

The Limits of Persuasion: Race Reformers and the Department Store Campaign in Philadelphia, 1945–1948

MARJORIE SWANN AND WILLIAM HEFNER listened patiently to the personnel manager, Miss Olive Leach,* and her assistant, Miss Pamela Martin,* at the John Wanamaker department store.¹ The store and its offices were palatial, trimmed in richly hued hardwoods and covered with polished marble. Rising from the selling floor downstairs in the store's lavish seven-story "Grand Court" stood the magnificent brass-cast eagle, a landmark and meeting-place for weary shoppers since the store had opened in 1912. At the south end gallery overlooking the court, the spectacular "Great Pipe Organ" rested quietly until a performance released its rich resonant tones into every corner of this gigantic space.²

They had been kept waiting for fifteen minutes after arriving that chilly January morning in 1946, but now the appointment was underway and off to a friendly start. Representing the Committee on Racial Equality (CORE), a new group formed during the war to oppose racial discrimination, the two white visitors asked their hosts about the store's hiring policies. Leach explained that blacks were excluded from only two job titles—saleswoman

¹ Interview with Olive Leach, Jan. 24, 1946, folder Committee on Fair Employment Practices in Department Stores, Committee on Race Relations, 1946, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Archives, Philadelphia, Pa. The AFSC has asked that I not use the names of individuals working for the companies in question unless they also were identifiable through other sources. I have created pseudonyms for these individuals, which I mark with an asterisk at the point where they first appear.

² William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993), 73–7, 212–13; *The Wanamaker Store in Philadelphia* [store pamphlet] (Philadelphia, 1923), 3, 4, 7, 31. My thanks to Kathi Kern for lending me this pamphlet from her private collection.

and clerk. Without pausing to acknowledge the obvious centrality of these two occupations in a department store, Leach remarked that although this policy might be altered one day, the process could not be rushed. Martin added that she hoped it would change in the future, but did not expect this to happen in her lifetime.

The main problem, Leach continued, was that Negro employees would scare away customers. For her, apparently, the term customer referred exclusively to white people. Besides, Negro women hired during the recently won war (not as clerks, however) had been "irresponsible," calling in too often with reasons for being absent. Misses Leach and Martin conceded that white women had also done this, but they added defensively that black women had done it more often. Hefner and Swann asked if the store was contemplating any change in policy. Probably not, Leach replied, because the Market Street Store Managers Association had recently met and, as Swann explained in her subsequent report, "had decided against hiring Negro salesclerks." Perhaps not wishing her visitors to leave empty-handed, Leach added that a dance had been held the previous year at Wanamaker's American Legion Post and all employees had been invited. Although there had been some concern about racial mixing beforehand, Leach indicated that all had gone smoothly "with both Negro and white employees dancing, eating, and drinking in the Wanamaker tea-room, where the dance was held." Although Swann and Hefner did not record their reactions to this disclosure in their typed report, they were undoubtedly aware of the curious taboos whites had placed on the two races consuming food or dancing in the same physical space and understood why Leach had thought this information significant. After informing the two women that several large department stores in New York and Boston had recently hired black clerks and absorbing Leach's non sequitur that small stores could do such things more easily, Swann and Hefner ended the interview, about thirty minutes after its late start.

These two young CORE activists were foot soldiers in a budding campaign for equal employment in Philadelphia's department stores. Spearheading it was the Committee on Fair Employment in Department Stores, a coalition organized in late 1945 in which CORE and other local groups, both black and white, labored to secure jobs for black women as clerks, saleswomen, and office workers at Wanamaker's and other stores in Philadelphia. Nationally, department stores were notorious for hiring only whites, although some black women "passed" as white to get jobs. During

the 1940s, however, department stores across the country began hiring a few black women and men into sales positions for the first time.³ The story of the department store campaign in Philadelphia offers a detailed look at why and how that change began. The nature of employers' reactions to the campaign provides important clues about the limits of persuasion as an effective strategy and suggests that their opposition was more complex than the term racism usually implies. At a time when some white Americans were coming to the conclusion that America's brand of racial apartheid was wrong, black and white racial reformers were grappling with questions about strategies they could use that would effectively overturn it. In that context, the ideas and experiences in Philadelphia just after the war foreshadowed the next two decades of efforts to create a "color-blind" employment system.

Although it was the largest and most public effort to date, the department store campaign was by no means the first concentrated drive to end racial discrimination in employment in Philadelphia. For decades, black groups and individuals in Philadelphia had worked tirelessly to place African Americans in good jobs and to convince employers to hire black workers, but had had only limited success. The Armstrong Association, founded in 1908, had operated since the 1920s as an employment agency for black men and women, especially those who had migrated from the South. The NAACP's Philadelphia branch (hereafter, the PNAACP) had fought to win equity for black teachers in the public schools. One of the city's oldest black newspapers, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, along with the Armstrong Association and the PNAACP, had lobbied hard to pressure local New Deal projects into hiring blacks on an equal basis with whites. Several groups and two of the three black newspapers, the *Tribune* and the *Independent*, had supported a "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign in 1930. Subsequent efforts

³ In 1940, African Americans in New York, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia had held only 2.4 percent of the 88,402 jobs in the general merchandise industry and black women accounted for only 1 percent of the 51,231 women employees, only slightly above the average for the industry nationwide, which employed 802,640 people. By 1950, black women were 2.7 percent of women employed nationally and 4.5 percent of women employees in twelve of the nation's largest cities: New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, St. Louis, Washington, D. C., Atlanta, Houston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Still, change was painfully slow, and it was not until the 1960s that black employment in department stores matched the proportions of African Americans in the general population. See Charles R. Perry, *The Negro in the Department Store Industry* (Philadelphia, 1971), 5, 33, 34, 36, 41; Paul Norgren and Samuel Hill, *Toward Fair Employment* (New York, 1964), 119-23; Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Culture: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana, Ill., 1986), 208-9.

by several groups, including the mostly-black Minister's Council on Economic Affairs and the National Negro Congress, succeeded in getting jobs for blacks at the Philadelphia Gas Company and the Philadelphia Electric Company. The Philadelphia Moving Picture Machine Operators Protective Association won a battle in 1936 opening jobs in eleven Philadelphia theaters to black ushers, cashiers, and film operators. Occasionally using pickets, civic leagues in North and West Philadelphia pressured stores in black neighborhoods to hire black employees. Despite these and other efforts, Philadelphia's employers enabled and maintained a thoroughly segregated labor force.⁴

In 1940, 60 percent of employed black women still worked in household domestic service or in janitorial jobs in business and government buildings. Low-paying work, such as that done by street cleaners, repair workers, elevator operators, porters, sewing machine operators, and clothing pressers, was available to women, as were some jobs in clothing shops, laundries, and tobacco and candy factories. Black men's toe-hold in industry provided low-skilled jobs in building construction, chemical plants, and sugar refineries, along with service jobs in railroad and street maintenance. Some of the biggest names in Philadelphia manufacturing, such as Leeds and Northrup,

⁴ V. P. Franklin, *The Education of Black Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1979), 117–21 (much of this information is from the *Philadelphia Tribune*, see pp. 251–52, nn. 66–78) and 96–99, 113–14; Clara Hardin, "The Negroes of Philadelphia: The Cultural Adjustment of a Minority Group" (Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1943), 34–38; H. Viscount Nelson, "Race and Class Consciousness of Philadelphia Negroes with Special Emphasis on the Years Between 1927 and 1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1969), 96–101; Nelson, "The Philadelphia N.A.A.C.P.: Epitome of Middle-Class Consciousness," *Afro-American Studies Professional Paper*, no. 2, 1972, Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1–51; Fran Barth Toll and Mildred S. Gillam, eds., *Invisible Philadelphia: Community Through Voluntary Organizations* (Philadelphia, 1995), 36–50; James A. Gross, "Negro Labor and the Industrial Department of the Armstrong Association—Philadelphia National Urban League" (M.B.A. thesis, Temple University, 1957), 1–14, 25–31; Charles Hardy, "Race and Opportunity: Black Philadelphia during the Era of the Great Migration, 1916–1930" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1989), 267–313. On similar efforts in Washington, D.C., see Gilbert Ware, *William Hastie: Grace Under Pressure* (New York, 1984), 66–80. For some examples, see memorandum from Donald W. Wyatt to Board of Managers, "Report of the Industrial and Research Department for the Months of December 1935 and January 1936," folder Statistical Reports (120), box 12, ser. 1, Research Department, Armstrong Association Papers, Temple University Urban Archives (TUA); "'Negro In Industry Week' a Great Success," Philadelphia, series 4, box 33, folder 1925–31, 1937, National Urban League Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (LC). See also Historical Information folder, ser. 5, box 11, folder 1925–31, 1937, ser. 4, box 33, National Urban League Papers, LC.

