

Toward Freedom

IN REFUSING to face squarely the special problem of Negro layoffs during the period of reconversion from wartime to peacetime production, the labor movement is courting disaster.

The problem arises out of the fact that racial discrimination in employment prevented the early entrance of Negro workers into war jobs in most industries. If strict seniority is followed in postwar layoffs, hundreds of thousands of Negro war workers, "the last hired," will again become "the first fired."

Such a development, of course, would be a terrific economic blow to the Negro people. They would be forced again, as during the Hoover depression, to bear the main brunt of that temporary unemployment which the reconversion period is sure to bring.

But the Negro people would not be the only victims of such a development. In this new period of our history, the postwar mass discharge of Negro workers from their jobs very easily could, and probably would, lead to the general disruption of the largest and most progressive trade unions, rendering them entirely incapable of protecting the economic



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interests of either white or Negro workers, and greatly weakening the essential organized labor base of our whole American democracy.

This was not true after World War I, when the Negro newcomers to northern industry had been prevented from entering the unions in great numbers by the traditional craft and racial exclusiveness of the AFL. The apparent interests of the unions were not seriously armed by the postwar discharge of most Negro war workers

NOW, however, hundreds of thousands of Negro war workers are within the unions, and are in the process of building new and wholesome relations with their white fellow unionists. Moreover, the continued strengthening of Negro-white unity within the labor movement and of Negro-labor political collaboration in the community generally is absolutely necessary for organized labor and for our country as a whole.

But if the reconversion period brings a gross disproportion of layoffs to Negro workers, there is nothing anyone can say or do that will not drive a deep wedge between white and Negro workers within the unions, and between organized labor and the Negro people in the political arena. Trade unionists could argue all they want to about the abstract principle of "seniority," but their words would

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mean nothing to Negro trade unionists faced with breadlines or to Negro voters whose collaboration organized labor must continue to strengthen.

If after this war the masses of Negro workers are again the "first fired," the trade unions will probably be split wide open by racial conflict. They will be easy prey for every kind of disrupter, within the unions and without, who sees an opportunity to exploit the racial issue to the detriment of the unions. And there would be no effective defense.

THIS problem is serious, but it can be solved in advance, through agreements to modify the application (not the principle) of seniority so as to assure that Negro workers will not bear a disproportionate share of postwar cutbacks. Yet no union, not even the great progressive CIO unions which have been holding conventions during the past few weeks, has faced this problem squarely.

They would do well to heed the warning of the London Tribune, which comments: "The forces of reaction in America can be counted on to make the most of the postwar situation by stirring up resentment between the white proletariat and the Negro proletariat. . . . Unless the unions can cope adequately with this problem, the Century of the Common Man may turn out to be the Century of the Common Man's enslavement."