

W H E N W I L L I T E N D ?

by

Frank R. Crosswaith

The question of Negro labor and its place in the official labor movement of the United States is one that will not down; like a periodical disease, it breaks out ever so often in places one least expects to find it. For fear of being misunderstood by those in the labor movement who become frantic at criticism and therefore are wont to view as an hostile act every honest attempt to correct gross wrongs, this writer desires to re-state here that he is unalterably wedded to the principles of organized labor. Ever since I became old enough to work, I have been consistent and relentless in preaching and practicing the principles of united action, industrial and political, for men and women who work. This devotion to labor, however, does not blind my eyes to the shortsighted, suicidal policy of our labor movement as that policy relates to the Negro worker in particular.

Those of us who see in the organized movement of the workers of this nation the only hope of the Negro masses for economic and social advancement, have long ago become used to hearing from organized labor eloquent protestations of friendship and concern for the well-being of Negro workers. From the official heads of the American Federation of Labor in particular have come, from time to time, noble words about organized labor "being solicitous of the economic and industrial interest of the Negro," nevertheless, as soon as these high sounding, virtuos phrases begin to settle into our minds and we are rudely awakened to the fact that a wide chasm exists between the professions of labor's spokesmen and labor's deed.

Speaking recently, before a mass meeting of Pullman porters in Harlem, Mr. William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, with an unusual display of heat and impatience, stated in answer to some Negro Communist hecklers that the American Federation of Labor never discriminates against a worker because of race or color. Flushed by being introduced to his audience as "the modern Abraham Lincoln come to free the American worker from wage slavery" President Green, also pledged to the tragic struggle of the porters the unstinted support of the Federation. So far, we have yet to see the first attempt made by the Federation to translate into concrete action this pledge. In the meantime, the Pullman Company like "Old Man River" keeps on rolling over the unorganized bodies of 12,000 Negro workers, the while it reaps from their helplessness greater and greater profits.

Recently in New York City, a Negro worker employed for over fourteen years as an upholsterer in an unorganized shop, came face to face with the naked prejudice existing in the labor movement. Jones was considered by his employers as one of their best mechanics. When the organizer of Local #70, International Upholsterer's Union of North America tried to effect organization in the plant, Jones like his

white fellow workers applied for membership in the Union; his co-workers applications were accepted, but his was rejected for the expressed reason that "he was not a white person." The owner of the firm pleaded with the Union's representative to accept Jones in the Union, and also pledged himself to employ Jones as long as the firm remained in business. But to this pledge, the agent replied "that it was the rule of the Union not to accept a colored worker." The Union steadily refuses to admit Jones who for the first time in fourteen years finds himself out of work with a large family depending upon his labor for their sustenance. It is experiences like Jones' which make it exceedingly hard for the Negro masses to accept the message of trade unionism; for even a Negro worker can at times note the difference between a theory and a fact. However, not all the unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor are guilty of practicing race and religious discriminations. The most notable exceptions are the needle trades organizations generally known as Socialist Trade Unions. Negro workers in these organizations enjoy all the rights, privileges and responsibilities, that go with membership. Specifically, the International Pocketbook Workers Union, offers perhaps the best example of a labor union which does not tolerate race prejudice among workers.

Recently, this Union discovered a shop in Newark, N.J., employing about sixty-five to seventy Negro workers, mostly girls. Their hours were unbearably long and their wages alarmingly low. The Union sent in its organizer and affected organization, with the result that a strike is now on in the Royal Leather Goods Corporation. The Union is generously paying reasonable strike benefits each week to the strikers. A Negro organizer has been retained to aid the strikers. Unions like the Pocketbook Workers which display a sense of social vision, responsibility and labor solidarity, help to keep alive in the breast of Negro labor a spark of hope and faith in the labor movement and afford us a glimpse of what organized labor can do when it decides to rid itself of the virus of race prejudice, stop its suicidal policy of race discrimination and transform its glowing promises into deeds. When, we ask, will it do so?

\*\*\*\*\*