Stetson Hat, Apex Hosiery, and General Electric, hired virtually no black employees at all. Service jobs were limited too. Visitors downtown never encountered a black store clerk, bank teller, insurance agent, waiter or waitress. Available service jobs, often merely opportunities to clean up after white people, invariably offered low pay and no chance to advance.⁵

The war began to alter this dismal landscape. Thanks to the efforts of unionist and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order in 1941 that required defense contractors to hire on the basis of merit, not race, and established the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice. He strengthened the order in 1943 with the creation of the more independent Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), giving nonracial hiring federal authority for the first time.

When the war ended, public conversations about whether to extend the wartime FEPC nationally, and about racial prejudice generally, were developing in cities and states across the country. Hitler's appalling barbarity, made undeniably apparent by the emerging horrors of the death camps, was helping to undermine popular theories claiming natural superiority for particular races and opening the door for whites to consider new ways of thinking about people of color, if not themselves. A few notable figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt had publicly expressed opposition to color line norms, and President Harry Truman was beginning to look like a white racial liberal which could mean at least a benign White House. Moreover, America's racial practices might prove embarrassing in the context of developing tensions with the Soviet Union over the meaning of freedom.⁶

⁵ Franklin, *Education*, 153; Hardy, *Race and Opportunity*, 86–87, 107–8; Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia 1840–1950* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); "Proceedings," National Survey Committee on Employment Opportunities for Negroes, Aug. 30–Dec. 31, 1940, p. 12, folder 54, box 94, Raymond Pace Alexander Papers (hereafter, RPA Papers), University of Pennsylvania Archives, University of Pennsylvania. Only one company departed from the trend. The Bunting Glider Company employed forty-three blacks in 1940 (28 percent of the labor force), thirty-six of whom were listed as skilled. Black-owned firms hired black employees, but most were too small to make a significant impact. For more information on the tremendous obstacles black women and men faced as they tried to get jobs in Philadelphia throughout the first four decades of the twentieth century, see Stanley Arnold, "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," in Toll and Gillam, *Invisible Philadelphia*, 45–50; and Mathew Countryman, "Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia," (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1999).

⁶ Steven A. Shull, *American Civil Rights Policy from Truman to Clinton: The Role of Presidential Leadership* (New York, 1999), 122; Merle Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941–1946* (Baton Rouge, 1991); Robert J.

All of this sparked extensive discussion about race and employment in the late 1940s. Whites and blacks participated in these conversations, rooted in a desire among middle-class reformers and liberals to work together in a philanthropic spirit to end racially discriminatory practices. Motives among whites were complex. Some self-consciously desired to do the right thing. Others, as Stephen Steinberg has pointed out, acted out of fear of race-based danger, specifically potential violence between the races. It was in this context that the Carnegie Corporation hired Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal to investigate the state of race relations in the United States. In its widely publicized 1944 report, Myrdal's project sharply criticized racial discrimination, but did so, Steinberg has persuasively argued, as part of an anxious white-centered wish to preserve white privileges. Still, Myrdal's massive report affected the overall context, even if fear of racial violence constituted one of the catalysts. Although attitudes were complex, the atmosphere was one in which racial discrimination was generally seen as a problem and the need for action at least implicitly understood.⁷

For some, the most obvious act would be to establish a permanent FEPC once the war emergency ended. That struggle failed during 1945, however, in the face of a recalcitrant Congress. Subsequently local and state efforts to enact versions of the FEPC sprouted in the East, Midwest, and West. In scores of communities across the country, local leaders began organizing to end formal and informal Jim Crowism. In 1945, the New York and New Jersey state legislatures passed the first state FEPC laws in the nation, followed by Massachusetts in 1946 and Connecticut in 1947. Only New York's contained substantial power, but at least all were on the books. Clearly, racialized behavior codes were beginning to creak, if not shift.⁸

Jakeman, *The Divided Skies: Establishing Segregated Flight Training at Tuskegee, Alabama, 1934-1942* (Tuscaloosa, 1992), 245-47; Blanche W. Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, vol. 2, 1933-1938 (New York, 1999), 153-89; and Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston, 1995), 21-49. FDR issued Executive Order 8802, which prohibited racial discrimination on all defense contracts, on June 25, 1941, and Executive Order 9346, which banned employment discrimination in war industries, on May 27, 1943. Unfortunately, the orders were weakly enforced in many industries and regions. In December 1946, Truman's EO 9809 established a Commission on Civil Rights and named Philadelphia attorney Sadie T. M. Alexander as one of its members.

⁷ Walter Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 272-311; Steinberg, *Turning Back*, 21-49.

⁸ George Schermer, "Effectiveness of Equal Opportunity Legislation," in *The Negro and Employment Opportunity: Problems and Practices*, ed. Herbert Northrup and Richard Rowan (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1965), 67-84; Norgren and Hill, *Toward Fair Employment*, 93-148; Shull, *American*

In Philadelphia, white and black racial liberals combined during and after the war into a broad alliance to address job discrimination in the city. Black migration to Philadelphia increased sharply during the war, boosting the black population from nearly 251,000 in 1940 (13 percent of total residents) to 376,000 in 1950 (18 percent of the total, nearly a 50 percent increase). Philadelphia employers were slow to alter discriminatory hiring, even after the executive orders. Although some improvements were discernable by 1944, they were not dramatic and this prompted activists to push harder.

Philadelphia's interracial Fellowship Commission had attracted national publicity since its formation in October 1941 because it had organized all of the city's leading civil rights organizations under one banner. Working through the commission, these leaders pressed for an end to racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination in housing, education, employment, and public accommodations. The Fellowship Commission joined together an impressive list of groups and individuals: the PNAACP; the Armstrong Association (the local affiliate of the National Urban League); the Council for Equal Job Opportunity (CEJO), formed during the war to funnel complaints to the local FEPC office; Fellowship House, a local experiment in interracial living and community organizing; the International Institute, which had addressed the needs of international residents and visitors since the 1920s; and the Philadelphia branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Also in the lead were several religiously-based groups, including two black Ys, the Southwest Belmont YWCA and the Christian Street YMCA; the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a national Quaker organization headquartered in Philadelphia; the Philadelphia Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC); the race relations committees of the Philadelphia Federation of Churches and the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends; and the tiny local office of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. A number of leaders in business, law and education also participated, including Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, the second black woman to receive a Ph.D. in the United States and the first to get a law degree at the University of Pennsylvania, and white illustrator Marjorie Penney, founder of Fellowship House and cofounder and staff member of the Fellowship Commission.⁹

Civil Rights Policy, 122; Steinberg, *Turning Back*, 21–49.

⁹ Franklin, *Education*, 151–59; Avis D. Carlson, "Philadelphia's Stitch in Time," reprint from *Survey Graphic*, July 1944, copy in Sadie T. M. Alexander Papers (hereafter, STMA Papers), box 62, folder 2, University of Pennsylvania Archives, University of Pennsylvania. See also material in note 4. The JCRC

These and other community groups had worked together in 1943 and 1944 to pressure the Philadelphia Transportation Company (PTC) to promote eight black men into conductor's jobs, hitherto an all-white preserve. After the regional FEPC office ordered the upgrade in the summer of 1944, one faction of white workers called a "hate strike" that ignited protest and violence. The race reform groups worked together night and day—in large part because images of the Detroit race riot of June 1943 were still fresh in everyone's mind—to keep a lid on tempers and to assist the federal troops who entered the city to restore order. Although the strike's explicit racism had been discouraging, the end-result was positive: the PTC began hiring blacks into many new job categories. The strike had also fostered close working relationships among supporters and had stimulated discussion about how to approach job discrimination in the future.¹⁰

By early 1946, the City of Brotherly Love was alive with activity supporting racial justice. Optimism for its success sprang from several quarters. One of the FEPC's twelve regional offices had been located in Philadelphia and had made some inroads into white-only workplaces during the war. Although the office's African American director, G. James Fleming, left his position at war's end just as the FEPC closed its doors, his new job with the American Friends Service Committee placed him at the head of its national Race Relations Committee. Its mission was to make Philadelphia a "laboratory" for addressing racism in American society. That same year, the AFSC created its Placement Service, headed by white University of Pennsylvania professor Frank Loescher, which aimed both at linking skilled black individuals with specific jobs, and more broadly at pressuring all employers in the city to hire black workers.¹¹ Fleming's active role in the

was the new name of the former Philadelphia Anti-Defamation Council, unrelated to the national Anti-Defamation League.

¹⁰ One of the results of the Detroit race conflict was the creation, initially through the auspices of the Pennsylvania Temporary Commission on the Conditions of the Urban Colored Population, of a City-Wide Interracial Committee, chaired by local social worker and labor mediator Jacob Billikopf. Mayor Bernard Samuel also created an Interracial Committee at about the same time, which historians have occasionally confused with the former group. The latter was much less active and followed the Mayor's lead. On the strike and its aftermath see *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 21, 1943, 1, 2; Aug. 28, 1943, 1, 4; Nov. 18, 1944, 3; July 7, 1945, 2; Sept. 29, 1945, 1, 4; Oct. 27, 1945, 18; "Minutes," Oct. 29, 1943, City-Wide Interracial Committee, box 88, folder 13, RPA Papers.

