

Toward Freedom

THE National Negro Congress studies of the effects of postwar cutbacks on the employment of Negro workers in specific plants makes a sorely needed contribution to the current discussion of proposed adjustments in union seniority practices. In the light of NNC findings, this discussion can now be brought down out of the realm of speculation and further developed on the basis of concrete facts.

The general question at issue is this:

Should labor unions adjust their seniority practices to assure that Negro workers, who but recently entered many industries, and types of work, will not bear a disproportionate share of the unemployment which cutbacks during the period of reconversion are sure to bring?

The principles underlying proposals for seniority adjustment are clear:

First, the basic policy of union seniority must be kept as a fundamental and necessary safeguard for all workers.

Second, the mechanical application of seniority must not be allowed to disrupt the unity of white and Negro workers within the unions, or to destroy the growing alliance of the Negro people with organized labor.

Third, the mechanical application of seniority must not be allowed to wipe out the Negro's newly-won right to work in many in-



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dustries and in many types of jobs, a right which the struggles of unions did much to win.

Fourth, the mechanical application of seniority would be unjust to the million or more Negro workers in war industries, large numbers of whom hold jobs from which they were barred by prewar racial discriminations.

IN THE light of these principles and on the assumption that the strict application of seniority to postwar layoffs would, in fact, result in grossly disproportionate and unfair discharges of Negro workers, it has been proposed that the application (not the principle) of seniority to postwar layoffs be adjusted to meet the special problem of Negro workers. It remained for the National Negro Congress to demonstrate, through systematic investigation, the correctness of the underlying assumption of fact.

With the help of union officials and management, the NNC has sought to find out just what effects a 50 percent cutback would have on the proportion of Negroes employed in selected New York plants. Studies have been completed in the Sperry Gyroscope Nassau plant (organized by UE), the United Transformer Corporation (also organized by UE), and the Ranger Aircraft Corporation (organized by UAW). Similar investigations are under way in other plants.

New Facts on the Seniority Adjustment Question

THESE studies reveal that if one-half the workers in the several departments of these plants were laid off according to strict seniority:

(1) The proportion of Negroes employed would remain constant or increase in a few scattered departments.

(2) The proportion of Negroes employed would be greatly reduced in most departments, the present proportions being lowered by from one-third to more than two-thirds in most cases.

(3) Negro workers would be eliminated entirely from some departments.

The studies reveal, further, that "three-day trial" and other negotiable seniority provisions in union contracts could, and probably would, operate to increase racial discriminations in the event of general layoffs.

Thus, it is clear that not only the principles, but also the facts involved in this problem argue for adjustments in union seniority practices as applied to Negro workers. There is no one formula that will apply everywhere, but the problem should be approached in terms of the concrete situation in each industry and plant.

Whatever the approach, however, this special problem of Negro workers (just like the special problem of veterans) simply has to be faced squarely by the trade union movement. The unity and strength of organized labor and continued democratic progress of our nation are the values at stake.