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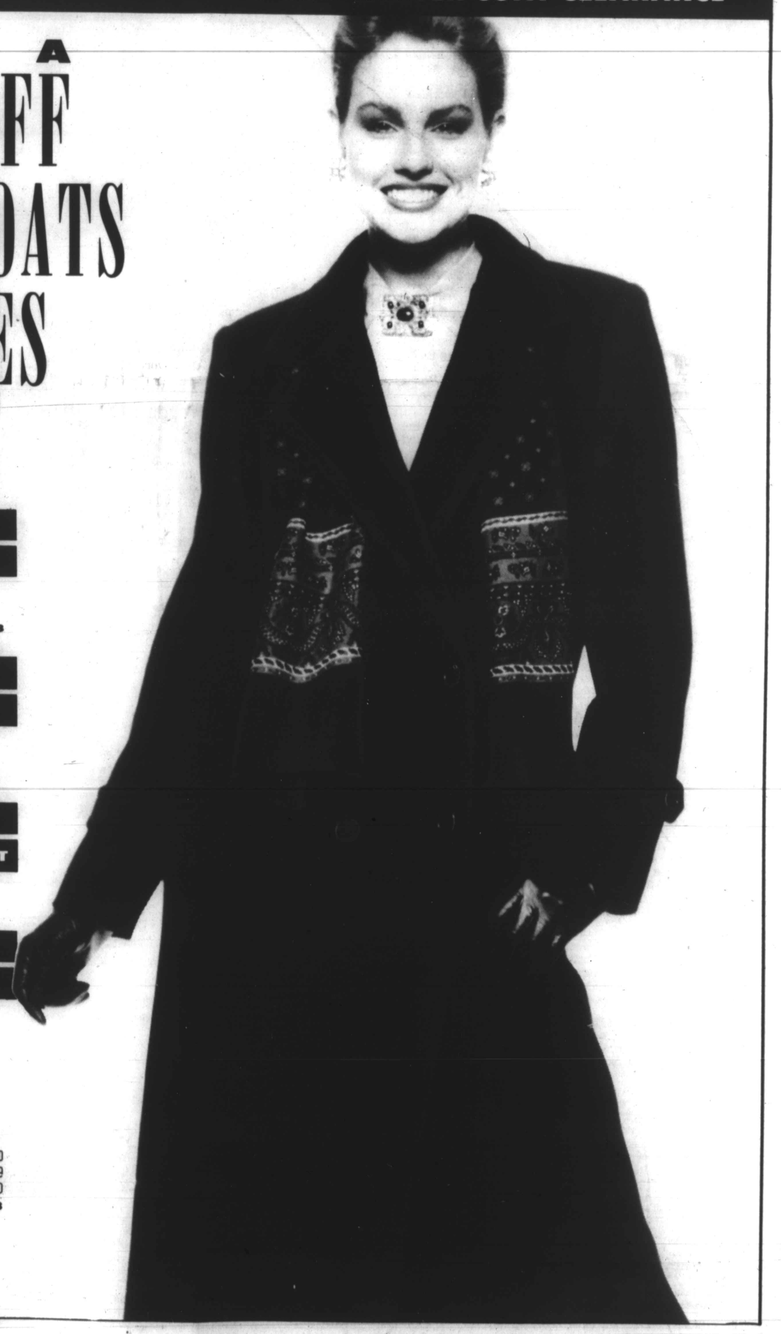

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The Afro-American Section B

BLACK HISTORY

■ Black History B2-B6
Saturday, February 18, 1989

The Black Worker and the Labor Unions

By Libby Clark
Amalgamated Publishers, Inc.
Labor's Black Giants,
Past and Present

"Collective bargaining has undoubtedly raised modern labor from something like chattel slavery to the threshold of industrial freedom and in this advance, labor, white and Black have shared."
W.E.B. DuBois, Crisis Magazine, 1918

Even as DuBois wrote the above, he was mindful of the fact that no blacks worked in the publishing house that printed the Crisis magazine, official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people (NAACP), which he edited.

As with other facets of life in America, blacks have waged long and sometimes unsuccessful battles for democracy and economic parity with whites in the nation's workforce.

Finally, after nearly one hundred years of blood, sweat and the dogmatic tenacity to "stay the course," efforts of Black pioneers in the labor movement are paying off.

Despite the rebuffs they endured, such leaders as A. Philip Randolph, organizer and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Willard S. Townsend, organizer and president of the United Transport Service Employees, expanded their respective unions under the aegis of organized labor and then fought long and hard to make the unions adhere to fairness and non-discriminating practices.

