

Toward Freedom

Negro Cutbacks, Seniority— Let's Admit the Problem

by Doxey A. Wilkerson

in last week's Chicago Defender:

"Organized labor has been generally insistent in securing rather rigid seniority clauses in its agreements. In one sentence, it merely means this: the last hired, the first laid off.

"The fact must be faced frankly that Negro men and women were the last hired in aircraft, so necessarily will be among the first laid off, with no discrimination as to sex or as to color."

Of course, this representative of management did not go on to point out that the anticipated exodus of Negro workers from war plants would gravely aggravate the social tensions which reconversion will surely bring; that it would greatly disrupt the unity of white and Negro workers within the unions; that it might well break the present political alliance between the Negro people generally and organized labor, and that enemies of the unions and the nation would be alert to exploit mounting racial tensions for the weakening of both.

There is no escaping the fact that there is, indeed, a special problem.

NOTHING is gained by declaring, as many union leaders like to do, that "we have a strict no-discrimination policy, and the

problem does not face us." Such unions also have a strict seniority policy, and its application in the traditional way is sure to displace Negro workers in disproportionate numbers, thus making them suffer anew the oppression which originated in pre-war anti-Negro employment policies or many companies.

It is futile to declare, as many other unionists tend to do, that "the fundamental solution to this problem is to work for full post-war employment for everybody, for the President's program of 60,000,000 peacetime jobs." That, of course, is the only long-range framework in which the Negro's special problems can be solved. But it leaves untouched the serious problems we will face during the temporary months of reconversion layoffs—a brief period, we all hope, but a period in which lasting damage can be done.

There are various approaches to a solution of this problem. One is set forth in Roy Hudson's excellent little pamphlet on Postwar Jobs—Veterans, Negroes, Women. There undoubtedly are others. On any given proposal, there is bound to be much difference of opinion. This is normal and wholesome; such differences can be resolved through full democratic discussion within the unions.

But the main task now is to convince the trade union movement that there is a problem which it must face, and one which it had better face now before the onrush of history confronts our unions with a situation they are not prepared to handle.

A SMALL conference of trade union leaders, meeting in New York last week to discuss the "seniority question," were told by one speaker: "Our first job is to get the trade union movement to admit that a problem exists." He was dead right, because many of our trade union leaders rather than tackle the problem till shy away from it through a curious assortment of rationalizations.

This is understandable, adaptations to new situations usually call for much ideological struggle to gain clarity, before decisive action is taken. And the more than a million Negro workers now within the trade union movement, most of them wartime newcomers with very limited seniority, do present the unions with an entirely unprecedented situation which old formulas simply cannot meet.

The plain fact is that, unless special measures are undertaken to prevent it, a disproportionately large number of these Negro war workers will be thrown out of their newly won jobs when postwar cutbacks become general, and in many industries Negroes will be eliminated entirely from plants where they have but recently been employed.

LISTEN to an outstanding personnel executive of the aircraft industry, writing