¹¹ Loescher received a B.A. in 1932, an M.S. in 1935, and a Ph.D. in sociology in 1946. He taught sociology at Randolph Macon Women's College from 1938 to 1944, and in 1945 was a lecturer at Temple University. "Biographical Information," folder J, Placement Service J-Z, 1948, Race Relations Committee, 1948, AFSC Archives. Loescher was director of the AFSC's first interracial campaign

AFSC and in other local organizations, including the CEJO and the Fellowship Commission, formed a crucial bridge between older black and newly-formed white and interracial organizations.¹² In early 1946, the commission and nearly all of its allied agencies moved into their own building, at 250 South 15th Street downtown. With their offices and activities coordinated and geographically concentrated, the FC hoped to mobilize Philadelphians not just to reduce racial discrimination in housing, education, jobs, and the courts, but to end it.¹³

Yet there were also reasons for pessimism. Racial incidents in schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, and stores both during and after the war continued to make it dangerous to be black in areas that whites regarded as their space. Initial efforts toward legislative remedies, in the shape of a Pennsylvania state FEPC, met swift and overwhelming defeat (proponents would not win a state law until 1955). Race reformers next turned to a municipal FEPC ordinance and submitted it to City Council in November 1945. At the urging of the city solicitor and to the relief of Mayor Bernard Samuel and many members of an unsympathetic City Council, the ordinance was tabled on the grounds that it might be unconstitutional, stalling its progress indefinitely.¹⁴ Undeterred, reformers continued work toward a legislative remedy, but in the meantime adopted persuasion as a tool to encourage employers to change their hiring patterns voluntarily. They

between 1941 and 1944. Between 1945 and 1948, he directed the AFSC's job opportunity program. He became the first head of the Philadelphia Fair Employment Practices Committee, later renamed the Human Relations Commission. He died in 1976 in Capetown, South Africa, in his capacity as chair of the Southern African Committee of the International Division of Quaker United Nations Committees. See memorandum, Ralph Rose to AFSC Board, Oct. 28, 1976, folder Frank Loescher, AFSC Office Files, AFSC Archives; and Clarence Pickett, *For More Than Bread* (Boston, 1953), 378.

¹² G. James Fleming, *Some Quaker Approaches to the Race Problem*, pamphlet, AFSC Office Files, AFSC Archives; Loescher to Martha Kraus, March 17, 1947, folder "B", Race Relations Committee, A-Z, 1947, AFSC Archives; Annual Report of the Race Relations 1 Committee 1947, Placement Service—General, 1947, 9–10, Race Relations, A-Z, 1947, AFSC Archives; Toll and Gillam, *Invisible Philadelphia*, 204; CEJO *Constitution*, no date, box 88, folder 13, RPA Papers; Pickett, *For More Than Bread*, 377.

¹³ Carlson, "Philadelphia's Stitch in Time," box 62, folder 2, STMA Papers.

¹⁴ Franklin, *Education*, 158–59; Norgren and Hill, *Toward Fair Employment*, 93. The ordinance effort was developed initially by the Citizen's Committee of the Philadelphia Area Conference for FEPC, which included the CEJO, the PNAACP, the Bi-Partisan Committee for a Pennsylvania FEPC, the American Jewish Congress, and the Civil Liberties Department of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World. See also *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 27, 1945, 1, 18; Nov. 3, 1945, 1; March 16, 1946, 15; March 23, 1946, 18; April 27, 1946, 1, 18; May 21, 1946, 13; May 25, 1946, 1, 9.

relied on language prevalent during the war that had linked democracy with equality, employment, and fairness. They also pointed to successful examples of interracial work forces during the war, and put a positive twist on the PTC strike to argue that working together was preferable to division, discrimination, and the threat of violence.

While the Friends' Placement Service, the Armstrong Association, and the PNAACP kept pressing employers in every aspect of the city's economic life to hire black workers, a coalition began forming in early 1945 to consider launching some kind of highly visible campaign, this time focused on a single occupation. Coalition partners hoped to create sufficient publicity in this effort to rivet public attention on racial discrimination in employment and thus possibly to assist the legislative efforts then underway. They decided on department store saleswomen and clerks.¹⁵

In the late summer of 1945, members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a Quaker-inspired group founded decades earlier and part of the developing coalition, conducted an informal poll outside four department stores to gain information for the store campaign. As shoppers left the stores, interviewers requested their participation in an "opinion poll." The interviewer then asked "Would you be willing to be served in this store by a qualified Negro sales-person?" The answers, the group reported in September, varied according to the race and sex of the interviewer. Still, over half of the white and three quarters of the black respondents questioned said yes (although one white patron revealingly stated, "yes, they wait on us for everything else").¹⁶

A month later, fourteen Philadelphia organizations formed the Committee on Fair Employment Practices in Department Stores.¹⁷ Many

¹⁵ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Aug. 21, 1943, 1, 2; Aug. 28, 1943, 1, 4; Nov. 18, 1944, 3; July 7, 1945, 2; Sept. 29, 1945, 1, 4; Oct. 27, 1945, 18; "Minutes," Oct. 29, 1943, City-Wide Interracial Committee, box 88, folder 13, RPA Papers.

¹⁶ "A White Hand—or Black? A Report of the Philadelphia F.O.R. [Fellowship of Reconciliation] Conference Department Store Poll," Sept. 22, 1945, folder 61, FEPC 1948-49, box 44, Armstrong Association Papers, TUA.

¹⁷ Loescher to Martha Kraus, March 17, 1947, folder "B", Race Relations Committee A-Z, 1947; Loescher, report on interview with Irwin Pincus, Sept. 24, 1946, AFSC Race Relations Committee, A-Z, 1946; meeting with Dr. Taber, Dr. Kirk, Mr. LeSeur, and Miss Gwinn, Nov. 13, 1946, Placement Service, Race Relations; Memo, "Strictly Confidential," Frank Loescher, Sara M. Hamill, and Elaine Pollard to Nellie Bok, Sept. 12, 1947, folder Placement Service—General, Race Relations Committee A-Z, 1947, AFSC Archives; Curtis Publishing Company, Oct. 31, 1946, Mr. E., Personnel Director, Placement Service, folder Visits with Employers, Race Relations, 1946, AFSC Archives. It is hard to know who originated this particular idea. It may have been CORE. In private correspondence, Frank

were active in the CEJO, and/or belonged to the Fellowship Commission, which offered space for the group's meetings.¹⁸ In addition to the usual cast of characters—including the AFSC, PNAACP, and the Armstrong Association—the Committee included the newly formed CORE group that Swann and Hefner represented; the independent and left-leaning United Peoples Action Committee formed by Arthur Fauset in late 1943 during the PTC controversy; the West Philadelphia Civic League; and in 1946 representatives from the Retail Clerks' International Protective Association (AFL).¹⁹ Participation in this campaign did not indicate that an organization believed only in persuasion as a strategy. Several campaign activists were also members of groups working simultaneously on the proposed FEPC ordinance. Still, many of them sincerely believed that they could end racial discrimination in employment simply by asking employers to change.²⁰

Though the progress made during the war had come largely through the FEPC's efforts in defense manufacturing not the service sector, the committee's decision to target department stores and their female employees had been carefully made. The National Urban League had its own effort

Loescher thought he had personally begun the effort, although UPAC's Arthur Fauset made a similar claim. In a 1998 essay, historian Berky Nelson mentioned in passing that the PNAACP had been responsible for the campaign, but this was not documented. See Berky Nelson, "Before the Revolution: Crisis within the Philadelphia and Chicago NAACP, 1940–1960," *Negro History Bulletin* 61 (1998), 20–27. CEJO often took credit for the formation of the committee. See Frank S. Loescher to Joseph H. Rainey, Oct. 22, 1947, folder 7, Council for Equal Job Opportunity 1946–55, box 6, series 1, PNAACP Papers, TUA; "Fair? Employment in Philadelphia," typescript, 4–5, folder 61, FEPC 1948–49, box 44, Southwest Belmont YWCA Papers (SWB-YWCA), TUA.

¹⁸ Meeting agenda, Nov. 25, 1947, folder 61 FEPC 1948–49, box 44, SWB-YWCA, TUA.

¹⁹ "Fair? Employment in Philadelphia," typescript, 4–5, SWB-YWCA, folder 61 FEPC 1948–49, box 44, TUA; Minutes of the Committee on Fair Employment Practices in Department Stores, Nov. 15, 1947, folder Department Stores, Race Relations Committee, A–Z, 1947, AFSC Archives; Minutes, Board of Directors, PNAACP, Jan. 29, 1944, folder 3, box 1, ser. 1, PNAACP Papers, TUA. The composition of the committee fluctuated and since some of the member organizations were themselves a group of several organizations, the list of members grows even more confusing. The following organizations were affiliated with the department store campaign at one time or another: AFSC Race Relations Committee, Friends Committee on Race Relations, American Jewish Congress, Armstrong Association, CEJO, Fellowship House, Fellowship of Reconciliation and its successor CORE, NAACP, WILPF, YWCAs of Germantown and Southwest Belmont, Friends Committee on Race Relations, United Peoples Action Committee, Committee on Racial Equality, Presbytery of Philadelphia, West Philadelphia Civic League, Retail Clerks' International Protective Association, Combined Operations of West Philadelphia, Student Welfare Council, National Conference of Christians and Jews, Teachers Intercultural Group.

