What did the unions do?

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Black workers fold hides at Chicago Union’s Stockyards. Photo: Chicago History Museum

The long shadow of the Chicago race riot, Part 3

Up to the 1920s, Chicago was the center of the labor movement in the United States. It was the heart and soul of the eight-hour-day struggle in 1886. Workers marched from factory to factory and shut them down.

Chicago's working class and its leaders, the Haymarket martyrs, gave May Day to the world. The capitalists violently crushed this movement and hanged its leaders—George Engel, Adolph Fischer, Albert Parsons and August Spies—on Nov. 11, 1887. Another activist, Louis Lingg, either committed suicide or was killed in his jail cell.

Because of its central location, sitting at the foot of Lake Michigan, Chicago became the industrial capital of the U.S. It was the railroad and meatpacking center of the country. In those days, railroads employed 2 million workers, 10 times as many as today.

Chicago was the headquarters of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, nicknamed "Wobblies"). In the fall of 1919, the Communist Party would be founded there in two conventions. (The two communist parties that were formed, the Communist Labor Party and the Communist Party of America, would merge in 1921.)

However, the workers' movement was virtually all-white. It ignored the super oppression of African Americans. What finally changed this around was the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution and the struggles of oppressed peoples.

The best of these socialists would have used guns to stop a lynching. Left-wingers attacked the color line that existed in most of the unions belonging to the American Federation of Labor. (The United Mine Workers was a notable exception in having a large Black membership.)

Eugene Debs won over 900,000 votes as the Socialist Party presidential candidate in 1920 while he was imprisoned for opposing World War I. Debs wrote that "the history of the Negro in the United States is a history of crime without parallel," in a 1903 issue of the International Socialist Review. The article was a fiery attack on racism and ridiculed white supremacy.

Yet for Debs nothing more was required from socialists concerning the struggle against racism except to say "the class struggle is colorless."

Debs was beloved for leading the American Railway Union's 1894 Pullman strike that shut down many railroads. President Grover Cleveland crushed the walkout by sending U.S. troops to Chicago.

Soldiers under the command of Gen. Nelson Miles shot down strikers. Miles had earlier captured Geronimo and would later invade Puerto Rico, making the beautiful island a U.S. colony.

But the ARU wasn't "colorless." Its convention delegates had voted 112-100 to bar Black workers from joining their union. Debs argued passionately against this racist ban. It would have been better if Debs had quit the Jim Crow ARU and organized an alternative open to all workers.

Members of IWW Timber Workers jailed in Grabow, La., in 1912. The union organized Black and white workers together and led the Merryville strike soon after. Photo: RootsWeb

The legendary IWW

The IWW sought to organize all workers. The Wobblies despised racism and at a time of almost universal anti-Asian racism, published literature in Japanese. African American IWW leader Ben Fletcher successfully organized Black and white dockworkers in Philadelphia.

It was their deeds that made the Wobblies an unforgettable part of working-class history. The Brotherhood of Timber Workers was particularly heroic.

It affiliated with the IWW at its May 1912 convention in Alexandria, La. Upon the urging of IWW leader Big Bill Haywood, the union members met together in defiance of the state's segregation laws.

The biggest IWW-led strike in the region was against the American Lumber Company in Merryville, La. Thirteen hundred workers went on strike there beginning Nov. 11, 1913.

These Black, Indigenous and white strikers stood together against company terror. Mexican workers brought in as strikebreakers joined the picket line. But the triple combination of the timber barons, the Santa Fe railroad and the state of Louisiana finally broke this strike.

Five union organizers were kidnapped. Four were terribly beaten. The African American F.W. Oliver was shot. By Feb. 19, 1914, all remaining union members in Merryville had been driven out of the town. Strikers were told that they would be killed if they returned.

Although the strike was crushed, the unity of these workers was never broken. This remarkable struggle took place only 30 miles away from Jasper, Texas, where James Byrd Jr. would be dragged to his death in 1998.

However, the IWW at the time would have agreed with Debs that socialism had nothing "special" to offer African Americans. This attitude ideologically disarmed the left.

Organizing the stockyards

Two years before the Chicago race riots there was a terrible massacre in East St.

Louis, Ill. In his autobiography, W.E.B. Du Bois estimated that 125 African Americans were killed there in 1917.

“The area became a ‘bloody half mile’ for three or four hours; streetcars were stopped, and Negroes, without regard to age or sex, were pulled off and stoned, clubbed and kicked, and mob leaders calmly shot and killed Negroes who were lying in blood in the street,” according to the Kerner Commission report.

