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Matthew Nichter

*Rollins College*, [mnichter@rollins.edu](mailto:mnichter@rollins.edu)

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# “Did Emmett Till Die in Vain? Organized Labor Says No!”: The United Packinghouse Workers and Civil Rights Unionism in the Mid-1950s

Matthew F. Nichter

**A**s Grace Falgoust approached the courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi, on the morning of September 20, 1955, she felt the weight of hostile stares. On the surface, little distinguished the plainly dressed thirty-four-year-old from the hundreds of other white people who had come to observe the trial of J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant, the men accused of brutally killing fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. However, since her arrival in Sumner the previous day, Falgoust had been passing out leaflets that described the defendants as “depraved.” To make matters worse, some locals spotted Falgoust and her interracial delegation from the United Packinghouse Workers of America sharing a picnic lunch together. Word quickly spread that the union activists were race-mixers. “Evidently our ‘sin’ of integration was far greater in the minds of these people than the gruesome murder of a Negro child,” Falgoust observed.<sup>1</sup>

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1. “Report by Mrs. Grace Falgoust on the Observations of the Delegation of UPWA Women from Louisiana Attending the Trial at Sumner, Miss., Sept. 19–23,” September 24, 1955, folder 7, box 369, United Packinghouse, Food, and Allied Workers Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison (hereafter UPWA Records).

Scholars have examined the Till case from a variety of perspectives, producing insightful analyses of newspaper bias, gender discourse, and artistic representation. More recently, historians have begun to document how Till's murder and the acquittal of his killers sparked a wave of marches and rallies, involving tens of thousands of people in every region of the United States. "Not since Pearl Harbor has the country been so outraged," exclaimed *The Crisis*.<sup>2</sup> While the scale and geographic scope of these protests is becoming clearer, little has been written about the labor movement's role in them. This inattention presumably stems from an assumption that union leaders in the mid-1950s were loath to champion the cause of a Black teenager accused of sexually harassing a white woman, especially in the face of a growing racist backlash against the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. But the labor movement was not a monolith during this period, and the Till case galvanized many union activists. In fact, the largest rallies condemning the murder and acquittal were sponsored by unions. Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Bradley, thought "the unions were just fantastic."<sup>3</sup>

The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), an interracial union known for its unusually strong commitment to African American equality, launched a vigorous campaign on behalf of Emmett Till in both the North and the South.<sup>4</sup> In Chicago, the UPWA's stronghold, the union's response to the Till murder intersected with its ongoing efforts to defend Black residents of the Trumbull Park housing project from attacks by white mobs. In the sugar refinery towns of southern Louisiana, where racial divisions and anticommunism had nearly destroyed the UPWA just a few years earlier, a series of tumultuous strikes led workers like Grace Falgoust to question traditional ideas about gender and race—and to demand justice for Emmett Till.

In addition to revising our image of a signal event in African American history, this essay contributes to wider historiographic debates over the relationship between organized labor and the Black freedom struggle. The burgeoning "whiteness" literature has examined European American workers' assimilation of racist ideology and the complicity of labor unions in the subordination of African Americans.

2. "Editorials: Till Protest Meeting," *The Crisis*, November 1955. There is a vast secondary literature on the Till case. On the murder and trial, see esp. Anderson, *Emmett Till*. On protest, see esp. Tyson, *Blood of Emmett Till*, 190–201; Gorn, *Let the People See*, 190–95. On media coverage, see, e.g., Houck and Grindy, *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press*; Metress, "Truth Be Told." On gender discourse, see Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White*, 86–110. On collective memory, see, e.g., Tell, *Remembering Emmett Till*. On artistic representation, see, e.g., Pollock and Metress, *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination*.

3. "Harlem Rally," *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1955; "20,000 Unionists in N.Y. Protest the Till Lynching," *National Guardian*, October 10, 1955; Mamie Till-Mobley, interviews by Clenora Hudson-Weems, January 6, 1988, and March 24, 1988, transcript, in Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, 227.

4. On the UPWA and African Americans, see esp. Horowitz, "Negro and White"; Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor*; Halpern and Horowitz, *Meatpackers*; Halpern, "The CIO and the Limits of Labor-Based Civil Rights Activism"; Halpern, "Interracial Unionism"; Fehn, "Race for Justice"; Fehn, "African-American Women"; Fehn, "The Only Hope We Had"; Warren, "Limits of Social Democratic Unionism"; Sidorick, *Condensed Capitalism*, 132–209; Hope, *Equality of Opportunity*.

But whiteness scholarship has done little to illuminate the contexts and strategies that have fostered durable interracial working-class solidarity. Greater attention to exceptional cases like the UPWA can help address this lacuna.<sup>5</sup>

A second body of scholarship, more attuned to differences in racial practices within the US labor movement, has highlighted the destructive impact of anti-communism on unions with impressive records of challenging white supremacy.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s gravely weakened many left-led unions, but it did not destroy them all. The UPWA represents an important link between the “civil rights unionism” of the 1930s and 1940s and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

### **“Mrs. Bradley, Your Fight Is Our Fight”: Chicago Packinghouse Workers Respond**

The Illinois Central train carrying Emmett Till’s mutilated body announced its arrival back in Chicago on September 2, 1955, with a piercing air-horn blast. The following day UPWA District 1, representing packinghouse union locals in the Windy City, issued its first press release, pointing out that racial violence was not confined to the South:

Our union heartily endorses and welcomes the statement by Mayor Richard J. Daley . . . urging that President Eisenhower act in securing justice in the Mississippi murder of young Till. We wish to point out to Mayor Daley, however . . . that right in his own backyard in Trumbull Park, Negro men, women, and children have been besieged, stoned, and threatened by the same kind of white supremacists as those who lynched Emmett Till in Mississippi.<sup>7</sup>

A day later, the UPWA District 1 Women’s Activities Committee held its annual Labor-Community Tea, attended by 150 packinghouse workers and representatives of various community groups. The committee pledged to donate \$300 to Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Bradley, to defray funeral costs and grocery bills.<sup>8</sup> That same afternoon, UPWA organizer Frank Brown addressed a rally at Greater Bethesda Baptist Church sponsored by the Chicago branch of the NAACP. Brown

5. For an assessment of the CIO by an influential whiteness scholar, see Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness*, 199–234.

6. Recent studies of left-led unions and African Americans include Gilpin, *Long Deep Grudge*; Parker, *Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement*, 83–115; Cole, *Dockworker Power*; Phillips, *Renegade Union*; Bérubé, “No Race-Baiting”; Taylor, *Reds at the Blackboard*. For debate over the Red Scare’s impact on the relationship between organized labor and the Black freedom struggle, see, e.g., Hall, “Long Civil Rights Movement”; Arnesen, “No Graver Danger”; Biondi, “Response to Eric Arnesen”; Lang, “Freedom Train Derailed”; Jones, “Unknown Origins”; Arnesen, “Civil Rights and the Cold War at Home”; Goldfield, *Southern Key*.

7. UPWA District 1 press release, September 3, 1955, folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records. District 1 comprised UPWA locals in Wisconsin and eastern Illinois, with the bulk of its membership in Chicago.

8. “Dist. 1 Women Hold Tea; Aid Till Boy’s Mother,” *Packinghouse Worker*, September, 1955; “Trophy,” *Packinghouse Worker*, September 1955.

complained that the National Guard had been dispatched to protect Emmett Till's murderers as they awaited trial in Mississippi, but not to restrain the white mobs that routinely terrorized Black residents of the Trumbull Park housing project in Chicago.<sup>9</sup>

On September 8, two days after her son was laid to rest, Mamie Bradley spoke at a rally for the first time (fig. 1). Sponsored by UPWA District 1, the event was held at the union's South Side meeting hall, where a thousand packinghouse workers jammed the auditorium. "Mrs. Bradley, we assembled here are members of a labor union, and your fight is our fight," proclaimed district director Charles Hayes. A collection was taken up, and Bradley gratefully accepted a gift of \$358.33. "If you will stand by me, I will stand by you," she promised. "I shall fight to the end."<sup>10</sup>

On September 23, J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant were acquitted of Emmett Till's murder by an all-white jury in Mississippi. Two days later, the Chicago NAACP staged a massive rally at the Metropolitan Community Church. The UPWA organized a "protest march and parade" from its union hall to the church. Featured speakers at the rally included Charles Hayes of the UPWA, journalist Simeon Booker, Chicago NAACP executive board chairman (and United Auto Workers organizer) Willoughby Abner, and honorary "Mayor of Bronzeville" John Earl Lewis. Prosecution witnesses Mandy Bradley and Willie Reed, who fled Mississippi after testifying against Milam and Bryant, were also introduced. Ten thousand people showed up to the event, the majority of whom could not fit inside the building. Chicago NAACP president Cora Patton and the UPWA's Frank Brown addressed the overflow crowd outside. Several days later, Brown and Lewis were the keynote speakers at a protest meeting sponsored by the youth wing of the Chicago NAACP.<sup>11</sup>

During September, UPWA District 1 collected fifty thousand signatures on a petition initiated by its Women's Activities Committee, demanding that President Eisenhower call a special session of Congress to pass civil rights legislation. In early October, Mississippi senator James Eastland and his Senate Internal Security

9. Carl Hirsch, "Lynching of 14-Year-Old Boy Arouses Nation," *The Worker* (DuSable edition), September 11, 1955.

10. "Did Emmett Till Die in Vain? Organized Labor Says No!," September 8, 1955, folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records; "Presidential Petition on Emmet [sic] Till Case," September 9, 1955, video recording, CBS News Archive, New York, NY; "Packinghouse Workers Give to Till's Mom," *Chicago Defender* (Chicago edition), September 17, 1955; "Chicago UPWA Rally Raps Slaying; Bias Groups Twist Econ Screws," *CIO News*, September 19, 1955.

11. Robert Birchman, "10,000 Jam Till Mass Meet Here," *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1955; "Did Emmett Till Die in Vain? Organized Labor Says No! Attend the NAACP Mass Rally," September 25, 1955, folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records; "Unite Youth for Justice and Equality for All at Chicago Youth Memorial to Emmet [sic] Louis Till," September 30, 1955, in Bracey and Meier, *Papers of the NAACP, Part 18, Series C*, reel 14. Two UPWA officials served on the Chicago NAACP branch's executive committee (Charles Hayes and Russell Lasley). Dick Durham estimated that packinghouse workers accounted for approximately 2,000 of the Chicago NAACP's 10,000 members. *Freedom's Call*, January 1955, masthead, in Bracey, Harley, and Meier, *Papers of the NAACP, Part 26, Series C*, reel 1; Richard Durham to UPWA International Executive Board, "Program Activities for 1955," p. 21, folder 4, box 368, UPWA Records.

