Working Class New York
Joshua B. Freeman
Life and Labor Since World War II
Also by Joshua B. Freeman

In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933–1966

Who Built America? Working People and the Nation’s Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society (co-author)

Audacious Democracy: Labor, Intellectuals, and the Social Reconstruction of America (co-editor)
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CHAPTER 4.
The Rise of a Social Democratic Polity

During the years after World War II, New York's working-class neighborhoods, its loft districts, even its City Hall, crackled with the political energy of a mobilized working class. Building on the foundations of wartime anti-fascism, the New York labor movement led the city toward a social democratic polity unique in the country in its ambition and achievements. New York became a laboratory for a social urbanism committed to an expansive welfare state, racial equality, and popular access to culture and education. Ultimately, most Americans—including many working-class New Yorkers—rejected this vision, preferring suburban-style, single-family home living, racially exclusive neighborhoods, and low taxes. But in its exceptionality, working-class New York blazed an alternative path of postwar social development, nurturing cultural and political leaders who transmitted some of its values to the country at large.

A passion for politics and public issues permeated working-class New York. Most workers did not actively engage in politics, but a large minority did, arguing issues, attending meetings, working in election campaigns, and participating in periodic mass mobilizations. Broadcaster Larry King recalled that in the Brooklyn of his youth even children were devoted newspaper readers, preferring the tabloids but sampling all the papers, including the Communist Daily Worker.

Mass political engagement of a degree almost unimaginable later on could be witnessed at Madison Square Garden. The arena—which could hold over twenty thousand people—served as a major sports venue in the 1940s, just as it did later, but it also hosted numerous political rallies, many sponsored or cosponsored by the labor movement. Garden events in 1945 included a CIO-backed rally demanding that the United States break diplomatic relations with fascist Spain, a “World Unity Rally,” also backed by the CIO, a “Negro Freedom Rally,” a celebration of the 26th anniversary of the Communist party, and a rally to kick off Jonah J. Goldstein’s Liberal-Republican-Fusion mayoralty campaign. The next year the Garden housed a rally supporting the Fair Employment Practices Committee, another calling
for "Big Three Unity for Colonial Freedom," a meeting protesting racial violence, another to back striking maritime workers, two Communist party rallies, and a rally cosponsored by the CIO for gubernatorial and Senate candidates it endorsed.²

The roster of Garden rallies testifies to a remarkable aspect of postwar New York—its large, vibrant political left. The forty thousand people who came out on May 1, 1946, to watch the first May Day parade since before Pearl Harbor, saw many of its elements on display. The two largest contingents came from the Communist party (CP) and the International Workers Order (IWO), a Communist-led fraternal group. Union delegations included two thousand sailors from the National Maritime Union (NMU), large groups from the Furriers and Local 65 of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU), and smaller contingents from the Office Workers, Shoe Workers, Furniture Workers, Painters, Bakers, Jewelry Workers, and United Electrical Workers (UE). Unofficial contingents included some two thousand dressmakers and cloakmakers.

It took the marchers—newspaper estimates of their number ranged from 18,000 to 100,000—four hours to enter Union Square. There they heard speeches by Communist leader William Z. Foster and three members of the New York City Council. Though small stuff by European standards, the parade was an impressive display by American ones.³

The wartime struggle against fascism gave the left unprecedented legitimacy. Working-class New Yorkers had made huge sacrifices. Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 suffered seventy-six deaths among its 5,380 member-servicemen. IBEW Local 3 had 3,081 members in the armed services, thirty-eight of whom were killed. Under the banner of antifascism, a resolve that such human expenditure not be in vain animated leftists and liberals.⁴

Electoral politics provided a measure of left-wing strength. In the 1945 city council elections the top vote-getter in the city was TWU president Michael J. Quill, a candidate in the Bronx of the left-liberal American Labor Party (ALP). Quill received the first-choice vote of nearly one out of five Bronx voters in the complex proportional representation system New York used to choose its legislative body. Even more remarkable, Communists Peter Cacchione in Brooklyn and Ben Davis in Manhattan got elected with the second and fourth highest vote totals, together garnering 122,625 first-choice votes. Eugene Connolly, another ALPer, and Ira Palestin and Louis Gold-
berg, from the anticommunist Liberal party, which like the ALP had strong union backing, also served on the twenty-three person city council. Proportional representation facilitated minor party success, but even in winner-take-all elections the left made some strong showings. Congressman Vito Marcantonio had a voting record so left-wing that conservatives used it as the yardstick by which to judge other members of Congress. In 1946 leftist RWDSU Local 65 organizer Kenneth Sherbell won election to the state assembly, and the next year Leo Isaacson, running on the ALP line, bested a New Deal Democrat in a Bronx special congressional election.

