

EDITORIAL

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p e r s p e c t i v e s

Much Labor, Much Pain, a Modest Gain



BY PROFESSOR MCKINLEY BURT

It is interesting that the present nationwide strike by the Teamsters Union against the United Parcel Service has revealed among our younger generation such a lack of knowledge about American labor history, labor law and many key issues concerning the work force and their place in it (AFL origin, National Labor Relations Board, CIO birth, Taft-Hartley).

It is not possible, of course, to improve this situation in such a short space as given here, but we can do this.

To begin, let us expand some of the historical workplace concerns I have introduced in my "book review" selection for this week's "Good Summer Reading," "Black Jacks: African American Seamen In The Age of Sail" (on another page). Their early successes and later trials and tribulations parallel the experiences of white labor--but

only for a time. Be sure to read this review and then get the book.

Since some will find it difficult to believe the advanced, modern concepts of working conditions and benefits that were in circulation before and immediately after the Civil War, I have relied upon citations from that basic source accepted by American Courts and administrative agencies: "Documents of American History," Ed by Henry Steele Commager.

At other times here I have given accounts of the initial cooperation and ease of association between workmen and women of all races after the Civil War. See Commager's Document No. 298. "Preamble of Constitution of the Knights of Labor", Jan. 1, 1878. "Beginning as a society of garment cutters in Philadelphia in 1869, it grew in power and strength until by 1886 it numbered an [incredible] three-quarters of a million members. Its membership included men and women, white and Negro, skilled and unskilled."

Among other things, the Knights of Labor demanded "weekly pay for labor performed the previous week...laws giving mechanics and laborers a first lien on their work for full wages...setting up a process of

'arbitration' in labor disputes...the prohibition of the employment of children in workshops, mines and factories before their fourteenth year...equal pay for both sexes...the reduction of hours of labor to eight per day so that 'laborers may have more time for social enjoyment and intellectual improvement'... Stop the railroads from seizing excess land/timber."

Can you even imagine the fear that swept the ranks of the new capitalists and empire-builders who had envisioned a vast supply of cheap, unorganized labor -- hundreds of thousands of illiterate immigrants arriving yearly and millions of ex-slaves helpless as the "Reconstruction Acts" failed miserably to provide them the promised land and other means. The 'New Capitalist' rushed to support the Ku Klux Klan. See Document 271, 1868.

As the 'Knights of Labor' declined under the pressures we have described, a new force became eminent in the union movement. See "Document 473, constitution of the American Federation of Labor 1932" This certainly differs from original documents I have seen (dated prior to 1900) where all activities and membership were restricted to the trades and were for "white males only".

This document simply mentions that the AFL was organized first in 1881, and reorganized as a national federation in 1886 - and describes structure.

For a fuller and more comprehensive perspective one should see major works on "Trade Unionism or Labor/Unions" as a section in economic books. Particularly, you will find that in 1936 the AFL split in two, the new entity being the "CIO" (Congress of Industrial Relations).

This group was more industry-general oriented than trade-specific, and was not nearly as racist as the AFL. The two groups reunited in 1955, principal unions being the Teamsters, The United Auto Workers and the United Mine Workers.

Today the trauma in the workplace centers around the daily increasing number of part-time workers (nearly 20 million), pensions and benefits. Some American workers are just discovering that many European workers get five weeks vacation each year regardless of years worked. Others have learned that the Kellogg Company (cornflakes) had a 30 hour week from 1933 to 1985. The U.S. Senate passed a 30 hour work week bill in 1933, but it died in the House.