DID EMMETT TILL  
DIE IN VAIN?  
ORGANIZED LABOR SAYS  
NO!



SEPTEMBER  
8, 1955 -  
7PM

HEAR THE MOTHER  
MRS. MAMIE BRADLEY  
AT  
DISTRICT ONE, UPWA-CIO  
PROTEST = MEETING = THURSDAY  
STEWARDS, OFFICERS, EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS AND ALL  
PERSONS INTERESTED IN  
JUSTICE  
ARE URGED TO ATTEND THIS MEETING - There must never be another  
LYNCHING!  
Issued by District One, UPWA-CIO

Figure 1. The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) was the first organization to sponsor a rally featuring Emmett Till's mother as a speaker. Over the next several weeks, Mamie Bradley spoke at dozens of rallies across the United States, sponsored by labor unions, churches, and the NAACP. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Subcommittee (SISS) came to Chicago to conduct an investigation into the use of the postal system to spread "Communist propaganda." Members of District 1 picketed the SISS meeting, carrying signs that read, "Senator Eastland—Who Killed Emmett Till?" The protesters distributed a handbill declaring, "Eastland's Witchhunts in Chicago Won't Stop Child Lynchings in Mississippi."<sup>12</sup>

### **Hot Stuff: Dick Durham and the National Campaign**

The UPWA's national response to the Till murder was coordinated by Richard Durham, who headed the union's Program Department. "Dick Durham was a militant," recalled a colleague. "He . . . provided leadership [that most] Negroes don't know about, but boy, he was hot stuff." Born in Mississippi in 1917, Durham grew up in Chicago and briefly attended Northwestern University. Employed by the Works Progress Administration's Writers Project during the Depression, he emerged as one of Chicago's most prominent Black activist-intellectuals in the years following World War II. He was the main creative force behind several landmark radio series that dramatized the struggles and achievements of African Americans, including WMAQ's award-winning "Destination Freedom" (1948–50). A leading figure in the Radio Writers Guild, Durham was also involved in a union drive at the *Chicago Defender*, which may explain why he was fired from the paper's editorial staff.<sup>13</sup>

The UPWA initially hired Durham to work in its Publicity Department, where his writing skills, organizational savvy, and encyclopedic knowledge of African American history impressed his coworkers. In early 1953, the union overhauled its Education Department and invited Durham to head a new Program Department, tasked with ensuring that the UPWA's broader social agenda was actively pursued throughout the organization (fig. 2). Durham—who was a member of the Communist Party at the time,<sup>14</sup> unbeknownst to most UPWA officials—thus became the union's point man on civil rights.<sup>15</sup>

12. "Union Carries Fight for Justice to Scene of Trial," *Packinghouse Worker*, October 1955; *Chicago Defender* (Chicago edition), October 15, 1955, p. 35 photo caption; "To the Citizens of Chicago," undated [October 7, 1955], folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records.

13. Oscar Brown Jr., interview by Julieanna Richardson, September 19, 2000, video recording, The HistoryMakers, Chicago; "Top Offices Are Refilled in Chicago," *Guild Reporter*, December 1, 1944; Williams, *Word Warrior*.

14. Oscar Brown Jr., a UPWA Program Department staffer who remained lifelong friends with Durham, recalled that he and Durham were both Communist Party members when the UPWA tapped Durham to head the Program Department. Oscar Brown Jr., interview by Cyril Robinson, September 23, 1995, digital transcript, Illinois Labor History Society, Chicago; see also FBI case file #100-HQ-367649 (subject: Richard Isadore Durham), Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC.

15. Williams, *Word Warrior*, 97–112; Ralph Helstein, interview by Elizabeth Balanoff, July 16, 1974, transcript, pp. 271–72, Oral History Project in Labor History, Roosevelt University Archives, Chicago. As Program Department head, Durham worked under the supervision of UPWA international vice presidents Russell Lasley and Tony Stephens, who headed the union's Anti-Discrimination and Organization Departments, respectively.



Figure 2. Richard Durham (pictured here circa 1949) headed the UPWA Program Department during the mid-1950s. Durham's staff were tasked with ensuring that the union actively challenged racism in the workplace and in the wider community. Photo by Dion A. Stams, Sr. Courtesy of the Vivian G. Harsh Collection, Chicago Public Library.

Durham had little difficulty convincing UPWA regional bodies to pass resolutions condemning the Till murder, such as the one approved unanimously by District 3 officers in Des Moines, calling for a special session of Congress to pass stronger civil rights legislation. UPWA members introduced similar resolutions at state and regional Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) gatherings. Addressing the California state CIO convention, packinghouse organizer Arthur Morrison called on union leaders to “get off their hands and get into action.” He criticized labor spokesmen who extolled the United States as a beacon of freedom for people around the world “after what’s happened in Mississippi . . . let’s straighten out America.”<sup>16</sup>

As in Chicago, UPWA locals in Kansas City and other meatpacking centers participated in mass rallies to protest the Till murder and verdict. In early October, the union embarked on a national petition campaign to demand a federal investigation of the Till case and the passage of robust antilynching and anti-poll tax legislation.<sup>17</sup>

The most unusual component of the UPWA's response to the Till murder was a decision to send eight union activists to Sumner, Mississippi, to observe the trial of Bryant and Milam firsthand. The UPWA representatives traveled in three separate regional delegations that somehow never crossed paths during their time in Mississippi. Two of the delegations—one from Chicago, the other from Louisiana—produced detailed reports about their experiences.

16. “More UPWA Districts Act on Till Outrage,” *Packinghouse Worker*, October 1955; “Union Protest in Till Death,” *Des Moines Register*, October 6, 1955; “California CIO Demands Federal Action on Mississippi,” *Southerner* (Dalton, GA), December 1955.

17. UPWA-CIO District 4, “Mass Memorial Meeting for Emmitt [sic] Louis Till,” September 25, 1955, folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records; “UPWA Board Opens Petition Drive for Federal Civil Rights Laws,” *Packinghouse Worker*, October 1955.



### **"This Is Where I Belong": Frank London Brown**

Frank London Brown and his wife Evelyn were among the thousands of Chicagoans who waited in line at Roberts Temple Church of God to pay their last respects to Emmett Till. Horrified by the sight of the teenager's swollen, battered face, the Browns identified with the courage of Emmett's mother, Mamie Bradley. They too wanted the whole world to know the ugly reality of racial violence: ever since moving into the Trumbull Park housing project the previous year, the Browns and their young children faced an almost daily barrage of rocks, bricks, broken bottles, and explosives that mobs of angry whites hurled at Black tenants. Frank's stomach was cut open during one of these episodes, leaving him with a permanent scar; Evelyn's nerves eventually got so frazzled that she broke out in hives. For all that, the Browns chose to remain in Trumbull Park. As Frank told a reporter, "This is where I belong. . . . I feel that I have a duty to stay out here, a duty to every Negro in the world, a duty to every white person in the world that believes in democracy, not to let them down by showing that mobs can win. . . . They will have to carry me out of here."<sup>18</sup>

No one who knew Frank Brown was particularly surprised when he volunteered to attend the trial of Till's killers. Hired as District 1 program coordinator by the UPWA six months earlier, Brown was responsible for implementing the union's civil rights agenda in Chicago. Of the eight UPWA representatives who traveled to Mississippi in 1955, only Brown lived in the North.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1927, Brown moved to Chicago with his family while still in grade school. Growing up on the South Side, he was exposed to both poverty and protest. He watched neighbors physically resist the eviction of his family, moving furniture and clothing back in "as fast as the landlord moved [us] out for non-payment of rent." Brown participated in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program at DuSable High School and sang baritone in the choir at Coppin Chapel AME Church. He briefly attended Wilberforce University before entering the army in early 1946. After recovering from an injury sustained during basic training, he was honorably discharged and returned to Chicago, where he enrolled at Roosevelt University.<sup>19</sup>

At Roosevelt, Brown met a dynamic group of Black student activists, many of them fellow veterans intent on realizing at home the democratic ideals for which they had fought abroad during World War II. Handsome and eloquent, Brown was elected to the student council alongside future mayor Harold Washington. Before joining the UPWA staff, Brown held a variety of jobs, including auto worker, postal

18. Evelyn Colbert [widow of Frank London Brown], telephone interview by author, December 16, 2008, notes in author's possession; "Says Future of Trumbull Up to Mayor," *Daily Defender* (Chicago), April 25, 1956; "American Week," July 4, 1954, video recording, CBS News Archive.