These electoral feats both overstate and understate left strength. On the one hand, by running only a few candidates leftists could concentrate their resources on key races. If any left group had run a full slate of candidates, most would have suffered devastating defeats. On the other hand, since the mid-1930s the Communist-led left generally had not seen electing its own candidates as its main mode of exerting power. Rather, it followed one variant or another of the Popular Front policy of seeking coalitions with liberal and centrist forces and influencing policy by mobilizing pressure on established leaders.

The ALP served as a key vehicle for the Popular Front. The statewide party had been founded in 1936 by the garment unions to funnel votes to Roosevelt. Although on paper it barred Communists, over the years their influence within it grew. During World War II an anticommunist bloc, led by David Dubinsky of the ILGWU and Alex Rose of the Hatters, broke away from the ALP to form the Liberal Party, after losing a bitter primary fight. In 1945, the ALP nominated Brooklyn Democrat William O'Dwyer for mayor before the Democrats themselves picked him, thereby helping to shape the ticket of the larger party. Because the election was a three-man race, O'Dwyer would have been elected even without the quarter of a million votes he received on the ALP line, but only with them did he achieve a majority. Once in office O'Dwyer gave the ALP (including the Communists within it) patronage appointments and, as an observer in Commentary put it, "could hardly have done more for the unions' cause had he been a labor or socialist mayor on the European model." Between electoral efforts, a dense web of institutions engaged leftists. Many left-wing newspapers came out in the city, including at least five dailies: the Daily Worker, the Forward, Morgen Freiheit, the China Daily News (Meizhou Huaqiao Ribao), and PM, an innovative paper founded in 1940 to give voice to the left-wing of the New Deal coalition.
were even more numerous. The city had left-wing schools, like the socialist Rand School (which had thirteen thousand students in 1946) and the communist Jefferson School (with five thousand students at its peak in 1947–48); left-wing arts and music groups; and even nightclubs with ties to the left, like Café Society.\textsuperscript{10}

Some left-wing groups operated citywide, but many were neighborhood-based. The Liberal, American Labor, and Communist parties and the IWO all had neighborhood clubs or branches. In addition, scores of local, left-led consumer, tenant, and neighborhood associations could be found scattered around the city, like the Ocean Front Tenants League, founded in Brighton Beach in 1945, which claimed to have seventeen hundred members.

Women dominated neighborhood-based groups, unlike unions and political parties, which men generally led. In part this reflected the emphasis of these groups on consumption issues, particularly housing and food costs, the domain of women in working-class homes. Also, housewives could participate in neighborhood activities while juggling child care and household work, obstacles to traveling further afield. By their nature localistic, neighborhood groups occasionally banded together in citywide or even nationwide movements. New York consumer organizations, for instance, played a major role in several postwar meat boycotts designed to drive down prices. In 1951, Brooklyn housewives, led by Clara Lemlich Shavelson (who as a twenty-three-year-old had helped spark the famed 1909 shirtwaist-makers’ strike), forced meat wholesalers to lower prices.\textsuperscript{11}

The left so pervaded some neighborhoods that residents could engage in a broad range of social as well as political activities without straying beyond its realm. And when the neighborhood got to be too much, the left could offer at least temporary escape, to resorts and summer camps run by the IWO, the Socialists, and unions such as the ILGWU, Furriers, and UE. In a few areas, like Brownsville, the Communists had such influence that the life of a defector could be made truly miserable.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to its institutional network, the Popular Front left benefited from some extraordinary mass leaders. Benjamin Davis, Jr., for example, never shone quite as brightly as his onetime mentor and ally Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., but for a time he came close. An African-American, the son of a prominent Atlanta businessman and Republican official, Davis attended Amherst College and Harvard Law School before returning home to practice law. Drawn to the Communist Party in the course of defending black Communist Angelo Herndon, charged with insurrection for organizing unem-
ployed workers, Davis was forced by death threats to flee Georgia. Settling in New York, he edited the *Harlem Liberator* and wrote for the *Daily Worker*, the *Amsterdam News*, and Powell's *People's Voice* while leading a series of anti-discrimination drives. In 1942, Davis helped Powell—the first African-American city council member—win a seat in Congress. In return, the following year Powell backed Davis's successful council bid (as did a host of musical luminaries including Billie Holliday, Teddy Wilson, Coleman Hawkins, and Ella Fitzgerald). An able speaker and writer, blessed with good looks, immense courage, and a Southern charm that appealed to the many ex-Southerners living in the city, Davis attracted a Harlem following perhaps dwarfed only by those of Powell and Davis's good friend Paul Robeson.13

