

Institutional Racism

Abstract The central thesis is that personnel within schools, universities and businesses discriminated against Black America. There is an assessment of the disastrous impact of the rule of prime ministers in the Caribbean, who refused to acknowledge the importance of Black Power. Most of these rulers in the Caribbean islands refused to listen to the grievances of trade unions. Also there will be an examination of the US unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) especially their reaction to discrimination against Black employees. During the 1950s and 1960s, the AFL-CIO held regular constitutional conventions on the issue of segregation and discrimination of Blacks.

Keywords American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations · Trade union · League of Revolutionary Black Workers Oilfields Workers Trade Union

After a refreshing visit to Africa in 1965, Malcolm X offered a revised perspective of the USA, "...the white man is not inherently evil but America's racist society influences him to act evilly. The society has produced and nourishes a psychology which bring out the lowest, most base part of human beings."¹ Indeed it appeared that certain institutions, existing during the 1950s and 1960s, contributed largely to the racism which was prevalent in US. An admirable characteristic during the Civil

Rights era was the uncompromising attitudes of leaders and organizations in dealing with crucial matters as desegregation at public institutions and housing. Institutions will be defined as “social arrangements and practices through which collective action can be taken.”² Afro-Americans who were excluded from certain institutions demanded certain standards and refused to accept empty promises, and they were in no mood to postpone their goals.

BUSINESS AND HOUSING

In the competitive world of business, racial practices were most apparent as being biased against Blacks. In the 1968 issue of the *Newsweek* magazine, in an article entitled “The Ordeal of the Black Businessmen,” the author predicted that during this period of turmoil if Blacks owned businesses in relation to their numbers, there would be ten times as many Black businesses.³ Similarly, Andrew Brimmer calculated the assets of Black businesses to be only 0.12% of the total financial assets in the US.⁴ Undoubtedly, during the 1960s, the existence of the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women’s Clubs eased some of the burdens on Blacks in the business sector.

Blacks were inspired to adopt nonviolent tactics in other areas which were diseased with racism. The *Texas Observer*, an Independent-Liberal weekly newspaper, noted that the Marshall sit-ins were similar to the Gandhian style of protests.⁵ In many Southern cities such as Birmingham, Montgomery and Louisiana, businesses were forced into desegregating their stores. However, a dilemma arose due to the strong racist attitudes, “Whereas African-Americans boycotted stores that discriminated against them as consumers, whites threatened to boycott those stores that ceased to treat them as second-class customers.”⁶

During this period, housing in the ghetto was overpriced and rooted in a capitalistic exploitative system.⁷ To overcome this barrier, group efforts were undertaken to improve the living conditions. In 1968, in Chicago, the Home Investment Fund, a nonprofit corporation was organized by the Chicago Conference on Religion and Race to assist minority families in the transition to White suburban areas. Julian Bond in “Uniting the Races” realized that more awareness was needed to overcome the challenges, “Each group of us must recognize that evil men and an evil system now crush our every aspiration, that no question

of education or job training or integration of jobs and housing can be implemented without a correlated grasp of power by the powerless.”⁸

SEGREGATED EDUCATION

Education, a powerful tool which could be wielded to free the misery and poverty of the mind was not readily accessible to Blacks. University admissions policies with entrance exams were designed for the students from the upper- and middle-class families. In addition to textbooks filled with stereotypes, there was IQ testing and negative attitudes of teachers which compounded the access to a decent education by Blacks.

How then did Blacks achieve a victory in education? Firstly, the Supreme Court decisions which were rendered in favor of Black university students—*Sweatt vs Painter* (1950) and *McLaurin vs Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education* (1950). But the turning point was the famous *Brown vs Board of Education* (1954) which overturned the infamous 1896 ruling of *Plessy vs Fergusson* in which the “separate but equal doctrine prevailed”. The trend continued and in 1968, two cases *Green vs County School Board of New Kent* and *Monroe vs Board of Commissioners* were poignant signs that segregated schools were being dismantled.⁹ The former case applied to New Kent County in which students were free to choose their schools after the desegregation process, and the second case was limited to Arizona in which students, despite registering at assigned schools, were free to transfer to another school. Not surprisingly similar patterns of segregation continued despite attempts at desegregation (Fig. 2.1).