19. Frank Brown, "Eye Witness Account: Trumbull Park, U.S.A.," *American Negro*, August 1955, folder 12, box 353, UPWA Records; Evelyn M. Brown Colbert, "The Works of Frank London Brown," March 31, 1980, paper submitted for English 333, Chicago State University, copy in author's possession; Evelyn Colbert, telephone interview by author, May 27, 2009, notes in author's possession; "27 Receive DuSable ROTC Promotions," *Chicago Defender*, November 4, 1944.

clerk, loan interviewer, and bar proprietor. A lover of blues and jazz, he occasionally sang in bebop combos.<sup>20</sup>

The Browns moved into Trumbull Park in April 1954, hoping to finally escape the shabby, overpriced housing to which Black Chicagoans were largely confined. After the project's first African American residents, Donald and Betty Howard, moved out in early May, Frank Brown quickly emerged as the Black tenants' most prominent spokesperson. He also became closely acquainted with local UPWA activists, who had been campaigning on behalf of Trumbull Park's Black families since the start of the conflict.<sup>21</sup>

As early as April 1952, UPWA staff attempted to set up a meeting with the commissioners of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) after an Argentinian family was pressured to leave Trumbull Park by neighbors who assumed they were Black. When mob violence erupted in response to the Howard family's arrival in August 1953, the District 1 Anti-Discrimination Department sent a group of white workers to the scene to investigate. Delegations from the UPWA met with the district attorney, mayor, police commissioner, and CHA officials, insisting that more be done to protect the Howards. When the CHA commissioners began debating whether to evict the couple, Black and white UPWA members repeatedly picketed the CHA offices and city hall, carrying placards that read, "We Don't Pay Taxes to Build Jim Crow Houses" and "CHA Commissioners Don't Be Cowards, Fight for the Howards." The UPWA also invited the Howards to address the union's first national Anti-Discrimination Conference. Throughout 1954, District 1 organized regular shopping trips, doctor visits, and holiday outings for Trumbull Park families. When principled integrationist Elizabeth Wood was fired from the CHA, UPWA international president Ralph Helstein sent a telegram to mayor Martin Kennelly protesting the decision, and District 1 director Charles Hayes joined an NAACP protest delegation that met with Kennelly and CHA officials. In September 1954, the UPWA and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters jointly sponsored an ad in the *Chicago Daily News* condemning Kennelly's failure to end the violence. District 1 also paid for Frank Brown's train fare to the 1954 NAACP national convention.<sup>22</sup>

Frank Brown first met UPWA District 1 program coordinator Oscar Brown Jr. (no relation) in late spring 1954. Oscar was a Communist, Frank a Methodist—but this didn't prevent the pair from becoming fast friends. Both men were as passionate about books and music as they were about racial justice and political activism. Their

20. "Hal Washington Elected President," *Roosevelt Torch*, October 25, 1948; John O. Killens, "Frank London Brown," *AMSAC Newsletter*, January 1963.

21. Hirsch, "Massive Resistance in the Urban North," 546; "Minutes of Meeting of District #1 Staff and Trumbull Park Families on Sunday," June 20, 1954, folder 4, box 422, UPWA Records.

22. Leo Turner, "Anti-Discrimination, District #1," April 26, 1952, folder 14, box 348, UPWA Records; Oscar Brown Jr., "The First Year," undated [circa December 1953], folder 11, box 354, UPWA Records; "To Push A-D Community Program," *Packinghouse Worker*, December 1953; "An Open Letter to Mayor Kennelly," *Chicago Daily News*, September 4, 1954; "Protests Made on Dismissal of Top Housing Official," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 10, 1954; "Since Sioux City," undated [circa September 1954], folder 11, box 422, UPWA Records. On District 1 and housing, see also Smith, *Racial Democracy*, 157–89.



Figure 3. Frank London Brown at his home in Chicago, circa mid-1950s. A resident of the Trumbull Park neighborhood, where white mobs repeatedly attacked his family, Brown helped lead the citywide struggle against segregated housing. He joined the UPWA staff in early 1955. Later that year, the union sent him to Mississippi to observe the trial of Emmett Till's killers. Photo in author's possession.

personal connection, and the union's consistent role in the Trumbull Park struggle, brought Frank into the UPWA fold. When Oscar was drafted into the armed forces in late 1954, the union granted him a leave of absence and hired Frank to fill his place.<sup>23</sup>

Trumbull Park remained central to Frank Brown's work with the UPWA (fig. 3). In June 1955, he led a picket of city hall with Black families from the project. Two weeks before Emmett Till was abducted, Brown and other UPWA leaders joined an NAACP delegation that met with Mayor Daley to protest the ongoing violence directed at African American tenants.<sup>24</sup>

### **"The Formula for Staying Alive": From Trumbull Park to the Till Trial**

Frank Brown flew from Chicago's Midway airport into Memphis, then rode a "bumpety old bus" to Clarksdale, Mississippi, about twenty miles from Sumner. Although he had become skilled at evading the mobs in Trumbull Park, he realized that he was "singularly unfamiliar with the formula for staying alive in Emmett Till's death place." Driving by taxi through the cotton fields on the way to the courthouse, the winding dirt road looked to him like "a venomous tongue."<sup>25</sup>

Brown arrived on the second day of the proceedings, shortly after Judge Curtis Swango had called a recess to enable the prosecution to locate additional witnesses. He met Mamie Bradley as she stood outside the courthouse with her father John Carthan and cousin Rayfield Mooty, waiting for their ride. Brown had escorted Bradley to the UPWA District 1 protest meeting, so they were not complete strangers. But he noticed that Mamie and her companions "seemed apprehensive, and somewhat afraid" because they were "unguarded." Brown felt the same way.<sup>26</sup>

23. "District One Program Report," June 29, 1954, folder 11, box 354, UPWA Records; Evelyn Colbert, telephone interview by author, January 24, 2009, notes in author's possession; Oscar Brown Jr., interview by Robinson; Oscar Brown Jr., interview by Richardson.

24. Frank Brown, "June 1-30 Program Coordinator's Report," undated [1955], folder 11, box 362, UPWA Records; "Chicago Mayor Hears NAACP on Trumbull Park Mobsters," *Daily Worker*, August 19, 1955.

25. Brown, "In the Shadow," 295, 293.

26. Frank Brown, "Program Coordinator's Report," September 29, 1955, folder 11, box 362, UPWA Records.

He met up with Bradley and her entourage again that evening. Mamie “expressed fear” that the distribution of leaflets in Sumner by UPWA representatives might negatively affect the outcome of the trial. Mooty seemed downright antagonistic, and Brown wondered whether Mooty’s “position as president of [a] United Steel Workers union local may have had something to do with this attitude.” The hypothesis was certainly plausible: the UPWA was widely viewed as one of the few remaining havens for “reds” within the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Over the next several days, Brown concluded that Mooty had advised Bradley to avoid contact with him. Brown nevertheless remained optimistic that the UPWA would be able to enlist Mamie’s support in its antidiscrimination campaigns, including the Trumbull Park fight.<sup>27</sup>

Brown could not get into the courthouse on Wednesday, due to the limited number of seats reserved for Blacks. He spent most of the day standing on the courthouse lawn, talking to other African American men denied entry. Above all, Brown was struck by their bravery: despite the presence of hostile whites, many of whom brandished guns openly, these Black men chose to stand their ground. “Used to be they would charge us with clubs and chase us off the grass,” one of the men explained, “but they know we ain’t running no damn where this time.” After court let out, Brown approached Emmett Till’s great-uncle, Mose Wright, and asked the aging sharecropper-preacher where he found the courage to testify against Milam and Bryant. “Some things are worse than death,” Wright replied. “If a man lives, he must still live with himself.”<sup>28</sup>

Back in Clarksdale, Brown heard rumors that several Black witnesses to the Till murder had been killed. His notes on the last two days of the trial are uncharacteristically vague. However, a short story that Brown published in 1959, “In the Shadow

27. Frank Brown, “Program Coordinator’s Report,” September 29, 1955. Mooty was the president of USWA Local 3911 at Reynolds Metals in McCook, Illinois. Mamie Bradley recalled that after Emmett was abducted, Mooty was “steering me which way to go because he was active in the labor movement and he knew the politicians.” Mooty strongly supported Bradley’s decision to have an open-casket funeral for Emmett, and helped arrange the public viewing. Mooty also contacted Steelworkers officials in Pittsburgh, who convinced USWA president David McDonald to send a telegram to Mississippi governor Hugh White. Till-Mobley interviews in Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, 239; Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 119–20; Rayfield Mooty, interviews by Elizabeth Balanoff, undated [1973–76], transcript, pp. 140–46, Oral History Project in Labor History, Roosevelt University Archives; Rayfield Mooty to Frank Shane, August 31, 1955, folder 53, box 7, United Steelworkers of America Civil Rights Department Records, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections Library, University Park, PA (hereafter USWA Civil Rights Records); David J. McDonald to Hugh White, telegram, September 6, 1955, folder 53, box 7, USWA Civil Rights Records. Though Mooty stood well to the left of most Steelworkers officials, he may have worried that public association with the UPWA would jeopardize his ability to garner further assistance in the Till case from national leaders of the USWA and NAACP. Shortly after Milam and Bryant’s trial, Boyd Wilson of the USWA Civil Rights Committee wrote Mooty reminding him to steer clear of Communists. Boyd Wilson to Rayfield Mooty, September 28, 1955, in Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, 283. On Mooty, see also Needleman, *Black Freedom Fighters*.

28. Brown, “Program Coordinator’s Report”; “Union Carries Fight for Justice to Scene of Trial”; Brown, “In the Shadow.”

of a Dying Soldier," is suggestive. The narrator and protagonist, "Frank" (husband of "Evelyn"), is dispatched to the Till trial by an unnamed Chicago union that employs him as a "program coordinator." When he arrives in Clarksdale, a hotel manager repeatedly warns him that the slightest breach of local custom could land him in a pine box. The manager also tells him that Black stool pigeons will inform on him if they find out why he has come to Mississippi. "Frank" has nightmares, and even the faintest noise in the hotel startles him from his sleep. On the fourth day of the trial, a taxi driver from the hotel comes to find him at the courthouse and insists that he get in the car. Back at the hotel, the manager informs him that "everybody in town" knows he is a northern supporter of Mamie Bradley and advises him to leave immediately. The following morning, "Frank" catches the first bus out of Mississippi.<sup>29</sup>

### **"Discrimination Is a Weapon to Divide Us": The Louisiana Sugar Refinery Strikes**

Predictably, the intensification of the UPWA's antiracist initiatives during the mid-1950s met with resistance from many white members. These discontented rank-and-filers became core supporters of a disaffiliation drive led by members and staff who charged that the UPWA was "Communist-dominated." The union's sugar refinery locals in southern Louisiana became key flashpoints in this battle. Blacks, who accounted for roughly half of the refinery workforce, generally opposed bolting from the UPWA, and with assistance from the national union staff, they were largely successful in defeating the secessionists. In the course of their struggle, Black activists recast the leadership of their locals, deposing open racists and forging stronger alliances with sympathetic whites.<sup>30</sup>

Escalating conflict with refinery owners bolstered the arguments of UPWA loyalists, who maintained that only through unity could workers improve their lot. In the spring of 1955, the union struck Godchaux Sugars and Colonial Sugars in the towns of Reserve and Gramercy, Louisiana. Located in bayou country, forty-five miles up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, both Reserve and Gramercy resembled nineteenth-century company towns. Many employees lived in company-owned housing and purchased household goods from company stores. In Gramercy, the town's drinking water and electricity were supplied by Colonial.<sup>31</sup>

From the perspective of the UPWA national leadership, the main issues in the strikes that began at both plants on April 14, 1955, were pay and benefit differentials that threatened to undermine union gains elsewhere. After nine months of negotiations, Godchaux and Colonial refused to grant the same ten-cent wage increase and five-cent benefit increase won by workers at the bellwether American Sugar plant

29. "Union Carries Fight for Justice to Scene of Trial"; Brown, "In the Shadow." Frank London Brown is best-known for his semi-autobiographical novel *Trumbull Park* (1959). During the early 1960s, he joined Fair Play for Cuba and organized the first course on African American history at the University of Chicago downtown campus. He died of leukemia in 1962, at the age of thirty-four.

