

DESEGREGATION AND THE U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT

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MANY racial segregationists in the Union of South Africa, like Prime Minister Strijdom and other Nationalist party officials, are deriving obvious comfort from the widening conflict over desegregation in the United States. The questions are bluntly asked: "What right has the United States to criticize us when she cannot solve her own racial problems without calling out the militia?" "If she cannot integrate her small Negro population which is culturally similar to the white population, what does she expect of us who are surrounded by a sea of primitive African blacks?"

These indignant questions are based on the patently false assumption that the status of persons of African descent in the United States is not substantially different from the status of Africans in the Union of South Africa. The questions also reveal an understandable ignorance of major trends in Negro-white relations in America.

Undoubtedly these observers see in American racial disturbances what they desperately wish to see in them, a justification for apartheid. But as a matter of fact there is little in the relations between Negroes and Whites in the United States which should provide much comfort to a South African segregationist. Indeed American experience would supply many valuable aids to that brave group in the Union who are sincerely seeking a solution to interracial conflicts in a multiracial society. The emphasis here is on solution, not suppression by brute force of one segment of the population, which seems to be the ultimate means of the great majority of whites in the Union of South Africa.

The American labor movement today as represented by the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, comprising over 15 million members, actively supports a policy of full equality for Negroes in American political and economic affairs. This policy of equal treatment also extends to many important social relations such as equal treatment in hotels; in bus, train and air transportation; in housing accommodation; and in educational facilities.

All of this is of comparatively recent development. Between 1945 and 1954, the various labor federations in the Union of South Africa and their affiliated unions reached almost unanimous agreement to support the program of the Nationalist government to deny equal job rights and trade union rights to African workers, who represent over 53% of all workers in South African industry. During this same approximate period, the American labor movement reached agreement on a program to fight for full equality for Negro workers in U.S. industry and in the labor movement.

This decision of the American labor movement, that is the AFL-CIO, climaxed several generations of bitter experience with segregation and discrimination against Negro workers. For nearly 250 years white workers in American industry had good cause to fear the competition of Negro slaves. By 1850 the economy of eight Southern States was based on the exploitation of these slaves, not only as plantation workers, but as artisans and hand-craft workers. In time the lot of the "free" white worker was little better than that of the slaves who often scorned them as "poor white trash". Laws passed by the slave states to protect free white labor had little success.

White workers in the Union (U.S. Federal) army fought bravely to preserve the United States from dismemberment during the Civil War of 1860, but deep in their hearts were fears of what would happen to their living standards when nearly four million slaves were set free. The Southern white workers fought just as valiantly to preserve slavery because they simply did not want Negro workers to be free. But the southern white worker could not improve his lot substantially without freedom for black labor.

During the generation following the Civil War, American workers made several determined efforts to form national trade union federations to foster the growth of national unions in rapidly expanding American industry. Leaders of the National Labor Union felt their main job was to protect the interests not of all workers, but mainly of whites. It discouraged, where it did not bar Negro membership entirely. Preoccupation with politics as well as faulty organizing methods caused the death of the NLU within a decade.

The successor to the NLU was the much more aggressive and flamboyant Knights of Labor. A few of its lodges barred Negro members, but as a rule the Knights accepted Negro workers

without noticeable discrimination. Within twenty years the Knights of Labor was practically dead due to a series of disastrous strikes, pre-occupation with politics, and faulty organizing methods.

Probably the main cause of the death of the Knights of Labor was the withdrawal of skilled craftsmen to form unions to protect their narrow trade interests. These new craft unions in 1886 formed the American Federation of Labor, out of which has grown the largest and the most powerful free trade union movement in the world. The unions in the AFL had little partisan interest in politics, only a fraternal interest in the lot of the unskilled worker, and generally barred Negroes from membership.

The AFL as a central labor body tried hard under the leadership of Samuel Gompers to exclude from affiliation those unions which expressly excluded Negro membership. The effort was abandoned in 1904 with the admission of the International Association of Machinists. In partial recognition of its responsibility to the untutored and unsophisticated Negro worker, the Federation declared its intention to organize Negro workers into separate local unions, bargain for them, and otherwise protect their interests until the larger white union claiming jurisdiction over the work done by the Negroes would agree to accept them.

Between 1900 and the mid 1930's AFL unions attained a total membership of only two and a half to three million. In the independent railroad unions were organized another half million workers. This little band of American workers stagnated in its prideful position as the aristocrats of labor, in its devotion to business unionism philosophy and to its craft union organizing methods. In this set-up there was little opportunity and even less welcome for the Negro worker. Similarly the labor movement seemed to be sternly indifferent to the efforts of Negroes generally to achieve political and social equality in other fields.

