**Black Nationalism and Opposition to Organized Labour in 1930s New York City**

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Modern historiography emphasises the importance of black nationalism in an ongoing ‘long’ civil rights movement, particularly during the Garvey and Black Power eras in the 1920s and 1960s. While not as prominent as these movements, this article shows that nationalism did not disappear during the 1930s. This is demonstrated by a case-study of the Harlem Labor Union (HLU), a black-only protest group formed out of remnants of the Garvey movement in 1935. Accused of being racketeers by opponents, this article finds that the HLU gained a hearing among the wider Harlem community through their willingness to rail against racist practices of white-dominated trade unions and to take the fight for jobs ‘onto the street’. A defining characteristic of the HLU was its fierce rejection of the interracial unionism espoused by newly vocal pro-union leaders, but the group achieved only patchy results on their own. Some attempts were made in later years to participate in broader protest coalitions. The fractious interactions with other organizations that resulted highlighted broader difficulties sustaining coordinated protests against discrimination in employment in this period. Consequently, the HLU’s story problematizes the ‘long’ thesis’ argument that black protest underwent a successful shift to the left during the New Deal era.

Keywords: Black nationalism, Harlem, New York City, employment discrimination, organized labour, long civil rights movement

We’re all Negro workers

We get things done - - we’re not shirkers

Victory - - Victory - - Victory

We’ll win in no time

Jobs for each other - -

Harlem Labor Union helps one another

We won’t give up, we must push through

And take what is our rightful due –

Jobs for one and all

(*Fighting Song of the Harlem Labor Union*, 1938)

Black nationalism all but disappeared during the 1930s. Such is the impression created by existing historiography on civil rights with its focus on Garvey-era nationalism in the 1920s and Black Power in the post-war years. Many scholars emphasize Black Power’s close connections to the ‘mainstream’ civil rights movement, placing both protest impulses as part of a continuous ‘long civil rights movement’ (Dowd Hall, 2005) or an ongoing ‘black freedom struggle’ (Tuck, 2010). Though these narratives encompass the interwar years, the New Deal is characterized as a time when black politics underwent a ‘proletarian turn’ (Sugrue, 2009, p. 36); a moment when nationalistic ideas were eschewed in favour of protest strategies that allied with labour and the left. The interwar years witnessed only very tentative roots for the resurgence of Black Power in the 1960s.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This article gives another hearing to 1930’s nationalism by considering the career of a militant nationalist group, the Harlem Labor Union (HLU). The HLU was a high-profile, black-only protest group formed by a group of ex-Garveyites in 1935 in Harlem, New York City. During its peak in visibility between 1935 and 1941, the HLU’s salient feature was its fierce rejection of the interracial unionism espoused by newly vocal pro-union leaders who have been central to existing studies. Some attention has been paid to the HLU’s leaders’ divisive role in fracturing the Citizens’ Committee formed in New York’s 1934 ‘Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work’ campaign which, for a time, promised to galvanize black Harlem to protest exclusionary hiring practices. The HLU also makes a cameo appearance in Joshua Freeman’s study of the Transport Workers’ Union for its role in the bus strike protests in 1941 (1989, p. p. 153, p. 255). In the most detailed study of the period as a whole, Cheryl Lynn Greenberg (1991, p. 221) recognized the divisive influence of the HLU, particularly during the ‘Don’t Buy’ campaigns, but concluded that ‘the community did not support either position (communism or nationalism) in a deep and sustained way.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Yet it is the left who seem to have won the day in the wider historiography. Particularly influential has been Mark Naison’s (1984, p. 263, p. 270) study of Communist Party activity in Harlem, but within this older work’s very detailed focus on the far left we get the intriguing acknowledgement that 1930’s politics had a ‘nationalist subculture’ and that the HLU provided an ‘alternative center of black economic activism.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

Part of the reason the actions and achievements of the HLU have remained under-explored stems from problems in the primary source record. Unlike their integrationist counterparts with whom they frequently clashed, such as Frank Crosswaith’s Negro Labor Committee (NLC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), there is no institutional archive for the HLU. Much of the evidence we do have resides in the archives of these antagonists and is, as a result, highly coloured by the deep antipathy felt towards a group seen to represent a threat to black progress in employment and the labour movement. Harlem’s biggest newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, had a generally pro-union editorial slant in the 1930s and carried only passing references to the HLU. The community’s other broadsheet, the *New York Age,* covered elements of the HLU’s work in more detail but still in sporadic fashion. These methodological challenges are large but not, it is contended here, entirely insurmountable. Indeed some of these problems actually point toward important realities about the nature of the HLU. The lack of an institutional archive, for instance, reflects the fact that the HLU’s leaders favoured an ad-hoc style of organization that emphasized street-level activism (and often confrontation) over organized negotiation, legal protests and political compromise. Meanwhile, the frequent vitriolic attacks on their work, particularly in the records of the NLC, illustrates the stark contrasts in ideas and tactics that marked black politics in the 1930s, while Crosswaith’s personal anger and frustration serves to suggest the HLU’s platform was garnering some support. As a result, despite the importance of acknowledging the skewed archival record, it is possible to go beyond the narrow rejection offered by some contemporaries and attempt a fuller and fairer hearing of the group’s ideas, actions and achievements.

This article reassesses the HLU during its peak between 1935 and 1941, examining its origins and initial platform, the extent of its successes opening up employment opportunities and finally its role in collaborative protest efforts between 1938 and 1941. The HLU can be analyzed in the context both of the longstanding history of nationalist politics in Harlem and the distinctive social and cultural milieu of the Depression years. In terms of the first approach, the legacy of Garveyism’s emphasis on racial pride and group solidarity was successfully traded on by the group’s leaders in its formative years. Yet after 1935 there seems to have been a shift away from incendiary separatist rhetoric towards a more outwardly conciliatory approach to organized labor and other black organizations. Though it eventually split the group, younger leaders tried to reorient the HLU towards a more ‘mainstream’ position, evidenced by its role in a broad-based coalition formed to press for new jobs in transport in 1941. Despite dabbling with a wider nationalistic programme when ideas circulated at a HLU-organized conference in 1938 to promote all-black economic institutions, the HLU responded to the fact that outright opposition to black union participation, a centrepiece of their platform, became an unrealistic position as unions grew rapidly in size and strength during the New Deal.

