1948, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 7, New York Public Library.

⁹⁹ Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 114.

¹⁰⁰ Cespedes Burke, "CIO's Loyal Opposition Appeals Direct to Murray", April 1, 1948, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 6, New York Public Library.

influence, as Reuther had famously done in the UAW.¹⁰¹ These efforts demonstrate Local 713's opponents' familiarity with the CIO's contemporaneous internal battles with the left, and their efforts to create transnational networks of support with anticommunist unionists to strengthen their hand in Panama. They echo - albeit with a different political valence - Local 713's own efforts to tap into networks of transnational support.

In late 1948, Canal Zone authorities increased their pressure on Local 713. Canal Zone Governor Francis Newcomer instituted a new loyalty test for UPWA representatives in a letter to Pascal Ampudia, Local 713's new president. Newcomer assured Ampudia that he did not intend to choose the union's officers, but insisted there must "...be no doubt as to the loyalty to the United States of the officers who may be selected to represent unions in their contacts with The Panama Canal."¹⁰² Canal authorities would not negotiate with anyone whose loyalties were deemed suspect, Newcomer told the press: "If we are satisfied that he does have Communistic connections we will not deal with him."¹⁰³ Panamanian officials - likely with encouragement from the Canal Zone - ordered UPWA regional director Max Brodsky to leave the country, citing alleged ties to communism. Brodsky sought refuge in the Canal Zone, but was expelled from the US territory after a week. Panamanian and Canal Zone officials ensured the UPWA could not replace Brodsky, denying passports and visas to three potential replacement organizers, as well as UPWA president Abram Flaxer.¹⁰⁴

In November 1948, Canal Zone officials agreed to do away with the gold and silver rolls, substituting the terms "local-rate" and "US-rate". But as with the removal of gold and silver

¹⁰¹ Unknown, Anonymous Letter to UAW President Walter Reuther, March 16, 1948, Westerman Papers Box 46, Folder 3, New York Public Library. The letter is anonymous and unsigned, but its author identifies himself as the recently deposed editor of Local 713's newspaper *AcCION*. Its author may have been Ernest Williams, who was removed from the masthead editors in early 1948.

¹⁰² Canal Zone Gov. F.K. Newcomer, "Letter to Pascal Ampudia, Local 713 President", November 10, 1948, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 3.

¹⁰³ "Acts on Labor Loyalty: Canal Zone Governor Declares Leaders Must Uphold the US", *The New York Times*, November 19, 1948, p.2. <https://nyti.ms/43Iy618>

¹⁰⁴ "Third UPW Official Denied Permit to Visit C.Z.", *The Panama Tribune*, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 10. For Flaxer's passport denial see R. B. Shipley, US Department of State, "In reply to F130-Flaxer, Abram", NYU Tamiment/Wagner, Abram Flaxer papers, Box 2, Folder 9.

signage in 1946, the change was cosmetic, leaving untouched the reality of segregation in the Canal Zone workforce. Thanks in part to the publicity campaigns of the UPWA, the gold and silver labels – with their stark connotations of racial inequality – had become increasingly embarrassing for Canal Zone authorities. They came under pressure from parts of the federal government – including the Departments of Commerce and State – to address the issue. The result was a rhetorical change that left untouched the underlying material realities. Though they would now be known by different names, the two workforces would remain segregated and subject to different wage scales. Only US-rate workers would enjoy fringe benefits like bonus pay and free housing. Silver workers were now local-rate workers, but the victory was a hollow one for Local 713, which sought real equality rather than semantic changes.¹⁰⁵

By mid-1949, the tide had turned decisively against the UPWA, both in the US and Panama. In the US, more locals turned against the union's leadership amid increasingly public disputes with the CIO.¹⁰⁶ In September, the CIO created an anticommunist competitor union - the Government and Civic Employees Organizing Committee (GCEOC) - and began to organize disgruntled UPWA locals. In Panama, a CIO delegation arrived in July to a frosty reception from Local 713 officials, who refused to meet with them. The CIO group offered extensive criticism of UPWA in the press and met with Local 713's critics, including George Westerman and the Panamanian minister responsible for Brodsky's expulsion.¹⁰⁷ In November, the CIO began the process of expelling UPWA for "pursuing the program and purposes of the Communist Party."¹⁰⁸ The process made little claim to impartiality: trial committee members – such as Emil Rieve of the Textile Workers, who presided over UPWA's trial – were invariably strong anticommunists aligned with CIO leadership, and the CIO itself "functioned as investigator, prosecutor, judge,

¹⁰⁵ O'Reggio, "Between Alienation and Citizenship", p. 230.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Cummings, President of Local 527 UPW-CIO, Buffalo, NY, Letter to CIO President Phillip Murray, May 12, 1949, Philip Murray Papers, Box 106, Folder 6, Catholic University of America.

