

BLACK INTELLECTUALS & LABOR 1900-1954

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Presented By:
Stacey Akines
February 27, 2025

OVERVIEW OF THEMES

This presentation will explore the relationship between Black intellectual' relationship to labor movements and Black intellectual labor production from **the early twentieth century up to the 1950s**, focusing on **five key themes**:

1. **The Study of Black Labor** – How Black intellectuals frame Black Labor and analyze the structural positioning of Black workers and their jobs.
2. **The Rise of Black Labor Newspapers** – The role of Black-controlled publications in advocating for labor rights and economic justice.
3. **Women's Leadership in Labor Movements** – The contributions of Black women intellectuals in shaping labor struggles and addressing intersectional oppression.
4. **The WPA and Black Intellectual Labor** – The New Deal's Impact on Black Intellectual Work.
5. **Government Repression of Black Labor Networks** – How state surveillance and suppression targeted Black labor activists, particularly those associated with political and economic perspectives outside of capitalism.

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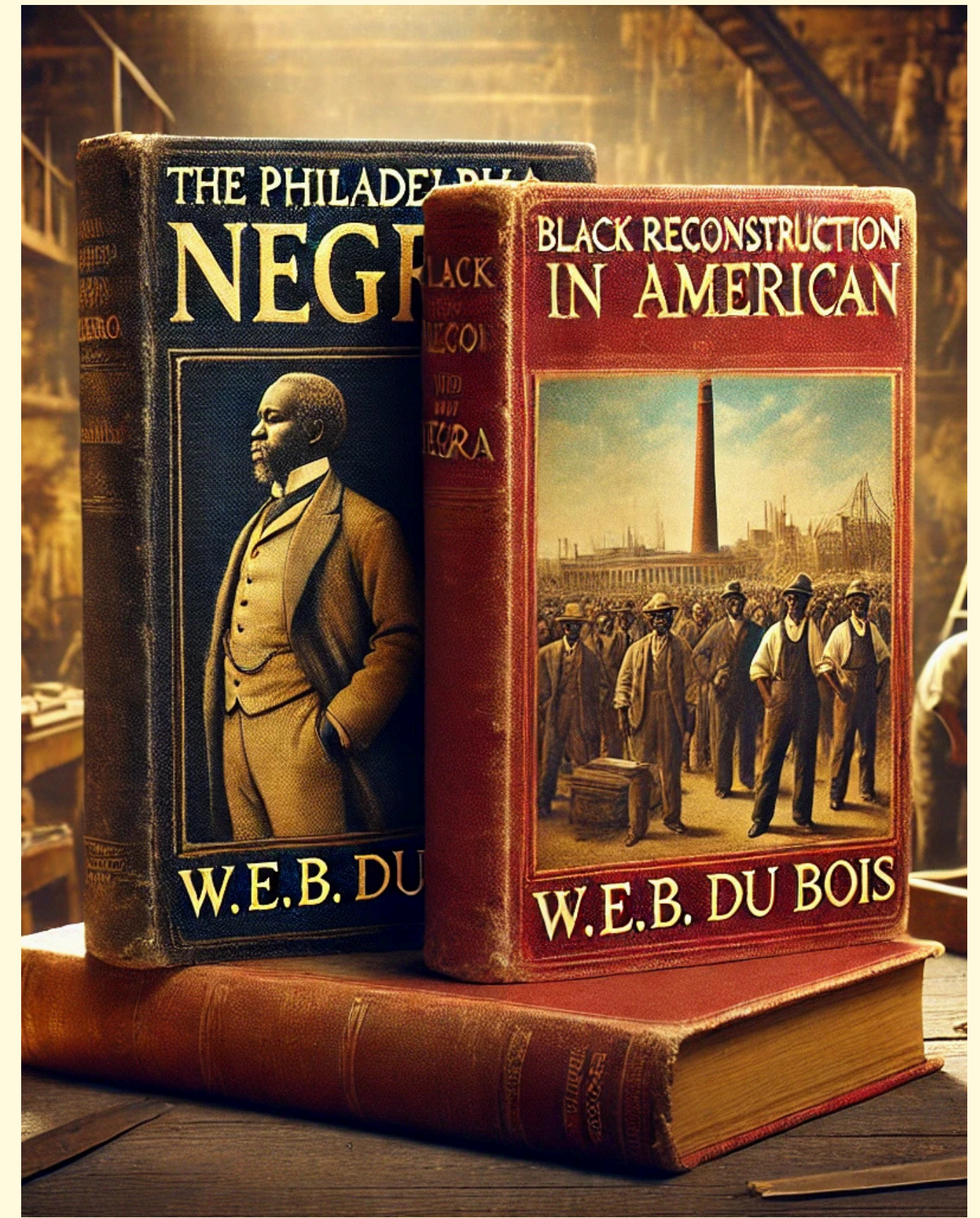


