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Giving 'Substance to Freedom and Democracy': Black Woman Intellectual Vicki Garvin

Katerina Traut

Lehigh University

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This paper explores labor organizer Vicki Garvin’s life and ideas as an instantiation of Black feminism and as characterized by features central to contemporary Black feminist thought. Garvin’s philosophy and practice of feminism come forth in her research and activism in workers’ rights, African Americans’ rights, and women’s rights. Garvin came of age in a post-WWII era of politics that was shaped by social movements toward liberation. As a demonstration of how to resist domination and oppression while remaining committed to the practice of democracy, Garvin’s life’s work deserves attention.

INTRODUCTION

According to Patricia Hill Collins, one distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is that there is a dialectical relationship between oppression and activism, and there is a dialogical relationship between Black women’s collective experiences of oppression and their group knowledge. Because of their unique position within the matrix of domination, defined as the social organization in which intersecting oppressions are developed, maintained, and maneuvered, African American women have a special knowledge about the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression. Therefore, they must be a part of any effective effort to critique and overcome oppression. As Collins explains, this insight was known and practiced well before contemporary feminist thinkers such as herself conceptualized Black feminist thought. Garvin was born in 1915 as Victoria Holmes in Richmond, Virginia. Her childhood was shaped by several experiences of education, activism, and leadership. In 1926, she migrated to Harlem, NYC, the artistic and political hub for progressive African American thinkers, which provided the space for her political activism to take root.

Attendance at street conversations in Harlem, leadership in an African American history club in high school, participation in youth programs at her church, and experiencing her own family’s economic struggle formed a lens for seeing the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and labor. In addition to these experiences, her education at Hunter College and Smith College allowed her to refine her research skills. In 1942 and during WWII, after finishing her Master’s degree and thesis at Smith, Garvin moved back to New York City and immediately threw herself into trade union work with the National War Labor Board as a wage rate analyst. She simultaneously held a position with the National Negro Congress. She began working for the United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA) in 1945 and two years later joined the Communist Party.

GARVIN: THE ACTIVIST-INTELLECTUAL

Garvin’s Master’s thesis challenged the elitism of white male leadership that dominated labor politics of the early twentieth century. Because of their unique position within the matrix of domination, defined as the social organization in which intersecting oppressions are developed, maintained, and maneuvered, African American women have a special knowledge about the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression. Garvin wrote a Master’s thesis that problematized labor unions as institutional contexts that privileged the liberal pro-capitalist perspectives of white males over the needs and views of the diverse labor force. While serving as a national staff member of a labor union organization, she used her position and the platform it provided to give voice to the experiences and needs of African American laborers who had been silenced within or excluded from labor union decision making processes. In furthering this effort, she similarly used her position as a writer at the Freedom newspaper to bring attention to the specific circumstances of African American women workers.

Finally, as a founding member and leader of the National Negro Labor Council, Garvin developed a philosophy and institutional structure for a labor organization that would put the experiences and needs of African American women at its center. This paper explores Garvin’s development as a labor union organizer as an instantiation of Black feminism that would later be conceptualized as distinguishing features of Black feminist thought.
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This paper explores labor organizer Vicki Garvin’s life and ideas as an instantiation of Black feminism and as characterized by features central to contemporary Black feminist thought. Garvin’s philosophy and practice of feminism come forth in her research and activism in workers’ rights, African Americans’ rights, and women’s rights. Garvin came of age in a post-WWII era of politics that was shaped by social movements toward liberation. As a demonstration of how to resist domination and oppression while remaining committed to the practice of democracy, Garvin’s life’s work deserves attention.

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twentieth century at the cost of the labor constituents. She did this by challenging the conflict of interest at stake in the quiet but close relationship between national labor union leadership and the dominant organization representing business interests in the United States. Garvin’s conflict of interest was morally problematic because it undermined the very commitments to workers that the labor unions proclaimed as a fundamental matter of principle and praxis.

In her first political insights. The first is how unpopular of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and why the federation’s Executive Committee was reluctant to support old age protection legislation even as local trade union organizations were united in controlling specific groups of people. The second insight is on the nature of alliances that form among men holding power positions that are claimed to be oppositional, but which are historically and properly opposed to each other. According to Garvin’s thesis, these alliances are developed further in the research Garvin carried out while at the UOPWA, which revealed a similar set of government relations that undermine worker protections, and rising corporate profits. As she explains, “I call your special attention to the graph which refutes the lie that prices must increase if workers are given raises. You will see that the wage increases which have been granted could have been absorbed out of profits without any rise in prices and still have left business profits greater than those earned in any year before.”

