

# A Champ in The City of Champs

*When the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Affirmative Action Programs, in the Weber case, every civil rights leader jumped into the arena to claim credit. The Black most responsible was Vice President Leon Lynch of the AFL-CIO Steelworkers Union, which carried the case to the high court. Lynch is the union's first Black national officer and a beautiful man."*

*-- Simeon Booker, Washington Bureau Chief, "Jet" magazine, July 26, 1979*

Who is Leon Lynch? What is it like to be the first Black top level officer of the largest industrial union in the AFL-CIO -- the 1.4 million member United Steelworkers of America?

To understand Leon Lynch and his accomplishments, you have to watch him in action.

Lynch is considered by many insiders to be among the one or two most important and influential Black trade unionists in America. Bayard Rustin says, "Leon is the most effective." Vernon Jordan said of Lynch, "Beyond question, he is one of the most important young men in organized labor and still greater things are to be expected of him." After serving in his steelworker post for three years, Leon Lynch, at age 45, has a central role in the Black-labor coalition.

One thing that is important to know about Lynch's position in the Union:

He is not just window dressing -- a role many talented Blacks have been consigned to in major corporations where they serve mainly in public relations and personnel capacities. His strength is bolstered by the fact that he has been elected by tens-of thousands of votes and not selected for his job.

In addition to supervising the USWA Civil Rights Department, in his capacity of Vice President (Human Affairs), Lynch oversees four other major components of the mammoth union -- its 40,000 member office, technical and professional division and organizing, wage and arbitration departments -- where "clear it with Leon" is the watchword.

He also has responsibility for leading the USWA representatives on the committee that implements the 1974 Consent agreement entered into by big steel and the union that established the nation's largest and most comprehensive industrial affirmative action jobs program for Blacks, other minorities and women. To save this successful affirmative action program and others modeled after it, Lynch marshalled the USWA's legal resources to fight and finally win in the Supreme Court, a favorable decision in the landmark Weber case. Speaking for the NAACP, it's Executive Director Benjamin Hooks said, "We deeply appreciate Leon's efforts in opposing Brian Weber's claim of reverse discrimination . . . Leon Lynch is well-known and well-regarded by the civil rights community."

Thus, Leon Lynch always has been in the frontlines of the civil rights struggle from the streets of Selma, Alabama to the law courts in Washington, D.C. This is true, too, of trade union struggles as he demonstrated by his important role in one of labor's recent major battles, the Steelworkers eventually successful effort to organize 18,000 workers, half of them Black, in the Newport News Virginia shipyards.

Today, the USWA Organizing Department, under Lynch's supervision, has set its sights on unionizing one of the world's largest manufacturers of chemicals -- the DuPont Company -- which has 50,000 production and maintenance employees, about 10,000 of whom are Black.

Perhaps the most important thing to know about Leon Lynch, as "Jet" pointed out, is that he is a good man, concerned about his fellow human beings, and he shows it.

It's clear that Lynch's powerful position has gone to his heart, not his head. He uses it to help people outside as well as inside the union. In his efforts to provide all the people in his community with the most modern and best health care -- Steelworker members are already covered by comprehensive medical insurance -- he serves on the board of the Kidney Foundation and United Way in the area around Pittsburgh where he now lives.

Born in a poverty-stricken area in Edwards, Mississippi, Lynch also had deep concern and keen insight into the problems and needs of young people, particularly deprived Blacks and other minority youth, for higher education or job training. This in part stems from his own experience. Turning down a college football scholarship in order to earn money for himself and his family, Lynch attended college at night until receiving his degree in 1967 from Roosevelt University in Chicago.

Perhaps Lynch's greatest satisfaction has been his contribution to forging unity between the labor and civil rights movements in pursuit of common goals -- such as full employment, a higher minimum wage and national health insurance. He has fought within the labor movement, particularly through his membership on the AFL-CIO's highest civil rights body, to end all vestiges of discrimination and through his deep involvement in the NAACP and other civil rights groups in insure that civil rights organizations do not support anti-labor and anti-Black measures such as "Right-to-Work". As a leader of the A. Philip Randolph Institute he has encouraged Black workers to become more involved and influential in their union and the Black community.

For Lynch the struggle for freedom, human rights and economic justice does not stop at the water's edge. He has, to give a few examples, spoken out on behalf of the rights of Soviet dissidents and Chilean trade unionists, denounced South African apartheid and defended the existence of Israel and testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to present the union's position favoring majority rule in Rhodesia.

Lynch did not start from the top. He came out of a steel mill where he was elected to a variety of local union offices. Lynch does not have a lifetime job and cannot rest on his laurels for he, like the other officers, must come up for election every four years. The USWA is one of the very few unions that holds a membership election for officers, a massive exercise in democratic participation. Lynch will win or lose on his own merits.

Why Leon Lynch is a hard runner, he is also a gentle man with a gift for persuasion -- a very difficult combination to beat. That's why his colleagues at the International headquarters in Pittsburgh call him "another champ in the City of Champs."



Overseeing five major departments of the 1.4-million-member United Steelworkers of America, Vice president Leon Lynch has a busy schedule. At his Pittsburgh headquarters office, he goes over workload with his top assistant, J. T. Smith.



United Steelworkers of America Vice President Leon Lynch with President Lloyd McBride and other top officers of the union, leading a march of thousands of Newport News, Virginia shipyard workers, who subsequently won union recognition after a four-year struggle.



Lynch encourages workers on the picket line.