

Jim Crow Wearing Steel-Toed Shoes and Safety Glasses: Dual Unionism at the Hughes Tool Company, 1918-1942

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There was a great wide gulf between what we were given and what a white person was given. When I first went there I was down for 40 cents per hour and when a white man came in there they put him down for 40 cents per hour; the difference was, we did the dirty work. In other words, that broom, that Georgia boogie, that wheelbarrow, the cleaning up was ours. But anytime a machine was used, even a file to file buzz off, that was the white man's job.¹

These words, spoken by retired Hughes Tool Company employee and union activist Columbus Henry, are a sad testament to the kinds of racial discrimination suffered by blacks working at Houston's Hughes Tool Company. Between the first and second World Wars, a separate and unequal Jim Crow shop floor culture thrived at Hughes Tool Company, as it did in industrial settings throughout the South.² Although black workers at Hughes Tool were members of its labor organizations from the beginning, segregation and racism posed significant problems for unionization. The question of how labor groups would reflect or combat the discrimination written into

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¹Columbus Henry, former president, Local No. 1, Independent Metal Workers Union, quoted in John S. Gray III, "Social Inequality of Hughes Tool Company Between 1928 and 1964" (unpublished term paper, Rice University, December 1981), copy in Independent Metal Workers Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

²Jim Crow laws, passed by Southern legislatures after the end of Reconstruction in 1877, formally segregated blacks from whites. Jim Crow survived until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Formalized racial discrimination at Hughes Tool did not end until passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The basic text for an understanding of formal legal segregation is C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

company rules divided black and white workers both between and within racial lines. The evolution of labor representation at Hughes Tool, from company-sponsored "unions," to independent unions, to locals affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was inextricably entwined with racial issues.

Hughes Tool Company owes its start to the discovery of oil at Spindletop, Texas, in 1901, which catapulted the state into national prominence as petroleum became an increasingly important energy source for the nation. Extracting crude oil from deep within the bowels of the earth created a demand for equipment capable of retrieving the underground petroleum pools. Houston's close proximity to the early East Texas oil fields made it the ideal location for the growing oil tool industry.³ The majority of drill pipe, tool joints, rotary rock bits, valves, Christmas trees, blowout preventers, and other implements necessary for recovering oil were developed, tested, and manufactured in Houston.⁴

One of the bold entrepreneurs entering the freewheeling chaos of the oil tool business was Howard Hughes, Sr., an oil drilling contractor at Spindletop. Hughes bought the plans for a revolutionary new drilling bit from Granville A. Humason, a millwright, for \$150. With Walter Sharp as his business partner, Hughes founded the Sharp-Hughes Tool Company in 1909 to manufacture the bit. Their rotary drilling bit became the bellwether for the industry. Hughes Tool quickly grew into the primary producer and supplier of bits used throughout the international petroleum industry. Sharp died in 1912 and the firm was renamed the Hughes Tool Company in 1915.⁵

In its first three decades, Hughes Tool Company enjoyed continuous expansion. The company's work force increased from 15 in 1913 to approximately 65 by 1920.⁶ In 1934, Hughes Tool employed around 2,000 hourly

³Joseph Pratt, *The Growth of a Refining Region* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1980); Henrietta Larson and Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *History of Humble Oil and Refining Company* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959). The Lucas Gusher at Spindletop in 1901 prompted the founding of numerous oil tool companies and machine shops in Houston. Cameron Iron Works and Reed Roller Bit were two others that developed simultaneously with Hughes Tool Company.

⁴Charles R. Hamilton, "Images of an Industry: The Hughes Tool Company Collection," *Houston Review* 15 (no. 1, 1993): 45.

⁵David McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 12; Joe Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political-Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 58-59; Pratt, *The Growth of a Refining Region*, 140.

⁶Louie Enz, interview by Mary Lyens, T. E. Parish, and Jim Clark, January 16, 1968, Hughes Tool Company Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. Louie Enz started as a machinist at the Hughes Tool Company in 1913 and eventually worked his way up to superintendent.

workers, and by 1939 that figure jumped to approximately 3,000. Blacks comprised about 700 of the total in 1939. In 1941, on the eve of World War II, 3,787 workers, of whom 806 were black, worked in Hughes Tool's Houston plant.⁷ From its beginnings in 1909 as a small job shop, the company had become one of Houston's leading employers by the 1940s. However, along with growth came labor problems.

