

An Incident at the Statler Hotel: A Black Pittsburgh Teamster Demands Fair Treatment During the Second World War

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On September 23, 1944, Theodore Johnson, a black Teamster leader from Local 609 in Pittsburgh, was denied entrance to the ballroom at the Statler Hotel in Washington, D.C.¹ His fellow Teamster officers had gathered there for a formal dinner and then a speech by President Franklin Roosevelt. Johnson responded by demanding an explanation from his union. He rebuked them for allowing such racial discrimination to be directed against a fellow union officer and for allowing it to occur at a time when blacks and whites were fighting together against a fascist enemy. When the national Teamsters Union's response to his complaint proved evasive, a local Pittsburgh civil rights group, which was formed earlier in the war, offered Johnson assistance. The Teamsters Union and its white leadership eventually provided Johnson with an explanation of the incident and promised immediate satisfaction should similar acts occur in the future.

Johnson's exclusion provides a snapshot of race relations in one of America's largest unions during World War II. It highlights a struggle for fair treatment by blacks in an old main line affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Furthermore, this incident demonstrates how some working-class blacks in Pittsburgh participated in the greater spirit of militancy for civil rights that historians have observed among African Americans in general during World War II.

Black Membership in White Dominated AFL Unions: The Teamsters in Pittsburgh

Much has been written recently about the struggle against racial discrimination in organized labor during the post-New Deal years. Most of this scholarship has centered on unions in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Formed originally as the Committee for Industrial Organization in 1935 under the leadership of John L. Lewis, the CIO stressed more aggressive organizing efforts, especially towards industrial workers and the unskilled, than had the often conservative and craft-dominated American Federation of Labor (AFL). Earlier accounts of the CIO stressed the way in which it broke with the more racist traditions of the AFL and actively recruited black membership.² A new revisionist school, championed by Herbert Hill, argues that racism, though modified in the CIO, remained very much a part

of organized labor in the younger labor federation.³ This debate has renewed interest in the connections between class and race in American labor history, but it has not challenged the assumption that typically exclusionary AFL unions experienced no real meaningful change in this period. Summing up the understanding of many scholars in this field, William H. Harris concluded that the CIO may have been acting “partly to win black support in its fight with AFL unions. But in fact, there was no contest. Most AFL unions, as well as the national office, remained staunch supporters of status quo racism.”⁴

What scholarship exists on race relations in the AFL unions during this period tends to date back several decades and largely consists of descriptions of their discriminatory practices. Indeed an early generation of scholars, writing in the 1930s, methodically documented the range and scale of racial exclusion and discrimination in AFL unions. Pioneering work by Sterling D. Spero, Abram L. Harris, and others, revealed that a number of AFL unions completely excluded black workers, while many others segregated them into separate and often inferior local unions. Black members of these white-dominated unions often lacked full citizenship rights within their organizations. The top leadership of the AFL, including such figures as Samuel Gompers, seemed to share the racist predilections dominant among whites of that time and took no effective action to protect the rights of black workers.⁵ Not until A. Philip Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in the mid-1930s did the AFL contain an affiliate that took a strong stand for racial justice.⁶ Some historians have argued that at the turn of the century this pattern of discrimination may have been modified in two large AFL unions, the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the International Longshoremen’s Association.⁷ Still, the general consensus remains firm. Those three affiliates have become the exceptions that prove the rule of a generally discriminatory climate within the AFL. Nell Irvin Painter explained this consensus when she wrote, “With the exception of the mineworkers’ and longshoremen’s unions, the left-led unions, and the unique Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, black workers and organized labor were mutually exclusive until the rise of the CIO in the mid-1930’s.”⁸

As the scholarship on the AFL and African Americans now stands, there are two problems. First, especially as summarized by Painter and others, the pattern of exclusion has been overemphasized. Black members of AFL unions have been generalized out of existence. Secondly, the agency of black workers within these discriminatory unions has been overlooked. How did African Americans within these discriminatory AFL unions react to their situation? Did they accept it, concluding that it was the inevitable result of white racism, and simply take what little protection or assistance their union offered? Or did they challenge the discrimination and hold their unions up against the AFL’s own rhetoric of brotherhood and unity?⁹

The short history of the incident at the Statler Hotel offers important insights on both of these problems. It reminds us of the significant presence of black members in those AFL affiliates often dismissed broadly as exclusionary. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), one of the largest labor organizations in the AFL, did not exclude blacks from membership and in this case African American members did object to discrimination within their union. A local black Teamster leader, Theodore Johnson, tried to hold his national union accountable; as a union member and as a representative of other black Teamsters he expected to be treated with fairness and respect by the national leadership of his union. Johnson and other Pittsburgh blacks drew added justification for their protest from the nation's obvious need for unity in the midst of World War II.

