

NOTE ON

THE ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE NEGRO IN THE UNITED STATES

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THE NEGRO WORKER in the United States is experiencing a major crisis of unemployment. Negroes now constitute a very large part of the hard core permanently unemployed group in American society. In northern industrial centers one of every three Negro workers were unemployed sometime during the past two years and a very high proportion exhausted all of their unemployment compensation benefits. More than fifty percent of all of the unskilled Negro workers in the country were unemployed for substantial periods during 1961-62 and it is evident that the unskilled Negro worker, forty-five years of age and over who lost his job, will never again work at productive gainful employment.

It is important to note that the rate of Negro unemployment during the past four years was almost constantly two-and-a-half times greater than the comparable rate for white workers. All of the available evidence indicates that this condition continues and may even become more serious in the near future. Thus, what has been a mild or temporary recession for the white worker is a major crisis of unemployment for the Negro wage earner.

Of great significance is the fact that since 1952, the gap between the average income of Negro and white workers has been increasing. By December of 1952, the Negro medium wage was approaching sixty percent of the white workers' average income. Since that time, however, the differential between the income of white and Negro workers has been growing steadily greater.

Many of the gains made by Negro workers at the end of the Second World War and in the post-war economic expansion have been vir-

tually wiped out, especially in heavy industry. As a result of automation and other technological changes in the economy unskilled and semi-skilled job occupations are disappearing at the rate of 35,000 a week or nearly two million a year. It is precisely in these job classifications that there has been a disproportionate concentration and displacement of Negro workers. At the present time the economic well-being of the entire Negro community is directly and adversely affected by the generations of enforced over-concentration of Negro wage earners in the unskilled and marginal sectors of the industrial economy.

As many traditional sources of Negro employment rapidly come to an end as the result of automation and other technological changes in the economy, Negroes must, of course, look to those areas of the economy where there are expanding job markets. Among the most important of these is the building and construction trades. However, here where there should be new employment opportunities for colored workers, the old-line AFL craft union tradition of racial exclusion and segregation is a major barrier in securing employment opportunities for Negro workers.

Gunnar Myrdal in the *American Dilemma* makes the following comment, which has almost as much validity today as it did in 1942, "The discriminatory attitude of the organized building crafts is the more significant at the present time, since they dominate the American Federation of Labor—a circumstance which is behind the reluctance of this organization to take any definite actions against exclusionist and segregationist practices."*

In the ten-year period from 1950-1960, in the State of New York, the increase of Negro participation in building trades apprenticeship training programs rose only from 1.5% to 2%. In most of these programs the role of the labor union is decisive because the trade union usually determines who is admitted into the training programs and, therefore, who is admitted into the union.

Recent studies clearly indicate that no significant advances have been made by Negroes into those craft union apprenticeship programs which have historically excluded non-whites. The railroad craft unions as well as the railroad operating brotherhoods remain adamant in their opposition to Negro craftsmen and bar apprenticeship opportunities to Negro youth.

Almost equally exclusive are the printing trades unions with excep-

* *American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal, Harper Bros., New York, 1944, p. 1102.

tions being found in some areas of the Assistant Printing Pressmen's Union and the Lithographers Union. Open access to plumbing and pipe fitting apprenticeships controlled by the Plumbers Union is a rare experience for a young Negro in the North as well as in the South. Similarly Negro youth are almost completely excluded from apprenticeship programs controlled by other building trade unions. Thus, the anti-Negro tradition of the old-line AFL craft unions remains intact.

It is necessary to note that in many communities where the public schools are now integrated, such as in East St. Louis, Illinois, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, trade unions continue to resist changes in the status of Negroes bitterly and, in fact, lag behind progress by other institutions in the community. In both East St. Louis and Tulsa, Negro children attend integrated schools during the day but their parents attend segregated union meetings at night, if they are admitted into labor unions at all.

We believe the record makes all too clear that in the seven and a half years since the AFL-CIO merger, the national labor organization has failed to eliminate the broad pattern of discrimination in its affiliated unions. On occasion there has been the admission of one or two Negroes as token compliance with state and municipal fair employment practices laws, as in Milwaukee and Cleveland, but this is essentially a limited and strategic adjustment to community pressure.

There has been a significant absence of leadership within organized labor on civil rights matters. As for the Federation's Civil Rights Department, its performance would seem to indicate that its major function is to create a liberal public relations image rather than to attack directly the broad pattern of anti-Negro practices. Racism in organized labor is essentially based on powerful vested interests that have been deeply institutionalized and sanctioned by tradition.

A continuation of this pattern will cause even greater crises in the years to come unless fundamental and rapid changes take place in the mobility and diversity of Negro labor in the United States. Negroes may be slowly winning the broad legal and social struggles for full citizenship rights but are currently losing the battle for economic equality and job opportunity.