A group of Hughes Tool machinists struck in late 1918. The exact nature of the differences between management and workers, whether it involved pay scales, work rules, or working conditions, is unclear. Although it is difficult to determine the number of strikers and the duration of the strike, it appears that the work stoppage involved both black and white workers.⁸ As a result of the strike, Howard Hughes, Sr., adopted the American Iron and Steel Institute's American Plan of Employment as a means of controlling his work force and preventing future labor unrest.⁹

The American Iron and Steel Institute's scheme called on management to control wages and working conditions; to prohibit labor unions; to establish "company unions," known as Employee Representation Plans (ERP); and to distribute welfare benefits such as health care, life insurance, burial services, and athletic equipment.¹⁰ Under the Institute's American Plan, Hughes Tool Company enjoyed unchallenged control over working conditions, work rules, pay, and benefits. The work environment thus created was characterized by wage scales set at arbitrary levels, ineffective seniority rights, and an inconsistent grievance process.¹¹

Hughes Tool believed that an ERP, consisting of committees on which management and representatives elected by workers met to discuss problems and grievances, was the best method of creating a contented work force. Hughes Tool Company formed its first ERP, the Mutual Welfare Organization (MWO), in 1918 so employee representatives could meet with management "to iron out [differences] that remained after the strike." In 1933, management changed the MWO's name to the Employees Welfare Organization (EWO). Moreover, Hughes Tool revitalized the EWO by increasing its

⁷National Labor Relations Board, *Decisions and Orders of the National Labor Relations Board*, vol. 27, August 27, 1940, to November 15, 1940 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 840, 1093. Hereafter cited as NLRB, *Decisions*.

⁸*Ibid.*, vol. 27, 840; Louie Enz interview.

⁹NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 841.

¹⁰*Collective Bargaining in the Steel Industry: Why Steel Favors Employee Representation Plans and Is Opposed to Professional Labor Unions* (New York: American Iron and Steel Institute, 1934), 3-5.

¹¹*Summary of Agreement Arrived at by the Hughes Tool Company and Its Hourly Employees*, October 1, 1937, Independent Metal Workers Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, File 3.

financial support, closely collaborating with the group's officers to formulate antiunion tactics, and by checkmating shop floor dissidents who favored representation by an independent union.¹² Management wanted the EWO to appear union-like so that it could attract workers who wanted an aggressive advocate for their rights, but increasingly the company used the EWO as a platform to promote its antiunion rhetoric and had the employee officers—rather than management officials—circulate the company's propaganda.

Management formed the Hughes Tool Colored Club (HTC) in 1926 as a "separate but equal" ERP for its black employees. The HTC, like the MWO and EWO, distributed welfare benefits and served as an antiunion organization. From its beginning in the 1920s until it was abolished by order of the National Labor Relations Board in 1941, the officers of the organization collaborated closely with management in controlling black workers.¹³ Jim Crow prompted the formation of the HTC, and its creation established a precedent for segregated labor organizations at Hughes Tool.¹⁴ Dual unionism helped prevent black workers from achieving occupational parity with whites.¹⁵

Black workers comprised between 20 and 25 percent of Hughes Tool Company's work force between 1918 and 1942.¹⁶ They worked in all six of the company's major production departments, but could hold only a limited range of jobs. In 1940, blacks could work in only 26 of the company's 270 hourly job categories.¹⁷ Segregated from whites by occupation, blacks performed unskilled and menial tasks. The company divided its six production units—machine shop, pattern shop, foundry, heat treat, shipping, and storeroom—into pay brackets based on occupation. Black pay scales peaked at the lowest white levels. Whites additionally enjoyed more numerous pay brackets covering a much wider range of pay, allowing them opportunities for advancement. (See Table 1.) The segregation of job classifications meant the segregation of lines of promotion, excluding blacks from advancing to

¹²NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 843, 847-849.

¹³Columbus Henry, tape recorded interview by author, Houston, Texas, January 11, 1994.

¹⁴NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 851-853; Columbus Henry, Allison Alton, and Maurice Easterwood, tape recorded interview by author, Houston, Texas, October 13, 1993.

¹⁵Dennis C. Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany, N.Y.: State University Press, 1986), 3-5.

¹⁶NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 840.

¹⁷*Contract Between the Employees Welfare Organization and the H.T.C. Club of the Hughes Tool Company and the Hughes Tool Company, Houston Plant, 1940-1941*, copy in author's personal collection. This contract reflects the salary disparity between whites and blacks. It was the first public listing by Hughes Tool of wages and job classifications.