30. Halpern, "The CIO and the Limits of Labor-Based Civil Rights Activism."

31. Alfred Maund, "Louisiana's Good Strike: Unity vs. Injunctions," *The Nation*, August 27, 1955; UPWA-CIO, "The Southern Sugar Strike—1955," undated [1955], folder 3, box 369, UPWA Records.

near New Orleans. Instead of reducing the North/South pay differential, as the contract with American Sugar did, the five-cent wage hike offered by Godchaux and Colonial would increase the differentials between the regions and within Louisiana itself. For the fifteen hundred workers at Godchaux and Colonial, and especially for Blacks, substandard pay and benefits translated into shoddy housing and a perpetual feeling of economic insecurity. The vote in favor of strike action was nearly unanimous in both locals.<sup>32</sup>

The two refineries employed Blacks and whites in roughly equal numbers, mirroring the demographics of the surrounding communities. The whites were mostly Catholics of Cajun and German ancestry, the Blacks mostly Baptists; both groups spoke a mix of French and English. African Americans were able to participate in town and parish elections, but the public schools remained rigidly segregated. Inside the plants, the UPWA made significant headway in breaking down racial barriers before the strike: Blacks cracked into formerly lily-white departments, and separate water fountains were eliminated.<sup>33</sup> Though the presidents of both union locals were white, Blacks held roughly half of the executive board positions.<sup>34</sup> Union leaders trumpeted the fact that despite provocations by management and law enforcement, there were no serious racial incidents throughout the duration of the walkouts. Moreover, “self-segregation in meetings, which had been the custom . . . has disappeared for the most part.” Interracial unity was a recurring theme in the strike bulletins published by the locals. As one white striker explained, “[We] see now that its [*sic*] not only black that’s slaves but white workers as well, and that discrimination is a dangerous weapon to divide us.”<sup>35</sup>

In Reserve, the strike quickly turned violent, with rifle shots reportedly fired into a manager’s home. Union supporters skirmished with strikebreakers and plant guards repeatedly, and on one occasion, workers “overturned . . . a car being driven

32. “Strike Two Sugar Refineries in South Close Godchaux, Colonial; 1,500 Out,” *Packinghouse Worker*, May 1955; “How’s This for a Strike Vote?,” *Packinghouse Worker*, May 1955.

33. “Officers Report, District No. 8,” undated [circa April 18, 1955], folder 1, box 365, UPWA Records; Richard Durham to George Thomas, October 8, 1954, folder 5, box 438, UPWA Records; “Minutes of the District Council No. 8 Executive Board Meeting,” October 9, 1954, folder 10, box 429, UPWA Records. Both union locals made donations to the NAACP in 1954. Russell Lasley to Local Union No. 1124, January 11, 1954, folder 6, box 352, UPWA Records; Russell Lasley to All Local Unions, March 3, 1954, folder 6, box 352, UPWA Records.

34. Alvin Vicknair to Butch Hathaway, April 26, 1955, folder 7, box 438, UPWA Records; Farrell Scott [member of UPWA Local 1167 in 1955], telephone interview by author, January 23, 2009, notes in author’s possession; C. J. Clark [member of UPWA Local 1167 in 1955], telephone interview by author, January 24, 2009, notes in author’s possession.

35. UPWA-CIO, “The Southern Sugar Strike—1955”; Emerson Moseley, “Reserve, La.—A Year Later,” *Packinghouse Worker*, February 1957; Charles Fischer, “The Strike That Jails Can’t Break,” *Packinghouse Worker*, June 1955; “Strike Bulletin #4,” May 10, 1955, folder 7, box 438, UPWA Records; “Special Strike Bulletin,” May 24, 1955, folder 10(2), box 365, UPWA Records; “Strike Bulletin #6,” May 26, 1955, folder 7, box 438, UPWA Records; Anna Provenzano, untitled report, undated [circa July 1955], folder 6, box 433, UPWA Records.

by Walter Godchaux, Jr., vice president of the sugar firm." Eviction notices were sent to strikers living in company-owned housing; *Life* magazine quoted refinery owner Leon Godchaux II wondering aloud whether Reserve would have to be "repopulate[d]." The company secured an injunction against mass picketing, which resulted in contempt charges against the entire executive board of Local 1124.<sup>36</sup>

In Gramercy, tensions escalated eight weeks into the walkout when a Pullman train rolled onto refinery grounds to provide on-site housing for strikebreakers. A judge sympathetic to Colonial management decreed a total ban on picketing, and twenty-seven members of Local 1167 were jailed for violating the order. After delivering speeches at a union rally in the town's high school gymnasium, UPWA international president Ralph Helstein and District 8 director George Thomas were charged with contempt and threatened with \$1,000 fines and up to a year in jail. Despite this severe intimidation, very few strikers—and virtually no African Americans—broke ranks. "[We] didn't have nothing in the first place," one Black striker remembered.<sup>37</sup>

By the summer of 1955, the Louisiana sugar refinery strikes had become a crusade for the entire UPWA (fig. 4). The union launched a national "Don't Buy Scab Sugar" boycott campaign, printing more than 750,000 posters, 350,000 pamphlets, and 70,000 stickers. In New Orleans, a broad array of AFL and CIO locals endorsed the boycott, and union members visited over four hundred stores to secure compliance. Packinghouse workers across the country "adopted" families from Reserve and Gramercy, sending money and school clothing for the strikers' children. In Chicago, UPWA locals adopted eighty families and took up weekly collections at plant gates. The national CIO endorsed the boycott of Colonial and Godchaux products, and in a welcome show of international solidarity, Cuban unions blocked the export of raw sugar to the struck refineries.<sup>38</sup>

Though the refinery workforce was overwhelmingly male, one of the most remarkable aspects of the sugar strikes was the militancy and initiative displayed by women. At the first meeting of the Local 1124 Women's Committee, the wives of male strikers voted to join the picket lines. The women also initiated a petition to recall the judge responsible for jailing the local's leaders. In Gramercy, the Local 1167 Women's Committee likewise voted to picket, in defiance of the blanket injunction. In addition to more traditionally "feminine" activities such as running strike kitchens,

36. "Sugar Foreman's House Fired On," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, April 17, 1955; "Report Violence in Sugar Strike," *L'Observateur* (Reserve, LA), May 7, 1955; "Special Bulletin," June 6, 1955, folder 9, box 125, UPWA Records; "Sugar Strike Turns Bitter," *Life*, July 18, 1955; UPWA-CIO, "The Southern Sugar Strike—1955."

37. UPWA-CIO, "The Southern Sugar Strike—1955"; "Gramercy Mayor Tries 'Fast One'; No Takers," *Packinghouse Worker*, August 1955; Jack Telfer to Richard Durham, September 18, 1955, folder 6, box 369, UPWA Records; Scott interview.

38. Russell Lasley to Ralph Helstein, "Report No. 1 on 'Don't Buy,'" July 28, 1955, folder 4, box 369, UPWA Records; Russell Lasley to Charles Hayes, October 28, 1955, folder 1, box 366, UPWA Records; "Scab Sugar out of New Orleans Area; CIO Boosts Campaign," *Packinghouse Worker*, August 1955; "Cuba Unions Crack Down on Godchaux, Colonial Sugar Supply," *Packinghouse Worker*, July 1955.



Figure 4. On strike against Godchaux Sugars in Reserve, Louisiana, 1955. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

women also kept lookout for scabs and traveled across Louisiana to spread the “Don’t Buy” message.<sup>39</sup>

Twenty weeks into the strike, 150 female representatives of UPWA locals in Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma met in Gramercy for the first-ever District 8 Women’s Activities Conference. Emmett Till’s body had been discovered just a few days earlier, and the case became the main topic of discussion at a “political action workshop” held on September 3. During the session, UPWA international vice president Russell Lasley argued that the Till murder represented “a move to deter Negroes and whites from the unity UPWA is trying to develop. . . . There must be opposition on the part of organized labor.” Lasley recommended that the locals send protest messages to President Eisenhower and Attorney General Brownell, and urged

39. “Women’s Activities of Local 1124, Reserve, Louisiana,” undated [circa July 1955], folder 10(2), box 365, UPWA Records; Provenzano, untitled report; “Women Swing into Action behind Sugar Strike,” *Pack- inghouse Worker*, August 1955; “From a Striker’s Wife,” *L’Observateur*, September 9, 1955. On women and gender in the UPWA, see, e.g., Walker-McWilliams, *Reverend Addie Wyatt*; Warren, *Tied to the Great Pack- ing Machine*, 99–113; Deslippe, “Rights, Not Roses”; Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor*; Horowitz, “Negro and White”; Fehn, “African-American Women.”



cooperation with NAACP branches. Lasley also called for delegations to Washington, DC, and suggested a "mass rally" in Mississippi "to let the residents know lynching and murder are not condoned." The conference passed a resolution which read in part: "Our heads are bowed with grief and compassion as we send to Mrs. Mamie Bradley of Chicago . . . our heartfelt sympathy. As women and mothers, we share her tragedy, and offer her the comfort that in her sorrow she is not alone. Out of our struggles today, added to her own, we are building a new, free, unafraid South."<sup>40</sup>

After the conference, UPWA international vice president Tony Stephens contacted the directors of Districts 8 and 9 to determine who would represent the union's southern locals at the Till trial in Mississippi. Stephens insisted that the UPWA contingent should be interracial, and tried to include rank-and-file workers as well as union staff.<sup>41</sup> After some schedule shuffling, white field organizers Bruce Nolan and Ada Lee Howell agreed to represent District 9, and white Program Department staffer Jack Telfer volunteered to bring a carload of activists from Reserve and Gramercy to represent District 8.<sup>42</sup>

### **Standing Fast: Jack and Marge Telfer**

A group of five drove from Louisiana to Mississippi together: Jack Telfer and his wife Marge; Grace Falgoust; Lillian Pittman; and Freida Vicknair. Telfer was technically the program coordinator for UPWA District 9, but he was on temporary loan to District 8 to assist with the sugar strikes in Reserve and Gramercy. Falgoust was a worker at one of the struck refineries, while Vicknair and Pittman were strike supporters active in the women's committees established by the local unions. All were white except Pittman, an African American.

