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John C. Dancy,
The Depression and the New Deal

Bradley H. Pollock

The Great Depression dealt a horrible blow to black America. From 1929 through 1933, few blacks could find jobs of any kind. "A specter of starvation haunted black America." Competition for available jobs was intense; unemployed whites now sought after the menial jobs that were traditionally reserved for blacks. Blacks were fired by the thousands, specifically to hire whites in their place, and found themselves displaced *en masse* from garbage collecting, street cleaning and domestic service.¹

During this period of hardship, John C. Dancy was Director of the Detroit Urban League (DUL). The National Urban League (NUL) had been created to deal with the economic and social problems of Afro-Americans, particularly those residing in urban areas. The major migration of blacks from the South to northern urban areas created new problems which the Urban League sought to address and the Depression aggravated. A comparison of the policies and programs of the DUL with those of the NUL reveals the distinctive qualities of Dancy's leadership that underwent significant changes in attitude and approach as the economic crisis and New Deal programs proceeded. Dancy was more conservative and slower to change than was the national leadership of the Urban League. His approach to race relations and racial uplift was clearly a product of the Booker T. Washington school of thought. The conditions caused by the Depression forced the NUL to increase its militancy and its

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involvement in politics. Dancy gradually and reluctantly accepted these changes in policy.

The National Urban League was founded on October 16, 1911 in New York City. It was a direct outgrowth of the Progressive era. The NUL resulted from the merger of three racial uplift organizations: the National League for the Protection of Colored Women, the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, and the Committee for Improving the Industrial Condition of Negroes in New York. Unlike these previous committees, the NUL was intended to be a broad organization that was national in scope. In many respects the NUL was a classic example of the progressive reform organizations of the day, and the white members of this new organization were involved in a range of municipal reforms and social justice movements. In fact, almost without exception, these white members fit the stereotype of the Progressive reformers of the early 1900s—they were members of the Anglo Saxon Protestant upper middle class.²

As Nancy Weiss indicates in her study of the NUL, progressivism is best understood if it is broken down into two wings. One wing consisted of a racist political movement (which supported black disenfranchisement and Jim Crow Legislation), the other, a humanitarian social justice movement. Within the social justice wing of progressivism were many intellectuals, social workers, and philanthropists who were concerned with the plight of Afro-Americans. It was progressive reformers of this type who played important roles in the NUL and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the two central racial organizations of the day.³

Two approaches formed the basis of the NUL philosophy. The first sought to professionalize social service work in the black community, stressing sociological research as a basis for social reform. The second approach was a conservative individualistic philosophy of racial uplift, influenced primarily by the teachings of Booker T. Washington.⁴

In this period (1910-1930), the major ideological influence on the NAACP was the thought of W.E.B. DuBois, which differed from that of Washington on several key points. The NAACP, in keeping with DuBois' philosophy, focused on the attainment of political and legal rights for blacks. DuBois believed that although economic issues were a fundamental concern, without political rights and social equality, the black community could secure few economic gains.⁵

The NUL, on the other hand, focused on preparing blacks for full citizenship by seeking to give them a stake in the nation's economy. This approach implied that blacks were second class citizens in America not because of racism per se, but because they were as yet unworthy of equality. This Washingtonian philosophy assumed that if blacks acquired wealth through a program of self-help and adopted white cultural values,

such as the Protestant Work Ethic, then whites would accept them into mainstream society. The Urban League sought to promote such values in the black community and to help blacks find economic opportunities. The Urban League, however, strayed from Washington's philosophy by placing its emphasis on the urban rather than the rural black community. Furthermore, in addition to help in job-seeking, the NUL provided social services to ease the pressures of urbanization on city-dwelling blacks.⁶

While the Urban League was engaged in job-seeking, counseling and social research, the NAACP employed agitation, public protest, propaganda, political lobbying, and court tests as tactics in its struggle for equality. The Urban League was far less overtly militant in its approach, and its public image was more conservative than that of the NAACP. Some leaders of the NAACP, such as Joel Spingarn, argued that the work of the Urban League was just as important as their own and that much of that work would be impossible if the League maintained a radical image like that of the NAACP. Through mild persuasion and diplomacy, the Urban League was often able to get money and jobs from some of the most conservative elements of society.⁷

Once the national office of the Urban League was established, the organization dedicated itself to expansion. Many cities had independent black social service agencies of various kinds. The Urban League absorbed many of these agencies through a program of national affiliation. Next to the national office in New York, the founding of the Chicago branch was most important. It was hoped that a successful branch in Chicago would serve as a model for the entire Midwest.

