

Specter of the Black Strikebreaker: Race, Employment, and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era

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In the last decade of the 19th century, the outcome of the clash between the miners and the Black Diamond Coal Company in the western mountain community of Mansfield appeared preordained. A labor force that had once numbered about 2500, composed of white men, mostly American, Welsh, Irish, and Canadian, had seen its ranks reduced by unemployment; those still employed endured repeated wage cuts (wages had been reduced by 25% in just over a year), which made it a struggle for “many a miner’s family to exist.” In an earlier bout of labor conflict, employers’ reliance upon militiamen and Italian strikebreakers led to a decisive defeat for the miners’ unions. Now, once again on strike, miners found themselves evicted from their company-owned homes and threatened by “[A]ctual starvation.” With strikers reportedly in an “ugly mood,” an outbreak of violence was only a matter of time.¹

Then the company delivered the *coup de grace* by importing large numbers of African Americans to replace the white union men. Labor agents scoured the Tennessee and Alabama mining district for experienced black miners. Upon hearing of the imminent arrival of “ignorant negroes from the South,” strikers recognized that the “end was near” and assembled in large numbers; their “excitement became intense.” When strikers failed to obey an order to disperse, militiamen fired “volley after volley” into the “ranks of an emaciated, half-starved, half-clad humanity,” resulting in numerous casualties. To “avoid future riots and to bring peace and contentment to Mansfield,” the local *Mining Review* reported, “only colored labor would be employed by the Black Diamond Company in the future.” With the importation of southern blacks, the *Review* predicted, “Mansfield had seen an end of the disgraceful scenes that had been reenacted every time the Black Diamond Coal Company had attempted to manage its own business in its own way.” Those “who had tired of rioting and strife,” it advised, owed the “colored men” a “warm welcome.” Black workers who were housed in newly erected stockades around the mines found significant employment opportunities awaiting them.²

The conflict engulfing the Black Diamond Company in the 1890s was unique in industrial America in only one regard: it was fictional. The author, W. S. Carter, was the president of the all-white and virulently exclusionary Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen. In “The Mills of God,” a serialized parable printed in his conservative union’s monthly journal, he offered a melodramatic morality tale of exploited if virtuous white workers, haughty employers and plutocrats, and impover-

¹ W. S. Carter, “The Mills of God,” *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine*, February, 1898, 146; May, 1898, 488; June, 1898, 632; November, 1898, 498; XXV, 6 (1898), 606–608.

² Carter, “The Mills of God,” *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* XXV, 6 (1898), 606–607.

ished, manipulated blacks. This story, Carter suggested, was an all-too-familiar one: "All have read of similar incidents—occurring year by year, and all terminating in like manner." Indeed, "The Mills of God" derived its inspiration and narrative structure from the recent annals of industrial warfare in coal mining communities. In the 1880s and 1890s, mining companies procured African Americans to break strikes by white coal miners in Washington, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, West Virginia, and other states.

Not all labor conflicts ended as did the one recounted by Carter. Concurrent with the publication of the "Mills of God" was a bloody confrontation between white miners and mine owners in the Illinois towns of Virden and Pana that bore a conspicuous resemblance to Carter's fictionalized account. When mine owners imported Alabama blacks to break a United Mine Workers' strike, white workers determined to "have living wages and that negro labor shall not supplant them in the mines and thus deprive them of their means of livelihood." A veritable race war erupted. In what some white unionists described as "one of the bitterest fights in the industrial history of this country," white miners won the battle. The lessons drawn merely reconfirmed a longer-held fear: that the "entire social fabric of the Northern states may crumble before the invasion of hordes of cheap negro laborers from the South" and that an "industrial race war" was only just beginning.³

The image of the black male strikebreaker in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a powerful and broadly provocative one,⁴ arousing the concern, albeit in opposing ways, of white trade unionists and black elites alike. That image haunted organized white labor. The black strikebreaker appeared, alternately, ignorant and aggressive, manipulated and defiant, docile and violent. In both their reflections and their policies, white trade unionists exaggerated black strikebreakers' role and deemed them a greater threat to white labor's interests than other groups of non-black strikebreakers. But over the closing decades of the 19th century, many, perhaps most, whites would scarcely have questioned the characterization of African Americans as a "scab race." After all, too many strikes in too many trades and industries—including mining, meat packing, longshoring, team driving, and even textile and iron and steel manufacturing—had been weakened, at times decisively, by employers' deployment of black labor. Although in reality blacks constituted only a small if ultimately undeterminable percentage of strikebreakers in the history of American industrial relations—white native-born and immigrant workers constituted a clear majority—white trade unionists and, indeed, much of American society would express little hesitation in hanging the charge, like a proverbial lynching rope, around the neck of the race.⁵

³ "The Labor Movement: A Race War in Illinois," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* XXV, 4 (1898), 378–379; Letter from W. L. F., *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* XXV, 5 (1898), 541–542; "Illinois Miners Win," *Railway Trainmen's Journal* XV, 12 (1898), 1005–1096; Victor Hicken, "The Virden and Pana Mine Wars of 1898," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* XII, 2 (1959), 263–278; "The Labor Factor in Race Troubles," *The Literary Digest* XVII, 26 (1898), 740–741. Also see Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780–1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987).

⁴ This essay addresses the image of black male strikebreakers only. Although black women (like white women) also served as strikebreakers, they were far fewer in number, never commanded the attention nor generated the hostility from whites that black men did. Similarly, black elites addressed themselves primarily to the issue of black men's anti-unionism and strikebreaking, not that of black women.