John Harley "Jack" Telfer was born in Thomas, Oklahoma, in 1907 and grew up in rural La Farge, Wisconsin. His parents divorced when he was young, leaving his mother in poverty, so Jack trapped and hunted to help support the household. Telfer took two years off from high school to work as a lumberjack before gradu-

40. "Minutes, First District #8 Women's Activities Conference," September 3, 1955, folder 1, box 79, United Packinghouse, Food, and Allied Workers District 5 Records, University of Texas at Arlington Special Collections Library (hereafter UPWA Southwest District Records); "Resolution of Protest against Lynch-Murder of Emmitt [sic] Louis Till Voted by First Women's Conference of District #8, United Packinghouse Workers of America, CIO," September 3, 1955, folder 1, box 79, UPWA Southwest District Records.

41. [Anthony] Stephens to [Ed] Dumas, teletype, [September] 9, September 16, and September 19, 1955, folder 11, box 430, UPWA Records; Anthony Stephens to George Thomas, September 13, 1955, folder 11, box 430, UPWA Records; Anthony Stephens to Ed Dumas, September 13, 1955, folder 11, box 430, UPWA Records. District 8 comprised UPWA locals in Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. District 9 comprised UPWA locals in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia.

42. Howell and Nolan did not produce written reports about their experiences at the trial. According to the UPWA newspaper, few whites in Sumner disputed Nolan's contention that J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant were guilty. But the locals invariably replied: "The jury knows better than to do anything to them." "Union Carries Fight for Justice to Scene of Trial"; "Officers Report," undated [circa 1956], p. 15, folder 10(1), box 365, UPWA Records.

ating from a Seventh Day Adventist academy in 1929. He slowly worked his way through college, taking whole semesters and years off to save up money. He sold Bibles door to door, worked in a sawmill, and wrote for a WPA-funded historical preservation project. After finally earning a degree from Milwaukee State Teachers College, Telfer became the director of public forums for the US Department of Education. He established the Town Hall Forum of Milwaukee, which brought CIO leader John L. Lewis to speak in 1937.<sup>43</sup>

An ordained minister, Telfer pastored several Congregationalist churches during the 1940s before joining the Unitarian Universalists in the early 1950s. He believed that “Christianity arose as a resistance movement” and often referred to Jesus as “a hand worker of Nazareth.” At the height of the Cold War, Telfer traveled throughout Europe—including the Eastern Bloc—to “study the conditions of working people.” He presented elaborate slide shows to his congregations, hoping to debunk stereotypes about Communist societies and thereby reduce the chance of nuclear war.<sup>44</sup>

During the mid- to late 1940s, Telfer worked closely with the UPWA in Ottumwa, Iowa, hosting a radio show sponsored by the union. In 1948, he served as vice chairman of the Iowa Progressive Party, touring the state with Paul Robeson. In 1950, Telfer moved to Wichita to pastor the First Unitarian Universalist Church. On Sundays, he would sometimes accompany a group of Black and white congregants to the Dockum Drug Store to demand service at its segregated lunch counter. Telfer’s church caused an uproar when it insisted on sending a Black delegate to the annual meeting of the South West Unitarian Conference in 1952. “Every sort of inducement and threat of professional retaliation was directed against me. . . . But I stood fast.” It was this episode that first brought Telfer to the attention of the UPWA’s Dick Durham.<sup>45</sup>

In the spring of 1953, Telfer moved to Atlanta to serve as program coordinator for UPWA District 9. “I had no idea what I was settin’ off,” he later admitted. In Jacksonville that September, Telfer was flogged by supporters of District 9 direc-

43. John (“Jack”) H. Telfer résumé, folder 9, box 353, UPWA Records; Jack Telfer to Tony and Mike Ambrose, July 9, 1974, audiotape, copy in author’s possession; Jack Telfer, interview by Clive Knowles, June 11, 1974, audiotape, Illinois Labor History Society.

44. John Harley Telfer, “Autobiography,” *La Farge (WI) Epitaph*, July 10, 1974; “Invocation by Jack Telfer at the First District 9 Anti-Discrimination Conference Banquet,” December 6, 1953, folder 9, box 353, UPWA Records; “Available for lectures and discussions . . . Rev. John H. Telfer,” undated, folder 9, box 353, UPWA Records. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Telfer collaborated with the American Friends Service Committee, the Committee for Peaceful Alternatives, and the World Peace Council. “Adventures in World Citizenship,” undated [circa late 1948], Jack Telfer papers, Wisconsin Historical Society; “Call to Mid-Century Conference for Peace, May 29, 30, 1950, Chicago,” in *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois*, reel 64; “Special Session of the World Peace Council, Berlin, July 1–6, 1952 (Report and Documents),” *New Times*, July 9, 1952, supplement, p. 38.

45. “CIO Commentator on Midwest Air,” *Billboard*, August 23, 1947; Jack Telfer interview; Eick, *Dis-sent in Wichita*, 58; Robert Kelso, “Of Human Rights,” *The Humanist*, March–April 1952; Jack Telfer to Richard Durham, February 11, 1954, folder 5, box 361, UPWA Records.

tor Adrian McKinney, a staunch anticommunist who was encouraging local unions to secede from the UPWA.<sup>46</sup> The following spring, racist union members in Moultrie, Georgia, broke up an educational retreat that Telfer had organized. The white supremacists "hurled insults and curses constantly," destroyed a blackboard, slashed car tires, and threatened a Black organizer at knifepoint. The stress took a toll on Telfer, and on at least one occasion he requested a transfer out of District 9, but he was ultimately convinced to stay. "Someone *obviously* has got to make equal rights a paramount issue throughout the locals in the South," Dick Durham told him. "That glorious opportunity seems to be yours."<sup>47</sup>

Marjorie Telfer was born in Austin, Texas, in 1922, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. Although her parents were not particularly liberal and she did not socialize with Black people growing up, Marge's horizons expanded during World War II when she joined the navy and spent long stretches in New York and other northern cities. She was working as a cartographic draftsman for the Army Corps of Engineers in Memphis when she met Jack Telfer in late 1954.<sup>48</sup>

On weekends, Jack would occasionally visit an old friend in Searcy, Arkansas, where Marge's father led a church. At mass one Sunday, Jack heard Marge sing a solo and decided to ask around for her phone number. Open-minded and adventurous, Marge was attracted to Jack's iconoclasm. On September 4, 1955—four days after Emmett Till's body was found—Jack and Marge married. They would later joke that they spent their "honeymoon" in Sumner, Mississippi, observing the trial of J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant.<sup>49</sup>

### **Hard Knocks: Grace Falgoust, Lillian Pittman, and Freida Vicknair**

Grace Falgoust was a white Godchaux striker who served as president of Local 1124's Women's Committee. Born in 1921, she was one of nine children who "came up from hard knocks" in nearby LaPlace, Louisiana. Before there was a union, the company relied heavily on day laborers, and Grace's father walked five miles to the refinery every morning, unsure whether he would find work. For extra income, Grace's

46. Jack Telfer interview; "White Leader Flogged, Defied Jim Crow Policy," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 8, 1953. Shortly after joining the Program Department, Telfer accused McKinney of condoning a segregated union dinner in Atlanta. The UPWA initiated disciplinary proceedings against McKinney, who denied Telfer's accusation and maintained that leftist union leaders were using it as a pretext to oust a vocal anticommunist. With the blessing of several regional CIO officials, McKinney began urging local unions to secede from the UPWA. "Report of John H. Telfer," July 25, 1953, folder 15, box 357, UPWA Records; "Statement by A. O. McKinney," October 1, 1953, folder "Hearings, 1953, Packinghouse," box 114, CIO Secretary-Treasurer Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit; "Exhibit No. 10, Statement of: David Burgess, Executive Secretary, Georgia State CIO Council," undated [1953], folder "Hearings, 1953, Packinghouse," box 114, CIO Secretary-Treasurer Records.

47. Jack Telfer to Richard Durham, April 6, 1954, folder 18, box 350, UPWA Records; John Henry Hall, "This is a report on my visit . . . in Moultrie," April 5, 1954, folder 5, box 361, UPWA Records; Richard Durham to Jack Telfer, March 30, 1954, folder 5, box 361, UPWA Records.

48. Marjorie Telfer, telephone interview by author, October 4, 2008, audiotape in author's possession.

49. Marjorie Telfer interview.

mother raised and cleaned chickens for a local butcher. “We were all poor. It was a poor community,” one of her sisters explained.<sup>50</sup>

Grace was born with a rare skin disease that prevented her from walking until she was four years old. The day after her high school graduation, she moved to New Orleans to seek treatment. She found a job as a welder’s helper in a shipyard, but the work irritated her skin, so she returned to LaPlace and began working at the Godchaux refinery. The filth that pervaded the plant was a major grievance among female workers in those years. Because there was no cafeteria, the women ate together in their dressing room, where “rats would eat your lunch.”<sup>51</sup>

Despite her poverty and disability, Grace devoted much of her energy to helping others. At Easter, she bought dresses for girls who couldn’t afford them. She and her husband Willis (himself a Godchaux worker) were unable to conceive, so they adopted a mentally disabled girl. Grace’s mother taught her that racial brotherhood is a Christian ideal, and Grace did not hesitate to invite Black guests into her home.<sup>52</sup>

Grace’s siblings hypothesized that her skin disease “made her feisty.” She was known for doggedly defending her opinions: “If you crossed her line . . . about religion or politics . . . she would fight you . . . until she was hoarse.” Grace’s compassion and willingness to stand up for her beliefs made her a highly effective union leader. “She didn’t take nothing from nobody.”<sup>53</sup>

Lillian Pittman served as president of Local 1167’s Women’s Committee. An African American, she was born in Linwood, Louisiana, in 1919. Lillian lived with her husband Robert, a Colonial striker, in company-owned housing a few miles’ walk from the refinery. Lillian’s mother gave birth to her at age thirteen, and Lillian too became a parent at a young age: at the start of the sugar strike, she had two grandchildren and a third on the way. A former Colonial worker herself, Lillian had worked the morning shift at the refinery, relying on neighbors to help get her daughter Ora Lee off to school.<sup>54</sup>

Lillian’s husband Robert had to quit school as a young boy to work in the rice fields, so Lillian and Ora Lee taught him how to read. Though Robert didn’t want Lillian to walk the picket lines, she was among the first women to do so. She was also active in the “Don’t Buy” campaign, appearing on regional television with Jack Telfer. As she explained to fellow delegates at a UPWA convention in Chicago in August 1955, “I worked in the [strike] kitchen, from the kitchen to the picket line, and from

50. “Report by Mrs. Grace Falgoust”; Yvonne Plaisance [sister of Grace Falgoust], telephone interview by author, July 1, 2009, notes in author’s possession.