The HLU operated as a partial bridge between 1920s Garveyism and post-war nationalism: founder member Arthur Reid was an ex-Garveyite and member Carlos Cooks was an apparent influence on Malcolm X. At a general level, the HLU tapped into Harlem’s longstanding nationalist political tradition - a diverse set of ideas to be sure – but one that can be broadly defined by a common commitment to ‘racial solidarity, self definition, self-reliance, and self-determination’ (Block, 2011, p. 27). Yet these wider questions of continuity and change in black protest continue to stir debate among historians; great caution must be exercised in drawing too close a connection between different phases of black protest.[[4]](#footnote-4) Moreover, though the HLU was more than a band of self-interested racketeers that demonstrated nationalism did not entirely disappear in the 1930s, it was unable to translate the emotional resonance of nationalism into a fully coherent political strategy to face the challenges of the decade. There is no evidence, for instance, that they attempted to fuse unionism and nationalism in anything like the same way that was seen subsequently in the Black Power era in places like Detroit’s auto industry.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Though their contribution to long-term histories of nationalism may have been comparatively limited, the career of the HLU reveals much about the context of its distinct time and place: black Harlem during the Depression, New Deal and war. Pursuing this approach forces reconsideration of another tenet of the ‘long’ thesis; the argument that black protest in the 1930s underwent a decisive shift to the left, as effective coalitions were formed which constituted a ‘decisive first phase’ (Dowd Hall, 2005, p. 1245) of labour-oriented civil rights protest. Throughout the three broad stages of their career – from fractious cooperation in the ‘Don’t Buy’ campaigns, to going it alone and taking the battle for jobs on to the street, to their (ultimately self-destructive) return to collaborative protest in the bus strike of 1941 – the focus on advancing black employment remained constant. They were by no means heroic figures with entirely selfless motivations. The HLU did, however, try to talk about some key problems facing black New Yorkers in the 1930s: the paucity of jobs and the sense that the newly assertive union and government officials involved in controlling employment presented vexing problems, not just fresh opportunities, for black workers. As responsibility for persistent discrimination became shared between complex networks of private, public and union forces, the HLU, like others, realized that coordinated protests that tackled these varied responsible parties became crucial. Yet the HLU’s frequently fractious interactions with these other organizations – the competing lefts of the Communist and Socialist Parties, the labour-oriented National Negro Congress (NNC), elements of the black church and groups like the NAACP and Urban League – showed just how much of a tall order maintaining coordinated protests represented. Despite being animated by similar concerns, the ‘proletarian turn’ to the left taken by some in the 1930s and central to the ‘long’ civil rights narrative was fiercely rejected by noisy sectors of New York’s activist community. One centrally important reason for taking the HLU seriously, therefore, is that its successes and failures in the period between 1935 and 1941 reveal some deep-seated personal and programmatic faultlines that undercut coordinated activism, pointing historians towards a more fragile picture of economic protests in the New Deal era.

**The Formative Years of the HLU, 1934 - 1938**

The formation of the HLU can be traced to the ‘Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work’ campaigns that energized a cross-section of Harlem’s political community in 1934. The coordinating group for this protest, the Citizens’ League for Fair Play, was formed in February 1934 by Reverend John Johnson of Saint Martin’s Protestant Episcopal Church and the editor of the *New York Age,* Fred Moore. The campaign sought to harness the collective consumer power of the black community to pressure white merchants in Harlem to hire black employees (Greenberg, 1991, pp. 120-130). Though they demonstrated the potential power of collective action, the ‘Don’t Buy’ protests were the first of several instances during the 1930s when coordinated activism was undercut by splits involving nationalist activists.

Though part of the initial protests against Blumstein’s Department store, nationalists including HLU founders Ira Kemp and Arthur Reid subsequently rejected the agreement reached by the Citizens’ League. Arthur Reid was originally from Barbados and was among a group of high profile of interwar street-corner speakers. Reid often worked alongside other Caribbean migrants like Hubert Harrison and Richard Moore, with whom he had been a founding member of the Africa Blood Brotherhood. Ira Kemp, meanwhile, was a more recent migrant from Macon, Georgia, associated with the group from the West Indies. Alongside Sufi Abdul Hamid’s Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance (NICA), Kemp renewed protests under the banner of the African Patriotic League (APL). Both launched independent boycotts of Beck’s Shoe Store, also on 125th Street, drawing criticism from the leaders of the Citizens’ League (Crowder, 2010; Turner and Turner, 1998, pp. 36-37; Greenberg, 1991, p. 124).

These controversies have been at the heart of the few studies that mention the HLU’s career. Some have accounted for the split of the coalition in terms of a narrow personal desire for power and control of the protest movement. Yet it is important not to draw a false distinction between a demand for power and deeply held ideas about racial protest, for Kemp and Reid justified their decision on dissatisfaction about the placement of supposedly light-skinned girls for the positions at Blumstein’s. Blumstein himself hinted this had been part of the agreement, when in racially coded language he stated that ‘the store naturally picked the most attractive personalities among the Negro girls’ (Muraskin, 1966, p. 15, pp. 41-44; Greenberg, 1991, p. 122).[[6]](#footnote-6) Kemp and Reid were also angry that no members of the picket lines were themselves to be offered jobs. Despite the well-attested fact that Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) retained only a fraction of its earlier organizational strength in the 1930s, ideas of racial pride, self-determination and a rejection of perceived accommodationist compromises with white institutions remained powerful parts of the overlapping political ideologies of the Depression years. The fracture of the ‘Don’t Buy’ coalition centred on both tactics and political principles, and demonstrated the capacity of Harlem’s nationalist activists to help make and break coordinated protests in the field of employment.

The ‘Don’t Buy’ campaigns also had a practical influence on the formation of the HLU in 1935. With the legality of ‘racial’ picketing being debated in the courts, Kemp and Reid became persuaded that a new organizational vehicle was needed to pursue their political programme; a programme which attempted to fuse principles of racial unity with the day-to-day problems of economic impoverishment and unemployment all-too-apparent during the Depression. On 19 July 1935 they applied for and were granted a limited charter by the State Department of Labor that sanctioned organizational efforts for a reorganized group, the Harlem Labor Union, between 110th and 125th Streets in Harlem (NLC Minutes, 17 January 1936).

The practical necessity of conducting employment protests through a more formal structure was demonstrated by the problems experienced by another dissenter from the ‘Don’t Buy’ campaigns, Sufi Abdul Hamid. Hamid was a converted Muslim, activist and self-proclaimed mystic who was frequently accused by contemporaries of anti-semitism.[[7]](#footnote-7) Hamid’s organization in 1934 and the first half of 1935 was called the Negro Industrial Clerical Alliance (NICA). The public face of NICA presented the community with a list of shared priorities centred on employment and economics (NICA, undated).[[8]](#footnote-8) All the while Hamid came to be known as the ‘Black Hitler’ of Harlem for his anti-semitic outlook. For all this notoriety, Hamid’s biggest problem was how to launch protests without falling foul of state labour laws. This was made apparent in 1934 when Hamid’s decision to renew picketing with Reid at Blumstein’s resulted in the New York Supreme Court declaring the activity illegal, ruling it did not constitute a legitimate labour dispute. Hamid carried out a rebranding exercise to combat this problem, but even after changing his organization’s name to the Afro-American Federation of Labor, a New York judge ruled a picket of the Manhattan Lerner store unlawful on the grounds they were a race group rather than a labour union (Muraskin, 1966, p. 20, pp. 33-35; Greenberg, 1991, p. 124). This ruling marked somewhat of an end for Hamid’s visible involvement with unionism in Harlem, but the problems he faced proved instructive: the formation of the HLU in 1935 indicated Kemp and Reid were attempting to learn the lessons of Hamid’s failure while managing, in the process, to recruit some of his former followers.

