

Even though it is scarcely remembered today, Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph laid out a path forward for the civil rights movement—the Jobs and Freedom Strategy—that bears striking relevance to the present.

# The Jobs and Freedom Strategy

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*Either we decide upon massive social investments now, or we face the incalculably more costly alternative of social disintegration and violence. In the long run, it is the budget-balancers and the tight-money boys who will prove to be the most impractical.*

— A. Philip Randolph<sup>1</sup>

*In 1876 they said: "We fought a bloody war to free the Negro. Must we also give him 40 acres and a mule?" Today they say: "We have given the Negro the right to eat at our lunch counters. Must we also*

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1 A. Philip Randolph, "Address on Civil Rights Resolution Before Sixth Constitutional Convention, AFL-CIO," in "Speeches and Writings File, Oct.-Dec. 1965," Box 41, *The Papers of A. Philip Randolph*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, 53.

give him a job so he can afford a hamburger?" As southerners know (better than the rest of us), had the answer been "Yes" in 1876, the question would not have arisen in 1967. And if it is not answered affirmatively in 1968, it will be with us in the year 2000.

— Bayard Rustin<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-1960s, with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts having swept away the legal bases of discrimination and segregation in America, civil rights leaders refocused their efforts on full-employment policy and general economic uplift to transform a recently won formal freedom into a *substantive* one. They would be disheartened to learn that that substantive freedom remains an unrealized dream today, but they would also be perplexed by the relative lack of importance given to broad-based economic reforms in contemporary debates and struggles for racial justice.

No two civil rights leaders held economic transformation to be so integral to the fulfillment of the promise of the civil rights revolution as Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, the key organizers of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The Economic Policy Institute has called this the "unfinished march" in recognition of the fact that, despite it being perhaps the most iconic protest of the twentieth century, its key demands — full employment, affordable housing and health care, and high-quality public education — have largely gone unfulfilled.<sup>3</sup> While affirming the unfinished nature of their project, contemporary radicals are nonetheless skeptical of the universalist approach of Rustin and Randolph, at least in part due to lingering discontent with their actions *after* the march. Swept into the halls of power, where

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2 Bayard Rustin, "The Liberal Coalition and the 1968 Elections," in "Blacks in Politics," *The Bayard Rustin Papers*, microfilm, University Publications of America, reel 17 0990, 4.

3 Economic Policy Institute, *The Unfinished March* (New York: EPI, 2013).

for a time they tried to influence officials in Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, the two began alienating many former allies with what was felt to be a drift to the center, symbolized most notably in their strategic hedging on the pressing issue of Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> For these and other acts of perceived perfidy, they became controversial, even reviled, figures on the Left almost as soon as the glow from that historic day in August faded.

Today the memory of these post-1963 betrayals looms large in assessments of their legacies. As opposed to the emerging mainstream image of Rustin as a marginalized intersectional hero — one sure to be bolstered by the forthcoming Netflix biopic *Rustin* (executive produced by the Obamas) — leftists still remember Rustin as the one who “sold his soul completely to the Democratic Party,” in the words of civil rights leader Julian Bond.<sup>5</sup> Manning Marable castigates “Rustin’s and Randolph’s accommodation to racism and betrayal of the black working class.”<sup>6</sup> Labor strategist Kim Moody blames them for making “one of the nation’s pre-eminent cross-class, bourgeois-dominated institutions stand in for actual working-class political organization.”<sup>7</sup> *Jacobin* editor Shawn Gude thinks of Rustin’s trajectory (and Randolph’s, by implication) as no less than a “tragedy.”<sup>8</sup>

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4 Jerald Podair, *Bayard Rustin: American Dreamer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 69. James Farmer characterized it more dramatically as a move toward the right (Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* [New York: HarperCollins, 1997], 322).

5 Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 228.

6 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1982* (London: Red Globe Press, 1984), 131.

7 Kim Moody, “Cedric Johnson and the Other Sixties’ Nostalgia,” *New Politics*, March 1, 2019.

8 Shawn Gude, “The Tragedy of Bayard Rustin,” *Jacobin*, May 23, 2018.

At the same time, there is renewed interest today on the Left in Rustin's critique of Black Power and the New Left and also in the Freedom Budget for All Americans, a campaign run by Randolph and Rustin during the period when they had already, in the opinion of some, "sold out."<sup>9</sup> Hinted at by Randolph in 1965 and unveiled by the A. Philip Randolph Institute in October 1966, the Freedom Budget outlined a federal budget for the elimination of poverty in the United States within a ten-year period. Rustin summarized the budget to supporters with seven basic objectives:

1. To provide *full employment* for all who are willing and able to work, including those who need education or training to make them willing and able.
2. To assure *decent and adequate wages* to all who work.
3. To assure a decent living standard to *those who cannot or should not work*.
4. To *wipe out slum ghettos* and provide decent homes for all Americans.
5. To provide *decent medical care* and adequate educational opportunities for all Americans, at a cost they can afford.
6. To *purify our air and water* and develop our transportation and natural resources on a scale suitable to our growing needs.
7. To unite *sustained full employment with sustained full production* and high economic growth.<sup>10</sup>

It's not hard to see the appeal today: looking at the Freedom Budget and the Bernie Sanders platform side by side, one might

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9 Adolph Reed Jr, "Bayard Rustin: The Panthers Couldn't Save Us Then Either," *nonsite.org*, January 8, 2023; Bayard Rustin, *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters*, ed. Michael G. Long (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012), 308.

10 Rustin, "What you can do about the 'Freedom Budget for All Americans,'" in "Freedom Budget," *Rustin Papers*, reel 12 0727, 2-3.

conclude that they were conceived by the same people. As Paul Le Blanc and Michael D. Yates argue in their book-length treatment of the Freedom Budget, there is clearly a need out there for a revival of Randolph and Rustin’s basic project.<sup>11</sup> But how, one might wonder, did such flawed personalities overcome their “perfidy” to formulate a working-class social and economic program that is still relevant more than half a century later?<sup>12</sup>

Rustin and Randolph undoubtedly made strategic and tactical missteps in a moment of political sea change, but today the memory of those missteps has prevented a reckoning with and appreciation for their post-1963 approach, which led, among other things, to the genesis of the Freedom Budget. In what follows, I aim to extract the core of that approach — the baby that is typically thrown out with the bathwater in assessments of their legacy. Not only did they accurately and somewhat uniquely diagnose an impasse for the civil rights movement, but their plan for moving beyond that impasse is one that still bears striking relevance to the present. Given the persistence of the social ills they reckoned with, it is worth revisiting Rustin and Randolph’s politics and strategies to understand why they privileged universal material guarantees, why their efforts ultimately failed, and what lessons their program has for activists today.

In the first three sections, I lay out the basics of what I call, after the march that informed its conceptualization, their Jobs

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11 Paul Le Blanc and Michael D. Yates, *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013). Readers will inevitably pick up on my heavier reliance on Rustin quotes than Randolph ones. The simple fact is that while Randolph was a more impactful political presence than Rustin, he was not the dynamic writer that Rustin was. I could easily replace most of the Rustin quotes here with Randolph ones and lose none of the meaning. This is evidence, to my mind, that they were perfectly simpatico during this period. I thus take their respective writings here to univocally articulate a political orientation.