⁵ As economist Warren Whatley has demonstrated, immigrant strikebreakers outnumbered African American ones, and employers were most likely to turn to blacks as a source of strikebreakers when immigration rates were low. Warren Whatley, "African-American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal," *Social Science History* 17 (1993), 555–558; Joshua L. Rosenbloom, *Looking for Work,*

If white workers perceived African Americans as a threat to their economic well being, they made little attempt to understand the motivations and goals of the black workers they confronted on the industrial battlefield. Instead, they depicted black strikebreakers as depraved and dangerous threats to their livelihoods and collective power. Viewing black workers as ignorant, depraved, largely unassimilable, and the dupes of capital, they drew the line at admitting blacks into membership in the labor movement with little apology. Black strikebreakers, AFL official John Roach insisted in 1904, were “huge strapping fellows, ignorant and vicious, whose predominating trait was animalism.”⁶ In response to the arrival of southern black strikebreakers during the 1894 Chicago packinghouse strike white stockyard workers even hung the effigy of a black roustabout from a telegraph pole. “A black false face of hideous expression had been fixed upon the head of straw,” a Chicago white daily paper reported, “and a placard pinned upon the breast of the figure bore the skull and cross-bones with the word ‘nigger scab’ above and below in bold letters.”⁷ A decade later, another influx of southern black laborers—perhaps as many as 5800—was met by outrage and widespread racial violence on the part of white workers and their sympathizers in the teamsters’ conflict. “It was the niggers that whipped you in line,” the rabidly anti-black southern politician Ben Tillman informed white Chicago stockyard workers after the collapse of their strike. “They were the club with which your brains were beaten out.”⁸ The number of examples could easily be expanded. Again and again, white workers drew similar connections between black strikebreakers and the failure of their strikes.

At their most charitable, white workers tended to dismiss black strikebreakers as misguided, ill-informed pawns of capital. Had they inquired further into their opponents’ motives, many of their fears would have undoubtedly been confirmed. Certainly some black strikebreakers were recruited under false pretenses or were honestly unaware that they were being used as weapons against white labor, as whites occasionally claimed. “The reason I left the camp,” explained black strikebreaker Daniel Webster during the 1891 Washington state mining strike, “was that matters had been misrepresented to us. We were told there was no strike, but that we were going to a new mine.”⁹ But others knew exactly what they were doing: the Negro “fairly aches for the opportunity to scab against whites,” one white union journal insisted.¹⁰ Daniel Webster was only one of a small handful of defectors from the ranks of black

Footnote 5 Continued

Searching for Workers: American Labor Markets During Industrialization (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 42, 54. On the extent and character of black strikebreaking, see Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (1931; reprint New York: Atheneum, 1969), 128–146.

⁶ Roach quoted in Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago’s Packinghouses, 1904–54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 39.

⁷ Quoted in William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (1970; reprint New York: Atheneum, 1985), 112. White packinghouse strikers would again hang a black effigy marked “nigger scab” a decade later during the 1904 strike. See James R. Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago’s Packinghouse Workers 1894–1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 172.

⁸ *Broad Ax*, October 15, 1904, quoted in Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 39. Whites did not monopolize this metaphor. During the Chicago teamsters’ strike the following year, the black weekly *Broad Ax* questioned employers’ use of blacks merely as “brutish clubs to beat their white help over the head.” *Broad Ax*, May 6, 1905, quoted in Spear, *Black Chicago*, 39.

⁹ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 19, 1891.

¹⁰ “The Labor Movement: A Race War in Illinois,” *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* XXV, 4 (1898), 379.

strikebreakers brought to the mines of Franklin, Washington; the vast majority, numbering as many as 600, clung to their new jobs despite white harassment and racial violence. Given the racially exclusionary barriers erected by many white unions and the racial division of labor that confined blacks to inferior positions, strikebreaking by African Americans could naturally serve as the threat white unionists perceived it to be.

It also represented something that most white workers, as well as black leaders, were scarcely prepared to comprehend: black strikebreaking was nothing less than a form of working-class activism designed to advance the interests of black workers and their families. In many instances a collective strategy as much as trade unionism, strikebreaking afforded black workers the means to enter realms of employment previously closed to them and to begin a long, slow climb up the economic ladder. As a strategy, of course, strikebreaking was not without its drawbacks, as many contemporaries, white and black, pointed out. The strikebreaking option was always a calculated risk. Black workers' value to white employers rested largely on their ability to check the power of white workers; they remained highly vulnerable in the labor market, often subject to the harsh—or even harsher—conditions that had prompted whites to organize in the first place. They also exposed themselves to potential or real violence at the hands of strikers and their sympathizers, who bitterly resented their intrusion into local industrial conflicts. Many white workers rejected outright the legitimacy of black workers' grievances about racial exclusion from unions and employment. Choosing instead to blame the victim, they not only refused to see strikebreaking as a form of working-class activism, but often proved resistant to recognizing or appreciating more familiar forms of activism—namely, labor organizing—in which black workers might engage.

Black elites—conservative clergymen, businessmen, and politicians, as well as newspaper editors and educators—also devoted considerable attention to the black male strikebreaker. Unlike white unionists, they did not object to his actions but rather encouraged them as a way of demonstrating loyalty and obedience to white employers and attain economic advancement.¹¹ As for trade unions, elites admonished black workers simply to steer clear of them. This vision of black advancement rested on a clear bargain—blacks would faithfully perform the South's labor and, in exchange, white employers would protect them and supply them with jobs and economic security. Just as their adherence to racial stereotypes prevented white labor activists from appreciating the rationale for black workers' actions, so too did an obsession with race blind black elites to the limitations of their own advancement strategies. Few understood the genuine workplace concerns of black labor beyond access to employment; few recognized, valued, or acted upon a central fact of industrial life—the existence of black working-class activists committed to challenging their employers' workplace practices through the trade union movement. From the 1880s through World War I, a relatively small but significant number of African Americans ignored elites' exhortations to faithful and loyal service and embraced workplace labor activism in general, and trade unionism in particular, as vehicles for combating economic and racial inequality.¹²

¹¹ A small number of black leaders, including T. Thomas Fortune, rejected strikebreaking as a viable or desirable option for black workers. "We lay it down dogmatically that the colored laborers cannot afford to antagonize the interests of white laborers, for the interests of the one and the other are identical in every particular." "Pernicious Labor Teachings," *New York Freeman*, May 1, 1886; also see "White and Colored Laborers Detrimental," *New York Freeman*, December 4, 1886.

¹² The scholarly literature on black labor activists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is large. See Herbert Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning: 1890–1900," in *The Negro and the American Labor*

Whites' belief in blacks' inferiority and fear of black strikebreaking, on the one hand, and black elites' sole interest in opposing racial discrimination in access to employment through alliances with powerful whites, on the other, obscured the degree to which black workers themselves adopted a variety of strategies, from strikebreaking to labor organizing, that reflected both racial and class concerns.