Table 1

Hughes Tool Company Pay Grades/Scales
Effective March 1, 1941

Department	Number of Pay Grades for Whites	Pay Scales for Whites	Number of Pay Grades for Blacks	Pay Scales for Blacks
Machine Shop	6	\$.65-1.28	3	\$.48-.62
Pattern Shop	4	\$.80-1.30	1	\$.54
Foundry	4	\$.80-1.00	3	\$.48-.60
Heat Treat	1	\$1.08	2	\$.54-.60
Shipping	3	\$.74-.87	3	\$.48-.62
Storeroom	none		3	\$.48-.62

Source: *Contract Between the Employees Welfare Organization and the H.T.C. Club of the Hughes Tool Company and the Hughes Tool Company, Houston Plant, 1940-1941*.

semiskilled and skilled jobs.¹⁸

In the machine shop department, blacks served as chip pullers and common laborers while whites operated all machines. The highest paid white occupations in the machine shop, such as tool room mechanics (tool and die-makers) and machine rebuilders, received 66 cents per hour more than the highest paid blacks in the department. The highest paid black jobs in the machine shop included the most physically demanding, hottest, and most dangerous: forge shop helpers.¹⁹ On the other hand, white tool room mechanics and machine rebuilders enjoyed the prestige and autonomy that come with being skilled tradesmen. The white-dominated occupational hierarchy guaranteed that blacks served secondary functions throughout the

¹⁸*Contract Between the Employees Welfare Organization and the H.T.C. Club of the Hughes Tool Company and the Hughes Tool Company, Houston Plant, 1940-1941*; Henry, Alton, and Easterwood interview; Robert J. Norrell, "Caste in Steel: Jim Crow Careers in Birmingham, Alabama," *Journal of American History* 73 (December 1986): 677; Herbert Northrup, "The Negro and Unionism in the Birmingham, Alabama, Iron and Steel Industry," *Southern Economic Journal* 10 (July 1943): 29-40.

¹⁹Henry, Alton, and Easterwood interview; *Contract Between the Employees Welfare Organization and the H.T.C. Club of the Hughes Tool Company and the Hughes Tool Company, Houston Plant, 1940-1941*.

plant. As events would show, the various labor organizations that represented Hughes workers agreed with the company on at least one issue—denying blacks shop floor equality with whites.

Hughes Tool's segregated ERPs functioned as an effective system of worker control during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Throughout American industry, such employee plans effectively kept bona fide labor unions from gaining a foothold. Workers enjoyed the company's paternalistic welfare benefits and management enjoyed autonomous control over its employees. The status quo created by the ERPs began to unravel in 1933 under the combined pressure of the Great Depression and New Deal labor reforms, as new federal laws that protected workers' organizing rights promoted a resurgence of union activism.

In June 1933, President Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). The first clause of Section 7a declared that "employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing...free from coercion of employers of labor." The second clause of Section 7a effectively prohibited company-dominated unions by stating that "no employee...shall be required as a condition of employment to join any company union...or refrain from joining a labor organization of his own choosing." Labor leaders declared Section 7a the "Magna Carta" for workers.²⁰ Industrialists loathed the legislation, which they believed undermined the accepted free-market orthodoxy that "collective action by workers constituted [an] inadmissible interference with the free play of the [labor] market."²¹

As noted earlier, late in 1933 Hughes Tool enhanced the EWO's role as an agent in the company's battle against unions. During the following year, Hughes Tool Company president R. C. Kuldell conferred with officers of the EWO over how the HTC could be improved as an antiunion organization and not violate the NIRA. The HTC's officers were not invited to the meeting. Kuldell wanted the HTC reorganized as the EWO had been.²² Management wanted the HTC to take an active role in blocking attempts to organize black workers. Apparently, Kuldell hoped that increased managerial control would make the HTC an effective deterrent to the threats of either black unionization or biracial unions.

Biracial unionization at a Southern Jim Crow factory, though unlikely, could happen. In Alabama, where Jim Crow rules also segregated workers, the Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers organized five thousand miners

²⁰Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), 98-102.

²¹John Schact, "Labor History in the Academy: A Layman's Guide to a Century of Scholarship," *Labor's Heritage* 5 (Winter 1994): 7.

²²NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 851-853.

into biracial unions between 1934 and 1938. Alabama mine operators, faced with a strong biracial union, were forced to make concessions to the miners.²³ Hughes Tool Company officials, aware of the events in Alabama, hoped to circumvent a similar occurrence by exerting more control over the HTC's operations and continuing to divide workers by race.

