



Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

Book Samples

ILR Press

2010

Black Power At Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry

David Goldberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/books>

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

Support this valuable resource today!

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Press at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Book Samples by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact catherwood-dig@cornell.edu.

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact web-accessibility@cornell.edu for assistance.

Black Power At Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry

Abstract

{Excerpt} As the contributors to this book show, confrontations with the building trades unions became a critical axis for the rise of Black Power and community control politics, and provide a means for us to rethink the history of Black Power through the fusion by the movement of community control and labor organizing. By tracing the evolution of these activists' organizing methods and analysis, we show that African American grassroots struggles to desegregate the construction industry provided a major, and in some cities the, means through which Black Power movements became ascendant in African American urban politics. Only through close attention to local politics are these profound cultural and political shifts visible. Because of their decentralized quality, the movements for community control of the construction industry varied by city, based on the idiosyncratic nature of the specific African American communities and political networks from which they emerged. These differences were accentuated by weak federal enforcement of affirmative action plans, which relied on a strategy of localism that placed the origin, evolution, and fate of construction industry affirmative action plans primarily in the hands of local actors and courts .

Keywords

Black power, affirmative action, civil rights, racism, War on Poverty, 1960s, 1970s

Comments

The abstract, table of contents, and first twenty-five pages are published with permission from the Cornell University Press. For ordering information, please visit the [Cornell University Press](https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/books/65)

BLACK POWER AT WORK

BLACK POWER AT WORK

Community Control,
Affirmative Action, and
the Construction Industry

**Edited by David Goldberg
and Trevor Griffey**

Property of
MARTIN P. CATHERWOOD LIBRARY
SCHOOL OF
INDUSTRIAL AND LABOR RELATIONS
Cornell University

ILR Press

AN IMPRINT OF

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS ITHACA AND LONDON

Copyright © 2010 by Cornell University

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street, Ithaca, New York 14850.

First published 2010 by Cornell University Press

First printing, Cornell Paperbacks, 2010

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Black power at work : community control, affirmative action, and the construction industry / edited by David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8014-4658-0 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8014-7431-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. African American construction workers. 2. African American labor union members. 3. Construction workers—Labor unions—United States. 4. Affirmative action programs—United States. 5. Labor movement—United States. 6. Black power—United States. 7. Civil rights movements—United States. I. Goldberg, David A., 1972– II. Griffey, Trevor, 1975– III. Title.

HD9715.U52B53 2010

331.6'396073—dc22

2010011806

Cornell University Press strives to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the fullest extent possible in the publishing of its books. Such materials include vegetable-based, low-VOC inks and acid-free papers that are recycled, totally chlorine-free, or partly composed of nonwood fibers. For further information, visit our website at www.cornellpress.cornell.edu.

Cloth printing	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Paperback printing	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1



For Leo Fletcher, Herbert Hill, and Tyree Scott

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: Constructing Black Power	1
<i>David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey</i>	
1. “Revolution Has Come to Brooklyn”: Construction Trades Protests and the Negro Revolt of 1963	23
<i>Brian Purnell</i>	
2. “The Laboratory of Democracy”: Construction Industry Racism in Newark and the Limits of Liberalism	48
<i>Julia Rabig</i>	
3. “Work for Me Also Means Work for the Community I Come From”: Black Contractors, Black Capitalism, and Affirmative Action in the Bay Area	68
<i>John J. Rosen</i>	
4. Community Control of Construction, Independent Unionism, and the “Short Black Power Movement” in Detroit	90
<i>David Goldberg</i>	
5. “The Stone Wall Behind”: The Chicago Coalition for United Community Action and Labor’s Overseers, 1968–1973	112
<i>Erik S. Gellman</i>	
6. “The Blacks Should Not Be Administering the Philadelphia Plan”: Nixon, the Hard Hats, and “Voluntary” Affirmative Action	134
<i>Trevor Griffey</i>	
7. From Jobs to Power: The United Construction Workers Association and Title VII Community Organizing in the 1970s	161
<i>Trevor Griffey</i>	

Conclusion: White Male Identity Politics, the Building Trades, and the Future of American Labor	189
<i>David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey</i>	
Notes	209
About the Contributors	255
Index	257

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers who read our book proposal and the manuscript, and provided thoughtful comments and guidance that helped strengthen the volume. In particular, we thank the contributors to this volume for their patience and understanding, and Fran Benson, our editor at Cornell University Press, for supporting our project and remaining a joy to work with throughout the process.

Trevor Griffey

I especially thank David Goldberg for being the driving force behind this volume and for challenging me to grow as a colleague and a scholar. And I thank my family for their faith and support.

I also thank James N. Gregory, Nikhil Singh, Moon-Ho Jung, Michael McCann, John Findlay, Quintard Taylor, and Susan Glenn at the University of Washington (UW) for their academic guidance, feedback, and inspiration. In addition, I thank Jessie Kindig for being an outstanding colleague.

Critical support for my research came from various UW institutions: the Simpson Center for the Humanities; the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies; the Graduate School Alvord Fellowship; the Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest; and the History Department Burg Scholarship, Rondeau-Evans Fellowship, and Travel Awards.

