

18-1 Lester B. Granger, Negro Workers and Recovery, 1934

During the Great Depression, black workers struggled against discrimination. "Last hired, first fired," was not an uncommon complaint from black Americans. Until the 1930s, however, most labor unions connected to the AF of L barred black workers. Not until John L. Lewis organized the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1935 did African Americans and recent European immigrants find a voice in support of their participation in the labor movement. In five years, black membership swelled to more than 200,000. The article below describes the obstacles black workers in St. Louis faced and the gains they made.

SOURCE: Negro Workers and Recovery by Granger, Lester B. *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life*. May, 1934. National Urban League.

NEGRO labor in St. Louis, MO., has shown the way for colored workers throughout the country to make an aggressive attack against prejudiced and discriminatory policies on the part of certain sections of the American labor movement.

For many months in the midst of the depression, Negroes saw all municipal work in building trades turned over to white union workers who steadfastly refused to allow a Negro mechanic to work with them. In the 17 Negro schools of the city, no Negro was allowed to earn a single dime on building or repair work. Representation to and conferences with city and union officials brought only evasive rejoinders and no action. Finally, the Negroes' patience snapped at sight of a \$2,000,000 colored hospital being erected in the middle of their own neighborhood, built with municipal and Federal funds, with no Negro carpenters, bricklayers, painters, or other skilled workers, allowed on the job.

Out of this resentment, guided and advised by the St. Louis Urban League, grew a Negro labor organization of building trades workers whose avowed aim was to protect the interests of Negro workers under the recovery program.

The new organization, the International Laborers and Builders Corporation, includes bricklayers, painters, decorators and paper-hangers, carpenters, plasterers, electricians, cement finishers and hod-canters, and laborers, with membership well over 300. Its efforts have met with instant results. Contractors formerly indifferent now show a disposition to employ Negro labor which is organized. And, most significant of all, A. F. of L. unions are taking a deep concern in the plans and activities of this new organization of Negro workers.

A sharp and dramatic appeal for organization of the 5,000,000 Negro workers in the United States, employed and unemployed, has been issued by T. Arnold Hill, acting executive secretary of the National Urban League.

In an open letter to Negro workers, the League head urges the organization of Workers' Councils in every city of the United States where Negroes are refused equal rights with whites to find work and to join labor unions.

"For sixty-eight years," the statement declares, "the Negro worker has been appealing to American Labor for a 'New Deal' in its treatment of black labor. These efforts have met either with limited, half-hearted success or with dismal failure, the only exceptions being in those fields where Negroes have banded together to demand the rights that were theirs.

"For fourteen months we have been witnessing in the United States an unprecedented effort at economic stabilization. The cause of labor is riding 'high, wide, and handsome.' Yet the cause of Negro workers has not been one of labor's aims. Appeals in your behalf have fallen far short of the desired goal. The position of Negro workers will be strengthened only if they, themselves, realize the necessity for action. You must organize to break down the discriminatory barriers that keep you out of unions and consequently out of employment. You must organize to demand a new deal for Negro labor.

"The National Urban League is, therefore, initiating the establishment of Workers' Councils as active aggressive units through which all Negro workers may obtain union recognition, increase their power for collective action and equal pay, and participate in the improvement of the status of all workers-white and black."

The statement urges all interested in forming or joining a Workers' Council to communicate at once with the National Urban League at 1133 Broadway, New York City. Special urging is given to present members of trade unions, regardless of local or national affiliation.

Questions:

1. What event changed employment practices in St. Louis?
2. Which workers were the first to organize. How did this affect the AF of L?
3. Why was organizing important for black workers?