Chapter VI:
Organized Labor: From Underdog to Overseer

No other reform movement has had such lasting impact on non-white Americans as the labor movement. The long-standing and decidedly hostile attitude of organized white labor toward nonwhite workers is a central theme of the nation’s social history. Nowhere else can there be found a more revealing measure of the average citizen’s commitment to the ideals of equality and fraternity; for in the crucible of conflict between labor and capital the very soul of white America is exposed to view.

Basing itself upon the masses of ordinary working people the labor movement has obtained the active participation of more individuals than any other reform campaign. Millions were drawn into the great labor struggles that marked the last century of U.S. history. The story of the effort to organize the working class comprises the longest history of any of the social change movements under consideration in this study. Its origins can be traced to the colonial period when free laborers began agitating for the full franchise and registering their dissatisfaction with inequalities in the tax structure and regulations that held wages down. Finally, the labor movement is the only mass-based reform movement that succeeded in establishing itself organizationally as a permanent part of the American power structure. The abolitionists drifted into obscurity after the Civil War; the Populists failed and disintegrated in 1896; the Progressives were literally absorbed by the new industrial order against which they had been reacting; and militant suffragists merged indis-
tistinguishably into the white electorate upon getting the vote. Only the labor movement has been able to maintain its independent base of support—a substantial portion of American workers—and its separate organizational identity while at the same time achieving some measure of real power within the system. Indeed, today national labor leaders are a part of that triumvirate of big business, big government and big labor that predominates in formulating national policy. If success is defined as carving out a comfortable niche within the establishment, then the leadership of organized labor has been successful like nothing else.

It is, of course, no secret that blacks and other minority workers, who comprise the vast bulk of the nonwhite populations, have been largely denied by the economic and political gains achieved by organized labor. The history of the American labor movement is one long and shameful story of exclusion, discrimination, outright treachery and open violence directed against black, Mexican, Chinese and other nonwhite workers. This is a tremendously involved story that cannot even be sketched in a brief chapter such as this. Instead, attention must be focused on the broader outline. In analyzing labor history it is particularly important to note the role of labor federations and other nationwide labor groups, since, at least officially, these usually disowned racial discrimination. Yet their practices, especially in the American Federation of Labor, only contributed to the institutionalization of racism. True, there have been exceptional unions and labor federations, but these have not been without their own problems. Moreover, they were usually short-lived, or over time they have yielded to the conservatizing influence of the more firmly established labor bureaucracies. Thus, in the years after the Civil War the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor hesitantly attempted to unite the whole working class without regard to race, sex or nationality; but these two groups disintegrated by 1890. The heyday of the IWW spread over only a few years following the turn of the century. A rebirth of the hope of labor solidarity accompanied the great organizing drives of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930's and 1940's, but CIO leaders purged the more radical unions and leaders from their ranks and eventually allied themselves with the conservative AFL.

The taint of racism in the labor movement cannot be attributed solely to the misleadership of labor bureaucrats or the conniving of capitalist bosses. Certainly opportunistic leaders have tried to capitalize on racial antagonisms to solidify white trade unions and secure their own leadership positions; and the owners and managers of industry were never reluctant to pit race against race, and nationality against nationality in order to depress wages and hinder organizing activities. Yet the conclusion cannot be escaped that many rank-and-file union members have been and are just as racist as the more bigoted labor leaders and employers. One scholar has castigated labor historians who "wasted much energy debating the AFL's attitudes toward black workers, when the truly bitter, and functional, racial animosities were not at the national but at the shop level. Unions have too often directed their recriminations at anti-union Negroes, rather than conceding their own inability to control the racial hatreds of white members." Summing up the contemporary situation, Julius Jacobson wrote: "The mounting evidence is that not 'some' members take a wrong-headed view but that the bulk of the union movement, on one level or another, follows discriminatory policies, and has successfully resisted the minimal internal union pressures and heavier external effort to bring full equality into the labor movement."

Ante-bellum Origins of White Hostility to Black Labor

In the South the slave system victimized not only blacks but also non-slaveholding whites. This latter class was made up of small farmers, craftsmen and laborers. In the chapter on Southern Populism attention was called to the fact that the small farmers resented blacks because the slave-plantation system pushed many of the former onto the most barren and least productive lands. A similar social-psychological dynamic was at work within the Southern labor
forces where slave labor was thrown into competition with free labor in the towns and at industrial sites. Many slaves were trained as skilled craftsmen so that they could perform maintenance and repair tasks on their owners’ plantations, which operated as self-sufficient economic units. Slaves trained in blacksmithing, masonry, carpentry and other mechanical trades were highly valued by their masters because (1) They could render numerous services on the plantation, which relieved the necessity of hiring outside skilled labor; (2) skilled slaves had considerably higher market value; and (3) skilled slaves could be hired out in the surrounding towns when they were not needed on the plantation, thus affording a profitable additional source of income to the masters. Slaves were also hired out as industrial workers. By 1860 some 200,000 slaves were employed as industrial workers in Southern mills, mines, foundries and railroads. Although there was considerable variation from one industry to another, and from one area to another, industrial slaves performed a wide range of tasks, sometimes including that of foreman or supervisor. Whether hired out as craftsmen or industrial workers, slaves were thrown into direct competition with white workers. Since there was little difference in quality of work, the determining factor in getting jobs became the wage rate. The slave artisan or industrial worker could be hired out by his master for lower wages because the individual slave, unlike the free laborer, need not be concerned with earning enough to provide himself with decent housing, clothing and food. These essentials were provided by the master or employer as part of his normal operating expenses. Needless to say, a gang of slave workers, housed in dilapidated barracks and supplied with only the coarsest of food and clothing, could be maintained at a much lower cost than an equal number of free workers.

Thus industrialism could exist beside a plantation slave system, but only in subordination to the slave economy. Surplus slave labor not needed on the plantations was available for hire, but the needs of the plantation system for ever more land and labor inhibited industrial investment and development. Moreover, the racial ideology of the dominant slave system—that blacks were no more than draft animals—promoted the corresponding notion that blacks were therefore incapable of performing industrial work using machinery. Even though this was patently untrue, the ideology mirrored the plantation system’s great demand for agricultural, as opposed to industrial, slave labor. (Later this kind of thinking was to provide a rationale for the exclusion of blacks from industrial work after the Civil War.) Thus the organization and ideology of the slave South mitigated against the triumph of industrialism in that area. For industrialism to become dominant required the availability of a large and fluid or “free” labor force that could be hired, fired and easily shifted from job to job as the market dictated, and for which the employer had no economic responsibility beyond payment of wages for work performed. This was the basic contradiction in organization and labor usage between the North and the South.

In reality, then, the Southern “white artisan was not competing with the black slave artisan any more than the independent storekeeper of the present is competing with the manager of the chain store in his territory. The white mechanic was competing with the slave owner whose cheap slave labor, financial resources, and political power gave him every advantage.” Clearly, the slave system seriously encumbered the free laborer in his struggle for a livelihood. But at the same time the racial ideology of the slave system acted to deflect attention away from the system itself by identifying economic distress with competition from “degraded” black workers. The situation was further complicated by the fact that in the accelerating struggle between labor and capital the slave occupied an ambiguous position. To his owner he was at once capital and labor; he was valuable property in himself and his work contributed directly to the enrichment of his owner. Whereas the chief concern of the free laborer was to gain a greater share of his employer’s wealth in the form of higher wages, to the slave such a struggle was utterly meaningless, since his status as chattel property decreed that his earnings were likewise the property of the master. Consequently, the existence of slavery within the capitalist system created a deep cleavage between slave laborers and free laborers; and since this economically induced division corresponded almost perfectly
with racial lines, it was a simple matter to picture it as a race conflict. Added to all of this was the employers’ practice, beginning in the 1840’s as Southern white workers were trying to organize, to bring slaves in as strikebreakers; in some instances, slave labor gradually supplanted free labor.