I am indebted to innumerable archivists, but my research would have been impossible without the following individuals: Don Davis of the American Friends Service Committee, Kathleen Crosman at National Archives Regional Archives (NARA) in Seattle, Gregory Cumming at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, and Karyl Winn at the Special Collections of the UW Library.

Most of all, I am indebted to the activists themselves, who trusted me to share their stories and whose guidance has transformed not only my scholarship but also my life: Todd Hawkins, Michael Woo, Bev Sims, Harold Wright, Michael Fox, and Dillard Craven in Seattle; Michael Simmons in Philadelphia; James Pannell in Shreveport; and Michael Conley, Walter Block, Ruford Henderson, and LaRue Thompson in Tulsa.

David Goldberg

This book began as an idea in my thick skull, but germinated into a viable project once I pulled Trevor Griffey away from his dissertation. As the table of contents shows, Trevor went above and beyond the call of duty. I thank him for his hard work, for making the volume immeasurably better, and for being a wonderful scholar and friend.

I also thank Shawn Alexander, Ernest Allen, Aaron Anderson, Shannon Anderson, Ian Anderson, Jay Anderson, General Baker, Jackson Bartlett, Beth Bates, Melba Joyce Boyd, John H. Bracey, Dana Brenner-Kelly, Raydin Brenner-Kelley, Eric Kelley, Sundiata Cha Jua, Liz Faue, Edward Finman, Willie Green, Jennifer Hamer, Zhandarka Kurti, Clarence Lang, Tricia Loveland, Daniel McClure, Kelli Morgan, Timothy O'Neil, Leah Raab, James Smethurst, Manisha Sinha, Thomas Sugrue, Monica White, and Rhonda Y. Williams for their feedback, friendship, support, and guidance during the creation of this book.

This project could not have been completed without generous financial support provided by Central Michigan University; the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Department of Africana Studies at Wayne State University.

Finally, I want to thank and honor my beloved late grandmother, Helen Brenner, and my mother, Elaine Rosenblat, for their unfailing love and support. I am forever indebted to my mother, who is currently battling terminal cancer, for always being there and for serving as both my mother and my father. While she may never see this book, she will always be with me. I thank you and love you dearly, Mom.

BLACK POWER AT WORK

CONSTRUCTING BLACK POWER

David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey

The construction industry has provided extraordinary opportunities for class mobility in the United States, but those benefits have been largely restricted to white men and their families. After World War II, home ownership became, along with Social Security, one of the few entitlements that the political culture of the Cold War allowed to be considered “American.” From the 1940s through the 1960s, generous federal government home-loan programs, highway construction, and tax incentives heavily underwrote residential construction in the United States (particularly in its suburbs). As numerous studies have shown, the racial exclusivity of the post–World War II federal subsidies for home ownership, combined with the lack of fair housing laws, ensured that the unprecedented class mobility afforded to Americans in the postwar era disproportionately benefited white families. The resulting disparate levels of wealth accumulation from the 1940s to the 1960s ensured that, as the middle class expanded, it remained predominantly white and suburban.¹

But the question of who owned homes or benefited from real estate speculation does not fully explain the role that the construction industry has had in shaping U.S. society. The growth of U.S. homeownership after World War II provided jobs that allowed millions of blue-collar workers and their families to participate in a new consumer society. Building trades unions facilitated this transition while restricting access to it. Construction industry unionization was at its apex in 1940–1960, when half of all construction jobs were union and unions controlled the industry in many cities outside the South. The fact that this was also a time when federal government construction spending was at its apex is hardly

a coincidence. Federal law, and many similar state laws, required that government contractors pay the “prevailing wage,” which in turn provided unions extraordinary leverage to organize the construction industry. These organizing campaigns did more than ensure that construction workers received a fair portion of the profits from the construction industry boom. They also wrested away employer prerogatives to train, hire, fire, and discipline workers from contractors. As a result, building trades unions exerted extraordinary power to control wages and worker access to an industry that during the post-war boom provided close to 10 percent of male employment.²

Thus, although the construction industry literally paved the way for the emergence of a postwar service-based economy, black workers remained largely trapped in industrial jobs that provided lower wages and few, if any, opportunities to ascend the ranks into management. The “racial welfare state” of the New Deal—which subsidized racially segregated homeownership and discriminatory employers and granted labor rights to racially exclusive unions—deepened racial segregation by limiting economic and social mobility to white men, thus producing “a mostly white and propertied proletariat in the suburbs, and a poor, inner city working class of people of color.”³ Black unemployment increased rather than decreased, even during the heyday of the postwar boom, because of the segregation of blacks into low and semiskilled jobs and inner-city neighborhoods made vulnerable to layoffs produced by automation, the relocation of factories to the suburbs, and deindustrialization.⁴

It was in this context that black activists in Philadelphia, frustrated with the glacial pace of post–World War II racial liberalism and the gradualist politics of the established civil rights leaders, built a largely working-class, grassroots movement incorporating the politics of disruption and direct action to confront institutionalized racism in the construction industry. Incorporating ideological and tactical approaches as well and constituents from nationalist and community-based activism and boycotts of the 1950s, “Philadelphia’s branches of CORE and the NAACP” in April 1963 began a two-month series of protests and construction shutdowns to demand “the inclusion of black workers in city-sponsored construction projects.” These protests brought mass direct-action tactics to large-scale, publicly funded construction projects in the North. In the process, they “attacked the very core of postwar Keynesian economics: business and unions reliant on government spending” and fundamentally transformed the northern freedom movement.⁵