Kuldell directed EWO officers to contact the leaders of the HTC so both groups could meet with J. H. Rohlf, the company's director of personnel, and enlist his help in improving the HTC's antiunion capabilities. Richard Guess, president of the HTC at that time, selected a committee from the club's membership to facilitate the changes. Guess had served several terms as president and his familiarity with management made him Kuldell's choice to head the newly reorganized black labor group.²⁴ Guess was a conservative who seldom voiced public criticism of Jim Crow. He was the ideal man to head the black labor organization at Hughes Tool because management could rely on him to represent the company's interest among black workers. Several workers from that time remember that many blacks working at the company regarded Guess as an "Uncle Tom."²⁵

The result of the meeting between Guess and his committee included his selection as the HTC's temporary chairman and the adoption of a constitution and bylaws patterned after the EWO. A copy of the constitution and bylaws were submitted to Kuldell for his approval. Kuldell voiced his satisfaction with the committee's work and offered his help. But just as he had done when the EWO made the same request, he waffled over signing the new constitution.²⁶ He clearly feared that public support for either the EWO or the HTC from the company president would violate the NIRA. In early April 1934, Guess and the committee presented the constitution and bylaws to

²³Norrell, "Caste in Steel," 671-673; Philip Taft, *Organizing Dixie: Alabama Workers in the Industrial Era* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 81-85. In 1934, under protection of the NIRA, the United Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers dispatched black and white organizers to the Alabama coal fields. The drive emphasized interracial solidarity and produced a sense of brotherhood among black and white miners. Unlike workers at the Hughes Tool plant, the Alabama coal miners were not occupationally segregated, a factor which must have contributed to the miners' ability to form a common cause across racial lines.

²⁴NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 851-853. The record shows that the committee was composed of approximately 9 to 11 members and Richard Guess.

²⁵Henry, Alton, and Easterwood interview.

²⁶NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 851. The cooperation between management and the HTC leaders is shown in a remarkable clause of the constitution. Article 4 allowed the officers of the HTC Club to decide on a member's grievance without a hearing by the grievance committee. If the aggrieved worker disagreed with the decision of the Club, he could face disciplinary action from management. Section 2 of Article 4 reads: "Any member of the HTC Club who makes a claim against this club, which claim is proven to be false, will be reported to the management of the Hughes Tool Company for such disciplinary action as they may impose." NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 852.

approximately 200 black workers at a meeting in the company's dining hall. Guess secured management's permission to use the company's facilities and Hughes Tool also furnished free printed copies of membership applications, bylaws, and the constitution. Those present at the meeting also decided to request a dues check-off, and the company began payroll deductions in May 1934.²⁷

In addition to his prominent role at Hughes Tool, Guess was a community activist who enjoyed a certain measure of influence in Houston's black community. He was an associate of fellow conservative C. W. Rice, the publisher and editor of *Negro Labor News* in Houston.²⁸ Rice also served as business manager of the Texas Negro Business and Working Man's Association. This group's mission was "to promote the industrial, commercial, financial, and agricultural development of the Negro race." It also served as a job placement service for black workers, both domestic and industrial. Rice used his newspaper and the Association as forums for his support of independent, black-only labor associations. He opposed the national labor organizations because he believed that white-run unions were no more concerned with benefitting black workers than white employers were, and felt that radicalism was more likely to cost black workers their jobs, especially during the Depression, than to advance the cause of equality.²⁹ Rice and Guess became allies in promoting the HTC.

Three years after the HTC was reorganized, Hughes Tool Company entered into a written labor agreement with the EWO and the HTC. The company wanted to demonstrate its compliance with the recently passed Wagner Act that called for employers to engage in collective bargaining with their employees.³⁰ The agreement, Hughes Tool's first published labor ac-

²⁷NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 852. Section 5 of Article 5 of the bylaws reads: "Each member will pay \$1.00 as a joining fee, and 75 cents per month as dues, which will be deducted from the third check of each month by the company."

²⁸Henry, Alton, and Easterwood interview; Hobart T. Taylor, "C. W. Rice—Labor Leader" (unpublished senior thesis, Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College, 1939), in C. W. Rice and *Negro Labor News* Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

²⁹Taylor, "C. W. Rice," 25, 27-33. The black community held mixed opinions of Rice. While many praised him, others, especially proponents of organized labor, accused him of charging excessive fees to workers seeking jobs through his agency and believed that his opposition to organized labor stemmed from viewing them as competitors to his lucrative business rather than from a real concern for black workers. Taylor, "C. W. Rice," 36, 48-52; Columbus Henry interview.

³⁰Schlesinger, *Coming of the New Deal*, 396-405. The National Labor Relations Act had been introduced in the Senate by Senator Robert Wagner of New York in March 1934. Commonly referred to as the Wagner Act, it passed Congress in 1935. The most important provisions of the act guaranteed that workers had the right to organize unions, prohibited companies from

cord, was meant to give the appearance of a negotiated contract between management and its welfare organizations. However, no portion of the document appeared to be a response to workers' concerns, and it granted control over the major labor issues—the production process, grievance procedure, seniority, and wages—to management.