The First World War and the increasing job opportunities it created in the North led to an enormous influx of blacks into midwestern cities. This fact, together with money from philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, enabled the National Urban League to establish additional affiliate branches. By 1919, NUL branches were established in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Columbus (Ohio), Detroit, Cleveland, Newark and Milwaukee.⁸

The Detroit Urban League was founded in 1916 with Forrester B. Washington as its executive secretary. His term in office was a short one, for in 1918 he was appointed to the Division of Negro Economics in the Department of Labor. John C. Dancy succeeded Washington as head of the DUL and remained so through the Second World War. John C. Dancy was born in Salisbury, North Carolina, on April 13, 1888. His father was a minister and local political figure. John was educated at Livingston College and at the University of Pennsylvania. Before joining the DUL he worked as a teacher and as a social worker. Dancy was one of Detroit's leading citizens, and he led the DUL for over four decades, periodically holding other positions of influence as well. He was a member of the Board of Trustees of the American Association of Social Workers, and he

was appointed by Mayor Frank Murphy of Detroit as a member of the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment and later as a commissioner of the Detroit House of Correction.⁹

When the stock market crashed in 1929 and the national economy began to collapse, Dancy remained quite optimistic. In response to a letter requesting information on the employment of blacks in Detroit, Dancy wrote that although blacks suffered more than others, all had felt the onslaught of the Depression. Furthermore, he stressed his faith in Hoover's administration and expected things to improve shortly. Dancy pointed out that few jobs were open to blacks even in the best of times, although there were certain areas of employment open to educated middle class blacks such as teaching, social work and government service jobs. Dancy argued that in these areas job opportunities for blacks were actually increasing. The implication of Dancy's statement is that for the majority of Detroit's black population the job market was scarce indeed, but the Depression had not made things substantially worse.¹⁰

Those who were unemployed were forced to go to the Department of Public Welfare for relief. The relief offered, however, was very meager and short-term. The scarcity of jobs and the inadequacy of the local relief program caused workers to fear losing their jobs, which led to a reduction in the number of strikes. The few strikes that did take place allowed blacks to get jobs as strikebreakers. This served to aggravate the racist attitudes of most labor unions. Blacks were blamed for the defeat of organizing drives in the auto, coal, and railroad industries. In 1929 black strikebreakers were accused of breaking the longshoreman strike in Boston. Dancy viewed strikebreaking by blacks as an effective means of gaining employment when no other outlets were available. According to Dancy, the interests of black workers were often closer to that of capital than to that of white workers.¹¹

At this early stage of the Depression, Dancy's tone was upbeat and optimistic, searching for something positive in even the most horrendous situation. This was not true of H.N. Robinson, director of the Chicago Urban League. According to Robinson, conditions for blacks in Chicago were extremely bleak. In a memo released to all Urban League locals, Robinson advised blacks to stay away from Chicago, for industrial workers were being laid off daily and even domestics could not find work.¹² Throughout the early years of the Depression, things continued to get worse, and increasing racism and discrimination were steadily displacing those blacks who had found jobs. In February of 1932, T. Arnold Hill (director of industrial relations for the NUL) released a memo which stated that groups of whites and even trade unions were demanding the displacement of blacks to provide jobs for white workers. Hill cited

examples of such activity and argued that the black community must organize against such action.¹³

In Detroit during the same month, the Labor Research Association (a group with Communist connections) published a report, "How The Crisis Hit The Auto Workers." Among other claims, this report attacked Detroit's relief program for being disorganized and doling out relief without regard to actual need. The report implied that blacks, a large percentage of the most needy, were discriminated against.¹⁴ However, since blacks made up thirty percent of those on relief in Detroit while comprising only seven percent of the population, Dancy argued that there was no racial discrimination in Detroit's relief program. People were arbitrarily refused relief, but according to Dancy this action was not based on race in any way. Furthermore, Dancy saw no conscious organized effort to displace blacks from jobs as was taking place elsewhere in the nation. Dancy, apparently, had great faith in Detroit's business leadership and in the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment to prevent any organized racial discrimination. In fact, in a letter to Walter White of the NAACP, Dancy took a very unusual position. He maintained that the economic crisis would actually improve race relations! He argued that blacks could eat and buy homes in places that had been off limits to them before the Depression. Dancy saw this as signaling a trend and thought that other racial barriers would begin to break down. In Dancy's opinion, "Prejudice is not increasing . . . While I have noticed no particular manifestations of tolerance or understanding, it appears that this depression has made us all kin."¹⁵ Dancy's argument suggests that economic hardship would make racial discrimination simply unaffordable. However, since blacks as a whole were hit even harder by the Depression than were whites, this change would have little effect on their lives, particularly if it were not accompanied by a real change in racial attitudes.

In the period from 1929 through 1933, Dancy's personal leadership and thought were clearly the determining factors in DUL policy. Dancy's main approach in this period focused on gaining employment for individual blacks by negotiating and lobbying with local white businessmen. This was generally the standard approach of the Urban League as a whole at this time. Dancy had contact with many private businessmen and local political figures in Detroit and was apparently quite a diplomat since he was able to secure a number of jobs for black individuals, particularly those with professional training.¹⁶

The first few years of the Depression did not sway Dancy from this traditional approach. Dancy's political and economic views were essentially conservative. According to Dancy, his views reflected those of Detroit's black community as a whole. As proof of his contention, Dancy pointed out that the Communist Party had little support in Detroit's black

community in spite of the severity of economic conditions. The Communists were desperate for black recruits, according to Dancy, and went to ludicrous lengths to attract them--but to no avail.¹⁷