During this period one occasionally found Negro and white workers as members with equal rights and opportunity to participate in managing the affairs of a local union. However, as a rule, if Negro workers were not excluded entirely, they were organized in "B" or "C" locals, functioning under the supervision of the nearest white local. Of course, such members of "B" or "C" locals had little chance to take part in grievance settlement or contract negotiation.

Between 1910 and 1930 several million Negro workers moved

up from Southern cotton plantations into laboring and semi-skilled occupations in manufacturing industries in Northern cities. The rebuffs they received from the labor movement first in Southern towns and later in Northern and border states became the basis of a strong belief among Negro workers that labor unions were one of the main barriers to their progress in American industry.

The fact that the American Negro population has become largely an urban population is due to (1) the rapid mechanization of agriculture in the old slave states, thus extensively displacing both Negro and white labor, (2) the sharp curtailment of European immigration to the United States during and after the first world war (3) the extensive conversion of manufacturing processes to mass production methods.

This latter development created an almost insatiable demand for unskilled and semiskilled labor. With the curtailment of European immigration, the Southern Negro worker became the most logical labor source. The white rural job seeker entering Southern towns and cities was hired far more readily than were Negroes, who were forced as a result to migrate to Northern, Eastern and Western industrial areas. This absorption of the Negro worker in Northern industry was stepped up during the second world war and has been sustained by high employment since 1945.

Not only did the thousands of Negro workers bitterly resent their exclusion from key jobs in American industry, but before 1935 reluctantly allowed themselves to be used as strike-breakers or "scabs" in such basic industries as steel, meat packing, farm machinery and auto manufacturing. This situation often precipitated bitter and bloody race riots. And though a residue of this bitterness and suspicion remains and causes difficulties in many communities, it is often easy to over-estimate its strength and durability.

Longstanding bitterness between Negroes and whites in the steel town of Gary, Indiana, barely thirty years ago, caused the local white population to flock into an anti-Negro organization called the Ku Klux Klan. They forced Negroes from local beaches; and supported white children in a prolonged strike to force a few Negro children out of a local public high school.

Today in this same town Negro and white workers share offices in the same steel workers union. Not only is the school system integrated, but a Negro serves as president of the school

board responsible for all Gary schools. Another Negro serves as president of the Gary municipal council.

This development is indicative of the fact that few Americans actually feel that the racial situation in the United States is so complicated that the ideal of American equality cannot eventually be fully realized.

Though individual Negro labor officials and civic leaders complained constantly about discrimination against Negro workers by trade unions, the labor movement as such did not tackle the problem seriously until the late 1930's. Samuel Gompers and William Green as presidents of the American Federation of Labor always patiently and earnestly defended the status quo with the explanation that the AFL as a central labor body did not discriminate, but that it could not impose its views on the matter upon its various affiliated unions, since each was fully autonomous. The AFL could only grant equal status to Negro unions and organize Negro workers rejected by white unions.

By 1935 it was obvious to many influential leaders in the American Federation of Labor that the growth of trade unions had lagged far behind the expansion of American industry and the growth of the industrial population. Except in the highly skilled trades, America was an open shop country. A Committee for Industrial Organization was formed within the AFL to press the view that in such mass production industries as steel, textile, automobile, rubber and farm machinery manufacturing, workers should be organized in all-inclusive units regardless of race, sex, creed or skill. The leaders of the CIO would not accept compromise of the principle of industrial organization and were eventually expelled.

Now free of all craft union restraints the CIO, now the Congress of Industrial Organizations, launched vigorous and all-inclusive organizing drives in America's basic industries. Its organizing efforts were phenomenally successful. And though it organized on a basis of interracial equality, white and Negro workers flocked to its banners with an enthusiasm never before seen in American industry.

The CIO made other contributions to American trade union activity. It engaged in strongly partisan political action in support of general social welfare programs. The new labor center, through its affiliated unions, its educational, publicity, and anti-discrimination committees, actively and constantly

promoted acceptance of the Negro worker as an equal with respect to union membership. The point was emphasized that the responsibilities of union leadership and administration should be shared with him without discrimination. The CIO used high ranking Negro aids and steadfastly refused to hold an annual convention in a town or hotel in which its Negro delegates might be subjected to any form of discrimination.

This revolutionary acceptance of the Negro worker was carried one step further. The CIO welded a close bond of political unity between organized labor and the Negro masses by giving full support to every measure to achieve for Negroes that social, political, and economic equality to which they are entitled by virtue of their citizenship.

The open acceptance of the Negro worker by the CIO led many of the old diehard AFL unions to curtail, if not to drop entirely, their discriminatory practices. Many also organized workers into industrial units. Thus the International Association of Machinists which had blocked Negro apprentice machinists and held Negro employment to a minimum in the nation's machine shops, eventually opened its doors and its international union president became a strong defender of fair treatment for Negro workers.

At the time of the merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955, when the two organizations had a combined membership of 15 million, including over one and a half million Negroes, strangely, a majority of these Negroes were in old AFL unions which had enrolled several hundred thousand Negro workers in the transportation, building construction, garment and service trades.

