

The Success of Negro Migration

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Walter F. White

SELDOM has there been a more interesting change of attitude than that of the South with regard to the migratory movement of Negroes during the past four years. When the war caused an appreciable decrease in the number of European immigrants and created an industrial void, an economic opportunity in northern industrial centers was offered to the southern colored man for the first time. The departure of a small number of Negroes caused some southern newspapers to utter paeans of praise, whether sincere or not. They felt that the old doctrine of settling race relations by deporting Negroes to Africa, long since abandoned by sensible persons, might be of value still and that the journey North was but one step towards ridding America of the "vicious, indolent, and criminal blacks."

A second stage occurred when the employer of the South found that he was unable to employ as many Negro laborers as formerly, and when his wife discovered, much to her horror, that she no longer could secure house servants with the ease of former years. About this time southern papers began carrying pitiful and heart-rending tales of deluded southern Negroes starving and freezing in the North and editorials appeared, gloatingly based on such stories, repeating the moth eaten story of the South being the Negro's best and only friend.

When this propaganda failed to check the increasing exodus, southern employers became frantic and began a persecution of the few labor agents working in the South, who were "fooling our Negroes to their doom by urging them to leave." Not realizing that the movement was a leaderless one and that it was the natural result of the economic law of supply and demand, affecting the labor world in the North, they failed utterly to appreciate that the economic pull from the North, added to the oppressive push from the South, was taking the Negro away.

A welcome aid to their theories, or lack of them, was the race riots of Washington, Chicago, and Omaha. Played up by the southern press, these riots were used to urge Negroes to return southward and to keep those who yet remained in the South. News articles appeared in profusion, headed: "NEGROES ANXIOUS TO RETURN SOUTH," "TO GIVE LOUISIANA BLACKS IN CHICAGO CHANCE TO RETURN," "CHICAGO NEGROES ASK HOMES IN SOUTH AGAIN," and a few with captions such as "CAROLINA WANTS BLACKS, LESS 'EQUALITY' DREAMS," "NEGRO LABOR WANTED," and "MAGNOLIA STATE INVITES WANDERING NEGROES HOME."

Commissions were sent from Southern States -Mississippi, Louisiana, and others -to furnish railroad fare to those Negroes who had found northern opportunity an illusive mirage. To their surprise, they found that instead of wanting to return, Negroes were well content, earning good wages, comfortably housed in many cities, and saving money. When reminded of race riots in the North, their answer was similar to that of a Chicago colored man, who replied, "If I've got to be killed, I would rather be killed by my friends." The universality of this feeling is evidenced by an inquiry made by the Chicago Branch of the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes into the motives actuating all Negroes who left that city on railroads during the week of the riot in July and August. During that week 261 Negroes came to Chicago and 219 left. Of the latter number only 14 left the city on account of the riot and not one was going South, but to other points in the North. Eighty-three of the 219 were going South, but in every case they were either returning from summer vacations, visiting, or going on business.

So much has been said and with so little foundation in fact about the Negro migrant that an inquiry has been made by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People into his progress in certain industrial centers of the North. These include Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Cleveland, the Atlantic Coast shipbuilding plants, the steel and manufacturing sections of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and adjoining states.

In Chicago 40,000 colored men and 12,000 women have been added to the industrial population since the migration began. According to T. Arnold Hill of the Chicago Urban League, the stockyards employ 8,000 of these; the Corn Products Refining Company has increased its force of colored employees in one year from 30 to 800; the International Harvester Company employs 500; and the Pullman Car Shops, 400. The Industrial Department of the Urban League places about 1,000 a month. Many of the industrial plants endeavor to maintain a ratio of one Negro to every three white workmen, although the population ratio in Chicago is one Negro to thirty whites. The outlook for retention of this labor is excellent, according to all reports, and no encouragement was given to southern labor agents in their efforts to induce Negroes to return. Negroes are rapidly adjusting themselves to the new industrial and social environment; they are saving money, which is evidenced by the large number of depositors in the banks located in the Second and Third Wards, where most of the colored population live; they are conducting an increasing number of business enterprises, and real estate dealers are reaping a rich harvest in selling homes to Negroes. In spite of the serious rioting of July and August, there is yet a marked influx into the city and jobs are secured with little difficulty for all who want to work. Employers who have had no experience before with Negro labor are, in the main, finding that the old belief about the inefficiency of Negro labor is a myth. The greatest proof of this is the eagerness with which colored applicants for jobs are received.

