Chapter reprint from *Death Blow to Jim Crow* that documents the 1946 Southern Negro Youth Congress in Columbia.
Death Blow to Jim Crow. The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights by Erik S. Gellman

During the Great Depression, black intellectuals, labor organizers, and artists formed the National Negro Congress (NNC) to demand a “second emancipation” in America. Over the next decade, the NNC and its offshoot, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, sought to coordinate and catalyze local antiracist activism into a national movement to undermine the Jim Crow system of racial and economic exploitation. In this pioneering study, Erik S. Gellman shows how the NNC agitated for the first-class citizenship of African Americans and all members of the working class, establishing civil rights as necessary for reinvigorating American democracy.

Much more than just a precursor to the 1960s civil rights movement, this activism created the most militant interracial freedom movement since Reconstruction, one that sought to empower the American labor movement to make demands on industrialists, white supremacists, and the state as never before. By focusing on the complex alliances between unions, civic groups, and the Communist Party in five geographic regions, Gellman explains how the NNC and its allies developed and implemented creative grassroots strategies to weaken Jim Crow, if not deal it the “death blow” they sought.

Gellman lays out how this “most militant movement for black freedom since Reconstruction” built a powerful united front, and why it dissipated after 1949. These are lessons needed for today’s movement for the same unattained goals.

Erik S. Gellman is associate professor of history at Roosevelt University. The author participate in our recognition of the 70th anniversary of the 1946 SNYC in Columbia SC, October 22, 2016.

Dr. Gellman has graciously given permission for the Modjeska Simkins School to reprint the chapter that focuses on the 1946 SNYC in Columbia SC for which Modjeska was the lead SC organizer.

Gellman’s acclaimed 2012 Death Blow to Jim Crow is available in paper or ebook from the University of North Carolina Press.

The Modjeska Simkins School for Human Rights is a nonpartisan project of the SC Progressive Network Education Fund. Contributions are tax-deductible, and can be made online at scpronet.com, by calling 803-808-3384, or by mail to PO Box 8325 Columbia SC 29202.

The South Carolina Progressive Network’s office is in the historic Modjeska Simkins home at 2025 Marion St., Columbia SC. To arrange a visit, call 803-808-3384 or email network@scpronet.com.
This 1946 letter from Modjeska to “community leaders” encouraging them to sponsor a student for her Leadership Training School will be used to recruit students to today’s Modjeska Simkins School.

2025 Marion Street  
Columbia, South Carolina  
July 17, 1946.

Dear Fellow-Citizens:

An unprecedented and invaluable opportunity is being offered young South Carolinians within the next month. A leadership training school—emphasizing the solution of problems of youth in our Southland—is being held at Harbison Junior College, Irmo, under the direction of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. As a member of the Advisory Board of this South-wide organization, I beg to make the urgent personal request that you help make this seminar the success that it should be.

It must be conceded that AT THIS VERY HOUR more than at any time in the history of this Nation, there is urgent need for the development of progressive thinkers to become the leaders of TOMORROW. The LEADERSHIP TRAINING SCHOOL is planned to do just that.

May I urgently request that you—as a community leader—use your influence to have selected at least one promising young person by or from your church, school, club, lodge, NAACP youth council, farm and home group—whether child of tenant, sharecropper, or farm owner; PDF sons and daughters, 4-H, fraternity, sorority, labor union, or other organization, to attend the THIRD LEADERSHIP TRAINING SCHOOL. Please send the application at once as advised on the enclosed folder.

I am certain that you will agree that any money spent to give an ambitious and promising young person the opportunity to attend this seminar will be a definite investment in the future of human relations in our Southland and our Nation. No money could be spent more effectively.

Any inquiries concerning the work of the Southern Negro Youth Congress in South Carolina should be addressed to Mrs. Annie B. Weston, State Supervisor, 2454 Millwood Avenue, Columbia 16, S. C.

Trusting that we shall have your full cooperation in this important matter, I am

Very sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Member, Advisory Board
SOUTHERN NEGRO YOUTH CONGRESS.

P. S. The accompanying copy of a letter from the Educational Director of the SNYC along with the enclosed folder will tell you more about the School. So
Modjeska Simkins School for Human Rights

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For more about the school, see our web site at www.scpronet.com/modjeskaschool/. Follow us on Facebook.
On October 20, 1946, in Columbia, South Carolina, W. E. B. Du Bois threw down the gauntlet. “The future of American Negroes,” he told an audience of 861 delegates of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), “is in the South.” Breaking from the trend of black intellectuals who called for migration to the North and West of the United States, Du Bois instead cast the South as the “battle-ground of a great crusade.” Southern youth, he declared, would need to make “the Great Sacrifice” to “rescue this land.” He then referenced Moses on the edge of the Promised Land in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy: “Behold the beautiful land which the Lord thy God hath given thee.” African Americans and working-class whites had built this “glorious land,” and, Du Bois contended, “it would be shame and cowardice to surrender . . . its opportunities for civilization and humanity to the thugs and lynchers . . . who choke its soul and steal its resources.” Du Bois spoke with tremendous optimism for a racial reconstruction of America after the Second World War. Looking out on the crowd of militant young southerners—black and white, male and female—Du Bois saw the potential for a mass movement to bring democracy to a “southland” burdened by three centuries of “the flat failures of white civilization.”

The SNYC and its allies envisioned a movement of black southern youth because they saw their local fight as a significant front in the battle for the fate of the democratic world. As the war against fascism came to an end overseas, they sought to develop a new analysis based on international events,
past and present, to foster a postwar movement for racial and economic justice that linked activities in the U.S. South to those of other working-class people around the world. Historians have recently declared South Carolina in the 1940s the “vanguard of the movement,” due to the level of black resistance there, and this chapter explores the extent to which these activists saw themselves as grassroots actors on a world stage.\(^2\) International issues preoccupied not only diplomats and world leaders, but also activists, students, and workers in South Carolina. Black southerners did not directly participate in the Council of Foreign Ministries alongside their longtime nemesis, South Carolina politician James Byrnes, but their protests and voices mattered in national and international arenas. SNYC leaders wanted to transform notions of southern black identity from provincial to national and then international, because they believed this wider vision would change the concept of Jim Crow from natural and immovable to artificial and breakable. Thus, by applying internationalist, anticolonialist discourse to what Du Bois saw as the “firing line” in the American South, these activists tried to connect world events to local conditions to inspire new forms of resistance to Jim Crow. To the SNYC, a postwar world without racial hierarchies was not only possible but essential to save humanity from nuclear war, fascism, and colonialism.\(^3\)

\[^2\] The possibility that political and protest activities would develop among blacks in postwar South Carolina seemed remote in 1940. In what would become part of the research for Gunnar Myrdal’s famous study on American race relations, *An American Dilemma*, a black woman named Wilhelmina Jackson surveyed race relations in Greenville, Charleston, and Columbia on the eve of the Second World War. What she found distressed her. Greenville, “known for its mills and [the] bad race feeling the mills have engendered,” had the best prospects because a recent black voting drive had shown “how white supremacy . . . can be made almost impotent or ineffective.” There, a local African American professor, a CIO attorney, and the president of the Greenville Workers Alliance had inspired local African Americans to register to vote. Over 700 blacks registered, but a concerted plan by the local Ku Klux Klan, the press, and the police intimidated most of them from casting ballots in the following election. John Bolt Culbertson, the white CIO attorney, complained to the NNC’s John P. Davis that half of the county’s court cases involved landlords who, with the blessing of the Justice of the Peace, “take all the household furnishings of negro tenants for a week’s rent and pocket the difference.” Despite NNC publicity in Washington that demanded federal
intervention, local vigilantism reversed the emergent struggle for the ballot in Greenville in the late 1930s.4

Elsewhere in South Carolina, Jackson did not see many better prospects. She deemed the NAACP chapter president in Charleston “an intellectual snob” who claimed to have 400 members but, when pressed, could not cite a single achievement of the group. The only real critic of the status quo, Jackson reported, was a “fairly militant man” named John McCray, who had protested police brutality in 1935 when local police killed eleven blacks without cause in a matter of months. This campaign, however, had “tacked on” to McCray “the dreaded name ‘radical’ . . . and, as a result, he is not accepted by the community.” In the state’s capital city, African Americans represented more than one-third of the 50,000 residents, but, Jackson concluded, “there is little political organization among Negroes.” The only active black protest group in the city, the Negro Civic Welfare League, had lobbied since 1938 for better health and recreation facilities without much success. Its secretary, Mrs. Andrew Simkins, a state tuberculosis agent, was one of the few residents who stood up against local acts of discrimination. Most black Columbians that Jackson interviewed saw “no point in trying to vote, in trying to get jobs, because [like one person told her,] ‘The white folks is goin’ to let you git so far and no farther.’”5

To make matters worse, politicians leveraged the threat of black equality as the primary means to win elected office. Despite the lack of activism in Columbia and elsewhere in South Carolina, blacks had become political pawns. Florence Derieux, editor of The State, a relatively liberal newspaper in Columbia, explained how, “as a backdrop, the Negro is the most powerful political factor in South Carolina” because “candidates’ whole activities are based on the predicate that Negroes might get something[,] and one of the main appeals in their campaigns is keeping the Negro out of political affairs of state.”6 Accompanying the politicians, the Ku Klux Klan had “[carried] on sustained campaigns against progressive candidates and [raised] scares like race and communism in C.I.O.” The only cure for South Carolina, Jackson believed, would be to remove its white dictatorship and force the federal government to get involved. “The day when Negroes will participate freely in politics here will still be far away unless the bull is caught right by the horns . . . and steps are taken to get federal intervention.”7

Beneath the pervasive levels of pessimism, these complaints also indicated that the seeds of change had been planted among blacks and whites in South Carolina. The New Deal brought unprecedented federal money into
the state, even though South Carolina Democrats like Senator “Cotton Ed” Smith had made their political careers out of “states’ rights.” Though Smith at first claimed to be a New Dealer, he increasingly worked against almost every measure brought forth by President Roosevelt and had even walked out of the 1936 Democratic Convention because a black minister gave a prayer as part of the proceedings. Washington proponents of the New Deal in 1936, increasingly supported by black northern voters, had tried to pass social welfare legislation but continually hit a southern Democratic roadblock. To remove this barrier, Roosevelt actively campaigned against Smith and other southern reactionaries whose obstructionist views on social welfare—but especially on race—threatened to break apart the national Democratic Party. Roosevelt, however, lost his battle to unseat Smith and his allies—these southern politicians stirred up racial animosity to drive whites to the polls and kept the New Deal’s southern working-class supporters disfranchised.8

