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From Socialism to Racism:
The Politics of Class and
Identity in Postwar Milwaukee

by
Kevin D. Smith

On April 3, 1956, voters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, went to the polls to choose their mayor in an election that pitted two-term incumbent and Socialist Party member Frank P. Zeidler against Milton J. McGuire, a conservative Democrat who chaired the city's common council. Ostensibly, Milwaukee's urban-renewal program was the major issue in the race. As the election drew near, however, press reports of a "whisper campaign" attacking the incumbent overshadowed the issue of urban redevelopment. The rumors, which had been circulating for more than four years, came to the attention of Milwaukee's daily newspapers when a number of local clergy denounced the stories from the pulpit. The rumors charged Zeidler with erecting billboards throughout the South inviting African Americans to Milwaukee to take advantage of its public housing and liberal social-welfare policies. By election day, the whisper campaign had gained national attention. It was touted in the South as proof of northern racism and deplored by nationally based publications like *Time* magazine as a misguided and dishonest effort on the part of real-estate interests to thwart the mayor's progressive agenda.[1] Although Zeidler was reelected, the whisper campaign, along with the Socialist's narrowing margin of victory, underscored the deep racial conflict that accompanied the rapid postwar growth of Milwaukee's black population.

Milwaukee's response to the increased African-American presence advances our understanding of the decline of the primarily class-based politics of the New Deal era in favor of the race-based or "identity" politics that has predominated in the United States since the late 1970s. Numerous scholars have attributed the splintering of the New Deal

[1] Editorial, *Shreveport Journal*, March 27, 1956; "The Shame of Milwaukee," *Time*, April 2, 1956, 23.

coalition to the late-1960s rise of identity-based social movements such as Black Power, second-wave feminism, and Gay Liberation.[2] As a growing body of literature reveals, however, the refusal of working-class whites in the urban North and West during and after World War II to accept integrated public housing and to permit neighborhood integration began to fracture the New Deal coalition long before the emergence of working-class "Reagan Democrats."[3] Milwaukee's history adds another dimension to this literature by illustrating the impact of Cold War anticommunism in undermining the prewar liberal consensus. The city's experience also reinforces the view that working-class whites, faced with the steady influx of black southerners, were no less willing than African Americans to define their interests on the basis of their race.

In Milwaukee the transition from class- to race-based politics resulted from three significant political and social changes, each reflected in the watershed 1956 election. First, despite Zeidler's reelection, Wisconsin's transition from a multiparty political system to a two-party state, consolidated during the early Cold War, left the mayor politically isolated. By focusing debate on Zeidler's party affiliation, conservatives manipulated Cold War fears to undermine his administration's ability to construct integrated public housing.

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[2] See Peter Brown, *Minority Party: Why Democrats Face Defeat in 1992 and Beyond* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1991); Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991); E. J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); Gordon MacInnes, *Wrong for All the Right Reasons: How White Liberals Have Been Undone by Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). For a particularly critical historical account, see David Burner, *Making Peace with the 60s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[3] See Gary Gerstle, "Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus," *Journal of American History* 82 (September 1995): 579-86; Arnold R. Hirsch, "Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, Chicago, 1953-1966," in ibid., 522-50; Thomas Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1960," in ibid., 551-78; Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). For book-length treatments of race relations in Chicago and Detroit, see Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). For historical interpretations that explore the development of "white identity," see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999).

Second, despite widespread support in the North for the growing civil-rights movement in the South, the massive northward migration of black southerners forced northern whites to confront their own attitudes and actions toward African Americans. As the whisper campaign indicated, many white Milwaukeeans, like their counterparts in other northern and western cities, harbored a deep-seated racism. Once aroused, this attitude increasingly penetrated the debates over public housing, redevelopment, and, ultimately, fair-housing legislation. Finally, growing black political power, illustrated most clearly by the 1956 election of Vel Phillips as Milwaukee's first African-American alderwoman, and reinforced by the emergence of a more militant black leadership, helped to raise expectations among many African Americans.

By the early 1960s, these rising expectations, in conjunction with stiffening white resistance to residential integration, completed the transition from class to race as the focus of Milwaukee's political discourse. Exhausted by personal attacks against his race-blind policies and unwilling to subject his city to further polarization over the issue of socialism, Zeidler declined to run for a fourth term in 1960.[4] His successor, Democrat Henry A. Maier, proved hostile to the aspirations of black Milwaukeeans in his rhetoric and policies, particularly in his consistent blocking, along with the common council, of Vel Phillips's initiatives for a municipal fair-housing law. Consequently, by the early 1960s many African Americans despaired of change through electoral politics and turned to more radical leaders, who ushered in a wave of protests, school boycotts, and housing marches which ensured that public debate would focus on race, rather than class.

Between 1940 and 1960 Milwaukee shared with many cities an increase in racial tension as more than three million southern African Americans migrated to the industrialized North and West. They settled not only in Chicago and Detroit, cities that already possessed a significant black population, but also in somewhat smaller places such as Portland, Oregon, Buffalo, New York, and Milwaukee, whose African-American communities had been small before World War II. For example, Milwaukee's black population increased sevenfold between 1940 and 1960, from 8,821 (1.5 percent of the city's population of 587,472), to 62,458 (8.4 percent of Milwaukee's

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[4] Frank P. Zeidler, "A Liberal in City Government: My Experience as Mayor of Milwaukee" (typescript photocopy in the Milwaukee County Public Library, Milwaukee, Wis., 1962), 643, 644.

total population of 741,324).[5] In all five cities, African Americans suffered discrimination in employment and, especially, in housing that contributed to growing racial conflict throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Unlike these other cities, however, Milwaukee's racial tensions did not come fully to the surface until the mid-1950s. Instead, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, socialism—personified in the figure of Mayor Zeidler—more than race, dominated the political debate over public housing and urban redevelopment.

Like most American cities, Milwaukee's most pressing concern as World War II drew to a close was a massive housing shortage, caused by a lack of money during the Great Depression and a shortage of building materials during the war. Many returning servicemen and their families lived in trailer camps, Quonset huts, and temporary barracks, while several homes and apartments in Milwaukee's older sections had deteriorated to the point of squalor. Meanwhile, despite the return of white servicemen to civilian employment, Milwaukee's extraordinary industrial strength continued to attract a steady stream of southern African Americans.[6]

In Milwaukee as elsewhere, the debate surrounding these demographic changes focused on public housing and urban redevelopment. When building materials became available, Federal Housing Administration (FHA) policies combined with the preferences of most white Milwaukeeans to ensure that the vast majority of new housing would be located on the outskirts of the city and in the surrounding suburbs.[7] In addition to providing low-cost mortgages for single-family homes in the suburbs, however, the federal government also provided millions of dollars to municipalities to clear slums and construct public housing through the Housing Acts of 1937, 1949, and 1954. Federal guidelines gave local governments considerable latitude in deciding how such funds

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[5] "Milwaukee," Published Reports, 1968, MSS 1776, file 10, box 2, African American History Collection, Milwaukee County Historical Society (hereafter cited as MCHS), Milwaukee, Wis.