Negroes, Booker T. Washington bluntly noted in 1913, were "very willing strike-breakers."¹³ But how and why did black men, individually or collectively, arrive at their decision to cross white union picket lines and subject themselves to the scorn of the white community and often its violence? One explanation rests with the role of black elites: the actions that invariably provoked objections from white workers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries usually evoked approval from black leaders. Viewing white unions as a disruptive, hostile, discriminatory, and even un-American force, black elites (and, presumably, many black workers who broke strikes) had few ethical qualms about advocating black strikebreaking. To the contrary, strikebreaking afforded advantages, not the least of which was jobs. "Those who have watched the strikes in this country for a decade or more," concluded the New Orleans *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, "have noted that the result of nearly every one has been the opening of some new door for the black laborer." By replacing white striking coal miners in Pana, Illinois, in 1898, black men from Alabama won, in the *Advocate's* eyes, "a fair chance to prove their worth as laborers to the Northern capitalist."¹⁴ On the eve of the U.S. entry into World War I, the black weekly, the *Chicago Defender*, attributed black strikebreaking to the "prejudiced clannishness" of white trade unionists. "STRIKE-BREAKING is not the fort[e] of the Afro American," the paper explained, "yet he is perfectly justified under existing conditions. It is a matter of earning a livelihood."¹⁵ To the *St. Louis Argus*, another black weekly, organized labor's racial policies rendered the very term "strike breaker" a misnomer. "We do not relish the expression 'strike breaker'

Footnote 12 Continued

Movement, ed. Julius Jacobson (New York: Anchor Books, 1968), 49–127; Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond 1865–1890* (1984; reprint Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Robin D.G. Kelley, "‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80 (1993), 73–112; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*; Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878–1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908–21* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism 1892–1923* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Eric Arnesen, "Biracial Waterfront Unionism in the Age of Segregation," in *Waterfront Workers: New Essays on Race and Class*, ed. Cal Winslow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Stephen H. Norwood, "Bogalusa Burning: The War Against Biracial Unionism in the Deep South, 1919," *Journal of Southern History* 63 (1997), 591–628; Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Eric Arnesen, "Following the Color Line of Labor: Black Workers and the Labor Movement Before 1930," *Radical History Review* no. 55 (1993), 53–87; Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹³ Booker T. Washington, "The Negro and the Labor Unions," *Atlantic Monthly* 111 (1913), 757.

¹⁴ "Prepare for the Industrial Warfare," New Orleans *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, September 4, 1902.

¹⁵ "Labor Troubles," *Chicago Defender*, July 3, 1915.

when referred to the Negro, because we want to be men as other men," it asserted during the 1919 steel strike. But the denial of the "privilege of joining most of the labor organizations," particularly the American Federation of Labor (AFL), meant that blacks' opportunity to work in many industries had only "come when the wheels of these plants have been stopped or threatened with stoppage by reason of strikes." Should this earn black workers the harsh sobriquet of strikebreaker? The *Argus* claimed no—the charge of strikebreaker was "unjust." "We are not strike breakers ... but we are workers, seeking to earn an honest living by the sweat of our brow." Blacks simply had "no alternat[iv]e," for they "must work when given the opportunity"; if that opportunity came only when white workers struck, so be it, for "necessity forces us to accept work when and where we can get it." All white unions had to do was "remove their ban on admitting colored men to their councils" and they would find the black worker "true and loyal" to the union cause.¹⁶

But even the rise of the more inclusive Congress of Industrial Organizations did not convince all black leaders that the time had come to adjust their thinking. As late as 1944, black educator Gordon B. Hancock would conclude that it was a "highly debatable question whether the Negro by reason of his desperate economic condition is morally bound to support the unions that deny him membership ... To expect impecunious Negroes to turn suddenly in their hunger and wretchedness and play the role of philanthropists is expecting too much of a group living on the ragged edge of existence." Strikebreaking might make unorganized black workers a "menace to organized labor." But, Hancock insisted, it was "better to be a menace than to be disregarded."¹⁷ Organized labor's larger reputation for anti-black animus, black workers' precarious economic status, and leaders' class perspectives and ideological preferences ensured that black elites would advise black workers to play it safe and stand clear of entangling alliances with their white counterparts. From their commanding position in the pulpit and the black press, elites preached the gospel of anti-unionism, drowning out the quieter, alternative voices of black trade unionism.

As important as black leaders' advice and counsel might have been, other factors undoubtedly contributed to black men's decision to cross white union picket lines. Contemporaries, novelists, and historians have provided numerous explanations for strikebreakers' behavior, including an unawareness of strike conditions when recruited by labor agents, an unfamiliarity with trade union principles, prior negative experience with white unions, philosophical or practical objections to white union practices, and a desperate need for jobs.¹⁸ Those who had recently migrated from the South to the North, for instance, carefully measured their current situation against the recent past, encouraging their course of action. Whatever problems they faced in the North, they paled in comparison to those in the South. The character of Big Mat, a southern migrant working in a northern steel mill after World War I in William Attaway's 1941 novel, *Blood on the Forge*, was undoubtedly representative of significant numbers of black newcomers to the industrial North. As a union drive built up momentum in his community, "he knew that he would not join the union," Attaway explained. "For a man who had so lately worked from dawn to dark in the fields twelve hours and the

¹⁶ "The Steel Strike," *St. Louis Argus*, October 24, 1919.

¹⁷ Gordon B. Hancock, "Race Relations in the United States: A Summary," in *What the Negro Wants*, ed. Rayford Logan (1944; reprint Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 231, 243.

