Viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly-based indigenous leadership—and not one or two charismatic leaders—can knit together the diverse interest of their local institutions.

—Barack Obama, “Why Organize?”

The early 1950s were the nadir of the American Communist Party’s (CPUSA) political life. By 1951, leading Communist officials had been convicted of federal crimes and imprisoned, Communist labor activists were expelled from industrial unions, and the Subversive Securities Control Act (also known as the Communist Control Act) required Communist organizations to register with the U.S. attorney general. The political capital of the Communist Party (CP) peaked in the late 1930s, a period commonly known as the Popular Front era, largely because of its support of progressive causes such as the unionization of the basic industries of the American economy. Even before the emergence of World War II, that political capital began to erode as many Americans came to view the CP as an organization whose loyalty was essentially with a foreign government. By the early 1950s, the CP was under siege on virtually all fronts. And yet somehow it found ways to continue its grassroots activism, focusing heavily on the socio-economic advancement of workers, people of color, and other dispossessed groups in American life. Despite their deteriorating public image, Communists and those that sympathized with their causes continued their activism, much of which was rooted in communities throughout the country, well into the postwar period.

Detroit, Michigan, provides a case in point with respect to the Communists’ sustained community activism throughout the postwar years. In early March 1951 approximately two hundred Detroiter accompanied the Reverend Charles Hill on a peace pilgrimage to Washington, D.C. Hill was
an African American Baptist minister who was involved in numerous endeavors that emphasized social justice. He was also no stranger to Detroit’s radical circles, including the CP. Earlier that year, Hill had been instrumental in the formation of the Michigan Council for Peace, an institution that was an offshoot of the national American Crusade for Peace. The purpose of this pilgrimage was to present a list of demands to the federal government, all of which emphasized a peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. The American Crusade for Peace had distributed polls earlier in the year and asked Americans questions such as if they favored bringing troops home from the Korean conflict. Such queries received an outpouring of support. By March of that year, the crusade had narrowed its demands to three primary issues: an American withdrawal from Korea, “Big Five” negotiations for “long-term” world peace, and keeping Germany disarmed. Naturally, anticommunists saw the crusade as another attempt to dupe unsuspecting Americans into turning over the government to communism. In the anticommunists’ view, these activists wanted the United States out of Korea to give the Soviets and Chinese a wide-open path in their quest to bring communism to all of Asia. One small newspaper went so far as to encourage Americans to not “be one of the dupes” and to have “nothing to do with” the polls. Hill countered by proclaiming that the crusade was a “purely American movement” consisting of “housewives, union leaders, and clergy.”

At best, it may be said that the American Crusade for Peace was moderately successful. The pilgrimage took place and the crusaders presented their demands to the government. But the crusade was a microcosm of a broader wave of communist activism that continued well into the post–World War II era. In fact, the crusade lent itself to other endeavors that were near and dear to the hearts of the CP, including, but not limited to, equality in the workplace, civil rights throughout the community, and protecting foreign-born Americans from deportation. Of course, CP veterans like Nat Ganley, Helen Allison Winter, and William (Billy) Allan were present at these events, but so too were progressive activists such as Coleman Young, the first African American to be elected as Detroit’s mayor, and Jack Raskin, general secretary of Detroit’s Civil Rights Federation. Perhaps most importantly, these campaigns and initiatives were grounded in a community setting. The events were presented as “Labor Press” picnics, were held in black churches, and/or were a broader part of Memorial Day commemorations.

The purpose of this book is to enhance the understanding of the central role Communists played in the advancement of social democracy in one city with a critical mass of heavy industry throughout the mid-twentieth century. Most works that examine communism during this period focus on
high-profile national cases and/or the controversies provoked by the release of the Venona decrypts in the mid-1990s. Labor historians have focused on the expulsion of left-led unions from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), not what Communists might have been doing in local communities. Not much has been written, either about Detroit or elsewhere, concerning the continued work of Communists and their allies to address community concerns in the 1940s or 1950s. And the work that has been done on anticommunism at the state or local level tends to focus on the anticommunists as opposed to the specific activities of the Communists. I argue that, at the local level, the CP was a social space where a variety of individuals came together to air a collection of grievances—institutionalized racism, economic injustice, employer exploitation, inadequate living conditions, an unresponsive local government, and so on. Moreover, it was within CP circles in places like Detroit that community organizing found a home. The motivations behind community mobilization and the people who led the rallies were mixed and varied. But the insistence that neither the time period nor locale changed the fact that American Communists, and even their fellow travelers, were agents of an alien foreign policy agenda seriously oversimplifies the process in which leftists helped “workers,” people of color, and other underrepresented groups become part of the mainstream citizenry in America.

