



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

The Crisis, Vol. 15, No. 5

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April 1917, labor conditions in East St. Louis have been desperately tense.

In order to combat such powerful employers, the laboring men were obliged to make a vigorous fight. None of the great plants is completely unionized. The men of the Aluminum Ore Company were unionized in an independent group but not affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.

Organized labor has been made to bear much of the blame of the riots of May and July, but it is only fair to the unions to look to the deeper causes of the trouble.

Alois Towers, a labor organizer of Belleville, Ill., told the committee that the labor unions recognized that there was no law to prevent the Negro from coming North, and that organized labor had no desire to prevent individuals from doing so. It was with the forced condition of thousands of these colored folk being brought into a community, where the laboring population was already equal to the number of jobs to be had, that the labor unions were at war.

There is no more tragic pilgrimage in history. Working under unfair conditions, denied his rights of citizenship and education, hounded by race prejudice, the southern Negro listened eagerly to the tales of prosperity and opportunity for his race which flourished in the nearest northern city.

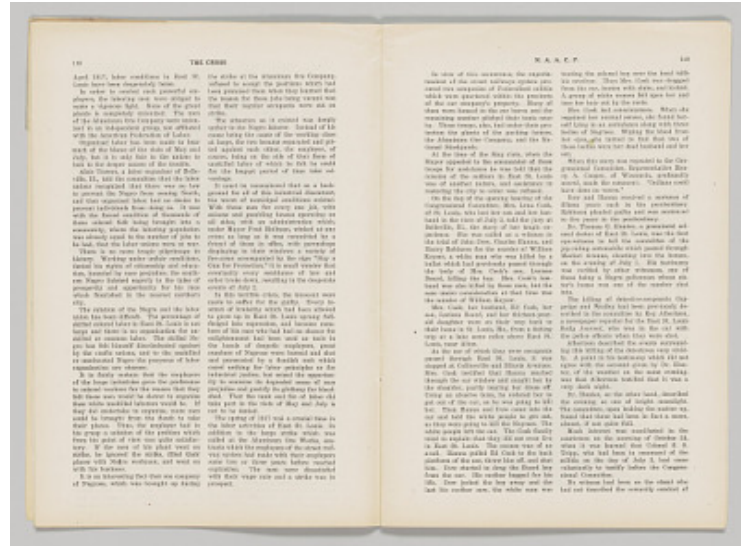
The relation of the Negro and labor union has been difficult. The percentage of skilled colored labor. The skilled Negro has felt himself discriminated against by the crafts unions, and to the unskilled or uneducated Negro the purposes of labor organization are obscure.

It is fairly certain that the employers of the large industries gave the preference to colored workers for the reason that they felt these men would be slower to organize than white unskilled laborers would be. If they did undertake to organize, more men could be brought from the South to take their places. Thus the employer had in his grasp a solution of the problem which from his point of view was quite satisfactory. If the men of his plant went on strike, he ignored the strike, filled their places with Negro workmen, and went on with his business.

It is an interesting fact that one company of Negroes, which was brought up during the strike at the Aluminum Ore Company, refused to accept the positions which had been promised them when they learned that the reason for these jobs being vacant was that their regular occupants were out on strike.

The situation as it existed was deeply unfair to the Negro laborer. Instead of his cause being the cause of the working class at large, the two became separated and pitted against each other, the employer, of course, being on the side of that form of unskilled labor of which he felt he could for the longest period of time take advantage.

It must be remembered that as a background for all of this industrial discontent, the worst of municipal conditions existed. With three men for every one job, with saloons and gambling houses operating on all sides, with an administration which under Mayor Fred Mollman, winked at any crime as long as it was committed by a friend of those in office, with



pawnshops displaying in their windows a variety of fire-arms accompanied by the sign "Buy a Gun for Protection," it is small wonder that eventually every semblance of law and order broke down, resulting in the desperate events of July 2.

In this terrible crisis, the innocent were made to suffer for the guilty. Every instinct of brutality which had been allowed to grow up in East St. Louis sprang full-fledged into expression, and because members of his race who had had no chance for enlightenment had been used as tools in the hands of despotic employers, great numbers of Negroes were burned and shot and persecuted by a fiendish mob which cared nothing for labor principles or for industrial justice, but seized the opportunity to exercise its degraded sense of race prejudice and gratify its gluttony for bloodshed. That the rank and file of labor did take part in the riots of May and July is not to be denied.

