

“Colored and Jewish Workers”

A Document By **A. PHILIP RANDOLPH**
and CHANDLER OWEN
edited by Philip S. Foner

The document which appears below was published March 20, 1920 in the Letters to the Editor column of the N.Y. Call, the Socialist daily. The Messenger, edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, was a Socialist Negro monthly published in New York City. It described itself as “The only Magazine of Scientific Radicalism in the World Published by Negroes.” Randolph and Owen were both members of the Socialist Party and called themselves, in their magazine, “two young colored men of the school of NEW NEGROES who stand upon principle.” The “New Negro,” unlike “the old Negro,” was not to be “lulled into a false sense of security with political spoils and patronage,” but demanded “the full product of his toil.” His immediate aim was for “more wages, shorter hours and better working conditions,” and in addition he stood for “absolute social equality, education, physical action in self-defense, freedom of speech, press and assembly, and the right of Russia to self-determination.” (The Messenger, Aug., 1920.)

The Messenger viewed the Negro problem as the “great labor problem of America,” and called for unity of Negro and white workers in the labor movement. It was critical of the leadership of the American Federation of Labor for failing to conduct a persistent campaign to organize Negro workers and to combat segregation in the trade unions. Besides editing The Messenger and speaking and campaigning for the Socialist Party, which they believed was entitled to the Negro’s political support, Randolph and Owen helped organize Negro workers into trade unions. In 1920 they organized the National Association for the Promotion of Labor Unionism among Negroes, with Owen as President and Randolph as Secretary. On the Advisory Board were white leaders of the Socialist Party, including Morris Hillquit, and leaders of the needle trade’s unions: Joseph Schlossberg, Rose Schneiderman and A. J. Shiplacoff.

In its May-June, 1919 issue, The Messenger launched a drive to sell 5,000 shares of stock at \$5 per share to enable the journal to increase its circulation. The response from the Jewish workers and their unions resulted in this letter to the N.Y. Call.

PHILIP S. FONER

DR. PHILIP S. FONER is an eminent American historian. Among his works are a History of the Labor Movement in the United States, of which four volumes have appeared, carrying the history to 1917; a four-volume edition of The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass; The Fur and Leather Workers Union; and a two-volume History of Cuba and Its Relations with the United States.

EDITOR of *The Call*:

Upon a careful and critical survey of unions in New York and in other sections of the country, the editors of *The Messenger* have found that the Jewish workers are some of the most class-conscious, and, too, the most sympathetic with the colored workers' strivings on the industrial field. We have yet to find a single group of Jewish workers manifesting unconcern or hostility to bringing their colored brothers into their unions. In fact, there is always a readiness, a willingness, an eagerness to extend the hand of fellowship, of brotherhood and good will to their fellow workers.

This fact was so prominent that we reflected as to its cause, and we assigned two reasons for the same. One is a deeper and more fundamental understanding of the class struggle philosophy, an understanding which enables them to see that so long as their colored brothers are unorganized, their standard of living is not safe. They appreciate the fact that it is suicidal folly to maintain an attitude of unconcern, indifference and apathy to the burning industrial house of their black neighbors. The other reason for this splendid spirit of brotherhood displayed by the Jewish workers is, doubtless, the fact that they, too, have been the historic victims of persecution, injustice and wrong. They have a history that is replete with unspeakable outrages in well-nigh every alleged civilized country. They have drunk the bitter dregs of the cup of persecution. In Romania, Poland and Russia the name of the Jew has long since been a mark of odium, hatred and unreasoning fanaticism.

Their lives were ruined, their bodies broken, upon the infamous wheel of the pogrom. The Tsar's Black Hundreds have done them to death. The

House of Romanoff's Cossacks hunted them down like birds of prey, and the pens of bigoted literateurs depicted them with contempt, derision and ridicule. Hence, the Jews have a deep and abiding feeling of love and human sympathy for the downtrodden and oppressed of all races. Their ears are not deaf to the bitter cries that come up from 15,000,000 of their black brothers, who, since the systematic trade in them passed with the Civil War, have become, in the alleged land of the free and home of the brave, the mud-sills of the industrial world and the flotsam and jetsam of society. This condition has been the deliberate and conscious work of organized capital in America. Lynchings, burnings, race riots, segregation, Jim-Crowism, disfranchisement, and every namable and conceivable device and machination for stigmatizing a people have been sedulously cultivated with a view to creating a division in the ranks of the workers, based upon race, which would result in enabling the master class to exploit both white and black workers with facility.

The only other group of workers in America who are equally sincere in their attitude toward the black workers are the oft-maligned, contemned, and spat-upon Industrial Workers of the World. This fact, too, might be explained by their knowledge of the class struggle philosophy, and by the fact that they, too, have been crucified upon the cross of capital.

