

# THE POSITION OF NEGRO WOMEN



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# Negro Women Workers in the U. S. A.

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**I**N a society based on production for profit, to be both a woman worker and a Negro is to suffer a double handicap.

The Negro woman worker is doubly victimized. She suffers both from the general discriminations against women workers and from her identity as a member of a nationality singled out by the ruling class for special plundering, persecution and oppression.

As a woman worker she feels the general inequalities—lower wages, longer hours, bad working conditions, etc., imposed upon women in a society based on private ownership of public wealth and resources, private control of the social means of production.

As a Negro, she is paid even less than her exploited white sister, made to work under even harder conditions, longer hours, etc., and is systematically excluded from all but the heaviest and dirtiest jobs. She is barred from promotion, as a rule. On her lower wages, she must meet the discriminative higher rentals extracted from Negro workers by piratical landlords, both Negro and white, in the segregated ghettos into which she and her family are forced to live by Jim-Crow laws or practices. Thus the dirty deal that falls to all working women in capitalist society falls heaviest upon the Negro woman worker.

For 300 years, under both chattel slavery and wage slavery, Negro women had worked on the plantations as laborers and in upper class households as domestics and personal servants. They were almost solely limited to these occupations up to 1910. From that year, however, the reports of the U.S. Department of Labor show that Negro women have been following the general shift from the farm into the industrial centers.

The entry of Negro women into industry was facilitated by the World War. In the early days of that bloody conflict when

American participation was limited to furnishing loans and war material to the Allies, the expansion of the war industries and allied industries created a demand for extra labor. Immigration being at a low ebb because of the war, the northern industrialists turned to the Southern plantations for Negro labor. Recruiting agents scoured the South, offering the Negro share-croppers and peons "work and freedom" in the North. The economic base was thus afforded for a mighty mass migration of Negroes from the South. Hundreds of thousands came North, seeking political freedom, decent wages and working and living conditions, and educational facilities for their children; eager to escape the terror-ridden South with its new slavery of peonage and share-cropping.

In 1917, when the rulers of the United States demanded the conversion of white and Negro workers into cannon fodder to protect the loans of the House of Morgan to the Allies, women were used to replace men, either wholly or partly, in many industries. White women so employed were paid less than the men had been getting, while Negro women received still lower wages. In addition, the Negro women were assigned to the heaviest and most hazardous jobs in the war industries, and to the more menial and grueling work in other lines, such as textiles and clothing factories, food industry, wood-product manufacture, etc.

"The census of 1920, taken immediately after the war period, showed that Negro women in the manufacturing and mechanical industries had increased by over one-half," a Labor Department bulletin reports.

Negro women, tormented by the memory of the drudgery and humiliations of farm and domestic service, happily imagined themselves firmly planted in the industries, with their relatively better conditions. Then came the end of the World War, the collapse of war-time "prosperity" which, because of the correspondingly high cost of living, was confined mainly to the munition barons and other war profiteers and 100 per cent "patriots". The crisis of 1921 led to wholesale firing of workers, with the women, and particularly the Negro women workers, the first to be discharged.

Hand in hand with the mass firing went the slashing of wages for those still employed, and the replacement of women workers with the demobilized men at greater speed-up and a resultant increase of profits for the employers.

Only in the laundry industry, notorious for its high speed-up, low pay, and terrible working conditions, and in certain departments of textiles, etc., with similarly bad reputations, were the Negro women able to hold their own. In these low-pay, unskilled industries, the employers can employ workers new to industry and therefore lacking in the traditions of organized labor. The Negro women fitted this bill. In addition to their inexperience in labor organizations, the bosses find it possible to isolate them from the white workers in the plants by the chauvinist poison of race hatred and prejudice which is carefully instilled into the minds of the white workers by the capitalist press, schools and other institutions, both governmental and private.

### Fought for Better Conditions

But the Negro women workers were not slow to protest against conditions. In some instances they even forced a betterment of the conditions in the industries. The history of labor struggles in the last two decades affords abundant proof that Negro women and men workers are among the best fighters for the interests of the working class and against capitalist oppression. Negro women participated in many strike struggles, and in several instances (Chicago and St. Louis nut-pickers' strikes) carried out militant strikes in factories where mostly Negro women were employed.

"In clothing, and food manufacture, there had been a great increase of Negro women by 1930," a bulletin issued by the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor reports, "very much larger—particularly in clothing—than the proportional additions to the American-born white women employed in these industries."

In food manufacture in 1930, the latest date for which we have Department of Labor figures, there was one Negro woman to every eight American-born white women. In the same year, nearly every fourth woman working in cigar factories was a Negro. Meantime "there had been a decline for Negro and some gain for white women" in textiles.