[6] John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999), 323, 324. Milwaukee's industrial output more than doubled between 1945 and 1953. During the same period, at least 56 percent of Milwaukee's work force labored in industry, one of the highest percentages in the United States. See also William F. Thompson, *Continuity and Change, 1940-1965*, vol. 6 of *The History of Wisconsin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988), 160-225.

[7] *Milwaukee Journal*, September 9, 1960; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 190-218.

would be spent, a policy that produced substantial social conflict at the municipal level during the 1940s and 1950s.[8]

In most northern and western cities with growing black populations, this conflict played out in terms of race. In Chicago it culminated in a pitched battle over the integration of the Trumbull Park Homes, a public-housing project on Chicago's far southeast side. Segregated since 1940 under the federal "neighborhood composition guideline," Trumbull Park was integrated in 1953 under new federal nondiscrimination policies. This action resulted in more than a decade of often violent resistance to the further integration of the project and the surrounding neighborhood.[9] In Detroit the wartime influx of southern African Americans resulted in a series of violent clashes over the integration of the Sojourner Truth Homes and in 1943 precipitated the most destructive race riot in the United States since the Civil War draft riots. In 1949 antilabor conservative Albert Cobo, who "opposed 'Negro invasions' and public housing," defeated prolabor and prointegration candidate George Edwards, despite strong opposition from the United Auto Workers and other CIO unions. During Cobo's mayoralty white neighborhood associations prevented the construction of public housing outside of Detroit's inner city and harassed more affluent African Americans who attempted to move into previously all-white areas.[10]

In Portland and Buffalo, though violence was rare, political debate quickly focused on the in-migration of southern African Americans during the early years of World War II. In Portland, whose black population grew exponentially with the expansion of the wartime ship-building industry, white defense workers prevented the integration of Portland's public housing. After the war, conservatives blocked further construction by arguing that public housing was inherently segregated, and thus "un-American."[11] During 1941 and 1942 Buffalo residents blocked attempts to locate public housing for black defense workers in

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[8] Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 60, 61.

[9] Hirsch, "Massive Resistance," 522-27, 548-50. The "neighborhood composition guideline" directed that the race of public-housing residents reflect the racial composition of the surrounding neighborhood.

[10] Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics," 553, 557, 563, 570, 572.

[11] Stuart John McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line: Civil Rights and Racial Ideology in Portland, Oregon, 1944-1965" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1998), 70-77.

all-white neighborhoods, contributing to the further isolation of African Americans on the city's southeast side.[12]

Milwaukee's postwar battles over public housing and urban renewal followed a different pattern from the conflicts in Portland and Buffalo, reflecting the longstanding division between the Socialist Party and its opponents. Organized as a distinct party in 1897, Milwaukee's Social-Democrats focused on public control of municipal services and utilities, development of park space, and preservation of clean government, an agenda often referred to as "sewer socialism."[13] Despite the Social-Democrats' moderate goals, Democrats and Republicans banded together in 1912 to impose nonpartisan elections in Milwaukee in the hope of uniting nonsocialist voters against Socialist candidates.[14] This attempt was unsuccessful, however. Illustrating the political clout of Milwaukee's largely working-class electorate, as well as the Wisconsin tradition of third-party voting, Social-Democrat Daniel Hoan served six terms as mayor from 1916 to 1940.[15]

By the late 1930s, however, the increasing liberalism of the national Democratic Party began to transform Wisconsin, and neighboring Minnesota, into two-party states. Before the 1930s, the Progressive and Stalwart wings of the Republican Party dominated Wisconsin state politics. But irreconcilable differences between the two factions over how to respond to the Great Depression led in 1934 to the creation of a separate Progressive Party. In turn, World War II divided the members of the Progressive Party between economic liberals and isolationists, a rupture that culminated in the disbanding of the party in 1946. Liberal Progressives then turned to the Democratic Party. In Milwaukee, meanwhile, where a conservative Democratic organization already existed, Socialists who found their "foreign character" a growing liability with the entry of the United States into the war had begun to join with Progressives to create a liberal wing of the Democratic Party. As Daniel Hoan explained his 1944 decision to join the Democrats: "I do want to

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[12] Neil Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power: Buffalo Politics, 1934-1997* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 65, 85, 95.

[13] Milwaukee's Socialist Party was officially known as the Social-Democratic Party, although it maintained ties with the Socialist Party of America.

[14] Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948), 521.

[15] Gurda, *Milwaukee*, 221.

help build some kind of political vehicle that the liberals are not ashamed to be in."[16]

Thus by 1947, when school-board member and Socialist Party activist Frank Zeidler announced his intention to run for mayor, a resurgent Democratic Party already challenged the Socialists' claim to leadership of Milwaukee's liberals. In Minnesota, where the Democratic Party experienced a similar resurgence with the decline of the Farmer-Labor Party, Democratic leaders promoted racial justice and anticommunism as a substitute for the class-based politics of the depression. As mayor of Minneapolis, which did not experience a significant increase in its black population until the late 1960s, Hubert Humphrey used a successful municipal civil-rights program to gain support for his 1948 election to the United States Senate. As a senator and vice president during the 1950s and 1960s, Humphrey helped to place civil rights and anticommunism at the heart of the national Democratic Party platform.[17] The presence of a growing black community in Milwaukee, however, militated against an emphasis on civil rights for that city's Democrats.

Instead, Milwaukee's Democratic leaders focused on anticommunism, making socialism the central issue of the 1948 mayoral campaign. In the primary, Zeidler and future Democratic congressman Henry S. Reuss bested a field of fifteen candidates to face each other in the April 6 runoff. Both candidates supported publicly financed urban redevelopment. Zeidler downplayed his party affiliation, turning for institutional support not to the Socialist Party organization but to the newly created Public Enterprise Committee, an association of Socialist and Democratic Party activists as well as other labor and community leaders.[18] Nevertheless, Reuss, along with the city's major dailies, the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, insisted that the "fundamental" issue of the campaign was Zeidler's "basic philosophy."[19]

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[16] Daniel Hoan to Ray Walker, February 16, 1946, quoted in Richard Haney, "A History of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin since World War II" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1970), 1.