In 1944 Theodore Johnson served as the Secretary-Treasurer of Refuse & Salvage Drivers and Helpers Union, Teamsters Local 609 located in Pittsburgh. Local 609 had about 350 members, all of whom apparently were black and worked hauling garbage. In an example of the way in which black members of AFL affiliates have been generalized out of existence, Local 609 has not been mentioned in any of the previous literature about black workers in Pittsburgh. Ira Reid's 1930 survey of black union members found only 518 of them in Pittsburgh, none in the Teamsters Union.¹⁰ Dennis Dickerson's later study asserted that, "The Pittsburgh local of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a racially separate group, was alone among AFL-affiliated organizations with a large black membership. Between 1935 and 1937 their numbers grew modestly from 142 to 153."¹¹ Dickerson makes no mention of a black Teamsters local union twice as large.

These earlier studies overlooked the black Teamsters of Pittsburgh probably because of the chronology of the local's union's formation; the local had an on-again-off-again history. A Teamsters local composed of black workers had existed in Pittsburgh before the first World War. Local 266, organized between 1912 and 1915, represented a couple of hundred African Americans who worked as garbage haulers.¹² Sometime between 1917 and 1920 that local gave up its charter.¹³ Two decades later, in 1937, the Teamsters Union issued a new union charter to black refuse haulers.¹⁴ The new Local 609 apparently represented the same type of workers who had previously belonged to Local 266. Unfortunately there are not enough records to indicate whether any further similarities existed; for instance, no records indicate who were the officers of the earlier Local 266. We thus cannot know if any of them helped lead the later Local 609. It is also possible that the old Local 266 had continued on as an independent organization after dropping its affiliation with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The available historical records, however, reveal nothing either way on the subject.

What we do know is that by December 1937 about 325 African-American workers belonged to Local 609. In the years that followed the membership ranged between 250 dues paying members and a peak of 380, with the average somewhere around 350.¹⁵ The size of Local 609's membership indicates that, in fact, a relatively high proportion of Pittsburgh's black teamsters were unionized. The United States Census of 1940 had found only 901 black men working as chauffeurs, truck drivers, and deliverymen in Pittsburgh; so the members of Local 609 made up over a third of all the working black teamsters in the city.¹⁶

A high rate of union membership did not mean that the conditions of Pittsburgh's African American Teamsters were ideal. In the twentieth century blacks had come to play a smaller and more menial role in Pittsburgh's trucking and driving business. In 1900, black drivers comprised 18 percent of all working teamsters in Pittsburgh, by 1940 they were only 9.6 percent. According to one account, blacks in those earlier years had "held the majority of taxi, hack, bus, and truck driver positions in Pittsburgh." Over time the tide of racism increased, as did the competition from second generation European immigrants. Those African Americans who continued to work as drivers found themselves consigned to the most menial of positions.¹⁷ They could, for instance, get work hauling garbage, but by the 1930s could no longer work as taxi drivers. The Yellow Taxi Company, which held a monopoly in Pittsburgh, refused to hire them.¹⁸

This marginalization affected more than black teamsters in Pittsburgh. According to historian Peter Gottlieb, this same pattern of discrimination hit African Americans across a range of occupations in the city during these years. Gottlieb's history of the southern black migration from 1916-1930 describes how earlier in the century blacks in Pittsburgh had enjoyed the possibility of gaining higher skills and more lucrative positions in a range of industries. By the 1920s, however, they were consigned to the most menial, unskilled, and least lucrative occupations. In the steel industry, for instance, they had become, as Gottlieb describes it, "a reserve army" of unskilled and often casual labor to be put to work on the least palatable jobs. In the service sector blacks lost the better paying jobs that served white clientele. For instance, black porters, replaced by whites at the higher priced downtown hotels, were left to work at the railroad stations.¹⁹ Describing changes in the steel industry in these years, Gottlieb observed: "The result of the employers' practices in assigning work to their new black employees was the emergence of a range of 'black' jobs in Pittsburgh."²⁰ His observation describes equally well the changes among the teamsters.