The battle to desegregate tertiary, secondary, and primary education was a milestone in the USA. Deputy Attorney General, Nicholas Katzenbach, intervened in Selma in 1965, to ensure admission of the first batch of Afro-American students into the University of Alabama. Similarly James Meredith, despite good grades, was denied access to University of Mississippi in January 31, 1961, and it was only later that year after a court decision was he able to attend.

At the elementary school level, the race situation was tense during the 1950s. There were instances of public schools attempting desegregation being bombed and Black students were pelted with rotten fruits. One outstanding example of defiance was at the Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Nine children dubbed “Little Rock Nine” bravely overcame threats and racist jeers to step into history and deliver another blow to segregation. During the 1960s, there was the existence of the



Fig. 2.1 Staff of Southern Christian Leadership Conference being thrown into segregated paddy wagon for protesting school segregation. *Source* Photo courtesy Rev. Hosea Williams Papers, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library, United States

National Committee for Rural Schools. This Committee was focused on education of Black children in the rural South. One of the supporters of this Committee was the United Automobile Workers (AFL-CIO).¹⁰

Obviously, the denial of opportunities resulted in setbacks for Black America. Lawrence Lucas in *Black Priest White Church* was critical of the situation, “Black folks are expected to be educated while they are denied admission to our educational facilities... they are expected to be trained for jobs- whilst apprenticeship programs and unions refuse to accept them....”¹¹ The desegregation process seemed a success but there were still shortcomings. During the period 1956–1957, 723 schools in the South were desegregated, allowing for 300,000 Black children to attend formerly all-White schools. However the ugly reminder of Jim Crow schools persisted as there were approximately 3000 White school boards

that opted to continue segregation, resulting in an alarming two million Black children being denied an equal opportunity in education.¹² In 1967, segregation persisted as 85% of the children in Washington D.C.'s public schools were Black. In Chicago, 87% of the Black students in elementary school attended all-Black schools in Philadelphia. And, there was a 99% Black enrolment in thirty-eight elementary schools.¹³

TRADE UNIONS

Racism in organized labor came under heavy attack and public scrutiny on the racial injustices meted out to Black members of unions. In one report of the AFL-CIO for the period 1955–1960 it was concluded, “AFL-CIO affiliated unions are today guilty of discriminatory racial practices in four categories: outright exclusion of Negroes, segregated locals, separate racial seniority lines in collective bargaining agreements and exclusion of Negroes from apprenticeship training programs controlled by labour unions.”¹⁴ Undoubtedly, there were now more concerted efforts in this period to remove discriminatory practices. One illustration of such attempts was the education of unions, workers, and the public through pamphlets, press releases, and regular conventions.

Often it is easy to associate the Civil Rights Movement with the South but Afro-Americans in the North were very much a part of the struggle and benefited from the gains. In fact, by 1960 only 59% of Black people resided in the South¹⁵ and the statement issued by the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) Executive Council on the Civil Right Act of 1966 exemplified this notion of concern for incorporation of North, “Certainly the inhumanity of the ghetto, the injustice of segregated housing, the denial of equal opportunity to Negroes is just as reprehensible when it occurs in Northern cities as in the South.”¹⁶ The infiltration of the Labour movement by the CIA would have contributed to the shortcoming of the AFL-CIO. In 1967, George Meany, President of the AFL-CIO, strongly condemned the CIA for using one of its conduits to fund the International Confederation of Trade Union (ICTU).¹⁷

In a move similar to COFO, in which the energies of certain Civil Rights groups were pooled into one organization, Labor underwent a similar amalgamation though on relatively smaller scale. Various Black organizations as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, United

Black Brothers in Newark, former members of SNCC and the Panthers and caucuses in Baltimore formed the Black Workers Congress.