Modjeska Simkins nonetheless saw this wedge in the New Deal coalition as an opportunity for blacks in South Carolina. Modjeska Montieth was born just days before the turn of the century to middle-class parents whom she remembered as “fearless people in a time when Negroes were supposed to cower.” Her parents emphasized education and sent her to Benedict College from elementary school through college. Her mother had been part of Du Bois’s Niagara Movement in the early 1900s, and Montieth attended local NAACP meetings as a teenager. In 1929, she married Andrew Simkins, a successful businessman, who enlisted the help of an elderly relative and a housekeeper so that Modjeska could continue her career outside the home. For the next decade, she traveled statewide as director of Negro Work for the South Carolina Tuberculosis Association, making contacts by fusing health and civil rights concerns. By 1942, however, she and her employer parted ways when Simkins’s health advocacy became secondary to her civil rights commitments.9 Civil rights activities became paramount for her, as South Carolina’s black organizations seemed to gain new resolve as war broke out in Europe. In 1939, chapters of the NAACP united to form a statewide organization to revitalize an organization that had at the time 1,200 members in eight communities; during the war that number grew tenfold.10

In Charleston, John McCray readily joined this growing tide. McCray grew up in Charleston County and had the privilege of attending the Avery Institute, a private school for black elites, where he graduated as valedictorian in 1931. He then earned a bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Talladega College in Alabama, but, finding no jobs for blacks in this field, he moved back to
Charleston in 1935 and worked as a debt manager while simultaneously beginning a career in journalism at a small paper called the *Charleston Messenger*. In the late 1930s, McCray made a bold move and started his own paper, which he named the *Lighthouse and Informer*. This paper, as much as the state NAACP apparatus, would bring together like-minded activists and disseminate information to black communities across the state “as the official ‘mouth piece’ of all militant movements.” Soon after he started the paper, McCray became convinced that Charleston, where he was “not accepted by the community enough to actually offer much leadership,” would not be the best setting for his new press venture. He moved to Columbia to be closer to like-minded activists like Simkins.11

Osceola D. McKaine joined McCray at the paper after returning from Europe. Born in Sumter, South Carolina, in 1892, he attended the Colored Common School there. Soon after graduating, he obtained work in Savannah on a merchant freighter that sailed the Caribbean, giving him a firsthand view of the colonialism of the Western powers. The ship then docked in Boston, where McKaine attended classes at Boston College before deciding in April 1914 to enlist in the army. His early assignments in the army included a stint with the all-black 24th Infantry in the Philippines, training in New Mexico, and participation in a cross-border raid into Mexico to capture Francisco “Pancho” Villa. By October 1917, McKaine had graduated from the Colored Officers School in Des Moines, Iowa. He left for France as part of the “Buffalo Regiment,” the newly formed 367th Infantry. When the war ended, First Lieutenant McKaine sailed back to the United States and settled in Harlem. In New York, he fused his international experience with radical politics. He helped lead a black veterans’ organization (initially formed in France), wrote for A. Philip Randolph’s militant newspaper, the *Messenger*, and joined the League for Democracy, another veterans’ group in Harlem. Probably due in part to the postwar “Red Summer” of violence that swept through America after the war, the League for Democracy collapsed in 1921. Soon thereafter, McKaine embarked upon a “new life” in Europe. By the late 1920s, he had settled in Ghent, Belgium, and, with a business partner, had opened a nightclub called Mac’s Place. This jazz cabaret employed over thirty people during its 1930s heyday, offering African American culture far away from America’s racial constraints. But for the spread of fascism, McKaine might never have come back to the United States. In May 1940, however, German troops reached Ghent and took over his club. Rather than remain open for the Nazi clientele, McKaine fled Belgium in early 1941 for the United States.12
Soon after his return, McKaine wrote about the racial fluidity he had witnessed in other nations. Europeans, he wrote, had respect for “jazz and spiritual music” and an admiration for the “American Negro.” The treatment by the French “was slightly tinged with paternalism,” the Flemish Belgians had been “slower to accept Negroes” than had the Walloon population, and the “Balkan peoples as well as the Slavs were all without racial prejudice insofar as Negroes were concerned.” McKaine deemed British people as the most prejudiced against blacks, but not “as brutally as many Americans.” However, the rise of the Nazis in Germany made the status of people of color become much more precarious, and McKaine’s fears of Nazi aggression became reality in the spring of 1940. He remembered experiencing two days and nights of air and naval bombardment in La Panne (near Dunkirk), where “the 5 stories of my hotel, trembled like leaves on a tree.” While he was never “molested or offended” by the Nazi soldiers who occupied his Belgian club, he saw the devastation they caused. Traveling back to Ghent on back roads, he “passed the corpses of men, women, children . . . still unburied,” and their gruesome sight convinced him to leave. McKaine’s cumulative experience in the Caribbean, Europe, and elsewhere had exposed him to a multiplicity of racial constructions. Further, the occupation of the Nazis of Belgium showed him the horror that derived from notions of Aryan supremacy. Nicknamed the “Lieutenant,” McKaine returned to his home state ready to fight for the freedoms he had experienced abroad.

Back in the United States for the first time in two decades, it did not take long for McKaine to get involved in black protest networks in South Carolina, which led him to meet Simkins and McCray. He had left his hometown of Sumter because of racial segregation and limited economic opportunities and had returned with at least “a splinter” of resentment on his shoulder. Like Simkins and McCray, McKaine was encouraged by the momentum he saw within the state’s NAACP. In 1942, McKaine helped revive the Sumter branch of the NAACP, becoming its executive secretary and initiating a campaign for racial parity in teachers’ salaries. When on a statewide speaking tour for the Palmetto State Teacher’s Association and the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, McKaine met Simkins and McCray in Columbia. The three hit it off and talked late into the night about McKaine’s international experience and civil rights vision for South Carolina. By 1943, both of these activists had hired McKaine (he worked as an associate editor of the Lighthouse and Informer and managed one of Simkins’s liquor stores) so that he too could settle in Columbia. With their backing, he filed and won lawsuits to obtain equal pay
for teachers in Charleston and Columbia. This collaboration emboldened all three and seemed to hold the potential for sustained collaboration in fighting for the citizenship of disfranchised and Jim Crowed South Carolinians.

Simkins, McCray, and McKaine all agreed that their efforts should begin with pursuing access to the ballot. On April 3, 1944, the national NAACP legal team won its most important victory when the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Smith v. Allwright that “the right to vote in a primary . . . is a right secured by the Constitution.” South Carolina, like Texas, had used its primary election to exclude blacks from the Democratic Party’s selection of candidates. As Wilhelmina Jackson explained, “Since [blacks] are excluded from participating in the primary which is the election, they feel that they are just parties to a farce when they participate in the general elections.” The South Carolina General Assembly, panicked by the decision, responded in dramatic fashion. Only ten days after the Supreme Court decided the case, it met in a special session and proceeded to eliminate all references to primaries from the state’s statutes. In so doing, the legislators hoped to circumvent the Allwright decision because the ruling was premised on primary elections as “conducted by the party under state authority.” If no state-supported laws formally existed, then the primary could be made a private affair and the Court’s decision did not apply.

Sitting in the audience during this special session, Osceola McKaine grew more and more indignant. McKaine and McCray interpreted the closing remarks of Governor Olin D. Johnston as “a threat of violence upon Negroes—an open invitation for the Klan to get busy!” The national press dubbed this new means of resistance of legislators the “South Carolina plan,” and other southern states saw it as a model response to the Supreme Court. During the next month, McCray, McKaine, and others formed the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP). Using both the pre-established networks of the state NAACP and the black political organizations that had developed around the campaigning for a fourth term for Roosevelt, the PDP convened in Columbia only two days after the white Democratic Party met there. Over 150 delegates, representing 38 of the state’s 46 counties, attended the convention to hear McKaine cry out for a “third revolution.” The decision, he told the PDP, was either to remain “spineless serfs” or to act as “free men.” The dichotomy of serfs and men suggested an international class struggle that went well beyond the Carolina coastline. The struggle for the ballot was about forming a power base necessary for blacks to overthrow their anachronistic status as serfs. The delegates responded with enthusiasm to the idea that “this day will
be remembered . . . when Negroes allied with liberal whites [and] decided to make this state a decent place to live.” With McCray and McKaine as cochairmen, the PDP elected eighteen delegates to contest the seating of the South Carolina lily-white Democratic Party at the National Democratic Convention in Chicago.19

The regular South Carolina Democratic Party worried about the potential power of this new party. The Columbia Record attacked McKaine’s speech, claiming he “talked too much” and “unwisely.” In response, McKaine wrote to the paper’s editor admitting that he “knew in advance that many statements contained in my speech would displease certain white men.” Yet, he said, “I wonder do [whites] know what is going on in the hearts of Negroes? I wonder do most of them care what’s going on in their heads and in their hearts? I ask these questions because if the white people don’t know what the Negroes are thinking about—that’s alarming; if they don’t know how they feel—that’s dangerous; but if they are not concerned about either; that can be calamitous.”20 McKaine suggested that white southerners underestimated both the intellect and the potential for resistance by African Americans. The proposed “third revolution” by the PDP threatened the state’s Democratic Party for the first time since Reconstruction. In response, white leaders expressed little concern publicly. In private, however, they were unnerved, concluding that any inclusion of blacks from South Carolina by the national party would require them to secede from the Democratic Party. If “any one of them should be seated in Chicago,” a state supreme court justice told the governor, “then our entire delegation will withdraw . . . and I am inclined to think that . . . several other states will join our delegation.”21

Fearing the fallout of a PDP challenge to the national Democratic Party, Robert E. Hannegan, chairman of the national committee, and William Dawson, African American Democratic congressman from Illinois, met with McCray in Washington to defuse the situation. McCray refused to capitulate or cancel the PDP’s plans. In mid-July, the delegates, using money raised by the PDP over the previous months, boarded a train in Columbia for Chicago. Once there, they did not get a hearing before the regular credentials committee of the Democratic Party but instead pleaded their case before a special six-member subcommittee. The subcommittee persuaded the PDP delegates to declare their support for Roosevelt whatever the outcome and then dismissed the PDP’s claim on technicalities while making vague private promises for future action against the lily-white southern delegations.22

The PDP delegation nationalized the struggle of South Carolina’s African
Americans. By challenging the all-white delegation in front of the national party, the PDP forced Democratic Party leaders to confront the disfranchisement of potential southern Democrats. The PDP delegates also paid close attention to the fate of their former senator, James Byrnes, who had come to the convention expecting to become the next vice president. Meanwhile, the PDP, Congressman William Dawson, and organized labor threw their support behind the current vice president, Henry Wallace, who had become more progressive since his stint as Secretary of Agriculture during the New Deal.23

Byrnes was not a rabid race-baiter like “Cotton Ed” Smith, but the PDP still found him threatening. In the early 1930s Byrnes had befriended President Roosevelt and had helped him pass New Deal legislation, serving as a conduit between southern Democrats and northern and western liberals in the House and Senate. While Byrnes supported white supremacy, he had initially showed restraint when speaking about race relations and had rarely made it central to his platform. Yet after 1937, Byrnes’s public demeanor changed. Though he won all but one precinct in South Carolina alongside Roosevelt in the 1936 elections, he now openly spoke out against black political participation. During the debate over the federal Wagner–Van Nuys antilynching bill, Byrnes led the opposition to the legislation, singling out NAACP head Walter White as one of the “Northern Negroes” who wanted to take over the Democratic Party. Confronted with 158 lynchings that had occurred in South Carolina since Reconstruction, Byrnes argued for the right of states to conduct their own affairs. Byrnes’s support for the filibuster of the antilynching bill made him odious and dangerous to African Americans in South Carolina, who interpreted his politicking as advocating the “right” of whites to kill blacks with impunity. Thus, his actions had given cause for activists to form the PDP and to challenge the legitimacy of the state’s Democratic Party.24

