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The Labors of a Race: Labor and Leaders in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Since the mid-19th century, labor activism in the African American community has shifted from least to most important in the Black freedom struggle. The roles of major figures like Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Dubois, and Booker T. Washington are crucial in understanding the rise of the African American Labor Movement. A trend of merging social and labor goals from the post Civil War era to the late 1960s culminated with the Memphis sanitation strike in 1968.

Introduction

There are shadows in history, of the past which have been overlooked, ignored, or even forgotten. In the discourse on African American history, the Civil Rights Movement has remained a point of interest, while related labor issues have not been fully explored. Few historians have studied how Civil Rights leaders from Booker T. Washington to Martin Luther King Jr. significantly impacted the labor movement in the United States.

The labor struggle in the African American community has changed drastically over time. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the Great Migration, African Americans were thrust into a wage-based economy. During the Civil War era, a relationship between labor and the Black freedom struggle developed. Tracking developments through key figures and events reveals several significant transitions.

Frederick Douglass and the Black Freedom Struggle

From the beginnings of slavery, African Americans prioritized abolition. The early goals focused on physical and legal freedom. It was not until Frederick Douglass that the abolition movement had a focused and central voice. In a speech given by Douglass, the goals of the Black freedom struggle were solidified. Douglass stated:

Do I hear you say you want black officers? Very well, and I have not the slightest doubt that in the progress of this war, we shall see black officers, black colonels, and generals even. But is it not ridiculous in us in all at once refusing to be commanded by white men in time of war, when we are everywhere commanded by white men in time of peace? (Bracey 2003).

Douglas set a trend for the issue of labor; he put it on the “backburner,” so to say, to concentrate on the crucial fight for abolition and the Civil War. With the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, the struggle for abolition was over, yet struggles for Black Americans were far from being finished.

Reconstruction and the Great Upheaval

Reconstruction started the recognized African American labor movement. In the years following the Civil War, many African Americans used their new freedom

to travel north to the industrial and urban centers of the Union. Although African Americans had been involved in industrial labor prior to the Reconstruction period, under the umbrella of slavery a free labor movement on the side of Blacks was near impossible and highly improbable. The Reconstruction period offered opportunities as well as challenges for African Americans in the workforce. This duality is represented in the earliest labor action on the part of African Americans. This period in American labor history is defined by a nation-wide labor movement called the Great Upheaval.

The Great Upheaval, as Brecher (1997) wrote, was a period of massive social unrest, and it “mark[ed] the first great American mass strike, a movement that was viewed at the time as a violent rebellion” (p. 13). At this time there was not a unionized labor front. A group of laborers fought for concessions from the B&O Railroad Company. In the Great Upheaval of 1877, the strike spread to most other industrial activities. In the town of Piedmont, West Virginia, African Americans as well as Whites organized in response to the B&O wage cut (p. 19). The incident with the B&O was not an isolated incident, and the 1877 strike wave continued.

African Americans led the charge in other industries as well. Brecher (1997) wrote that there was a trend with the general strikes of 1877: they would “often [start] with black workers and [spread] to whites” (p. 31). This trend was prevalent in Galveston, Louisville, and St. Louis. In Galveston, “black longshoremen...struck for and won pay equal to their white fellow workers” (p. 31). In St. Louis and Louisville the front was united—Black and White laborers called for better pay. This event portrays the underlying problem in the labor force. Galveston happened as a result of the inequality between Black and White workers. African Americans were fighting for the respect and equality which White workers already expected. The incident of the Great Upheaval displays two critical facts of the early African American labor activism: first, it shows how even though Blacks could strike and win, there was still segregation in American labor, harbored in racial prejudice in the workplace; second, Black labor activists worked separately from the Black freedom struggle. Where Black labor activists were usually fighting for concessions on a local level, the Black freedom struggle was focused on political gains on the state and federal level. The two would remain separate for many years to come.

The unsuccessful nature of Reconstruction led African Americans to adopt new strategies to deal with racial inequality. The rise of Jim Crow laws in the 1890s in the South led to a new set of goals in the Black freedom struggle as a way to cope with the hardships Blacks faced. Out of this period Booker T. Washington arose. Washington gained authority in 1895 as a conservative and a focused race leader. Hailed as influential and praised by both Blacks and Whites, Washington preached self-improvement through basic mechanical and agricultural skills; he also accepted segregation as a reality. Washington defined the Black freedom struggle in similar terms to Douglas, basing many of his goals in mere survival. He advocated to raise the standards of living for African Americans. His school, the Tuskegee Institute, offered Blacks the ability to learn a trade or skill that would benefit them in the labor force. Washington saw the struggle as freedom from violence and freedom to exist as a community. These beliefs led Washington to have a negative view of labor activism, and pushed him to place little significance on the advancement of labor.