A Washingtonian at heart, Dancy believed that the "better" elements of the black community would prove themselves worthy in the eyes of white society--and that a philosophy of black "self-help" and accommodation to white authority was the best approach to black advancement.¹⁸ He was a black Republican and had a number of fairly close ties to conservative Republicans throughout the state of Michigan. One such contact was a Mr. Chester M. Culver of the Employers' Association, who solicited Dancy's support for a campaign against the organization of a local schoolteachers union. Included with Culver's request for support was a propaganda sheet entitled, "A Political School Teacher is a Public Enemy." This sheet argued that a teachers union would ruin education and was, in fact, a Communist conspiracy. Dancy apparently made no reply to Mr. Culver's letter; or if he did, he saw fit not to include it in the Detroit Urban League papers.¹⁹

Economic conditions continued to decline and by 1933 it was practically impossible to find jobs for unemployed blacks in Detroit. This plight may not have radicalized Dancy, but it did have an effect on the agenda of the DUL. Dancy's ability to find positions even for college educated blacks was drastically curtailed. As of January 1933, forty thousand families in Detroit were on relief and well over thirty percent were black families. Unable to provide employment, Dancy, together with other members of the Detroit Community Fund, organized a program called, "Community Program for Cultural Expression When There is Drastic Extension of Leisure Time." The focus of this program was to keep unemployed people busy with "cultural affairs." This can be interpreted as a Washingtonian "cultural uplift" program or as a throwback to a Hull House approach toward immigrant uplift. Under the circumstances there appeared to be little else Dancy and the DUL could do.²⁰ Nevertheless, Dancy remained optimistic; he did not view the disproportionate unemployment of blacks as a result of intensifying racism.

The inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) took place on March 4, 1933, and about this time Dancy began to realize the full austerity of the Depression and the unlikelihood that it would soon end. The DUL was going broke, with all of its funds tied up in banks which had been closed the previous month by the Governor of Michigan. The same was true of the Detroit Community Fund and the Childrens' Fund (community organizations that helped to finance DUL programs). According to Dancy "...the banks have all my possessions...in the language of the street we are in a hell of a fix."²¹ Dancy referred to the closing of the banks in a

negative, anti-New Deal tone. This probably reflected Dancy's conservatism and Republican allegiance rather than resentment of the bank closings, since the banks of Michigan were closed before President Roosevelt's "Bank Holiday." This shortage of funds forced Dancy to begin laying off case workers and others employed by the DUL. He anguished over this, but the situation was out of his control.²²

After FDR took office the orientation of the National Urban League began to change. From the very beginning the New Deal created new opportunities for blacks. To take advantage of such opportunities, however, the black community had to be organized and vigilant. During the new President's first month in office, T. Arnold Hill wrote to Dancy concerning the new beer legislation. Now that prohibition was over, Hill was afraid that blacks would not be hired or rehired at breweries that were reopening. Blacks needed every job they could find and could not allow a new industry to open without black participation. Dancy's attitude differed from Hill's; he replied that Detroit breweries were not hiring blacks, but this was because they were only rehiring experienced men--not because of racial discrimination.²³

Hill's more aggressive position was indicative of the change in NUL policy. The national office thought it was necessary to begin to lobby the federal government on behalf of the black community. The NUL was receiving reports of racial discrimination in employment and relief nationwide. As a result, Eugene Kinckle Jones (Executive Secretary of the NUL) wrote to Dancy and asked him to organize ten or more prominent people in Detroit and have them call or telegraph the new Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, to urge her to protect the welfare of black workers.²⁴

The Depression quickly dried up the National Urban League's traditional sources of funding and support, and it could no longer depend on private philanthropy to the extent it once had. However, the federal government and the New Deal loomed as potential sources of support, which would perhaps respond benevolently if the plight of the black community was made known to FDR's administration.²⁵

The National Recovery Administration (NRA) was one of the major agencies of the New Deal prior to 1935. Its purpose was to repair the damage done by the Depression to America's industrial sector. Two of its central methods were to control industrial production and to establish a code of fair practices among industries crucial to the national economy.²⁶ The majority of black leaders responded negatively to the NRA since they blamed the NRA for large displacements of black industrial workers. The NRA codes never covered most black workers, who were either domestics or unskilled laborers, and in the South many NRA provisions allowed lower wage minimums for black workers than for white workers. In the

industrial North, where employers were required to pay the same wage to workers regardless of race, blacks lost their jobs in large numbers. Employers preferred to replace black workers with white workers or machines rather than pay them an equal wage. Thus, the NRA had the effect of sparking discrimination rather than reducing it. Black job displacements induced indirectly by NRA codes became so widespread that black leaders began to refer to the NRA as the "Negro Removal Act."²⁷ It seemed at this point that blacks could place no faith in New Deal programs. Nevertheless, the NUL resolved to continue its lobbying efforts and to struggle against discrimination--especially in the NRA. In August of 1933 the Urban League established Emergency Advisory Councils for Negro Workers (EAC) whose purpose was to investigate claims of discrimination and to provide information to black workers on NRA programs. To this effect T. Arnold Hill stated clearly:

The Urban League is determined that the Negro shall receive his rights as a citizen in the administration of the plans for national recovery. As a matter of fact, there can be no national recovery if the twelve million Negroes are excluded from the benefits which the Administration hopes to obtain by the extra-ordinary measures passed recently by the Congress.²⁸

