

THE TASK BEFORE US
By James ONeal

(Editor's Note: This is the sixth 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.)

Consider the situation in the South. Thousands of white workers there have deep prejudices against the Negro. Yet many thousands of these whites are steeped in the deepest poverty. They get little more education than the Negro. Why are they ragged, ignorant and poor? Because the same ruling whites that rob the Negro worker rob the white worker!

If every Negro's place in the South was filled by a white man conditions of the white workers would be what they are now. But the white worker, because of his ignorance and prejudice, sees only the color line and not the class line. He sees the Negro whom he dislikes instead of the white masters, whom he should dislike.

No Hope in Hatred

Now, the Negro worker dislikes the white worker because the latter dislikes him. YET BOTH ARE ROBBED BY THE SAME CLASS OF WHITE CAPITALISTS, CONTRACTORS, BANKERS AND EXPLOITERS IN GENERAL!

The great task before the workers of both races is to make both see that so long as they hate each other—the class that robs both will continue to exploit them. There is no hope for either so long as they hate. There is hope when they cease to hate. This will be the beginning of understanding, and understanding is necessary before there can be unity of action. Even in the South this is possible, and we have even seen the beginning of that union of white and colored labor in behalf of their common interests.

A White Labor Hero

In Bogalusa, Louisiana, in November, 1919, there was a striking instance of this unity of white and Negro wage workers. Bogalusa was the headquarters of the Great Southern Lumber Company, whose sawmill is said to be the largest in the world. For some time it had made use of unorganized Negro workers against white wage workers. What happened is told by Benjamin Brawley, in his "Social History of the American Negro," p. 349:

"The forces of labor, however, began to organize the Negroes in the employ of the company, which held political as well as capitalistic control in the community. The company then began to have Negroes arrested on charges of vagrancy, taking them before the city court and having them fined and turned over to the company to work out the fines under the guard of gunman. In the troubles that came to a head on November 22, three white men were shot and killed, one of them being the District President of the American Federation of Labor, who was helping to give protection to a colored organizer."

Extend that Understanding!

Here is a glorious beginning of that understanding between white and Negro workers against the common enemy. A white union organizer gave his life in defence of a Negro member of the wage working class! Extend that understanding between the workers of both races from Bogalusa throughout the South and the North and this class brotherhood would wipe out much of the ignorant prejudices that prevail.

What is wanted is not a "white" South or a "black" South, but a working class South and a working class North. The workers on the docks in New Orleans some years ago were also involved in a strike and the white and Negro workers struck side by side and shared in the hardships and sacrifices of the strike. These incidents show that the accursed prejudices can be wiped out and unity of the workers of both races obtained. To realize it should be the aim of intelligent men and women of the white and Negro working class.

Erase Labor's Color Line!

Negro workers should organize into unions and continually insist upon the trade unions extending help to them in this work. They should continually insist on the color line being wiped out wherever it exists, and that Negro unions be amalgamated with the other unions. They should point out the advantages to both white and Negro workers in such unions. They should send committees before the unions for this purpose. Wherever possible they should get a white unionist who understands the need of this to supplement their appeals.

This is the way to labor solidarity in industry.

Social Equality

There is nothing harder to make the prejudiced white understand than the question of "social equality." The same white worker who holds this prejudice may be working in the same ditch, on the same farm, or in the same factory with Negro workers. He may be working for the same master. He may be getting wages that are little more than the Negro worker receives. He may be living in a shack that he calls "home," just as the Negro worker does. In the South his children may be deprived of an education just as the Negro's children often are.

"White Supremacy" a Myth

Yet this white worker, who in every respect has been reduced to a level equal to that of the Negro worker, is afraid of "social equality!" In the South many such white workers believe that they are a part of what is called "white supremacy." As a matter of fact, both the Negro and such white workers are victims of a "white supremacy" exercised by white exploiters.

Such white workers need not fear social equality. The white masters have placed both Negro and white labor on the same plane of equality of servitude. They will stay in this equality until both join hands to liberate themselves from those who buy their labor power and exploit them in the labor market.

(To Be Continued)