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Charles Washington
Publisher & Editor
Gary Ann Taylor
Business Manager
Yvonne Lerch
Account Executives

Mark Washington
Distribution Manager
Larry J. Jackson, Sr.
Director of Operation
Mike Leighton
Copy Editor

Contributing Writers:

Professor McKinley Burt,
Lee Perlman,
Neil Heilpern

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.,
Portland, Oregon 97211

503-288-0033 • Fax 503-288-0015

Email: Pdxobserv@aol.com

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Civil Rights Journal

More Signs of Hope

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

In the midst of all the depressing news about violence and environmental racism and budget cuts and racial injustice and economic injustice there are always wonderful signs of hope. One of them is in my hometown, Washington, D.C. It is a sign that communities given up on by outsiders can flourish, if only given half a chance.

Right after graduating from college, I returned to Washington to teach. My teaching career was short, but it was spent in one of the Nation's Capital's poorest communities, Anacostia, which was located in the southeast section of the city. In the post Civil War days of the city,

Anacostia, located across the Anacostia River from the rest of the city, was seen as an expansion of the city's boundaries and a pathway to economic expansion as well. Indeed, Frederick Douglass chose to live in a large house on a hill in Anacostia, overlooking the city's expanse.

But as often happens in cities where a river divides one community from another, Anacostia remained an isolated step-child and even today feels far removed from the Washington we all think of. During recent decades, Anacostia found itself the site of illegal and toxic dumping, deteriorated public housing, rising crime and little economic development. But all of that is changing.

A recent videotape, Across the River, narrated by journalist Hedrick Smith, tells the stories of people in the Anacostia community who were determined to turn their community around. Instead of abandoning Anacostia, they chose to stay and fight for the life of this community in which many of them had grown up.

Take the story of the Alliance of Concerned Men, a small group of African American men who had gone to high school together, but who had drifted apart in adulthood. Propelled to do something about the alarming rise of young black men with no positive role models in the home, these men decided they could do something about it themselves. They

have established relationships with children and young men; providing affection, good advice, prayer and tough love.

Or take the story of the Public Service Academy, a school within a school at Anacostia High School. It has a 94% graduation rate and represents a chance for its students, many of whom come from troubled homes. An integral part of the program of this small school is the public service which the students are required to do and which often leads to summer or after-school paid jobs for them.

These are inspiring people who have something to teach us all. What can we do to reclaim our children and our communities?

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

Civil Rights Journal Workers' Rights And Strawberries

When we eat that wonderful summertime fruit known as strawberries, we don't often think of those whose hard work makes our enjoyment possible. But the reality is that thousands of workers must do the backbreaking work to harvest the fragile crop.

They work in difficult conditions, for low wages and are now experiencing a crisis which needs public support.

As public demand for strawberries has increased in the last three decades, strawberry production has increased sixfold.

Today it is a billion-dollar industry. About 80 percent of the nation's strawberries are grown in California and nearly half of them in one region in that state. Almost all of the pickers are

Mexican or Mexican American.

The strawberry industry is different from most other farm industries. California growers in one region number some 270 and range from very large farms to those which are thousands of acres in size. Every grower operates under an exclusive contract with one of eight shippers or "coolers," who form the economic core of the strawberry industry.

Growers work under contract to these coolers, who set quality guidelines and production timeliness and set standards for such things as crop care and pesticide use. Smaller farms are particularly vulnerable and technically each farm is an independent business.

These factors have made it difficult for strawberry workers to or-

ganize for better working conditions and pay. A decade ago the average hourly wage for strawberry workers was \$9.10 in current dollars, but now the average has dropped to \$6.11. Strawberry workers report that they were paid the same wage, \$5.75 per hour, for seven years in a row. But the actual wages paid to an individual worker can vary dramatically when hourly rates are combined with rates per tray harvested.

In some years, growers have promised higher wages to workers who returned the next year, only to have their incentives for higher production cut.

Working conditions for the strawberry workers are difficult at best. On hot days the company may provide ice in the drinking water for the pickers,

but then charge them for the ice. With the work requiring them to constantly bend over, pickers are required to fill three trays an hour, but they are sometimes pushed to produce six to eight trays. In some cases toilets are not readily available and women complain of sexual harassment and abuse.

Then there is the question of exposure to pesticides.