This bloodbath inspired the NAACP’s famous “silent march” on July 28, 1917, down Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue.

The memory of East St. Louis hung over the efforts to organize the 50,000 to 60,000 workers in Chicago’s Union Stockyards.

Meatpacking and poultry workers still have some of the highest injury rates of any occupation. A century ago it was worse.

People were horrified by Upton Sinclair’s description in his novel “The Jungle” of a worker falling into a boiling vat. People wondered what was really in their sausage. (“The Jungle” is irredeemably spoiled by a racist description of Black workers.)

William Z. Foster set out to organize these workers. Foster was a former IWW member who realized that most workers looked towards the American Federation of Labor. He believed that union activists should struggle within the AFL to make it fight.

The problem with this formulation was that, in 1919, Black workers knew they were unwanted by almost all of the craft unions and railroad brotherhoods, which at that time constituted the majority of organized labor.

Foster organized the Stockyards Labor Council with the backing of Chicago Federation of Labor President John Fitzpatrick. The idea was to get the different

craft unions to back an organizing drive. Any jurisdictional problems could be worked out later.

This was meant to be a half-step towards industrial unionism. Even if the workers would later be separated into different craft unions, they would be united at the bargaining table. Any "unskilled" workers not wanted by these craft outfits would be members of a "federal labor union" directly affiliated to the AFL.

Workers responded enthusiastically to this organizing drive. Among those who signed union cards were thousands of African Americans.

Future Black communist leader Harry Haywood's sister Eppa was a union activist at Swift. It seemed that the color line within the labor movement was about to be broken.

But the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen never joined the Stockyards Labor Council. The New Majority, published by the Chicago Federation of Labor. continued to print racist "jokes."

Even the craft unions that were members of the council refused to drop their whites-only membership policy. African Americans weren't allowed to join them. Instead they were stuck in the federal labor unions, some of which became all-Black Jim Crow locals.

This was poison to the organizing campaign. Close to one out of four meatpacking workers in Chicago was Black. They were sick of paying union dues for second-class union membership.

Doomed by the race riot, this union drive eventually fizzled out. It would be another 20 years before the workers in the stockyards would be organized, largely by Communist Party members, in a genuine industrial union: the Packing House Workers of the CIO.

Labor's failure to confront racist violence

Swift, Armour and the rest of the packers were the greatest beneficiaries of the Chicago race riot. They got the cops to prevent a union march in early July 1919 that was to go through African American and white neighborhoods. Two separate parades were held instead, with the Black and white marches coming together at a playground.

What did the the left do to stop the attacks on African Americans?

Alongside the red summer of lynchings, there was also a red scare. Hundreds of socialists were still locked up for opposing World War I. The IWW headquarters had been raided and its leaders were jailed.

Some union leaders were outspoken against racism. Among them was John Kilkulski, who published the Polish newspaper Glose Rabotnica. He would be assassinated on May 17, 1921. His killers were never found.

What was absolutely necessary was for the Stockyards Labor Council to organize defense squads of Black and white union members. But how could these unions have done so when most of them refused to let African Americans join their organizations in the first place?

Some must have wanted to intervene. The base of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers was thousands of workers making suits at the Hart, Schaffner & Marx factories.

Most of these workers were Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire. Some had participated in the Russian revolutionary movement. They were as familiar with anti-Jewish pogroms as African Americans were with lynch mobs.

It was only years later that the labor movement and the left realized the necessity of

stopping racist violence. An outstanding example was the campaign led by the Communist Party to save the lives of the Scottsboro defendants.

Another was the Dec. 14, 1974, march against racism in Boston, which was conceived by the communist leader Sam Marcy.

The mob violence in 1919 injected a higher level of race hatred into many white workers in Chicago. A long-reaching effect of this poison was to conservatize large sections. The inevitable result was to eliminate Chicago's leadership in the working-class movement.

Next: Communists fight racism and evictions

Sources: "The Kerner Report: The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders"; "Organized Labor and the Black Worker 1619-1973" by Philip S. Foner; "History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Volume 6, Postwar Struggles 1918-1920" by Philip S. Foner; "Black Bolshevik, Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist" by Harry Haywood; "Down on the Killing Floor, Black and White workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-54" by Rick Halpern; "A Few Red Drops, the Chicago Race Riot of 1919" by Claire Hartfield.

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