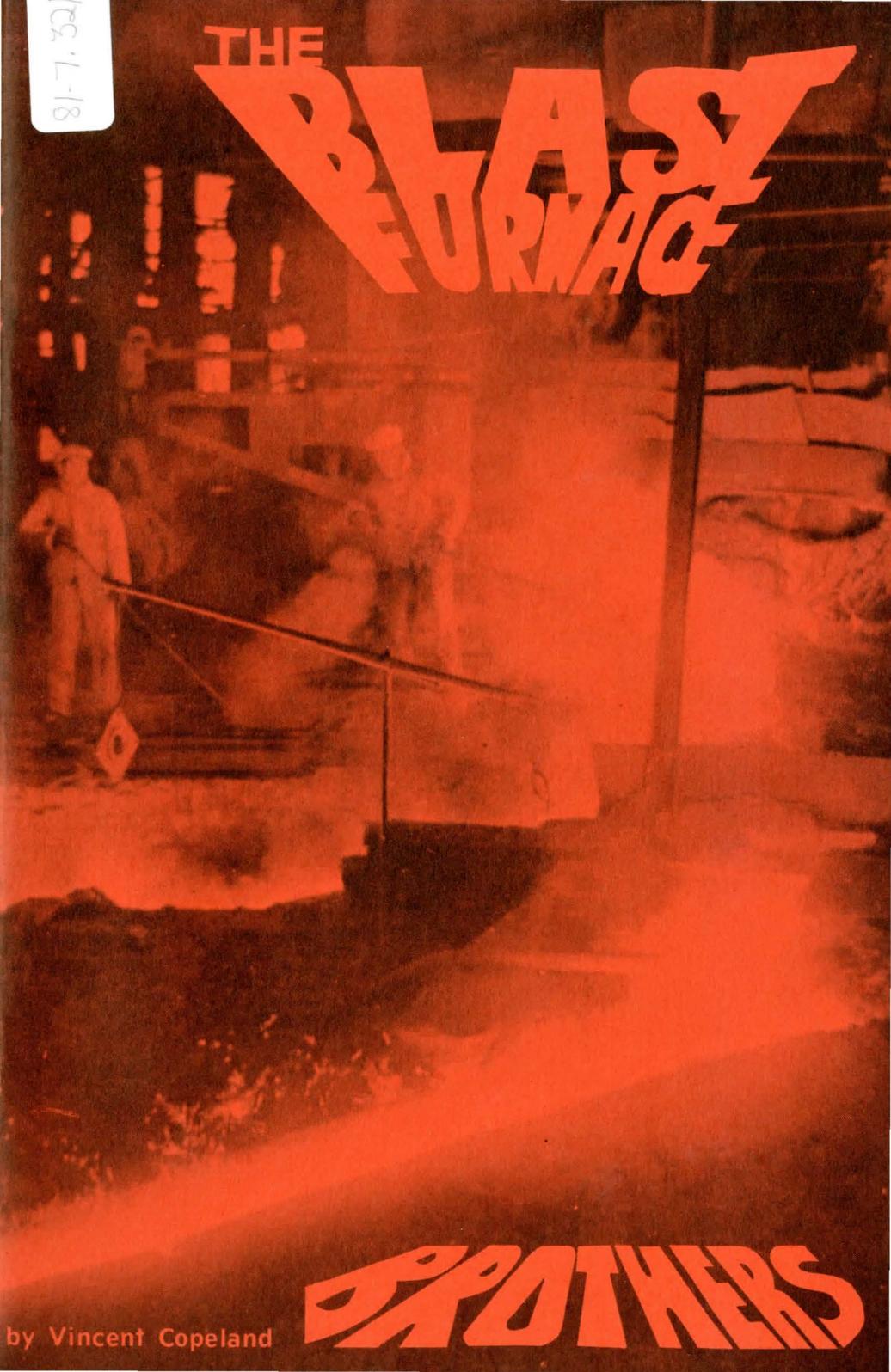


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# THE BLAST FURNACE



by Vincent Copeland

# BROTHERS

# **the blast furnace brothers**

by VINCENT COPELAND

CENTER FOR UNITED LABOR ACTION 1973

**The Center for United Labor Action is:**

**an association of working men and women devoted to the improvement of working conditions and the advancement of all workers of all races and nationalities in the struggle against the U.S. corporations. It helps to organize the unorganized and aims to make existing labor organizations more effective.**

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# introduction

This is the story of two important victories that were won, first by the Black workers, and then by the white and Black workers together, in the Bethlehem Steel Company's Lackawanna plant a few years ago.

I hope that the point of the story is clear and that the white reader becomes convinced of the great importance of white workers taking the initiative—*among the whites*—in fighting for Black-white unity in the struggle to improve the conditions of all workers.

In describing the psychology of a certain group of white workers, however, I meant not only to be helpful to white progressives in their efforts to fight racism among the members of their own race but I have tried also to help the Black workers to eavesdrop, so to speak, upon this particular group of whites. In doing this, I have tried to reveal some of the inconsistencies and even weaknesses in the hold of white racism on the majority of white workers, in general. Black labor militants looking for allies in the long struggle for recognition and equality will decide whether I have done this well or not.

White racism, the greatest internal enemy of the U.S. labor movement, absolutely must be fought and overcome. But a certain real and very effective labor unity can be achieved long before this poison is wiped out of white consciousness.

It is the *struggle* of workers—Black and white—to better their conditions of work that creates the possibilities for mass education against racism, not the other way around. And this

story proves the truth of that proposition, if it proves nothing else.

But nothing in this pamphlet should be taken as an argument against having an independent Black Caucus in any union or plant where whites predominate, or even in some plants where they do not. The long history of white racism in the U.S. union movement makes it all but impossible to function on a really equal basis with whites in a unified movement. Even where there is good will on the part of leading rank-and-file whites, as there was in the case described here, even where there is real struggle on their part to fight both company racism and white worker backwardness — Black workers often find that there must be special all-Black groupings for self-protection, if not for an actual substitute for the white-dominated union itself.

As a matter of fact, the Black furnace workers were not able to sustain the gains they had made in the years after the events described here, and they were compelled to form their own Black Caucus as a result. In a way, perhaps, they had already formed this caucus during the time of the story, but they didn't call it a caucus.

The caucus they formed in recent years went up and down and sometimes disappeared altogether. Unfortunately, it is now needed more than ever in Lackawanna, although the Black worker-leaders involved are extremely sensitive to the danger of polarizing white racism even more sharply than it is already polarized in such an explosive town.

Because there is a new flood-tide of white racism in Lackawanna, which corresponds exactly to a new low ebb of unionism, there is a new weakness of all the workers against the mighty power of the company.

A so-called "Rights for Whites" group has arisen in Lackawanna, and it is directed squarely against Black equality. It is much more powerful than the Black Caucus at the moment and it is extremely dangerous to the welfare of the Black-white majority.