The white workers made some attempts to curb the use of slave labor, but for the most part “the white workers accepted their lot, blaming and hating the Negro for their plight.” Like the small farmers of the day, the Southern white workers did not understand that they were competing not against black workers per se but against the wealthy white man’s slave system. Instead they vented their hostility against the visible symbol of the slave system, the black worker, whether slave or free. The relative handful of free black artisans who lived in the South were in the most difficult position of all. They, too, had to meet the competition of slave labor and in addition they felt the brunt of white workers’ hostility, being restricted by the whites both in their right to work in certain occupations and in their freedom of movement.

If life was hard for the free black worker in the South, his fate in the North was no better. Racial antagonisms fostered by slavery were born down heavily on the black worker. He was even prohibited from living in several Northern states and many local communities. The driving force behind such prohibitions was the resentment of white workers who strenuously objected to the use of black labor. They contended that the presence of black workers resulted in lowering of wages and standards of work. Backing up their objections with open violence and murder, white workers succeeded in restricting Northern black labor mainly to domestic and personal service occupations.

Although some white workers supported the anti-slavery cause, many others were antagonistic toward the abolitionist movement. Due in part to the repeated attacks made by middle-class abolitionists on the embryonic labor movement, there was another anxiety that was more important in feeding this sentiment. Many white workers in the North feared “that abolition would bring thousands of black laborers into the nation’s industrial centers to compete for jobs that unskilled white laborers wanted, and that the wages of the whole working class would be driven down.” White laborers who already resented the presence of a small number of black workers in the North were thus even more hostile toward the idea of emancipation.

Yet the Southern slave system was already weighing heavily on the Northern white worker as it oppressed his counterpart in the South. While slavery placed upper limits on both wages and job opportunities in the South, labor historian Joseph G. Rayback reports that “in the North employers were telling their labor force that they had to work as long and as cheaply as the slaves of the South in order to compete with the Southern manufacturer.” Some white workers recognized the doubly oppressive nature of the slave system, and they supported abolition on the grounds that slavery degraded all labor, white as well as black. However, it was not until the aggressive expansion of the slave system in the two decades preceding the Civil War that significant numbers of white workers in the North became anti-slavery. However, the majority were not pro-emancipation; they were merely alarmed by the expansion of the slave system into lands that they wanted reserved for their own settlement. Their first aim was to emancipate themselves from “wage slavery” by becoming small property owners in the Western territories, an outlook expressed by the Free Soilers. As with the Southern small farmers the lure of the frontier was a convenient safety valve for releasing discontent.

The First General Strike

Southern secession and the attack on Fort Sumter left the North with little choice but to go to war. Even so, the North entered the conflict with no intention of freeing the slaves. Northern political leaders wanted to contain and limit the slave system, not destroy it. Lincoln’s motto was “The union, with or without slavery.”

Emancipation became necessary as a consequence of what W.E.B. Du Bois termed a massive general strike by slaves during
the early stages of the war. According to Du Bois, the South had counted on black slave labor to raise food and cash crops for civilians and the Confederate army. In a crisis it was even expected that slaves could be used for military purposes. "Slave revolt was an ever-present risk," Du Bois noted, "but there was no reason [for the Southerners] to think that a short war with the North would greatly increase this danger."

Southern rebels made careful calculations of the usefulness of slaves in the war effort. In 1861 an Alabama newspaper editorialized: "The total white population of the eleven states now comprising the Confederacy is 5,000,000, and, therefore, to fill up the ranks of the proposed army, 600,000, about ten per cent of the entire white population, will be required. In any other country than our own such a draft could not be met, but the Southern states can furnish that number of men, and still not leave the material interest of the country in a suffering condition. . . . The institution of slavery in the South alone enables her to place in the field a force larger in proportion to her white population than the North. . . ." Clearly, then, the South determined that the slave system gave it a significant advantage in the coming conflict.

But advantage turned to liability as the black slaves surprised both the South and the North by using the civil conflict as the occasion for a gigantic general strike. Thousands upon thousands of slaves escaped from the plantations and headed for the Northern lines. "This was not merely the desire to stop work," Du Bois believed. "It was a strike against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved in the end perhaps half a million people [out of a total slave population of four million]. They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations."

The white politicians and military commanders of the North at first did not appreciate the significance of this development. Instead, officers of the Northern armies ordered their men to round up the escaped slaves so they could be returned to their masters. It was more than a year before the Northern leaders realized that the general strike afforded the North a tremendous opportunity. If the North would sanction the strike, if the North would encourage slaves to leave, it could break the economic backbone of the South. An emancipation proclamation would encourage even more slaves to run away and thereby totally disrupt Southern agriculture. Moreover, the escaped slaves were anxious to aid the Northern armies. Eventually about 150,000 slaves became Union soldiers, while several hundred thousand aided the federal armies as laborers. The first Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 was thus primarily a military, rather than a humanitarian, gesture. Du Bois contended that the blacks who joined the Union forces were crucial in shifting the tide of war in favor of the North.

Meanwhile, white labor in the North was confused and resentful during the war. Many workers gladly joined the Union armies, but fear of labor competition, intensified by racist Democratic propaganda, soured the enthusiasm of others, especially the unskilled. Still other white workers regarded the war as a conflict between the industrial rulers of the North and the agrarian master class of the South. To them, the common man was represented by neither party in the strife. By and large Northern white workers took no cognizance of the slaves' role in aiding the Northern war effort. On the contrary, it was all too easy for many of them to treat blacks as the prime cause of the war and the troubles it brought.

For example, the existence of a discriminatory conscription law inflamed the white working classes. The law made it possible for the wealthy to evade military service by providing a substitute or paying a $300 fee. Some labor leaders such as William Sylvis, while supporting conscription, attacked the class discrimination inherent in the law. The anti-administration press was not so judicious. It pandered to the fears and prejudices of the white workers and urged them to make known their views on the subject. Roused to anger, workers unleashed a three-day insurrection in New York City in 1863. White workers, mostly unskilled Irish laborers, ransacked the main recruiting station, wrecked shipyards, railroads and streetcar lines. But what began as a class conflict turned into an ugly race riot. Blaming black people as the cause of the war and conscription,
the white mob destroyed homes and murdered every black person they could lay their hands on. The black population of New York was terrorized, and many fled the city. Similar race riots occurred in other parts of New York State, as well as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin.

Thus, while the Civil War and the activities of the slaves compelled the abolition of the practice of holding slaves as property and transformed slaves into "free" workers, at the same time white workers were highly agitated and increasingly worried about how to protect their jobs and status. This small-property mentality can be traced to the early trade or craft unions whose members regarded their skills as a kind of property, to be protected from interlopers and passed on to a chosen heir in the form of an apprenticeship. Following the Civil War the defense of trades and jobs as so much property—reflecting the hegemony of bourgeois ideology—was to be a central underlying theme in the manifestations of racism in the labor movement. Some of these concrete manifestations in the trade unions and their contribution to altering the status of black labor will now be investigated.

**Discrimination in the Trade Unions**

After the Civil War a variety of methods developed in the trade unions for discriminating against newly emancipated black workers. Over a period of time these became more elaborate and sophisticated, especially as some of the cruder forms of discrimination came under attack and had to be modified. Such discrimination, not only in the trade unions but throughout the labor movement, aided in forcing black workers out of a central role in the Southern economy into a marginal, but essential, role in the Northern, and later, national economy.

If emancipation and Reconstruction gave black people a brief taste of political freedom and power, the joint actions of prejudiced employers and exclusionist craft unions severely eroded the economic position of black labor. At the conclusion of the war the vast majority of black workers were unskilled laborers and consequently automatically excluded from the growing unions which sought to organize the skilled trades. Furthermore, skilled black craftsmen (who constituted 80% of the South’s skilled mechanics in 1865) were excluded from the trade unions on purely racial grounds. White workers were determined to monopolize trades in which blacks were once active. It was common practice for trade unions, especially in the burgeoning transportation industry, to insert a clause in their constitutions that specifically prohibited non-white membership. The history of the railroad unions is an unrelieved story of strikes, treachery and violence aimed at completely eliminating blacks from any but menial positions on the railways and in the shops and yards. As late as 1930 there were still at least 26 national unions that formally excluded black workers.¹⁴

Other trade unions managed to exclude blacks through informal methods. Ray Marshall states that these included "agreements not to sponsor Negroes for membership; refusal to admit Negroes into apprenticeship programs or to accept their applications, or simply to ignore their applications; general ‘understandings’ to vote against Negroes if they are proposed (for example, as few as three members of some locals can bar applicants for membership); refusal of journeyman status to Negroes by means of examinations which either are not given to whites or are rigged so that Negroes cannot pass them; exertion of political pressure on governmental licensing agencies to ensure the Negroes fail the tests; and restriction of membership to sons, nephews, or other relatives of members."¹⁵ Trade unions that have employed such devious informal techniques of exclusion include the building trades, plumbers and electricians unions.