All over the United States Negroes now serve as officers of unions composed of both Negro and white workers. This fact is more common in the North than in the South. It is a common experience for Negro union officials to engage actively in collective bargaining with employers on behalf of both Negro and white workers. Two Negroes serve as vice-presidents of the newly merged American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations.

When AFL-CIO president George Meany went before the platform committees of the national conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties to urge adoption of policies of paramount interest to labor, he carried the fight for Negro equality with him. On behalf of the American labor movement

he recommended that the major political parties of the country support legislation which would desegregate public education in those few states where school segregation still exists; he wanted poll taxes outlawed, segregation in public facilities abolished, and a civil rights division to be established in the Federal Department of Justice to enforce the citizenship rights of Negroes and other groups.

In sharp contrast with what has been happening in the Union of South Africa, American labor is not seeking government aid to curb Negro employment opportunities. Instead, American labor again recommended that the U.S. Congress enact legislation making it unlawful for an employer to discriminate against a worker because of his race or national origin. Seventeen states in the American union already have such laws in various forms, and the Federal government already forbids its personnel officers to discriminate against Negro applicants. Similarly government contractors are forbidden to discriminate on the basis of race.

Organized labor in the United States has strong practical as well as idealistic reasons for working for full equality for Negro workers. The unions would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to have organized the mass production industries without opening their doors to Negro workers. In many industrial centers this statement is equally true of the service and needle trades.

In view of the fact that workers in mass production industries could not finance for themselves the insurance, retirement benefits, and the health and housing services possible for the much more highly paid skilled workers, industrial unions were naturally more interested in the New Deal, the Fair Deal, and other versions of the welfare state. This interest also quite naturally led to intensive political action to guarantee that the Federal and State legislatures would approve labor recommendations concerning the general welfare. In many large industrial areas labor has come to count heavily upon Negro support of its candidates.

In the economic field AFL-CIO unions have been tremendously helpful in reducing segregation and discrimination against Negro workers. Scarcely a generation ago the status of Negro workers in U.S. industry was so precarious that hardly anyone questioned the statement that the Negro was the last hired and the first fired. It was no simple task for union leaders to convince many

employers that provisions in collective bargaining contracts relating to seniority and promotions should apply equally to Negroes. Other employers had to insist that the local unions respect the Negro workers' rights under the bargaining contract.

Numerous incidents have come to public attention through strikes and other disturbances on the part of white workers to prevent the promotion of Negro employees. Generally the resistance offered by comparatively few employers and white workers has not seriously hampered the trend toward complete desegregation in U.S. industry.

The first convention of the merged labor movement, the AFL-CIO, recommended that all of its affiliates negotiate non-discriminatory hiring agreements with employers. A committee on civil rights, reporting directly to the AFL-CIO executive council, was set up to investigate charges of discrimination against Negro workers and to recommend appropriate action.

Despite this long series of favorable developments, the Negro worker is still far behind his white brother, though the gap that separates them is rapidly closing. Though Negroes are 10% of the U.S. labor force, their proportion of skilled, semi-skilled and supervisory jobs is far less than 10%. Though the per capita income of the Negro population is high compared with the rest of the world, it is still a little better than half that of whites. This point is reached only after tripling the pre-war per capita income of Negroes, so that today it exceeds fifteen and a quarter billion dollars after taxes.

It should be noted that differences in Negro-white income are due only partly to discrimination, but largely to lack of training and industrial experience. Negroes performing the same work as white workers receive identical compensation. Many Negroes exceed whites in both skill and income, but in the main the Negro is low man in the American economic order.

The slow desegregation which has been going on throughout the whole of American industry obviously has not brought full equality of opportunity to the Negro worker. But not until the Supreme Court of the United States ordered desegregation of schools supported with public funds did strong, organized opposition arise to desegregation in industry.

In five of the states most affected by the court order, White Citizen Councils, founded to preserve segregation in Southern life, penetrated some local branches of the labor movement. Soon national trade union offices were facing angry demands

that the unions discontinue their support of civil rights for Negroes. The protesters were particularly bitter over labor's endorsement of proposals to withhold federal educational funds from states that refuse to comply with the desegregation decision of the Supreme Court.

At the height of this desegregation agitation many union members in Southern states threatened to withdraw from their unions, even to form a Southern Federation of Labor. It is to the credit of American labor leaders that these threats were met with patient explanation of labor's position and without compromise.

It is extremely unlikely that organized labor would reverse its policy of equal status for Negro workers. Long experience has emphasized the point that Negroes will not "make the job cheap" so long as they have the right and the freedom to protect their labor as free workmen. American labor has also discovered that an exploitation of any section of the labor force, even a minority as small as 10%, pulls down the standards of all labor.