Davis's fellow Communist councilman, Peter Cacchione, came from a more humble background. The son of Italian immigrants, he grew up in a small Pennsylvania town. For years he worked as a trainman and metalworker. During the Depression he roamed the country, ending up in New York. Attracted to the Left through the Communist-led Unemployed Councils, Cacchione soon emerged as the head of the Brooklyn CP. Elected to the city council in 1941, he pressed such issues as maintaining New York's low transit fare and ending racial discrimination in housing and major league baseball. His combination of radical politics, attention to local issues, and down-to-earth manner won him reelection in 1943 and 1945, each time with a greater number of votes.14

Mike Quill, in holding both major union and electoral posts, continued a once-common practice that had become unusual by the mid-1940s. Born on a farm in western Ireland, into a home steeped in Irish nationalism, Quill enrolled in the Irish Republican Army as soon as he was old enough. After moving to New York in 1926, he took a job as a subway change maker. During the mid-1930s he joined a melange of Communists, Irish republicans, and militant workers in organizing the TWU. Quill's razor-sharp wit, ridicule of authority, and infectious high spirits made him a favorite among leftists, unionists, and Irish immigrants alike. Probably briefly a member of the CP, once he became president of the TWU, Quill avoided too close identification with the party. Nonetheless, he declared that he "would rather be called a Red by the rats than a rat by the reds."15

And then there was Vito Marcantonio, arguably the greatest popular tribune the New York left ever produced. Entering politics as a protégé of Fiorello La Guardia, Marcantonio inherited La Guardia's East Harlem political machine once the Little Flower moved to City Hall. Elected to Congress
in 1934, Marcantonio repeatedly won reelection until 1950. While other New Deal-era radicals captured congressional seats, none had anywhere near his longevity.

Marcantonio's extraordinary career was in some ways a tribute to his ability, determination, and character. In private a reserved man, Marc, as everyone called him, in public became an electrifying figure, a masterful speaker in English or Italian and a competent one in Spanish (important in a district that over time grew more heavily Puerto Rican). Fiercely dedicated to his job, Marc familiarized himself with every detail of what went on in his district. Much of his success rested on his constituent service operation and personal intervention in the lives of East Harlemites, somewhat in the manner of a village patron, helping them get veterans benefits or medical services or legal assistance or even settling family disputes. Marc's integrity, modest lifestyle, and loyalty to community social norms won him the support of thousands of voters who did not share his leftism.

But if Marcantonio's success constituted a personal triumph, it also represented a collective achievement. Although Marcantonio himself was not a Communist, the Communist Party made his reelection a top priority, assigning cadres from throughout the city to work on his campaigns. The ALP and left-wing unions and fraternal groups pitched in with money and volunteers. Marcantonio especially benefited from ties to the United Public Workers (UPW), whose members, employed in the city's Department of Welfare, he could call on to assist his constituents. Concentrating resources on Marcantonio undermined other left-wing projects, including the growth of the ALP as a whole, but it helped sustain a national voice for the labor movement, the Popular Front, civil rights, and Puerto Rican independence without equivalence in mid-century America.16

For all the institutional density of the Popular Front-Left, and its leaders' abilities, it was the labor movement that made it a significant force in New York life. Without their labor base, the Communists would have been marginal figures, somewhat like the Trotskyists, whom C. Wright Mills acidly described as "bureaucrats without a bureaucracy."17 At the end of World War II, in the New York-area CIO the Communists and their allies dominated the leadership of the UE, TWU, NMU, Furriers, American Communications Association, UOPWA, UPW, Shoe Workers, and Furniture Workers, and controlled Local 65 and most of the department store locals of the RWDSU. In the AFL they led locals of bakers, building service workers, and jewelry
workers, the painters union district council, and Local 6 of the Hotel and
Restaurant Employees (which had well over twenty thousand members).
Also, some leaders of the unaffiliated International Association of Machinists
worked with the Communists.\textsuperscript{18}

In addition to individual unions, the Communist Party and its allies con­
trolled the CIO Greater New York Industrial Union Council, which served
three important, interrelated functions. First, it fostered interunion support
and solidarity. Second, it acted as the political arm of the local CIO (although
it could not truly speak for the whole CIO because many noncommunist and
anticommunist unions refused to affiliate with it). And third, it represented
labor before government bodies and in civil society. Though nominally led
by its president—until late 1947, Joe Curran from the NMU—day-to-day re­
sponsibility for the council fell into the hands of its secretary-treasurer, Saul
Mills, a former newspaper reporter, and the rest of its eleven-person paid
staff.

