

# African Americans, Labor Unions, and the Struggle for Fair Employment in the Aircraft Manufacturing Industry of Texas, 1941–1945

By JOSEPH ABEL

DON ELLINGER WAS A FRUSTRATED MAN IN THE SUMMER OF 1944. LEAD examiner for the Region X office of the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) in Dallas, Texas, Ellinger and a small staff of investigators had spent the last two years working to obtain entry for African Americans into the all-white training facilities at a bomber factory owned by Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corporation (Convair) in nearby Fort Worth. Neither conferences, surveys, nor appeals to management had worked; if anything, Ellinger complained, since he began his investigations Convair's discriminatory practices had grown worse, expanding into such areas as hiring, upgrades, and discharge. "The attitude of the company, which from the first has been negative, is now openly hostile," he lamented, and the only means of reaching a resolution appeared to be through costly public hearings. Despite this negative assessment, Ellinger admitted that there was at least one small bright spot in the situation. Although African Americans were prohibited from joining the International Association of Machinists (IAM), J. D. Smith, the white president of IAM District Lodge 776, had offered his union's cooperation to the FEPC, in effect challenging the racial practices of the local aircraft industry and setting himself apart from the vast majority of southern labor activists. Even more heartening to Ellinger was the length to which Smith seemed willing to go to fulfill this pledge: in a gesture that would have been considered progressive within most American unions at the time, let alone one operating in the segregated South, Smith threatened to initiate arbitration proceedings against Convair management for unjustly firing an African American janitor, a tactic that gained the man's reinstatement. Having faced similar forms of managerial intransigence himself, Ellinger was pleased to

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be able to report back to his superiors in Washington, D.C., that Smith and District 776 "took a strong stand and fully represented the [black] worker as if he were a member of the IAM."<sup>1</sup>

This brief glimpse into the inner workings of Fort Worth's largest aircraft manufacturing facility both confirms and challenges a number of interrelated historical arguments surrounding the struggle for fair employment in the South during World War II. To begin with, Ellinger's tense exchanges with Convair and his feeble recommendation for public hearings will no doubt be recognizable to those who have examined the short-lived FEPC. Since the 1970s, numerous studies have laid bare the effects of outside opposition and organizational weakness on the ability of the committee to carry out its important work. In his examination of the FEPC's administrative history, Merl E. Reed paints a picture of an embattled committee that encouraged fair employment through investigations and public hearings yet lacked the authority to issue sanctions or demand full compliance. Although he acknowledges the courage and tenacity of the FEPC's integrated staff, Reed concludes that this innately weak federal agency was barely able to dent the surface of the South's caste-bound racial system, let alone overturn it, in the face of employer opposition. In a more recent study examining the impact of wartime manpower policy on the region, historian Charles D. Chamberlain agrees with Reed's assessment and presents the FEPC as generally ineffectual in removing the barriers placed before black southern workers.<sup>2</sup> Local accounts of the FEPC's investigations in the southern shipbuilding, oil refining, and railroad industries have all reached similar conclusions concerning managerial resistance, the committee's institutional weaknesses, and their combined effect on job prospects for black workers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, June 29, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," Box 2, Closed Cases, Records of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1940-1946, Record Group 228, National Archives and Records Administration-Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas, hereinafter cited as RG 228 (first quotation); Don Ellinger to Clarence Mitchell, July 21, 1944, Folder "International Association of Machinists, 10-UR-418," Box 6, *ibid.* (second quotation). I would like to thank Alex Lichtenstein, Andrew Kersten, and the anonymous readers for the *Journal of Southern History* for their insightful comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge, 1991); Charles D. Chamberlain, *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South during World War II* (Athens, Ga., 2003). For detailed studies of the committee's activity in other regions of the nation, see Andrew Edmund Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46* (Urbana, 2000); and Clete Daniel, *Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness: The FEPC in the Southwest, 1941-1945* (Austin, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Merl E. Reed, "The FEPC, the Black Worker, and the Southern Shipyards," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 74 (Autumn 1975), 446-67; Bruce Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II," *Journal of American History*, 80 (December

As shown by Ellinger's protracted efforts to secure even minimal compliance from Convair, the heretofore neglected Fort Worth aircraft industry fits within the historiographical consensus surrounding the FEPC's shortcomings.<sup>4</sup> Of course, to point out the committee's overall ineffectiveness in north Texas is in and of itself nothing new. Where this article breaks new ground is in its explanation of the ephemeral yet undeniable economic gains made by black workers during World War II. Across the nation, the portion of African Americans employed in defense production increased from just 3 percent of the industry's total workforce in 1942 to more than 8 percent by 1945. During the same period in the South, African Americans gained close to 900,000 jobs.<sup>5</sup> Ellinger's frustrations notwithstanding, black workers even made advances in the Fort Worth aircraft industry, eventually occupying several thousand positions at Convair and its rival North American Aviation in the nearby town of Grand Prairie.

In their efforts to explain this important economic moment, historians have thus far advanced two main arguments. Not surprisingly, the first of these explanations tends to minimize the importance of the FEPC and instead looks to wartime labor markets for answers. According to such scholars as William H. Chafe, Richard Polenberg, and David Brody, it was the extreme shortage of manpower during the war that necessitated the temporary opening of jobs and industries long closed to African Americans. In this equation, the FEPC was symbolically important but otherwise accomplished very little for black workers.<sup>6</sup> Standing against

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1993), 952–88; Emilio Zamora, "The Failed Promise of Wartime Opportunity for Mexicans in the Texas Oil Industry," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 95 (January 1992), 323–50; Alexa B. Henderson, "FEPC and the Southern Railway Case: An Investigation into the Discriminatory Practices of Railroads during World War II," *Journal of Negro History*, 61 (April 1976), 173–87. General histories of the FEPC include Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*; Louis Ruchames, *Race, Jobs, and Politics: The Story of FEPC* (New York, 1953); Herbert Garfinkel, *When Negroes March: The March on Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics for FEPC* (Glencoe, Ill., 1959); and Judson MacLaury, *To Advance Their Opportunities: Federal Policies Toward African American Workers from World War I to the Civil Rights Act of 1964* (Knoxville, 2008), 89–110.

<sup>4</sup> Although there is not yet a full treatment of the wartime struggle for fair employment in the Fort Worth aircraft factories, the industry is sporadically mentioned in Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, 129–30, 136–37, 194–95.

<sup>5</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York, 1999), 775; Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, 158.

<sup>6</sup> William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (6th ed.; New York, 2007), esp. 15–19; Richard Polenberg, *War and Society: The United States, 1941–1945* (Philadelphia, 1972), esp. 99–130; David Brody, "The New Deal and World War II," in John Braeman et al., eds., *The New Deal: The National Level* (2 vols.; Columbus, Ohio, 1975), I, 267–309. Also see Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York, 1976); and Barton J. Bernstein, "America in War and Peace: The Test of Liberalism," in Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1968), 289–321.

this economic interpretation is the work of a more recent group of historians who focus specifically on the FEPC. While recognizing the institutional weaknesses of the committee, these scholars tend to afford it a great deal more significance. In his study of fair employment in the Midwest, for example, Andrew Edmund Kersten argues that even in cities like Detroit where labor shortages were a chronic problem, discriminatory patterns of employment persisted throughout the war. It was only through the continuous intercession of the FEPC and such allied organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Detroit Urban League, and the United Automobile Workers (UAW) that black workers were eventually able to enjoy the fruits of wartime prosperity.<sup>7</sup>

While there is some truth in each of these interpretations, it is Kersten's naming of a labor union as a partner of the FEPC that is most relevant to this article. To the extent that African Americans were able to break down discriminatory barriers during the war, they were dependent on the willingness of local organizations to lend their resources and influence to the government's fair employment investigations. As Ellinger's praise for the actions of J. D. Smith and the lily-white IAM indicates, it was exactly this type of cooperation that defined the FEPC's relationship with unions in Fort Worth. Indeed, had it not been for the willingness of both IAM District 776 and its crosstown counterpart, UAW Local 645, to reject the racist excuses used by Convair and North American to justify their discriminatory practices, it is unlikely that African Americans would have secured even temporary concessions through the proceedings of the institutionally weak FEPC. The question, however, is why? Why would the local leadership of a union such as the IAM—whose whites-only membership ritual was held up as a prime example of institutionalized working-class racism even in its own time—challenge the culture of its own organization by helping African Americans? More broadly, what could compel the recallable officers of either aircraft union to flout the racial mores of their membership in order to assist a government agency whose sole purpose was perceived by many as limiting the rights of white southerners?

The voluminous scholarship on working-class race relations during the 1940s provides few answers to these questions. On one side of the debate are those like Kersten who see the potential for interracial cooperation residing most prominently within the UAW and other left-leaning

<sup>7</sup> Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War*, 4. Also see Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 9–10.

industrial unions, especially those affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In their studies of automobile manufacturing, tobacco processing, rubber production, and meatpacking, these scholars contend that union support for equal employment was largely driven by an ideological commitment to racial equality that was itself premised on the need to organize the heavily interracial workforces of these industries.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, the other side of this historiographical coin emphasizes the racial obstructionism practiced by many of the craft unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). One of the most oft-cited examples within this scholarly tradition is that of the West Coast boilermakers, whose decision to defy an FEPC order led to a California Supreme Court case in which the union's discriminatory membership practices were declared illegal.<sup>9</sup> Jacob Vander Meulen has extended a similar argument to the burgeoning southern aircraft industry by linking union opposition to the FEPC to the intense organizing struggles between rival AFL and CIO unions at the AVCO-Vultee plant in Nashville, Tennessee. In this case, the all-white IAM lodge (AFL) defended the company's discriminatory hiring practices and labeled the FEPC's investigations an attempt to help the racially integrated UAW (CIO) organize.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars have pointed out similar anti-FEPC activity among local unions affiliated with both the AFL and the CIO in the shipbuilding, refining, and oil tool industries as well.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War*, 5; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (December 1988), 786-811; Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 142-250; Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana, 1993), 177-213; and Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-54* (Urbana, 1997), 167-218. On the sources and frequent ambiguity of the CIO's racially egalitarian ideology, see Michael Goldfield, "Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism during the 1930s and 1940s," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 44 (Fall 1993), 1-32; and Bruce Nelson, "Class, Race, and Democracy in the CIO: The 'New' Labor History Meets the 'Wages of Whiteness,'" *International Review of Social History*, 41 (December 1996), 351-74.

<sup>9</sup> On the boilermakers' challenge, see Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 267-317; William H. Harris, "Federal Intervention in Union Discrimination: FEPC and West Coast Shipyards during World War II," *Labor History*, 22 (Summer 1981), 325-47; and *James v. Marinsip Corporation*, 25 Cal. 2d 721 (1944). For a comparative account of the boilermakers' experience on both the West and the East Coasts, see Andrew E. Kersten, *Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II* (New York, 2006), 68-99.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Vander Meulen, "Warplanes, Labor, and the International Association of Machinists in Nashville, 1939-1945," in Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995* (Knoxville, 1997), 37-57.

<sup>11</sup> Reed, "FEPC, the Black Worker, and the Southern Shipyards"; Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile"; Ernest Obadele-Starks, *Black Unionism in the*

Both of these interpretations fail to offer a satisfactory explanation for the FEPC-friendly activities of unions in the Fort Worth aircraft plants. While the lily-white IAM District 776 certainly cannot be categorized as left-leaning, the segregated UAW Local 645 also never showed much of a penchant for progressive racial ideology during the war. Nor did either local ever have to contend with a large African American workforce, the presence of whom in other circumstances helped moderate the institutional racism of certain unions. Considered within this context, what inspired the racially moderate actions of these two locals? Why, in the absence of either ideological or organizational motives, did neither of these unions emulate the blatant racism of more exclusionary labor organizations?