This white caucus is aimed consciously and unconsciously against the existence of the union itself. In order to liquidate this danger, in order to destroy this organized racism and answer the needs of the Black and white workers in the plant, a somewhat greater struggle is needed than that of the Blast Furnace Brothers of years ago.

But even so, a beginning has to be made somewhere. And the Brothers did show that a beginning could be made.

It is also true that the events took place at a different period than the present, and that it may be very hard to gain back the precious ground that has been lost since those days. But then again, "those days" were not so perfect, either. The social situation was not so very wonderful then, even though the past often seems to be so attractive when viewed through the hazy spectacles of older warriors.

While the union movement was in better shape than now and it was easier to make the top bureaucrats take a formally progressive position if the workers pressed hard enough, things were not so easy in general.

The cold war had begun, and although the anti-radical witch-hunt had not yet gained national momentum, it wasn't the best time for fighting for social justice in Lackawanna. But the workers, Black and white, were hoping to improve their lot — as workers always are. And a hard, consistent, principled effort, along with the use of some tactical wisdom, did have a chance of succeeding.

Finally, I should comment on what is today a more pressing question than at any time in recent memory: what about the Blast Furnace Sisters?

The women of Lackawanna were at that time working at home, in laundries, in domestic service, or occasionally in office jobs. But several years *earlier* they too had worked in the blast furnace department, and not at the easiest jobs. This was during the Second World War, at a time when "men's work" was so often done by women, who have not had much of a chance to do it since.

However, much of the work in the blast furnace department should not have to be done by men *or* women.

The struggle for sexual equality may go through a period of getting more blast furnace jobs for women. But ultimately, there should be equality for all to *refuse* such jobs, just as there should be equality for men and women *not* to spill their blood in wars for Bethlehem Steel and its fellow corporations to take over the world. (The idea of women gaining equality by being soldiers, as men are compelled to be, is nearly always advanced by those who are most *against* women's equality.)

In spite of the colorful aspects of some of the work I have described in the story, I would, in the interests of human development, rather eliminate the work of the blast furnaces altogether.

But that is a task for later on.

I have jumbled the names of all the workers concerned because many of them are still in the plant; the arm of the company is long, and I might have inadvertently revealed something the company didn't already know. The names of management figures are given exactly, however, and whatever immortality they may gain from this story, they are welcome to it.

V.C., April 1973



Willie Brainard wanted to work in the repair gang. He had sweated away five years of his life on the furnaces and he saw new kids being hired from the streets every spring and put on as repair helpers with no seniority in the department at all. He could fix cars, remodel a house interior, repair a radio — Why couldn't he be a repair helper on a much cruder job and do just as well as an eighteen-year old with no mechanical ability at all?

Willie was twenty-eight years old, six feet tall, about 225 pounds of mostly muscle. The color of his skin, which shouldn't have anything to do with this story at all — but does — was black.

Well, he did get in the repair gang and a dozen other furnace men did, too. It took practically a revolution for him and them to do it, but they did it.

To understand the way they did it, you have to understand the blast furnaces—and Lackawanna.

The blast furnace department was a hard place to work. It was hell itself before the union came in, back when you couldn't even sit down for five minutes after cleaning the cast. Even if you were big and strong (and not every furnace man was as tough as Willie), your chest would heave and your knees would shake from the effort. You couldn't sit down because there weren't any seats to sit on. Sometimes the guys would find an old plank and lay it on a pile of coal or something like that and use it for a bench. Then Montgomery, the general foreman, would come by and make you throw the plank in a slag ladle. And you'd

watch it burn up out of the corner of your eye while you were shuffling back to work as slow as you could without getting into more trouble.

Things were that way for a long time. But when I was there, the furnace men had a regular shanty on each furnace floor and they could sit down every once in a while if they really didn't have any work that needed doing right then. Their work was still stinking tough and dusty, sulphury and hot, just the same as before. But now they could think they were human beings for a few minutes between casts and cleanups. They even could relax enough to play pinochle at lunch time and on lucky days have fifteen or twenty minute coffee breaks.

You had to clean up the runners after you tapped out the furnace and let out three or four hundred tons of wildly running liquid cast iron that would pour out into the iron ladles waiting on the track below. And by the time you cleaned those runners, (when you could get within ten feet of them without burning your clothes and scorching your face) the little pools of iron had hardened into red hot globs that had to be gotten out with long crowbars. And the crowbars were so long and heavy you almost got sick just to handle them at all if you weren't used to them.

You sweated like hell both summer and winter. Only in winter you could get pneumonia, because the sides of the furnace floor were open to the icy winds from Lake Erie. Oh yes, the repair gang used to come up in November and nail or wire a lot of corrugated iron sheets over the railings to serve as makeshift walls. They did act as windbreakers. But the cold winds off the frozen lake got through just the same and the drafts hit you like an iceberg coming into an inferno.

There were five men who ran each furnace. They were the hot-blast man (or stove tender), the keeper, the first helper, second helper and third helper. Except for some of the hot-blast men, whose jobs were higher paid and not quite so hard as the others, they were all Black.

The furnace foreman—a "working foreman"—was called the blower. He was white.

Years earlier, the furnace crew had been *all white*. By 1940 it was still about fifty-fifty. When the U.S. got into the Second World War and all the good jobs opened up in aircraft, auto and machine shops in Buffalo, the young white guys went there instead of into the blast furnaces and at the same time the furnace

work was expanding, so more Black guys were hired. The company opened up a couple of old furnaces (A and B—they must have been built sometime in the 1890s or very early 1900s). And the Blacks got the furnace jobs that were vacated. Before long, the furnace workers were nearly all Black.

But the repair gang, always working around the furnaces, once in a while sweating as much as the furnace men themselves to make quick repairs and quick changes while the furnace was running so the company wouldn't lose a lot of money (as it claimed it did if a furnace was shut down even for a few minutes)—the repair gang was ALL WHITE.

It was only once in a while, of course, that anybody in the repair gang really worked as hard as anybody on the furnace floor. But it was no prize of a job, compared to an indoor factory maintenance job, for instance. Sometimes on a winter day with ten-degree or even zero winds coming in off the lake, you could almost freeze to death doing an outside job on the trestle. Or if you were trying to unfreeze a snow-covered four-foot coke oven gas-pipe that went along the hundred yards or so between furnaces and you were using alcohol, which is colder than ice, and getting it all over you, it could be pretty miserable.

The pay was the same for a repair helper as for a third helper on the furnaces. A full repairman got a little more than a first helper. And the keeper and hot-blast man both got the same as a millwright. But everybody knew the repair job was better than the furnace job. Otherwise, why would one be almost all Black and the other all *white*?

The beauty of it for the company was that it was much harder for the workers to get together in any real move to fight the bosses. It was bad enough with the different races and nationalities in the plant, the Irish thought they were so much better than the Poles, and the Italians didn't even get hired very much at all at that time. And it was bad enough that the whites in general thought they were better than Blacks. But in the blast furnace department you had the added disunity of a color-dividing line going right through the department with all the Blacks on the furnace floors and all the whites in the repair gang or similar jobs. The miracle was that there had been enough unity to get anything out of the company at all. But there was.

