When Americans today think of the civil rights movement, they are most likely to think of iconic images from the struggle for rights in the South. Whether of bus boycotts in Montgomery, police dogs attacking nonviolent protestors in Birmingham, or Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech,” such images are usually presented as a narrative that emphasizes the role of charismatic national leaders struggling to right the wrongs of a backward and racist social system in one region of the country. Typically, this story is presented in a manner that suggests that the struggle has been successfully completed.

The actual history of the civil rights movement in the United States is much more complex. Recent historical research has shown that it was actually composed of many local struggles, in which the actions, strategies, and acts of defiance of thousands of mostly anonymous ordinary Americans shaped the course of the larger movement. Further, this new scholarship has demonstrated the intensity of civil rights activism in the North and West as well as in the South. Although other regions of the United States generally avoided the explicit legal segregation of Jim Crow, discrimination existed and sometimes took violent forms in these areas. Along with housing, employment constituted one of the most contentious areas of race relations—and the focus of much of the northern civil rights movement. Philadelphia played a central role in these northern struggles, as it became the site for some of the most innovative and significant strategies for combating job discrimination.

During World War II, Philadelphia had experienced a bitter and divisive conflict over the hiring of blacks as drivers and brakemen on the city’s trolleys. When the Philadelphia Transportation Company attempted to integrate these positions, its white employees went on strike in protest. With war workers dependent on the transit system to reach their jobs, the shutdown threatened to hamper production for the war effort. As a result, President Franklin Roosevelt intervened and sent the army to Philadelphia to operate the trolleys—and oversee the integration of PTC’s workforce.
Following the war, civil rights activists focused on establishing legal mechanisms to create "racial breakthroughs" in segregated workplaces. This approach relied on an assumption, spelled out most directly by the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal in his classic 1944 study *An American Dilemma*, that racism constituted primarily an individual pathology that could be resolved through example, reasoned discussion, and appeals to fairness. This conception suggested that employment discrimination could be effectively challenged through the hiring of even a few qualified African Americans, who would win over their new co-workers through their obvious on-the-job merit. To do this, reformers in many northern cities and states sought to create Fair Employment Practices (FEP) laws and FEP commissions to investigate violations and enforce integration. Philadelphia's 1951 city charter banned employment discrimination and established a new Commission on Human Relations (CHR) to enforce the law.

Under the direction of nationally prominent race-relations specialist George Schermer, the CHR during the 1950s investigated cases of hiring discrimination and conducted negotiations with employers to secure the kind of breakthroughs emphasized by the Myrdalian racial liberalism of the day. The commission, however, lacked effective sanctions to enforce its rulings. Even more broadly, it required direct evidence of specific acts of discrimination before it could implement even the limited remedies available to it. Merely demonstrating that the composition of an employer's workforce reflected patterns of discrimination was not enough. But many firms—and entire industries—in Philadelphia (and elsewhere) hired exclusively through networks of friends and family members, networks that were deeply rooted in churches, ethnic neighborhoods, and, especially, unions. No one outside of those groups ever learned of the job openings. As late as 1970, a construction worker explained to a reporter from *Philadelphia Magazine* that "it's a neighborhood thing. We all know each other. When you work as long as we have to make a good thing, you want to hand it on to somebody you know. Not everybody who gets in is the son of somebody, but he's some kind of relative, brother-in-law or something." Such hiring processes did not need to actively discriminate against African Americans, because black Philadelphians simply did not have access to basic information about the employment opportunities, let alone to the networks that controlled them. The CHR approach, and the Fair Employment Practices strategy generally, soon came up against a wall that was nearly as impenetrable as it was invisible.

By the mid-1950s, many in Philadelphia's African American community had grown restive. Like other northern cities, Philadelphia had experienced high rates of black migration from the South since the early decades of the 20th century, particularly during the industrial labor shortages of the two world wars. Many of Philadelphia's migrants came from agricultural regions along the Atlantic seaboard, where most had little access to education or skills training. Increasingly segregated in the city's most dilapidated housing in North and West Philadelphia, these migrants found few opportunities in the postwar city. As frustration grew, African American activists began to turn, sometimes haltingly, away from the gradualist strategies of racial liberalism. 

