

CORE - LATOR

FIGHT "BACKLASH" RUSTIN'S SPEECH TO THE PACKINGHOUSE WORKERS

CORE has received permission to reprint the speech made by Mr. Bayard Rustin at the Convention of The United Packinghouse, Food & Allied Workers in May, 1964. Because of limitations of space we have had to cut this speech. All deletions are indicated by 3 dots. In order to preserve context, we have inserted a few words. All words inserted or changed by us appear in brackets.

ON CIVIL RIGHTS

...I want to go back to the founding of this country, because there has never been a moment in America's history that the white people have not been in serious and deep trouble over an unanswered question. That question has been, from 1776 until today, what do we do with the Negro.

...As a child in school I was taught that the American Declaration of Independence was a great and noble document. It is a good document but one could not describe that as noble which got us into a moral trap from the beginning; for the founding fathers were talking about all men being created equal, but they meant white men only. ...

THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

...We permit[ted] two economic systems to develop in this country which ultimately has to war, one upon the other. And the reason there were two economic systems is that one which developed in the South was built on slavery; the one which was built in the North was built on free labor.



BAYARD RUSTIN

Therefore, we lost more American men, white men, in the most senseless war between brothers in this country; but that war sprang from the fact that one of these economic systems was built on slavery. ...

[Then] in 1876 one man [was] elected President of the United States, but, because he would not promise to keep the Negro in a new slavery, they stole the election from him and gave it to another man.

[And again] you have World War I in which every available man [was] needed to defend the nation, but Negroes who were willing to defend the nation [had] to fight for the right to die; and the boys in the NAACP spent a year in Washington before Negroes could lose their blood to defend the nation. (CONT. 96)

RUSTIN...

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IN DEEPEST TROUBLE

I tell you these things, my friends, because it is not the Negro who is in deepest trouble, it is the nation. It is the nation because that same system, the same political system, has produced for all of us a monstrous condition.

Now, if there is any white person here who believes in medicare for people over 65, is he aware that he cannot get that medicare for his mother until the civil rights revolution is won?

If there is anyone here who is in a poor school district where the federal government should be giving millions of dollars to help children live in and understand an industrial, mechanized, automated society; is that same man aware that so long as the Dixiecrats control the Senate, which is to say they control it because Negroes cannot vote, these men will not give ... federal aid to school children of Mississippi and Alabama, white children first of all, who need better education. ...

Those are the men in our Senate who are anti-Catholic, and anti-Jewish, anti-labor, anti-Negro, and who are opposed to all social insurances for whites; but their power derives from the economic and social position of the American Negro.

By definition and by mathematics, more white people are in trouble until this problem is solved than Negroes, because there are simply more of them.

The civil rights revolution, therefore, is not merely for the uplift of the American Negro because the American Negro cannot be uplifted unless the entire society is uplifted. He cannot find work when there is not work. Therefore, there must be work for all or he will not get it.

Therefore, the civil rights revolution is a revolt against the contradictions of this society. ...

The Negro people are attempting to come into the total American citizenship in a period of automation, of a declining economy, and this makes a profound difference. ...

The use of machines means that the Negro is facing not only discrimination and segregation, but machines. ...

There are twice as many young Negroes on the street now because we were late comers. We didn't have skills, and the machine has crippled us; but the machine is also crippling the trade union movement. ...

Now, the integration of progressive forces is needed. That is to say the labor unions, the churches, the minority groups, the intellectuals and the poor.

Not the Negroes alone, nor labor alone, nor the poor alone, but these groups, together, must find a political program around which they can wrap themselves to deal with the contradictions in this society, and the rights of minorities including the Negro.

This is necessary if we merely look for a moment at a couple of interesting items. ... [with regard to the voting rights of Negroes in the South]; we can no longer afford, in the United States of America in 1964, a one-party system to exist which brutalizes more white people in Mississippi than it does Negroes.

It must be swept away in order that democracy shall exist in Mississippi; for until true democracy exists there, there cannot be the kind of economic competition which will mean that that land can be lifted into its own.

What is the meaning, under the circumstances, of the passage of the Civil Rights Bill? Gov. Wallace [knew] very well what he [was] doing, going up and down the country trying to defeat the bill.

But, friends, do not believe that Mr. Wallace [was] fundamentally interested in defeating that bill to harm Negroes. That [was] not his objective.

He want[ed] to defeat that bill because to pass that bill, to create cloture for the first time since 1908 in the Senate, [meant] the beginning of the end of the oligarchy in Alabama and Mississippi which has brutalized both white and black.