The company was always way ahead of the workers, though, when it came to lining people up against each other. Here's how

they kept it working in the blast furnace department:

You came into the labor gang on your first day of work. You might shovel spills off the railroad tracks the first few days, or help to dig a ditch, or clean up an overflow of hot cinder (slag). But as soon as there was an opening on the furnaces, even a temporary one-day opening, you would get your chance to move up. That is, if you were *Black*, you'd move up to the furnaces; if you were *white*, you'd move up to the repair gang.

After you moved up to the furnaces and you had felt the teeth of the hot blast, you usually felt like going back down to the labor gang—even though you'd lose money to do it.



Willie Brainard, like almost everybody else on the furnaces, had stuck it out. But after five years he decided he would get into the repair gang. And he knew as well as anybody else that that wouldn't be easy.

It so happened that he changed clothes in the north welfare building. For some reason the company called the locker room-shower-equipped glorified brick-sheds in the blast furnace department "welfare buildings." There were three of them. Covered with ore dust and furnace grime on the outside, but kept as clean as shaky old crippled ex-furnace men could keep them on the inside, they served the purpose. And we did succeed in scraping off the dirt in them.

Quite a few repair gang guys changed in the north welfare building along with twenty or thirty furnace men. The jimcrow line did not extend to the bath house.

One day Willie Brainard said to Jimmy Burns, who had a locker right across the aisle from him, "Say Jimmy, I notice a new guy was just hired off the street for your gang."

"That's nothing new," said Jimmy. "You mean that skinny kid with the glasses?"

"Yeah," said Willie. "How about putting in a grievance for me to get that job? I got five years' seniority."

"A grievance? Why not?" answered Jimmy.

Now, as you might guess, Jimmy Burns was white. And Jimmy, like Willie, could think of a dozen reasons "why not,"

first and foremost being company policy. An ordinary white worker might think that God had made the blast furnace men Black and the repair men white. But Jimmy, being an active union steward, very much aware of what was going on all around him, knew that it was not God, but the Bethlehem Steel Company that was the creator of the situation.

But that didn't mean he thought he could change it very easily.

He also knew the repair gang guys pretty well. And although they didn't make racist cracks in front of him and especially not in front of the Black guys themselves, he knew they were cliquish and racist, too. They never used a bad word about Black people while they were at work, it seemed. But that was partly because so much of their work was done near the Black workers. Many of them laughed and joked with the furnace men, but they felt they were one kind and the furnace guys were another.

About half of them had been brought up in Lackawanna and they might easily have been part of the white gangs that used to go across the tracks to the end of town on Saturday nights and pick fights with the Black kids. Most of the Black kids in those earlier days had come up from the South, and they were underfed and rickety with toothpick legs. They had the disadvantage of being strangers and outsiders—and looking it.

But anyway, out came Jimmy's grievance pad. At that time the stewards all carried their pads and made out grievances in duplicate, giving one to the boss and filing the other at the union hall. As Jimmy wrote this particular grievance up, he was wondering if he would ever win it. And as Willie signed it, he was telling himself that he *would* win, no matter what.

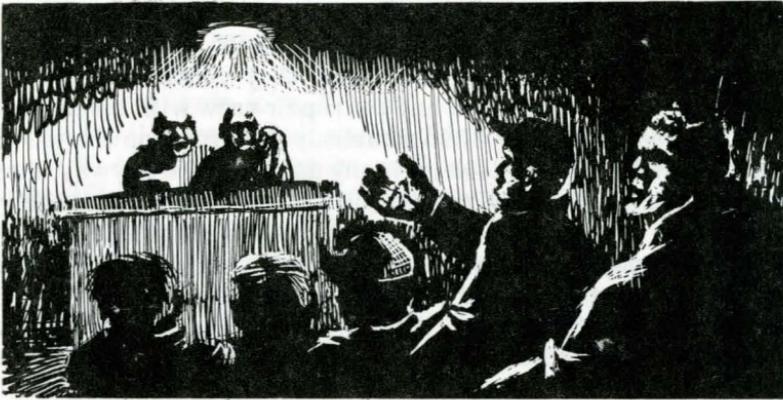
Now you have to know a little about Jimmy Burns. Not that Jimmy was so different from anybody else. Everybody in the blast furnace department was pretty much like everybody else. That is, the Black workers were pretty much like the other Black workers and the white workers were pretty much like the other white workers. And both Black and white were more like each other than they knew.

But Jimmy had been brought up in nearby Buffalo, rather than in Lackawanna. And while Buffalo might just seem like a glorified Lackawanna to a person in a really big city, it did have a little more possibility for you to learn about the world and its problems. Jimmy had learned a little there. Besides that, he had

hitch-hiked around the country. He had seen places where Black people were treated better than in Lackawanna; he had met some Black professionals who were smarter than most whites in the steel plant; and he had seen some young Black leaders in the restaurant union when he washed dishes for a while in New York City. He had also been to some places where Black people were treated even *worse* than they were in Lackawanna. That made him think about the idea that *everybody* should be equal. On top of all that, he read books about labor history and he got radical ideas about the future of humanity.

With all that, you'd think he would be very different from the rest of the repair gang. And if you looked closely, he was. But from a distance—like the distance from which the furnace men were looking—Jimmy didn't look so different from the others.

And that was about right. The truth was that if all the other guys had done the same things and been in the same places he had, why, they would probably have felt about the same way he felt.



Jimmy was always finding things that the company was doing wrong, and pointing out how the guys had a right to challenge these things. So they came to him with grievances pretty often. And even though he was in the all-white repair gang, he had helped fight quite a few grievances for the Black furnace men, too.

Here's how he was able to do it:

The superintendent of the whole department, John Hill, was a kind of egomaniac, as superintendents often are in relation to those they think are below them. Hill used to hold "mass" stewards' meetings in the safety meeting hall, where anywhere from five to fifteen stewards used to gather maybe once or twice a month to take up three or four "big" grievances with him.

That didn't prevent them from taking up grievances on the spot, too, when they occurred. They often barged into Hill's office after a foreman wouldn't give in on something that required immediate attention.

But this big meeting was Hill's way of getting "good labor relations" with his department, and he thought he was pretty smart doing it that way. He and his department clerk, Robert Hay, would sit up there on a sort of stage and dispense justice like feudal lords. (Robert Hay made up the schedule every week and was directly responsible for the job assignments, so where there was too obvious an injustice, Hill could always blame it on Hay.)