[17] Between 1940 and 1950 the black populations of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota) increased from 9,900 to 14,022, a bit less than 42 percent. During the same period, Milwaukee's black population increased by more than 131 percent, from 8,821 to 20,454. See Jennifer Delton, "Forging a Northern Strategy: Civil Rights in Liberal Democratic Politics, 1940-1948" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1997), 106-10, 157.

[18] Gurda, *Milwaukee*, 337. The Public Enterprise Committee was originally called the Municipal Enterprise Committee.

[19] *Milwaukee Journal*, March 21, 1948.

In the words of *Journal* editors, socialism was not simply "a method of operating city government," but "a political philosophy" that involved "a change in the American system of capitalism and free enterprise."[20]

Despite these attacks, Zeidler handily defeated his opponent in the run-off election. With heavy support from organized labor, his margin of victory came from Milwaukee's working-class majority, most of whom resided on the city's all-white south side. Reuss won only the three wards on Yankee Hill, where upper-middle-class WASP professionals were concentrated. In addition to electing Zeidler, voters approved a series of referenda enabling the city to issue bonds to finance public housing, eliminate "blight," and construct freeways from the suburbs to the downtown business center. Of the fifteen candidates in the March primary, the top three finishers had supported these publicly financed initiatives.[21]

The struggle in Milwaukee over urban renewal focused not on whether the inner city should be rebuilt but on whether redevelopment would rest in public or private hands. The Zeidler administration, reflecting the longstanding aspirations of liberal housing reformers, envisioned a comprehensive renewal program financed largely by the federal government, that would combine the demolition of substandard buildings with the relocation of inner-city residents to integrated public housing constructed throughout the city. Insisting on the provision of public housing for those displaced by redevelopment projects but unable to afford private-sector housing, Zeidler refused to proceed with substantial slum-clearance projects until accommodations could be secured for all of those whose dwellings were to be razed.

Zeidler's opponents, organized chiefly around the Milwaukee Board of Realtors (MBR), the Certified Rental Operators' Alliance (CROA), and the Milwaukee County Property Owners' Association (MCPOA), argued instead that "private enterprise" should oversee the rebuilding of the inner city. Opposing the expenditure of public funds for redevelopment, these groups claimed that the supply of private rental properties was adequate to the needs of inner-city residents and that the construction of public housing would undermine the livelihood of the landlords and realtors who did business downtown. Like Democratic leaders, Milwaukee's real-estate interests took full advantage of the anticommunist hysteria sweeping the nation. Attacking public housing

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[20] Editorial, *Milwaukee Journal*, March 23, 1948.
[21] *Milwaukee Journal*, April 7, 1948.

as "un-American" and "socialistic," they had little need for overtly race-based appeals.[22]

Zeidler attempted to build on the work of previous city governments to expand public housing and to institute a program of publicly financed slum clearance. In 1944 John Bohn, Zeidler's nonpartisan predecessor, had established the Milwaukee Housing Authority (MHA) to purchase land and finance the construction of public housing. In 1945 the common council approved the construction of Hillside Terrace, an integrated project in the heart of the black community. By December 1948 the project was completed, and residents began moving in. Between 1948 and 1951 the Zeidler administration oversaw the erection of additional integrated housing projects, including Westlawn, which was located in an all-white neighborhood on Milwaukee's far-west side.[23]

In 1951, however, public-housing opponents took advantage of a provision in the Federal Housing Act of 1949 that exempted federally financed housing projects from local property taxes to attack the mayor's plans. The MCPOA gathered the signatures necessary to place a question on the April ballot requiring that any proposed housing project that would not pay full property taxes first be submitted to the voters for approval in a separate referendum. Denouncing public housing as "socialistic," the organization rested its case on the question of "whether or not the American people had a right to vote." It also worded its referendum question so that a "no" vote on the MCPOA referendum question indicated support for public housing. In turn, public-housing supporters, organized as the Citizens' Antislum Committee, placed their own referendum question on the ballot, which asked Milwaukee voters whether they wanted slum clearance, "irrespective of any other resolutions or act."[24]

Despite opposition from the Antislum Committee and the *Milwaukee Journal,* the MCPOA referendum passed by a narrow margin of 1,589 votes.[25] In the same election, however, the slum-clearance referendum passed by more than ten thousand votes. Zeidler and the Antislum Committee attributed the mixed results to voter confusion

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[22] Zeidler, "A Liberal in City Government," 425. For some examples, see Dominic H. Frinzi to Frank P. Zeidler, March 29, 1955, file 7, box 198, Frank P. Zeidler Papers (hereafter Zeidler Papers), Milwaukee County Public Library; and "Zeidler Unmasked," *Newsletter of the Certified Rental Operators' Alliance,* March 1956, 3.

[23] Milwaukee Redevelopment Authority, "History—as of July 1, 1959," file 4, box 198, Zeidler Papers.

[24] *Milwaukee Journal,* January 7, 1951.

[25] Ibid., April 1, 2, 1951.

over the wording of the MCPOA referendum and claimed that the result of the second resolution indicated clearly the strength of support for publicly financed redevelopment.[26] Nevertheless, the 1951 ballot presented a formidable political obstacle to the construction of new public-housing projects in Milwaukee throughout the 1950s.

The outcome of the 1952 municipal elections further undermined the drive for public housing. Although Zeidler was reelected by a record margin, conservative gains in the common council augmented the power of Milton McGuire, the council's president. Endorsed by Milwaukee's real-estate interests, McGuire assembled a majority coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats who opposed public housing. Recognizing the evident power of the forces arrayed against public housing, Zeidler refocused his administration's efforts toward slum clearance in the Old Third Ward, where there were fewer residents to relocate than in the more densely populated Hillside area.[27]

Located east of the Milwaukee River, the Third Ward had been home after the late nineteenth century to most of the city's Italian-American population. Life in this community had centered around activities at the Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Catholic Church. By the mid-1950s most Third-Ward residents had moved to the suburbs, reducing membership in the Blessed Virgin from a high of some fifteen hundred families during the 1930s to fewer than two hundred families in 1955. The surrounding area had become increasingly industrialized, resulting in a mix of dilapidated, and often abandoned, residential structures alongside warehouses, light industry, and other small businesses, including a number of taverns. In 1954 the Zeidler administration proposed a plan that called for acquiring the church building and razing it, along with the remaining residential structures and small businesses. The land would then be sold to private firms for light industrial use.[28]

