The Negro in Times of Industrial Unrest

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# The Negro in Times of Industrial Unrest

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69 The scope of this paper is limited to the local situation in Chicago. The writer has for six years observed conditions among workingmen in this, the most rapidly growing Negro city population in the country, a population which in the last forty years has increased twice as rapidly as the total population of Chicago, and sixteen times as rapidly as the total Negro population of the country.

The question of earning a living—how to get a job and how to hold a job—is the most serious and most difficult question now confronting the Chicago Negro. He must work where he can rather than where he will. Times of industrial unrest, of which there are many in this city, have often offered to him opportunities for work which were before closed. The three most significant instances of such unrest in which Negroes had conspicuous part were the building trades’ strike of 1900, the stockyards’ strike of 1904, and the teamsters’ strike of 1905. Prior to 1900, Negroes played but little part in the industrial situation on account of the smallness of the Negro population.

## The Building Trades’ Strike

During 1899 and early 1900 one of the most powerful labor organizations in Chicago was that of the building trades, which controlled almost absolutely the building situation in the city. Over against them, however, was the growing organization of building contractors, slowly preparing to meet the labor men. The contractors were the aggressors in the struggle which began February 5, 1900, against what they called the “tyranny” of the Building Trades’ Council, which had prohibited the use of machinery, and apprentices, and “made possible the limitation of a man’s work to one-half his capacity.” The contractors held in brief that there should be no limitation of work, no restriction upon the use of machinery or tools, an eight-hour day at fifty cents per hour, one and one-half pay for overtime, and double pay for Sundays, a Com69mittee on arbitration, and a three-years’ agreement.

Up to this time Negroes had done but little work in the building trades. The unions in order to limit competition had not seen fit to invite them to join, and had in many instances refused, by blackballing, Negroes who presented themselves for membership. Most of the Negroes, therefore, who had come from the South with their trades, found it easier and quite as lucrative to go into domestic and personal service. Some gave up their trades, and others alternated between waiters’ work and porters’ work, and doing the odd jobs in their line which came to them as non-union men.

The boycott of the building contractors was followed by a general strike of the building trades, and this was the opportunity of the non-union laborer, and along with him of the Negro. The strike lasted all the summer and the number of Negroes increased until they were an important issue. There was, however, no wholesale importation from the South. On one of the largest buildings in the city, the Mandel Department Store, a large number of Negroes were employed, and their presence caused much violence, despite police protection. Violence, however, did not frighten the Negroes, and more peaceful means were used. The Chicago Federation of Labor, representing all the organized labor bodies of the city, issued an appeal to the Negroes, which because of its significance is given here:

The frequency with which unscrupulous employers of labor are of late supplanting white men by their colored brethren in times of industrial troubles is a question of most serious moment to the wage-earners of this country. In calling attention to this question it is not our intention to arouse sentiment which might lead to race prejudice, or a race war, which would be deplorable in its results, but rather in a friendly spirit to lay before our colored brethren a statement of facts which we hope may convince them of their error. … We do not even condemn them, believing they are more justly entitled to our sympathy and support. In the slavery days, now happily gone by, 70when the traffic in human flesh and blood remained a blot on our civilisation, the Negro was unable to free himself from the bondage. His white brother rose in arms and declared that the slave should be free. To-day the Negro is being used to keep the white man in industrial slavery. The colored man, more simple in his ways, with fewer wants and these more easily satisfied, is contented to work under conditions which are irksome to the white workman, and he is to-day, perhaps unconsciously, being used to try to drag the white man down to a level lower than was the Negro before he was freed from slavery. …

It is to remedy this that we appeal to him, to welcome him into our fold, to elevate him to our standard and to better his condition as well as our own. The trades-union movement knows no race or color. Its aims are the bettering of the condition of the wage-earner, whatever his color or creed. In this spirit we appeal to the colored workman to join us in our work. Come into our trades unions, give us your assistance and in return, receive our support, so that race hatred may be forever buried, and the workers of the country united in a solid phalanx to demand what we are justly entitled to—a fair share of the fruits of our industry.

This appeal was taken seriously by many Negroes, who left the ranks of strike-breakers to join the unions. Some of these indeed became so zealous for the cause of unionism, that they even tried the persuasion of violence upon other members of their race, when words were not found strong enough to stop them from work.

The strike ended in the fall, the Building Trades’ Council was disrupted, and the unions left in a weak condition. But in the recuperation many more Negroes were among the membership of the unions than before. Of these the Negro membership of the hod-carriers was especially strong, for in this kind of work the Negroes had been the strongest competitors.

## The Stockyards’ Strike

The next great struggle in which Negroes were engaged was the stockyards’ strike.

