

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Angles of Agitation:
Lester Rodney's Various Approaches for Chipping Away at Baseball's Color Barrier

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Lester Rodney, sportswriter for New York's *Daily Worker* and *Sunday Worker* newspapers, wrote extensively about the inequity of America's baseball establishment. He was a man who "consciously used sports as a way to raise political issues."¹ As Terry Cannon, Director of the Baseball Reliquary in Monrovia, California,² remarked on the day of Rodney's induction into the Reliquary's Shrine of the Eternals that Rodney wrote about all sports but his "primary attention focused on baseball and his crusading fervor highlighted that sport's color barrier."³ By showcasing prominent African American athletes in his columns and editorials for the journalistic organ of the American Communist Party (CPUSA), he made the case for integration of the United States' national pastime. Rodney's use of direct and expressive language helped bring attention and support to the campaign to break the color barrier Major League Baseball, applying pressure on those in control to correct the inequality that existed. Rodney's contributions to the *Worker* also placed the CPUSA's calls for social justice in a context specific to baseball and strengthening the resolve of the movement for the game's integration. His writing was insightful and informative, examining the relationship between race and sports closely while doing "more than just record from the sidelines."⁴

Lester Rodney was born in Manhattan on 17 April 1911, and his family relocated to Brooklyn when he was six;⁵ this was where love for the Brooklyn Dodgers blossomed. Rodney

¹ Dave Zirin, "'Red' Rodney," in *A People's History of Sports in the United States: 250 Years of Politics, Protest, and Play* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 67. Zirin is currently the Sports editor of the *The Nation*.

² Bob Keisser of the *Long Beach [California] Press-Telegram* referred to the organization as perhaps "the game's most eccentric yet relevant group" in his article "Rodney Finally Gets Some Respect," printed 17 July 2004. The Reliquary has been deemed "the Alternate Hall of Fame" by some.

³ Terry Cannon, "Introduction Speech for Lester Rodney," supplied by The Baseball Reliquary, Inc., 24 July 2005, 1.

⁴ Dave Zirin, "It All Starts with Lester Rodney," in *What's My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 27.

⁵ Irwin Silber, *Press Box Red: The Story of Lester Rodney, the Communist Who Helped Break the Color Line in American Sports* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 20. This book will be treated as both a primary and secondary source, as it is written in the style of a lengthy interview between Silber and Rodney. Large passages are in the first-person voice as if Rodney had written them himself, and many of them are introduced or discussed by Silber to provide additional background information and context.

knew little of the Left while growing up and he once admitted to Irwin Silber, “I was in my twenties before I even knew what a Communist was.”⁶ He graduated from high school in 1929, the year his father’s business failed as a result of the stock market crash. Rodney was forced to turn down a partial scholarship to run track at Syracuse University because his family could not afford to pay the remainder of the cost of attendance, and this marked the beginning of a string of odd jobs and the development of Rodney’s career as a writer.

Rodney began attending night classes at New York University’s Greenwich Village campus in the early 1930s, where he became acquainted with the American Communist Party. He became familiar with the *Daily Worker* publication in the early winter of 1936⁷ and was almost immediately struck by its treatment of sports. Much of the CPUSA leadership still viewed sports as little more than a distraction from members’ work to improve their lives.⁸ The Communist Third International, or Comintern, however, had agreed in July 1935 the Party should work to improve membership by bringing national Parties closer to the traditions and cultures of their respective locales. This meant that the CPUSA would work toward the Americanization of the Party, and one way in which this could be achieved was by more openly embracing Americans’ love of sports.⁹ Because of its status as the national pastime in America, baseball was given special attention in this effort.¹⁰

Because the paper only wrote about sporting events in the weekend edition Rodney found it difficult for the *Worker* to provide good reporting, and “when they did feature pieces and analysis they sometimes slipped back into the denouncing-the-system mode.”¹¹ Rodney wrote to the *Worker*, agreeing with its criticisms of sports, but saying it should also “ask why sports

⁶ Silber, 19.

⁷ Silber, 1.

⁸ Silber, 2-3.

⁹ Silber, 4.

¹⁰ Larry Tye, *Satchel: The Life and Times of an American Legend* (New York: Random House, 2009), 184.

¹¹ Silber, 7.

[were] so meaningful to U.S. workers in the first place.”¹² *Daily Worker* editor Clarence Hathaway soon invited Rodney to discuss his views on the *Worker*’s sporting news and Rodney told him best sports coverage should not only highlight the injustice and exploitation in American sports but also recognize the fun and beauty of sports.¹³ This led Hathaway to encourage Rodney “to put his typewriter where his mouth was”¹⁴ by writing submissions for the *Worker*’s weekly sports section. Thus began a twenty-two year career with the paper.¹⁵ It was not long before Rodney became an official Party member and his section quickly began to embody the popular new CPUSA slogan, “Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism.”¹⁶ As sports section editor, Rodney was not only edited reports “but cover[ed] sports in a way they had never been covered before -- with an eye on their social impact.”¹⁷ The twenty-five year-old Brooklynite “who knew as little about socialism as he did about journalism”¹⁸ was head of a section of the *Worker* “that was lightyears ahead of its time . . . [which] vibrated with the intersection of sports and struggle.”¹⁹

The campaign to integrate baseball began for Rodney almost immediately after he joined the *Worker* staff in 1936 and formed a new daily sport section. His calls for the end of what the Communists had labeled “Jim Crow Baseball” were a prevalent feature of the section until Rodney was sent to fight in the Pacific Theater in the Second World War. Rodney’s torch was passed to other writers on the staff while he was overseas and he received the news of Jackie Robinson’s signing to the Brooklyn Dodgers’ minor league system while still out of the country.

