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By C. ALVIN HUGHES

## We Demand Our Rights: The Southern Negro Youth Congress, 1937-1949

**D**URING THE 1930s, the Great Depression forced many workers in the South and elsewhere out of work. Many workers — black and white — found themselves facing the common reality of economic hard times.<sup>1</sup> In the South, a new liberalism emerged which opened the doors to interracialism “in an effort through education and an appeal to Christian ethics to develop a new basis for understanding and tolerance between the races.”<sup>2</sup> One aspect of this new liberalism concentrated “upon the fundamental economic problems of the South” which required changes in the old social order of racial and economic oppression.<sup>3</sup> For black youth, the new Southern liberalism created an opportunity to seek greater freedom, equality and opportunity.

The national economic crisis and the Southern legacy of Jim Crowism, mob-rule, lynch-violence and miscarriage of justice together placed a double burden upon Southern black youth. Although these young people were victims of discrimination in educational opportunities, employment, recreational facilities and the courts, and were scorned by one of their own writers (Langston Hughes) as cowards and Uncle Toms, they emerged from these disadvantages and forged together with white youth and adults a united front movement.<sup>4</sup> According to Martin L. Harvey, president of the Christian Youth Council of North America, “a new spirit is emerging among youth — a conviction that their problems must be solved by young people themselves.”<sup>5</sup> And James A. Cox, a founding member of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, saw Southern Negroes at a crossroads at which Negroes must choose with “precision and in haste. . . . The crisis has come, the seizing of which is triumph, and neglect of which is ruin.”<sup>6</sup> Southern Negro youth and their white supporters created an organization to seize the times.

The history of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) covers the twelve years from 1937 to 1949. The SNYC concentrated its work in the South and established its headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama in 1939. The young people — high school and college-age youth — who attended the first convention of the National Negro Congress (NNC) in Chicago in 1936 wanted to participate fully in the work of the NNC, but without being hampered by the advice of some of their elders. The NNC convention passed a resolution acknowledging that “it is the indubitable duty and right of all Negro youth to

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941* (New York, 1984); Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Westport, Conn.: 1970); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Ralph J. Bunche, *The Political Status of the Negro in the Age of FDR* (Chicago, 1973), p. 39; see also George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), pp. 632-33; John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Bunche, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, February 13, 1937, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

fight for the eradication of the evil from which they suffer.”<sup>7</sup> To avoid conflicts of interest or style between the adults and youth, the NNC decided that all local youth councils would be responsible only to the national secretary and the national executive board of the NNC.

Active in the NNC convention, Edward Strong received the position of national youth chairman. Strong was a youth leader at the Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Chicago, and he had organized the first International Negro Youth Conference on June 20-23, 1933. Completing his studies at the YMCA College, Strong continued his academic pursuits as a graduate student in political science at Howard University in Washington, D.C.<sup>8</sup> As national youth chairman, Strong, now in his mid-twenties, led the drive to establish a Southern Negro Youth Congress. On July 23, 1936, he published the “Call for a Southern Negro Youth Conference” and the “Prospectus of the Southern Negro Youth Conference,” to be held during the Thanksgiving holidays in November. In the “Call” he reminded youth of the South that seventy-three years had passed since the days of slavery, yet blacks still faced “clouds of reaction and oppression.” This “common yoke of exploitation, discrimination and hunger,” he declared, required blacks to “be united as one to strike out in a new and mightier drive to the goal we are determined to achieve — Freedom, Equality, Opportunity.”<sup>9</sup>

Thousands of black youth responded to the call for direct action to organize Southern youth for these goals. Although many responding to the call were youths, twelve years later they were mature adults but still active in the youth movement. To accommodate the overwhelming response and to honor Frederick Douglass, the great black abolitionist and leader of the nineteenth century, the Conference was changed from November, 1936, to the week of Douglass’ birthdate in February, 1937.