The 1963 Philadelphia protests helped launch a six-year, nationwide movement for “affirmative action from below” that became rooted in Black Power and community control politics. Construction protests spread to other job sites in the northeast during the summer, including the Downstate Medical Center in

Brooklyn and the Barringer School in Newark, campaigns chronicled in this volume. Throughout the summer, activists, many of them associated with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), became “impatient with the pace of change” and experimented “with new, more militant forms of protest.”⁶ According to Elliot Rudwick and August Meier, the 1963 protests precipitated a series of “changes that involved not only a stress on the grievances of the black poor, but also an escalation of tactics, the beginning of an erosion in the commitment to nonviolence, and a tendency towards black separatism.” What emerged in their wake was a movement of local movements that frequently blurred the lines between civil rights and black power while also placing the two in increasing tension with one another.⁷

Although they are connected with much longer struggles for jobs and justice and community-centered labor organizing, the 1963 protests and those that followed do not fit neatly within a history of the “long civil rights movement.” The expulsion of black radical labor organizations and leaders from the labor movement during the Red Scare created a generational vacuum between the 1940s- and 1950s-era black radicals and 1960s activists. Cold War unionism, dominated by the building trades unions, further limited the options available to the civil rights leaders and unionists who remained. Internal efforts to reform the building trades unions through voluntarism, liberal-labor coalitions, or remaining race-based caucuses such as the Negro American Labor Council proved futile, and racially progressive allies within the labor movement were scarce and enfeebled.

The 1963 building trades protests were central to the “Negro Revolt of 1963” and represented the limits of civil rights unionism and fair employment politics. Activists organized outside the formal labor movement to demand “that racial equality in construction” and local jobs for local people “be measured by results” rather than procedure.⁸ When these demands were not met and federally funded urban renewal projects continued, activists, including mainline civil rights organizations, increasingly turned to Black Power labor politics and community control organizing to gain access to jobs as well as control of the economic and physical development of inner cities.⁹

As the contributors to this book show, confrontations with the building trades unions became a critical axis for the rise of Black Power and community control politics, and provide a means for us to rethink the history of Black Power through the fusion by the movement of community control and labor organizing. By tracing the evolution of these activists’ organizing methods and analysis, we show that African American grassroots struggles to desegregate the construction industry provided a major, and in some cities *the*, means through which Black Power movements became ascendant in African American urban politics.

Only through close attention to local politics are these profound cultural and political shifts visible. Because of their decentralized quality, the movements for community control of the construction industry varied by city, based on the idiosyncratic nature of the specific African American communities and political networks from which they emerged. These differences were accentuated by weak federal enforcement of affirmative action plans, which relied on a strategy of localism that placed the origin, evolution, and fate of construction industry affirmative action plans primarily in the hands of local actors and courts.¹⁰

The chapters in this book thus provide case studies whose sum is greater than their parts. Their focus on local politics contribute to a growing body of literature focusing on expanding our understanding of civil rights histories beyond charismatic leaders to understand how local people's participation in the black freedom movement drove much of its intellectual and political evolution. Our regional focus on the urban North stems from the fact that campaigns to desegregate the construction industry did not enter the South until the early 1970s, and emerged largely in response to federal government intervention.¹¹ Inspired by the southern civil rights activism, the campaigns to desegregate the building trades galvanized local movements in the North in ways that voting registration and direct action campaigns against public segregation politicized local people in the South.¹²

The ascension of community control and Black Power perspectives within local movements to desegregate the building trades during the early and mid-1960s are chronicled at length in the first three chapters of this book, which present case studies of Brooklyn, Newark, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Chapters 4 and 5, studies of Detroit and Chicago, continue this approach, but chronicle the development and activities of the Black Power construction coalitions formed in wake of spreading urban uprisings, whose campaigns facilitated the implementation of affirmative action in the building trades beginning in 1969. These chapters, along with chapter 6, on the hard hat movement, the Nixon administration, and affirmative action policy, contextualize how and why affirmative action was so quickly compromised. Activists, however, responded to this turn of events by using direct action and construction shutdowns in an attempt to revive and gain control of the implementation of affirmative action programs during the 1970s, as detailed in chapter 7, a study of Seattle's movement.

