

Handout #3: Before '47: Early Efforts to Desegregate Major League Baseball

1) From “Out of Left Field,” written by Peter Dreier and Robert Elias (excerpt)



New York City May Day Parade, Communist Party demonstrators, 1940

Reporters for African American papers (especially Wendell Smith of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Fay Young of *The Chicago Defender*, Joe Bostic of *The People's Voice* in New York, and Sam Lacy of *The Baltimore Afro-American*), as well as Lester Rodney, sports editor of the Communist paper, *The Daily Worker*, took the lead in pushing baseball to hire Black players. They published open letters, polled white managers and players (some of whom felt threatened by the prospect of losing their jobs to Black athletes, but most of whom had no objections to integration), brought Black players to unscheduled tryouts at spring training, and kept the issue front and center. Several white journalists joined the chorus.

Progressive unions and civil rights groups picketed outside Yankee Stadium, the Polo Grounds, and Ebbets Field in New York City, and Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field in Chicago. Activists gathered more than a million signatures on petitions, demanding that baseball tear down the color line.

In July 1940, the Trade Union Athletic Association staged an “End Jim Crow in Baseball” demonstration at the New York World’s Fair. The next year, progressive unions sent a delegation to meet with Commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis and to demand that baseball recruit Black players. In December 1943, Paul Robeson addressed owners at their annual winter meeting and urged them to integrate. Under orders from Landis, the attendees ignored Robeson and didn’t ask him a single question.

In 1945, Isadore Muchnick, a progressive member of the Boston City Council, threatened to deny the Red Sox a permit to play on Sundays unless the team considered hiring Black players. Working with several Black sportswriters, Muchnick persuaded Eddie Collins, the team’s reluctant general manager, to give three Negro League players — Robinson, Sam Jethroe, and Marvin Williams — a tryout. The Sox had no intention of signing any of the players, nor did the Pittsburgh Pirates or the Chicago White Sox, who orchestrated similar bogus auditions. Nevertheless, the public pressure and media publicity helped raise awareness and furthered the cause.

Other politicians became allies. During his 1945 reelection campaign, New York City Council member Ben Davis — a former college football star, a Communist, and an African American — distributed a leaflet featuring photos of two Blacks: a dead soldier and a baseball player. “Good enough to die for his country,” it read, “but not good enough for organized baseball.”

That year, the New York State legislature passed the Quinn-Ives Act, which banned employment discrimination, and formed a committee to investigate hiring practices including a task force that focused on baseball. Soon after, New York City mayor Fiorello

LaGuardia established a committee on baseball to push the Yankees, Giants, and Dodgers to sign Black players. Left-wing congressman Vito Marcantonio, who represented Harlem, called for an investigation into the sport's racist practices.

2) From "Sam Neham," by Peter Dreier for *Society for American Baseball Research* (excerpt)



Actor and Activist Paul Robeson, 1942

For several years, left-wing unions marched in May Day parades with "End Jim Crow in Baseball" signs. On July 7, 1940, the Trade Union Athletic Association, comprised of 30 left-wing unions, held an "End Jim Crow in Baseball" demonstration at the New York World's Fair. Progressive unions and civil rights groups picketed outside Yankee Stadium, the Polo Grounds, and Ebbets Field in New York City, and Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field

in Chicago to demand an end to baseball’s color line. In June 1942, several major unions — including the United Auto Workers and the National Maritime Union, as well as the New York Industrial Union Council of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) — sent resolutions to Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis demanding an end to baseball segregation. That December, ten leaders of the CIO, the progressive union federation, went to the winter meetings of baseball’s executives at Chicago’s Ambassador East Hotel to demand that major league baseball recruit Black players, but Landis refused to meet with them. In December 1943, the publisher of *The Chicago Defender*, a leading Black newspaper, arranged for the well-known actor, singer and activist Paul Robeson to head a delegation (that included Wendell Smith) to meet with Landis and major league owners at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City. Robeson told them: “The time has come when you must change your attitude toward Negroes. . . . Because baseball is a national game, it is up to baseball to see that discrimination does not become an American pattern. And it should do this this year.”

Questions for Students:

1. What are the various groups that are invested in the idea of desegregating Major League baseball?
2. Why do you think the desegregation of baseball, a sports-related issue, had such political importance?
3. Why do you think Paul Robeson was an important voice to bring into the struggle for equality in baseball?
4. World War II was going to bring struggles around baseball and segregation to a head. Why do you think that might be the case?