The AFL-CIO held regular constitutional conventions on the issue of Civil Rights during the 1950s and 1960s. This organization was outspoken and took a firm stance on matters dealing with desegregation and solemnly resolved in 1955, “We urge all of our affiliated states and local bodies to work with other liberal forces in their communities to facilitate a peaceful and effective transition to a unsegregated American educational system.”¹⁸

The trade union movement in the USA was blessed with the presence of two Afro-American labor stalwarts—Williard S. Townsend, President of the United Transport Service Employees, and A. Phillip Randolph, militant fighter with over forty years experience in the labor struggle. Despite these progressive attempts at reforming institutions, it was difficult to eradicate racism. Feagin and Vera in *White Racism* argued that the Civil Rights laws of the 1960s did not end the covert and subtle forms of racism in the police, jobs, housing and education sectors.¹⁹ Angela Davis expounded on the unfinished goal of King in creating a stronger link with Labor, “...I think it’s really important to acknowledge that Dr. King, precisely at the moment of his assassination, was re-conceptualizing the civil rights movement and moving toward a sort of coalitional relationship with the trade union movement. It’s I think quite significant that he was in Memphis to participate in a demonstration by sanitation workers who had gone out on strike.”²⁰

Civil Rights organizations effectively used the media to highlight the injustices and increased the awareness among citizens of the obstacles of racism. Through press releases, conferences, stickers sit-ins, and demonstrations, the battle was fought in the 1950s and 1960s. On October 22, 1964, in Springfield, the CORE branch organized “Operation Stand-Up” to encourage ethnic minorities to reject poor housing conditions in their neighborhoods.²¹ On November 6, 1964 in Seattle, Washington, the CORE organized a boycott—D.E.E.D which meant Drive for Equal Employment in Downtown Seattle. In Montgomery in Alabama, CORE demanded the reversal of a wrongful conviction of over 200 Alabama protestors, “Accused of violating an injunction against protest marches the demonstrators had been summarily arrested and jailed without being charge and without bail.”²²

These organizations also received correspondence from Black prisoners seeking relief from unjust treatment. In the case of “Trenton Six”

from New Jersey State prison, one inmate passionately appealed to the Civil Rights Congress, "At the time I was sentenced, I had no counsel I pleaded and was sentenced all in one day. While I am sensible to my wrong, I still feel I was entitled by law to counsel. I also feel that the Judge sentenced me without even asking for a probationary report."²³ It was such cases which prompted the Civil Rights groups to be the voice of the oppressed and to publicise the sufferings of the Afro-American under the justice system.

In the labor movement, there was a similar overwhelming effort to battle the wedge of racism and create racial harmony. Among the radical workers adhering to Marxism, the obstacle to Black progress seemed to be capitalism. Despite this economic view, their belief in participation was consistent with the prevailing views of the movement. "The main problem and the primary task is to win the white workers to an understanding of the effects of racism on the workers" movement and to gain the white worker's active participation in the struggle for full equality.²⁴ The craft unions of the American Federation of Labor did not appeal to Blacks. Industrial unions merged that attracted a large Black following. These included the United Mine Workers and United Automobile Workers.²⁵

The radical Black worker believed that the benefits of racism to the capitalist were "its power to divide the mass of white workers from the black workers and lend him into the employer's camp."²⁶ Herein was an ideology which reduced the obvious color barriers and saw the need for unity of Black and White workers in a class struggle against the oppression of the White capitalist-controlled system. There were positive signs such as in St. Louis with the United Auto Workers at the Chrysler truck plant. The Local 110 fielded a slate led by a Black for president and a White candidate for vice president. Likewise, in Milwaukee at the American Motors Body Plant, Ted Silverstein won as vice president but more importantly he won on the "Black and White Get It Together" caucus ticket. This platform had the unique combination of two White and two Black running candidates. These positive expressions by Blacks and Whites within Labor were evidence that class solidarity existed.