¹² Zirin, *Fool*, 25.

¹³ Silber, 9.

¹⁴ Mike Takeuchi, “Journalist Honored for Role in Integration,” *The Santa Barbara [California] News-Press*, 1 August 2005.

¹⁵ Silber, 9.

¹⁶ Silber, 11.

¹⁷ Zirin, *Fool*, 26.

¹⁸ Tye, 184.

¹⁹ Zirin, *People’s*, 67.

Despite his pivotal role in breaking the color line, Rodney was “buried below the horizon of the sports landscape”²⁰ soon after the end of baseball’s segregation because of his political affiliation, making him “little more than a historical footnote”²¹ for decades. Chris Lamb, Communications Professor at College of Charleston, said that in society today it is difficult to imagine how popular communism and widespread racism had been, but they “would converge on the *Daily Worker*’s pages not just to make baseball more democratic but also to further civil rights in American society.”²² During Rodney’s time, the *Worker*’s “journalists personally thrust themselves into the fray. No other newspaper or magazine became more involved”²³ in the dismantling of the color barrier in professional baseball.

New York City was a great place to write about such a movement and help to address “a terrible wrong that needed to be righted,”²⁴ considering the glut of Major League Baseball teams and lack of dissent when it came to their operations. Despite the fact the city had three Major League teams, its mainstream newspapers were hesitant to comment on racism in baseball.²⁵ Rodney and his sports staff worked hard, and under his direction they “skillfully deflated all of major league baseball’s justifications for excluding African Americans.”²⁶

During the McCarthy Era of the 1950s, Rodney continued to write, but published under assumed names.²⁷ He left the *Daily Worker* and the CPUSA in 1958 and he moved his family to California after “Stalin murdered the socialist dream,” but has always lived by the mantra “Don’t

²⁰ Zirin, *Fool*, 23.

²¹ Jack Epstein, “Baseball’s Conscience Finally Gets His Due,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 July 2005.

²² Chris Lamb, “A Reporter’s Role in Breaking Baseball’s Color Barrier,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 August 2006..

²³ Chris Lamb and Kelly Rusinack, “Hitting From the Left: The *Daily Worker*’s Assault on Baseball’s Color Line,” in *Take Me Out to the Ballgame: Communicating Baseball*, edited by Gary Gumpert and Susan J. Drucker (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, Inc., 2002), 301.

²⁴ Takeuchi.

²⁵ Davis, E11.

²⁶ Cannon, 2.

²⁷ According to Jack Epstein, pseudonyms included Benjamin Brewster and Lyman Hopkins.

mourn, organise.”²⁸ in regards to addressing injustice. Surely one must find it fitting to hear such a sentiment from a man who helped to affect great change in athletics in the United States.

Lester Rodney has been discussed by many writers over the course of the last fifteen years, but none have examined his sports coverage in its own right. Irwin Silber’s book *Press Box Red: The Story of Lester Rodney, the Communist Who Helped Break the Color Line in American Sports*, was a valuable resource. Silber has called it the book Rodney should have written long ago. Kelly Elaine Rusinack’s 1995 M.A. thesis “Baseball on the Radical Agenda: The *Daily* and *Sunday Worker* on the Desegregation of Major League Baseball, 1993 to 1947,” in which she treated the movement as a whole, was also a great help. Rusinack has completed extensive interviews with Rodney and has also written about the movement with Chris Lamb. Long Island University History professor Joe Dorinson has described Rodney’s role in the campaign as one in which he “pummeled the tycoons who supported the lily-white system in baseball.”²⁹ David Davis of *The Los Angeles Times* has called Rodney an “an early, often lonely voice in the struggle to end segregation in baseball.”³⁰ San Francisco State University History professor Jules Tygiel, who has written extensively about the breaking of baseball’s color barrier, has said the writer was not alone in his pushing for equality in baseball, but “nobody beat the drum louder.”³¹ Numerous other sportswriters have written about Rodney as a luminary in the fight to desegregate baseball, but none have studied him to great detail and many have borrowed from each other. No truly scholarly resources were located for the research of this project.

²⁸ Buckley.

²⁹ David Davis, “Hero Had One Strike Against Him,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 July 2004, E11.

³⁰ Davis, E1.

³¹ Epstein.

The remainder of this text will be devoted to examining Lester Rodney's original writing from the *Worker*, analyzing the various ways in which he made the case to end baseball's Jim Crow era. His work is separated categorically, but most sources are included chronologically within their given sections. A look at Rodney's recollections of the campaign to integrate baseball will serve as a conclusion.

Making the Case for Better Baseball

Some of Lester Rodney's articles outlined the ways in which incorporation of black athletes would improve individual teams and the game overall. Appeals were made to franchise leadership in which Rodney pointed out the ways the acquisition of a particular player would benefit a team that may have been struggling with its current roster. Similar arguments were also directed toward fans, encouraging them to pressure those in charge of their favorite teams to make changes that would lead to the improvement of the sport as a whole.

