

## **The Southern Negro Youth Congress: A Participant Recalls Its Past**

*In the article below historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall recounts her role as a founder of the New Orleans Youth Congress and the early years of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. This account is part of her soon to be published memoirs.*

Few of us know what we should know about the continuity of the movements for full racial equality in the Deep South. Amnesia about black history cuts us off from the past and undermines our self-image and our confidence that we can bring about important, constructive change in the world. I write as a historian whose life and work was inspired by the movements for racial equality in the South during the 1940s. The long civil rights movement in the south was powerful during the 1930s and 1940s. It was an interracial struggle with strong ties to the movements of sharecroppers, small farmers and industrial workers, university professors, students, business people, professionals and intellectuals. I share here some of my memories as a founder and participant in the New Orleans Youth Congress which became closely tied to the Southern Negro Youth Congress. One of SNYC's greatest achievements after World War II was organizing the Southern Youth Legislature held in Columbia, South Carolina in October, 1946. By 1947 SNYC was destroyed by racist and political terror, the cold war and the Red Scare and largely erased from historical and popular memory. Professional historians have begun to study the massive amount of previously unknown documents about these forgotten movements. I present here what I remember about the Southern Negro Youth Congress during its brief time of triumph after World War II and its sudden collapse in 1947 although it was not formally dissolved until 1949.

In the early fall of 1945, shortly after World War II ended, I read an announcement in the *New Orleans Times Picayune* informing the public that an international youth delegation was returning from the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco and stopping in various cities across the United States to establish a new, international youth organization to promote the aims of the United Nations. Everyone at the meeting was white. The delegates announced they had met with Negro youth in New Orleans first and then organized this separate meeting for whites. The Negro youth from their previous meeting walked into the white meeting in a body, sat down, and announced there would be no racially segregated youth organization in New Orleans claiming to support the objectives of the United Nations. Thus was founded the New Orleans Youth Council. It quickly became a large, active interracial organization and functioned under various names for the rest of the 1940s. We met as equals and fought racial discrimination, disenfranchisement and segregation. We had several hundred official and fringe members including students from all the universities in New Orleans, some high school students and young workers who were musicians, merchant seamen, factory workers, homemakers, maids, and business-owners. Many of our members were recently returned veterans of World War II who lived in black housing projects. The black veterans also

belonged to the Louisiana Veterans' Organization. We attended each others' parties and dances in our offices and homes and went to Afro-Louisiana music clubs, bars and restaurants together all over town. We all stood up together talking, joking, and laughing in the segregated streetcars although there were lots of vacant seats. We picketed the downtown department stores demanding they let African-Americans shop there. The NAACP Youth Council wanted to picket with us, but their parent organization would not allow it.

Our main means of communication was giving out leaflets all over town. The most memorable distributions took place at the longshoremen's shapeup at 6 a.m. on the docks. Crew bosses pointed to each man they wanted to hire for that day, saying, "You!" We would bring hundreds of leaflets calling for full equality for all, the right to vote, encouraging them to register and vote, protesting racial segregation and police brutality.. The longshoremen grabbed our leaflets, read them, folded them up and put them in their pockets. Not one leaflet was left on the ground.

Our major activity was voter registration. We sent interracial teams as door-to-door in black and poor white neighborhoods. The registration form asked for the applicant's age in days, months, and years. We would make these calculations, drive the applicants to the registrar's office and bring them back again and again after they had been turned down for technicalities, or for no stated reason. Some people were reluctant to go. One woman said she thought colored people weren't supposed to vote. But most of the response was positive, willing, and even grateful. Recently returning veterans were especially receptive. One veteran told me, "If you take the trouble to come here to help us vote, we can sure take the trouble to go to the registrar's office."Our voter registration campaign was so successful that a significant black vote emerged in New Orleans shortly after World War II.

In September 1946 we held a conference in New Orleans to promote racial equality. James E. Jackson, Jr., Educational Director of the Southern Negro Youth Congress gave the closing speech. The following month, we drove a car of delegates to SNYC's Southern Youth Legislature in Columbia, South Carolina. Another car of black longshoremen and truck drivers accompanied us as we drove through some of the most dangerous places in the South. At the Southern Youth Legislature I was deeply influenced by historian Herbert Aptheker's speech about slave revolts in the South. We had always been taught that slaves accepted and never resisted slavery. This speech was a revelation to me. I came to understand the power of history to change consciousness and inspire the struggle for equality.

As a newly elected member of the Executive Board of SNYC, I was seated on the stage right behind W.E.B. DuBois when he gave his closing address, "Behold the Land." His major message was that talented young people should remain in the South and struggle

for equality. This brief, powerful and prophetic speech had enormous influence on the delegates. Many of them went on to become both mentors and participants in the more famous civil rights movement which began in Montgomery, Alabama nine years later.

All the full time staff of SNYC were Communist Party members and under its discipline. This created some problems which I will discuss elsewhere. When the New Orleans Youth Council was born in 1945, the Communist Party had dissolved itself the year before and knew nothing about this new, spontaneous youth movement. By 1946 almost all the New Orleans Youth Council officers were recruited into the restored Communist Party of Louisiana. NOYC was ordered dissolved by the Communist Party ostensibly to create a chapter of SNYC instead.

By 1947, SNYC was dead. Here's how it happened. An openly publicized meeting at Carpenter's Hall in the French Quarter was announced by the Communist Party to introduce James E. Jackson, Jr., Educational Director of SNYC, to the community as the Communist Party's new District Organizer. The meeting was brief. Police were lined up along the walls. A goon squad (vigilantes) from the Seafarers' International Union (an all white AFL union) attacked the audience with metal folding chairs. The police waited until the attack was over and arrested only the speakers and the men in the audience, not their attackers. I went to night court to see what became of the men. Judge Edwin Babylon presided. He asked the prisoners to choose a person to be their spokesman. They chose an African-American trade unionist. The judge was shocked, and said, "You mean to say you white people are going to let a *nigger* speak for you?"

Members of the goon squad came looking for James Jackson in his apartment a few days after the trial. He locked himself in the bathroom and picked up the top of the toilet tank to defend himself. The police arrived and charged him with criminal mischief for breaking the toilet! As he left the courtroom, a mob was outside waiting for him. My father, attorney Herman L. Midlo, walked out of the courthouse with Jackson and told the crowd, "I know every one of you and you won't get away with it if you lay a hand on this man."

The mob let Jackson leave unharmed. He left town shortly thereafter and joined his wife Esther Cooper Jackson and their family in Detroit. By then all of SNYC's leadership had already retreated north to escape the violence directed against SNYC meetings by Birmingham Police Commissioner T. Eugene "Bull" Connor in Birmingham. Only SNYC founder and leader Louis E. Burnham remained in the South to co-chair former Vice President Henry A. Wallace's southern campaign for President in 1948. After the presidential race ended with cold warrior Harry S. Truman's victory, Burnham closed SNYC's office in Birmingham and left the South.

**Sources:**

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