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Negroes a Source of Industrial Labor

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For southern migrants, one of the prime attractions of the wartime North was the availability of jobs that had previously been closed to African Americans. Many northern employers hired blacks during World War I not because they wanted to but because they desperately needed labor. Employers, like many other white Americans, often maintained that blacks were culturally and biologically inferior to whites. In the pages of the white business journal Industrial Management, *Dwight Thompson Farnham argued that managers required distinctive strategies for the "handling" of black labor that took into account African Americans' ostensible laziness, ignorance, and childishness. Migrants most likely never read the reflections of northern employers like these. But if they had, they would have encountered familiar and disquieting racial stereotypes and managerial practices virtually guaranteeing that they would be treated as second-class workers.*

The United States Has a Negro Population of 10,000,000 to Help Meet Our Labor Shortage

American industry has given generously of her second million of workers. Every day further calls are made as the training camps are emptied into our transports. . . .

Last year some of our more progressive corporations awoke to the fact that there was a vast reservoir of labor—amounting to over 10,000,000 souls—nearly 11 per cent of the country's population—as

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yet practically untapped for manufacturing purposes. With true American initiative these corporations sent agents into the South. Negro settlements were placarded with notices setting forth the high wages and the ideal living conditions prevailing in the North. Trainloads of negro mammies, pickaninnies and all that miscellaneous and pathetic paraphernalia of mysterious bundles and protesting household pets which accompanies our colored citizen on his pilgrimages moved into St. Louis, Kansas City and Chicago, and from there were distributed to the industrial centers of the country.

The South awoke and chased the corporation agents out of town. Southern newspapers began to tell the negro how well off he was at home and who his best friends were. The North began to discuss segregation ordinances. Some communities took the law into their own hands with results which will be a shame and a disgrace upon their names so long as they exist. Corporations shipped carloads of negro workmen into mining and manufacturing villages, tried them out and shipped them out as utterly useless. Last Fall every train south was filled with darkies whose motto, as one expressed it to me, was, "Back to Alabam' or bust." What was the remedy? . . .

The really serious problem which confronts the would-be user of negro labor is that of handling his negroes in such a way as to avoid disastrous loss of operating efficiency. In the South you will hear two contradictory descriptions, "lazy as a nigger" and "slave like a nigger." Both are right and may apply to the same man. The difference is all in the management. I have had foremen who had been accustomed to the supervision of Americans, Slavs and Italians for years come to me in despair—"I can't do anything with the brutes; if I'm good to 'em they shoot craps and sleep, and if I cuss 'em out they shrug their shoulders and say, 'If you doan' like de way a' wukhs, boss, you can jes' give me mah time!'" The mistake most foremen make is that they use the same method with the negro that they use with white labor. . . .

We accuse the negro of laziness. His ancestors picked their food from a bush, fished it out of a stream, or speared it in the next block. Why should he inherit a feverish desire to work? We accuse him of leading a hand to mouth existence. Why should he be obsessed with a desire to emulate the squirrel, when any fruit his ancestors stores would have spoiled and any alligator hams cured would have been carried off by the driver ants? Why should he build him a house for tornadoes and floods to destroy or raise cattle for the tsetse fly to put to sleep? Besides, he didn't feel like it, being wearied by heat and parching

winds—and he probably had malaria with like enough a touch of sleeping sickness. Under such conditions you could hardly expect him to be fussy about his clothes or to do much reading evenings. In fact, it is not surprising that he was a bit uncultured at times, given to dining on his enemies and indulging in super-Wagnerian music and voodooism.

The Negro Is Different

Once the plant executives, the foremen who come in contact with the workmen, realize that the negro is different physically, temperamentally and psychologically from any of the white races, the battle is half won. At first the tendency is to regard him either with intense hatred or else as a joke—a remnant of some minstrel show, organized especially to furnish innocent merriment. The man who hates the negro very seldom ever gets on with him. The darky is as quick to feel dislike as a child and resents it accordingly. The man who regards his antics at first with amused toleration is much more likely to eventually control him, although there will be a great many periods of discouragement when the amateur overseer will feel very much as did A. B. Frost's dominie who rescued the bull calf and undertook to lead him to safety with the halter tied about his waist. Sympathy and understanding are necessary but sentimentality is fatal, as experience demonstrates.

Misunderstandings Are Easy

The negro's responsiveness very often leads to serious misunderstandings. He will generally listen respectfully and appreciatively to what you say and seem to understand exactly, when, as a matter of fact, he has not the faintest idea what you are driving at. If you have been used to driving your meaning home to some foreign-born citizen with exhausting gestures and extravagant facial gyrations your first feeling is one of relief at having an honest-to-goodness American to deal with. But when your colored auditor goes and does exactly what you told him not to do, or quits on pay day after accusing you of gross misrepresentation and unfairness, you begin to long for your erstwhile audience of Southern Europeans who had to have the word hammered into them with a club but who understood it once the operation was completed. The remedy is, of course, extreme care and conscientiousness in explaining to the negro exactly what you want him to do and also exactly what you do not want him to do. Then make him tell

you in his own words what you said to him and stay and see that he does it that way. . . .

Firmness Needed with the Negro

As in dealing with the child, firmness is absolutely necessary. If you tell a negro to do anything, see that he does it—or that he departs elsewhere immediately. But be sure he understands you before you lose your temper at what seems to be sulkiness or disobedience. When I was in the third grade at school a youngster I knew was punished repeatedly for disobedience and for impudence. It later developed that he was nearly deaf. It is necessary to remember in handling the negro that his responsiveness when addressed and his apparent willingness to please may be assumed to cover a slow understanding which it is not fair to blame him for. He is not above trying you out, however, just as the class of youngsters tries out a new teacher, nor is he any more scrupulous of taking advantage of you, if you prove to be "easy," than is the average young devil who attends our schools. . . .

Someone Must Think for the Negro

From an economic standpoint the man who can think for the greatest number of other men is the most valuable. He grades all the way down from a Lincoln or a Wilson, capable of thinking for a nation, to the working leader of a two man crew. The less thinking a man can do for himself the larger proportion of what he earns has to go to someone else for supervision. The rank and file of negroes require more supervision than the rank and file of whites. By this I do not mean more "driving" nor more "watching," I mean constructive supervision in the sense of thinking for and looking ahead for. We must provide the negro with the foresight of which his ancestor's environment has largely deprived him. . . .

Some Segregation Necessary

A certain amount of segregation is necessary at times to preserve the peace. This is especially true when negroes are first introduced into a plant. It is a question if it is not always best to have separate wash rooms and the like. In places where different races necessarily come into close contact and in places where inherited characteristics

are especially accentuated, it is better to keep their respective folkways from clashing wherever possible. Separate work rooms or even division into crews on strict racial lines are not at all necessary, if both races are given to understand that each will be fairly treated, but that swift justice will be meted out to the man who starts something. . . .