

# The Universal Negro Improvement Organization

Inspired by the writings and achievements of Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey started the Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League in Jamaica, West Indies, on August 1, 1914.

Later shortened to the simpler Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the organization had ambitious goals. They included plans to help modernize the indigenous traditional tribes of Africa; encourage love and pride in the black race; help develop self-sufficient communities for people of African descent; create a central black country; develop educational programs focusing on black history and culture; and improve the overall conditions of blacks throughout the world. The organization adopted for its motto, "One God! One Aim! One Destiny!" The principal faith blacks must follow, said Garvey, was "that of confidence in themselves."

After operating a series of failed newspapers throughout the Caribbean, Garvey was working for the Pan-African journal *African Times and Orient Review* when he read Washington's *Up from Slavery* and began a correspondence with the well-known educator. Garvey was particularly moved by Washington's ideas on economic independence for blacks and by his founding of the Tuskegee Institute. He wrote Washington that it was his hope to build a similar industrial school in Jamaica. Once he had established his headquarters for UNIA in Jamaica, he traveled to the United States with plans to raise funds to build such a school. Those plans changed after his arrival on March 23, 1916.

Instead of returning to Jamaica after touring and lecturing in more than three dozen states, Garvey made his way to Harlem in New York City. In Harlem, he joined the thousands of West Indians who had made their way to New York along with southern African Americans as part of the Great Migration. With their assistance, Garvey transferred his presidency of UNIA from Jamaica to Harlem.

He purchased for UNIA a large auditorium on 138th Street and named it Liberty Hall, the first of many that would open almost everywhere a branch of UNIA was founded. With a capacity to hold 6,000 people, the auditorium was used in a variety of ways. Worship services were held there on Sunday mornings, and it was generally open to the public for meetings on issues affecting the black community. It also functioned as a facility for dances and concerts. During the winter, a soup kitchen was opened and temporary accommodations were provided for the homeless.

Liberty Hall was also, of course, where people came to hear Marcus Garvey deliver speeches on racial pride, spiritual prophecy, and economic prosperity. Such speeches often drew on biblical allusions and prompted Garvey's followers to compare him to the great deliverers of the King James Bible. This religious aspect of Garvey's leadership intensified further with his repeated proclamations of a black God and Christ, through UNIA's affiliation with the African Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the organization had an official chaplain general in the form of West Indian George A. McGuire.

UNIA became the parent organization that housed several major operations. One of those operations, started in 1919, was the **Negro** Factories Corporation, designed to compete with white-owned production companies by producing and marketing comparable commodities. Corporation branches existed in Africa, the West Indies, and the United States. They included a grocery store chain, restaurant, a black doll production company, printing presses, a steam laundry operation, a tailor shop, and a hotel. Among the corporation's greatest achievements was the fact that it provided employment for thousands of black workers.

The legendary Black Star Line also got its start in 1919, funded by 100,000 shares of stock sold at \$5 each. Stock sales were restricted to blacks, and no one individual could purchase more than 200 shares. Originally capitalized at \$500,000, the shipping line was recapitalized in 1920 at \$10,000,000. As with all operations associated with UNIA, the Black Star Line was designed to serve the black community on an international, or Pan-African, level. Outfitted with four secondhand ships, its principal mission was to boost trade between black organizations in Latin America, Africa, and the United States. Critics of the venture promoted the idea that the shipping line was acquired to transport blacks en masse out of the United States and settle them in Africa. According to Garvey's widow and frequent coworker, Amy Jacques Garvey, that was never the case. Plans were, however, drawn up to establish in Liberia a colony of skilled workers who could contribute to the African continent's technological development, but the Liberian government denied permission to form such a colony. Nevertheless, the need for constant repairs made the fleet more of a liability than an asset; after four years and limited runs it was half a million dollars in debt.

A more successful UNIA operation was its official publicity organ, **Negro** World, with Amy Jacques Garvey serving as associate editor. Begun in 1919 and lasting until 1933, **Negro** World gained an international readership with editions in Spanish, French, and English distributed throughout the United States, Latin America, and Africa. Articles in the newspaper focused largely on the activities of UNIA itself and featured front-page editorials by Garvey. Other writings promoted black nationalism for the African continent and advocated political awareness of world events pertaining to blacks. In addition, while defending and promoting Garvey, it retaliated against attacks by such critics as W. E. B. DuBois of the *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, A. Philip Randolph of the *Messenger*, and Cyril Briggs of the *Crusader*.

UNIA held its first international convention in August 1920. The affair was marked with a gala parade through Harlem, designated representatives from 25 countries (some of whom had actually been living in Harlem for years), sales of stock, and the drafting of a Declaration of the Rights of the **Negro** Peoples of the World. A much-decorated Garvey in paramilitary uniform rode through Harlem alongside UNIA's Black Cross Nurses, **Universal** African Motor Corps, and Black Flying Corps. The occasion was also used to announce the organization's official colors: red for the blood of black people, green for the aspirations and stolen land of black people, and black for the race itself. After UNIA had been operating for two years in the United States, Garvey estimated its membership at 4 million. By 1923, he placed the figure at 6 million. Critics stated that a more realistic number was 200,000, which was the circulation of **Negro** World. The

number of branches in some 38 states, including the Deep South, came to 700. Moreover, the organization had 200 branches outside the United States. Whether UNIA had 200,000 members or the 6,000,000 that Garvey claimed, he had succeeded in becoming the first black man to launch and develop a mass movement geared toward the advancement of black people, something A. Philip Randolph would spend the bulk of his career attempting to accomplish.

The momentum that swelled UNIA's membership in the early 1920s began to taper off with the repeated criticisms of Garvey in the black press. The organization's effectiveness was further hampered by administrative and financial difficulties. It received an all but fatal blow when Garvey and three of his associates were arrested in 1922 for mail fraud. He served three months in New York City's Tombs Prison and two years in the Atlanta Penitentiary. He was deported in December 1927 to Jamaica as an alien convicted of a felony.

Garvey tried but was unable to move the UNIA headquarters back to Jamaica. The organization went bankrupt with debts amounting to \$200,000. The fleet of the Black Star Line was auctioned off to help settle UNIA's accounts. The publishing plants, Liberty Halls, and other operations were all lost. Still, Garvey held UNIA conventions in Jamaica in 1929 and 1934. Moving to England in 1934, he opened branches of UNIA in Paris, France, and London but never regained the following he once had. He died in London on June 10, 1940.

### **References and Further Information**

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