The agreement guaranteed that management retained control over the production process by allowing it to set piecework quotas. Workers could appeal to the EWO's executive committee if they felt that the company's production quotas were too demanding.³¹ The committee, staffed by Hughes Tool's handpicked men, often sided with management when workers complained that they were victimized by speedups in order to meet the higher quotas.³²

The grievance procedure allowed workers who felt that they had been treated unfairly, under the rules and regulations of the company, to file complaints.³³ The agreement did not contain a published list of the company's rules and regulations, making it difficult for an aggrieved employee to demonstrate to what extent the rules had been violated.

The agreement granted the company discretionary control over seniority rights. In the event of a reduction in force, management reserved the right to handpick individuals, regardless of seniority, and keep them on the job. Also, workers on second and third shifts could not automatically bump to first shift when they accrued enough seniority. The company hired men for certain shifts and only considered requests for transfer from one shift to another.³⁴

Although the agreement did not include a detailed job classification system, rates of pay, or rules and regulations, it did reveal racial discrimination in wages and benefits. The agreement designated a dual wage system: "The minimum beginners wage for semi-skilled (white) men is forty-five cents (45c) per hour; for unskilled (colored) men, forty cents (40c) per hour."³⁵ Moreover, blacks had to wait for two years to be eligible for a \$500 life

interfering with the operation of unions, created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to enforce the provisions of the act, and empowered the NLRB to take action against companies that did not comply with its decisions. However, as the constitutional issues raised over the Wagner Act slowly made their way to the Supreme Court between 1935 and 1937, most companies, including Hughes Tool, disregarded it.

³¹*Summary of Agreement Arrived at by the Hughes Tool Company and Its Hourly Employees*, October 1, 1937, 5-6.

³²C. D. Wilson, tape recorded interview by author, Houston, Texas, February 4, 1994.

³³*Summary of Agreement Arrived at by the Hughes Tool Company and Its Hourly Employees*, October 1, 1937, 8-9.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 3.

insurance policy, while whites only had to wait six months for a \$1,000 policy.³⁶ The agreement further stipulated that in all labor disputes, management would negotiate with the EWO's executive committee and exclude that of the HTC.³⁷ Without the power to negotiate with management and without voice in the actions of the EWO, the HTC offered no possibility of relief from the racism suffered by Hughes Tool Company's black workers.

The 1937 agreement was motivated not only by the passage of the Wagner Act, but also by management's fear of outside labor organizations—specifically, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) of the CIO. Formed in July 1936 and headed by Philip Murray, the SWOC had organized steelworkers in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Alabama. Its greatest triumph came on March 1, 1937, when it forced U.S. Steel, America's bastion of the open shop and staunch supporter of the American Plan of Employment, into a collective bargaining agreement that won workers a 10-percent wage increase, a 40-hour week, and union recognition.³⁸ In early 1937, the SWOC dispatched staff men to Houston to organize workers at Hughes Tool Company and other oil-tool manufacturing firms in the Bayou City. According to National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) records, Hughes Tool signed the 1937 agreement with its two company unions in reaction to the SWOC's anticipated organizing drive in the plant.³⁹

The SWOC created Local No. 1742 for workers at Hughes Tool. Between 1937 and 1941, the egalitarian SWOC recruited both blacks and whites into Local No. 1742 and resisted pressure from white workers who called for a separate Jim Crow local for blacks.⁴⁰ The issue of segregation seriously hampered the SWOC's organizing efforts. This, and the fact that the SWOC utilized some organizers who were sympathetic to socialism and communism, made the union controversial.⁴¹ Opponents of the SWOC red-baited the

³⁶Summary of Agreement Arrived at by the Hughes Tool Company and Its Hourly Employees, October 1, 1937, 10-11.

³⁷Ibid., 1-11.

³⁸Ronald L. Filippelli, *Labor in the USA: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 190-191; Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, *Labor's Untold Story* (New York: United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, 1955), 311-312.

³⁹NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 849-851.

⁴⁰Steel Workers Organizing Committee, *First Wage and Policy Convention of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, December 14, 15, 16, 1937* (Indianapolis: Allied Printing, 1937), 118. The resolution to the convention reads: "Resolved, That this convention wholeheartedly and completely endorse the policy of organizing into powerful industrial labor organizations in this country all workers regardless of race, creed, color and nationality."

⁴¹David Brody, "The CIO After 50 Years: A Historical Reckoning," *Dissent* (Fall 1985): 462-463. Regardless of whether or not any SWOC organizers sent to Houston were Socialists or Communists, the specter that they might be hampered organizing efforts.

union by distributing an anti-SWOC pamphlet entitled *Join the CIO and Help Build a Soviet America*.⁴² During this four-year period, the SWOC recruited approximately 425 workers from among Hughes Tool's nearly 3,000 hourly employees.⁴³ Many white workers sympathetic to the SWOC refused to join because of the union's biracial philosophy and its ties to radical elements.