...The white people of the South never truly have had an opportunity to do what they honestly want to do because of these political oligarchies.

...[We] should realize that the abolitionist movement did not begin in Massachusetts. The abolitionist movement began in Georgia and South Carolina where whites originally wanted the Negroes free, because they were like you - they did not want to have to work and make a miserable living beside slavery.

...At the end of the Civil War a group of white and Negro workers almost created a revolution in the South; and ...it took the power of several southern states to break that interracial labor movement.

Now, I come to a very important question which many white people have. They say to me, "Mr. Rustin, why are Negroes out in the streets? Why are they stirring things up? ..."

I want to remind [you] that from the beginning of our history most progressive social action began in the streets and not in legislatures, and the reason for this was very simple.

USE YOUR RIGHT TO VOTE!!!
VOTE NO ON BIGOTRY!!!
VOTE NO ON 14 !!!

LAW AND COMMUNITY

Law does not precede community. Law is only useful where there is a community spirit to enforce it; and where the legislature does not act, and will not act, Americans have always gone into the street.

That little thing that took place in Boston, that began our history, was not a group of Bostonians sitting in a room talking about how bad King George was.

They marched into the streets. They took this tea and they dumped it into Boston Harbor.

In 1935 they passed the Wagner Act which should have given the labor movement the opportunity to flower overnight. Did it? It did not. What did it take?

It took 1937, for I can remember, the sit-down strikes, the taking over of factories. Then, and only then, when the masses of laboring people had gone into the streets, did the Wagner Act have meaning.

Let us take the right of women to vote. I can scarcely remember this, but I do know that my grandmother was one of them.

She chained herself to the White House. She went with women and lay in the White House on visiting days.

HOW WOMEN WON THE VOTE

These women were arrested and beaten and dragged to jail, but they created the community of spirit which made it possible for women to vote in this country.

I ask you if this has happened with labor, if it has happened with the rights of women to vote, if it happened with our founding fathers, will not Negroes now be called super-Americans because they go into the streets to fight for democracy.

Now, lest there be confusion, I would like to outline already what we Negroes going into the street has meant for America - has meant for white people in America, not only in moral terms but in very concrete political terms, what the movement of Negroes in the street has already contributed. ...

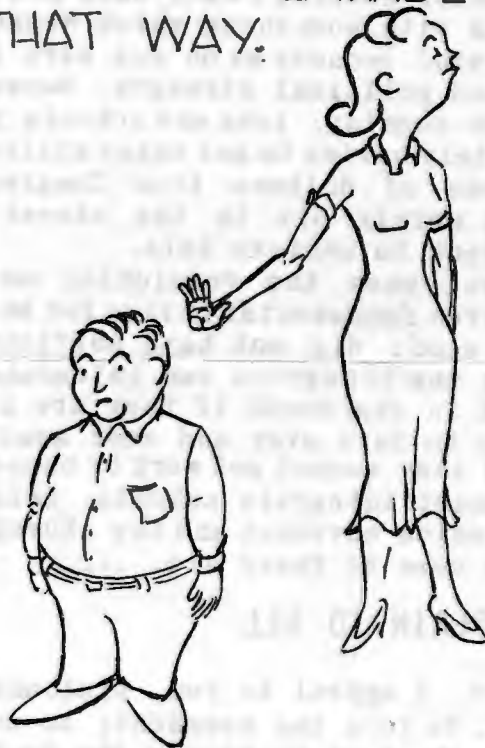
What I know is that by Negroes going into the streets in America we have anticipated the Pope, we have made an Ecumenical movement here.

Protestants, Catholics and Jews, for the first time in American history, [moved] together to Washington around the Civil Rights Bill - more Protestants, Catholics and Jewish religious leaders than labor leaders.

The fact that the Negro movement has put them in motion means that, if there ever came an assault on labor in this country, they are now prepared by the habit of moving, to go out to defend labor and the poor. ... [and] it is the movement of the Negro poor who have begun what I hope will be a great and mighty war on poverty.

[Then] in 1960, when McCarthyism was so tight that not a student on the American campus dared to have a political debate, when the Negro students in North Carolina started sit-ins, by the power of their

DON'T MIX THE TALL RACE WITH THE SHORT RACE. IF GOD HAD WANTED EVERYONE THE SAME SIZE, HE WOULD HAVE MADE THEM THAT WAY.



WOULD YOU WANT YOUR DAUGHTER TO MARRY A SHORTY?

SUPPORT SEGREGATION
HALT MIDDLESIZEISM

deeds and personalities, they forced white students in almost every college to organize politically on the campus.

