Problems of the Negro Masses

WHICH WAY: LABOR OR CAPITAL?

by Will Herberg

The economic crisis and the tremendous growth of unemployment have given a new emphasis to a number of very serious questions of concern to the Negro worker. None of these is more pressing than the problem of coping with unemployment, for to the Negro worker unemployment is an even worse scourge than to the white worker. However incredible may be the levels to which the general unemployment figures are shooting, the percentage of unemployment among the Negroes is still higher! It is calculated that unemployment has hit the Negro worker at least twice as hard as the white worker. In the city of Pittsburgh(1), for example, a city where Negroes are but 8% of the total population, 40% of the applicants for the municipal relief fund were Negroes. In Buffalo, a survey of the National Urban League showed that "in March 1930 17.7% of the Negroes were unemployed as compared with 10.8% among the whites. In Philadelphia, in one district 29.2% of the Negroes were unemployed and 6.7% of the white."(2) With all necessary secondary modifications, it remains true that the inferior status, economically and socially, of the Negro in American society, condemns him to be "the first to be fired and the last to be hired."

It must be recognied that it is often the white worker himself who helps condemn his colored fellow-worker to this position. The A. F. of L. in practice rejects any idea of the economic equality of Negro and white workers. As a rule it refuses to organize the Negro and, in the rare cases that it does, it segregates him in jim-crow unions. Cases are notorious in which conservative labor unions have ordered strikes because a Negro worker was employed while white workers were out of a job!

By and large, the situation is the same in "normal" times as far as the relations of the Negro to industry are concerned. It is a commonplace, yet it is an aching truth, that the access of the Negro worker to industry is barred by numberless obstacles even in normal times, that he can only find a place in industry in inferior and low-standard positions, that all too frequently his entry into industry is gained thru strike-breaking and scabbery. The problem of the Negro and unemployment in this crisis is an aggravation of the more general problems of the Negro and industry in normal times.

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Hounded from every side, discriminated against and spurned by those to whom he has a right to look for fraternal assistance, the Negro worker indeed needs the clearest vision if he is to reach the goal of racial and economic emancipation, or even make substantial improvement in his conditions. Unfortunately the guidance received by the Negro working masses today is not such as to lead in this direction. It comes today from just those elements of the Negro people who, in spite of their undoubted sincerity, are unfortunately not in the position to point out the road. It comes today from the "community leaders" (the preachers, the teachers, and the politicians), from the "social workers" and journalists, from precisely those who, owing to their own class position, are themselves (including the Garveyites) thoroly and subtly influenced by the crassest prejudices of "white American capitalist civilization."(3)

What are the proposals recommended by these bourgeois leaders to the Negro workers to help them meet the problems raised by unemployment and by modern industrial conditions as such? From a general viewpoint, these proposals may be grouped under three heads: (1) "Let us use the consuming (buying) power of the Negro people to force them to hire our people!" (2) "Let us build up our own industry and commerce to make places for our workers on a plane of equality and no discrimination." (3) "Let the Negro workers collaborate with the white capitalists by offering to work at lower wages and thus force an entry into industry."

Let us examine each of these proposals in order to see their significance for the Negro worker.

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1. "Using Our Consuming Power."

The triviality of the first proposal is obvious on the face of it. It is indeed possible to organize boycott actions to compel petty shopkeepers in Harlem to hire Negro clerks and it is even possible on occasion to kick up a row big enough to force a Woolworth store in Chicago to make a "promise." But what has this to do with the hundreds of thousands of Negro workers in the coal, iron, steel, oil, automobile and packing industries—in the basic industries of America? Can the Negro people use their "buying power" to refuse to buy locomotives or automobiles so as to compel the big trusts to end discrimination against the Negroes? Or shall the Negro people refuse to buy meat or coal to the same end? There is no substance to the "use our buying power" proposal: it can only be raised by those whose social vision is bounded by petty industry and petty trade, who thoroly consistent! The "political science" to be found in its columns bears the same relation to Marxism and Leninism as chiropractic does to medical science!

see everything not from the viewpoint of Negro workers (the great mass of the Negro people), but rather from that of the Negro small business man.

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2. Building a "Negro Economy"

The second proposal is more pretentious but hardly more realistic. Do the champions of this plan seriously propose the establishment of a "Negro" coal or iron or steel or packing industry side by side with the existing giant trusts and competing with them? For it is precisely in these industries that the overwhelming bulk of the Negro proletarians are found —and not in the small shops in Harlem or on the South Side of Chicago. Could a more visionary, more utopian proposal be imagined? Is it not clear that the only tangible benefits of the attempts to build a "Negro economy" would be limited at best to the Negro small capitalists?

Is it not obvious that:

> "The success of a Negro petty-capitalism will give economic reality merely to our contemporary Negro middle class which is temperamentally detached from the realities of working class life?" (4)

Or that:

> " . . . however successful Negro business enterprise may be . . . it must in the nature of the case remain a diminutive force in modern industrialism—which is to say, that its heralded power for meeting the problem of Negro unemployment will be of small importance?" (5)

And suppose, merely for the sake of argument, that a "Negro economy" is developed. Of what substantial benefit could this be to the Negro industrial worker? **The Negro who has become a capitalist is more of a capitalist than a Negro.** Is it not conceivable that a Negro employer may exploit and oppress and **even discriminate** against Negro workers just as do white capitalists—**and for the same reasons?** Have we not heard of Jewish capitalists who refuse to hire Jewish clerks? Is it not notorious that the ultra-Zionist capitalists are precisely among the worst exploiters of their dear fellow-Jews? Capitalists first—Jews afterwards, very much afterwards! The Negro workers should learn this lesson.

(Concluded in the next issue)

(1) "Work," by H. A. Lett, Opportunity, March, 1931.
(2) "Interracial Frontiers," by Eugene Kinckle Jones, Opportunity, March 1931.
(3) This, of course, does not exclude the possibility of individual Negro bourgeois intellectuals adopting the point of view of the Negro toiling masses nor does it exclude the possibility of the various strata of the Negro petty bourgeoisie and even bourgeoisie playing their part in the emancipation struggle of the Negro people. What it excludes, however, is their leading role in this struggle as a class.
(4 Abraham L. Harris: The Negro Worker
(5) Ibid.