The decision of a group of ex-Garveyites to organize as a black only ‘labor union’ was dismissed as narrow opportunism by opponents. Certainly the decision to ape a union structure was partly spurred by the clear practical benefits offered by labour organizing as a protest strategy after 1935. The pragmatic reasoning was revealed by the subsequent comments of one founding member, James Brown, who recollected that, ‘[w]e didn’t know so much about labor unions, but since we weren’t allowed to picket when we weren’t a union [...] we became one’ (Muraskin, 1966, p. 52). Complying with evolving New Deal labour legislation was important. The same month the HLU received their charter, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, often known as the Wagner Act) replaced the stricken down National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). That same year, the formation of the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO, later renamed the Congress of Industrial Organizations) promised to organize workers across occupational, ethnic and racial lines. These nationwide developments combined with local concerns to place labour organization near the top of Black Harlem’s political agenda, an agenda to which nationalists attempted to respond.

The formation of the HLU was not merely about narrow opportunism; both domestic and international events during 1935 shaped the protest culture of which the HLU were part. The riot that erupted in Harlem in March 1935 had dramatically exposed the economic plight of the community. The Mayor’s Commission on Condition in Harlem, appointed to investigate the riot’s causes, identified the importance of economic inequality, reporting that discrimination in employment ‘accounts to a large extent for the continuous impoverishment’ of millions of black citizens in New York, adding that the ‘low economic status of the Negro in Harlem is basis to every other problem in the community’ (Mayor’s Commission, p. 34).[[9]](#footnote-9) Meanwhile, feelings of racial awareness were also being stirred by events overseas, in particular the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Loren Miller observed in the left-wing *New Masses* in July 1935 that, ‘Garvey’s preachment of an African Empire left a deep impression on Harlem [...] The Ethiopian situation has given them [nationalists] renewed vigor and their voices are raised on a half-dozen street corners crying out against the white man’s injuries and urging Negroes to turn their eyes to the ancestral fatherland’ (Miller, July 1935). Reid was one of the most high-profile of these, giving many street-corner speeches on stepladders urging black people to boycott Italian-owned businesses.

As 1935 drew to a close, the HLU emerged as a somewhat idiosyncratic attempt to combine the street-level militancy and race-first rhetoric of nationalist politics with the formal organizational trappings of a union. Their first foray into Harlem protest occurred during the *Amsterdam News* dispute between October and December 1935 and demonstrated their willingness to vocally denounce interracial trade unionism (Ayers, 2014). In this dispute, fifteen editorial workers who had been dismissed by the owners of Harlem’s biggest black broadsheet organized a community-wide boycott, fighting for reinstatement and union recognition. A broad cross-section of community leaders rallied to support the workers by organizing a boycott of the paper that eventually won the writers reinstatement and union recognition, but Reid and Kemp vigorously protested against their actions. Kemp tried to combine domestic and international concerns, on one occasion disrupting a picket line led by the American Newspaper Guild, the white-led union the writers sought to join,by parking a truck in front of the picket adorned with US and Ethiopian flags. A sign was on the truck that demanded to ‘know why white Communists and Socialists were helping the white, outlaw, dues-collecting guild to wreck a great non-commercial Negro institution’ (Chase, 1935). Kemp and Reid were on the losing side of this battle; the community boycott forced the paper to be sold to new owners who reinstated the editorial workers, even though the pro-union credentials of the new owners were subsequently called into question (Ayers, 2014). The dispute had demonstrated the willingness of the HLU, with their new ‘union’ form, to directly oppose many of the other most influential community leaders advocating black membership of integrated unions, including Frank Crosswaith and his Negro Labor Committee (NLC) and churchman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. The *Amsterdam News* dispute presaged a period where the HLU operated as a high-profile thorn in the side of advocates of black union membership.

Many were unimpressed by the HLU’s attempt to combine street-level agitation, nationalism and black-only labour organization. Foremost among the HLU’s opponents was Frank Crosswaith of the NLC, who remained utterly unconvinced of the legality of the HLU’s activities. In Crosswaith’s view, the HLU was little more than a racketeering operation conducted by a few misguided and self-interested leaders who posed a dangerous threat to the vital task of advancing ‘legitimate’ union membership among New York’s black working communities. Minutes of the NLC’s meetings and its yearly organizational reports made frequent pejorative references to the activities of the HLU. In 1938 the NLC reported that, ‘many conferences were held during the year and plans formulated to combat this ill-begotten organization’ (Report of Activities of the Negro Labor Committee, 1938). The pro-union NLC repeatedly made accusations that the HLU was more interested in extracting money from employers rather than fighting on behalf of employees, saying that Kemp and Reed had ‘received from the employers sums of $5 and $6 as a so-called membership fee for employees’ (Organizational Report, 1936). Frank Crosswaith repeated these accusations of racketeering in a letter to Mayor LaGuardia, writing that initially ‘some of the merchants in an effort to escape dealing with bona-fide Unions, did give encouragement to this Incorporated Union, however, many of these merchants have since seen the error of their ways’ (Letter from Crosswaith to LaGuardia, 1938).

The evidence of the HLU’s activities drawn from NLC sources is, of course, highly partial. Despite the lack of conclusive proof it seems entirely plausible that the organization did make money by requiring members to pay a fee in return for finding employment, while also occasionally attempting to charge employers fees too. Some evidence actually produced by the HLU itself was obtained by the NLC that appears to confirm the HLU entered into agreements with managers not to picket or otherwise disrupt their business activities. On 3 May 1939, John A. Parris of the HLU wrote a guarantee to A.G. Porter, the proprietor of the Paradise Grill and Restaurant on Lenox Avenue, that the AFL ‘cannot and will not place a picket line outside of his premises,’ and that deliveries and purchases would not be hindered by the AFL. The HLU were in no position to offer guarantees from the AFL, of course, and their actions in this case drew understandable censure from AFL leaders angry at the attempt of the HLU to confuse the proprietor and to extract guarantees, most likely in return for money (Letter from Webster to Collins, 1939).