Washington was a staunch believer in employer-based labor policy, and

his views on strikes and unions reflected his “don’t-rock-the-boat” mentality. He advocated for an anti-union South, and felt strongly that labor organization would lead to increased violence and turmoil. His ideology led to the growing number of Blacks acting as strikebreakers. This view, however beneficial to employers, led to increased tensions between Black and White workers and Marshall (1965) wrote that “The resentment fostered among Negroes by the action of White unionists was reinforced by anti-union Negro leaders such as Booker T. Washington” (p. 17).

Washington’s platform on labor and race became central to the labor community and to the African American community as a whole. As Marshall (1965) notes, Washington expressed these views openly to the glee of business owners everywhere, and nowhere more poignantly than in his Atlanta Exposition address in 1895, where he “advised Negroes to shun politics and to acquire agricultural, mechanical, commercial, domestic, and professional skills to meet the competition of whites” (p. 18). In Washington’s 1895 address, he said:

Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. (Wheeler & Becker, 2002, p. 39)

Washington felt labor activism and advancement were not priorities in the Black freedom struggle. His ideas on labor affected the actions of the public: African Americans acted as strikebreakers, Black union membership was low, and White unionists resented Black workers.

African Americans acted as strikebreakers as early as the 1850s, which became a prominent issue in the labor movement at the turn of the century. In longshoremen’s groups, Nelson (2001) discovered that early strikebreaking activities were rationalized in that “blacks had come to see strikebreaking as the only means to regain access to a field of labor where they had once been prominently represented” (p. 19). At the turn of the century strikebreaking was the central issue involving Blacks and unionized labor. In the longshoremen’s occupation strikes were common:

African Americans served as strikebreakers...and were able to establish a more secure foothold in 1895, when the Ward Line employed a contingent of blacks to break a local in Brooklyn and thereafter relied on Negro labor ‘to the exclusion of all races.’ (p. 25)

It was popular belief that “companies were deliberately attempting to turn the Negroes into a race of strikebreakers, with whom to hold the white workers in check” (p. 166).

The animosity that built up between White unionists and Black strikebreakers was furthered by segregated union organizations. Both the Knights of Labor (KOL) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had problems with segregation at the local and federal level. Tensions between local union members and African Americans weakened the federal status of these still-young national organizations and drove a wedge between White unionists and would-be Black members. Washington’s model of no resistance had been widely accepted and put into practice. By the early 1900s, however, Washington’s views were not the single opinion in the Black freedom struggle. W.E.B. Du Bois became a staunch critic of Washington and a beacon of activism in the labor movement.

Change on the Horizon: W.E.B. Du Bois

Du Bois' theories on race and equality were opposite of Washington's. A social scientist and brilliant thinker, Du Bois inferred that there was a different solution to inequality. Where Washington accepted segregation as part of society, Du Bois saw segregation as a major problem and obstacle to racial equality. He was widely popular for his ideas on the "Talented Tenth," his theory on social uplift utilizing the top 10% of the African American race. He is noted for his role in founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Du Bois' activist and progressive ideas made him unpopular with White America. The Black community, however, was inspired by his call to abolish segregation and political inequality. Du Bois founded the Equal Rights League, and as Taylor and Hill (2000) found, "the voter registration campaign of the Equal Rights League...tended to emphasize the ways in which a moral working class could change whites' views concerning blacks" (p. 118). Du Bois advocated for the abandonment of the "American Negro culture" in an attempt to gain a "concept of world humanity" (Nelson p. 140). This translated to just the opposite of what Washington was advocating.

Du Bois knew the opposition Black laborers faced with racially unequal labor unions like the AFL. He called for Black activism and Black organization. Even though many of Du Bois' ideas concerned a potent message of organization, he never fully advocated labor activism as a main goal in the Black freedom struggle. Many of the ideas Du Bois expressed were used by the labor community. This local push toward organization was a turning point in the Black labor community, and helped establish Du Bois as a leader. This turning point focused on inclusion into White labor unions.