Labor and civil rights activists saw the vice presidential choice as essential to sustaining the New Deal coalition of liberals and progressives. With Roosevelt’s health in question, most delegates concluded that the vice president would likely become the next American president. The PDP agreed “to [not] stage a scene” at the Chicago Convention, but its presence convinced many Democrats that nominating Byrnes would prove divisive. Sidney Hillman, representing labor as the head of the CIO Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC), refused to endorse Byrnes. William Dawson met privately with Byrnes and then told Chicago mayor Ed Kelly that he would not endorse him either. Before the convention, Byrnes and Roosevelt assumed that the nomination would not dissuade black voters, who adored the president and...
First Lady. The arrival of the PDP from South Carolina suggested otherwise. Edgar Brown, a black Republican Party politician from Illinois, had met the PDP delegates at the train station in Chicago and offered them free accommodations at the Stevens Hotel, sponsored by the Republican owner of the Chicago Tribune, Colonel Robert McCormick. The PDP rebuffed the antilabor and conservative McCormick, but his offer raised the possibility of an exodus from the New Deal coalition. Meanwhile, Chicago mayor Kelly had warned Roosevelt that only the voting strength of the city’s Black Belt would carry Illinois. Dawson’s rebuke of Byrnes meant that the loyalty of blacks, many of whom were only recent converts to the party, might be in jeopardy. While Wallace lost the nomination for being too progressive, Byrnes lost for being too conservative, thanks in part to a political party that had been organized earlier that year.

The delegates came home from Chicago optimistic about their new political party. “Both Washington and Chicago should have taught you,” PDP leader and delegate A. J. Clement wrote to McCray, “that two years is not too long to wait to build the type of organization, that . . . would place us in a most impregnable position to bargain and collaborate.” The party soon thereafter nominated Osceola McKaine to challenge Senator Olin D. Johnston in the November 1944 senatorial election. In October, “Mac” toured two dozen towns and cities in South Carolina and became a recognizable leader for African Americans across the state. The surviving evidence of his stump speeches shows that he downplayed the international aspects of his politics to foster a larger coalition of voters. He mentioned his background as a soldier in France and Mexico, but otherwise McKaine spoke only of domestic politics. He called for a secret ballot and “economic security for all” in the postwar. Instead of declaring his radical intentions as he had the previous spring at the PDP convention, he reached out to moderates during the tour who might have shied away from internationalism. McKaine staunchly defended Roosevelt and the New Deal to persuade liberal whites to join the majority-black PDP.

The election results disappointed. Fraud probably diminished the total vote of 3,124 for McKaine, but he nonetheless came in third. Olin Johnston received 94,556 votes, and Republican J. B. Gaston received 3,807. In January 1945, McKaine went to Washington, D.C., to register a complaint with the Senate that voting fraud had occurred in several South Carolina precincts, involving “at least two instances of police assigned to precincts influencing Negroes to vote certain tickets.” A black man routinely got ten years on the chain gang for stealing, McCray said, while Johnston was rewarded a seat in
the Senate. PDP leaders believed that a fight on the floor of the Senate would bring more national attention to the denial of voting rights in South Carolina. McKaine's protest, however, was largely symbolic. Even if a few of the ballots cast had been fraudulent, the PDP lost by a margin of 90,000 votes. With blacks outnumbering whites in twenty-two of the forty-six counties in the state, the PDP needed to expand its electorate.  

By 1945, McKaine believed that the Progressive Democrats needed a wider reach and saw one potential new source in the SNYC. He had come to regret that their delegation had not "staged a scene" at the 1944 Chicago Convention, admitting on the campaign trail that he wished the PDP negotiators had not capitulated. He also concluded that South Carolina activists needed to create alliances with groups outside their local contexts. In 1942, McKaine had attended the Fifth All-Southern Negro Youth Conference in Tuskegee, Alabama. At this SNYC conference, McKaine listened as Paul Robeson explained how he had "learned" in his international travels "that [the] suffering of human beings transcends race." However, internationalism did not mean forgetting local people. "We must remember the poorest worker out here on a plantation," Robeson said. "If they can throw him out they can throw me out too." This understanding of the "Negro problem" in America appealed to McKaine. Soon thereafter, he wrote to the SNYC asking why they had no representation in South Carolina. "We shall be happy to push the movement," he wrote, "if you will send us one or two directives." The SNYC replied by reminding McKaine that his ally Modjeska Simkins had been a sponsor of the Tuskegee conference and had recently agreed to serve on the Adult Advisory Board to SNYC.  

Although the SNYC's Louis Burnham assured McKaine that "we have not . . . overlooked the important state of South Carolina," the organization had not made inroads there since its 1937 formation. The SNYC focused on Virginia and Alabama, and to some extent on Louisiana and Tennessee. As Louis Burnham put it in 1942, "Results are slow when the only resources we have are human." Especially during the Second World War, the SNYC concentrated activities around its Birmingham headquarters. Yet this circling of the wagons was also partially attributable to the change in philosophy of the Communist Party (CP) to put the war abroad above all other concerns. The SNYC pitched itself as a "win-the-war agency," while also struggling against the poll tax, extralegal violence, and disfranchisement. When these two aims came into conflict, the war took precedence. For example, a draft of Esther
Cooper’s fiery 1942 SNYC speech, titled “Negro Youth Organizing for Victory,” contained several excised passages concerning discrimination in the armed forces and the lack of black officers. “Mr. President,” one such deleted passage read, “Negro youth want to be fully integrated into every phase of army life.” Thus, evidence suggests that the SNYC responded to pressure from the U.S. government, CP, and CIO to scale back protest during the Second World War, but a lack of resources to expand outside of Alabama would have kept the SNYC out of South Carolina in any case. It was not until after the end of the war that the SNYC became more able to expand its membership, which coincided with McKaine’s search for new allies to sustain South Carolina’s movement.

McKaine’s international experience spurred his connection to the SNYC. In early 1945, McKaine accepted a position on the SNYC’s Adult Advisory Board. He was asked by F. D. Patterson, president of the Tuskegee Institute, and by Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Florida, president of the National Association of Colored Women, and former director of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration, and McKaine considered the appointment a “high honor.” Soon thereafter, he agreed to speak at the SNYC’s “May First Voting Rally” in Birmingham. With the Nazis on the brink of surrender abroad, McKaine took the opportunity to show how the southern struggle for the vote was part of the worldwide movement for human rights. “Whatever we may do here in Alabama,” he declared, “will affect the actions of the oppressed in South Carolina, in South Africa, in India and in Manchuria.” Ordinary people had a responsibility to reorganize the world. “It is no simple coincidence that we have gathered here tonight to seek a solution to the problem of making democracy work in a limited region,” McKaine said, “while, at the same time, most of the nations of the world are meeting in San Francisco with the same [intention] for the whole world.” He believed that just as the newly formed United Nations must “not fail to bring to the earth universal peace and prosperity,” the SNYC must “not fail to contribute our share to their efforts by [bringing] a full measure of democracy to our Southland.” According to McKaine, minorities and working-class people had an opportunity to use the ballot in the United States and elsewhere to make the postwar world a democratic one.

McKaine defined freedom in terms similar to his Reconstruction era ancestors from South Carolina. A generation older than most SNYC activists, McKaine saw a strong connection between this new movement and Reconstruction. The Second World War had inspired a “worldwide movement of
the oppressed and underprivileged” and a new understanding that “certain undeniable rights all men should enjoy wherever they may be.” One of these rights, the right to vote, was the “prerequisite to full citizenship.” The ballot for McKaine represented the “badge of citizenship,” because, quoting Frederick Douglass, he saw it as a means for African Americans to no longer “under-value ourselves.” A movement to secure the ballot would embolden blacks to destroy Jim Crowism. This movement would parallel the one by blacks in the 1870s, only now the “oppressed and underprivileged” would bring democracy to the world. “Emerging from our subconsciousness,” McKaine told the crowd in Birmingham, “was the need again for history to repeat itself, as when during the first bright days of Reconstruction, the legislatures controlled by the newly freed slaves and the emancipated poor white gave our region its first democratic governments.”

McKaine’s speech fell on receptive ears. More than any other southern liberal or left organization, the SNYC had sought international connections to other youth groups, concentrated on worldwide political developments in its publications, and used international circumstances to both inspire and inform its members’ activism. The SNYC’s Cavalcade featured a monthly column, “Youth around the World,” which informed its readers of anticolonial struggles from Ireland to African nations to Cuba. The SNYC’s second conference in Tennessee had delegates from India, Ethiopia, and China; Max Yergan of the NNC and the Council on African Affairs spoke in Birmingham on “Africa and the War”; Louis Burnham fostered new contacts at the Latin American Youth for Victory Conference in Mexico City; and other SNYC members attended an international youth conference in Washington in the fall of 1942. At the Washington conference, SNYC delegates heard President Roosevelt address the “youth of the world.” They discussed the war and how to win the peace. “We . . . of many lands, races, cultures, religions,” delegates from England, the Soviet Union, China, India, Africa, and elsewhere wrote, “affirm our determination to fight on to the complete rout of Fascism.”

Until the end of the Second World War, SNYC leaders mainly learned about international politics and cultures through leftist organizations and especially from the CP. SNYC members interacted with Communists during the 1930s, and many SNYC leaders either joined the party or were at least influenced by it. Exposure to the CP’s international perspective benefited these SNYC activists by offering them a cogent analysis of race in a global context. It enabled them to understand their particular predicament in the U.S. South by comparing it to other contexts of class and color exploitation. Most of them had
never traveled abroad, and the CP’s foreign policy allowed them to imagine the Soviet Union as an alternative to American capitalism.

The reliance on the CP for international education also had its drawbacks. When Communists switched from their militant antifascism to nonaggression with Nazi Germany in the fall of 1939, the SNYC followed the same path. It declared Roosevelt a “war-monger” who only sought “new markets and colonies” for an “imperialist adventure,” one which called upon the “common people . . . to do the dying,” even though they were not “represented by either side.” They argued that the British “[enslaved] Indian and African people,” and its “ruling clique” had no democratic aims for the war. They insisted the SNYC should concentrate on “the most elementary democratic right” of voting at home. In June 1941, however, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union and the CP’s foreign policy changed virtually overnight. Now the war effort abroad trumped all other causes, and again the SNYC fell in line, albeit with an emphasis on fascism at home as well. In May 1942, the SNYC made a “July 4th Declaration” in support of the war, calling Britain one of America’s “mighty allies” and offering to show “our loyalty” to the war in exchange for a full right to jobs and job training in defense industries and the armed forces. When the SNYC articulated two opposite arguments for peace and war within the span of two years, it confused some of its members, but unlike the NNC, it did not suffer a major public split. In local southern contexts, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the NAACP, and other groups worked with its young black leaders as much as they had before. Nonetheless, even though the SNYC maintained an international vision through the war, it was not entirely of its own making.