Communists and Community seeks to reframe the traditional chronology of the CPUSA as a means of better understanding the change that occurred in community activism in the mid-twentieth century. The traditional narrative emphasizes the international push to fight the rise of fascism through a “popular front.” Beginning in 1935, Moscow began to view Hitler, Franco, Mussolini, and their ilk as a greater threat than international capitalism and, thereafter, encouraged American Communists to forge alliances with socialists, progressive Democrats, and even moderate Republicans when it came to the fight against fascism. Historians have correctly pointed out that this gave the CP a greater level of respectability and legitimacy than it had witnessed heretofore. Yet most scholars define the Popular Front period as ending at the beginning of World War II. Certainly the Nazi-Soviet Pact, a nonaggression agreement between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, made it much more difficult to defend communism, but it did not end the brand of community activism the CP had sponsored throughout the mid-1930s. Communists and Community argues that Popular Front activism continued to flourish throughout the war years and into the postwar period, pointing out that Communist organizers were some of the most effective advocates for the socioeconomic betterment of a multiracial workforce throughout the mid-twentieth century.
As it stands, current scholarship that focuses on American communism after 1945 centers almost entirely on anticommunists or the shortcomings of the party, which eventually led to its demise. Given this trend in the literature, one comes to the conclusion that throughout the postwar period left-wing grassroots activists remained hunkered down and under siege as the postwar anticommunism wave began to crest. Yet throughout this period in Detroit, CP activists mobilized support for affordable housing, brought attention to police brutality, sought protection for the foreign-born, and led a movement for world peace. They continued to bring attention to issues involving civil rights throughout the city. They established “labor” schools that trained the next generation of working-class activists and simultaneously offered “know-how” courses that afforded non-native speakers a chance to improve their written and spoken English. Nationally, they supported Henry Wallace’s 1948 bid for the presidency as the Progressive Party candidate. Locally, they ran for and won seats to local political posts throughout Detroit on the Progressive Party ticket. And of course, they continued to play a vital role in various unions throughout Detroit.

A reexamination of the chronology of the CPUSA and the role leftists played in community activism provides a needed complement to the story of white ethnic backlash in the 1940s as described by Thomas Sugrue, Kevin Kruse, Arnold Hirsch, and others. Focusing on the work of the CP in local communities during World War II and the postwar period demonstrates that many progressives embraced civil rights and social-democratic policies in cities such as Detroit. These progressives are largely missing from studies that document the waning of the New Deal order. Such a work is also needed as a corrective to the scholarly focus on the party’s shortcomings as well as to better understand the relatively quick rise of conservatism among white ethnic workers.

Deeply embedded in the CP’s quest for industrial democracy were issues involving civil rights and social equality. Civil rights activists like Coleman Young had long considered civil rights synonymous with labor rights. As far as Communists in Detroit were concerned, segregation in intra-union bowling leagues was every bit as serious a matter as seniority rights in the plants. While union officialdom acknowledged institutionalized racism, ethnic bigotry, and sexism in the shops and throughout the community, their responses to it were lukewarm. Collective bargaining or legal injunctions, not direct action, became the preferred mode of addressing Jim Crow. Communist organizers and those that sympathized with them not only recognized the problem of institutionalized inequality; they also framed the issues as specifically relevant to grassroots, neighborhood concerns as they
staged demonstrations, boycotts, or rallies. In this way Communist organizers helped bridge labor and civil rights. Equal access to Detroit's Graystone Ballroom, adequate housing for racial minorities during the war years, or insisting that women war workers be allowed to keep their jobs were issues embraced by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and other unions throughout the 1940s, and the Communists were instrumental in mainstreaming these causes. Similar to Jane Addams, Albert Parsons, Emma Goldman, Eugene V. Debs, and other “radicals” of the early twentieth century, Communists throughout the war years forced more general union officials to embrace matters that were either considered marginal or narrowly defined niche issues in American life. By merging labor rights with civil rights and grounding their efforts on the community level, Communists in Detroit opened up a social space where a diverse collection of individuals could come together and air their grievances. In doing so, they connected bread-and-butter issues with the broader struggle of working-class America. This focus on community created important resources and had enduring effects on American workers at the grassroots level. The Second Red Scare compromised not only the leftists who had led the initiative to empower ordinary people but also the movement they had helped build. By 1946 the Soviet Union was the new enemy of the United States and “Red hunting” had become not only politically acceptable but a viable way to further political careers. Anything associated with collectivism, including community organizing, was susceptible to the charge of “communistic.” The mobilization of community-based activism had become directly associated with radicalism and, consequently, a liability to the labor-liberal-left coalition.

