Negro Labor’s Quarrel with White Workingmen

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# Negro Labor’s Quarrel with White Workingmen

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903 Most treatises on the history and philosophy of the American labor movement have taken little of the painstaking inquiry necessary to establish the significance of negro workers to trade unionism. Many authors who make this omission do so because of adherence to the popular assumption that since the vast proportion of negro labor has been devoted to agriculture in the South, its relationship to the trade union movement, which has been largely in the industrial North, has been practically nil. The migrations of negroes from the South to the North have upset this sort of reasoning. They have shown that this reservoir of Southern black labor, even if composed chiefly of agricultural, domestic and unskilled workers, could be tapped by the captains of industry as occasion should warrant, and that upon the occurrence of stresses in a one-crop agriculture system, the labor which was devoted almost wholly to the production of its staple crop, cotton, and which was unorganized, would shift to the Southern and Northern cities to take its place among the older white industrial wage earners.

Since 1900 the negro’s importance in mechanical and manufacturing enterprise has steadily increased. Between 1910 and 1920 the number of negroes, 10 years and over, gainfully employed in agriculture decreased 24 per cent.; the number in domestic and personal service decreased 5.1 per cent, while in the extraction of minerals the number increased 20.6 per cent., and the manufacturing and mechanical occupations showed an increase of 125 per cent.

Concomitant with this growing importance of negroes as industrial wage earners, the question of unionization has become paramount. The perception of need for organization is reflected by the embittered criticism of W. E. B. DuBois, Director of Publicity, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, against the temporizing policy of the American Federation of Labor; by the National Urban League’s recently proffered assistance to the federation in constructing a definite program for the inclusion of negroes in the various trade unions; by the attempt of negro union members to foster within the federation a more thorough organization of negroes; by the present attempt of the negro sleeping and dining car employees to build a gigantic national organization in these occupations, and by the propaganda 905 which is being conducted among colored workers by the negro radicals affiliated with the Workers (Communist) Party of America.

At the 1919 convention of the American Federation of Labor the Committee on Resolutions reported that it had under advisement a resolution requesting an international charter of colored workers, another asking for the services of organizers from the federation, and a third urging that a colored organizer be appointed in every State of the Union. Another resolution asked that a man, preferably colored, be stationed at Washington to look after the interest of colored workers, and another made complaint against the International Union of Metal Trades for refusing membership to negroes. These recommendations were adopted and referred to the Executive Council, which was in turn advised to give special attention to organizing colored workers everywhere. Similar resolutions had been presented in 1902 and 1907, with little action resulting. In the same year that the aforementioned petitions were presented a resolution recommending the organization of colored Pullman porters, dining car cooks and waiters, train porters, firemen, switchmen, yard engineers, boilermakers and assistants, machinists and helpers, headlight tinkers, coach cleaners, laundry workers, shop and track laborers and section men into a separate colored railway department, was presented by representatives of the Central Labor Council of Tacoma, Wash. The resolution read:

Whereas the influence of world affairs on the present and future condition of the mass of laborers is such as to make necessary a closer and more kindred feeling of sympathy and purpose on the part of all labor; and

Whereas this spirit of oneness of purpose can and will only be most completely achieved when the benefits derived by the efforts of organized labor arc not predicated on race or creed, or sex or color, hut rather shall he the common lot and heritage of all; and

Whereas, in the past, because of a lack of realization on the part of the organized white laborer that to keep the unorganized colored laborer out of the field of organization has only made it easily possible for the unscrupulous employer to exploit one against the other, to the mutual disadvantage of each, resulting always in creating that undemocratic and unchristian thing—race prejudice—and its foul by-products, riot and mob rule, as during the mine trouble in the Pacific Northwest in the early ’90s, as more recently on Puget Sound during the longshoremen’s strike and at East St. Louis; and

Whereas it is the duty and should be the privilege of every man or woman to labor under such conditions and at such times … as will be conducive to his or her contributing such strength as to effectively aid our common country and successfully wage the battles of war and to meet the problems of peace; be it

Resolved, That we, the undersigned colored railway employees, being typical colored laborers, do hereby petition the Central Labor Council of Tacoma, Wash., to give its endorsement to the plea for a plain, square deal for the colored American laborers; and, be it further

Resolved, That the Central Labor Council … be and is hereby petitioned to instruct its dele; gates to the forthcoming convention of the American Federation of Labor to give us support in applying for an international charter to organize colored railway employees. …