It looked pretty terrible, I guess. But somehow, none of the

stewards, including Jimmy Burns, ever demanded that they sit *equally* around the table with John Hill. Maybe this was because they had his number and they knew they could combine the strength of the furnace men and the repair crew with the humble pleading they had to do when somebody got drunk on the job or got in a terrible fight or took too many days off. And anyway, they knew that when they sat as "equals" around the big mahogany table in the front office building, when they were going "above" Hill to the plant management—they didn't do any better and sometimes not as well. The big shot labor-relations expert, Benny McDonald, used to pass out cigars to those who would take them, but he didn't give you anything much unless you were about ready to walk out—along with the whole department.

So they let John Hill play God, while they got as much out of him as they could.

At those meetings Jimmy Burns would put in his two cents' worth about furnace floor grievances as well as repair gang gripes and he got as well known by the furnace stewards as by anybody else. A couple of times he fought hard to defend the promotion of a Black first helper to the job of stove tender in place of a white guy who didn't have as much time on the furnaces but had been taking turns as stove tender through Robert Hay's or somebody else's favoritism.

As far as Hill was concerned, he didn't mind too much giving in on this and giving the right job to the Black worker, because he was smart enough to see that there would be more production from the furnaces if all the Black guys were working together—especially if the foremen were all white, which they were.

But this was small potatoes compared to Willie Brainard's case. The furnace grievances did not involve the question of lily-white purity, even though they might have made one white guy (at a time) sore at Jimmy.

Bringing up Willie Brainard's grievance would strike at the company's whole racist policy of dividing the races between furnace and repair gang. It would strike at John Hill's whole system of management. At the same time, it would raise the "Black question" with the whole repair gang, even though it shouldn't have. That is, it was nobody's business but Willie Brainard's and Johnny Weinheimer's against whom Willie wrote the grievance. But life being what it was in the blast furnace department, it didn't work like that.

Racism isn't just hatred; it's also *fear*.

Suddenly the repair guys were afraid. They were afraid of a lot of Black guys coming into the gang and doing the white guys' work, taking their jobs, "taking over" the gang, as the real racists put it when the half-racists didn't have a word for it.

With all their ignorance and backwardness, though, they were still a kind of together-gang. They worked together, not just as repairman and helper, but often in teams of ten or fifteen—sometimes in a very big job like changing the small bell at the top of the blast furnace, nearly the whole seventy men—millwrights, repairmen, pipefitters, helpers and all, would pitch in together. (The small bell weighed about five or six tons, I think. It was a kind of stopper at the top of the furnace, about a hundred twenty feet above the ground, that sealed the furnace pressure while twenty or so tons of ore, limestone and coke were dropped down into a raging furnace below when the *big* bell was lowered.)

This common work didn't make them blood brothers, of course. But they did get to know each other pretty well. They sometimes went hunting or ice-fishing together (this was before Lake Erie got polluted and most of the fish were killed). At least a dozen lived within three blocks of each other in Woodlawn, just south of the plant. And they drank in the same saloons.

The houses they lived in were sometimes rented from the company, sometimes bought from the company, sometimes bought from people who had bought them from the company at an earlier time. Years after this the company took back all the houses in Woodlawn and built some more steel mills there. The time was when the company owned *all* of Lackawanna. It donated big to some of the churches there, and even to Father Baker's orphan asylum, from which men grew up to become workers in the blast furnace and some other departments of Bethlehem Steel—if they had not become too demoralized by the asylum. During big strikes the *Buffalo Evening News* and the *Courier Express* (the only newspapers people read in Lackawanna) always explained why the company couldn't afford to pay you any more money or why wage increases would cause inflation.

You couldn't expect the repair gang guys to know that the company owned their *minds* almost as much as it owned their houses and the rest of their lives.

But even after you've said all that, there was no good, logical

reason—even from the point of view of the white guys—why Willie Brainard shouldn't have worked in the repair gang. No reason but unthinking, blind racism. That, and the fact that things had been a certain way in the past and people thought they were always going to be that way in the future.



You might wonder why none of the *Black* stewards had put in a grievance for Willie Brainard, or why he didn't go to them rather than to Jimmy Burns.

It was not out of any lack of militancy on their part, that I can tell you for sure. Henry Becker, Dave Hope, Milton Howard and Albert Gresham, who were the main furnace stewards, were hard and tough as well as militant. It didn't seem to me that they were afraid of anything or anybody. Hill himself would sometimes go up on the furnace floor at just the moment when the hot iron was pouring out like hell-on-the-double and try to tell the workers how to do something or other "better." And any one of these men would curse him and threaten him with iron bars for his trouble. And like a certain type of slave-master must have done in the old days, he would just pretend not to notice and forget it. I remember just a few years after this, how Albert Gresham, who was about six feet three and looked like he was three feet across the shoulders with about 240 pounds of beef on him, held up his fist in front of a cop's mouth in the middle of a union meeting where a half-dozen cops had rushed the stage, and he said, "If you don't stop that, I'll push my fist right down your throat." And the cop stopped.

But the *Black* stewards had their hands full in those days, just fighting for the right of *Black* workers to *live*. They had really *led* the union fight to organize the whole plant some years before—so much so that the anti-union elements used to say the

Steelworkers Union in Lackawanna was a “n—r” union. (The whites and the local white “leaders” have forgotten that, now.)

The Blacks had been the first to be arrested on the picket line in the organizing strike of 1941. Cliff LeBrain from the furnaces and Lamar Cook from the coke ovens, especially. They had given strength to the white workers by their example. They had taken care of much more than their share of scabs. They had gotten rid of the bench-burning Montgomery. They had got what looked like a little unity with the white workers, only it didn't look like much. For instance, they got a Black vice-president of the local at every year's election. They knew it was only tokenism that the white majority voted for a Black vice-president (the whites wouldn't have voted for a Black *president*). But it was *good* tokenism. And most of the blast furnace guys didn't feel that they were quite ready to take on the question of repair gang jobs, although not a single one would have told that to Willie, who himself was well aware of the situation.

For a few of the furnace men, this might have been a kind of Uncle-Tomism—waiting for time and God to change the hearts of white people. But for most it was a hard cautiousness, a wariness that arose from a feeling that the fight was bigger than it looked.

They knew that the company profited from the racial division, and no doubt Henry and the other Black stewards understood that the company was the ultimate *cause* of white prejudice, just like their ancestors from Mississippi, Alabama and Virginia where they came from, strongly suspected that Ole Massa was the real manipulator of white prejudice in the South.

But they also knew that practically every bar in Lackawanna was for white only, with just Merriweathers' on Ridge Road and another one on the Turnpike, four or five doors from Three Gate serving Blacks exclusively. (There must have been nearly a hundred saloons in town—there were even more of them than there were churches.) Kane's Tavern in front of the union hall at Three Gate had begun to serve Blacks along with whites after the union moved into the hall in the rear of Kane's building. But a lot of Blacks still wouldn't drink there because they knew that Kane was still such a racist. (The white union guys either didn't know it or didn't think about it. And the Blacks never told them.)