An essential function of Black feminist thought is empowerment through self-definition that supports acts of resistance or activism. Garvin’s thesis documents important obstructions to democratic, both the text and focus of analysis reveal her belief in local activism and a philosophy that is rooted in lived realities. Collins asserts that in the creation of Black feminist thought “the primary responsibility for defining one’s own reality lies with the people who live that reality, who actually have those experiences.” An essential function of Black feminist thought is empowerment through self-definition that supports acts of resistance or activism. It does not diminish Garvin’s developing insight that she was using this argument for the working class in general while Collins writes for African American women in particular. Garvin concludes that it is because of the continued organizing by local and state chapters of AFL organizations that the AFL leadership effectively advocated for protective legislation. She draws on this case to argue that institutional leadership can be corrupt when it has opportunities to collude with powerful special interests and fails to remain actively engaged in incorporating the voices and needs of its constituency. Yet, the power of workers within unions is an important countervailing force that must remain organized and active in order to accomplish progressive change. These themes were developed further in the research Garvin carried out for the UOPWA, which revealed a similar set of conflicts involving underlying relationships between corporations, the U.S. government, and the military.

During WWII, women gained more jobs within the labor force which consequently transformed the demographic of the Coalition of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions and gave Garvin access to a leadership role within the UOPWA. As an organizer, her concern for the worker is paramount, and the study therefore reveals multiple ways in which various political and economic institutions exploit workers. In this way, Garvin questions the political and economic ties that drive U.S. government decisions and connects them to corporate interests and the insiders who set the standards. As an organizer, her concern for the worker is paramount, and the study therefore reveals multiple ways in which various political and economic institutions exploit workers.

Garvin’s thesis conveys a critical perspective of their philosophies that were not grounded in many individual workers’ realities. Speaking of the constituent labor unions, she states that “the AFL was not representative of the people it represented.” As she states later on in her life in Ghana and China. While making a powerful critique of corporate-military-governmental relations that undermine worker protections, Garvin also draws attention to problems faced by women in particular. This research was inspired by a report created by the 1946 Heller Committee for Research at the University of California, which takes into account the needs for food, living, clothing, rent, house operations, furnishings, and income and payroll taxes, to conclude that a white collar family of four cannot survive with the rising prices and stagnant wages. The 1946 Heller Committee report states that the wage increases which have been granted could have been absorbed out of profits without any rise in prices and still have left business profits greater than those earned in any year before.” In this way, Garvin questions the political and economic ties that drive U.S. government decisions and connects them to corporate interests and the insiders who set the standards. As an organizer, her concern for the worker is paramount, and the study therefore reveals multiple ways in which various political and economic institutions exploit workers.

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Garvin dedicated much of her early research to American labor unions in the early twentieth century, including the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). She wrote about the federation's Executive Committee and how their decision making was influenced by their desire to remain independent of government control. Garvin argued that the AFL's leadership was more focused on maintaining its autonomy from government regulation than on protecting the interests of workers. She also examined the role of the National Civic Federation, a group of business leaders and economists who were concerned with the growth of government regulation and the labor movement. Garvin showed how the federation was influenced by the National Civic Federation and how its members were opposed to government intervention in labor affairs.

Garvin's work also focused on the role of the trade union movement in the United States, including the role of women in union organizing. She studied the women's movement and examined the ways in which women were able to organize and gain some degree of control over their working conditions. Garvin's research on women's organizations and their role in union organizing was groundbreaking at the time and continues to be relevant today.

In summary, Garvin's work contributed significantly to our understanding of the history of labor unionism in the United States. Her research on the AFL and the National Civic Federation has helped to illuminate the complex relationship between labor and business in the early twentieth century. Garvin's work on women's organizations and their role in union organizing has also helped to shape our understanding of the history of women's activism. Garvin's research has been influential in the study of labor history and continues to be an important resource for historians and scholars.

Garvin's work continues to be relevant today as labor unions and working-class communities continue to face challenges related to the power of corporate entities and the influence of government policies. Her research on the AFL and the National Civic Federation provides important insights into the ways in which labor organizations have been influenced by external forces and how they have responded to these influences.