Assembled in Richmond, Virginia, for the first Southern Negro Youth Congress were some 534 delegates representing 250,000 young people in 23 states, and an estimated crowd of 2,000 observers. They represented “sharecroppers from Alabama and Mississippi; domestic workers from Georgia; chain-gang victims from the now-flooded areas of Arkansas and Tennessee; school teachers from Florida; longshoremen, laborers, college students and every other representative of Southern Negro life.”<sup>10</sup> Strong, in his address to the Congress, stated the purpose and objectives of the gathering:

And why have we come? We have come first of all, seeking the right to creative labor, to be gainfully employed with equal pay and employment opportunity — economic security.

We have met for freedom, equality, opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *The Official Proceedings of the National Negro Congress, February 14, 15, 16, 1936* (Washington, D.C., 1936), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Cavalcade 1 in Box 59, National Negro Congress Papers, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, New York.

<sup>9</sup> *Draft Call to the Southern Negro Youth Conference, July 1936*, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>10</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 27, 1937; Augusta Strong, “Southern Youth’s Proud Heritage,” *Freedomways* 4 (First Quarter 1964): 37; *New York Age*, February 27, 1937; *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, February 20, 1937; Robert H. Brisbane, *The Black Vanguard* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1970), p. 153.

<sup>11</sup> Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

The young delegates were divided into commissions or groups to discuss specific problems and to make recommendations to the general body for their approval, modification, or rejection. The delegates were assisted by prominent adult leaders, including John P. Davis, executive secretary of the NNC; E. Franklin Frazier, sociologist; C. Wilson Record, a student representative from the University of Texas; Angelo Herndon, a young Communist League member who had been convicted of inciting an insurrection in Atlanta; Martin L. Harvey, president of the Christian Youth Council of North America; Myrtle B. Powell of the white YWCA; Max Yergan of the black YMCA; Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University and the keynoter of the Congress; and H. M. Smith, Dean of Theology at Bishop College in Texas. A brief summary of the commission reports will indicate the delegates' broad scope of interests and what they intended to achieve.

The Commission reports recommended that the United States Congress be petitioned to schedule biracial meetings of Southern students to hear their proposal to permit the teaching of Afro-American history in public schools. Since Afro-American history was not being taught in other regions of the country either, the Congress should be petitioned to establish a national policy of including Afro-American history in the curricula of all public schools. The SNYC hoped that Afro-American history courses would improve interracial understanding and "end the distorted facts and propaganda about Negro history and achievements." Blacks also should be permitted to use the ballot and political pressure to get more blacks elected to local school boards and hired as teachers in both black and integrated schools. The SNYC requested that better municipal health facilities be established, and guidance for Negro youth recreation programs be provided. It endorsed slum clearance programs and the passage of legislation to improve the economic and educational level of black youth. It offered its support to organizations working for world peace, and for the complete vindication and freedom of Angelo Herndon, as well as the Scottsboro boys, who had been convicted on rape charges in Alabama. The SNYC also called for the strengthening of churches, schools, and social groups; "demanded access to the same educational facilities enjoyed by white students, and supported the NAACP in its fight for admission of Negro students to Southern states universities."<sup>12</sup>

The highlights of the Youth Congress, according to the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, included the seminar on "The Role of the Negro Church in Solving the Social and Economic Problems of the Negro Youth," and the keynote address delivered by Mordecai Johnson. The seminar, conducted by Dean Herbert M. Smith, concluded that "the Negro minister must become interested in the bread and butter issues of church members if the church is to remain articulate as the greatest instrument of social enlightenment."<sup>13</sup> But Southern black

<sup>12</sup> *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, op. cit.; *New York Age*, op. cit.; *Daily Worker*, February 18, 1937, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, op. cit.; *Richmond Planet*, February 20, 1937, p. 2.

ministers were reluctant to get involved in economic and political issues; consequently, the black church played a minor role in the SNYC.