Employers set these restrictive hiring policies, but white workers also played a role in the growing discrimination being practiced against their black counterparts. In factories and other jobsites white workers often refused to

work alongside blacks.²¹ Evidence indicates that white local Teamster Union members also took part in the efforts to limit blacks to particular driving occupations. During a strike against Kaufman's Department Store in 1916, the store had hired black delivery drivers. Department store drivers enjoyed a comparatively prestigious position in the hierarchy of jobs available to teamsters. After the strike the local white Teamsters, who would not accept blacks holding such jobs, successfully campaigned to get all of these black drivers, fired.²² At times black teamsters came to resent their white counterparts. The black drivers who found themselves banned from driving taxicabs in Pittsburgh clearly blamed their white counterparts for the discrimination. In 1947, when a new taxi company formed in Pittsburgh specifically to serve the needs of blacks in that city, its all-black driving force refused to join the local Teamsters affiliate with jurisdiction over taxidivers. As the local Teamsters organizer described their decision to the national headquarters, the black taxi drivers "refused to join the Cab Drivers Union as they maintained that Local Union 128 never had any colored drivers and they never had an opportunity to drive a taxi cab and they didn't feel they wanted to join that organization at this time."²³

Discrimination within the Teamsters Union in Pittsburgh existed, but on the other hand the black members of Teamsters Local 609 belonged to a national union, the IBT, which unlike several other AFL affiliates historically had been open to African Americans. The white founders of the IBT in 1903 had faced a teaming industry in which black workers played an important role. According to the Census of 1900, African Americans comprised about 12% of the teamster workforce nationwide. In the South they played an even more important role, sometimes making up over 90 percent of the local teamsters.²⁴ To build a stable union, the IBT made efforts to organize these black teamsters, and the national union's leaders had promised fair treatment to those who joined.²⁵ By 1912 perhaps as many as one-seventh of the IBT's total membership was made up of black teamsters.²⁶

Treatment of these black members by their union at the local level varied a great deal. Some northern locals were integrated with both black and white officers serving side by side.²⁷ Southern locals seem to have universally practiced segregation with separate locals for white and black teamsters. But, at least in some cases, these separate black and white locals worked together in a tight partnership. They negotiated together with their employers, when necessary they took joint strike votes, and finally they walked the picket line together. In New Orleans, black and white drivers in such segregated locals received equal wages.²⁸

As a national organization, compared to some other AFL affiliates, the IBT could in some ways appear open and fair. In Herbert Northrup's 1944 survey, *Organized Labor and the Negro*, he found fourteen national unions that formally excluded blacks from membership; six were AFL affiliates. In

those unions the national organizations' constitutions specifically banned blacks from membership. Several other AFL affiliates practiced exclusion, but less directly or less formally. The large and important International Association of Machinists had a clause in its membership ritual that barred black workers. According to Northrup, six other national unions affiliated with the AFL "habitually exclude Negroes by tacit consent." In addition, seven AFL affiliates accepted black members, but limited them to membership in separate Jim Crow local unions. In these AFL affiliates the segregated local unions functioned as auxiliary locals whose black members lacked basic citizenship in their unions. In the Boilermakers for instance, black locals could not have their own business agent. Instead, a white business agent from the nearest white local union "supervised" a segregated local. Black members of these segregated locals paid the same union dues as white Boilermakers, but received only half the death and disability benefits. Finally, black Boilermakers in these segregated locals had no say in governing their national union, as their auxiliary locals could not send any delegates to the national union's convention.²⁹