"Double Crossed" by American Industry

For labor the years leading to WWI, the 1920s, and the Great Depression tended to represent the "real life" conflict of goals expressed by Washington and Du Bois. There were still conservative moves to break strikes and remain unorganized. The steel industry represented what was happening in the nation. African Americans had been relatively successful in their unorganized state and, as Nelson (2001) found, many rose to "semiskilled and even skilled jobs" (p. 162). With the onset of WWI and the Great Migration north, the Black population in the steel industry grew phenomenally. This wave of Black laborers added to the old pattern of African Americans as strikebreakers in the Great Steel Strike of 1919. The common theme was "that African Americans entered the iron and steel industry mainly as strikebreakers" (p. 164). Again, Washington's ideology seemed to hold, now with a strong sense of revenge tied to it. The idea that African Americans had their own motives in acting as strikebreakers is common. The notion that "the opportunity for steady employment in better-paying jobs" (p. 166) was hard to pass. Another notion was that African American's "own vivid recollections of how the aggression of white workers had helped structure their marginal access to industrial labor markets" (p. 166) was an underlying cause for the strikebreaking. Even with a large majority of important mills seeing very little organization from Black workers, there were instances of overwhelming support for the unions.

Alongside the conservative anti-union notions of Black labor in the steel industry, the ideas of Du Bois were slowly creeping into the minds of unorganized

Black labor. In the years leading to WWI, both activist and conservative Blacks shared floor space in the mills of the steel industry. As early as 1881, African Americans had organized in the steel industry under the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. Nelson (2001) found that in areas like Cleveland and Chicago, 85 to 100% of the Black labor force organized within the Great Steel Strike of 1919, though the important mills at Gary and Pittsburg saw almost no strike participation. The Great Steel Strike of 1919 was pivotal, however. The event would prove to African Americans the need for organization and a change in labor ideology, one that would lean on Du Bois' ideas and foster new leaders in the labor movement.

In the economic highs of the 1920s and the crash of the Great Depression, African Americans realized the possibility of unionization. After the steel strike, labor in general was doing well. Rates were up, and the United States was riding the high tide of wartime boom. However, the African American laborer was less well off than his White counterpart. African Americans were earning lower wages and working more dangerous jobs. During the Great Depression, feelings of inequality were solidified when African Americans were laid off before Whites. Many African Americans felt "double crossed" by the mills. The 1919 actions of Black strikebreakers led to resentment by other African Americans because, as Nelson (2001) discovered, "even though they stood with the company in the strike of [1919]...they did not benefit" (p. 184). These feelings, along with the actions of the desegregated and openly equal labor organization, the CIO, led to widespread participation of African Americans in unions.

Federal action, including the Wagner Act and several New Deal programs, fostered pro-union ideas in the African American community. One major proponent of organized labor was National Negro Congress Secretary John P. Davis. In 1936 he adamantly declared the Black and White issue that faced African Americans. As Nelson (2001) wrote, "he was telling black workers that they faced a clear and momentous choice between joining the union with their white fellow workers and taking the side of their slave driving employers" (p. 191). Davis cemented the notion of Black activism into the labor movement. From conservative strikebreaking efforts to becoming unionized Black workers, the shift in goals becomes clear—from Washington to Du Bois. On the horizon, however, was arguably one of Black labor's greatest leader yet: A. Phillip Randolph.

A Shift in Goals: A. Philip Randolph

From 1941 to 1960, one major figure led a new generation of African Americans in the labor movement. Randolph was a courageous labor leader who blended the struggle of labor, class, race, and equality into one cause. He contrasted starkly with Washington and Du Bois in that his main focus was labor, not politics. Where Du Bois had focused on a top-down advancement through organization (NAACP for example), Randolph reversed this by organizing at the working class level to change inequality from the bottom up. In 1929 Randolph became the president of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), an important and largely Black union. His actions made him an important figure in the AFL-CIO. He was critical of the AFL-CIO leadership and made it a point to call out unions that perpetuated segregation. Randolph declared, "I don't believe that...Negro members of a union have a right to maintain a Jim Crow local," a telling statement of Randolph's feelings

on what Nelson (2001) referred to as the “separate but equal mentality that was still prevalent in certain unions” (p. 134).

