

The writer was C.I.O. organiser for Little Rock, Arkansas, in the early 1940's.

## In black and white

*Jean Jenkins*

THE racial problem differs in extent between the North and South: perhaps more important, the *character* of the problem is also different. In the northern and western states, the problems encountered by Negroes are those of the poorly-paid factory worker. The last to be hired, they are the first to be fired. Like Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Poles, Irish and Slavs, housing and jobs are their greatest problems. These are problems of class, and Negroes in the north and west have joined the organizations of the working class to fight for improvement. Indeed, northern white workers, fearful of the threat to wages and working conditions presented by large numbers of unorganized Negroes, have

insisted that Negroes be admitted to the trade unions.

In the south, however, the barrier of caste so effectively divides the poor whites from the Negroes that almost no joint action can take place. This accounts for the astonishing pockets of hard-core Republicans.

The Georgia cracker, the Mississippi clay-eater, or the Arkansas hill-billy, regards his white skin and untainted ancestry as his most valued possession. For well over a hundred years he has lost out to the Negro economically. Turned out of the rich delta lands by large plantation owners who used slave labour, the poor white was pushed farther and farther back into the piney

woods and mountains where he could eke out a bare subsistence on a small farm. This group, competing for jobs with the more easily-controlled Negroes, was at first desirous of sending all Negroes back to Africa. Later, because they were so anti-Negro, they became anti-slavery. Many of them still vote for "Lincoln's party". They live in "lily-white" towns where no Negro has even been allowed to spend the night; they form a large part of the membership of the Ku Klux Klan. Living in unchinked log cabins on sow-belly and black-eyed peas, plagued by hookworm and pellagra, largely uneducated, the girls marrying at fourteen or fifteen, these are the people of *Tobacco Road*.

The state of Arkansas is one of the more backward of the southern states. In social services, money spent on education, infant mortality rate, disease rate it ranked, in 1940, 47th among the 48 states (Mississippi was 48th). Its population was well mixed. In the northern part of the state is the hill-billy area of the Ozark Mountains, with small hill farms on badly eroded land, backwoods families living below the subsistence level in "lily-white" communities, usually voting Republican. In the east is the rich delta land along the Mississippi River, with large prosperous plantations worked by Negro share croppers. Us one large city, Little Rock, was becoming industrialized by leaps and bounds during the war.

In 1942, Ozark farmers were streaming into Little Rock to work in the munitions factories, and coming into competition for jobs with Negroes. Many employers preferred to hire Negroes,

since they felt that the hill farmers were unreliable. Tension grew, but a shortage of labour in the rapidly expanding town helped to control it. Nonetheless, violent attacks on Negroes occurred week after week.

Little Rock at that time possessed a number of A. F. of L. craft unions, with several Jim Crow locals. The CIO local formed shortly before was in effect a general union; it included cotton oil mills and cotton compresses, sawmills, a sewing machine factory, two shirt factories, and aeroplane parts factory, a concrete pipe factory, a fertilizer plant, a box factory, a machine shop, and several nearby plantations. In all these factories both Negroes and whites were organized and workers of both races helped to "bring the blessings of the union" to other workers in the same trade. Organization proceeded with evangelical zeal and was enormously

successful. The greater the achievements of the union, however, the greater the organized resistance to it. Beatings were common; men were fired, or run out of the county or across the state line; houses were burnt; children were molested—and this in time of total war.

The events at Little Rock shocked the world: those who know how easily the racial problem degenerates into violence, were impressed rather by the degree of restraint shown on both sides. If this first major incident had occurred in Georgia or South Carolina or Mississippi the results would undoubtedly have been far more serious. In the face of Southern intransigence, such incidents may still occur. Little Rock was not an isolated phenomenon, and continued violence is to be expected throughout the South so long as the attempt to break the caste barrier separating Negroes from whites in schools continues.

## In black and white—2

*Norman Birnbaum*

The Little Rock disturbances scandalised the world, completely overshadowing another ugly racial episode which occurred at the same time in the North—an organized attempt to prevent a Negro from moving into a Pennsylvania new town. This episode merits analysis, however, for it reminds us that racial conflict does exist in the North, and that it has its own distinctive pattern even in the so-called liberal and advanced communities in the United States. The difficulty in question has subsided for the moment. The Governor dispatched the State Police to protect the Negro family (there are some few hundred thousand coloured voters in Pennsylvania). The racist whites have confined themselves to mounting a steady campaign of harassment from the house next door, purchased for the purpose. Some residents of the town have gone out of their way to demonstrate solidarity with the Negro newcomers. But the affair is by no means an isolated one: similar incidents have taken place continuously—if intermittently—ever since the northward drift of Southern Negroes, and its like is sure to occur again, possibly on a major scale.

The Pennsylvania township is in many ways typical of the new settlements that have sprung up outside the major American cities during the recent boom. Named Levittown after its builder, its housing designs are entirely standardised and its population only less so. Levittown was planned to accommodate the workers of a large new steel mill on the Delaware River north of Philadelphia. Its residents include many **white-collar** workers and manual workers alike who

travel down to the city every day and who have no connection with the factory. The entire population has this in common: they are economically and socially mobile, anxious to capitalise on prosperity by maximising their material possessions and by improving their position on the American status ladder. It should not be thought that most Americans wish to climb this ladder indefinitely; they are well aware that it ends in mid-air. But the inhabitants of Levittown are clearly intent on leaving something behind them: an old neighbourhood, a less spacious and attractive house, educational facilities of an inferior sort. All these things, of course, were characteristics of existence on the margin of poverty. Levittown's residents are young—but many knew the margin, or slipped beneath it as children. And marginality of this sort, in the urban areas, has always meant the proximity of the Negro ghettos. The Negro was, in fact, almost invariably below the margin—so much so that today the presence of Negroes in an area produces the ineluctable impression of poverty.