Even Finkelstein's place served white only. It was the only Jewish-owned and run tavern in Lackawanna at the time, and you would have thought the owner would serve Blacks. But he must have been afraid. I remember how he used to come out on the coldest days in January and February, in the 1946 strike to

give everybody on the picket line (and there were twenty-seven separate picket posts for the huge three-mile long plant) coffee, hot chocolate and nice thick soup. None of the other bartenders did that, although some, like Kane, gave bottles to the Local officers and others whom they figured might be influential friends. Finkelstein gave the Black pickets the best—out on the picket line. And that certainly was to his credit. But they didn't reward him with their trade after the strike was over, because they knew he didn't want them to.

So the difficulty of breaking down the color line in the repair gang was probably better understood on the furnace floors than it was in the repair gang itself. The oppressed think over these things many, many times as they feel the sometimes thoughtless whip of the oppressor. The oppressed learn to be psychologists long before "psychology" ever gets into a college classroom.

It wasn't at all the case that white Jimmy Burns was *more* interested in getting Willie Brainard into the repair gang than the Black brothers, especially the Black stewards. Not at all. But Jimmy was in a good position to talk to the whites and to bring the power of the Blacks into the fight against the company in a way the Blacks themselves could not so easily do in the first stages of the fight. (Jimmy didn't understand this part of it so well at first, either, but that is really what happened.)

He was in pretty solid with most of the repair gang guys, or thought he was, and that gave him a bit of confidence. He had been in the gang for a good year and a half at the time, having been transferred from another part of the plant. And he won several grievances for the repairmen which made him a little more popular than the average.

During the previous summer he had led a fight to get the whole gang out of work a half-hour earlier, and won it. They had been working from 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. with a half-hour off for lunch. And a guy named Tony Lembicz, who was sort of a goof-off in a way but with a sharp eye for his rights, kept bugging Jimmy about the furnace men getting off at three sharp, and why couldn't the repair gang get out at that time, too?

At first Jimmy didn't pay much attention to Tony and nobody else believed it would be possible to change what had existed since practically The Year One. But then, to make a long story short—a story which included an attempted walkout that fizzled and then a successful little wildcat at ten minutes to three one day (it felt like a revolution to many of the participants, even

though they had gone through a couple of big *official* strikes)—the grievance was won, and the guys, including Tony Lembicz, all took Jimmy out for free drinks all around.

That was in the summer time.

In the winter, when Jimmy took Willie's grievance in to the master mechanic, "Bob" Fallon, and the word got around to the repairmen and pipefitters, things were a little colder.

Not many of the guys said much either way. But there were a few less slaps on the back for Jimmy Burns. And gradually the idea penetrated the gang that somehow several of the present white helpers would be replaced by Blacks. Naturally, Jimmy denied this, but it made a nice story for the really dirty racists, especially guys like Van Waggoner, who was dirty mean as well as physically tough, but somehow he did have a little influence. So the story got repeated quite a bit.

While everybody was still chewing over the idea of Willie Brainard "tipping the racial balance" as they say nowadays, Jimmy went in to see Bob Fallon again, figuring that he might have a better chance with him than with John Hill. "Bob" was a mechanical engineer in his late thirties, much more of a technician than a foreman, but he made all the real supervisory decisions about the gang, while old Smitty, who had the *name* of foreman, who remembered back to the tough old days when they cut steel plates with a sledge hammer and cold chisel instead of a burning torch, just "pushed" the gang, and didn't really have much to say in the administrative department.

Fallon, who was called "Bob" for some reason I can't figure out unless it was because no one wanted to say "Mr. Fallon" to him, was not quite so "Irish" as his name. That is, he had no hint of good humor or of the easy-going joviality the Irish are supposed to have. He was, in fact, rather Puritanical—certainly so in his love of the "Puritan work-ethic" you hear so much about nowadays. Only unlike Richard Nixon and his rich friends, Fallon actually liked to work himself. He would even come into the plant on *Christmas Day*—not just to spy on the repairmen in the skeleton crew (although he did that, too) but to make sure that the furnaces weren't breaking down and the company was getting every pound of pig iron possible and not losing a penny from its billion dollar assets.

One Christmas Mike Spelik, one of the old guys on the repair track (where they fixed the big slag ladles and the fifty-ton iron

ladles) watched Fallon puttering around in the snow outside the tool shanty and said:

"Don't have sense enough to stay home. He must be a Protestant, or something."

I guess Fallon *was* a Protestant (from Northern Ireland) but he thought even the Catholics would give him high marks for coming in on Christmas Day when he didn't have to, instead of thinking he was a fool, which they did.

But anyway, in relation to Willie Brainard, Fallon wasn't so funny. He fully understood the company's policy. And he knew how to utilize the gang's prejudices at the same time—partly because he was good and prejudiced himself.

When Jimmy went in to give him a nudge and ask him how the grievance was going, all of a sudden the great master mechanic got red in the face and piped up:

"You won't be so popular around here if you win that grievance!"

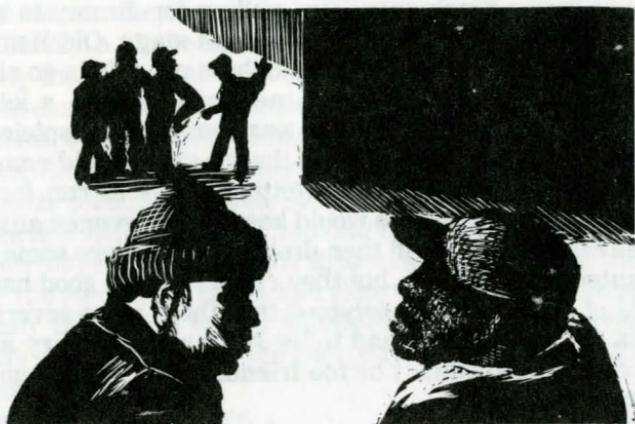
Jimmy got red in the face, too, and yelled back:

"That's what you think! Well, I'll tell you something. I'm gonna be *more* popular, because the guys know that I'm fighting for the right thing, see!"

Well, that was the right thing to say. Jimmy knew Fallon was a racist from way back, even though too smart to make openly racist remarks. But Jimmy was not at all sure he was so right about the guys appreciating the fight. And he felt pretty bad.

There was another white steward in the gang—Arnie Simmons—who in fact had gone into the office with Jimmy when he presented the original grievance. But Arnie wasn't much help in winning it or talking to the guys or even keeping up Jimmy's spirits.

Arnie began telling him about how this or that white guy wouldn't back up the grievance. And Jimmy could see that Arnie wished he had never got mixed up in it. Nobody would actually tell Jimmy to his face that they didn't want Willie in the gang, though. Jimmy hoped this was because they were ashamed of themselves, but suspected it might also be because they didn't want any trouble with him—or with the Black workers.