Black Power at Work chronicles the profound impact that these grassroots movements had on national political culture and the social-movement origins of affirmative action politics. At their peak in the 1960s and early 1970s, these movements were diverse and diffuse, spread by activists in loose communication with one another rather than being directed by a single organization, coalition, or government actor from the top down.¹³ At the local level, militant tactics that halted

work on billions of dollars of federal construction created a crisis for civil rights moderates and liberal-labor political coalitions. Deeming the gradualism of the liberal establishment to be ineffective and racist, black militants' calls for power and not promises created fissures in Democratic Party coalition that helped set in motion new forms of urban politics. "The protesters," Thomas Sugrue argues, "were not, in a strict sense, the architects of affirmative action. They did not draft executive orders and federal regulations. But, by taking their grievances to the streets and construction sites," they made affirmative action politically possible.¹⁴

Yet these grassroots campaigns not only drove the creation of affirmative action but also sought to connect the desegregation of the building trades with the broader Black Power movement goals of black community control and economic and political self-determination. The case studies in *Black Power at Work* locate the development of the Black Power construction struggles as a process beginning in 1963 and extending into the early 1970s, but they strongly refute the notion that Black Power contributed to the declension of the movement. Rather, the studies show that the community-based labor politics and grassroots organizing of these local Black Power movements served as the catalyst that pushed building trades struggles and civil rights litigation beyond their prior limitations.¹⁵

Taken together, the chapters in *Black Power at Work* unsettle a number of assumptions that have informed the history of civil rights, Black Power, affirmative action, the labor movement, and 1960s social movements. First, they remove affirmative action history from the world of public policy by placing its origins within the context of black radical and nationalist community organizing during the 1960s and 1970s. Second, by highlighting the community organizing strategies of Black Power activists in the 1960s and early 1970s, specifically around the politics of employment and unionization, the studies in this book show the centrality of the labor question to the evolution of Black Power. The question of building black independent and political power, for example, was often directly connected to debates about how to best organize black workers to fight against economic marginalization and discrimination, both within and outside the "house of labor." Third, by treating affirmative action law as *both* labor law and civil rights law, the case studies provide a means for us to see Black Power labor activism not as antiunion—as some labor historians have derided it—but as an important form of labor radicalism.

From Inclusion to Community Control

What we now think of as affirmative action was first implemented on Public Works Administration (PWA) and U.S. Housing Authority (USHA) projects in

the 1930s and early 1940s, but it was supplanted as a remedy for employment discrimination when liberal activists focused on securing fair employment legislation during and after World War II.¹⁶ The 1963 job-site protests, however, resurrected quotas or goals as a remedy for employment discrimination by using direct action and construction shutdowns to demand specific percentages of jobs in inner-city construction. These often protracted and large-scale protests drew violent responses from white tradesmen and police, as well as the attention of the federal government. Yet, although they raised awareness of discrimination in the building trades, these initial protests produced little in terms of tangible results. When confronted with discrimination charges, unions denied having bias or responsibility but pledged to police themselves, and local authorities deferred to the unions. Similarly, President John Kennedy's Executive Order 11114, a direct response to the Philadelphia protests, called for affirmative action against discrimination on publicly funded projects but failed to define what this entailed or to provide an enforcement mechanism.¹⁷

The liberal political machines and the federal government proved themselves either unwilling or unable to effectively respond to the challenge to union racism posed by African American communities. From late 1963 forward, activists in cities across the country incorporated "militant strategies and rhetoric" from the emerging Black Power and community control movements. Increased funding for inner-city construction, in the form of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs—first the Office of Economic Opportunity and later also Model Cities—contained provisions requiring the "maximum feasible participation" of community residents, which local activists organized to test and expand.

The Newark Coordinating Committee (NCC), a coalition group formed in 1963 by Newark members of CORE that had led the Barringer protests, moved "beyond merely exposing discrimination and demanding redress" by fighting to gain oversight of apprenticeship training and placement as well as community control of local health services and urban renewal programs. The failure of the initial direct action campaigns and protests had a similar impact on activists elsewhere. At the national level, the unwillingness of the federal government to "take affirmative action" against racial discrimination in the building trades unions led James Farmer, CORE director, to consider sponsoring independent unions in 1964 to "put pressure on established unions that discriminate in admitting new members."¹⁸ CORE never established independent construction unions for fear of drawing the ire of the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and losing important financial support, but it did embark on a "pilot project" in Boston that created "a voluntary organization cutting across racial lines...to obtain more construction contracts for Negro contractors, more construction jobs for the skilled Negro worker, and

more apprenticeship opportunities for the unskilled Negro worker.”¹⁹ In addition, in 1966 in the San Francisco Bay Area, Justice on Bay Area Rapid Transit (JOBART) activists staged protests to demand access to jobs on the construction of the regional rail system (Bay Area Rapid Transit, BART), part of a larger effort to “rebuild the black community in place by using development money attached to major projects like BART.”²⁰

A specific trajectory within the long civil rights movement historiography refutes the dominant narrative that depicted Black Power and black nationalism as reactionary post-1965 phenomena that caused the declension of the “the good” civil rights movement. This scholarship rightfully revives the long ignored pre-1960s black radical tradition, and depicts a long Black Power movement by linking the Garvey movement; the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work campaigns; National Negro Congress; National Negro Labor Council; black internationalism; Nation of Islam; and local black nationalist, radical, and self-defense organizations and activists to the development of Black Power in the 1960s.²¹

The contributors to *Black Power at Work*, however, make a conscious distinction between prior instances of black nationalist, community-centered, and black radical politics and the Black Power movement. We recognize that 1960s-era black nationalism, as John Bracey argued nearly forty years ago, resulted “from a long historical development and” was “not merely a specific response to immediate conditions.”²² Yet linking earlier movements to the Black Power movement often obscures the “strategic vision, goals, objectives, leaders and followers, practices, symbols and discourses” of each movement while failing to adequately address the specific historical contexts in which they were operative.²³ The movements that developed around the building trades in the 1960s shifted tactically and ideologically as activists experimented with and responded to local and national social, political, and cultural currents that were very different than those encountered by prior activists.²⁴ For example, although black labor organizations such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters may (or may not) have represented workplace-based Black Power in decades prior, during the 1960s they sought to work within the existing labor movement and its institutions and discouraged black independent labor organizing.