This article argues that the actions of organized labor in behalf of African Americans at Convair and North American need to be viewed from a more practical standpoint. As Alex Lichtenstein has demonstrated in an essay on Florida's wartime shipyards, when considering working-class race relations and the efficacy of the FEPC it is best to focus on such contextual factors as the strength of local unions, the attitudes of union officials, and the level of hostility toward organized labor that existed among plant management.<sup>12</sup> This observation rings true when considering the unique situation that prevailed among the unions at Convair and North American. In both settings, newly formed

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*Industrial South* (College Station, Tex., 2000), 101–27; Emilio Zamora, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics during World War II* (College Station, Tex., 2009), 125–203; Zamora, “Failed Promise of Wartime Opportunity”; Michael R. Botson Jr., *Labor, Civil Rights, and the Hughes Tool Company* (College Station, Tex., 2005), 133–36. Also see Bruce Nelson, “CIO Meant One Thing for the Whites and Another Thing for Us’: Steelworkers and Civil Rights, 1936–1974,” in Zieger, ed., *Southern Labor in Transition*, 113–45; Robert J. Norrell, “Caste in Steel: Jim Crow Careers in Birmingham, Alabama,” *Journal of American History*, 73 (December 1986), 669–94; Nancy L. Quam-Wickham, “Who Controls the Hiring Hall? The Struggle for Job Control in the ILWU during World War II,” in Sally M. Miller and Daniel A. Cornford, eds., *American Labor in the Era of World War II* (Westport, Conn., 1995), 120–44; Eileen Boris, “‘You Wouldn’t Want One of ‘Em Dancing With Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II,” *American Quarterly*, 50 (March 1998), 77–108; and Katherine Archibald, *Wartime Shipyards: A Study in Social Disunity* (Berkeley, 1947). Broader accounts of the ambiguous relationship between the FEPC and the labor movement can be found in Herbert Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*. Vol. 1: *Race, Work, and the Law* (Washington, D.C., 1977), 173–381; Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619–1973* (New York, 1974), 238–74; and Paul D. Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor: A New History* (Baton Rouge, 2006), 196–219.

<sup>12</sup> Alex Lichtenstein, “Exclusion, Fair Employment, or Interracial Unionism: Race Relations in Florida’s Shipyards during World War II,” in Glenn T. Eskew, ed., *Labor in the Modern South* (Athens, Ga., 2001), 135–57. This point is also made in Goldfield, “Race and the CIO”; and Robert Rodgers Korstad, “The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism: Context Matters,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 44 (Fall 1993), 41–44. For a well-written work demonstrating that local conditions often colored race relations even within the most discriminatory unions, see Kersten, *Labor’s Home Front*, 68–99.

locals of the IAM and the UAW worked alongside the FEPC not out of ideological affinity for racial equality but rather to advance their own organizational strength in the face of determined managerial resistance. So long as they refused to broach the taboo subject of social equality, the local leaders of these unions were able to conflate the economic grievances suffered by African Americans—who never presented a significant numerical challenge to the area's white aircraft workers anyway—with the managerial abuse visited on aircraft workers in general. These efforts to legitimate the unions' collective bargaining authority, self-serving though they may have been, nevertheless benefited both black workers and the FEPC. By demanding a workplace in which management's actions were constrained by a set of fairly negotiated contractual rules, local IAM and UAW leaders struck an important if unintended blow against the arbitrariness of wartime employment discrimination and situated themselves alongside the FEPC as agents of change in the segregated South.

The prelude to this unexpected alliance took place on June 25, 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 "encourag[ing] participation in the national defense program by all citizens . . . regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin." Mandating that all defense training programs were to be administered free of discrimination and that all federal defense contracts were to contain a non-discrimination clause, the order also established the FEPC to ensure that these orders were observed by employers in the bustling wartime economy. Black workers in Texas and across the country had every reason to celebrate this event: besides promising unprecedented federal support for struggles against economic inequality, the executive order also provided a psychological boost in that it was the brainchild of A. Philip Randolph, an African American and longtime labor activist. Almost immediately, letters from minority workers around the country poured into the FEPC's Washington office to ask for help battling the racism of employers, fellow workers, and unions. Unfortunately, the first year of the new antidiscrimination agency's life left these hopes largely unfulfilled. The organizational jurisdiction of the FEPC remained in flux until July 1942, when the committee was given a semipermanent home under the authority of the War Manpower Commission (WMC). As it turned out, WMC head Paul McNutt was little interested in Roosevelt's fair employment program and sought to marginalize the FEPC by cutting its already limited budget and denying it access to sorely needed staff resources. Although the committee did manage to hold several nationally publicized hearings on workplace discrimination, including

one in Birmingham, Alabama, on southern industry, the obstacles placed in front of it by McNutt left it ill-suited to address the complaints of African Americans in Texas or any other area of the country throughout most of 1942.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time that the FEPC was attempting to establish itself as a viable antidiscrimination agency, the southern economy was undergoing a dramatic transformation. Through massive infusions of capital in the form of military contracts and construction subsidies, federal intervention thrust the region into the national economic mainstream and signaled to the world that Dixie was a crucial link in the production chain forged by the so-called Arsenal of Democracy.<sup>14</sup> Although it may be an exaggeration to argue, as some historians do, that this period was more important than the Civil War, there can be little doubt of World War II's economic impact on the South: by 1942 average wages had jumped by 40 percent over the 1939 figure, and manufacturing expanded by at least half during the conflict. Southern cities such as Fort Worth—the economy of which had depended heavily on the export of oil, cattle, and other raw materials before the war—suddenly became flush with new jobs and industry. Out of the \$7.6 billion in defense contracts that Texas received, Dallas and Fort Worth took in approximately \$2.3 billion, a massive sum that set the area apart as one of the South's greatest beneficiaries of wartime largesse.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Executive Order No. 8802, June 25, 1941, <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/od8802t.html> (quotation); Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 10–15, 21–76; MacLaury, *To Advance Their Opportunities*, 94–99; Zamora, “Failed Promise of Wartime Opportunity,” 329–30.

<sup>14</sup> Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, chap. 1. For an excellent historiographical essay on World War II and its impact on the South, see James C. Cobb, “World War II and the Mind of the Modern South,” in Neil R. McMillen, ed., *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson, Miss., 1997), 3–20. Also see Gregory Hooks, “Guns and Butter, North and South: The Federal Contribution to Manufacturing Growth, 1940–1990,” in Philip Scranton, ed., *The Second Wave: Southern Industrialization from the 1940s to the 1970s* (Athens, Ga., 2001), 255–85; Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980* (New York, 1991), 88–111; Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York, 1986), 239–74; George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913–1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), 687–731; James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936–1990* (2nd ed.; Urbana, 1993); and Gerald T. White, *Billions for Defense: Government Financing by the Defense Plant Corporation during World War II* (University, Ala., 1980). More recently, geographer Robert Lewis has questioned whether wartime manufacturing provided a basis for southern economic transformation. See Lewis, “World War II Manufacturing and the Postwar Southern Economy,” *Journal of Southern History*, 73 (November 2007), 837–66.

<sup>15</sup> Morton Sosna, “More Important than the Civil War? The Impact of World War II on the South,” in James C. Cobb and Charles R. Wilson, eds., *Perspectives on the American South: An Annual Review of Society, Politics, and Culture*, Vol. 4 (New York, 1987), 145–61; Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 72; Kathryn Currie Pinkney, “From Stockyards to Defense Plants, the Transformation of a City: Fort Worth, Texas, and World War II” (Ph.D. dissertation, University



At the forefront of this federally financed industrial revolution were the massive Convair and North American aircraft plants. The story of north Texas's rise to prominence as an aircraft manufacturing center began in 1939 when Amon Carter Sr., Fort Worth's most prominent booster, began a propaganda campaign to recruit what was then known as the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation. Although the city had many things going for it (not the least of which was Carter's personal friendship with Consolidated president Reuben Fleet), the San Diego company initially set its sights on a tract of land west of Dallas near the farming community of Grand Prairie. Perhaps under pressure from Carter, however, Consolidated backed out of this deal, thus opening the way for the Defense Plant Corporation's decision to construct a more than \$7 million plant on the site and lease it to North American in September 1940. Initially, this announcement appeared to offer a grim fate for Fort Worth's chances of securing its own aircraft factory; with a desire to spread both the nation's strategic resources and its wartime wealth, the Army Air Corps favored a more distant site in Oklahoma. But this situation only stiffened the resolve of the pugnacious Carter, who responded by pressing the city's case with influential bureaucrats, legislators, and even Roosevelt himself. Finally, after several tense months, on January 3, 1941, the War Department compromised by announcing that it would build aircraft factories in both Fort Worth and Tulsa. On April 18, 1941, less than two weeks after the North American facility in Grand Prairie was dedicated, a silver spade broke ground for the \$10 million plant in Fort Worth. Leased by the government to Consolidated—which was subsequently purchased by the Vultee Aircraft Corporation and became popularly known as Convair—the Fort Worth plant became the largest fully automated aircraft factory in the world when it was completed in April 1942.<sup>16</sup>

With the opening of North American and Convair, north Texas joined what was already becoming one of the largest and most important segments of the nation's defense effort. Throughout the country, prime military aircraft manufacturers employed more than 750,000 workers, with subcontractors employing another 250,000. While

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of North Texas, 2003), 26–32, 51–52, 78–80; Richard F. Selcer, *Fort Worth: A Texas Original!* (Austin, 2004), 55–63, 67.

<sup>16</sup>“Huge Airplane Plant Dedicated by Knudsen,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 8, 1941, pp. 1, 4; “Dirt Broken in Rain for Plane Plant,” *ibid.*, April 19, 1941, pp. 1, 6; Roger Bilstein and Jay Miller, *Aviation in Texas* (Austin, 1985), 94–95; Pinkney, “From Stockyards to Defense Plants,” 80–95. On the Defense Plant Corporation's financing of aircraft facilities, see White, *Billions for Defense*, chap. 6. The best biography of Carter is Jerry Flemmons, *Amon: The Life of Amon Carter, Sr. of Texas* (Austin, 1978).

much of this workforce was concentrated on the West Coast, the residents of Dallas, Fort Worth, and their environs also contributed mightily to building up the nation's airpower. By the end of the war, North American's Grand Prairie facility was employing nearly 39,000 workers, while Convair's payroll bulged with some 30,500 employees. As was the case throughout the nation, these two plants became increasingly dependent on women as military service sent men overseas. Within a year after North American hired its first female production workers in November 1941, at least 30 percent of the plant's employees were women. Female employment statistics at Convair were equally impressive, with nearly 11,600 women (approximately 38 percent of the workforce) engaged in assembly work by the end of the war.<sup>17</sup>

For these thousands of men and women, life in the North American and Convair plants was both exciting and daunting. Though parts of the manufacturing process shared a great deal in common with other mass-production industries such as automobile assembly, aircraft workers had to adopt new methods peculiar to the industry. To begin with, the size and complexity of finished aircraft made it impractical to operate a single, constantly moving assembly line. Instead, workers erected scaffolding and jigs around stationary planes and then swarmed over and around each other to complete their various tasks before the plane was moved to the next assembly position. The variety of jobs these workers performed was astounding—in addition to a virtual army of riveters and buckers, aircraft plants also employed thousands of metal press operators, drillers, deburrers, subassembly installers, electricians, welders, carpenters, toolmakers, jig builders, and inspectors, to name but a few. For periods ranging from forty-eight to sixty hours and more per week, the members of this industrial juggernaut worked at their tasks under a flood of artificial light and amid ear-piercing mechanical sounds. The physicality and repetitiveness of life in the plants no doubt led many to

<sup>17</sup> Wayne Biddle, *Barons of the Sky: From Early Flight to Strategic Warfare: The Story of the American Aerospace Industry* (New York, 1991), 271; Roger E. Bilstein, *The American Aerospace Industry: From Workshop to Global Enterprise* (New York, 1996), 73–74; John B. Rae, *Climb to Greatness: The American Aircraft Industry, 1920–1960* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 151; V. Dennis Wrynn, *Forge of Freedom: American Aircraft Production in World War II* (Osceola, Wis., 1995), 12. For more detailed discussions of women aircraft workers, see Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* (Boston, 1987); Constance Reid, *Slacks and Calluses: Our Summer in a Bomber Factory* (Washington, D.C., 1999); and Chester W. Gregory, *Women in Defense Work during World War II: An Analysis of the Labor Problem and Women's Rights* (New York, 1974), 67–79.

agree with the statement of one young man that aircraft work “[is] like a jail sentence . . . and after the war, we’ll be out.”<sup>18</sup>

While likening aircraft manufacturing to incarceration may have been an exaggeration—most workers were simply glad to have a job after the travails of the Great Depression—such statements reflected the very real power that Convair’s and North American’s supervisors retained over their employees. Better known throughout the plants as “Damn Red Button[s]” due to the color of their identification badges, company officials guarded their managerial prerogatives and adamantly opposed anything that might impede their authority. This tendency was especially evident in the dim view that the aircraft manufacturers took of unions and labor relations in general. In California, where the industry was strongest, the antiunion sentiment of aircraft plant managers put them in the vanguard of the struggle to retain the state’s reputation as “the white spot of the open shop.”<sup>19</sup> In the summer of 1941, this antagonism toward employees was demonstrated in dramatic fashion at North American’s main plant in Inglewood, California. Just as the first aircraft began rolling off the production line in Grand Prairie, managers at North American’s West Coast facility had enlisted the support of Roosevelt and the army in putting down a Communist-inspired strike by employees who accused the company of refusing to bargain with their representatives. Besides serving notice on unions throughout the nation that production disruptions would not be tolerated during the war, the outcome of the Inglewood strike also provided a preview of the hard-nosed style that North American officials subsequently employed in their dealings with both black and white workers at the new plant in Texas.<sup>20</sup>

Convair’s prewar history lacked the same dramatic confrontations with employees, but the attitude of its managers was no better than that of their North American counterparts. This antagonistic stance was perhaps best personified by Convair’s chairman of the board, Tom

<sup>18</sup>“Adroit Use of Manpower Claimed by Airplane Plant’s Officials,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 2, 1943, sec. II, pp. 1, 11; Jacob Vander Meulen, *Building the B-29* (Washington, D.C., 1995), 47, 51, 55; Reid, *Slacks and Calluses*, 52 (quotation).