12 Stephen Steinberg, “Bayard Rustin and the Rise and Decline of the Black Protest Movement,” *New Politics* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1997).

and Freedom Strategy. This strategy had three basic elements: (1) the need to pursue public jobs programs, (2) to do so through a coalition between civil rights organizations and organized labor, and (3) to avoid the dangers of what Rustin called “frustration politics.” In the fourth section, I then review why the Jobs and Freedom Strategy did not pan out in the mid-’60s in the form of the Freedom Budget campaign. I close with implications for the present.

## 1. THE JOBS DEMAND

The most famous event in civil rights history was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The *freedom* part seems obvious, but of the myriad economic issues facing black America in the 1960s, how did *jobs* come out on top? Why not *housing* to upgrade the 9.3 million housing units that the 1960 census declared “seriously deficient”?<sup>13</sup> Why not *health care* to aid the 60 percent of hospital patients in the lowest income groups who had no insurance?<sup>14</sup> Or why not *education* to call back to the Supreme Court case that inaugurated the modern civil rights movement?

The simple reason that jobs won out is that the March on Washington was organized by Randolph and Rustin. For the two socialists, jobs — or as they often preferred, “full employment” — was *the* crucial addition to civil rights: the latter would mean *formal* equality, but only the achievement of the former could produce *substantive* equality. At the time, agricultural work in the South had become increasingly mechanized, and manufacturing was leaving Northern cities just as millions of black workers were entering them. Without decent jobs, racial tension between white

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13 Rustin, “Why We Need a ‘Freedom Budget,’” in “Freedom Budget, 1965–1968,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 12 0645, 50.

14 Rustin, “Why We Need a ‘Freedom Budget,’” 58.

and black workers over basic material issues was bound to grow.<sup>15</sup> And without the ability to gain *economic* independence, the formal independence granted by civil rights legislation would ring hollow. Indeed, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, that is precisely what both Randolph and Rustin saw happening in urban riots. The promise of civil rights legislation in contrast to the daily indignities and material deprivations in urban areas was received as an insult: in Rustin's words, "To the urban underclass, the civil rights revolution of which they had heard so much was a frustrating reminder of the plight of their daily lives."<sup>16</sup>

For Rustin, full employment unlocked the entire economic situation.

The key ... is decent jobs. It is easy to lose sight of this amid all the sociological jargon which tends to project a hundred different problems where one multifaceted problem exists. Some people say that housing is key — as if there were no connection between the snail's pace of housing construction and unemployment in the construction industry. Others point to education — as if the 750,000 new classroom units we need over the next 10 years can be built without manpower, or as if reducing the teacher's load by hiring teacher's aides had no meaning for the unemployed in the ghetto. Still others

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15 Mathew Forstater, "From Civil Rights to Economic Security: Bayard Rustin and the African-American Struggle for Full Employment, 1945–1978," *International Journal of Political Economy* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 68.

16 Bayard Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom: The Changing Patterns of Black Protest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 60. It is important to note that there were dramatic economic gains in the mid-1960s — from 1965 to 1969, the poverty rate for black children fell from 65.6 percent to 39.6 percent (it only fell an additional 0.6 percent between 1969 and 2010) — they just were not happening fast enough to stave off frustration. See William E. Spriggs, "The Unfinished March for Jobs: Focus of U.S. Fiscal Policy Must Shift Back to Full Employment," Economic Policy Institute, November 20, 2013.



point to family instability — as if one could not point to direct statistical correlation between family instability and male unemployment rates.<sup>17</sup>

Dealing with economic factors in general was important, but jobs for all was the demand that united them. And in a situation where the private sector was not providing enough jobs, public jobs programs had to be the answer, as they were in the New Deal. Rustin even explicitly characterized the Freedom Budget as a New Deal for black America, to be backed by a league of organizations with the vision and heft of the Congress of Industrial Organizations:

The CIO had to organize itself but it did so under circumstances of Federal intervention which made the momentous task easier to perform. Negroes have to organize themselves. And the Freedom Budget, which is their New Deal thirty years late (but better late than never) will not simply provide full and fair employment and lay the basis for the destruction of the physical environment of poverty. Like the Wagner Act and the social investments of the New Deal, it should also evoke a new Psychology, a new militance and sense of dignity, among millions of Negroes who will see something more concrete and specific than a promise of eventual freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Part of this “new Psychology” was an enlarged class consciousness: in joining as full-fledged members of the proletariat, black workers would gain a new understanding of themselves as *American* workers.

The difficulty, of course, was that, unlike in the era of the New Deal, the crisis of black poverty stood in sharp contrast to the

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17 Rustin, “Facts,” in “Race Riots, 1960s,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 18 1251, 81.

18 Rustin, “Freedom Budget Article,” in “F.B. General Corr.,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 13 0195, 246.

general prosperity of the '60s. New Deal public jobs programs were a response to a deep and widespread economic crisis, and the political will to experiment with them was forced partially by a new upsurge in working-class militancy. Working families that had settled into the suburban middle classes were not about to recreate 1934. Randolph and Rustin faced the uphill task of both translating events like the Watts riots into general social urgency and amassing the popular pressure required to force the hands of politicians and resistant business interests.

Winning New Deal-style jobs programs was thus always going to be a Herculean task, but of the goal itself, Rustin and Randolph were certain. Full employment would lessen racial tension, alleviate the material deprivation undergirding urban riots, complement the formal freedom of civil rights legislation with a substantive freedom, improve housing, education, and health care, and, most important, lead to the possibility of greater *political* power in creating the conditions “for the black *lumpenproletariat* to become a proletariat.”<sup>19</sup> “Jobs” was *the* demand.

And its relevance has not lessened in the present. Public jobs programs are needed today not only to repair American infrastructure and carry forward much-needed climate mitigation and adaptation work, but also to transform the economies of impoverished areas and provide security for poor and working-class people. Such full-employment policies would also weaken the economic drivers of injustices in contemporary policing and the carceral system by mitigating the conditions that these systems are intended to manage. As they were for Randolph and Rustin, jobs are still a necessary prerequisite for increased freedom today.

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19 Rustin quoted in Forstater, “From Civil Rights to Economic Security,” 71.

## 2. THE CIVIL RIGHTS-ORGANIZED LABOR COALITION

The March on Washington did more than impress upon Randolph and Rustin that the jobs demand was the right one to prioritize. It also demonstrated the power of the coalition of civil rights organizations, labor unions, and religious groups that brought the march to fruition. Their faith in that “Coalition of Conscience” (United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther’s phrase) was maintained through the introduction of the Freedom Budget, which Randolph framed in a speech from October 1966 as an effort “to undertake the redemption and completion of the goals set forth on that historic day in August of 1963.”<sup>20</sup>

In Randolph and Rustin’s shared analysis, Cold War politics had created a certain opening for the pursuit of civil rights, as the state of race relations was an embarrassment to many in the ruling class.<sup>21</sup> Black protest in the South spoke to this embarrassment, and as Rustin reflected years later, that protest and the white violence it elicited, amplified through the television medium, “aroused the conscience of the nation” and conferred on the civil rights movement a “moral authority.”<sup>22</sup> No such strategic opening existed for the civil rights movement to “expand its vision beyond race relations to economic relations,” as Rustin urged it to do in his February 1965 article “From Protest to Politics.” Thus, the fundamental task after the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts was the less media-friendly and more plodding work

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20 Randolph, “Address at Freedom Budget Press Conference, Salem Methodist Church, New York City, October 26, 1966,” in “Speeches and Writings File, 1966,” Box 41, *Randolph Papers*, 89.