The SWOC's opposition to race-based discrimination cast it in a favorable light in Houston's black community. Though the mainstream white press was relatively indifferent to the SWOC's arrival in Houston, African Americans stayed well informed about the union's activities through community events and Houston's major black newspapers. For example, in May 1937, the Houston chapter of the NAACP sponsored an open labor forum at the Antioch Baptist Church. Representatives from the SWOC and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) extolled the advantages of their respective unions. The SWOC's spokesman, Roy Sessions, declared that his union offered blacks the best opportunity to better their condition in the workplace. The crowd listened politely to the AFL's representative, but was unmoved. The audience's cool reception to the AFL spokesman suggests that they were familiar with the Federation's record of racial and occupational discrimination.⁴⁴

C. W. Rice, spokesman in favor of independent unions, challenged the assertion that the SWOC was the best labor organization to represent blacks at Hughes Tool. In his presentation, Rice warned the audience that the spokesmen for the SWOC and the AFL were ignorant of the real workings of their respective unions. He concentrated his criticism on the SWOC, dismissing its official policy of racial equality, and charged that the union was "too young and controversial for Negro workers to accept it for their only salvation."⁴⁵ He suggested that black workers should form their own organi-

⁴²Alison Alton, Maurice Easterwood, Columbus Henry, Halbert Mabry, and C. D. Wilson, interview by author, October 13, 1993; "Reds in CIO Will Ruin Organized Labor If They Are Not Stopped," *Labor Messenger*, April 4, 1941, 1. The AFL's International Association of Machinists distributed the pamphlet to workers at Hughes Tool Company. The pamphlet was published by the reactionary, antiunion Constitutional Educational League. Joseph Kamp, a wealthy New York businessman, founded the Constitutional Educational League shortly after the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933. Kamp and members of the exclusive organization believed that the New Deal threatened America's constitutional government and formed the League to block New Deal social and labor reforms. They used the same rationale as a reason to focus their attacks on labor. See Boyer and Morais, 317-318.

⁴³NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 854.

⁴⁴*The Informer*, May 29, 1937, 1. The AFL's International Association of Machinists organized a local union at Hughes Tool in 1933, but its policy of representing only skilled workers, combined with the AFL's separatist and discriminatory attitudes, did not further its acceptance among black laborers.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, July 14, 1937, 6.

zations and then bargain with their employers. He opposed black participation in organized labor based on the AFL's record of racial discrimination in its numerous Houston locals.⁴⁶ Rice implied that blacks who joined the SWOC would probably lose their jobs. Admitting that "thousands of Negro workers [were] overworked and underpaid and have no redress," he nonetheless admonished that large labor unions such as the SWOC could not be trusted to protect the interests of black workers.⁴⁷

Rice and Carter W. Wesley, a strong supporter of the SWOC and publisher of Houston's leading black newspaper, *The Informer*, became bitter enemies as they debated over which labor union best served the interests of black workers. Wesley considered his paper the official black voice for organized labor in Texas and used it as a platform to support the SWOC and criticize Rice. In an editorial directed against Rice, Wesley denounced "narrow-brained Negroes who argue that Negroes should not join the AFL or the CIO." He claimed that black leaders who tried to keep white and black workers separated in the South did so in order to "feather their own nests...and are just Benedict Arnolds who sell out their own group."⁴⁸

The SWOC represented organized labor's first challenge to the rule of Jim Crow at Hughes Tool. Its call to organize black and white workers into the same local challenged segregation and stimulated debate in the black community over the SWOC's sincerity and ability to break down the barriers of racial discrimination.

In addition to battling the divisive effects of segregation, the SWOC faced management-directed attacks from the EWO and HTC, a direct violation of the Wagner Act.⁴⁹ As a consequence, on June 8, 1939, the SWOC brought charges of unfair labor practices against Hughes Tool, the EWO, and the HTC before the NLRB's Fort Worth Regional Board. The SWOC accused its antagonists of unfairly discriminating against the union's effort to organize workers at the company. On October 14, 1940, the NLRB ruled in favor of the SWOC and ordered Hughes Tool to "completely disestablish the EWO and the HTC."⁵⁰

⁴⁶Taylor, "C. W. Rice," 40-42. The Houston locals of both the International Longshoreman's Association and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Stablemen and Helpers, A.F.L., had negotiated agreements with employers that took jobs away from their black members in order to give them to white members.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 38-40.

⁴⁸*The Informer*, May 6, 1939, 2.