According to Hill, the EAC would have branches at the national, state and local levels which would cooperate in the effort to weed out discrimination in the NRA. When the FDR administration was made aware of the gross discrimination and job displacement going on under NRA auspices, NRA officials proposed as a possible solution to establish lower wage codes for black workers as was already the case in parts of the South. Blacks could do without this kind of "job protection", and Hill attacked the proposal vehemently. He asserted that if blacks were paid starvation wages, it would depress the wages of all workers. In anger, Hill proclaimed, "...it is better that Negro workers insist upon wages equal to those paid whites, even if it means their ultimate discharge, than to accept smaller wages and thereby perpetuate the class distinctions that now exist...Are we to have a New Deal for whites and an Old Deal for Negroes?"²⁹ Hill's position, which was militant and uncompromising, indicated a change in the attitude of the NUL. Not only was the Urban League orienting itself toward the federal government, but it was doing so in an aggressive manner.

Leuchtenburg indicates in his study that by 1934 the NRA was widely criticized and that black leaders were among its harshest critics. Surprisingly Dancy's criticism was relatively mild. Dancy believed that

the programs of the NRA were fundamentally sound, even though they did nothing to prevent racial discrimination. Even in Detroit, when the NRA codes established minimum wages, blacks were fired in large numbers and replaced by whites. This was due to the racism of individual employers, according to Dancy, and the government agents of the NRA were not to be blamed for it. Dancy followed the lead of T. Arnold Hill and the NUL and criticized discrimination where he found it. His tone, however, was less severe and he was generally complimentary of the Roosevelt administration as a whole. In fact, Dancy made a point of saying that he was pleased with what he considered to be the Roosevelt administration's stand against racism. Dancy was not specific, but he was probably referring to FDR's denouncement of lynching and his support (although hesitant and merely verbal) of the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill. In spite of his compliments, Dancy was careful to make clear that he was not endorsing the Democratic Party.³⁰

The Public Works Administration (PWA), organized in 1933 and provided for legislatively by the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), had a different record with regard to blacks. The PWA was part of the Department of the Interior under the leadership of Harold Ickes. The official purpose of the PWA was to prime the pump of the national economy through capital expenditure. This was to be done by large scale public works projects of a wide variety. President Roosevelt's initial reaction to this plan was negative, and he had to be convinced (by advisors such as Harry Hopkins) of its validity and necessity. Ickes was a cautious, though zealous, reformer and the massive building projects of the PWA were carried out far too slowly to do much toward stimulating the economy. This slowness was due in part to Ickes' meticulous efforts to prevent waste and corruption within the PWA. Like Hopkins, Ickes was particularly sensitive to the problems of blacks and diligently worked to prevent racial discrimination in the PWA. Ickes' efforts were not totally successful, but the PWA under his direction did more to eliminate federal indifference to discrimination than anything since Reconstruction.³¹

Ickes insisted that the number of blacks hired by PWA projects reflect their percentage in the population. PWA policy also provided that blacks be hired as skilled as well as unskilled laborers. Officials in the South largely ignored PWA directives with regard to race. However, northern urban areas like Detroit and Cincinnati followed Ickes' demands closely. The PWA built a large number of low cost public housing projects; and not only were black workers involved in their construction, but they also occupied a third of all such housing units. This housing provided homes for many middle class blacks as well as the very poor, and in fact, the rental fees paid by blacks were less than those of whites. In cities like Detroit, these housing projects had the effect of increasing residential

segregation, but this apparently was not a central concern of black leaders at this time. Some blacks were hired as skilled workers by the PWA, but the majority of PWA unskilled workers were blacks. The concern of black leaders, however, was that blacks were being hired by the PWA rather than displaced.³²

For years President Roosevelt had dreamed of a nationwide conservation program that would beautify and restore the countryside while employing young men and giving them the benefits of military discipline. This dream was actualized in the formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Young men employed by the CCC were paid a small wage in addition to room and board, lived in work camps, and received military discipline as part of their job. Roosevelt believed that military regimentation was good for their character and made sure it was included in the program. The CCC was involved in soil and wildlife conservation and planted more trees than any other organization in the nation's history, public or private.³³ There was little contact between the CCC and the DUL, and Dancy had little to say concerning it. The only evidence of interest in the CCC on Dancy's part involved a couple of letters from individuals requesting Dancy's help in gaining admittance to the local camp outside Detroit.