On Tuesday, July 12, nearly fifty thousand men, many of whom were Negroes, stopped work at the command of Michael Donnelly, president of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, who had organized the stockyards’ unions and who conducted the Strike. The grounds for the strike were the refusal of the packers to grant to the unskilled men a minimum wage of eighteen and one-half cents per hour, and an equalization of the wages of skilled men. The strike was general in the West and involved all the large houses. Ten days later, however, the packers and labor men came to a tentative agreement. On July 23, the men applied for their former positions. But in a few hours they were called out again, as it was charged that the packers discriminated in hiring the old men. Thus began a second strike, which was to continue nearly two months. The packers determined to break the strike after the efforts at peace failed. To do this they turned to the Negroes. For more than twenty years there had been Negroes employed in the stockyards. Both Mr. Armour and Mr. Swift were friendly to them. There had been but little premeditated effort to break the strike, and in recruiting strikebreakers there was very little system. Employment agencies, private individuals, ’’runners,” and others, scoured the city. Thousands of Negroes were imported and in a few days more than ten thousand Negroes were in the various plants. Lodging-houses, commissaries, and pleasure rooms were hastily provided; Negroes were eager to seize the situation.

A description of the inside workings among the laborers, is given below by a young Negro medical student, who became a strike-breaker:

There was no regular way of getting men. I heard on the streets that men were needed and wages were high. Partly on this account and largely for the experience, I determined to go, and appeared next morning at the station to await the stockyards’ train. The station was crowded with restless men and women all eager to work. … Finally the train came—ten coaches long. Pell-mell the people rushed in—women, girls and men—till the cars were so crowded the conductors could not collect the fares. This was only one of five such trains which went to the yards the day I went there. Along the road, there were many jeering crowds, who kept up a continual harassing noise all the way to the yards. Occasionally there was a stone thrown at us by some overzealous labor unionist who had escaped the eye of the policeman. …

Arriving, I found myself in a crowd of men going to Nelson Morris’s plant. We were led to the check room and registered by a man who claimed to have secured us. … After staying around 71 for a half hour I was one of those picked out as waiters. We went downstairs in a large barnlike room, with no windows and only a door communicating with the outside world. The floor was wet from the dripping vats above, in the room formerly used for packing sausage, corn beef, etc., the food was now cooked. … Dinner time came. Fifty-three of us waiters had large flat trucks loaded with lard-cans full of food, beans, potatoes, meat, peas, tomatoes. This was put into tin plates, while coffee was placed in lard pails, and bread, butter and sugar on the tables. Then in all glorious disorder came rushing in between 700 and 800 hungry men, each choosing his own place at the table and eating what was before him. …

Most of the Negroes employed were unskilled and were so indiscriminately gotten that it cannot be said that they were effective workers, or even the better type of strike-breakers. They served a purpose, however, by the greatness of their numbers, of weakening the strikers. Within one month an industry which had used ninety-five per cent white labor now threatened to use eighty-five per cent Negro labor. It was more than unionism could bear. The more thoughtless strikers and their friends used violence, and made it positively dangerous for a black face to appear in “Packingtown.” But the thoughtful few saw another side of the subject, and used persuasion and proffers of future friendliness to Negroes. Negro preachers, political leaders and others were asked to urge the strike-breakers to quit work. On August 24, 1904, a telegram was sent to Booker T. Washington by prominent members of the Chicago Federation of Labor to this effect: “Organized labor of Chicago, representing 250,000 men and women of all races, respectfully requests you to address a mass meeting of colored people in this city on the subject, ‘Should Negroes Become Strike-breakers.’” The telegram included also expressions concerning the efforts of the unions to overcome race prejudice.

On September 9, the strike ended, the unions surrendered unconditionally, and the men went back to work. The majority of the Negroes had not gained in proficiency, and quit or were discharged. A fair proportion remained. To-day no industry in Chicago employs more Negroes than the packing industries, where in nearly every branch they may find employment.

## The Teamsters’ Strike

The teamsters’ strike began April 6 in sympathy for the garment workers of the mail-order house of Montgomery Ward & Co., who had been upon a strike since November. On Friday, April 7, seventy-one teamsters employed by that firm quit work. The next day strikebreakers, among them many Negroes, took their places and delivered goods under police protection. There was a brief but futile effort at settlement; then a grim determination on the part of both employers and teamsters to win. The strike spread to the railway express drivers, department store drivers, coal drivers, parcel and baggage delivery drivers, furniture, lumber and truck drivers, and other teamsters who refused to deliver goods to strikebound houses, in all about 5,000 men.