In spite of sometimes chaotic methods, the council made itself a signifi­
cant force in local politics. It organized mass demonstrations, sponsored
voter registration drives, endorsed candidates, threw resources behind them,
and sent lobbying delegations to Albany and Washington. The scale of the
council's efforts could be staggering: it routinely issued leaflets in very large
press runs—up to two million copies—and on election day in 1944 helped
field 22,500 people in a joint CIO-ALP effort for the Roosevelt ticket.\textsuperscript{19}

From 1940 through 1948 the council followed the political line of the CP,
with only minor deviations. For the party, the council served as a channel of
influence on local government and politics, allowing it to promote its posi­
tions and its people in the name of mainstream labor. Adherence to the CP
line caused only occasional flareups between the council and the national
CIO, because during the immediate postwar years their domestic programs
did not differ greatly.\textsuperscript{20}

Postwar CIO policy used as its jumping off point FDR's 1944 call for an
economic bill of rights. The CIO interpreted this to require, above all else,
maintaining price and rent controls so that postwar wage gains would not be
eroded by inflation. Beyond that the CIO called for a massive housing con­
struction program (the Wagner-Ellender-Taft Bill); national health insurance
(the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Bill); national standards for public education
and teachers salaries and federal grants to eliminate rural-urban and black­
white inequities; improvements in the G.I. Bill; aggressive federal action
against racial discrimination including an antilynching law, abolition of the
poll tax, a permanent fair employment practices committee, and the ousting from Congress of members who incited racial violence; an increased minimum wage extended to uncovered low-income groups; price guarantees for farmers; antitrust action; aid to small business; and a shift of the federal tax burden from low to high earners. The CIO promoted this program on both moral and economic grounds, juxtaposing large corporate profits to declining real worker income and contending that without full employment, rising income, and tax redistribution to elevate national purchasing power, the country again would be plunged into a depression.  

The Greater New York Industrial Council tried to find concrete ways to press forward the CIO program. In 1945, for example, it sponsored a conference on postwar housing and community planning that featured Senator Robert Wagner, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The council devoted a great deal of energy to fighting increases in consumer costs, pressing for the retention and enforcement of price and rent control laws (at one point debating but rejecting a proposal from RWDSU Local 65 for a four-hour general strike in support of price controls). The council also supported consumer boycotts aimed at checking price hikes. One UE local even bought eggs directly from Long Island farmers and resold them to members "to show that prices can be considerably lower than they are today." "Our food bills," it argued, "are not a solely economic but also a political matter." The council strongly opposed increases in the city sales tax and the subway fare, which directly impacted the working-class standard of living, and pressed for the use of state government surpluses to aid the deficit-ridden city government.

The CIO Council involved itself in social services, relief, and charity, too. In 1943 the CIO organized its own United Way-type charity, the CIO War Chest, in order, as Amalgamated Clothing Worker leader Jacob Potofsky recalled, "to coordinate the giving by the CIO, and to get credit for it." "Before the advent of the War Chest," Potofsky noted, "credit for contributions from labor was given to employers." "By contributing to the various institutions," he continued, "CIO members will not have to consider themselves charity cases if the need arises for hospitalization or any personal service." To further help its members, the CIO Council worked with the Greater New York Fund to establish a Workers Personal Service Bureau as a bridge between unionists and welfare agencies, and itself ran a Veterans Service Bureau.

The CIO Council leadership saw as its province all aspects of society
that affected workers, including politics, the economy, race relations, and so-
cial welfare. The AFL Central Trades and Labor Council differed dramatic-
cally. While leaders of the CIO Council conversed in the language of social
democracy, leaders of the rival AFL group remained rooted in an older tradi-
tion of "pure and simple unionism," that stressed immediate, job-related con-
cerns of particular groups of workers.