21 Andrew E. Kersten, *A. Philip Randolph: A Life in the Vanguard* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 83, 71–2.

22 Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom*, 24.

of building “a coalition of progressive forces” into “the *effective* political majority in the United States.”<sup>23</sup>

For the civil rights organizations themselves, this meant turning away from what had been a strategic vanguardism in the early phases of the movement (but which was turning increasingly into an *unstrategic* vanguardism — see the following section for more) and toward building representative mass membership organizations. In the early phases of the civil rights movement, younger organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were the tip of the spear, but they were also, in Rustin’s estimation, essentially *majoritarian* in orientation — not because they spoke to a preexisting majority that opposed segregation but because they *sought* that majority and eventually won it over. If they wished to keep that majoritarian orientation in a new phase of struggle, they needed to develop the kind of representative structures that would allow them to speak and act on behalf of a defined constituency.

Rustin’s evolving attitude toward the NAACP represented the flip side of this coin. Before 1963, both his political sympathies and personal ties lay with organizations like SNCC and CORE, while his relationship with NAACP director Roy Wilkins, who often viewed protest actions with a great deal of suspicion, was

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23 Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” in *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, eds. Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (New York: Cleis Press, 2015), 117, 125. As Adolph Reed Jr notes, “From Protest to Politics” appeared “before the escalation of the Vietnam War and the Watts uprising — at a moment when it was not quite clear how far Lyndon Johnson’s administration and its governing coalition could be pushed toward an agenda of racial equality and social democracy.” It thus bears what Reed calls a “strategic ambivalence”: Rustin’s critiques “could have implied a strategic response to the variants of black power consciousness inflected toward radical political economy as easily as they did his argument for fastening black aspirations to the Democratic liberal-labor coalition” (Adolph Reed Jr, *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], 273).

rather ambivalent. In 1970, by contrast, he praised the NAACP for being the one “national organization in the black community.”

It is the only black organization which organizes almost a half million dues paying members and which collects almost five million dollars exclusively from black people. The Urban League does not get its money from black people; SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] does not get its money from black people; CORE never got its money from black people. And yet today, the one organization which is never discussed is the NAACP.<sup>24</sup>

Despite his disagreements with Wilkins, Rustin recognized the NAACP as an actual *representative* institution with lists of dues-paying members invested in the organization, and his belated praise expresses lament over the course that the younger civil rights groups took.<sup>25</sup>

Rustin and Randolph also urged the civil rights organizations, in addition to building themselves up internally, to avoid “going it alone” and to partner with their natural allies in the labor movement. As Rustin wrote in a pamphlet on right-to-work laws in 1967:

Labor and minority groups have been where the real action is — the bullets, the dogs, the lynch-ropes, the billy clubs, blood dripping down through the leaves of the trees, and blood running out of the open shop. This makes us brothers not only under the skin, but also brothers in blood, in sweat, and in tears, all shed in the service of making America safe for democracy. It is to the credit of the American labor movement,

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24 Bayard Rustin, “Socialism or Moralism?,” *nonsite.org*, [July 7, 1970] January 8, 2023.

25 John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 240.

and a challenge to its treatment of the Negro in the future, that I cannot make that statement about any other institution in America.<sup>26</sup>

At the time, many on the Left thought the proposal of a civil rights–labor coalition, while nice and sensible in theory, was a dead letter in practice given the bureaucratization of labor. *New Politics* editor Julius Jacobson argued that while unions are a “potential force for democracy,” in the United States “the radical young has good reason to feel that Big Labor is as venal as most other institutions of the American Establishment.” The AFL-CIO, in his view, was “committed to racial equality in a most general way” and on “paper and in resolutions” only.<sup>27</sup> In a *Dissent* article from 1966, Paul Jacobs agreed, saying “it would be foolish for radicals to expect much more from the unions than a kind of generalized support for anti-poverty programs” and civil rights.<sup>28</sup> Black Power organizations were even more hostile to the labor movement than New Leftists: CORE began collaborating with the National Right to Work Committee to set up the Black Workers Alliance, and SNCC believed “that one of the major roadblocks to the freedom of black people is the labor movement as it is presently constructed.”<sup>29</sup>

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26 Rustin, “The ‘Right to Work’ Laws,” in “Right to Work,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 5 0396, 6.

27 Julius Jacobson, “Coalitionism: From Protest to Politicking,” *New Politics* (Fall 1966), 50, 54, 57.

28 Paul Jacobs, “What Can We Expect from the Unions?,” in *The Radical Papers*, ed. Irving Howe (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 257.

29 Rustin, “The Failure of Black Separatism,” in “Black Separatism,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 17 0913, 16; Stokely Carmichael to Bayard Rustin, August 16, 1966, in “F.B. General Corr.,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 13 0195, 32. As Rustin reflected later, liberals and the New Left became united in the late 1960s in seeing labor “not as a progressive force, but as a reactionary and racist institution, with a bigoted membership and a leadership devoid of social vision. The causes of this hostile attitude were many and complex: class bias and snobbery, a lack of understanding of labor’s goals and accomplishments, and an *as-yet-unarticulated desire to supplant the labor movement’s position within the Democratic party*” (Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom*, 75–6, emphasis added).

Such criticism and hostility must have bordered on amusing to Randolph, who knew perhaps better than anyone in the country the extent and depth of discrimination and bureaucratization in American trade unions.<sup>30</sup> He was nonetheless at the forefront of advocating a civil rights–labor coalition, because his essential question here was not “Are unions good?” but rather “Will they be allies in accomplishing the task at hand?” And since the task was full employment, the answer was a clear yes, not for moral reasons but because the goal was in organized labor’s naked self-interest and because of the industrial power labor could bring to bear.

Both Randolph and Rustin repeatedly emphasized that unions were unquestionably beneficial institutions for black workers, who were disproportionately more likely to be union members than their white counterparts. They also invariably added that “the legislative program of the trade-union movement can go a long way toward satisfying the economic needs of the larger black *community*.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, at a certain point in the mid-’60s, Randolph and Rustin believed that the civil rights movement should simply adopt the political program of the AFL-CIO — again, not because it or its member unions were model organizations (they were not) but

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30 The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was chartered with the American Federation of Labor in 1935, and from that moment on, Randolph was a tireless internal critic of racial discrimination in the unions. At the 1959 AFL-CIO convention, Randolph proposed a resolution that would expel unions that discriminated against black workers. George Meany attacked him for wanting to destroy organized labor from the inside and challenged his credentials on the issue: “Who the hell appointed you as the guardian of the Negro members in America?” In 1961, the AFL-CIO Executive Council formally censured Randolph for stirring up trouble where there supposedly was none. Even Randolph allies David Dubinsky, James Carey, and Joe Curran did not oppose the censure (Walter Reuther was not present at the relevant meeting). Randolph was thus intimately familiar with the problems of organized labor. See Kersten, *A. Philip Randolph*, 88; Paula F. Pfeffer *A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 223.

