

Progressivism in the CIO

With the Roosevelt era of the 1930s, and the passage of the Wagner Act, some leaders within the ranks of the AFL began to reject the discriminatory policies of the majority of the international union leaders. It became obvious to others that if the international unions continued to exclude blacks, employers would have little trouble in recruiting strikebreakers from the excluded class. Under the rising pressure of Negro protest, a number of AFL leaders launched a series of organizing campaigns in the mass-production industries, and ultimately formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

The resulting AFL-CIO rivalry caused a schism in the ranks of labor—one which led the CIO to concern itself primarily with the organization of the steel, auto, mining, packinghouse, and rubber industries, all of which employed large numbers of blacks. It has been said that no other CIO leader better understood “the importance of equalitarian racial policies for successful unionism than John L. Lewis of

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the United Mine Workers.” In this union, the common economic and occupational hardships endured by all minimized, although they did not totally eliminate, racial differences among members, even those in the South. Lewis’ policies in this area were soon followed by Philip Murray, president of the steel workers, and Walter Reuther, head of the auto workers. CIO policies ultimately prompted Thurgood Marshall to declare that “the program (of this organization) has become a Bill of Rights for Negro labor in America.”

These new unions broke sharply with traditional racial practices. Segregationist constitutions and bylaws were erased. Locals admitted blacks, and in a few cases, integrated seniority lines. Negroes were elected to executive positions within locals. Some new unions gave priority to lifting wage scales for low-paying jobs, most of which were filled by Negroes, and to training and upgrading “underemployed” black workers. One such union was the Transport Workers Union in New York, which negotiated substantial wage increases for change clerks and saw to the promotion of black workers to skilled, well-paying white-collar positions.

Unfortunately, such achievements were exceptions that proved the rule of discrimination throughout America’s labor movement, especially in craft locals (e.g., cooks and electricians) and hall-oriented locals (e.g., seafarers and lumber and sawmill workers). In the South, the black’s position in unions was actually weakened when, in reaction to the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision, segregationist groups formed alliances with union locals.

Far from being conducted in an aura of secrecy, the cooperation of Southern segregationists and union leaders was widely publicized. In many localities, notices appeared in local papers stating that the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klan would be holding a meeting in a union hall.

In 1960, six years after the desegregation decision, the NAACP charged that the “Ku Klux Klan and White Citizen Council Forces, especially in Alabama, have moved into many local unions and made them, in effect, virtual extensions of segregationist organizations.” Such union-segregationist

alliances were apparent to Southern blacks who were understandably more concerned with the situation in their locality than with pro-civil rights declarations from national union headquarters. As a result, Southern blacks often voted in a bloc, in NLRB elections, against union certification. In some cases, black votes defeated major organizational campaigns. One such election, still discussed in union circles, was held at the South Wire Company, Carrollton, Georgia, where 45 Negro workers out of several hundred are believed to have voted en masse against certification of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. The union lost by 8 votes. At the Savannah River Atomic Energy Project in Aiken, South Carolina, 600 black workers out of 3,100 tipped an election against certification of 17 metal trades.

The Merger

It is against this background of erratic progress and racist reaction that the AFL and CIO merged in late 1955. The elimination of racism within unions was announced as a major goal of the new giant union. Its constitution pledged that the AFL-CIO would encourage all workingmen "without regard to race, creed, color or national origin or ancestry to share equally in the benefits of union organization." A Civil Rights Committee was established to achieve these goals.

This pledge was, of course, applauded by civil rights and liberal organizations. But five years later, in a report on racism within organized labor, the NAACP charged that "the national labor organization has failed to eliminate the broad pattern of racial discrimination and segregation," and that "efforts to eliminate discriminatory practices within trade unions have been piecemeal and inadequate and usually the result of protest."

There was considerable evidence to support these charges. Despite the exemplary declarations accompanying the merger, the AFL-CIO shortly thereafter admitted two unions, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the Brotherhood

of Railroad Trainmen, at a time when they had racist clauses in their constitutions.

The AFL-CIO also ignored defiance of state anti-discrimination orders by segregated locals. In April 1957, the New York State Commission against Discrimination ordered the merger of the all-white George N. Harrison Lodge and the all-black Friendship Lodges of the Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks. The white union disobeyed the order and the lodges remained segregated for several years.

The AFL-CIO also refrained from pressure or comment when member unions went to court to defend exclusion of blacks. In 1958, after elimination of a "Caucasian only" clause from its constitution, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen successfully defended continued exclusion of blacks in a suit brought by Negro firemen in a Cincinnati Federal Court.

Leading black trade unionists observed that the AFL-CIO could expel unions for corruption or Communist ties, but not for violating civil right laws and policies.

Infighting between black and union leaders intensified in the late 1950s. The NAACP brought a number of suits under state fair employment practice laws to force admission of blacks to unions. Activists attacked labor's historic gods. In a scathing article in *Commentary* magazine, Herbert Hill, labor director of the NAACP, charged, with some telling evidence to support him, that Samuel Gompers, after struggling with some early idealism, became a racist who despised blacks and hated Asians. Hill also charged that the East St. Louis and Chicago black pogroms of 1917 and 1919

were incited and executed by white unionists who feared the use of Negro strike breakers, and that Gompers defended the rioters in a debate with Theodore Roosevelt.

The AFL-CIO promised it would try to eliminate discrimination from “within the house of labor.” George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, stated that discrimination only survived in the labor movement as a “bootleg product, sneaked in by subterfuge.”

Meany added that those “that practice discrimination know that its days are numbered.” But other leaders of the federation argued that it could not compel locals to adhere to the national union’s egalitarian policies.