These observations have been prompted by the experiences which the editors of *The Messenger* had in appearing before various unions in the interest of *The Messenger* "Sustaining Fund." It is to the credit of the workers in the International Ladies' Garment Workers, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the International Furriers that they recognized

the significance of intelligent propaganda carried on by *The Messenger* magazine among the colored workers. It is the hope of the editors of *The Messenger* that the organized white workers of America will become even more alert to their enlightened self-interest by formulating a comprehensive

and systematic program of propaganda and organization work among colored workers. The coming industrial crisis makes this immediately imperative.

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH and
CHANDLER OWEN
Editors of *The Messenger*.

Four months after this tribute to the Jewish workers was published, The Messenger's editors again appealed to the members of the needle trades' unions in New York City for support. Advance, official organ of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, carried the appeal July 23, 1920 and gave it a push with an editorial urging support. The reference in the editorial to the action of the American Federation of Labor was overoptimistic, but it was influenced by the fact that at its 1920 convention in June, the A.F. of L. had adopted a resolution requesting the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks to amend its constitution so as to strike out the words "only white," and admit Negroes to membership without discrimination. Although the Amalgamated was not a member of the A.F. of L. at this time, it hailed this stand against discrimination.

Justice, official organ of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, carried The Messenger's appeal Aug. 6, 1920 under the following headline: "An Appeal From The Messenger. The Negro Publication Preaching Solidarity Among Black and White Workers Needs Immediate Help." No editorial urging support of the appeal accompanied it in Justice.

The reference in The Messenger's appeal to the Negro vote in New York City in 1917 is to the vote cast for Morris Hillquit, the Socialist candidate for Mayor. The reference to the "Burlison-Palmer regime of ruthless and indescribable persecution," is, of course, to the persecution of radicals and militant trade unionists by Albert S. Burlison and A. Mitchell Palmer, postmaster general and attorney general respectively under Pres. Woodrow Wilson during the post-war Red Scare. There is one slight inaccuracy in the appeal. The first Socialist Branch, the majority of whose members were Negroes, organized in the United States, was the Colored Socialist Branch, formed in New York City in 1911.

PHILIP S. FONER

DEAR Comrades and Brothers:
This is a cry for help. We are at the crisis of the life of the mouthpiece of the black workers of America. With our backs to the wall, we are still fighting desperately the powerful capitalist iron heel of reaction that is bent upon silencing the one radical, clear, class-conscious voice which advocates unionism on the industrial

field and Socialism on the political field, as the only hope and salvation of the Negro worker.

Comrades, for 19 long months *The Messenger* has preached the solidarity of white and black workers, for which it has been denied second-class privileges, and has become the victim of the Burlison-Palmer regime of ruthless and indescribable persecution.

It has reached a circulation of 33,000, but the high cost of paper has forced it down, and now threatens its complete destruction. It faces a large deficit every month which it cannot meet. That means that either our cry for help is heeded or *The Messenger* dies. But, Comrades and workers, this would be nothing short of a calamity, and an irreparable disaster. For out of 350 or more Negro publications, serving the financial and industrial oligarchs of America who rob black and white labor of the product of their toil, *The Messenger* alone proclaims "to the worker the full product of his toil."

Comrades and Brothers, the Negroes constitute one-tenth of the workers of America. They, because of ignorance, are used as tools, as cat-paws to pull the chestnuts of capitalists out of the industrial fires. They are used as scabs to break down the standard of living of organized white labor, and then they are thrown aside. But the white workers are largely responsible for this, for they have denied them entrance into their various unions and then condemned them as scabs. The Negro worker is just as capable of understanding the working class message of Unionism and Socialism as his white brothers are. He only needs education—that is the mission of *The Messenger*. The editors of *The Messenger* are A. Philip Randolph, Socialist candidate for State Comptroller, and Chandler Owen, Socialist candidate for Assemblyman from the 21st A.D. They are also instructors in the Rand School of Social Science. They organized the first Socialist Branch, the majority of whose members are Negroes, in America. Through their work, the Socialists in 1917 polled 23 per cent of the Negroes' vote in New York City. *The Messenger* was

the real force and backbone of the educational campaign.

We call upon every class-conscious worker who believes in working class solidarity, who has a sincere devotion to the principles of brotherhood, to give from a dime to a dollar to the cause of sending the message of Unionism and Socialism to their black brothers. This is not charity. It is enlightened self interest. Send today—don't delay! The call is urgent. Contributions are received at 31 Union Square, care of Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

Editors of *The Messenger*
A. PHILIP RANDOLPH
CHANDLER OWEN

The Editorial:

ELSEWHERE in this issue will be found an appeal from the colored workers for financial aid for their journal, *The Messenger*. Time was when the official labor movement ostracized the wage workers with dark skin. Solidarity for them was confined to the so-called radicals among the white workers. The employers took advantage of that racial hostility to pit the white workers against the black and the black against the white, and keep them all divided. That inflicted so much injury upon the American workers that the American Federation of Labor was finally compelled to proclaim the identity of interests of the white and colored workers.

The Negro workers are a great and growing factor in industry. They will cooperate among themselves and with their fellow workers of other races only to the extent that they are educated to their class interests and are befriended by us. *The Messenger* is doing this work and is entitled to our support.