The spring of 1917 was a crucial time in the labor activities of East St. Louis. In addition to the large strike which was called at the Aluminum Ore Works, contracts which the employees of the street railway system had made with their employers some two or three years before reached expiration. The men were dissatisfied with their wage rate and a strike was in prospect.

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In view of this occurrence, the superintendent of the street railways system procured two companies of Federalized militia which were quartered within the precincts of the car company's property. Many of them were housed in the car barns and the remaining number pitched their tents near by. These troops, also, had under their protection the plants of the packing houses, the Aluminum Ore Company, and the National Stockyards.

At the time of the May riots, when the Mayor appealed to the commander of these troops for assistance he was told that the mission of the soldiers in East St. Louis was of another nature, and assistance in restoring the city to order was refused.

On the day of the opening hearing of the Congressional Committee, Mrs. Lena Cook, of St. Louis, who lost her son and her husband in the riots of July 2, told the jury at Belleville, Ill., the story of her tragic experience. She was called as a witness in the trial of John Dow, Charles Hanna, and Harry Robinson for the murder of William Keyser, a white man who was killed by a bullet which had previously passed through the body of Mrs. Cook's Son, Lurizza Beard, killing the boy. Mrs. Cook's husband was also killed by these men, but the case under consideration at that time was the murder of William Keyser.

Mrs. Cook, her husband, Ed Cook, her son, Lurizza Beard, and her thirteen-year old daughter were on their way back to their home in St. Louis, Mo., from a fishing trip at a lake some miles above East St. Louis, near Alton.

As the car of which they were occupants passed through East St. Louis, it was stopped at Collinsville and Illinois Avenues. Mrs. Cook testified that Hanna reached through the window and caught her by the shoulder, partly tearing her dress off. Using an abusive term, he ordered her to get out of the car, as he was going to kill her. Then Hanna and Dow came into the car and told the white people to get out, as they were going to kill the Negroes. The white people left the car. The Cook family tried to

explain that they did not even live in East St. Louis. The excuse was of no avail. Hanna pulled Ed Cook to the back platform of the car, threw him off, and shot him. Dow started to drag the Beard boy from the car. His mother begged for his life. Dow jerked the boy away and the last his mother saw, the white man was beating the colored boy over the head with his revolver. Then Mrs. Cook was dragged from the car, beaten with clubs, and kicked. A group of white women fell upon her and tore her hair out by the roots.

Mrs. Cook lost consciousness. When she regained her normal senses, she found herself lying in an ambulance along with three bodies of Negroes. Wiping the blood from her eyes, she turned to find that two of those bodies were her dead husband and her son.

When this story was repeated to the Congressional Committee, Representative Henry A. Cooper, of Wisconsin, profoundly moved, made the comment: "Indians could have done no worse."

Dow and Hanna received a sentence of fifteen years each in the penitentiary. Robinson pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years in the penitentiary.

Dr. Thomas G. Hunter, a prominent colored doctor of East St. Louis, was the first eye-witness to tell the committee of the joy-riding automobile which passed through Market Avenue, shooting into the houses, on the evening of July 1. His testimony was verified by other witnesses, one of these being a Negro policeman whose sister's house was one of the number shot into.

The killing of detective-sergeants Coppedge and Wodley had been previously described to the committee by Roy Albertson, a newspaper reporter for the East St. Louis Daily Journal, who was in the car with the police officers when they were shot.

Albertson described the events surrounding this killing of the detectives very vividly. A point in his testimony which did not agree with the account given by Dr. Hunter, of the weather on the same evening, was that Albertson testified that it was a very dark night.

Dr. Hunter, on the other hand, described the evening as one of bright moonlight. The committee, upon looking the matter up, found that there had been in fact a moon, almost, if not quite full.

Much interest was manifested in the courtroom on the morning of October 24, when it was learned that Colonel S. O. Tripp, who had been in command of the militia on the day of July 2, had come voluntarily to testify before the Congressional Committee.

No witness had been on the stand who had not described the cowardly conduct of

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