The pesticides used on strawberries often cause headaches, vomiting and rashes in workers, but they receive little or no information about which pesticide is being used. Workers who become ill from the pesticides are sometimes accused of drinking too much the night before or are told they are suffering from food poisoning. Legal and health care advice regarding these issues often are unavailable

or limited to English only.

Housing conditions for strawberry workers are often substandard. Some live in camps, where there are low wooden and concrete buildings in the middle of the fields. Each building includes four apartment, which are rented out by bedrooms. Small children living in the camps are exposed to the pesticides sprayed in the nearby fields.

Over the past few years the United Farm Workers have attempted to organize the strawberry workers, as they had the grape pickers in the past. Strawberry workers, who work for an eight-month season, are not protected by the National Labor Relations Act and are thus at the mercy of the growers and the coolers. Those workers who have been seen as union support-

ers or organizers often just have not been rehired. Moreover, where union elections were won, growers simply plowed under the crops, terminated workers or selectively shut down operations rather than negotiate a UFW contract.

We who enjoy the fruit can not just take for granted the food that we pick up in our supermarket. We must raise questions about rights of the strawberry workers to have safe working and living conditions and adequate pay for a difficult job.

(Write to Driscoll Strawberry Associates (the largest U.S. cooler) at P.O. Box 50045, Watsonville, CA 95077-5045 and ask what are they doing to ensure that workers are not harassed for union activity and what they are doing about growers

This Way For Black Empowerment

BY DR. LENORA FULANI

Since President Clinton's signing of the welfare reform act - the one his policy advisors told him to veto while his "score-points-at-all-costs" political advisors told him to sign -- moving welfare recipients from public assistance to jobs has become a government focus. In his State of the Union address in February, Clinton called on corporate America to join in creating new partnerships with government to evolve welfare-to-work programs. Things don't appear to be going so well.

Recently, a front page Wall Street Journal article reported on what it

called the "mixed results" of one such program undertaken by Sprint and AT&T in Kansas City, Missouri. These efforts -- loudly trumpeted by the White House at the beginning -- have succeeded in placing a total of seven workers at Sprint, one of whom was let go after the first week. AT&T hired one person whom they fired in two weeks.

These statistics do not bode well. And as you might expect, various explanations have begun surfacing. One corporate insider stated that the programs were ineffective because corporate America wasn't "ready."

A supervisor at Sprint said, "There are welfare recipients who choose to succeed and those who choose not to." Can the same be said of presidents?

With the success rate so low, a debate has arisen as to which is the best method to effect welfare-to-work. Once camp argues that you must train people before placing them in private sector jobs. The other presents the "job first" argument, where welfare recipients receive a one week crash course oriented toward employment basics, like getting to work on time, and not on job skills. This is

the approach that is gaining popularity with policy makers because it is cheaper and because "quick fix" statistics can be used to demonstrate how effectively the program is working.

However, there is no quick fix here. The U.S. economy has been structured over the long haul to be an economy without full employment. While the range of unemployment fluctuates between 3% and 7% depending on various factors, there has always been -- by design -- a sector of Americans relegated to being unemployed. This economic phenomenon

has historically helped, among other things, to keep wages down and, thereby, profits up.

The welfare and unemployment programs adopted during and after the Great Depression which institutionalized unemployment were based on policy makers' acceptance of this macro-economic feature of the U.S. economy. Not surprisingly an entire culture of being both unemployed and unemployable has evolved. Schools educate -- but not everyone -- because unemployability is desirable. Welfare must discourage self-reliance so that the demand for jobs

and job training from within the permanent underclass will be muted. This institutionalized culture cannot and will not be overcome by "job-first" or even by "training-first" approaches.

You cannot take a society -- business and the poor alike -- socialized over lifetimes for intractable unemployment and then, because the political climate now opposes Big government spending create a few programs that will suddenly transform the long-term unemployed into reliable workers.