⁴⁹Further details of these actions are in Michael Botson, "Organized Labor at the Hughes Tool Company, 1918-1942: From Welfare to the Steel Workers Organizing Committee" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Houston, 1994), 66-85.

⁵⁰NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 27, 837.

Officials and members of the EWO and HTC expressed considerable resentment against the NLRB's decision.⁵¹ This tension created an ideal atmosphere for former EWO and HTC members to organize their own independent union. In late 1940, these disaffected workers formed the Independent Metal Workers Union (IMW), which organized two locals. Local No. 1 was exclusively for whites, and Local No. 2 was reserved for blacks.⁵² In late 1941, the membership voted in favor of securing a charter for Local No. 1, and the NLRB officially chartered the local. The IMW voted not to request a charter for the black local. Chartering Local No. 2 would have vested the black union with equal power and rights. The union's white membership, which comprised a majority of the IMW's total, blocked the possibility of a charter election and denied blacks parity with whites.⁵³

Those who supported the new union did so for a variety of reasons. C. W. Rice championed the IMW, declaring that the SWOC's promise of radical changes in the racial status quo would only stir up trouble for blacks.⁵⁴ Rice took the view that independent unions with racially segregated locals, such as the IMW, could better protect blacks from employers as well as from white workers who engaged in unfair labor practices.⁵⁵

Among the adherents to the segregationist cause was Houstonian Vance Muse, a fundamentalist right-wing Christian preacher, and cofounder of the Christian American Association. The Christian Americans, a reactionary antilabor group, utilized race-baiting to discourage union organizing in Texas and throughout the South. Muse charged that if the SWOC represented workers at Hughes Tool, the union would force "white men and women into

⁵¹"Examiner Calls HTC Co. Union," *The Informer*, February 24, 1940, 1.

⁵²"Form Local of M.W.U.," *The Informer*, November 16, 1940, 1; *Greater Houston (Texas) City Directory, 1940* (Houston: Morrison & Fournrey Directory Company, 1941), 535. Local No. 1 elected the following officers: Henry Foster, president; Richard Thompson, vice-president; Wilson Harrison, secretary; and Jackson Pruett, treasurer. All were former members of the EWO. Local No. 1 opened its office at 6513 Harrisburg, across the street from the Hughes Tool plant. Local No. 2 elected B. J. Lewis, president; S. B. Grant, vice-president; R. M. Grant, secretary; and Lee Henderson, treasurer. The black local opened an office and meeting hall at 3704 Dowling Street in Houston.

⁵³"Grovey Tells Why He Supports CIO-SWOC In Hughes Plant," *The Informer*, October 11, 1941, 5.

⁵⁴"Duncan, Martin, Join; Organization of All Workers Underway," *The Informer*, May 3, 1941, 1.

⁵⁵Taylor, "C. W. Rice," 39-40.

⁵⁶Stetson Kennedy, *Southern Exposure* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1946), 84; *The Southern Patriot* 2 (December 1944): 1-8, in Southern Conference for Human Welfare Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center.

organizations with black African apes whom they shall have to call brother or lose their jobs."⁵⁶ Muse and his group vigorously supported antilabor politicians such as Governor "Pappy" Lee O'Daniel of Texas and were instrumental in helping pass numerous antilabor laws throughout the South.⁵⁷

The SWOC's integrationist policy proved fatal to its organizing efforts. As a result of the NLRB's 1940 decision, the SWOC and the IMW would be pitted against each other in the union certification election in August 1941 to determine which group would gain the collective bargaining rights for Hughes Tool's workers. During the critical period between 1940 and 1941, the SWOC continued to reject calls from white members who clamored for a Jim Crow local. As a result, the IMW won the August election with 1,601 votes, while the SWOC received 950.⁵⁸ The SWOC's policy of nondiscrimination could not overcome the human element of prejudice among many white workers at Hughes Tool. Local No. 1742's black and white membership voted on the issue and approved a measure to segregate.⁵⁹ Accordingly, in 1941, the SWOC began segregating seating at its local meetings and, late that year, chartered Local No. 2457 for blacks.⁶⁰ Both moves silenced white criticism that the union forced racial mixing on its white members. The SWOC had compromised its egalitarian principles for the union's survival.⁶¹ During the same period, the SWOC faced similar prejudices in Birmingham, Alabama, and, despite the precedent set by the biracial miners' unions in that state, managed to organize that city's steelworkers only after segregating the locals.⁶²

Local No. 2457's black officers began recruiting heavily from among members of the IMW's black local. They extended an olive branch to blacks in the IMW and invited them to join the SWOC, rather than condemning them for their membership in the independent union. Black SWOC leaders emphasized their union's effort to include blacks in union decisionmaking—a sharp contrast to the IMW, where Local No. 2 did not have a charter and was denied representation on any committee that included white members from

⁵⁷Victor H. Bernstein, "The Antilabor Front," *The Antioch Review* 3 (September 1943): 334-336; George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 61-68.