In the Teamsters, on the other hand, no such formalized system of discrimination existed. Black local union officers served as delegates to national conventions and black Teamsters served as officers in both segregated and integrated local unions. No formal policy of racial exclusion had been adopted by the IBT; instead the union's 1940 national constitution promised that "any person 18 years [of age] or over, of good moral character, employed in the craft or the various employments over which this International has jurisdiction, shall be eligible for membership."³⁰ The Teamsters' official journal proudly proclaimed in 1942 that, "There is no line, insofar as the colored race is concerned, in our organization." "It is the duty of our general membership," the article asserted, "to see to it that he [the Negro member] enjoys the same conditions for the same kind of work and is given the same understanding and consideration when grievances occur, as any other member." Officially the union was proud of both its black members and its enlightened policies. This same article warmly observed that in the Teamsters Union, "some of our best members belong to the Negro race." During an AFL Convention in October 1942, IBT President Daniel Tobin responded to A. Philip Randolph's criticism of discriminatory policies in the labor federation by noting that the Teamsters had more black members than Randolph's own Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.³¹

Yet on the local level discrimination continued in spite of the formal ban. Theodore Johnson and another officer from Local 609 attended the national Teamsters' Convention in 1940, and they would attend again in 1947.³² The members of Local 609, however, could not transfer into Pittsburgh's other Teamster local, Local 128 because they could not get jobs driving a cab in their city. Nor was this an isolated case. Blacks in St. Louis and Chicago

protested in the late 1930s against Teamster locals in their cities which would not allow African Americans to deliver milk and other goods.³³ In spite of their claims of fair treatment, the national leadership of the Teamsters allowed this kind of occupational discrimination. As President Tobin explained in 1943, "we admit to membership Negroes who are qualified to do our work and we place the responsibility on the employer as to whether or not those applicants for membership are qualified to perform the work." Tobin acknowledged that such discrimination occurred, but he carefully placed all of the blame for it at the feet of the employers. "The entire responsibility as to the ability of the individual to perform the work, is left with the employer," he emphasized.³⁴ For their part, employers, in Pittsburgh and elsewhere, could point out that they simply bowed to the prejudices of their white, unionized employees.

Thus when Theodore Johnson traveled to Washington, D.C., in September 1944, he went as a black local union leader in a union that proclaimed its openness and fairness, but he must have known that the national IBT still allowed racial discrimination to occur. His reaction to events in Washington that month indicate, however, that Johnson did not accept such discrimination.

An Incident at the Statler Hotel in 1944 and a Demand for an Explanation

In late September 1944, the President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Daniel Tobin, called together local Teamster leaders from across the country to come to Washington, D.C., for a national union conference.³⁵ On the evening of September 23, these delegates were invited to attend a special dinner at the ballroom of the Statler Hotel where they would hear a speech by President Franklin Roosevelt launching his 1944 re-election campaign. Although some 700 Teamster officials attended the dinner that night and enthusiastically cheered Roosevelt on, Theodore Johnson was not one of them.³⁶ He had been barred entrance at the door. Who exactly denied him entrance that night—personnel from the hotel, the union, or some other party—remains unclear, but he ultimately blamed the union for allowing the discrimination to occur.

Johnson responded to the incident by sending a bitter telegram to the union's national headquarters. "I consider this act of discrimination to be not only against me and the 350 members who I represent," he wired, "but against the entire Negro race." It was, he asserted, a particularly inappropriate time for such casual acts of racism. His wire read, "This is very significant at this time of war and especially during this presidential campaign." He wanted an explanation and wrote, "I would like this matter clarified before I return to my people." The telegram went out at five minutes to midnight, only a few hours after he was barred entrance.³⁷

Four days later, national Vice-President Thomas Flynn, wrote back an evasive letter. As a representative of the national union, Flynn observed that

Johnson had been issued a ticket for the dinner and a place had been reserved for him at one of the tables. Flynn suggested that some type of misunderstanding had occurred and the union should not be blamed. He asked Johnson to write back with more details and the national headquarters would look further into the matter. "There was no discrimination whatever on the part of any of the officials of this union so far as I can learn," wrote Flynn.³⁸