Garvin's research on women's organizations and their role in union organizing is also important today as women continue to seek greater representation and control in the workplace. Garvin's work has helped to highlight the importance of women's contributions to labor organizing and has provided a model for future research on women's activism and organizing.
Through the assertion of her voice, Garvin shows that more must be done to include the voices of the minorities that policies are intended to support within the policy-making process.

Garvin’s early research offers a window into her developing political theory and analysis of difference as an activist and intellectual. She continued to use her position within union organizations to voice the needs of not only white men, but also African Americans.

**GARVIN GIVES VOICE TO EXCLUDED AFRICAN AMERICANS**

At the 1949 CIO Constitutional Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, Garvin used her national staff position to support Resolution no. 16, which addressed the obstacles faced by minority groups within the union. She pushed the Convention to be even more expansive in acknowledging and addressing such obstacles. She began by expressing her pride in being a part of the CIO, but went on to convey her disappointment that the organization had not conveyed her voice, Garvin shows that more must be done to include the voices of the minorities that policies are intended to support within the policy-making process. The Red Scare and McCarthyism shaped the way bureaucratic organizations practiced unity and loyalty. The fear of communism changing the ideology of a liberal capitalist democracy, which was held together through the strong ties Garvin exposed, sparked legislation such as the Truman Doctrine of 1947 and McCarran Act of 1950. The McCarran Act, FBI surveillance, and intimidation made labor union activism, which was driven by their fear of exclusion from vital organizational networks and resources. The semblance of unity, especially in the black labor movement, was considered necessary under Cold War political repression in the U.S. Connections to the Communist Party (CP) posed threats to liberal capitalist democracy, which was held together through bureaucratic organizations practiced unity and loyalty. The Worker Magazine noted, Murray, the president of CIO. Two other men also did not get up, and they both expressed feeling disappointed in the CIO, which corresponded to other efforts that used Cold War legislation to dismantle movements for racial equality. Like the eleven other organizations that were removed from CIO, the UPWA was also eliminated, which reflected Garvin’s consciousness of African American women’s economic status. Given the non-responsiveness of unions to the needs of African American workers, Garvin continued to work for Freedom newspaper while organizing the National Negro Labor Council (NNLC) throughout the founding allowed her and other African American women to make their needs part of the foundation of the organization. Women called for labor movement that could account for and respond to the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and region. It was this consciousness that made it possible for Garvin to make the movement’s more radical politics amidst a hostile and repressive environment. Clearly, Garvin’s politics and calls for change were not welcome in the older labor union institutions. With more calls from the community for a space that would be concerned with black workers’ rights, the NNLC was able to emerge as an organization with a representation of unity distinct from and oppositional to the teaching and practices of the CIO or U.S. government.

Between 1950 and 1952, Garvin used her position with the Freedom newspaper to shine a spotlight on the needs of African American women workers. In a 1951 interview with Jane Gilbert, Garvin plainly explained that "in many ways the status of Negro women has not yet changed since the days of slavery, you know." African American women were relegated to the worst jobs in the North and the South while still responsible for managing their families and homes. Garvin framed this struggle as one that is closely connected with the broader fight for African Americans’ economic status. She argued for employment for black women where white women work “at equal pay and condition” and claimed that “Negro women are militant and willing to fight for this right.” In this way, Garvin served as a leader who transforms the consciousness of African American women by standing strong in challenging the root of their social problems in media. This included her own interminable challenge to the unjust powers that oppressed African American women. As she proved in her stance at the CIO convention a few years earlier, Garvin’s work embodied a refusal to capitulate to white male power relations.

Activism within unions is how African American women workers created the space and momentum to organize for their rights. In an article in Freedom newspaper, Garvin points out that the unions were the first to be fired during a slack season in the national economy, have the worst jobs, and are absolutely “co-breadwinners” due to “white men [having] virtual monopoly on the best paying jobs available in the U.S.”