The NUL office claimed that blacks were not given an equal opportunity to participate in the CCC program and were often denied acceptance into the camps in order to allow more places for whites. This kind of discrimination was particularly acute in the South. In October of 1933, T. Arnold Hill released a memo to all Urban League locals suggesting that all branch directors write to Frank Pearson (director of the U.S. Employment Service) to ensure the fair treatment of blacks by the CCC. Furthermore, Hill stated that local branches should make sure that black applicants to the CCC understood the proper application procedures, and that local Urban Leagues should also lobby with their local relief organizations to protect black applicants against discrimination.³⁴

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) provided a variety of relief programs for those in need. These programs ranged from direct relief, or "the dole," as it was sometimes called, to work relief and relief for transients. Once again the NUL was worried about discrimination, and with good reason. In the nation as a whole, blacks were discriminated against in relief programs, especially in the South, and particularly in work relief programs. Dancy had contact with New Deal relief agencies in several noteworthy ways. In November 1933 the FERA allotted over \$472,000 to twenty-four states in order to carry out relief programs for transients, which ran until FERA's funds began to dry up. Dancy made an attempt to secure funding through the FERA for the DUL transient program. The sources are unclear however, on whether he

received the funding or not. In a similar manner, Dancy sought funding from the FERA for an adult education program. The federal guidelines, however, only provided such funding for rural areas or for adults who could not read or write English.³⁵ When the entire public school system of Detroit was about to collapse, Dancy became involved in the effort to secure funding for the school system and organized a small self-improvement program for adults and high school drop-outs that received funding through the FERA. This also allowed Dancy to provide jobs for a few unemployed black school teachers.³⁶

In February of 1934 Forrester B. Washington was appointed director of Negro Work for the FERA and another relief agency, the Civil Works Administration (CWA). This did not result in increased funding for the DUL, but perhaps having a former director of the DUL as an official of a major relief agency did contribute to keeping discrimination in regard to relief at a low level in Detroit. In reality, Washington's influence may not have been needed. Dancy maintained throughout the Depression that there was little or no discrimination against Detroit blacks in direct relief. In fact, by the spring of 1934, some white leaders in the Detroit area were suggesting that blacks be returned to the South to take pressure off the relief rolls in Michigan, which indicates that blacks in Detroit may have been receiving more than their share of the dole.³⁷

By April of 1934 employment in Detroit had increased 134 percent over its lowest point, but blacks still comprised twenty eight percent of those on direct relief. This situation prompted Dancy to make the famous statement, "...The Negro is the last to be hired and the first to be fired."³⁸ Dancy may not have been the first to use this phrase, but he claimed credit for popularizing it. Before 1935 blacks in Detroit generally did not benefit from work relief programs. The FERA provided funding to states for the establishment of work relief programs, and it was at the state or county level where decisions were made regarding blacks. For a brief period in the winter of 1933 and the early spring of 1934, millions of people were employed directly by the federal government in work relief projects conducted by the Civil Works Administration (CWA). The CWA lasted only a few months, but tended to hire more blacks than previous work relief programs. In the spring of 1934 CWA projects in the Detroit area were turned back over to the CERA (the county branch of the FERA), which not only continued to employ blacks but increased their number. The CERA employed over twenty thousand people, approximately twenty-five percent of whom were black. The CWA was responsible for decreasing racial discrimination in work relief in the Detroit area, albeit in a somewhat incidental manner.³⁹

Before the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the NUL was harsh in its criticism of New Deal relief programs. In an

article published in *Opportunity*, T. Arnold Hill stated that due to the policies of the work relief programs the employment opportunities they offered for black professionals were indeed distressing. According to Hill, it was practically impossible for black professionals to find employment in the private sector and rarely were they employed by the works division of the FERA or by the CWA. A few whites were employed as professionals by these agencies, but even they were often employed outside their fields. New federal guidelines had just been released, but Hill feared they would do nothing to alter the situation. The new guidelines stated that municipal and state governments must provide for "unemployables." Since black teachers, engineers, architects and so forth were not likely to be placed in their fields, Hill suspected that racists would simply categorize them as "unemployable" and place them on the dole.⁴⁰ This prospect outraged Hill and he expected the worst.

The new agency proposed by FDR in January of 1935 became known as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Harry Hopkins was placed in charge of this agency, whose job it was to employ as many people as possible; the aim was not to prime the pump but simply to get people off the dole. Most importantly, Hopkins was a crusader against racial discrimination. Divisions of the WPA such as the Federal Writers Project and the Federal Theatre Project created positions and outlets for many black professionals. Some WPA jobs consisted of "make work" projects, but others provided vital services and cultural enhancement to the community.⁴¹

Dancy made few comments regarding work relief agencies and programs. As mentioned earlier, he did discuss relief in general, saying that blacks in Detroit were not discriminated against in direct relief but that there was discrimination in hiring. Dancy's silence in this regard is indeed strange. According to Harvard Sitkoff, the WPA was a "godsend" for blacks. Nationwide, many thousands of blacks were employed by the WPA in all manner of positions and the WPA was the third largest employer of blacks after domestic service and agriculture. Therefore, one would expect Dancy to commend the WPA for its work in the Detroit area or at least to discuss it. The only clear references to the WPA in Detroit that are found in the DUL papers are job requests funneled through Dancy. For example, a Mr. Cathcart wrote to Dancy on February 4, 1936, seeking a position in social work and asking for Dancy's assistance. Dancy replied that all such inquiries should be sent directly to the WPA rather than to him. Furthermore, he indicated that the odds on obtaining such a position were extremely poor.⁴²

The WPA and the PWA were both highly significant to the black community, so much so that one would expect to find a wealth of material concerning them in the DUL papers. There is little comment by Dancy on

these agencies either praising or criticising them. Perhaps Dancy believed that the PWA and WPA had been praised thoroughly enough by others and he had no criticism worth mentioning. This still does not explain the conspicuous absence of data on the DUL and its relationship with the PWA and WPA in Detroit, and may actually be quite significant in itself.⁴³