Lester Rodney's article published in the *Sunday Worker* 30 August 1936 began with a discussion of letters he had been receiving "from every major league city." In it, he accused mainstream newspapers of ignoring the idea that integration might bring up the standard level of play in baseball. This, he argued, would not only reinvigorate baseball itself, but would also improve the atmosphere of sportsmanship and boost attendance. Rodney ended the column with a call to action which reflected his hope for such changes to be made before the opening of the 1937 baseball season: "So, let the magnates hear from you, baseball fans -- let the curtain go up on a real baseball season in 1937 . . ." ³²

³² Lester Rodney, "Indignant Fans Want Negro Stars," New York: *The Sunday Worker*, 30 August 1936, 14. This argument would be revisited a number of times in the following years. On 15 June 1938 Rodney cited Hugh Bradley of the *New York Post* and Jimmy Powers of the *Daily News* as supporters of integration. In an article titled "B'klyn Club Hires Negro Track Ace Tonight, Why Not the Baseball

As a self-avowed Brooklyn Dodgers fan, Rodney often made his readers aware of his disappointment in the team's repeated failures at excellence in the National League. In an article titled "Glimmer of Hope for Dodgers," he considered the team's rather dismal position near the bottom of their division since their last World Series title in 1924. Rodney's tone at the opening of the article was surprisingly light and optimistic as he considered the fact that Dodgers fans were clearly not of the "fair weather" variety, as they continued to endure being let down. Despite perennially poor showings by the team, Rodney cited attendance records to show that Dodgers' devotees were "ready to support a winner the moment it shows its head in Flatbush."³³

Making Predictions

A number of Lester Rodney's writings in the *Daily* and *Sunday Worker* attempted to look into the future and anticipate the end of Jim Crow baseball. Sadly, all were partially inaccurate and many were flat-out wrong. The predictions, however, were likely to get readers' hopes up, and this would have been very helpful in activating a broader base of support for baseball's integration.

In an article printed 17 September 1937, Rodney mentioned the agreement among "baseball observers" that the likelihood of segregation ending by 1939 was good. His word choice here was interesting, as the term "observers" is quite vague. It is likely that Rodney made

Stars?" he brought up the fact that Bradley had mentioned "at least 20 Negro stars who would put new life and interest into the National League." He also caused readers to wonder why the Dodgers were willing to hire Jesse Owens to run as a sort of sideshow during that evening's game at Ebbets Field but not any Negro baseball players. Following another season of dominance by the New York Yankees in 1939, Rodney suggested that the managers of other teams begin hiring black ballplayers to give their teams a better shot at gaining an advantage over the emerging Yankee dynasty. The article, "Why Break Up the Yanks? Just Let the Other Managers Sign Up Some of the Negro Stars," was printed on page eight of 10 October's *Worker*.

In his "On The Score Board" column from 22 February 1940, Rodney said that baseball was "still a grande game, but of course [it would] be a much grander game the day it no longer matters what color a player is as long as he can hit, run and throw."

³³ Rodney, "Glimmer of Hope for Dodgers," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 11 February 1937, 8.

In the article, Rodney called on Dodgers' manager Burleigh Grimes to "take the initial step in breaking down the wall of discrimination against Negro stars by hiring Satchell Paige, the Negro Dizzy Dean (in ability, not talking attributes)." There were black recruits Rodney could have considered, but it was very clear he believed Paige was the best option for the Dodgers' first acquisition from the Negro Leagues.

this choice deliberately, as the lack of clarity in the statement provided convenient loopholes through which one could crawl if a projection proved false.³⁴

Taking a whimsical turn for Christmas Eve 1937, Rodney listed the wishes of some of his staff writers. One, Art Shields, asked for lower ticket prices for baseball games while Ben Davis, Jr., wished for the eradication of segregation in all American sports. Rodney's own Christmas wish was a combination of hope and forecast by betting that Santa would take time to visit New York in June should Satchel Paige have the opportunity to pitch to Yankees Joe DiMaggio and Lou Gehrig in a regular season game.³⁵

The article "Brilliant Saga of Our Negro Athletes" discussed a number of successful black athletes in other sports, including past football great Paul Robeson and track stars like Jesse Owens, thus arguing for equality across them all. By providing evidence of African Americans excelling elsewhere, Rodney again illustrated the worthiness of Negro baseball players to compete with their white counterparts. Growing support among Brooklyn fans was also cited as an element to help with the destruction of "the still erect, but tottering and discredited, walls of Jim Crow in American athletics."³⁶ With the advances being made, it must

³⁴ Lester Rodney, "See Jim Crown in Big Leagues Nearing End," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 17 September 1937, 10.

The following Sunday, in an "Big League Jim-Crow on Last Legs," Rodney expressed his excitement concerning the recent announcement by the *New York Daily News* that Negro players like Paige, Johnny Taylor, and "Cool Papa" Bell would be a welcome addition to the Majors. That day, 26 September 1937, on page eleven of the *Sunday Worker*, Rodney used boxing language in explaining the impending demise: "Watch Mr. Crow absorb a sudden kayo. He's getting a little round-heeled now."

³⁵ Lester Rodney, "Dear Santa: A Few Items for You List," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 24 December 1937, 8.

³⁶ Lester Rodney, "Brilliant Saga of Our Negro Athletes," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 23 June 1938, 8.

After the close of the 1938 season, Rodney informed his readers that all New York City's sports editors had joined a number of players in supporting integration in baseball. "Jim Crow Can Be Ended by 1939!" featured on page fifteen of the *Sunday Worker*, stated that given the increasing support all that was needed to end discrimination in baseball by the opening of the 1939 season was "a little push from the fans."

Rodney also argued that a "final push will do the trick now, perhaps in time to give us a couple of more vital pennant races in 1940" in his 19 July 1939 article "You Can't Stop Sportsmanship!" The piece was printed on page eight of the *Worker* that day.

On page eight of the 11 October 1939 *Worker*, after the close of another season, Rodney again posited that segregated baseball would soon be a thing of the past. In "On the Score Board: '39 the Last Season For Jim Crow?" he told his readers that it was "going to be a tough job to stem American sportsmanship" much longer.

have been difficult for Rodney's readers to greet such statements with disbelief. Certainly the campaign was gaining enough support that many in the movement agreed with Rodney that the end had to be drawing very near.

