

Tobin Fails to Understand Full Danger of Jim Crowism

By Rose Wortis

In the November issue of the *International Teamsters Journal* the speech delivered by President Daniel Tobin at the AFL convention in reply to Philip Randolph on Negro discrimination in the AFL is presented in full. The December issue carries the discussion further in an editorial.

Mr. Tobin is president of one of the largest unions of the AFL, a leading member of its executive council and member of the Labor Victory Committee. His views therefore merit serious consideration.

Mr. Tobin expresses great indignation at the "impudence" of Randolph in questioning the sincerity of the AFL membership on this question.

He says, "To listen to him here yesterday you would think that we were holding them back and were destroying them." To justify his attack on Randolph and minimize his indictment against the shameful conditions, Tobin cited his own union as an example, stating that 99,000 Negroes have been accepted into the union without prejudice and the same wages are demanded for them as for the white men.

TEAMSTERS UNION ALSO

Evidently this is true in most states, but Mr. Tobin did not tell the whole story at the convention. For in a subsequent editorial printed in December he admits that even in the Teamsters Union all is not well. The editorial states, "There is some slight misunderstanding yet in some of the southern states on this point where we have a few local unions not very many consisting entirely of Negroes (Jim Crow). The Negroes want this condition." Doesn't this sound familiar? Do not all the poll taxers say the Negroes just love to be Jim Crowed and segregated. It is only the modern "Carpet Baggers" who object and raise a rumpus.

When we look at the composition of the national leadership of the Teamsters, we find that it is not only some local unions in the south, but the International Union as such that has not as yet accepted the Negroes on a full basis of equality. Despite the fact that 99,000 members, as stated by Tobin, are Negroes, not a single international officer or general executive board member is a Negro. Surely this is not due to the fact that no Negro aspires for such office or that none are qualified and available. The experience of the CIO and a number of more progressive AFL unions show that the personnel is

there only if given a chance.

It is not my intention in the least to minimize the accomplishments of the trade unions in organizing close to a million Negro workers. It is indeed a shining example of how eager the Negro workers are to join the ranks of organized labor.

Mr. Tobin could have done a great service to the labor movement, to the nation, to our war effort if instead of taking issue with Randolph he would have directed his remarks to his colleagues on the executive council to the delegates, citing the examples of his own union to prove the advantages of opening the doors of all unions to Negro workers. The harm done to the labor movement by continuing existing color bars which split the ranks of the workers to the advantages of the open shoppers, was clearly brought to the attention of the convention by Randolph when he showed that in the south where the division between Negro and white exists, the ruthless exploitation of the Negroes underlines the conditions of all workers in the south and north as well.

DEEP RESENTMENT

It is difficult to read Randolph's speech with the incontrovertible facts of wholesale discrimination, abuse, and callousness without feeling of shame and deep resentment.

Tobin terms these discriminations, "little incidents." What are these so-called incidents? Let me quote from Randolph's effective and very truthful speech that hit right home.

"There are about 15 to 20 unions affiliated with the AFL that have color clauses in their constitutions." These include "the Boiler Workers International, the International Association of Machinists, every union in the Department of Railway Employees affiliated with the AFL." Then there are many national and local unions which have no color provisions in the constitution but by practice and custom do not permit Negro workers to join.

The incident at the Kaiser Shipbuilding Yard where the business agent of the Iron Workers read the riot act to Negro workers who came from New York to Portland for jobs that had a higher differential in pay than laborers because of skill is a dramatic but by no means isolated example.

THE INDICTMENT

Summarizing his whole indictment, Mr. Randolph said, "You can't become a member unless you get a job and when a Negro goes to the

employer and asks for a job, the employer says, 'No, you can't get a job unless you have a union card.' There the Negro worker is between two forces both of which are against him."

Let Mr. Tobin as a leader of labor give some thought to these millions who read in the newspapers, who hear on the radio that there is a great demand for manpower only to find that as far as they are concerned all doors are closed. They cannot get jobs in war industry because they are unskilled, they cannot acquire skills because they are barred from industry by the unions and employers. They cannot join unions because the most important unions do not accept Negroes, they are discriminated against in industry in the unions.

Mr. Tobin further speaks of the six hundred thousand white men of the north who gave their lives in holy sacrifice to make the "black men free" to prove his point. All honor to their memory. They understood the immortal words of Lincoln that "America cannot be half free and half slave." In honor of their memory we their descendants must carry forward the work they left unfinished.

WIPE OUT RACISM

The descendants of the heroes of the Civil War, especially the organized labor movement, must be in the forefront of the struggle and by its example encourage others to wipe out the shameful Hitlerite race discrimination practices in our national life.

Mr. Tobin rises to heights of indignation because Randolph said, "We won't take it (discrimination) any longer. We will do something about it." He interprets these remarks as a threat. "This kind of stuff," says Mr. Tobin, "starts the fires of destruction and the unnecessary offering of human life."

In arguing thus, Mr. Tobin whether he knows it or not falls into the trap of using the arguments of the poll taxers. It is not the poll taxers who rail against the progressive forces fighting against these abuses who must be fought, but those who are "stirring up the Negroes."

Fortunately Mr. Tobin does not speak for the more progressive forces in the AFL who are growing even stronger and who are beginning to recognize the harmful effect of race discrimination not only for the Negroes but the whites as well.

In the numerous local unions, joint boards and some internationals especially where the progressive

forces are influential, Negroes are not only accepted to membership but are gradually being integrated into leadership. A dramatic example of this we saw a few weeks ago when one of the postal clerks local publicly installed Negro members, despite the discriminatory provisions in the international's constitution.

If I have any fault to find with Mr. Randolph's otherwise excellent speech it is that he did not take sufficient note of these encouraging developments which only go to prove that the main fault is at the top, and that the great mass of the white workers can be won for a policy of accepting Negro workers in their shops and unions on a basis of equality.

It is the duty and responsibility of the leadership of the labor movement especially the progressive leaders to use their position of leadership to wipe out the blot of race discrimination. To give full cooperation to official government policies and agencies set up for this purpose, to make the labor movement a more powerful force in the present struggle, to preserve and extend our democracy.

It is certainly not to the credit of the progressive forces in the AFL that for the past three years not a single delegate rose to support Randolph on the convention floor. However, it is not only at the convention, but in the daily life of the unions that these problems will be solved. The advances of the progressive unions must be popularized more widely throughout the AFL.

A very important instrument in carrying forward the work of education and struggle is the Negro Labor Victory Committee in New York. This committee coordinates the activities of the affiliated unions. During the short period of its existence it has done a yeoman's service to the labor movement and the Negro people. It merits all the support to carry forward its valuable work.

ELIZABETH ROGERS.

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