Organized by Randolph, the March on Washington showed public outcry for legislation regarding employment barriers on the grounds of race. Marshall (1965) noted, “Randolph organized a movement to lead 50,000 Negroes in a protest march on Washington” (p. 212). Randolph had been outraged by the inequality in the workplace: “this sense of outrage must surely have been intensified by the realization that the nation was preparing for a war against fascism, an ideology based in part on racism” (p. 212). Taylor and Hill (2000) found that Randolph criticized the nation when he stated, “If American democracy will not give jobs to its toilers because of race or color...it is a hollow mockery and belies the principles for which it is supposed to stand” (p. 255). The threat of a march was a success; President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the (FEPC) or Fair Employment Practices Committee. Randolph represented the new phase in the Black freedom struggle based in civil rights and labor activism. His achievements as a labor leader brought together the civil rights and labor movements. Honey (1999) noted that in the words of factory worker Matthew Davis, Randolph was more than just a labor leader. Davis states, “People give Martin Luther King a lot of credit, but A. Philip Randolph was way ahead of Martin Luther King” (p. 252).

Turning Point: King and the Sanitation Workers

The labor and civil rights movement headed by Randolph was not well established until the 1960s, as can be seen in the Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968. Despite the civil rights movement, much of the South was still segregated. Leaders in the Black community pushed for equal rights and opportunity, and some legislation passed. During the 1950s and 1960s the Black sanitation workers in Memphis, TN, dealt with a multitude of racial problems in the workplace. For example, Estes (2005) wrote, “white supervisors openly discriminated against black employees in job assignment, pay scale, and advancement...In addition to paying miniscule wages, the city attempted to save money by refusing to modernize ancient equipment” (p. 133). The situation was severe by the early 1960s, and attempts to bring union action against the city failed—once in 1963 and again in 1966. The unequal treatment of Black sanitation workers reached a boiling point in 1968, when “an old garbage truck malfunctioned, killing two black workers...The *Commercial Appeal*, one of two white dailies in Memphis, reported that the workers had been ‘ground up like garbage’” (Estes 2005, p. 134). When the walkout began, it gained national attention, and soon after Martin Luther King Jr. arrived and led the civil rights wing of the strike.

King had become a national presence in the fight for civil rights. He had established his reputation with involvement in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the NAACP, along with success in the peaceful protest in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington. Like his predecessors, King had not focused on the issue of labor activism and advancement. His goals in the Black freedom struggle were to end all forms of inequality and racial segregation by using non-violent protest. In the summer of 1968, King would focus all his efforts on issues of labor and class in Memphis.

The strike in Memphis merged the civil rights movement and labor. The goals of labor and civil rights met at the forefront of racial prejudice. Though the Memphis

Sanitation Strike was unsuccessful and King lost his life in Memphis, the implications of the Sanitation Strike of 1968 are important. For the first time, civil rights and workers rights shared the same stage. Randolph had concluded this was the only option for African Americans in society, a united fight starting with labor rights. King’s presence at the strike strengthened the ties that Randolph created, the unification of civil and worker’s rights. In the end though, the strike of 1968 foreshadowed a decline in labor activism.

After King’s murder in Memphis, Black leadership was in disarray, and the push for equality in labor faded. The assassination of King dispersed Black ideology. In the 1970s the Black freedom struggle split, with one side favoring the continued work of King and the other movement concentrating on Black Power ideology. This split clearly affected labor.

In 1977 another sanitation worker’s strike occurred in Atlanta. Maynard Jackson, the first Black mayor of the city and former supporter of labor organization, laid off 1,000 sanitation workers who participated in a walkout. This incident represents the dissolution and perhaps the end of the era of African American labor rights and a definite low point in African American labor history. Labor activism and the goals of the Black freedom struggle split-poetic injustice. The hostility that labor faced in the aftermath of the assassination of King reveals the retrograde direction labor was moving in the Black freedom struggle. Labor took a back seat to political and cultural goals that the Black freedom struggle began to push as key issues.

The binary that developed from Reconstruction up to the civil rights movement between labor and the Black freedom struggle is clear. Labor activism has always been a part of the Black community but not always at the forefront of the Black freedom struggle. Washington’s views on segregation and conservative anti-union sentiments stuck with the African American community until the early 1900s. Du Bois’ ideas on activism and Black unification battled Washington’s views in the labor movement, especially in the steel industry of WWI. A. Philip Randolph redefined the Black freedom struggle in terms of labor; his views encompassed the ideals and solutions identified by half a century of hardship in society. With Randolph and King labor action and civil action unified. The Black freedom struggle placed labor as its main goal, focusing on class as well as race in what seemed like a time of unlimited opportunity. However, the modern poverty level among the African American community is a tragic reminder of the progress that was so violently halted in Memphis in 1968.

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