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I. 1900–1920: W.E.B. DU BOIS AND THE STUDY OF BLACK LABOR

Du Bois' Key Works:

- *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899): Examined Black workers' economic conditions and employment barriers in Philadelphia, highlighting structural inequalities and discrimination in the labor market. (Isabel Eaton's "Special report on Negro Domestic Service")
- *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935): Introduced the "General Strike" of enslaved workers as a foundational labor action that challenged the Southern economy and contributed to the Union's victory during the Civil War. (See page 55 in the linked edition)



I. 1925: SURVEY GRAPHIC ESSAY: “BLACK WORKERS AND THE CITY”

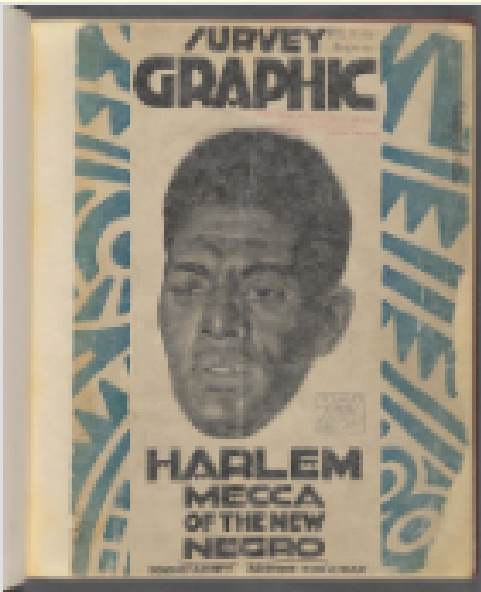
March 1925 Survey Graphic-Harlem Mecca of the New Negro

- [Charles S. Johnson](#) frames the Black worker as marginalized yet adaptable, shaped by systemic exclusion, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation in urban labor markets. Black workers are primarily confined to low-wage, unskilled jobs, such as domestic service, janitorial work, and personal service roles, due to barriers in hiring, union exclusion, and employer bias. Migration to Northern cities offers new opportunities, but cultural dislocation and overcrowded living conditions present additional challenges.
- Johnson highlights the Black worker’s struggle to organize, as labor unions often exclude them, and traditions of personal loyalty and individual job bargaining weaken collective labor power. Despite these challenges, he sees potential for industrial integration, arguing that leadership, collective action, and dismantling systemic job segregation are key to economic mobility.

