

NEGRO MEMBERSHIP IN AMERICAN LABOR UNIONS  
Reviewed by Frank R. Crosswaith.

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"NEGRO MEMBERSHIP IN AMERICAN LABOR UNIONS" represents a study of the subject matter made by the National Urban League under the direction of its capable Research Director, Ira De A. Reid; and sells for \$1.00.

The book is misnamed. A more appropriate title for it would be "The Negro Workers' Factual Indictment of American Labor".

On the one hand it presents, in a most scholarly and convincing manner, the eloquent professions of labor with respect to the welfare of Negro labor, and on the other it exposes the deeds which give the lie to these professions. That the labor movement suffers in the comparison goes without saying.

In his preface Mr. Reid disclaims any efforts to "present a critical analysis" of the methods by which Negro workers have entered labor organization, or the methods employed to exclude them. Mr. Reid did not have to make this disclaimer. The facts he has gathered speak far more eloquently and convincingly than anything which he or any one else might say.

Proportionately, the number of Negro workers exceeds that of the rest of the population of the country. Of the total number of fish packers and curers in the country, 42% are Negroes. Of every 100 longshoremens, 32 are Negroes. Of every 100 railroad laborers, 28 are Negroes. Of every 100 fertilizer workers, 75 are Negroes. Of every 100 tobacco workers, 33 are Negroes. Of every 100 iron and steel workers, 14 are Negroes. Of every 100 workers in the lumber and furniture and the building trades, 20 and 33 respectively are Negroes. Between the period of 1910 and 1920 semi-skilled Negro workers in slaughter and packing houses increased 1,832%. In the iron and steel industry an increase of over 237% was registered. During the same period, the number of Negroes in occupations called "Negro jobs" showed a marked decrease.

A careful reading of the book gives one the inescapable impression that it is only at such times as the Negro worker appears to be gaining a foothold inside those trades from which he had been carefully excluded by white labor that the labor movement gave him any sort of sympathetic consideration, and not very much even then.

It took organized labor thirty years after the emancipation of the Negro from slavery, to recognize the black worker. At a convention of the American Federation of Labor in 1900, affiliated unions were urged to repeal constitutional and other clauses which excluded from membership persons on account of race, creed or color. However, nothing was done in a constructive way until 10 years later, when the Negro worker began to scab his way into industry; then a plan to organize Negroes into separate unions was formulated. One year later a charter was issued to a Central Labor Union in Danville, Va. Immediately thereafter, Negro unions began to appear all over the South.

Today both the A.F. of L. and the Communists pose as pioneers going into the South with the message of trade unionism. The fact of

the matter is that for many years the Negro worker alone held aloft the banner of labor organization in the South. At one time the city of Charleston, S.C. was considered the best labor organized city in the U.S. This credit came to the "City by The Sea" because of the presence there of many powerful Negro labor unions.

When Negro delegates began to appear at conventions of the Federation, immediately they sought to bring to the attention of their fellows the plight of workers of their race. In the convention of 1917 Negro delegates presented four resolutions: (1) demanding a charter from the metal trades and charging their International with discrimination, (2) protesting against the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks who had consistently refused to aid Negro freight handlers and station employees (3) asking that a charter for an international union be given to the Railroad Coach Cleaners of St. Louis, (4) requesting an organizer to work in Alabama. Each of these resolutions was turned down by the resolutions committee.

Thereupon, the Federation decided to grant Federal charters to Negro workers whenever they were excluded by internationals of their craft. This policy has resulted in there being more "ex" Negro trade unionists in the United States today than active members of unions. Another result has been to alienate the influence and support of Negro institutions, including the church, and thus arraign them against the best interest of labor. In 1919 there were affiliated with the Federation 109 Negro Federal local unions. Ten years later only 38 remained. Of these, 14 belonged to the Pullman Car Porters, while 7 of the remaining locals are classified as "inactive".

A phase of the book which should prove of great value to all who are sincerely interested in labor's struggle is that which deals with the constitutions and rituals of several units of the A.F. of L., which not only exclude Negroes, but "foreigners" and people who are not "christians" and those who "were not born white". The Blacksmiths believe that "Colored helpers may be organized in auxiliary under the jurisdiction of a white local." These Colored helpers "shall not transfer except to another auxiliary local composed of Colored members" and "Colored members shall not be promoted to be Blacksmiths or helpers' apprentices" and "will not be admitted to shops where white helpers are now employed." The Hotel and Restaurant Employees' International Alliance, which still fights to gain control of the Pullman Porters Union, insists that when a Colored member goes into a city where there is no jim-crow local "he must remain a member of the local of the city from which he came."

In his treatment of "The Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers" and its attempt to organize the laundry workers as well as its successful organization of the Motion Picture Operators of New York, Mr. Reid does not display that thoroughness which characterizes his statistical criticism of labor's treatment of the Negro. This is also true of his reference to the fantastic claims of Renzi Lemus who poses as "Grand President" of the Dining Car Waiters.

Nevertheless, "Negro Membership in American Labor Unions" deserves an important place in the library of every labor organization, for it enables one to see the American labor movement thru a microscope of realism. Not until organized labor adopts a more class-conscious attitude toward Negro labor can it hope to win over to its side of the struggle for industrial Democracy the millions of Negroes who belong to labor.

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