Where black workers were not excluded outright they were usually organized into segregated locals. These segregated locals were then placed under the control of a white local or the national union. According to Spero and Harris, where segregation was the official policy of a national union, one or all of the following discriminations usually occurred: "(1) Negroes are organized in auxiliary locals usually in subordination to the nearest white local; (2)
they may not transfer to white locals; (3) they are not eligible for promotion to skilled work; (4) they may not hold office; and (5) they are represented in conventions or conferences only by white men.”11 Some years later A. Philip Randolph would argue that segregated auxiliary locals were like the “colonies of colored people” established by the “empire systems,” and which enjoyed “none of the rights that the white population in the mother country enjoy, except the right to be taxed.”119

While not all craft unions excluded or segregated black workers, investigation revealed that several unions that claimed full acceptance of black membership in fact practiced preferential placement in the employment of whites, thus discriminating against the black union member.20

Around the turn of the century the American Federation of Labor initiated a policy of chartering federal locals to black workers who were denied admittance to the white unions in their trades. These federal labor unions yielded good public relations material for the AFL, since their existence lent credence to the impression that the federation was genuinely interested in the welfare of black workers. However, as Bernard Mandel observed: “These bodies were completely ineffective to protect the interests of their members, for they were detached locals with no national head, and their standards were theoretically to be protected by the very internationals which claimed jurisdiction over their work but refused to admit them to membership.”21 The weakness of the segregated federal locals was attested by the fact that they were among the first unions to be destroyed when the AFL went into a decline after 1920.22

All in all, the policy of segregated locals and federal unions proved a very effective complement to the policy of racial exclusion. Organizing black workers into powerless, segregated locals brought them under the thumb of the white unions. Their freedom of movement and wages were in the hands of the white union, while at the same time segregation ensured that their grievances and demands would not be fairly met. In a word, under this policy black workers were organized, segregated and then ignored.

Union discrimination, as a reflection of white supremacy, was not limited to black workers. The majority of organized labor consistently opposed the immigration of Asian and Mexican workers and did little, if anything, to organize them. In California leaders of the white working class were the initiators and mainstay of the Chinese and Japanese exclusion movements.23 White workers either actively discriminated against and many times excluded nonwhite workers from the mines of California and the Southwest, or acquiesced in the employers’ practice of using different wage scales for white and nonwhite workers and holding certain skilled jobs for whites only. Asian and especially Mexican agricultural workers worked many times in jobs considered beneath whites, but even in agriculture organized white labor tried to push out nonwhite workers.24

Employers in California and the Southwest actively sought immigrant labor in order to obtain a cheap, docile labor force. In addition, they deliberately kept the immigrant groups isolated to ensure that the workers would not integrate into American society and transfer to better paying jobs. Organized labor cooperated fully in isolating nonwhite workers, leaving them vulnerable to extreme exploitation. Yet organization among agricultural workers did occur and many strikes took place, especially among the Mexican workers in the 1930’s. The extreme racism of the white populace of the West and Southwest contributed to the employers’ repression of this independent labor organizing. In addition, in most of these strikes the strikers were not aided by organized labor but left to their own devices. This made the Mexican workers particularly vulnerable as leaders would be arrested and deported as undesirables.25

Impact of Labor Racism

The impact of organized labor’s racist policies on nonwhite workers was disastrous. Instead of being brought into the mainstream of organized labor the nonwhite work force before the Great Depression
was excluded and degraded. The terrible consequences of these policies were graphically demonstrated in the case of black labor. When combined with other trends in the Southern and national economics, trade union discrimination acted to reduce black labor in the South to an impoverished subproletariat—a vast reserve army of unorganized labor which employers could draw upon to break strikes called by white workers. The racism practiced by white unions thus came full circle and was forcibly turned against them by the owners and managers of the new industries.

Several steps were involved in this process. In the first place, the class of black craftsmen, a product of the slave system, was virtually eliminated. Historian Charles Wesley estimated that at the conclusion of the Civil War 100,000 out of a total of 120,000 craftsmen in the South were black. Between 1865 and 1900, however, the proportion of black artisans declined sharply due to the differential advantage accruing to white skilled workers as a result of trade union exclusion. Since craft unions control employment opportunities, unlike industrial unions, highly skilled black workers—masons, carpenters, plasterers, tailors, shoemakers, cabinet makers, painters, seamstresses, etc.—were forced to abandon their trades to become sharecroppers, agricultural workers or common laborers. They simply had no alternative.

As black craftsmen were being eliminated the rural black population was reduced to semi-slavery under the sharecropping system. Kept in perpetual debt by the landlord-merchant, the black sharecropper could eke out only the most miserable existence on his small patch of land. But even this state of affairs was highly unstable, and large numbers of black people were forced off the land and into the towns and cities, first in the South and later the North. The chief causes of this migration were (1) the widespread anti-black terrorism that began during Reconstruction; (2) the agricultural depression of the 1870's which hit small farmers and sharecroppers with special severity; (3) the capitation of Populism to white supremacy which further isolated and undermined blacks in the South; (4) the beginning mechanization of agriculture which eliminated more farm jobs; and (5) the opening up of jobs in the North due to labor shortages created by World War I.

As blacks left the land they went into the Southern cities where Northern capital was already making great inroads. The expansion of the railroads opened the way to exploiting the South's rich natural resources. Northern capital poured into the lumber industry, buying up huge stretches of timber land, expanding the sawmills and multiplying many times over the value of Southern lumber output. Coal and iron deposits were developed, and Birmingham started on the road to becoming a major steel-producing center. A rapid expansion in cotton and tobacco manufacturing also took place.

Black workers were brought in at the lowest levels in many of the new industries, although some, such as textile manufacturing, virtually excluded the black worker. These workers were paid one-third to one-half the wages they would earn for the same work in the North. The working period in industry varied from 60 to more than 80 hours per week; and of course the largely unorganized black workers had no say as far as wages and working conditions were concerned. At the same time most of the skilled and better paying jobs went to white workers—a practice which became institutionalized with the passage of time. Even in older Southern industries, such as tobacco manufacturing where blacks once held a virtual job monopoly, the introduction of machinery provided a rationale for excluding black workers from skilled occupations.

Until World War I, industrial work in the North and Midwest was the province of white workers. The greatly feared flood of ex-slaves did not materialize after the Civil War, and the few who did make their way North were kept out of skilled occupations by rigid discrimination. Instead, rapidly expanding Northern industry was furnished with a constant supply of cheap labor by the steady stream of European immigration. The 13 million immigrants who arrived in this country between 1870 and 1900 were anxious to find decent employment in the promised land. But nativism and Anglo-Saxonism combined to make life difficult for the newcomers. Most of the immigrants, who were mainly unskilled and unorganized, went to work in Northern industries where employers skillfully used ethnic stereotypes to isolate and divide the national groupings, thereby checking pressure for wage increases by inflam-
ing an already highly competitive situation. Ironically, one of the few things that united the various white ethnic groups was that almost all of them soon adopted the American prejudice against black people. What is more, the European immigrants also pushed blacks out of the personal service occupations in the North. Willing and able to provide the same services at the same price, the immigrants enjoyed the distinct advantage of being white in a white-supremacist society. Thus, in an area of the Northern economy where blacks had made some gains by providing personal services to white customers, they were undercut by European immigrants.

Employers in the North largely disregarded black workers as a source of industrial labor, except during periods of acute labor shortage as occurred during World War I, and, of course, during strikes. Northern employers had occasionally drawn upon the Southern reserve of black farmers and sharecroppers to help them break strikes, but it was not until the 1880’s, as blacks were being forced off the land and the white labor movement was gaining ground, that this became a regular and frequent practice.