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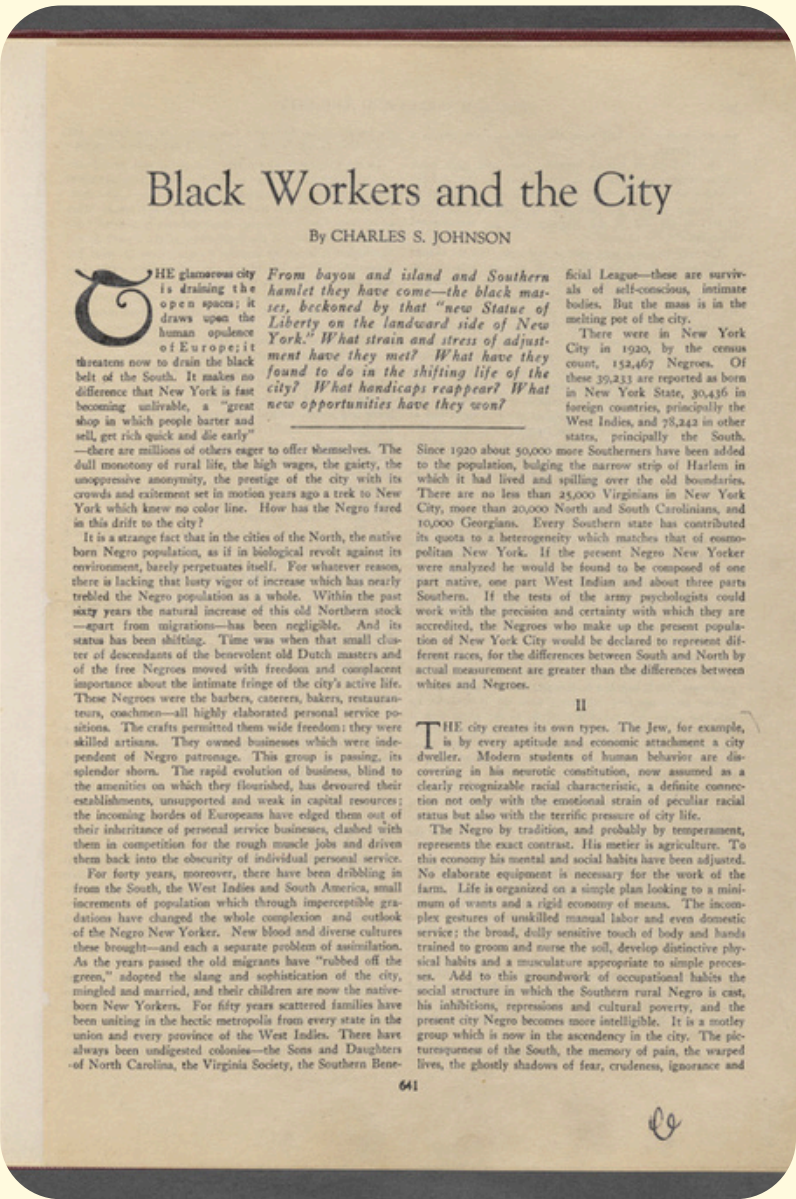
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Harlem, Mecca of the new Negro

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II. 1920–1930: HARLEM AND BLACK INTELLECTUAL LABOR

Labor Newspapers as Intellectual Spaces:

- *The Messenger* (1917) – A. Philip Randolph & Chandler Owen promoted socialism and labor rights.
- *The Crusader* (1918) – Cyril Briggs' Pan-Africanist, interracial revolutionary socialism with black nationalism and anti colonialism.
- *Negro World* (1918)-Hubert Harrison (editor-1920)- the official newspaper of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Hubert Harrison became the principal editor of *Negro World* in January 1920, during which time he transformed it into a leading political and literary publication.



“The Offices of the Negro World ca 1924,” National Library of Jamaica Digital Collection , accessed February 20, 2025, <https://nljdigital.nlj.gov.jm/items/show/389>.