Telling this story from the local community perspective is also important because it further demonstrates the fluidity of the Popular Front alliances and explains how activism helped address the everyday concerns of individuals at the grassroots level. *Communists and Community* uses Detroit as a case study to examine how communist activists and their sympathizers used the community as an effective means of enhancing the quality of life for the city’s working class and the long-term effects of organized labor’s decision to force communists (or even those with any abstract affiliation with communism) out of the unions and abandon community-based activism. In that sense, it is essential to look at labor activism at the local level.

To fully appreciate the work the Communists undertook in Detroit, it is important to get a comprehensive picture of the city, its neighborhoods, and the local progressive forces within them. By 1941 Detroit was a sprawling industrial metropolis with factories, mills, and machine shops dotting the
urban landscape. These manufacturing facilities were scattered throughout the city. Throughout the 1920s, the Dodge Main Plant, located in Hamtramck (a separate municipality within Detroit’s city limits) employed thousands of workers of all races and ethnicities. The east side was dominated by the colossal Packard Plant. Located near “Poletown”—the heart of the Polish community in Detroit—Packard’s forty-acre industrial complex became the main source of income for thousands of Detroiters of Polish descent. The west side and down-river region was home to Henry Ford’s Rouge facilities. The Rouge was a city in and of itself. It employed hundreds of thousands of workers from all walks of life and attracted Detroiters from every corner of the city.

Despite the fact that these industrial complexes were scattered throughout the region, there was a definite heart to the city of Detroit. This central area of the city was home to several racial and ethnic conglomerations and comprised the core of Detroit’s working-class community. For example, by 1930, more than 66,000 Polish Detroiters (or persons of Polish descent) lived in Detroit; another 40,000 took up residence in Hamtramck. Detroit’s “Polonia” (or “Poletown”) consisted of the area bounded by St. Antoine Street on the west, Gratiot Avenue on the east, Canfield Street on the south, and Grand Boulevard to the north. From the earliest stages of Polish immigration to Detroit, Poles established community-based, self-help institutions. The Forest Avenue Dom Polski was one of these institutions. Located in the heart of Poletown, the “Polish house” was a center of community interaction throughout the 1920s. In the 1930s, it dedicated itself to the care of unemployed Polish workers and in some instances served as an organizational hub for striking workers.

The area bounded by Clinton Street on the south, Russell Street on the east, Brush Street on the west, and Watson to the north was home to Detroit’s Jewish community. Further south, there was a clustering of Italian residents. This neighborhood was bounded by St. Antoine on the west, Orleans/Dequindre Avenue to the east, Congress Street on the south, and Mullett Street to the north. The area to the immediate west of Woodward Avenue became home to thousands of Mexican Detroiters throughout the 1920s. “Little Mexico,” as it was called, was located in the area just west of Woodward, bounded by Third Avenue on the west, Abbott Street on the south, and Grand River Boulevard to the north. Finally, the south side of the city was home to thousands of African American workers. Bounded by Brush Street on the west, Chene Street/Dequindre Avenue on the east, the Detroit River on the south, and Congress Street to the north, this area became known as “Black Bottom.” By 1926, 54,170 African Americans (66 percent of Detroit’s black population) resided in the area. See Figure I.1.
Figure I.1 Detroit neighborhood map. (Source: Created by Tony Cepak.)
The fact that so many ethnic groups were tightly packed into this part of the city gave union and community organizers a unique opportunity to reach out to residents and focus their campaigns around issues that all Detroiters could support, regardless of race or ethnicity. For Coleman Young, Detroit’s “Urban Passages” set it apart from other midwestern industrial centers. The churches and saloons that “shouldered each other tolerantly” and the “house-and-yard” nature of its working-class constituency defined Detroit throughout the 1930s and 1940s. And beneath those smokestacks, a vibrant, colorful, radical world had flourished for almost three decades. Radicalism found a home, quite literally, in the city. From the earliest stages of the twentieth century, radicals occupied the physical geography of the city and used it as an organizational hub for issues affecting workers, racial and ethnic minorities, or other groups that were most vulnerable to the social ills of laissez-faire capitalism.

