Lily-White Labor

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# Lily-White Labor

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170 In 1881, Jeremiah Grandison, a Negro worker of Pittsburgh, Pa., told the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions then meeting in that city, that it would be dangerous for them to exclude from their membership common laborers in general, and Negro workers in particular, lest they “in an emergency, be employed in positions they could readily qualify themselves to fill.” At that time the skilled craftsman was supreme. Through his union he sought to protect his skill, which was at a premium, and his craft, which was an art. The organization of the unskilled worker was considered ill-advised, for that group then would become dependent upon the skilled workers in the unions. The unskilled worker was to be considered only when the skilled ones “were in danger of losing their advantages and places, due to the unstinted competition of the unskilled.”

The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions resolved itself into the American Federation of Labor, which organization attempted to maintain the same liberal membership policy for Negro workers that was fostered by the Knights of Labor. For the first nine years of its existence the pressure of organization routine kept the racial difficulties in the background. It was not until 1890 that the A.F. of L. gave specific attention to the problem of color discrimination. In that year it went on record as looking with disfavor “upon trades unions having provisions in their constitutions which exclude from membership persons on account of race or color.” The 1893 convention reaffirmed “as one of the cardinal principles of the labor movement that the working people must unite or organize, irrespective of creed, color, sex, nationality or politics.” In substantiation of this avowed policy labor leaders cited the fact that the International Association of Machinists had been refused admission to the Federation because its membership was limited to white persons. In 1897 the Federation finding it necessary to refute charges to the effect that trades unions were obstructing the economic progress of Negroes by refusing them admission to their organizations, declared that “it welcomes into its ranks all labor without regard to creed, color, race, sex or nationality, and that its efforts have been and will continue to be to encourage the organization of those most needing its protection, whether in the North or South, East or West, white or black.” When, in 1910, Samuel Gompers was accused of reading the Negro out of the labor movement, he stated that, “instead of reading the Negroes out of the labor movement, my contention, and the contention of the American Federation of Labor is to try to bring them into the organized labor movement in our own country.”

For forty odd years such declarations as the aforementioned have been fed to the Negro workers. When the World War ushered in a period of greater industrial inclusion for Negro workers, representatives of Negro organizations petitioned the A.F. of L. to “show a more active interest in the organization of Negro labor.” As a result of this overture, the 1918 convention adopted a resolution to the following effect:

It is with pleasure we learn that leaders of the colored race realize the necessity of organizing the workers of that race into unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, and your committee recommends that the Executive Council give special attention to organizing the colored wage workers in the future. We wish it understood, however, that in doing so no fault is or can be found with the work done in the past, but we believe that with the cooperation of the leaders of that race much better results can be accomplished.

When the Communists called the Negro Labor Congress in Chicago in October, 1925, the Federation branded the scheme as deceptive and deserving of the indignation it received. For “It is bad enough to mislead those who have an equal opportunity to know, but to take advantage of the weakness of those who have a moral right to our special care is quite outside the pale of decency and ethics. The A.F. of L. offers to Negro wage earners as a substitute for the Communist movement the “protection and the experience of the Trade Union Movement”[1](#fn1) (as exemplified by the A.F. of L.).

Though the American Federation of Labor has uttered pronouncement upon pronouncement favoring the admission of Negro workers, that body has failed to convince the masses of Negro workers that it is rendering other than lip service to such expressed policies. For evidence these workers cite 171 the fact that twenty-two national unions, eleven of which are affiliated to the A.F. of L., exclude Negroes from their membership through provisions in their constitutions or rituals.