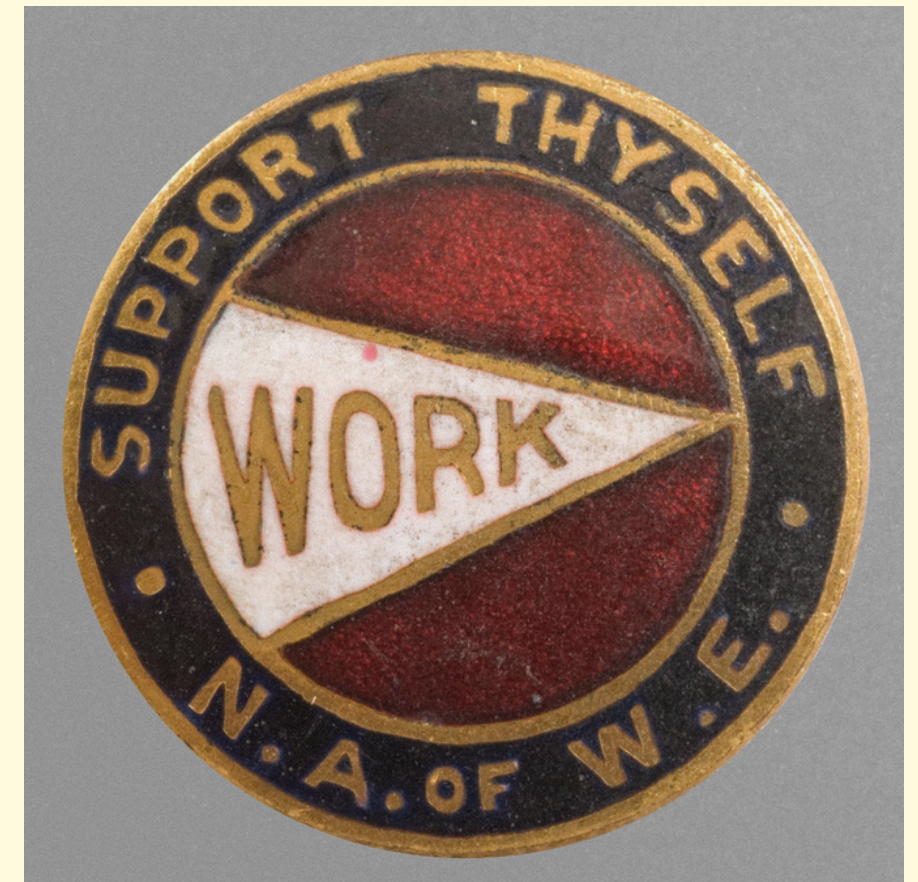
III. 1920–1950: BLACK WOMEN INTELLECTUALS AND LABOR

Nannie Helen Burroughs and Domestic Labor Advocacy:

- Burroughs was a pioneering educator and labor activist who founded the National Association of Wage Earners (NAWE) in the 1920s to support Black women in domestic work.
- She pushed for better wages, protections, and workplace dignity for Black women laborers who were often excluded from traditional labor movements.
- Her speeches and writings emphasized economic independence, racial justice, and education as tools for labor empowerment, laying the groundwork for later women's labor organizations in the 1950s.



Nannie Helen Burroughs (center) and other women at the National Training School in Washington, D.C. Source: Library of Congress.



Courtesy of the "Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site", www.nps.gov.

ave been actively engaged.

COLORED MEN CAUSE WHITE BOSS TO BE FIRED.

Longview, Texas, August 14, 1918.

Special to The Observer

Among the many industries in this progressive city is the Graham Mfg. Co., which employs almost 100 persons of color. It seems from best accounts that one of the newly hired hands from the country, who did not move fast enough to satisfy the mind of one of the "straw bosses," that this "straw boss" raised his "hind leg" and applied it to the "gable end" of the colored man's pants, and to proceed to hand him his time. The matter became noised over the plant and all of the men decided at once to quit work unless the "straw boss" was reprimanded in some way or pledged to not have this happen again. The matter was reported to the president of the plant and he told them to return to work and that this would not happen any more. The men went to work until noon but continued to brood over the matter, and when the hour came to begin the evening tour of duty the blow of the whistle failed to move 95 colored employees. The president waited for nearly fifty minutes after time and finally went to where the men were and asked what the trouble was. The men replied that they had concluded to not return to work unless the "straw boss" was fired. After some parleying the manager told them that their demands would be acceded to, whereupon the men returned to work. Sure enough the offender has been let out and at last accounts was seen trying to get a job at the Kelly Laundry. The lesson learned from this incident teaches what can and will be accomplished through organiza-

circumstances under a government as flexible as our system is will ever accomplish the ends sought. For the worthy and superior colored man will go beyond them and find a niche of his own making where he will establish himself and command respect. We only ask for the exercise of simple justice in a free government and for the consideration justly due us. If any bugbear that has ever risen in the brain of unthoughtful white men had ever appeared there would be reason to fear, but it is a well established fact that not one prediction that he has made about the race has ever come true.

What a wonderful habitat this world would be if the plans of Him who fashioned it were carried out by men as intended from the beginning. The bugbear of social equality, race domination, race extinction etc. have all faded into the misty past because such were not entertained by the thoughtful men of neither race.

For a moment forecasting the future it requires no philosopher with microscopic sharp-sightedness nor seer with acute discrimination to discover that toward which the present will lead. If we have succeeded under conditions so unfavorable by reason of his ambition to succeed his darkest days are behind, for dimly above the horizon the "morning light begins to break."

Houston, Texas Observer.

WANTED—A Good Representative in every town. Can make from \$15.00 to \$50.00 per week working for us. Particulars free. R. C. GULLEY, 404 E. Marshall St., Richmond, Va.

WANTED.—One or two ladies for a nice furnished room, with or without board. Apply 812 St. James street, Mrs. R. B. Watson.

A TRAINING CAMP FOR COLORED WOMEN FOR HOME DEFENSE

Ten Weeks of Intensive Instruction in War

Work at the Nation's Capital.