Johnson remained unmollified by this response and apparently turned for support to a local civil rights group that had emerged in Pittsburgh in 1942. In reply to the efforts by the national union to brush off the incident, the Greater Pittsburgh Citizens' Coordinating Committee wrote to President Tobin asserting that the incident at the Statler Hotel had assumed a great significance to working people in Pittsburgh. "The rank and file teamsters of Local 609 and of the Negro people generally, and most especially the trade unionists of this community, have heard of this occurrence and are bitterly opposed to the action of the person or persons responsible for this malicious act." The incident could not be casually excused or swept to the side, the Committee warned Tobin. "These individuals are insisting that an investigation be made by you, Mr. Tobin, and that an explanation as well as an apology be made to Mr. Johnson, the Negro people, Local Union 609 and to the trade unionists." As had Johnson, the Citizens' Coordinating Committee reminded the IBT of how inappropriate such acts of discrimination were during the time of shared sacrifice that existed in World War II. "It has become obvious that the purpose for which we are fighting this war and the social objective toward the world is moving, is in just the opposite [direction] of what took place in Washington, D.C."³⁹

The Greater Pittsburgh Citizens' Coordinating Committee exemplified a new sense of militancy among African Americans and a willingness to organize for change that had emerged during the Second World War. The Coordinating Committee claimed to represent "40 civic, labor, and fraternal organizations" in the Pittsburgh area. Its proclaimed goal was to join "together in a public-spirited movement to insure the fullest participation of colored citizens in the war effort, i.e. training, employment opportunities, civilian defense and adequate housing." It had been formed in early 1942 and was led by James M. Reid, the News Editor for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black newspaper.⁴⁰ The correspondence addressed to the Teamsters Union was signed by the Trade Union Section of the Coordinating Committee, specifically B. F. Gibson, Chairman, and Fred Holmes, Secretary.

A wave of organization building took place in the African-American community during these years. Both Gibson and Holmes also held leadership positions in the National Negro Congress branch in Pittsburgh. Formed after a national conference of 200 black organizations held in 1936, the National Negro Congress' declared goal had been to improve the economic condition

of black Americans. It represented both the rise of new civil rights organizations in the New Deal and the great focus that these civil rights groups gave to economic issues.⁴¹ World War II also brought the growth of a number of civil rights organizations across the U.S. A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement and the Congress of Racial Equality were two new national organizations, but there were a host of new local committees too. By one count "over a hundred city, state, religious, and community race relations committees" had been formed by 1943.⁴²

This spirit of militancy and organization drew strength from the tensions involved in mobilizing a racially divided nation for war against fascist and totalitarian regimes. While the federal government declared itself the champion of democracy abroad, African Americans raised the question of how much real democracy they enjoyed in America. Historian Richard Dalifume has noted that during World War II, "cynicism and hope existed side by side in the Negro mind." African Americans discovered that they could use the war to challenge white Americans to do better in the field of race relations. The *Pittsburgh Courier* observed in one of its editorials: "What an opportunity the crisis has been . . . for a more enlightened attitude toward a tenth of its people."⁴³

During the war African Americans in the South and the North more vigorously protested a variety of discriminatory practices—from the denial of political and legal rights in the South, to the common *de facto* segregation practiced in many Northern communities.⁴⁴ Pennsylvania's blacks, for instance, benefited technically from a state law calling for equal access to public facilities regardless of race. In practice, though, in Pittsburgh during World War II segregation frequently occurred. Most of the larger hotels would not accept blacks as guests. Some restaurants refused them service. And, as we have seen, they were banned from some occupations, such as taxi driving. A 1945 study found that two-fifths of the manufacturing firms in Pittsburgh's Allegheny County would not hire blacks. In 1943 a *New York Times* reporter wandering through Pittsburgh's main black district, the Hill, encountered a sense of the opportunity that the war provided to express impatience with these conditions. One man explained to the reporter, "You can't expect the Negro to fight for democracy on foreign soil and not be resentful of the fact that democracy is being denied to his family back home."⁴⁵

This was the attitude that Theodore Johnson expressed when segregation blocked him from attending his own union's meeting in September 1944. A year earlier, in January 1943, Johnson's Local 609 had been the first Teamster Local in the Pittsburgh Joint Council to sign up all of its members for a government war bond drive, proving their dedication to the fight to save democracy.⁴⁶ Johnson now demanded that his national union do a better job of standing up for his rights.