If it hadn't been for Henry Becker talking to Jimmy when he came up on the furnace floor, he might have even thrown in the towel. Not that Henry was one of those old philosophers like in the movies—with white hair and sad stories and sentimental understanding, like with Uncle Tom and Little Eva. Henry was an old *fighter* who had experienced everything and suffered pretty nearly everything. He once told Jimmy how he and his family had been on welfare in the Depression and the “visitor” had come right into the kitchen one day and lifted the lid off the stew pot and told the family they couldn't afford stewing beef (there was a half-pound of it in the stew), and they had to learn to live on less.

He told the story as though it had just happened the day before and he was still waiting to strangle that welfare worker.

One day when Jimmy was working with part of the gang to change a “plate” (That's a two or three-hundred pound copper cooler with water circulating through it to cool the furnace walls along with a couple of hundred other “plates” like it.), he asked Henry's advice about how to win the grievance from the company and how to handle the gang—and Henry said:

“Don't ask *me* anything about white people. I've had them on my back all my life from the time I was born in Mississippi. But let me tell you something. You can win that grievance if you want to. All you've got to do is keep fighting, and you'll see.”

Jimmy wanted to ask, “How do you keep fighting in a case like this?” But he didn't.

Not so many Black guys were pulling for Jimmy to win the grievance as you might think—not at that stage. Old Henry was really in Jimmy's corner, even though he put things so sharply. But in addition to the problems I mentioned before, a lot of the other furnace men thought there was something suspicious and strange about the whole thing and that no good would come of it. Some thought Jimmy was just getting ready to run for Local Union president and that he would keep the grievance alive until after the election time and then drop it. There were some others who wanted to fight it out, but they couldn't see a good handle to get hold of. Old Henry understood that there were several handles, but the first handle had to be Jimmy. And Henry also understood that he shouldn't be too friendly with Jimmy until this point was proved.

So there were a few days or weeks when Jimmy Burns would walk along the path between the furnaces and the long bleak stockhouse where the iron ore, the coke and limestone were stored by the thousands of tons, and feel like the whole plant was coming down on his head alone—when the furnace workers looked down from the furnace floor twenty-five feet above him without waving and the repair gang guys passed by without saying hello to him.

Then, in one of those odd meetings with John Hill emcee-ing it over the stewards in the safety meeting hall, Henry Becker just broke into the proceedings with a sharp question about why Willie wasn't getting his seniority rights. And every single steward there, Black and white, weak or strong, chimed in agreeing completely with Henry's point.

"Say, Mr. Hill," Henry rasped at the great man, "what are you going to do about Willie Brainard's job in the repair gang. We think it's about time a Black man got a break around here. We ain't asking for no favors. We're asking for justice."

As simple as that, it was. But you could see that big boss Hill was a little shaky. And then every Black *and* white steward—there might have been a dozen there altogether—put in his statement, too. Both Black and white sounded about the same, but you could tell that the Black really meant it more. On the other hand, even though there was a certain amount of ceremonialism about it all in the case of the whites, they did want Henry to know they agreed with him. Maybe they wouldn't have raised their voices at all if Henry hadn't spoken up. Maybe they wouldn't have backed up Jimmy alone nearly as well, if at all.

Remember, they voted for a Black vice president in such a way as hardly a single self-respecting Black liberationist today would say thank you for. And they supported the grievance only when it became a public question. Maybe that's a way of saying it was tokenism. But in spite of itself, it went beyond tokenism. And the Black stewards and Jimmy took strength from it and pushed harder after a couple of white stewards had spoken up. Then you could see that Hill was really thinking things over.

A few days later, after the grievance had gone to the front office of the plant and Jimmy and Henry argued it out around the mahogany table with Benny MacDonald, who didn't even offer them any cigars this time, the company agreed to put Willie into the gang.

It was a great victory.

Jimmy thought it was all over now. But old Henry knew it had just begun and he told Jimmy this was the first step and there would be lots more happening although he didn't know what.

Sure enough. About a week later, on a raw March morning, Jimmy came into work almost at the last minute before 7 a.m. And there was Willie with brand new overalls, on his first morning in the gang, trying to smile, while almost the whole gang was on the other side of the tool house.

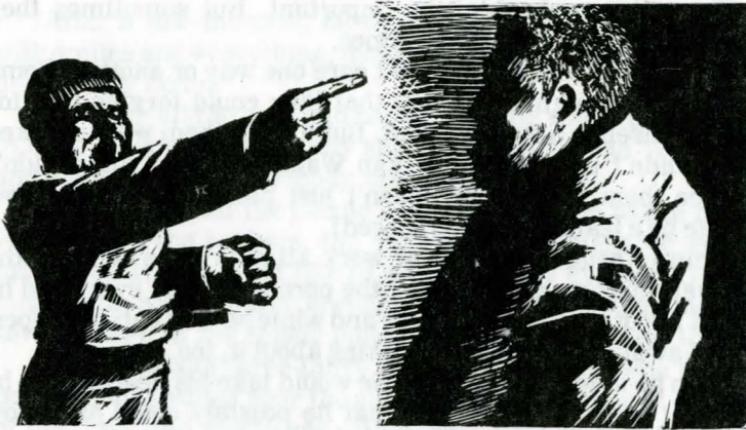
There was just one white guy talking to Willie, a guy named Johnny Locking. Johnny wasn't a steward, and never pretended to be such a great union man or anything. But he got so sore when he heard Van Waggoner and Hank Rogers using racist epithets in a loud voice and being nasty without anybody answering them back that he went over to talk to Willie, even though he had never really met him.

That small thing, that small action of Johnny Locking, was the link that got connected to one link after another in the next few days and weeks until almost every single white mechanic and helper was on the same wave-length with Johnny and acted like human beings. But at that particular moment it was also important that Jimmy Burns went up to Hank Rogers and Van Waggoner and spoke his piece to them and spoke it real loud, because then a few of the guys began openly agreeing with Jimmy for the first time.

It was more their sense of fairness than anything else, maybe. But Jimmy learned a lot from that.

He learned, for one thing, that if you let the loud-mouthed

racists have the whole floor, every other white will think he ought to be a racist, too. Why is that? Social pressure, maybe. Moral cowardice, perhaps. But the point is that the racism *can* be reversed. And white working people can be led by anti-racists as much as by pro-racists, if the leaders are strong—and they seize the time at the right time.



It was a victory for Willie and it was a victory for justice. But naturally Jimmy thought it was kind of a victory for *him*, too. He felt pretty good for the next couple of days. And as you might expect, he overdid things a little bit.

You know how sometimes you make a hit doing things one way and then you try the same thing over again and expect to do better than you did before, and suddenly you fall flat on your face? Well, that's about what Jimmy did.

He saw the gang accepting Willie and figured—maybe correctly—that Hank Rogers and Van Waggoner were a little isolated. So when Van Waggoner made a nasty remark a couple of days later, Jimmy walked up to him in front of four or five other guys in the tool house and gave him a real good scolding, much better than the first time—called him a dirty no-good racist and so on. Van being so big and tough, this made Jimmy look pretty good—at first.