Part of the difference was generational. Most CIO leaders—with the ma-
jor exception of those from the Clothing Workers—were still young when
World War II ended. Quill, Curran, and Mills, for example, had not yet
reached forty. By contrast, the AFL council was a gerontocracy. Its secretary,
James C. Quinn, came out of the hatters union but had been a full-time coun-
cil employee since the late 1920s. Martin T. Lacey, secretary-treasurer of
Teamsters Local 816 and council president from 1945 until his death twelve
years later, made Quinn look like a neophyte, having been a paid union offi-
cial since 1903.24

The formal political positions the AFL council took to a surprisingly de-
gree resembled those of its CIO counterpart. The AFL group backed the
Wagner-Murray-Dingell Social Security bill (as did the national AFL); sup-
ported Henry Wallace's confirmation as secretary of commerce; backed the
push for a permanent fair employment practices committee; and supported
President Truman's 1946 housing, minimum wage, and full employment pro-
posals. Locally the council supported the Quinn-Ives antidiscrimination law
and generally opposed increases in transit fares, controlled rents, or the city
sales tax. In short, the council backed the same combination of Keynesian-
ism, expanded welfare measures, and an end to racial discrimination in em-
ployment that formed the heart of CIO left-liberalism.25 However, in sharp
contrast to the CIO Council, the AFL group was vehemently anticommunist.
It did not share the CIO's internationalism, particularly its militant pro-UN
stance (it rarely addressed foreign policy issues at all),26 and refused to work
with liberal groups like the Union for Democratic Action that allowed pro-
communist organizations to affiliate with them.27

In electoral politics, the AFL generally stayed out of primary fights and
then endorsed the Democratic ticket. Unlike the CIO, it rarely sponsored
mass mobilizations, demonstrations, or large-scale voter registration drives.
Some AFL unions operated politically outside the council framework. The
building trades unions, for example, had their own nonpartisan committee.
The ILGWU by itself could mobilize two thousand campaign workers.28

More than formal political position, however, style, priorities, and sense
of purpose distinguished the two labor councils, especially the AFL's comparative parochialism and seeming remove from major social developments. Compared to the CIO, for example, the AFL council spent very little time on strike support. Reading its minutes from 1946, one would not realize that the greatest strike wave in the country's history was in progress. AFL unions actually conducted most of New York's largest postwar strikes, but the council seemed to see these as discrete, routine events, not part of a larger social conflict requiring broad mobilization or strategic solidarity. Similarly, economic reconversion, price controls, unemployment fears, international relations, and the other great postwar issues that the CIO Council extensively discussed rarely got mentioned at meetings of the AFL body. And while some AFL affiliates tried to organize just the types of workers the postwar labor movement often has been accused of ignoring—white-collar, sales, and service workers—the council itself played little role in these efforts.29

Rather than politics broadly construed, strike support, or organizing, the council concentrated on promoting the narrow interests of particular affiliates. This fell squarely in the AFL tradition. For most of its history, the AFL gave much higher priority to championing the minority of the workforce its affiliates represented—disproportionately male, white, and skilled—than the interests of the working class as a whole.

The AFL council paid particular attention to preserving unionized jobs. Often this involved serving as an advocate with the state apparatus. Usually depicted as more voluntarist than the CIO, the AFL was actually more entangled with the state than the younger labor federation, repeatedly intervening over the myriad rules, permits, and franchises that affected unionized workers, from the size of oil trucks allowed in the city to a proposed ban on electrical and neon signs advertising liquor (opposed on behalf of the electrical workers, sheetmetal workers, and signwriters) to a bill allowing milk and cream to be bottled in one gallon containers, which would have eliminated some teamsters' jobs.

Concern with job preservation led the AFL to deal with broad social issues from a remarkably parochial point of view. Its strong support for public works (including public housing) reflected as much its desire to keep construction workers employed as a commitment to expanded government services. The council (like the national AFL) opposed the St. Lawrence Seaway, which it feared would take away jobs from longshoremen and teamsters, and spent almost as much effort mobilizing against it as it did against Taft-Hartley. More extreme and more comical was AFL opposition to permanent
voter registration on the grounds that it would reduce the amount of work for unionized printers! The council utilized its political connections to maintain a city government practice of hiring only unionized firms to do its printing, while the local branch of the AFL Union Label and Services Trade Department launched campaigns promoting patronage at unionized establishments and the purchase of union-made goods.30

In spite of the political differences between and within the citywide labor councils, union activists agreed about enough to significantly affect the politics of the city and region. During the 1940s, a kind of “New York exceptionalism” was cemented, a local polity that during coming decades came to symbolize the best or worst of urban liberalism, depending on one’s point of view. National and international events to a great extent determined living and working conditions. But at least in some regards, working-class New Yorkers controlled their own fate.