When the plan was made public, Father Anthony Cogo, the pastor of Blessed Virgin and a staunch anticommunist, hired a team of lawyers, authorizing them not only to save the church but also to outline a plan to fight the mayor's entire program of urban renewal. Characterizing Zeidler as a "church burner" and his program as a "dastardly attack on the fundamentals of American democracy," the

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[26] Ibid., April 2, 1951.
[27] Ibid., April 2, 1952; Zeidler, "A Liberal in City Government," 315.
[28] *Catholic Herald Citizen*, March 26, 1955.

lawyers mobilized some four hundred Third-Ward residents to circulate petitions and attend public hearings en masse to voice their objections to the demolition of the church.[29] Most effectively, Blessed Virgin defenders threatened a series of lawsuits based on a provision in Wisconsin's constitution that required jury trials for the condemnation of individual property holdings. Even though the Catholic archdiocese forbade Cogo to participate further in the effort to save the church, the threat of legal action not only halted the Third-Ward project but also made the acquisition of land for public housing more difficult.[30]

Meanwhile, McGuire's common-council faction attempted to gain control of the Milwaukee Housing Authority, hoping to disband it and sell its public-housing projects to private concerns.[31] Publicly, McGuire and his associates attacked the MHA for its efforts to construct a building to house its operations, but privately they admitted to Zeidler that their goal was to prevent the use of public funds to house the poor. Indeed, when Zeidler asked McGuire if the MHA had "outlived its usefulness," he replied, "as far as low rent housing is concerned, yes."[32] Accordingly, sympathetic state legislators introduced three bills to diminish the MHA's power. The first, to abolish the MHA, and the second, to prohibit the construction of public housing without a referendum, passed the legislature; but both bills were vetoed by Wisconsin Governor Walter J. Kohler, Jr. The third, which permitted the sale of public-housing projects by an act of the common council or a referendum, became law with Kohler's signature in the fall of 1955.[33]

Although the common council did not invoke its new power during the 1950s, this law, in combination with the 1951 anti-public-housing referendum and the threat of legal action, brought the Socialist urban-renewal plan nearly to a standstill. The Zeidler administration was able to clear a few blocks, but it was unable to do anything substantial before Zeidler left office in 1960. As in other industrial cities, the inability to construct public housing exacerbated the deterioration of living conditions in the black community. Unlike disputes in Detroit, Chicago, Buffalo, and other industrial cities that

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[29] Frinzi to Zeidler, March 29, 1955, Zeidler Papers.

[30] Father Leo Brust to Father Frances Beres, May 5, 1955, unprocessed folder labeled "Blessed Virgin of Pompeii," Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.; Zeidler, "A Liberal in City Government," 401.

[31] Zeidler, "A Liberal in City Government," 316.

[32] Ibid., 327.

[33] *Milwaukee Labor Press*, December 1, 1955.

had growing black populations before the mid-1950s, the urban-renewal fight in Milwaukee did not focus on the relocation of inner-city African Americans to previously all-white neighborhoods. Instead, under the umbrella of the Cold War, conservatives linked public housing with un-Americanism, and then blamed the Socialists for worsening conditions in Milwaukee's inner city. In 1956 the newsletter of the Certified Rental Operators' Alliance charged: "Mayor Zeidler is responsible in that he talks and doesn't act—then he uses his inactivity as a Trojan Horse for public housing. A program of public housing is socialistic."[34]

Despite a history of strict, though informal, neighborhood segregation, white Milwaukeeans prided themselves on their racial "tolerance."[35] The history of race relations in Milwaukee partially justified this view. Though confined largely to the Sixth Ward in the lower northwest side by restrictive covenants and "gentlemen's agreements," Milwaukee's small African-American community entered the industrial work force during the Great Migration. Industrial employment in turn supported the growth of a black middle class. After World War I, as a wave of racial violence struck other northern cities, Mayor Hoan prevented the use of black strikebreakers, sparing Milwaukee similar convulsions. Increased competition during the Great Depression heightened racial tension and loosened the African-American foothold in industry, but the World War II recovery returned black workers to manufacturing jobs in Milwaukee without major incidents.[36]

Between 1943 and the mid-1950s the influx of southern African Americans reached massive proportions, encouraged by general prosperity, the opening of new industries to black labor, and the development of kinship networks that connected the rural South with the industrial North. Employment discrimination still occurred, but it lessened considerably after World War II under pressure from the Milwaukee Urban League and the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights, a municipal panel charged with mitigating ethnic and racial tensions. For southern African Americans, expanding opportunities made Milwaukee a choice destination, where jobs, at least as low-skilled labor, seemed to abound. Many also viewed Milwaukee as a relatively tolerant place, where racial lines did not

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[34] "Zeidler Unmasked," 3.

[35] Gurda, *Milwaukee*, 361.

[36] Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 56, 71, 80, 147.

divide the city as sharply as they did by then in cities like Detroit and Chicago.[37]

As in other northern and western cities, however, a pervasive pattern of racial segregation governed Milwaukee's postwar housing recovery, severely restricting the ability of the African-American community to expand geographically as it grew numerically. In 1949 civic and religious leaders thwarted an attempt by segregationists to prevent a black family from moving into a local veterans' trailer camp.[38] Two years later, when the newly constructed Westlawn housing project drew criticism from those who feared the establishment of a "Negro colony" in a white neighborhood, community leaders again stepped in to prevent significant racial incidents.[39] But by 1952 the effect of quiet but rampant housing discrimination had become evident. That year, the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights reported that segregation was "widely and openly practiced," and "had resulted in a ghetto pattern" in which African Americans found it "almost impossible to move out of Milwaukee's worst housing area."[40]

In the fall of 1951 the Reverend T. Theophilus Lovelace, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church, invited the predominantly black National Baptist Convention to hold its June 1952 "National Sunday School and Baptist Training Congress" in Milwaukee after plans to hold the convention in Denver, Colorado, fell through. The mayor's office was cool to the proposal, citing the short notice Lovelace gave for the assembly. But when the Baptist minister continued with his plans for the convention, the Zeidler administration committed the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights to work for an incident-free event.[41] This gathering was the catalyst for a series of incidents that would upset the delicate balance that had kept racial prejudice in Milwaukee largely beneath the surface.

Although the congress appeared to go smoothly, it exposed underlying racial tensions. The organizers' greatest problem was finding accommodations for nearly ten thousand visitors. After a frantic search for housing, conference organizers, in cooperation

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[37] *Milwaukee Journal,* March 29, 1952.

