

The Hosts of Black Labor

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AMERICAN industry is slowly beginning to awake to the fact that there is in this country a great reservoir of labor which has been only partially tapped. The South has nine million black folk of whom five million are productive workers. As a mass they are ignorant and unskilled, but they are ambitious, willing to learn, and for the most part at present wretchedly underpaid. Lynching, lawlessness, lack of schools, and disfranchisement have slowly but surely made them ripe for change.

What is America doing with these black laborers? We may envisage four hosts who must deal with them -the planter, the manufacturer, the union laborer, and the Northern Negro. The planter inherits a tradition from which he seldom escapes. This tradition regards the Negro laborer as a serf, without a vote, with little education, low wages, and medieval conditions of work. The manufacturer, North and South, has as his ideal a surplus of common labor, whether black or white, which will keep wages low by severe competition and periodic unemployment. The union laborer proposes so to restrict and monopolize skilled labor as to compel the employer to grant a living wage. These three hosts are pretty well known; but there is a fourth who is not so often thought of. He is the Northern Negro, the representative of the 1,725,141 Negroes established in the North either a generation or more ago or by more recent migration, who have, except in the case of the newest comers, found an industrial place and a racial philosophy and who are the first to be affected by a widespread migration from the South.

These, then, are the four hosts waiting to welcome or repel the Southern black laborer. What has been the result of their and his interactions? We can perhaps best trace it by noticing the gyrations of a little black dot on the map of the United States. This little black dot represents the center of gravity of the Negro population in the United States. This little dot was near Petersburg, Virginia, in 1790. It moved south and then west until 1910, when suddenly and for the first time in American history it struck eastward, and in 1920 was nine and one half miles farther east and nineteen and one half miles farther north than ten years before.

What does this mean? It means that between 1870 and 1910 the Negroes sought economic salvation in the free land of the West and Southwest and that the migration in this direction offset the considerable migration north and east; but that with the beginning of the World War there occurred the greatest revolution in migration which the Negro has known for a century; and that by actual census figures, the net, gain of the North and West and loss of the South between 1910 and 1920 was 334,526 black folk.

This northward movement of the Negro population was renewed in the fall of 1922. The great Northern industrial plants sent out a call for semi-skilled and unskilled labor. Just as the cutting down of immigration during the war made a scarcity of common labor, so the new immigration laws together with expanding business are having the same effect at present. The result can be felt all through the South; not as a sudden movement, but as a gradual and expanding tremor.

It is emphasized by the attitude of the white South.

Commercial Appeal:

The result of all this may be easily conjectured. A colored minister of the Methodist Episcopal church writes: "As district superintendent for seven years, touching twenty-five counties in Mississippi, the State which had, according to the census of 1910, almost one-tenth of the Negro population of the United States of America, my observation and experience lead me to state that the exodus is still on and will no doubt continue gradually toward the North and West for some years. In many places hundreds have gone within the last few months. Many churches have depleted memberships because of the exodus. Seventy-five were counted that left one community within twenty-four hours." The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* of December 24 declared that within ninety days more than 12,000 Negroes had left the cotton fields of Mississippi and Arkansas for the industrial plants of Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit. It stated that on an average 200 Negroes leave every night from Memphis northward on the Illinois Central, taking with them not only their household goods, but often several months' provisions.

The *Columbia, S. C., State* notes the departure of Negroes from South Carolina, and W. P. Conyers, a white citizen of South Carolina and former member of the State Board of Pardons, said in a recent speech: "We have educated many Negroes, and it is from this class of educated, intelligent, industrious, thinking Negroes that the emigrants are coming. It is from the very class of Negro that the South can least afford to lose. But the thinking Negro, the Negro with some education, some ambition, a desire to better care for his family and educate his children, is going North in large numbers. And he doesn't come back."

From Georgia we learn that some "13 per cent or 32,000 of the total number of Negro farmhands in Georgia is estimated to have moved North during the last twelve months." South Carolina and Florida offer figures almost as startling, while the migration during one recent week of more than 5,000 unskilled Negro laborers from North Carolina has resulted in the shutting down of some fifty highway construction projects. From Arkansas, one gentleman writes us, "there is a certain alarm in all circles over the large outflow of Negroes to Northern points. It amounts to a veritable exodus and there seems to be no means of stopping this migration."

