

“Negro Wage Earners and Trade Unions” by William Green (October 1934)

During the past five years Negro wage earners have been turning to the organized labor movement with new conviction. They are becoming responsible union members, sharing the benefits and hardships of union endeavor. With increasing frequency they have appeared in Washington as representatives of wage earners for the business of code making. These developments are evidence of substantial progress in the growing acceptance of responsibility on the part of Negro workers.

The American Federation of Labor sees in this development the beginning of a new era for wage-earners. Membership in a trade union represents a desire to keep step with economic and social progress and acceptance of the responsibilities for working out progress for wage-earners. This constructive attitude means that both white and Negro workers will join ranks in determining and maintaining minimum and maximum standards. When any one group however small accepts substandard conditions, the wage structure for all is undermined. Although the labor movement has had every sympathy for the handicaps of Negro workers, willingness on the part of some to undercut standards of compensation and workmanship, have been the source of practical difficulties. While we appreciated the reasons for the situation, it is with frank gladness and relief we note the progress of these workers beyond the necessities which prevented them from working common cause with us.

There is an immediate problem in many industries with which the advanced groups may cope--the Southern differential which in so many cases means the determination of the industry to depress Negro wages. Opportunity for Negro wage earners lies not in undercutting wages for white workers but in cooperating for the elimination of such a differential.

Negro workers need high wages so that they may increase their reserves. In periods like the past five years, the reserves of many have been exhausted. The unemployment relief census taken by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in October 1933, showed that 18 per cent of the Negroes of the country were on relief as contrasted with 9.5 per cent of whites. In order to build up reserves for the emergencies of life, Negroes must have higher pay for their work and set aside a fixed amount for savings and emergency purposes. You want just as good homes and as good opportunities for your children as any other citizens of this country: The way to do it is organization for the purpose of negotiating a work contract with your employer that will provide higher wages and better work conditions. Your union executive will be responsible for negotiation of the work contract and for seeing that it is enforced. You pay dues into your union to pay your union executives and the expenses of the organization. If your dues are high enough the union may set up union benefits. During the year of 1933, the unions of this country paid out over 40 millions of dollars for death, sickness, unemployment, old age, disability, and other benefits. All of this was in addition to assuring members the highest wages paid in industries and securing the five-day week for the majority.

All those, Negro wage earners who want to undertake seriously the job of increasing their incomes and assuring themselves of definite work rights, should join the union of their fellow workers or apply to the American Federation of Labor for a charter.

You can better yourselves if you are ready to make the effort. It will require courage and endurance, but what others have done you can do. I know many Negro miners who are splendid union workers, who can always be counted on for most faithful union responsibilities.

The union is the first step.

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