The majority of the black migrants coming North took low-paid, unskilled jobs in mass-production industries: steel mills, automobile plants, foundries and meat-packing houses. But the move North was marred by frequent strife and violence. Many of the blacks who first entered these industries came as strikebreakers. Discrimination by both employers and trade unions led the black worker to accept eagerly any sort of job that gave him a foothold in Northern industry, even if at the expense of a white worker out on strike. With few exceptions class solidarity was prevented from growing by institutionalized white supremacy. Seeing his opportunities curtailed by employers and his fellow white workers, the black worker sometimes concluded that strikebreaking offered his only chance of smashing through the barriers of job discrimination. However, strikebreaking by unorganized black workers only increased the determination of white workers to exclude blacks from labor organizations. Blinded by their own racism the white workers piously asserted that a black who scabbed was not worthy of being admitted to a union; conveniently forgetting that exclusion left the black worker few options: He could starve or he could take a job in disregard of labor principles which were not intended to include him. Such a discordant situation inevitably led to violence, as happened in the terrible anti-black riots that repeatedly shook Chicago between 1894 and 1919.7 The pattern of the Civil War riots was repeated as blacks became the victims of a class struggle between whites. Neither white employers nor white workers regarded blacks as anything more than passive, faceless beings, barely human, to be manipulated at will and destroyed if they evidenced too much independence.

The net result of the process described in the last few pages was a radical transformation of the black work force. During the decades of capitalist accumulation prior to the Civil War, black slave workers were essential to the development of the American economy, providing the nation with much of its early wealth. As industrial capitalism matured into monopoly capital, however, black workers were reduced to a reserve of cheap labor which could be manipulated, excluded and degraded at the whim of employers and trade unions. Blacks were cast in the role of “shock absorbers” of American economic and class conflicts: few enough to be disregarded in times of recession, yet numerous enough to make a marginal difference in times of military or economic need. In effect, black workers provided an essential subproletariat which added elasticity to the national labor pool, and which—because of its insecure status—could also be pitted economically against other sectors of the labor pool. Thus, blacks were forced to absorb a disproportionately heavy share of the economic stresses and conflicts inherent in a monopoly capitalist economy, with the side effect that class contradictions were obscured and often deflected into race conflicts.

Social and Economic Causes of Labor Racism

It is possible to identify certain specific factors that have fostered racism in the labor movement. Important among these is the prevailing racist social climate. There can be little doubt that rank-
and-file union members reflected and helped to propagate the racist attitudes and stereotypes common in white society. With notable exceptions only the most feeble and sporadic attempts were made by the established unions to educate their members away from racist thinking. The more common occurrence was for unions to implement racism in their practices and procedures, thus giving concrete form to the prevailing social ideas.

This was particularly true of those unions, such as the railroad brotherhoods, which also regarded themselves as fraternal and social organizations. It was a regular practice for such unions to sponsor dances, picnics and other social events in which the members were encouraged to take part. Since these unions were formed at a time when "social equality" was being loudly denounced, it comes as no surprise that they excluded blacks. Even after the turn of the century the social equality issue continued as a rationale for exclusion. Thus at the 1905 convention of the railway car workers a resolution in favor of black admission met with sharp attacks. "I don't think," one delegate declared with great emotion, "there is a member in this room that believes in taking the Negro in with him on social equality. I believe that God in his infinite mercy made the Negro but he never made him to be a car worker. I do not believe the time will ever come when he should come into a union along with carmen. . . . I want to tell you that I am a Northern man. . . . I was born with an abolitionist father; but when the time does come that I must sit down in social equality with the Negro. . . . I want to be carried to the nearest insane asylum." 89

As already noted, the most common rationale for excluding blacks from trade unions was the notion that black workers were strikebreakers and therefore untrustworthy. This was little more than a thin disguise for racism. While it was true that black workers were used by employers in many industries to break strikes—with the active encouragement of some black community leaders—nevertheless race hatred caused (1) the prevalence of black strikebreaking to be exaggerated, and (2) its meaning to be distorted. Unbiased labor scholars have noted that the number of strikes disrupted by black labor does not begin to compare with the number broken by white scabs. Rather, race prejudice causes the black strikebreaker, even though he may be only a few among hundreds of white scabs, to be singled out for special slander and violence. Historically, the press, often pro-employer, has played a central role in provoking latent race hatreds on the picket lines.

A case in point would be the 1905 Teamster's strike in Chicago. Over a period of time some 5,800 strikebreakers were brought in to fill the places of 5,000 strikers. All but about 800 of the strikebreakers were white. Yet the press aroused racial animosities by printing stories that pictured hordes of blacks taking the jobs of the white strikers. In point of fact, it was white strikebreakers who were doing the cause greatest harm. Moreover, "even where Negro unionists have struck side by side with white, the introduction of Negro strike breakers has stirred up the same racial antipathies among white strikers as if they alone had been carrying the strike." 90

Such thoroughly racist behavior prompted Booker T. Washington to complain: "Strikers seem to consider it a much greater crime for a Negro who had been denied the opportunity to work at his trade to take the place of a striking employee than for a white man to do the same thing. Not only have Negro strike breakers been savagely beaten and mobbed by strikers and their sympathizers, but in some instances every Negro, no matter what his occupation, who lived in the vicinity of the strike has found himself in danger." 91

Strikebreaking had been distorted to seem as though it were a racial question. Actually it was a problem of economics, union organization and employer tactics. Black workers who were welcomed into the unions displayed no greater proclivity to scab than did white unionists. However, a group, of any race whatever, which is in an economically depressed condition and excluded from union membership can be readily manipulated by employers to the detriment of organized labor. Labor leaders have known this simple fact from earliest times, but many of them chose to ignore it and instead blamed black workers for their own victimization.

When the AFL was organized in the early 1880's its leader, Samuel Gompers, prodded by a black delegate, urged that all working-
men be organized irrespective of color. This was both a matter of principle and practicality. Divisions in the labor movements only eased the employers’ task of holding wages down. Gompers even recognized that white prejudice was the cause of black exclusion from the labor movement and this encouraged their use as strikebreakers. Yet within a few years Gompers yielded to racist forces within the labor movement and tried to shift the blame for strikebreaking to black workers themselves. “When asked [in 1896] why there were not more skilled Negro workers, he assigned two reasons for it,” states Bernard Mandel. “First,” he said, “Negro workers did not possess the required skill, but he did not mention the fact that most of the trade unions prevented them from acquiring that skill by refusing to accept them as apprentices. The second reason was that in many cases when white workers were on strike, Negroes took their places and thus helped the employers to tear down labor standards and destroy the unions. While he had previously argued that this was the inevitable result of the white workers’ ignoring the organization of Negroes, he now stated: ‘If workers will not organize to protect their own interests and the interests of their fellow workers, or if workmen are so lost to their own self respect and interests as to turn the weight of their influence on the side of the capitalists as against that of the workers, these men are enemies of progress, regardless of whether they be white or black, Caucasian or Mongolian.’

In 1899 Gompers told the United States Industrial Commission that organized labor discriminated against blacks not because of race prejudice but because they have “so conducted themselves as to be a continuous convenient whip placed in the hands of the employers to cow the white men and to compel them to accept abject conditions of labor.” Six years later he asserted that “caucasians are not going to let their standard of living be destroyed by negroes, Chinamen, Japs, or any others.”

Gompers and other labor leaders of his persuasion knew full well what they were doing. Although he originally opposed opening the doors of the AFL to unions that practiced racial exclusion, Gompers soon realized that many powerful craft unions were determined to preserve a racial monopoly of available jobs. Without the support of these unions the AFL was doomed to impotence. Thus, Gompers and other labor leaders abandoned the principle of labor solidarity and instead opportunistically embraced racial discrimination as an expedient method of uniting the privileged upper levels of white labor (around white supremacy), while entrenching themselves in positions of power. Following the lead of the Populists they accomplished this by a simple racist trick; viz., blame the victims for their own victimization and then use this as the reason for excluding them.

I ideological and Structural Contributors to Labor Racism

Looking back over labor history it is possible to discern three different forms of labor organizing which arose with the development of the U.S. political economy. These three represented quite different responses to the crisis presented to labor by industrialization and economic concentration.