Yet the influence of international affairs also became more personal during the war years for the SNYC. Young black men enlisted and were drafted into the armed forces, traveling outside their local communities for training and then to the Pacific Theater at the end of the war. At home, news from the war dominated the press, and wartime propaganda filled the airwaves. The most important effect was that foreign affairs influenced the daily lives of southern Americans in an unprecedented way. Global circumstances now became central to the SNYC because of the war.

The growing internationalist perspective of Esther Cooper and James Jackson embodied this changed perspective. Cooper attended an International Youth Planning Conference in Mexico City in late 1941, meeting delegates from Central and South America. This conclave showed the potential for a pan-American antifascist youth movement. She concluded that the SNYC had
a responsibility to change the southern United States to keep up with Latin American youth movements. Meanwhile, James Jackson became convinced that the war represented a battle between “Barbarism and World Slavery [and] freedom-loving people of the world.” Like many other SNYC members, he enlisted in the army, and he spent the next three years in the service, training at Tuskegee and elsewhere before being deployed to Burma.45

Selections from James Jackson’s letters to his wife, Esther Cooper, show an expansion of his perspective beyond the southern United States as a result of his service in the armed forces during the war. In 1944, he applauded news of Du Bois’s speech about the war. He wrote that Du Bois had become the unofficial spokesman for “the silenced millions of the world’s darker peoples.” A year later, he concluded that the war would have a profound effect on international democracy. He had come to believe that the West “cannot honestly hope to attain a very high stage of democracy as long as the people of the Far East are held in colonial subjugation.” The war produced a “ferment” among these people that “can never again be contained within the framework of ante-bellum colonial oppression.” In late 1945, he declared the SNYC as part of this “ferment.” After the war ended, he hoped they would “take the offensive against the Ku Klux Klan and for the fulfillment [of Roosevelt’s] four freedoms.” It was, Jackson concluded, a “great age to be alive in!”46

Chosen as a delegate to the World Youth Conference in London, Esther Cooper sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in October 1945. Sponsored by the International Youth Council, a Soviet-influenced British organization formed in 1941, the conference attracted 437 delegates from 62 countries. “There were soldiers and sailors, airmen and tankmen; former partisans and heroes from Yugoslavia and U.S.S.R.; men and women from colonial and semi-colonial countries including India, South Africa, Gambia and Nigeria; youth from Latin America and China,” Cooper reported. She listened and participated in panels relating to “minority problems” in the postwar world. On one such panel, she was particularly impressed with Kitty Boomla, an Indian delegate, who described British racism against the Indian people and called for “youth in advanced countries to take practical steps to eliminate color and race discrimination in factories and workshops, trade unions, schools and colleges, and in literature.” Cooper met Kwame Nkrumah, the future prime minister of Ghana, and other African leaders and reported with delight that Godfrey K. Amachree of Nigeria presented a resolution calling for “colonial countries . . . to be free and independent” as the “first need of youth” in the postwar world. When not attending official conference sessions, Cooper dined with the All-
India Trade Union representatives, visited the Africa House at the University of London, and even helped arrange a dinner for delegates of color to meet W. E. B. Du Bois, who had traveled to Manchester for the Fifth Pan-Africanist Conference. By late November, Cooper had visited with American soldiers in England, talked with the Anglo-American society in Gloucester, and spoken over the BBC about the “SNYC and conditions in the South.” Finally, she secured a visa to the Soviet Union, the last destination on an itinerary that took her across war-torn Europe.47

Returning to the United States in February 1946, Cooper reunited with her husband, James Jackson, and together they set off on a tour of the South to speak about how their travels had informed their politics. They spoke at black colleges and in major cities, including Birmingham, Montgomery, New Orleans, and Columbia. Adult advisory board members of SNYC such as Tuskegee president Frederick Patterson and South Carolina’s Modjeska Simkins helped them arrange and advertise their appearances. At churches, college chapels, and lodges, the Jacksons discussed international colonialism, the role of postwar youth, war reconversion in the United States and the Soviet Union, and their vision for world peace. They spoke about how they hoped the tour would show the “close bond of interest which exists between American Negro youth and democratic youth throughout the world.” Meanwhile, in private conversations, Jackson had lambasted the CP leadership of Sam Hall during the war as “condescending paternalism to Negro members” and discussed how W. E. B. Du Bois had a better analysis of the postwar world than did black CP leaders. While neither Jackson nor Cooper abandoned the CP as an important international network and ally to the SNYC, they were determined not to be bullied by certain older CP leaders whom they thought had lost touch with grassroots people, especially in the South. Now with international experience behind them, they became more determined than ever to chart their own course, and the tour raised much-needed money for the SNYC to build its councils. Through education, organization, and militant action, they hoped to make the SNYC into a vanguard for a postwar movement.48

McKaine and Simkins, for their part, argued that the SNYC’s new path needed to go through South Carolina. They convinced SNYC members that they could reach South Carolina’s younger black and progressive white populations and enter the already-established PDP network. In late 1945 and early 1946, they, along with Annie Belle Weston, a PDP leader, convinced the SNYC to focus on South Carolina for the first time. The SNYC agreed with enthusi-
asm and set an October date for the Seventh All-Southern Youth Congress in Columbia. They conceived the conference as a “mass mobilization of youth” with a twofold purpose. First, they would make the conference a launching point “to complete the struggle . . . begun by our forefathers in the Civil War and Reconstruction period, when they struck a mighty blow for freedom.” Second, they would expand this historic struggle to encompass “the great contribution made by Negro servicemen and women in the recent war [because] we are fighting the same battle on the homefront.” The planning committee hoped this past struggle would connect with the recent war for freedom and generate a new southern movement for equality.49

The connection between the war abroad and local civil rights struggles at home became tragically apparent in February 1946. Since the war’s end, South Carolina’s citizens had come into contact with returning black and white veterans on a daily basis. One such veteran, Sergeant Isaac Woodard, boarded a bus in Georgia to return home to his family in North Carolina. During his journey, Woodard asked the bus driver to make a rest stop. The driver did so reluctantly, in Batesburg, South Carolina. Once stopped, he chastised Woodard for taking too long and called the local police. Chief of Police Linwood Shull arrived and forcibly removed Woodard from the bus. A group of officers then proceeded to beat him in a nearby alley, gouging out Woodard’s eyes and almost killing him. Rather then getting medical attention for him, they threw him in jail for disorderly conduct. McCray was the first person to publicize this case, which by the spring had sparked a national NAACP campaign and by the summer had become the focus of four national radio programs by Hollywood celebrity Orson Welles.50

The beating of Woodard reconfirmed the SNYC’s decision to focus on South Carolina. The planning committee embarked on an organizing campaign across the state, training homegrown leaders with the potent mix of international politics and African American history and initiating campaigns against disfranchisement and Jim Crow facilities. “Especially do we want representatives from the so-called ‘backward’ communities,” Weston wrote. “As you know,” she continued, “we are living in an era of thought revolution and positive action. The World—even our Glorious Southland—is changing before our eyes whether we realize it or not.” Traveling across the state that summer, Weston thought that educational programs for African Americans in these “unprivileged sections” of South Carolina would make them the “citizens of tomorrow.”51 Meanwhile, Modjeska Simkins worked tirelessly to promote the SNYC in Columbia. Simultaneously involved in local campaigns for...
recreation and for hospital facilities for blacks, Simkins employed “personal ‘button-holings’” to get people to join. In late July, Simkins wrote to the snyc headquarters: “Picture me getting out not less than 10,000 cards and letters in this heat.”52 McKaine, having landed a paid field representative job for the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (schw), embarked on a voter registration tour. The schw, an interracial organization with liberal and left members, had an overlapping membership and strong alliance with the snyc. McKaine worked for both groups in his tour of southern states for voter registration.

At the beginning of the tour, McKaine helped lead a snyc-organized march of veterans in Birmingham. Since the war ended, the snyc had organized a veterans’ committee in Alabama and elected as their leader the twenty-one-year-old Kenneth Kennedy, a Talladega College student who had served with distinction overseas in the Battle of the Bulge. In January 1946, McKaine came to Birmingham to help launch the snyc voting drive led by veterans. Marching double file through the streets to the Jefferson County Courthouse, a hundred veterans attempted to register. Most were denied, based on their failure to answer the registrar’s questions to his satisfaction. But the registrants did not intimidate easily. When the registrar asked one veteran, “What is the government?” he responded defiantly, “The government is the people.” Although most of the delegation did not successfully register on that day, they made a powerful gesture by marching in uniform. They demanded the ballot as a human right of citizens and veterans. By the next election, Alabama’s black voter registration had doubled. Elsewhere, McKaine registered thousands of new black voters in places like Norfolk, Virginia, and Savannah, Georgia. Simkins applauded McKaine’s successful field work but hoped that schw leaders would assign McKaine to his home state. In July, Simkins wrote to her allies in South Carolina, asking them to send postcards to schw to demand McKaine’s return. Simkins called the situation in South Carolina “urgent,” and when McKaine returned in the fall he proved instrumental in organizing the Columbia Youth Legislature, the snyc’s upcoming South Carolina conference, which it organized as a mock congressional session.53

The snyc also sought to train a new crop of leaders in South Carolina. For ten days in August, it led a Leadership Training Institute at Harbison Junior College, just outside the small town of Irmo, which included practical training in writing press releases, public speaking, and organizational techniques, along with daily classes in the “History of the Negro in Politics,” “Winning the Ballot,” and “World Affairs.” The snyc also benefited from the partici-
pation of the Highlander Folk School, the progressive educational institute in Tennessee for labor unions and other activists. Two Highlander teachers, Mary Lawrence and Bill Elkuss, attended the institute, teaching some of the courses, offering critiques to SNYC leaders during the week, and bringing materials from Highlander that the school had gathered over the years. The two dozen participants lived at the college, and when not in class sessions, they spent their leisure time discussing politics, singing spirituals and labor songs, dancing to the radio, and playing sports.54

One SNYC goal was to inspire these new leaders to think differently about race. During the 1930s, Franz Boas and other anthropologists had debunked theories of biological determinism based on race. Applying this new anthropology, SNYC teachers challenged race as a biological category and provoked students to rethink notions that they had become accustomed to in the southern United States. A “True-or-False Test” administered to the students at the Leadership Institute illuminates what the SNYC intended. The test asked the students, “What do you know about race?” along with statements to evaluate such as “skin color is the most important physical characteristic,” “man’s physical appearance is affected by his environment,” “American Negroes look
to Europe, Africa and America for their ancestry,” and “the blood of Negro and white people is the same.” Other questions about Germans, Danes, Jews, Africans, and Europeans put race into a world context. Exercises like these, the snyc educators hoped, would prompt leaders to see their second-class racial status in the United States as historically contingent rather than a fact of nature, thus challenging the underpinnings of Jim Crow ideology, which tied racial “customs” to all daily activities and customs in southern society.55