## White Unionists’ Attitude

A lengthy hearing was held on the subject. The representatives of the Hodcarriers and Building Laborers, which admitted negroes, and the Boilermakers, which did not, opposed the adoption of the resolution. The Committee on Resolutions reported that acceptance and execution of the aims of the proposal would contravene the jurisdiction of unions of trades represented in the proposed colored railway department. It said: “It is not the policy of the American Federation of Labor to grant charters along racial lines. We know that many international organizations affiliated with the American Federation of Labor admit colored workers to membership, and in these organizations their interests can best be protected and taken care of. There are other organizations that have not as yet opened their doors to colored workers, but we hope to see the day in the near future when these organizations will take a broader view of this matter. Until that time we urge the Executive Council to organize the colored workers under charters of the American Federation of Labor.” The committee’s first statement that the Federation did not issue charters upon a racial basis conflicts with its last suggestion that the Executive Council organize colored workers under 905 charters from the American Federation of Labor. But even though the Executive Council had been known to grant charters along racial lines, the colored petitioners from their experience in the Federation should have known that the organization of negroes into a separate railway department would violate the jurisdiction of those unions of trades which admitted negroes and some of which were to constitute the colored railway department. When the above resolution was presented fifty-five unions reported that they admitted negroes. These were:

The United Mine Workers, Textile Workers, Seamen, Cigarmakers, Teamsters, Longshoremen, Carpenters, Plasterers, Bricklayers, Maintenance of Way Employees, Laundry Workers, Tunnel and Subway Workers, Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees, International Typographical Union, Brick and Clay Workers, Hodcarriers and Building Laborers, Leather Workers, Blacksmiths, Motion Picture Players’ Union, American Federation of Teachers, American Federation of Musicians, Steam and Operating Engineers, Bakers, Painters, Postal Employees, Decorutors and Paperhangers, Hotel and Restaurant Employees, Barbers’ International Union, Metal Polishers, Stereotypers and Electrotypers, Letter Carriers, International Fur Workers, Civil Engineers’ Association of Boston, Firemen and Oilers, Quarry Workers, Boot and Shoe Workers and Molders.

If the response from these unions is an exact measure of the number which debarred negroes in 1919, it seems that 45 out of the 111 affiliated unions admitted negroes. This response is deceptive. What many meant by replying affirmatively was that they organized negroes into separate local unions under their jurisdiction. So these forty-five affirmative responses should be discounted so as to exclude such unions as the Painters, the Hotel and Restaurant Employees, the Blacksmiths and others who maintain separate locals for negro members. It is difficult to determine what unions and how many reject negro workers on account of color. Many whose constitutions do not debar negroes offer little encouragement to them to join. They discourage negro membership by remaining silent on the issue and should a negro apply for admission, reject his application. The Structural Iron Workers is a case in point. There are other unions whose constitutions contain clauses prohibiting the admission of negroes. Among these are the Machinists, the Boilermakers, the Railway Mail Association and the Switchmen. On the other hand, even if a union’s international constitution may not prohibit negro membership, the policy of its local union determines whether negro workers in a given community will be organized or not.

## Local Color Prejudices

The position, then, of the negro in the ranks of organized labor is as much influenced by the racial traditions and customs of the locality in which a local union exists as by the existence or non-existence of legislation enacted by the national bodies against negro membership. In other words, even if the constitution of the national union does not prohibit membership on account of race, the local union may be compelled by the racial psychology of its environs to adopt exclusion tactics. In the light of these conditions the petition for a separate colored railway department instead of being entirely rejected should have been a stimulus to the creation of definitive machinery for handling a problem of race rendered more intricate within the federation by its own functional and structural characteristics. At a later date the Committee on Organization directed a conference between several of the organizations involved in the problem of the colored railway workers. Two of the organizations were the Brotherhood of Carmen and the Brotherhood of Boilermakers. When the Carmen’s convention was held in 1921 the following constitutional amendment was adopted: > On railroads where the employment of colored persons has become a permanent institution they shall be admitted to membership in separate lodges. Where there are separate lodges of negroes 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 meeting or convention where delegates may be seated by white members.

The nearest approach toward effecting machinery for the education of white and black workers as to their common interests came in 1918, when John R. Shillady, Secretary to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Fred Moore, editor of The New York *Age*; Emmet J. Scott, Special Assistant to the Secretary of War; Thomas Jesse Jones, Educational Director, Phelps Stokes Fund, and Eugene Kinckle Jones, Secretary to the National Urban League, were requested to confer upon plans for organizing negro workers. The first meeting was merely consultative. But six months later Mr. Kinckle Jones of the National Urban League wrote this letter to the late Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, in behalf of the committee:

We write to present suggestions for further cooperation between our committee and the American Federation of Labor, as growing out of our recent conference in Washington.