²⁰ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 27, 1945, 1, 18, Nov. 3, 1945, 1; March 16, 1946, 15; March 23, 1946, 18; April 27, 1946, 1, 18; May 21, 1946, 13; May 25, 1946, 1, 9.

underway nationally to encourage retail stores to stop discriminating, although the Armstrong Association did not take the lead in launching Philadelphia's campaign. The 1935 state Equal Rights Law had already ended legal segregation in public accommodations, so African Americans shopped in downtown stores, tried on clothing, and used public restrooms without incident. Yet jobs as anything but janitors, elevator operators, restaurant kitchen workers, and merchandise stockers were impossible to get. Committee members stressed how highly visible sales clerks were and that hiring even a few black women to wait on customers could have a far-reaching impact. Members reasoned that once (white) shoppers and (white) employees actually saw black people in these jobs and black bodies in white space on a daily basis, their attitudes about integrated workplaces and African Americans generally would change. This in turn could help topple barriers in other industries and locations. Moreover, it could help convince legislators on the city and state level that fair employment worked successfully and profitably.

Beginning with women, rather than men, might at first glance seem surprising, but the race reform movement's efforts in the city throughout the 1940s and early 1950s placed equal emphasis on jobs for both men and women. Although men led many of the groups, women were very active in all them, most notably in the Southwest Belmont Y and the WIL, which were woman-run. Moreover, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander and Crystal Bird Fauset (a Democratic Party organizer) were both high-profile local and national public leaders. The wartime iconography of Rosie the Riveter may have played a part, but black and white race reformers also understood that necessity required many black women to be breadwinners. Still, no one questioned the conventional wisdom that men and women naturally did different jobs or that service for others was inherently female.

Finally, the department store's symbolism was important to both reformers and those who wished to maintain the status quo. Like Wana-maker's, many department stores were elegantly appointed, but even the more modest ones still built their marketing around the popular belief that Americans could purchase an array of goods that elsewhere might be reserved only for the elite. Consumerism reflected what historian Roland Marchand has termed a "Democracy of Goods," wherein even the most humble citizen had equal access to products of all kinds. Similarly, in *Land of Desire*, William Leach described the "democratization of desire," a new conception of democracy that emphasized each individual's "equal rights to

desire the same goods." Leach argued that this individualistic democracy made it easier to accept that rapid industrialization had weakened political democracy by creating power centers outside its reach. The Depression had temporarily unsettled these notions, but ultimately, by underscoring the importance of consumption to the well-being of the nation, it had reinforced them. Department stores showcased America's abundance and provided glittering evidence of its national virtue. Perhaps the gross contradictions between the vision of democratic plenty for all and the overt racial discrimination that these stores' practiced made them especially compelling sites for whites who worried about racial inequities.²¹

The new committee's stated goal was simple: convince executives of the major downtown department stores to end "job discrimination" and to hire blacks in jobs at all levels in their stores.²² Committee members believed they had to respond to the popular argument that hiring black clerks would cause white customers to flee and white employees to quit. They believed that to be successful they had to convince store managers and owners that employing black workers would not only be "safe but [also] profitable."²³ Basically, they wanted to reassure these white businessmen that they would not have to give up anything in order to become race-blind in their hiring policies. Reformers believed that they could end discrimination without unduly inconveniencing white employers. That belief stood at the core of their activities.

Racial reformers' proposed remedies centered on whites and their potential reactions. Only rarely in the committee's deliberations did black

²¹ See Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985), 217-22, 290-95; Leach, *Land of Desire*, 3-12; Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judd, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998), 5, 6, 11-15, 124. See esp. in this volume, Charles McGovern, "Consumption and Citizenship in the United States, 1900-1940," 37-58.

²² Untitled typescript, folder Department Stores, Race Relations, A-Z, 1946, AFSC Archives; Maurice Fagan Oral History, typed transcript, Walter Philips Papers, TUA; "Statement of Witnesses on Behalf of CEJO in support of Fair Employment Practices Commission before the Committee on Law and Municipal and Country Government, City Council of Philadelphia, Feb. 19, 1948," Series A-4619, RG 148, Commission on Human Relations (CHR), Philadelphia City Archives (PCA). Ironically, the first meeting of the Fellowship Commission in August 1941 had been in Snellenburg's restaurant, which employed no blacks.

²³ "Fair? Employment in Philadelphia," typescript, 5, SWB-YWCA Papers, folder 61 FEPC 1948-49, box 44, TUA; untitled typescript, folder Department Stores, Race Relations, 1946, A-Z, AFSC Archives; "Report to the Race Relations Committee on the Dinner for Department Store Executives," typescript, Department Stores, Committee on Race Relations, 1948, AFSC Archives.

customers take center stage. On a practical level, this emphasis made sense because power resided largely in white hands. However, this initial assumption ironically reproduced the idea that white concerns and voices counted more than black ones, a key characteristic of the existing system that had fostered the racially segmented labor market. In recent years, scholars have discussed racism in new ways, exploring the ideological underpinnings of a set of racial beliefs and practices, often referred to as whiteness, that defines white racial identity as superior and innocent relative to racial identities marked as inferior and suspect. The racial system that secured white privilege, they have argued, is embedded deep inside our institutions, cultural practices, and legal codes in a way that permits it to claim neutrality and legitimacy. Although the intentions of racial reformers were lofty, they were not yet ready to think in these systemic terms. Their emphasis on what whites would think may have reinscribed the very attitudes they hoped to alter. It certainly nourished their central premise that equity could be gained without upsetting whites or their businesses.²⁴

As committee chair, members elected Charles Shorter, a Howard University graduate, former industrial secretary for the Armstrong Association, and until recently an official in the personnel office at the all-black shipyard of the Sun Shipbuilding and Drydock Company in Chester, Pennsylvania.²⁵ The com-

²⁴ A sampling of this literature should include: David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, 1998); Thomas Ross, "Innocence and Affirmative Action," in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia, 1997), 27–32; Ruth Frankenburg, "Introduction: Local Whiteness, Localizing Whiteness," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham, 1997), 1–34; Ian R. Haney Lopez, "The Social Construction of Race" in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia, 1995), 191–203; George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 1998), vii–viii, xiii, xix, 2–5, 16–20, 22, 23, 41, 45; Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993), 1713–14; Derrick Bell, "Property Rights in Whiteness—Their Legacy, Their Economic Costs," in Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 75–83. Harris argues that civil rights law was flawed because policy makers have been more worried about how whites might react to policy than about how to craft legal remedies that truly aimed to stop discrimination and create a just system. Lipsitz shows that despite civil rights laws and the advances of the 1960s (not to mention the reactions and reversals thereafter), Americans of European descent have managed to increase the "absolute value of being white" since World War II. He documents his claim in a relentless list of examples from housing, banking, and highway construction to medical care, criminal justice, and education.

²⁵ Memo, JSL to LRR, May 3, 1946, folder FEPC in Department Stores, 1946 Committee on Race Relations, AFSC Archives; minutes, Philadelphia Fellowship Commission, Dec. 11, 1945, folder 1, box 62, and Minutes, monthly meeting of the board of directors, Armstrong Assoc., May 8, 1947, folder 14, box 56, folder 14, STMA Papers. In early 1946, Shorter was hired as executive secretary of the PNAACP, but the branch's internal disturbances prompted him to resign that post and also his

mittee quickly began fashioning arguments to use and a plan to follow. The blueprint included gathering information about existing store policies, using various forms of pressure to change the policies, referring job candidates with impeccable credentials, and praising cooperative businesses in public arenas. In its planning, the committee read and used the National Urban League's 1946 study of Boston and New York department stores, some of which had already hired a few black women sales clerks, and a report on Pittsburgh's recent efforts.²⁶

The targeted stores—Lit Brothers, Frank and Seder, Stern's, N. Snellenburg Company, Bonwit Teller, Strawbridge and Clothier, John Wanamaker, and Gimbel Brothers—were the city's leading retailers and constituted the central hub of a vibrant downtown. Gimbel's, Strawbridge's, Wanamaker's, Snellenburg's, and Lit Brothers lined the broad and upscale Market Street corridor, east of City Hall, the city's tallest building and the landmark from which all north-south street addresses were calculated. The rest were scattered within walking distance. Many were family businesses founded in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, whose descendants were still active in Philadelphia's economic and social life in the 1940s. The two largest, Strawbridge and Clothier and John Wanamaker Company, were also the oldest and, with Bonwit's, emphasized the high end of retailing. Justus C. Strawbridge and Isaac H. Clothier, both Quakers, formed their business in 1868 on the northwest corner of 8th and Market Streets, several blocks west of the store John Wanamaker had opened in 1861. By the 1940s, Strawbridge's stood on the same site, but in an elegant new building completed in 1931, while Wanamaker's had long occupied a whole block at the southwest corner of 13th and Market Streets and was now in the sumptuous store opened in 1912.²⁷

chairmanship of the committee in December. Frank Loescher became acting and then permanent chair in 1947, while Shorter continued to participate as a member.