Crosswaith’s complaint that the HLU was merely dressing up as a labour union was understandable. Yet by 1938 the HLU had actually received a significant legal boost. In 1938 the Supreme Court nullified a state-level injunction against picketing on a racial basis in New Negro Alliance vs. Sanitary Grocery Company, a case that had originated in Washington D.C that re-energized several ‘Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work’ campaigns (Helgeson, 2007, p. 381). Though the complaints made by Crosswaith were understandable, the HLU could not simply be dismissed as an irrelevant band of racketeers. Despite the attempts of a range of white-led unions associated with both the AFL and CIO to organize sectors of New York’s black workers, many Harlemites remained sceptical of the motivations and consequences of these efforts. Reid articulated this sentiment as he hailed the 1938 ruling as ‘one of the most important verdicts effecting [sic] the economic life of the Negro,’ arguing it gave black Americans ‘the right to fight for jobs – something vitally needed – without hog-tieing him to unions most of which fail to give him a fair share of jobs, even in the Harlem area.’ Reid concluded in characteristic style: ‘The fight is on!’ (*NYA,* 9 April 1938). One of the few surviving leaflets produced by the HLU combined this criticism of union discrimination with a defence against the frequent accusations of racketeering. Criticizing the attempts of unions to organize across racial lines, the leaflet retorted ‘Why don’t Black and White Unite downtown,’ attempting to deflect accusations of racketeering by saying they would seek to ‘defeat the purposes of the White Racketeers’ (HLU, N.D.). Edward Brown of the HLU made the point that union contracts made by CIO and AFL unions prevented otherwise willing employers from employing more black staff. Drawing upon a sense of the area’s distinct community identity, Brown posed the rhetorical question of why white CIO leaders in the Bronx should have a say in black employment issues in Harlem (*NYA,* 23 April 1938).

What was not captured in the HLU’s attacks was the fact that labour unions in New York had a range of practices regarding racial inclusion. One contemporary observer, Charles Franklin (1936, pp. 266-267), wrote that this diversity reflected black experiences in the nation-at-large while adjudging that ‘[i]n Manhattan conditions [were...] not quite so serious as in the United States as a whole.’ That discrimination persisted in various forms even in the most ‘friendly’ of unions was a common complaint made even by advocates of black union membership. As Thurgood Marshall said four years later of the evidence put on his desk at the NAACP’s national headquarters in New York City in 1940, ‘[t]he discrimination extends from the most conservative A.F of L. Unions to the most radical C.I.O. Unions’ (Letter from Marshall to Hastie, 1940). Even as black union membership expanded dramatically, the HLU were able to capitalize on the existence of widespread discrimination. Drastically simplifying the situation and drawing little distinction between different unions’ racial practices allowed the HLU to carve out a niche for themselves as a group with a populist message, willing to vocalize the problems of black union exclusion and to take to the streets in protest.

In the matter of style as well as principle, the contrast with the NLC was instructive. They too noted the problem of union discrimination, but Crosswaith’s group promised to use its ‘influence to weed out of the ranks of labor, racial and other prejudices that are harmful to the best interest of the working class [using...] the civilized weapons of education, fraternization, persuasion and organization’ (Rules Governing the Negro Labor Committee, N.D.). In contrast, the HLU’s John Parris boasted in 1938 that, ‘Unlike other labor unions, we actually go out and fight for jobs’ (*NYA,* 13 August 1938). As new systems of collective bargaining were ushered in by New Deal-era unionization, the HLU offered black workers facing these often bewildering developments a clear vision that, from the perspective of many, astutely combined domestic socio-economic concerns with powerful sentiments of racial unity.

**Organizational Successes of the HLU**

If the HLU was more than an irrelevant fringe group of racketeers, taking the group and its platform seriously also necessitates an attempt at an objective assessment of their successes and failures. After 1938, the HLU had some legal backing and an organizational base to pursue a programme of activism. Some evidence (primarily drawn from local press accounts given that references in the records of opponents like the NLC speak only of the group in negative terms) suggests the HLU did secure some new job opportunities in the period between 1938 and 1941. One former member recalled how he had decided to join having heard Arthur Reid, saying he had ‘been inspired’ by a step-ladder speech in 1938 about the need to get jobs for black workers. This member then described his confrontational tactics with a Harlem butcher who already had an agreement in place with the AFL, recalling he said: ‘to hell with the AFL; they are downtown and we are in Harlem and they can’t help you if we throw a picket line around the place.’ This tactic reportedly succeeded in gaining jobs for black workers in butchers across Harlem (Radford, 1954, pp. 288-289). Also in 1938, the HLU reported the successful placement of Ruth Graham, a clerk-stenographer from 140th Street, at the Metropolitan Casualty Insurance Company. The HLU also claimed credit for opening up the first black clerical jobs at the Merton Cushman Bakery’s main office on 117th Street. These negotiations were conducted by HLU member James Lawson, a nephew of Bishop Lawson who was a ‘well-known Harlem clergyman’ (*NYA,* 9 April 1938). The HLU appears to have made these individual gains by mixing confrontational tactics with more formal negotiations on an ad-hoc, case-by-case basis.

Increases in employment opportunities were often local and rather limited. This problem was not lost on the HLU’s leaders. One of the group’s newer leaders, Roger Straughn, assessed the placement of four black men in a pawnbrokers shop in July 1938 in the *New York Age* by saying that:

While the average Harlem job seeking agency would make a “great to do” over securing four jobs for ex-porters from a firm employing 100,000 white workers, we look upon our recent victory as a case of civic duty. The first four jobs on the part of the Harlem Labor Union is just one phase of the work of our organization which calls for the general economic development of the race, and the forcing of the white worker to share his job with his black brother (16 July 1938).

Though written in a public forum designed to engender support from the wider community, Straughn’s words suggest leaders in the organization wrestling with the question of how their race-first rhetoric could be matched with a programme that would make gains on a wider scale.

Two examples illustrate this growing awareness among the HLU’s leaders that broader strategies were needed to address the problems of the community. First, Ira Kemp ran for election for the 19th Assembly District in 1937 for the Republican Party, running against Benjamin McLaurin, a unionist from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters campaigning for the American Labor Party. Both lost to the incumbent Democrat candidate, William Justice (Naison, 1991, p. 237). Kemp died later that year and had his funeral held in Powell Jr.’s Abyssinian Baptist Church in December 1937, but efforts to broaden the appeal of the HLU continued (*NYA,* 11 December 1937).