¹⁸ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 210, 214–217; Spear, *Black Chicago*, 37; Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, *Anyplace But Here* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 136–144.

long shift were not killing. For a man who had known no personal liberties even the iron hand of the mills was an advancement.”¹⁹ For other migrants, unfamiliarity with trade unionism likely was involved. The white Chicago social reformer Mary McDowell recounted to black social scientists Sterling Spero and Abram Harris an encounter between a newly employed black stockyard worker and a union organizer during the union drive of World War I. “‘It all sounds pretty good to me,’ said the Negro” when explained the advantages of union membership, “‘but what does Mr. Armour think about it?’”²⁰ The Interchurch World Movement’s Commission of Inquiry into the 1919 steel strike also invoked the novelty of northern jobs and the character of black workers’ relationship to management. “Unaccustomed to the complexities of modern large-scale industry,” it concluded, “the colored worker still regards his relationship to his employer as a personal one. His grievances are his own affair.”²¹

The behavior of many black strikebreakers, at least in Chicago and Pittsburgh, could not be attributed solely to industrial inexperience, for the Commission also discovered that “the great numbers of negroes who flowed into the ... plants were conscious of strike breaking ... Through many an experience negroes came to believe that the only way they could break into a unionized industry was through strikebreaking.” The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, established after the 1919 race riot, arrived at a similar conclusion. The African Americans interviewed by its members “often expressed themselves as distrustful of the unions because prejudice in the unions has denied them equal benefits of membership.” Their first opportunity to break into a new industry often came only through strikebreaking, and even if they earned less than the union scale, their new wages were often higher than they had earned before. This, the Commission concluded, “tends to make them feel that they have more to gain through affiliation with such employers than by taking chances on what the unions offer them.”²² In such infertile soil the seeds of trade unionism failed to take root among many black migrants.

Reconstructing the motivations and aspirations of black strikebreakers remains frustratingly difficult.²³ Largely if not entirely missing from discussions by contemporaries and historians are the voices and perspectives of black strikebreakers themselves. This should not be too surprising for, after all, strikebreakers formed no lasting organizations

¹⁹ William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (1941; reprint New York: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 222.

²⁰ Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, 130.

²¹ The Commission of Inquiry, The Interchurch World Movement, *Report on the Steel Strike of 1919* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Hoe, 1920), 138, 178.

²² Commission of Inquiry, Interchurch World Movement, *Report on the Steel Strike of 1919*, 138, 178; Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 404. Also see Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915–45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 39–40, 276–277.

²³ Stephen H. Norwood provocatively argues that strikebreaking “appealed to many African Americans because it provided the black man his best opportunity to assume a tough, combative posture in public and to display courage while risking serious physical injury or even death. Strikebreaking thus allowed African American men to challenge openly white society’s image of them as obsequious, cowardly, and lacking the ability to perform well under pressure.” This may have been the case, but in discussing his two principle examples—the national 1904 packinghouse strike and the 1905 Chicago teamsters’ strike—Norwood features few voices of strikebreakers and instead relies heavily on the views of the white press, labor leaders, and the black middle class. His emphasis on the centrality of black masculinity is not based on black workers’ own interpretations of their motivations. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 80. For a similar critique, see Brian Kelly’s review, “Bad Ol’ Boys: Scabs, Labor Spies, and Gun-Slinging Entrepreneurs,” *Reviews in American History* (forthcoming 2003).

that might have left a paper trail record and published no newspapers or journals in which they explained their position. The black strikebreaker remains, to a large extent, a shadowy, silent figure glimpsed only through his actions or through the eyes of others. His portrait, painted by black elites, white trade unionists, and employers, is necessarily sketchy and impressionistic; it likely reflects the perspective of the observer more than that of the observed. But while the distortions produced by white employers, unionists, and journalists reflected their racial views or antipathies, those produced by the black elite reflected to a large extent its class bias. Black commentators frequently framed strikebreaking as a *racial* issue—as a legitimate response by African Americans to labor market discrimination and trade union exclusion. Strikebreaking *was* a racial issue, to be sure. But it was also a particular kind of *class* or *labor* issue as well. As much as black elites thought they spoke for black workers, their interests and perspectives could differ, sometimes subtly, sometimes sharply. Those elites' static and often caricatured portrayals of black workers and strikebreakers are undermined by explorations of the more complex world inhabited by black workers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Two examples of black strikebreaking on the West Coast—on the Seattle docks in the World War I era and in western Washington state coal mines in the early 1890s—offer a lens into black working-class perspectives and are worth examining in detail.

In the 1960s, social scientist Horace Cayton recalled a revealing encounter he had during his youth in World War I near Yakima, Washington, with a white member of the Industrial Workers of the World. "I got nothing against the colored," his new friend "Red" lectured him. "But on the whole the colored don't make good union men. The white bosses have held them down so long they can't believe in anything except the rich." Red had "no use" for "race prejudice," which "just divides and confuses the working class, like religion." "The bosses make scabs out of Negroes to divide the workers," he continued. "Negroes shouldn't let themselves be used but they do. I remember one Negro we took care of during the strike on the waterfront. Caught him walking through the picket line and when we got through with him he'd learned about the class struggle. Bet he never broke a strike again!" Cayton was unimpressed. "I'd break a strike to get a decent job, beating or no beating," he replied. "Son, you got to realize that your people, and my people, too, have been the victims of a hundred and fifty years of slavery," Red retorted. "Right here in America. Human slavery. But there's wage slavery, too ... Negroes will have to learn to endure the present temporary state of things in order to bring about the new world of the workers. You got to have faith in the future, in the real leaders of labor."²⁴

That, to young Cayton, was pie in the sky. Just as Christianity was but a myth to Red, the "new world of the workers" in the future was a myth to him. The Wobbly's argument made no convert of Cayton, and his subsequent experiences would only underscore its utopian fallacy. Upon receiving a letter from his father that a longshore strike in Seattle meant that waterfront jobs were numerous, he abandoned his position with the Great Northern Railroad to try his hand at dock work. With a newly purchased cargo hook and work gloves, Cayton finally felt himself "a man" ready to "earn big money." Dispatched to the piers at Smith's Cove, he and two other black strikebreakers were accosted by white strikers who pulled their trolley off the tracks. "Get up, you black son of a bitch!" angry whites howled at one of the men. "We'll teach you to break a strike and take the food out of our kids' mouths." When

²⁴ Horace R. Cayton, *Long Old Road: An Autobiography* (1963; reprint Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970), 101, 107, 109.

the man didn't move, his attacker swung a cargo hook into his neck, hauled him to his feet, and shouted, "We should burn you alive like they do down south!" The wounded man was taken from the car, accompanied by the second black strikebreaker. Stunned into absolute silence, Cayton was saved only by the timely intervention of an "apple-cheeked" white woman who angrily declared that Cayton was with her. White strikers demurred. "He looks too young, anyway," one replied. "No one is going to get hurt who isn't scabbing." Despite his brush with death, Cayton became a longshoreman, and the strike, with the assistance of numerous black strikebreakers, was eventually broken.²⁵