²⁶ Minutes, Philadelphia Fellowship Commission, Dec. 11, 1945, box 62, folder 1, STMA Papers; Charles R. Perry, *The Negro in the Department Store Industry* (Philadelphia, 1971), 31–32. Although the retail industry had traditionally hired whites-only, during the war Gimbel's in New York had hired 750 black workers, some of whom held clerical and sales positions; Herman D. Block, "Discrimination Against Negroes in Employment in New York, 1920–1963," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 24 (1965), 361–82. The Urban League report found that nine of the city's seventeen stores hired blacks as salespeople and clerks. See Perry, *Negro in the Department Store*, 41–2; Warren M. Banner, "Profiles: New York," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 17 (1944), 273; Norgren and Hill, *Toward Fair Employment*, 119–23.

²⁷ Leon Harris, *Merchant Princes: An Intimate History of Jewish Families Who Built Great Department Stores* (New York, 1994), 72–73.

Although they had initially encountered anti-Semitic prejudice, German- and Dutch-Jewish retailers had eventually gained a strong position in Philadelphia retailing. Jacob and Samuel Lit, both active in Jewish charities in the city, began retailing in the 1830s and in the 1890s opened Lit Brothers, long a fixture on Market Street between 8th and 9th Streets. In the 1930s, Philadelphia real estate and department store magnate Albert Greenfield added Bonwit Teller's and Lit's to his City Stores chain, but the original names remained. Nathan Snellenburg had begun selling clothing in the Jewish retail area close to the Delaware River, but moved his store to 12th and Market Streets in 1894, the same year that the seven Gimbel brothers opened their store at 8th and Market.²⁸ Sterns and Frank and Seder's were considered at the more modest end of the retailing spectrum, while Gimbel's, Snellenburg's (owned by Greenfield by the 1940s), and Lit Brothers' were closer to the upscale end. Black customers shopped in all of the stores, but their patronage was distributed unevenly. Stern's was generally considered to have the most integrated clientele, while Bonwit's, Wanamaker's, and Strawbridge's had the least.

The committee initially placed great faith in the power of gentle persuasion, holding quiet conversations with company officials and delicately coaxing them toward a change of heart. This approach likely arose because of Quaker influence in the committee and a liberal middle-class belief that the race problem derived simply from whites' prejudiced attitudes. Once employers saw the light, their attitudes and thus their policies would abruptly change and the "problem" would disappear. Whatever its roots, the idea presumed that whites needed only to open their hearts in order to effect social change. A small group of representatives from several of the member organizations—including Carolyn Moore of the NAACP and CEJO, Frank Loescher at AFSC, May Schwartz, Marjorie Swann, and William Hefner from CORE, Wayne Hopkins from the Armstrong Association, and Charles Shorter, chair of the committee—began by visiting small stores already hiring black sales staff to learn about their experiences. Then they met with company personnel managers in the targeted stores to learn exactly what the current policies were. Next, they or someone else in the group made appointments with store executives to ask them to change their

²⁸ Murray Friedman, ed., *Jewish Life in Philadelphia, 1830-1940* (Philadelphia, 1983), 267-68; Harris, *Merchant Princes*, 72, 88-9. Greenfield was a major player in Philadelphia Democratic politics.

policies. There were to be no threats or accusations, just careful positive negotiations.²⁹

Fortunately, we have a record of some of these one-on-one visits because Frank Loescher kept copies of the detailed reports he and the three interviewers from CORE (Schwartz, Hefner, and Swann) wrote after each meeting. He filed them with the placement service reports that he and his small staff generated on their visits. Between 1945 and 1947, Loescher's office interviewed over four hundred employers across all the city's businesses and industries, including department stores, banks, restaurants, manufacturers, unions, and public schools.³⁰

Using the Placement Service interviews, including the department store reports, requires caution. No tape recorders were used, although interviewers were encouraged to write up the interview immediately after leaving the store. Moreover, I have been unable to find equivalent records among the papers of the other groups involved in the campaign. Store officers' responses are thus filtered through these particular white eyes and readers should be mindful of the specific context. My confidence in their value developed as I compared them with wartime FEPC case files, the AFSC's nonstore interviews conducted by several different people, and the case files the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission created after the 1948 city ordinance forbade racial discrimination in employment. These reports offer us a unique glimpse at the behaviors white people used to maintain the status quo and thus the limits of persuasion as an effective strategy for change.

Committee members always began their initial visits with department store officials by affirming that they were only "fact-finding." May Schwartz and William Hefner visited Gimbel's store manager Mr. Banks* in mid-January 1946 and opened discussion in the usual way. Banks explained that he was aware of the interest in this matter and that he had spoken recently to a "fine type" of Negro woman (they quoted him) about this matter. He

²⁹ Typescripts of oral history interviews with George Schermer and Sadie Alexander, in the Walter Phillips Papers, TUA; untitled typescript, no date, Department Stores, Race Relations, A-Z, 1946, AFSC Archives; interview with Budd Company, Oct. 30, 1946, Placement Service, Manufacturing, Race Relations, 1946, AFSC Archives; Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York, 1994), 69; Ruth Feldstein, "Anti-racism and Maternal Failure in the 1940s and 1950s," in *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth Century America*, ed. Molly Ladd Taylor et al. (New York, 1998), 145-68.

³⁰ Frank Loescher, "Annual Report, 1947," folder Annual Report, box Race Relations, 1947, A-Z,, AFSC Archives.

grew increasingly defensive about the right of department stores to institute their own policies, declaring that "outside interference was an imposition." They assured him again that they were only gathering information. He asked what they would do with it and they explained that they would use it to advise "Negro friends" who were looking for jobs. The groups they represented, the visitors continued, wanted to promote interracial understanding. Then they suggested that an easy way to make the change in a store would be to promote a stock girl. He would not do it, he replied. He had never hired black sales or office workers; no Market Street store ever had. The vast majority of his customers were white and he feared he would lose business were he to hire blacks. He added that if anything were to change, all of the stores would have to act at the same time. Gimbel's would not take the initiative. Perhaps to suggest that the store exhibited some racial good will, he volunteered that all elevator operators and their supervisor were "male Negroes," and that a "Chinese girl" had been hired at one time as a clerk, although when the other employees complained, she had been moved to another, more isolated job. May Schwartz's report on the interview stressed the atmosphere of "reconciliation" they tried to establish and her commitment to continue to work with this man and "hope that the picture would change for the better."³¹

Charles Shorter's visit with Strawbridge's president Herbert Tily in February 1946 proved frustrating. The two men could hardly have been more different. Shorter was an African American man in his thirties whose experience with the NAACP and the Armstrong Association made him expertly informed about black workers and employment in Philadelphia. The eighty-year-old stern-looking Tily had worked for the company since he was a fourteen-year-old messenger boy. He was accustomed to being in charge and having others defer to him. Politely but firmly, Tily told his visitor to speak instead with the downtown Merchants Association. He promised to help set up the meeting and then get back in touch.

After six weeks, Shorter had not heard a peep from Tily and the silence continued after repeated unsuccessful attempts to reach him by telephone. He and Loescher tried a different tack. Loescher telephoned Mr. Herman Jackson,* head of the Merchants Association, to request the meeting. An

³¹ Interview with Mr. Banks, Jan. 15, 1946, May Schwartz and William K. Hefner, folder Department Stores, Race Relations, A-Z, 1946, AFSC Archives.

attorney by training, the seventy-year-old Jackson had been a vice president and general counsel to Strawbridge and Clothier since 1927.³² Although Jackson had been president of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends since 1933 and thus might be expected to be open to Loescher's entreaties, he was not. There was no need for a meeting, he argued, because all the stores had individual policies over which he had no influence. When Loescher then asked Jackson's advice about how to get black clerks hired in the city's stores Jackson grew hostile. The AFSC had no business telling companies what to do, Jackson lectured. Loescher proposed that he and Charles Shorter come and make a presentation to the Merchants Association as a whole. "Absolutely not," Jackson replied (they quoted him). Jackson asked Loescher if he were a Friend. Loescher was not, but Jackson announced that he was a "birthright Friend" and that the "Service Committee will hear about this." Loescher wrote in his notes that he tried to keep talking with Jackson, stressing how serious this question was. If conciliation did not work, he explained, there could be picketing as there had been in New York. Then, Loescher wrote, Jackson "blew up and accused me of threatening Strawbridge and Clothier." In a conciliatory tone, Loescher explained he did not intend a "threatening spirit" and urged Jackson to talk with some of the other employers who had been visited. That exchange ended the interview.³³

Jackson's reactions are revealing. As a born (not converted) Quaker, he apparently felt he would have special influence with the AFSC. His comment suggested rank pulling and an assertion of his higher status and greater authenticity. It indirectly threatened Loescher by suggesting that Jackson could endanger his job. Jackson's indignation and sense of assaulted authority suggest that he took his class, racial, and Quaker privileges for granted and now felt affronted by Loescher's challenge. His right to control his own business and his unselfconscious sense of entitlement as a white person were part of his racialized and gendered class identity and authorized him to exclude or include anyone from his private or public life. His conduct, and that of many others Loescher interviewed, operated without any need

³² Obituaries, ser. 7, Personnel Records, box 57, Strawbridge and Clothier Coll.; "Memorial Service Held for Herbert J. Tily," *Store Chat* [house magazine for Strawbridge and Clothier], vol. 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1949), 1-5; both in Hagley Museum and Library.