The oldest is craft unionism, of course, which goes back to the eighteenth century when production was organized according to skilled trades which were passed from master to apprentice. By the late nineteenth century, craft or trade unionism sought to protect the interests of skilled craftsmen by monopolizing work and excluding competition from unskilled workers, a possibility which had developed with the growth of the industrial system. What monopoly is to business, craft unionism is to labor. Craft unionism advocates organization of only the skilled workers; the unskilled are automatically excluded. It further encourages exclusion by limiting opportunities for apprentices to join the union and learn the trade. A craft union is thereby able to establish a virtual monopoly over its trade, and control both work opportunities and wages. What is termed the “aristocracy of labor,” the highly skilled and tightly organized craftsmen, benefited immensely from the monopoly and exclusion of the trade unions.
Most of the unions that came together in 1881 to form the AFL were craft unions, and their ideology was reflected in the structure of the organization they set up. The AFL was a confederation of autonomous national and international craft unions. Jealously guarding the autonomy that made possible the building of a protective wall around the jobs they controlled, the constituent unions granted only limited power to the federation, thus ensuring that the narrow and conservative policies of local unions could dominate the policies of the Federation. This fostered racism in the AFL. Federation officers were reluctant to use what power they had in enforcing racial equality because a strong stand might jeopardize their positions. Thus, craft unionism, once militant, became more conservative and racist as it incorporated itself into the structure of monopoly capitalism.

The second major form of labor organizing is industrial unionism. Mechanization and industrialization meant that many of the old skills and crafts were being replaced by unskilled or semi-skilled mass-production operations. Consequently, effective labor organizing increasingly demanded that unions organize all workers in a given industry—skilled and unskilled, black and white—rather than follow the old tradition of organization by crafts.

However, industrial unionism did not develop overnight. Its growth was hindered for many years by the entrenched position and conservative policies of the craft unions, which long were the dominant element in the labor movement, and it did not fully mature until the great labor struggles of the 1930's. Hence, industrial unionism went through an embryonic or experimental period when its character was not clearly defined. This is usually referred to as reform unionism, and was especially apparent in the two decades after the Civil War when industrial capitalism was beginning to mature into monopoly.

Reform unionism represented in part a continuation of the political reform activity that was pervasive in American society before the Civil War. As manifested in organized labor this reformism sought to abolish, or at least modify, the wage system through independent political action. In theory, reform unionism hoped to bring all wage earners into a great labor party. However, sharp differences in political orientation between the reformers and black labor leaders, combined with racial prejudice, forestalled the development of lasting black-white unity.

It would be accurate to conclude that craft unions have generally opted for racism not only because of the general social climate but also because racism was a logical extension of the exclusionism practiced by these unions; whereas the unions most friendly toward nonwhites have been those organized on the industrial principle of labor solidarity. While the discussion in the preceding pages would bear out the first part of this statement, it remains to examine the policies of the labor reformers and industrial unions.

Reform Unionism

After the Civil War the principle of labor solidarity without regard to race was advocated most strenuously by the radical reformers of the National Labor Union (NLU) and the Knights of Labor—organizations that also proposed producers' cooperatives and independent political action as instruments for the salvation of the working class. But even these exceptional unions were not without serious problems.

The NLU, formed in 1866, was the first trade union federation of the postwar era. From the outset important NLU leaders pushed the organization to follow an equitarian racial policy, to make "no distinction of race or nationality," but the organization's course was marked by confusion and evasion of the issue, and further complicated by the leaders' inability to understand or support the freedmen's struggle for full political and civil rights.

At its second convention in 1867, a committee was appointed to study the question of racial cooperation. The committee came up with an evasive report. It pointed to "the danger in the future of competition in mechanical negro labor" and noted the diversity of opinion among the membership on the subject, finally concluding that the whole question should be postponed until the next meeting.
William Sylvis and other NLU leaders objected to postponing a decision. Predicting that the freedmen would “take possession of the shops if we have not taken possession of the negro,” Sylvis declared, “If the workingmen of the white race do not conciliate the blacks, the black vote will be cast against them.” The matter was referred to the committee but was dodged again when the committee reported simply that it “had come to the conclusion that the constitution already adopted prevented the necessity of reporting on the subject of negro labor.”

It was not until 1869, when confronted by a black labor delegation, that the NLU formally adopted a resolution urging that black workers be organized. Isaac Meyers, a black labor leader, praised this action but he observed that the real test would be whether the resolution was implemented by the affiliated unions. The NLU was a delegate organization with no powers of enforcement; hence Meyers’ caution was well founded. In point of fact, only groups affiliated with the Marxist International Workingmen’s Association in New York and, at the national level, the Cigar Makers and Carpenters and Joiners unions took any official steps to organize black labor. Most unions simply refused to take a stand or openly excluded black workers by constitutional provision.

The official air of cooperation between the NLU and black labor did not prevail for long. Black workers, increasingly under the sway of political leaders such as P.B.S. Pinchback of Louisiana and Frederick Douglass were greatly concerned with winning political equality and civil rights, and they regarded the Republican Party as the political instrument for achieving these goals. In addition, black labor conventions deprecate the notion of class struggle, thinking that education and cooperation would make such strife unnecessary.

The white leadership of the NLU, on the other hand, proposed to reform the monetary system, increase taxation on the rich and reduce the workday to eight hours. It hoped to achieve these reforms through the agency of an independent labor party. Furthermore, the NLU, identifying its enemies as the Northern industrialists, attacked the Radical Republicans, ridiculed Reconstruction programs such as the Freedmen’s Bureau, and proposed in essence that political power be returned to the Southern planters.

The tension between the black and white labor organizations came to a head at the 1870 convention of the NLU. The black delegates were outraged when two of their number were initially denied seats at the convention on the grounds that they were agents of the Republican Party. After this meeting the blacks withdrew from the NLU. At its 1872 convention the National Black Labor Congress, which had been organized in 1869, denounced the NLU and reaffirmed its loyalty to the Republican Party. The black labor group carried out agitational and organizational work in the South, but over the next two years it lost much of its trade union character, becoming more of a political organization appended to the Republican Party. By 1874 it had ceased to exist. Meanwhile, the NLU had also declined, torn between trade unionism and political activism while drifting ever closer to the Democratic Party.

The relationship between the NLU and black labor amply illustrated the manifold complexities of race, politics and economics during Reconstruction. Racial prejudice and fear of economic competition virtually nullified the NLU’s official policy of racial cooperation. At the same time black political survival was, for the moment, dependent on an alliance with the Republican Party, which also represented Northern industrial capital. Leaders of the NLU, recognizing the class character of the Republicans, were drawn toward alliances with discontented farmers and middle-class reformers who were mainly Democrats. Thus, whatever common interests existed between the NLU and black labor were submerged in a whirlpool of conflicting currents. Furthermore, the pragmatic approach of both groups to economic and political problems emphasized short-term considerations at the expense of long-term objectives. Neither possessed an analytic framework from which to assess overall trends in the American political economy. Most blacks clung desperately to the Republican Party, failing to realize that the Republicans would champion black rights only so long as their class interests made it expedient to do so. On the other hand, craft unionists in the NLU gladly excluded black workers in order to
gain immediate advantages for white craftsmen. They thus endorsed capitalism’s self-serving ideology of race conflict; and thereby helped render unattainable reform unionism’s long-term objectives, which could be achieved only by practicing a solidarity that crossed race lines. Early Marxist labor leaders, who at least possessed an independent ideology, exercised only limited influence in the labor movement as a whole. Moreover, the Marxists, drawing upon the European experience, tended to underestimate the importance of race in America, or they, too, simply succumbed to the prevailing prejudices.