The best place in America to understand the Spirit as well as the Letter of this fight to make Democracy safe for the world

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Motor and Truck Driving and Repairing	Operation of Power Machines
First Aid and Home Service	Printing
Forewomen and Supervisors of Women's Work (Three Months)	Repairing and Remodeling Clothes
Welfare Superintendents (Three Months)	Best Methods of Preparing and Conserving Food
Group Leaders Among Women Workers	Practical Housekeeping
Operation of Elevators	Waiting in Public and Private Places
Bundle Wrapping	Cleaning and Care of Public Buildings
	Home Gardening
	Canning and Drying
	Stenography and Typewriting

PLACES AWAIT THE QUALIFIED.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ADDRESS—

MISS NANNIE H. BURROUGHS,

PRESIDENT THE NATIONAL TRAINING SCHOOL FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, LINCOLN HEIGHTS, WASHINGTON, D. C.

Stan



THE MECHANICS SAVINGS

NAMED BY THE UNITED STATES

DEPARTMENT AS A WAR

N. W. CORNER THIRD

RICHMOND,

III. 1920–1950: BLACK WOMEN’S INTELLECTUAL LABOR

Louise Thompson Patterson, Claudia Jones, and Esther Cooper Jackson: Merging Black Women Intellectuals, Black Labor and Civil Rights

Louise Thompson Patterson, Claudia Jones, and Esther Cooper Jackson played pivotal roles in organizing around the Scottsboro Boys case, demonstrating how the fight for racial justice, labor rights, and global anti-colonial struggles were deeply interconnected. Their work brought together advocacy for Black workers, demands for fair legal representation, and international solidarity, showing that racial oppression and economic exploitation were inseparable. Through grassroots organizing, legal defense campaigns, and international outreach, they connected the struggle of the Scottsboro defendants to broader movements for economic and racial justice, emphasizing the need for collective action across different arenas of resistance.



Courtesy of the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture



gettyimages
Credit: Universal History Archive

Getty Images Universal history Archives

III. 1920–1950: BLACK WOMEN'S INTELLECTUAL LABOR (CON'T)

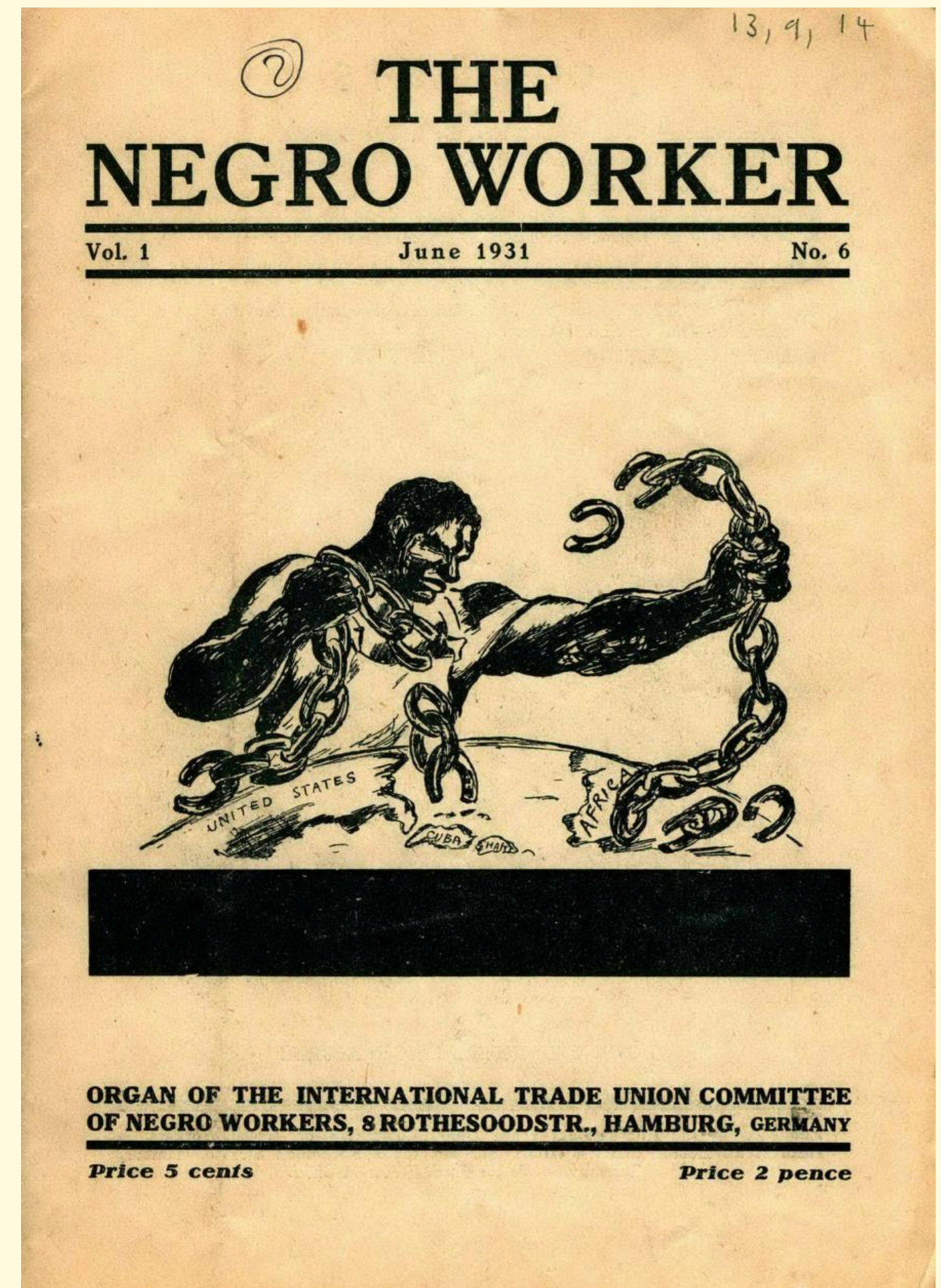
Claudia Jones and Her Work in The Negro Worker