The highest weekly wages of Negro women in any branch of textiles in the fifteen states studied was \$8.95 in bag making, while as low as \$4.25 was paid those workers handling wastes. The N.R.A. codes, with their legalization of wage differentials for Southern white workers, and a still lower wage differential for Southern Negro workers, have made very little difference to the Negro women workers in textiles.

### N.R.A. "Blessings"

The N.R.A. codes, which have been used to cut wages under the pretext of establishing a minimum wage (which in many industries has become the maximum wage), operated particularly sharply against the Negro working woman. In many cases employers paying even below the N.R.A. minimum have fired their Negro employees rather than increase their wages. In most instances, however, the employers have found the N.R.A. authorities willing to co-operate in continuing wage discriminations against Negroes.

The Southland Manufacturing Company, for instance, a cotton shirt making concern of Alabama, employs mostly Negro women (95 per cent). The N.R.A. code for cotton-making industries calls for a weekly wage of \$12 in the South. The company appealed for, and obtained, exemption on the pretext that its Negro women workers were "incompetent", and "deserved" only \$9 a week at the most. This wealthy company, a subsidiary of the Reliance Manufacturing Company, was staunchly supported in its wage discrimination and slander of Negro women workers by Dr. Robert Russa Moton, principal of Tuskegee, and Dr. G. Lake Imes, secretary of the institution.

The N.R.A. ruling in this case is typical of the wage differentials permitted under the N.R.A. against Negro workers, and Southern workers generally. For instance, the cotton code allows a \$12 a week wage in the South, as against a \$14 wage in the North. As shown above, the \$12 Southern wage is further cut in the case of Negro workers.

The number of dressmakers and seamstresses not in factories declined among both white and Negro women between 1920 and 1930, owing to increased demand for cheaper factory-made clothes. So although there were nearly 27,000 Negro women in this field in 1920, by 1930 the number had dropped to slightly more than 20,000.

Today, there are more than 18,000 Negro women employed at some form of tobacco manufacture. Their work is generally confined to "the more menial, the lower paid, the heavier and more hazardous" jobs.

### Largest Group in Domestic Service

The largest group of Negro women workers are still to be found in domestic and personal service. In 1930, there were considerably more than 600,000 of the nearly 2,000,000 Negro women workers reported for that year, in domestic and personal service. Of these, the domestic servants—cooks, chambermaids, household maids, etc.—and the day workers are probably the worst exploited. Wages of these workers are as low as ten dollars a month. Wages paid day workers—women hired by the day to clean and do the washing, etc.—are as low as fifty cents a day in New York City, and probably lower in most other communities. As a rule they are given only one meal by their employers and must provide their breakfast before reporting for work, and their supper, after their day's work. All out of 50 cents, from which they must also pay rent, buy clothes, etc. In addition, many report robbery of their pitifully small wages by racketeering employers. Their employment is highly irregular.

In 1930, Negro women workers had also made some slight

gains in industrial employment, before the crisis which began in 1929 had resulted in a general breakdown of capitalist production, with unparalleled mass unemployment and suffering for millions of working class families and small tradespeople.

The figures of the Women's Bureau show that slightly more than 50,000 were in steam laundries and cleaning and dyeing establishments in 1930. During the same year, about 18,000 Negro women were working as housekeepers and stewards, with perhaps a like number as waitresses. Nearly 16,000 worked as untrained nurses and midwives, while considerably over 12,000 served as hairdressers, manicurists and barbers. Charwomen and cleaners numbered more than 11,000; elevator operators slightly exceeded 4,000.

### Figures Conceal Terrific Exploitation

Dry as these bare figures are, and concealing the terrific exploitation and unhealthy working conditions to which Negro women workers are subjected in the steam laundry and other industries, they are significant and important. They show that Negro working women, battling against tremendous odds, have made inroads into fields from which they were formerly barred. The conditions imposed upon women workers, and in particular upon the Negro working women, are barely hinted at in a bulletin, "Women At Work", issued by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor:

"While women workers in general have been restricted by lack of opportunities for employment, by long hours, low wages, and harmful working conditions, there are groups—the latest comers into industry—upon whom these hardships have fallen with doubled severity. As members of a new and inexperienced race arrive at the doors of industry the jobs that open up to them ordinarily are those vacated by an earlier stratum of workers who move on to more highly paid occupations. Negro women constitute such a new and inexperienced group among women workers."