This is the crux of the matter. To be sure it is reported that thousands of the newcomers are finding employment at relatively high wages, but this does not settle the matter. First of all there is no sign that even this continued migration of its labor force is really impressing the South. There is no real diminution of Southern lynchings; there is no disposition to let the Negro vote; there is some improvement in schools, but this is usually in cities and seldom in the country districts; and above all there is the sinister growth of the Ku Klux Klan. Despite this, little Southern papers continue to declare fatuously -we take the words from the Gaffney, *South Carolina Ledger*: "The South is the home of the Negro and nowhere on earth can he receive the consideration he does at the hands of Southern white men!"

These statements are not true and Negroes know they are not true. They know too that in the long run the South cannot keep them from migrating in spite of offensive measures of various sorts. And the Negro is increasingly determined not to submit to Southern caste rule.

This does not minimize his difficulties in the North First he must find a job, and between him and the better jobs stand the labor unions. Undoubtedly in the North the attitude of the labor union has reflected the attitude of the white public. There has been a determined effort to keep the black laborers out of the skilled unions, and while the unions have had to give in here and there, there had been little real change in this policy of exclusion. No Negro today can belong to any of the railroad unions and the various "full crew" laws were simply methods of driving out

Negro competition. Whenever there is an attempt to unionize labor beyond the highly skilled field immediately the race problem comes to the fore as in East St. Louis and in the late steel strike. In the South in the same way the unionized white laborer is willing to furnish mobs to keep the black field hand "in his place."

But with common labor scarce and semi-skilled labor unorganized the Negro can gain a foothold, although often this involves "scabbing" and increased hatred and prejudice. He accepts low wages and long hours because even these are better than Southern peonage. And with this situation the Northern industrial barons are perfectly content and congratulate themselves.

In addition to this the new Negro laborer is immediately forced upon the established Northern Negro group. Now the position of this group is not strong economically nor socially. Its security depends largely upon the non-agitation of the race problem. If racial differences are not emphasized by newspapers or by new facts the Northern Negro becomes gradually a citizen judged by his individual deserts and abilities. If, however, there comes a sudden new migration, the level of intelligence and efficiency in these newcomers is almost inevitably below that of the Negro already established in the North. Public opinion lumps the new with the old without discrimination. New racial irritation, hatreds, and segregations arise. The problem of new dwelling-places becomes severe and it is a double problem, for not only must the new black men have homes to shelter them, but the white home owners must, as far as possible, protect the beauty, moral level, and value of their homes.

The Northern Negro, therefore, faces a peculiar dilemma. He knows that his Southern brother will and must migrate just as he himself migrated either in this generation or

the last. He feels more or less acutely his own duty to help the newcomer, and the Negro churches and charities of great cities like Chicago and New York have done a marvelous work in this direction even though it has fallen far below the need. But on the other hand the black Northerner knows what this migration costs. In the years from 1900 to 1922 there has been an average of a race riot in the United States every year, half of them in the South and half in the North. Serious encounters have been threatened in a half dozen other Northern and several Southern centers. In these same years, 1,563 Negroes have been lynched; since the war thirty-four Negroes have been burned alive at the stake. In other words the race war is not simply a future possibility -it is here.

From this turmoil and interaction of interests and human passions has come one very great result and that is the pushing of the American Negro by sheer necessity to a higher point of courage, intelligence, and determination, of economic stability and clear thinking than ever before in his history or in the modern history of any Negro group. He easily leads the black folk of the world. And if there has lingered any conviction that the Negro is going to be satisfied with a permanent position of caste inferiority it is high time that that thought was dispelled from the minds of thinking Americans.

Here then is the critical time. What shall the public say? It is tempted to say: Bring the South north. Discourage Negro migration by reproducing "Jim Crow" conditions of Alabama and Texas in Ohio and New York. Such a policy is suicidal. The Northern Negro has a vote and is learning how to use it. A national caste movement would weld into unity a powerful mass of desperate men, led by intelligence and property, filled with resentment, armed with the ballot, and determined to fight to the bitter end in alliance with any group or element that promised

success. Such a mass might be clubbed to death by mobs, but remember that it cost Chicago thirty-eight deaths, 537 injured, and millions of dollars in money to make an unsuccessful and bitterly regretted attempt at this method of race adjustment.

The public, therefore, in the end must say: There is but one way out. The South must reform its attitude toward the Negro. The North must reform its attitude toward common labor. The unions must give up monopoly and aristocracy as methods of social uplift. The Negro must develop democracy within as well as without the race.