As new leaders came to the fore, the HLU organized a national conference on black labour issues in the summer of 1938. Termed the National Negro Labor Conference, the organizing committee explained that the ‘time was ripe’ for a national conference because of the large black population in urban areas, the increased unionization of black workers and the Supreme Court decision which legitimized picketing on a racial basis (*NYA,* 18 June 1938). The conference was organized in collaboration with the Citizens Civic Affairs Committee, a group from Brooklyn who were reported to have picketed Kushner’s Store to hire more black staff (*NYA,* 11 November 1938).[[10]](#footnote-10) The HLU’s conference suggested they were trying to bring together some of these organizations to develop a more coherent strategy. The HLU’s letterhead in 1938, with the instructive banner of ‘In Unity there is Strength,’ listed the New Negro Alliance in Washington D.C., the Congress of Negro Workers in Philadelphia, the Afro-American Workers Association in St. Louis, the African Patriotic League in New York and the Brooklyn Job Committee among the HLU’s associates (Reid to Crosswaith, 1938).

Precisely what the HLU, and the principles of nationalism more broadly, could offer to black employment problems was up for debate at the conference. A letter to the editor of the *New York Age* from one organizer, H. C. Francis, gave a rationale for attempting to think about the problems of black workers in broad terms:

The time has come for Negro labor to shape a definite policy because the immediate circumstances demand action more appropriate than spotty movements, or aimless drifting [...] The interest of Southern Negro Labor, both industrial and agricultural; that of Northern Negro labor, which is urban, industrial and preponderantly unskilled and marginal; the attitude of Negro Labor to white labor unions; that of Negroes to Negro labor unions; the anomalous and conflicting interests of unorganized Negro business (11 June 1938).

Francis’s comments provide insight into the overlap between nationalistic organizational efforts among groups like the HLU and business-oriented strategies of self-help, for the letter also stated that ‘If Negro business men do not organize in the interest of their common outlook and development their business will never inspire confidence.’ Self-help strategies had, by and large, fallen out of favour in the Depression but continued to attract some support from a number of black professional groups. Francis’s letter also threw light on the wider limitations of nationalistic political strategies in the late 1930s. Whatever the continued allure of building up opportunities ‘within the race’ in places like Harlem (especially for business groups), the growing importance of black workers’ relations with white-led unions could not be ignored. As unionization continued apace (‘The whole system of American business is now undergoing readjustment in alignment with the Wagner labor laws and other New Deal measures,’ as the letter correctly realized), developing exclusively black economic systems seemed increasingly anachronistic (*NYA,* 11 June 1938).

These programmatic and ideological flaws were compounded by the fact that the HLU’s informal street-level style meant it was ill-equipped to form and run a national protest organization. Perhaps unsurprisingly the National Negro Labor Conference appears to have achieved only modest results. Delegates attended an accompanying ball, held at the Renaissance Casino on 138th street, advertised on the same leaflet detailing the HLU’s *Fighting Song*. The song began by proclaiming ‘We’re all Negro workers,’ promising ‘We’ll win in no time’ and that the HLU would help ‘take what is our rightful due – Jobs for one and all’ (Leaflet for the National Negro Labor Convention Ball, 1938). Exactly how this would be achieved remained unclear. These lyrics were characteristically militant, but the HLU were hardly the only group to emphasise racial identity and the importance of jobs during the 1930s. For instance, similar emphasis on the special challenges facing black workers could also be found in the platform of the first pro-union National Negro Congress (NNC) held in 1936. Though some representatives from other cities attended the HLU’s attempt at a national conference, only a few limited decisions were reached. These included the appointment of Bedford Lawson Jr., the black lawyer who had represented black interests during the recent Supreme Court ruling, as chairman of a new organization called the National Negro Labor Federation which was intended to organize Negro Labor Units throughout the country (*NYA,* 9 July 1938). There is no extant evidence of these Negro Labor Units in operation. Despite the tentative attempt to broaden its scope and appeal, the group remained a local organization that achieved mainly sporadic successes.

With the benefit of historical hindsight, the limitations of the HLU’s racially exclusive platform seem apparent. Yet developing a coherent nationalistic political platform for the 1930s, based around separate black unions and businesses, had never been a central part of the HLU’s platform. From the very beginning, the HLU had been less about forging new political ideas than it had been about tapping into existing nationalistic sentiments first stirred by Garveyism and attempting to address the economic problems of the Depression, especially those that could be pinned on the rise of white-led unions, and taking the battle for jobs to the street. As a result, though it seemed paradoxical, at the same time as organized labour was gaining quickly in size and strength and outright opposition to black union membership was becoming unrealistic, the HLU became increasingly popular among the community-at-large.

By 1939, the group’s growing reputation prompted the national branch of the NAACP to send George Murphy, the organization’s publicity director, to undertake an investigation into their activities. Murphy’s report was fiercely critical of the organization’s platform. Like opponents in the NLC who produced similarly partial accounts, Murphy saw the HLU as a malevolent organization, ‘not interested in the question of employment of Negroes under union conditions, or even under conditions that may properly lead to unionization and thus security.’ The HLU’s programme was only, according to Murphy, ‘taking advantage of the perfectly truthful situation of a scarcity of jobs for Negroes in Harlem, and distorting the situation so that legitimate labor unions in Harlem get a black eye, and racial animosity is intensified’ (Murphy to White, 1939). Yet despite his personal opposition, Murphy conceded that the HLU had a membership between two and three hundred; he also adjudged that an average ‘man in the street’ might take the view that ‘It makes very little difference to me whether the Harlem Labor Union is a legitimate labor union or not. I know this – they have been able to get several jobs for Negroes in Harlem where organized labor has been unable to do so’ (Murphy to White, 1939). Murphy’s observation provides a rare and important piece of evidence that addresses the wider appeal of the HLU. That Murphy stressed their popularity despite his personal antipathy towards them reinforces the sense that the HLU had a reputation and influence far exceeding its actual size and strength. It can be inferred that despite the prominence of interracial unionist politics within emergent groups like the NNC, principles of racial solidarity continued to resonate strongly in the Harlem community. More significantly, it was the perception that the HLU were willing to take the fight for black jobs – the *leitmotif* of protest in the Depression decade – on to the street that Murphy adjudged gave the HLU their appeal. One former member of the HLU attested to this appetite for direct protest, saying ‘we could always depend on the Harlem people because they were mad, hungry, and hemmed-in’ (Lawrence, 1954, p. 289). Though criticisms of their solutions by opponents were understandable, the HLU drew a following through its willingness to talk about and tackle the genuine problem of employment discrimination.

**The HLU in Community Protests, 1938 – 1941.**

The next question to be asked, therefore, was whether the popularity of the HLU’s style with the ‘man in the street’ could be translated into making tangible gains on a wider scale. In the final years of its most high-profile period, the HLU appeared to realize the limitations of case-by-case protests and the inescapable presence of organized labour in New York’s economic life, and began to work with others in the community. Though the 1938 conference suggested the group were debating ways to develop a more systematic nationalist platform, the HLU had been moving away for some time from the more explosive racially-charged rhetoric associated with the flashpoint of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Tracing the HLU’s story in this latter period sheds light on the widespread understanding of the necessity for coordinated community activism that, where possible pressured unions, management and government alike. At the same time, the HLU’s recurring differences with other organizations and the internal schism that resulted from this change of tack hinted at the wider fragility of this era of economic protest.