The New Deal brought about a drastic change in the status of organized labor in America. The relationship between black workers and organized labor had always been strained at best. Many unions were blatantly racist and often the only industrial work that black workers could get was as strikebreakers. The National Urban League was painfully aware of this fact, and a black labor program that it put forth in 1934 contained the following statement:

For sixty-eight years the Negro worker has been appealing to American labor for a "new deal" in its treatment of black labor...these efforts have met either with limited half-hearted success or with dismal failure; the only exceptions being in those fields where Negro workers... banded together to demand the rights and to exercise the powers that were theirs...⁴⁴

Neither Dancy nor the national office of the Urban League were under any delusions concerning blacks and organized labor. In fact, Dancy went so far as to claim that black workers in Detroit received better treatment from management than from the unions. Dancy pointed out that the Ford Rouge plant had employed blacks for years (the only auto plant to do so), and by so doing had done more to combat racist stereotypes (black workers as too inefficient and lazy for industrial work) and to promote the cause of black workers than any union.⁴⁵ The Ford Rouge plant was of course the exception and not the rule. In other parts of the country, especially in the South, if black workers were hired by industrial firms at all, they were often paid lower wages than white workers. In such cases, if black workers demanded equal pay for equal work or started to discuss organizing a union of their own, management would threaten to fire them if they did not remain complacent.⁴⁶

Black workers suffered from abuse by both management and organized labor. Management often used black workers to depress wages and to break strikes of white workers. Yet when black workers sought to join white workers in a common cause, they were rebuffed as well. In 1934 and 1935 labor legislation was proposed that would completely change the nature of labor-management relations. The NUL leadership was afraid that

if unions gained new power as a result of the pending legislation, they would use that power to entirely exclude blacks from the work place.

T. Arnold Hill was particularly concerned with the proposed Wagner "Labor Disputes Act" of 1934. According to Hill this bill, if passed, would lay the basis for the development of closed shop industries.⁴⁷ This could spell disaster for the black worker. Since blacks were excluded from many unions they could only work as strike-breakers in an organized shop, and under the proposed legislation strikebreakers had no rights. The NUL launched a campaign to add an anti-discrimination clause as an amendment to the bill. Dancy and other directors of Urban League locals joined in this national lobbying effort. The Urban League worked with the NAACP in fighting for an amendment to this Wagner bill that would deny the benefits of the legislation to any union that practiced racial discrimination. Elmer Carter was sent to Washington as the Urban Leagues' main lobbyist. T. Arnold Hill along with others prepared a statement for the Senate Committee on Labor and Education which summarized the objections of the black leadership to the unamended bill. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was the major force against the insertion of an anti-discrimination clause. The original bill as drafted by Senator Wagner did contain a clause which outlawed closed shops if restrictions were placed on the membership of a given union. It was the AFL that forced Wagner to eliminate this clause from the bill.

In addition to black leaders, conservatives opposed the "Labor Disputes Act" and it failed to pass. However, the struggle continued and the AFL eventually won the battle. White labor consolidated its support and in 1935 the National Labor Relations Act passed and was signed by FDR without the proposed Urban League--NAACP amendment.⁴⁸ The AFL refused to budge and black organizations simply did not have the finances or the political clout to defeat such a powerful lobby. The result of the Wagner Act, true to black fears, was that black workers were closed out of certain industries for years to come.

Dancy and the DUL were also involved in other lobbying efforts concerning labor legislation. Beginning in 1933 a national drive in support of minimum wage legislation was conducted by the American Association of Social Workers (of which Dancy was a member). The NUL became involved in this drive, and on the local level Dancy supported the Michigan "Minimum Wage Bill for Women and Minors." However, there is no hard evidence suggesting what Dancy actually did to lobby for the bill. By June of 1934 the NUL was involved in organizing support for the Wagner-Lewis bill for state unemployment insurance.⁴⁹ The information in the DUL papers concerning labor legislation is extremely thin. The Fair Labor Standards Act was not passed until June of 1938, and Urban League lobbying efforts were not especially significant in its

passage. As Sitkoff argues in his study, blacks apparently could not organize effectively, gather the support of powerful legislators, or bring to bear enough resources to make a major impact on the New Deal. Blacks may have benefited from some of the labor legislation of the New Deal, but they were not responsible for bringing it about.⁵⁰

Dancy was a conservative man in many respects and was not particularly fond of organized labor. In fact, although Dancy generally supported the policies of the NUL, there is little evidence of direct lobbying by Dancy in support of labor legislation, even though he received numerous requests from the NUL and other sources to do so. This does not mean that Dancy was anti-labor or even anti-union. In a 1934 statement Dancy indicated that he saw the basic interests of organized labor and black workers as one and the same. He maintained, however, that it was the responsibility of unions to recognize this fact and change their policies accordingly. Dancy proclaimed, "Organized labor has had a golden opportunity presented it to work for all workers but has neglected to take advantage of it, but organized labor will learn in due time that it cannot hope to be successful in its demands until it fights the battles of all laborers instead of the few."⁵¹

