"KEPT RIGHT ON FIGHTIN' . . . " African American Women's Economic Activism in Milwaukee

Crystal M. Moten, Dickinson College

During and after World War II, many African Americans migrated to urban areas in the North and West in search of economic opportunities. Although they faced widespread job discrimination, Black women struggled for employment in offices, factories, and stores. Black women in Milwaukee organized in an autonomous club for working women, La Circle, and also submitted formal complaints attesting to injustices. Although unsuccessful, their resistance had both local and national dimensions, especially when considered within the context of a surge in new scholarship that investigates the economic dimensions of mid-twentieth-century Black freedom struggles. These freedom fighters sowed the seeds for later activism by Black working women in the city, including union leader Nellie Wilson, who forced one of Milwaukee's largest manufacturing companies, A. O. Smith, to eliminate gender discrimination from its hiring practices. These examples represent not only the persistence of Black women's economic activism in postwar Milwaukee but also the nationwide emergence of such resistance during the civil rights era.

Black Working Women and Industrial Labor in Milwaukee

During and after World War II, many African Americans migrated to urban areas in the North and West in search of economic opportunities. Although they faced widespread job discrimination, Black women struggled for employment in offices, factories, and stores. Black women in Milwaukee organized in an autonomous club for working women, La Circle, and also submitted formal complaints attesting to injustices. Although unsuccessful, their resistance had both local and national dimensions, especially when considered within the context of a surge in new scholarship that investigates the economic dimensions of mid-twentieth-century Black freedom struggles.[1] These freedom fighters sowed the seeds for later activism by Black working

Journal of Civil and Human Rights Spring/Summer 2016, Vol. 2, No. 1 pp. 33–51

women in the city, including union leader Nellie Wilson, who forced one of Milwaukee's largest manufacturing companies, A. O. Smith, to eliminate gender discrimination from its hiring practices. These examples represent not only the persistence of Black women's economic activism in postwar Milwaukee but also the nationwide emergence of such resistance during the civil rights era.[2]

Although Milwaukee was home to many successful urban industrial workers, Black women aspiring to postwar careers in the city's manufacturing firms, like Sylvia Bell and Willhemenia Berry, often experienced a different reality.[3] Bell migrated to Milwaukee from Louisiana in 1947 but could never obtain a manufacturing position, despite coming because she thought jobs there would be plentiful. Companies simply would not hire her because of her race, gender, and lack of education. Bell stayed in the city, nevertheless, becoming a community leader after her brother was killed by police.[4] Berry left Louisiana and migrated to Milwaukee in the mid-1940s. Milwaukee, she said, "really wasn't anything like they came back and said it was. It was not that good. I'm not disputing what've said—but people who were living here would tell you that it was much better than it was. But, after we came here, it just wasn't that way."[5] Bell and Berry both came to Milwaukee from rural Louisiana, expecting to find employment in Milwaukee's heavily advertised manufacturing industries, but instead took jobs as nursing assistants—a typical, physically demanding, low-wage job that many Black women in Milwaukee had to take because they were excluded from factory positions.

The discrimination faced in Milwaukee by these Black women resonated with longstanding national patterns where Black female workers had the hardest time getting jobs. Although many Black women left farms and domestic service to successfully find manufacturing work, they were still underrepresented in factories. Examining employment-related census data from the period 1860–1960, sociologist Enobong Hannah Branch found that, although the numbers of Black women employed as operatives in manufacturing industries steadily increased, their percentages—when compared to white men, white women, and Black men—have historically been the lowest (see Figure 1). Although some Black women had manufacturing jobs, many of them were still impoverished. Men received high-enough industrial wages to escape poverty, but not necessarily working women, especially African Americans, who were relegated to the lowest-paying positions.[6]

Milwaukee was one of the most industrialized cities in the urban Midwest, and although, when it came to manufacturing jobs, Black women there did better than Black women nationally, the number of Black women employed