The story of Johnson and his actions in this case highlight the strong ties between this new civil rights militancy and the black working class. These ties were particularly strong in the city where he lived and worked. In Pittsburgh for instance, the local chapter of the National Urban League, following the pattern of civil rights groups nationally, had begun in the mid-1930s to deal with the economic concerns of black workers in that city. William Hill, who began serving as the Industrial Secretary of the Pittsburgh branch of National Urban League (NUL) in the mid-1930s, concentrated his efforts on training African-American workers for construction work while he lobbied hard to get them admitted to AFL unions in the area. Hill, along with R. Maurice Moss, the Executive Secretary of the Pittsburgh NUL, helped set up a series of "Workers' Schools" from 1937-1938. Over 500 workers reportedly attended these schools, where college professors, professionals, and community leaders sought to "train workers for intelligent participation in the process of industrial and political democracy." In effect, these were leadership seminars, meant to train black workers to get the most out of their union membership by teaching them skills in public speaking, parliamentary procedure, and giving them a background in labor issues and current events.⁴⁷ At about the same time that the Urban League set up those schools, a local chapter of the National Negro Congress formed. There were ties between the two organizations. According to the FBI intelligence records, in 1938 William Hill served in leadership positions both in the Urban League and with the Allegheny County Committee for the Second National Negro Congress.⁴⁸

Johnson himself represented a link between the African-American working class and the civil rights movement. It is not known whether or not Johnson went to one of the Workers' Schools, although it certainly seems possible, even likely, since Local 609 received its charter from Teamsters Union at the same time that those courses were being held. But we do know that he participated in the Pittsburgh branch of the National Negro Congress. In April 1942, he attended a conference sponsored by that group on "The Negro and the War." The speakers included union officials from Pittsburgh branches of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union and the Building Service Employees Union.⁴⁹ By 1943, according to FBI intelligence reports the National Negro Congress (NNC) in Pittsburgh had become inactive. According to the Bureau, "the membership of this organization (NNC) is accomplishing its purpose through the Citizens Coordinating Committee."⁵⁰ Thus, a year later, when Johnson found himself blocked from a meeting of his own union, he turned not to the NNC, but to the Citizens' Coordinating Committee.

The Teamsters Union Reacts

As Johnson sought help outside the AFL, the national office of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters had begun to explore the incident at

the Statler Hotel with more care. His complaint was referred to the local General Organizer for the Pittsburgh area, Albert Dietrich. After meeting in person with Johnson and then the entire executive board of Local 609, the Refuse and Salvage Drivers Local, Dietrich reported back to the national headquarters. He had found that Johnson and the other local black union officers blamed the union, not the hotel, for the act of stopping Johnson from entering the dinner on September 23. Dietrich wrote: "They feel that the discrimination was by the International Union instead of the Statler Hotel as the delegate was able to attend the Conference held at the Statler Hotel on Sunday morning after the dinner."⁵¹

Dietrich proposed that the union offer Johnson the explanation he and the Citizen's Coordinating Committee had been demanding. The explanation, Dietrich suggested, should come first hand from the union's national officers at their headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana. "I believe that if a meeting was arranged in Indianapolis so that a couple of their officers along with the writer could come down and discuss this particular situation with you that an understanding could be reached satisfactorily to all parties concerned." The meeting, Dietrich argued, should be soon, as early as October 19, two weeks in the future.⁵² Writing back, national headquarters agreed to Dietrich's proposal.⁵³

The meeting took place a week later than Dietrich suggested, but everything else seems to have followed his plan. Johnson came to Indianapolis, accompanied by another Local 609 officer, and by the organizer, Dietrich. They met with Thomas Flynn, who had assumed the position of acting union president while Tobin worked on Franklin Roosevelt's re-election campaign.⁵⁴ We do not know how Johnson felt after this meeting; no record of his thoughts remains. But we do have an account of the encounter that Flynn sent to the Citizen's Coordinating Committee the day after the meeting. It described what had taken place and—one can assume—reviewed the explanations that he had provided to Johnson.