[38] Ibid., July 8, 9, 10, 13, 1949.

[39] Ibid., April 13, 1952; Corneff R. Taylor to Frank Zeidler, July 9, 1952, folder 5, box 155, Zeidler Papers.

[40] *Milwaukee Journal,* March 29, 1952.

[41] Mayor's Commission on Human Rights, "Report of Special Sub-Committee on National Baptist Convention," September 27, 1951, file 8, box 68, Zeidler Papers; Stanley Budny to Frank P. Zeidler, n.d., in ibid.

with community and church organizations, managed to secure lodging in hotels, private homes, and churches. And when the convention concluded successfully, many white community leaders extolled the event as proof of Milwaukee's enlightened attitude toward race. Although some white Milwaukeeans were persuaded to provide shelter for congress delegates, however, the majority viewed with great alarm the arrival of such a large number of African Americans.[42] Newspaper coverage of the convention, even in the relatively liberal *Milwaukee Journal*, lent an air of crisis to the situation. Although it published several appeals for help in housing the delegates, the *Journal* frequently reminded its readers that the organizers had failed to secure lodging before announcing the event.[43] Zeidler, recalling the assembly some forty years later, remembered that it had "panicked the city." He attributed increasing racial tensions after 1952 partly to the effect of the convention in alerting many white Milwaukeeans to the presence of a growing black community in their midst.[44] Confirming Zeidler's account, correspondence sent to the mayor's office throughout the remainder of the 1950s, much of it anonymous and viciously racist, attributed the beginnings of Milwaukee's "Negro problem" to the 1952 congress.[45]

The Baptist gathering also helped to awaken the African-American community to the extent of housing discrimination in Milwaukee. Many black leaders, including Lovelace, praised the city for its cooperation in holding the event.[46] Other African Americans disagreed. In the wake of the convention, Ellie M. Willis, a black reader of the *Milwaukee Journal*, related in a letter to the editor how her mother was denied rental housing because of her race. Willis explained that a number of landlords had told her mother that apartments were available, but they refused to rent one to her when they learned she was black. Expressing the feelings of countless black Americans with similar stories, Willis decried the hypocrisy of Milwaukee whites in congratulating themselves for their racial tolerance while maintaining a system of residential segregation.[47]

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[42] Minutes of Official Board Meetings, February 1, March 7, April 4, 1952, MSS 224, file 4, box 1, Church Women United, MCHS; *Milwaukee Journal*, March 28, 1952.

[43] For examples, see *Milwaukee Journal*, February 8, June 6, 1952.

[44] Frank P. Zeidler, interview by author, Milwaukee, Wis., March 21, 1996.

[45] See "Correspondence," file 7, box 92, Zeidler Papers.

[46] *Milwaukee Journal*, June 23, 1952.

[47] Ellie M. Willis, letter to the editor, *Milwaukee Journal*, July 8, 1952; Vel Phillips, interview by author, Milwaukee, Wis., September 28, 1996.

Meanwhile, among white residents, Milwaukee real-estate agents exacerbated racial fears when they began to engage in the practice of blockbusting. In a scenario common to northern cities after World War II, an unscrupulous realtor would sell a home in a white neighborhood on the fringes of the African-American community to a black family at an inflated price. The real-estate agent then urged other white residents to sell their houses at a loss because the presence of African Americans in the neighborhood would bring down property values. The result was a windfall for the realtor, increased enmity between white and black residents, and greater resolve on the part of many whites to prevent the sale of homes in "their" neighborhood to African Americans.[48]

Then the murder of three whites by a black man brought fear of rising crime in Milwaukee's inner city to widespread public attention. In November 1952 a deranged African American murdered a white cleaning-shop owner, his wife, and an employee. Despite the fact that Milwaukee had one of the lowest crime rates of any city of its size in the United States, this incident encouraged the belief among many whites that the growing black population was responsible for a major "crime wave." Tension increased further when Police Chief John W. Polcyn asked for an increase in policemen for the Sixth Ward and reported to the *Milwaukee Journal* that 80 percent of the city's crime occurred in an area that was inhabited predominantly by African Americans.[49]

At the end of 1952 civil-rights leaders and city officials attempted to calm fears and prevent the stigmatizing of the black population. The Milwaukee NAACP called on whites to "reject rumors and hysteria" and to recognize that the alleged "crime wave" was a "human problem due to a general state of unrest, poor housing, [and] the migration of white, Negro, and other nationality and racial groups who have yet to be adjusted to their new environment."[50] The Mayor's Commission on Human Rights persuaded the *Milwaukee Journal*, but not the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, to end the practice of identifying by race African Americans accused of criminal offenses. The police department instituted a training program on race relations and hired a handful of black officers to patrol the Sixth Ward. Zeidler publicly blamed real-estate interests for the growing unrest,

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[48] *Milwaukee Journal*, October 8, 9, 1952.
[49] Ibid., November 10, 1952.
[50] Ibid., November 12, 1952.

citing their opposition to public housing and their exploitation of "white reaction to the Negro invasion of new neighborhoods."[51]

Despite these efforts, race relations continued to deteriorate. Between 1952 and 1956, as the whisper campaign against Mayor Zeidler gained currency among more and more white Milwaukeeans, "racial disturbances" began to occur in which crowds of black youths gathered to protest the arrest of African Americans suspected of a crime, particularly when the reason for the arrest was unclear. Just as he had attempted earlier to minimize the issue of socialism, Zeidler now tried to minimize the racial aspects of the growing unrest in the inner city. In 1956 his administration released a study that acknowledged occasions of "mob-like behavior" on the lower northwest side. But it concluded that the "racial aspects of the episodes were entirely incidental." Rather, according to the report, such incidents resulted from overcrowding and blight in the area and from the inexperience of many rural migrants with city life.[52]

The 1956 municipal election confirmed the growing impact of race on Milwaukee's political discourse. Supporters of Zeidler's opponent, Milton McGuire, continued to pound "the issue of socialism."[53] Indeed, the 1953 Korean War armistice and the 1954 censure of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy did not lessen the attacks on Zeidler's party affiliation. The whisper campaign about Zeidler's supposed billboards inviting southern African Americans north to Milwaukee left no doubt, however, that white residents had become increasingly vulnerable to racial anxieties. To counter the rumors, Milwaukee's CIO-affiliated labor unions and the AFL-backed Milwaukee Federated Trades Council contacted sister unions in the South, who reported that they had found no such billboards. Prominent clergy publicly condemned the introduction of the race issue into the mayoral election. Both Zeidler and McGuire denounced the campaign and agreed to cosponsor a public "day of prayer" in support of racial harmony. Zeidler was reelected, but his narrow margin of victory reflected the intensified social conflict in Milwaukee caused by white racism and the growing overcrowding of the black population in the inner city.[54]

While the 1956 election brought racial prejudice among white Milwaukeeans into the open, it also contributed to growing black

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[51] Ibid., November 13, 14, 1952.