Meanwhile, the structure of Negro society has been changing. Most northern Negroes are immigrants from the South, or their children. The economic opportunities available in the North during two world wars, and the grinding indignity of life under the southern caste system, has been emptying the South of its coloured population. (This is the probable solution to the racial problem there.) In the North, the Negroes are disproportionately represented in the unskilled and lowest paying occupations. They have been crowded

into slums of an abominable kind, and the social facilities granted to them have been inferior. (Their death rates are still higher than those of other groups, and New York City today cannot staff schools in coloured areas with enough teachers.) Hampered and hindered in a hundred major and minor ways, they do have formal legal equality—and the vote. Equally important, northern white workers are unable to employ the caste barrier to keep Negroes out. In order to prevent the formation of a reserve army of blacklegs, they have insisted on Negro inclusion in unified trade unions. It has been possible, therefore, for an increasing number of Negroes to climb into the ranks of the skilled workers. Along with a slowly increasing number of Negro clerks, civil servants, teachers, and sub-professionals, the skilled workers have formed a stratum in Negro society intermediate between the depressed unskilled workers and the tiny "black bourgeoisie" mercilessly pilloried in a recent work by Franklin Frazier. The new Negro class, however, is no less anxious than the whites to avoid the poverty and misery of the Negro ghettos. Its members, therefore, are continually seeking housing in places like Levittown.

By and large, these new Negro classes in the urban and industrial centres of the North are being drawn slowly into the circle of consumption and culture which encloses the white majority. The American Negro past is, after all, a distasteful compound of slavery, humiliation and poverty: Negroes who have found work and learned skills in communities where no racial sanctions were

enforceable legally, seek to become the legitimate heirs of the American future. They have before them the inspiration of other ethnic and national minorities who have found their place—in the second and third generations—in the cultural melting-pot. They are not hyper-nationalist, as other minorities have been during the period of active McCarthyism (American Catholics, for example). But they are profoundly American in manner, mores and aspirations. Popular Negro magazines (e.e., *Ebony*) are merely blackface parodies of American culture: but in deeper ways the Negro in the North is beginning to share those high-consumption values which are characteristic of the white skilled and middle classes, the realisation of which has been accelerated considerably by the post-war prosperity.

The paradox is that prosperity itself has sharpened racial tension in the North. Northern whites are tolerant of Negro occupational mobility under present circumstances: it costs them nothing. But mobility has brought some Negroes within striking distance of housing in new white neighbourhoods, or in older areas once exclusively white. Since the Courts have ruled restrictive covenants in housing legally unenforceable, once Negroes have a foot inside, they cannot be squeezed out again. In fact economically mobile Negroes are now entering into *social* competition, at a new pace set by American expansion itself:

and they are often in competition with white groups which are themselves unsure of their social and economic status. The white groups are prey to the usual American anxieties (that the boom will burst, that the Russians will take Dulles seriously and blunder into war), and because they have themselves only recently crossed the frontier of poverty, they are not cushioned against their fears and insecurities. The Negroes are therefore trying to scramble on to the first rung of the American ladder of success before it has been quite vacated. The white groups retain memories of the slums, and they see the Negroes close at their heels as the image of their despised past. Prosperity, which ought to have broken down social antagonisms, can itself create or sustain tensions when it is kept up at an extremely high pressure, and when it is accompanied by fears and insecurities of a severe character.

American culture has assimilated the Scandinavians and the Germans, but it only tolerates the Italians and Slavs: it may be that the society is now mobile at a rate which is too fast for it to assimilate Mexicans, Puerto Ricans—and Negroes. This is so particularly when the groups are large in number and do not suffer language difficulties (e.g., the Puerto Ricans), for then the rate of "intrusion" is high, and the line of assimilation easily degenerates into a line of violence. This is true of the advancing Negro in the North, for not only is there

a residue of racial feeling in the North, but there are often hostile groups of white Southerners (as there were in the Detroit race riots) prepared to exacerbate racial tension.

The problem in the North appears to be a special facet of a general problem: the problem, of social minorities in a highly shifting, highly competitive society. This is a society in which the shifts of status generate deep tensions of their own which may easily be tinged with racialism and take quite different forms. The problem of the South, on the other hand, is a problem of the now historically enshrined barriers of caste between racial groups, and the concerted efforts of the Negro community, as a community, to break them for ever. The form is different, but fundamentally there is a deep underlying similarity: tension in each case stems from the desire of the American Negro to be integrated fully *into* American life and culture: they claim only the best of what they see, and they form their aspirations in the mould of American life. They are a loyal minority, and as such they represent a challenge of the deepest kind—a challenge from within. The solution itself is a solution which lies within the society, the solution of integration and assimilation. The barrier to this are the entrenched hostilities bred by class or caste—hostilities which line the pathway to integration with violence and hatred.