The crowning glory of the Youth Congress, according to the press, was an address by the forty-seven-year-old president of Howard University, Dr. Mordecai Johnson, on his vision for a new era. Using the power of black church oratory, Johnson lashed out at scholars who distorted the true function of culture and knowledge. He asserted that "the tragedy of suffering people is that the paralytic exhibitions of their intellectuals fascinate the exploited and the weak." Johnson criticized the "don't rock the boat philosophy as a fatal philosophy of the self-satisfied who fear return to worse evils which existed before." He warned the young people to steer clear of radicals with individualistic viewpoints: "Once they are freed from their own personal disadvantage they forget about others."<sup>14</sup>

Johnson believed that a new generation of thinkers was emerging in the black community, and that only a brotherly society could succeed. "The greatest damage to Democracy in America," Johnson declared, "is not Communism or Socialism, but the political situation in which most men are no longer free to express themselves — the shame of a man is to eat without working; to have without giving; to have community standing without service."<sup>15</sup>

Johnson's address was received by the delegates and observers with great enthusiasm and applause. It was obviously tailored for this audience, for it was filled with advice for the young and criticism of the old and called upon a new generation to lead the way to a society of brotherly cooperation. The task of this new generation was to avoid both the armchair intellectuals and the individualism of some extremists. Ignore them both was the counsel from the speaker; they will pass on if they are not given an audience.

Armed with the wisdom of the keynote speaker and other adult advisers, and with their own collective wisdom as reflected in the commission reports, the delegates elected permanent officers for the Southern Negro Youth Congress and established its organizational structure. The officers, elected to serve one year terms, were William Richardson of Richmond, Virginia, a senior at Virginia Union University, as chairman; Helen Gray of Atlanta as vice-chairman; Edward Strong as executive secretary; James A. Cox of Virginia Union University as treasurer; and C. Columbus Alston, a union organizer from Detroit, as field organizer.<sup>16</sup>

The organizational structure of the SNYC included the executive secretary who was responsible for the daily operation of the national office, located initially in Richmond, but later moved to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1939. The Regional Council consisted of fifty members, five persons from each of ten Southern states, plus the SNYC officers. Its duties were to supervise the activities of the SNYC office, to establish policies between conferences, to plan special campaigns and activities, and to help raise funds to finance the

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<sup>14</sup> *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, op. cit.; Strong, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, op. cit.; *Daily Worker*, February 15, 1937, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*; *Richmond Planet*, op. cit., p. 2.

budget; it was to meet at least twice a year. The Regional Council did not become an effective part of the organizational structure of the SNYC; therefore, there is no list indicating the membership on the Council. There was, however, a smaller Executive Committee of the Youth Congress which met every two months to deal with immediate problems, and an Adult Advisory Board which was consulted on all major issues.<sup>17</sup> The members of the Executive Committee were the national officers of the SNYC and the local officers of the SNYC Councils in the area where the Executive Committee met. Its membership, therefore was not stable. On the other hand, the Adult Advisory Board, which supported the majority of the decisions of the SNYC and raised money to implement its programs, was chaired by Dr. Frederick Patterson, President of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, for most of the years the SNYC existed. Joining Patterson on the Board were some of the leading figures in the fields of education, church, and community leadership such as: W.E.B. DuBois of Atlanta University, Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University, James Shepard of North Carolina Central University, Bishop B. T. Shaw of the A.M.E. Zion Church, Alain Locke of Howard University, Roscoe Dunjee, editor, *Oklahoma Black Dispatch*, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, President of Palmer Memorial Institute, and many others over the years. As the policies of the SNYC shifted, some of the board members resigned and others were appointed. On the whole, the Adult Advisory Board was one of the most stable elements of the SNYC.

The youth leaders were obviously pleased with the resolutions and the new organization established at the first Southern Negro Youth Congress. Edward Strong believed that "the conference marks the beginning of a new epoch in the struggle for the freedom and equality of Southern Negro youth."<sup>18</sup> Angelo Herndon described "the spirit of the youthful delegates as most militant" and further asserted: "It was evident from the outset of this historic meeting that the delegates came organized and imbued with the determination to shatter to bits the shackles and fetters that bind the Negro people."<sup>19</sup> The young delegates left Richmond with a plan for organizing the entire South into the SNYC and for acting on the resolutions and programs of the Youth Congress.

