

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

That Student-Initiated Course in Socialism: Reflections on “Towards a Socialist America” Forty-Six Years Later

by Eric Arnesen



SOLIDARITY FOREVER BY ROGER PEETVIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

When I arrived at Wesleyan University in the Fall of 1976, socialism was not a subject on my mind. My exposure to the concept was limited to twelve novels by Upton Sinclair – the *World's End* series featuring Lanny Budd, a socialist-turned-FDR supporter-turned secret agent, whose life story became a vehicle for Sinclair's sometimes melodramatic (but always interesting) history of the world from the Great War to the early Cold War. The first few were gifts from a theater teacher who directed a number of productions in which I had acted, but I searched out the rest and read them in my high school years. I arrived at college as a liberal coming from a family of liberals. My first vote in a presidential primary shortly before stepping onto campus was for California governor Jerry Brown; I recall cheering when Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford that November. When I arrived on campus, I had no predetermined career path or preference of study, though I leaned toward theater and music. Serendipitously, Wesleyan's administration had assigned me an academic advisor, Vera Schwarcz, in the History Department. Before selecting classes, we met to discuss a possible course of study. It was then, in my first week of college – I think I'm recalling this correctly – that Vera recommended a student-run tutorial, "Towards a Socialist America." I readily agreed and enrolled in the class that Fall, the second time the course had been offered. "What a way to begin a college career!" one anonymous student – it was me, actually -- declared in an article about the course in a 1978 *Radical Teacher* article about the course authored by Stephen Ward, David Ebb, Stephen Rome, and me. It is that article and its subject that I reflect upon in the paragraphs that follow.

My political and intellectual world changed dramatically as a result of the class. I recall intense weekly discussions, a variety of perspectives on the table. By the semester's end, I told my fellow students that I hadn't yet been fully convinced by what we had read to declare a new political allegiance. ("They smiled," I noted in the article). But I set out to learn more. In the Spring, I took Vera's Maoism and the Chinese Revolution; the following fall I enrolled in a team-taught course on Marx, Lenin, and Mao with Professors Schwarcz, Philip Pomper, and Oliver Holmes. Somewhere along the line I took English professor Dick Ohmann's "Bread and Circuses" lecture class – or did I just serve as a teaching assistant? I participated in a small student-run tutorial on politics and education; took multiple seminars in Latin American history with a Marxist sociologist... and I'm sure there were other classes taught by progressive instructors that I can't remember. ("My college course load looks like I'm majoring in radical studies," I wrote as one of the four TSA alumni quoted at the beginning of the article). Along the way I wrote papers on Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*; the economic case against nuclear power generation; Marcuse's revision of Freud; the state, the individual, and freedom in Hegel and Marx; the morality of thought reform in the Chinese revolution; the aborted Chilean road to socialism; activism and determination in the thought of Li Ta-Chao, an early 20th century Chinese Marxist; and political repression in American history. (I only recall these topics because I just found a notebook containing all of them in a storage container in a crawl space in my basement.) My interest in theater diminished significantly, though I did at some point act in an adaptation of Studs

Terkel's *Working* directed by fellow student Paul Hammer. I no longer studied music but did perform radical songs at coffee houses and at various demonstrations. In the semester following my TSA experience I joined the campus chapter of the Clamshell Alliance. Toward the end of the Spring 1977 semester, I participated in a mass protest against the construction of the nuclear power plant in Seabrook, New Hampshire, an act of civil disobedience that put 1,414 people – including a good number of Wesleyan undergrads – in jail (which, in this instance, was a National Guard armory) for up to two weeks. I missed my final exams but, thankfully, Wesleyan being Wesleyan, we were granted academic amnesty and didn't have to make them up. In my remaining time in college, there were more demonstrations, take back the night marches, South African divestment occupations of administration buildings, and many semesters of writing for *Hermes*, the campus's radical newspaper. In retrospect, it's safe to say that my encounter with my freshman advisor set me on a path rather different than the one that I anticipated or that my parents appreciated.

