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The Hosts of Black Labor

Condensed from *The Nation* (May 9, '23)

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A MERICAN industry is slowly beginning to awake to the fact that there is in this country a great reservoir of labor which has been only partially tapped. The South has nine million black folk of whom five million are productive workers. Lynching, lawlessness, wretched wages and debt-peonage, lack of schools, and disfranchisement have slowly but surely made them ripe for change.

With the beginning of the World War there occurred the greatest revolution in migration which the Negro has known for a century; by census figures, the net gain of the North and West and loss of the South between 1910 and 1920 was 334,526 black folk. Just as the cutting down of immigration during the war made a scarcity of common labor, so the new immigration laws together with expanding business are having the same effect at present. The result of this immigration may be conjectured. The Memphis "Commercial Appeal" of December 24 declared that within 90 days more than 12,000 Negroes had left the cotton fields of Mississippi and Arkansas for the industrial plants of Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit. It stated that on an average 200 Negroes leave every night from Memphis northward. From Georgia we learn that some "13 per cent or 32,000 of the total Negro farmhands in

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Georgia have moved North during the last 12 months." South Carolina and Florida offer figures almost as startling, while the migration during one recent week of more than 5,000 unskilled Negro laborers from North Carolina has resulted in the shutting down of some 50 highway construction projects. In Arkansas, "there is a certain alarm in all circles over the large outflow of Negroes to Northern points."

W. P. Conyers, a white citizen of South Carolina and former member of the State Board of Pardons, said in a recent speech: "We have educated many Negroes, and it is from this class of educated, intelligent, industrious, thinking Negroes that the emigrants are coming. It is from the very class of Negro that the South can least afford to lose. But the thinking Negro, the Negro with some education, some ambition, a desire to better care for his family and educate his children, is going North in large numbers. And he doesn't come back."

There is no sign that even this continued migration of its labor force is really impressing the South. There is no real diminution of Southern lynchings; there is no disposition to let the Negro vote; there is some improvement in schools, although this is seldom in country districts; and above all there is the sinister growth of the Ku Klux Klan. And there is still the slave-holding psychology. The Commissioner of Labor in Georgia openly declares that his department is going to stop the "enticing" of Negroes away by arresting "labor agent parasites" and "heavily fining" them; and by other methods of law and force. Can he keep Negroes in the South by these methods? Last December the Memphis "Commercial Appeal" reported the case of a Negro who said he had worked 10 years on one plantation, and this year in settling up he had only \$50 coming to him.

The Negro is increasingly determined not to submit to Southern caste rule. But this does not minimize his difficulties in the North. First he must find a job, and between him and the better jobs stand the labor unions. Undoubtedly in the North the attitude of the labor union has reflected the attitude of the white public. There has been a determined effort to keep the black laborers out of the skilled unions, and while the unions have had to give in here and there, there has been little real change in this policy of exclusion. No Negro can belong to any of the railroad unions.

But with common labor scarce and semi-skilled labor unorganized the

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Negro can gain a foothold, although often this involves "scabbing" and increasing hatred and prejudice. He accepts low wages and long hours because even these are better than Southern peonage.

In addition to this the new Negro laborer is immediately forced upon the established Northern Negro group, whose security depends largely upon the non-agitation of the race problem. If racial differences are not emphasized by newspapers or by new facts the Northern Negro becomes gradually a citizen judged by his individual deserts and abilities. If, however, there comes a sudden new migration, the level of intelligence and efficiency in these newcomers is almost inevitably below that of the Negro already established in the North. Public opinion lumps the new with the old without discrimination. New racial irritation, hatreds, and segregations arise. The problem of new dwelling-places becomes severe and it is a double problem, for not only must the new black men have homes, but the white home owners must protect the beauty, moral level, and value of their homes. The Northern Negro, therefore, faces a peculiar dilemma. He knows that his Southern brother will and must migrate just as he himself migrated either in this generation or the last. He feels more or less acutely his own duty to help the newcomer. But on the other hand, the black Northerner knows what this migration costs. In the years from 1900 to 1922 there has been an average of a race riot in the United States every year, half of them in the South and half in the North. In these same years, 1,563 Negroes have been lynched; since the war 34 Negroes have been burned alive at the stake. In other words the race war is not simply a future possibility—it is here.

From this turmoil and interaction of interests and human passions has come one very great result and that is the pushing of the American Negro by sheer necessity to a higher point of courage, intelligence, and determination, of economic stability and clear thinking than ever before in his history or in the modern history of any Negro group. The Negro is not going to be satisfied with a permanent position of caste inferiority.

Here then is the critical time. What shall the public say? It cost Chicago 38 deaths, 537 injured, and millions of dollars in money to make an unsuccessful and bitterly regret-

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ted attempt at a wrong method of race adjustment.

The public in the end must say: There is but one way out. The South must reform its attitude toward the Negro. The North must reform its attitude toward common labor. The unions must give up monopoly as a method of social uplift. The Negro must develop democracy within as well as without the race.

