

'Migration From South To North Raised Race's Standard Of Living'

Compulsory Education And Superior Health Instruction Gains Seen By C. S. Johnson

Editor Of Opportunity Mentions Unionism As Sign Of Rising Intelligence Of Negro Workers

[Editor's Note—This is the concluding installment of an article by Charles S. Johnson, Editor of Opportunity Magazine, on the Negro's economic development. The article was delivered as an address before the S. A. A. C. P. conference recently.]

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(Editor of Opportunity)

NEW YORK, July 14.—Some of the most important aspects of these changes may be noted: The movement from South to North increased the living level by exposure to sterner requirements. Higher wages were able to be measured to satisfy the needs of migrant families who were exposed to compulsory education, health instruction, exam-

- (4) Innations, clinics and hospitals. Child labor among Negroes was reduced from 46.5 in 1910 to 21.9 in 1920.
- (5) Negro workers have now been in contact with industry about ten years and have in a large measure readjusted their working habits to its demands.
- (6) In the normal advance to work in industry they have reached those borders of semi-skilled and skilled workers more carefully protected by labor unions. To

these unions they are now clamoring for admission, as the most direct route to work. The strength of their menace to organized labor, which with few exceptions has been unfavorable to Negro inclusion, has been sufficient to soften hostility. The less skilled lines of the organized work have large numbers of Negro members—the longshoremen with about 10,000 members; the hod carriers and common building laborers with about 5,000. On the other hand, carpenters with 340,000 members have only 552 Negroes, and the painters with 120,000 members have only 279 Negroes. Where the unions are freely open to them, they have been joining with the general movement of workers. There has developed recently a conviction that the future of Negroes in industry and their economic independence will depend upon their own capacity for self-organization. This conviction has been aided materially by the magnificent efforts of the Pullman porters' union and the success of the dining car men's organization.

- (7) As an indication both of the providence of the group and its potential resources the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company alone has 2,500,000 Negro policyholders, over one-fifth of the entire Negro population, representing possibly close to a billion dollars.
- (8) The life span of Negroes for the five-year period following the migration, according to this same company's figures, increased about five years.
- (9) In the South the movement away from the plantations of Negroes and whites, which began the destruction of the plantation system, which has limited ownership of small farm sites, fostered peonage and a very vicious credit system, and kept the section precariously dependent upon the vicissitudes of one crop. Many of the economic abuses will doubtless disappear with the system, and added impulse will be given to crop diversification.
- (10) Movement away has contributed to a breaking up of the black belt which, in itself, has held the section in the grip of fear of numerical and political domination.
- (11) The readjustment following the movement has helped make possible, through interest in preserving the Negro labor supply, and through the attention centered upon the newer and not unreasonable wants of Negroes, the creation of inter-racial committees which numbered some time ago over eight hundred.
- (12) In the North, and to a degree in the South, the widened margin of existence, wider cultural contacts have undoubtedly been the support of the recent new cultural expression of Negroes, marked by their new intellectual attitude toward themselves, and the sudden confident note in their poetry and art.

Linked with the immediate future are factors of promise and doubt. Those workers, despite occasional surface indications of restlessness and unadaptability, are now established in most of the basic industries and the possibilities are that there will be a constant demand for their services. An industrial machinery adjusted to the yearly consumption of a million new recruits yearly will need this surplus labor from the South. The construction industry alone, which represents about 11 per cent of the workers, requires, it is estimated, 25,000 new skilled workers merely to replace those lost by death, retired and promoted. On the present basis at least 368,000 new workers are required annually for these places, and immigration from the most important Southern European countries has been cut down to one-sixth of the usual. Gaps are appearing in the skilled and semi-skilled occupations as well as unskilled which have to be filled.

As a response to this demand there has been a growing use of Mexican labor along with Negro labor; introducing a new factor into the Negro situation. Between 1920 and 1927 there has come into the country 353,721 Mexicans. They have gone for the most part in farming sections abandoned by whites and Negroes in Texas and California and into the industrial centers on the work which Negroes were just engaged upon in 1916 and 1917.

As yet there is but little actual competition, the Mexicans taking the least desirable jobs, pushing up Negroes one grade as the Negroes in turn pushed up foreign born, who in turn pushed up the native whites. In many places Negro workers are given a better scale of wages than Mexicans, as whites are in many instances given a better scale than Negroes.

- (1) The exposure of Negro workers to industry for about 10 years has carried them closer to skilled work and its provision for organization. Thus we have now as a most acute question that of the admission of Negroes to labor unions. The question does not yet seem as serious with Mexican workers.
- (2) The periods of demand are favorable to employers attitudes toward Negroes, while the inevitable depression brings mental reaction, which reflects itself not merely in Negro work, but in other phases of their life.
- (3) There is the question of a possible saturation point for a group which does not like the European immigrant, lose itself and its racial identity after the first or second generation.
- (4) Increased standards bring increased demands, which become extremely irritating, particularly with the ability to rent or buy properties outside the old established Negro residence areas.
- (5) The release of white workers in the South from the pressure of

cheap Negro labor is making possible a new labor consciousness which is reflecting itself in the increasing exclusion of Negroes from their town trades. It is a situation similar to the first release of these white workers after Emancipation. Last year the white bricklayers of Nashville petitioned the city council to stop permitting Negro boys to be taught trades in the schools. Seventy-five years ago the white carpenters of Atlanta petitioned the city council on the same grounds.

- (6) Over a half million new voters have been enfranchised.
- (7) There is the same possibility that Mexican labor can be used as a whip for Negro labor, as Negro labor was used as a whip for white labor.
- (8) The resident alien labor supply since the years of reduction are approaching the age limits which mark the end of active labor and more accelerated mortality. The demand for both Negro and Mexican labor will be further increased.
- (9) Along with this there is an effort under way to place Mexican labor on the quota basis restricting the reserve supply still further.