Statistical Evidence

It was not particularly difficult to show that Negro ball players were capable of competing on the Major League level, and providing figures was a good way to play to readers' sense of reason. There was an extensive group with the needed abilities and "*Worker* reporters could, and did, supply a long list of names of great black players; they also pointed out that the level of play in the Negro Leagues was in no way inferior to the major leagues."³⁷ Much of Lester Rodney's writing placed the spotlight on particular players or groups of players whose abilities merited serious consideration for inclusion in the Majors.

Rodney outlined the feats of a double-header of exhibition games played at the Polo Grounds on Sunday 19 September 1937 and made the argument that if twenty-five thousand fans attended games played between two Negro all-star teams, they would surely come to games in which these black stars played against the white heroes of the Majors. Another facet to the assertion was the spectacular level of play exhibited by all the participants and the huge benefits it would offer in helping improve the game.³⁸ Photos of prominent Negro players were also common features of numerous *Worker* sports pages.³⁹

³⁷ Rusinack, 28.

³⁸ Lester Rodney, "No-Hit Game for Taylor, Young Negro Ace," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 20 September 1937, 6.

On Monday 27 September 1937 Rodney flipped the idea of the separate leagues as a sort of slave system when he referred to Satchel Paige as the "master of the greatest teams of major leaguers ever assembled." The exhibition game that weekend had pitted Negro all-stars against Major League standouts, and Rodney supported the growing sentiment that Paige was the greatest pitcher in baseball's history, regardless of the league. Paige's success that day, chronicled in the page ten article "Big Crowd See Satchell Paige Turn Tables," including striking out eight batters,

Fan Support

Another part of the *Daily* and *Sunday Worker's* baseball coverage involved the fans of the sport themselves. This included not only white patrons of the Major Leagues but also touched on issues concerning African American enthusiasts of the Negro Leagues. In some cases bringing supporters on board was a relatively easy task, because as Kelly Rusinack explained, "the CPUSA's fight to end Jim Crow in baseball was virtuous and conscientious, characteristics Americans did not usually associate with Communism."⁴⁰

Sunday 16 August 1936 was an important day in which the campaign to end segregated baseball was officially begun by the *Worker*. The article "Fans Oppose Jim-Crow in Big League Baseball" featured phrases like "Baseball is the people's game" and highlighted the exclusion of African Americans. This set up a dichotomy in which one was forced to question whether or not black athletes were truly worthy of the game. For the *Worker* to make such an aim would have been to label much of American society as outright racist. If this was the case, according to CPUSA ideals, then those in favor of baseball's continued segregation could not be true

keeping pressure on the white all-stars throughout the game, and doing "his share of the stickwork," proving himself to be a good hitter on top of his pitching prowess.

An upcoming game at Yankee Stadium between the Cubans and the Black Yankees, both of New York, was highlighted in Rodney's 18 May 1940 article "Great Negro Players at Stadium Tom'w." The piece, printed on page eight, worked to draw more fans to the game by pinpointing the strengths of the black players to be on the field. In doing this Rodney reminded his readers that the Cubans would be starting the same nine men who had played against the 1939 National League champion Cincinnati Reds and the St. Louis Cardinals in exhibition games in Havana, Cuba, that winter. That lineup had "amazed the unknowing by trouncing the Cards and holding the champion Reds in three games -- one victory each and one game tied."

³⁹ Accompanying an article titled "Crowds Cheer Call for Negro Stars in Majors," printed 8 July 1940, was a photo of Negro catcher Josh Gibson, "called the best catcher in the game and one of the greatest in history by many big league managers and players."

A photo was printed on the sports page 28 September 1938, titled "CALLING ALL SECOND DIVISION TEAMS!" The photo was of the Negro National League All-Stars, a roster that Rodney offered to those teams who had struggled to gain the upper hand near the close of the season, saying they were "15 Negro stars that can lift you into the higher brackets."

⁴⁰ Rusinack, 18.

Americans, since “to the Communists, discrimination and democracy could not coexist.”⁴¹ At the bottom of the column were fan testimonials, one of which was from Dorothy Shand of the Bronx, who argued baseball “should teach fair play, not ignore it.”⁴² Featuring real people helped make the arguments made in the *Worker* more relatable. On page fifteen Rodney compared segregationists to Hitler ⁴³ and it is difficult to believe that many Americans would want to be considered similar to the Nazi leader.

Attendance at games featured rather prominently in many of Rodney’s articles, particularly exhibition matches in which African American teams were pitted against their Caucasian counterparts. The game between all-stars from the Negro and Major Leagues on 27 September 1937 drew a large crowd that had become typical of such exhibitions. Rodney did not make mention of the numbers of spectators as simple numerical fact. This was one of the ways in which he worked toward convincing readers of the advantages of the campaign to end baseball’s segregation. That point becomes especially clear when one considers the fact that the following statement was one of the first sentences in the article. “Another great crowd of 25,000 greeted the great Negro baseball stars at the Yankee Stadium yesterday to add another nail in what begins to look like Jim Crow’s early coffin in our national pastime.”⁴⁴ The imagery provided within this line also gave strength to the movement’s efforts to put the period of segregation in Major League Baseball to rest once and for all.

Rodney’s semi-regular column “On the Scoreboard” became especially poignant on 21 September 1938, when he printed a letter he had recently received from Lieutenant James Hill of the International Brigade fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Rodney devoted the entire column

⁴¹ Rusinack, 18.

⁴² Rodney, “Fans Oppose Jim-Crow in Big League Baseball,” New York: *The Sunday Worker*, 16 August 1936, 1.

⁴³ Rodney, “Fans and Sports Writers Demand Negro Players Be Admitted to Big League Baseball Teams,” New York: *The Sunday Worker*, 16 August 1936, 15.

