

LABOR LIFTS THE BAR TO OPPORTUNITY

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WHEN the road to opportunity is open for most people but is barred for some, because of these people's color or religion, the characteristic American reaction is to cry "Unfair!"

Discrimination violates the sense of fairness deeply rooted in the American tradition. Americans by nature are not exclusive. They don't like special privilege. Their kids don't go for the teacher's pet. They don't care much for any artificially set up elite. Any caste system is to them detestable. To them a good thing is something from which everybody benefits, everybody gains.

Believing in freedom, Americans detest restraint. They feel that everybody should be able to go places without hindrance. Yet on many roads in America traffic has not been flowing freely for everybody. Some Americans have found themselves barred from the high road to opportunity and shunted off into blind alleys and dead ends only because of the shape of their nose or the color of their skin.

Opportunity to earn a living, which means not only an opportunity to get a suitable job but also an opportunity to get a better job, has not always been equal in industry. Denial of this opportunity to some has been widely regarded as an injustice. And there has been much said to protest this injustice, to inveigh against it and to denounce it.

But to right a wrong takes deeds, not words.

As we look upon the American industrial scene, we see the far-reaching effects of the current economic recession. In factories and shops through the land there have been widespread layoffs. New jobs have been harder to get.

Under these conditions of job scarcity, discrimination becomes keener, tougher. To overcome it, to establish and maintain true equality

of opportunity, becomes a more difficult, a more challenging task.

The first responsibility to stamp out discrimination in hire, tenure and conditions of employment falls upon management.

There are many industrial firms that have established a notable record of eliminating discrimination in their own establishments. Companies like International Harvester and North American Aviation, to mention but two examples, have at least tried to make a sustained and determined effort to put into effect and keep alive an even-handed and fair employment policy. Yet nationally management as a whole has failed to do its part in assuring equality of opportunity in employment.

There is not one association of manufacturers, not one chamber of commerce, not one trade association in our land that has established machinery to promote equal opportunity and maintain fair employment policies among its members.

There are, to be sure, public agencies endeavoring to advance the acceptance of fair employment in industry. But their effectiveness is limited. In the federal government, the President's Committee on Government Contracts administers an executive order of the President which calls for non-discrimination on work performed under federal government contracts. But this program is limited by the fact that it applies only to business and industrial firms doing work on federal government contracts.

The committee itself is merely a coordinating agency. It strives to get the contracting agencies of the government to insist on non-discriminating policy and to secure compliance with it.

On the state level, too efforts have been made to apply a fair employment policy under the state laws. But here again the effect is a very

limited one. Only thirteen states and Alaska have mandatory fair employment practices acts on their statute books.

Where then is the major source of initiative and leadership in extending non-discrimination to our entire industrial scene?

The record shows that the one voluntary institution which has established comprehensive machinery to combat discrimination is organized labor. The AFL-CIO not only proclaimed non-discrimination as one of its foremost policy objectives; it also set up procedures to put its policy into practice.

The AFL-CIO has in operation a Civil Rights Committee which assists the Executive Council in shaping programs and procedures to deal with problems of discrimination within the ranks of labor itself as well as to eliminate all forms of discrimination in employment.

The merged labor federation has also set up a subcommittee of the Civil Rights Committee known as the Subcommittee on Compliance. This body reviews complaints of discrimination and attempts to resolve them. If necessary, unsolved cases are placed before the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO for appropriate action in accordance with the AFL-CIO policy.

The staff of the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Department, at its headquarters in Washington, is responsible for processing complaints and putting into effect the various phases of the non-discrimination program.

In addition, the AFL-CIO has called upon its affiliates "to set up internal Civil Rights Committees and staff machinery for effective administration of a meaningful civil rights program within their ranks, working in close cooperation with the Civil Rights Committee and the Civil Rights Department of the AFL-CIO."

MANY national and international unions have had such machinery of their own in operation for some time. Additional unions are being added to this list. For example, a recent addition is the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union. Pursuant to its 1957 convention action, this union's Executive Board acted last February to establish a Civil Rights Committee responsible for the administration of the union's non-discrimination program.

State and even local bodies of organized labor are likewise setting up non-discrimination machinery of their own in different parts of the country. A recent example is the action of the Kalamazoo Labor Council of Kalamazoo, Michigan, on March 10.

What the central body of this relatively small but important industrial community did was to establish its own permanent standing committee on civil rights, having as its functions:

"1. To suggest programs of action to the Labor Council which will aid it in carrying out the civil rights programs of the national and state AFL-CIO.

"2. To encourage Labor Council affiliates to establish civil rights committees on the local union level and to encourage local unions in strengthening present procedures which are designed to establish equality of opportunity for all members, regardless of race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry."

I N a recession, when layoffs are widespread, discrimination takes on its toughest form and is the hardest to combat. The workers who are regarded as "different" only because of the color of their skin know well the old formula which prevails in times like these: *"the last hired and the first fired."*

It is good and important news today that there are large and rapidly growing areas in industry where this formula no longer applies. These are the portions of industry where our unions have insisted on including a non-discrimination clause in their collective bargaining contracts with management.

Such a clause simply establishes the rule that in hiring, layoffs, promotions and all other terms and conditions of employment there is to be no discrimination because of the race, creed or color of workers covered by the union contract.

This non-discrimination rule is now law in a major portion of American industry—not law laid down by the government or the courts, but voluntarily promulgated by labor and management on *union initiative*.

The AFL-CIO Department of Civil Rights, with the help of cooperating agencies, has recently begun a series of spot checks to determine the effectiveness of these non-discrimination clauses in union-negotiated contracts.

We know that in much of industry minority workers are still running the gamut of the old and, to them, ominous formula: "last hired and first fired."

Yet enough evidence is in to show that major portions of our industry, including much of our basic production, where union contracts with non-discrimination clauses are in

effect, are islands where this formula no longer applies.

Thus, as we look at the record, we find that the one institution which has done most to wipe out discrimination from America's industrial scene has been the labor union. The one instrumentality which has proved the most effective in removing the bar to opportunity in employment has proved to be collective bargaining.

The non-discrimination clause alone does not accomplish the result we seek. Effective enforcement of the clause, vigilant administration of the grievance procedure and contract enforcement are a special responsibility of our unions today.

The time is now—when it will count most—for the labor movement to throw into its fight against discrimination the skill, the resources and the will to win of all its organizations and of their members.

This is one campaign we *must* win—not only to prove the worth of unionism as a voluntary institution and a mainstay of our industrial democracy, but also to assure the survival and future growth of industrial democracy itself.

Labor has already done more than any other group to lift the bar to employment opportunity in our land. It is up to us to keep open the high road to equal opportunity for every American.

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