Looking back at the original syllabus for the Spring 1976 class and the co-authored article on the course from *Radical Teacher* in 1978 (which, I must confess, I have no recollection of writing, though I recognize some of my phrases even today), I'm struck by the expansiveness of the required readings. I'm pretty sure that I first encountered the text of *The Communist Manifesto* in the class; I certainly hadn't encountered Lenin's *State and Revolution* before that semester. I have no idea how we managed to discuss Ernest Mandel's *Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory* or what I made of Marx's pamphlet, "Wage Labor and Capital." I still have my copy of Harry Braverman's 1974 *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, a classic which helped me pass a French translation exam in grad school in the early 1980s. (I selected a cognate-filled passage from the French edition of Braverman and managed, barely, to translate it back into the original English). I also retain my copies of Sennett and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Terkel's *Working*, and James Weinstein's *Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics*. At some point over the past four or so decades my copy of Murray Bookchin's *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* disappeared. I also recall reading excerpts from Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* and other early second-wave feminist works, though these don't appear either on the original syllabus or in the *Radical Teacher* article; perhaps I read them in a different class.

What did those of us under the age of 20 and the facilitators who must have been either 20 or 21 make of Marx, Lenin, Mandel, and the rest? At the distance of a half century, I have no idea. But back in 1978, my colleagues and I put it this way with regard to the "basic tools" provided in the "brief introduction to Marxist economics and the structure of modern capitalism": The readings introduced "such fundamental terminology and concepts as 'proletarian,' 'bourgeoisie,' 'surplus,' 'monopoly,' and the 'labor theory of value,' allowing us to discuss "the historical impact of changing modes of production on the relations of production." (Re-reading these words today, would I be wrong to think that ChatGPT could put it better?). Our 1978 article noted that the "application of Marxist tools of

analysis" was "probably the most enlightening part of the course for some students" but also "proved to be the most challenging to teach and to learn." That section of the course remained "the most unyielding and least satisfying." That's not surprising. My sense is that we picked up the jargon; muddled our way through theoretical texts without much guidance (or actual understanding), and channeled a post-New Left sensibility about capitalism's oppressiveness. Beyond that, I don't think Ernest Mandel sank in very deeply. (An aside: I did take a summer class at Boston University in 1979 that was team taught by Mandel and Andre Gunder Frank; I recall little but I did get an "A" on my fuzzy theoretically final paper – or at least that's the way I remember it. I suspect that neither of the two instructors bothered to read it).

In retrospect, TSA equipped us less with a set of analytical tools -- and certainly not with tools that most of us could coherently deploy on paper or in practice -- than with a general left critique of American society, a vocabulary to describe (or misdescribe) a host of issues, and a sense that we were part of a longer history of radical struggle that had changed and could still change the world. "Although some of the readings may intimidate us," our article conceded, "the process tends to instill solidarity and a feeling of unity that is a very real and exciting aspect of the course." And what we didn't nail down in the tutorial we might pick up from the various left-of-center faculty to further our understanding.

Then there was a steady stream of progressive speakers who graced the campus. TSA organizers might have been responsible for bringing Michael Harrington-- we had read chapters of his *Socialism* in the tutorial -- to Wesleyan. I recall lectures by Herbert Marcuse, Dick Gregory, and Kwame Touré (Stokely Carmichael, whose memorable words have stuck with me over the decades: "Capitalism is a stupid system. It is a wicked system. It is an evil system," I think he declared before a packed room of enthusiastic undergrads), among others. For many of us, our education took place both in and beyond the classroom.

After more than thirty years of university teaching and a brief stint in academic administration, I find it hard to imagine a course like TSA being offered in most institutions of higher education today. To the best of my knowledge, there are no "student run tutorials" allowed at my university, and if they exist, they wouldn't be actual courses-on-the-books for credit. Besides, in this day and age, many concerned-about-their-children's-job-prospects parents would be none too happy to pay good (i.e., exorbitant) tuition money for credits in a class taught by ... other students. More problematic today, though, is TSA's stated purpose: the course was, our 1978 article explained, "originally intended as an advocacy course for people who felt themselves to be on the political Left and were seeking creative solutions to the problems of advanced capitalism in the U.S." A "looser approach" was adopted shortly thereafter to "accommodate" students' "varying expectations." In both its harder and softer variants, the course assumed an "explicitly anti-capitalist stance" and its very title – "Towards a Socialist America" – aimed to explore what life in a USSA (yes, that second "s" is for socialist) would be like and entertained various pathways toward arriving at that very