⁴⁴ Lester Rodney, “Big Crowd See Satchell Paige Turn Tables,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 27 September 1937, 10.

to it because it was remarkable for a man fighting “somewhere in Spain to write a letter to America in support of the campaign against Jim-Crow in baseball . . . [p]articularly when the lieutenant was trainer of the Oklahoma City Baseball Team of the Class A Texas League, and started life in a town where no Negroes were allowed to live.” Hill explained in the letter that his experiences with Negroes in both baseball and combat led him to admire them greatly and realize that they deserved more equal footing in baseball. This served as a clear case for the argument that one can be taught racial sensitivity and acceptance. The connection to baseball was also important to the article, as it illustrated the game as a conduit for peaceful cohabitation of the races. Rodney strengthened the argument of the column by closing it with the line, “And some of the wounded vets back from Spain inform me that Lieutenant Jim Hill is quite a fighter.”⁴⁵ By doing this, Rodney effectively placed Hill on a pedestal, his life-altering paradigm shift serving as a goal for readers to aspire to.

Those fans who did mobilize for the cause tended to come out in droves and their efforts were quite effective. A petition campaign began in New York City schools in the spring of 1940 with DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx. The fact that “[n]o one refused to sign and indications are that almost 100% of the vast student body will put it on the dotted line”⁴⁶ was a strong indication that the youth population was quickly growing tired of segregation in baseball. Near the end of the 1940 baseball season, Rodney pointed out that the huge success of that year’s

⁴⁵ Lester Rodney, “On the Scoreboard,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 21 September 1938, 8.

⁴⁶ Lester Rodney, “High School Students Join Drive on Baseball Jim Crow as Clinton Starts Petition Campaign,” 5 April 1940, 8.

The California Youth Legislature began a similar drive that spring as well, a move that Rodney highlighted in his 30 March 1940 article “California Youth Aim to Reach Hundreds of Thousands in Campaign.”

A photo had been printed with one of Rodney’s “On The Scoreboard” columns 25 July 1939, featuring fans at Yankee Stadium signing petitions being circulated by the Youth Communist League, which “ran out of [them] after thousands signed. Exactly a year after that, Rodney spoke of petitions that met with equal success in his article “10,000 at Fair Petition to End Baseball Jim Crow.”

petition drives in saying printing all the signatures would leave “no space for any other sports news on the sports page.”⁴⁷

Working with trade unions helped fuel the campaign greatly.⁴⁸ Rodney mentioned the results connections like these proved to have in a speech he made at an event coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of Jackie Robinson’s joining the Brooklyn Dodgers’ roster in 1947.

[We] also stimulated educational picket lines at both Negro League and big-league games. At one Negro League doubleheader in New York in 1939, more than 10,000 signatures calling for an end to the ban were obtained, including those of all the Negro players. (By 1942 Commissioner Landis had more than a million petition signatures on his desk.)⁴⁹

Rounding up volunteers was an important part of the movement, resulting in successful endeavors on a grand scale. Such mass involvement surely sent a powerful message to those making the big decisions in the baseball system that fans not only enjoyed watching African American baseball players but would also work for their inclusion in the Major Leagues. This also served as an appeal to capitalistic aims, as the Communists viewed the magnates as operating their business more for sheer profits than fans’ enjoyment.

There were times when Rodney encouraged readers to voice their support by writing in to the *Worker*. Such was the case on 23 May 1940 when he requested mail providing reasons to end the segregation of baseball. Fans were also asked to predict the score of that week’s Negro

⁴⁷ Lester Rodney, “The Fight Is Being Won -- Final Push Can End Baseball Jim Crow Now,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 26 August 1940, 8.

⁴⁸ An image was printed on the page eight sports page 4 May 1940, featuring members of the baseball team from the Wholesale and Warehouse Union, part of the Trade Union Athletic Association in New York, assembled in that year’s May Day parade with banners and signs calling for baseball’s integration. Under the photo was a caption documenting the group’s popularity that day, explaining that the “contingent was enthusiastically received all the way down the line of march.”

⁴⁹ Lester Rodney, “White Dodgers, Black Dodgers,” in *Jackie Robinson: Race, Sports, and the American Dream*, edited by Joseph Dorinson and Joram Warmund (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998), 92.

Leagues doubleheader at Yankee Stadium. Two winning letters were chosen and their writers given free working press tickets to the games.⁵⁰

On New Year's Day 1941 Rodney spoke of the millions who had come out to support the push for integration since the campaign began in 1936, "because Americans are sportsmen who hate discrimination and phony inequality."⁵¹ As the support grew across the nation, it became increasingly clear that those who opposed breaking the color barrier in baseball were part of a dwindling minority.

Targeting Baseball's Leadership

Much of the campaign against baseball's Jim Crow system was aimed at those in high positions in the league. These officials were the ones the *Worker* criticized the most, and "Rodney's approach was to entice the reader to openly despise the big league owners and their cronies for their capitalist, hence racist, attitudes that would never change."⁵² Team owners were often referred to as "magnates," likely an implication of their close ties to the capitalist system the CPUSA considered largely harmful to the rights of all workers, as well as their disregard for the welfare of the players whom they effectively owned and controlled through the use of strict contract agreements and stringent team rules.

When reviewing the year in sports for 1937, Rodney singled out National League President Ford Frick as one of the people the *Worker* had forced to admit that there was no explicitly written rule barring African Americans from the Major Leagues.⁵³ An article from 10 January 1938 involved excerpts and Rodney's thoughts on an interview with Clark Griffiths,

⁵⁰ Lester Rodney, "Readers Can Win Free Tickets to Negro Games," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 23 May 1940, 8.

⁵¹ Lester Rodney, "A Happy New Year to Sports Fans," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 1 January 1941, 8.

