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## THE BLACK WORKER IN THE 1980s

by Tom Larson

Labor Department announcements of new highs in unemployment rates have become monthly features of the current recession. While whites as well as blacks are suffering, the monthly unemployment figures especially demonstrate the precarious economic position of black workers. Unemployment has soared to 50% of black teenagers, 20% of black men, and about 17% of black women. These rates are more than twice as high as the comparable rates for whites.

The decline in the economic position of blacks is not related just to the current recession. In 1979, the income of the typical black male was 62% of that of a typical white male, but by 1981, it was only 59%. This year, the figure may be close to 57%, which is near what it was in 1964. In terms of family income, the ratio between blacks and whites was .55 in 1960. By 1970, the family ratio had risen to .61, but by last year it was down again to .56—little different from the situation of 21 years ago. The relative income position of blacks today is in stark contrast to the optimism of the early 1970s, when some believed that racial inequality could be eliminated by the end of this century.

To some degree, recent declines in relative income may just reflect the old pattern of "last-hired, first-fired" which has long plagued black workers. However, the overall pattern of change in the economic position of blacks suggests that fundamental shifts in the structure and in the institutions of the American economy have as much or more to do with the economic fate of blacks as guarantees of legal equality, or affirmative action programs, or cyclical downturns. Historical processes have led to current patterns of occupational and industrial segregation. Looking back at the relative economic position of blacks, we can identify improvement in the 1960s, little change during the 1970s, and now a decline in the past three years. The outlook for black males today is bleak, and there is urgent need for new breakthroughs into new industries.

**The Historical Pattern** The major events of the century for blacks have been the migration of agricultural workers out of the rural South, and the development of large urban ghettos. The first great migration began around 1915. Blacks were pushed out of southern agriculture (as were whites) by the boll weevil, floods, and low agricultural prices. At the same time, they were pulled to manufacturing centers by labor shortages stemming from the cessation of massive European immigration. Labor shortages allowed blacks to cross the color-line and gain entry to such Northern industries as steel, meatpacking, and shipbuilding. Still, blacks were confined to unskilled and unpleasant jobs that native whites did not want. Despite massive migration, 42% of black males remained in agriculture in 1930 (compared to only 24% of white males), and black women continued to work as domestics and on farms, and not yet in clerical occupations.

Another great migration out of Southern agriculture began during and after World War II, and continued through the 1960s. This second wave of migrants was pushed out of the South by the belated mechanization of cotton farming. Again industry needed labor, and in the post World War II period, black men became essentially urban blue-collar workers. Black women gained entry to clerical occupations in the expanding service sector of the economy.

Michael Reich, author of *Racial Inequality*, has found that much of the overall improvement in the relative economic position of blacks can be traced to their movement out of the low-wage rural South and into higher-wage urban areas of both the North and the South. But in his examination of changes in income inequality by region in the 1960s and '70s, Reich found no significant improvement in black workers' income, relative to white workers in the North and the West. Only in the South did blacks gain

relative to whites. Part of this gain may reflect changes due to the civil rights movement, as some Southern industries like textiles opened up to blacks during the '60s. Much of the gain may be due simply to the movement of blacks from rural areas to Southern cities. The post World War II demise of the old cotton-tenant farm system and the later increase in aggregate demand due to the Vietnam War build-up may be the largest sources of black economic gains of the 1960s and early '70s.

**Current Trends** So far, the basic changes in employment of the black labor force have been the entry of men into heavy industry, and the entry of women into clerical and other white collar occupations. Still, the labor force remains heavily segregated. Blacks tend to be found in older industries, as well as in less-skilled occupations, and are still doing the hot, hard, and heavy work. Almost 1/3 of black men work in only six industries (construction, steel and iron, auto, transportation, personal services, and education). In the southern lumber industry and in some other industries, blacks have been employed since the days of slavery. More often, blacks entered industries which had previously depended upon immigrants for unskilled labor, and took over only the more unpleasant duties. For every industry and occupation, there is a history of how the color-line has been drawn and redrawn.

Some studies have touted impressive changes in the percent of non-whites in higher status professional and technical occupations. But in many cases, high status occupations have had so few blacks that the entry of a handful represents a large percentage increase. This is mere tokenism. In other cases, the use of data on non-whites is simply misleading. "Non-whites" includes Asians, Native Americans, and some Hispanics, as well as blacks. In general, blacks constitute less than 70% of non-whites in the professional and technical occupations (with the percentage decreasing as occupational prestige increases), while blacks comprise more than 90% of non-whites in the less skilled occupations. For the most part, black men are employed today in the same types of jobs and in the same industries in which they were employed 20 years ago.

When we look at the industries which are major employers of black men, we can better understand why blacks are not doing well today. The men are heavily concentrated in industries which are either in decline (steel, auto, textile mills, meatpacking, education), or are sensitive to cyclical downturns (construction, lumbering and wood milling, hospitals). Black women may be more fortunate in being employed largely in the service sector, which is much less sensitive to cyclical downturns.

Gaining access to the heavy industries which used to be the core of the economy was a major triumph for the black male worker. The occupational improvement that black men have achieved in recent years has largely consisted of movement up the job ladders in these same industries, where the color-line was previously broken. But if the black worker is to advance further toward economic equality, more color barriers must be crossed. Black workers remain poorly represented in industries such as chemicals, plastics, electrical machinery, and electronics. These are the so-called "high-tech" industries, where many believe the future lies. One major task of the 1980s will be to overcome obstacles to the employment of black workers in such industries, which have better current prospects for future growth.

-- Tom Larson

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