31 Rustin, “The Blacks and the Unions,” in “Labor Unions,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 18 0721, 112.

because their political priorities, including full employment and the repeal of Section 14(b) of Taft-Hartley, were now also those of the civil rights movement.<sup>32</sup> Even in the midst of a 1961 spat with George Meany, when Randolph spoke of “this strained Negro-labor relation,” he still clearly understood the stakes: “Since the Negro community and the labor community have common interests and common enemies and should have common objectives, this crisis of confidence between these basic communities constitutes a grave danger to the cause of the Negro and labor.”<sup>33</sup>

There were also positive examples of meaningful collaboration.<sup>34</sup> California’s Fair Employment Practices Act of 1959 was made possible by a coalition of labor and civil rights leaders, and that alliance had been instrumental in beating back right-to-work laws in other states.<sup>35</sup> Though the AFL-CIO did not officially sponsor the 1963 March on Washington (an ongoing embarrassment for Meany), labor did substantially support the event. The loudspeaker tab at the Lincoln Memorial of \$16,000, for instance, was picked up by the United Auto Workers and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union.<sup>36</sup> After the march, the AFL-CIO’s Civil Rights Department, armed with a much larger lobbying team than any of the key civil rights organizations, was instrumental in pushing federal civil rights legislation.

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32 “The goals of the Freedom Budget parallel the objectives of the American Labor Movement and will make a significant contribution to their achievement” (Donald Slaiman, “Statement,” in “F.B. Press Conference,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 12 0785, 41).

33 Randolph, “Memorandum Re: Negro American Labor Council,” in “Labor, Civil Rights in the CIO-AFL General, 1960-68 and undated,” Box 25, *Randolph Papers*, 148.

34 Randolph, “Labor Day and Racial Justice,” in “Speeches and Writings File 1967,” Box 42, *Randolph Papers*, 48.

35 Fred Glass, *From Mission to Microchip: A History of the California Labor Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

36 Pfeffer, A. *Philip Randolph*, 260.



That said, Randolph and Rustin understood that this was an alliance that had to be forged and reinforced, that it was not waiting there to be mobilized but could be solidified in the process of struggle.<sup>37</sup> Randolph averred that the postwar trajectory of the labor movement toward being “richer in body and poorer in spirit” had to be reversed.<sup>38</sup> Rustin wrote:

I think that the Freedom Budget can provide the contest in which unity would not only be possible but imperative. When for instance, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (Local 3) won a reduction in the work week in New York under the leadership of Harry Van Arsdale, 300 of the 1000 new apprenticeship openings went to Negroes. The Freedom Budget would open up jobs on a much vaster scale. Instead of competition between black and white workers for scarce jobs under conditions of high unemployment rates, the threat of automation, or both, there would be a joint self-interest in both integrating and unionizing the new employment. Under such conditions, the current Negro-labor alliance on questions like the repeal of Section 14B of the Taft Hartley, the extension of minimum coverage and increase in benefits, etc., would become that much more meaningful and dynamic.<sup>39</sup>

Again, there was probably no one more qualified to speak to organized labor’s bureaucratization and discriminatory practices than A. Philip Randolph, but he and Rustin understood that

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37 “I favor a coalition of labor, Negroes, progressive religious forces, middle-class liberals and the poor, who are not presently organized. And because the poor are unorganized, the coalition of which we speak does not yet exist, except embryonically” (Rustin, “The New Radicalism: Round III,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 17 1211, 203).

38 Randolph, “Crisis of Victory,” in “Speeches and Writings File, January 30, 1965–September 17, 1965,” Box 41, *Randolph Papers*, 4.

39 Rustin, “Freedom Budget Article,” In “F.B. General Corr.,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 13 0195, 252.

coalition politics is not based on mutual affection but mutual interest, and also that the proposed coalition had to be solidified, not taken for granted. This was a new phase for the civil rights movement, and they hoped, in turn, that the sparks ignited in bringing together disparate groups in coalition would reignite the fighting spirit of labor. “United in a powerful Coalition of Conscience,” wrote Randolph, “the cause of civil rights and labor’s rights can and will prevail; without it, the future is uncertain.”<sup>40</sup>

Today there is a lingering New Left suspicion of existing trade unions as burdensome and regressive, perhaps even in some cases imbricated with “histories of racism and colonial dispossession” in such a way as to make them essentially compromised.<sup>41</sup> Theoretical discussions of class and race spill over into assumed division between the aims of labor and racial justice — thus the prominent emphasis, in the wake of the George Floyd uprising, on the development of internal education programs for union members around implicit bias and racial capitalism.<sup>42</sup> Randolph and Rustin always understood, as organizers do, the potential antagonism between different interests within any particular coalition, but they also asserted the essential bond in “the cause of civil rights and labor’s rights” and that unity around that cause had to be carefully and patiently forged in a common political project. To abandon that work meant not only a precarious future for both labor and civil rights; it also meant a descent into the insidious realm of frustration politics.

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40 Randolph, “Civil Rights Revolution and a New America,” in “Speeches and Writings File, Oct.–Dec. 1965,” Box 41, *Randolph Papers*, 28.

41 Michael Levien, “White Energy Workers of the North, Unite? A Review of Huber’s *Climate Change as Class War*,” *Historical Materialism*, 2023.

42 Stephanie Luce, “Unions Take Up the Fight for Racial Justice,” *Convergence*, May 19, 2021.

### 3. AGAINST FRUSTRATION POLITICS

A famous sign from the March on Washington read “Civil Rights Plus Full Employment Equals Freedom.” It was a precise formula and, unsurprisingly, Randolph’s suggestion. Freedom was the *sum* of the two. After the *de jure* fight for civil rights was won with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, the movement had to turn to the task of achieving full employment, without which freedom would remain but a promise. The “Jobs and Freedom” slogan might thus be reread as “Jobs and *then* Freedom.”

Everywhere around them, however, Randolph and Rustin saw activists wanting to shortcut around the part about *jobs* (and the coalition strategy needed to win this demand) and get directly to the part about *freedom*. To them, both Black Power and the New Left, finding the United States to be rotten to the core, had given up on the formulation of a concrete and achievable political program and were turning to increasingly odd insurrectionary fantasies and localist experiments that did not in any way alter the fundamental structures of capitalist society. For Rustin, the varied retreats to communes, drug subcultures, armed revolutionary cells, and “community control” all followed from a more basic pessimism about the possibility of actual structural transformation in the United States. In this, the new radicals were in unwitting agreement with conservatives and the regressing liberal establishment that nothing about American society would ever really change; in Rustin’s words, “those ... who reject America with hate [are] in unconscious coalition with the worst and most reactionary elements in this country.”<sup>43</sup>

Having renounced progressive and concrete solutions to America’s ills, these new formations also advocated tactics that

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43 Rustin, “Notes on Remarks, World Without War Council Conference, May 3, 1968,” in “Correspondence 1968,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 21 0996, 189.