The realities of the Depression and the New Deal affected the political orientation of the black community of Detroit and, to a certain extent, Dancy and the DUL as well. According to Professor Sidney Fine in his study, *Frank Murphy and Detroit Years*, the political participation of blacks in Detroit in the 1930s was relatively low, but to the extent that they did participate, they were largely Republicans.⁵² But a gradual swing of the black community from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party took place during the New Deal era. With the coming of the New Deal, far more assistance was given to the black community by the Democratic Party than by the Republican Party. Dancy was still closely tied to the Republicans as late as 1936. There was nevertheless an apparent tension in Dancy's thought. In June of 1936, Dancy was asked to serve on the Republican campaign committee, but no reply to this request is in the DUL papers.⁵³

Ralph B. Stewart, a black physician, a member of the National Allied Republican council, and apparently an old friend of Dancy's, wrote to Dancy from Washington D.C. on July 22, 1936, asking for Dancy's explanation of the apparent shift of black support in Michigan away from the Republican Party and toward the Democrats and the New Deal. Stewart wanted to know if this political shift was as profound as it seemed, and if so, what could be done to stop it.⁵⁴ Dancy replied that blacks had received political jobs from the Democrats that Republicans would never have offered them. According to Dancy, blacks received more recognition and had more access to inner party circles with the Democrats than the

Republicans allowed. Furthermore, the New Deal had generally been beneficial to blacks in Detroit, and in fact, there was less discrimination and segregation in Detroit than in Washington D.C. On top of all this, Frank Murphy's (the mayor of Detroit) popularity in the black community was second only to that of Senator James Couzens. Dancy maintained that all of these factors combined explained why blacks were leaving the Republican Party in Michigan. Dancy pleaded with Stewart to keep his remarks confidential, "--for he [Dancy] is only political behind closed doors."⁵⁵ Dancy was quite aware that the Democrats were courting the black vote. In his view, this was not necessarily a bad trade off, at least in the case of Detroit.

As early as 1932, the National Urban League, and particularly T. Arnold Hill, recognized that political action on the part of blacks was necessary if the New Deal was to address black concerns. Along with this came a realization that Government rather than individual businessmen would be the source of assistance to blacks. Hill, as director of Industrial Relations and later as acting Executive Secretary of the NUL, took a more DuBoisian approach to black problems than the Urban League had done previously. It was DuBois' contention that economic interests could not be secured without political power. Hill clearly saw that political action, in the form of voting, lobbying, agitation and organization was vital if black interest in the New Deal was to be protected. This approach seems to have filtered down to Dancy and the DUL, since his programs did not differ substantially from those proposed by the national office. Generally, it appears that most action concerning the New Deal was initiated in the national office. Dancy carried out the directives of the national office as they pertained to Detroit.

On the issue of partisan politics, both Dancy and the NUL office were affected by the New Deal. The NUL office was critical of the New Deal until 1935. From that point on, especially with the work of the PWA and the WPA, the Urban League and black leadership in general could find little fault. There was far from enough aid, but there seemed to be far less racism involved in how that aid was administered than blacks had come to expect. This change in attitude toward the New Deal was partly responsible for drawing the Urban League toward the Democratic Party. The political shift in the Urban League is best understood as a reflection of a process taking place in the black community as a whole.

In Dancy's case, this move toward the Democrats involved a fair amount of mental turmoil. Dancy was at heart a conservative and appears to have been a committed Republican. The economic hardships of the Depression forced Dancy and the Urban League as a whole to look increasingly toward Government rather than to private business for support. This meant an expanding political orientation and a gradual shift

away from Washingtonian tactics and toward a more DuBoisian approach. Economic gains for the black community could not be won nor protected without political action by blacks themselves. Dancy found little to criticize in the Roosevelt administration and found himself a willing (although uncomfortable) part of the black community's tilt toward the Democratic Party.

NOTES

¹ Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal For Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue Volume I: The Depression Decade* (New York, 1978), 35.

² Nancy Weiss, *The National Urban League 1919-1940* (New York, 1974), 29-46; 46-48.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵ Weiss, *Urban League*, 65; also Bradley H. Pollock, "The Thought of W.E.B. DuBois and the Dilemma of the Racial Dialectic" (unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Southern Louisiana, May, 1980), 15.

⁶ Weiss, *Urban League*, 64-68.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Arvarh E. Strickland, *History of the Chicago Urban League* (Urbana, Illinois, 1966), 21.

⁹ Report by John C. Dancy on the history of the DUL and an autobiographical brief. 2-27 March 1930, file [1-30] and 1933, Detroit Urban League Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Hereafter cited as DUL Papers.

¹⁰ Letter from John C. Dancy to Glen Carlson, October-December 1929, file [1-29], Directors' General file, DUL Papers.

¹¹ Sitkoff, *Deal for Blacks*, 170.

¹² Special Bulletin from H.N. Robinson, Director of the Chicago Urban League to all UL branches, 25 November 1929, file [1-29], DUL Papers.

¹³ Release from the office of T. Arnold Hill, "Efforts to Displace Negroes Continue," 6 February 1932; also a report entitled, "How The Crisis Hit Auto Workers," February 1932, file [2-18], Directors' General File, DUL Papers.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter from Dancy to Walter White, 9 March 1932, file [2-19], DUL Papers.