Decades earlier, black pioneers in Cayton's Washington participated in a comparable drama involving the region's developing mining industry. Labor unrest was nothing new in King County, Washington, when the latest bout of union-management conflict erupted in the spring of 1891. In many respects the unfolding drama was a familiar one, resembling in broad strokes, if not all its particulars, those taking place in coal mining communities in Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa.²⁶ In the early 1880s, white miners in the Washington mining towns of Newcastle, Roslyn, and Franklin had affiliated with the Knights of Labor. Although they had successfully driven Chinese workers out of the mines, the introduction of 400 black strikebreakers from the Midwest in 1888 enabled the Northern Pacific Coal Company to keep its union at bay in Roslyn for over a decade. Local managers of the financially strapped Oregon Improvement Company drew inspiration from the Northern Pacific's example. In 1891, they brought matters to a head by demanding that the Knights accept a contract providing lower wages, barring any work stoppages, and imposing other onerous work rules. To the miners, this was nothing less than a "virtual surrendering by the employees of their individuality to the company," something the miners rejected as creating "a system of bondage equal [to] if not worse than chattel slavery." Predictably, they vowed to refuse to "submit to a surrender of their rights as American citizens." The stage was set for confrontation.²⁷

According to the company's plan, OIC mine superintendent T. B. Corey then traveled east to Missouri, Iowa, Indiana and Illinois, where he distributed handbills advertising for 500 black miners and laborers, promising "Good wages," "Steady work," and "No strikes or trouble of any kind." Corey was familiar with the region and with black strikebreakers, having earlier worked as a mining superintendent in Braidwood, Illinois, where he had successfully recruited hundreds of blacks to break a white union strike. On May 13, his "Black Train" departed Saint Paul, Minnesota, with hundreds of experienced miners and at least 50 family members; they

²⁵ Cayton, *Long Old Road*, 110–114. On Seattle longshoremen in this era, see Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919–1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 27–28, 165–165.

²⁶ Herbert Gutman, "Labor in the Land of Lincoln: Coal Miners on the Prairie," in Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 117–212; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*.

²⁷ "300 Miners Strike," *Tacoma Daily News*, April 2, 1891; "Out in Washington," *United Mine Workers Journal*, June 4, 1891; Mark Stern, "Black Strikebreaking in the Coal Fields: King County, Washington—1891," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5, 3 (1977), 60–70; Robert A. Campell, "Blacks and the Coal Mines of Western Washington, 1888–1896," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 73, 4 (1982), 146–155; Alan A. Hynding, "The Coal Miners of Washington Territory: Labor Troubles in 1888–89," *Arizona and the West* 12, 3 (1970), 221–236; Steven Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in the 20th Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); "Trouble in the Coal Mines, 1889," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 37, 3 (1946), 321–257.

numbered as many as 675. Arriving in Washington on May 17, they began working the following day under the protection of 150 armed guards. To local whites, Franklin resembled “a place occupied by a hostile invading army,” with whites playing the part of “natives of a captured city, the guards and their black cohorts answering to the captors.”²⁸ Sympathy strikes by nearby white workers ensued, as did violence in late June; the Washington National Guard patrolled the mines for almost a month. Finally, in late July, white miners surrendered, agreeing to the wage cuts and conditions they had previously rejected. The Knights of Labor was effectively dead in King County and black miners, once reviled as outsiders, found a permanent place in the region’s mines.²⁹

From the moment of their arrival, blacks were the targets of white workers’ contempt. “Well, boys, the niggers are coming!” white strikers declared when they first heard word of the strikebreakers’ impending arrival. “Look at Corey’s black slaves,” their wives declared as the train carrying hundreds of blacks pulled into Franklin.³⁰ Strikers invoked a common litany of charges against the newcomers: they were “ignorant blacks” who were part of a “systematic attempt to force the condition of Washington coal miners lower and lower until they should become absolutely passive instruments in the hands of the corporation”; they were “more submissive than white men,” were poor miners, and were “only a little removed from slavery and barbarism.” The 600 or so African American newcomers were “worthless individuals” taking the place of “honest laboring men,” insisted a strike supporter. “These negroes, as serfs of a greedy corporation, have been brought here and protected in slavery by armed men for blood money.” “Shame to the colored man who would advise the slavery of his race,” he concluded, “shame to those who would perpetuate this slavery.”³¹

The object of relentless physical and verbal attacks, black strikebreakers and their supporters defended themselves, refuting accusations of inferiority, violence, and ignorance leveled at them by their white working-class opponents. In many cases experienced miners themselves, they had had ample opportunity to observe white unions in action and found them wanting. Far from the ignorant dupes of capital that whites found them to be, black miners knew what they were doing, and many, in fact, justified what they did on the grounds of American citizenship, which they asserted against a backdrop of deep discrimination and white hostility as a matter of economic necessity and as a matter of pride.

To black miner Charles H. Johnson, America’s long and enduring history of oppressing its black population gave African Americans little choice if they hoped to survive economically. “We know that we are scoffed at and looked upon as the dregs of all races because we have been oppressed by the cursed yoke of bondage,” he informed readers of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. “If there is one race on the globe which has a grievance, it is the poor colored folk,” a people abused and excluded by other groups. “Now, the labor unions will condemn us and make us believe that we are everything but a people. They say we are insulting, presumptuous and without character. We take all that without a murmur.” Aware that “prejudice is against us” in Franklin, he insisted that it “is against us everywhere,” with whites expecting blacks to “stand back and suffer

²⁸ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 18, 1891.

²⁹ “Washington State: The Deplorable Changes of a Year,” *United Mine Workers Journal*, November 12, 1891; “From Far West: Deplorable Conditions Result from Bad Management,” *United Mine Workers Journal*, February 25, 1892.

³⁰ “Breaking a Strike,” *Mobile Register*, May 19, 1891; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 17, 1891.