**Selective patronage marked a new departure for civil rights in Philadelphia, as blacks had taken direct, community-based action against racial discrimination—and won.**

One of those looking for new approaches was Rev. Leon H. Sullivan of North Philadelphia’s Zion Baptist Church. Six and half feet tall, with a powerful speaking voice, Sullivan cast an imposing and charismatic figure. After growing up in poverty in Charleston, West Virginia, he had earned an athletic scholarship to West Virginia State College. After injuring his knee, Sullivan made his way through college while working in a steel mill and serving as a part-time minister for two local congregations. It was in the latter capacity that he met the famous Harlem minister (and future congressman) Adam Clayton Powell when the latter spoke at a local NAACP meeting. With Powell’s assistance, Sullivan moved to New York after graduation to study theology at Union Theological Seminary while serving as an assistant minister at Powell’s Abyssinian Baptist Church. Sullivan came to Zion Baptist in 1950 and immediately threw himself into community work. His first major project in Philadelphia involved an antigang project that tried to place African American teenagers in part-time jobs. Progress proved slow, and Sullivan gradually realized that many of the teenagers’ parents were themselves without jobs. Sullivan’s exploration of the situation made the consequences of job discrimination in his new city painfully clear. As he struggled with the issue, Sullivan reached out to other black ministers to search for a solution. In the spring of 1960, the group launched a campaign of boycotts against companies that discriminated in either hiring or promotion.

Known as “selective patronage” (in order to avoid charges of illegal restraint of trade), the new boycott movement focused on a single firm at a time. The ministers politely approached each target company and made a significant but reasonable request for the hiring or promotion of black workers. If the firm complied, the ministers went on to another employer. If it did not, each minister used his next Sunday sermon to urge parishioners to withdraw their patronage from the targeted company. Outreach also occurred in locations as varied as bars and beauty salons—reaching a different audience than the churches. Sullivan announced the first boycott, of the iconic Philadelphia bakery Tastykake, in a sermon entitled “The Walls of Jericho Must Come Down.” Tastykake fought back, but after a drawn out and difficult struggle, eventually acceded to the ministers’ demands. Between 1960 and 1963, 29 firms became the targets of selective patronage. Each one eventually reached an agreement with the ministers, and according to one estimate, the boycotts opened at least 2,000 skilled jobs for black Philadelphians. Selective patronage marked a new departure for civil rights in Philadelphia, as blacks had taken direct, community-based action against racial discrimination—and won.

In the aftermath of the boycotts, however, employers complained of difficulties in identifying adequate numbers of qualified black applicants to fill the newly opened positions. Sullivan and the other ministers initially viewed such claims with skepticism, but gradually concluded that the community’s lack of educational opportunities meant that the skill issue was real. To address the problem, they formulated an ambitious plan for a self-help job-training program. With little capital and less knowledge about industrial training, the program opened in a former North Philadelphia police station in January 1964. Known as the Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC), the program
African Americans owned relatively few prosperous businesses. As Sullivan later put it, “it was not enough merely to get jobs, we had to create jobs.”

operated at first with donated equipment and with funding from foundation grants and community contributions.