This insider approach to racism within organized labor failed to change discriminatory practices within the AFL-CIO, particularly the craft unions, thus providing the inspiration for calls for self-determination and independent unionism by the Black Power movement. In fact, the challenge posed by Black Power unionism was so great that civil rights unionists (including Bayard Rustin, the A. Philip Randolph Institute, and the Workers Defense League) actively sought to *shorten* the Black Power movement by working in conjunction with

building trades unions to usurp grassroots leaders during “hometown plan” affirmative action negotiations.²⁵

Black Power and Black Mondays

The successes and limitations of the civil rights movement and the complicity of liberalism in the expansion of institutionalized racism at home and abroad during the 1960s bolstered the growth of a Black Power movement that “thought globally and acted locally.”²⁶ Black workers, activists, institutions, and businessmen, frustrated with the deleterious effects of continued white economic and political control of urban areas—particularly in cities with rapidly expanding black populations—were attracted to the goals and rhetoric of community control rather than integration. But they lacked the vast resources needed to establish black economic and political self-determination in inner-city neighborhoods struggling with the crippling effects of deindustrialization and second ghettoization. By seeking control over urban renewal projects, contracts, and the jobs they created, local Black Power activists fought to ensure that federally construction projects of the mid-1960s would be as politically and economically beneficial to inner cities and their residents as the urban renewal programs of the 1950s had been for white suburbanites. This approach gained increased currency as urban unrest and state repression escalated.

Civil unrest and “long hot summers” had dominated U.S. urban politics from 1963 to 1968. Inner-city “riots,” most often triggered by incidents of police brutality, began in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 and spread a year later to Harlem and Rochester, New York, and then to Philadelphia. Following the Watts (Los Angeles) uprising of 1965, hundreds of similar rebellions took place during the next three years in cities throughout the country. White Americans, however, including political leaders, proved ambivalent at best about substantively addressing the rampant racial discrimination in housing, employment, and education, along with widespread police brutality, that had enraged urban black communities. The mass upheavals in Detroit and Newark in 1967 were the largest, and they were followed by unrest around the country after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968. By mid-1968, these rebellions showed few signs of abating, and many if not most observers at the time assumed that they would persist for years to come.²⁷

Instead, a change took place in African American urban politics between 1968 and 1969 that has yet to be adequately explained. Rather than persisting, the rebellions largely came to a halt and were replaced by well-organized grassroots political campaigns. The possibility for violence, which gave the militant demands made by Black Power activists attention that they otherwise would have lacked,

have also caused contemporaries and historians to overlook the significance of the local organizing traditions that Black Power advocates solidified in the wake of the rebellions. Instead of looting, everyday people rose up to demand jobs. Instead of setting fires, the poor residents of racially segregated African American cities across the country demanded control of the rebuilding of their communities. Instead of promoting uprisings that expressed black frustration and powerlessness, local Black Power activists, in concert with activists across the nation, organized campaigns that mobilized hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of people to demand control over the policies and institutions that impacted their lives and communities. Across the country, Black Power, already operative in several local construction struggles, went to work.

These processes gained a wider expression and a more specific formulation when, on August 29, 1968, over 3,000 black activists met in Philadelphia to attend the Third National Conference on Black Power, whose theme was "Black Self-Determination and Black Unity through Direct Action." An observer from the press described the four-day event, with its roughly fifty different plenary and workshop sessions, as being different in tone from the "loud rhetoric" and bluster that defined the Black Power conference held in Newark the previous year. With the meanings of Black Power already theorized and the need for implementation and organization clear, conference attendees in Philadelphia participated in "intense and serious discussion... [about] programs of action in which blacks at all levels—both moderates and militants—can become involved." Seizing control of the political, economic, and social institutions whose everyday operation allowed white people to exercise control over black urban communities, activists believed, would harness the rise in black militancy that followed the outbreak of the urban rebellions in a common struggle to end "internal colonization" and establish black self-determination and "community control."²⁸

Formulating an economic program for Black Power played a significant role in shaping how conference attendees framed what Black Power and community control entailed. Conference attendees linked the call for jobs with the call for political power and the development of black businesses and job opportunities with larger demands for power beginning at the local neighborhood level. Federal government funding of urban renewal projects and the reconstruction of postrebellion inner cities through the Model Cities Program deeply implicated the U.S. government in the razing of African American communities in the name of social progress. Conference attendees attacked existing "federally funded institutional expansions, highway development and urban renewal" as coordinated attempts to fragment and weaken black communities, institutions, and voting power as the concentration of black citizens in urban areas expanded.²⁹ Activists rejected these federal projects as a form of "colonization," a "neo-plantationism"

created by “the systematic effort of racist planners and politicians to isolate, confuse and destroy Black people socially, economically, mentally and spiritually.”³⁰

But Black Power activists also saw organizing potential in federal redevelopment projects. Community control groups, if effectively organized at the grassroots level, could demand that every aspect of such projects—from policy making to labor—be placed under black control. To work toward this objective, activists dedicated themselves to taking control of or blocking Model Cities programs at the local level while also developing “trade training institutions, programs and unions” on a nationwide basis to create a material foundation for community economic development and self-determination.³¹ This call for action, and the subsequent movement building that took place across the country, set the stage for a looming confrontation among Black Power activists, racially exclusive skilled trades unions, and the U.S. government.

