

OPPORTUNITIES AWAIT RACE IN BUILDING TRADE

Black Labor Is Cheap Because It Hesitates to Unite In
Exposing Labor Union Tactics and Supporting
Competent Leadership.

By **TILLIE KAPLAN**

WASHINGTON, Aug. 23—Do the Negroes employed in the building service industry need a powerful, unified organization with a sincere leadership to unite them in their political and economic struggles for higher wages and shorter hours? A glance at the conditions prevailing gives a mighty, affirmative answer.

Scores Are Underpaid

Fourteen hours a day and a day off only "when my owner gives it to me," is the situation of one bitter Negro elevator operator, duplicated everywhere over the entire country. There is a bit of sardonic humor in his answer; he means of course the owner of the building. A sum of \$50 a month for 98 weekly hours represents this man's total earning capacity, although he has reached the age of forty. Many janitors are working only for their rent in basement quarters (which probably violate all the laws on housing!) and are expected to be on the premises 24 hours; these

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Organization May Solve Job "Fight"

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hours make it impossible for them to supplement their meager wages, where they do get any. One cannot help marveling at the patience of these people who permit themselves so long to live under conditions where they must have two jobs in order to provide themselves with bread. One job should be enough to provide everyone with more than the necessities of life!

Given Menial Jobs

Negroes suffer doubly. Not only are they constantly refused jobs because of color discrimination, but even where they have them, and have worked for five or ten years conscientiously, they are exposed to the mercy of the employer's whims and scruples about colored people.

A report from a Brooklyn organizer on the Bush Terminal, a storage and renting enterprise, shows quite vividly what the trend in the building service industry is. He has had to testify before the NRA Board that this company, which employs both black and white help, fired a large part of its building service employees, and is now having an elevator operator sweep the streets, wash the windows, and scrub floors. In other words, according to his report, Bush Terminal is going to show the world how to do away with porters, window cleaners and scrubwomen.

Need for Organizing Urgent

With such objective conditions, the Building Service Employees

Union has a tremendous base for organization; but a large membership will rapidly disintegrate unless proper tactics are adopted and the right leadership is in the saddle. A re-check of the membership of the locals in the Borough of Manhattan gives evidence that there is an important movement in the direction of this union; they have 7,000 members out of 350,000 employed in this industry. As was stated in this column last week, the Negro group, which by this time must be approximately 1,000, is distinguishing itself in its ability to recognize the fundamental principles of trade unionism and in its hungry desire for unity around a program to bring a better life.

It is important, therefore, that some of the weaknesses of this organization, which are found also in a large part of the American union movement, be exposed and speedily corrected so that they will not be handicapped from within when some decisive problems with employers arise.

Some Unions Have Helped

A Negro member has been the first to analyze for the writer the most outstanding weakness in the union, although the various locals have really been very effective instruments in counteracting discrimination against Negroes in search of jobs and in compelling owners of buildings to take back their workers fired because they were black, victories which warrant the existence of the organization as far as the Negroes are concerned. He complains against the practice of splitting up the industry into separate unions corresponding to the division of work, as into porters, watchmen, elevator operators, and janitors. Asked for a reason for splitting up workers in this way, a union leader of New York replied: "Well, you know how it is. The workers aren't ready to come together yet. The superintendents think they are better than the handymen and separating them keeps them from fighting."

This is not so. In Tacoma, Wash., Local 38, is listed as organizing all the divisions just named into one local; and in Harlem, New York, where there is a janitor in the same local with the porters "under" him, a fine spirit of understanding has been achieved. This is the same old applesauce in a different plate. You know what it is like: "We can't have blacks and whites together. They just won't mix. And it will start a race riot."

Real Unity Needed

Another serious failing which the Negroes, with their much more highly developed instinct for unity, must take the leadership in correcting, is that of having seven different autonomous locals in the same city without a central council to coordinate their activities until they unite into one union. What an infantile outlook on labor organization!

Within the Building Service Employees Union Negroes must see that two specific practices are begun in order to facilitate their work of organizing and to prepare them for winning improved conditions for both union and non-union service employees. They must get immediately plenty of space in the official magazine, "Public Safety," published at 130 North Wells street, Chicago, where they can have an open national forum for

the discussion of the special problems which always arise in connection with the Negroes in this country. In addition to this demand, they must see also that the union provides them with educational opportunities in subjects pertinent to their activities, so that they can really become the leaders of their people in this industry.