Take the number one CIO priority, the control of living costs. While the battle to maintain price controls was fought and ultimately lost in Washington, the special case of rent controls played out differently. Imposed during the war in some areas, including New York, by the federal government as part of its anti-inflation program, after the war Washington gradually eased and then eliminated rent regulation. However, it allowed individual states to take over the control system, an option that New York, under immense popular pressure, took up. (In 1947, one organization alone, the Bronx Emergency Council to Save Rent Control, claimed forty-five thousand members in thirty-three neighborhood branches.) In 1950 the New York state government regulated 96 percent of the rental units and nearly 80 percent of housing of any kind in New York City. In the years that followed, while the rest of the state and those parts of the country that had not already done so shed rent controls—meant to be a temporary measure until postwar construction could ease a national housing shortage—in New York City they became, as Emanuel Tobier and Barbara Gordon Espejo put it, “a permanent part of the political landscape, ardently supported by a large and vocal constituency.” Unions made up a significant part of that constituency, lobbying the board that controlled rents, winning representation on it, and, in the case of the CIO, establishing a “rent clinic” to provide advice for its members. A half-century after World War II ended, rent control remained ensconced in New York City, infuriating landlords and free market ideologues while tenaciously
defended by tenant groups, some of which traced their roots to the 1940s left.\textsuperscript{31}

Similarly, laborites, liberals, and leftists fought long, hard, and in the main successfully to maintain low transit fares. For nearly a half century after 1904, when the New York subway opened, popular pressure kept the fare on subways, trolleys, and most buses at five cents. In 1940 the city took over the operation of almost the entire rapid transit system and many bus and trolley lines, changing the political calculus of the fare. What had been primarily a matter of government regulation and antimonopoly populism became a municipal budget and tax issue. Faced with growing transit deficits, necessitating increased subsidies and higher taxes, Mayor O'Dwyer raised the fare to ten cents on the subway and seven cents on city buses and trolleys in 1948 after a long, complex struggle. The difficulty he had in doing so reinforced the belief of many conservatives and large property owners (interested in keeping down tax rates) that the transit tariff had to be removed from the political arena. They partially accomplished this in 1953 with the creation of the semiautonomous New York City Transit Authority, charged with running the transit system using passenger revenue alone, and authorized to raise the fare to do so. Still, the political climate was such that until 1970 fare hikes were modest and infrequent. This helped sustain an exceptional pattern of mass-transit use; in 1989 the New York subway carried one out of every nine mass-transit riders in the country.\textsuperscript{32}

The case of transit illustrates the commitment of New York liberalism to using the state to both hold down living costs and provide extensive services. In housing, too, pressing the state to provide services as well as hold down costs was a key political goal; New York was not only the national center of rent control, it also was the national center of public housing. When World War II ended, the city was accommodating over fifty-eight thousand people in fourteen projects run by its housing authority. During the next five years the authority built twenty-one more projects. During the decade after that it added another 75,403 units.\textsuperscript{33}

New York's unrivaled municipal college system provides another example of the unusual extent of its services. In 1945 the city's Board of Higher Education was running four tuition-free colleges. Over the next fifteen years, aided by collections from the federal government for students covered by the G.I. Bill, the system expanded to include four two-year colleges and two divisions of four-year schools that were soon to become independent colleges. Together the colleges enrolled 93,000 students, 36,000 full-time.\textsuperscript{34}
The postwar years saw an expansion of other municipal services as well. In 1949 the city floated a $150 million bond issue to upgrade its public health facilities. The city broadcasting system grew from one radio station to three radio and two television stations (including those run by the Board of Education).35

New York even had a quasi-public arts center that brought high culture to working-class audiences. When in 1942 the city found itself in possession of a massive Shriners Temple on 55th Street as a result of a tax default, Mayor La Guardia decided to establish a nonprofit City Center for Music and Drama “to meet the demand for cultural entertainment at reasonable prices.” Labor representatives played a major role in launching the new enterprise, attending planning meetings, serving as incorporators, and sitting on its board. The Clothing, Garment, and Musicians unions each lent the Center $5,000 and Workmen’s Circle (a Jewish workers fraternal group) $2,500, a significant slice of the initial working capital. Almost immediately City Center began offering top quality, low-cost symphony, theater, opera, and ballet performances (in the latter two cases by its own companies) to “shirtsleeved audiences” that included many unionists, in a familial atmosphere far different from the stiff formality of traditional high-art venues.