[52] Bruno V. Bitker to Frank P. Zeidler, June 13, 1957, file 4, box 156, Zeidler Papers.

[53] Zeidler, "A Liberal in City Government," 327.

[54] *Milwaukee Journal*, March 12, 14, 1956.

political power. African Americans had overwhelmingly supported the white socialist mayors, Daniel Hoan and Frank Zeidler, but they had also long sought to elect a black alderman. They lacked an absolute majority even in the Sixth Ward, however, and were further divided by class distinctions, making it difficult to organize a unified effort on behalf of a single black candidate. During the Great Depression, moreover, African Americans, like many white socialists, gravitated toward the Democratic Party, pitting black candidates against each other in nonpartisan elections. Thus in 1944 African Americans helped to elect a black state assemblyman, LeRoy J. Simmons, to represent the Sixth District (which coincided with the Sixth Ward), but they were unable to elect a black alderman from the same area.[55]

In 1956, however, Milwaukee's annexation of additional land prompted a redistricting that resulted in the creation of the Second Ward, a new seat in the midst of the black community. With no white incumbent to support, regular Democratic Party leaders in the city of Milwaukee backed Simmons for the post. But in the April runoff he was defeated by Vel R. Phillips, a black University-of-Wisconsin-trained lawyer and political newcomer who was endorsed by the county Democratic Party and organized labor. Phillips also outpolled two write-in candidates, Julian A. Nagel and Frank J. Kanauz, who had based their campaigns explicitly on their opposition to the election of an African-American common-council member.[56]

As an alderwoman, Phillips helped to bring the question of residential segregation to the forefront of Milwaukee's political debate. Born and raised in Milwaukee, she found that African Americans from other wards saw her as their representative to the common council as well. She viewed this as a mandate and a responsibility to represent her larger "constituency" in an effort to better the lives of minorities throughout the city.[57] The symbolic importance of a black council member raised expectations among many African Americans that real change might result. Phillips's influence was further augmented by the emergence of even more militant black leaders, who served notice to white Milwaukeeans that the failure to accept moderate change might result in the rise of more radical approaches to the struggle for civil rights.

Phillips supported urban renewal, but only in conjunction with an adequate plan to resettle those displaced by slum-clearance projects. To this end, in 1958 Phillips proposed the construction of a new housing

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[55] Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 123, 135, 136.
[56] *Milwaukee Journal*, April 4, 1956; Phillips, interview.
[57] Phillips, interview.

project in her own ward, financed by the federal government, that would provide three hundred low-cost housing units for those unable to afford market-rate rents. According to Phillips, the project would not only provide housing for many elderly people whose fixed incomes were inadequate to pay for decent housing but would also serve as a first step toward rehabilitating the Second Ward.[58]

Phillips's proposal met with immediate opposition. Spokespersons for the Milwaukee County Property Owners' Association and the Certified Rental Operators' Alliance denounced the plan as a "socialistic" burden on taxpayers, and an unnecessary one to boot, because of the existence of a large number of rental vacancies throughout the city. Phillips answered that those who qualified for public housing could not afford the rents charged in the private sector, and thus the project would not compete with rental operators for potential renters. More importantly, however, she asserted that for many Milwaukeeans the issue was not a question of economics but one of race. Charging that many "people like to confuse public housing and Negro housing," Phillips insisted to the *Milwaukee Journal* that they were in error. "Low-rent public housing is exactly that—it is a means of providing low rent standard housing to those who cannot afford to pay high rentals." To think otherwise, she concluded, "is not only erroneous, but it is unfair both to the Negro community and to the public housing program generally." Despite her efforts, the proposal died quietly at the hands of the city's land commission, in part a victim of the 1951 public-housing referendum.[59]

Phillips's charges were proved true two years later when opponents of another public-housing project she proposed for Milwaukee's south side focused explicitly on race. Phillips argued, as did Zeidler, that public housing should not be concentrated in the most rundown sections of the city, but should instead, like Westlawn, be dispersed throughout the Milwaukee area. South-side residents voiced their objections in equally plain language. At a meeting called by the newly formed South Side Citizens' League, the majority of the four hundred people in attendance heartily cheered when one resident declared: "We do not want the colored people on the south side, and believe me, that's the whole thing."[60] Yet again, Phillips's proposal went down to defeat.

Meanwhile, as Phillips fought for change through the political system, other black leaders began to push for direct action to protest

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[58] *Milwaukee Journal*, March 9, 1958.
[59] Ibid., March 9, 25, 1958.
[60] Ibid., September 1, 1960.

racial discrimination. In early 1958, motorcycle policeman Thomas F. Grady fatally shot Daniel Bell, a twenty-two-year-old African American who fled after a traffic stop. Grady's exoneration by an all-white medical-examiner's jury, despite the testimony of witnesses who claimed that Bell was unarmed, brought forth a wave of organized protest in the black community.[61]

Leading this agitation was the Reverend Raymond L. Lathan, the young pastor of New Hope Baptist Church, one of the city's fastest growing African-American congregations, who organized a "prayer march" to call for Grady's prosecution. With strong support from his congregation, as well as other black leaders, Lathan threatened to descend on Milwaukee's centrally located MacArthur Square with more than one thousand protestors. Heavy pressure from the mayor's office and the remonstrations of a number of Milwaukee's more conservative religious leaders persuaded Lathan to cancel the march. Nevertheless, the so-called Daniel Bell Incident signaled the growing willingness of many of Milwaukee's African Americans to "take to the street" to protest racial discrimination. As one black Milwaukee resident remembered the incident in 1996: "We wanted to do something about [the Bell shooting], but we just didn't have the power."[62]

As the 1950s drew to a close, race relations in Milwaukee hovered on the verge of crisis. Reflecting the high level of tension, Zeidler had opposed Lathan's prayer march because he feared a repeat of Detroit's 1943 riot.[63] In response to the Bell incident, as well as to renewed unrest in the black community during the summer of 1959, the Zeidler administration commissioned a comprehensive study of racial friction in the city. Completed in April 1960, just five days before Zeidler left office, the "Inner Core Study" found considerable physical deterioration and overcrowding in the inner city, as well as neglect by the municipal government of the needs of the city's minority residents. The study called for a comprehensive program to strengthen families, improve community recreational facilities, educate police officers assigned to the inner city, and, above all, improve housing in the area. As in earlier reports emanating from Zeidler's administration, the study minimized the racial aspects of the problem, dividing the blame for racial tensions

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[61] In 1978 a former Milwaukee policeman confessed that the patrolman had planted a knife on Bell after the shooting. For an overview of the case, see Jeff Kannel, "The Death of Daniel Bell: Can the Truth Be Found After Twenty Years?" *Cityside* 3 (January 22, 1979): 2-7.