This picture of progressive advancement, of older workers moving on to higher paid occupations, is deliberately false. It is a hypocritical justification by a governmental agency for job and wage discrimination against Negroes generally, and Negro women in particular. To expose its falsity we have only to remember that the same policy of studied discrimination operates against the employment of Negroes as clerks in the big stores, as conductors on street cars and subway and railroad systems, and in other unskilled categories. The Southern white ruling class frankly explains this policy as aimed to keep Negroes "in their place", that is, at the bottom of capitalist society.

Confining Negro workers to "the more menial, the lower paid, heavier and more hazardous jobs", not only enables the bosses to subject them to greater exploitation, but to use them to depress the wages of all workers. All the tricks at the disposal of the white ruling class are used to force the Negro into a lower position, to create antagonism and hatred between Negro workers and white workers, and thus to hamper united effort for better conditions.

### Unity of White and Negro Workers Essential

Only where discrimination against Negroes is vigorously combated and the unity of all workers forged in joint struggles can the working class better its conditions. It is up to the white women workers, themselves the victims of wage and other discriminations, to realize the necessity to struggle for, and with the Negro women workers, for equal rights, equal pay for equal work, and an end to intolerable working conditions. The white working women, in their own interests, must stand at the head of the struggle for improved conditions for the Negro working women. The same is true of the white men workers whose own interests demand that they conduct the sharpest fight against all practices of sex and racial discrimination. They, too, must demand equal pay for equal work and the right to all categories of jobs for women, white and Negro, and the youth, which also



suffers special discrimination at the hands of the exploiters of labor.

Simply to recount the abstract figures of gains and losses for the Negro working women in various industries does not tell enough. How about the kind of work they do? "Food Manufacture" sounds impressive. What kind of work do Negro women do under this head? We quote from "Negro Women in Industry in 15 States", U. S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Bulletin No. 70:

"This industry, in which many of the occupations are disagreeable in the extreme, forms a good example of the placing of newcomers in the most undesirable of its tasks, since in many cases it was in the most unpleasant of these that Negro women, a group recently come into the industry, were engaged. For 60 per cent of all the women included, occupations were reported. About one-third worked with casings and chitterlings. The latter are the intestines of hogs; the former, coverings for sausage, prepared from intestines and other internal membranes of cattle, sheep, and hogs. The earlier processes of removing the contents, turning wrong side out, scraping, brushing, and trimming, are often *done in rooms with cement or brick floors that sometimes are covered with so much standing or running water that the workers find it necessary to wear rubber boots.* [Our emphasis—E.G. and C.B.]

"While work in these departments is usually performed by men, some Negro women were found in casing and offal departments and on the killing floor. They turned, cleaned, scraped, and washed casings; washed fat; pulled fat from casings; and trimmed fat. A few singed off hair, and additional occupations in this department were cleaning racks, splitting weasands, braining heads, taking out hogs' eyes, ripping guts, measuring bladders, shaving ears, plucking lungs, and skinning sheep tongues. Casings are again handled in the sausage department, where it is more usual to find Negro women than in the earlier processes. In the making of wet (fresh) sausage they were washing casings, pulling fat from chitterlings, tying and linking sausage, and one was a scaler (weigher). In the

preparing of dry sausage they were turning, brushing, scraping, salting, trimming, cutting, matching, and sewing casings."

### Oppression of Negroes Due to Capitalism

"Food Manufactures" thus affords an example of the kind of jobs to which Negro women are relegated, *as a matter of capitalist policy*, where they find it possible to find employment. Wages paid these women "compare favorably", we are told, with those of white women. "Compare favorably" and "are identical" have different meanings, just as "democracy" and "self-determination" have different meanings when uttered by representatives of different classes of capitalist society. Under capitalist democracy, which is in reality the dictatorship of an exploiting minority against the vast toiling majority of the population, Negro workers and working women are expected to get along on less pay. A favorite argument of the bosses is that the Negroes' standard of living is "lower" than that of the white workers.

To force Negro workers to exist on a lower standard of living and then use their impoverished conditions to justify lower wages and job-discrimination is typical of capitalism, which is based on the exploitation of the majority by a minority of capitalists and rich landlords, plus the special plundering and violent suppression of the Negro people as an oppressed nationality. The exact opposite obtains in the Soviet Union, where the victorious October Revolution which overthrew capitalism swept out at the same time all the garbage of race hatred, national oppression and sex discrimination by which capitalism maintains its murderous rule. Today, under the guidance of the Communist Party and its leader, Joseph Stalin, the women workers of the nationalities formerly oppressed under Tsarism are equal partners with all sections of the Russian toilers in the triumphant construction of Socialist industry and agriculture. The October Revolution ended the age-long oppression of women throughout the length and breadth of Russia. This is no accident. We find the same

process in the Soviet districts of China, and wherever the Soviet flag has been raised by the revolutionary working class. Only through the Soviet Revolution can the oppressed working women, white and Negro, of the capitalist countries, achieve emancipation.

