DAVIS CHAMPIONS CAUSE OF STEEL WORKER: LOW WAGES AT BIRMINGHAM SCORED ...
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DAVIS CHAMPIONS CAUSE OF STEEL WORKER

LOW WAGES AT BIRMINGHAM SCORED IN TALK

Living-Cost Favors Pittsburgh Mill Labor In Comparison With South.

By DUTTON FERGUSON

WASHINGTON, D. C., August 10—John Prescott Davis, executive secretary of the Negro Industrial League, continued the determined fight for low-waged workers when he appeared before the National Recovery Administration's hearings on the steel industry, held last Monday, before nearly 1,000 white persons, in the main auditorium of the Department of Commerce.

Deputy Administrator K. L. Simpson presided over the afternoon hearings when both Mr. Davis and Dr. Robert Weaver appeared.

After identifying himself as a representative of the Negro Industrial League, Mr. Davis began his extensive recital of facts which went to the bottom of the labor and wage injustices, particularly in the South.

Arguments Meet Objection

"We realize the necessity in such a hearing as this," began Mr. Davis, "of confining ourselves to a statement of factual information having direct bearing upon this code and upon the specific articles under discussion."

"Representatives of our organization who have appeared at hearings on other codes have not transgressed this reasonable rule, and, I do not propose to do so," continued the speaker.

"However, I ask your indulgence at the outset, Mr. Deputy Administrator, to say briefly that a basic consideration larger in principle than the code under consideration, but directly related to the purposes of the code, must be introduced at this time."

"The Negro citizen has suffered grievously the results of an economic policy of laissez faire in this country. It now appears that under the partnership table we are met to plan in a spirit of industrial goodwill with a new labor economy designed to abolish labor misery. It should at once be clear that if this "new deal" is to be effective industry in this country cannot be allowed to exist with a part of its employees denied the benefits of the programme; that if increased buying power is the key to national recovery, the mass of Negro citizens——"

At this point Deputy Simpson interrupted the young league officer. He informed him that an argument of this type had no place in open hearings, "we are willing to hear your argument and are not willing to have you make a statement of any facts in support of your argument. We are not willing to change our rules to permit argument to be made at this time."

N. I. R. A. C. P. Action Recalled

Mr. Davis continued. "We have prepared an extensive statement of facts with regard to Section 7-a. . . . Our position is substantially the same as that of Mr. William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, with one important exception and we submit that it is highly necessary that a plan of representation such as Mr. Green, when he appeared a few moments ago, that there be reached an agreement, a gentlemen's agreement on the part of the employers, that there shall be no discrimination on account of race, creed or color.

"The action taken by the 24th annual convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, representing 12,000,000 Negro fellow citizens, last July . . . . . that effect . . . . . the statement of the same . . . . . .

"Attention is called to the rise of the steel industry in the South and West. The wage in- . . . . . laborers in the South, and at . . . . . Alabama, particularly strong criticism . . . . . .

Low Wage Laborers In South

"The statement showed . . . . . facts concerning . . . . . steel industry . . . . . 570 workers at . . . . . furnaces and . . . . . other branches . . . . . steel industry, 82.- . . . . . cent of the to- . . . . . under the . . . . . industry includes 61,984 colored laborers. This unit represents 15 per cent of the total numbe rof persons under the classification of laborers. In the high branches of the steel and iron industry the Negro totals 20,685 workers.

Two important regions of the industry are in a group of states including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Michigan, and in the Southern section made up of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina and Tennessee.

The Davis statement further showed that in the West 30,054 colored workers, classified as laborers, are in the steel and iron mills. In the South there are 19,993 colored laborers. Of the total 31,234 laborers the Negro represents 60 per cent of the total for the Southern states. Alabama has 10,515 colored laborers in the iron and steel industry. These workers constitute 81 per cent of the total laborers employed by the branches of the industry in the State covered by the proposed code.

Rent Only Higher In Pittsburgh

Charging that "the purpose of the division of the steel industry into wage districts is to perpetuate wage differentials," Mr. Davis continued, "much has been said of the difference in cost of living in the South and the rest of the country. The degree of differences has been over stated. In the case of the cost of living in Birmingham (Ala.), the most important center of the iron and steel industry in the South and in Pittsburgh, a corresponding center of the West, price quotations for certain leading foodstuffs, etc., are available for as recent a date as June 15, 1933."

In tête-à-tête-for-item detail, the speaker compared the cost of most of the basic foodstuffs in Pittsburgh with Birmingham. Concluding this portion of his statement, Mr. Davis said, "on the basis of such an analysis from Bulletin 357, Bureau of Labor Statistics) and from the retail prices presented above, it appears that there is no reason to expect the food and light and fuel groups of good, which represents the greater part of the expenditure for wage-earning families to warrant the presumption of a marked difference in the cost of living between the leading cities of the Southern and Western branches of the iron and steel industry . . . . With the exception of rent, there are no important components in this remainder of goods and services whose price is appreciably greater in the Western city (Pittsburgh). In so far as the differential in the cost of housing for the Southern worker is due to the existence of the employer-owned house, it is an objectionable feature and should be corrected. In no circumstances should it be the basis for lower wage rates in the South. In so far as the differential is due to unsanitary and over-crowded dwellings in the South, it should certainly not be the purpose of this code to perpetuate these conditions."

Holding that the second reason for the difference between wages paid in the South and wages paid in the West, is due to "the rather ambiguous 'general economic condition,' in Article III, Section 5 of the Code," Mr. Davis said, "at present there are vast reservoirs of potential workers congregated about each and every center of this and all other industries . . . The existence of a large potential labor supply in the South is not a characteristic peculiar to that section and offers no basis for a difference in the rate of minimum wage rates."

Praises Labor Secretary Perkins

Mr. Davis concluded his statement by saying, "There exists no reason for a difference between the wages paid in the Southern States and wages paid in other sections. Our appearance here would not have been necessary had there been an inkling of the splendid speech of Secretary Perkins made at the beginning of this hearing. We can do no more in a discussion of wages and hours than to concur in her recommendations that the multiplicity of districts be abolished in this code, the hours be reduced, that wages be increased to no less than 45 cents an hour for the Southern district."

Mr. John Prescott Davis, who has appeared at hearings on all of the codes for all large industries of the nation, received his education at Bates College, Lewiston, Maine. He received his LLB. from Harvard School of Law this year. His co-worker, Dr. Robert Weaver, is the youngest student to ever secure a Ph.D. from Harvard University. Dr. Weaver, who holds two other degrees in economics from Harvard, is research director of the Negro Industrial League. The young men work their briefs favoring higher wages for colored industrial workers jointly. They alternate at presenting these briefs at the hearings of proposed codes in the auditorium of the Commerce Department.

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