⁵⁸"Duncan, Martin, Join; Organization of All Workers Underway," 1; NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 36, 904. Of 2,828 votes cast, there were 22 that chose no union. In the 1930s and 1940s only a very small minority of steelworkers opposed unionization under any banner.

⁵⁹"Grovey Tells Why He Supports CIO-SWOC In Hughes Plant."

⁶⁰Columbus Henry interview.

⁶¹"Grovey Tells Why He Supports CIO-SWOC In Hughes Plant."

⁶²Norrell, "Caste in Steel," 673-686.

Local No. 1. Blacks served jointly with whites on three of the SWOC's committees, sharing equal representation on the bargaining and policy-fixing committees and holding seats on the grievance committee. The black local also participated in all decisions affecting jobs, wages, hours of work, and working conditions. The SWOC's segregated union did not achieve complete parity, but it did provide black unionists better standing than in the IMW. The advantages appealed to many black workers at Hughes Tool, and Local No. 2457 experienced steady growth.⁶³

The nation's entry into World War II also helped the SWOC's effort at Hughes Tool. The company needed to hire an unprecedented number of workers to fill its defense contracts, and Hughes Tool's work force doubled during the war.⁶⁴ SWOC organizers recruited heavily among these new hires, and in the fall of 1942 the SWOC claimed to have the loyalties of 56 percent of Hughes Tool's workers. On November 27, 1942, the Regional Labor Board decreed that the SWOC's claim had merit.⁶⁵

Since the IMW's contract with Hughes Tool was nearly expired, and both unions claimed a majority, the NLRB ordered that an "election by secret ballot shall be conducted as early as possible."⁶⁶ The election took place over a three-day period beginning on December 10. The SWOC triumphed. It recorded 1,680 votes and the IMW received 1,538 votes.⁶⁷ On December 26, 1942, the NLRB declared the SWOC as the exclusive collective bargaining agent for workers at Hughes Tool.⁶⁸

The contract negotiated between the SWOC and Hughes Tool, signed on April 6, 1943, rewarded blacks for their faith in the union. The contract ended race-based wage and occupational segregation. For the first time in Hughes Tool Company's history, black and white workers were promised equal pay

⁶³"Local 2457, CIO Is Host to Hughes Tool Workers in Session," *The Informer*, August 22, 1942, 15; "Colored Workers Courted," *ibid.*, August 23, 1941, 8; "CIO Lays Claim to Majority; Gain Is Definite Certainty," *ibid.*, September 5, 1942, 1.

⁶⁴NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 45, 824-825. In October 1942, the NLRB estimated that Hughes Tool would need to increase its work force by 100 percent, from approximately 3,000 to 6,000 employees, to meet its defense contracts.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, vol. 45, 823.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, vol. 45, 825.

⁶⁷"CIO Scores a Major Triumph at Houston Plant," *The Informer*, December 19, 1942, 1. The labor board allowed Hughes Tool employees serving in the armed forces to vote if they could personally cast a ballot in Houston. Maurice Easterwood was serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps at Ellington Field, south of Houston, when the election was held. He secured a furlough and traveled up to Houston to cast his ballot for the SWOC. Maurice Easterwood, tape recorded interview by author, Houston, Texas, November 29, 1993.

⁶⁸NLRB, *Decisions*, vol. 56, 990.

for equal work. Blacks could now, at least on paper, advance to jobs previously closed to them.⁶⁹

The IMW, and the divisive issues of race, did not simply vanish after the SWOC's victory. Much as the SWOC had done after its electoral defeat, the IMW began mounting a new organizing drive with the goal of retaking the right of collective bargaining. The competition between the two unions intensified between 1942 and 1946. Indeed, the 1942 election proved to be merely the opening skirmish in what would become a brutal struggle between the SWOC and the IMW. The SWOC lost the right to represent Hughes workers to the IMW in 1946, and did not regain it until the IMW was forced to disband in 1964 because of its segregationist policies. Race played a critical role in the ongoing story of unionization at Hughes Tool, just as it had been crucial in shaping how that unionization came to be. At Hughes Tool Company, just as elsewhere in Houston and throughout the South, the spread of organized labor cannot be fully understood without a careful look at the context of racism and segregation.

⁶⁹*Contract Covering Wages, Hours, and Conditions of Employment Between United Steelworkers of America C.I.O. Locals 1742 and 2457 and the Hughes Tool Company, April 6, 1943, copy in author's personal collection.*