[62] Harold Mason, interview by author, Milwaukee, Wis., June 27, 1996; *Milwaukee Journal*, March 18, 21, 1958.

[63] Zeidler, interview.

between problems caused by southern migrants unused to city life and white misunderstanding of these new residents.[64]

By 1960, however, it was apparent that Milwaukee's political debate would focus squarely on the issue of race. Zeidler was the only Socialist Party member remaining in city government. His decision not to run eliminated the most plausible target for "redbaiting," diminishing, if not eliminating, the use of this tactic in 1960s Milwaukee politics. It also removed the restraining influence his administration had exercised over civil-rights issues. Although Zeidler insisted that black and white Milwaukeeans be treated equally, he called for the acculturation of African Americans, rather than the acceptance of cultural differences by whites, as the key to improving race relations.[65] In contrast, Phillips and other black leaders, charging that anticommunist rhetoric was just a cover for racism, maintained that progress required whites to change their behavior. These growing black demands for racial justice, in combination with the election of a more conservative city government, ensured that race would occupy the center of public debate in Milwaukee for years to come.

The 1960 municipal elections set the stage for growing racial turmoil throughout the rest of the decade. In part, the election was a referendum on Zeidler's policies. In the April runoff, Zeidler's 1948 opponent, Congressman Henry Reuss, faced State Senator Henry W. Maier. Reuss, who won the endorsement of the Public Enterprise Committee and Zeidler's implicit support, advocated a continued reliance on publicly funded redevelopment efforts and the construction of additional public housing. Maier called for the replacement of all Zeidler appointees in municipal government and greater cooperation between private enterprise and the city in urban redevelopment. Neither candidate addressed Milwaukee's growing racial conflict.[66]

The results of the vote nevertheless reflected the racial divide. Although both mayoral candidates had been active in the revitalization of Wisconsin's Democratic Party, their backgrounds illustrated the tension between race and class in the party coalition. As a United States congressman, Reuss supported civil-rights initiatives, declining to debate Maier in one instance on the grounds that he was needed in Washington

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[64] See Mayor's Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City, *Final Report to the Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, City of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: The Committee, 1963).

[65] Thompson, *Continuity and Change*, 377.

[66] Peter K. Eisinger, *Patterns of Interracial Politics: Conflict and Cooperation in the City* (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 118; *Milwaukee Journal*, March 30, April 4, 6, 1960.

to carry on the struggle. As a state senator, Maier had identified himself with the interests of working-class whites. Accordingly, when Maier won the run-off election, it was no surprise that his largest majorities came from Milwaukee's south side, whose residents opposed liberal attempts to facilitate the movement of African Americans into their neighborhoods. Reuss's best showing came from the heavily black sections of the northwest side, despite the fact that Maier represented this area in the state legislature. In the aldermanic races, Vel Phillips won reelection by a comfortable margin, but the vote strengthened the conservative majority on the common council.[67]

Unsurprisingly, Maier and Phillips were soon at loggerheads. During his first three years in office, Maier declared an official "moratorium" on the construction of public housing and announced a "go slow" policy on civil rights. Meanwhile, Phillips concluded that residential segregation was the greatest obstacle to improved housing for African Americans. She thus turned her attention to the passage of a citywide fair-housing ordinance. In 1962 Phillips proposed a law in the common council that would have prohibited both formal and informal discrimination in the renting or selling of housing within the city. Maier led the opposition to the proposal, arguing that African Americans were unable to find housing outside of the inner city not because of residential segregation but because of their inability to afford higher rents and mortgages. He also insisted that the passage of a Milwaukee ordinance in the absence of fair-housing laws in the suburbs would result in the further exodus of whites from the city.[68]

As Phillips introduced her fair-housing proposal, she declared it "doomed to a violent death the moment it was uttered . . . like so many other issues pertaining to racial discrimination that have been sent to the Mayor's office."[69] And indeed, under heavy pressure from the mayor, the council defeated Phillips's bill by a vote of eighteen to one. Undaunted, Phillips proposed the same measure year after year during the mid-1960s, only to see it defeated overwhelmingly each time.

The failure to pass a fair-housing law highlighted the growing impasse between the aspirations of black Milwaukeeans and the city's increasingly conservative power structure. Many of Milwaukee's African Americans, viewing these defeats as the failure of electoral politics to overcome racial discrimination, turned instead to direct action to achieve

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[67] *Milwaukee Journal,* March 10, April 6, 1960.

[68] Henry W. Maier, *The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous: An Autobiography* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1993), 107-10.

[69] *Milwaukee Star,* May 5, 1962.

their goals. The first demonstrations were directed largely at local businesses that refused to hire black workers.[70] The protests broadened, however, when the newly formed Milwaukee chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) instigated a series of protests against the intemperate words of Fred Lins, a member of the Community Social Development Commission of Greater Milwaukee.