³³ FSL to RRC, May 3, 1946, folder FEP in Department Stores, Race Relations, 1946, AFSC Archives.

of deliberate intent, to reproduce and sustain a white-centered world view and power structure.

Loescher arranged a meeting at Strawbridge's in July with Mr. Richards,* a man Jackson had recommended. Richards noted that he and Jackson had both talked with Lewis Carter of the Armstrong Association for over an hour and a half, but wanted no further interference on the subject from anyone on the committee. Customer and employee reactions were foremost in his mind. If other stores such as Gimbel's did it, Loescher asked, would Strawbridge's? No, he would watch and see how it went. At this point, Loescher later reported, Richards suddenly blurted out an angry question—what right did the AFSC have telling employers whom to hire?³⁴ Like Jackson, Richards's anger expressed his sense of control over his property in a free market. What Richards challenged was the right of anyone to interfere with his authority over hiring decisions.

Given the postwar context that stressed the superiority of democracy, discredited racial inferiority theories, and called for at least some reappraisal of conventional racial practices, why did these men reject the committee's arguments so emphatically? Certainly their reactions reflected an array of intertwined forces. First, these men were part of a business elite in Philadelphia that had long had its way. In a culture where the rights of private property were virtually sacred and in an industry where unions had been weak, these businessmen had usually presumed complete jurisdiction over their businesses. They were employers of largely working-class women, although they took pains to exclude women who looked foreign or poor, and their class and gender position further naturalized their power. Although all customers were welcome, the atmosphere of genteel affluence the stores sought to project in their tearooms and on the selling floors marked downtown department stores, unlike many neighborhood shops, as unmistakably middle-class. The outlook of most store managers thus reflected their own class positions and the dominant class culture of the stores themselves. As men, they were accustomed to masculine authority and dominion, underscored here in the stores' decidedly female work force, clientele, and atmosphere. These department stores, particularly Wanamaker's and Strawbridge's, were also very much white spaces, where

³⁴ Interview with Mr. Richards, July 10, 1946, folder Race Relations, Visits to Employers, Race Relations Committee, 1946, A-Z, AFSC Archives.

the economic rewards of white racial privilege were in evidence daily. Even the "Democracy of Goods" might not apply evenly to African Americans. In Philadelphia, unlike the South, black customers were permitted to try on clothing, but whites might still feel affronted if African Americans acquired goods that duplicated their own. The whiter the clientele, the more prestigious the store in whites' (and even some blacks') eyes. Likewise, for black shoppers the very act of purchasing goods in large downtown department stores could signify defiance of white racial codes. The department store produced a culture of consumption that could work to remind white customers what was special and superior about being white.³⁵

While race reformers may have viewed the inclusion of black clerks as an ideal emblem for a "Democracy of Goods," many managers and owners may have felt that an "intrusion" by blacks would disrupt the store's essential culture. The very things that convinced racial reformers that stores were a good place to start—their visibility and their symbolism—may also have contributed to store management's discomfort. Each responded to racially coded meanings that the stores represented, one side transgressing and the other side preserving them. Having already bowed to democracy's requirement that all shoppers may enter, store managers may have felt that hiring black sales clerks threatened to compromise whiteness too much. In this reading, store managers' actions were not simply examples of individuals' racist attitudes (although those were certainly present). They reflected a larger racial system that assumed the right of whites to decide, to exclude, and to benefit forever at the expense of those outside its boundaries, which were themselves unstable and in constant need of policing.

Given the level of resistance the committee encountered, Loescher decided to approach the stores in a more calculated way. In April, he met with Jacob Billikopf, a nationally prominent social worker and labor arbitrator, the executive director of the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia, and recent chair of the wartime City-Wide Interracial Committee. Billikopf had considerable experience with department store managers because he had

³⁵ E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958), 158–72; Strasser et al., *Getting and Spending*; Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 75–123, 209; Victoria de Grazia, introd., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), 1–10. For a poignant example of whites resenting blacks' consumption of fancy goods, see Mamie Garvin Fields, with Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York, 1983), 9–10, 62–63.

served as arbitrator in a disagreement between the stores and the Warehouseman's Union in the late 1930s. He warned Loescher that Wanamaker's and Strawbridge's would prove the "hardest to deal with," and that the committee should start elsewhere and pick off one store at a time. Billikopf advised starting with Stern's because it had more black customers than the other stores.³⁶ Since many store owners' first thought was that no one had a right to ask them to do something that would cause them to lose money, the advice Billikopf offered seemed smart.

Stern's indeed proved more approachable when Loescher, Shorter, and Carol Dewey from Fellowship House called on the owner in late May. Mr. Stern said he would like to hire blacks in his store. He explained that his son was a graduate of the George School (a Quaker school in Bucks County) and was currently enrolled at Haverford College (also Quaker). He said that he would consider integrating if other stores went along. Loescher later wrote that Mr. Stern struck him as very sincere. His personnel manager, Miss Justice, expressed to Loescher privately that she was ready to help, though she warned it would take some time.³⁷

By late summer the committee had visited every store in the city. Not a single one had agreed to change its policy. Hoping, however, that store owners had been affected by the campaign, the committee hired several young women as testers to see whether stores would now respond differently to black applicants. In September 1946, Miss Mary Florence,* who had a high school diploma, a junior college degree, and four years of work experience in a supervisory capacity, went to several stores to answer ads recently listed in the local papers. She filled out applications at Strawbridge's, Snellenburg's, and Stern's but was never called for an interview. There was an offer of work at the fountain in the basement of Lit Brothers, but she declined it and expressed an interest in clerical work. The store representative

³⁶ Billikopf advised that someone "prominent" should call on Philadelphian Albert Greenfield, owner of the large City Stores national chain, who had been "sympathetic" to our cause in the P.R.C. situation and might be helpful." I was unable to find any reference in Greenfield's papers to assistance provided to the group. Also, given his role as co-chair of the City-Wide Interracial Committee during the war, I found it somewhat surprising that Billikopf apparently did not take an active role in the department store campaign. Interview, April 19, 1946, Committee on FEPC in Department Stores folder; Race Relations Committee 1946, AFSC Archives; Herman Jackson, president, Philadelphia Merchants Association, to Dr. Beury, Oct. 11, 1937, Billikopf Papers, American Jewish Archives (AJA), Hebrew Union College.

³⁷ Interview with Mr. Stern, May 29, 1946, folder Race Relations, Visits to Employers, Race Relations, 1946, A-Z, AFSC Archives.

promised to let her know if they found a place for her. No one ever called her back. Frank and Seder explained that they would "hire colored," but had no openings at present. Miss Florence filled out an application there, but got no calls. At each stop she asked if the store "practiced fair employment." All said yes. Meanwhile, the local papers continued carrying the job ads.

Four other testers tried. Strawbridge's told one that there were no openings for sales girls. The store offered another woman a job as a stocker. Strawbridge and Clothier, Lit Brothers, and Frank and Seder all told two other testers they only hired Negro women as stock girls. None of the women was ever hired as a saleswoman or in any white-collar job. All had the qualifications and all applied for the jobs, but they got nothing; there were boundaries they could not cross.