Earlier in this pamphlet we referred to the mass migrations of Negroes from the South in search of decent economic and living conditions and political freedom. Even a brief and incomplete survey such as this, of the conditions of the Negro working woman, affords dramatic proof that the half-slave conditions in the Southern Black Belt continue to set the pattern for the economic and social oppression of the Negroes in the North as well. The stifling lynch atmosphere of the South hangs like a cloud over the whole country. It is thus clear that the struggle for better conditions in the North must be directed against Negro oppression in the Black Belt, as well, for governmental and administrative control and authority over the Black Belt territory by the Negro majority in that territory, with full rights for the toiling white minority.

### **Discrimination Against Negro White-Collar Workers**

So far we have considered only the conditions of Negro women in industry and domestic service. What of the Negro woman professionals and white collar workers? Is their lot any better?

It is especially in the "respectable" professional and white collar jobs that the ruling class draws a sharp line between what it marks off as "Negro jobs" and "white jobs". Most of the big department and chain stores, mercantile establishments, etc., refuse to employ Negroes in any capacity other than porters and charwomen. Like Negro jurors in Southern states and many northern centers, Negro stenographers, typists, file clerks, business executives, etc., are "curiosities" not to be encouraged.

Regardless of her training and capabilities, the Negro professional woman worker finds it almost impossible to secure a job. The employers themselves put up the barriers, usually re-

sorting to the alibi either that "the customers won't stand for it", or that the white workers won't. The fallacy of both arguments has been proven by experience where Negro professionals have been given employment. In many cases, white workers have been won to supporting the demands raised by the Communist Party, Young Communist League, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights and other organizations, for employment of Negroes as clerks, store managers, etc., without any firing of workers already employed.

### Color Line Among Teachers

School teachers comprise the largest professional group among Negroes, and here women predominate. Confined almost wholly to segregated sections of big cities, or to rural Southern schools, Negro teachers are forced into a position of economic and social inferiority to white teachers. In the North, the pay of white and Negro teachers is usually identical, but in the South a teacher is paid according to her color. If she is black she gets much less. For example, in Louisiana Negro elementary school teachers receive an average of \$292 a year, as against \$1,107 for white elementary school teachers. Negro high school teachers receive \$661, while white high school teachers are paid \$1,419. In Arkansas, Negro teachers in the elementary schools are paid \$434, white teachers \$634; Negro high school teachers \$696, white high school teachers, \$1,236. Behind these figures is a deliberate attempt to limit the education of Negro children, with shorter school terms, etc. In Alabama and other Southern states, most of the Negro schools have been shut down during the past two years on the pretext of shortage of funds.

The crisis, which has dealt hammer blows to the smaller businesses, in particular, has had a tremendous adverse effect on the development of enterprises owned by Negroes. But even at its best, Negro business has been able to afford jobs for only a relatively small number in any Negro community, and usually at wages even lower than those paid Negroes by white enterprises.

Few Negro stores employ more than one clerk in addition to the proprietor, while in many cases the proprietor and his family do all the work in the store. Negro newspapers, theatres, real estate offices, etc., have provided jobs for a number of Negro professionals, but nothing in proportion to the number turned out by business schools and colleges each year.

Among the Negro physicians, lawyers, dentists, etc., the picture is somewhat different, but still discouraging on the admission of reformist leaders themselves. However, because of the enforced segregation of the Negro masses and discrimination at the hands of white physicians, and others, the Negro physicians, lawyers and dentists usually get the business in their communities. The impoverished conditions of the Negro masses are, however, reflected in the small earnings of the Negro doctors, lawyers and others. Negro women in these professions are relatively few.

It is evident that Negro business does not come within a thousand miles of providing jobs, not to mention decent wages and working conditions, for any significant proportion of the toiling Negro population. Nor is it true, as some reformist leaders maintain, that Negro unemployment can be solved simply by forcing white stores in Negro neighborhoods to employ Negroes. The fight for jobs for Negroes, and against all discriminatory practices, must be broadened out to include the big factories, department stores, etc., which are outside of the Negro ghettos. This fight, to be successful, must be based on a united front struggle of all workers, white and Negro, such as is envisaged and promoted by the Communist Party, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, and other militant organizations. It must raise at the same time the demand for unemployment and social insurance, without discrimination. It must support the mass fight to force the U.S. Congress to pass the Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill, H.R. 2827. This bill is the only one which provides for decent relief, and guards against discrimination against Negro and foreign-born workers.