From July to September 1969, Black Power activists around the country organized a wave of direct action protests against employment discrimination in the U.S. construction industry. Demanding the immediate implementation of affirmative action programs to fund black contractors and hire and train black (and sometimes also Puerto Rican) workers on federally funded construction projects in inner-city neighborhoods, protesters shut down billions of dollars of government projects in many of the largest U.S. cities. Beginning in Chicago and Pittsburgh in July, spreading to Philadelphia in August, and inspiring similar actions throughout the urban North from Seattle to New York City in September to coincide with Black Monday protests called by activists in Pittsburgh, this wave of direct action campaigns was directly responsible for the breakthrough of affirmative action at the federal level.³²

What little has been written about the wave of construction-site closures in 1969 tends to describe them as *both* riots and protests, as an extension of the “long hot summers” and a transformation of them, even though actual violence was rare and burning and looting were nonexistent.³³ Black Power activists intentionally mobilized protests to capitalize on white people’s fears of racial violence in the wake of urban rebellions. In cities such as Detroit and Washington, D.C., the scale of the previous rebellions and fear of continued racial unrest were so great that the mere threat of protest was sufficient to provide activists with leverage to demand community control of, and federal intervention in, pending inner-city redevelopment projects.

Black Power at Work

Histories of affirmative action written since the early 1990s have documented how the political crisis that protesters created made the Philadelphia Plan—the

first affirmative action plan ever imposed by the federal government—politically possible. The imposition by the U.S. Labor Department of the Philadelphia Plan, which imposed goals and timetables for the hiring of black construction workers on federal contractors in Philadelphia, opened the door for similar affirmative action plans in other cities as both riot prevention and a civil rights policy alternative to the War on Poverty.³⁴ At the same time, officials in the Richard Nixon White House hoped to flood the construction industry with low-wage nonunion labor as a means of controlling the contribution of high construction industry wages to inflation.³⁵ But regardless of Nixon's goals, the tactic he introduced proved uncontrollable. In conjunction with the increasingly expansive interpretation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act by the federal courts, the Philadelphia Plan moved the metric for discrimination from individual acts of discrimination to workplace diversity statistics and shifted the object of reform in fair employment law from individual actions to institutionalized patterns and practices of racial discrimination.

Yet, despite the significance of the 1969 protests to this change in federal policy, most histories have taken these movements out of affirmative action history. Intellectual and policy studies of affirmative action invoke civil rights campaigns (if at all) mainly to describe them as a pretext for action by the Nixon White House. They largely omit what preceded or followed the Black Monday protests as if the movements had no role in the subsequent development or enforcement of affirmative action.³⁶ Similarly, the voluminous histories of civil rights, Black Power, and 1960s social movements of the last forty years have almost totally ignored the Black Monday protests.

Perhaps one reason why these protests have been overlooked by historians is that telling their history requires rethinking the declension narratives of the civil rights movement and African American urban politics that have structured so many histories of the late 1960s and 1970s. By demanding jobs and not welfare, power and not proclamations of equal opportunity, Black Monday protest leaders cut against the stereotypes of hopelessness, passivity, criminality, and a “culture of poverty” that have dominated popular discussions of African American ghettos and the development of the so-called underclass during the post-civil rights era.³⁷ Instead of being the passive victims of capital flight (urban deindustrialization) and white flight (urban depopulation), the participants in these campaigns imagined a new direction and purpose for both inner cities and the black freedom movement. The Black Monday protest leaders were local activists, not national media icons. Their organizations were so new that they seemed almost ad hoc, and they blended community and labor politics in a way that often blurred the boundaries among civil rights organizations, black nationalist organizations, independent labor unions, and social service agencies. They were led by a combination of black youth (often involved in War on Poverty job

training programs), community activists, and black construction workers and contractors who do not fit neatly into the standard organizational genealogies of the civil rights, Black Power, and the labor movement. Their mobilizations gave everyday people the means to put forward their own vision to confront institutionalized racism and the so-called urban crisis. Affirmative action in the construction industry had been a goal of the black freedom struggle since 1963, but the Black Monday protests produced what six years of prior protests and shutdowns had paved the way for but failed to secure.