The Highlander teachers who attended the Irmo sessions applauded the snyc’s educational work. They especially approved of the choice of courses and noted that a “lack of group spirit was not a problem at this particular Institute.” For the students, whose average age was eighteen and whose professions ranged from teachers to union organizers to college students, the institute sparked further activism. Many of them would participate in discussion sessions during the October snyc conference and become the local leaders of snyc councils in Irmo, Moncks Corner, Orangeburg, and other small towns in South Carolina.56

Yet an alliance between these new snyc councils and local Progressive Democrats across the state did not come easily. Since the Chicago Democratic Party Convention, the PDP had splintered between militants like McKaine on the one hand and the nAACP and business professionals on the other, who saw help from outsiders as problematic and internationalism as reckless. In March, A. J. Clement, a leader of the PDP in Charleston and an official of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, pressured McCray to oust McKaine from the party. PDP leaders, Clement reported, had been grumbling ever since McKaine had sought alliances with groups outside of South Carolina. These Progressive Democrats imagined their party as a political group within precincts that challenged lily-white Democrats in local elections. Talk of alliances from outside the state, not to mention outside the country, frightened them. Rumors circulated about “outsiders” taking over the PDP, and Clement urged “the leaving of our ranks by McKaine” for the good of the party. During the spring, McCray deliberated over whether to endorse McKaine’s plans or to remove him to placate the conservative wing of the PDP. McCray worried about the presence of CIO-PAC members and other outsiders in his state and even began to question Modjeska Simkins, due to her willingness to form alliances with radicals from outside South Carolina. From Nashville, McKaine wrote back a stirring endorsement of Simkins and convinced his ally “Mac” to side with those who sought to push the PDP outside of strict local political boundaries. While sympathetic to his PDP “domestic
troubles,” McKaine told McCray, “Don’t let unproved friends cause you to always become suspicious of those who have never let you down. . . . Stick with Mrs. Simkins.” After all, McKaine concluded, taking broad-based action would be a “shot in the arm for the PDP,” something the party had desperately needed since the cessation of the tumultuous events of 1944.57

McCray did stick with Simkins, and they both began to fuse PDP goals with those of the SNYC. In the spring of 1946, the SNYC joined the state’s Progressive Democrats and NAACP chapters to organize “Jim Crow Sunday” to boycott all segregated theaters and local transportation systems on the first Sunday of every month. “In the eyes of God,” one pamphlet declared, “all men truly, whether Negro or white, are brothers.”58 In August, McCray implored that “Believers in Human Rights for all men” should boycott every place that segregated white from black in South Carolina. Any person who supported the white primary or used a facility that housed segregated political activities, McCray declared, “is an enemy of American democracy whether he realizes it or not” and “must be made to pay for his un-Democratic acts.” Calling those who continued to support the white primary “traitorous,” the PDP committed itself to the SNYC and the SCHW for a human rights struggle.59

Nationally, SNYC members participated in an NNC campaign that expressed its internationalism by taking an unprecedented step: petitioning the United Nations “on behalf of 13 million oppressed Negro citizens.” Drafted by delegates to its June 1946 Detroit convention (including representatives from the SNYC) and supplemented by eight pages of evidence gathered by the historian Herbert Aptheker, the NNC petition called for an international investigation into “economic, social, and political discrimination resulting from racial oppression” in the United States under Article 71 of the UN Charter. The NNC expressed “profound regret” in a letter to the secretary-general of the United Nations, Trygve Lie, that blacks “having failed to find relief through constitutional appeal, find ourselves forced to bring this vital issue” to the newly created international body. The petition’s announcement was followed by a “universal storm of applause” from the 1,000 delegates in Detroit, and it made international headlines after its formal presentation to the secretary of the UN’s Commission on Human Rights on June 6 in New York. “It will be interesting how the worthies who run the government,” a People’s Voice editorial surmised, “will try to squirm off the hot spot they now occupy by virtue of the . . . petition.”60

Following its submission to the United Nations, Dorothy Burnham brought the petition’s spirit to Paris to expose southern forms of fascism in an interna-
tional forum. As an SNYC delegate to the World Federation Democratic Youth Conference, a group that functioned as a junior United Nations, Burnham appealed to her fellow delegates to condemn the "growing Ku Klux Klan movement and wave of terror against Negroes in the United States." Convinced by her urgent appeal, the delegates, from fifty-three countries, issued a joint statement that cited this terror as "one of the most active fascist forces in the world today," threatening the international cooperative effort for the "consolidation of peace and realization of democracy." Back home, the NNC and the SNYC embarked on a campaign to obtain 5 million endorsement signatures from U.S. citizens, as well as from dozens of international organizations, which included the British Guiana Trade Union Council, the West Indian Negro Association in Trinidad, the Women’s International Democratic Federation, and the Barbados Progressive League. While the petitioners waited for a response, they held people’s tribunals in several cities but especially looked forward to the upcoming Columbia Youth Legislature, where black and white southerners would formulate their roles against Jim Crow in the coming international freedom movement.

In October 1946, over 800 southern delegates convened at the Township Auditorium in Columbia, South Carolina, to map out a human rights struggle for the Southland. “We do not come together as a mock legislature,” the SNYC wrote in the conference program. “We do not intend that the laws which we make here shall end here.” For those three days, the delegates felt like the fate of the world was in their hands. They debated resolutions in conference sessions on youth and labor, peace, veterans, and education and held hearings on voting and civil liberties. The sessions “buzzed with excitement,” according to North Carolina delegate Junius Scales, who also described Columbia’s black community as a “solid bastion of support.” Scales, a white University of North Carolina student who had joined the CP, expressed surprise that “grass-roots Negro youth from all over the South” dominated to such an extent that “Party regulars were lost among them.” According to a press release, the SNYC chose South Carolina because it represented the only state where blacks legally could not participate in the Democratic primaries, but certainly the choice also came as the result of the PDP formation that so openly challenged black disfranchisement. The mock legislature convened in Columbia to show the world that the next generation of blacks and whites could bring democracy to the southern United States.

The legislature was not just another conference. Three of the most signifi-
cant African American leaders of the first half of the twentieth century served as the keynote speakers on successive evenings. The SNYC invited Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Paul Robeson, and W. E. B. Du Bois to Columbia. For a weekend at least, this roster of speakers coming southward reversed the flow of the years of the Second World War when civil rights opportunities drew southerners to the North. Now the SNYC would bring New York to Columbia to signal that the postwar battlefront for civil rights would be a southern one. Its leaders billed Powell as the “modern statesman” from New York City who “led the people on the picket lines” before becoming the “clarion voice of justice” in the U.S. House of Representatives. The SNYC deemed Robeson its hero. His call for democracy had been embraced by “the hopeful and striving men and women of all nations and colors.” Southern youth also called Robeson their hero because he simultaneously represented a “genius” and an “everyman,” a symbolic embodiment of African Americans across class and geographic divides. SNYC saved its highest honor, though, for W. E. B. Du Bois. As an NAACP leader, Pan-African Congress president, historian, and teacher, Du Bois represented the “foremost champion of colonial and oppressed people everywhere.” SNYC leaders presented him with an award for past service, reasoning that without him their movement would never have taken root.

The adoration of Du Bois, Robeson, and Powell only represented part of the delegates’ employment of the past to draw inspiration. Its organizers had lined the walls of the Township Auditorium with the portraits of southern blacks who had been elected to federal office during Radical Reconstruction in the early 1870s. Seeing these portraits, delegate Jack O’Dell remembered them as “fascinating” because “I did not know that there had been black congressmen.” One portrait was of Hiram Revels, a Mississippian who became the first African American elected to the Senate in 1870, and whose grandson, Revels Cayton, went on to serve as executive secretary of the NNC, personifying the connection between southern youth of the 1940s and their ancestors. “The movement of the ‘new South’ today, Esther Cooper declared, “was foreshadowed in the glorious achievements of the Reconstruction period, when white men and black men shared political power in true representative state governments.” Cooper’s vision of Reconstruction echoed a group of black revisionist scholars who since the mid-1930s had sought to undermine the dominant school of professional historians led by Columbia University William Dunning, who depicted blacks as unprepared for citizenship and the era as “tragic.” The SNYC saw itself as the vanguard in dismissing the Dun-
ning school and validating Radical Reconstruction. African American and Marxist scholars resurrected this history, but the SNYC made it matter.

SNYC activists especially embraced Howard Fast’s 1944 novel *Freedom Road* because it mixed contemporary leftist politics with the postbellum history of South Carolina. The novel centered on Gideon Jackson, a former plantation slave, who fought in the Union army, served in Congress, and helped organize a farm for poor whites and freedmen. *Freedom Road* ended, however, when the Ku Klux Klan destroyed the farm and killed Jackson. The novel forcefully argued that Reconstruction did not fail because of corruption or poor planning but because white supremacists terrorized its adherents out of existence. “Not only were the material things wiped out and people slain,” Fast wrote in the afterword, “but the very memory was expunged.”

The use of Fast’s novel helped revive the memory of black militancy during
the previous Reconstruction after the Civil War. "The post-war world is going to be a Reconstruction era," Adam Clayton Powell Jr. concluded in a review of *Freedom Road* in the NNC's *Congress View*. He believed that "if black and white cannot live together . . . then every sacrifice that the fighting men . . . have made will have been in vain." Fast worked with the NNC's cultural committee to organize events in Harlem, Detroit, and along the West Coast. The SNYC encouraged southern youth to read the book by sponsoring an essay contest in 1944. Paula Robeson (no relation to Paul Robeson) from Talladega College in Alabama won the prize, writing, "In very few, if any history classes would one learn . . . [that] Negroes and whites were meeting together, working together, living together and pledging loyalty for the benefit of all." This interracial cooperation showed that there were "no half-way measures about the supreme matter of living together" and insisted that "it is for us, the youth of today, to find or produce, or to become such men" like Gideon Jackson. *Freedom Road*, as applied by the NNC and SNYC, presented "a promise for the future."71

The memory of Reconstruction was never so poignant, however, as when the Columbia Youth Legislature convened. Set in South Carolina like *Freedom Road*, the meeting brought Fast's novel to life inside the Township Auditorium. The white delegates from the University of North Carolina felt as though they had "entered . . . a future we had only dreamed of" and felt the "sheer joy of communication with Negroes as people."72 Then, on Saturday night Howard Fast appeared in Columbia. Fast recalled speaking with a sharecropper en route to the conference, about thirty miles outside of town. The sharecropper had heard of the coming conference in Columbia and told Fast that while there may have been a lot of talk in New York, there would be "a lot of talk in Columbia too" this weekend. When Fast asked what he meant, the sharecropper replied, "Folks talk and they get to moving, don't they?" Fast concurred. For the "first time since Reconstruction in 1868," he observed, "a thousand Negro and white delegates were meeting together in a youth legislature." The portraits of blacks elected during Reconstruction "were only fitting [in] that they above all others should watch the truth emerging from their gallant and much-traduced struggle for freedom and equality." Although more than seventy years separated their struggles, Fast concluded that the "South is changing" again, and the "counterrevolution" won by elite whites would be overturned.73