## II

In addition to the Brotherhood of Dining Car Conductors, the Order of Railway Conductors of America, the Grand International Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, the Neptune Association, the American Federation of Railroad Workers, the Brotherhood of Railroad Station Employers and Clerks, the American Association of Train Dispatchers, the Railroad Yardmasters of America, the Railroad Yardmasters of North America the following unions affiliated with the A.F. of L. exclude Negro workers: The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Shipbuilders and Helpers of America, the International Association of Machinists, the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen, the Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks, Freight Handlers, Express and Station Employees, the Order of Sleeping Car Conductors, the National Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots of North America, the Switchmen’s Union of North America, the Railway Mail Association, the American Wire Weavers Protective Association, the Order of Railway Telegraphers and the Commercial Telegraphers Union of America. As a result of the exclusion policy of the eleven unions affiliated to the Federation not less than 225,000 Negro workers are denied trade union affiliation and its attendant benefits.

Because of the A.F. of L.’s policy that affiliated organizations may not retain in their constitutions any discriminatory clause or clauses against the race or color of workers, the Boilermakers and the Machinists accomplish such an exclusion by a pledge which forms a part of the ritual, and binds each member to propose only white workmen for membership. Singularly, the Machinists who were refused membership in the Federation until 1895 because the constitution made eligible for membership “white workers” only, were admitted when the same exclusion was achieved through their ritual. The Negro workers, however, would have little reason for quarreling with the American Federation of Labor if that organization did no more than obey the letter of the law. Though some unions not admitting Negro workers have jurisdiction over fields in which few or no Negroes are employed—as the Dining Car Conductors—that exclusion serves to prevent Negro employment in that field. Unfortunately the A.F. of L. has not played fair with itself in this respect, to wit: the cases of the Machinists, the Boilermakers, the Railway Clerks and the Railway Mail Association.

In the case of the Railway and Steamship Clerks, the Federation (1) permitted the union to remain a member and exclude Negro workers (2) organized the excluded workers into local unions subject to the A.F. of L. (3) failed to validate its ruling on discriminatory clauses by permitting the Railway Clerks to retain its affiliation to the A.F. of L. (4) suspended the union because it failed to obey a ruling of the Federation on a jurisdictional dispute arising with the Teamsters’ Union (5) permitted the union to reaffiliate upon satisfactory settlement of this dispute without having the clause “all white persons” removed from the constitution.

About fifteen years ago the Railway Mail Association was reported to have two hundred Negro members who were railway postal employees. While a member of the A.F. of L. this body amended its constitution so as to exclude Negroes from membership because “statistics indicate that certain groups of society are a greater risk than other groups. Being chartered as a fraternal organization it was inconsistent for the Association to attempt to carry any group of workers at the expense of others, and this thought possibly had a great deal to do with the amending of the constitution as it was amended.” The only Negro members of the Association today are the “hangovers” from the early days.

The American Federation of Labor condones other discriminatory practices affecting Negro workers. The Railway Carmen, for example, limits its membership to “any white person between the ages of 16 and 65 years.” In 1921 the Carmen, without changing the aforementioned restriction made a special ruling covering 500 Negro workers employed on railroads in the South. The constitutional amendment on this matter reading:

On railroads where the employment of colored persons has become a permanent institution they shall be admitted to membership in separate lodges. Where these lodges of Negroes are organized they shall be under the jurisdiction of the nearest white local, and shall be represented in any meeting of the Joint Protective Board Federation, meetings or conventions where delegates may be seated, by white men.

No more definite example of the restriction of free labor is extant than that fostered by the International Brotherhood of Blacksmiths, Drop Forgers and Helpers, affiliated to the A.F. of L. When the Blacksmiths were forced to organize the Negro workers because of the great inroads that group was making into the organized field, the following constitutional qualifications were established:

Where there are a sufficient number of colored helpers they may be organized as an auxiliary local and shall be under the jurisdiction of the white local having jurisdiction over that territory. Colored helpers shall not transfer except to another auxiliary local composed of colored members, and *colored members shall not be promoted to blacksmiths or helper apprentices and will not be admitted to shops where white workers are now employed.*

One of the objects of the Brotherhood of Blacksmiths is “to perpetuate our association on the basis of friendship and justice.” What a satisfying creed for 10,000 Negro workers employed in the trades over which this union has jurisdiction!