different America. If such a course remained on the books today, one can picture columnist George Will holding it up as proof positive that the academy has lost its mind (he writes such columns on a regular basis) or Tucker Carlson raging furiously on Fox "News." Even before Governor Ron DeSantis and other red state legislators started banning classes, concepts, and books they find problematic; even before the *1619 Project* became a flashpoint for culture warriors; even before "woke" became a slur promiscuously employed by a turbo-charged right – conservatives, at least since the 1980s, were complaining about tenured radicals and their supposedly left-leaning universities. Of course, leftists are hardly alone in bringing their politics (on occasion) into the classroom. I took an introductory economics seminar at the same time I enrolled in TSA, and I can assure you that its pro-capitalist stance-- might one call it advocacy? -- was squarely on display; almost fifty years later, I doubt that the real estate concentration at my current institution's School of Business is a hotbed of pro-rent control or multi-family housing construction sentiment. (I actually don't know about that last point... but I bet I've got that right). Politics... kinda hard to avoid 'em.

Then there are the academic bureaucracy and the external accreditation agencies. Could a TSA-like course pass muster at my own institution these days? First, a multidisciplinary faculty committee in the college of arts and sciences would undoubtedly look askance at both the explicit politics and the instructional model. (Upon reflection, a cost-conscious Dean's Office might, for a moment, entertain the financial benefits from collecting tuition dollars from students without having to pay full-time or even appallingly low-paid adjunct faculty....). But then, the powers-that-be who vet and give final approval to sample course syllabi would insist that we render unto Caesar powers that be and spell out clearly, and with strong verbs (!), the learning objectives. If a TSA syllabus included them, they might read:

By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- Historically critique capitalism "using the tools of macro- and micro-analysis" in the Marxist tradition
- Imagine life in a socialist America and explore pathways to that life;
- Develop "creative solutions to the problems of advanced capitalism in the U.S.";
- Demonstrate how "capitalism reinforces and manipulates" sexism and racism "to rationalize inequality and to prevent the development of working-class unity";
- Apply "hegemony and theories of the state" to grasp the "dialectical relationship between the economic base of capitalism... and the political and ideological superstructure of capitalist society";
- "Account for the lack of broad-based support for revolutionary change in a society so fraught with inequality."

(Lest you wonder, I haven't just invented that quoted language above for effect; our 1978 *Radical Teacher* article used those phrases to convey what TSA sought to accomplish). Econ and political science classes with their own decidedly non-left biases escape scrutiny by accreditors who share their decidedly non-left biases. And courses with noticeable (if vague) left biases toward "social justice" also escape accreditors' scrutiny for other reasons. But TSA and its learning objectives? I see them hitting a proverbial brick wall even in blue states that still recognize the value of the social sciences and humanities; in red states where demonization and censorship have become the law of the land, they would elicit howls of protest and merely confirm the Right's vision of tenured radicals run amok and universities as the last sanctuary of the revolutionary left. In either case, between academic administrators and regional accreditors, a proposal for a TSA-like class would likely be dead on arrival.