Despite its modest beginnings, OIC had a number of innovative features that led to rapid growth. First, OIC officials quickly realized that many training candidates lacked basic reading and math skills. As a result, the program implemented remedial courses in these areas. In 1964, this was an innovation. Most existing training programs carefully selected the applicants with the best skills, who would be most likely to succeed. Such practices allowed programs to report high placement percentages, but also effectively excluded the “hard-core” poor. OIC did the opposite, and it soon developed an even broader “feeder” program that sought to acculturate new trainees to the program and its expectations—as well as those of the workplace generally—before placing them in an actual skills course. Sullivan explained in 1966 that “the feeder program is designed to ‘unwash the brainwashed minds’ of enrollees who have come to OIC with poor opinions of themselves and who have been brainwashed into inferiority.” This approach helped OIC reach low-income, seemingly unemployable individuals who were most in need of its services. This helped OIC maintain credibility as a part of the civil rights movement, which proved important in sustaining grassroots legitimacy as the program expanded. Second, OIC emphasized self-help and access to opportunity as core principles. These traditional American themes echoed ideas being emphasized in the early stages of the new federal War on Poverty. By 1971, OIC had received more War on Poverty money than any other organization in Philadelphia, and it had undertaken an expansion that would allow it to reach more than 150 U.S. cities and 46 foreign countries by its peak in the early 1980s. OIC also won praise and financial support from the business community, including from companies that just a few years earlier had been targets of selective patronage. Negotiations during the boycotts had allowed Sullivan to establish relationships with key business leaders, and as even more radical Black Power ideas began to circulate in Philadelphia and other cities, Sullivan and OIC held great appeal for the business community.


OIC also produced results. Its trainees gained a strong reputation for on-the-job performance, to the point that the prominent Philadelphia business leader and politician Thacher Longstreth declared that “an OIC stamp on a worker is like a sterling stamp on silver.” By the end of 1969, OIC claimed that 15,084 people had graduated from the Philadelphia OIC and that 9,261 had secured some form of job placement. Sullivan and OIC officials, however, had by then come to another realization, one that actually had the most sweeping implications for the broader effort to secure employment rights for African Americans in a city where they struggled not only with discrimination, but also with the decline of the old manufacturing sector. While OIC could place trainees in jobs, African Americans owned relatively few prosperous businesses. As Sullivan later put it, “it was not enough merely to get jobs, we had to create jobs.” Relying on a model of community-based ownership, OIC secured a combination of federal small-business funds, federal contracts, and corporate subcontracts and management support. Eventually known as the Progress Movement, the effort eventually included a shopping center in North Philadelphia as well as garment, electronics, and aerospace manufacturing firms. Together, the businesses employed nearly 400 people at their peak—almost all of them African American and many of them graduates of OIC training programs. Both OIC’s training programs and the Progress Movement businesses, however, experienced significant declines by the 1980s.

OIC, of course, was not alone in developing civil rights-based responses to employment-related discrimination in Philadelphia. As Sullivan turned towards job-training and business-development strategies, other activists adopted even more assertive direct-action tactics. In 1963, Philadelphia NAACP president Cecil B. Moore, along with the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), protested African Americans’ near total exclusion from high-paying construction jobs with a series of marches and sit-ins at a school construction site in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood. Focusing particularly on the construction of public facilities, Moore and the protestors demanded that the city’s building-trades unions open their apprentice programs, membership rolls, and hiring halls to
blacks (the unions had near complete control of the hiring process). As negotiations proceeded, violence broke out when white construction workers tried to force their way onto the blockaded building site. Similar protests against construction-industry discrimination spread to other northern cities. President Kennedy tried to stem the conflict with an executive order barring discrimination on federally funded projects (the northern protests also contributed to the president’s decision to propose a civil rights bill), but little on-the-ground progress in hiring occurred. In 1967, the Department of Labor implemented a new trial policy known as the “Philadelphia Plan” that required contractors to meet a target of African American hiring roughly proportional to the regional population make-up. The Philadelphia Plan was in effect the first fully developed affirmative-action program.

For all of the Philadelphia civil rights movement’s accomplishments in limiting—if not eliminating—employment discrimination, it faced stark constraints because of the process of deindustrialization that had already begun in many cities. As factories departed for other areas of the country or overseas, or simply closed, the economic and personal stress faced by working-class whites as well as blacks compounded the difficulties of achieving workplace integration. Between 1948 and 1987, Philadelphia lost more than two-thirds of its manufacturing jobs. Some were replaced by service-sector growth, particularly in higher education and health care. Such sectors, though, posed their own problems of access and equity for low-income African Americans. As the 21st century began, the very real gains of Philadelphia’s civil rights movement had in many respects been swamped by the losses caused by the decline of the industrial sector.