The ideal of black-white labor solidarity advanced to a highwater mark in the nineteenth century during the heyday of the Knights of Labor. Organized as a secret society in 1869, the Knights, under the leadership of Uriah Stephens and Terence V. Powderly, stressed the ideal of industrial brotherhood and attempted to educate the trade unions away from their exclusionist practices. Recognizing the dangers posed by black-white competition and lack of organization, the Knights officially welcomed all workers into the fold, skilled and unskilled, black and white. 77

The Knights reached their maximum strength during the period of labor unrest in the 1880’s. It was during this time that large numbers of black workers were recruited into the organization. At its peak in 1886 the Knights claimed between 60,000 and 95,000 black members out of a total membership of 700,000. 78 If these figures are accurate, the Knights had a larger percentage of black members than either the AFL or CIO could claim as late as 1945. Most of the black members were organized into some 400 all-black locals. The first of the black locals was set up in Iowa in 1881. In some areas, including the South, black workers were integrated into the white locals. During its existence several independent black unions affiliated with the Knights, including a black teamsters union in Louisville and hod carriers unions in St. Louis and Washington, D.C. Also, several of the organizers and leaders of the Knights were black workers.

Throughout the country, but especially in the South, the Knights faced stiff opposition in their campaign to organize black workers. Blacks were intimidated, imprisoned and murdered if they dared to join the organization. In South Carolina the legislature appropriated money to increase its militia, and it very nearly passed a bill “extending the conspiracy laws of the state with the avowed purpose of preventing the Negroes from organizing into local assemblies.” 79 Eventually the Knights in South Carolina were compelled to go underground.

Blacklisting, terrorism and frame-ups were freely employed to weaken and finally destroy the Knights of Labor. In addition, the organization was beset by internal dissension stirred up by the trade unions. Trade unionists were hostile to its reform goals and especially the Knights’ flirtation with Populism. Despite the official policies of the Knights, many of these unions continued to exclude black workers, and they agitated for a “pure and simple” unionism that would concern itself only with increasing wages and tightening union control over jobs. These were the chief interests of the skilled white workers, and soon the trade unions withdrew from the Knights to join the AFL.

The withdrawal of the trade unions speeded the dissolution of the Knights. Unfortunately, the organization drew much of its power from the well-organized and rapidly growing trade unions, and consequently their defection constituted the final blow to the “Noble Order.”

The most radical form of revolutionary idealism in the labor movement’s subsequent history was represented by the IWW. Founded in 1905 in opposition to the conservative and exclusionist trade union policies of the AFL, the Wobblies, as members of the IWW called themselves, did much to popularize the concept of industrial unionism, although in the end they failed to build a lasting labor organization. Opposed to segregation of any sort within the labor movement, they opened their membership and leadership to anyone who was a wage worker, regardless of race, nationality or sex, purposely keeping initiation fees and dues low so that everyone could join. Committed both to building an industrial union capable of fighting the everyday battles of labor and to acting as a revolutionary cadre promoting class consciousness and socialism, they
were destroyed by employers' repressive tactics and systematic persecution by the federal government during and after World War I.\textsuperscript{46}

To Wobblies the basic conflict in society was between employers and workers. They rejected the "business unionism" of the AFL which espoused a partnership of interests between the two groups, and for this reason they were reluctant even to sign formal contracts with employers. Preaching the need for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a new social order with the working class in control of production and distribution, their volatile rhetoric created hysteria among the respectable classes and earned them the undying hatred of employers who used every method in their power—from smear campaigns to mass arrests, deportations and open violence—to destroy the IWW. Working hand-in-hand with the businessmen, the national leadership of the AFL helped employers plan strategy, provided strikebreakers, publicly malign the Wobblies and even forbid affiliated unions to support IWW strikes, although this latter directive was not always followed.\textsuperscript{47}

The Wobblies believed that increased concentration of ownership and solidarity among employers necessitated a unified working class. Their dedication to the class struggle meant that they conceived the problem of racism in simplistic class terms. To them race prejudice was simply manufactured by employers to keep workers divided against themselves. They had little knowledge of the involved history of racism and only a limited appreciation of the extent to which it had become embedded in the entire American social fabric. Within their organization and activities they were consistent in promoting racial solidarity and brought Japanese, Chinese, Mexican and black workers into their organization. In their denunciation of Jim Crow, lynching, disfranchisement and the exclusion movement on the West Coast, they in effect challenged white supremacy. However, this challenge was weakened by their insistence that there was no "race problems," only the class struggle. Consequently, they lacked any concrete program to alleviate the racial oppression of nonwhites, and this limited their appeal. They did not, for example, actively support the black struggle for the vote.\textsuperscript{48}

Within the IWW, organization of black workers, who may have comprised as much as 10 per cent of its membership,\textsuperscript{49} was strongest among the dock workers and longshoremen in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Norfolk, Virginia, and in the lumber mills of Texas and Louisiana. The Philadelphia Marine Transport Workers, of whom half were black, was an exception to the general inability of the IWW to organize stable unions. The leaders of the dock workers concentrated more on building a union according to the principles of industrial unionism and devoted less energy to promoting revolutionary syndicalism. Affiliating with the IWW in 1913, this union exercised job control on the docks and gave industrial equality to black workers under the leadership of both blacks and whites, including the foremost black IWW organizer, Ben Fletcher. Unable to win a strike called in 1920, although solidarity among the workers was maintained, the Marine Transport Workers declined in 1923 due to competition from other unions, disagreements with the new IWW leadership and the failure of yet another strike.\textsuperscript{50}

The lumber workers of Texas and Louisiana organized the Brotherhood of Timber Workers in 1910 with segregated locals and power vested in the white locals. But upon seeking membership in the IWW in 1912 they were told by organizer Bill Haywood to integrate their meetings. According to Spero and Harris, integrated meetings became the policy except in cases where local authorities intimidated black workers into meeting separately. Destroyed by the repression of employers who were determined to block union organizing, the Brotherhood did achieve racial solidarity among not only its own members but also among blacks, Mexicans and foreign whites who were brought in as strikebreakers.\textsuperscript{51}

Although their membership shot up with each strike, the IWW was unable to sustain a large, stable membership, especially in the East among the industrial workers. Moreover, with the exception of the Lawrence textile strike of 1912, most of its strikes were not fully successful due to the repressive tactics of employers and government and lack of support from the main body of organized labor. The IWW's main strength came from the migrant workers of the
West, the homeless and despised "unorganizable" groups who were forced to drift from place to place seeking work. Here the IWW found ready recruits, for it offered the despised respect, the hopeless hope and the exploited an understanding of the causes of their condition and a course of action.34

Aside from repression, failure to consolidate their gains stemmed in part from the IWW's dual purpose of being at the same time a union and a revolutionary propaganda group. It was much more successful in the latter role. In addition, tensions existed between the Eastern and Western locals regarding the concept of leadership and centralization. But most important of the disagreements within the IWW was a dispute over political action as a method of achieving its goals. Unlike the NLU and the Knights, many Wobblies believed that corruption and the influence of Big Business in American politics removed the possibility of achieving socialism through political action. Rejecting the government as a tool of the capitalists, these Wobblies believed that only direct action on the part of the workers would bring about the new social order. This position was solidified at the 1908 convention under the leadership of Vincent St. John, William Troutmann, and the Western delegates, causing a large loss of membership and outside support. At a time when progressive reformers were turning to political action as a panacea for social ills, the Wobblies' position seemed incomprehensible. But many of the members of the IWW were disfranchised—the foreign-born, floating workers, nonwhite workers and women—and for them electoral politics was something less than a real option.35 In addition, Philip Foner has observed, "as a syndicalist organization, [the IWW] opposed political action at the ballot box as a waste of energy, and put its faith primarily in industrial organization and the general strike."36 All options were closed, however, as business and government conspired to eliminate the Wobblies and their organization.

With the destruction of the IWW the vision of a radically new society, the hope of labor reformers and revolutionaries, all but died. Unable to infuse their ideals into the labor movement as a whole, rejected by their own and persecuted by their class enemies, the labor visionaries faded into obscurity. Yet their incessant agitation and propaganda, coupled with the dynamics of a maturing industrial capitalist economy, pointed the way to a new form of unionism that was to take hold of the American working class.

Industrial Unionism and the CIO Era

Early industrial unions, such as the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the International Ladies Garments Workers Union (ILGWU), demonstrated that the problem of strikebreaking could be solved not by exclusion but by better labor organization. Put into practice, this simple insight—long advocated by labor leaders—was an important advance in overcoming racial prejudice in parts of the labor movement. As events turned out, however, this first step was followed by many reversals and other developments which hardly bode well for black labor.