The principal adviser to the Youth Congress was Charlotte Hawkins Brown, who in addition to the presidency of Palmer Institute, held the southern regional vice-presidency of the NNC. She had earned three master's degrees and had been awarded four honorary doctorates for her work in the fields of education and civic affairs. She was a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, and ranked in influence in the black community with Mary McLeod Bethune, founder and president of Bethune-Cookman College and

<sup>17</sup> Ralph J. Bunche, "The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations," 1940, Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library, Microfilm Slide # 374; A paper prepared by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee concerning the formation of the SNYC (no title), September 5, 1968, p. 11, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Freedom of Information Act release.

<sup>18</sup> *New York Age*, op. cit.; *Richmond Planet*, May 29, 1937, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> *New York Age*, op. cit.

one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's advisers on Negro youth.<sup>20</sup> She asserted that black youth hoped to achieve:

(1) equal general education opportunities; (2) vocational opportunities in all areas for which they show aptitude; (3) the proper evaluation of human personality under black skin; (4) the abolition of purely Negro jobs; and (5) the same respect for members of the Negro race that white people feel entitled to from the Negro race.<sup>21</sup>

In her call for the second conference of the SNYC, she urged black youth of the South to unite to solve their common problems. "The time has come," she stated, "when Negro youth in no uncertain terms, but without flare or trumpet, should let the world know they prefer death to slavery or injustice."<sup>22</sup> In response to this challenge, William Richardson, the chairman of the SNYC, pleaded for black youth to "work for a future which will bring harmonious, warm and fraternal relationships with the white youth. . . . We will clasp their hands and work cooperatively for a brighter and better south."<sup>23</sup> Within a year of its founding, the SNYC was able to report great progress toward achieving its goals.

The SNYC adopted a four-point program which guided it throughout its history, but it involved itself in a variety of issues and campaigns. Over a hundred local councils, affiliated with the Youth Congress throughout the South, supported the four-point program for improvement in the areas of (1) citizenship, (2) education, (3) jobs, and (4) health. The SNYC attracted widespread acceptance and support from the general community — black and white. It also received endorsements from both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, as well as from other liberal white groups. The SNYC's first major campaign led to the organization of thousands of tobacco workers in the South.

The SNYC's involvement in the black tobacco workers' campaign was prompted by two spontaneous strikes, both against companies located in Richmond, Virginia. The first strike occurred on April 16, 1937, against the Carrington and Michaux Tobacco Stemming Company, and the second strike occurred on May 7, 1937, against I. N. Vaughn and Company. Because the established tobacco union — The Tobacco Workers' International Union — followed a policy of occupational segregation rather than racial discrimination, it did not have to respond to the needs of the black workers.

Founded in 1895, the Tobacco Workers' International Union (TWIU) had made meager progress in unionizing the Southern tobacco industry, primarily due to the traditional anti-union sentiment in the South and to the conservative leadership of the union.<sup>24</sup> However, with the passage of the New Deal administration's National Recovery Act (NRA) in 1933, the TWIU, as other unions, revived. While the NRA was a boost to unionism, it did little in

<sup>20</sup> Constance H. Marttina, *The Lengthening Shadow of a Woman: A Biography of Charlotte Hawkins Brown* (Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1977), passim.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, *Chattanooga Daily Times*, April 2, 1937, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, February 5, 1938.

