



# The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford

*Beth Tompkins Bates*

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In the 1920s, Henry Ford hired thousands of African American men for his open-shop system of auto manufacturing. This move was a rejection of the notion that better jobs were for white men only. In *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*, Beth Tompkins Bates explains how black Detroiters, newly arrived from the South, seized the economic opportunities offered by Ford in the hope of gaining greater economic security. As these workers came to realize that Ford's anti-union "American Plan" did not allow them full access to the American Dream, their loyalty eroded, and they sought empowerment by pursuing a broad activist agenda. This, in turn, led them to play a pivotal role in the United Auto Workers' challenge to Ford's interests.

In order to fully understand this complex shift, Bates traces allegiances among Detroit's African American community as reflected in its opposition to the Ku Klux Klan, challenges to unfair housing practices, and demands for increased and effective political participation. This groundbreaking history demonstrates how by World War II Henry Ford and his company had helped kindle the civil rights movement in Detroit without intending to do so.

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