¹⁰⁷ United Public Workers, "UPW Resolution on Kyne and Schwartz," adopted by UPW Executive Board September 28, 1949, Philip Murray Papers, Box 106, Folder 6, Catholic University of America.

¹⁰⁸ Emil Rieve, "Report of Executive Board Committee Appointed by President Murray to Conduct Hearings on United Public Workers of America", November 5, 1949, Philip Murray Papers, Box 106, Folder 6, Catholic University of America.

and executioner.”¹⁰⁹ UPWA’s expulsion was completed in January 1950, and in March Local 713 dissolved its association with the Public Workers.¹¹⁰

In the wake of UPWA’s ejection, members of the West Indian community debated the causes of the end of the union’s short career in Panama. For opponents like George Westerman, a chief cause of Local 713’s downfall was the domineering attitude of UPWA’s white international representatives, whom he believed failed to understand the community’s history and the importance of its reputation for loyalty to the US. Men like Sachs and Brodsky “were sent to serve the local membership; to suggest, recommend, and guide, not to dominate the rank and file followers nor to become union masters.” As Kaysha Corinealdi has argued, the use of words like “masters” and “dominate” was likely purposeful, meant to evoke the history of slavery as Westerman argued that local-rate workers’ plight was being exploited for political gain by white interlopers.¹¹¹ But for some members and officers of Local 713, white UPWA officials were sincere allies in the local-rate workers’ fight, and it was the CIO who had betrayed them by failing to provide effective advocacy on their behalf in Washington. Speaking at a union meeting in April 1950, Local 713 organizer Roland Dean said that while “he detests white people..., Flaxer, Weinstein Goldsmith, Strobel, and Brodsky [were] sincere white men to the Negro race and that he will always support them.”¹¹² Some Local 713 officials saw men like Westerman and Sydney Young as “Uncle Tom’s boy[s]”, doing the bidding of Canal authorities as they campaigned against the union.¹¹³ These disputes represented a fundamental division over whether confrontation or conciliation was the best way to win concessions from Canal Zone and US officials. Westerman and his allies worried that canal authorities could disband the union,

¹⁰⁹ Zieger, *The CIO*, p. 288-289.

¹¹⁰ Pascual Ampudia, “Local 713 Leaving UPW,” March 20, 1950, New York University Tamiment/Wagner, Abram Flaxer papers, Box 2, Folder 9.

¹¹¹ Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, p. 85-86.

¹¹² Samuel Roe, “Memorandum to Chief of Division, Canal Zone Police”, April 10, 1950, Westerman Papers Box 46, Folder 3, New York Public Library.

¹¹³ Samuel Roe, “Memorandum to Chief of Division, Canal Zone Police”, November 14, 1949, Westerman Papers Box 46, Folder 3, New York Public Library.

while Local 713's strongest supporters believed that "a strong militant fighting union that does not give a damn who it embarrasses" was exactly what local-rate workers needed.¹¹⁴

IV: The Uncertain Wages of Anticommunist Unionism, 1950-56

Local 713's successor was the new Local 900, affiliated with the CIO's Government Employees Organizing Committee (GCEOC), created by CIO leadership to organize government workers previously aligned with UPWA. Its president would be Ed Gaskin, principal of a Canal Zone school and one of the leading rebels against Local 713. Local 900 represented a test of the proposition – advanced by Westerman and his allies – that anticommunist unionism could win gains for local-rate workers that had not been possible because of Local 713's affiliation with the politically suspect Public Workers. Organized by an unimpeachably anticommunist union and backed by the considerable power of the CIO in Washington, the loyalty of local-rate workers could no longer be questioned, and Canal Zone officials would have to take their demands seriously. In place of the confrontational multiracial unionism of Local 713, Local 900 would attempt to use its proximity to power to win gains for local-rate workers. Local 900 would make its demands in the language of the Cold War, pitching unionism as a way to contain communism as the Cold War morphed into open warfare in Korea. In this respect, Local 900's approach mirrored the shifting strategy of the CIO as it attempted to adapt to the politics of the Cold War and make the most of its marriage with the Democratic Party.¹¹⁵