Randolph and Rustin found counterproductive and in some cases morally offensive.<sup>44</sup> Advocating violence, burning flags and draft cards, and praising the Vietcong were all tactics that they felt would turn the public away from the causes of civil rights and pacifism. In this, they perceived the new forms of protest as almost diametrically opposed to those employed in the early civil rights movement and worried that protest itself was being corrupted to reinforce a purity politics that increasingly hindered progressive reform. As Rustin wrote,

Genuine radicalism ... is not measured by how loud and abusively one can shout or by the purity and beauty of one's rhetoric. Rather, genuine radicalism seeks fundamental change through concerted, intelligent and long-range commitment.... Obviously there is much wrong with the trade union movement; obviously there is much wrong with black people in the United States; obviously there is much wrong with white liberals; obviously wherever we look we can find fault. But the only result of endless fault-finding is that you end up in a corner with the few people who are as good and pure as you are. It renders impossible the building of a political movement capable of directing its attention to the most basic task of all — the redistribution of wealth.... Those self-appointed spokesmen who raise divisive issues to prove the superiority of their politics are not really radical. By confusing and distracting from the real sources of social change, they retard the struggle for equality and justice.<sup>45</sup>

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44 Randolph, "The Crisis of the Civil Rights Revolution," in "Speeches and Writings File, 1968," Box 42, *Randolph Papers*, 14.

45 Rustin, "The Future of Black Politics," in "Blacks in Politics," *Rustin Papers*, reel 17 0990, 24; Rustin, "Mobilizing a Progressive Majority," in "Blacks in Politics," *Rustin Papers*, reel 17 0990, 8; See also, "The words 'radical' and 'revolutionary' are thrown around very loosely these days. A close look at the situation will reveal

Rustin was a vocal critic of these new tendencies, undoubtedly a key reason why he is remembered today on the Left with such ambivalence. (Randolph was even more dismissive than Rustin, but curiously he is not remembered so tragically.) But it is important to couch the criticism here within the Jobs and Freedom Strategy rather than see it simply as divisive complaining. The new ideologies of the mid-'60s were not just different tendencies in the left ecosystem; they were often *opposed* — philosophically, methodologically, and in a fairly absolute sense — to what Rustin and Randolph were trying to do.<sup>46</sup> The younger “radicals” could not help but see these criticisms as the tired chidings of old men, but Rustin and Randolph were clear throughout that what they diagnosed in the new frustration politics and its “go-it-alone” methods was a fundamentally conservative move that would in turn prompt a political regression among white liberals and a backlash from the Right.<sup>47</sup> This internal fracturing and damage, as well as the misguided effort of “seeking refuge in psychological solutions to social questions,” was understandably of primary concern. “This coalition can only be destroyed if we destroy it from within,” wrote Rustin.<sup>48</sup>

Rustin in particular could paint with a broad brush when it came to his criticisms of “the young and alienated”; to accept

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that many so-called militants are actually helping the most conservative elements in the society. From this point of view one is entirely correct in describing the New Left as reactionary” (Rustin, “The Kids, The Hardhats, and the Democratic Party,” in “Columns, 1967–1985,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 19 0149, 204).

46 A confidential SNCC position paper, written on November 22, 1966, reflects an outright hostility to the Freedom Budget, concluding that it reinforced “economic white supremacy” (“Position on Freedom Budget, November 22, 1966,” in *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959–1972*, microfilm, Microfilming Corporation of America, reel 11 0341, 13).

47 Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom*, 74.

48 Rustin, “The Failure of Black Separatism,” in “Black Separatism,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 17 0913, 18; Rustin, “Coalition: The Only Route to Victory,” in “Labor Unions,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 18 0721, 149.

his views whole cloth would not be so different from accepting the story about Rustin and Randolph selling out after 1963. The important point for my purposes is that they diagnosed a perfectly understandable reaction to the political impasses of the 1960s, one that prioritized immediacy and radical tactics out of a belief in the need for total revolution but was hampered by a desire to circumvent the present. "There is always the danger that the felt need deriving from a perception of fundamental and historic injustices will conflict with the required political strategy," wrote Rustin in 1969.<sup>49</sup>

Both Rustin and Randolph, of course, understood well that felt need and the corresponding allure of social analysis that dismissed the United States as "unreconstructably racist."<sup>50</sup> Indeed, in many speeches and articles in the late '60s and early '70s, Rustin tried to lay out clearly the "anatomy of frustration" behind the new attitudes, how they were perfectly understandable in themselves, but how *acting* on them was not only politically counterproductive but also confused regarding the experience of black Americans as a whole, which had more to do with everyday material concerns than an encounter with "structural racism."<sup>51</sup> As Adolph Reed Jr has recently argued, this analysis applies today no less than it did then:

Unlike Rustin's matter-of-fact, real-time observation regarding the impact of the legislative victories, Black Power ideologues then and other race-reductionists since have rejected political analysis anchored by historical specificity in favor of an abstract idealism in which there is no meaningful or authentic

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49 Bayard Rustin, "The Total Vision of A. Philip Randolph," in *Time on Two Crosses*, 196.

50 Rustin, "Black Power's Legacy," 48.

51 Rustin, "The Anatomy of Frustration," in "Race Riots, 1960s," *Rustin Papers*, reel 18 1251, 92-108.

political differentiation among black Americans, and race/ racism exhausts the totality of black political life.<sup>52</sup>

For Rustin and Reed both, frustration politics flattens entire populations and constituencies in ways that minimize the broad and shared concerns of most people within them. To the extent that this “abstract idealism” reigns in political spaces (an effect, indeed, of the lack of representative, membership-based organizations that Randolph and Rustin called for), we are left “operating at high moral dudgeon [rather] than in engaging strategically and taking account of nuances of disagreement.”<sup>53</sup>

To sum up these first three sections, Randolph and Rustin believed that (1) the civil rights movement of the mid-’60s should push above all for public jobs programs by (2) strengthening the coalition that backed the 1963 March on Washington (and in particular solidifying its relationship to organized labor) while (3) rejecting the new frustration politics and its attendant dangers for the movement. This was the core of the Jobs and Freedom Strategy, the positive vision behind much of their thinking at the time and a strategy that still bears much relevance to the present. Before I draw out that relevance in the final section, I will, in the next, recount why the Jobs and Freedom Strategy failed in the form of the short-lived Freedom Budget campaign.

#### **4. THE FAILURE OF THE FREEDOM BUDGET AND THE FRACTURING OF THE “COALITION OF CONSCIENCE”**

I have distinguished the Jobs and Freedom Strategy from the Freedom Budget campaign here because the latter was, tragically, a slow-moving disaster in a moment of jarring political tumult.

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52 Reed, “Bayard Rustin.”