In order to organize in the central competitive mining area—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and western Pennsylvania—it was necessary to eliminate the possibility of miners being brought from the coal fields of the South to act as scabs. When the UMW was organized in 1890 its leaders concluded that rather than excluding potential strikebreakers the union should organize them—and since a large percentage of the miners in the South were black this meant that they, too, should be organized. Black miners were brought into the union not only as rank-and-file members but also as organizers and leaders.

However, union leaders' efforts were hampered by the attitudes of many Northern white miners who "often refused to work with Negroes, and in some places have struck or threatened to strike if they were employed."37 Further, although the locals in the South were organized on an interracial basis, seating arrangements at meetings often were segregated. Despite these problems, the UMW succeeded in bringing a great measure of interracial labor solidarity to parts of the South.38

The UMW unfortunately failed to remember the lesson of its own history. In 1922 the union made the near-fatal mistake of blacklisting a racially mixed group of nonunion miners who had
aired it in a strike. The UMW's desertion of these miners eventually precipitated a revolt in its ranks led by Communists who accused the union of racism. This revolt, plus the fact that many black miners were disillusioned and leaving the union, led to the defeat and virtual collapse of the UMW in 1927.  

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) faced a similar problem with strikebreakers being brought into the shops from the South, and it decided to organize these workers who were mostly black women. This positive attitude was reinforced by the union's experience in organizing the diverse nationalities seeking employment in the garment industry. But ethnic competition still marred the ILGWU's record. The union was so structured that as late as 1965, although its membership was heavily black and Puerto Rican, its leadership and the better jobs were in the hands of the children of the white immigrants who flooded into the union decades ago.  

The hardships of the Great Depression inspired a new wave of reform activities, including a vigorous organizing drive aimed at bringing workers in the mass-production industries into the unions. The drive was spearheaded by industrial unionists in the AFL under the leadership of United Mine Workers personnel and assorted labor radicals, including Communists. This organizing effort was resisted by the craft union leaders of the AFL and in 1937, when the industrial organizers were expelled, they formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Because of the CIO's interest in organizing and protecting the unskilled mass-production workers it became an active lobbyist for New Deal social welfare legislation. The federal government, concerned that widespread labor unrest might result in a revolutionary situation, passed laws that facilitated labor organizing, but these laws also brought organized labor under closer scrutiny of government agencies.

The CIO was more favorably regarded in the black community than the AFL because of the former's avowedly friendly attitude toward black labor. The CIO organized black workers both as a matter of principle and out of necessity. The industrial principle of labor solidarity and, perhaps more important, the evident fact that black workers had made tremendous inroads in the mass-production industries since World War I meant that these workers could not be ignored. The CIO brought black workers into leadership positions; it won equal wages for black and white workers; and it tried with considerable success, especially in the North, to eliminate social segregation among its membership. The CIO also established a civil rights committee which carried on active propaganda, both within and outside the labor movement, against race prejudice.

It further sought the good will of the black community by making financial contributions to the NAACP and other organizations, and it provided personnel to work in some of these groups. In return, NAACP leaders actively campaigned for CIO unions. By 1945 black workers comprised almost seven per cent of the CIO's membership, as compared with 3.4 per cent for the AFL. The CIO made its greatest gains among black workers in the automobile, steel, shipbuilding, electrical and packinghouse industries of the North.

Although the CIO leadership initiated an aggressive campaign against racial discrimination, the limits of its capabilities soon became apparent. During World War II white CIO members struck several times to prevent the hiring or upgrading of black workers, with the result that black workers were confined largely to unskilled work in CIO unions. In Illinois white workers even went on strike to maintain segregated toilets. CIO leaders opposed these strikes but the leadership itself was becoming less militant on the question of racial equality.

The leadership's retreat on the race question coincided with the launching of its Southern organizing drive in 1946 and the rise of the anti-communist hysteria that gripped the nation following the war. As soon as the CIO began moving into the South it was met with a barrage of accusations. The press and Southern industrialists charged that union organizers were Communists, subversives, carpetbaggers, nigger lovers, etc. The AFL, fearing that its hegemony in the South might be threatened, opportunistically joined in the attacks. The attacks reached hysterical pitch, and the CIO leadership, instead of maintaining its stance and viewing the attacks
as indicative of its strength, gave in to the pressure. Attempting to placate its sworn enemies, it appointed regional directors who were more in accord with the racism and anti-communism of the Southern industrialists. Its Southern drive became a campaign to organize white workers first, with black workers often relegated to segregated locals. In an effort to present itself as 100% American, the CIO also purged its ranks of members and unions suspected of being pro-Communist, and in the process it eliminated many of the radical reformers who were most committed to racial equality. Its civil rights committee became a watchdog to keep Communists out of the labor movement and out of the black community.

In the postwar years the CIO in effect purged itself of the vision of reform and labor solidarity that had inspired its formation. By the beginning of the 1950's the CIO was well along the road toward the kind of political conservatism and bureaucracy which characterized the AFL. The final step in this process was taken in 1955 with the merger of the two. Although blacks were represented in the leadership of the new group, Ray Marshall pointed out that "a number of features of the merger caused Negroes to become increasingly skeptical of the federation's civil rights program. Some Negro leaders noted that unions could be expelled for corruption and communism but not for civil rights violations. . . . Relations between the AFL-CIO and the Negro community were also influenced by the fact that two-thirds of the official positions of the merged organization, including the presidency, went to the AFL. . . . Furthermore, the AFL-CIO Executive Council admitted two unions—The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen—to the merged organization even though they still had race bars in their constitutions."795

On paper the AFL-CIO was committed to racial equality, but its bureaucratic structure and political conservatism acted to vitiate this commitment. The intense black-white labor strife that occurred in the years after the merger and the recurring necessity for black workers to resort to litigation in order to break down race barriers clearly indicated that the AFL-CIO leadership, for all its resolutions and rhetoric, had little desire to mount a serious drive to eliminate white racism from the labor movement.

**The Black Community and Black Unionists**

Considering the pronounced hostility of the bulk of the labor movement during most of its history, it is remarkable that the black community has not with one voice rejected unionism outright. There has indeed been a strain in that direction but this has been countered by the economic realities of black community life. The overwhelming majority of the black population are members of the working class—until relatively recently the professional and business classes were minuscule. Consequently, the black community has long displayed an active interest in labor principles despite the unfriendliness of much of white labor. To be more precise, at least four different responses to labor organizing have been manifested at various times in black history. These are (1) anti-unionism, (2) adaptation to segregation within the union movement, (3) militant protests to challenge racist practices in the unions, and (4) independent labor organizing activities.

The prevalence of racism in so much of the trade union movement provoked many black community leaders to adopt an anti-union, pro-employer attitude. Booker T. Washington summarized this view in an article that was published in Atlantic Monthly in 1913: "The average Negro who comes to town does not understand the necessity or advantage of a labor organization which stands between him and his employer and aims apparently to make a monopoly of the opportunity for labor." The black worker is "more accustomed to work for persons than for wages," he contended. "When he gets a job, therefore, he is inclined to consider the source from which it comes." The black worker regards his employer as his friend, Washington said, and "does not understand and does not like an organization which seems to be founded on a sort of impersonal enmity to the man by whom he is employed." Washington,
black workers. In addition some chapters provided employers with social workers whose duties included espionage and informing on the off-duty activities of black employees, indoctrinating black workers against unionism, and operating social clubs financed by employers as a way of pacifying labor unrest. However, it must also be noted that other Urban League chapters were friendly and helpful to organized labor, especially after the advent of the CIO, and as early as 1918 the National Urban League and the NAACP together approached the AFL in an attempt to get it to change the discriminatory practices of its member unions.

The anti-union attitude of some black community leaders and organizations cannot be attributed entirely to the racial practices of white unions. In point of fact, black leaders have also been hostile toward black labor groups. In the 1920's when A. Philip Randolph was organizing his all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union, he was attacked by black politicians and newspaper editors. Randolph was accused of being communist-influenced and of misleading the black workers in his union. Although much of this opposition was engineered by the Pullman Company, it was symptomatic of an underlying antagonism toward the principles of labor organizing that went far beyond the question of racism in white unions.