Schiller Hall is one of the oldest and most important examples of such institutions. Schiller began as a German social hall constructed in 1905 by a German architecture firm, Mueller and Milder. Located at St. Aubin and Gratiot, the hall served a variety of functions. For example, it was home to a German singing contingent at one point in the early twentieth century, but by the 1930s it became a union hall and “refuge for leftist political groups.” Schiller Hall would continue to be an important center of communist activism well into the 1940s. As late as 1948, Schiller was used to stage “rallies,” “mass meetings,” and celebration dinners.

Yemans Hall, at 3014 Yemans in Hamtramck, was another communist-controlled community institution. As early as 1905 it served as a meeting house for the International Workers Order (IWO) when Daniel DeLeon, president of the Socialist Labor Party, broke away from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and relocated his operations in Detroit. During the Depression, speakers, most notably Communists, used the hall to stage speeches and rallies. Unemployed Councils, organizations of unemployed workers in the 1930s, used Yemans as an organizational base in the early years of the Depression, and many “front” groups operated out of the hall. Stanley Nowak, Mary Zuk, and the Reuther brothers used the hall at various times to promote one cause or another. Simultaneously, the hall was a fraternal home for many Polish mutual aid societies (many of which cooperated with left-wing groups). According to the independent scholar Don Binkowski, the left-leaning Glos Ludowy (The people’s voice), the Polish newspaper in Detroit, operated out of Yemans from time to time. Like Schiller, Yemans would continue to be an organizational and even entertainment center throughout the postwar years. By the late 1940s, the Detroit Red Squad, an undercover anticommunist branch of the Detroit Police De-
partment, had taken notice of Yemans Hall and regularly recorded the license plates of all the cars parked in or near its parking lot. 

Like Yemans Hall, the Detroit Workmen’s Cooperative Restaurant, in the Polish community at 2935 Yemans Avenue, was a combination of an Eastern European immigrant community institution and a base for Detroit’s left-wing activists. By 1937, the Detroit Workingmen’s Cooperative Society had established restaurants across the city to afford working people a place to eat at reasonable prices. Workers and radical activists ate there, and periodically there was entertainment. The Workmen’s Cooperative Restaurant survived into the postwar years and was another center of CP activism in Detroit. The upper echelons of Detroit’s party leadership frequently met there and it, like Yemans, was well known to anticommunist forces in the late 1940s.

By the early 1930s, several businesses started to market themselves directly to the radical crowd in Detroit. Schuman’s Books was one such establishment. Located downtown at 4840 Cass Avenue, Schuman’s announced that it sold “All the Important Periodicals Unusual Books at Moderate Prices.” The Economical Kosher Restaurant was another local business within the radical sphere in Detroit. Advertising in the New Force—the print organ of Detroit’s branch of the John Reed Club—the restaurant proclaimed that it was “A Place with Atmosphere where all Radicals Gather.”

The John Reed Club of Detroit was another community-based, radical institution that offered a social space in the 1930s. Established in 1929 in an effort by the CP to spread its influence among writers and other intellectuals, the clubs were organized at a community level, and most industrial centers, including Detroit, had one. Outside of its work in the world of culture, the club frequently sponsored gatherings and events designed to bring workers of all walks of life together. For example, in May 1932 it sponsored the “First Annual John Reed Club Cabaret Night” at Oaklawn, near Owen. It also sponsored picnics, radical guest speakers, rallies, and dramas. By 1935, the club had essentially disbanded, but its “activism” lived on in the dramas it performed downtown at the Detroit Institute of Art.