³¹ *Tacoma Daily News*, May 25, 1891; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 17, 25, 1891.

while others live.” This Johnson and his cohort refused to do. “Let them call us scabs if they want to,” he noted of the white strikers. “We have concluded that half a loaf is better than none.” Disavowing any malice, Johnson wanted “the world to know that we are not the fools that some think we are. We want to live and to let others live.”³²

Citizenship rights and resistance to racial subordination were the themes emphasized by black miner G. S. Bailey: “[W]hen a black man begins to assert his rights of American citizenship it very often creates a commotion in the public mind,” for “[e]vil and designing men hold him up to the public gaze with scorn and derision, falsifying almost every statement made in regard to him.” Any man with “courage to champion his cause” is “branded as a villain and unfit for public confidence.” But the time had finally come for African Americans to show that “the cry, ‘This is a white man’s country,’ does not hold water.” Yet doing so would come at a cost: for exercising the rights of citizenship guaranteed under the law, “we are misrepresented and all manner of bad things said about us”; whites “seek to assassinate and murder us.” The “white man has had our sweat, our blood, our strength, and our lives for nearly 300 years,” he continued, robbing blacks and depriving them “of the chance to accumulate wealth and accomplishments of learning and are seeking to do the same things today. They deny us the right to make a contract to suit ourselves, and when we have done this they call us savages,” boycotting blacks’ employers and threatening their lives, “simply because they give us the work that the white men refused to do.” But blacks would no longer be deterred; “we do not care who it pleases or who it does not. We will make just such contacts as we want to make, and live up to them when they are made ... All we ask is to be let alone.” This was not an isolated struggle, confined to the ranks of Washington’s newest black arrivals. Bailey predicted that blacks would “continue to use all our energy and influence to infuse into the minds of the people of color of the United States that spirit of manhood and independence that so fitly characterizes true American citizens, for which our color sacrificed their lives in the late civil war ... We shall endeavor to attend to our own business, make our own contracts, work for whom we please get as much wages as we can, save our earnings and claim a respectable place among the people in the community in which we live.”³³

These views were amplified in the joint statement of three other black miners—John Bedell, Phil Taylor, and Prest Loving—who also invoked notions of patriotism and nativism. “This is a free country to all law-abiding American citizens,” they insisted in an attempt to contrast African Americans’ behavior with that of immigrant radicals, and the “colored men’s record stands upon the pages of history.” That history included not just a long-term residence in America but consistent loyalty and patriotic service to the nation through the taking up of arms on behalf of “liberty and freedom” during the war for American independence, the war of 1812, the Mexican war, and, of course, the “war of the late rebellion” to defend “our flag of liberty.” “Hence we feel a right to work in any part of our native country,” they continued, to which “no true born American citizen would raise any objection.” Only “European paupers”—men “who come to this country for their liberty and freedom” who even before they are “naturalized ... are ready to agitate strikes and lead riots”—questioned blacks’ right to work. “[T]rue born Americans”—like African Americans—were too proud “to engage in anything to disgrace” their country; in contrast, labor unions were “largely composed of the foreigners to rule or ruin” who daily harassed the black miners in Washington. Then came the

³² *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 5, 1891.

³³ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 7, 1891.

challenge: if white miners were “so aggrieved by the colored man mining in King county,” they concluded, “we would advise them to leave and make room for a more peaceable class of citizens.”³⁴

J. H. Orr, an African American living in Franklin who was likely a strikebreaker, most forcefully addressed the issue of trade unions’ negative relationship to black workers. The “labor unions will condemn us and make us believe that we are everything but a people,” he declared. “They say we are insulting, presumptuous and without character.” Blacks were “looked upon as the dregs of all races.” Even the opening of the doors of the Knights of Labor to black members had done little to improve blacks’ image or economic position. For wanting “a little morsel to help keep our starving souls as we travel this journey of life,” blacks were “abused” and “called scabs.” With the “brand of Cain” marking them, blacks were “aware that prejudice is against us” in the Washington mining communities. But that was nothing new: “It is against us everywhere.” But rather than “stand back and suffer while others live,” black workers had seized the opportunity to work. For that, “Let them call us scabs.” All we ask, he later explained, “is to be treated as are other citizens.”³⁵

Denied equal rights and respect in the nation’s political, social, and economic arenas, the black strikebreakers in western Washington expressed bitter resentment at the history of racial inequities and their treatment at the hands of white society. They also unapologetically justified their taking of jobs from striking white miners as an economic necessity, as an exercise of their right to employment and contract in a market economy, and as a matter of right based on decades of patriotic service and citizenship. For many, the journey west was a permanent move in search of opportunity. Some were accompanied by their families—an indication of their desire to settle in Washington—while many others sent for relatives once they firmly established themselves in the mining communities. In subsequent generations, these men and women would be remembered by their descendants as “black pioneers,” family firsts who established an enduring black presence in Washington state. Long after African Americans, both workers and elites, warmed to the labor movement, black Washingtonians would recall with pride, and without apology, the courageous accomplishment of this pioneering generation. There is no question that in breaking racial employment barriers, Washington’s black pioneers had demonstrated the capacity of black workers to compete with whites and, in so doing, furthered the economic advancement of the race. That much black elites would have approved of, and white workers would have objected to. But in their own way—a way that neither black elites and especially white unionists could appreciate—they were engaged in a distinctive form of black working-class activism, one which entailed physical risks, required group solidarity, and demonstrated collective bravery, forethought, and determination.

* * *

Across the country in Rendville, Ohio, the Washington state coal miners’ strike caught the eye of Richard L. Davis, an African American organizer for the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Born in Roanoke, Virginia in 1865, Davis had lived in Rendville, a Hocking Valley mining community, since 1882. He gravitated toward the orbit of organized labor by 1890, when he was elected to the young UMWA’s District 6 Executive Board in Ohio; in 1896, he would be elected to the union’s National

³⁴ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 4, 1891.

³⁵ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 5, 1891.