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Pennsylvania Fair Employment Practice Act of 1955, excerpt

The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania hereby enacts as follows: . . .

Section 3. Right to Freedom from Discrimination in Employment.—

The opportunity for an individual to employment for which he is qualified without discrimination because of race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin is hereby recognized as and declared to be a civil right which shall be enforceable only as set forth in this act.

African Americans protest against the Philadelphia Transportation Company's policy of not hiring black motormen or conductors, Nov. 1943. Federal pressure due to wartime labor shortages led the company to change that policy in the summer of 1944, which sparked a strike by white workers and a military takeover of Philadelphia’s transit system as a wartime emergency. Philadelphia Record Photograph Collection.
Section 4. Definitions.—As used in this act unless a different meaning clearly appears from the context:

(a) The term “person” includes one or more individuals, partnerships, associations, organizations, corporations, legal representatives, trustees in bankruptcy or receivers.

(b) The term “employer” includes the Commonwealth or any political subdivision or board, department, commission or school district thereof and any person employing twelve or more persons within the Commonwealth, but does not include religious, fraternal, charitable or sectarian corporations or associations, except such corporations or associations supported, in whole or in part, by government appropriations.

(c) The term “employe” does not include any individual employed in agriculture or in the domestic service of any person, nor any individual employed by his parents, spouse or child.

(g) The term “discriminate” includes segregate.

Section 5. Unlawful Employment Practices.—

It shall be an unlawful employment practice, unless based upon a bona fide occupational qualification, or except where based upon applicable security regulations established by the United States or the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:

(a) For any employer because of the race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin of any individual to refuse to hire or employ, or to bar or to discharge from employment such individual, or to otherwise discriminate against such individual with respect to compensation, hire, tenure, terms, conditions or privileges of employment, if the individual is the best able and most competent to perform the services required.

(b) For any employer, employment agency or labor organization, prior to the employment or admission to membership, to

(1) Elicit any information or make or keep a record of or use any form of application or application blank containing questions or entries concerning the race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin of any applicant for employment or membership.

(2) Print or publish or cause to be printed or published any notice or advertisement relating to employment or membership indicating any preference, limitation, specification or discrimination based upon race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin.

(3) Deny or limit, through a quota system, employment or membership because of race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age, national origin or place of birth.

(4) Substantially confine or limit recruitment or hiring of individuals, with intent to circumvent the spirit and purpose of this act, to any employment agency, employment service, labor organization, training school or training center or any other employe—referring source which serves individuals who are predominantly or the same race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin.

(c) For any labor organization because of the race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin of any individual to deny full and equal membership rights to any individual or otherwise to discriminate against such individuals with respect to hire, tenure, terms, conditions or privileges of employment or any other matter, directly or indirectly, related to employment.

(d) For any employer, employment agency or labor organization to discriminate in any manner against any individual because such individual has opposed any practice forbidden by this act, or because such individual has made a charge, testified or assisted, in any manner, in any investigation, proceeding or hearing under this act.

(e) For any person, whether or not an employer, employment agency, labor organization or employe, to aid, abet, incite, compel or coerce the doing of any act declared by this section to be an unlawful employment practice, or to obstruct or prevent any person from complying with the provisions of this act or any order issued thereunder, or to attempt, directly or indirectly, to commit any act declared by this section to be unlawful employment practice.

(f) For any employment agency to fail or refuse to classify properly, refer for employment or otherwise to discriminate against any individual because of his race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin.

(g) For any individual seeking employment to publish or cause to be published any advertisement which specifies or in any manner expresses his race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin, or in any manner expresses a limitation or preference as to the race, color, religious creed, ancestry, age or national origin of any prospective employer.

Section 6. Pennsylvania Fair Employment Practice Commission.—

There shall be, and there is hereby established in the Department of Labor and Industry a non-partisan, departmental administrative commission for the administration of this act, which shall be known as the “Pennsylvania Fair Employment Practice Commission,” and which is hereinafter referred to as the “Commission.”

Approved—the 27th day of October, A. D. 1955.

GEORGE M. LEADER