First, we wish to place before you our understanding of your statement to us at the conclusion of the meeting. We quote you as follows, and will be glad to have you make any changes in the text os will make the statement more nearly conform to the ideas which you have in mind relative to the connection that should be established between white and negro workingmen:

“We, the American Federation of Labor, welcome the negro workingmen to the ranks of organized labor. We should like to see more of them join us. The interests of workingmen, white and black, are common. Together we must fight unfair wages, unfair hours and bad conditions of labor. At times it is difficult for the national organization to control the actions of local unions in difficulties arising within the trades …; inasmuch as the national body is made possible by the delegates appointed by the locals; but we can and will use our influence to break down prejudice on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude, and hope that you will use your influence to show negro workingmen the advantages of collective bargaining and the value of affiliating with the American Federation of Labor. But few people who are not thoroughly acquainted with the rapid growth of the American Federation of Labor know of the large numbers of colored people who are already members of our organization. The unpleasant incidents in connection with efforts of colored men to get recognition in trades controlled by the American Federation of Labor have been aired and the good efforts of wholesome and healthy relationship have not been given publicity; and for that reason a general attitude of suspicion has been developed toward union labor on the port of colored working people; but I hope that out of this conference will spring a more cordial feeling of confidence in each other on the part of men who must work for a living.”

We are willing to cooperate with the American Federation of Labor in bringing about the results of the recent conference arid would make the following suggestions and recommendations, which, with your approval, we shall proceed to carry out to the best of our ability:

First, we suggest that you prepare a statement along the lines of the quotation from you given above and send it to us for approval and that it be given to the negro press throughout the country as expressing your position on ma tiers connected with the relationship between negro and white workingmen.

This statement, in our judgment, should contain a clear exposition of the reasons why certain internationals may exclude colored men, as they do by constitutional provision, and still be affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, whose declared principles are opposed to such discrimination. This we think necessary because the stated facts above alluded to will be familiar to the leaders among the colored people, particularly to editors and ministers, whose cooperation it is essential to secure if best results are to be obtained. We would suggest that you consider the expediency of recommending to such internationals as still exclude colored men that their constitutions be revised in this respect.

Second, that a qualified colored man to handle men and organize them be selected for employment as an organizer of the American Federation of Labor, his salary and expenses, of course, to be paid by the American Federation of Labor.

Third, that for the present we meet at least once a quarter to check on the results of our cooperative activities and to plan for further extension of the work, if satisfactorily conducted.

Fourth, that you carry out your agreement to have your Executive Council voice its advanced position in its attitude toward the organization of negro workingmen and have these sentiments endorsed by your St. Paul convention in June, and this action be given the widest possible publicity throughout the country. We shall he glad to hear from you at your earliest convenience as to the action taken by your Council on these recommendations, with such other suggestions or recommendations as may occur to you.

## Negro Resentment

The Council reported that it was pleased with the report of these race leaders, hut that it could find no fault with the past work of the federation. It agreed that with cooperation of these leaders it could do much better in the future. No further action was taken upon the proposition. Whereas the 1918 convention had appeared 907 to portend fundamental changes of moment to negro workers, the procrastination which ensued thenceforth was a disillusionment, The less conservative negro. leadership spoke embitteredly; and W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of *The Crisis*, commented: “The recent [1918] convention of the American Federation of Labor at Buffalo is no proof of a change of heart. Grudgingly, unwillingly, almost insultingly, this federation yields to us inch by inch the status of half a man, denying and withholding every privilege it dares at all times.” Agitation of this sort had been persistenly waged by Mr. Du Bois through *The Crisis*, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

A more positive approach toward solving the problem was agreed upon at the association’s 1924 convention. The association issued a proposal to the American Federation of Labor for beginning an intensive campaign of organization among negro workers and for the education of white and black workers as to their community of economic interests. Similarly, the National Urban League for Social Service Among Negroes has very recently created a Department of Industrial Relations, one of whose functions is to engender sympathetic racial attitudes among white and black workers. President Green has promised cooperation from the Executive Council of the federation. And, in New York City, a trade union council has been formed, with the services of a paid worker, who is to promote more amiable race relations in the trade unions and direct trade union affiliation among negro workers.