By linking the development of alternatives to the urban crisis to the engagement by the Black Power movement with labor movement politics, the case studies in *Black Power at Work* contribute to the emerging field of Black Power studies. Recent works in this field have highlighted the relationship of the Black Power movement to prior struggles and its varied meanings and manifestations among community organizers and theorists, black feminists, cultural nationalists, student organizers, and clergy, as well as its influence on the development of “rainbow radicalism.”³⁸ These works have begun shifting attention away from a prior focus on familiar national figures, singular activists and organizations, and titillating tales of violence and declension. Yet more still needs to be done to describe Black Power’s labor politics and the impact that the campaigns for jobs had on the history and development of the movement locally and nationally. With the exception of school decentralization campaigns, the movements for community control of the construction industry secured more mass support than most of the better-known and more iconic campaigns of the Black Power movement. The chapters in this book provide a starting point for documenting this history as part of the broader project of connecting it to the robust and complicated Black Power community-organizing tradition.³⁹

Peter Levy locates the origins of Black Power labor politics in deindustrialization and the limits of liberalism, arguing that industrial “social activist unions, which had stood at the front of the fight for civil rights and economic reform, bore the brunt of the Black Power critique because they were the unions that were most susceptible to the structural changes taking place.” The construction unions, which “had the worst records on civil rights,” were in Levy’s estimation “less affected by structural changes and thus escaped part of Black Power’s wrath.”⁴⁰ But the Black Monday protesters’ use of direct action at the point of production and their focus on community control of inner-city construction directly challenge such narrowly focused definitions of Black Power and Black Power unionism. And, although Black Power unionism did not replace civil rights unionism or end the long civil rights movement, even these movements and the shifting historical contexts in which they operated cannot be understood without first acknowledging the ways in which Black Power rhetoric and

organizational activities influenced black workers both within and outside the “house of labor.”⁴¹

The Chapters

Black struggles for inclusion in the northern building trades unions and the construction industry began long before the rise of direct action protests during the 1960s. During the first half of twentieth century, black tradesmen in the North and West were restricted from working in all but the low-skill “trowel trades” and were forced into segregated locals that lacked power on the job and lacked influence within their respective unions. When individual attempts to join unions proved fruitless, as Erik S. Gellman (chap. 5 in this volume) discusses, some black tradesmen formed independent worker associations that served as parallel labor organizations, not unlike those found among black craftsmen in other segregated industries in the early twentieth century. Or, as John J. Rosen (chap. 3) and David Goldberg (chap. 4) document, black tradesmen sought greater control over their work through state or local licensing to become independent construction contractors.⁴²

White contractors and the unions, through labor and contractor federations, generally colluded at the local level to refuse to admit black workers to skilled trades and to marginalize their voluntary worker and contractor organizations. At the national level, in 1935 the AFL, in which the building trades unions had long played an essential part, threatened to withdraw its support for the Wagner Act (which legalized union organizing for the first time) if an amendment that made racial discrimination an unfair labor practice was not removed from the bill. With no explicit prohibition of union racism, and with the exclusion of domestic and farm laborers (nearly two-thirds of all black workers at the time) from union rights, the Wagner Act became “the Magna Carta for white labor.”⁴³

Practices of racial discrimination in the building trades thus remained firmly intact despite the establishment of racial quotas on PWA and federally funded public housing projects. Subsequent fair employment campaigns led by local chapters of the National Negro Congress, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Urban League during the 1930s and 1940 had little impact.⁴⁴ As a result, black tradesmen largely remained restricted to working with small black contractors on piecemeal, short-term jobs in black communities. Well into the post-World War II era, the racial exclusivity of the building trades unions, much like the skilled trades in the railroad and printing industries, remained stark. An Urban League survey of plumbers unions, for example, found *no* black journeymen in twenty of the twenty-three cities

it surveyed. Bricklayers, although mildly better outside the South, had twenty-five formally segregated southern locals in 1962. In New York City, a number of trades had “for white only” and “father-son only” apprenticeship clauses, and many others followed this practice in deed rather than words.⁴⁵

In 1956, following the merger of the AFL and CIO, NAACP Labor Secretary Herbert Hill found little support for the proposals he frequently offered to eliminate racial discrimination in the building trades unions.⁴⁶ Hill’s appeals to the international building trades unions were continually rebuked, and George Meany, AFL-CIO president, regularly “defended the practices of the building trades councils.” This included the defense by Meany and the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee of Milwaukee Bricklayers Local 8 even after local courts ruled that the union was in violation state antidiscrimination laws. The AFL-CIO also refused to intervene when presented with evidence that East St. Louis Plumbers Union Local 630 had completely barred blacks from membership. Meany did help three black youths in Cleveland gain entrance to an apprenticeship program for the electricians union in 1957 by threatening to decertify the union, but this was a rare exception that proved the rule. Ten years later, for example, the 1,200-member local still had only two black journeymen and two black apprentices.⁴⁷ Even Walter Reuther, the president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and prominent supporter of the southern civil rights movement, “failed to lift a finger during AFL-CIO council meetings” on building trades union discrimination.⁴⁸

“By the end of 1959,” Gilbert Jonas explains, “the NAACP and Labor Secretary Hill had abandoned hope that racial justice in the workplace could be accomplished under the leadership of white labor leaders.”⁴⁹ During the early 1960s, Hill stepped up his efforts to expose the racism of the building trades unions in speeches and widely publicized studies. But, rather than appealing to the conscience of the AFL-CIO, Hill began promoting aggressive litigation and grassroots organizing in local NAACP branches.⁵⁰