Their experience illustrated the limits of persuasion. Given what was at stake for the stores, asking individuals to have a change of heart was simply not going to work. Stepping up its application of pressure, the committee next publicized the results of the testing in a pamphlet and began distributing it widely, hoping that this might make some of the stores uncomfortable enough to reconsider. It did not.³⁸

Although the persuasion visits continued, committee members now admitted that these alone would be insufficient. They needed new tools, especially to address employers' often-expressed fear of losing white customers. Since this appeared to be the chief obstacle, they needed to use white customers to pressure the stores to change their policies. Like many activists before and since, committee members reasoned that capitalism's profit requirements could be harnessed in the service of progressive change if the desired behavior could be recast as "good for business." First, they tried a "sticker campaign." Affiliated groups distributed printed stickers which read "I should like to see qualified Negroes included in your sales force" to members and asked them to enclose one with each store bill they paid. The committee asked members to write letters to the stores and to ask their friends to do the same because "the stores do take these letters and stickers from their customers seriously."³⁹ In addition to behind-the-scenes efforts, the committee began thinking about more visible

³⁸ Untitled typescript, folder Department Stores, Race Relations, A-Z, 1946, AFSC Archives; "Fair? Employment in Philadelphia, A Case History," folder 61 FEPC, 1948-49, box 44, SWB-YWCA Papers, TUA.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Each member group was supposed to use whatever pressure possible with its own members. Since many businesses were owned by Quakers, the AFSC made special efforts to win their support. While Quaker principles were part of the argument, there was also an implicit message that good Quakers don't disagree. Failing to climb on board could be read as evidence of weak religious conviction.

tactics. For example, the committee sponsored a dinner on June 18, 1946,⁴⁰ at the Barclay Hotel for "store executives," civic leaders, and union officers. Although Curtis and Nellie Bok invited the guests, only half of those invited attended, and Clarence Pickett lamented to Jacob Billikopf that, "I am also sorry that some of the biggest of the people aren't going to be on hand." The featured speaker, *Fortune Magazine's* public opinion expert Elmo Roper, told his audience that public opinion polls showed that blacks were doing these jobs in several cities with no ill effect on business. He urged stores to start hiring black clerks immediately. According to an AFSC Race Relations Committee report on the dinner, the president of one of the large stores privately told an AFSC representative as the party ended "Don't you worry. We'll take care of this."⁴¹

Finally, in December 1946, Gimbel's upgraded one black woman to the position of cashier in the rug department.⁴² Loescher, who had become the temporary committee chair, urged every group to have members write letters praising the change and to open charge accounts at the store and explain why in letters to the company. Soon after, Stern's announced that it had hired a black clerk.⁴³ Finally, a breakthrough seemed in the making. The dam did not give way, however. The rest of the stores dug in, still arguing that they would lose white business if they hired Negro saleswomen or clerks.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Clarence Pickett, *More than Bread*, 379; Clarence Pickett to Jacob Billikopf, June 18, 1946, folder 13, box 23, Billikopf Papers, AJA. The AFSC believed that Clarence Pickett's and Curtis Bok's signatures on letters helped get people to attend the dinner.

⁴¹ "Report to the Race Relations Committee on the Dinner for Department Stores Executives," untitled typescript, folder Department Stores, box Race Relations 1948, AFSC Archives; Pickett to Billikopf, June 18, 1946, box 23, folder 13, Billikopf Papers, AJA; Memorandum, "Strictly Confidential," Frank Loescher, Sara M. Hamill, and Elaine Pollard to Nellie Bok, Sept. 12, 1947, folder Placement Service—General, and interview with Plymouth Stationery Co., March 12, 1947, folder Visits to Employers, box Race Relations, 1947, A–Z, AFSC Archives.

⁴² Memo, "Strictly Confidential," Frank Loescher, Sara M. Hamill, and Elaine Pollard to Nellie Bok, Sept. 12, 1947, folder Placement Service—General, box Race Relations, 1947, A–Z, AFSC Archives.

⁴³ *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 4, 1947, 9.

⁴⁴ See folder Department Stores, box Race Relations, 1947, A–Z, AFSC Archives, especially letter from Wanamaker's to Loescher, Dec. 5, 1947, and Mr. L. Funk to Loescher, Aug. 20, 1947; Minutes of the Committee on FEPDS, Dec. 16, 1947, and Loescher to Dwight Perkins, Dec. 3, 1947, box Race Relations, 1947, AFSC Archives. Frank Loescher lost few opportunities to keep pushing. In his December 3, 1947, letter to Dwight Perkins, the president of Strawbridge and Clothier, he noted that "I have been reading your 'ads' for salespeople—most recently in the Sunday Inquirer for November 30th." The placement service, he offered, would be "glad" to make recommendations of "competent Negro women" for the sales jobs advertised and noted parenthetically that so could the Pennsylvania State

With some committee members failing to come to meetings and morale lagging by the fall of 1947, CORE proposed an intensive new phase of the effort. Loescher had reported to the committee that he had detected a softening in stance during his recent discussions with Wanamaker's officials.⁴⁵ One of the store executives had indicated that if the committee could present petitions with large numbers of signatures, the store might budge. CORE's multistep plan, including a massive petition drive and, if all else failed, large-scale picketing of the stores, would concentrate reformers' energies on the Christmas rush between November 25 and December 25.⁴⁶ CORE offered to spearhead the petition drive if member organizations would simultaneously launch an extensive letter-writing effort. CORE also pledged to "give sixty hours a week to the project for the next two months." President William Hefner implored his colleagues on the committee to vote for the proposal. "We need a new technique, dynamic as the atomic bomb," he warned, because continued discrimination could contribute to a "third World War."⁴⁷ The intense imagery Hefner invoked here may have reflected a conscious strategy on his part or may have expressed fears about racial violence motivating his actions. In any case, it certainly underscored his sense of urgency and crisis. The committee agreed on the new stage of the campaign.

While Lewis Carter (Armstrong Association), Elizabeth Young (PNAACP), and Frank Loescher focused on meetings with store buyers to elicit their help, Hefner began organizing the petition drive. His group quickly placed a booth at City Hall to collect signatures and asked member organizations to circulate and then retrieve hundreds of petitions. Volunteers stood outside

Employment Service and the Armstrong Association. He enclosed a booklet on how to integrate Negro workers. In closing he edged a little farther: "I also hope you will talk to two or three officers of the Committee on Fair Employment Practices in Department Stores. Would Monday December 8th, at 2 p.m. or Wednesday December 10th, be a convenient time?"

⁴⁵ Loescher meeting with Mr. F at Wanamaker's, Aug. 20, 1947, folder Department Stores, box Race Relations, 1947, A-Z, AFSC Archives.

⁴⁶ Sara M. Hamill to "member," Nov. 21, 1947, folder 61 FEPC 1948-49, box 44, SWB-YWCA Papers, TUA.

⁴⁷ "Minutes," Committee on Fair Employment Practices in Department Stores, Nov. 15, 1947, folder 61 FEPC 1948-49, box 44, SWB-YWCA Papers, TUA; "Proposed Plan of Action of committee on Fair Employment in Department Stores: November 25 to December 25, 1947," n.d., Committee on Fair Employment Practices in Department Stores, box 81, Fellowship House Papers, TUA; Sara Hamill to members, Nov. 21, 1947, box 81, Fellowship House Papers, TUA; *Philadelphia Tribune*, Nov. 4, 1947, 9, clipping files, Temple Afro-American Cultural Center, Temple University.

stores and on street corners during the Christmas rush handing out leaflets that asked shoppers to support the campaign. "We, the undersigned Philadelphia shoppers," the petitions began, "believe that discrimination in employment on the grounds of race, creed, or national origin is against democratic principles." Stores were asked to hire people "on the basis of their ability." The petition noted that Gimbel Brothers and Stern and Company had already done so "successfully."⁴⁸

The committee supported the petition with letter writing on a massive scale. Leaders from each constituent agency wrote to their members asking for their individual support, but also asking them to recruit any other civic groups to which they belonged. Members received four sample letters, along with the names and addresses of the presidents of all Philadelphia department stores and copies of the "latest leaflet" being distributed. The arguments in the letters stressed beliefs in democracy and the potential for lost business. "I am ashamed to find it necessary to write a letter of this kind to you when your store is so progressive in many respects," one letter began. "But while you continue to practice race discrimination in your employment policy you are, in this respect, lagging behind the better department stores of the eastern part of this country. Why won't you practice the democracy that is inherent in our Constitution by dropping the color line in your employment policy?" Another prodded: "It seems to me that in these critical times when the practice of real democracy is so essential to world peace the practice of such discrimination is indefensible." Sample letter no. 3 explained, "I am a liberal person and therefore I am ashamed to learn that your store, which I have patronized for years, refuses to hire Negro sales clerks simply because they are Negroes."⁴⁹

A delegation from the committee met with Republican mayor Bernard Samuel and asked him to use his good offices to arrange a meeting among department store executives. He declined. The committee sent letters asking for help to all members of the mayor's Interracial Committee, which met infrequently and seldom took a public stand, but the body yielded to the mayor.⁵⁰ The campaign established a special committee linked with Friends

⁴⁸ "A Petition to Philadelphia downtown Stores," folder 61, FEPC 1948-49, box 44, SWB-YWCA Papers. The petition drive had begun before the committee officially approved it.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Hefner to Mrs. Ellen Brown Mack, YWCA of Philadelphia, Belmont Branch, Jan. 20, 1948, and attachments, SWB-YWCA Papers, folder 61, FEPC 1948-49, box 44, TUA.