The analysis may be carried on to include the Brotherhood of Maintenace of Way Employees, with 10,000 Negro members, all of whom are en172titled to “all of the benefits and protection guaranteed by the constitution,” but not one of whom may represent his lodge in the grand lodge. That privilege is for white men, who shall be selected by their colored brethren. Or, the analysis may include the International Association of Sheet Metal Workers who organize Negro sheet metal workers into segregated unions from which they may not transfer except to another segregated union; or the Hotel and Restaurant Employees who provide in Section 20 of their constitution, that

If a colored worker at our craft shall desire to enter a local in a city where only a white local exists, he may be accepted in the International Union as a member-at-large, provided he possesses the necessary qualifications.

or, the National Federation of Rural Letter Carriers who, while accepting Negro members in some states permit only white members to serve as delegates to conventions, and as office holders; or, the Flint Glass Workers who object to Negro workers universally because “the pipes on which glass is blown pass from one man’s mouth to another”; or, the Journeymen Plumbers and the Electrical Workers, who, though not restricting membership to white workers by law are generally understood not to admit Negroes. As early as 1903 the editor of *The Electrical Worker* wrote “We do not want the Negro in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, but we think that they should be organized in locals of their own, affiliated to the American Federation of Labor as that organization knows no creed or color.”[2](#fn2)

## III

The suggestion of the Electrical Workers that Negroes join local unions affiliated to the A.F. of L. illustrated the effect of the measure adopted by the 1902 convention of the Federation whereby separate units of Negro workers might be organized by that body. It was in 1900 that President Gompers suggested that these separate locals be organized. Realizing that some remedial action had to be taken in the situation produced when thousands of Negro workers were denied union affiliation, the 1902 convention amended the Constitution of the A.F. of L. as follows:

Separate charters may be issued to Central Labor Unions, Local Unions, or Federal Labor Unions composed exclusively of colored members, where, in the judgment of the Executive Council, it appears advisable and to the best interests of the Trade Union Movement to do so.

By such action the Federation not only recognized the legality of excluding Negroes from organized bodies, but accepted “James Crow” as a full-fledged member of the American Federation of Labor. If the labor leaders of that day had not totally misread the trends in American industrial life, it is doubtful that they would have attempted giving such permanency to the institution of Negro local and federal unions. They, the labor leaders, undoubtedly felt that such an organization was better than no organization. The Negro workers, on the other hand, found that being directly affiliated to the A.F. of L. through the local unions was, in many instances, as good as having no organization at all. Why? Because, instead of removing barriers from the path of Negro workers, it perpetuated an existing one—biracialism; because, it established a dual system of federation and because the Negro local tended to create for the Negro worker a bargaining power wreaker than that of the white worker. With what results? The secretary of Local Union No. 17786 states:

We do not get the same rights as the white help do in no way. Of course we get 14 days off in the summer months without pay and the whites get it off with pay—14 days. But we pay just as much dues as they do and do more work for the company. We are only getting $3.12 a day for 8 hours, no time and half for overtime.”

There is no doubt that the A.F. of L. enjoyed a measure of success in organizing Negro workers through the medium of local unions until 1923. In December, 1911, there wrere 11 Negro local and federal unions with 309 members affiliated to that body. In 1919, the number of locals had increased to 169. In 1929 there were 21 locals. In 1911 there were three salaried Negro workers employed as organizers; in 1929 there was none. When the National Urban League broached the question of Negro organizers to the Executive Council of the Federation in 1926, that body decided that it was impossible to add a Negro organizer at that time, despite the fact that outside sources were willing to pay half of the salary of such a person. The relative and absolute decline of Negro local unions is shown in the following table:

Local Trade and Federal Labor Unions Composed Exclusively of Negro Workers and Per Cent of Negro Unions in Total for Selected Years, 1919—1929

|  |  | Total Locals | Negro Locals | Per cent Negro |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1919[3](#fn3) |  | 900 | 169 | 18.7 |
| 1921 | Nov. 4 | 679 | 141 | 20.8 |
| 1922 | Mar. 15 | 663 | 131 | 19.9 |
| 1922 | June 1 | 592 | 108 | 18.2 |
| 1923 | Nov. 12 | 527 | 79 | 14.9 |
| 1925 | Jan. 1 | 408 | 41 | 15.4 |
| 1926 | Mar. 10 | 372 | 38 | 11.1 |
| 1927 | Dec. 15 | 342 | 23 | 6.7 |
| 1928 | Dec. 31 | 377 | 23 | 6.1 |
| 1929 | Nov [4](#fn4) | 383 | 21 | 5.4 |

Thus, the one instrument ordained to foster the organization of Negro labor, the Negro local, has shown itself to be incompetent in meeting the situation. Because it lacked a system of control and supervision the Negro local has failed to keep the Negro worker organized on the one hand, and has been negligent in fostering his inclusion in national unions on the other. Furthermore, it has shown that same gap between the Federation’s policy and practice, for, despite the fact that each member of a local trade or federal labor union is required to take an obligation to the effect that,

I am to be respectful in work and action to every woman, to be considerate to the widows and orphans, the weak and the defenseless, and never to discriminate against a fellow worker on account of creed, color or nationality,

there are local trade and federal labor unions that unhesitatingly state a violation of that part of the obligation, pertaining to color discrimination. Local No. 10167 of Baggage Messengers does not admit Negro workers on account of its “business transactions with the public, does not regard the organization of Negro workers as essential to the success of the labor movement in its case, and makes no effort to secure Negro membership.”

## IV

What then is the official policy of the American Federation of Labor toward the organizing of Negro workers? It consists of a number of resolutions urging that Negro workers be organized ; generous declarations to the effect that workers should be organic without regard to race, creed or color; protests here, and vacuous decrees there against the organizing efforts of left-wing groups; the segregated organization of Negro workers in certain occupations through local trade and federal labor unions; a few organizing campaigns that died aborning; the employment, at various times, of a few Negro organizers, and a total inability, if not unwillingness, to compel the member International unions to remove from their constitutions Negro exclusion clauses or have their charters revoked.

The A.F. of L. essays certain policies, “stands for” them, realizing they are not being made effective. It has attempted to live up to a philosophy of liberalism without performing the mechanics necessary to make that liberalism a reality. So void and few have been the A.F. of L.’s efforts in behalf of Negro workers, despite its pronouncements, that it has failed to crystallize the opinion of Negro and white workers, and the public to any other effect than that the American Federation of Labor “stands for” the organization of workers, despite their race, creed or color-, then, with complacent self-satisfaction sits down, having done actually nothing. In fact, the American Federation 189of Labor, because of its hands-off policy in the early nineties, because of its failure to maintain the organization of the thousands of Negro workers organized in local trade and federal labor unions from 1917-1922, and despite its Negro membership of 61,032 workers belonging to national unions affiliated to the A.F. of L., has less positive power and influence among Negro workers than at any other time in the last thirty years.

When the Negro worker faces his problems of affiliation to organized labor he expects to find a champion in the A.F. of L. This worker knows that such limitations so far as his being organized is concerned are secondary considerations. The prime factor is that his employment opportunities are restricted to a greater degree, because he is excluded. Therefore, when the American Federation of Labor condones practices similar to the above mentioned, and sugarcoats these practices with its palaver about all workers being organized despite race, etc., etc., etc.,—meanwhile skilfully evading or bluntly ignoring the plaints of the Negro group

1. Editorial—*The American Federationist*, Vol. 32, No. 10. October, 1925.[↩︎](#fnref1)

1. *The Electrical Worker*—April. 1903, p. 102.[↩︎](#fnref2)

1. Statement of Samuel Gompers, “Negro in Chicago,” p. 405.[↩︎](#fnref3)

1. Handbook of American Trade Unions, U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin No. 5„ p. 6, November, 1929.[↩︎](#fnref4)