<sup>19</sup>Reid, *Slacks and Calluses*, 117 (first quotation); Jacob A. Vander Meulen, *The Politics of Aircraft: Building an American Military Industry* (Lawrence, Kans., 1991), 216 (second quotation).

<sup>20</sup>Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York, 1982), 57–63; James R. Prickett, “Communist Conspiracy or Wage Dispute? The 1941 Strike at North American Aviation,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 50 (May 1981), 215–33. On the response of management to the challenges of labor during the 1940s, see Howell John Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison, Wis., 1982), 41–89.

M. Girdler. Well before the aircraft industry began its rise to prominence in Fort Worth, Girdler had earned a reputation as a fierce opponent of labor unions who was not above inciting violence to avoid working-class organization. The most famous example of these tactics occurred in 1937 when Girdler, who was then serving as head of Republic Steel, masterminded the defeat of the CIO's Little Steel strike, the climax of which was the brutal killing of ten workers by Chicago police in the infamous Memorial Day Massacre. Not surprisingly, Girdler's distaste for organized labor and shared governance on the shop floor did not diminish when he entered the aircraft industry. In a speech before the Foremen's Club of Fort Worth, the Convair chairman reminded his managerial subordinates that they were to act as the undisputed bosses of their respective departmental fiefdoms. "You are not in your department to win any popularity contests," he charged. "Get your workers to like you if you can, but be sure to have their respect. Without respect, and without the discipline that results from respect, you can never build a well-knit, smooth working combination of workers." In their interactions with employees, the managers at Convair, several of whom had worked for Girdler at Republic, took these instructions to heart and brooked little opposition to their authority.<sup>21</sup>

The reluctance of North American and Convair to countenance any assault on the managerial prerogatives of the supervisory staff provided a good indication of the uphill battle that African Americans and the FEPC would fight throughout the war. If FEPC officials entertained any hopes that it would be easier to gain the cooperation of the transplanted Texas management of these companies, the reality they faced offered a rude awakening. Though most hailed from the ostensibly less hostile racial environment of California, early managers at Convair and North American were unwilling to challenge the prevailing social order of the segregated South. Many feared that doing so would needlessly antagonize white workers; others presumably shared their employees' prejudices. One excuse often used by management to justify discrimination was the claim that union contracts prevented them from dealing fairly

<sup>21</sup> "Address of Tom Girdler . . . Before Foremen's Club, Fort Worth, Texas, Division," October 17, 1943, Folder 24, Box 1, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, District Lodge 776 Papers, AR 48 (Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Library), hereinafter cited as District 776 Papers (quotations); "Anti-Union and Labor Baiting Is History of CVAC Management Personnel," Fort Worth *Labor News*, April 26, 1946. On the Little Steel strike, see Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill, 1995), 60-63; and Tom M. Girdler with Boyden Sparkes, *Boot Straps: The Autobiography of Tom M. Girdler* (New York, 1943), 223-373.

with African Americans. While such pretexts were particularly disingenuous in light of the aircraft manufacturers' antagonism toward labor and the iron grip that they tried to maintain on the shop floor, the limiting effect on African American job opportunities was still the same.<sup>22</sup>

Such excuses led to the industry's first run-in with the FEPC. In December 1942 L. Virgil Williams of the Dallas Negro Chamber of Commerce wrote to the committee, complaining about the quality of training facilities available to African Americans who hoped to work in the aircraft factories. Williams's grievance was far from unique: at the end of January 1942, only 194 of 5,630 southern training programs accepted black workers. Dallas's African American population had gained both a large training facility and a \$46,000 grant for equipment in September 1942, but Williams maintained that these funds were being raided by white training officials, who used them to purchase materials and machinery for their own students. Williams also criticized the director of the black training program for not passing on the names of qualified graduates to the local office of the United States Employment Service, which itself was under a great deal of scrutiny for channeling African Americans into discriminatory jobs. Earl Bowler of the U.S. Office of Education, which as administrator of these training programs had already had its own run-in with the FEPC, agreed with Williams that placement of black graduates had so far been difficult because no employers in the area would hire them. According to Williams, this situation had become so bad that the supervisor of the black training school was urging graduating students to accept positions as janitors at North American. When Bowler brought this matter up with North American management, industrial relations director Nate Molinarro offered little more than a vague promise that the company would begin hiring African Americans as paid trainees once conditions in the plant warranted such action. The company also indicated that it would set aside at least two departments for black workers but gave no indication of when this might occur.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>It should be noted that not all industrial employers were as antagonistic toward African Americans and the FEPC as Convair and North American initially were. For examples, see Kersten, *Race, Jobs, and the War*, 29-30, 51-52, 80.

<sup>23</sup>L. Virgil Williams to George Johnson, December 15, 1942, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-173," Box 8, Closed Cases, RG 228; Earl Bowler to E. G. Ludtke, January 22, 1943, *ibid.*; George M. Johnson to Walter White, January 13, 1943, Folder 1, Box A265, Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), hereinafter cited as NAACP Records. On the aptly named "jobs movement" among African Americans in the wartime South and the FEPC's larger struggles to secure equal training facilities for them, see Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*,

Not surprisingly, Molinarro's weak assurances failed to spur any significant action. Though North American management attempted to neutralize criticism by hiring an African American as assistant personnel officer, black workers continued to find it difficult to gain entry into the plant throughout the first half of 1943. Nearly six months after Williams reported the discriminatory conditions, a frustrated Bowler opined that it might be time to scrap the black training program altogether and instead focus on the actual needs of the companies in the area, a recommendation that would leave job discrimination essentially untouched. Even as tales of North American's discrimination began to be broadcast throughout the state by the African American press, the FEPC could do little to help. Still controlled by the largely unsympathetic War Manpower Commission and centered in Washington, D.C., the committee did not have the resources to initiate a full-scale investigation of the situation in Dallas.<sup>24</sup>

The turning point for the area's African American workers came on May 27, 1943, with Roosevelt's decision to issue Executive Order 9346. Drafted in response to a growing number of complaints from civil rights leaders about WMC leader Paul McNutt's apparent lack of concern for fair employment, this new order removed the FEPC from the War Manpower Commission and made it directly responsible to the president. The order also significantly expanded both the jurisdictional and geographic scope of the committee, allowing it to investigate all firms whose work was deemed essential to the war effort and setting up a system of regional offices throughout the country. This latter decision proved especially important for aircraft workers in Texas, who were henceforth able to file complaints with the FEPC's new Region X office in Dallas. Led by Don Ellinger, Leonard Brin, and the distinguished historian Carlos Castañeda, investigators took up the cause of fair employment in Texas, focusing the bulk of their attention on the oil refining and shipbuilding industries of the Gulf Coast and the aviation industry in and around Fort Worth.<sup>25</sup>

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175-204, esp. 184; and Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, 40-68, 86-96. An interesting case study of African American struggles to gain adequate war training is offered by Merl E. Reed, "Bell Aircraft Comes South: The Struggle by Atlanta Blacks for Jobs during World War II," in Eskew, ed., *Labor in the Modern South*, 102-34.

<sup>24</sup> Earl Bowler to E. G. Ludtke, May 28, 1943, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-173," Box 8, Closed Cases, RG 228; "Exodus of Negroes from Dallas Grows as Local War Plant Denies Them Jobs," *Dallas Express*, May 8, 1943, pp. 1, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 112; MacLaury, *To Advance Their Opportunities*, 99-101. For information on Castañeda, see Félix D. Almaráz Jr., *Knight without Armor: Carlos Eduardo Castañeda, 1896-1958* (College Station, Tex., 1999), esp. chap. 8. On the

TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITY FOR FEPC REGION X, JULY 1, 1943–JUNE 30, 1944

<i>Cases Pending, July 1, 1943</i>	<i>Total Cases, July 1, 1943–June 30, 1944</i>	<i>Total Cases Closed</i>	<i>Cases Satisfactorily Adjusted</i>	<i>Cases Dismissed</i>	<i>Cases Pending, July 1, 1944</i>
14	336	213	86	124	123

SOURCE: Fair Employment Practice Committee, *First Report: July 1943–December 1944* (Washington, D.C., 1945), Appendix E.

As indicated in Table 1, the reorganization of the FEPC set off a rash of new complaints in Region X and breathed new life into the struggle for training facilities in north Texas. In late June 1943, Williams and the Negro Chamber of Commerce once again filed a formal complaint regarding North American's refusal to hire skilled blacks. Shortly thereafter, FEPC executive secretary George Johnson contacted North American president J. H. Kindelberger directly to complain about the situation in Texas. Johnson made special note that the Grand Prairie plant had recently assumed control of a training school for white teenagers while black graduates were still unable to secure employment. This decision to go above North American's local leadership apparently had the desired effect. Following negotiations with black leaders and the War Manpower Commission, Molinarro announced in early July that North American would begin employing African American trainees directly as part of a new production-training program in such skills as drilling, painting, and subassembly installation. Once these students completed their instruction, Molinarro promised, they would be transferred into areas of the plant where they were needed.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the lengthy delays and the necessity of appealing to higher authorities within the company, the FEPC could tally its first experience at North American in the win column. During the four months after Molinarro's announcement, over three hundred African Americans were trained and employed in aircraft work through the program that North

FEPC's work in the Gulf Coast refining and shipbuilding industries, see Zamora, *Claiming Rights*, 158–203; Zamora, "Failed Promise of Wartime Opportunity," 323–50; and Obadele-Starks, *Black Unionism in the Industrial South*, 101–27.

<sup>26</sup> A. Maceo Smith to Walter White, December 11, 1942, Folder 1, Box A265, NAACP Records; Earl Bowler to W. D. Gallier, May 28, 1943, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-173," Box 8, Closed Cases, RG 228; George Johnson to J. H. Kindelberger, June 15, 1943, *ibid.*; "Final Disposition Report," February 5, 1944, *ibid.*; "North American Aviation Starts Paying Negro Trainees," *Dallas Express*, July 10, 1943, p. 1.

American established.<sup>27</sup> By comparison, the committee's earliest efforts at Convair were not nearly as successful. In June 1942 FEPC officials approached the management at the Fort Worth plant and urged division manager Roland G. Mayer to offer training for African Americans. Initially it appeared that Mayer might be willing to cooperate: he promised to establish a training program for placing blacks in the center wing section of the plant. Upon further investigation, however, FEPC officials discovered that this program had never been set up and no African Americans had been moved into the jobs supposedly set aside for them. A full two years later, in June 1944, Ellinger still could not report any progress on this front; in fact, he admitted that the situation had grown worse as Convair had ceased offering training programs of any kind throughout the entire plant.<sup>28</sup>

Fortunately for African Americans, Ellinger was not deterred by the opposition he faced at Convair. As a former organizer with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) in St. Louis and Dallas, Ellinger had had more than his share of confrontations with management by the time he became an FEPC investigator. Hoping to correct Convair's discriminatory training situation, Ellinger secured a conference with Mayer; the company's director of labor relations, John Hassler; and an official from the Army Air Corps in August 1944. Ellinger pointed out to this group that of the 800 black employees at Convair, only 114 held skilled or semiskilled classifications and that not a single one of these workers had been hired at any position above janitor or laborer. Despite this evidence, both Convair officials accused the FEPC of stirring up trouble where none existed, and Mayer stated categorically that he would not mix black and white workers. Only after Ellinger threatened to call a public hearing did Mayer relent and request suggestions on how Convair might comply. Though this concession seemingly represented a breakthrough, Ellinger continued to doubt the company's sincerity, declaring that "the attitude expressed by [Convair] made such a proposal fruitless since it was clear that they intended to do nothing about it."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> "Final Disposition Report," February 5, 1944, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-173," Box 8, Closed Cases, RG 228. Perhaps because of North American's internal training program, Dallas's black defense-job training center was closed in September 1943 due to low attendance. See Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, June 29, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228.