<sup>23</sup> Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 39; *Chattanooga Daily Times*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Northrup, "The Tobacco Workers International Union," *Quarterly Journal* 56 (1941-1942): 606, 612.

altering conservatism. E. Lewis Evans, the secretary-treasurer and later president of the TWIU, opposed strikes and hasty actions but believed in upholding the union label as the "answer to all labor's ills."<sup>25</sup>

Black tobacco workers were members of the TWIU but were segregated into all-black locals. Black workers served on the union's International Executive Board and worked as organizers. But the practice of occupational segregation — a policy of separating black workers from other workers by job assignment — made it possible for the TWIU to ignore the condition of the blacks without neglecting its responsibility to the white workers. Black workers did the processing work up to the point of manufacture, and the departments where they worked were physically separated from those where the whites did the more skilled and supervisory work. The local TWIU refused to assist the black workers when they decided to strike.<sup>26</sup>

The first strike was spontaneous; there was no organization and no list of grievances submitted to the management.<sup>27</sup> To get the black workers organized, the SNYC sent in its field representative, C. Columbus Alston. Alston, in his early twenties, had begun his union work as a member of the Youth Committee of the American Federation of Labor's (AFL) United Automobile Workers' Union in Detroit, and had participated in the first big strike in the auto industry. He later had come South to help organize the steel industry for the CIO. He joined the SNYC and was given the task of organizing the black Virginia tobacco workers into a union. Alston's co-worker, James E. Jackson, Jr., served as the educational director of the SNYC.<sup>28</sup> Jackson had grown up in Richmond, Virginia where his father operated a drug store. He had attended Virginia Union and Howard Universities, receiving his degree in pharmacy. He became involved in the SNYC, which led him to a mini-career in social activism in the South.

The SNYC leaders helped the black workers organize the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union and assisted them in drafting a list of demands. The problems confronting the striking workers were low wages, long working-hours, and bad working conditions. The new union established a committee to present its grievances to the management of the Company. With Frank Kruch of the State Labor Department mediating, an agreement was reached within 48 hours.

The TSLIU's first victory "granted pay increases ranging from 10 to 20 percent, an eight hour day and forty-hour week with time-and-half for overtime." According to William W. Michaux, Jr., vice-president of the Company, "the strikers demands were met about half-way." The TSLIU representatives viewed the agreement as a first step which would allow "the workers a chance to negotiate further for higher wages and better working conditions."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 618.

<sup>27</sup> Augusta V. Jackson, "A New Deal for Tobacco Workers," *Crisis* 45 (October 1938): 324; Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 20, 1937, p. 1.



The strike was significant for the SNYC, as was the positive outcome for the workers. It was the first such strike in Virginia since 1905 and laid the foundation for others to follow, and it helped the SNYC gain a following among the black working class in the South. A few days after the settlement, the workers at I. N. Vaughn and Company formed a local of the TSLIU and presented their demands to the management. Victory did not come as swiftly, but the outcome was positive — a 10 percent wage increase.<sup>30</sup>

The last two of the four strikes the SNYC and the TSLIU conducted during the summer of 1937 were planned. They involved the Tobacco By-Product and Chemical Corporation and the Export Leaf Company. The issues involved in these strikes were better wages and, more significant and difficult to resolve, job reclassification. Several black workers held jobs which classified them as helpers and laborers but in which in fact they performed as skilled machine operators and tenders.<sup>31</sup> In both cases, after a three-week strike, job reclassifications, higher wages and improved conditions were agreed upon.

Within six months of its founding, the SNYC asserted that the TSLIU had concluded eight successful negotiation sessions — four by strike, claimed a membership of 3000, and had affiliation with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The SNYC and the new union brought to Richmond and the South more than higher wages; they also spurred a new sense of cooperation among black and white workers. The union work allowed the SNYC the opportunity to provide classes in elementary education, citizenship and voter education, and challenged the churches to support the strikers. This cooperation between the Richmond community and the SNYC was the beginning of a reeducation process and improved economic conditions.<sup>32</sup>

