

Some Experiences in Organizing the Negro Workers

By EARL BROWDER

IN view of the tremendous tasks facing the revolutionary movement in organizing the Negro workers together with the white workers in the revolutionary unions, it is of value to secure as much knowledge as possible of past experiences in this direction. Especially is this clear when we realize that past experience bear out recent events in the South, proving that "racial prejudice" is an artificial thing deliberately cultivated by the employers, and that it can quickly be broken down, and the white and Negro workers can be, and have been, mobilized in fraternal working class solidarity for common struggle.

The following story of events in Chicago in 1919, was furnished to me by Jack Johnstone, at that time secretary of the Stock Yards Labor Council, in the form of his personal recollections and in newspaper clippings and leaflets.

The race riots in Chicago, in 1919, were organized by the white bourgeoisie, in an effort to enforce an unofficial segregation of Negroes who were being drawn from the South into industry in large numbers, especially in the stock yards. They took place at a time of sharp class struggles all over the world—the time of the first German revolution, and the slaughter of the German workers by "Bloody Noske" the socialist; of the imperialist intervention against the Soviet Union; of the general strikes of Winnipeg and Seattle, in America, and the great movements of the steel workers, miners, and packing house workers. The masses of workers in the American Federation of Labor were, in spite of and against their bureaucratic leaders, developing militant struggles. The race riots of Chicago were a part of the counter-offensive of the capitalist class against the rising tide of working class revolt.

In July, 1919, the employers of Chicago instigated and encouraged a movement to drive the Negro workers out of certain residential sections by violence, making use of bombing of Negro homes to terrorize them and drive them into "Negro districts." The aim was to impress upon the Negro workers that in the North, as well as in the South, from which they had recently come, they must "know their place," the place of "loyal" slaves of white masters; to establish the dogma of racial inferiority, with lower

wages for the Negro workers than for the whites, with worse unsanitary housing conditions; to divide the white and Negro workers; to imbue the white workers with a false feeling of superiority, and whip them into mob violence against the Negroes. This aim, a classical example of imperialist methods of dealing with oppressed peoples and the working class, was carried through by the bourgeoisie in many cities, above all in Chicago.

That this movement was consciously supported by the ruling capitalist circles, is amply demonstrated by an extract from an editorial in the *Chicago Tribune*, July 2, 1919, which said:

“Regardless of the validity of the claims of the whites, it is a matter of fact that these claims do exist, the whites do resent the appearance of colored people in white neighborhoods and the resentment does, whether justly or not, work a change in the neighborhood feeling and in property values. We may as well look the facts squarely in the face and we ask the colored people to consider them.”

The ringleaders in the capitalist conspiracy were the Packing House capitalists (the “Packers,” for short). The largest part of the Negroes were in the packing houses, and the riots were designed to destroy the unions. For months prior to the outbreak, the Stock Yards Labor Council had recognized the serious threat directed against it by the situation being deliberately created by the employers, who had their agents working among both white and Negro workers.

WHITE AND NEGRO AGENTS OF THE BOSSES

First in importance of the bosses' agents among the workers were the officials of the A. F. of L. craft unions affiliated to the Stock Yards Labor Council; these constituted less than 10 per cent. of the total membership, the main bulk of which was butcher workmen, or unskilled workers, whose union took in Negroes on a basis of full equality. These craft union officials, by their discrimination against the Negro workers, furnished the basis for the agitation among the Negroes against all unions with white workers, even though the Stock Yards Labor Council organized all Negroes, of whatever craft, into the general organization when they were excluded by the craft unions.

The Negro agents of the bosses were not from among the workers. They were such elements as the secretary of the Negro Y. M. C. A., and two Negro aldermen of the second ward, who were on the payroll of the Packers. One of them, Alderman L. B. Anderson, appeared before the government Food Administrator, Alschuler, ostensibly on behalf of the Negroes, but in reality for the Packers, to oppose the recognition of the Union. The

Packers, through their paid Negro agents, even went so far as to organize a Negro company union, which issued the following proclamation:

"GET A SQUARE DEAL WITH YOUR OWN RACE"

"Time has come for Negroes to do now or never. Get together and stick together is the call of the Negro. Like all other races make your own way, other races have made their unions for themselves. They are not going to give it to you because you join his union. Make a union of your own race; union is strength. Join the American Unity Packers Union of the Stockyards, this will give you a card to work at any trade, or as a common laborer, as a steamfitter, etc. A card from this union will let you work in Kansas City, Omaha, and St. Louis, or any other city where the Five Packers have packinghouses.

