

Labor and the Negro

By Doxey Wilkerson

Organized labor must take steps now to crystalize policies and develop procedures which will prevent the wholesale discharge of Negro workers as war production declines and when war plants are reconverted to civilian production.

This is not a problem which can be postponed until after the war, nor is it a problem of the Negro workers alone. In the interests of the labor movement itself, and in the larger interests of the nation—for democratic national unity in the 1944 elections and to guarantee the perspective of Tehran—trade unions must tackle this issue and work out progressive solutions NOW.

Since Negro workers were the "last hired" in major war industries, any mechanical application of the seniority principle would make them the "first fired" when the time for mass lay-offs arrives. This process is already under way in a number of plants. Carried to its logical conclusion, Negro workers would bear the brunt of whatever unemployment results from the decline and ultimate cessation of war production.

DANGER OF DISUNITY

* Justly anxious over this threat to their employment security, Negro trade unionists and the Negro people generally have already begun to raise the question: What is the union going to do to protect our jobs? They must be given a definite and a progressive answer.



The alternatives are internal division and weakening of the unions, and disruption of the growing alignment between organized labor and the Negro people in the democratic coalition of national unity. Nothing could better serve the interests of those defeatist enemies of our country who hope to seize control of the government in 1944, to reverse the progressive foreign and domestic policies of President Roosevelt, and to supplant the democratic goals of Tehran with fascist oppression at home and imperialist aggression abroad.

A truly enlightened approach to this problem was adopted recently by Local 252, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers, which is trying to organize duPont's Remington Arms Plant at Bridgeport, Connecticut. Their policy on Negro lay-offs warrants serious consideration by every union in the country.

When the company announced that production would have to be curtailed and about 3,000 workers laid off because of a nation-wide accumulation of small arms, UE Local 252 (as reported in the Dec. 22 issue of REMCOM NEWS) addressed the following letter to the plant manager:

"Dear Sir:—On Sunday, Dec. 12, the membership of Remington Local 252 voted the following recommendations on layoffs as they affect Colored workers:

"1. While seniority is the governing principle on layoffs, a mechanical application of seniority would result in the elimination of every Colored worker at Remington, with resultant hardship on the Colored community as a whole.

"2. That seniority as a principle assumes that a generation of work-

ers had an opportunity to accumulate seniority. However, due to discriminatory practices, Colored workers never had a chance to accumulate seniority.

"3. That justice and fair play demand a reasonable approach so that the same PERCENTAGE of Colored be laid off as white workers—no more, no less.

"4. That plant-wide seniority lists be compiled for both Colored and white, and (if) cut-backs are to average, say, 30 per cent of the plant personnel, then this same percentage to be applied equally to both lists. This will maintain the present ratio in the plant.

"5. That the effective date for the compilation of the seniority lists shall not apply to those hired prior to Jan. 1, 1939, the date of Lend-Lease.

"Very truly yours, Neale McGillicuddy, International Organizer."

Here lies a progressive solution to the problem of Negro lay-offs in war plants. The policy adopted by UE's Remington Local 252 fully protects the basic principle of seniority, and at the same time assures justice to Negro workers. It is a policy which, in one form or another, the trade union movement as a whole must undertake to apply.

This is the way to strengthen the bonds of unity between white and Negro fellow-unionists — to protect labor from the attacks of its enemies. This is the way to strengthen the unity of labor and the Negro people as a whole—to protect our country from Hitler's helpers here at home. This is a policy which the wartime needs of our nation and the progressive perspective of Tehran imperatively require.