Among the first strike-breakers were a large number of Negroes. Negroes drove for such firms as Marshall Field, Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co., J. V. Farwell, Johnson Chair Co., and others who had not before employed Negro teamsters. The coal companies were freshly manned almost entirely with Negroes. This was, as usual, the signal for violence. For one hundred and five days there was a fierce struggle; and for at least forty days it seemed that there was war. Over five hundred cases of violence were known to the police, and at least a score of deaths resulted. During the second month the teamsters weakened considerably, and the end came July 20 when the Teamsters’ Joint Council declared the strike off without condition. The coal teamsters, however, did not go back to work, but kept up the strike against the coal companies who were employing Negroes. August 23, however, the coal teamsters decided to call off; but at this writing, August 30, policemen are still guarding Negro drivers of coal wagons

After the first three weeks of the strike Negroes constituted an ever-decreasing number of strike-breakers. Of the total number of men employed by the Employers’ Association, there were 700 white men from Chicago to 200 Negroes; 4,300 white men were imported from St. Louis, Toledo, Buffalo. Cleveland, Minneapolis. Indianapolis, Omaha, Peoria, Pock Island, Moline, Davenport, and other cities, 72 while about 450 Negroes were brought from St. Louis and 150 from Kansas City. At the end of the strike there were only about two per cent Negro strikebreakers. The cause of this decrease was chiefly the violence which the strike incited. Officers of the Employers’ Association assure me that the Negroes were quite as competent as the whites, but that white strike-breakers objected to working with them; and that Negroes were often especially singled out for violent attacks by strikers and strike sympathizers. The race issue was raised by strikers, encouraged by exaggerated reports of some of the daily papers. The populace was in a fever, condemning Negro strikebreakers more than white strike-breakers, and deriding and committing violence upon them, even when they did not approve of the grounds of the strike. Many of the Negroes left their work voluntarily; but the majority remained until they were discharged. Now about eighty Negroes hold places gotten during the strike.

## Winning Place Against Odds

After this review, one comes to the question: Why do Negroes become strikebreakers? A prominent labor editor of this city writes me in answer to this question, that the cause is “a certain prejudice which exists against them (Negroes) in the minds of white men, no matter how we might try to disguise the feeling, which operates against them in securing employment under normal conditions.” Of course it must be borne in mind that Negroes seldom constitute the majority of strike-breakers. The public is in danger of being misled upon this point. In the teamsters’ strike the impression was abroad that Negroes were the majority of strike-breakers. No less a personage than a Negro secretary of the teamsters’ union wrote me that Negroes constituted ninety per cent of the strike-breakers during the first weeks of the strike, and forty per cent at the time of his writing (July 1). The fact is Negroes never made up as high as ninety per cent of the strike-breakers, and July 1 were only about five per cent. The bulk of Negro workmen never consisted of strike-breakers. Nor are Negroes opposed to unions. Many struck with the unions and remained loyal to them at the stockyards. In the teamsters’ strike, while there were 800 Negro strike-breakers, the unions held a membership of nearly two thousand Negro teamsters, and one of their number represented the coal drivers at the Philadelphia convention of the Brotherhood of Teamsters in August. There are a half-dozen Negro delegates to the Chicago Federation of Labor, and several Negro local union officers. Yet it still remains that in times of industrial peace the more desirable places are closed against Negroes, either because the employers will not hire them or the men will not work with them.

Negroes become strike-breakers, also, because of the high wages paid during strikes. The union scale, and even higher, is paid. Teamsters receive $4 and $5 per day, which is paid every evening. Lodging was often furnished and sometimes board. This has great force with the unemployed and discontented classes.

The relation of Negroes to industrial unrest makes it clear that whatever the Negro is to have in the labor world must be won by him against odds, and held by superior force. Only as the Negro develops into a strong competitor will he be recognized. Many examples of this occur each year. A case at the stockyards is typical. Several years ago a Negro “boner” came from Kansas City where he had followed his trade as a union man. He was not admitted to the union in Chicago. Here “boning” was considered a “white man’s” job, and members of the union though outwardly friendly to the Negro, privately advised one another to “knock the Negro” if he aspired to anything except a “Negro’s job.” But during the strike Negroes got the opportunity to develop proficiency as “boners.” Now it is no longer considered “a white man’s job,” and the Negroes who work at it are being urged to join the union.

The part which Negroes have played as strike-breakers has caused a higher value to be put upon their labor than before. Often an employer did not employ a Negro simply “because he had never had any” or “because he preferred whites,” or because at some time in the past he had had some trouble with an individual Negro. Thus the door of opportunity is closed until this employer is forced to 73 take Negro strike breakers. This was the case in many instances during the last strike, and in most cases the efficiency and courage of the Negroes was surprising. Mr. Reed, of the Employers’ Teaming Company, said to me, “The Negroes did noble work. Their courage has seldom been surpassed.” The secretary of the F. G. Hartwell Coal Company, for whom Negroes had not before worked, said, “The Negroes have gained considerably by assisting the employers in this strike. They have shown a commendable spirit of pluck and independence.” The Peabody Coal Company’s secretary expressed himself as “highly pleased” with his Negro teamsters.

On the other hand the part of Negroes in strikes is bringing the unions to deal with less of insincerity than heretofore with the Negroes. They are beginning to realize in fact, what they have asserted in theory, that the cause of labor cannot be limited by color, creed or any other extraneous condition. They have shown the commendable spirit of welcoming the Negroes when they have been able to win their places. To-day, as never before, unionism, which has often, meant the crowding out of Negro laborers, is in an increasingly friendly attitude toward black men. This increase will be more and more as the Negroes increase in competency and intelligence.