In Trinidad and Tobago, there were similar instances of class solidarity during the 1970s. Labor played a crucial role in Black Power protests. One of the early incidents was bus strike on April 21, 1969. The unions involved included the progressive Transport and Industrial Workers' Union (TIWU) headed by Joe Young and Clive Nunez and the radical Oilfields Workers Trade Union (OWTU). On this day, more

than 650 workers took strike action against the Public Transport Service Corporation (PTSC). The attempt to block the buses was met with stiff resistance from the police. In this strike, some leaders as Clive Nunez received a beating from the police. Among those union members who were fined \$10 or 14 days imprisonment included Joe Young (President of TIWU), Carlton Rosemin and Sylvester Mondesir (of TIWU), Stephen Maharaj who was leader of the Workers and Farmers Party (WFP), Krishna Gowandan (of the TIWU) and George Weekes of the OWTU.²⁷

The fear and concern of the government of Trinidad and Tobago, as a result of the violent attacks, was evident on March 11, 1970 when Karl Hudson Phillips, the Attorney General, threatened to suppress the movement. Finally, on March 23, Prime Minister Eric Williams spoke to the public. Williams dealt with foreign control of the economy and promised to appoint a commission to investigate accusations of racial discrimination in the business sector. He also decided to reduce unemployment with money generated from a tax to be imposed on certain companies. The promises and assurances by the prime minister and officials of the People's National Movement (PNM) did not appease the masses who wanted immediate improvements in their lives.

During April to May 1970, Prime Minister Eric Williams, who was the Minister of National Security, under the Emergency Powers Act of 1970, seized the union's books and its officers were victimized. On April 21, 1970 among the union members arrested and retained were George Weekes, Carl Douglas, Assistant Secretary (Palo Seco Branch), Winston Lennard (Education Officer). On April 22, petrol bombs were thrown at *the Vanguard's* printery and an attempt was made to destroy the Paramount Building, headquarters of the OWTU. A day later, two other OWTU members—Nuevo Diaz (Labor Relations Officer) and Chan Maharaj (member of the Port-of-Spain Branch) were arrested. On May 14 and 15, 1970, the OWTU's books and records were seized by the police and the union's headquarters and printery invaded by the police. On May 29, the executive of the OWTU issued a statement denying rumours they were financing subversive organizations. Verne Edwards, Vice President of the OWTU, said that since the seizure of records by police, the policemen had been "terrorising many of the Union members under the pretext that they were looking for missing documents." The delay in reacting to events could have been a cause for the government to remain in power. CLR James, speaking in Toronto in June

1970, claimed, "If only the OWTU Executive had launched a general strike to defend their arrested leaders, the government would have fallen."²⁸

In September 1970, Eric Williams sought to justify the imposition of the National Security Act, 1970. Williams contended, "Did not speakers on NJAC marchers encourage marchers to loot stores on Frederick, Henry and Charlotte Streets with the words 'Take Now, Pay Later?' Who proclaimed 'National Rape and Arson' week?" He also reminded the public that George Weekes had called for the destruction of Frederick Street and OWTU's Clive Phill of the OWTU wanted to overthrow the democratically elected government of Trinidad and Tobago.²⁹ Critics of the Security Act said that Williams sought to create a police state and a permanent state of emergency.

On July 13, 1971, the Fraud Squad police spent four hours searching the OWTU's headquarters in San Fernando. Among the items seized were bank statements, checks, receipts and vouchers. Weekes told a police officer, "This is real fascism...This is nothing but total aggression against the OWTU." A few months later, in August 1971, at the General Council meeting of the OWTU, Weekes and two members were arrested on fraud charges. On September 27 at the court hearing, in a dramatic turn of events, Weekes cut his clenched fist and chest with a razor and shouted, "In the name of the Black Indian and African masses and in protest against the corrupt Williams' regime I shed my blood."³⁰

The growing disenchantment prompted the government to draft the Industrial Relations Act (IRA) in 1971. However, this failed to reduce the antagonism of labor. Eventually the IRA, 1972 (Act No. 23), was passed and replaced the Industrial Stabilisation Act of 1965. This made cosmetic changes to the ISA as it gave unions a limited right to strike. It was obvious that the trade unions were considered a threat to the government during the 1960s and 1970s.

The OWTU's statement in April 1970 on the February Revolution is relevant in the twenty first century and partly explains the continuing high levels of corruption, poor governance and inefficiency, "...the government of the party in power and the yes-men and no-men of the parties in Parliament are pawns and play-things in the hands of the white, foreign imperialist robbers and local capitalist swindlers who drain the wealth of our country abroad and take the cream of what stays at home."³¹

NOTES

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