

ECONOMICS AND THE RACE QUESTION

By James ONeal

(Editor's Note: This is the first installment of a new booklet, "The Next Emancipation", written by one of America's foremost historians, James ONeal. It has been published to sell at cost, 10¢ postpaid, by the Negro Labor News Service, P.O. Box 66, College Station, New York City, or 2653 Washington Blvd., Chicago.)

To live a happy, free life, with abundance assured to all; to have education and leisure; to be free of the curse of debt; to know that our children's future is assured; to be comfortably housed; to have work in pleasant surroundings; to enjoy ample incomes with a few hours of useful labor each day; to live in peace with our fellows; to know that men are no longer beasts to torture and lynch the weak; to breathe the free air with human beings enjoying all these rights, is the task of the next emancipation.

The Negro was a slave and now is "free." The white worker was a slave and now is "free." How do we know? We should know from history. The Negro was torn from his home in Africa and sold to white masters in America. What the masters did they said was law. It was law, for they and their lawyers made the law. Their officials enforced the law. So for nearly 250 years the Negro and his children were the bondsmen of white slave owners.

But the white workman was also a slave for about 200 years in America. Thousands were brought to America as contract slaves. Thousands were political offenders sold for terms of service to American planters. Thousands were kidnapped in British ports, brought to America and sold. White workers born in the colonies were sold for terms of service for minor breaches of the law.

The Negro's servitude was known as chattel slavery. The white worker's servitude was known as "indentured service." In the American colonies laws for Negro slaves often applied to these white slaves. In the law codes both had the same lowly status. Both Negro and white could be parted from their families. Neither could marry without the consent of the master. Both could be whipped by the master. Both received the cast-off clothing of the masters. Both were crowded to suffocation in the ships bringing them to American ports. Thousands of Negroes and whites died in this traffic across the Atlantic, died of overcrowding, starvation and disease.

The white workers who were not "indentured servants" were wage workers. Yet their wages were generally fixed by law. For petty offenses they were sold into indentured service. Their terms could be increased for disobedience, for striking a brutal master, for trying to run away, or for some other reason. So that a man bound to serve three years or five years might serve ten years or twenty years or thirty years.

The laws to catch runaways applied to whites as well as Negroes. This was even put into the Constitution of the United States. Read Article IV, Section 3. It remains where the "fathers" of the

government put it. It reads: "No person held to SERVICE or labor in one State, under the laws thereof, escaping into another shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such SERVICE or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such SERVICE or labor may be due."

The word "service" was inserted in this clause to include white "indentured servants" who escaped from their masters. The word "labor" applies to the Negro. The word "persons" included both. Therefore, whites as well as Negroes were regarded and treated as slaves. The only difference was that the "indentured servant" was not a slave for life.

We get one important lesson from these facts. The Negro question is not exclusively a color question. The white masters enslaved men and women of their own color as well as Negroes. What the masters wanted and what the masters got was cheap labor. It was a LABOR problem with them.

If we would understand the Negro question we must realize the fundamental fact that it is at bottom a LABOR question. It is not a matter of religion. Religious men have enslaved religious men. Infidels have enslaved infidels. Why? Again comes the answer, because they wanted cheap labor. The Puritan, Quaker, Catholic and Episcopal Church of England were established in the colonies. The Puritans held whites in bondage in New England. Even in Pennsylvania for a time William Penn's agents gathered "indentured servants" from Europe. The Episcopal Church ruled in Virginia, where whites and Negroes were enslaved. The Catholic Church in Maryland had its Catholic slave owners. In all these colonies masters owned men and women of their own religious faith.

Neither religion nor color drew a line between mastery and slavery. It was a LABOR question with the masters of both colors and all religions.

Nor was it a matter of "good" men or of "bad" men. Many masters were brutal and some were kind. But both types owned slaves or "indentured servants." Color made no difference to them. Neither did religion. They were interested in having cheap LABOR that would keep them in ease and comfort. This they obtained from both whites and Negroes.

This fundamental fact not only underlies the Negro question, but the whole labor question of our time. It affects the white worker, the Negro worker, the Mexican, the German, the French and all other nationalities.

(To be continued)