In 1963, CORE, the most militant of the civil rights organizations in the North in the early 1960s, accelerated the work of Hill and the NAACP. CORE chapters were important pioneers in using direct action to challenge racism in the construction industry, sparking the initial protests in Philadelphia and participating in the movements that followed.⁵¹ Inspired by CORE and NAACP protests in Philadelphia and New York City, Brooklyn CORE, with the help of a local black ministerial alliance, halted construction on the Downstate Medical Center in summer 1963. This campaign, as Brian Purnell (chap. 1 in this volume) argues, represented an unstable fusion of civil rights and Black Power perspectives and tactics. The Downstate Medical Center protests, although failing to secure jobs for local residents, pushed CORE and other movement participants in a variety of different directions in the years that followed. Brooklyn CORE, for

example, went from being half white in summer 1963 to being predominantly black, working class, and more radical and community-centered as a result of the Downstate campaign. At the individual level, Sonny Carson, Brooklyn CORE member and Downstate activist, went on to become a major force in the community control and Black Power movements, later serving as the chairman of the economics workshop at the Third National Conference on Black Power in Philadelphia in 1968.⁵²

The history of CORE and the Newark Coordinating Committee (NCC) similarly helps us see the gradual development of Black Power and its intersections with the civil rights movement prior to the late 1960s.⁵³ CORE members' involvement in building trades protests in New Jersey moved younger militant activists from the margins to the center of the Newark freedom movement. As Julia Rabig (chap. 2 in this volume) shows, the formation of the NCC challenged the gradualist, integrationist approach to civil rights taken previously by the Newark democratic machine, established civil rights leaders, and the business elite. What is more, their protests at the construction of Barringer High School in 1963 set off a series of changes within the Newark freedom movement so that calls for affirmative action became connected to calls for community control. These demands were advanced by the development of autonomous and parallel institutions, ideological and tactical approaches that expanded following the 1967 Newark rebellion.

The increasing significance of community control and Black Power politics in construction struggles resulted largely from the failure of previous efforts of blacks to gain inclusion in the trades. Government officials generally approached the topic of discrimination in the building trades unions by deferring to union supporters. Although the Department of Labor authorized the Bureau of Apprenticeship Training (BAT) to decertify discriminatory programs in 1963, BAT, headed by a former official of the New York Bricklayers' Union, refused to do so. This approach produced token results while maintaining union control of access, training, placement, and jobs.⁵⁴

Between 1963 and 1968, "protests and policy innovations reinforced each other in a feedback loop"⁵⁵ that eventually took the enforcement of civil rights law to uncharted territory. Herbert Hill, of the NAACP, provided the public face for the diffuse movements in the urban North, leading protests that called for strengthened federal policy while also fighting for the rigorous enforcement of existing mandates. Hill pushed for litigation against building trades unions, crafting some of the very first lawsuits seeking to enforce Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁵⁶ He also helped organize and publicize a wave of 1965 protests.⁵⁷ And while continuing to provide information, organizational support, and resources to civil rights activists around the country, by the late 1960s, Hill had helped foster the development of independent black worker unions and black

contractor associations in an attempt to bypass the building trades unions and to make workers' calls for community control of construction a reality.⁵⁸

Efforts to desegregate the building trades generally attracted the guarded attention of policymakers—but only after construction protests were joined by large-scale civil disorders and rising black militancy. Job site and union hall shut-downs occurred in St. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Newark, and the Bronx in 1964 and summer 1965, but the federal government did not intercede.⁵⁹ But on August 11, 1965, when rebellion broke out in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, national political discourse finally began to debate the consequences (and, less often, the causes) of African Americans being forced to live in highly segregated and impoverished neighborhoods located in the center of the wealthiest U.S. metropolitan regions. Roughly six weeks later, President Johnson intervened by issuing Executive Order 11246, which reaffirmed Kennedy's prior order and created the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC) to enforce it.

The OFCC, located within the U.S. Department of Labor, had substantially more power than the free-floating and underfunded agency created to enforce Title VII, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). It was granted the power to cancel contracts with contractors who had failed to take affirmative action against discrimination when subcontracting labor, but it refused to enforce this provision. Instead, it began crafting plans "to enforce compliance on construction contracts" for St. Louis and San Francisco in 1966 and for Cleveland and Philadelphia in 1967.⁶⁰

By targeting cities that were already hotbeds for construction protests and Black Power organizing, the OFCC programs ended up contributing further to Black Power organizing. These plans expanded the ineffectual model created by BAT, giving credence to radicals' demands for community control. OFCC programs were funded by the Labor Department's Manpower Administration and were overseen in collaboration with the building trades unions and moderate black organizations such as the Urban League, Workers Defense League, Trade Union Leadership Council, and Opportunities Industrialization Centers. They focused on increasing the pool of minority applicants to apprenticeship programs, but had little effect on the placement of minority workers in jobs or their admission into unions.

Federally imposed remedies were slow in developing and strongly resisted by both the building trades unions and segments of the government.⁶¹ The building trades unions responded to the implementation of the St. Louis Plan by walking off the Gateway Arch construction site, provoking a protracted legal dispute. The Cleveland and Philadelphia plans crafted a year later—the former was later "recommended to the Kerner Commission"⁶² as a means of combating unemployment and rioting and served as a model for the latter—were stronger. Both