Executive Board. In addition to his organizing efforts, Davis devoted considerable energy to writing about organized labor and the relationship between black and white workers, penning a steady flow of letters to such labor periodicals as the *United Mine Workers Journal* and the *National Labor Tribune* which reveal him to be a tireless advocate of black trade union affiliation, a proponent of interracial unionism, and a critic of white labor's racism. In late July 1891, Davis received a clipping from a friend, containing the letter to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* written by strikebreaker G. S. Bailey and recounted above. Davis, who rarely missed an opportunity to preach organized labor's cause, again took up the pen to refute the Franklin miner's arguments, which, in Davis's eyes, needed "severe criticism." In so doing, he articulated a moral and political vision that ran counter to the advice of most black elites and charted a far different path for black workers' advancement.³⁶

At the heart of his critique, Davis damned those who would break strikes like Bailey. The "blackleg," he charged, "should not be allowed to live among decent people." To Bailey's depiction of white strikers' efforts to "murder and assassinate" African Americans, Davis firmly responded by justifying white trade unionists' violent response: "I would like to ask the gentlemen this question, suppose that you were working in a place and the company brought in three or four hundred white men to take your places." What would be the result? "I fancy you would not speak as you do now," Davis continued. "No, sir, you would pick your gun if you had one, and you would try to kill every white man that you saw, whether he was your enemy or not." The defense of community and union standards rendered understandable, even sympathetic, white attempts to repulse the strikebreakers' advance, in Davis' opinion.

More fundamentally, Davis charged Bailey with misrepresenting the status of African Americans at the end of the 19th century. "How utterly false!" was Bailey's claim that the Negro had been a chattel slave a quarter century earlier but was now a "free American citizen." Drawing upon a broader labor discourse of wage slavery, Davis contrasted the antebellum and postbellum eras. "None of us who toil for our daily bread are free. At one time, as he has said, we were chattel slaves; to day [sic] we are, one and all, white and black slaves." The "chains of bondage" were forged around workers more firmly by "just such actions as have been taken in the state of Washington." And, for Davis, black strikebreakers merely played into employers' hands. The time had finally come "that the negro should know better than to run from place to place to break down wages ... He can plainly see that the money kings of this country are only using him as a tool to fill his own coffers with gold." Black gains at whites' expense involved undercutting white labor and an acceptance of an inequality of condition. If and when black strikebreakers came around to asking for the same conditions as unionized whites, employers would "have no further need for you." The answer was not for blacks to stoop beneath whites' level but to organize themselves:

I would say to the negro, of which race I am proud to be connected, let us be men; let us demand as much for our labor as any other nationality; let us not suffer ourselves to be trampled upon any more than any other people. We are a people; we are men; we constitute one-sixth of this great country so far as

³⁶ Herbert G. Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of their Meaning," in *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, ed. Julius Jacobson (New York: Anchor Books, 1968), 52-57; R. L. Davis, "From Rendville," *National Labor Tribune*, July 25, 1891.

numbers are concerned, consequently it is not a white man's country; it is partly ours as well, so let us prove ourselves men and the equal of any others.

Where black elites counseled reliance on employers, regardless of the conditions of work or rates of pay, Davis insisted on another path: "the labor organizations will do more for the negro than any political party can or ever will do. So let us get into them and try to make this country what it should be."³⁷

Davis' jeremiad was, in this instance, directed at blacks who not only engaged in strikebreaking activity but did so proudly and aggressively. Answering G. S. Bailey required Davis to ignore the strikebreaker's complaints against white violence and the long history of white opposition to black economic advancement. But Davis was hardly unmindful of the realities Bailey addressed and, on other occasions, directed his tirades against whites who refused to deal fairly with blacks. "I assure anyone that I have more respect for a scab than I have for a person who refers the negro" as "big black buck niggers," as one white did in the pages of his union journal, Davis declared in 1898, "and God knows the scab I utterly despise." Strikebreaking (as Bailey implied) stemmed from white hostility to blacks. "[Y]ou seldom hear of negroes being brought in ... to break a strike" where blacks and whites worked together. "I say treat the negro right and he will treat you right."³⁸

In this last piece of advice, Davis was not entirely wrong. During the 1880s, some 60,000 African Americans (other estimates put the number at 90,000 in 1887), organized into 400 union locals, affiliated with the Knights of Labor, an association open to workers regardless of race (with the exception of the Chinese). In defiance of black elites' standard advice, black Knights and other trade unionists engaged in extensive strike activity in Virginia, Florida, Alabama, Texas, and Louisiana, amongst other places. As Sidney Kessler concluded almost a half century ago, from the end of Reconstruction through the Populist upsurge of the 1890s, black workers did "not resign themselves to passivity," as elites recommended, but "pressed for their demands, not only as Negroes, but also as working men and women."³⁹ Even when the inclusionary Knights collapsed and the restrictive American Federation of Labor became the nation's dominant labor organization in the 1890s, black workers in specific industries formed numerous all-black unions, whose successes or failures reflected those of the larger labor movement as well as the racial dynamics in their trades and communities. By the opening of the 20th century, as many as 5000 black dock workers were union members in New Orleans alone, and thousands more organized in Galveston, Houston, Mobile, Key West, Savannah, Newport News, and Baltimore. African American unionists in the Birmingham coal district numbered just over 5000, while in the piney woods of Louisiana and East Texas they also numbered in the thousands. Black domestic workers and washerwomen formed small union locals in St. Petersburg, Norfolk, Little Rock, Houston, Mobile, and New Orleans during the 1910s, as did Virginia tobacco stemmers and oyster shuckers, Florida phosphate miners, and Chicago and New York Pullman porters. Where white workers erected few organizational barriers or treated "the negro right," in Davis's words, black workers often proved ready

³⁷ Davis, "From Rendville," *National Labor Tribune*, July 25, 1891.

³⁸ Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America," 103.

³⁹ Sidney H. Kessler, "The Negro in Labor Strikes," *The Midwest Journal* VI, 2 (1954), 17; Kessler, "The Organization of Negroes in the Knights of Labor," *Journal of Negro History* 37 (1952), 248-276; Leon Fink, "'Irrespective of Party, Color or Social Standing': The Knights of Labor and Opposition Politics in Richmond, Virginia," *Labor History* 19 (1978), 325-349.

converts to the union cause. And even where whites did erect barriers, blacks often found self-organization to be a necessary tool of self-defense. Although the genuine “breakthrough” of black workers into the labor movement would await the rise of the industrial union movement of the 1930s, a tradition of black unionism embracing literally tens of thousands of African American workers—albeit a small if nonetheless significant minority of all such workers—emerged in the years between the 1880s and 1920s.