In Pittsburgh competent observers, who are in close touch with labor conditions, state that fully 12,000 Negroes have been placed during the past two and a half years. One large employer of labor states that Negro labor as a whole is far superior to any type of immigrant labor which he has used. Thrown into the rigorous industrial life, working in mills with roaring machinery overhead and all around him, the man who has been used only to the quiet life of the rural South finds it difficult at first to adjust himself to the new order of things. Yet the testimony is almost unanimous that after a period of adjustment, the vast majority soon shake off habits of tardiness, of indolence, of unreliability, and of carousing at night, and are rapidly absorbed into the industrial life. It is evident in Pittsburgh that prohibition has had a beneficial effect, for there is less disorder and savings bank deposits are growing larger. All signs indicate a bright outlook for the retention of those who have already come and many more who are planning to come North.

Five thousand migrants have been placed in Cleveland. Recently a questionnaire was sent to 150 industrial plants, asking for specific information on the question of the efficiency of migrant labor. Practically all of the questionnaires were answered and only a few expressed any dissatisfaction. In the main, the answers were highly laudatory, and due to rigid citizenship requirements which employers have adopted, the outlook is exceptionally good for the Negro in preference to the immigrant population upon which employers have been largely dependent in the past.

One Detroit automobile firm employs some 1,200 to 1,500 Negroes. Another similar plant employs over 1,100. In this latter plant a most interesting situation has taken place, which is a valuable commentary on the efficiency and adaptability of Negro labor. In one of the departments of this establishment prior to the introduction of Negro labor, 70 white men of various nationalities were producing an average of 18 chassis a day. The official records of this plant show that within six weeks after an all-Negro force was placed in this department, 50 men were turning out from 40 to 50 a day - a clear gain in efficiency of over 300 per cent. Another blow to the exponents of the doctrine of race inferiority!

According to Dr. George E. Haynes, of the Department of Labor, 24,647 Negroes were employed in shipbuilding on the Atlantic Coast during the war and 14,075 since the war ended. Of this number a large percentage was employed in those lines of employment classed as skilled labor, and this number is increasing as the Negro is given the opportunity to prove his worth.

All of the above testimony is but a fragment of the record being made by the migrant.



As long as the tide of immigration is turned away from America rather than toward it, he will be able to enter into northern industry in ever increasing numbers. Further factors are the efficiency of his labor, the attitude of labor unions and non-labor union groups, and his absorption into the industrial, economic, and social life of the North. The one question which confronts Negro labor is that of his making good and continuing to do so. Without attempting to moralize, if he does make good and if the migration continues to bring more colored labor into the North, the difficulties which he now confronts in overcoming a mythical and slanderous propaganda of untruths as to his worth will be gradually, but surely, overcome. There is great opportunity in the North for men and women who are willing to work and the southern employers of labor may as well abandon all hopes they may be cherishing of inducing the Negro to return. The American Federation of Labor has, on paper at least, abolished the color line. This forms an excellent barometer as to the future of Negro labor, but that barring of the color line in the A. F. of L., or any other organization of labor, will only be permanent when Negroes make good in large numbers and present their case in strong enough terms to force consideration and recognition.

According to all visible signs, the Negro migrant has made good, the migration is still going on, and will continue to go on until the industrial needs of the North are supplied and the South can learn to accord to the Negro all the privileges he demands. Some raving demagogues of that section may declare that this will never be. Their statements do not interest the Negro, however, and the time may yet come when the South will awaken from its dream of hordes of disillusioned Negroes flocking back to their "best friends," and will realize the gold mine of Negro labor which it had and lost.