## Effects of Unemployment

Negro women workers, the most exploited in industry, are also the worst sufferers from unemployment. The situation of the jobless Negro woman worker is described by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor as "extremely serious and upsetting to the economic welfare of the country". Official Labor Department statistics for the whole country for the past five years are lacking, but the special unemployment census taken in 21 selected urban areas in January, 1931, prove that the Negro working woman gets the dirtiest deal at *all* times. It must be remembered, too, that these figures represent 1931, and that conditions for all workers, Negro and white, men and women, have worsened considerably since then. We quote from the Women's Bureau bulletin "The Employment and Unemployment of Negro Women":

"Of the 18 cities and three boroughs of New York City each of eight cities and two boroughs gave normal employment to 10,000 Negro women or more. In these areas taken together 42 per cent of the Negro women workers were out of work as compared with 18 per cent of the American-born white woman and 13 (12.8) per cent of the foreign-born white woman. The proportion of Negro women unemployed ranges from 29 per cent in Brooklyn and Manhattan Boroughs of New York City to 75 per cent in Detroit. Over 40 per cent of the Negro women normally employed were jobless in Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, Houston and Philadelphia. Of the nine cities, Philadelphia, with 22 per cent of the American-born white women workers unemployed, had the worst record for this class. In every case very much smaller proportions of whites, both American and foreign-born, than of Negro women were jobless."

The opposition of the employers and their governmental agencies, and of the A. F. of L. bureaucrats, to real unemployment and social insurance operates especially severely against the unemployed Negro woman worker. Inadequate relief, humiliating

treatment, and often callous denial of any relief whatever, is even more often her lot than of the jobless white woman. As a rule, she is given smaller food and rent checks where she has been placed on the relief rolls. And she is the first to be dropped in the periodical attempts of the relief agencies to curtail relief to the barest minimum with which they can get away.

Even more than unemployed white families, Negro unemployed families have been forced to double up in homes, with resultant overcrowding and menace to health. This has led to a sinister increase in Negro infant mortality, disease and death rates.

### What Is to Be Done?

Even the meager relief grudgingly given to the unemployed was won only after the sharpest struggles. Unemployed and employed, Negro and white, welded together under the leadership of the Communist Party, forced this concession from the bosses and their government. Similar joint struggles in various parts of the country have wrested additional concessions from the relief agencies from time to time. These joint struggles of Negro and white workers against unemployment and hunger, and the unity of the working class which is being forged in these united actions, were given great impetus by the world-wide fight organized and led by the Communist Party and the International Labor Defense against the Scottsboro lynch verdicts and for the lives and freedom of the nine innocent, framed-up Scottsboro lads.

White and Negro workers, uniting in struggle against Negro oppression, have forced a halt to discrimination in relief in many instances, have blocked evictions of unemployed Negro families (Chicago, Cleveland, New York, etc.); have forced the hiring of Negro workers in a number of instances (Empire Cafeteria, New York, etc.).

These struggles must be intensified and broadened. Larger masses of white workers must be drawn into the fight against Negro oppression, against racial and sex discriminations, for full economic,

political, and social equality for the Negro people, and for the right of self-determination for the Black Belt. The Communist Party's position that the white workers can be won for this struggle has been confirmed in countless joint actions of white and Negro workers during the past six years. It received dramatic confirmation in the world-wide mobilization of millions of white workers in defense of the Scottsboro boys and the oppressed Negro people. Under the guidance of the Communist Party, increasing sections of the white toilers are beginning to realize that their own emancipation is inextricably linked up with the liberation of the Negro people. Neither the Negro masses nor the white workers can achieve real freedom unless they achieve an unbreakable unity in the fight against their immediate and common enemy—the white capitalists.

The Soviet Union offers the shining example of the correctness of the Communist program of unity of white and Negro workers, and of all sections of the toiling population. In the Soviet Union, women have been emancipated. Nationalities and races who, under the old Tsarist regime, suffered oppression equal to that of the Negroes of the United States, are now, under the new Soviet government of the workers and farmers, enjoying complete freedom, equality and the right of self-determination. There the workers and farmers of the varied nationalities have united in fraternal and harmonious union in the work of building up a Socialist society. They have abolished race hatred and national oppression as well as unemployment and mass misery. The economic and cultural standards of the whole toiling population are being constantly raised as a result of fresh victories in the triumphant building of Socialist industry and agriculture.

The victorious workers and peasants of the Soviet Union point the revolutionary way out of the morass of capitalist race hatred and national oppression, chronic mass unemployment and suffering, fascist reaction and imperialist war.