On this front, Local 900's record was one of clear failure. From late 1950 through 1955, Gaskin repeatedly appealed to Canal Zone officials for concessions for local-rate workers, only to be met with polite but consistent refusals. Instead, US officials repeatedly undermined Local 900 and union members grew frustrated with the CIO's ineffective advocacy in Washington.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Seth Widgerson, "The Wages of Anticommunism: U.S. Labor and the Korean War", in Shelton Stromquist ed., *Labor's Cold War: Local Politics in a Global Context* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 226-257. The title of this section is also derived from Widgerson's helpful phrase. See also Davis, "The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party," 76-77.

Beginning in 1953, US officials negotiated directly with their Panamanian counterparts a new treaty governing the canal, talks from which representatives of local-rate workers were largely excluded. The resulting 1955 Remon-Eisenhower treaty significantly eroded the standard of living for local-rate employees. By the time Gaskin resigned from Local 900 leadership in 1956, it was beset by infighting and many of its members no longer believed that US-aligned unionism was an effective way to advance their interests.

After disaffiliation from the UPWA in March 1950, Local 713's remaining loyalists initially tried to preserve it as an independent union. Bitterness at the CIO over the forced divorce from UPWA lingered, with members accusing CIO leaders of union busting and acquiescence to "Jim-Crowism".¹¹⁶ But the union would clearly need representation in Washington to be effective, prompting Local 713 leaders to appeal unsuccessfully to John L. Lewis' United Mine Workers – then locked in their own struggle with CIO leaders – for a charter.¹¹⁷ Local 713's short life as an independent union effectively ended when GCEOC organizers arrived in the Canal Zone in mid-1950. Led by GCEOC assistant director John Yancey, they worked closely with Westerman and other Local 713 opponents, drawing leaders for the new local from the group of rebels against its predecessor.¹¹⁸ Their position made clear that Local 713 had no path to CIO affiliation as an independent union, leading to mass resignations of officers and reducing officials to pleading with remaining members to pay their dues.¹¹⁹ By October, Local 713 had ceased to exist.

Having led the campaign against UPWA, George Westerman took a leading role in midwifing its replacement. More than just a newspaper columnist, Westerman increasingly claimed leadership of the West Indian community in Panama, and he was deeply invested in

¹¹⁶ M.A. Turner, "Memorandum for Chief of Division", May 20, 1950, Westerman Papers Box 46, Folder 3, New York Public Library.

¹¹⁷ George Westerman, "Letter to Allan Haywood", New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 4.

¹¹⁸ John Yancey, "Summary of the Panama Canal Zone Operations and Problems of Local Rate Employees", New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 5.

¹¹⁹ Samuel Roe, "Memorandum to Chief of Division", June 1, 1950, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 3, New York Public Library.

maintaining its reputation for anticommunism and loyalty to the US. Throughout the spring and summer of 1950, he corresponded with GCEOC's Secretary-Treasurer Milton Murray – moonlighting from his role as head of the American Newspaper Guild, a reliably right-wing CIO affiliate – urging him to quickly send organizers to take control of a new local.¹²⁰ As ever, the threat of a rival union federation - the AFL or CTAL - organizing the local-rate workers loomed.¹²¹ Westerman remained keenly focused on the race of potential GCEOC officials. In April, when plans to send a Latino organizer named Gilbert Anaya appeared in the press, he emphasized to Murray that “...although the bulk of the workers did claim Panamanian citizenship, the racial origin of fully 85 percent is Negro.” Westerman suggested as an alternative Willard Townsend, an African American official in the United Transport Service Employees whose anticommunism Westerman believed could “...convinc[e] the local workers that this doctrine is not suitable to them and should not be encouraged among them.”¹²² When Anaya arrived despite his advice, Westerman was eager for recognition of - and compensation for - the role that the *Tribune* and other English-language newspapers had played in expelling UPWA and paving the way for GCEOC. He suggested a down payment on a GCEOC advertising campaign of at least \$1,000, divided between the four papers, “...would represent a fine gesture of appreciation for the invaluable services rendered.”¹²³

Westerman's requests for a Black anticommunist GCEOC representative were answered in 1951 when the CIO sent Ed Welsh to work with Local 900. Welsh was a CIO veteran with particular experience in organizing Black workers. During the war years, he helped lead a campaign to organize 6,000 Black workers at a Wilmington, North Carolina shipyard. Welsh

¹²⁰ George Westerman, “Letter to Milton Murray”, March 20, 1950, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 9.