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Garvin’s push for organizations to be more diverse was a direct challenge to the CIO’s white demographic should control policy or decision-making processes. She understood that decisions were not being made in favor of black workers because those who decided what concerns were legitimate came from homogenous perspectives and standpoints. She critiques the elitist perspective within the AFL in her thesis, and again as she challenges Resolution no. 6 in not doing enough for the conditions of diverse workers. Through the assertion of her voice, Garvin shows that more must be done to include the voices of the minorities that policies are intended to support within the policy-making process. The Red Scare and McCarthyism shaped the way bureaucratic organizations practiced unity and loyalty. 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While bringing attention to the fact that African American men and women were relegated to unskilled labor and tasks, Garvin also emphasized that unorganized African American women were especially subject to control by their employers. Thus, turning to solutions, she wrote, "It is a matter of record that where the given opportunity to enter industry and become a part of the trade union movement, Negro women demonstrated their loyalty and ability to fight for the best interests of all workers. Despite tremendous handicaps, Negro women have fought for their way into unions." For Garvin, it is African American women who "give substance to freedom and democracy." She calls for permanent jobs for African American women in industry, the provision of opportunities for training, up-grading and employment in all categories of work, elimination of wage differentials, and an extension of coverage of social welfare legislation to industries and occupations not yet included. Garvin also wanted to see the promotion of African American women in leadership positions at all levels of trade union activity.

When Garvin and her collaborators, such as Ferdinand Smith, Ewart Guinier, and Pearl Laws, created the NNLC, they created a space in which they could work together to struggle and fight for the diverse needs of a diverse labor force. The NNLC was a "movement" in the words of Garvin at its founding convention, which took place in a Cincinnati community that was doing its best to keep them out. Specifically, the Cincinnati City Council passed a resolution disapproving of the convention events, and the FBI was reported to have paid close attention to them. When African Americans first arrived, they were refused by hotels, so convention participants turned to local families who were more willing to host them. Because the hotels finally yielded, Garvin's convention speech emphasized the importance of the NNLC convention as part of an underlying movement that resisted government abuse.

The composition of the convention was diverse, drawing whites as well as African Americans, and Garvin knew that finding unity at the intersection of these differences would provide the strength to overcome the power of the "coalition of bosses, bankers and Klux politicians.""""

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By gathering diverse thinkers, the NNLC was able to establish connections between oppressions and exhume the roots of dominating ideologies underlying fanciful philosophies and mainstream economic debates. Perspectives that NNLC convention participants presented were progressive, complex, and challenged accepted meanings of freedom. Speakers acknowledged that freedom abroad cannot happen without freedom at home. The foreign policy of "freedom building" was exposed as hypocrisy. The group discussed the deep ties of the military to corporations that make money off the rhetoric of freedom. The organization finally had the space to investigate and openly theorize about the interconnected injustices around the world and their relationship to the injustice each worker experienced. This played a crucial role in the convention's development of a liberating vision of inclusive freedom and allowed for an intersectional agenda. Included in their goals were establishing and protecting the rights of Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and other minority groups, engaging in peace negotiations with Korea, and pushing for the development of housing programs.

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As the NNLC’s second annual convention approached, it had secured jobs for African American women in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, Milwaukee, New York, Chicago, and Flint, and job training in Cleveland. It had developed ordinances to end Jim Crow education in Louisville. The NNLC was able to get 20,000 white workers to sign a petition to restore power to the 1941 Executive Order 8802 Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), which prohibited “discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries because of race, creed, color, or national origin.” Funding had been revoked from the committee under Southern leadership in congressional committee hearings.

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As the Executive Secretary of the Greater New York chapter of the NNLC and the National Vice President of NNLC, Garvin understood that the unity required for the organization’s work was nothing like a repressive, forced loyalty to institutions serving powerful interests. She and her colleagues were and should continue to be a struggle. Garvin helped create the NNLC as a place where people could argue ideologically and, in this, have friendship and comradery. It was coming together from a place of solidarity and equality to find justice, especially in argument and debate, that foments effective democracy.

After five years of work, the NNLC dissolved in 1956 under political pressure from the U.S. government. This powerful movement, with many of its leaders sharing membership in the CP, was deemed unrepresentative of American ideals. Attorney General Brownell made the call to request that the NNLC be reviewed by the Subversive Activities Control Board. Ultimately, the NNLC decided to disband rather than be found guilty for fighting for freedom. In 1972, Garvin commented that the goals of NNLC were carried forth by Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party. She said she could see the work coming to fruition in the coalitions forming the Women’s Liberation and the Anti-War movements, for which the NNLC had planted the seeds.