"This union does not believe in strikes. We believe all differences between labor and capital can be arbitrated. Strikes is our last motive if any at all."

"GET IN LINE FOR A GOOD JOB."

(Signed) "American Unity Packers Union of the Stockyards."

The Stock Yards Labor Council opposed the agents of the bosses with a program of organization of the Negroes, with a guarantee of equal rights. Inter-racial dances and other social affairs were organized. Any Negro barred from one or other of the A. F. of L. craft unions, could join any local of the Butcher Workers. A Negro was elected vice-president of the Stock Yards Labor Council, and there were seven paid Negro organizers, who were: Bell and Robinson, two Negro organizers from the United Mine Workers; John Riley, an engineer; A. K. Foote, vice-president of the Council; a steamfitter, barred from the steamfitters' union; Robert Bedford and I. H. Bratton, butchers; and a Negro woman (name unavailable at time of writing) from the Women's Trade Union League.

The Stock Yards Labor Council carried on a constant struggle with small craft unions which barred Negroes, to force them to abandon all discrimination. This struggle for equal rights culminated during the race riots, in the adoption of a resolution by the Council, expelling from the Council all unions which refused to accept the Negroes on a basis of full equality.

THE STRUGGLE IN JULY AND AUGUST

It was under these conditions, plus the atmosphere created by the race riots in Washington and other cities, that the Stock Yards Labor Council decided in June, 1919, to intensify the campaign to draw all Negroes into the Union. Street-corner organization meetings were organized. The Packers used mounted police to

ride into these meetings and break them up. The Stock Yards Labor Council called a protest strike, which was only settled by the workers winning the right to speak on the streets, and by the removal from the district of the police officer in charge of the aggressions, Captain Caughlin. Thousands of Negro and white workers joined the Union. The climax of this campaign was to be a parade of Negro and white workers, through the Negro neighborhood, on July 6, which was nicknamed the "checkerboard parade."

At the last moment before the parade took place, the police issued an order forbidding it, on the demand of the Packers and the Negro politicians, on the grounds that it might provoke a conflict. The Stock Yards Labor Council made one of its serious mistakes by failing to defy this order of the police; instead, whites and Negroes paraded separately, coming together in a joint demonstration in Beutner playground at LaSalle and 33rd Street. There took place an enthusiastic demonstration of solidarity of 25,000 to 30,000 Negro and white workers.

On July 27th, the employers played their trump card. White agents, with faces blackened to appear as Negroes, set fire to and burned a block of houses inhabited by white stockyard workers, mostly Poles. Immediately the employers threw a large force of militia, police, and deputy sheriffs, into the stock yards, and their agents spread among the white workers to incite them to violence against the Negroes.

The Stock Yards Labor Council called a mass meeting, which was held at 50th Street and Oakley, attended by 30,000 white workers. The meeting unanimously and enthusiastically declared its solidarity with the Negroes. Even the capitalist *Herald-Examiner*, reporting the meeting, was forced to give the keynote of the meeting as contained in the speech of J. W. Johnston, secretary of the Council, who said:

"He (the Negro) has the same privileges in organized labor as you have. It is up to you to protect him. The non-union Negro is being brought into the yards by the Packers, he must be brought into the Union. There is no color line in this Union, and any man who attempts to draw one violates the Union code and has no right to protection."

The meeting voted to strike, demanding the withdrawal of all the armed forces from the stock yards. This strike-vote was endorsed by the 4,000 Negroes in the Union. White and Negro workers went on strike together, and stayed out until their demand was met.

The presence of militia, police, and deputy sheriffs in the stock yards was for the purpose of covering the organized assault made by

the Packers' agents upon the Negroes, and to participate in the pogrom started by these agents. All that had gone before, bombing of Negro homes, the killing of two Negroes early in July, was but a prelude. The militia and police were used to disarm the Negroes; while the white pogromists were given a free hand to kill Negroes. There were 2,800 police and 3,000 militiamen thrown into the Negro districts. Not one white man was killed or wounded by police and militia, but at least a half of the Negro casualty list were killed or wounded by the police and militia. In spite of this one-sided struggle the Negroes defended themselves exceptionally well.

The Stock Yards Labor Council held its 35,000 white and Negro workers on strike, in solidarity with the Negro workers, demanding the withdrawal of the armed forces, and the return of the Negroes to the Yards under the sole protection of the Union. This sustained demonstration of inter-racial solidarity played a large part in bringing the riots to a close. During the whole time, no considerable number of white workers in the stock yards were involved in the assaults upon the Negroes; on the contrary, the 35,000 organized white and Negro workers stood solidly together—the one bright spot on a black page of American history, the race riots—carnivals of murder—organized throughout America in 1919 by the capitalist class.

