

The Colored Worker in the New Era
By Frank R. Crosswaith

Spero and Harris. THE BLACK WORKER. New York: Columbia
University Press, 1931. \$4.50.

Before the war Negro labor, in the main, constituted a reserve upon which employers drew freely during strikes, or whenever a scarcity of white labor existed. As a consequence the Negro worker came to be called "the American Scab." Because of his strike breaking activities, organized labor directed toward him its thinly disguised hostility, while the employers of labor treated him with unconcealed insolence.

This was the pathetic picture which for nearly a half century the Negro worker cast upon the industrial screen of America. It was not wholly of his own making. White labor, by denying to the Negro worker practical participation in the trade union movement, contributed much toward driving him into this position.

Catapulted out of his agrarian setting by the results of the war between the slave holding South and the rising industrial North, the Negro found himself deposited in the world of work without land, money or tools. Far more tragic than the lack of these, he was without education. He drifted naturally into the social swamps of personal service. He became the cook, the waiter, the bell-boy, the porter of America. The world war partially rescued him from his menial position and gave him his golden opportunity to enter industry through a door more honorable than scabbing.

Negro Labor Looks Up

Until the present terrifying period of depression, approximately one and one-half of the accredited four million Negroes gainfully employed were engaged in the basic industries of the Nation. The sudden transfer of so large a group of hitherto despised workers into the higher realms of industry was bound to have repercussions in the social, economic, and psychic relationship of the Negro to the rest of the population. Race riots and lynching, which in the past had been largely confined to the South, began to occur in the industrial centers of the North and West, where Negro workers had succeeded in invading the closely guarded sanctums of the skilled trades. East St. Louis and Chicago became open battle grounds upon which the advancing black worker and resisting white labor fought.

To read THE BLACK WORKER, by Spero and Harris, is to understand these, and many more vitally important socio-economic facts regarding the Negro problem in American industry. With the exception of two chapters, the authors have succeeded in producing a work that will long remain the most complete, authoritative, and scholarly book dealing with Negro labor in the United States. Unlike most writers who deal with this subject, the authors have given us not only a factual study, but they have subjected these facts to a keen, penetrating, and scholarly interpretation in the light of modern sociology and economics.

The book is divided into five general parts, treating of "The Slave Background of The Negro", "Early Trade Unionism And The Negro", "The Negro As a Strike Breaker", "Industrialism and The Negro", and "Negro Labor Since The War". Each part is further divided into chapters where is carefully considered every imaginable phase of Negro relationship with white America. The book is well documented with a rich, extensive bibliography.

Prejudice Creeps In

Strangely enough, it is in the latter part of the book where are treated such contemporary questions as "The New Negro", "Socialism", "Communism", and "The Pullman Porters" that the authors boldly abandon their admirable role of impartial historians and permit their political prejudices and personal animus to conquer them. By so doing they have tarnished the otherwise golden luster of their remarkable achievement.

There is space here for only two specific criticisms.

In connection with the chapter on "The Negro and Socialism" the authors appear more concerned with misrepresenting the Socialist Party than with presenting the facts. James Oneal, well known author and editor, and a recognized historian of the American Labor movement, who is intimately familiar with the period and events the authors discuss in this chapter, recently wrote: "The Socialist Party at its very origin approved the policy of labor solidarity." But the authors (Spero and Harris) state that "the party never got far beyond the resolution stage." In this they are mistaken."

When Debs declared that the "Socialist Party had nothing special to offer the Negro," he was simply repeating what the Negro members of the Socialist Party were saying. In the convention of 1901 the delegates adopted a long resolution stating clearly the position of the Socialist Movement on the question of justice for the Negro. This resolution was adopted despite the objections of the Negro delegates in that convention, who insisted that Negroes had no desire to be singled out for special mention by their Party.

Crosswaith vs. Lancaster

In their appraisal of the Pullman Porters the authors not only deliberately perverted the facts in the most important and significant industrial struggle ever waged by Negroes, but also placed themselves in the inexcusable position of attempting to destroy the character and reputation of a Negro whose years of activity and devotion to the labor movement has won for him the respect and confidence of workers of every race. It is not true as the authors state that "Frank Crosswaith, an organizer who had been dropped, preferred charges of misuse of funds against Roy Lancaster, the Secretary-Treasurer". Nor is it true that "competent accountants found the charges baseless."

The charges against the Secretary-Treasurer of the Porters' Union were brought by Crosswaith and endorsed by four of the six leaders of the Brotherhood while Crosswaith was still an officer of the organization. No "competent accountant" sifted these charges and no committee exonerated the Secretary-Treasurer. The recent Convention of the Porters' Union dismissed the Secretary-Treasurer on similar charges. Furthermore, the membership is now requesting the return of Crosswaith to the Union in official capacity.

A decent regard for truth should persuade the authors to take immediate steps to revise these chapters, which constitute serious blemishes in a book that in other respects deserves unstinted praise.

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