And here let me take a position that is at odds with the one I and my colleagues expressed in 1978: That's not a bad thing. Consider TSA's objectives, stated unapologetically in full view. Its originators did not frame the course as an introduction to socialism per se. They accepted "as a given an affirmative answer to the question, 'Do we need socialism in America' and uses this as a point of departure," according to the original syllabus. Although they prepared the tutorial "from a democratic socialist perspective" that approached the "material critically and undogmatically," the tutorial's originators hoped that the class would "lead to some sort of socialist organizing/educational group at Wesleyan." I'm sure in many cases it did. But today, *promoting* leftwing student activism in my classes is not and should not be one of my learning objectives as a university faculty member. If students find the material in my classes useful in their subsequent political activities, great. Indeed, I hope that that some do. If they don't, I am content if they find the material challenging, compelling, or thought-provoking. I know I and many of my progressive colleagues would raise objections if a group of conservative undergraduates proposed a kind of reverse TSA -- say, a tutorial called TACA (Towards an Anticommunist America) or TFMA (Towards a Free-Market America) -- that advanced an overtly and largely unquestioned libertarian or otherwise rightwing political agenda. A course that automatically denigrated every government intervention in the economy from the New Deal through Obamacare and that aspired to serve as a recruiting center for the Federalist Society, Turning Point USA, or some Koch-funded operation? I'd neither trust those students to arrive at credible readings that genuinely reflected a range of critical perspectives nor appreciate their efforts at using a college course as a vehicle to turn back the clock even further on social progress. Ditto for a faculty member attempting to do the same.

I agree with the editors of *Radical Teacher*, who believe that there is ignorance in the U.S. today "about socialism domestically and internationally." I would extend that point to highlight ignorance about the history of almost everything, socialist and other progressive movements included. But addressing the ignorance of history is different from deploying history in the service of a cause. As a historian, I have confidence in my reconstruction of the past,

though I am willing to both entertain alternative understandings and debate my own findings. As a teacher, I have little interest in instructing my students on what the future should look like -- something I would find presumptuous and inappropriate. Even if I were so inclined, I lack confidence in my ability to apply my historical insights to predict or inform the future. Whenever historians offer their "lessons" or apply their knowledge of the past to justify some course of future action, my eyebrows go up. Back in 2007, many of my distinguished progressive colleagues penned a "Historians for Obama" open letter that invoked their knowledge of the past to promote the Democrat's candidacy. "As president," they wrote, "Barack Obama would only begin the process of healing what ails our society and ensuring that the U.S. plays a beneficial role in the world. But we believe he is that rare politician who can stretch the meaning of democracy, who can help revive what William James called 'the civic genius of the people.'" ¹ It didn't exactly work out that way, once again demonstrating that historians who know the past don't necessarily have great insight into the future.

We delve into "radical discontent" in the 1960s through explorations of the New Left, second-wave feminism, and the antiwar movement; we pay considerable attention to the building of a New Right, from its earliest stages in postwar America through the Goldwater campaign and movement building efforts in the 1970s and 1980s.

My reservations about the predictive power of history or the legitimacy of deploying it to further an explicit political agenda don't lead me to downplay a commitment to addressing the ignorance of the past in general or of social movements in particular. Both animate my teaching. In my bread-and-butter lecture class on the "U.S. since 1945," we spend significant amounts of time -- in readings and in lectures -- exploring the civil rights movement of the 1940s as well as its evolution in the 1950s and 1960s. We delve into "radical discontent" in the 1960s through explorations of the New Left, second-wave feminism, and the antiwar movement; we pay considerable attention to the building of a New Right, from its earliest stages in postwar America through the Goldwater campaign and movement building efforts in the 1970s and 1980s. In my research seminars on 20th century African American civil rights, we cover a wide range of activism, both top down and bottom up, from the 1930s through the 1970s. We address Communists' engagement with the "race question," the March on Washington Movement of the early 1940s, struggles to desegregate the military, and the economic dimension of the 1963 March on Washington, as well more "conventional" subjects like the emergence and evolution of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Freedom Rides, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Summer, and the rise of Black Power. Along the way, students encounter a number

of activists who don't always or even usually find their way into high school civil rights coverage: Floria Pickney, Bayard Rustin, Pauli Murray, A. Philip Randolph, and Gloria Richardson, among others. And in my seminar on "Communism and Anticommunism in 20th Century America," we engage the problematic history of the Communist Party -- I'm upfront about my critical perspective² - through readings by orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist scholars, as well as various primary sources. We similarly work our way through the multiple varieties of anticommunism, from the paranoid right to the social democratic left. In my classes I make it clear to my students that while I have a perspective, one informed by decades of research and writing, I don't actually care *what* they think-- that is, what positions they take on the material we tackle - - only that they engage with that material, understand that material, and formulate independent and informed judgments about it.