¹²¹ Some embassy officials preferred to see the AFL take over representation of local-rate workers, even offering payment to Westerman to help bring it about. But Westerman doubted that the AFL, given its decades of support for white American workers in the Canal Zone, could be an effective advocate for local-rate workers. See Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 114-115.

¹²² George Westerman, “Letter to Milton Murray”, April 6, 1950, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 9. Emphasis in original.

¹²³ George Westerman, “Memorandum to Gilbert C. Anaya”, May 6, 1950, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 10.

was also a former communist who traveled to the Soviet Union in 1929, part of the Communist Party's efforts to build a vanguard among African Americans. In Welsh's case, the trip had the opposite effect, precipitating his break from the CPUSA later that year to join the breakaway faction led by Jay Lovestone, himself a future anticommunist and key official in the AFL's Cold War foreign policy.¹²⁴ Welsh's communist past gave him the credibility of a convert as he embraced the CIO's postwar anticommunism. While assigned to Panama, he won a citation from the Crusade for Freedom, a CIA-backed anticommunist propaganda campaign.¹²⁵

Local 900's leaders and officials immediately attempted to capitalize on their newfound proximity to power. Through the fall of 1950, Gaskin prepared a list of 17 priorities for submission to Canal Zone Gov. Newcomer. They included creation of a single wage scale, a higher minimum wage, a program of automatic increases, equal pay for equal work between US and local-rate workers, improvements to disability, healthcare, and housing programs, and the elimination of segregation in the Canal Zone.¹²⁶ Responding in November, Newcomer politely refused to give ground on nearly every issue. Wage increases, he told Gaskin, "...cannot be favorably considered at this time." Automatic increases in pay for local-rate workers would "reward both the competent and incompetent," while the present system provided "incentive for the employee [that] is conducive to greater productivity and better workmanship." That logic evidently did not apply to US-rate workers, who had enjoyed automatic wage increases with seniority for decades. Improved health and retirement benefits were impossible given their impact on the Canal's budget, which was already under pressure from Congress. Sick leave could not be increased, nor could the Canal company change its practice of kicking retired workers out

¹²⁴ Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983, p. 16-25. The Lovestone delegation's trip to Moscow and disputes with COMINTERN are detailed in Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone - Communist, Anti-Communist and Spymaster*, New York: Random House, 1999, p. 84-104.

¹²⁵ For Welsh's citation (which misspells his surname), see Lucius Clay, "Crusade for Freedom, 1951 Citation", NYU Tamiment, Edward K. Welsh Papers, Box 1, Folder 1. On the Crusade for Freedom, see Arch Puddington, "Crusade for Freedom", in *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*, 20-32, University Press of Kentucky, 2000.

¹²⁶ Gaskin's requests are summarized in Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p.115-116.

of their Canal Zone housing when their employment ended.¹²⁷ Newcomer did give some ground on some issues in a subsequent meeting in May 1951, allowing for small within-grade wage increases for local-rate employees.¹²⁸ But the returns of Local 900's first year were meager, especially given the benefits Local 713's antagonists had envisioned from disaffiliation with UPWA.

