

Amplifying Black Voices in the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Department Records: A Case Study in Context Appraisal Digitization

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Abstract

At first, content appraisal for digitization of the national AFL-CIO Civil Rights Department Records was driven by the assumption that the Federation worked in close collaboration with the civil rights movement to oppose discrimination, both within organized labor, and the throughout the broader society. Therefore, we only needed to digitize a selection of the department's records covering its most important functions and activities. Our first attempt at using this traditional functional approach focused on the administrative, chronological, correspondence, and subject files, all largely created by the department's directors and their staff.

However, as we read secondary background literature and reviewed documents in the records, it became clear that the historical interaction between the civil rights movement and the AFL-CIO was more complex than simply a mutually supportive relationship. At its founding in 1955, the AFL-CIO stated a principal of equal participation, "To encourage all workers without regard to race, creed, color, nationality. The founding convention led to the creation of the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Department to implement this principle of "encouragement."

From the start, several factors undermined its efforts. Among the AFL-CIO affiliated national unions, entrenched conservative and racist forces with a tradition dating back to anti-bellum times continued to defend and enforce exclusion, segregation, and discrimination, particularly in the south. In the face of this ongoing opposition, the AFL-CIO leadership claimed it had no power to enforce equality at the local, state, and national levels because its affiliates were autonomous and not subject to the Federation's authority, at least on this issue.

For the Civil Rights Department, this meant that negotiations aimed at voluntary compliance was the only tool it had in its efforts to eliminate discrimination. In addition, the labor movement's traditional opposition to outside interference in its internal affairs limited cooperation with government agencies and outside civil rights organizations. The stated principle of equality combined with these policies meant that the AFL-CIO often pursued a contradictory approach to civil rights, declaring support for the movement's broad social goals and backing up its words with some limited financial, legal and mobilization support, while at the same time, resisting outside civil rights movement pressure to eliminate racist practices within labor. These dynamics were compounded by the fact that the department was led by appointed white liberals from 1955 to 1974, who had not experienced racism in their personal lives. More outspoken Black union leaders, who had decades of experience combating racism on the job and in the labor movement, were passed over for leadership positions in the department.

Consequently, many Black labor civil rights voices are muted or buried in the records or can even be absent. While as archivists, we cannot restore absent speech in the records, we can seek ways to make silenced Black voices more visible. A starting point for this process was rejecting an almost exclusive emphasis on digitizing functional records recreated by the department's leadership in favor of a more balanced approach between this material and documents created by

or about Black civil rights activists at the workplace, local, state, and national levels. This approach would bring African American voices to the fore while providing a context of how the department reacted to Black demands at the height of the civil rights movement.

About the authors:

Ben Blake is the Archivist for the Labor and Social Justice Collections within Special Collections and Archives at the University of Maryland. He is responsible for several major labor collections, including the national records of the AFL-CIO, and the carpenters and bakery workers unions. Ben has over 23 years of experience as an archivist in a wide range of positions and has been involved in a number of archival projects documenting the history of labor and social justice organizations, individuals and events. He holds a BA in social science from Hampshire College, a MA in history from Cleveland State University, an MLIS from the University of Pittsburgh, and the SAA Digital Archives Specialist Certificate. Ben's professional interests include documenting labor and social justice events as they happen, establishing local community archival programs, and the history of the relationship between organized labor and other social justice movements, particularly the struggle for Black equality. He has published an article in the *American Archivist* on the history of labor archives, "The New Archives for American Labor: From Attic to Digital Shop Floor." Ben's current research and writing is focused on the 1937 "Little Steel" strike, Black shipyard workers in Chester PA, 1930s-1940s, working class opposition to American fascism in the Depression era, a new documentation strategy for labor archives, and a do-it-yourself manual for social justice archives.