Now slowly but consistently blacks are moving into positions of leadership in many facets of organized labor, most especially in the burgeoning public service unions.

For the first time in the history of organized labor in the United States, the labor movement has its first black president of a major union.

He is John N. Sturdivant, 50, who was elected in August 1988 as president of the American Federation of Government Employees by nearly 85,000 votes of its 700,000 plus membership.

An 18-year veteran of AFGE, Sturdivant defeated 12-year incumbent Kenneth T. Blaylock for the post on the second ballot.

Sturdivant represents a new "wave" of black leadership within the ranks of organized labor, whose aim it is to revitalize the unions, increase membership and move organized labor into the 21st century.

Among them are Willie Baker, vice president, United Food and Chemical Workers; William Burris, executive vice president, American Postal Union;

Constance Bryant, vice president, Communications Workers of America; Charles Faulding, secretary-treasurer, Transport Workers Union of America;

Gloria Johnson, member and director, Social Action Department, International Union of Electronics, Electrical, Salaried Machinists and Furniture Workers;

William Lucy, secretary-treasurer, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; Leon Lynch, vice president, United Steel Workers of America;

Robert McGlotten, legislature director, AFL/CIO; Frederick O'Neill, vice president, Executive Council, AFL/CIO;

Gene Upshaw, president, Federation of Professional Athletes and vice president of AFL/CIO;

Howard Richardson, vice president, Hotel, Restaurant Employees of America; Calvin Moore, vice president, Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, and;

Vice presidents Constance Cabell, Nathaniel LaCour, Jr., Loretta Johnson, Sandra Irons and Barbara Van Blake, director of Civil Rights, American Federation of Teachers, respectively.

There are hundreds more blacks with top official and administration positions within the confines of organized labor in this country today, but there is also room for improvement by the union's white hierarchy.

At the turn of the century organized labor was slow to recognize the organization of Black workers as the key to the overall success of the trade union movement.

Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor, saw the exclusion of Black workers as a policy that would spell certain doom to trade unionism unless such policies were abandoned.

He felt that working men and women should be organized irrespective of color.

To approach the organization of workers from any other prospective, Gompers believed, was to provide a needless division of workers that could be used by employers to keep down the wages of both groups.

As early as 1890, the AFL went on record stating its opposition to unions that excluded members primarily because of race or color.

However, there were still many unions that stubbornly resisted the policy and refused to grant membership to black workers.

A call for joint action by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and black workers in 1924 led to the formation of a joint interracial Labor Commission to carry out the mission of bringing more blacks into the country's labor movement.

That call led to the formation of the Trade Union Committee for organizing black workers.

The "TUC" as it was called, was a joint committee of trade unionists and members of the Black organizations, including the NAACP.

Funded by the AFL and a New York-based foundation, the "TUC" called on the AFL to hire black organizers and sought to convince black workers of the necessity to join with their white trade union brothers in a common fight to secure workers' rights for all.

The formation of the "TUC" helped set the stage for the 1925 founding of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a move supported by the NAACP.

The BSCP through its founder, A. Philip Randolph, sought recognition from the Pullman Company as the official representative of porters and maids improvements in wages and working conditions and equal status within other international unions within the AFL. The BSCP achieved its goals within 12 years.

The Roosevelt era of the 30s and the passage of the Wagner Act somewhat curtailed blatant discriminatory practices against black workers within the AFL.

A. Phillip Randolph, organizer and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

Black protests became so overwhelming until some sympathetic and foresighted AFL leaders initiated a series of organizing campaigns in the mass production industries that later led to the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

The CIO concerned itself primarily with the organization of steel, mining, automobile, packinghouse and rubber industries, all of which employed large numbers of blacks.

John L. Lewis' United Mine Workers Union was the organizational and by-laws prototype that was followed by Philip Murray of the Steel Workers Union and Wlater Reuther, founder-president of the United Automobile Workers, all are now deceased.

Their overall concern with the plight and advancement of the black worker in the labor movement prompted Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, then an attorney for the NAACP, to refer to the program of the CIO as a "Bill of Rights for Negro Labor in America."

These new unions broke sharply with traditional racial practices. Locals admitted blacks, and in many instances integrated seniority lines.

Others gave priority to upgrading job levels and wage scales, especially in low paying jobs dominated by blacks.

During the 1981-84 Reagan recession, black teenage unemployment soared past the 50 percent mark. Today there is a 41 percent unemployment rate.

John N. Sturdivant

Martin Luther King, Jr. leads more than 200,000 protesters on an orderly "Freedom March" on August 28, 1963, in Washington, D.C.