With war raging in Korea, Local 900 leaders increasingly cast the union's utility to the US in Cold War terms. Reacting to Newcomer's denials of Local 900's requests in January 1951, Welsh told the press that the decision "represents a complete negation of the fundamental principles of democratic thought and action" and "was as harsh and as cold as the point of a North Korean soldier's bayonet."¹²⁹ Writing to the Secretary of Defense, Westerman warned that continued discrimination in the Canal Zone would "...negate in practice what the United States preaches to the world." These arguments reached some elements of the US government. Rep. Adam Clayton Powell - a Black Harlem Democrat and anticommunist - spoke to a House committee in October 1950 about the discrimination he had experienced on a trip to Panama, where he was "...the first United States citizen of color to be allowed the privilege of living in the Panama Canal Zone and using the public facilities."¹³⁰ Local 900's mobilization of such Cold War arguments highlighted its differences from its predecessor, Local 713: where Local 713 had criticized discrimination as inconsistent with US democratic values, Local 900 urged an end to discrimination because its continuation would put the US at a disadvantage in the Cold War. This difference reflects the influence of Cold War liberalism – now the dominant ideology of US liberals – which couched appeals for social justice in the defensive Cold War terms of denying

¹²⁷ Canal Zone Gov. F.K. Newcomer, "Letter to Mr. E. A. Gaskin, Local 900 President", November 27, 1950, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 11.

¹²⁸ F.K. Newcomer, "Letter to Acting President, Local 900 GCEOC-CIO", June 6, 1951, Westerman Papers, New York Public Library, Box 46, Folder 13.

¹²⁹ "CIO Representative Scores Governor's Answer to Union", *The Nation*, January 13, 1951, NYU Tamiment, Edward K. Welsh Papers, Box 1, Folder 7.

¹³⁰ Adam C. Powell, "Report of Adam C. Powell", Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, October 20, 1950, New York Public Library, George Westerman Papers, Box 49, Folder 27.

propaganda victories to the Soviet Union.¹³¹ These arguments influenced the State Department, which was increasingly concerned about the impact of Canal Zone discrimination on the nation's reputation in Latin America, but proved unable to force Canal Zone authorities to change course.

In part, this reflected the peculiar character of the canal's governance, which left the Zone's governor more accountable to Congress - where the influence of the AFL was strongest - than to the president and the State Department.¹³² Infighting over the Canal Zone was evident on Gaskin's 1951 trip to the US, where he was encouraged by his State Department handlers to speak out against Canal Zone segregation, which he called "...a terrible blot on the conscience of America." Upon his return to Panama, embarrassed Canal Zone officials pressed him unsuccessfully for a retraction.¹³³ The Truman administration disrupted the normal procedures of Canal Zone succession - in which the chief engineer typically became the next governor - and appointed an outsider, Gen. John Seybold, to succeed Newcomer. This move again raised hopes among Local 900's leaders that they would have a more amenable negotiating partner. In late 1952, Local 900 reopened negotiations with both military and canal authorities, pressing them to address many of the same issues - wages, equal pay, housing, and healthcare costs - that Newcomer had refused to resolve in 1950. The results were much the same. Canal authorities would not raise local-rate wages, end the local-rate system, extend within-grade step raises, or commit to equal pay for equal work. They would not agree to give employees advance notice of planned reductions in force, reduce healthcare costs, or discard the use of the terms "local-rate" and "US-rate", which evoked the hated gold and silver designations. Responding to a question about segregation and discrimination, Seybold found "...little to add to previous expressions of

¹³¹ Daniel Bessner et al, "A Brief History of Cold War Liberalism," p. 304. On the broader dynamics of race in this period of the Cold War, see Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 17-46.

¹³² Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 117.

¹³³ *Ibid*, p. 116.

policy on this matter.” Local 900 was again left with little to show for its turn towards anticommunist unionism.¹³⁴

In 1953, the US and Panama began negotiations on a new treaty governing the Canal. Concerned about its Cold War image in Latin America, the Eisenhower administration saw a new treaty as a relatively low-cost way to address the charge that it retained colonial control over Panamanian territory. For their part, Panamanian officials wanted to regain sovereignty over the canal, addressing a longstanding affront to the nation’s pride. Labor issues became a major element of the negotiations, and Gaskin saw an opportunity for local-rate workers to gain a new ally in the Panamanian government of José Antonio Remón. Local 900’s leaders hoped that the Panamanian state would help them press US officials for concessions on longstanding labor disputes, especially the wage gaps between local- and US-rate workers. The union publicly supported the renegotiation effort, holding a rally in favor of treaty revision in Colón on March 22, 1953. Gaskin pressed Remón to advocate for local-rate workers amid US plans to reduce their numbers, push children of Zone employees into Panamanian schools, and move them out of Canal Zone housing.¹³⁵ But it soon became clear that Panamanian authorities were more concerned with securing sovereignty over the Canal and benefits for Panamanian business, which had long complained of unfair competition from the subsidized Canal Zone commissaries. In an effort to salvage the position of his members, Gaskin traveled to Washington in mid-1954 to testify to the House Committee on Appropriations, unsuccessfully urging lawmakers to reconsider their budget pressures on Canal Zone authorities.¹³⁶ In a radio address on Labor Day 1954, Gaskin bemoaned both governments’ lack of consideration of the impact of the proposed