In its early days, City Center’s New York City Opera Company embodied the political spirit of the working-class that made its existence possible. With a top price of two dollars (compared to $6.05 for an orchestra seat at the Metropolitan Opera), it made a virtue of its financial constraints by hiring young American singers who had not yet achieved international reputations. “The prevailing audience attitude,” one opera historian noted, “was one of encouragement for innovation.” The September 1945 debut of baritone Todd Duncan presented for the first time an African-American in a leading role at a major American opera company. By contrast, the Met did not desegregate for another decade. Though over time the City Opera audience became increasingly middle-class, the company retained its innovative spirit and kept ticket prices at roughly a third those at the Met.36

Individually, few of the services New York City provided were unique. Other cities built housing and operated transit systems, colleges, hospitals, and even radio stations. But no city offered services of the scale and range of those in New York. In 1950 New York had twenty-two municipal hospitals; no other city had more than three.37

Organized labor played a critical role in creating the homegrown version of social democracy that made life in New York unlike anyplace else in
the United States. Working-class pressure by no means alone accounted for the rise of this left-liberal polity, which had more in common with postwar European norms than with politics in contemporaneous United States cities. But with literally millions of New Yorkers living in a household with a union member in it, labor had potential clout at the polling place, in neighborhoods, and in the streets which, even when only partially mobilized, constituted an unrivaled force for progressive change in the city.

As labor groups and their allies fought to expand public services, they struggled to ensure that public resources and economic opportunities would be open to all, regardless of race or religion. Elements of the labor movement (though by no means all of it) allied with black groups and civil rights organizations in a persistent fight against discrimination. This, too, distinguished working-class New York from national norms.

The mid-1940s were an optimistic time for those hoping to change the country's long history of racial injustice. The war mobilization, the democratic rhetoric that surrounded it, and the growing African-American electorate in key northern states made racial discrimination a national political issue for the first time since Reconstruction. In most places, however, the immediate postwar period proved to be a false spring of racial liberalism, especially in the South, where the defense of white supremacy soon hardened. In New York, by contrast, antiracist efforts continued unabated. Remarkable were both the breadth of support for this struggle and the large role organized labor played in it.38

The 1945 Quinn-Ives Law exemplified New York's exceptionality. As World War II drew to a close, and the effort to make permanent the weak, wartime federal Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) faltered, the New York state legislature passed the Quinn-Ives Bill, the first law in the United States to explicitly prohibit discrimination in private employment on the basis of race, creed, color, or national origins. Quinn-Ives did not pass without opposition; the Chamber of Commerce, Board of Trade, New York State Bar Association, three railroad brotherhoods, some real estate and manufacturing concerns, and multi-hatted public builder Robert Moses all came out against it. But more notable was the extent of backing for the bill, which passed with bipartisan support by overwhelming majorities. Active backers included the New York Federation of Churches, the YMCA, the Urban League, the American Jewish Congress, the National Negro Congress, the American Labor and Liberal parties, and the CIO. Even the state and city
AFL endorsed the bill, despite its ban on discrimination by unions, which was the kind of state interference in the affairs of organized labor that the federation in the past had vehemently opposed.  

The broad support for antidiscriminatory legislation in part reflected the sense of many New Yorkers besides African-Americans—most notably Jews—that they were being denied equal rights. Between July 1943 and December 1944, the most common complaint to the FEPC from New Yorkers was not racial discrimination (the cause of less than a fifth the complaints), but religious discrimination (over two-fifths the complaints), usually accusations of anti-Semitism. Reformers often joined the two issues; Mike Quill's literature for his 1943 city council race, for instance, called for "A City United Against Religious and Racial Discrimination."  

Quinn-Ives formed part of a broad postwar assault on segregation and racial inequality. In Brooklyn, for example, branches of the YWCA and YMCA, various church groups and hospitals, and, of course, the Dodgers desegregated. In the latter case, possible prosecution under Quinn-Ives, a growing population of potential black fans, an ongoing campaign by leftists and black activists demanding the integration of baseball, the desire to tap a new talent pool, and an inclination by Dodger general manager Branch Rickey to act fairly all came into play. The 1940s and early 1950s also saw a growing if still modest number of African-American officeholders. By the mid-1950s, New York City had an African-American congressman, city councilman, borough president, state senator, and five state assemblymen.  

New York unions regularly contributed to the Urban League, NAACP, and other civil rights groups; protested acts of racial violence in the region and the South; and futilely called for federal anti-poll tax, antilynching, and FEPC legislation. Occasionally they supported racial quotas to ensure African-American representation within the labor movement and in the public sector. The bylaws of Local 6 of the Hotel Workers, for example, required that one black and one female officer be appointed if none was elected as a general officer of the union or to its board of vice presidents, while the NYC CIO Council called on Mayor O'Dwyer to appoint a "representative of Negro people" to a vacancy on the Board of Education. But if nominal labor support for racial justice was widespread, action in its pursuit tended to be most vigorous among black unionists and those within the communist orbit.  