Following Howard Fast was the personification of Gideon Jackson: Paul Robeson. After singing "Go Down Moses," "Scandalize My Name," and
“Water Boy” to set the mood, Robeson compared the urgent need for action in 1946 with Reconstruction. Robeson thundered, “The history of the Negro people as shown in Freedom Road, as shown in the lives of men like Denmark Vesey, has been one of continuous struggle.” The previous month, Robeson had led the American Crusade to End Lynching to Washington, a campaign that had demanded that President Truman prosecute those responsible for lynching African Americans. This 3,000-person protest at the Lincoln Memorial, co-chaired by Robeson and Albert Einstein, was composed of people from thirty-eight states, including delegates from the SNYC and the NNC. The United States, Robeson said, had no authority to take the lead in prosecuting Nazis at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial when southern whites could lynch returning black soldiers with impunity. Rebuffed by Truman when he led a delegation to Washington in September for action against lynching, Robeson hoped to make good on his threat in Columbia that if the president did not do something to stop lynch mobs, “the Negroes will.” “Today,” he said to the SNYC delegates, “the Negro people refuse to be shot down.” The audience responded with tremendous applause.74

For all its invocations of the past, the SNYC saw this contemporary reconstruction as international. Robeson told the audience how he had witnessed the destruction of Spain’s democracy and worried that the same fate awaited America. Drawing on another international parallel, Robeson explained how in France he had seen how the Vichy government “attacked minorities like the Negro people and the Jewish people. Next, they called everybody a Communist and before you knew it, the jails were filled.” The lesson of the war was that people had to stand up for each other when government tried to suppress dissent, freedom of speech, and the rights of its minorities. “It is our great destiny,” he concluded, that black southerners act like their grandparents did during Reconstruction and take control of the debate over race and rights so that conservatives do not succeed in “scaring every liberal from fighting for the rights of the oppressed people.”75

To the SNYC, battles over U.S. citizenship advanced a broader struggle for human rights. At the conference, delegates from Latin America and Africa spoke in person, and telegrams from other youth leaders from abroad were read aloud. Drawing out the historical influence of the Haitian revolution on the United States, Theodore Baker spoke on how the contemporary U.S. government worried that “a country of Negroes, free and independent, desiring to manage its own conditions of life and advancing on the road to progress would be a bad example for the 13 million Negroes who still struggle for their
liberty.” He urged the southern youth in attendance to see colonialism and disfranchisement as intertwined, saying that the “occupation of the American dollar . . . constitutes another form of slavery.” These delegates connected African American struggles to other peoples of color. “May I remind you that in Africa you have a group of your own race who are also struggling to maintain sovereignty,” a delegate from Liberia said. “If they fail, the race has failed. If they succeed, the race has succeeded.” Less profound but symbolizing America’s hypocritical social construction of race, McKaine noted that “the brown skinned Haitian delegate” had “no difficulty procuring a room in a small white hotel” that barred African Americans of lighter skin tones. By taking the struggle of black Americans out of its local context, the delegates exposed Jim Crow as illogical rather than natural and defined resistance as a responsibility to humankind rather than an exercise in futility.76

The next day, W. E. B. Du Bois brought the conference to a closing crescendo by declaring South Carolina the “firing line” of the struggle for human rights. This line was not “simply for the emancipation of the American Negro and the Negroes of the West Indies [but for] the emancipation for the colored races; and for the emancipation of the white slaves of modern capitalistic monopoly.”77 No person represented the convergence of these Reconstruction and international ideas better than Du Bois. He published his doctoral thesis in 1896, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America*; wrote a 1906 essay in *Collier’s Weekly* that declared “the Negro problem in America” to be “but a local phase of a world problem”; made a seminal contribution to postbellum historiography with *Black Reconstruction*; and had recently convened the Fifth Pan Africanist Conference in England.78 Inside the church at Allen University in Columbia, Du Bois tied all of the strands of the conference together.79 South Carolina stood at the center of the world, Du Bois believed, because it “has led the South for a century” in trying to “build slavery upon freedom” and placing “tyranny upon democracy” and “mob violence on law.” In short, South Carolina would become a test of whether the postwar world would become “a reasonable world.” Du Bois believed that “reason” would prevail if southern black youth took up the cause of human rights.80

While the SNYC discussed the postwar world, Charleston native James Byrnes negotiated its fate. One of President Truman’s first decisions after the death of Roosevelt was to appoint Byrnes, an odious figure to many African Americans, as secretary of state.81 African Americans asked how a man who had defeated a federal antilynching law and denied the right to vote to African
Americans in his home state could lead the United Nations to protect human rights and bring peace. South Carolina activists responded to this appointment by issuing a handbill: "Our Jimmy Byrnes . . . is trying to teach the Bulgarians democracy, [yet] only two out of ten people in his home state take part in elections." The handbill called for the end of the poll tax and for equality of economic opportunity, two issues "our famous son" had overlooked in his mission for world democracy.82 Despite his busy travel schedule as secretary of state, Byrnes remained aware of the developing movement against him. In the fall of 1946, his politics and those of his critics converged, when Byrnes returned from months of peace negotiations in Paris and the youth legislature convened in Columbia.

The states' rights defense of southern Democrats seemed to contradict Byrnes's role as an international mediator. The U.S. government in the postwar period had much more of a vested interest in the internal political affairs of other nations. Dean Acheson of the State Department declared that "this government is resolved that the rights of religious, political and economic minorities shall be protected" and "is defending the rights of weaker peoples democratically." Would Byrnes, upon his return to the United States, echo Acheson's sentiments? On the same Friday night that the SNYC conference began, Byrnes delivered a national radio address to outline the details of what he had accomplished in Paris and of how the United States and Soviet Union would achieve a lasting peace in the postwar world. He worried about "continued if not increasing tension between us and the Soviet Union" but still expressed confidence in a "people's peace." When it came to local sovereignty, Byrnes's statements seemed less clear. "War is inevitable," he told America, "only if states fail to tolerate and respect the rights of other states to ways of life they cannot and do not share." In future negotiations he hoped for a "reconciliation of difference and not a yielding by one state to the arbitrary will of the other."83

Byrnes's rhetoric is open to at least two interpretations. In one sense, his "tolerance" alluded to a "spheres of influence" solution between the Soviet Union and the United States. Surveying the exchanges in Paris between Byrnes and Molotov, a New York Times editorial suggested this possibility. "If the stability of [Europe] cannot be restored there may be a kind of stability in each of the ruptured halves." The problem with this stability though, was that "it may be a stability that will impoverish many millions of helpless people."84 Similarly, the editors of the Chicago Defender prophesized that "so long as the 'get tough with Russia' attitude animates our entire foreign policy, just so long
will any real action in behalf of the colonial peoples be difficult.” In short, this peace would be at the expense of minorities like African Americans in the United States because local tyrants would continue to rule without international interference. Yet the rhetoric of Byrnes and especially of Acheson suggested another interpretation as well. Byrnes’s plea for tolerance of difference also implied that peoples should have the freedom to establish their own democracies. Supporting this latter interpretation, Byrnes said, “No state should ignore or veto the aggregate sentiments of mankind.” These varied interpretations suggest that Americans did not yet define U.S. foreign policy in Cold War dichotomies; Byrnes’s October 1946 speech implied at least two paths for a postwar world.

The delegates and leaders in Columbia, however, did not mince words about Byrnes. They thought they knew him too well. “While Secretary Byrnes was making his nationwide radio address,” a SNYC press release read, “2,680 citizens of his home state joined with delegates . . . in vigorous condemnation of his hypocritical policy of making speeches about democracy in Europe and denying democracy to millions in the South.” The delegates greeted a resolution for his removal from office with “loud applause.” Paul Robeson reinforced this resolution on Saturday night. He declared that “one of the weaknesses of Mr. Byrnes’ position in Paris” was that “America cannot escape [its] own crimes.”

Nobody at the conference, however, worried more about Byrnes’s power than Du Bois. The two men had a history of animus dating back to the First World War and the summer of 1919, when race riots had erupted across America, resulting in at least 100 deaths. Du Bois had hoped this racial violence would dissipate with the return of black veterans, who had proven their citizenship through military service. Byrnes also fretted over the postwar violence, which included a riot in Charleston, but for different reasons. He blamed the disturbances on black veterans in general, and on W. E. B. Du Bois specifically. From the floor of the Senate, Byrnes called for the prosecution of Du Bois under the Espionage Act, though his real target may have been blacks in his home state. Soon after his tirade, Byrnes wrote to an editor of a Charleston paper that “if there were a fair registration, [black citizens] would have a slight majority in our state. We cannot idly brush these facts aside. Unfortunate though it may be,” he concluded, “our consideration of every question must include this consideration of the race question.” With this history in mind, Du Bois told the youth legislature, “Byrnes is the end of a long series of men,” including South Carolina’s own race-baiter, Ben Tillman, “whose eter-
nal damnation is the fact he looked truth in the face and did not see it.” Like Jan Smuts, who called for human rights in the United Nations while repressing blacks in South Africa, Byrnes must “yield to the forward march of civilization.”

This SNYC critique of American foreign policy provoked an immediate response. Governor Ransome J. Williams was among the many white southern Democrats who counterattacked. “It is regrettable,” he told the press, “that ‘Communist elements’ came boldly and brazenly into South Carolina in an effort to undermine Secretary of State Byrnes’s position.” The local white press also interpreted the SNYC conference as subversive. Ignoring other components of the proceedings, the Columbia Record headline quoted only one white delegate and headlined its article: “Russia Is Praised at Negro Meeting.”

More direct, the Beaufort Gazette editorialized that the conference showed that “there is no place” in the Democratic Party for those who “vilitfy the names of such great South Carolinians as John C. Calhoun, Benjamin Ryan Tillman, and E. D. (Cotton Ed) Smith, whose memories are revered by all true South Carolinians to say nothing of Secretary James F. Byrnes, who fortunately in these days of international discord is still in the land of the living.”

But most surprising, and portending liberal anti-Communist policies to come, the New York Times reporter proved the most dismissive. The SNYC’s criticisms of Byrnes “revealed the degree to which the Communist Party has been able to guide the actions of the conference,” the Times reported. As evidence, the author cited a session at which a debate between delegates about the labor movement became a “wholesale denouncement of the AFL.” The article omitted the fact that blacks had denounced the AFL’s discriminatory policies for a decade, and even the author admitted that the attack on Byrnes “was made easy by emphasizing that he is a native of South Carolina, and for a long time has been a leader of the Democratic party [and] has persisted in barring Negroes from . . . political affairs.”