¹³⁴ Canal Zone Gov. J.S. Seybold, “Letter to Mr. Edward Gaskin, President, Local 900 GCEOC-CIO”, February 12, 1953, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 11. See also Col. C.Z. Shugard, “Letter to Mr. E.A. Gaskin, President, Local 900 GCEOC-CIO”, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 11.

¹³⁵ Edward Gaskin, “Letter to His Excellency President Jose A. Remon”, April 8, 1954, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 11.

¹³⁶ Edward Gaskin, “Statement of Edward A. Gaskin”, House Committee on Appropriations, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 11. The testimony is undated, but Conniff dates it to mid-1954, see Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 118.

treaty on local-rate workers, despite Local 900's contributions to the fight against communism on the canal. His position had been made more difficult by the "nonchalance and indifference of the workers in joining and supporting the organization," alluding to the union's infighting and financial struggles amid the ongoing treaty negotiations.¹³⁷

When the Eisenhower-Remón treaty was ratified in 1955, it constituted a serious loss for Local 900's members. Their income became subject to Panamanian taxation, and those who resided outside the Zone could no longer shop at Zone commissaries, reducing their standard of living. Hundreds of Zone workers lost their jobs as canal operations were transferred to Panama, and non-US workers were forced to move out of their Canal Zone housing and into Panama.¹³⁸ In one sense, the treaty achieved a long-standing goal of canal unions, since it eliminated the use of local-rate and US-rate wage scales, the last vestiges of the hated gold-silver system. But since wages would be based on prevailing rates in Panama, which were substantially lower than the rates achieved by Zone workers after decades of organizing, this constituted a serious pay cut for those lucky enough to remain employed. In early 1955, Gaskin identified 45,000 unemployed former Canal Zone workers.¹³⁹

To make matters worse, the treaty once again divided the largely Afro-Panamanian membership of Local 900 from the rest of Panama. For most mestizo Panamanians, the 1955 treaty was seen as a major national triumph, returning a measure of sovereignty over the canal. In that context, the complaints of the largely Afro-Panamanian Canal Zone workers were seen as ungrateful and inappropriate in the mood of national celebration. In the eyes of the Panamanian elite, Afro-Panamanian reactions to the treaty once again called into question their membership in the national family.¹⁴⁰ Critiques of Local 900 workers as privileged and criticism of their

¹³⁷ Edward Gaskin, "Labor Day Address", September 6, 1954, New York Public Library, Westerman Papers, Box 46, Folder 11.

¹³⁸ Conniff, *Black Workers on a White Canal*, p. 118.

¹³⁹ Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, p. 138-139.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 140-143.

leaders for speaking English instead of Spanish returned to Panamanian politics, unwelcome echoes of the citizenship disputes of the 1940s.

Canal Zone authorities also retaliated against Gaskin and Local 900 for their support of treaty renegotiation. In September 1954, Canal Zone authorities agreed to recognize a new GCEOC union – Local 907 – representing Panamanian workers on US military facilities both inside and outside the Canal Zone. The new local divided the local-rate labor movement and reduced Local 900’s dominance within it. Its members and leadership also reflected the growing presence of mestizo Panamanians among local-rate workers (though its membership was still majority Afro-Panamanian) serving to further isolate the largely Afro-Panamanian Local 900. Despite Local 907’s close relationship to Panamanian nationalism and its mestizo leaders, neither union was given a significant role in negotiating the treaty or the debates around its ratification.¹⁴¹ In 1955, Canal Zone authorities denied Gaskin further leave of absence for his union activities, forcing him to resign from his longtime job in a Canal Zone school. A Canal Zone divorce court imposed heavy alimony payments he believed were politically motivated. The union membership blamed Gaskin for the failures of the treaty, while Panamanian critics questioned his patriotism. He resigned in 1956, “a broken man.”¹⁴²

Gaskin and other Local 900 leaders blamed a lack of effective representation from the CIO for the disastrous treaty outcome. The union estimated it had sent more than \$60,000 to the national CIO since its founding, but never received effective representation in Congress. Letters to CIO leaders asking for help during the treaty negotiations were never answered.¹⁴³ Even George Westerman, who had played such an important role in UPWA’s expulsion and Local 900’s founding, found fault with the CIO: “If the CIO, powerful organization as it is in Washington, had been reasonably interested in the problem of Panama and its citizens, they

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 137-138.