¹⁶ Letter from Dancy to Dr. Olson of the University of Michigan Hospital, 21 November 1929, file [1-29], DUL Papers.

¹⁷ Letter from Dancy to Walter White, 9 March 1932, file [2-19], DUL Papers.

¹⁸ John C. Dancy, *Sand Against The Wind*. (Detroit, Michigan, 1966). This is the general tone of the whole autobiography and is reflected in the nature of Dancy's own life.

¹⁹ Letter from Chester M. Calver to John C. Dancy, 1 March 1933, file [2-27], DUL Papers.

²⁰ Letter from John Dancy to Forrester B. Washington, January 1933, file [2-25], DUL Papers.

²¹ Letter from John Dancy to Eugene Kinckle Jones of the National Urban League, 2 March 1933, file [2-27], DUL Papers.

²² *Ibid.*, Also Letter from John C. Dancy to Mrs. Lois Weldon, 1 March 1933, file [2-27], DUL Papers.

²³ Letter to Dancy from T. Arnold Hill, 24 March 1933, file [2-27], DUL Papers.

²⁴ Release by T. Arnold Hill from the NUL office to all Urban League branches, 12 August 1933, Directors' General File, file [2-33], DUL Papers.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940* (New York, 1963), 64-71.

²⁷ Sitkoff, *Deal For Blacks*, 54-56.

²⁸ Release by T. Arnold Hill from the NUL office to all Urban League branches, 12 August 1933, Directors' General File, file [2-33], DUL Papers.

²⁹ Immediate release from the office of T. Arnold Hill to all Urban League branches, 2 September 1933, Directors' General File, file [2-33], DUL Papers.

³⁰ Speech by John C. Dancy, "The Negro in the Recovery Program," July 1933, Directors' General File, file [3-8], DUL Papers.

³¹ Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 52-70; Sitkoff, *Deal For Blacks*, 67-69.

³² Ibid.

³³ Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 174. And Paul K. Conkin, *FDR and the Origin of the Welfare State* (New York, 1967), 47.

³⁴ Memo from the NUL office to all Urban League branches, 14 October 1933, Directors' General File, file [2-34], DUL Papers.

³⁵ Immediate release from the NUL office to all Urban League branches, November 1933, Directors' General File, file [2-35] DUL Papers. Note: Dancy must have received funding somewhere because he did carry out a transient program.

³⁶ Letter to Dancy from the Detroit Board of Ed., 5 December 1933, Directors' General File, file [2-36], DUL Papers.

³⁷ Dancy, "The Negro on the Recovery Program," 3.

³⁸ Ibid. Note: Dancy infers that he coined this phrase. To this author's knowledge this is incorrect and is an exaggeration on Dancy's part or perhaps just unclear wording.

³⁹ From Dancy's report on black employment in Detroit for June 1934, June 1934, Directors' General File, file [3-8], DUL Papers, 2.

⁴⁰ T. Arnold Hill, "Uncle Sam's Payroll," *Opportunity*, February 1935, 54.

⁴¹ Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 124-130.

⁴² Sitkoff, *Deal for Blacks*, 70. And a letter from Dancy to a Mr. Cathcart, 4 February 1936, Directors' General File, file [3-22], DUL Papers.

⁴³ There are next to no comments by Dancy concerning the PWA and WPA in the DUL Papers or in *Sand Against the Wind*. If such material exists, it must be in sources of which this author is not aware.

⁴⁴ From a National Urban League Labor Program Document, 1934, Directors' General File, file [3-6], DUL Papers.

⁴⁵ Dancy, "The Negro in the Recovery Program," 4.

⁴⁶ A note of intimidation from Scripto Manufacturing Co. to its black employees, 2 Sept. 1933, Directors' General File, file [2-33] DUL Papers, 2.

⁴⁷ Letter from T. Arnold Hill to John C. Dancy, April 1934, Directors' General File, file [3-5], DUL Papers.

⁴⁸ Sitkoff, *Deal for Blacks*, 52.

⁴⁹ Letter from the chairman of the Urban League Social Legislation Committee to Dancy, June 1934, Directors' General File, file [3-7], DUL Papers.

⁵⁰ Sitkoff, *Deal for Blacks*. The central thesis Sitkoff argues throughout his book is that the black community did not have enough organized political or

economic power to influence the New Deal to its benefit. However, blacks did benefit from the New Deal, psychologically as well as materially.

⁵¹ Speech by Dancy, "The Negro in the Recovery Program," July 1933, Director's General File, file [3-8], DUL Papers.

⁵² Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: the Detroit Years* (Ann Arbor, 1975), 99-100, 115, 180, 183-184.

⁵³ Letter from Dr. Sinclair Perry to John C. Dancy, 1 June 1936, Directors' General File, file [3-26], DUL Papers.

⁵⁴ Letter from Ralph B. Stewart to John C. Dancy, 22 July 1936, Directors' General File, file [3-27], DUL Papers.

⁵⁵ Letter from John C. Dancy to Ralph B. Stewart, 28 July 1936, Directors' General File, file [3-27], DUL Papers.