TSA in the 1970s was a genuinely ambitious course in the many themes it attempted to cover, in the difficulty of its subject matter, and in its goal of forging socialist activists. Almost half a century later, I look back and see the tutorial resembling an introductory class, albeit one that imposed a workload few first-year students would consider reasonable today. Our 1978 *Radical Teacher* essay did note that grades were "scrapped in favor of comments and conversations" and that for those "who do opt for grades, these are arrived at through continuing discussions and criticism." That might still be appealing in 2023, at least for some. The essay also highlighted "our share of absenteeism, uncompleted reading, and pre-emptive monologues and dialogues," problems that could "subvert even the most engaging topics." Even if students did complete all of the reading - and actually managed to understand it - they would gain only a glimpse into the rich and sometimes problematic world of radical scholarship. Take the history of socialism and the American left tradition, for instance. In 1976, there was an older literature that explored the Socialist Party in the early 20th century and the U.S. Communist party from 1919 onward, much of the latter written by staunch anticommunists whose politics ranged from the McCarthyite to the Social Democratic. We didn't read any of that. Rather, we took on a few essays by the polemical but always interesting Christopher Lasch and chapters by the democratic socialist James Weinstein. That was hardly enough to give undergrads a clear sense of the left's American traditions, much less allow them to grapple with its moral and political complexities or apply its lessons to their political work. In a sense, what we got was a New Left Cliff Notes version of that history.

In the decades that followed TSA's early years, the scholarly literature on the American Left, some of it critical but much of it downright adulatory, exploded in quantity. Even the Communists, once the target of "traditionalist" or "orthodox" critics who harped on their subservience to Moscow and rigid party lines, underwent a historiographical reinvention at the hands of New Leftists who went to graduate school and used their new academic skills in an attempt to recover a useable past. (That resurrection of the CP's reputation evinced pushback from those still in the traditionalist camp, whose anticommunist case was

bolstered, to a degree, by the revelations of espionage by a not insubstantial number of party members). I tackle elements of that history in my "Communism and Anticommunism" seminar, with the aim of assisting students in engaging that complicated story as well as the ways different camps of historians have understood and framed the Communists' record. The broader history of the 20th century left - which I don't cover in the seminar but do examine in my research - is a messy one; there is much to admire and much, frankly, to abhor.³ And the "Left" came in countless varieties - the Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Federation, the Communist Party, the Communist Party (Opposition), the Communist League of America, the Socialist Workers Party, the American Workers Party, the Socialist Labor Party, and more (and that only gets us to the 1940s) - each with their distinctive if often related vision of social transformation yet often at each other's throats. Some historians approach their subjects as just that - subjects; others are true believers who want to put their protagonists on a political pedestal and still others are academic fellow travelers who want to highlight the good and downplay the bad in the hope of inspiring a new generation of activists. To understand the Left's history in the 20th century, one must study not only its individuals, associations, and currents but the historians who reconstruct the Left's past as well. And to do justice in the classroom to the history of the Left, students might be reasonably expected to devote an entire semester to the task, and even then they'd just scratch the surface. Given the abundance and complexity of the scholarly literature today, it would be impossible to treat the subject in a week or two, as we did - albeit with a much smaller literature - over four decades ago.

Perhaps one way of thinking about the "Towards a Socialist America" tutorial of 1976 is to see it not as a dated model or prototype for a revised radical class but as a part of the Left's longer history. If the 1960s are remembered as a decade of rebellion, upheaval, and unrest, the 1970s are often recalled in popular lore as the "Me Decade" -- years of private self-absorption, spiritual introspection, and the pursuit of self-fulfillment - or as an era marked by a crisis of democracy and legitimacy, on the one hand, and of stagflation, on the other. The '60s - and all that they signified -- might have ended in much of America, but those of us students living in the dorms or off-campus in Middletown, Connecticut joked that the '60s were alive and well at mid-'70s Wesleyan. TSA was a self-conscious project by those who, I believe, considered themselves as a part of an extended New Left, determined to rekindle and keep the flame alive and learn from the successes and failures of the immediate and more distant past. To do that, its founders created a model of a learning environment, in the words of original participant Jay Kilbourn (who I'm almost certain was my resident hall advisor in the Foss 4 dorm that year), "in which people could explore a new style of education - where they could both learn and teach and where they could really share their thoughts with each other." Small groups, no grades, discussion and criticism, games and exercises, rotating facilitators - TSA was conceived as a "class with a non-hierarchical structure and shared responsibilities" that rejected "supposed objectivity." It assumed an unabashedly anti-capitalist stance, drew upon a sampling of recent