From the 1920s on, African-American unionists formed a whole series of New York-based organizations to fight job discrimination and promote the unionization of blacks. Immediately after World War II—perhaps because of
a perception that race issues had won a place on the mainstream liberal agenda—many of these groups became inactive. In April 1949, however, class-wide black labor activism revived when a group of four hundred unionists—most but not all black, and many with ties to the CP—formed the Harlem Trade Union Council (later renamed the Greater New York Negro Labor Council). Led by Ewart Guinier of the United Public Workers, the council backed Local 968 of the International Longshoremen’s Association, an almost entirely African-American Brooklyn unit, in its long battle for a fair share of waterfront jobs; publicized employment discrimination in the hotel, building, and printing trades; joined the fight against the whites-only policy at Metropolitan Life Insurance’s giant housing project, Stuyvesant Town; campaigned for a hospital in Bedford-Stuyvesant (an African-American section of Brooklyn); and protested cases of racial violence. Along with a similar group in Chicago, it helped create what became its parent body, the National Negro Labor Council. To try to counter these moves, anticommunist black socialist Frank Crosswaith—an ILGWU organizer—revived the Harlem Labor Committee, which he had founded in 1935.

Among unions with a majority of white members, those that had or once had ties to the Communist Party tended to be the most active in pursuing racial justice. In a few industries—including retail pharmacies, hotels, and small machine and electrical shops—their efforts brought employment and promotion gains for nonwhites. UE Local 475, for example, campaigned to get black and Puerto Rican workers into higher paid and more skilled jobs. Active in the National Negro Labor Council, the local, like UE nationally, promoted the council’s model fair employment practices contract clause. In 1952 it got this language into forty-seven of its contracts. The union also set up its own Fair Employment Practices Committee. Like many left-wing unions, Local 475 sponsored Negro History Week activities (on one occasion a speech by W. E. B. DuBois) and membership meetings to discuss black, Puerto Rican, and women’s rights. Another UE local, 1227, which like 475 had a mostly white membership, elected an African-American as its president in 1946.

Even on the left, unions with large African-American memberships, like the National Maritime Union, tended to be the most attentive to the problems of black workers. However, some overwhelmingly white groups, like the Retail Drug Employees Union, Local 1199, had remarkable records of antiracist struggle. As part of a late 1930s organizing campaign, 1199 pressured Harlem drugstores into hiring black pharmacists and upgrading other African-
American employees. In 1947 it committed itself to opening up drugstores in the “entire city to negro employment in all capacities.” While some unions used their hiring halls to block black employment, 1199 used its to promote it. When it suspected that an African-American sent out from the hall failed to get hired because of race, the union would “ask other members in the hiring hall to waive their seniority in order to send out another Negro member for the same job.” Slowly, African-Americans workers—including pharmacists—began being hired by drugstores outside black neighborhoods.49

The high priority left-wing unions like UE, 1199, RWDSU Local 65, and the United Public Workers gave to what they called “the Negro Question” paralleled the policy of the Communist Party, which during the early 1950s made the struggle against “white chauvinism” a litmus test of loyalty (as well as a weapon in internal factionalism). However, even after unions like 1199 and 65 drifted away from the Communist Party, their commitment to racial justice stayed intense. In the case of 1199, its early grappling with racism helped prepare it for the extraordinary organizing drive it embarked on in the late 1950s that transformed it from a small, heavily-Jewish, largely-male New York drugstore union into a large, heavily nonwhite, largely female national health and hospital workers union. African-American and left-wing trade unionists helped sustain the citywide and national civil rights struggles during the 1950s, when support for them was thin, and they were to be an important source of leadership for the movement when it blossomed in the 1960s.50

In a variety of ways, then, labor—and particularly the left wing of the labor movement—helped set the optimistic, democratic tenor of postwar New York politics. The ramifications of the style of liberalism that labor helped sustain were concrete and far-reaching. For millions of New Yorkers, labor politics meant greater access to jobs, housing, health care, education, and culture.

The continued success of New York labor politics, however, was by no means assured as the 1940s drew to a close. The deepening Cold War, a national political shift to the right, an aggressive management campaign against unions, and a rising tide of anticommunism changed the terrain on which labor operated. Longstanding tensions within the labor movement soon exploded, with profound, long-range effects.