¹⁴² Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal*, p. 119.

¹⁴³ Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*, p. 141.

would have lent their support to working out a 'more beneficial program' for their members on the Canal Zone."¹⁴⁴

V: Multiracial Unionism in Imperial Context

The career of CIO unions in Panama reflects both the promise and the limits of multiracial unionism in the context of the early Cold War. The CIO's first serious attempt to organize local-rate workers was blocked by canal authorities, bolstered by claims that union representation would undermine the security of an area vital to the war effort. But the war years also exposed the gap between the US' rhetorical embrace of democracy and the practice of unequal wages and segregation in the Canal Zone. Local 713's founding in July 1946 drew on the preexisting organization among West Indians, but it was also transformed by the Public Workers' insistence that local-rate workers' demands were not only for economic improvement but also racial equality. Local 713's brand of multiracial unionism enabled it to form important connections with the broader Black diaspora and mobilize allies on its behalf in the US progressive left and labor movement. The pressure the union exerted on Canal Zone authorities was considerable, leading to a series of rapid gains for local-rate employees between 1946 and 1948.

But confrontational multiracial unionism also mobilized Local 713's powerful enemies. In the political climate of the Cold War, UPWA's communist-affiliated leaders became a handicap for Local 713. Canal Zone authorities turned against the union, inhibiting its ability to operate and denying it additional gains for workers. The union also lost the support of key West Indian community leaders led by George Westerman, who argued that local-rate workers could improve their situation only through an alliance with an unimpeachably anticommunist CIO affiliate. That premise was tested by Local 900, which traded Local 713's confrontation for

¹⁴⁴ George Westerman, "Representation of Local-Raters", *Panama Tribune*, August 26, 1956, New York Public Library, George Westerman Papers, Box 45, Folder 2.

accommodation. Without the taint of UPWA's politics, Local 900 leaders attempted to leverage the strength of the CIO in Washington and the US' Cold War sensitivity to its international reputation to equalize the position of local-rate workers with their US-rate colleagues. That bet largely failed as Canal Zone authorities repeatedly denied Local 900's requests for concessions. The union's powerlessness in both the US and Panama was underscored by the 1955 Eisenhower-Remon Treaty, which cut thousands of local-rate jobs and reduced the standard of living of those who remained. Canal Zone workers' experiment in anticommunist unionism failed.

This history also captures the promises and limits of unionism as a vehicle for racial liberation in the mid-20th century. Its cast of characters included a variety of Black leaders, both in Panama and in the US, who staked out different positions about how Black workers should pursue economic and racial justice, the linkages between those struggles, and the proper role of white allies in pursuing them. For figures like UPWA's Ewart Guinier and Thomas Richardson, and Local 713's Cespedes Burke, the struggles for racial and economic equality could not be meaningfully separated. Pursuing them effectively required a confrontational approach toward the state and necessitated alliances with communists, who were by 1948 beyond the pale of the CIO and the Democratic Party. That confrontation was especially risky in the context of the Panama Canal, given its vital importance to US empire. But for other Black leaders, such as George Westerman and Local 900 leaders Ed Gaskin and Ed Welsh, to confront the state was to court disaster, risking the reputation for loyalty to the US that Black canal workers had spent more than forty years building. Both racial and economic justice were best pursued by courting powerful allies and challenging the US to live up to its own stated ideals. Black canal workers needed to choose their allies - particularly white ones - with care, lest they endanger their own reputation for loyalty and become unwitting pawns in larger ideological struggles.