The real reason for the alarm over the conference, the SNYC surmised, was the potential effectiveness of its “program of action.” In a stern rebuttal to the governor and other state legislators who condemned the meeting, SNYC leaders argued that his attack was an “obvious attempt to discredit the highly successful conference.” The resolution against Byrnes that “has drawn your fire,” they wrote, “expressed the increasing recognition of the American people that the foreign and domestic [policies] of our government are inseparable, and that our relations with other powers cannot be entrusted to those who represent the most backward and undemocratic policies in internal af-
fairs.” Importantly, the rebuttal included discussions of American troops in China, the lend-lease policy of Britain that resulted in killings in Indonesia, “bullying” in the Balkans, and the “hysterical ‘get tough with Russia’ attitude” of Byrnes’s foreign policy.94

Criticism from the press aside, the conference made a deep impression on those in attendance. Rose Mae Catchings, a YWCA leader and SNYC member from Tennessee, wrote that “many of the sessions so moved me that tears of joy and satisfaction well-up into my eyes; at times breath became only short-winded gasps. It was great, great, great!” Catchings believed that “[we] now have a rare and extraordinary opportunity,” and after the conference she became a lifelong activist for human rights.95 The conference also convinced W. E. B. Du Bois of the SNYC’s promise. Since the early 1940s, Du Bois had singled out Louis Burnham, James Jackson, and Esther Cooper as the “coming young leaders of the South.” Thereafter, Du Bois kept apprised of the SNYC and had an especially close friendship with Esther Cooper.96 After leaving Columbia, Du Bois compared the conference to the 1909 founding of the NAACP, thirty-five years before. It took “rare courage” for the SNYC to host this conference in the South, he wrote, and unlike the “well-to-do ‘Leaders’” in the North, SNYC leaders “take their stand on the firing line of race-relations.”97

The SNYC movement, mapped out at its mock legislature in Columbia, got off to a promising start. In early January, the organization sent a delegation led by Edward Weaver to Washington that represented eleven southern states. The delegates—among them a black veteran from Mississippi, a white housewife from New Orleans, and a black college student from South Carolina—lobbied for the support of legislators on Capitol Hill for the SNYC’s eight-point legislative program. Welcomed by progressive legislators like Idaho senator Glenn Taylor, who had supported the “Oust Bilbo” campaign, activists also got commitments from less-sympathetic representatives like Lister Hill of Alabama, who agreed to back the anti–poll tax bill. Meanwhile, the Crusade to End Lynching reconvened in Washington to protest the increased racial violence in the South. Two months earlier, an all-white jury in South Carolina had taken only a half hour to exonerate the police officers from Batesburg of all charges in the beating of Isaac Woodard. Crusade to End Lynching participants blamed President Truman for this injustice and gathered in Washington to implore him and Congress to pass a national antilynching statute.98
including Allen University in Columbia and Harbison Junior College, enthusiastic local council presidents reported their membership lists and activities. For example, the three S NYC clubs in Moncks Corner organized a joint conference on labor, health, agriculture, and education. As a guest speaker, the S NYC’s Annie Belle Weston held the audience “spellbound” as she discussed her travels to foreign nations and the “Negro’s part in his own freedom.” Other councils fought for a local library, registered voters, and conducted busing...
surveys. “For the first time in the history of little Moncks Corner,” one council later reported, “[Negro] school children are riding to school in school buses.” The president of one of these councils, Leroy Aiken, a former student at the Leadership Training Institute in Irmo, worked with local SNYC councils and PDP members to achieve this small but significant victory. By the spring of 1947, SNYC reported eleven councils and clubs in South Carolina with a paid membership of over 600.

As the head of the state PDP, McCray believed that the SNYC councils and the PDP could bring the generations into a collaborative movement. Quoting the expression “as South Carolina goes, so goes the South,” McCray reported in 1947 how the PDP had elected councilmen in small towns like Conway and come in second in many other local electoral contests during the last election. “Only this last summer,” he continued, the PDP idea had spread to cities like Little Rock, Birmingham, Jackson, and Miami. He saw the PDP as both an independent party and a “bludgeon between the major parties” to get African Americans the vote.

The SNYC also secured the services of Herbert Aptheker for a tour of southern colleges. Aptheker, the noted white Communist scholar of African American history, had formed a close relationship with SNYC members the previous year through Du Bois. Organizing for the Columbia Youth Legislature, Modjeska Simkins wrote to SNYC headquarters in Birmingham that she “was particularly happy to hear . . . [that] Mr. Aptheker” would attend. At the conference, Aptheker spoke and led a two-hour discussion on “The Negro and Politics: An Historical Introduction.” After the conference, the “innumerable requests” from delegates for his “splendid address” convinced Louis Burnham to hire Aptheker for a monthlong speaking tour of black southern colleges.

In early February, Aptheker set off on a twelve-stop tour of the South to speak on black history and on how scholars and “fighters for the Negro people’s liberation . . . have been attempting to rescue this past from oblivion and vilification.” He lectured to large gatherings in college chapels, taught as many as six classes in a single day, and discussed the SNYC with students at informal gatherings. Aptheker focused his speeches on how the “United States announced its entry into the world of nations with a flaming manifesto of revolution” in the eighteenth century, yet “twenty percent of [the] country’s population was in chains.” The contradiction was compounded, Aptheker argued, as the United States took on a larger role in the world through the United Nations while its African American and working-class white populations in the South remained disfranchised. After Aptheker’s University of
North Carolina visit, SNYC vice president and fellow Communist Junius Scales wrote that he had “never seen an audience so impressed.” He specifically mentioned Aptheker’s “magnificent” handling of the question-and-answer session and reported that “a Negro preacher in the audience thanked him from the floor for the service he was rendering his people, and the entire audience applauded at length.” Aptheker’s six pamphlets at this event and others sold out, so the SNYC distributed copies of the newly printed Du Bois “Behold the Land Speech” to recruit new members. The success of Aptheker’s tour emboldened young southerners to question their place in the South, past and present. Contrary to the conclusions of the Dunning school of historical thought and even of the contemporary sociologist Gunnar Myrdal that blacks became “enfranchised without their asking for it,” Aptheker argued that blacks won the right to vote through their own activism, which now assumed a global dimension.102

Near the end of his tour, Aptheker spent a weekend at the Columbia home of Mrs. Simkins to assess the SNYC’s progress in the four months since the historic conference.103 Soon thereafter, Simkins wrote to Aptheker expressing feelings of both hope and distress. In early January, Secretary of State James Byrnes resigned due to personal battles with Truman over the president’s “Fair Deal” reform policies, which included a civil rights platform. South Carolina activists were vindicated in their assertion that the Jim Crow politician Byrnes had no legitimacy in broadcasting freedom to the world when “forty-three percent of the [state’s] electorate” had had the vote stolen from them.104 On the basis of this disfranchisement, an almost exclusively white voting bloc in South Carolina had elected segregationist Strom Thurmond, a Fifteenth Amendment violation that the federal government brushed aside, choosing instead to intensify a “witch hunt that seems hell-bent against all who would want the right thing done about anything.” Although she was “still slugging” in Columbia, Simkins reported that “general affairs in the Capital relative to the world picture” made her “all torn up about everything.”105

The lack of connection with organized labor represented one reason Simkins felt “torn up” about the movement’s future direction in South Carolina. At the end of the Second World War, the CIO leadership recognized the largely unorganized South as the Achilles’ heel of organized labor. So long as race continued to divide industrial workers below the Mason-Dixon Line, they remained unorganized, with low pay and no protections, and northern
industrialists increasingly took advantage of these southern conditions by moving their factories there. With the wartime no-strike clause rescinded, the CIO leadership decided to commit hundreds of organizers and upwards of a million dollars to a campaign they called “Operation Dixie.” Yet the program would prove doomed nearly from the start due to the cautious outlook of the CIO in 1945. The hierarchical leadership that Van Bittner had established in the steel industry after NNC organizers helped create a powerful union in the North, as well as the lack of CIO support for the independent SNYC union movement among tobacco workers in Richmond during the late 1930s, revealed that the CIO leadership was less interested in a “culture of unity” than the narrower goals of dues and union recognition.

Osceola McKaine tried to bridge both sides of this coalition, as it seemed to come apart along the seams of race. In a state of shock over the behavior of CIO unionists he encountered as a field organizer for the SCHW in 1946, McKaine wrote to CIO vice president Allan Haywood that “a certain number of white CIO organizers in this region” might “be readily mistaken for AFL . . . if one judged them by racial attitudes.” These organizers “should be told,” he continued, “that the CIO expects them . . . whenever and wherever possible, to practice what the CIO preaches.” CIO organizers, Haywood replied, dealt with race in a “realistic way.” Only a month later, McKaine saw the fragmenting results of this policy, as blacks in South Carolina and elsewhere “turn[ed] their backs” on interracialism. Thus, although critical of the CIO for its lack of internal civil rights unionism, McKaine also felt compelled to defend it from the alternative of segregated locals and black nationalism. Blacks and whites won the war “on the basis of unity,” he said in one statement, and the postwar CIO represented an “outstanding example in which white and Negro laborers are cooperating.”

The CIO’s fear of turning off racist white workers, however, had direct implications for the SNYC. The CIO did not want its field workers to engage in political activities, but at the same time it expected to organize laborers in the racially divided South. The SNYC had hoped for strong union representation at its Columbia meeting, noting that its movement needed to be “connected with the CIO drive to organize 1 million underpaid workers in the South.” Its leaders invited Philip Murray, the head of the CIO, to the conference, but Murray declined. They instead received a commitment from Mike Quill, the white Communist leader of the Transport Workers Union in New York, to keynote the labor session. But Quill did not show up at the last minute. As Van Bittner, the head of Operation Dixie, made clear on October 19, 1946—
coincidentally during the same weekend as the Columbia Youth Legislature—the CIO leadership wanted nothing to do with the SNYC or “any other organization living off the CIO.” The SNYC’s militant and international agenda, most prominently represented in Columbia by Du Bois and the Council on African Affairs, which had forged connections to international trade unions, illuminated a view of unionism that made Bittner queasy. Mid-level CIO organizers, especially black ones, saw the SNYC’s goals as parallel to their own. These delegates came from mine, furniture, public, steel, and tobacco unions, all within the left wing of the CIO. The CIO’s national leaders, meanwhile, became increasingly antagonistic.

