

Coal Culture

Frank Crosswaith: Orator, Activist, and Socialist

By
Irwin M. Marcus

Frank Crosswaith was a New Yorker who had a long and diversified career which included stints as a labor official and organizer, socialist activist and orator, and a government official. His trade union connection was with the International Ladies' Garment Workers. In this position he spoke and wrote in support of workers and the labor movement and was strongly anti-communist. Characterized as the "Negro Debs", for his oratorical prowess, he undertook a number of tours in behalf of socialism and Socialist Party candidates. He was also an official of the Housing Authority in New York City in the Fiorello La Guardia mayoral administration.

Some of his tours included speaking engagements in Pennsylvania. He spoke in Reading, in Black Lick, and Nanty-Glo. The latter occasion was the most controversial as town officials prohibited him from speaking. Nevertheless, he didn't leave the town until he delivered his talk and ironically the crowd which attended his rescheduled talk was larger than that for his initial presentation. This experience illustrated the problem of practicing freedom of speech even in a coal town with a strong labor tradition and generally sympathetic public officials. On the other hand, Crosswaith's experience illuminated some improvements since the 1920s. In 1922 the nearby town of Vintondale was the site of a free speech initiative involving Arthur Garfield Hays, a leader of the

American Civil Liberties Union. He was arrested and tried for his attempt to deliver a speech in Vintondale.

Not surprisingly, Frank Crosswaith addressed the issues of racial prejudice and discrimination. In 1933 he joined leaders of the Continental Congress for Economic Reconstruction, especially Norman Thomas, in condemning the racial discrimination of Washington, D.C.'s hotels and racially discriminatory policies of the federal government.

In the early 20th century many prominent black activists became members of the Socialist Party. The roster included Hubert Harrison, Chandler Owen, and A. Philip Randolph. However, by the mid-1920s all of them pursued other paths ranging from labor unionism to Garveyism. On the other hand, Crosswaith, in the 1920's and 1930's followed a fairly consistent path for socialism. This road consisted of several major elements: a combination of industrial unionism, democratic socialism, and progressive politics.