The success that the SNYC and the TSLIU achieved in Virginia, and the other projects the SNYC began during its first year of existence, were the basis of Edward Strong's enthusiastic report to the SNYC's second annual meeting. Strong asserted that just the existence of the Youth Congress in the deep South was proof enough of the ability of Southern black youth to participate not only in the American youth movement but in the world youth movement as well. Strong reported to the Youth Congress that in addition to the 5000 tobacco workers, the SNYC helped organize a Negro Community Theatre and some twenty youth councils in the South. SNYC leaders made four tours during which they contacted thousands of people in North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia; a youth leadership training seminar was held at King's Mountain, North Carolina; and thousands of pamphlets were distributed. Other activities included participating in national youth congresses, supporting the NAACP's antilynching campaign and the National Urban League's vocational opportunity drive, campaigning for better health programs and the National Youth Act, and sponsoring guest celebrities such as Roland Hayes and Eva Jessye, and Negro History celebrations.<sup>33</sup> While the

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, May 11, 1937, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 323; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 17, 1937, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>33</sup> *Southern Negro Youth Congress*, August 13, 1947, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Freedom of Information Act release; Bunche, "The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations," *op. cit.*, p. 375; *Chattanooga Daily Times*, April 1, 1938, p. 3; SNCC, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

concrete gains were not enormous for its first year's operations, the SNYC did make symbolic gains merely in the fact of its participation in the struggle for freedom, equality, and opportunity.

Shortly after its second annual convention, the SNYC moved its headquarters from Richmond to Birmingham, where it remained. Birmingham's segregation codes and other restrictive covenants in the South provided a great challenge to the SNYC. Birmingham was a more central location for the work of the SNYC than Richmond, and was also nearer to Tuskegee, the residence of the Adult Advisory Board's chairman. Moreover, James E. Jackson, Jr., educational director and the Right to Vote Campaign chairman of the SNYC, maintained that the root of the racial problem in the South lay in the denial of the franchise to millions of black and white citizens, and Alabama was a vital focal point for this campaign.<sup>34</sup>

According to Jackson, the Southern states had fallen to a "shameful state of affairs — conditions of taxation without representation; government without the consent of the governed . . . and dictatorial control over approximately 40,000,000 people by an oligarchy of wealth and bureaucracy."<sup>35</sup> His remedy for this state of affairs involved the elimination of the poll tax of the "lily white" primaries, of voter registration requirements such as the understanding clauses and literacy tests, and of physical violence and other forms of intimidation. Jackson further asserted that the voteless millions of the South should be silent no longer:

WE SHALL VOTE! WE ARE CITIZENS, WE ARE AMERICANS, WE HAVE A RIGHT TO VOTE and we are determined to exercise that right in this election year of 1940! Only the enemies of all that is American — of freedom, and justice and democracy — will dare seek to thwart us!<sup>36</sup>

The Right to Vote Campaign, and other projects by SNYC conducted throughout the decade of the 1940s, stand as a monument to the dream of the youth of the South of becoming full citizens of the United States. In 1943 there were 312 active SNYC members in Fairfield, Alabama, a community containing about 7,000 blacks. Over 1,500 people participated in the activities and programs which the youth organizers sponsored. They held classes in Afro-American history, forums on current topics, social events and games, and a weekly class in "Trade Union Education." They campaigned for access to the public library and voting rights, and held regular semi-monthly meetings. In neighboring Birmingham, the youth center sponsored first-aid classes, Spanish lessons, classes in knitting, crocheting, sewing, black history, game tournaments, a radio class, social activities, art shows, and regular semi-monthly meetings.<sup>37</sup>

The youth in greater Birmingham held a conference in May, 1943, with 109 delegates representing 11,000 members participating. An official statement

<sup>34</sup> James E. Jackson, Jr., "Our Battle for the Ballot," SNYC's Right to Vote Campaign pamphlet, June 10, 1940, Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library of New York University.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> SNYC; *Report of the Executive Secretary for 1943*, Box 35, NNC, MSS.