- During the 1930s and 1940s, Claudia Jones was a key voice in *The Negro Worker*, a publication that highlighted the struggles of Black workers globally. She used *The Negro Worker* as a platform to critique the systemic exclusion of Black workers, particularly women, from New Deal labor protections. Jones wrote extensively about how domestic and agricultural laborers—sectors where Black women were overrepresented—were deliberately left out of labor protections such as the National Labor Relations Act (1935) and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938).

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Courtesy of: The Internet Archive: "The Negro Worker" (1928-1932).

IV. 1935–1943: THE WPA AND BLACK INTELLECTUAL LABOR AS WORK

New Deal's Impact on Black Intellectual Work:

- The WPA (Works Progress Administration) provided jobs for Black scholars and writers.
- Key Projects & Figures:
- Federal Writers' Project (FWP) – Collected slave narratives (LOC).
- Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, Effie Lee Newsome, Margaret Walker, Era Bell Thompson
- Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright,
- Negro Theatre Project – A platform for radical labor critiques.



*Zora Neale Hurston at Federal Writer's Project booth at New York Times Book Fair, 1937
Courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Archives*



V. 1951: GOVERNMENT REPRESSION OF BLACK LABOR NETWORKS

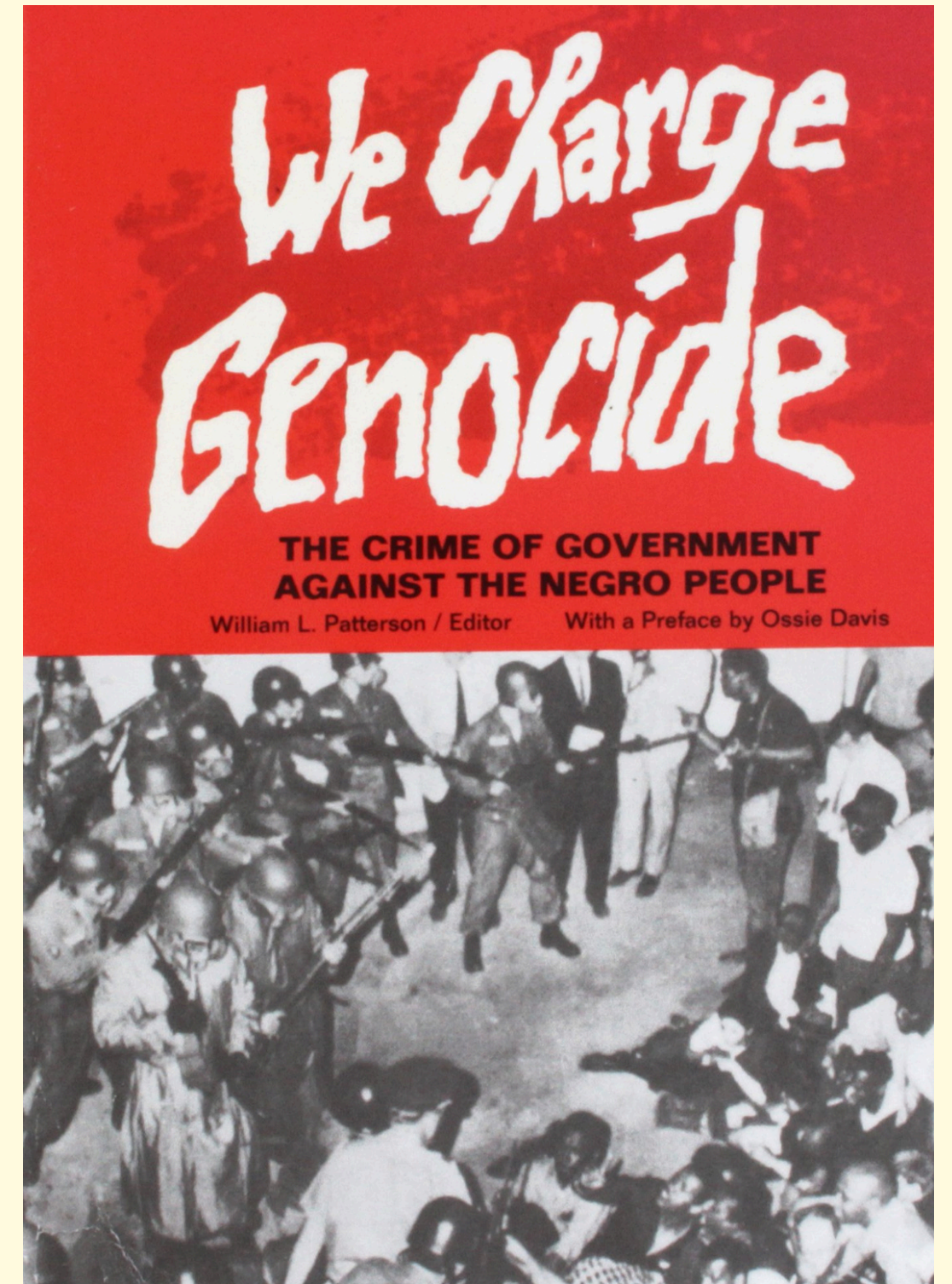
William L. Patterson, Paul Robeson, Preface Ossie Davis

- ***Black Intellectuals Labored to Charge Genocide***
- William L. Patterson's *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Against the Negro People* (1951) was a direct challenge to U.S. government suppression of Black people, particularly in the context of state violence, labor repression, and Cold War political suppression. The petition, submitted to the United Nations by the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), framed systemic racial violence and oppression—lynching, police brutality, economic exclusion, and segregation—as acts of genocide under the UN's Genocide Convention (1948).

