Racism was as evil as capitalism in Julia’s mind. Her commitment to the struggle for racial equality went back at least to the 1930s. She brought her concern to her work in the woodworkers’ union auxiliary and later recruited the wife of one of the first African American longshoremen in Portland into the ILWU’s ladies’ auxiliary. She also joined or worked with a number of civil rights organizations, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, and the Japanese American Citizen’s League.

Back in the thirties, when I was president of the Woodworkers’ auxiliary, I took to inviting guest speakers from other unions to talk so that our members would learn something about the problems of other unions. Of course, the reason I did that is because I wanted to lead up to getting a black speaker there (although the Woodworkers didn’t discriminate the way that the Longshoremen did when I first got mixed up with them). So we invited this officer of the NAACP group here. He was a porter at the city jail.

I remember the speech he made because I was so turned off by it. He said, “We don’t want to be invited to your homes and we don’t want you in ours, but we feel we’re entitled to the same wages and the same civil rights as you people have.” I guess black people did have the right to vote at this time, but a lot of other rights they didn’t have, and they had these Jim Crow signs all over town, you know.

So when I thanked him for coming and talking to us, I said, “I’m very sorry that I’m not welcome in your home because you and your wife are welcome in mine.”

A week or so after that, we got an invitation from the Sleeping Car Porters women’s auxiliary [Ladies’ Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters]
inviting us to send a delegation of three women to their next meeting, and the nice little letter said that they were in the habit of having refreshments afterward, but that if our women didn’t feel that they wanted to stay, they needn’t feel that they had to.

I was dying to go myself, but I decided better not waste the invitation on somebody who didn’t need it. I was very anxious to see everything went alright, so I appointed a delegation. I couldn’t leave it up to an election, it was too important. Not very democratic, is it?

So I appointed this woman who’d been a schoolteacher and one of the loggers’ wives whose husband had been in the IWW and a woman who’d been brought up in the South and was very racist, but she was basically a very kind, good, sweet person. You know, some of the people that have the worst ideas are the nicest people. She finally agreed to go.

It was a good decision because when they reported on their experiences there, she made the best one of anyone. She said, “I’m so glad I went because they’re just folks the same as we are.” Then she said, “Refreshments were so delectable. I want you to get out your notebooks and write down the recipe.” Well, I thought it was a perfect report. ‘Course, the schoolteacher made the kind of report you’d expect a schoolteacher to make.

I really wasn’t too interested in the struggle of the blacks in Oregon because they only had nineteen hundred members and they had made themselves a little safe enclave in the white world. They weren’t interested in doing anything about anything really. They just wanted to be left alone and not to be disturbed. But after the shipyards came, a great many blacks came to Portland and they were a different type.

What really changed me about working in the black organizations was the black people I met after the Vanport flood. The ones at Vanport understood more. They were more aggressive in getting their rights. When they came to Oregon, they had believed that Oregon was free. It was a fearful shock to them when they found out that it was worse than in the South, because there was physical prejudice against them. It was really dreadful.

I remember getting on the St. John’s bus and a black man got on the bus and sat down in this seat where a white man was sitting. This white man got up—he had a southern voice—and he said, “Put this so-and-so off this bus. I won’t sit with him and I don’t even want to ride in the same bus with him. We don’t allow this down South.”

Well, you know, I don’t usually lose my temper but I completely blew my cool. I stood up in the aisle and made a speech. I said, “You’re not down South anymore, you so-and-so and such.” Although I don’t really use that kind of lan-