Tobacco unions seemed a promising avenue into southern labor since SNYC members had organized several thousand of these workers in the late 1930s. By the Second World War, the most militant black organizing drive emerged in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Tobacco organizers there showed that the achievements the SNYC made in 1930s Richmond had similar potential in the 1940s Carolinas. SNYC endorsed the activities with Theodosia Simpson, a key leader in this black-majority union movement who became a board member of the SNYC. The SNYC hoped to spread the union to other tobacco regions like Charleston, and Simpson attempted to organize SNYC councils in Winston-Salem for younger tobacco workers and children of older union members. On his February tour, Aptheker spoke to thousands of workers in the Camel Local in Winston-Salem, a union described by the SNYC as “unique in developing a young Negro working class leadership, specifically among women tobacco workers.” But organizers like Simpson were exceptional in the CIO. Soon after the conference, the branch of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers called a strike against American Tobacco in Charleston while launching organizing drives in Columbia and Sumter, as well as at locations in other states. Unlike the previous SNYC organizing role in Richmond against American Tobacco, SNYC members played a much smaller part in this union campaign. Its leaders signed a letter supporting the union’s strike but did little else. Black and mostly Communist, the few union leaders who worked with SNYC activists hoped to loosen southern labor from its national CIO straitjacket. With the national CIO becoming hostile to these ideas, this symbiotic connection became less possible. The difference between unionism that reified Jim Crow and an internationalist movement that broke it apart became apparent. “Bittner’s policy against outside aid goes a great deal deeper than the announced quarantine on Communists,” a Saturday Evening Post reporter observed. “The South has never looked kindly on imported
ideas of any character.” Yet these outside connections and pressures, SNYC activists realized, represented exactly what local movements needed to break down antidemocratic practices.

The threat of another war, attacks on civil liberties, and the increasing U.S. military role abroad in places like Greece and Turkey forced SNYC leaders into an increasingly anti-American foreign policy position. The Truman Doctrine, announced by the president in March 1947, purported to support free peoples in other parts of the world, but the SNYC, like other organizations on the black left, saw this doctrine as an American takeover of Britain’s former colonial role. The commitment, the SNYC wrote in a press release, “to expend whatever is necessary to oppose ‘communism’ in any part of the world . . . is [not] that different from the doctrine [with] which Hitler duped the German people and the people of many other free countries.” One month later, the new secretary of state, George Marshall, returned from Moscow convinced that diplomacy would no longer work. Two months later, the Taft-Hartley Act, passed by both houses despite Truman’s veto, demanded a purge of Communists in the labor movement if unions wanted to continue to receive government protection. The SNYC saw this new federal turn as disastrous. “Many international governments and individuals look with question at the American program of foreign policy,” Edward Weaver of SNYC wrote, “because they wonder if the application of American democracy to their countries (many of whom have colored peoples in them) will mean the same patterns of segregation and discrimination.” Seeing the “Negro problem” as primarily “one of economics,” Weaver added with pessimism that the “present . . . hysteria and war drive” made him doubt whether “ordinary channels of social change” like a “legislative approach” would work. Even the NNC petition to the United Nations, attributable in part to Eleanor Roosevelt’s prioritizing of Cold War imperatives over racial discrimination as chair of the Commission on Human Rights, was dismissed by the UN’s General Assembly with little comment. With the SNYC attacked as a “Communist front” organization, previous channels of protest now seemed blocked.

Weaver’s pessimism was not shared by Walter White of the NAACP, who saw encouraging signs that the federal government would support racial reforms in exchange for cooperation with new Cold War prerogatives. The near-fatal beating of Isaac Woodard in Batesburg, South Carolina, occurred in February, and it was only through John McCray’s muckraking journalism that the national NAACP leadership decided to champion his cause by the summer. The NAACP framed this outrage as an international embarrassment,
provoking President Truman to take a tougher stance on civil rights matters. Although the Missouri-born president often employed racial epithets in his speech, Truman nonetheless saw the lynching of Woodard as symbolic of a larger problem. “When a mayor and a City Marshal can take a Negro off a bus in South Carolina, beat him up and put out one of his eyes, and nothing is done by the State Authorities,” Truman wrote, “something is radically wrong with the system.” This outrage was in part strategic. Truman understood by 1948 that the black vote was becoming crucial to an electoral victory. With the SNYC putting its energy and resources into the campaign of the Progressive Party and Henry Wallace, a third-party effort that criticized U.S. foreign policy and called for a broad array of civil rights reforms, Truman might lose black Democrats. Thus, during the same year of the Truman Doctrine, the president launched a Commission for Civil Rights, presented a platform that condemned lynching and the poll tax, and called for the desegregation of interstate transportation. When in June 1947 Truman said that Americans “cannot wait another decade or another generation to remedy these evils,” SNYC leaders must have thought he had quoted one of their own statements.119

The Cold War activism climate in the United States, however, was not just the result of the Truman administration’s policies. The CP also had detrimental effects on the SNYC, because many of the latter’s leaders were CP members or sympathizers, meaning that they were not only susceptible to governmental prosecution but also subject to an increasingly domineering organization. Junius Scales, an SNYC vice president, wrote a memoir that provides a rare glimpse into this side of the domestic Cold War. According to Scales, the SNYC had shown the CP that they “could organize and move the most militant and advanced young Negroes [and] enlist the support of much of the Negro middle class.” Yet CP leaders in 1946 and 1947 became dictatorial and divisive as they became isolated from liberals through the sharpened dichotomies of the Cold War. The party jargon that called for “democratic centralism” often seemed like a “pyramid of dictatorships” to Scales. The relationship between the CP and the SNYC was also generational and patriarchal. To SNYC activists and CP members like Esther Cooper, Communist leaders like Sam Hall and Harry Haywood seemed to have a cult of personality about themselves that turned off younger activists, who struggled in the trenches for ethical goals rather than personal ones. The desire to change the CP from within (as well as not link the SNYC directly to it), combined with increasing threats of violence against Cooper and her husband, James Jackson, contributed to their decision to leave the SNYC shortly after the Columbia Youth Legislature in order to
join the CP leadership in Detroit. Moreover, with increasing Cold War hostility, local CP leaders became “handcuffed by policies of Stalin’s Soviet Party, which cared nothing for the Communist parties of other countries except to the extent to which they were immediately useful to the Soviet Union.” The American CP, Scales believed, “narrowed and undercut” many of its ongoing struggles “to make the Bill of Rights a blazing reality” by the way it “glorified all things Soviet” and portrayed the expansion of the Soviet Union into other parts of world as “the advance of social revolution and the well-being of all people everywhere.” As Soviet leaders trampled on the human rights of independent peoples abroad, it became harder and harder for SNYC members to see their movement as parallel to Stalin’s goals. This separation would “drive wedges between the Negro middle class and the Negro workers,” as well as between CP members of the SNYC and the larger grassroots membership.

The SNYC’s postwar internationalism in South Carolina allowed it to develop and act in ways that went far beyond civil rights reform. By placing their local struggles into international contexts, SNYC activists embraced a broader human rights agenda. This allowed them and their allies to see beyond the fixed racial caste system of South Carolina. As late as 1940, whites controlled the ballot, the benches in the local park, and even southern history. The SNYC urged local blacks to resist this state of physical and mental dominance through a global politics that linked them to other working-class peoples around the world. This link became much more direct when SNYC activists had the opportunity to travel abroad and foster connections to citizens of other nations, and, in the case of the Youth Legislature, bring international delegates to Columbia. Meanwhile, black veterans returning home also experienced circumstances very different from their southern upbringing. These unofficial international diplomats discussed what they had seen with local blacks and formulated plans to put their new ideas into action. This syncretic strategy—combining the international and the local—launched a widespread movement against Jim Crow. The fusion of the SNYC with local activists in the PDP and the NAACP in South Carolina, culminating in the “flash of lightning in Columbia,” made the state in 1946 a key front for the struggle for antiracist democracies around the world.

Yet the SNYC movement in South Carolina suffered from the same ties that helped galvanize it. As the United States and the Soviet Union became more antagonistic toward each other, the CP, which had helped provide such a rich array of connections to grassroots democratic movements, also increasingly...
compromised them. When James Byrnes and Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, discussed the fate of the world in 1946, they ironically had much more in common than SNYC leaders had surmised. SNYC members argued that Byrnes’s style of diplomacy stemmed from the way he wielded power in his own state of South Carolina. The disfranchisement, poll taxes, and segregation that served as the backbone of his domestic political career exposed Byrnes’s foreign policy as an attempt to create similar dictatorships elsewhere. What SNYC members did not realize or admit was that the Soviet Union had acted with similar intentions. Like Byrnes, Soviet leaders also made deals and advanced on territories at the expense of the democratic rights of the people they affected. Having based so much of their international agenda on CP premises, certain SNYC leaders now had trouble breaking from them because it would mean a refutation of their very identities as activists.

Liberals found this stubborn loyalty to Communism difficult to understand because of its hypocrisy but failed to appreciate the value of SNYC’s international political ideology or its accomplishments. While the SNYC and the Wallace campaign suffered defeat at the hands of red-baiters and race-baiters in local towns in the South, as well as suppression by the State Department and the attorney general, they had also helped force a blueprint for civil rights onto the federal agenda. The militant pressure that the South Carolina movement, as elsewhere, placed on the Democratic Party, led President Truman to create a civil rights commission. This commission issued a 1947 report entitled To Secure These Rights, which outlined goals very similar to those of the SNYC even as government anti-Communism marginalized it as an organization. The SNYC and other civil rights groups, the report’s authors concluded, tried to “prove our democracy an empty fraud,” which had made the “mishandling of any racial, religious, or national group in the United States . . . not only . . . our internal problem.” Civil rights action now had an “international reason.” One year later, Truman acted on the report by issuing Executive Order 9981, which desegregated America’s armed forces.122

Federal officials endorsed some of the goals of SNYC while simultaneously isolating its network of activists. The black middle-class and liberal white leaders that had endorsed the SNYC in 1946 now endorsed Truman over Wallace for president in 1948. Suppression of the SNYC would cause its demise in 1949 and push South Carolina far from the center of the next generation’s southern freedom struggles. “I went to Charleston,” a former PDP leader wrote McCray in 1957, and “there was little imagination, little dash and daring.” This lack of action caused him to ask, “Who in South Carolina is
traveling about ‘talking it up’ as we used to do it five and ten years ago? Has every body gotten old and lost heart?” McKaine, at least, became disheartened with the scene there—by August 1947 he was back in Ghent, Belgium, reporting on the freedoms blacks could experience there while continuing to agitate for rights back home. After all, he wrote, “Frederick Douglass fought slavery from this side of the Atlantic.” In the Cold War years to come, many other black activists would join McKaine overseas.\textsuperscript{123} Back home, Simkins and others in the s\textsc{nyc} continued the fight, but they did so with mixed feelings about a domesticated form of civil rights activism. The s\textsc{nyc}’s Rose Mae Withers Catchings would later apply her experience by becoming a leader in the international movement against apartheid in South Africa, but the overall impact on black students and workers in places like Moncks Corner and Anderson seemed less apparent by the 1950s.\textsuperscript{124} As one former P\textsc{dp} member wrote to John McCray, “When I think of [Roy] Wilkins, and Martin Luther King . . . I have to laugh” about how their earlier struggles seemed all but forgotten. “Yes, they are getting the front pages now,” he concluded, “but I doubt that they had the novel experiences that we had.”\textsuperscript{125} The South a decade later would again become the “firing line,” as activists challenged the lily-white southern Democratic Party at its 1964 Atlantic City convention and struggled to secure the vote for African Americans. Yet, as in the first Reconstruction, the “very memory” of South Carolina’s postwar internationalist movement for economic justice had seemingly disappeared from popular memory.\textsuperscript{126}