One of the more important community staging grounds for the union’s campaign in the late 1930s was Hartford Avenue Baptist Church. Traditionally, the black churches and their ministers had been allied with Henry Ford. Whereas many automotive companies refused to hire black workers, Ford was the leading employer of African American labor throughout the 1920s. The Reverend Charles A. Hill was not the prototypical black minister, however. He resented the way blacks were treated at Ford’s and that they were essentially being used as political pawns by the company to
stave off unionism. In the late 1930s, he opened his church as a center for union meetings. In fact, it was said that UAW Local 600, the largest union local in the world (complete with a large contingent of left-leaning unionists) throughout much of the twentieth century, was founded at Hartford Avenue Baptist Church.43 And when Henry Ford wrote to Hill, warning him that future use of the church for union meetings would result in his parishioners being fired, Reverend Hill “in his own pious way . . . told Ford to go to hell.”44

One of the most overlooked community institutions within the radical orbit was a two-chair parlor in Black Bottom known as Maben’s Barbershop. Coleman Young claims his early political consciousness was shaped at Maben’s. He described it as “a left-wing caucus in the afternoon, and the nights were meetings held in private houses behind drawn curtains. It was a climate very conducive to the nurturing of young radicals.”45 Haywood Maben was no stranger to the Left in Detroit and he attended CP meetings well into the 1940s.46 Young went on to say that he “knew the party line backward and forwards from Maben’s barbershop, and while I didn’t agree with all of it, I didn’t give a damn who I was associated with on the side of equal opportunity. At the time, the Communists and Reverend Hill were about the only ones doing anything about discrimination.” 47 Maben’s epitomized the concept of a Popular Front community institution. It was as much a political auditorium as it was a free market endeavor and, as evidenced by Young’s recollections, was a training ground for young radicals eager to pursue civil rights and social equality in American life.

These establishments were more than community institutions in Detroit. They served as launching sites for broad campaigns that sought to empower working-class Detroiters. For instance, in 1946 approximately three hundred citizens assembled at Schiller Hall to hear the chairman of the Michigan CP, Carl Winter, speak out against violence that targeted the black community and demand a greater local, state, and even federal response to racial violence. 48 More importantly, these institutions served as collective centers where a complex array of working Detroiters from various ethnic and racial backgrounds assembled to produce a shared mutualism, which the CP could in turn mobilize for the uplift of the broader working class “community.”49

Even before Saul Alinsky began his work in Chicago, Communists in Detroit were deeply engaged in community-based activism designed to promote unity, racial tolerance, and broad-based support for the issues affecting the lives of working-class Detroiters. Detroit’s Communists were successful because they framed issues regarding working-class resistance in the context of community events. By the early 1940s, neighborhoods, local institutions, and the community were an important part of working-class
identity in Detroit. On some level, Detroit’s communists understood this concept of class identity had the potential to become a rallying point for causes thousands of workers would support. From 1941 throughout the war years and well into the postwar period, the party’s attention to community affairs in Detroit helped create industrial unions and an enhanced public relief system, and at least addressed racial and economic equality in American life. By the late 1940s, suburbanization, an influx of new migrants from outside the region, shifting definitions of race, and exhaustion from liberal wartime reforms had redrawn the sociopolitical map. By 1950 the concept of community, once the glue that brought together a diverse working class, had been shattered. And although the UAW, the new guardian of working-class well-being throughout the United States, continued to pursue liberal reform measures to improve the lives of working Detrotiers, a central unifying issue, like “community,” was largely absent. By the mid- to late 1950s, when most of the communist organizers had either been removed from leadership roles in the unions or forced underground, labor leaders concentrated most of their attention on collective bargaining with the goal of better contracts and higher wages, seemingly abandoning issues involving equality of opportunity, access to public amenities, or a seat for organized labor at the decision-making table.

For many years labor historians have placed the blame for the unfortunate position that working-class Americans found themselves in by the twenty-first century squarely on the shoulders of the leaders of organized labor. This line of thinking emphasized that after World War II, union leaders, including but not limited to Walter Reuther, focused their efforts almost entirely on bread-and-butter issues—lucrative contracts, fringe benefits, higher wages. Accordingly, this focus came at the expense of other issues that were not as centrally relevant to financial concerns—equality, inclusion, and other democratic principles that sought to improve the overall welfare of working-class Americans, not simply their monetary bottom line. Perhaps most importantly of all, union leaders pursued their goals not through the militant direct action that helped build unions like the UAW but through collective bargaining. Had these unions maintained that militancy, not purged the communists and socialists who so skillfully honed and directed that militancy, and stayed true to the course of social reforms that were encompassed in the early days of industrial unionism—civil rights, full development of personhood, and/or a more equitable economy—twenty-first-century American workers would be in a far better situation and enjoy a much higher standard of living today. But this line of thinking is based on the supposition that leaders like Reuther were successful in securing financial security for their respective constituencies. Recent scholarship demonstrates that this was not, in fact, the case.
In many ways, recent scholarship has vindicated Walter Reuther and the leadership of the UAW as historians such as Daniel Clark have demonstrated that automotive employment, and consequently economic life, was anything but stable throughout the postwar period. Clark posits that in addition to the usual list of challenges facing labor leaders, financial instability was a mainstay in Detroit’s auto industry during the 1950s. So while it is tempting to blame Reuther for his focus on bread-and-butter concerns—as opposed to racism, sexism, and other forms of institutionalized inequality both inside and outside of the factory gates—the reality of the situation in the postwar era leads one to the conclusion that the leadership’s plate was already plenty full and there was a definite need to focus on the more immediate concern of steady, consistent employment.51

