

How CIO Packers Licked Jimcrow

In 1919 the Bosses Pitted White Against Negro, But Today . . .

By CLAUDIA JONES

The full story of the solid Negro-white unity demonstrated in the recent strike of the CIO United Packing-House Workers is yet to be told.

Herb March, dynamic leader and Regional vice-president of the Chicago Packinghouse Workers CIO Union spotlighted several outstanding ones.

From its very inception, the Packinghouse Workers built their union on Negro-white unity, March said. The degree of Negro-white unity among the members of the union is practically unmatched by any other basic industrial union, he added.

Whence does this tradition of unity spring?

Speaking to Herb March, I learned that the answer lies in the history of the union, in its struggles for the rights of its Negro members.

40-50 PERCENT NEGROES

"Take Chicago," said the union leader. "At the inception of union organization, approximately 20-30 percent of the union members were Negroes. This, in itself was a factor in stimulating the need for understanding the problems of the Negro workers. In turn, it became the basis for the fundamental thinking of the organization as a whole. One-third of the entire union is composed of Negro members. Today, in Chicago approximately 40-50 percent of the Packing House Workers are Negro workers."

I asked March what the sentiment of the workers on the eve of the strike was. He frankly told me that despite this tradition of unity, the union never forgot that the white members were subject to pressure of the white-supremacy ideas of the employers.

"In fact," he stated, "the war had brought an influx of white and Negro workers to Packingtown from below the Mason-Dixon line. Many of the white workers brought all the prejudice and jimcrow tradition that is not yet an outlaw there. The Negro workers wanted proof of the union's sincerity on their needs. Whereas our union, founded on unity, had never had the need for a special anti-discrimination committee, during the war, it was found necessary to establish such an anti-discrimination committee."

"Our anti-discrimination committee was set up—and at that," said March, "in a union where approximately one half of the local union presidents are Negro and two-thirds of their executive officers are Negro."

March told me further that even with this gain, the employers prejudiced tactics did not cease. To the white workers they raised the cry of

"Negro domination." To Negro workers they raised the cry that "whites were trying to oust them from leadership posts and that this was the real issue involved in the strikes."

REMEMBERED 1919

Such was the situation on the eve of the strike. It was not accidental therefore that such alien propaganda caused concern among whites. "Would the Negroes be solid



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for the strike?" "Would they stick?" "Would they fall for the employers' tactics that 'now was the time to take over' the union? The white workers remembered in past strikes the use that the employers made of Negro workers as scabs, and the justification Negro workers felt since at that time the AFL union carried on no struggle.

The Negro workers likewise remembered the race riots of 1919 when many packing house workers, fresh from the South, were utilized in anti-Negro riots against them.

But the CIO union and its members also remembered the struggles of the past, their great lessons learned in the anti-fascist war, and they viewed this wage struggle as one that united the workers, Negro and white.

NEGROES FIRM

All this is history now. The Negro workers were solid—and were, in the words of Herb March "the best fighters." The skepticism of some white workers who said "You know how it is, the Negro people have bad living conditions, they live hand to mouth and have no reserve" were overcome when the unprecedented unity in the soup kitchen, on picket duty, etc., was demonstrated by Negro strikers everywhere. Important too, was the solidarity of the Negro community to the strik-

ers as well as the white communities around the yards.

The recent rally at DuSable High School was perhaps a high point in the unity. Negro and white packing-house workers flocked to the Negro community. It was amazing to many that an outstanding collection was contributed by white and Negro strikers, who had not yet gotten their full pay check.

Of its significance, March says:

"The result of the meeting was to raise the question of unity to a higher level. For many of the white workers who came to the South Side, in support of the struggles of the Negro workers, especially the refusal of a big hotel to grant the Negro Memorial foundation space for its Negro History rally, this was a new experience. And they were very much impressed.

"The fight against discrimination against Negroes is being recognized more and more by our white members like the fight in the trenches against fascism. White unionists must learn this lesson well. The American Bourbon - Monopolists fought against the establishment of mixed troops in the U. S. Army because they fear its impact on the unity of Negro and white on the labor front."

GIs in Japan Say Mail Service SNAFUD

TOKIO, Feb. 27. — GI's in the occupation force are complaining about the long delays in mail deliveries to and from the States.

One Army transport plane leaves Japan daily and only 10 percent of its pay load goes to regular GI airmail.

This is the only mail plane for all the occupation forces in the Japan area. Lt. John C. Hoops, postal officer at the Atsugi airfield, says, "Under these circumstances the schedule very often cannot be met."

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