⁵² Rusinack, 41.

⁵³ Rodney, "The Daily Worker Sports Page in '37 --," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 27 December 1937, 8.

President of the Washington Senators franchise.⁵⁴ The interviewer, Sam Lacey, was sports editor for the *Washington Herald*, a black newspaper in the nation's capital. Griffiths made the assertion during the interview that the stars of the Negro Leagues were indeed performing at impressive levels, within the context of their own league and peers, but they would not be able to perform consistently at the high level required for success in Major League Baseball. To this, Rodney responded with the suggestion that Griffiths had not been paying attention to the world of sports at large, citing the great achievements of numerous African American athletes who had surpassed many of their white competitors in their respective fields.

Hasn't he heard about the three Negro boxing champions of the world, Joe Louis, John Henry Lewis and Henry Armstrong? Didn't he happen to notice that Negro track stars . . . just about won the Olympic Games of 1936 single-handed and have dominated their events 'consistently' before and since?⁵⁵

Rodney also pointed to a number of black football players who had excelled, arguing that Griffiths' point was irrelevant considering the rigors of sport and the increased strain placed on its participants compared to baseball. When letters were sent to the owners and managers of all the Major League teams in the United States in May 1939, asking if they would object to hiring Negro players if the ban were lifted, Rodney asked his readers, "What better way to celebrate the 100th anniversary of our National Pastime at a time when America is re-affirming its

⁵⁴ This team no longer exists. The franchise was moved from Washington, D.C., to Arlington, Texas, and is now known as the Rangers. Notable figures in the franchise's history include Hall of Famer Ted Williams, who managed the team for a short time in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and George W. Bush, who in the 1990s was a partial owner of the Rangers.

⁵⁵ Lester Rodney, "Pinning a Magnate Down on Jim-Crow," New York: *The Daily Worker*, 10 January 1938, 8. Rodney also employed a bandwagon approach in the article, encouraging Griffiths and the public to join the movement to break down the color barrier in baseball. He also appealed to Griffiths' supposed avarice and the passion that fans had for the game: "Why not join the tide, Mr. Griffiths? For one thing, you'll get a hell of a lot more customers in your stadium when there's no more discrimination to hurt the sport we love so much."

fundamental democratic principles?”⁵⁶ Phrases like this reflect Rodney’s belief that making baseball more fair would lead to greater equity in the whole of American society.

Support from Within the Leagues

A number of Lester Rodney’s articles for the *Daily* and *Sunday Worker* were drawn from interviews he conducted with prominent figures of both the Major and Negro Leagues. Through these contributions, Rodney sought to disprove the assertions that none of baseball’s white players would stand for the integration of their sport or that African-American players were perfectly content remaining in a separate system. He was also able to gain the support of some of the men in charge of Major League teams.

The first piece of this type to be printed in the *Worker*, called “one of the most stunning articles of the campaign to that point”⁵⁷ by Kelly Rusinack, was also the one that perhaps created the greatest stir within the baseball realm. Its title, “DiMaggio Calls Negro Greatest Pitcher,” was sure to have caught many readers’ attention, especially in New York where the young “Joltin’ Joe” had already become something of a sensation. The article grew out of an interaction between DiMaggio and a reporter in the Yankees’ locker room, in which Joe was asked who he thought to be the greatest pitcher he had ever faced.⁵⁸ Many reporters heard his response, but Lester Rodney was the only one to actually print it.⁵⁹ While playing in off-season exhibition games on the West Coast, DiMaggio had had the chance to face Paige when all-star

⁵⁶ Lester Rodney, “Big League Magnates, Managers, Polled on Baseball Jim Crow,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 27 May 1939, 8.

⁵⁷ Rusinack, 31.

⁵⁸ Lester Rodney, “DiMaggio Calls Negro Greatest Pitcher,” *The Daily Worker*, 13 September 1937, 8.

⁵⁹ Lester Rodney, “On the Scoreboard,” *The Sunday Worker*, 30 January 1938, 14.

Rodney also relayed this fact to Lamb and Rusinack during a personal communication dated 6 November 1997, as noted in their “Hitting From the Left” article of 2002.

His conversation with Will Buckley of *The Guardian* touched on this fact as well. In the interview with Buckley, published 20 August 2005, Rodney said, “there was not a word about it in other papers. These writers weren’t racist, but their papers wouldn’t handle that stuff. It’s unbelievable that journalism was so debased. And I had an exclusive. I didn’t want it to be a Daily Worker exclusive, I wanted to end the darn ban.”

teams from both the Negro and Major Leagues were pitted against each other. Rodney cited the repeated “inclusion of Paige and other Negro players in the all-star games as soon as the official season ends” as proof “that the average big league ball player would welcome the Negro star into the game.” He then went on to accuse league magnates of being the only stumbling block toward integration, stating:

They don't relish the idea of a member of a supposedly inferior race showing his ability in the glare of the American sports page . . . Their position is weakening rapidly, and the statement of the game's greatest player won't help them.⁶⁰

By having Joe DiMaggio's as the first in a series of interviews, Rodney likely brought more attention to this element of the campaign, but also garnered support by taking advantage of the hero worship of DiMaggio, than if he had begun with another baseball personality. The statement was rehashed the following Sunday, Rodney using it to make the case for allowing Negro pitchers into the Major Leagues in order to slow the hot bats of the New York Yankees that fall.⁶¹

Not a week later, an article of similar substance was published, and this time Lester Rodney's focus was the legendary pitcher Satchel Paige. He was one of the few mainstream sportswriters to pay Paige much mind, and even more of a rarity was the fact that Rodney did not portray the Negro Leagues star “in racist stereotype, as [the] hard-throwing Stepin Fetchit”⁶² some other writers had. One of the objectives of this article was to undermine the argument made by some in the baseball establishment that black players were happy being stars in their own league without having to compete with white athletes. Rodney provided this explanation to Paige biographer Larry Tye:

⁶⁰ Lester Rodney, “DiMaggio Calls Negro Greatest Pitcher,” *The Daily Worker*, 13 September 1937, 8.