Another important caveat in the longing for organized labor to pursue a more progressive social agenda is the fact that not all workers wanted the same outcomes from their leaders. The “working-class community” existed in an abstract. It consisted of different races, ethnicities, sexes, and skill levels who, at one time or another, did not always want the same things. This community was remade at various times with an influx of migrants from across the country, none of whom were born in Detroit or presumably felt a connection to the greater community. Civil and human rights were worthy causes and viewed as critically important to workers of the racial/ethnic minority variety, but it is by no means clear that white workers shared these concerns as long-term goals with respect to the labor movement. As Lisa Fine, Stephen Meyer, and others have demonstrated, the greater working class was rife with nativism, racism, and sexism. Combined with the immediacy of a volatile postwar labor market, it is fair to say that a sizable contingent of the working-class community in Detroit welcomed Reuther’s emphasis on collective bargaining with corporate America and on political influence within political circles.52

This is not to suggest, however, that an emphasis on collective bargaining came without any costs to postwar workers. Community organizing was uniquely equipped to address racial discrimination in bowling alleys, Jim Crow practices in real estate markets, or institutionalized racism deeply embedded in the Detroit Police Department. The pressure the CP and/or its progressive allies brought through marches, demonstrations, boycotts, and so on helped open public life for thousands of working-class Detroiters, many of whom were racial minorities. When the Communists were forced out of the unions, civil rights activism assumed a much tamer posture, at least on the surface. And it must be said that while Reuther did not necessarily come to power on the coattails of anticommunism, protecting the
leftists from the ravages of the Second Red Scare was not a hill he was willing to die on either.

Examining the sustained emphasis leftists placed on social reform measures enhances the understanding of working-class self-assertion, dissent, and activism in the mid-twentieth century. The postwar purge of leftists from the ranks of organized labor was indeed a loss for the labor movement, but it was far more complex than a power grab by union leadership, let alone a simple change of heart when it came to what issues mattered most. This nuance thus provides a more holistic understanding of how working-class Americans experienced the postwar world and how they sorted things out in the grand scheme of things.

Although sustained grassroots organizing is an important part of understanding the nature of the CP and its involvement in labor activism in the mid-twentieth century, it is equally important to note that Communists were not the only group to rely on community mobilization to achieve their broader goals. “Community” was a contested concept and one that did not always have progressive connotations. Rosemary Feurer’s _Radical Unionism in the Midwest_ demonstrates that a committed cadre of working-class activists used “community-level organizing” to build one of the most democratic unions of the mid-twentieth century. Yet many grassroots United Electrical Workers (UE) members opposed left-led local union leaders and the community initiatives they sponsored.53 Scholars of the conservative movement have also outlined the concept of grassroots activism in recent years. Lisa McGirr, Rick Perlstein, Matthew Lassiter, and others have noted the ways in which anti-integrationists tapped into grassroots anger and mobilized homeowners in defense of their beloved communities.54 In Detroit, the Kenwood Improvement Association assembled approximately 1,700 families to storm city council meetings to protest the Gratiot Housing Project, a postwar housing project that epitomized mid-century liberalism and efforts to integrate mainstream American life.55 White supremacists also realized the potential in community mobilization. Thinly cloaked, Ku Klux Klan–inspired organizations, such as the Courville District Improvement Association, presented themselves as homeowners rights groups. But in reality, Courville advocated the use of “fighting units” to keep neighborhoods exclusively white, suggested a boycott of financial institutions that lent money to African Americans, and recommended a formal segregation system in theatres, stores, and even churches.56 It might be said that right-wing community organizers were more successful than their leftist counterparts but, in any case, race was certainly a roadblock to working-class unity within the community context throughout this period.57
The examination of midcentury grassroots activism also demonstrates how fragile community coalitions were in centers like Detroit. Not every working-class Detroiter shared the Communists’ militancy or long-term goals even in the 1941–1945 heyday. In fact, as early as April 1945, Catholic trade unionists were proclaiming “Unity with Commies Not Possible.”58 Winning the war and establishing unionism as a permanent mainstay in the American economy were shared goals of both the Communists and those that chose to work with them in the context of community mobilization. Working-class Detroiter of many varieties were willing to slog with the Communists and use community activism as the instrument to achieve these shared goals, but after the war, with unionism firmly established in the workplace, the alliances of these interrelated coalitions began to fray. Quite content with the cushy union contracts that organized labor had negotiated for them, many non-Communists began to see little reason to continue to be active in the community, let alone to maintain the militancy of the Communists.59