What black elite proponents of industrial accommodationism consistently failed to understand was that for many black workers, not all workplace issues were primarily racial issues; that is, everything experienced in the labor market could not be reduced to a matter of race. Like whites, black workers objected to low wages, intolerable working conditions, abusive managers, and workplace humiliation, some of it racial, much of it not. Nothing in the black elites’ program spoke to these on-the-job realities. To the contrary, their advice suggested that blacks work harder, accept lower wages, and endure harsher conditions than whites, in an attempt to curry employers’ favor. All that seemed to matter was access to jobs, not the quality of life on the job. For all their talk about manhood, economic citizenship, and dignity, the elites’ strategy in effect counseled black labor loyalty, passivity, and subordination to employers. Some black workers were willing to take the bargain, but many were not, and they turned to collective action in an attempt to address the exploitative and often brutal conditions under which they labored. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the gospel of trade unionism appealed not merely to whites but to significant numbers of African Americans as well.⁴⁰

If trade unionism and strikebreaking were both forms of black working-class activism, the factors pushing black workers in one direction or the other were grounded in their concrete experiences and evolved over time. To World War I-era migrants from the southern countryside where unions were nonexistent or from urban centers where they were discriminatory, a policy of skepticism or caution toward the northern union movement appeared prudent. But with industrial experience came a frustration that black elite wisdom proved incapable of addressing. Following the collapse of the Seattle waterfront strike, even young Horace Cayton, who had witnessed brutal physical attacks upon his fellow black strikebreakers, eventually joined a revived union in an effort to improve working conditions, encouraging other blacks to join as well. In this instance, however, to little avail. While they succeeded in establishing a black and white local and winning a closed shop and union dispatching office, persistent discrimination against blacks soured Cayton on the experience, leading him to conclude, that “you just couldn’t trust any white man.”⁴¹

But others arrived at a different conclusion. Many black miners in western Washington slowly migrated to larger towns and to Seattle, where work opportunities were greater. But by the time the United Mine Workers Union revived after 1900, the former strikebreakers joined with their white counterparts to tackle their common workplace grievances. Black migrants in northern packinghouses also made the transition from union skeptics, opponents, and strikebreakers during and after World War I to union stalwarts in the 1930s; as shopfloor veterans during the Depression, many spearheaded

⁴⁰ On African Americans and the gospel of unionism in this era, see footnote 12. Also see Eric Arnesen, “The Great American Protest,” in *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Arnesen (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), 26–29.

⁴¹ Cayton, *Long Old Road*, 118.

organizing efforts in the 1930s and contributed to the formation of one of the nation's most racially progressive unions, the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee. Together with whites, they tackled not only workplace racial discrimination but issues ignored by black elites—"slim pay envelopes," the "lean months of poverty," the "prolonged agony of layoffs," and the "mutual fear and distrust" that blacks and whites "slaved side by side in." Similarly, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters campaigned tirelessly, and successfully, in the late 1920s through mid-1930s to win over not just black workers but the black elite to a pro-union stance.⁴²

Black elites were slower to abandon their conventional economic nostrums and traditional accommodationist advice, but many came around slowly to supporting black workers' collective initiatives by the Great Depression and World War II. So did an important wing of the American labor movement, particular the industrial unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The "solidarity of labor is another myth as far as the history of American labor is concerned," the black scholar Rayford Logan declared in 1944. But matters were changing. In contrast to the sorry record of the AFL, the CIO "has been the most aggressive organization in recent years in promoting not only economic equality for the Negro but also political and even social equality." That same year, the *Northwest Herald*, a weekly black paper from Seattle, would similarly conclude "in less than 10 years, the Labor Movement has become the most powerful force for progress in the Negro community ... Where the Negroes feared unions yesterday, today Negroes look to the labor unions with hope for a New Day."⁴³ These were something of an exaggeration, to be sure, but such assessments would have been unthinkable only a decade earlier. As contemporaries recognized, the emergence of a new generation of black workplace activists, coupled with the rise of a hopeful new industrial union movement during the 1930s and 1940s, irrevocably altered the relationship of African Americans to the organized labor movement.

The historic 1941 face-off between the United Automobile Workers of America and the Ford Motor Company in Detroit wrote something of an obituary for the classic strikebreaker saga. Although not all of black Detroit's leaders endorsed the UAW, many did; although not all black workers left the Ford plant when the strike was declared, many responded to the strikers' plea for support. And although Ford "had deliberately injected the race issue by utilizing blacks as strikebreakers," in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick's words, the UAW and pro-union black leaders closely collaborated to defuse racial tensions, appealing to strikebreakers to join the walkout and holding "the Ford Motor Company, not the blacks, responsible for the 'crime' of strikebreaking." Their efforts proved successful.⁴⁴ The growing numbers of black trade unionists did not mean

⁴² Quote from Harold Preece, "What Goes on in Packingtown? Black Workers Have Learned to Raise their Heads and to Act Unitedly for their Full Rights in Industry," *Chicago Defender*, September 23, 1939. On packinghouse workers, see Roger Horowitz, "*Negro and White, Unite and Fight!*": A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-90 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); on Pullman porters, see Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 84-96; Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). On the broader shift in black politics in the 1930s, see Beth Tompkins Bates, "A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941," *American Historical Review* 102 (1997), 340-377.

⁴³ Rayford W. Logan, "The Negro Wants First-Class Citizenship," in *What the Negro Wants*, ed. Logan, 12-13; "Labor Unions Most Powerful Force in Negro Community," *Northwest Herald*, October 18, 1944.

⁴⁴ The classic and unsurpassed account of the 1941 Ford strike is August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 82-107. Also see Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 192-197.

that labor movement discrimination had vanished. Rather, black activists would campaign to eliminate barriers to participation and advancement by working within unions or through such institutions as the state and federal courts and the World War II-era Fair Employment Practice Committee. The figure of the black strikebreaker—long a fearful specter looming in the collective white working-class imagination as well as a conservative, even valiant, force in the eyes of black elites—lost much of its emotional, psychological, and political force. Strikebreaking, by both blacks and whites, never vanished, of course. But the once powerful concept of the black strikebreaker was largely laid to rest.