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We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People by William L. Patterson, 1970
Courtesy International Publishers

V. GOVERNMENT REPRESSION OF BLACK LABOR NETWORKS

The United States Government Nexus of Suppression

During the 1950s, the FBI, House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), state and local police departments, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), U.S. State Department, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) were all involved in suppressing Black political activism through surveillance, harassment, legal prosecution, travel restrictions, and violence.

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Public Domain: Pennsylvania Democrat Francis E. Walter,



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- *Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. 1925. "Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro." Survey Graphic, March. [Link](#).*
- *National Park Service. "National Training School for Women and Girls." nps.gov. [Link](#).*



RESOURCES

Resources

Historical Archives

- *The Offices of the Negro World, National Library of Jamaica Digital Collection.* [Link](#).
- *The Negro World Digital Collection, New York Public Library.* [Link](#).

Online Digital Collections

- *The Messenger (1917) – A. Philip Randolph & Chandler Owen.* [Marxists Internet Archive](#).
- *The Crusader (1918) – Cyril Briggs’ labor newspaper.* [Marxists Internet Archive](#).
- *Photographs & Exhibits*
- *National Park Service: Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site.* [Link](#).
- *Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture: Scottsboro Boys Exhibit.* [Link](#).
- *Library of Congress: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project (1936-1938).* [Link](#).
- *References*
- *Patterson, William L. 1951. We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Against the Negro People. New York: Civil Rights Congress.* [Link](#).
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THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING!

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