The community thus served an essential role in the labor movement in cities like Detroit throughout the postwar period. While some historians see the community as a key limitation in labor’s ability to survive in a transnational (or even transregional) economy, they do not take into account how community mobilization helped reshape the political landscape and new voting coalitions it brought into the fold.60 For instance, Tom Alter has demonstrated how activists in the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike used community to engage “social movement unionism”—the practice of immersing workers in political struggles outside of the workplace and emphasizing the larger themes of “human rights, social justice, and democracy.”61 Moreover, as Mary E. Triece points out, the CP’s female activists used the community to bring attention to the needs specifically relevant to women throughout the Great Depression. This activism, accordingly, “had an impact on the labor movement as a whole, redefining the boundaries of working class struggle.”62 Similar to the findings of Craig Jackson Calhoun and Leon Fink, this study views the institution of community as a strength within the labor movement as it provides networks of “kinship, friendship, shared crafts, or recreations” that offer “lines of communication and allegiance.”63 If anything, community organizing represents one of the most underutilized weapons in labor’s approach to uplift working-class Americans.64

This book views the decline of community activism within organized labor as a casualty of the Cold War. Of course, there are other reasons for this decline, but anticommunism played a fundamental role. Community activism tied to certain places, groups, institutions, and/or activities was
both a tactic and an analysis by the communists—it was a way to gather important information for organizing and to promote a fundamental critique of the system through the contradictions of everyday life. Communists did care about bread-and-butter issues to the extent that these brought workers to a structural understanding of their position. They did not want workers to experience economic insecurity, either. The role leftists played within organized labor or the activism that they sponsored within the community was not an “either-or” situation. It may have been possible for Reuther to beat the collective bargaining drum while the communists simultaneously continued their work in the community. This would have allowed for the labor movement to retain its social movement posture that defined it throughout the Great Depression while at the same time addressing the very real financial concerns held by rank-and-file workers. But as the American-Soviet relationship deteriorated in the aftermath of World War II, a Cold War consensus settled into American life. International communism replaced imperial fascism as the new threat to American democracy, and collectivism of virtually any variety was tagged as “communistic” and attacked. Concurrently, the heating up of the Cold War launched the careers of Joseph McCarthy and like-minded people who used the mantra of anticommunism to intimidate their political enemies, shape American foreign policy, attack New Deal liberalism, and roll back many of the gains that specific groups of Americans, like workers, had attained throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s. Cold War anticommunism resulted in the expulsion of Communist activists from the ranks of organized labor and drove many of the community institutions they launched in the Popular Front era underground. The purge of these activists, as well as the anticommunist investigations that often accompanied them, helps explain the forestalling of further gains for blue-collar Americans. After the leftists were forced out of the unions, they had no base to implement their community campaigns. Progressive unions including the UAW became the de facto guardians of working-class well-being by the late 1950s, and although collective bargaining could claim some success when it came to improving workers’ financial bottom line, they were ultimately much less responsive to the issues that emerged as Detroit and other industrial centers entered into an era of an “urban crisis.”

The concept that debate was silenced or activism became timid throughout the McCarthy era is not new. Ellen Schrecker, Gerald Zahavi, and Martin Halpern, among others, have convincingly demonstrated that McCarthyism destroyed the labor-left coalition of the New Deal era and internalized vital issues such as health care, social reform, and dissent. But
as Schrecker rightly points out, little work has been done to assess the
damage or how this transition in American political culture affects the
people of the United States today. The purpose of this book is to shed light
on this damage.