Acting from working class instinct, without revolutionary theory and therefore with many blunders, yet the Stock Yards Labor Council had made a real contribution to the development of revolutionary trade unionism in the United States, on one of its most important problems, the organization of the Negro masses together with the whites in close solidarity.

THE BETRAYAL BY THE A. F. OF L.

With the close of the riots, and the return of the workers to the Yards after the withdrawal of the armed forces, the Packers and their agents organized a new assault, and an even more vicious one, against the Stock Yards Labor Council.

The capitalist press led the way, with a campaign of accusation against the Council that it (the Council) had been the cause of the pogrom against the Negroes.

The Packers followed by discharging 400 white workers, the Union shop stewards, who had led their departments on strike.

The Government, through the Food Commissioner, Alschuler, condemned the Union for striking in support of the Negroes.

Finally, the National Secretary of the Butcher Workmen's Union (A. M. C. and B. W. of N. A.), Dennis Lane, who had disappeared from the city during the pogrom (like Mayor

Thompson, another "friend" of the Negroes!), reappeared upon the scene. He condemned the officials of the Stock Yards Labor Council as "Bolsheviks and I. W. W.'s," and expelled the Stock Yards Labor Council from the Union with its 30,000 members.

This mass expulsion, because of left-wing policies, was the first of its kind in America in the post-war period. It was endorsed by the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor, and the Chicago Federation of Labor was instructed to throw out the delegates of the Stock Yards Labor Council.

At that time the Chicago Federation of Labor headed the "progressive" tendency within the A. F. of L. It defended the position of the Stock Yards Labor Council. But finally, in order to save the Chicago Federation from being also expelled, it was mutually agreed by Federation and Council that the latter should withdraw, and that the Federation should continue (as it did) to give its support to the Council.

This weak and mistaken policy of the Federation and the Council was characteristic of that period. All who took part in those struggles were without any well-developed revolutionary theory or program of action, with the result that the most serious mistakes were constantly being made. The left-wing socialists, then in the process of forming the first Communist Parties, were entirely outside the struggle. The I. W. W. isolated itself on principle. The little group of militants in the A. F. of L., who had left the socialist party for the syndicalist movement, were, while more practical in the current struggles, still entirely without a correct revolutionary program or perspective.

The result of these expulsions, and the lack of aggressive struggle against them, was the destruction of the militant union of the Stock Yards Labor Council. It was killed by the treachery of the A. F. of L. officialdom, who could not forgive its achievement of solidarity of white and Negro workers against the capitalist class; but the A. F. of L. officials could not have succeeded in killing it, if the Stock Yards Labor Council had been able to fight under a clear, theoretically-grounded, Bolshevik leadership.

JOINT STRUGGLE OF BLACK AND WHITE

The outstanding lesson of 1919, in Chicago, is that all the obstacles to unity and solidarity between white and black workers came, not from either group of workers themselves, but from the enemies of the working class—from the capitalist press, from the bosses, from the bourgeois politicians (white and black), and from the reactionary A. F. of L. officialdom.

Not at any single moment was there any resistance from workers,

white or black, to the policy of equality, of solidarity, of the Stock Yard Labor Council.

The Negro workers, while their bourgeois race leaders were crawling on their bellies before their white paymasters, defended themselves, remained solidly with the Union, and refused to go back to work except under the direction of the Stock Yard Labor Council.

It was 30,000 white workers who struck solidly, against the employers, the government and all its forces, and against their own highest A. F. of L. officials, in solidarity with their Negro brothers.

From both white and black workers, there was unanimous and conscious joint struggle for a common program against the reactionaries of both races, but above all against the white capitalist class and its agents.

These experiences proved, just as today the National Miners' Union, the National Textile Workers' Union, and all the sections of the Trade Union Unity League are proving, that there is no deep division between white and black workers, that racial prejudice are artificial cultivations of the capitalist class, designed to break the solidarity of the workers, but which can and must be completely smashed, in order that the working class may unite all its forces, of all races and colors, men and women, youth and adults, for its common struggle against the common enemy.

This story was told by Jack Johnstone to a meeting of strikers in the Murray Body plant in Detroit a few months ago, when a young Negro comrade had asked if the Chicago race riots were not caused by a fight between union white workers and non-union Negro workers. The young Negro comrade asked Johnstone to write up the story. Johnstone has been too busy since then with organizational and strike work to do the job. The present writer has been glad to volunteer to do it for him, in the firm belief that it will contribute to the fulfillment of our present task of organizing Negro and white workers for joint struggle, for a common program.