⁵⁰ "Minutes," Nov. 15, 1947, folder Committee on Fair Employment Practices in Department Stores, Fellowship House Papers, box 81, TUA; *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 24, 1943, 1; July 31, 1943, 4; Dec. 15, 1945, 4; Sept. 25, 1943, 1.

groups "to concentrate on Strawbridge and Clothier."⁵¹ Some volunteers handed out fliers wherever they went and others worked to get local press coverage, including union, black, and neighborhood newspapers, and to place announcements on local radio stations, especially the sympathetic WFIL.⁵² The committee considered using other tactics if these did not work, including "jamming phone lines of the stores" with waves of telephone calls (a method that Pittsburgh groups had just used successfully) and organizing picketing outside the stores.

Despite the committee's best efforts, however, store policies did not change. Wanamaker's backed away just as the petition drive shifted into high gear. A letter from the store management in early December 1947 merely stated that officials were still thinking the matter over. Christmas came and went. Wanamaker's and the other stores remained silent.⁵³

By early 1948, the political landscape had changed from two years earlier. The previous years' elections had brought new faces and new attitudes to the City Council, and the Council for Equal Job Opportunity now moved confidently forward with the ordinance. Perhaps because of the public campaign for fair employment, Mayor Samuel had also signaled that he would sign the bill if the City Council passed it. Several cities and states had enacted such legislation in the last year and public opinion had shifted enough to support it. All indicators pointed to a favorable reaction when the ordinance went to City Council for consideration on January 15, 1948. Loescher tried one last time to reach Wanamaker's through persuasion. "We'd like to see you put in your policy before the Law is enacted," he wrote the store's president on January 28, adding, "We would be happy to talk with you."⁵⁴ But Wanamaker's had no response and made no change.

The City Council approved the ordinance in February 1948. Although

⁵¹ "Agenda," Nov. 25, 1947, folder Committee on Fair Employment Practices in Department Stores, box 81, Fellowship House Papers, TUA.

⁵² "Proposed Plan of Action of Committee on Fair Employment in Department Stores: November 25 to December 25, 1947," folder 61 FEPC 1948-49, box 44, SWB-YWCA, TUA. See also "Summary Report on Campaign to Secure Non-Discriminatory Hiring Policy in Major Pittsburgh Department Stores," *op. cit.* Pittsburgh groups conducted picketing in early 1947 and three of the five stores apparently hired black salesclerks.

⁵³ Wanamaker's to Loescher, Dec. 5, 1947, and "Minutes of the Committee on FEPDS," Dec. 16, 1947, folder Department Stores, Race Relations Committee, 1947, A-Z, AFSC Archives.

⁵⁴ FSL to John E. Raasch, Jan. 28, 1948, folder Department Stores, box Race Relations, 1948, AFSC Archives.

no additional store changed its policy before the final vote, after the ordinance's approval the wall quickly crumbled. By April, Lit's, Strawbridge and Clothier's, and Snellenburg's had hired black clerks. By the end of the year, all of the downtown department stores employed at least some black saleswomen. Still, as late as October 1949, the AFSC's Placement Service found Wanamaker's continued resistance a serious problem and the service's new chair, Ralph Rose, frequently admonished the store over the next several years to hire more black women in sales and clerical positions.⁵⁵ Ultimately, discrimination migrated outside the city when the stores opened branches in the white suburbs in the 1950s. They easily hired white saleswomen and clerks without meeting resistance, while the downtown stores became their sites for "fair employment."

The department store campaign signaled a transition in tactics and foreshadowed new problems for achieving job equality. The interracial coalition had begun with quiet, private persuasion, but gradually had to shift to more public forms of pressure in the face of firm resistance. Persuasion had long been the primary tool in northern cities for opening job opportunities for black men and women, as the Urban League's example illustrates. The war had created new conditions in many American cities that motivated alliances of black and white race reformers to intensify these campaigns. The federal FEPC offered a new model for challenging employment discrimination with state authority. Once the FEPC seemed doomed, reformers in cities and states across the country began working on state and municipal legislation to compel employers to make hiring decisions based only on merit, not race. The new atmosphere carried persuasion to new levels, but also ultimately demonstrated its limits as an effective tool.

After months of delay, foot-dragging, and mistrust, only the law had been

⁵⁵At that time, Wanamaker's apparently employed fifty black workers, but still had only two black women in sales, only four or five in clerical positions, and an additional two secretaries in the executive offices. See Ralph Rose interview at Wanamaker's, Nov. 2, 1949, folder Job Opportunities Program 1949, box Job Opportunities, Race Relations, 1949, AFSC Archives. Still only two of the fifty were in sales and only a few more had clerical jobs. At Stern's, however, the results were more encouraging. Miss Justice had truly lived up to her name. The AFSC reported in 1949 that she and Mr. Stern had hired African American salespeople in several departments throughout the store and that they had posted signs regarding the city ordinance prominently. She had also traveled to other stores in the state to discuss the new store policy with employees. In Ralph Rose's estimation (when Loeschner became head of the PFEPC in 1948, Rose replaced him at the AFSC), Justice "is probably doing as much as anyone in Philadelphia to accomplish the answer we are all working toward." Interview with Miss Justice, Nov. 11, 1949, folder Visits with Employers, box Placement Service, Race Relations, 1949, AFSC Archives.

capable of swiftly implementing a nondiscrimination policy in Philadelphia. Had the committee continued to rely on persuasion, the stalemate might have dragged on for months or even years. Did the campaign succeed indirectly, however? Did its visibility help win over public opinion on the ordinance? One cannot say for sure, but undoubtedly it contributed to the developing climate that opened itself to legislative remedies.

If it did help shape public opinion, why did it fail to achieve its goal directly? Again the evidence does not provide a simple answer. Many merchants indicated that they opposed the campaign because they thought black clerks would scare away white customers and because their businesses were private property and not subject to outside interference. On the one hand, these public statements may have concealed more ambivalent feelings. Some stores may have wanted to make the change but did not dare to do it individually. In these cases, the ordinance might have provided them with crucial cover, allowing them to hire black clerks without having to appear eager to do so. They may have waited until all stores had to comply so that no store could be singled out as "too friendly" to blacks. Had this been the case for all of the city's stores, however, the Merchants Association could have helped ease the way earlier by having all stores simultaneously announce new hiring policies.

Instead, the stores continued to resist even when the ordinance seemed guaranteed to pass. Merchants may have preferred to represent themselves publicly as reluctant objects of government coercion, rather than as willing volunteers for change. The protests had demonstrated that there was more than one unified "public," but managers and owners may have been convinced that most white customers did not want these changes. Merchants may have worried that voluntary agreement would attract more black shoppers to their stores and that, coupled with hiring black clerks, could have made their stores appear "too black." While merchants may have been genuinely concerned that this could scare white customers away, their anxiety may also have stemmed from their own white identities. These were elite stores after all. Their status was associated with whiteness—the best stores were white. The two stores that had agreed to changes had more black patrons than the rest. "Darkening" the likes of Wanamaker's and Strawbridge's would mean losing something as valuable as money, a sense of special superiority, a kind of intangible property. If this were the case, certain stores might not have wanted to appear congenial to black shoppers under any circumstances, because even if they made money from black shoppers, they would still have forfeited a treasured and lucrative possession, their

image of exclusivity. The opposition of store managers to hiring black women clerks may have arisen in part from their unrecognized feelings about their own privileged social location: their rights and wants trumped black women's need or desire for employment. Some of them may even have found it difficult to imagine black women touching and selling the fine products they associated with being white and middle-class.⁵⁶

It is also possible that merchants wanted to make the persuasion campaign look ineffective on general principle. The campaign had been strong, visible, and concerted. It had included both white and black groups and individuals. Allowing that kind of progressive coalition to feel or look powerful in public may have appeared to be more dangerous than being forced to change hiring policies by the largely white City Council. Alternatively, some City Council members might have been so offended by the naked resistance of the merchants to the campaign that they voted for the ordinance in part to distance themselves from such bad manners.

In any case, the ordinance thus appears in this story as the *deus-ex-machina* that secured a victory for racial equality. Without the force of law, the claims to privilege of Philadelphia merchants would likely have been sustainable for some time to come. Yet would the ordinance truly be a victory? If all that was needed was to increase the number of black faces in a workplace, then perhaps the answer was yes. If more was required, however, the answer might look more complicated. What the ordinance did not address was who decided what constituted merit or fairness. Nor did it prevent discrimination in the new suburban stores. Would black newcomers alter the dominant white discourse in every workplace or would blacks be expected to act white or defer to white authority? If whites operated overtly and covertly to preserve their privileges, what would happen and who would care? In sum, could laws disrupt the workings of the white-centered racial system or were they simply another product of it that would reproduce the very system they were designed to topple? Whatever the answer, the force of law now seemed necessary to make any changes, however meager.

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⁵⁶ My thinking on merchants' motives and on whiteness is indebted to the work of Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York, 2001); and the works by Roediger, Frankenburg, Lopez, Lipsitz, Harris, and Bell cited in n. 24.