This study is organized chronologically. It begins in 1941 in the early
stages of World War II. Chapter 1 introduces the “communist cooperative”
in Detroit. Institutions such as the Detroit Citizens Committee and the
Civil Rights Federation were established in the late 1930s as part of the
Popular Front tradition. While these institutions consisted of activists of
many political backgrounds, individuals with at least a loose affiliation with
Detroit’s CP were in positions of leadership. The activism these cooperatives
pursued was emblematic of the Popular Front. They fought for improved
race relations, economic equality, and the democratization of the commu-
nity throughout Detroit. More importantly, the alliance that communists
forged through these institutions continued well into the postwar period,
long after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the presumed death knell of
the Popular Front era. Chapter 2 establishes the crisis of World War II. It
chronicles the continued communist effort to promote civil rights within
Detroit’s labor movement, but it also points out that this Popular Front–
modeled activism spilled over into the community. Using community activ-
ism, communist organizers carried the fight for civil rights into numerous
racial and ethnic communities throughout Detroit. They were foremost
among the calls for adequate housing for black war workers who had mi-
grated to the city to work in the defense industries. They were also instru-
mental in promoting progressive race relations in the aftermath of the 1943
race riot.

The middle chapters of the study analyze the postwar period and the
transitional nature of community activism. Chapter 3 traces the final years
of the war and the immediate postwar period. Although it notes the rise of
postwar liberalism, it also insists that the immediate postwar period was a
missed opportunity for a liberal-radical alliance for a more democratic
America. For example, the 1945 General Motors Strike, at least initially,
enjoyed the mutual support of both liberals and leftists. Each group brought
their own resources to the struggle to challenge corporate hegemony in the
postwar era. It was not until the CP, on a national level, started to alter the
official party line that the liberal-left relationship started to sour. Chapter 4
outlines the initial Second Red Scare period. It notes that while anticom-
unism was rapidly becoming intertwined with the postwar political cul-
ture, communist organizers continued to address concerns at the grassroots
level. They ran in and were active throughout Progressive Party affairs, they
established “worker” schools, and they dedicated themselves to the protec-
tion of the foreign-born.
The final three chapters focus on the redefinition of activism in the McCarthy age. Chapter 5 examines the sociopolitical implications of the Second Red Scare. It highlights a general shift to the political right, especially the adoption of antilabor legislation such as the Taft-Hartley Act, and how this transition in political culture affected the way officials within organized labor thought about community activism. Chapter 6 examines communist activism in the early 1950s. As the Cold War consensus began to crystallize, activism and protest became synonymous with radicalism. Outside the South, where the civil rights movement was only beginning to build momentum, it was Communists and those that sympathized with them that helped preserve community mobilization and activism at a time when it was increasingly under siege in the United States. Chapter 7 centers on anticommunism at the community level, the criminalization of radicalism, and the results of labor liberalism becoming the de facto guardian of working-class well-being by the mid-1950s.

The Conclusion begins in 1956 when, for all intents and purposes, the CP was politically dead. Liberalism, on the other hand, was nearing its peak of its electoral success. Unions such as the UAW continued to promote a progressive agenda well into the 1960s, and this approach did have its short-term successes. Acknowledging that the UAW did not achieve the immediate goal of stable employment helps us understand why Reuther and company emphasized the financial ends of unionism. But however forgivable collective bargaining may have been in this respect, it must be said that this approach underperformed when it came to securing civil rights, a greater sense of political equality, and/or a more inclusive postwar economy. Collective bargaining may have succeeded in raising the pay of autoworkers, and to a lesser extent offering a new level of security solidified by fringe benefits, but it proved to be far less responsive to the goal of a culture of inclusion whereby workers, especially those of racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, could fully participate in the mainstream American sociopolitical life.66

In 1957 Theodore Draper wrote that the individuals who flocked to the Communist movement found an infinite variety of things once they arrived.67 In Detroit, the people who came into the CP fold found community. Detroit’s CP provided a setting where a complex variety of individuals came together to pursue goals, which may initially have seemed narrow and oriented toward a very specific demographic but ultimately allowed party organizers to mobilize broad-based support for the everyday concerns of working-class Detroiters. Such an approach allowed the party to forge alliances with multiple racial and ethnic communities, provided it with a direct line of communication with unions and other...
working-class organizations, and mounted public pressure on govern-
ment and business officials to improve the lives of thousands of average
citizens all across the city. The removal of Communists from Detroit’s
labor movement thus marginalized a vital weapon from organized labor’s
arsenal when it came to combating exploitative employers and reaction-
ary politicians.68