Lins was president and treasurer of an inner-city sausage factory and an opponent of fair-housing legislation who had been appointed to the commission to represent Milwaukee County residents. In July 1963, reporters at a commission meeting overheard Lins saying, "Negroes look so much alike that you can't identify the ones that commit the crime," and "an awful mess of them have an IQ of nothing."[71] After a month of heated negotiations, CORE members began picketing the county courthouse, vowing to continue the protest until Lins was removed from the commission. The number of picketers averaged more than one hundred a day. The campaign also included "call-ins" that brought a total of nearly five hundred phone calls demanding Lins's resignation, as well as a series of "sit-ins" in the office of county board chairman Eugene H. Grobschmidt that resulted in numerous arrests by the county sheriff's department.[72] The protests ended unsuccessfully in late September after sixteen demonstrators were arrested by Milwaukee police during an overnight sit-in in Maier's office to protest the mayor's support of Lins.[73]

The failure to oust Fred Lins, however, did not spell the end of civil-rights protests in Milwaukee. Instead, more radical leaders began to direct the movement, and they kept Milwaukee in an uproar throughout much of the 1960s. Just a few days after the end of the Fred Lins protests, a prominent black attorney, Lloyd Barbee, announced the organization of the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC) to protest de facto segregation of the city's public schools. In 1964 and 1965 Barbee, along with the Reverend B. S. Gregg of St. Matthew Christian (Colored) Methodist Episcopal Church and Father James Groppi, an assistant pastor at St. Boniface Catholic Church, a predominantly black, inner-city parish, led

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[70] William Dahlk, "The Black Educational Reform Movement in Milwaukee, 1963-1975" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1990), 7; *Milwaukee Star*, August 25, 1962. In August 1962, for example, members of the Milwaukee branch of the Negro American Labor Council picketed local A & P grocery stores, winning an agreement from A & P to hire additional black workers.

[71] Thompson, *Continuity and Change*, 379.

[72] *Milwaukee Journal, Final*, September 3, 1963.

[73] *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 21, 1963.

boycotts of Milwaukee's public schools. George C. Wallace's 31 percent showing among Milwaukeeans in the 1964 Wisconsin presidential primary after he railed against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in a campaign stop in the city was a strong indication of white reaction to these events.[74]

Race relations in Milwaukee reached their nadir in late 1967 and early 1968, when Groppi led a string of protest marches to force the adoption of a citywide fair-housing ordinance. Groppi's troops, the members of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council, began by picketing the homes of common council members in July 1967. The outbreak of a major riot in Detroit later that month, followed by a civil disturbance in Milwaukee that closed down the city for nearly ten days, briefly curtailed the protests.[75]

When the curfew was lifted, Groppi and the youth council began to march into the all-white south side. South-side residents attacked marchers while chanting slogans such as, "We want slaves," and "Niggers [sic] back to the jungle."[76] Privately, many south-side priests pressed archdiocesan officials to prohibit Groppi from leading further protests, but they declined to intervene openly in the disturbances. Instead, the mostly Catholic south siders found a priest from a nearby suburb, Father Russell F. Wilton, who was willing to act as their leader and spokesperson. In the words of the Port Washington priest, "We are not going to let those savages—those black beasts—take our rights away."[77] Only after two hundred consecutive nights of marching, as well as the passage of a federal fair-housing law, did Mayor Maier and the common council agree to municipal fair-housing legislation. Illustrating the continued racial conflict in the city, however, as well as the breakdown of the New Deal coalition, a majority of Milwaukee's overwhelmingly Democratic electorate voted for Richard Nixon and George Wallace instead of Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 presidential election.[78]

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[74] Frank A. Aukofer, *City with a Chance* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1968), 56. For a comprehensive account of the MUSIC boycotts, see Dahlk, "Black Educational Reform Movement."

[75] For a discussion of Milwaukee's "riot" that is sympathetic to the aspirations of civil-rights activists, see Aukofer, *City with a Chance,* 1-30; for an opposing view, see Maier, *The Mayor,* 63-92.

[76] Aukofer, *City with a Chance,* 112.

[77] Ibid., 126. See also Eugene Bleidorn, *In My Time: Aspects and Perceptions of Personal Experiences* (Milwaukee: Eugene Bleidorn, 1994), 100. Bleidorn was pastor of St. Boniface during the mid-1960s.

[78] Aukofer, *City with a Chance,* 112, 136, 143; Eisinger, *Patterns of Interracial Politics,* 118.

In Milwaukee, as in other northern and western industrial cities, the refusal of white working-class residents to integrate their neighborhoods contributed to the fracturing of the New Deal coalition well before the rise of "multiculturalism." Some on the left may imagine halcyon days before identity politics and mourn the dawn of race- and gender-based advocacy as the end of a better era of New Deal-style unity. But Milwaukee's story demonstrates that it was working-class whites, not African Americans, who fractured the left by forcing black northerners to pursue their quest for economic and social justice in racial terms.

Before the mid-1950s, the fight over socialism allowed white racism to remain dormant. The relatively evenhanded treatment afforded black residents by the socialist administrations of Hoan and Zeidler militated against the most flagrant expressions of racial prejudice, making possible the initial integration of the city's postwar public-housing projects. But the Cold War association of public housing with "un-Americanism" accomplished in Milwaukee, as in Portland, what explicitly antiblack agitation achieved in Detroit, Chicago, and Buffalo. Anticommunist rhetoric, of course, was often used to mask racial discrimination. Still, Milwaukee conservatives combined Cold War rhetoric with sophisticated electoral, legislative, and legal maneuvering to block further construction of integrated public housing without overt appeals to racial prejudice.

The outcome of the public-housing fight nevertheless contributed to the deterioration of race relations. The failure to provide low-cost housing in outlying areas, in conjunction with the continued influx of southern African Americans, worsened living conditions in the inner city, which led to increased unrest. But despite their claims of racial "tolerance," working-class whites in Milwaukee were just as likely as those in other northern and western cities to blame the behavior of African Americans for the problems of the black community. Black leaders, who insisted that improved race relations required a change in white behavior, merely responded in kind. The decline of class-based politics in Milwaukee rested first on the anticommunist rhetoric that Democrats employed to attack the socialist program of public housing and urban redevelopment. The unwillingness of white Milwaukeeans to grant equality to African Americans, illustrated most clearly by the whisper campaign and increasingly explicit resistance to neighborhood integration during the late 1950s, accelerated this decline as it thrust the issue of race to the center of Milwaukee's political debate.

Milwaukee's resurgent Democratic Party was no more successful than the Socialists in preventing conflict between the city's black and white residents. Notwithstanding its success in securing passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Democratic Party was often unable to apply its program of antiracism at the local level. Thus during the 1960s, liberal Democrats from the North, such as Hubert Humphrey and Henry Reuss, might promote civil rights in the South. But Democratic mayors in northern cities, including Chicago's Richard Daley and Henry Maier, had little to gain from an attack on residential segregation.[79] Instead, Maier, like Daley, bolstered his appeal among working-class whites through confrontation with black leaders and turned the city's urban-renewal program over to business interests that made few provisions for housing displaced African Americans. In this context, the combination of growing racial hostility among whites, rising expectations among African Americans, and the emergence of an increasingly militant black leadership made the transition from class- to race-based politics not only understandable but also all but inevitable.

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[79] For a comprehensive discussion of Richard Daley's mayoral administration, see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto.*