But when Van answered Jimmy back, it was a little different. What he called Jimmy wouldn't look good in print, so I won't put it down here. But it not only wouldn't *look* good, it didn't *sound* good to the other guys and it was plain that they expected Jimmy to fight Van Waggoner—physically.

That's what I mean by Jimmy overdoing it. He couldn't have licked Van Waggoner under any conditions, and he knew it. But he had got himself in a position where he had to fight or be labeled sort of a coward by a lot of the guys.

These things shouldn't be important. But sometimes they are. And this was one of the times.

Some of the repairmen didn't care one way or another. Some were strong enough for Jimmy that they could forgive him for getting himself in a spot like that. But a lot of them were shocked that he didn't take a sock at Van Waggoner, and you couldn't convince them that Jimmy wasn't just plain scared. And how could he be a leader if he was scared?

Jimmy thought about it at work all day while some of the guys were looking at him out of the corner of their eyes. And he thought about it on the way home and while he was eating supper. He kept awake half the night thinking about it, too.

Then he made his decision. He would take his beating, but he would get everything out of it that he possibly could and show everybody he was game.

So the next morning he went up to Van Waggoner when everybody was still hanging around the tool house waiting for work assignments and he said:

"You know what you called me yesterday, Van?"

"So what are you going to do about it?" Van growled back at him.

"Just this. I'll be waiting for you out in front of the Buffalo Gate at three o'clock."

Van looked surprised and said, "Yeah, you and all your Black friends, I suppose."

Jimmy was very excited and nervous, and he held his voice low so it wouldn't squeak. "That won't be necessary," he said in what came off as the best cowboy picture style, somehow.

That was all, except that the rest of the work day was pretty tense. Jimmy knew he couldn't beat Van either at slugging or at boxing. But one thing he did know was that he could show everybody he was not afraid.

He did this by making a break away from work a few minutes early and dressed up fast, running out to Buffalo Gate so as to be there ahead of Van Waggoner. When people came out of the plant, at least a few of them would see him waiting there alone and figure that he was ready and waiting—and maybe even anxious—to fight.

Sure enough, Jimmy made it out there first. And even while he was nervous and scared, he waved at workers driving home in the direction of Buffalo.

After a few minutes, he waved more and more cheerfully with smiles and everything, making the most of the situation that he possibly could.

But then all the cars had passed and the whole plant seemed to have let out the whole day shift, and still no Van Waggoner—and for that matter, nobody else, either.

Where were all the people who usually came to see a fight? Where were the backers, the betters, the doubters, or even the plain bloodthirsty, that like to see somebody get hit? The word might not have gotten around to the whole department but seventy men in the repair gang certainly knew about the fight.

Finally, about three-thirty, old Mike Gorman, who lived in a part of Lackawanna near the plant and liked Jimmy, at least part of the time, and had never said a word against Willie, came up and asked:

“Are you still waiting for Van Waggoner?”

And when Jimmy said yes, he continued: “I saw him sneaking out Three Gate almost half an hour ago. You might as well go home. He ain’t going to fight anybody today.”

Jimmy could hardly believe it. He asked Mike if he were sure.

Mike was sure.

Well, it was kind of comical in a way. And the next day there were a few hidden smiles all around, although nobody said anything out loud, except an old Croatian pipefitter who told Jimmy (who at that time was helping in the pipe gang) to do some little job and then said:

“Now don’t give me any argument. You’re not talking to Van Waggoner now.”

And Jimmy knew he wasn’t supposed to say anything, but just grin and do what he was supposed to do.

Why didn’t Van Waggoner show up? It was cowardice all right, but cowardice of a special sort. Van Waggoner was such a racist that he really thought that the furnace men were going to get him if he fought with Jimmy!

But why didn’t any *Black furnace men* show up to give Jimmy some backing?

Not many of them probably knew about the fight, although Willie Brainard might have told somebody on the furnace floor and it would have got all around. If they did know about it (and Jimmy never asked a single one if they did), they must have

stayed away for exactly the opposite reason of Van Waggoner. That is, they didn't want anybody to think that it was a racial question and they might be drawn into a showdown with a whole bunch of whites and make bad feelings that wouldn't go away for a long time.

But the real question is: why didn't a single person from the white repairmen come and either back up Jimmy or back Van Waggoner?

Only a few days before it looked like the majority of them were against Willie Brainard and all set to keep him out of the gang. Then came a fight, a physical fight between a white supporter of Willie and a white opponent. And they just didn't feel like coming around.

Maybe if it had been a Black guy fighting a white guy, maybe if it had been Willie fighting Van Waggoner (and Willie could have beaten Van Waggoner with one hand, almost) it might have been different. Maybe they didn't know which side they were really on. I would like to say that they had overcome their racism thoroughly. But that wasn't true, either.

You don't always come out roses when you take a strong stand. You might go down. But if you're determined to fight anyway, you often have a better chance, especially when big things are involved besides your own personal welfare.

The good guy in the cowboy movies is supposed to have an advantage because the angels are on his side. That is quite a big piece of baloney. But maybe in the Lackawanna plant, Jimmy had an advantage because some of the good in everybody was on his side.



Well, after all this, you could say that there had been a real victory. But was there any great education of the whites against racism? Was there, as they say nowadays, any “raising of consciousness?” Did the white guys learn from all this that Black workers are just as good as white and all deserve the same opportunities?

Maybe they learned a little, but if they did, it didn’t show much.

Willie himself was so patient and goodnatured (although as I have said, he could have licked at least three quarters of the gang with one hand) that it wasn’t long before you heard little half-racist cracks again—after things settled down and nobody “blamed” Jimmy Burns any more.

And when Jimmy would ask them—How about Willie Brainard? Ain’t he just as good as any white mechanic?—they would say:

“Aw you know he’s not the same as them others!”

Well that was pretty ignorant. But that was the way it was.

Racism does go pretty deep. The white guys didn’t change their basic understanding when they accepted Willie—at least, not in any way you could notice or see in their conversation or attitude about the Black people as a whole. They just somehow got it in their minds that Willie was different—almost as if he was white, even though he was as dark as anybody in Alabama.

Well, a few weeks went by and Jimmy felt a let-down because

after all that fighting and arguing and almost-fighting, everything seemed just like it was before.

And then a funny thing happened.

A few guys in the gang used to work as "turn men"—that is, a millwright, repairman and repair helper would work together on the day turn, then a week three to eleven, and then a week on eleven to seven. On the afternoon and midnight shifts they would be the only repairmen on duty.

Usually they wouldn't work too hard, but they often fixed some important emergency breakdown. Once in a while the breakdown would involve pipe work, and they would phone back to the shop for the pipefitters, who also had a couple of guys on "turn." But the pipefitters would often take another fifteen or twenty minutes to get to the breakdown and sometimes even longer if they were out on another job already.

So the company thought of the bright idea of making the turn repair crew each carry a pipe wrench along with their other tools when they went out on a job.