⁶¹ Rodney, “DiMaggio Boosts Negro Moundsman,” New York: *The Sunday Worker*, 19 September 1937, 11. More attention to the struggle for integration was likely generated when the *Worker* featured daily commentary from one of the men playing in that year's World Series, Yankees' third baseman Red Rolfe.

⁶² Lamb.

The thought was that Negro stars wanted to play only among their own people, which was patently ridiculous. Here was a guy who knew he was the best pitcher in the game and he wanted to go where the money and notoriety would be best. He wanted to prove his worth. He understood exactly that somebody of his caliber pitching in the big leagues would lead the way for a new generation of black kids.⁶³

There was no mistaking the kind of impact Paige knew he could have, not just on baseball but society in general. Paige made clear during the interview that he did not believe Negro stars could be happy in a separate league. He also challenged the winners of that year's World Series to a game against a Negro all-star team at Yankee Stadium -- if the Major Leaguers did not win the game the Negro players would not get paid -- and proposed a vote to be given to baseball fans which he was certain "would be 100-1 for us." Paige was sure of the attendance integrated teams would attract, saying, "the Yankee Stadium wouldn't come close to holding the fans who would come out the first day Negro ball players went to action."⁶⁴ He also refuted the opinion held by many in the baseball establishment that the public would not support integrated baseball.

[S]ome politician warned us not to tour the state of Texas once. Said Negro and white ball players on the same field down there would never be tolerated. We toured the state from one end to the other and you should have heard the crowd cheer us.⁶⁵

When Rodney asked Paige about the campaign to end Jim Crow baseball there was a tacit element of support, and the pitcher admitted he saw the issue simply as "a question of time before the fans will want to see the Negro stars and will demand them."⁶⁶ As the movement went on and athletes' willingness to speak out increased, the list of men who would support putting an end to segregated baseball grew longer. Rodney told sports writer and historian Dave Zirin that it had been "meaningful when players like Johnny Vander Meer or Bucky Walters said 'I don't see why they shouldn't play.'" Such statements punched holes in the argument many

⁶³ Tye, 193.

⁶⁴ Lester Rodney, "Paige Asks Chance for Negro Stars," in *Fighting Words: Selections from Twenty-Five Years of "The Daily Worker"* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1949), 55. The article was printed 16 September 1937.

⁶⁵ Rodney, *Fighting*, 55.

⁶⁶ Rodney, "Paige Asks," 56.

team owners made that white players would never stand for integration and “[f]rom then on, every story we did had a purpose, and the *Daily Worker* was on the desk of every other newspaper.”⁶⁷

The following May, after the start of the 1938 season, Rodney got another widely-revered baseball player to join in the conversation. Pitcher Dizzy Dean echoed DiMaggio’s claim that Satchel Paige was the best pitcher he had ever face and spoke plainly when he said Paige was “as good as any [pitcher] now drawing pay checks in the major Leagues!”⁶⁸ This article served to further erode the foundation league officials had attempted to build on the idea that most players in the major leagues would refuse integration. Conducting interviews with active players strengthened the effort to integrate, and this one with Dean “was yet another testimony to the unreasonable argument against desegregating major league baseball.”⁶⁹

Support from those who ran the game increased considerably in 1939. Del Baker, manager of the Detroit Tigers, put the responsibility to integrate back on the shoulders of those above him in August that year, saying if “the men that make those rules change it, that’s OK with me.”⁷⁰ Ray Blades, manager of the St. Louis Cardinals made similar statements,⁷¹ and so did Pittsburgh Pirates’ manager Pie Traynor soon after.⁷² Magnates began speaking out around the same time, when Pittsburgh Pirates President William E. Benswanger admitted that he thought “the Negro people should have an opportunity in baseball just as they have an opportunity in

⁶⁷ Zirin, *People’s*, 71.

⁶⁸ Lester Rodney, “Diz Tells What He Thinks of Negro Star,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 19 May 1938, 8.

⁶⁹ Rusinack, 70.

⁷⁰ Lester Rodney, “On the Scoreboard: A Chat With Del Bake, Detroit Tigers’ Manager,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 4 August 1939, 8.

⁷¹ Lester Rodney, “‘Owners Will Admit Negroes if Fans Demand Them’ -- Blades,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 18 August 1939, 8.

⁷² Lester Rodney, “Pie Traynor, Pittsburgh Players, Blast Jim Crow,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 1 September 1939, 8.

music or anything else.”⁷³ A discussion with Brooklyn Dodgers President Larry MacPhail was carried over two days, and he admitted to Rodney that he was aware of “many Negro players good enough to help big league teams”⁷⁴ and called segregation in baseball “a violation of American sportsmanship as well as democracy . . .”⁷⁵ This addition of figures from the upper levels of the Major League organization was certainly a welcome bolster to the campaign, and added another nail to the coffin of Jim Crow as it stood among those directly involved in the game.

Employing Communist Rhetoric

Incorporating Party doctrine, what some may call propaganda, was not particularly common in Lester Rodney’s writings in the *Daily* and *Sunday Worker* sports section. There were, however, occasional discussions of wage issues and concepts of fair compensation for athletes as laborers. Not only were the Negro Leagues discussed, but there was also mention of some white baseball players’ salary issues in a smattering of Rodney’s writings.