53 Reed, “Bayard Rustin.”

In its early stages, it was conceived as an inside job: a task for Lyndon B. Johnson's willing administration to carry out as part of its comprehensive civil rights agenda. The Freedom Budget was announced by Randolph at the November 1965 planning conference for the 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights, "To Fulfill These Rights." Randolph's claim there that solving the economic problems of urban areas would require a \$100 billion investment apparently sent President Johnson "through the roof."<sup>54</sup> In February 1964, Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz had proposed a \$5 billion jobs program, financed by a cigarette tax, to which Johnson "didn't even bother to respond."<sup>55</sup> According to Adam Yarmolinsky, the War on Poverty planners debated early on "whether to concentrate on creating jobs for people, preparing jobs for people, or preparing people for jobs," and they "decided for the latter."<sup>56</sup> If Johnson found the idea of spending \$5 billion on his own secretary of labor's jobs program too ridiculous to even respond to, one can only imagine what he thought of Randolph's \$100 billion "Marshall Plan ... to invest in massive public works."<sup>57</sup>

The inside route was thus always blocked to them, but that did not stop Rustin from spending most of 1966 making grand designs in the sand. The A. Philip Randolph Institute engaged economist Leon Keyserling to draw up plans for what would eventually become an eighty-eight-page technical document outlining a radically transformed federal budget. The process of its

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54 Morris Abram, interview by Michael L. Gillette, May 3, 1984, Interview II, transcript, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Oral History Collection, 6.

55 David P. Stein, "Fearing Inflation, Inflating Fears: The End of Full Employment and the Rise of the Carceral State" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2014), 162.

56 Stein, "Fearing Inflation, Inflating Fears," 161.

57 Randolph, "Crossroads of the Civil Rights Revolution," in "Speeches and Writings File May 29–Nov. 28, 1964," Box 41, *Randolph Papers*, 35.



formulation was so bogged down in revision, attention to spurious detail, and a desire to get the right list of individual (rather than organizational) sponsors that the document was not even ready to present at the June 1966 White House conference; it would eventually be released in October of that year, and the “popular” twenty-page version would not come out until February 1967.<sup>58</sup> Just as importantly, jobs became one issue among many as the Randolph Institute took upon itself the task of commenting on just about every facet of American life.

By the official launch of the Freedom Budget on October 24, 1966 — as David P. Stein notes, “four days after the end of the legislative session for the 89th Congress — the Congress that had passed so many important pieces of legislation” — Rustin and Randolph should have jettisoned anything but a clear, popular orientation.<sup>59</sup> After belatedly coming to terms with the fact that the White House was no longer returning their calls, they did put together an organizing plan, one which involved the creation of Freedom Budget committees around the country that drew their members from churches, youth groups (specifically the Young People’s Socialist League and the United States Youth Council), civil rights organizations, and trade union locals — in short, the elements of the coalition they sought.

Such committees were established in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Sacramento, and Boston by March 1967, though it’s unclear that they did much beyond educational meetings and small-scale voter registration.<sup>60</sup> By October 1967, Keyserling was complaining to

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58 On May 16, 1966, Rustin decided “that it would be premature to announce the Budget at the forthcoming White House Conference” (Rustin, “June 2nd meeting to discuss revised Freedom Budget,” in “F.B. Freedom Budget Committee,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 12 0753, 16).

59 Stein, “Fearing Inflation, Inflating Fears,” 185.

60 Bayard Rustin to Leon Keyserling, March 2, 1967, in “F.B. Corr. Leon Keyserling,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 13 0002, 149.

Rustin that “the army of supporters for the Freedom Budget ... seems to be vanishing [into] thin air.”<sup>61</sup> No doubt the organizing component of the campaign was a far cry from the barnstorming of the 1941 March on Washington movement or the gargantuan effort of the 1963 march, but for reasons covered below, it is not clear that Rustin could have patched together an army of activists even if the on-the-ground effort were more inspiring.

As if this all weren't enough, they decided to release the Freedom Budget, at Keyserling's urging, with an agnostic position on the Vietnam War. The proposal of a full federal budget (rather than a jobs program) naturally raised the question of revenue generation at a time of war escalation. Rather than go with their consciences (both Randolph and Rustin personally opposed the war) and propose the funding of their social spending through a lowering of defense spending, they argued that their plan could be carried out regardless of what happened in Vietnam. Freedom Budget materials expressed no support for the war, but it was not a time for nuance. Economist Seymour Melman concluded that it was a “war budget.”<sup>62</sup> SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael agreed: “To ask for part of the Freedom Budget is to ask for the continuance of the war in Vietnam.”<sup>63</sup> Students for a Democratic Society's Michael Kazin said it was “welfarism at home and imperialism abroad.”<sup>64</sup> Organizing in the face of these accusations was a more or less impossible task, and Freedom Budget committee meetings were marred by open dissent to the budget's basics.

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61 Leon Keyserling to Bayard Rustin, October 19, 1967, in “F.B. Corr. Leon Keyserling,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 13 0002, 90.

62 D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 437.

63 Stokely Carmichael, “First Symposium Panel, April 20, 1967,” in *Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959–1972*, microfilm, Microfilming Corporation of America, reel 57 0671, 17.

64 D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 439.

For all of these reasons, the Freedom Budget campaign itself was nothing very inspiring: it had misplaced trust in the Johnson administration in the early phases, rolled out a more academic than popular document (and well past the point when it would have made a splash), radically underinvested in the organizing component, and pushed a divisive position on the Vietnam War. It nevertheless seems unlikely that fixing the many tactical errors of the Freedom Budget would have resulted in a very different outcome for the campaign. The more fundamental problem was simply that the coalition that Randolph and Rustin imagined supporting such an ambitious agenda did not materialize. What happened?

On the civil rights side of their proposed civil rights–labor coalition, the rise of Black Power alongside the older civil rights organizations’ accommodation to the Democratic Party split the movement. There had already been plenty of tension between the civil rights organizations in the lead-up to 1963, resulting, among other things, in the censoring of the radical elements of John Lewis’s speech at the march. These fault lines became chasms after the 1964 Democratic National Convention, where Rustin, Martin Luther King Jr, Walter Reuther, and others had implored the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to accept a compromise from Johnson that the former felt was a simple rejection. The ground had thus been well prepared for outright hostility by the time Carmichael first articulated Black Power.

In a 1966 article for *Commentary*, Rustin noted the “serious split” that was widening between the young and older civil rights leaders, and he impugned Black Power for “isolat[ing] the Negro community [and] encourag[ing] the growth of anti-Negro forces.”<sup>65</sup> There’s no question that the rise of black separatism and the turn

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65 Bayard Rustin, “‘Black Power’ and Coalition Politics,” *Commentary* 3, no. 42 (September 1966).

to community control split the civil rights organizations internally, so bitterly that CORE could come out and directly call the NAACP racist in the early '70s for having tried "to ram its bankrupt integrationist policies down the throats of Black people."<sup>66</sup> In 1972, Rustin rather self-contently asserted the correctness of his 1966 prediction, claiming that Black Power "has left us a powerful legacy of polarization, division and political nonsense."