A more militant and radical determination to break down race and color psychology in the ranks of American labor was expressed by the Fourth Congress of the Third Internationale in Moscow in 1922. The Congress resolved that “the international struggle of the negro race is a struggle against capitalism and imperialism” and that “the Communist International is not simply the organization of the enslaved white workers of Europe and America, but equally the organization of the oppressed colored peoples of the world.” It further resolved to “fight for race equality of the negro with the white people, as well as for equal wages and political and social rights”; to “use every instrument within its control to compel the trade unions to admit negroes”; and to “take immediate steps to hold a general negro conference or congress in Moscow.”

The American Negro Labor Congress, organized in Chicago, Oct. 25-31, 1925, is partial fruition of the Communists’ avowal to organize the American negro into a revolutionary working-class movement. The congress, though not actually known to have been backed by Soviet money, was openly sponsored by the Workers’ Party of America. Nevertheless the demands of the Labor Congress, which struck at certain restraints and repressions that social circumstance has placed upon the negro, can hardly be labeled as revolutionary or even as ultra-militant utterances. From another point of view the congress manifested decided radicalism. Attributing race prejudice to modern capitalism, it pronounced this indictment: “Intent upon holding down the workers of all races as a general lower class, our masters wish to make us a general lower class within a lower class. The white worker must be made to realize that this discrimination against the negro worker comes back against him ultimately.” The criticism leveled at the American Federation was no less scathing: “The failure of the American Federation of Labor officialism, under pressure of race prejudice benefiting only the capitalists of the North and South, to stamp out race hatred in the unions, to organize negro workers, and to build a solid front of the workers of both races against American capitalism, is a crime against the whole working class. If the unions of the American Federation of Labor, through ignorance and prejudice, fail in this duty to the American workers and continue a policy of exclusion in the face of the influx of negro workers into industry, we negro workers must organize our own unions as a powerful weapon with which to fight our way into the existing labor movement on a basis of full equality.”

## Radical Appeal to Negroes

The American Negro Labor Congress appears to be fundamentally a revolt against color psychology in the American labor movement and, incidentally, a pro908test against iniquities arising from the race distinctions perpetuated in American institutions. Like most of us, the negro Communists believe that the insecurity of job and the inadequacy of income are bound up inextricably with the negro’s problems of housing, health and cultural development. But, unlike some of us, they believe that nothing short of a new social order can relieve the negro of such social handicaps. Furthermore, the inability of the negro wage earners to better their economic status through collective bargaining because of the barriers set up by various unions against negro membership; a belief in the alleged conspiracy between white employers and their employees to keep negro workers out of certain occupations; a growing disquietude among the negro masses over the conciliatory character of some of the existing negro organizations whose progress in race relations provokes doubtful concern; and a general dissatisfaction with the restraints placed upon the negro by American race sentiment, are factors which furnish a field of inviting fertility to propaganda which promises a world where economic and social equality prevails.

Perhaps most of the rank and file of the American Negro Labor Congress was wholly unacquainted with Marxian economics and the recent Leninized version of it. Nor, perhaps, is this rank and file gravely concerned with any proposed reorganization of modern industrial society. Yet the Communist Party’s appeals to it may meet a sympathetic response in spite of its impotence to secure any immediate economic good for the negro or, for that matter, any immediate good either for the negro or for the white worker. But when a promise of racial equality, which, although as a rule of secular conduct, has to await realization in a future world, is reinforced by observance of equality in social practice, as is done in the Workers’ Party, it must have a tremendous appeal to a disadvantaged group such as the negro. And the success of economic radicalism is contingent upon the capacity of the conservative working class forces to effect a counter-reformation.

The American Negro Labor Congress’ resolve to organize negroes into their own labor unions has been anticipated by the Pullman porters. Several attempts have been made to organize the negro sleeping and dining car employees into a national union. The dining car employees were successfully organized on several railway lines. But all attempts to organize the sleeping car employees were futile. The present organization of porters, who are being led by A. Philip Randolph, editor of The Messenger, seems assured of success. It is estimated that 60 per cent, of the porters employed by the Pullman Company are in the organization. When completed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Employees will approximate a total membership of at least 10,000.

A decade and a half ago the most serious problem facing the negro masses as they surged cityward was securing industrial opportunity. Today, although numerous restrictions exist in many localities against the negro’s entrance into the higher skilled occupations, his problem is ceasing to be “securing the right to work.” More and more it is becoming “organizing so as to counteract the weaknesses of the individual wage earner in industrial society.” The whole cultural, intellectual and social life of the negro, like that of other groups, is dwarfed to the degree that life in the lower stratum is economically secure. These working-class movements among the negroes are therefore pregnant with significance to him and the society of which he is a part—this, whether the movements are radical or conservative; whether they are erected within the American Federation of Labor or outside of its jurisdiction.