In 1938, a group of Harlem’s leaders launched the biggest orchestrated campaign since 1934 to achieve greater representations of black workers in employment in Harlem and other parts of New York. Led by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and another churchman, William Lloyd Imes, who worked alongside Arnold Johnson, the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment of Negroes was first formed in March 1937. The committee led boycotts of, and personally lobbied, an array of concerns which restricted employment to black workers and achieved some notable successes in securing more work at public utilities companies (Ottley and Weatherby, 1967, pp. 288-289).

The HLU was a listed participant in the Coordinating Committee but in Harlem their role was divisive. Attempts of the Coordinating Committee to reach an agreement with the Harlem Chamber of Commerce floundered as a result of the HLU’s refusal to reach and abide by written agreements, agreements that impinged on their ability to conduct pickets and protests on their own terms. The presence of the HLU was also a factor in the failure of Frank Crosswaith and the NLC to add their weight to the jobs campaign. Crosswaith personally threatened to organize a general strike by AFL and CIO affiliated unions in Harlem to combat the HLU, who Crosswaith felt had been exploiting the agreement made between the Coordinating Committee and merchants (*NYA,* 3 September 1938). The NLC appointed a committee to interview Powell Jr. and Imes because it wanted the leaders, ‘to publicly clarify their position on the activities of the Harlem Labor Union [and...] to assure the trade unions that nothing in their compact will be used to jeopardize the gains of the trade union movement in Harlem’ (Poston, N.D.). In response, Powell Jr. issued a public statement that said there was, ‘complete harmony between all of the organizations in the Coordinating Committee,’ promising that in ‘the future there will be no picketing instituted by the Coordinating Committee or any of its affiliates without first a definite understanding.’ Powell Jr. apparently managed to secure the cooperation of Reid, who promised not to picket stores where black workers were employed and were members of CIO and AFL unions, while being allowed to carry on activities against unorganized concerns (*NYA,* 5 November 1938). By November 1938, this compromise was extended as it was agreed that the HLU would carry on activities in Harlem while the rest of the committee would work on outside campaigns (Naison, 1991, pp. 268-269). Interestingly, from the same period, a letter written by Arthur Reid to Crosswaith survives in the NLC’s archives, with Reid seeking Crosswaith’s help finding work for one his followers. One can only speculate at what reaction this communication would have produced, but it suggests Reid did not draw the sharp distinction between the HLU and NLC’s work that Crosswaith did. It might also have been part of the HLU’s attempt to work more constructively with other groups after 1938, but no evidence of a reply exists (Reid to Crosswaith, 1938).

The split in the jobs campaign of 1938 revealed the apparently new willingness within the HLU to join in with collaborative protest efforts, but also their continual ability to divide and alienate those on the pro-union left like Crosswaith. The HLU’s capacity to cooperate, but also to divide, was part of the HLU’s role in the community-wide campaign to extend jobs on New York City’s bus network between 1939 and 1941. In December 1939, Arthur Reid spoke out about the need to open up jobs for black bus drivers in New York. Reid identified that the Transport Workers Union (TWU) needed to be a first target in these efforts (*NYA,* 2 December 1939). Only two weeks later, however, Reid was forced to resign from the HLU alongside Vice President James Lawson, Secretary John Parris and Treasurer James Kelly. All were arrested after an altercation with a store detective attempting to take a fifteen year old to the police on accusations of shop lifting. On leaving the organization, Reid discussed the changes that had occurred in the HLU’s strategy since the beginning of his work in 1934:

When I set out in 1934 to place Negroes in sales and clerical positions I was frank to admit that my primary purpose was to train Negroes in white owned concerns in order that they might eventually go in business for themselves. Nit-wits who think that I have set up a rival union to either the AFL or the CIO are foolish. I’m only concerned with Negroes being integrated in the economic life of America (*NYA,* 16 December 1939).

Despite the self-serving nature of this article, Reid’s comments highlight an interest in portraying a shift from an all-out rejection of organized labour –a vision Reid presumable adjudged out-of-step with reality after nearly six years of the New Deal - towards a rhetorical goal of ‘integration’ in economic life. A similar shift in approach was articulated two months later by another founding member, Francis Minor, who had previously been one of Sufi Abdul Hamid’s supporters. Describing plans for a conference to be held between the HLU and the Uptown Chamber of Commerce, Minor insisted that the HLU wanted to work cooperatively with others, saying that previously they had used a ‘trial and error’ system but had now reached a ‘happy medium,’ including promoting a ‘Shop in Harlem’ campaign (*NYA,* 3 February 1940). Suggesting a willingness to negotiate as well as protest, in the late 1930s the HLU reportedly lobbied for black jobs in telephone, gas, banking and insurance industries in addition to their campaign in transport (*Baltimore Afro-American,* 23 December 1939).

Events during the bus strike protests in 1941 demonstrated the HLU’s partial shift towards a more conciliatory approach but also, ultimately, the persistence of enduring divides over questions of integration and cooperative protest. These questions were given greater urgency by the newly powerful position of organized labour in controlling employment. Having taken part of the lead in targeting restrictive employment practices on the city’s bus networks, the HLU’s new leadership played a role in negotiations between unions and management in April 1941. Discrimination faced by black workers on New York’s numerous bus and rail operators had long been a source of concern to Harlem’s protest community. The emergence of the Transport Workers’ Union (TWU), an industrial union affiliated with the CIO, offered an opportunity to challenge these longstanding exclusionary arrangements, despite the fact that the inclusive promises occasionally made by the TWU’s leaders were often not reflected in hiring decisions and employment practices on the ground. Having grown in size and strength since starting in 1934, the TWU went on strike in January and February 1941 for improved working conditions for their members. Upon the conclusion of the strike, a committee of black community leaders took the initiative to make their specific claims for redress. The committee was named the United Bus Strike Committee. With Adam Clayton Powell Jr. again playing a leading role, the other leaders were Arnold Johnson, Hope Stevens of the New York National Negro Congress (NNC) and Roger Straughn, leader of the HLU (*NYA,* 26 April 1941).

The United Bus Strike Committee achieved a seemingly remarkable success, a moment described by Joshua Freeman (1989, p. 154, p. 255) as the ‘pivotal’ event in changing the TWU’s practices on race. This success resulted from the concerted pressure applied by the wide reach of the temporary Bus Strike Committee. Crucially, the Committee managed to avoid being put off with vague promises of action – a common earlier complaint – by coordinating their negotiations between the TWU and two specific companies, Fifth Avenue Coach and New York Omnibus. Importantly, the Committee’s broad cross-section of support enabled it to mobilize the community to boycott the offending companies in a dispute that lasted nearly a month. As a result of this pressure, a tripartite agreement was signed between the companies, the unions and black community groups. It announced around 100 new jobs would be created for black bus drivers and around 70 as mechanics. These new hiring procedures would be done on an alternate basis, white then black, until employees matched the city’s 17% demographic ratio (Freeman, 1989, p. 256).