<sup>29</sup> Memo to File, n.d., *ibid.* Biographical information on Ellinger was taken from "Heart Attack Takes Don Ellinger," Washington (D.C.) *Machinist*, February 24, 1972, pp. 1, 7.



Notwithstanding his misgivings, Ellinger submitted the FEPC's proposal to company officials several days after the meeting. Hoping to capitalize on the earlier success in Grand Prairie, he pointed out that even though the percentage of African American employees at North American was more than twice what it was at Convair, there had been no real racial trouble to speak of. "Our observation has been that friction between races in a plant does not develop unless it is deliberately stirred up," Ellinger stated. "Workers of both races have worked together for years in this region and no failure to utilize available needed skills can be justified on a fear of friction." Ellinger also reminded Mayer that the FEPC was neutral on the subject of physical segregation so long as any arrangements made did not restrict employment opportunities. As requested, the letter concluded with a number of specific recommendations for Mayer to consider. These included making a public announcement of Convair's commitment to fair employment, surveying the qualifications of all African Americans and determining where these workers could best be used, and establishing relations with a representative committee of black workers who could act as a liaison to management.<sup>30</sup>

Ellinger's entreaties to Convair reveal a great deal about how the FEPC and its staff approached their investigations in the South. To begin with, Ellinger's assertion that blacks and whites had "worked together for years" was somewhat disingenuous: workplace interracialism had almost never occurred under conditions of equality within the region. While the implications of this statement would not have been lost on a southerner, Ellinger may have hoped that Mayer, a Seattle native, would be more amenable to such arguments.<sup>31</sup>

Ellinger's suggestion that the FEPC might accept some type of segregated arrangement also indicated that he understood the delicate nature of his mission. Though the segregation of black workers in war plants would not become a major issue until May 1943, when it was used to quell a race riot in the shipyards of Mobile, Alabama, the practice presented problems for the FEPC. Virtually all the committee's field representatives maintained that geography had to be considered when reaching settlements, yet they also understood that doing so risked setting precedents that might carry over into other regions where such

<sup>30</sup> Don Ellinger to R. G. Mayer, September 11, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228.

<sup>31</sup> Biographical information on Mayer was derived from "Newman Quits Consolidated," *Dallas Morning News*, May 12, 1944, p. 3.

conditions were not the norm. Equally worrisome was that prominent civil rights groups such as the NAACP opposed such compromises. These critics argued that any arrangement condoning segregation not only limited the opportunities of African Americans but also ensured that they would be quickly dismissed after the war through the wholesale liquidation of all-black departments. The FEPC was never able to find a satisfactory solution to this dilemma other than to insist that workplace segregation should never be allowed to interfere with black job prospects. With these vague instructions in hand, the committee's field representatives were left to use their judgment in determining when such arrangements were beneficial and when they constituted discrimination. In the case of Convair, Ellinger's decision to recommend segregated departments was likely informed by the fact that as early as 1942 the Dallas Negro Chamber of Commerce, one of the area's most prominent civil rights organizations, had suggested a similar arrangement at North American. Considered alongside the company's history of stonewalling, the group's stance seems to have been the key factor in convincing Ellinger that all avenues, even segregated ones, needed to be explored if black workers were to gain any concessions in the plant.<sup>32</sup>

Whatever hopes Ellinger had that Convair might be willing to accede to his recommendations were dashed with the evasive response that Mayer provided over three months later. Although Mayer admitted that retooling operations had prevented him from making an investigation, he stated bluntly that he could not agree with any of the allegations outlined and believed that the racial situation at North American was not nearly as rosy as Ellinger had painted it. No training programs were needed, he argued, because the Convair plant had increased its efficiency so much in recent months that it had terminated approximately a third of the workforce. Mayer also contended that Convair had a definite plan for upgrading its employees as well as a "highly-praised" grievance procedure and an industrial relations department where any individual could file a complaint if he or she were dissatisfied with his or her classification. In an operation as large as Convair, Mayer continued, it was impossible to police all supervisory employees to ensure that they were carrying out managerial policy "without allowing personalities to creep into the various transactions," a particularly disingenuous statement given the managerial philosophy of the company. Mayer concluded that in almost four years of operation, the Fort Worth

<sup>32</sup>Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 117-19; Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, 59.

plant had had virtually no labor difficulties, and he again restated his belief that the FEPC was in error. For his part, the normally resourceful Ellinger seems to have been taken aback by this intransigent response. Lacking the authority to issue hard sanctions, Ellinger could do little more than report to his superiors that Mayer was lying and that the company was actually behind schedule in fulfilling its contracts owing to a lack of manpower.<sup>33</sup>

As revealing as these prolonged confrontations between the FEPC and Convair were, training discrimination was but one of the many unfair practices that African Americans faced in the Fort Worth aircraft industry. Even after overcoming the daunting challenge of gaining entry into the plants, black workers continued to endure discrimination in the types of jobs they were offered, the pay they received, and the discipline that was meted out to them. One of the abuses inspiring the most complaints was the unwillingness of supervisors to properly classify African American workers. In one such case, a pair of black welders complained that although they were performing the same basic duties as whites in their department, North American refused to advance them any higher than the "C" classification. The labor relations department tried to cover itself by claiming that the men were accurately classified according to the printed job descriptions, but this argument was discredited when the same company official admitted that "some things just can't be done" in Texas.<sup>34</sup>

In a similar case involving a group of black painters, one complainant who asked for an upgrade to an "A" classification recalled being told by his foreman that "here in the South, a nigger cannot be called a white man regardless of how good a worker he is." This case particularly worried the FEPC since a number of aggrieved African Americans had quit after realizing how limited their opportunities for advancement were. When Ellinger confronted North American management about the situation, director of labor relations F. J. Conlan again denied any discrimination and maintained that the company was within its managerial prerogatives to upgrade employees as it saw fit. Molinarro agreed, adding that many of the men had very poor attendance records and were therefore unfit for upgrades. Employing another frequently used tactic, Molinarro also questioned the character of one of the men by

<sup>33</sup>R. G. Mayer to Don Ellinger, November 18, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228 (quotations); Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, December 12, 1944, *ibid.*; Don Ellinger to Clarence Mitchell, December 22, 1944, *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>L. Virgil Williams to Carlos Castañeda, November 26, 1943, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-160," Box 8, *ibid.*

pointing out that he had allegedly abandoned his wife and children. Perhaps embarrassed by these revelations, Ellinger accepted the company's agreement to upgrade one of the complainants and put the others on notice that they would be considered for similar promotions if their attendance improved.<sup>35</sup>

The FEPC ran into this same stubbornness when it confronted management at Convair about its refusal to offer upgrades to African Americans. In particular, a number of black janitors and laborers testified that they had been denied the opportunity to upgrade into supervisory positions in their all-black department as well as into more skilled jobs elsewhere in the plant. An investigation by the Army Air Corps found that Convair's policy was to not upgrade blacks until there was a surplus in the pool of janitorial workers, a situation that apparently presented itself infrequently. The result was that inexperienced whites were hired off the streets for jobs that should have been open to these black workers based on their qualifications and seniority. Confronted by the FEPC, Convair management responded with "bristling hostility," contending that the black workers involved were both satisfied with their current positions and unqualified to take on supervisory duties. Faced with such uncompromising resistance, Ellinger again seemed at a loss. His only response was to suggest that blacks at Convair write letters to the company laying out their talents and ambition and to ask that all future decisions regarding upgrades be handled by the company's central personnel office rather than by individual foremen.<sup>36</sup>

All these problems were magnified exponentially when the applicant was an African American woman. Despite their confrontations with the FEPC over training and hiring practices, officials at both plants refused to hire black women in any but the most menial positions. This was the case for Elizabeth Myers, who wrote to the War Manpower Commission in June 1943 complaining that she had been unable to secure employment at North American despite having completed a war training course. "Is it true," she asked, "that colored women are allowed to sacrifice their time and energy in taking this training with no hope of gaining work in a plant? Not even a maid's job?" Each time she went to the local employment office to inquire, she was told to wait

<sup>35</sup>"Final Disposition Report," September 26, 1944, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-268," *ibid.*; F. J. Conlan to Don Ellinger, April 17, 1944, *ibid.*; Don Ellinger to F. J. Conlan, April 19, 1944, *ibid.* (quotation); Nate Molinarro to Leonard Brin, May 29, 1944, *ibid.*; Don Ellinger to F. J. Conlan, June 1, 1944, *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, June 29, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," Box 2, *ibid.*

a few more days and then given minor domestic jobs to tide her over. After the matter was referred to the FEPC, it was discovered that North American was refusing to hire black women as production workers on the grounds that it did not have segregated facilities for them. It took over six months for the company to offer Myers a trainee job.<sup>37</sup> Many other potential female employees, such as Willie Mae Young and Carrie Tucker Buckner, were refused applications at the employment office while white women received jobs. Even when the FEPC investigated such complaints, the constantly fluctuating employment figures at the plants made it difficult to determine whether these and other aggrieved women had presented clear-cut cases of discrimination.<sup>38</sup>

The inflexibility of management was the root cause of most discrimination at the plants, but when attempting to settle complaints the FEPC also had to contend with the racial attitudes of white workers. Although officials at both North American and Convair often used threats of white backlash as a blanket excuse for refusing to make adjustments, such outbursts occurred frequently enough that Ellinger could not afford to ignore the matter. One such incident involved an African American named William Keele, who worked as an alignment operator in an all-black department on the night shift at North American. When this department was eliminated in the summer of 1943, Keele and two other employees were placed on the all-white day shift. Almost immediately, however, nearly two dozen white workers walked off the job rather than work alongside African Americans. In order to quell the disturbance, North American officials removed the trio from the alignment department and relocated them to a lower-skilled section of the plant without any reduction in pay. After his own protest to management yielded what he believed was an unsatisfactory offer of a different job, Keele filed a complaint with the FEPC alleging that his skills were being underutilized and he was being underpaid.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Elizabeth Myers to Dr. Robert Weaver, June 19, 1943, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-75," Box 7, *ibid.* (quotations); James Bond to Lawrence Appley, August 20, 1943, *ibid.*; "Final Disposition Report," February 11, 1944, *ibid.* On the experience of African American women in the workplace during World War II, see Maureen Honey, ed., *Bitter Fruit: African American Women in World War II* (Columbia, Mo., 1999), 35-125; and Karen Tucker Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II," *Journal of American History*, 69 (June 1982), 82-97.

<sup>38</sup>"Final Disposition Report," December 30, 1944, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-449," Box 8, Closed Cases, RG 228.

<sup>39</sup>"Statement of William Keele," April 12, 1944, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-249," *ibid.*; Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, May 26, 1944, *ibid.*; "Final Disposition Report," August 9, 1944, *ibid.*

Drawing on his experiences in the multiracial and multiethnic ILGWU, Ellinger realized that these issues had to be handled gingerly. On the one hand, in addition to minimizing the chance of another walk-out, he wanted to avoid unduly antagonizing North American management—who, for once, appeared to be sincere in their efforts to adjust the situation—by demanding that they return Keele to the alignment department. On the other hand, Ellinger worried that pressing Keele to accept the company's offer would sanction the segregation of future black complainants into separate departments where their job opportunities would be circumscribed. Not knowing how to proceed, Ellinger wrote to the FEPC's director of field operations, Will Maslow, commenting that the outcome appeared bad no matter what course of action he took. In response, Maslow reminded Ellinger that the FEPC was not against segregation per se as long as it did not interfere with the rights of minority workers. Maslow recommended that unless there was to be some loss of seniority involved, Keele's acceptance of the company's transfer offer would be viewed as a satisfactory adjustment of his case. This advice came to naught when Keele once again refused to accept a transfer elsewhere in the plant. Given the situation, Ellinger's only hope was to prove to management that the white workers would not rebel again if an African American was placed among them. With the help of the alignment department foreman and a cooperative UAW shop steward, Ellinger devised a plan whereby Keele would be used to fill in for a temporarily absent white jig operator. Much to Ellinger's relief, the disturbances that the company had warned about never materialized, and Keele was transferred back to the alignment department permanently, with a small pay raise.<sup>40</sup>

If William Keele's tribulations demonstrate what could be achieved with a little assistance from management and a great deal of persistence by the FEPC, his experience also raises the important question of the role played by organized labor in the investigations at Convair and North American. Given the history of unions in Fort Worth, one could certainly be forgiven for thinking that the UAW's cooperation with Ellinger was an aberration. Up to the beginning of World War II, conservative AFL craft unionists in the building trades and railroad brotherhoods dominated the local labor movement. With their main focus on improving wages and maintaining job security for skilled white