In the end, neither confrontation nor accommodation delivered racial or economic equality for the Canal Zone's Black workforce. The height of Local 713's power - between

mid-1946 and early 1948 - came closest to achieving the goals of multiracial unionism, but even those gains fell far short of full equality. But Local 713 could not hold back the tide: political trends in the US meant that Westerman and his allies were likely correct that a continuing alliance with a communist-led union was unsustainable and potentially disastrous for local-rate workers. But the anticommunist unionism of Local 900 was less confrontational and thus easier for US officials to ignore. At each stage of CIO unionism in the Canal Zone between 1939 and 1956, the demands of US empire were decisive, filtered through the Canal Zone's peculiar system of governance. The importance of the canal to US military and economic power constrained any confrontational strategy, since a union could not use its most potent weapon, the threat of a canal-crippling strike. US policymakers had demonstrated their willingness to use force to break any union that even threatened such a step, and memories of the 1920 strike remained fresh among Black Canal Zone workers. Neither could Black canal workers fully align with Panamanian nationalists, given their cultural and linguistic divisions from the mestizo majority and Panamanian nationalists' unwillingness to fully embrace their cause. But accommodationist strategies were also limited, ensuring that canal workers received only the minimum concessions US policymakers felt necessary to avoid international embarrassment, and limited by US-rate workers' superior representation in Washington.

Black Canal Zone workers constituted a people without a protector. They were not accepted as full members of the Panamanian national family, nor did the empire on whose behalf they toiled recognize any special obligation to them. Unionism offered a chance to bridge this divide, allowing Black canal workers to claim a capacious version of citizenship that included both racial and economic equality on the canal their ancestors had dug and full membership in their adopted homeland. It offered a chance to create transnational solidarities with allies in the Black diaspora and progressive elements of the labor movement. Unionism in Panama was unable to fully deliver those aspirations for reasons outside the control of its adherents, namely the politics of the Cold War, the demands of US empire, and the CIO's

indifference to their struggle. But that did nothing to diminish Afro-Panamanians' aspirations for full and equal citizenship in Panama, the US, and elsewhere in the diaspora.

The struggle of the silver workers and their unions is largely forgotten today, but its lessons remain keenly relevant. Unionism remains a vital - though still imperfect - vehicle for workers to improve their lives and insist on their full equality. Studies show that the racial wealth gap in the US has increased as unionization rates have declined, and that Black workers who belong to unions make higher wages and are more likely to have employer-provided healthcare than their unorganized peers.¹⁴⁵ Nearly 80 years after the failures of Operation Dixie, organized labor is once again fighting to organize workers in the south, where Black workers are overrepresented.¹⁴⁶ As the labor movement once again confronts the question of how to effectively organize multiracial workforces – and resist attempts by its opponents to divide workers by race – the lessons of Local 713's multiracial unionism are newly relevant.

Similar echoes can be found in the way the labor movement relates to the US state and its imperial project. The story of Canal Zone workers echoes many other places around the globe where the demands of US empire have been put before the economic and racial equality of workers. From thousands of Filipino workers serving fast food to soldiers in Iraq, to South Asian workers abused by contractors on military bases in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, cheap, foreign, and exploitable labor remains essential to the functioning of US empire.¹⁴⁷ The career of CIO unions in the Canal Zone illustrates the limits of attempting to win gains for imperial workers through an alliance with the state. But that history also points to the promise of potential solidarities between workers in the imperial core and its most far-flung outposts. US

¹⁴⁵ Natalie Spievack, "Can labor unions help close the black-white wage gap?", *Urban Institute*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/can-labor-unions-help-close-black-white-wage-gap>.

¹⁴⁶ Jeanne Whalen and Lauren Kaori Gurley, "UAW gets first Southern win as Tenn. plant overwhelmingly backs union," *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/04/19/vw-uaw-tennessee-vote/>.

¹⁴⁷ Adam D. Moore, *Empire's Labor: The Global Army that Supports US Wars*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. See also Katie McQue, "Abuses on US Bases in Persian Gulf ensnare legions of migrant workers", *Washington Post*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/27/defense-contractors-persian-gulf-trafficking/>.

unions are increasingly responsive to their members' opposition to some aspects of US foreign policy.¹⁴⁸ The history of Canal Zone unions points to how unions were - and could be again - a counterbalance to the exploitations of empire.

¹⁴⁸ United Autoworkers, "UAW Statement on Israel and Palestine", December 1, 2023, <https://uaw.org/uaw-statement-israel-palestine/>.

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