Therefore, I say that the Negro movement saved the American campus from the death of McCarthyism.

You hear of the rent strikes in New York. ... Do you know the true meaning of the rent strike? The Negro movement through the rent strike is forcing the courts of this country to put into law that human rights are superior to property rights.

... [Finally] we are living with a 19th Century school system in which most of your children are not being educated to live in an age of automation.

The Negro people interested in integration ... discovered that they could not move merely for integration, they had to move for quality schools. [Therefore] if and when we get quality schools in this nation, ... you may thank the Negro movement in the streets for making your problem clear. ...

A CLEARER PICTURE

Now, I have told you what I think Negro revolt has meant. I would like now to pass on to a more important point.

When the Negro struggle was purely in the South and fundamentally about public accommodations, the problem was very simple - Montgomery about the right to ride in a bus; the sit-ins about the right to eat; then the freedom riders about the right to ride from place to place. ...

When the revolt moved to the North, and the Negro people attacked the problems of jobs, schools, housing, they were no longer dealing with something which Negroes alone can win; because we do not have the economic and political strength; because if you touch housing, jobs and schools you are ultimately having to get these millions and billions of dollars from Congress. You cannot merely sit in the street or climb a crane to achieve this.

Therefore, when the revolution moved to these three fundamental things for which the Negro alone did not have sufficient power (for any 20 Negroes can integrate a restaurant in the South if they are prepared to go to jail over and over again), they found they cannot get work or houses, or they cannot integrate schools, unless the trade union movement and the churches and others come to their aid. ...

EXPLAIN TO ALL

Therefore, I appeal to you, profoundly and deeply, to join the movement; to come into it; to stand up to people who do not understand; to explain to them what truly is happening, that it is their child - not black children - first their own children who are being crippled.

Now, if this does not happen I would like to tell you what I think is going to happen to labor. When men do not have work they are seldom interested in principles. ... More and more poor whites and poor Negroes will come out against everything that the trade union movement stands for, unless the trade union movement is prepared to embrace them.

You will find them coming out for right-to-work laws. You will find them coming out for open shop. You will find them coming out against seniority, not because they believe in opposing it, but because they are so desperate without work.

That's what you and I can fight together. Alone we cannot fight. ...

What we need and what we must have now is black men, white men and brown men who recognize that there is no freedom for any man, no dignity for any man unless he has a job and can support himself.

A PROGRAM

Therefore, I propose to you a ... program.

Number one: since private industry in this country either cannot, or will not, put all men back to work, we must insist that the government, the public sector of this economy, become an employer, and that any man who wants to work ought to have it.

Number two: not one of your sons, dear friends, not one of them, not a single mother's son today in the United States knows what to plan and train for in the face of automation.

Practically all the young people in school today who learn to be typists will not be needed as typists by their junior year in high school, so somebody scratches his head and says we will make medical technicians out of them.

But then we discover that four years from now we won't need any more medical technicians, it is all being automated. ... Until there is planning in this economy we cannot know what to train young people for, and we must insist that there be planning.

Number three: we must have a public works program which involves billions of dollars in order to put people back to work now, not next week, not a week from next Thursday.

People say to me, "Mr. Rustin, what are you going to do with the Negroes who come out of Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama? They are 30 years of age, 40 years of age, they have three children, and they have a third grade education."

I know precisely what we can do with them, we can put them to work building roads, schools, hospitals, parks and numbers of other things. ...

SPIRITUAL REVOLT

Let me conclude by saying, my friends, that the actually unique thing about the civil rights revolt is spiritual.

Where else in the history of these United States have you found a leadership which urges on the people non-violence? Where there are dogs, cattle prods, fire hoses, churches bombed, children killed in church, and yet every responsible Negro leader says to the Negro people, "Do not return evil for evil, turn the other cheek. It is hard for you to do, but you must do it because we are not here to make war on white people; we are ultimately to live in peace with them."

Sure, you can have a Mau Mau in Kenya because all the British are going home anyhow. You can get away with it. In Algeria you can drive the French out with guns, because you are a majority and they are a minority; but in this country the black man is a minority.

But the people who believe in progress and good and justice in the trade union movement, in the churches, amongst the intellectuals, amongst the poor - it is our grasping their hands that makes us a part of the majority for progress and good will.

I, therefore, have pledged and pledged again that although I may be arrested 23 times more - put on a chain gang again - I hope that Almighty God will make it possible for me honestly to say I would not want to harm one hair of one head of one white person, for I am dedicated not to injury, but to overcoming injury with decency.