Such was the case in March 1937 when Rodney mentioned the “unhealthy, lopsided condition” created by the wealth of those in charge of baseball. Discrimination against African American ballplayers was also labelled as un-American, “despite the rapidly growing movement to smash the Jim Crow walls.”⁷⁶ Rodney also accused those in charge of baseball of more or less

⁷³ Lester Rodney, “First Magnate Adds Voice to Managers, Players,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 7 August 1939, 8.

⁷⁴ Lester Rodney, “On The Score Board: Talking It Over With MacPhail,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 29 August 1939, 8.

⁷⁵ Lester Rodney, “On The Score Board: More on the Chat With MacPhail,” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 31 August 1939, 8.

⁷⁶ Lester Rodney, “What’s All That Training Camp Sound and Fury About?” New York: *The Daily Worker*, 15 March 1937, 8.

A similar article was printed on page eight of 8 April 1937’s *Worker*. In “Light on that Baseball Myth,” Rodney discussed issues concerning players’ salaries in the Major Leagues, mentioning the “wage system of professional baseball,” in which a black list included any player “who happens to think he is worth more than he is offered.” The

stealing from the public when he stated that the system was a “set-up with which this big business asks the increasingly labor conscious people of America to pour out their dollars.”⁷⁷

Looking Back

Lester Rodney did not appear to expect the youth of contemporary America to truly understand the struggle of which he was a part. The pervasive nature of segregation once had in this country is not something he believed the young people would be able to fully appreciate.

Rodney had this to say to *The Guardian*'s Will Buckley concerning the lack of connection:

It's hard to tell young people today that midway through the 20th century in the so-called Land of the Free players who were qualified, or indeed overqualified, to play in the big leagues could not play because of the pigmentation of their skin.⁷⁸

Rodney's disdain for discrimination was clear in many of his columns while writing for the *Worker* and in interviews since. Due to the progress in racial and social equality that has been made in the years since his involvement in the campaign to break down baseball's racial barrier, it is no surprise he found it difficult to believe that the current generation could properly comprehend the struggles it took to achieve fair treatment a mere half-century ago.

Despite the fact that some may consider Branch Rickey to be a revolutionary of sorts, Rodney viewed him as a simple “opportunist.”⁷⁹ He made it clear that he saw the matter of Rickey acquiring Jackie Robinson for the Dodgers' system a matter of good timing, and that Rickey “was shrewd enough and bold enough to do it.”⁸⁰ He said in 2005 that Rickey “was

article went further in its images of slavery in baseball, accusing team owners of binding players “for life -- but the magnate can discharge [them] on 10-days notice.”

⁷⁷ Rodney, “Light.”

⁷⁸ Buckley.

⁷⁹ Davis, E11.

⁸⁰ Davis, E11.

bolder and smarter than the other and realised it was becoming inevitable. So he decided to take credit for something that was inevitable, like Nixon going to China.”⁸¹

Lester Rodney showed many times his immense respect for the man who officially broke through the wall between the Negro and Major Leagues. The fact that he repeatedly made mention of the hardships Jackie Robinson endured is reflective of Rodney’s great admiration for the stellar ballplayer. In 1997 he spoke about Robinson’s continued struggles after the demise of Jim Crow baseball.

For him, there never really was a great sigh of relief, the feeling “we did it, it’s over.” In 1949, when he was free at last of the imposed restraint that had suppressed his very being, when the real Jackie Robinson stood up -- aggressive and vocal, the kind of athlete he had been in a Jim Crow army -- he encountered an immediate double standard. White ballplayers with the same qualities . . . were invariably seen as tough, scrappy competitors: winners. The first black player was termed shrill and irritating.⁸²

There was nothing but admiration and a lingering sense of amazement in Lester Rodney’s voice as he spoke of Jackie Robinson, a fellow inductee to the Baseball Reliquary in July 2005.

Despite the fact that he “had to subordinate his own personality” to keep from creating too much controversy, Robinson was still an extremely powerful force of change, Rodney said. Major League Baseball’s first black player affected change on a number of levels: “Jackie changed people . . . he changed players . . . I saw him change sportswriters . . . he finally changed baseball.” Rodney also established a strong link between Robinson’s integration of the Majors in 1947 and President Truman’s integration of the American Armed Forces in 1948, asserting the two events were not completely isolated or that their timing was purely coincidental. It was obvious that Rodney firmly believed in Robinson’s ability to create monumental change when he

⁸¹ Buckley.

⁸² Rodney, “White Dodgers, Black Dodgers,” 95.

closed that afternoon by saying, “I think there should be a statue of Jackie Robinson on the Mall in Washington, D.C.”⁸³

Despite his important role in the effort to end segregation in baseball, Lester Rodney has remained humble. He told David Davis of the *Los Angeles Times* in 2004 that his “small contribution was getting on the record that there were black players good enough to play in the majors. Anyone with a social conscience would have done the same thing.”⁸⁴ He told Vic Ziegel of the *New York Daily News* prior to his induction into the Shrine of the Eternals in July 2005, “It just seemed like the right thing to do . . . and when you changed baseball at the time, you changed the country.”⁸⁵ It has long been clear that Rodney did not join the campaign for riches or glory, but simply to aid the correction of a great inequity in American society. As Terry Cannon said in 2005, “the sins of the American Communists were deep and numerous; but their virtues and contributions were also manifold. Lester Rodney embodies the best of this heritage.”⁸⁶

⁸³ *Baseball Reliquary Induction Day 2005 Excerpt: Lester Rodney*, 8 minutes 53 seconds, Copyright Terry Cannon, 2005.

⁸⁴ Davis, E11.

⁸⁵ Vic Ziegel, “The Honor of a Lifetime,” *New York Daily News*, 23 July 2005.

⁸⁶ Cannon, 3.

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