We hear little from those who popularized black power and in turn became household names through the notoriety it generated. Stokely Carmichael lives in Africa — he has dismissed America as unreconstructably racist and from time to time issues statements of praise for one of Africa's most brutal dictators. H. Rap Brown is in jail. Eldridge Cleaver is in exile under house arrest in Algeria, a nation that, we were told, is the vanguard of Third World revolution. Floyd McKissick, the super-militant of CORE days, is today a real-estate entrepreneur and a militant Republican.

Of course, Black Power advocates blamed the marginalization of their own organizations on the betrayals of white liberals and tired old men like Randolph and Rustin, not to mention political backlash and the insidious efforts of COINTELPRO. For my purposes, the point here is simply that Black Power did have a divisive effect within civil rights organizations, attracting the previous dynamism of the earlier phase of the movement and channeling it away from mass politics as conceived by Rustin and Randolph.

It's worth noting, however, that the differences here were not just ideological but also organizational. Rather than heeding Rustin's call to build up its membership lists and become effective coalition partners, SNCC famously expelled its white membership

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66 Rustin, "Equal Time," in "Black Separatism," *Rustin Papers*, reel 17 0913, 75.

in 1967. Even before then, it was approaching bankruptcy, and it was nonexistent by 1970. In 1966, CORE's budget of \$400,000 roughly equaled its debts. Throughout Director Floyd McKissick's term, CORE tried and failed to raise money from labor, receiving money from the Ford Foundation instead, and worried that "the Internal Revenue Service was about to padlock the door."<sup>67</sup> They were only saved from this situation, in 1968, by resources from the Harvard Institute of Politics and debt reduction aid from Robert F. Kennedy.<sup>68</sup>

Unlike the civil rights organizations, which entered a period of relative inaction and decline, labor woke from its slumber in the mid-'60s. Strike activity picked up in a remarkable wave of workplace militancy, even though it never reached the level of unrest of 1919 or 1934. The agitation, however, did not come from labor leaders but in opposition to them. The rank and filers were reacting against speedups and a general lack of control in the workplace, but they also were rebelling against their leadership, inspired by and in agreement with the New Left and Black Power organizations that criticized the bureaucratization and capitulation of organized labor. It's certainly possible that better tapping into this "rank-and-file rebellion," or at least dynamizing union locals around the Freedom Budget, could have put upward pressure on the leaders Randolph and Rustin worked with to make them better coalition partners than they ultimately were.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, this was Rustin's thinking in 1964, before he started playing nice with George Meany.<sup>70</sup>

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67 Nishani Frazier, *Harambee City: The Congress of Racial Equality in Cleveland and the Rise of Black Power Populism* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2017), 148, 193.

68 Frazier, *Harambee City*, 196.

69 See *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below in the Long 1970s*, eds. Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow (London: Verso, 2010).

70 Discussion with Bayard Rustin, "The Negro Movement: Where Shall It Go

One paradox of the rank-and-file revolt, however, was that it coincided with deindustrialization and a new employer offensive, and thus with the decline of union power more generally. It would therefore not be quite right to think that if Rustin and Randolph had just linked up with the rank and file, the Freedom Budget would have had more success. Unions were being shot in the foot by stodgy and sometimes corrupt leadership, but they were also being shot in the head by the political-economic shifts that inaugurated the neoliberal period.<sup>71</sup>

With unions thus entering a period of decline, and the young, dynamic civil rights organizations having broken decisively with the older ones (and having also atrophied significantly, not uncoincidentally), the Coalition of Conscience failed to come together in the mid-'60s. When Rustin said that the Mobilization for the Poor People's Campaign was "the last chance America will have to make an effective choice for nonviolence, for democracy and for the integration of our national institutions," he meant it.<sup>72</sup> With the election of Nixon, the Jobs and Freedom Strategy lay in tatters.

For all the flack Rustin has received for his belief in "realignment," it's notable that a realignment *did* occur in the Democratic Party during the moment when his envisioned coalition failed to become the "active political force" he hoped it would be.<sup>73</sup> Instead of a new coalition led by civil rights organizations and trade unions, a new liberal coalition was forged "of the rich, educated, and dedicated with the poor," in Eric F. Goldman's words. Rustin seemed to approve of historian Walter Laqueur's "more caustic phraseology"

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Now?," *Dissent* 11 (Summer 1964), 282.

71 I am borrowing this phrasing from Michael McQuarrie.

72 Rustin, "Statement," in "Press Releases," *Rustin Papers*, reel 4 0669, 4.

73 Rustin, "From Bayard Rustin," in "F.B. Freedom Budget Committee," *Rustin Papers*, reel 12 0753, 7.

for this new coalition, one “between the *Lumpenproletariat* and the *Lumpenintelligentsia*.”<sup>74</sup> The characterization stings a bit upon reading.

## 5. THE JOBS AND FREEDOM STRATEGY TODAY

The Jobs and Freedom Strategy was formulated for civil rights organizations in a situation of recently acquired formal equality and persistent economic inequality. It would benefit black Americans, but as Randolph and Rustin emphasized, they wanted a Freedom Budget for All Americans. “The tragedy,” Randolph wrote in the introduction to the Freedom Budget summary, “is that not only the poor, the nearly poor, and the once poor, but all Americans, are the victims of our failure as a nation to distribute democratically the fruits of our abundance.”<sup>75</sup> The Freedom Budget was a needed complement to civil rights, but it was more capaciously a progressive solution to the 1960s crises of poverty and economic instability.

In the intervening period, those issues have only intensified and become more diffuse. The housing shortage today is estimated at between four and six million homes, and 30 percent of all households are burdened with unaffordable rent or mortgage payments.<sup>76</sup> About half of Americans have difficulty with health care costs, with 40 percent putting off medical care as a result.<sup>77</sup> And while productivity in the United States grew by 74 percent

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74 Rustin, “The Blacks and the Unions,” in “Labor Unions,” *Rustin Papers*, reel 18 0721, 113.

75 A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: A Summary* (New York: The A. Philip Randolph Institute, 1967), 6.

76 Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, *The State of the Nation's Housing 2022* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2022).

77 Alex Montero et al., “Americans’ Challenge with Health Care Costs,” Kaiser Family Foundation, July 14, 2022.

between 1973 and 2013, wages only grew by 9 percent.<sup>78</sup> Housing insecurity, unaffordable health care, wage stagnation — these are not only the dominant economic concerns of black Americans today but also the defining characteristics of life for working people as a whole, and they are precisely the social issues that the Jobs and Freedom Strategy sought to address.<sup>79</sup>

Now as then, there is a tremendous amount of work that needs doing, including building public housing, improving transportation and energy systems, and generally repairing America’s dilapidated infrastructure. Now as then, the task is to compensate for the lack of private investment in these projects with long-term public investment accomplished through the creation of federal jobs programs, and it is to the contemporary left’s credit that this is the central proposition of one of its leading ideas, the Green New Deal. Pursuing the Green New Deal — as opposed to the “Wall Street Keynesianism” of Joe Biden’s administration, where the tap of state spending has been turned on but without any thought of long-range investment in public goods — might be the narrow path on which it is possible to reverse American decline and mitigate growing inequality while also addressing the existential threat of climate change.<sup>80</sup>

Well-designed jobs programs would also tackle contemporary policing and carceral injustices, which are, as Cedric Johnson argues in his recent *After Black Lives Matter*, undergirded by “the fundamental problems of working-class exploitation, joblessness, and immiseration.”<sup>81</sup> Only by “abolishing the conditions,” Johnson

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78 Lawrence Mishel, Elise Gould, and Josh Bivens, “Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts,” Economic Policy Institute, January 6, 2015.