Despite this unusual victory, no sooner had the agreement been signed when factions within the HLU voiced their vehement opposition. Indirectly quoting a former officer of HLU, the *New York Age* reported that some members feared that black workers would be ‘dressed up as drivers’ after the settlement and then, after the public had been suitably appeased, moved back into working in garages. The former member charged this was part of a conspiratorial agreement devised to avoid embarrassment to TWU leader Michael Quill by fellow left-wingers Stevens and Powell Jr. Straughn, representing the HLU, was criticized by these disgruntled elements for being too easily led (12 April 1941).[[11]](#footnote-11) Some in the HLU had been frustrated at the perceived retreat from militant opposition to organized labour for some time. The arrest of Reid and other senior members led to a battle for leadership of the organization at the beginning of 1940. Some were apparently ‘disgruntled’ with the new President George Wattley because he was viewed to have been under the influence of another member, James Thornhill, whose leftist tendencies allegedly ‘caused a deal of contention among the membership’ (*NYA,* 30 November 1940). By 1941, Roger Straughn had taken over leadership of the organization but tensions remained.

The splits in the HLU reflected underlining dilemmas facing advocates of nationalism at the end of the New Deal. In the same week that the contract was signed, Carlos Cooks told the press that:

We are serving an ultimatum on the United Strike Bus Committee, New York Omnibus Co., Fifth Avenue Coach Co., and the Transport Workers Union, that unless we see Negro drivers driving buses throughout Harlem within the next month, ending May 30 the committee will reopen picketing of bus lines (*NYA,* 26 April 1941).

There is no evidence of Cooks being able to follow through on his threat, even though the placement of black bus drivers was indeed delayed. On the surface, the HLU’s collaborative approach led to their biggest ever success, but this had only been achieved by joining a protest coalition involving other groups, including from the pro-labour left, and mixing direct protest with discussion and compromise. Such accommodations did not sit comfortably with members of the organization like Cooks.

The bus strike protests of 1941 proved to be both the HLU’s most high profile engagement in community protest and a step towards the fragmentation of their organization. After 1941 the visibility of the HLU declined. Nonetheless, placing nationalists back into the picture of protest in the New Deal era suggests a need for caution in accepting the positive verdicts assigned to ‘Popular Front’ wartime activism (Biondi, 2003, p. 6).[[12]](#footnote-12) It is clear that the HLU paid a heavy price for their involvement in the bus strike protests of 1941 as their organization fragmented internally, but events showed the objections raised by members like Cooks were not entirely without merit. The slow turnover of staff in New York’s bus network in 1941 meant the first jobs for black drivers did not arrive until 1942. Moreover, it was the demand for labour during wartime that eventually helped open up some new job opportunities, exemplified in the case of the Third Avenue Railway when jobs did not become available until 1943 (Freeman, 1989, p. 256).[[13]](#footnote-13) The HLU’s career suggested many in black New York remained un-reconciled to the newly powerful position of organized labour in both industrial and craft union forms. The fractious relationships that resulted meant sustained action of the type which had won the day during the bus strike protests of April 1941 proved hard to replicate.

At the same time, the HLU and its supporters did not disappear from the political scene entirely. In 1949 the HLU were recorded protesting against discriminatory employment practices in the Fay-Loevins store on 145th street, a protest also waged by the local NAACP branch. When Fay-Loevins sued in response, the New York Supreme Court ruled against the legality of the pickets (Feldblum, 1951, p. 183). There is also some evidence of the HLU continuing into the 1960s (*Amsterdam News,* 23 July 2012).[[14]](#footnote-14) In addition, Carlos Cooks’ personal story demonstrated the continuous nationalist presence in New York politics. In the late 1930s Cooks remained a member of the UNIA, becoming leader of Harlem’s Advance Division and working on the Greater Liberia Repatriation Bill (Fitzgerald, 1997, pp. 313-314, p. 318). One year before the bus strike protest after the death of Marcus Garvey in 1940, Cooks formed the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement, an ‘educational, inspirational, instructive, constructive, and expansive society’ that was aimed at ‘bringing about a progressive, dignified, cultural, fraternal and racial confraternity amongst the African peoples of the world’ (Van Deburg, 1997, p. 84). The ANPM was described by another member, Robert Harris, as the ‘one true and natural outgrowth’ of the UNIA and survived into the postwar years, despite the fact that Cooks spent time in prison for making inflammatory wartime speeches in favour of Hitler (Fitzgerald, 1997, p 318; Harris et al., 1992, p. ix). Another member of the HLU, James Lawson, also remained in Harlem, becoming president of another nationalist organization, the United African Nationalist Movement (UANM) with which Cooks was also temporarily involved. Lawson and Cooks had a fractious relationship, however, with Cooks reportedly clashing with the UANM over their willingness to cooperate with white leaders which prompted him to restart his ANPM in 1949. Cooks was said to have been a personal influence on Malcolm X and went on to produce literature that commemorated Ira Kemp and his work with the HLU (Harris et al., 1992, pp. xx-xv, pp. 257-258). In 1952 the UANM, meanwhile, echoing earlier attitudes and tactics of the HLU, became involved in a protest against discrimination in New York’s brewing industries. The UANM branded the Urban League, who were part of a Citizens’ Committee for the Integration of the Brewing Industry, ‘20th century Uncle Toms’ and disrupted community meetings involving Ella Baker of the NAACP and the same Hope Stevens who had represented the NNC during the 1941 bus protests (Biondi, 2003, pp. 257-258).

**Conclusion**

The story of the HLU suggests that the assertive forms of nationalism that shot into national consciousness in the late 1950s drew not only upon nationalist ideological and cultural traditions in general terms, but upon some direct personal and programmatic connections with New Deal- era activism. In 1959 a documentary entitled ‘The Hate That Produced’ shed light on the ‘hidden’ phenomenon of black nationalism, focusing attention on the Nation of Islam and its young minister Malcolm X. For those familiar with the story of the HLU, it was unsurprising to see James Lawson also make an appearance, speaking against the NAACP and Ralph Bunch at home and white colonial domination in Africa. Lawson remained active in Harlem politics afterwards, advocating armed self-defence in the 1960s (The Hate That Hate Produced, 1959). Great caution needs to be exercised, however, when deciding how these personal connections with more high profile nationalist periods should be interpreted. Though nationalism in the 1930s should not fall into a historiographical crack between 1920’s Garveyism and 1960’s Black Power, the HLU did not successfully adapt nationalistic sentiments into a coherent political program to the extent seen in these more familiar eras.[[15]](#footnote-15) Though its role has been under-acknowledged, the historiographical argument offered here is not that nationalism won the day in the 1930s, or that nationalism remained the same powerful force between the 1920s until the 1960s.