Two black researchers, Horace Cayton and George Mitchell, attempted to analyze this phenomenon in terms of the ideology that characterized many of the leaders of the black community. Reporting their findings in a book, Black Workers and the New Unions published in 1939, they observed that a small elite group had grown up in the black community. Composed of businessmen, professionals, newspaper editors and religious leaders, this elite made its living by furnishing goods and services that the segregated black community was prevented from obtaining in the white world. Segregation and discrimination thus created a separate economic base that made possible the development of a black elite; and these factors also shaped its ideology. According to Cayton and Mitchell:

The educated upper class Negro does not, now that he has found a comfortable place, care to champion doctrines which purport to help
the black worker by changing the social system. ... that has given him a position of advantage within his group. In addition to the fact that he is complacent and respectable, perhaps because he is complacent and respectable, the upper class Negro is economically conservative. His primary interest tends to be in that which protects the differential between himself and the Negro masses, rather than in an effort to improve the conditions of the majority of his group in a manner which almost necessarily endangers his own position. The Negro masses have accepted the leadership of this handful of upper class persons. Since black workers have been isolated from the influence of the white working class, the talented, educated members of their group appeared as their natural leaders. Race consciousness had built up a semblance of solidarity between the classes which has benefitted the Negro elite by providing its members with a tenable social position and has benefitted the blacks by giving them leaders who have symbolized to them their possibilities as persons if conditions but allowed. The Negro upper class depends on this racial solidarity to maintain and enable it to exploit the market for professional and business services which racial prejudice has tended to create.44

The petty bourgeois black elite therefore opposed labor organizing not only because of racism in the union movement, but also because labor organizing by black workers threatened to create an alternative leadership to the established community leaders. Moreover, the radicalism of some black labor leaders raised questions as to the viability of the capitalist system; a system in which black businessmen were anxiously seeking to participate more fully. Du Bois' Talented Tenth thus found labor organizing and economic radicalism offensive to its newly found social status and its vested economic interests.

Black workers and labor leaders respond to union racism in several different ways. Some simply adapted to segregation and attempted to make the best of the situation. For example, Southern locals of the International Longshoremen's Association maintained a rigid structure of job and union segregation, with special work-sharing arrangements elaborated between black and white locals. In exchange for the job-sharing arrangements black longshoremen supported the ILA in bargaining with employers and aided it in resisting the organizing efforts of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. These reciprocal agreements resulted in blacks rising to positions of considerable power within the ILA. The leaders of the black longshoremen thus successfully used segregation to acquire a power base within the union and to obtain certain benefits for the black members. This attempt to convert a liability into an asset was not at all unusual in situations where black workers had to function within a segregated white union.41

A more widespread response among black workers was to protest the racism of the union movement and to demand full and equal admission to all levels of the labor movement. As early as 1869 black labor leaders confronted the National Labor Union with this demand, and black spokesmen have continued to press the matter ever since. The urgency of black labor needs moved the Urban League and the NAACP to make similar overtures to the AFL in 1918, 1920, 1924, and 1929. Within the AFL the most tireless fighter against discrimination was A. Philip Randolph. Literally for decades at every AFL convention, Randolph used his position as president of the sleeping car porters union to attack racial discrimination. For the most part, however, his complaints and proposals were ignored. Randolph also took his protest to the federal government. In 1941 he threatened to launch a massive black march on Washington unless President Roosevelt called a halt to discrimination in defense plants. Roosevelt issued an executive order establishing a federal Fair Employment Practices Commission, and he prohibited racial and religious discrimination in the war industries, government training programs and other government industries. Since that time blacks have with greater or lesser success prodded the federal government to pass anti-discrimination legislation and to bring pressure to bear on organized labor. In 1960 Randolph and other black labor leaders formed the Negro American Labor Council which sought to wage an organized fight against discrimination from within the labor movement.

Along with protest activity, black workers reacted to the racism of organized labor by establishing independent labor unions. As early as 1868 the first state and local conventions of black workers
were held and in January, 1869, the first national black labor congress took place in Washington, D.C. In many areas where black workers were excluded from the white unions they organized their own unions. By 1929 there were at least 13 such independent unions with a reported membership of between 15,000 and 20,000. In 1919 an attempt had been made to federate all of the black unions into an organization called the National Brotherhood Workers of America. For a time the Brotherhood Workers achieved considerable strength among shipyard and dock workers in Virginia. The organization embraced socialism and Randolph's magazine, The Messenger, became its official organ. Significantly, the Brotherhood Workers also saw the necessity of organizing black agricultural workers in the South. It was on the West Coast, however, that organization among agricultural workers first took hold. Shortly after the turn of the century Mexican agricultural workers attempted to organize. In 1910, along with Japanese workers, they called a strike in the sugar beet fields at Ventura, Calif. The first stable organization of Mexican workers was the Confederacion de Uniones Obreras Mexicanas in Southern California in 1927. This group was a forerunner of Caesar Chavez' organization of Mexican-American farm workers.

The most famous of the independent black unions was Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. First organized in 1925, after a decade of jurisdictional disputes with AFL unions, it was finally chartered as a national union by the AFL in 1936.

More recently there has been an upsurge of independent organizing among black and other nonwhite workers. A good example of the contemporary movement was seen in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, organized among auto workers in Detroit. Formation of the League began in May, 1968, around the issue of racial discrimination in the auto plants and the acquiescence of the United Auto Workers union in these practices. In some plants blacks reportedly made up as much as 70 per cent of the work force, but because of discrimination they were restricted to the hardest, lowest-paying and least-skilled jobs. The UAW, one of the pioneering CIO unions, made little effort to halt this practice. After some experience with wildcat strikes the black workers, with the help of black community groups and students, started to build their organization, gradually spreading it to other plants and even other cities.

For the most part the early independent unions of nonwhite workers were not notably successful. They were not strong enough to protect their members in the face of powerful employers, and by and large they had to accept work standards and wage scales set by the dominant white unions. It is only in those areas where nonwhite workers have made up all or a very substantial portion of the work force—such as the Pullman porters, or in the Detroit auto plants, or in California agriculture—that independent minority unions have enjoyed a greater measure of success. The future of the minority unions, and newly formed minority caucuses within predominantly white unions, is very uncertain, but, aside from protest groups and falling back upon the good will of a federal government that is itself part of the structure of racism, they appear to offer the only serious challenge to white supremacy in organized labor.
Chapter VI

18. Spero & Harris, The Black Worker, p. 75.
24. For example, in 1911 AFL organizers near Fresno, Calif., tried to convince employers to accept the white union affiliate, the United Laborers of America, because this could eliminate the Japanese from harvesting grapes. See Philip S. Foner, History of the Labor Movement in the United States (4 vols.; New York: International Publishers, 1947-1965), IV, p. 260.
27. Tuttle, "Labor Conflict and Racial Violence."
29. Ibid, p. 132.
34. For a discussion of the ideological differences between black and white labor see Preston Valien, "The ‘Mentalities’ of Negro and White

35. A similar altercation with roles reversed had occurred at the 1869 meeting of the black national labor convention when two white delegates were accused of being secret emissaries of the Democratic Party.


37. Like most of the rest of the labor movement (including black labor groups), however, the Knights were hostile to Chinese contract labor. A black leader of the Knights, Frank J. Ferrell, was prominent in the unsuccessful fight to include Chinese workers in the organization.


41. Foner, Labor Movement in the U.S., IV, pp. 65, 88-95, 239.


43. Spero & Harris, The Black Worker, p. 331. There is some disagreement about the reliability of this figure since the IWW never published any official statistics on black membership.

44. Ibid, pp. 333-36.

45. Foner, Labor Movement in the U.S., IV, pp. 252-54.

46. Ibid, pp. 120, 549.


49. Spero & Harris, The Black Worker, p. 228.


51. Spero & Harris, The Black Worker, pp. 379-81.


57. This utopian reasoning ignored the fact that the black capitalist, like his white counterpart, would still seek to minimize his labor costs, and from an economic standpoint would not necessarily be more favorable to the black worker than a white employer similarly seeking cheap labor.