51. Plaisance interview.

52. Plaisance interview.

53. Suzanne Mustanich [niece of Grace Falgoust], telephone interview by author, June 30, 2009, notes in author’s possession; Plaisance interview.

54. “Union Carries Fight for Justice to Scene of Trial”; Ora Lee Broden [daughter of Lillian Pittman], telephone interviews by author, November 11, 2008, and May 23, 2009, notes in author’s possession; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, Louisiana, ED 47-10, sheet 12B, lines 86–87, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

the picket line to the courthouse, and what I mean by the courthouse is, I was put on the stand and tried. . . . But we housewives didn't give up because we don't want our husbands to go back in that plant unless they have a contract."<sup>55</sup>

Freida Vicknair, age thirty-eight, was active in the Local 1124 Women's Committee. Her father, a Lithuanian immigrant, ran a boardinghouse in Reserve. Freida's husband Alvin, a mechanic at Godchaux, was hired as a UPWA field representative in 1954. Black activists considered Alvin a reliable ally and welcomed his appointment to the union staff. Freida initially resented the long hours her husband put in as a union rep, but she recognized the importance of his work and stuck by him. At the District 8 Women's Activities Conference, she introduced a resolution condemning the state of Louisiana for its failure to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board*. She was convinced that "there cannot be a 'our way of life' in any section of our country. . . . If we want to grow and prosper we must all live the same way of life which allows every citizen the same privileges and freedom."<sup>56</sup>

### "How Bad It Is in Mississippi": From the Sugar Strikes to the Till Trial

Driving 350 miles from Louisiana to Mississippi resulted in "innumerable problems" for the interracial delegation from District 8, as all of the public accommodations en route were strictly segregated. When they entered the Magnolia State, inconvenience and indignity were compounded by fear—and the eerie sensation of having traveled backward in time. "Throughout the delta we saw endless fields of cotton," explained white Godchaux worker Grace Falgoust. "Negro men, women, and children were picking this cotton under the broiling Mississippi sun. A vivid picture of the Old South!" Even the sleepy refinery towns of the Louisiana bayou seemed positively cosmopolitan in comparison. "Upon entering the state of Mississippi, one could almost feel the 'steel curtain' ring down," Falgoust recalled. "At different times it was necessary to ask for directions. . . . When inquiring from any of the Negro race, we could immediately see the tension on their faces. Indeed they live in fear and oppression. One must actually see this to realize their need for emancipation. Slavery still exists . . . not in actual form, but in the heart and mind of the people."<sup>57</sup>

55. Broden interviews; "UPWA Program on TV Gives Viewers Sugar Strike Story," *Packinghouse Worker*, August 1955; *First Special Convention of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, C.I.O.*, August 8, 1955, p. 65, Wisconsin Historical Society.

56. *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920*, Louisiana, ED 52, sheet 18B, lines 77, 80, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; Alex Summers to Anthony Stephens, April 6, 1954, folder 1, box 113, UPWA Records; Russell Lasley to International Officers, April 8, 1954, folder 1, box 113, UPWA Records; Alex Summers to Anthony Stephens, April 12, 1954, folder 14, box 357, UPWA Records; Alex Summers to Anthony Stephens, April 19, 1954, folder 14, box 357, UPWA Records; "Political Action Workshop, 1st Women's Conference, District No. 8, UPWA-CIO," September 3, 1955, p. 9, folder 1, box 79, UPWA Southwest District Records; Freida Vicknair, "Report on the Till Trial," undated [1955], folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records. Lillian Pittman seconded Freida Vicknair's resolution, which passed unanimously.

57. "Report by Mrs. Grace Falgoust."

When the District 8 delegation arrived at the Sumner courthouse on Monday morning, September 19, Jack Telfer convinced Sheriff H. C. Strider that he was a bona fide journalist and proceeded to occupy a vacant seat in the white press section. Telfer made a point of introducing himself to the Black newsmen crowded around the small card table the court had designated for them, and worked out an arrangement with photographer Ernest Withers to purchase pictures from the trial for *Pack- inghouse Worker*, the UPWA newspaper.<sup>58</sup>

Telfer's four female companions were unable to get into the courthouse, so they spent the morning outside on the lawn, passing out copies of the UPWA District 8 Women's Conference resolution on the Till murder. During the midday recess, the women shared a picnic lunch under a nearby tree. Their interracial group met with "disapproving and shocked glances" from locals. "The three white ladies and I were sitting down and along came a white photographer and took our picture," recalled Lillian Pittman. "He asked us were we from Chicago, and we all answered, 'No, we are from Louisiana.' He couldn't believe it."<sup>59</sup>

After lunch the women tried once more to enter the courthouse. This time only Pittman was rebuffed. While waiting outside, she eavesdropped on a conversation between two prospective jurors. Both men felt certain that Bryant and Milam were guilty. But rather than risk physical retaliation by voting to convict, during voir dire they deliberately answered questions in a manner that ensured their elimination from the jury.<sup>60</sup>

On Tuesday, September 20, the white press section filled to capacity, and several journalists complained that Jack Telfer was sitting in a space reserved for someone else. When Sheriff Strider ordered Telfer to move, Telfer produced the press credential that Strider himself had signed the previous day. The sheriff was beginning to lose his patience. Strider was an imposing figure, "a short man weighing 270 pounds who carries no visible gun, but appears to depend upon the brutal armament of an oversized black jack, sticking prominently out of the right-hand pocket of his trouser." Telfer may have been intimidated, but he was not cowed. He walked over to the Black press section, which had been outfitted with a longer table for the second day of court, and sat down in an empty seat. To his surprise, no attempt was made to remove him, so he remained in the "Black" section throughout Tuesday's proceedings.<sup>61</sup>

Mamie Bradley made her first appearance in court that morning, flanked by her father John Carthan and cousin Rayfield Mooty. Bradley was "modishly dressed" in a dark gray suit with a pleated skirt and a small black felt hat, exhibiting "absolute poise under the most difficult circumstances." Jack Telfer presented her

58. Jack Telfer to Richard Durham, September 20, 1955, folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records.

59. Lillian Pittman to Dick Durham, undated [1955], folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records.

60. Jack Telfer to Richard Durham, September 23, 1955, folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records. Several prospective jurors were rejected because they said they had donated money to the defense, another because he admitted bias against Blacks.

61. Telfer to Durham, September 20, 1955.



Figure 5. Jack Telfer presents Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Bradley, with a UPWA resolution condemning the murder of her son. Telfer was a radical preacher and UPWA staffer who traveled to Mississippi with a union delegation from Louisiana to observe the trial of J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant. This picture was taken in the courtroom on September 20, 1955. Photo by Ernest Withers, in author's possession.

with a copy of the District 8 resolution, which she "graciously accepted, despite the swirl of confusion" caused by dozens of reporters and photographers angling to get near her (fig. 5). During a quiet moment after the chaos subsided, Bradley and her father read the document. "I am so grateful to them all," Bradley told Telfer during a recess. "Please tell the women of your union that what they have sent to me means so much to me at this terrible time."<sup>62</sup>

The white women from District 8 were able to get into the courtroom on Tuesday, but Lillian Pittman was again turned away. She spent the morning distributing copies of the District 8 resolution to Blacks standing outside on the lawn, as she had done the previous day. Pittman's conversations gave her a clearer sense of "just how bad it is for the poor people in Mississippi." She "talked to some of the people about political action. They didn't know what I was talking about. I had to explain to them what I meant. Then some answered me, 'Lady, do you want us to be killed and put in the Tallahatchie River?'" Pittman also tried to "talk union to the people," most of whom were cotton pickers. Disenfranchised, lacking even the most basic workplace rights, Pittman's interlocutors were palpably scared. Later that evening, a cross was burned near a railroad depot on the outskirts of Sumner.<sup>63</sup>

62. Telfer to Durham, September 20, 1955.

63. Pittman to Durham; "Cross Burning Is Ignored," *Jackson (MS) Daily News*, September 22, 1955.

The Till trial began in earnest on Wednesday, September 21. Rather than push his luck with Sheriff Strider, Jack Telfer took a seat in the white press section, which had been enlarged since the previous day. Telfer hadn't made his peace with the Jim Crow courtroom, however; he had merely changed tactics. At the urging of Dick Durham, Telfer spoke with some of the Black journalists about issuing a joint statement condemning the separate and unequal facilities. There was some interest in the proposal, but attorney Basil Brown, an adviser to Representative Charles Diggs of Detroit who accompanied the congressman to the trial, insisted that the idea was "ridiculous."<sup>64</sup>

In a curious reversal of fortune, only one of the women from District 8 was able to get into the courtroom on Wednesday: Lillian Pittman was among the two dozen African Americans permitted to sit in the audience. From the next-to-last row, Pittman took detailed notes on the trial to share with Black journalists denied entry into the building.<sup>65</sup>

For their part, rather than wait on the lawn, Freida Vicknair, Grace Falgoust, and Marge Telfer decided to venture downtown to gauge the sentiment of the wider community. To their dismay, all of the whites they encountered were dyed-in-the-wool racists. Two "aristocratic" elderly ladies averred that Blacks positively enjoyed picking cotton in the hot sun. A store clerk boasted that only whites voted in Tallahatchie and the adjoining counties. Though Vicknair got him to concede that this amounted to "taxation without representation," he was otherwise unmoved by counterargument. Regarding the murder trial, several townspeople "insisted that the body sent to Chicago was not that of Emmett Till. No one protested the innocence of Bryant and Milam—in fact, we were told that this crime was justified." The locals were uniformly confident that any juror who dared vote in favor of a conviction would be killed in short order.<sup>66</sup>

During the afternoon recess, the District 8 delegation shared lunch with a Canadian journalist who had expressed interest in the sugar strike. Afterward, Falgoust, Vicknair, and Marge Telfer made an unsuccessful attempt to sweet-talk the sheriff's deputies guarding the main entrance to the courthouse. Falgoust was warned that "something might happen" if she continued to mix with Negroes, "because we don't do that here." She responded to the thinly veiled threat with her characteristic sass: "We just love to mix."<sup>67</sup>

After court let out for the day, the District 8 delegation took a long drive with *Nation* correspondent Dan Wakefield to discuss the sugar strike. The group was threatened by a white man in a passing car, who "told us we had better get the 'Hell' out of Mississippi before he killed a half-dozen of us," according to Pittman. "I asked the man did he own Mississippi? He couldn't answer me." Though outwardly defiant, Pittman felt

64. Jack Telfer to Richard Durham, September 21, 1955, folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records.

65. Caption on photograph of Lillian Pittman, box 13, photo accessions, Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America Records, Wisconsin Historical Society.