<sup>40</sup>Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, May 26, 1944, *ibid.*; Will Maslow to Don Ellinger, June 8, 1944, *ibid.*; Memo to File, July 17, 1944, *ibid.*; "For the Files, Regarding 10-BR-249 and 10-BR-268," May 25, 1944, *ibid.*; "Final Disposition Report," August 9, 1944, *ibid.*

workers, such unions had little use for African Americans or more progressive forms of civil rights unionism.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the war, these exclusionary forces found a mouthpiece for their racial sentiment and voluntaristic pure-and-simple unionism in the octogenarian C. W. Woodman, publisher of Fort Worth's only labor journal, the *Union Banner*. Born during the Civil War, Woodman had been one of the original organizers of the Texas State Federation of Labor in 1900 and was a fifty-year member of the AFL-affiliated printing pressman's union, thus giving him plenty of time to imbibe the insular ideology of craft unionism. Besides boasting that Fort Worth had had no labor trouble in nearly two decades, Woodman also used the *Union Banner* as a sounding board for his views on race. The paper frequently carried editorials blasting the efforts of "carpetbaggers" from northern cities to stir up trouble among the South's black population. Like most white southerners, Woodman believed that whites and blacks in the region had "a perfect understanding," and he warned that overtures toward social equality from "crazy people" up north would surely result in the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan and other extremist groups. These pieces became increasingly strident during the war as growing attention was focused on gaining jobs for African Americans.<sup>42</sup>

As important as Woodman's paper was for expressing craft union racism, the real bastion of antiblack sentiment in the Fort Worth labor movement was the Trades Assembly. Although this body nominally cooperated with the small number of African American union members in the area, its white leaders and delegates made very clear whom the junior partners in this relationship were. More than six months before the aircraft plants even opened, for example, an IAM member representing a small local foundry informed the body that black workers were seeking the same recognition as whites from Convair management. Appalled, the Trades Assembly went on record in agreement with

<sup>41</sup> On the development of the pure-and-simple craft union ideology that dominated the AFL during the first half of the twentieth century, see William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998); Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill, 1997); and Howard Kimeldorf, *Battling for American Labor: Wobblies, Craft Workers, and the Making of the Union Movement* (Berkeley, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> "Convention Program," Fort Worth *Union Banner*, June 19, 1942; "Breeding Race Trouble," *ibid.*, October 8, 1943 (first quotation); "The Negro We Know," *ibid.*, November 13, 1942 (second quotation); "Be Careful of Colored Problems," *ibid.*, August 11, 1944 (third quotation); "What Is Social Equality?" *ibid.* Biographical information on Woodman was taken from "Union Banner Completes 58th Year," *ibid.*, April 23, 1948.

one delegate's conclusion "that the negroes would not be on equality with the white at any time here in Texas."<sup>43</sup>

The elder statesmen of the Trades Assembly also did not look kindly on outside interference in their affairs, even when it came from within the labor movement. In February 1941 the assembly passed a motion instructing the AFL not to charter any so-called federal labor unions until local members had a chance to examine the application. For decades, the AFL had set up federal labor unions as a means of directly organizing less skilled workers who would otherwise have been overlooked by the labor movement because they did not qualify to join established craft unions. In practice, however, federal labor unions usually served as Jim Crow auxiliaries and offered the larger craft unions an opportunity to control African American workers without having to fully represent their interests or accept them as members. Although it is not clear why the Trades Assembly took this action, it may have been an attempt to prevent any top-down directive by the AFL—which during the war conceded the need for at least marginal equality—that would infringe on the privileges of white members. Less than a month later, in a vote that seemingly confirms this conclusion, the assembly carried another motion protesting the creation of a union for skilled black workers.<sup>44</sup>

The arrival of the aircraft industry in north Texas created a dilemma for Fort Worth's stagnant labor movement. Centered in small shops where labor relations remained something of a personal affair, the area's craft unions were ill-suited to the task of organizing the thousands of often unskilled workers newly employed in the massive facilities of North American and Convair. However, just as they gave rise to a new local economy, the construction of the aircraft plants also marked the beginning of an important shift for the Fort Worth labor movement. The task of organizing this new group of workers fell to international representatives of the UAW and IAM, which had emerged as the main rivals for collective bargaining rights in the aircraft industry.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Minutes, October 9, 1941, Folder 8, Box 6, Fort Worth Trades Assembly Papers, AR 2 (University of Texas at Arlington Library).

<sup>44</sup> Minutes, February 27, 1941, *ibid.*; Minutes, March 26, 1942, Folder 9, *ibid.* The record of this latter meeting gives no indication as to what industry the "Skilled Workers (colored)" were attempting to organize. On the early history of federal labor unions, see Robert H. Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century* (3rd ed.; Baltimore, 2002), 71–72, 78–79; and Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, 92–93. On the AFL's wartime record on civil rights, see Kersten, *Labor's Home Front*, 68–99.

<sup>45</sup> For information on the fierce wartime competition between the AFL and the CIO, see Kersten, *Labor's Home Front*, 139–65; and Zieger, *CIO*, 111–90.



Born during the tumultuous CIO struggles of the 1930s, the UAW had gained a reputation as a progressive and militant industrial union that sought to organize all workers regardless of skill, race, or gender. Given the dynamism of this young organization, its interest in the newly emerging enterprise of aircraft manufacture came almost naturally. As auto companies began retooling UAW-organized factories for war production, union leaders recognized an opportunity to extend their organization's influence into aircraft plants across the country. This strategy took on added urgency after Roosevelt adopted UAW vice president Walter Reuther's slogan of "500 Planes a Day," serving notice that the mass-production techniques pioneered in automobile manufacturing would have to replace older batch methods of aircraft production.<sup>46</sup>

By comparison, the IAM was an unlikely candidate for organizing aircraft workers. For decades after its founding in Atlanta in 1888, the IAM epitomized the old-line exclusionary craft unions of the AFL, with its base among highly skilled machinists in railroad repair shops. These labor aristocrats maintained strict control over the union and used it to protect their interests through conservative sweetheart contracts with employers. Having come out of the insular railroad shops themselves, the IAM's steadfast executive officers were initially opposed to organizing aircraft workers for fear that such efforts would weaken the tradition of craft unionism and dilute the bargaining power of more-skilled workers.<sup>47</sup>

This attitude began to change in 1936, however, when William Boeing, who was then seeking ways to limit competition in the cut-throat industry, offered the IAM a closed-shop contract covering all his Seattle workers. In exchange, Boeing demanded an ironclad no-strike pledge and assurances that the union would organize other aircraft companies as well. Not wanting to fall behind its increasingly aggressive UAW rival, the IAM gladly accepted Boeing's offer and launched its own organizing campaign among the nation's growing body of aircraft workers. Much to the chagrin of the union's old-timers, however, this new organizing effort slowly began to diminish the once clear lines that had existed between skilled and unskilled labor. As wartime mass-production techniques revolutionized the industry, the IAM simply

<sup>46</sup> Vander Meulen, *Politics of Aircraft*, 209; Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York, 1995), 160–65 (quotation on 162).

<sup>47</sup> Mark Perlman, *Democracy in the International Association of Machinists* (New York, 1962), 11–24; Perlman, *The Machinists: A New Study in American Trade Unionism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 105–12; Vander Meulen, *Politics of Aircraft*, 215–17.

could not afford to ignore the growing army of riveters, drop-press operators, and other semiskilled operatives who made up the bulk of the aircraft-manufacturing workforce. Though old railroad men continued to dominate the IAM's politics for some time to come, their conservative ideological influence began to wane.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the emerging parallels in their trade union philosophies, the two unions converged much more slowly on the treatment of African American workers. Even within the progressive CIO, the UAW was famous (or infamous, depending on one's location) for its leaders' public commitments to racial equality. In its hometown of Detroit, the union maintained close ties with the NAACP and used this alliance to great effect in organizing African American workers. This is not to say, of course, that all UAW locals and their members agreed with the international's racial program. Though the union's international officers tried to impress on the members the necessity of interracialism, the largely autonomous local leadership frequently rebelled against such strictures. At the North American plant in Grand Prairie, for example, one of the executive board members of UAW Local 645 forthrightly stated in the early months of the FEPC's investigations that "here in Texas there shall be no social equality," and that outsiders were not going to tell whites that they had to accept African Americans as equals.<sup>49</sup>

As revealing as such bigoted sentiments were, local UAW officers were nevertheless hard-pressed to ignore African Americans. In many instances, white leaders depended on black workers to carry out much of the work involved in organizing the union. Such was the case at North American, where Local 645 was organized on an integrated basis with a great deal of help from those at whom the board member's vitriol was directed. According to W. M. "Jack" Anderson, the local's first president, black janitors were an indispensable part of the UAW's organizing drive at North American because their duties required them to wander throughout the plant. "These nigras [*sic*] was organizing everybody," Anderson recalled. "They not only organized the Black, they would talk to the people in these different departments." This effort accelerated even more rapidly after Anderson enlisted the support of the Dallas

<sup>48</sup> Vander Meulen, *Politics of Aircraft*, 211–17; Perlman, *Machinists*, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Zieger, *CIO*, 85, 153–56; Lichtenstein, *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 207–11; Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, 139 (quotation). On the UAW's often ambiguous relationship with African Americans, see David M. Lewis-Colman, *Race against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit* (Urbana, 2008); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979); and Kevin Boyle, "'There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can't Heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940–1960," *Labor History*, 36 (Winter 1995), 5–23.

Negro Chamber of Commerce. Besides pleading with North American's black workers to extend the organizing drive, Anderson recalled, the leaders of that civic group also attempted to raise the moral indignation of all workers in the plant by advertising the deplorable conditions that many African Americans endured: "[The company] took a big wire . . . mesh wire, oh it was twenty feet high. And people couldn't get in there to see these people, to talk to them. So there these Black people was in this screened-in department, like a bunch of animals . . . They kept them in there like a bunch of slaves. Just pitiful. Something very bad. So that was another selling point to get the people to sign the union card, to see how a human being was being treated." In short, Anderson concluded that had it not been for the African American workers, the local never would have gained enough signatures to call for an authorization election. Such interracial campaigns, even if they were undertaken for strategic reasons, put the UAW light-years ahead of most other unions in the South at the time.<sup>50</sup>

By contrast, the IAM has been frequently held up as a sterling example of the racist exclusionism prevalent among craft unionists. Foremost among the union's sins was its exclusion of African Americans as members. The mechanism for this discrimination was the IAM's not-so-secret induction ritual that pledged all new members never to recommend for membership anyone not of the white race. For years, this discriminatory language disqualified African Americans from even the most menial jobs in places where the IAM held closed-shop agreements. Such problems became especially acute during World War II with the rapid expansion of shipbuilding, aircraft manufacturing, and other industries in which the IAM was prominent. Boeing's closed-shop facility in Seattle provided perhaps the best example: out of a workforce of 41,000, there was not a single black employee in 1941. When confronted about such shameful episodes, the IAM's national leadership announced that while it was not opposed to the employment of African Americans, neither the FEPC nor any other government agency had the authority to compel it to accept black members. Similar records of discrimination could be found at IAM-organized aircraft plants in Missouri, Tennessee, California, and, of course, Texas.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> "Transcript of Tape on 'History of Local 645' Made by Jack Anderson in 1994," n.d., Box 1, UAW Local 848 Records, Accession 95-66 (University of Texas at Arlington Library).