Instead, it is argued that the HLU’s ultimate historical significance lay in what their story reveals about the nature of 1930s black politics, particularly regarding the potential for successful economic activism. In some ways the HLU seemed to come full circle between 1934 and 1941, initially collaborating with other protestors in the ‘Don’t Buy’ campaigns of 1934 then breaking out to form their own oppositional protest group before eventually once again participating in the April 1941 bus strike coalition. Though leaders in the HLU partly came to realize that an outright rejection of organized labour was untenable and their own organization became increasingly fragmented, the challenge they offered was not entirely misguided. Furthering the personal financial positions of their leaders may well have been part of their early activities, but they also offered a loud and consistent voice that lambasted the discriminatory practices of the numerous white-led unions professing interest in organizing across racial lines. Perhaps because they simplified the situation, drawing little distinction between different unions, the HLU garnered a following. They seemed willing to articulate widely held and understandable grievances in the black community, grievances many likely felt were not being properly addressed by pro-union supporters in groups like the NLC. On their own, the HLU occasionally opened up job opportunities for black workers in Harlem. On other occasions they merely displaced unionized black workers with members of their own organization, to the understandable chagrin of the NLC. Evidence suggests that after 1938 there was a growing acceptance within the HLU that organized labour was here to stay and that efforts to command a following and tackle discrimination in employment would have to take account of that fact. The denouement of the HLU’s most high profile phase during the bus strike protests in 1941 highlighted this realization; it also fractured the organization, demonstrating the wider problems faced by those seeking to sustain broad-based protest coalitions. These coalitions stood the best chance of wresting meaningful concessions from the varied public and private forces who controlled New York’s labour market.

The fight for fair treatment in employment did not, of course, disappear; it remained a central goal for a range of groups throughout the 1940s and beyond. Though just one part of this bigger story, the HLU’s stormy career shed light on some problematic features of New Deal era protest politics that have little space in the narrative arc of the ‘long’ civil rights movement. Reconstructing the HLU’s often divisive history, despite the limitations mandated by the quantity and quality of evidence of their activities, shows that many in black New York from different very viewpoints diagnosed similar problems – centred on the economic dimensions of racial inequality – but found it understandably difficult to agree upon a coherent unified response. This was a moment, however, when the shared control of employment among labour, government and management groups meant coherent, coordinated responses were more necessary than ever to tackle the problems associated with discrimination faced by black New Yorkers. The HLU’s story highlighted that, despite attempting to address some similar concerns, the ‘proletarian turn’ towards interracial protest strategies and alliances with labour and the left undertaken by some in the was strongly rejected by others in New York’s diverse activist community. Despite the undoubted limitations of their programme – limitation its leaders tried to grapple with - the HLU were more than marginal outliers on the wrong side of history.

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1. Bracey, Meier and Rudwick (1970, p. xiv) provided a classic interpretation that nationalism was in ‘eclipse’ during the 1930s, arguing that the ‘proliferation of nationalist ideologies and organizations that reaches a climax during the 1920s was followed by a thirty-year period in which nationalism as a significant theme in black thought was virtually non-existent’; See also Van Deburg (1997, p. 13); More modern studies have looked to the 1930s in search of the roots of post-war resurgence of Black Power, for instance in Joseph (2006, p. 103); A broader historiographical discussion of ‘Black Power Studies’ is provided in Joseph (2009); A clear statement of the ‘long’ civil rights movement is contained in Dowd Hall, (2005); Some scholars have taken 1930s nationalism more seriously, for instance Fitzgerald (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On nationalists’ role in the ‘Don’t Buy’ campaigns see, Muraskin (1966); (Radford, 1953); (Crowder,1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An influential interpretation of war-era protest is advanced by Biondi (2003) who argues that a ‘Black Popular Front’ emerged in the 1940s which brought liberal, labour and leftist groups together to work on behalf of working class protest issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For instance, Cha-Jua and Lang (2007, p. 269) have criticized the ‘long’ civil rights movement’s ‘tendency to flatten chronological, conceptual, and geographic differences’; A useful summary of recent debates about the movement’s periodization is provided by Lawson (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an example see Georgakas and Surkin (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For instance, Muraskin (1966, p. 15, pp. 41-44) argued the split was primarily about personal power, saying this early schism is ‘best understood if we see [black nationalists’] attempts to capture the boycott movement, with its mass following, for themselves,’ but elsewhere we learn that Arthur Reid claimed that the light-skinned leaders of the Citizen’s League for Fair Play had intentionally picked “high-yellow” girls to work at Blumstein’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hamid was quoted in the *New York Times* in October 1934 as saying the ‘war is on’ against Jews (Thompson, 2007, p. 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The NICA promoted their programme to organize, ‘all Negro Workers in Harlem to insure to them Living Wages and Decent Working Hours, Better Housing Conditions, Better Hospitalization, More Opportunities for Negro Physicians, The ENDING OF RELIEF JOB DISCRIMINATION.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For background to the riot, see Greenberg (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The HLU had an affiliated in Brooklyn, it seems, the Amalgamated Labor Association, who in August 1940 participated alongside the local branch of the Greater New York Coordinating Committee and the Local Affairs Committee of the Kings Country Young Republican League, in what was planned to be an ‘orderly parade’ of about 50 people of Fulton Street Stores in Brooklyn who did not employ black workers(*NYA,* 3 August 1940). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Ritchie, the chairman of the bus company, was more positively judged to have been in favour of extending black employment, leading opponents within the HLU to view the TWU as the main obstacle. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the wider debate about employment equality in New York, Chen (2006) has emphasized the emergence of powerful conservative opposition to fair employment legislation in the 1940s; Gerstle (2006, p. 1297) suggests the same episode – passage of Ives-Quinn in 1945 – actually ‘points to the power of the emerging liberal consensus on racial equality, not its fragility or weakness.’ A useful summary of recent debates over protest during the war years is contained in Kruse and Tuck (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Also see Meier and Rudwick (1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. An obituary for Harlem resident Verna Pointer noted that as well as her involvement with the NAACP, she had been elected secretary of the HLU in 1966, reportedly its first new secretary elected since 1941. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Joseph (2009, p. 752) suggests the ‘freedom surges’ of the war years combined with ‘New Negro radicalism of the 1920s’ both set the scene for the post-war upsurge in nationalism in the late 1950s; The point that nationalists in the interwar years were part of a continuing protest tradition is also made by Watkins-Owens (1996, p. 110). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)