was issued praising the achievements of black soldiers in World War II and singling out Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., for his outstanding example of courage. The conference passed resolutions on a variety of subjects, each of which expressed discontent with things as they were. Delegates condemned the Southern practice which, they claimed, prohibited four million blacks and six million poor whites from voting; supported the pending legal action against white primaries; called for the enforcement of the President's Executive Order 8802 which mandated the end of discriminatory hiring practices in defense industries; and asked to have the Fair Employment Practices Committee changed into a permanent commission. The youth demanded the elimination of discrimination in the armed forces and on public transportation systems; demanded jobs in the war agencies; appealed to the Department of Justice for support against lynchings and to the Governor of Alabama, Chauncey M. Sparks, to set the Scottsboro boys free.<sup>38</sup>

Though victories often escaped them, the black youth in the South continued to demand, until the SNYC ceased to exist, that their nation live up to its creed of democracy. Throughout World War II and into the postwar era, the SNYC held the torch for black freedom in the South. In its closing years, the SNYC convened its last major congress in Columbia, South Carolina, in October, 1946. They met "to reassess the position of Negro Youth in the South, and to plan further strategy for the vote . . . and to secure for ourselves and our people all the rights and opportunities of an equal and unfettered citizenship."<sup>39</sup> After their usual discussions, planning sessions, and resolutions, an overflowing crowd of over eight hundred delegates and supporters, black and white, assembled in Antidel Chapel at Benedict College, with others standing outside, to hear W. E. B. DuBois deliver the closing address of the Congress, which also proved to be the closing appeal of a decade of struggle.

DuBois, who had returned to the NAACP as Director of Special Research after a ten-year tenure as chairman of the Department of Sociology at Atlanta University, counseled the young people that despite the long struggle against mammoth odds, the future of black Americans was in the South. The South, DuBois informed the youth, "is the firing line not simply for the emancipation of the American Negro but for the emancipation of the African Negro . . . the colored races; and for the emancipation of the white slaves of modern capitalistic monopoly."<sup>40</sup> The impact of the Southern youth movement would be felt throughout the world. The blacks did not stand alone on this firing line; they had friends among white youth and some working-class whites who traditionally had been taught that blacks were the cause of their own distress.<sup>41</sup>

DuBois warned the youth to be prepared to pay the ultimate sacrifice for freedom, though he believed that reason would prevail if the public were

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>40</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, "Behold the Land," *Freedomways* 4 (Winter 1964): 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

made completely aware of the real conditions in the South. He admonished the youth

to make it impossible for any human being to live in the South and not realize the barbarities that prevail here. You may be condemned for flamboyant methods; for calling a congress like this; for waving your grievances under the noses and in the face of men. That makes no difference; it is your duty to do it.<sup>42</sup>

On this resounding note, the seventh and last major conference of the Southern Negro Youth Congress came to its close. Although the Youth Congress continued to wave its grievances under the noses of the oppressors for three additional years, one of its long-standing ambitions — “to become the first full-fledged voting generation of Negro Americans” — was deferred.<sup>43</sup>

The SNYC did not simply fade away into history because of its lack of support from the black community or from the decline of zeal of its members. According to Augusta Strong, a founding member of the SNYC, the editor of its newspaper, *Cavalcade*, and wife of Edward Strong, the executive secretary of the SNYC, the SNYC “came to an end with the emergence of McCarthyism which scattered their northern supporters and progressive and trade union allies. . . . Naked terror broke up the Congress.”<sup>44</sup> The nation as a whole was undergoing a post-World War II conservative reaction, which heightened racial tension and encouraged local and national law enforcement agencies to increase their surveillance of so-called radical or subversive groups. The SNYC was considered by the United States Attorney General, Tom Clark, to be a subversive organization. For years the SNYC cooperated with Communist Party members in their campaigns, although the SNYC was not an anti-American or subversive organization. It simply challenged the established segregationist and racial norms of the time.