Naturally, the mechanics didn't like the idea of carrying the extra wrench or doing the extra work. And naturally, they made themselves look good by saying they were thinking of the pipefitters and didn't want to put one of them out of work. And of course the company—in the person of Bob Fallon—swore up and down that no pipefitter would be displaced.

Anyway, although it seemed like a small thing, it got hotter and hotter when Fallon just laughed at the grievance and John Hill hardly listened either. The gang was steamed up enough to walk out, although you wouldn't think they'd want to lose a day's pay or more over a couple of men carrying or not carrying a pipe wrench.

Jimmy Burns wondered if all the big talk really amounted to anything, especially when he remembered how hard it had been a year earlier to get the gang to walk out a half hour ahead of quitting time to demonstrate for the eight-hour instead of the eight-and-a-half-hour day.

But it was serious. And as a matter of fact, the victory over the eight-hour day was in everybody's memory, too. Only they remembered the victory better than they remembered how nobody walked out at first.

So there they were, ready to walk. But the company was ready, too. The company could get enough foremen to take care

of repair emergencies for a single day. And it was all set to bring extra repairmen over from the open hearths and the shops if the stoppage lasted more than a day. And the top union leadership might sanction that, if it wasn't done too obviously. There sometimes wasn't a clear line between the shopmen's work and the repair gang's work. And the shopmen could easily say they weren't scabbing.

But a walkout was a walkout, and it would be a good demonstration, regardless. That's the way the guys looked at it. They were so burned up by this time that they almost didn't care if they won the beef or not. They just wanted to express themselves.

So Jimmy, Arnie and Johnny and a couple of others were organizing it and talking it up. And so the furnace workers heard about it, too.

And when Jimmy was doing some repairs on old H Furnace (which one time had the world's record for production of cast iron, but wasn't about to win any new ones), Henry said:

"Say, why didn't you tell us about the walkout?"

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Jimmy, just as he was getting the idea of what Henry did mean.

"Maybe we might walk out, too," said Henry.

Jimmy looked at Henry and grinned. Then he whistled. "Do you think all the furnaces would go?" he asked.

"Why not?" said Henry.

Now Jimmy hadn't even thought about the idea of asking the furnace men to back up the repair gang, but not because he was worried about what had happened in the case of Willie Brainard. He figured that the furnace men liked what had happened all right.

But he knew very well that the furnace men didn't think much about a grievance on carrying an extra wrench that might weigh five pounds at the most. He could see the great double-length, double-thick iron crowbars they used every day. In fact he had done turns as blacksmith-helper and hefted these bars when the blacksmith sharpened and re-tempered them and he had a healthy respect for anybody who could work half the day over red-hot iron with them.

He had seen big, barrel-chested men grunting and heaving as they worked with these bars, prying the just-hardened iron puddles out of the runners. And he often saw the third helpers

carrying two or three of these brutal tools to the blacksmith's shop, carrying what amounted to ten or fifteen good-sized wrenches, at least, all as part of the day's work—and not the hardest.

He knew that not one furnace man in the whole department could really identify himself with the white mechanic who didn't want to carry a pipe wrench.

Then he looked at Henry's face again and he knew that Henry meant it. Then he went up on C Furnace and saw Dave Hope and he went up to A and B and saw Albert Gresham and Milton Howard and he saw *their* faces, and he knew that *they* meant it.



So the next day they all walked out—all. That is—furnace men, repairmen, gas washers, ore dock shovellers, cranimen, gantrymen, skip car operators, stockhouse workers, laborers—everybody.

The way it was done was something, too. Henry, Albert, Dave, and Milton walked through the department with Jimmy Burns. And it was already so well organized, all they had to do was tell the workers that the company had not changed its position on the pipe wrenches.

Everybody just nodded. Especially the furnace men.

One third helper was still up in the furnace crane when the committee came by, and he just held up his one right hand palm upward as if to ask how things were (you couldn't have heard him shout very well from where he was, anyway). And Dave just shrugged with both of his palms turned upward, as though to say, "the boss says no." And the third helper ran the crane back to the wall and got out and came down right away.

It's really something to see when a whole blast furnace department shuts down at once. It was something then, and it still is now.

The big furnaces are constantly under a tremendous pressure of heated air, and when you shut them down, you let the blast pressure off into the atmosphere and the whole town of Lackawanna hears it. When you do this with five furnaces at once, it is quite an occasion.

When the first one goes, it reminds you of a comet taking off from the earth instead of cruising around in ellipses a few billion miles away. There's a WHO-O-O-O-M that would wake the dead. In fact, it wakes the living night shift workers who are sleeping over in Lackawanna. And when the other furnaces let out with the same noise, the sleepers wonder if it's a walkout or a big accident. The Fire Department phones up to see if the steel and cement, clay and copper and other materials require their services. The undertakers get ready for company-paid business.

In addition to the furnaces, there are other spectaculars.

The big ore-bridge cranes that go back and forth over mountainous piles of ore, with the bridge part about eighty feet in the air and the legs on a lot of train wheels, with a cab going back and forth on the bridge, dangling a ten-ton bucket below—these big cranes all roll to the end of the ore field and the operators climb down slowly, bringing their lunch pails with them, so there is no mistaking their intentions.

And the heavy "gantry" cars on the trestle—they all bunch together neatly at one end of the trestle and *their* operators get out.

Then, when all the laborers and other workers see and hear all this, in case anyone had any worries that the walkout was on or off, all doubts are resolved and everybody heads for the showers.

But the key to the whole thing as you can plainly see, is the blast furnace men, themselves. And although they had had big struggles before, although they had practically *led* the organizing strike of 1941 as I have said, and although they had been at the very core of the general national strike of 1946 and led the fight when the foremen scabbed, although they had run one wildcat of their own after that when a furnace man was unfairly fired—this was absolutely the first time they went out for a "white" gang's grievance exclusively.

The company lost five thousand tons of blast furnace iron that day. But they lost a lot more.

Because we won. We all won. The millwrights never had to carry the pipe wrench, you can be sure of that. But a little more than that was won.

Jimmy, for instance, could go up to almost anybody in the repair gang and say, "Well, why do you suppose we got so much

help on that grievance?" or "You know why the furnaces walked out with us, don't you?"

And the guys would always say, "Yeah" in a very impressed way and look thoughtful as though they were chewing over some strange-tasting tobacco and being surprised that they liked it.

Jimmy wasn't much of a preacher, and he couldn't have been one in the blast furnace department even if he had wanted to be. But he did take the opportunity to tell it like it was. The white gang didn't learn as much about Black history or white oppression as they should have, of course. But they did learn something about *equality*, and they began to understand the great power of the BLAST FURNACE BROTHERS.

That summer and fall—without fights, without racial epithets and without even talking about it—there were nine more Black repairmen in the blast furnace repair gang.

It wasn't the millenium and the saloons and churches in Lackawanna were still the same as they had been before. But it was enough to show you that things could be different than they are.

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