<sup>51</sup> Perlman, *Democracy in the International Association of Machinists*, 39; Perlman, *Machinists*, 108, 279; Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 209-16; Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 35-36. At Boeing and a number of other companies with closed-shop IAM agreements, discrimination against African Americans was sometimes partly corrected

But change was coming to the IAM. Not even the discriminatory language of the union's ritual could escape the civil rights tide slowly spreading across the country during the war. Fueled by patriotism and a pragmatic desire to organize the growing number of unskilled aircraft workers, many of whom were African Americans, sentiment began to rise in the IAM's ranks for amending the discriminatory membership requirements. At the union's 1940 convention, delegates from New York, Pennsylvania, and California all advocated elimination of the ritual and the admission of African Americans; the matter was tabled, however, after the union's secretary-treasurer, a southerner, declared that local lodges would likely do as they wanted regardless of any official action. Perhaps drawing on the secretary-treasurer's words, a growing number of local lodges did indeed tackle the issue themselves. At the same time that the FEPC was investigating the massive Boeing lodge, for example, another lodge in Seattle tried to circumvent the union's membership prohibition by interpreting the whites-only clause as applying to an individual's character rather than his skin color. Sadly, these local officials were advised by the national leadership that their interpretation was in error, and the lodge ceased its efforts to recruit black members. A group of black workers who had been granted membership by an IAM lodge in St. Louis were afforded similar treatment once international officers discovered the local's transgression.<sup>52</sup>

These isolated rebellions gave way to a more widespread campaign against the union's membership policy in 1944 when the officers of District Lodge 727, which represented 35,000 workers at Lockheed Aircraft in Burbank, California, sent an open letter to lodges throughout the country. "Our membership believes," this communication read, "that the [all-white] clause in our ritual is unworthy of our great democratic association and opposed to the principles of democracy in the Constitution of the United States." Though District 727 was chastised for embarrassing the union with such public entreaties, its campaign garnered support for opening the IAM's ranks to African Americans: at the 1945 convention, a floor vote on whether to eliminate the ritual was defeated by the slim margin of 2,173 to 1,958. Not even Harvey Brown, who as president of the IAM was one of the staunchest defenders of its discriminatory policies, could deny the importance of these numbers.<sup>53</sup>

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by allowing the local lodge to issue work permits to African Americans if they would pay the equivalent of initiation fees and monthly dues.

<sup>52</sup> Perlman, *Machinists*, 278-79; Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 214-15.

<sup>53</sup> Dale O. Reed and W. M. Holladay to IAM recording secretaries, n.d., Folder 8, Box 4, District 776 Papers (quotations); Perlman, *Machinists*, 278-79. That a national campaign to repeal

While there is no record of whether District 776 voted for elimination of the ritual during the 1945 convention, the Fort Worth union seems to have been among the growing number of IAM lodges that favored amending the union's discriminatory membership policies. Shortly after the leaders of Lodge 727 began circulating their antidiscrimination letter, District 776 president J. D. Smith informed the FEPC's Don Ellinger that many of the union's local leaders at Convair hoped the IAM executive council would follow the example of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers and establish auxiliary locals for African Americans. Despite coming under scrutiny when the FEPC discovered that the boilermakers used this segregated arrangement to minimize black representation in union leadership, auxiliary locals fostered direct contact between local union leaders and African American members. By contrast, the AFL's federal labor unions usually depended on absentee AFL staff members to act as intermediaries, a situation that often resulted in underrepresentation of black workers and their interests.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, like their UAW counterparts at North American, District 776 leaders still showed definite limits to their racial moderation. While he favored the creation of segregated auxiliaries within the IAM, Smith made it clear that he would not take any action unless the Grand Lodge approved such arrangements throughout the nation. Even in the absence of official sanction, however, Smith did not ignore the organizational aspirations of Convair's black employees, who in 1943 chartered their own federal labor union with assistance from the local IAM aircraft industry organizing committee. Known as the Glover Colored Aircraft Workers Union, this AFL affiliate had the same drawbacks for African Americans as other federal labor unions, namely, its failure to provide its members with a voice in the affairs of their bargaining agent, District 776. Nevertheless, that Smith and his fellow IAM officers even considered such action was an important

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the IAM's ritual came out of Lockheed is not surprising given that in 1941 the company had been the first aircraft manufacturer to actively seek out black employees. See Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 39.

<sup>54</sup> Don Ellinger to Clarence Mitchell, July 21, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-336," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228; Harvey Brown to Dale Reed, February 16, 1944, International President's Office Records, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Records (Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison), microfilm, reel 271; hereinafter cited as IAM Records, microfilm. On the use of Jim Crow auxiliaries by the boilermakers union and its conflicts with the FEPC, see Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 267-317; Kersten, *Labor's Home Front*, 68-99; and Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 185-208.

departure from the racism that had dominated the Fort Worth labor movement.<sup>55</sup>

International union policies aside, the true litmus test of the labor movement's wartime commitment to African Americans was found in how well union leaders performed their duty of representing workers at the local level. In the case of William Keele, it is tempting to dismiss the cooperation he received from his Local 645 steward as little more than a peculiarity. When this conclusion is considered alongside the full history of wartime representation by both Local 645 and District 776, however, the evidence suggests that Keele's positive experience was part of a broader pattern of accommodating relations between the FEPC and the local leadership of the aircraft unions. Throughout the war, Ellinger's correspondence with his colleagues in Washington was full of statements praising both UAW and IAM officials for their cooperation in adjusting African American complaints. This analysis is not to suggest, of course, that either union was an oasis of racially progressive thought: even as he praised their leaders, Ellinger voiced concerns about the willingness of these same men to condone segregation in their unions. Personal attitudes aside, union support was nevertheless instrumental to the FEPC's accomplishments in the Fort Worth aircraft plants. In the end, the single most important factor in explaining why both the UAW and IAM cooperated with Ellinger was the hostility they faced from management at North American and Convair. As the war dragged on, the leaders of Local 645 and District 776 recognized that the struggles of African Americans against arbitrary discrimination complemented their own battle for fair contracts and dignified treatment on the job.

The clearest evidence of the IAM and UAW's local approach to African Americans can be seen in the way they handled these workers' grievances. Because wartime unions lacked the power to sanction strikes or other protest actions that might disrupt production, the formalized grievance procedure was perhaps their most powerful tool for convincing workers of the unions' usefulness. Speaking to local union leaders in 1943, IAM Grand Lodge representative L. M. Fagan warned, "The most important thing is not a wage increase, but job protection and seniority rights. Your job is to sell Texas on your union, and your work

<sup>55</sup> Don Ellinger to Clarence Mitchell, July 21, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-336," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228; "Subject: Federal Labor Union No. 23394," December 11, 1953, International President's Office Records, IAM Records, microfilm, reel 108; "Glover Colored Aircraft Workers Union Charter," April 21, 1943, Folder 18, Box 6, District 776 Papers; Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, 130.

will really begin when you win the election, for you must police your agreement with management." Though they might have found it disagreeable to assist African Americans, local leaders took Fagan's words to heart and recognized that even racial grievances had to be vigorously adjudicated if the aircraft unions hoped to maintain their legitimacy in a wartime environment where more militant actions were impossible.<sup>56</sup>

One important grievance case involved R. C. Carroll, a black janitor at Convair, who served as president of the Glover Colored Aircraft Workers Union. Since being hired in 1942, Carroll had gained recognition as a hard worker and was often consulted for advice by foremen in the offices he cleaned. In June 1944 Carroll wrote labor relations director John Hassler to request consideration for either an upgrade to the position of leadman or a transfer to another department. Carroll's entreaties apparently did not please his white foreman, however, for Carroll began to receive disciplinary notices on trumped-up charges of insubordination and absenteeism. This treatment continued for several days until Carroll was discharged.<sup>57</sup> When Ellinger contacted Convair, he was told that Carroll had been let go due to a failure to maintain work standards and an alleged penchant for loafing. Ellinger remained suspicious, though, and continued to press the company for the real reason. His doubts were confirmed when a representative of Convair stated that Carroll was simply attempting to get a job in the maintenance department, where he would have the opportunity to work with whites. "All these niggers want," the official argued, "is a chance to work with white people."<sup>58</sup>

Faced with this rather forthright admission, Ellinger contacted District 776 president J. D. Smith to ask for his help in gaining Carroll's reinstatement. As fate would have it, Carroll's case came at an opportune time for the union. Since being recognized as the plant's sole collective bargaining agent in March 1943, District 776 had been engaged in a bitter battle with Convair's recalcitrant labor relations department

<sup>56</sup> "CIO Flayed by Dallas Union Man," *Dallas Morning News*, February 16, 1943, pp. 1, 9. For a case study outlining the importance of the grievance procedure in the institutional culture of industrial unions, see Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*, 211–23. On the centrality of the grievance procedure in the early history of Fort Worth's aircraft unions, see Kirk White, "The Development of IAM District Lodge 776 in Fort Worth, Texas, 1942–1946: A Case Study in the Growth of Organized Labor during World War II" (M.A. thesis, University of North Texas, 1999), 66–70, 77–82.

<sup>57</sup> R. C. Carroll to John Hassler, June 6, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-336," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228; R. C. Carroll to Don Ellinger, June 15, 1944, *ibid.*; Statement of J. L. Roberts, H. Avells, and A. Dudley, June 27, 1944, *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, June 29, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," *ibid.*

to secure a contract. By the summer of 1944, members of the union had become so frustrated with the progress of negotiations that they filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for a strike vote under the War Labor Disputes Act.<sup>59</sup> This action placed District 776's leaders in an awkward position. On the one hand, the legitimacy of the local lodge depended on its officers' doing whatever it took to secure a contract, so for them to oppose the strike petition would risk rank-and-file abandonment of the union. On the other hand, these same leaders were also bound to honor the no-strike pledge signed by the AFL and the CIO in the opening days of the war. Relieving local leaders of their quandary, the national officers of the IAM took charge of the situation through a direct appeal to the membership in Fort Worth. After reminding the would-be strikers that given the recent invasion of Normandy their cooperation was more necessary than ever, Grand Lodge officials rescinded the petition.<sup>60</sup>

While the Grand Lodge's action ended the immediate threat of a strike, there still remained the issue of securing a contract and dealing with the even more frustrated District 776 membership. Carroll's termination took place within this tense atmosphere. Smith shrewdly recognized that Carroll's case could be used to keep the members' blood boiling by providing an example of the blatant discrimination that was possible when management went unchecked. Although the district president confided to Ellinger that Carroll had been out of line in requesting a job where he would have to work with whites, Smith nevertheless filed a grievance on the termination and took the case up with the plant grievance committee. At first, Convair refused to budge, but Smith turned the tables by threatening to initiate arbitration proceedings against the company. This warning took on even more significance when the union's paper, the *Cow-Town Plane Facts*, offered its public support for Carroll's reinstatement. Faced with the prospect

<sup>59</sup>On the events leading up to District 776's strike petition, see White, "Development of IAM District Lodge 776," pp. 57-88. Under the War Labor Disputes Act, better known as the Smith-Connally Act, unions operating in essential war industries were required to give the government thirty days' notice of their intent to strike. It was hoped that this cooling-off period would allow enough time for disagreements to be more amicably resolved—in reality, tensions often increased significantly during the intervening period. If a strike were called without this official authorization, not only could the affected plant be seized by the government, but the union could also be held liable for any damages caused by its members. However, because even the threat of a strike was often enough reason for the government to seize a plant, union leaders began to use this tactic to leverage concessions from management. See James B. Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law during World War II* (Urbana, 1998), 195-97.

<sup>60</sup>H. W. Brown to J. D. Smith, June 8, 1944, International President's Office Records, IAM Records, microfilm, reel 345.



of an expensive arbitration and an even more agitated workforce, Convair reinstated Carroll with full seniority rights and transferred him to the day shift. Though Ellinger admitted that the FEPC's influence with Convair may have helped, he concluded that "[the] adjustment affected was handled by the machinists and they deserve full credit for it."<sup>61</sup>

Carroll's case was not the only African American grievance that the all-white IAM became involved in. When janitor Ennis Dunkin was fired for substandard production in January 1945, he brought his complaint to Smith, who agreed to initiate a grievance even though the forty-eight-hour time limit for doing so had passed. Like Carroll, Dunkin had apparently been quite active in the union's organizing efforts and served as a trustee for the Glover auxiliary. Through Smith's assistance, Dunkin was eventually offered reinstatement in April, but he refused it on the grounds that he had secured a position as foreman with another company. Lest this decision be misunderstood as a condemnation of District 776, Dunkin declared that the union had done well by him and that Smith had personally called about returning to work at Convair.<sup>62</sup>

Even more impressive was the IAM's willingness to fight in behalf of African American women for higher wages. Following a lengthy struggle by the international office of the IAM, in July 1944 the War Labor Board ordered management at Convair to completely redo the company's wage rates. Under the so-called Southern California Airframe Industry (SCAI) plan, all workers in Convair's Fort Worth facility were to be reclassified and paid retroactively according to job descriptions established by a National Airframe Panel based on its observations of defense plant operations on the West Coast. As it had done in virtually all matters involving labor relations, however, Convair attempted to skirt the order when possible by working employees outside designated classifications for wages below those specified. Although there is no evidence that the company targeted African Americans, such tactics did

<sup>61</sup> Don Ellinger to J. D. Smith, June 16, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-336," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228; Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, June 29, 1944, *ibid.*; Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, July 21, 1944, *ibid.* (quotation); "Convair Union Withdraws Strike Vote," June 16, 1944, International President's Office Records, IAM Records, microfilm, reel 345; "Robert Carroll Termination Case Headed for Arbitration," *Cow-Town Plane Facts*, July 14, 1944. This episode is also briefly mentioned in an essay by Merl Reed, but his conclusion that Carroll's reinstatement was brought about in part by a group known as the Fort Worth Negro Welfare Council is contradicted by Ellinger's account. See Reed, "Bell Aircraft Comes South," 127.