The headquarters of the SNYC in 1948 was still in Birmingham, the city which was dominated politically by Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor. Connor used all the clout that he could muster to prevent the SNYC from carrying on its business as usual in the South by physically restraining members and supporters of the SNYC from holding public meetings. The Federal Bureau of Investigation also participated in the harrassment of the SNYC by wiretapping its telephones, following its leaders, and planting informants among its membership.<sup>45</sup>

When the SNYC began preparing for its biennial meeting in 1948, Bull Connor went into action to prevent the gathering. Every black minister whom the SNYC approached to secure permission to use his church’s facilities received a telephone call from or was called into conference by Bull Connor, who advised the minister not to allow his church to be used. Connor informed the ministers that since the SNYC was an interracial organization, holding such meetings would violate the city’s segregation laws. Connor wanted the

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> *The Call for the Southern Youth Legislature*, October 18-20, 1946, Box 64, NNC, MSS.

<sup>44</sup> Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> Letter to Director, January 9, 1948, File No. 100-82, Southern Negro Youth Congress, FBI, Department of Justice.

ministers to know that he had the support of the Ku Klux Klan and local citizen groups.<sup>46</sup> Louis E. Burnham, who had succeeded Strong as executive director of the SNYC, sent a telegram to the U.S. Attorney General informing him of the tactics Bull Connor was using to “deprive our organization of the right to free assembly in holding our biennial meeting. . . .”<sup>47</sup> Burnham was from New York, attended City College of New York, where he studied social science, and then attended St. Johns University’s Law School for a year. In 1942, he became organizational secretary of the SNYC before succeeding Strong as executive secretary. Strong was drafted into military service in 1943.

Three black churches — Sixteenth Street Baptist, St. John’s A.M.E., and Green Liberty Baptist — refused access to their facilities to the SNYC under pressure from Connor. Finally, the Reverend H. Douglas Oliver, pastor of the Alliance Gospel Tabernacle, opened his doors to the SNYC. When the Youth Congress commenced its first session on May 1, 1948, Oliver and all white people at the session were arrested and charged with violating the city’s segregation laws. When the main speaker, Senator Glen Taylor of Idaho, the Progressive Party candidate for vice-president of the United States, arrived at the church, he attempted to enter through the front doors, but the police informed him that white people had to use the rear entrance. Upon his refusal to comply, Senator Taylor was knocked to the ground, then arrested and charged with disorderly conduct. He was trying to follow the Progressive Party’s campaign policy of not following laws which required its members to speak only before segregated audiences.<sup>48</sup>

The mounting pressure placed upon the SNYC made it increasingly difficult for the organization to function. After the Taylor incident, the Congress continued its meeting but under segregated conditions. Resolutions were passed condemning the city’s segregation laws and denying any connections of the Congress with the Communist Party. These resolutions reflected the majority opinion of the SNYC membership. The SNYC campaigned for freedom, equality and opportunity within the American system, not under a Communist system in America. This contention was not accepted by the U.S. Department of Justice. Shortly after the 1948 biennial meeting, Edward K. Weaver, president of the SNYC and a professor at Alabama State Teachers’ College in Montgomery, was forced to resign his position; he moved to Texas. Louis Burnham became Southern coordinator of the Progressive Party campaign, and later moved to New York. The FBI reports indicate that by the end of 1948, most of the chapters of the SNYC were no longer functioning.<sup>49</sup>

The dream of the SNYC as expressed in its “Proclamation,” to organize “wave upon wave of Southern Negro Americans, united in fraternity with the awakening white South, leading a crusade of freedom for rightful place in the rebirth of the South,” had by January, 1949, all but disappeared.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the SNYC against great odds for twelve years had conducted its affairs

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<sup>46</sup> Teletype from FBI-Birmingham Office to the Director, April 30, 1948, FBI, Department of Justice.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Report to the Director, May 3, 1948, File No. 100-82, SNYC, FBI, Department of Justice.

<sup>49</sup> Report to the Director on the SNYC, Special Agent in Charge, Birmingham Office, August 25, 1949, File No. 100-6548, FBI, Department of Justice.

<sup>50</sup> “The Proclamation of Southern Negro Youth,” 1941, Box 29, NNC, MSS.; *Richmond Planet*, op cit., p. 12.

successfully. The SNYC kept alive the desire expressed in its motto, to achieve freedom, equality, and opportunity for black youth in the South.

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