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Communists fight racism and evictions

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'Don't starve, fight': Thousands of unemployed workers demonstrate in Chicago, 1932. Credit: Encyclopedia of Chicago

The long shadow of the Chicago race riot, Part 4

Despite the race riot and segregated housing, Chicago's Black population more than doubled in the 1920s and reached 233,903 by 1930. Even in 1940, during the Great Depression, the figure climbed to 277,731.

A small Mexican community also grew, despite the massive deportations of the early

1930s. About 5 percent of workers at the Armour and Swift packinghouses were Mexican.

The Chicago Defender became one of the best known African American newspapers and was distributed countrywide. In 1928, the African American Oscar DePriest was elected from Chicago to the House of Representatives. He became the first Black member of Congress since George Henry White of North Carolina was driven out in 1901.

It was in Chicago and the Midwest that Black workers made their greatest impact in the labor movement. African American, Latinx and white communists in Chicago fought for food, jobs and unions in the 1930s.

Black workers are still the last hired and the first fired. By 1931, during the Great Depression, Chicago's white neighborhoods suffered a horrendous 28 percent unemployment rate. But 85 percent of African Americans in a Chicago neighborhood who had jobs the year before were now unemployed.

'Don't starve, fight!'

When the capitalist economic crisis broke out, the Communist Party issued the call, "Don't starve, fight!" Fifty thousand people marched in Chicago on March 6, 1930, for unemployment relief and free milk for children.

Hundreds of thousands more demonstrated across the country in New York, Detroit, Milwaukee and other cities. It was mass actions like these that won unemployment compensation and ultimately food stamps (now known as SNAP benefits).

Communists were the spark plugs in launching Unemployed Councils across the country. In Chicago's homeless shelters, 1,500 people joined the councils.

Communists in Chicago led 408 demonstrations in 1931 and 566 in 1932. People

would march on Chicago's relief stations demanding food and rent money. When an official at the Emmerson relief station slapped an African American, Unemployed Council members forced their way past cops to get justice.

In a Chicago winter, evictions can mean death. Between Aug. 11 and Oct. 31, 1931, 38 percent of the cases before the renters' court involved African Americans, even though they were just 6.9 percent of Chicago's population.

The Unemployed Councils fought evictions. The Black communist leader Claude Lightfoot described in his autobiography how thousands of people would gather in Washington Park and go to where the sheriff was kicking a family out of their home. In the lead would often be the fearless communist David Poindexter, who had been a follower of the Honorable Marcus Garvey.

Police retaliated by killing African Americans Abe Gray, John O'Neil and Frank Armstrong on Aug. 3, 1931, during an anti-eviction action. Armstrong's mutilated body was later found in Washington Park. Like Freddie Gray, who was killed by Baltimore police in 2015, Armstrong had been given a "rough ride" by the cops.

Thirty thousand people, half of them white, marched down State Street to protest this atrocity. At least twice that number watched from the sidewalks. "The crowd just took over State Street — there wasn't a cop in sight," Harry Haywood later wrote in his autobiography, "Black Bolshevik."

One African American activist later said that this was the first time they had seen white people cry for any Black person. That's how barbarous social relations are in the capitalist United States.

Chicago Mayor Cermak was forced to issue a moratorium to halt all evictions. Everyone knew that it was "the reds" that forced him to do it.



Unemployed rally in Chicago's Grant Park during the Great Depression.

Organize!

An early union success was achieved in 1933. Jewish communists helped organize 1,500 Black women employed in the Sopkins sweatshops.

Communists knew that organizing unions goes hand-in-hand with fighting racism. Squads moving furniture back into the homes of people whom the landlord or bank were trying to evict had Black and white members.

Even a white worker saturated with racism could be affected by Black and Latinx people helping to save his or her home. The ruling class knows this too.

The late Les Payne wrote a series of articles in Newsday in early 2001 about how African Americans and Latinx people were kept from becoming firefighters in New

York City. The wealthy and powerful considered it socially dangerous if Black, Latinx or Asian firefighters saved the life of a white baby in a racist neighborhood like Howard Beach.

In 1919, 58 percent of the attacks on Black people happened near Union Stockyards. Every attempt was made to whip up racism in the “Back of the Yards” neighborhood.

On Aug 2, 1919, arsonists set fire to homes occupied by Lithuanian and Polish families. Almost a thousand people were made homeless. Even though a grand jury decided that it was white racist gangs that committed this crime, the Chicago Tribune blamed Black people.

Now, during the Depression, poor white families in the Back of the Yards were being evicted. Black and Latinx workers were helping them get back into their homes. The basis for organizing packinghouse workers was being built.

During the thirties, the Polish immigrant Bolesław “Bill” Gebert led Chicago’s communists. A fierce anti-racist, he would be deported during the anti-communist witchhunt. The Communist Party published a daily newspaper in Polish, *Głos Ludowy*, that fought racism and anti-Semitism.

The Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee set out to organize the stockyards. Two key organizers were the communists Herb March and Henry “Hank” Johnson.

The bosses used Polish women to segregate some of the departments. With the help of his Polish comrades, Hank Johnson, who was Black, learned a little Polish.

After Johnson gave a short speech in Polish to the women workers, they lined up to sign union cards. That’s what an upsurge of the working class looks like.

Next: Daley's racist machine

Sources: "Red Chicago, American Communism at its Grassroots 1928-1935" by Randi Storch; "Chicago Slums to World Politics, Autobiography of Claude M. Lightfoot" by Claude M. Lightfoot; "Down on the Killing Floor, Black and White workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-54" by Rick Halpern; "Black Bolshevik, Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist" by Harry Haywood; "Race Riot, Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919" by William M. Tuttle, Jr.; "A Few Red Drops, the Chicago Race Riot of 1919" by Claire Hartfield.

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