<sup>62</sup> "Statement of Ennis Dunkin," January 13, 1945, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-462," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228; Ennis Dunkin to Don Ellinger, April 19, 1945, *ibid.*

fall hard on these workers since they were already concentrated in the lowest-paying jobs.<sup>63</sup>

In July 1945 IAM Grand Lodge representative C. Z. Lindsey informed Smith that Convair had refused to upgrade its African American maids to the classification of janitor, even though they were already performing the duties of a janitor under the SCAI plan. Even worse, the company was paying these women up to twenty cents per hour less than the designated rate for janitors and had refused to give them the retroactive lump sum that other workers had received. When Lindsey asked Convair's Hassler why the women were not given the full pay owed them, the company official glibly responded that he was concerned about the consequences of an "economic disparagement within the Fort Worth colored colony" if highly paid maids were introduced there. In a statement rendered all the more impressive by its writer's apparent lack of racial prejudice, Lindsey advised Smith that District 776 "should lend every effort to secure justice for those whose rights have been so deliberately [*sic*] ignored by insisting they be classed as janitors."<sup>64</sup>

Smith took Lindsey's instructions to heart and approached Convair several times with requests that these African American women be properly classified. Each time he was met with a request that the union instead negotiate a stipulated agreement outside the regular SCAI plan allowing for maids to be paid less than janitors. In bringing the matter up with the National Airframe Panel, Lindsey said there was no way the union could agree to such a stipulation since "it would amount to a separate low rate of pay for females performing essentially the same duties as males at a higher rate." Faced with these untenable demands, Smith petitioned the NLRB for authorization to conduct a strike vote in July 1945, a shrewd tactic that took advantage of the War Labor Disputes Act's provision requiring unions to obtain the approval of their members before taking any kind of strike action. Although the disparity in maids' wages was not the sole issue about which Smith complained, it is quite telling that he included it among the five most important areas of disagreement between the union and Convair.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup>C. Z. Lindsey to Benjamin Aaron, July 1, 1945, International President's Office Records, IAM Records, microfilm, reel 345; "Fort Worth Air Plant Wage Plan Decreed," *Dallas Morning News*, August 24, 1944, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup>C. Z. Lindsey to J. D. Smith, May 23, 1945, International President's Office Records, IAM Records, microfilm, reel 345 (quotations); C. Z. Lindsey to Benjamin Aaron, July 1, 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup>J. D. Smith to Paul Herzog, July 10, 1945, *ibid.* The other areas of disagreement that Smith cited to the NLRB were the company's refusal to follow seniority in layoffs, the application of the six-month merit review, the replacement of production workers with downgraded supervisors, and the proper handling of grievances concerning hours and rates of pay. *Ibid.*

Had Smith or any other union leader in Fort Worth threatened a strike in behalf of African American maids before the war, they likely would have been labeled as radicals and unceremoniously dismissed from their duties by angry white members. By the end of the war, however, such demands apparently no longer raised eyebrows among the thousands of IAM members who had struggled for a contract over the past three years. For these workers, the plight of a few black maids was another example of Convair's constant attempts to deal unfairly and unilaterally with its workforce. Smith's strike threat worked: in August 1945 the union withdrew its petition after Convair agreed to negotiate a permanent contract and clarify older areas of dispute.<sup>66</sup>

Although UAW Local 645 never had to resort to filing charges or petitioning the government for a strike vote in its battles with North American, it too became involved in a number of grievance cases in behalf of African American members, demonstrating in the process its commitment to the principles of strong, contract-focused unionism. One particularly incendiary incident took place in late 1943 and involved a black laborer named Willie Shields. At the end of his shift in North American's metal segregating department one evening, Shields was threatened by a group of white men when he tried to squeeze past them on his way to the time clocks. Having reported the encounter to his leadman, Shields believed the problem would be taken care of and thus attempted to take the same route the following night. This time, however, the white men were waiting, and when one of them struck him on the leg with a pipe, Shields picked up a brick and threatened to defend himself. The melee ended without any further violence, but Shields's troubles were just beginning. Reporting the confrontation to his leadman once again, a worried Shields asked whether he and other African American employees would be forced to carry guns to the plant in order to protect themselves from such thugs. Almost immediately after making this statement, the beleaguered black laborer was detained by plant security and terminated on charges that he had threatened a supervisor. When Shields protested his firing to North American's labor

<sup>66</sup>C. Z. Lindsey to Benjamin Aaron, July 1, 1945, *ibid.*; "IAM Lodge Withdrew Strike Petition After Reaching Agreement with Convair," *Cow-Town Plane Facts*, August 10, 1945. Although he does not mention African American women specifically, Andrew Kersten maintains that the IAM was one of the labor movement's most adamant supporters of equal pay for equal work during the war and consistently refused the attempts of management to create separate job classifications for men and women. See Kersten, *Labor's Home Front*, 124. For an account of black women's relationship with organized labor during the war and how it compared with the experience of white women, see Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement* (2 vols.; New York, 1979-1980), II, 360-93.

relations office, he was told to consider the dismissal a favor since he probably would be killed if management sided with him against a group of whites.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly, Shields's case was tailor-made for intervention, and both the UAW and the FEPC soon became involved. Grievance committee chairman Homer Davidson was the first person from the union to come to Shields's aid, filing a complaint that quickly worked its way through the established grievance procedure. In keeping with its past dealings with employees, management refused to budge on its decision, and the grievance was dropped from the committee's agenda. Suspicious that Davidson had not pressed the case hard enough, FEPC examiner Leonard Brin began looking into the operations of Local 645 as part of his investigation. Meeting with the local's executive council, Brin reported that half the leadership was sympathetic to the problems of blacks, while the other half was "either antagonistic or unable to see the core of the problems involved." Davidson himself admitted dropping Shields's grievance but said he had been forced to do so because he could not secure any African American witnesses to testify. The other officers present defended Davidson's actions and maintained that they handled cases on behalf of African Americans the same as other members. This apparently did not impress Brin, especially after he discovered that black members of the local were meeting separately from whites at the Negro YMCA in Dallas. When Davidson and the council urged him to convince these workers to return to the union hall, Brin refused, saying that it was not up to him to do the union's organizing for it. Although he officially concluded that the meeting had impressed the local leadership with the importance of the FEPC's program, Brin—who did not have a background in the labor movement and was thus much less concerned than Ellinger about embarrassing recalcitrant unions—stated confidentially that it might be necessary to call in the UAW's international officers to supervise the local.<sup>68</sup>

Hoping to avoid this drastic course of action and solidify relations between the FEPC and Local 645, Brin called on Ellinger to meet with the union's officers one more time. Following a conference with these leaders, Ellinger reported back that they had agreed Shields's firing was racially discriminatory and would take any action necessary

<sup>67</sup> Leonard Brin to Will Maslow, March 3, 1944, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-156," Box 8, Closed Cases, RG 228; "Statement of Willie Shields," February 1, 1944, *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> "For the File: North American Aviation, Inc., of Texas," March 7, 1944, *ibid.*; "Memo to Maslow," n.d., *ibid.* (quotation). Biographical information on Brin can be found in Denton L. Watson, ed., *The Papers of Clarence Mitchell Jr.* Vol. II: 1944–1946 (Athens, Ohio, 2005), 767.

to sell this conclusion to the members and the public. The real trouble, they insisted, was getting North American to go along. The officers and Ellinger agreed that the crux of the problem for Shields and all other workers in the plant was the grievance procedure, which was weak and under management's control. Without the most airtight evidence, a grievance had almost no chance of coming successfully through arbitration, which explained the initial dismissal of Shields's case. Ellinger maintained that Shields was not the only member to suffer from the weakness of the contract: out of nearly two dozen cases recently filed, the union had won only two.<sup>69</sup>

In spite of his earlier lukewarm assessment, these updates convinced Brin that Local 645 was indeed fulfilling its obligations to African American members. The real issue was to show that this case (which had become less pressing because Shields had been drafted) was part of a larger pattern of discrimination that could only be adjusted by holding hearings on the situation at North American. Brin was therefore dismayed to learn that his superiors in Washington had contacted UAW president R. J. Thomas and criticized the local for supposedly refusing to reinstate Shields. Thomas responded by sending an international representative to Grand Prairie, a move that did little to put Brin in Local 645's good graces. In letters to Thomas and FEPC chairman George Johnson, Brin assured both men that the union's officers had been consistently helpful. Furthermore, based on his own frustrating communications with North American, he doubted that any offer of reinstatement had ever been made to Shields. Even more important, Brin concluded that the consequences of a solitary adjustment in Shields's case, which was now a moot point, would only "serve to bury for all time the vicious situation in this plant where supervisory employees kick minority groups around, apparently with the consent of higher authority." What was needed was a hearing to publicly expose North American's discrimination and compel its compliance. Despite this impassioned plea for broader action by the FEPC, Brin's superiors in Washington were confident that the episode had taught North American a much-needed lesson, and they refused to call the requested hearing.<sup>70</sup>

Like its IAM counterpart at Convair, UAW Local 645 was also concerned about North American management's arbitrary use of

<sup>69</sup> Don Ellinger to Leonard Brin, March 23, 1944, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-156," Box 8, Closed Cases, RG 228.

<sup>70</sup> Leonard Brin to George Johnson, April 19, 1944, *ibid.* (quotation); Leonard Brin to R. J. Thomas, April 19, 1944, *ibid.*; "Final Disposition Report," August 9, 1944, *ibid.*

classifications and wage scales. Regardless of its members' personal feelings about African Americans, the union had to confront any and all violations of the contract lest such actions embolden the company to commit further abuses. In the midst of Shields's case, another complaint came into the FEPC from Joseph Brown, a truckman's helper, alleging that African Americans in North American's transportation department were not being offered upgrades. In addition to Brown's complaint that he was being worked as a truck driver for ten cents an hour below the proper rate, a number of his fellow workers were unhappy at having to train new white workers who would then advance ahead of the black employees. There was also a great deal of dissatisfaction with the foremen in the transportation department, especially a former prison guard named Sells who allegedly bragged about shooting black prisoners. Hoping to adjust the matter through the union rather than the FEPC, Ellinger convinced Brown to gather other black workers for a meeting with grievance committee chairman Davidson and Local 645 president O. H. Britt. Both union officers assured the men that they were welcome in the union hall and urged them to make use of the grievance procedure when such discrimination took place. Ellinger concurred, telling the gathered workers that the union's regular shop procedure was the best place for them to seek redress since it had broader coverage than the FEPC. Davidson also agreed to appoint more African Americans to positions as union stewards and selected a man on the spot. For their part, Brown and his coworkers decided to hold a monthly meeting in order to convey their problems directly to Davidson and the grievance committee. When news of this gathering and the union's support for it reached the general foreman of the transportation department, he quickly agreed—over the objections of North American's labor relations director F. J. Conlan—to remove foreman Sells, appoint three black leadmen, and further investigate Brown's pay discrimination claims.<sup>71</sup>

Impressive as the UAW's and the IAM's local representation of African Americans was, skeptics will no doubt point out that official actions by union leaders reveal relatively little about the attitudes of rank-and-file members. And indeed, certain events do suggest that the racial attitudes of white aircraft workers did not soften significantly during the war—both the violence meted out to Willie Shields for pushing past a group of white workers at North American and the refusal of white employees to work alongside William Keele at Convair bear

<sup>71</sup> Don Ellinger to Leonard Brin, April 25, 1944, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-288," *ibid.*; "Special Meeting of Dept. 59: Colored People," April 13, 1944, *ibid.*

witness to this. Shameful as these episodes were, however, they must be considered alongside contrary examples. Though they had to be persuaded by District 776 leaders that it was in their interest, Keele's white antagonists did eventually accept him into their department without further protest. If the violence at North American was disturbing, it must also be remembered that according to Local 645 president W. M. Anderson, black janitors enjoyed great success in organizing white workers during the union's early efforts at the plant. Even more telling is that the IAM's much-publicized campaigns to reinstate R. C. Carroll and secure equal wages for black female janitors apparently did not elicit any reaction from the thousands of white rank and filers who read about the initiatives in the *Cow-Town Plane Facts*. While it would be going too far to argue that this quietude indicates the absence of racism, it does suggest that white workers were developing a basic sense of economic fairness with regard to their African American counterparts. At a time when the union was struggling to secure an organizational foothold at Convair, District 776's leadership would certainly not have advertised these racial grievances if they did not feel that such action enjoyed at least some support from the all-white membership.