66. "Report by Mrs. Grace Falgoust"; Vicknair, "Report on the Till Trial."

67. "Report by Mrs. Grace Falgoust"; Pittman to Durham.



so scared I didn't know what to do. After I had seen the picture of the Till boy's body what was killed. It was a horrible sight to look at. After I got back to my hotel room I put the two large chairs against the front door and the back door. I even turned the fan off, and burned the light all night, and pulled the shade down. That's the way all the [Black] people feel in Mississippi, because they told me so.<sup>68</sup>

"It is clear," Jack Telfer wrote to Dick Durham, assessing the trial up to that point, "that a great whitewash is being prepared in this place. The thing stinks more every day as urgent and pertinent questions are not asked [by the prosecution]. Whole blocks of inconsistency are allowed to go unchallenged." Telfer complained that even the northern liberal journalists covering the trial were too soft on the judge and prosecutors. How could justice be served when "pressing hard on the back of every person's neck is the knowledge that brutality and physical cruelty can fall swiftly" in response to even the slightest violation of Jim Crow etiquette?<sup>69</sup>

The entire District 8 delegation was able to view the trial on both Thursday and Friday. Having thoroughly alienated the lawmen stationed at the main entrance, Vicknair, Falgoust, and Marge Telfer managed to get into the courthouse by following a group of white locals through an auxiliary door in the back of the building (fig. 6). Anticipating an acquittal, the UPWA group decided to call a press conference, to be held immediately following the announcement of the verdict. However, they abandoned this plan on Friday morning, judging that the scene at the courthouse would be far too chaotic. Instead, they chose to write a joint statement, which they circulated as a press release. "Obviously, the statement had to be prepared before we could know the decision of the jury," Jack Telfer explained, since the reporters would rush back to their hotel rooms to write after the verdict was announced. "There were some sharper thrusts which I felt might well go into this statement, but since the women from Reserve and Gramercy felt that these more bitter statements ought not to be included . . . we deferred to their judgment since they were putting the thing out." Marge Telfer frantically typed twelve copies during the noon recess.<sup>70</sup>

**PRESS RELEASE, SEPTEMBER 23, 1955,  
FROM DELEGATION OF WOMEN FROM UPWA-CIO, LOUISIANA**

We four Southern women . . . came to the Sumner trial of the kidnapers and killers of young Emmett Till as an inter-racial delegation of labor unionists and union housewives. . . .

In the struggles we have had to wage . . . against the exploitation and oppression of the wealthy sugar barons of Louisiana, we have slowly and painfully learned a few lessons about race relations which have prepared us to understand [what] we have seen and heard this week.

The chief lesson . . . is the absolute necessity of both white and Negro workers standing together if the people of either race are to win decent wages, job security, and the full rights and privileges of American citizenship. . . .

68. Pittman to Durham.

69. Telfer to Durham, September 21, 1955.

70. "Report by Mrs. Grace Falgoust"; Telfer to Durham, September 23, 1955.

Our employers tried to keep us workers divided along racial lines by discriminating against Negro people. . . . Therefore, for a number of years now we have held unsegregated union meetings, elected union officers of both races . . . and refused to sign any contract with the sugar companies that provided for differences in pay based on race. . . .

As we came to accept both Negroes and whites as having an equal right to respect and consideration, we have discovered new and precious meaning in the words of brotherhood taught us by religion. . . . We have spelled out our background . . . to show why we are so shocked by what we have seen and heard in and around Sumner these last five days.

1. In the courtroom we have seen . . . the press representatives of Negro newspapers and radio stations placed against a far wall 50 feet from the jury seats, where many words of testimony were inaudible, while the non-Negro reporters were placed in a semi-circle around the jury seats, close at hand. . . .

2. Throughout the trial . . . the most deeply offensive epithet that can be substituted for the word "Negro" has been used again and again. Such terms are not used among our union members. . . . We believe their use in this trial violates the right of all citizens to equal treatment, and prejudices a fair outcome.

3. We observe that no Negro citizens were called as prospective jurors . . . due to the fact that there is not a single registered [Negro] voter in this county. . . . In these circumstances we cannot agree that a fair trial leading to justice is assured.

4. The widespread existence . . . of prejudice [against Negroes] . . . was indicated to us by the many people in Sumner and nearby towns who stated that even if the two defendants . . . had slain Emmett Till as charged, they should be acquitted because 14 year old Till had "wolf-whistled" at Mrs. Bryant. . . .

5. We express our sympathy for Mrs. Mamie Bradley in her cruel bereavement and call upon all women, Negro and white, North and South, to join in condemning and working together to end the race discrimination out of which such crimes as this one are inspired.<sup>71</sup>

With the exception of the *Toronto Star*, which briefly quoted Jack Telfer, none of the major newspapers mentioned the UPWA's presence at the Till trial, nor the District 8 delegation's trenchant criticism of Mississippi justice. Grace Falgoust was nevertheless convinced that the trip was worthwhile: "I am sure that the people present will long remember the women who broke the racial barriers in this section."<sup>72</sup>

71. "From Delegation of Women from UPWA-CIO, Louisiana," September 23, 1955, folder 7, box 369, UPWA Records.

72. John Brehl, "Smoked Fags during Trial Happily Light Up Stogies as Jury Says 'Not Guilty,'" *Toronto Star*, September 26, 1955; "Report by Mrs. Grace Falgoust." In mid-November, the Telfers spoke to hundreds of Dillard University students about their trip to Sumner. In early 1956, the union sent Jack to Washington, DC, to discuss the Till case with the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights. "Union Organizer Tells DU Students of Till 'Trial,'" *Louisiana Weekly*, November 19, 1955; Jack Telfer, "Report on Legislative Work at Washington, D.C.," January 27, 1956, folder 6, box 369, UPWA Records. In the spring of 1956, the Telfers moved to California, where Jack helped the UPWA organize farmworkers. During the 1960s, Jack returned to the ministry and taught courses on African American history. Marge became a librarian in the Berkeley public schools.



Figure 6. Emmett Till's killers were acquitted by an all-white jury in Sumner, Mississippi, on September 23, 1955. The UPWA delegation from Louisiana stopped to take this photo as they were leaving Sumner. From left to right: Freida Vicknair, Lillian Pittman, Marjorie Telfer, and Grace Falgoust. Photo by Jack Telfer, in author's possession.

### Small Victories

Langston Hughes eloquently expressed the sentiment of millions of African Americans in the aftermath of the Till verdict: "I Feel Mississippi's Fist in My Own Face." UPWA leaders believed the time was ripe for a "march on Washington" to pressure the federal government to enact stronger civil rights legislation. But only the NAACP possessed the legitimacy, financial resources, and organizational infrastructure to organize such a march, and the association's national leadership balked at the tactic. "This was the kind of situation that needed real mass action, so we thought, and it wasn't forthcoming," complained UPWA president Ralph Helstein.<sup>73</sup>

Though they were frustrated by their inability to force the hand of the federal government, packinghouse unionists had an impact at the local level. In Chicago, where UPWA leaders insisted that "Mississippi is right here . . . out at Trumbull Park

73. Langston Hughes, "I Feel Mississippi's Fist in My Own Face, Says Simple," *Chicago Defender*, October 15, 1955; Russell Lasley to Roy Wilkins, November 8, 1955, in Bracey and Meier, *Papers of the NAACP, Part 21*, reel 10; Helstein interview by Balanoff, p. 222. Among the prominent figures advocating a "march on Washington" in the wake of the Till verdict were Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Mississippi activist T. R. M. Howard, and Rev. Charles Hill of Detroit.

Homes,” outrage at the Till verdict reinvigorated the campaign to defend integrated public housing. On October 25, 1955, more than two thousand people—some estimates ranged as high as five thousand—picketed city hall for four hours demanding more decisive measures to quell the white mobs in Trumbull Park. UPWA staff claimed that one thousand of the protesters were packinghouse workers. Frank London Brown, whose car was stoned by racists shortly after he returned from Mississippi, spoke at plant gate meetings urging workers to attend the mass picket, and a substantial number of white workers turned out. Two weeks later, in what Chicago NAACP officials described as the “first significant break in the Trumbull Park situation” in months, the chief of police announced that Blacks would be permitted to walk through the neighborhood without a police car escorting them, if they chose.<sup>74</sup>

In Louisiana, meanwhile, the Colonial Sugars strike was settled in mid-September on terms favorable to Local 1167. Godchaux Sugars proved more stubborn, and as the strike dragged on, members of Local 1124 became increasingly convinced that the company was bent on crushing the union altogether. Finally, in late December, eight months into the walkout, Godchaux agreed to a ten-cent pay increase. To celebrate its victory, the local sponsored an interracial Christmas party for the workers and their children.<sup>75</sup>

### A New Phase

The Montgomery bus boycott, which began in early December 1955, marked the beginning of a new phase in the Black freedom struggle. The UPWA quickly embraced the burgeoning protest movement and its leadership.<sup>76</sup> Martin Luther

74. “Step Up Fight for Trumbull Crackdown,” *The Worker* (DuSable edition), September 18, 1955; Richard Durham to UPWA International Executive Board, “Program Activities for 1955,” p. 4, folder 4, box 368, UPWA Records; George F. Brown, “Say KKK Cross Burned at Trumbull Park,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 8, 1955; Richard Saunders, Todd Tate, and Annie Collins, interview by Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz, September 13, 1985, audiotape, United Packinghouse Workers of America Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society; Chicago NAACP press release, “News from Chicago Branch,” November 7 [1955], in Bracey, Harley, and Meier, *Papers of the NAACP, Part 26, Series C*, reel 1.