political and academic Marxist literature from a number of disciplines, and served an “important function” of “providing politically active people with an understanding of the connections among various issues,” offering them a “firmer base from which to become politically involved,” and helping to “unify the various political movements at Wesleyan.” It served as both a political incubator for those involved and a reminder, to those of us looking back at it, that the 1970s were hardly the quiescent years they are so often remembered as, at least in some places. TSA, then, kept alive the legacies of the New Left of the 1960s – at least for a while (the course, I was surprised to learn while writing this reflection, survived into the 1990s) and inspired many to think critically about the nature of American society.

In my case, TSA was a springboard first to other left-tilting courses and to political activism in my college years and, later, to an academic career devoted to the study of race and labor in 19th and 20th century U.S. history. TSA, then, is part of my history, the first time I was introduced in depth to the themes of inequality and the possibilities of social transformation. I have left behind many of the concepts and much of the vocabulary the course popularized. The Marxism that infused its curriculum is more interesting to me as an ideological artifact of the moment to be studied and contextualized than as a guide to understanding the world; and whatever appreciation I once had for the advocacy dimension that characterized the course I eventually jettisoned in graduate school. But the course inspired my fascination with the history of the Left, racial and economic inequality, and the power of social movements. If I didn’t follow the path my younger self and TSA’s originators had intended, TSA did lead me to ask questions and pursue paths of inquiry that have genuinely engaged and sustained me over almost half a century, have informed my teaching and research, and, I hope, have resulted in historical writing that others, in and beyond the academy, have found interesting, useful, or inspiring.

Notes

1. “Historians for Obama,” History News Network (2007) at <https://hnn.us/articles/44958.html>.
2. My perspective on the American Communist Party and its history, which one Trotskyist historian has dismissively termed “*nouveau arriviste* traditionalist” [Brian D. Palmer, “Introduction: James P. Cannon and the ‘Prince’s Favors’” in Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1928-38* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 16] can be found in Eric Arnesen, “Civil Rights and the Cold War At Home: Post-War Activism, Anticommunism, and the Decline of the Left,” *American Communist History* 11, No. 2 (Spring 2012): 5-44; Arnesen, “The Traditions of African-American Anticommunism,” *Twentieth Century Communism* Issue 6 (2014): 124-148; “Faction Figure: James P. Cannon, Early Communist History, and Radical Faith,” *Labour/Le Travail* No. 63 (May 2009): 243-258; and “Henry Wallace’s Flawed Crusade,” *Dissent* 60, No. 4 (October 2013): 93-97.
3. For a recent appreciative but not uncritical history of the American Left, see Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011); for a polite critique of that book, see Eric Arnesen, “Ambiguous Legacies: Michael Kazin’s *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 10, No. 1 (March 2013): 123-135.
4. Coming to Wesleyan in the Fall of 1976, I did not have any sense of the political environment that preceded my arrival. John Houston, a campus socialist and later an editor of *Politics and Education*, told a reporter that his class came to “a politically quiet campus” in 1973, but “by the time its members were graduated in 1977, there was a biweekly activist newspaper, a Socialist organizing committee, numerous issue-oriented political committees – and even a new class called ‘Towards a Socialist America.’” Tim Redmond, “Campus Activists Find New Goals,” *Hartford Courant*, December 17, 1978.

Eric Arnesen, Wesleyan Class of 1980, is the Teamsters Professor of Modern American Labor History at The George Washington University. He is the co-chair of the Washington History Seminar, a joint project of the American Historical Association and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the author of *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics* (1991); *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (2001); and *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents* (2002). He is currently finishing a biography of the African American socialist, labor leader, and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph.



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