One other important incident at Convair reveals the slow but steady breakdown of exclusionary racial sentiment among the plant's white rank-and-file union members. In February 1944 a white worker named J. D. McNeely was laid off by Convair, and his job was taken over by a group of less senior African Americans. Supported by the statements of at least six of his coworkers, McNeely filed a grievance with District 776 complaining about this situation. While it is tempting to view this complaint as being racially motivated, McNeely seems to have considered the incident from a less-biased perspective and laid bare the issues at stake with admirable clarity: "When [assistant foreman] Smith told me he didn't have enough work for me I said to him that I thought the ones who had been there for some time should have preference over the newer ones. He told me seniority didn't count with him, that he would keep the ones he wanted to. Apparently that is what he did because he kept men who had been employed less than six months." For McNeely, the race of the individuals who replaced him was secondary to the clear violation of the seniority principle that he and other District 776 members were demanding in the union's contract negotiations.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup>"Statement of J. D. McNeely," n.d., Folder 15, Box 3, District 776 Papers.

This same sense of economic injustice was shared by the coworkers who testified in McNeely's behalf. Though they all made the point that "a Negro" had taken McNeely's job, these witnesses seemed more concerned that the black replacement was doing the same work for the minimum rate of sixty cents per hour. Notably, unlike their counterparts in the Keele case, these white witnesses stayed on the job after McNeely's black replacement entered the department. In short, the same goal that compelled union leadership to take up the grievances of African Americans and cooperate with the FEPC also drove the various participants in McNeely's case: a pragmatic desire to counter the arbitrary authority of the aircraft manufacturers. In this bitter industrial struggle, white aircraft workers had little choice but to recognize that their welfare and the strength of their union depended on maintaining such color-blind economic principles as seniority and equal pay for equal work.<sup>73</sup>

As much as racial attitudes and union practices had evolved, neither the rank and file nor their leaders were in a position to address the looming problem of unemployment facing all defense workers at the end of the war. Proponents of fair employment were equally fearful that even the minor gains won by African Americans would vanish once industries shut down and veterans returned from overseas. FEPC officials began preparing for the inevitable downturn as early as the summer of 1944 but found themselves cut off from high-level discussions about reconversion to a peacetime economy. The impact of this falling economic tide on the FEPC's already limited bargaining power was particularly pronounced at Convair. As the final year of the war began, Ellinger had at last managed to gain some movement from management on training and upgrading African Americans. The turning point came in February 1945 when the army ordered Convair to comply with the FEPC's program. While still denying that his company had ever practiced discrimination, Convair's director of labor relations, John Hassler, agreed to set aside the foundry, drop hammer, and plaster departments for African Americans and to reassign the whites holding these jobs. Hassler also assured the FEPC that seniority and employee evaluations would govern who would receive transfers. Though Ellinger cautioned that his superiors were likely to reject the plan if they thought that segregated departments would serve to limit black opportunities, given

<sup>73</sup> "Statement of Five Workers," March 4, 1944, *ibid.*; "Statement of H. C. Huff," March 6, 1944, *ibid.* It is not clear exactly what action, if any, IAM officials took or whether McNeely was reinstated.



the frustrating history of negotiations at Convair he was willing to recommend Hassler's idea on a trial basis in order to prove that African Americans could work in higher classifications. Just as expected, the FEPC's national office expressed concern about the arrangement, but ultimately officials there too agreed that it should be temporarily accepted "as a prelude to complete compliance."<sup>74</sup>

Initially, the upgrading program seemed to work quite well. According to Jackson Valtair, a consultant sent by Ellinger to meet with Hassler in late March 1945, management at Convair was "fairly satisfied" with the progress being made and had already conducted two training classes consisting of close to one hundred black employees under the supervision of skilled white sheet metal workers. Although Hassler contemptuously asserted that efficiency among the transferred black workers had fallen off after several weeks, Valtair confirmed that this slowdown was due to a change in the materials used. The black workers and their representatives in the Glover colored lodge also expressed their satisfaction with the program even as they urged continued vigilance on the part of the FEPC. By early May, African American employees of various skill levels represented over half of the workforce in the drop hammer department. Even more important, ninety of these workers had proved themselves in skilled classifications, leading Convair's fabrication superintendent, C. J. Petrick, to conclude that the program should be extended when the need for additional workers arose.<sup>75</sup>

By the time Petrick made this recommendation, however, the employment situation at Convair had already begun to deteriorate. Since initiating the upgrade plan in February 1945, close to 2,400 employees had been terminated due to decreasing workloads, and serious talks were being held on the prospect of cutting the workweek back to forty hours in order to avoid more layoffs. In light of these changes, Hassler reported that "the company does not feel that it would be justified in terminating qualified, experienced, white employees in order to make jobs for Negroes." More disturbing was the announcement in late May

<sup>74</sup> Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 321-26; Don Ellinger to Clarence Mitchell, February 8, 1945, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228; Don Ellinger to Clarence Mitchell, February 9, 1945, *ibid.*; "Outline of Plan Relative to Increasing Employment of Negro Men and Women," n.d., *ibid.*; Clarence Mitchell to Don Ellinger, February 28, 1945, *ibid.*; Don Ellinger to John Hassler, March 6, 1945, *ibid.* (quotation).

<sup>75</sup> Jackson Valtair to Don Ellinger, March 26, 1945, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228 (quotation); Jackson Valtair to Don Ellinger, May 11, 1945, *ibid.*; John Hassler to Capt. M. H. Baugh, May 12, 1945, *ibid.*; "Present Status of Plan for Employment of Negro Workers at Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp.," n.d., *ibid.*

that the army was cutting back its purchases of aircraft by some 17,000 planes. As a result, by the end of September the workforce at Convair, which stood at roughly 23,000 at the beginning of the year, was scheduled to be slashed by another 10,000 employees. Having already produced a large surplus of parts, Convair's fabrication operations were particularly hard hit. In an ominous signal of the hard times to come, the company announced that the drop hammer department into which many African Americans had recently transferred was scheduled for elimination. Whether there was any sinister intent behind this decision is difficult to say, but Ellinger immediately realized that it devastated the FEPC's program. Given that more than 4,000 of the fabrication workers being laid off were white, Ellinger concluded that "[it] seems . . . we have no acceptable complaint because of the one hundred Negroes who were included in the reduction."<sup>76</sup>

The situation was even bleaker at Grand Prairie, where in mid-August 1944 the army decided to curtail North American's existing prime contract for bombers. Although the plant retained some subcontracting work, the announcement meant that more than half of the roughly 30,000 total employees still on the company's payroll were to be laid off by the end of the year in line with their seniority. With hundreds of workers leaving every week, it was not long before African Americans got caught up in the fray. In December, Volney Phillips, one of the three black men promoted to the position of leadman in the transportation department case earlier that year, received word that he was being demoted to truck driver and replaced by a less-senior white employee. When Phillips asked why, his foreman forthrightly told him that due to cutbacks and departmental rearrangements there was no longer an all-black crew for Phillips to lead. Ellinger sent off a letter protesting this decision and requesting access to the company's employee evaluations so that he could determine for himself whether Phillips was entitled to remain in the position. Rather than dispute the FEPC's charges, however, North American's labor relations director, F. J. Conlan, simply replied that the company had utilized as many African Americans as it could and would continue to do so "when practical." Ellinger could do little in response—in July 1945, southern legislators had managed to cut the FEPC's budget in half, virtually crippling its field operations.

<sup>76</sup> "Present Status of Plan for Employment of Negro Workers at Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp.," n.d., *ibid.* (first quotation); Don Ellinger to Will Maslow, May 31, 1945, *ibid.*; "Reverting to 40-Hours Week Is Now Being Considered," *Cow-Town Plane Facts*, May 11, 1945 (second quotation); "Cutback Starts in Fort Worth," *ibid.*, June 1, 1945; Chamberlain, *Victory at Home*, 157.

Given these circumstances and the acceleration of layoffs in the plant, Ellinger conceded that the case was no longer adjustable. Two weeks later, in the wake of the Japanese surrender, North American announced that the Grand Prairie plant was to be shut down completely and all of its remaining 15,000 employees let go.<sup>77</sup>

Given that the eviscerated FEPC was unable to mount even a feeble campaign against the wholesale liquidation of black workers during the final months of the war, how are its investigations at North American and Convair to be evaluated? Any answer to this question must take into consideration the hard-fought gains Ellinger and his counterparts had achieved for African Americans over the previous years. When the Region X office was first opened, North American had refused to hire black workers for any other than janitorial and labor positions. But by mid-1944, over 2,300 African Americans worked in fifty-seven different classifications, including over four dozen black leadmen and assistant foremen. Though hundreds of these employees were still concentrated in unskilled work, for many others who gained work as riveters, assemblers, and inspectors, both the FEPC's and UAW Local 645's help were crucial. Unfortunately, the record of achievement at Convair, where a harder-nosed managerial style prevailed much longer than at North American, was more mixed. As late as October 1944, the Fort Worth plant employed only about 600 African Americans out of a total workforce of some 20,000, and all these workers were concentrated in a mere seven classifications. By the time the FEPC and its local allies in the IAM gained the backing of the military to force Convair to create an upgrading plan, wartime cutbacks had made this step a moot point. As the war in the Pacific entered its final weeks, Ellinger stated that regretably Convair had given the committee "the shadow of a satisfactory adjustment without its substance." When one considers the wholesale terminations that took place throughout the country in all the defense industries the FEPC investigated, Ellinger's conclusion provides important insight into a national issue.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup>"Memo to File," January 23, 1945, Folder "North American Aviation, Inc., 10-BR-454," Box 8, Closed Cases, RG 228; Don Ellinger to F. J. Conlan, February 6, 1945, *ibid.*; "Memo to File," July 30, 1945, *ibid.*; F. J. Conlan to Don Ellinger, February 19, 1945, Folder "North American Aviation, 10-BR-76," Box 7, *ibid.* (quotation); "17,000 More Workers at NAA Face Layoff by Mid-November," *Dallas Morning News*, August 17, 1944, pp. 1, 11; "North American Receives Shutdown Order," *ibid.*, August 16, 1945, pp. 1-2; Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 328.

<sup>78</sup>"Final Disposition Report," October 19, 1944, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-127," Box 2, Closed Cases, RG 228; Don Ellinger to Clarence Mitchell, July 16, 1945, Folder "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corp., 10-BR-235," *ibid.* (quotation).

The bleakness of the war's final days for black aircraft workers continued during the immediate postwar years. With the downsizing of Convair and the closing of North American, only a severely limited pool of jobs remained open to African Americans in the Fort Worth plants—brooms and shovels quickly replaced rivet guns and metal presses as the main tools for those lucky enough to remain in aircraft production. Furthermore, the FEPC's loss of its congressional battle for permanence in 1946 deprived African Americans of a symbolically important ally in their struggle for equality on the job.<sup>79</sup> Not until 1953, with the creation of Dwight D. Eisenhower's President's Committee on Government Contracts, did fair employment again become a priority for the federal government.<sup>80</sup>

Perhaps most tragic, in the absence of the FEPC, IAM District 776, Fort Worth's only remaining aircraft union, rapidly lost interest in the special problems facing black workers. As national IAM leaders struggled to revise the union's discriminatory initiation ritual and define its place in the emerging postwar civil rights coalition, local IAM leaders focused on the day-to-day shop-floor struggles essential to forging a vigorous union and a strong contract. Though they did not completely turn their backs on African Americans, these more organizationally secure union leaders made little effort to link the racial grievances of an underrepresented minority group to the broader economic interests of the entire membership. In short, as the nation entered this uncertain readjustment period, those who believed in the moral and economic imperatives of fair employment faced a long and daunting battle to make their voices heard.

<sup>79</sup> On the final days of the FEPC, see Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 321–43.

<sup>80</sup> For information on the President's Committee on Government Contracts and equal employment during the 1950s, see Robert Frederick Burk, *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights* (Knoxville, 1984), 89–108; Paul D. Moreno, *From Direct Action to Affirmative Action: Fair Employment Law and Policy in America, 1933–1972* (Baton Rouge, 1997), 180–88; Ronald Alan Schlundt, "Civil Rights Policies in the Eisenhower Years" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rice University, 1973), 59–91; and Joseph Abel, "Sunbelt Civil Rights: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Aircraft Manufacturing Industry of Texas, 1940–1980" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rice University, 2011), chap. 3.

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