75. “Fact Summary Sheet, Southern Sugar Strike—1955,” September 19, 1955, folder 4, box 369, UPWA Records; “Reach Godchaux Agreement; ‘Our Heads High’—Thomas,” *Packinghouse Worker*, December 1955; Scott interview; Edward Shanklin to Russell Lasley, January 4, 1956, folder 13, box 372, UPWA Records. Both Black and white workers remained active in the two unions throughout the late 1950s. In 1958, an interracial group from Local 1124 launched the St. John Parish Voters League. Alvin Vicknair, “Notes from the Road,” *Packinghouse Worker*, October 1957; *Packinghouse Worker*, May 1958, p. 3 photo; *Packinghouse Worker*, June 1959, p. 2 photo; Emerson Moseley, “Job Now Is to Register,” *Packinghouse Worker*, July 1958.

76. In the spring of 1955, UPWA delegates to the Alabama State CIO convention attempted to introduce a resolution condemning segregated public carriers. A few weeks later, Black members of UPWA Local 108 in Atlanta reportedly sat at the front of city buses, intending to get arrested and file a lawsuit through their NAACP branch, but “no cases were made.” John H. Telfer, “Report of Beginning of ‘Don’t Buy Godchaux Sugar’ Campaign,” May 30, 1955, folder 10(2), box 365, UPWA Records; *Eleventh Constitutional Convention, The United Packinghouse Workers of America (AFL-CIO), District No. 9*, March 10–11, 1956, pp. 124–25, box 24, UPWA Records.

King Jr. met with UPWA officials for the first time during a visit to Chicago in mid-February 1956. The union's Research Department had just discovered that National City Lines, which owned and operated the Montgomery buses, also had subsidiaries in some forty cities across the country. Dick Durham urged King to contact labor leaders in each of these cities to discuss the prospects of spreading the boycott. There is no record of King's response, but Durham's proposal probably seemed like pie-in-the-sky. Which unions would be willing and able to help coordinate a nationwide boycott? The UPWA had locals in Sioux City, Cedar Rapids, and a few small cities in Illinois, but lacked a presence in most of the other places where National City Lines held municipal transportation contracts. If nothing else, King must have been struck by the boldness of his newfound allies.<sup>77</sup>

On March 28, 1956, approximately seventeen thousand packinghouse workers in Chicago stopped work for five minutes in solidarity with the Montgomery bus boycott. That same month, the UPWA international executive board donated \$1,000 to the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). Packinghouse locals around the country raised money for the MIA, and by June the union's contributions totaled \$3,350.<sup>78</sup> In early 1957, UPWA leaders participated in the first meetings of what would eventually become the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). An \$11,000 donation from the union proved critical to the SCLC's survival during its first year, when income from all sources totaled just \$13,000. "Your generous gift was really the means by which our then infant organization was able to begin its work," King acknowledged. The UPWA remained a staunch supporter of King and the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

The haunting image of Emmett Till's mangled face is seared into our collective memory, a tragic epitome of the brutal violence that helped maintain white supremacy in the Jim Crow South. But Till's murder was more than just a tragedy, for it also inspired an outpouring of determined protest, in which labor unions played a prom-

77. "Proceedings, the Montgomery, Ala. Bus Boycott Conference," February 13, 1956, folder 6, box 373, UPWA Records; "National City Lines, Inc.," undated [circa February 1956], folder 6, box 373, UPWA Records; "National City Lines," undated [circa February 1956], folder 6, box 373, UPWA Records; "Support to Montgomery Bus Boycott," undated [1956], folder 6, box 373, UPWA Records.

78. "Prayers," *Packinghouse Worker*, April 1956; "UPWA Aids Bus Boycott," *Packinghouse Worker*, March 1956; "UPWA Has Hefty Contribution for Bus Boycotters," *Packinghouse Worker*, June 1956.

79. Three African American UPWA leaders attended the initial SCLC meeting in Atlanta: international vice president Russell Lasley, District 1 director Charles Hayes, and field organizer John Henry Hall. Russell Lasley, "Report on the Southern Leaders Conference on Transportation and Non-Violent Integration," undated [circa January 1957], folder 5, box 381, UPWA Records; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 648n20; Martin Luther King Jr. to Members of United Packing House [sic] Workers of America, May 17, 1961, folder 8, box 395, UPWA Records. Little has been written about the UPWA's role in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, but see Levy, *New Left and Labor*; Levy, *Civil War on Race Street*, 128; Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*; Honey, "Introduction."

inent role. The United Packinghouse Workers of America campaigned energetically, from the Chicago stockyards to the Louisiana bayou. UPWA leaders drew parallels between lynching in the South and mob action in the North, arguing that Black and white workers in both regions stood to gain from a united struggle against racism in all its forms. Packinghouse workers petitioned, marched, and rallied to demand justice; the UPWA organized the first mass meeting at which Mamie Bradley spoke; and an interracial group of union activists traveled to Mississippi to observe the trial of Till's killers, flouting segregation inside and outside the courtroom.

A growing body of scholarship has highlighted the ruinous effects of anti-communist repression and factionalism on labor unions with impressive records of challenging racial inequality.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s dealt a hammer blow to the forces of "civil rights unionism," but the impulse was never completely suppressed. Like a number of other Old Left institutions that managed to survive the McCarthy era—such as the Highlander Folk School and the Southern Conference Educational Fund—the United Packinghouse Workers of America represents a significant continuity in the midcentury Black freedom struggle.

As the only left-led union to remain within the CIO after the expulsion of eleven "Communist-dominated" affiliates in 1949 and 1950, the UPWA was certainly an anomaly. It was relatively insulated from the government harassment and "raiding" by rivals that crippled most of the expelled unions, yet avoided a wholesale purge of radicals from its leadership and maintained a highly democratic internal structure.<sup>81</sup> As importantly, African Americans comprised a growing minority of the meatpacking and sugar refinery workforces, often assigned to critical roles in the production process; in Chicago, the union's historic stronghold, the vast majority of packinghouse workers were Black.<sup>82</sup> This unusual combination of circumstances facilitated the pursuit of an aggressive civil rights agenda during the mid-1950s.<sup>83</sup>

80. See note 6 above for references to this literature.

81. Three qualifications should be noted. First, while there were many Communists and leftists of other stripes on the UPWA staff and among the membership, none of the union's elected international officers during this period were Communists, and they signed affidavits affirming this, in accordance with the Taft-Hartley Act. Second, while the UPWA was therefore relatively insulated from anticommunist attacks, it was not completely immune and made some concessions to them. See, e.g., Horowitz, "Negro and White," 175–205; Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor*, 218–45; Harris, "Mixed Melody." Third, although UPWA local and regional bodies retained a significant measure of decision-making autonomy, the Program Department was a highly centralized operation, with program coordinators for each region appointed and supervised by the union's international leadership in Chicago.

82. Like other African Americans of their generation, many Black packinghouse workers were emboldened by the antifascist spirit of home front mobilization for World War II and by their service in the armed forces. Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor*, 167–200, 212–18.

83. Horowitz, "Negro and White," 203–27; Halpern, "Getting to Grips"; see also Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, *Left Out*, 232–65. UPWA leaders were building on a tradition of antiracist activism that traced back to the union's formative years, on which see references in note 4 above.

Of course, resolutions and speeches meant little unless flesh-and-blood individuals were willing to press the union's program in the face of resistance from within and outside. Not all UPWA leaders were as principled and selfless as Program Department staffers Frank London Brown and Jack Telfer, who frequently risked their lives confronting racism.<sup>84</sup> But no other majority-white union fought with such vigor.<sup>85</sup> As the backlash against *Brown v. Board* gained momentum, the UPWA provided an infrastructure and cultivated an ethos that encouraged working-class southerners like Grace Falgoust and Lillian Pittman to forge meaningful solidarity across the color line. Falgoust and her coworkers may not have cast off all vestiges of "whiteness," but they defied prevailing class, gender, and racial norms during a deeply conservative period.

A leaflet circulated by District 1 in 1955 asked, "Did Emmett Till Die in Vain?"<sup>86</sup> The question remains salient, as racial violence, discrimination, and inequality continue to plague this country more than half a century later. Those who seek to revive the tradition of civil rights unionism would do well to remember the UPWA activists who answered resoundingly: "Organized Labor Says No!" ■

MATTHEW F. NICHTER is assistant professor of sociology and coordinator of Africa and African American studies at Rollins College.

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84. In early 1957, at the behest of UPWA president Ralph Helstein, Richard Durham was fired from his position as head of the Program Department. For some time, Durham had been coordinating an informal caucus pushing for greater Black representation on leadership bodies and a more militant stance on racial issues. Helstein believed that the group's approach would alienate white members and destabilize the union; by dismissing Durham, he may have also been trying to limit the power of Durham's most influential white ally in the UPWA, international vice president Tony Stephens. Helstein interview by Balanoff, pp. 271–79; Ralph Helstein, interview by Les Orear, undated [circa 1980–82], transcript, pp. 147–89, Illinois Labor History Society; Oscar Brown Jr., interview by Robinson. In 1964, Durham became the editor of the Nation of Islam's newspaper, which led to his collaboration with Muhammad Ali on the boxer's memoir. Durham later wrote speeches for Chicago mayor Harold Washington. Williams, *Word Warrior*.

85. Draper, *Conflict of Interests*, 37; Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 270–73. David Roediger acknowledges that the UPWA "pushed uncommonly hard for antiracist positions in the workplace and beyond," but nevertheless erroneously characterizes the union's general approach during this period as "nonracial syndicalism"—the blinkered, opportunistic stance he ascribes to the CIO as a whole. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness*, 222.

86. "Did Emmett Till Die in Vain? Organized Labor Says No!," September 8, 1955.

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