79 *More Black than Blue: Politics and Power in the 2019 Black Census* (Oakland, CA: Black Futures Lab, 2019).

80 John Terese, “Is This the Green New Deal?,” *Damage*, September 14, 2021.

81 Cedric Johnson, *After Black Lives Matter: Policing and Anti-Capitalist Struggle* (London: Verso, 2023), 32.



contends, can we truly deal with the problems of modern policing, and to abolish those conditions, we need “public works and the decommodification of basic needs, infrastructure and amenities.”

In economic terms, public works would provide jobs for those who cannot obtain market-based employment. In paying employees above the prevailing wage, the program could apply progressive pressure to low-wage labor markets in the region. By providing previously unemployed, underemployed and poor residents with more income, public works would have an immediate multiplier effect in working-class neighborhoods, raising demand at the existing neighborhood-level businesses that provide basic goods and services — e.g., grocers, convenience stores, restaurants, dry cleaners, laundromats, clothiers, etc. — and sparking new investment given the rising consumer capacity. Although this might be overstated, the option of safe, legal employment might also help to deter survival crimes and forms of unregulated and criminalized work.<sup>82</sup>

Unlike simple cash transfers, public jobs programs create the kind of broader economic transformation required to alleviate the social conditions that modern policing manages.<sup>83</sup> In “proposing a set of bourgeois strategies and solutions for addressing the structurally determined conflict between police and the surplus population,” the Black Lives Matter movement in particular and the program of racial liberalism more generally are not, in Johnson’s opinion, focused on this material transformation of blighted urban areas, and thus ultimately incapable of accomplishing the goals they have set for themselves.<sup>84</sup>

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82 Johnson, *After Black Lives Matter*, 33, 256.

83 For a contemporary defense of public jobs programs and a jobs guarantee, see Dustin Guastella, “Jobs for All: A job guarantee puts workers in the driver’s seat,” *nonsite.org*, December 29, 2019.

84 Johnson, *After Black Lives Matter*, 333.

No less applicable to the present than the ends of the Jobs and Freedom Strategy are its means. Though Rustin's version of coalition politics is often remembered as essentially meaning a capitulation to the Democratic Party, his fundamental call to build strong membership organizations that work together in coalition is more difficult to refute, as is his emphasis on the importance of building a progressive coalition with organized labor in a leading role. Indeed, to the extent that left membership organizations seek out coalition partners (even ones they bear substantive reservations about) and are invested in re-dynamizing the labor movement, in recognition of the power it could have to influence progressive change, the Left has sided with Randolph and Rustin over the critics of coalition politics. Thus, despite the vitriol that still circulates regarding Rustin's perceived perfidy, today's democratic socialist left has made partial but decisive steps away from the purity politics and disdain for "Big Labor" evident among Black Power adherents and New Leftists.

Still, the prospects for trade unions and racial justice organizations joining together in pursuit of a full-employment program appear even dimmer than they did in the mid-'60s. The US labor movement continues its slow decline; treading water for many unions is work enough.<sup>85</sup> It is nonetheless difficult to imagine any true mitigation of inequality in America without the work of the actually existing labor movement, which, despite its membership losses, still commands impressive resources.<sup>86</sup> Unions must be pushed from within and from without to use those resources to strengthen themselves internally and organize new members, and progressive organizations of all stripes, with an understanding of

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85 Jonah Furman, "A New Report Shows the US Labor Movement Hasn't Yet Reversed Its Decline," *Jacobin*, January 22, 2023.

86 Chris Bohner, "Now Is the Time for Unions to Go on the Offensive," *Jacobin*, June 5, 2022.

the potential power that unions could wield to advance progressive policy, must in turn learn to prioritize labor's goals not just in word, as part of a laundry list of other goals, but in deed.

Organizationally, Randolph and Rustin would be disappointed to learn that the NAACP's mass membership model still makes them somewhat of an outlier among racial justice organizations today. As even liberal outlets are beginning to admit, the organizational underpinnings of Black Lives Matter are somewhat confusing, with a "decentralized coalition of local organizers who eke out progress city by city, dollar by dollar," on the one hand, and "an opaque nonprofit entity, well capitalized and friendly with corporations," on the other.<sup>87</sup> Black Lives Matter has captured well the spirit of the present racial reckoning, but with such decentralized networks below and an unaccountable nonprofit (itself linked to a maze of other nonprofits, for-profits, and consulting firms) at the top, it is a far cry from the kind of representative organization that Rustin and Randolph imagined.

Related to this lack of organizational concretization is what they would have undoubtedly seen as the continued embrace of frustration politics, evident in a prevailing tendency among liberals and on the Left to "reduce the sources of inequality to psychologistic factors like prejudice, discrimination, or a generic racism" and also in protest actions employed more to antagonize than to relate.<sup>88</sup> In Randolph's estimation, protest action that did not aim to speak morally to a majority was disastrous for the civil rights movement:

As a rule, tactical maneuvers that smack of the ridiculous meet with public scorn and rejection, as they, of course, deserve. We cannot afford to demean the dignity, nobility, and high moral

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87 Sean Campbell, "The BLM Mystery: Where did the money go?," *New York Magazine*, January 31, 2022.

88 Reed, "Bayard Rustin."

promise of the Civil Rights Revolution by short-cut, ill-advised improvisation of action of extremist orientation.<sup>89</sup>

Randolph and Rustin were undoubtedly wrong to turn away from what Johnson has called the “repertoire of movement strategies” as such, but they also foresaw in the new forms of spontaneous protest a kind of emotional catharsis unconnected to political ends.<sup>90</sup> They did not oppose protest per se as much as they did a social philosophy that severely hampered the possibility of progressive change, movement tactics that did not aid that change, and a media environment that sensationalized those tactics. Randolph and Rustin would have counseled today’s organizers and activists to hold the high drama of frustration politics off with one hand while grasping for the levers of structural transformation with the other.

In retrospect, it feels like the neoliberal restructuring was inevitable, but the preservation and extension of the New Deal order through its revitalization with new actors, most notably the civil rights organizations, was an eminently worthwhile task in the mid-’60s. Indeed, one might argue that it was the narrow door through which the collapse to come could have been staved off. After the demise of the Freedom Budget campaign, the Left became more insular, minoritarian, and powerless, and organized labor suffered a catastrophic decline, culminating in the present moment of confusion and instability. Our institutional and political situation presents a much bleaker prospect for its pursuit, but the Jobs and Freedom Strategy still offers a path forward, and its unfulfilled promise will haunt us in increasingly morbid ways if we do not walk it. 🙏

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89 A. Philip Randolph, *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, eds. Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 276.

90 Cedric Johnson, “What Black Life Actually Looks Like,” *Jacobin*, April 29, 2019.