Flynn's account depicts something short of an apology. However, it also describes a meeting where IBT leaders made a real effort at explanation, along with expressions of contrition. Partly, Flynn offered excuses for what had happened on September 23. "I am sure that you realize that in setting up this dinner there were many complications," Flynn explained. "The Government, as well as the Secret Service, the photographers, the news writers and others made it necessary every few hours to make some changes in the seating of the delegates." And, he allowed, in the confusion the union had made a mistake. "Unfortunately, in one of the misunderstandings, Brother Johnson was involved."

Though he acknowledged that the incident was regrettable, Flynn defended the IBT, arguing that the incident was exceptional. "The colored representatives

and members of our organization, not only in Pennsylvania, but [in] all places in the country have never had any occasion to find fault in all previous conferences, conventions or gatherings of our people.” Johnson and several other black delegates had attended the IBT’s national convention in Washington in 1940. According to Flynn, they “were afforded every consideration. They attended the sessions in the Constitutional Hall, as well as the dinner and banquet given at the Mayflower Hotel.” In another section of the letter, Flynn carried this line of argument further, in fact beyond the bounds of accuracy. “I want to assure your committee that it has always been the policy and practice of this International Union that there be no discrimination of any nature because of race, color or creed.”

If the meeting gave the IBT a chance to defend itself, it also seems clear from Flynn’s letter that they wanted to satisfy Johnson’s complaint by promising to do better in the future. Flynn wrote the Coordinating Committee: “We have assured the representatives of Local 609 that if there is ever any question [that] arises regarding a matter of this kind again that they are immediately to take it up with myself or President Tobin.”⁵⁵ After the meeting in late October 1944, the incident at the Statler Hotel was apparently resolved. No further correspondence in reference to it survives and all parties involved seemed to have gone on to other matters.

Conclusion

We can draw several conclusions from the history of this incident, some more interesting than others. Johnson’s exclusion from the Washington meeting highlights the sorts of racial discrimination that existed within the Teamsters Union in 1944. All parties seemed to have agreed that Johnson’s fellow union officers, not the hotel’s employees, blocked him from entering the Statler’s Ballroom that night to hear President Roosevelt’s speech. The IBT might claim, as Flynn had written, that the union’s policy forbade “discrimination of any nature,” but practice sometimes differed from policy. Still, the existence of discrimination would not have been surprising to Johnson given the sorts of exclusion that he knew occurred in Pittsburgh where, for instance, black drivers could not drive cabs. Neither does this sort of discrimination offer anything new to our understanding of the Teamsters and the American Federation of Labor in general. Most historians writing on race and labor have depicted these AFL unions as at least racially discriminatory, if not completely exclusionary.

The reactions to Johnson’s exclusion by all of the parties involved, however, provide us with new insights on race relations in the Teamsters Union, and in the AFL in general. First, Johnson’s response indicates not acceptance, but anger. If he was at all representative of other black Teamster members, his reaction reveals that they expected their union to afford them a measure of

respect and fair treatment. Like Johnson they could hold the union up to its own policy statements against discrimination. References to the war effort reveal that Johnson's and the Coordinating Committee's complaints about discrimination drew strength from the general rise in militancy among blacks in World War II. Similar to other African Americans, union members such as Johnson saw the war as an opportunity to shame white Americans for their discriminatory practices.

For its part, the Teamsters Union seems to have been eager to make amends. The white leadership might have had a range of motives. As in the past, they probably sought to maintain the union's strength by guarding its ability to organize all of the workers under its jurisdiction, both blacks and whites. Because the union sought to represent all teamsters nationwide, it felt compelled to respond to Johnson. The presence of rival CIO organizers must have sharpened this concern with self-preservation. At a meeting of the Teamsters Southern Conference in December 1944, a few months after the incident at the Statler, Teamster officials complained vigorously about the CIO's successful efforts to raid their membership.⁵⁶ Dissatisfied blacks working in the Teamsters jurisdiction, the leadership must have realized, could now join a rival union. Finally, Daniel Tobin, the President of the Teamsters, probably worried about how publicity of the incident at the Statler Hotel would affect the re-election efforts of Franklin Roosevelt. Tobin was a prominent ally of Roosevelt and the chairman of the Labor Division of the Democratic Party. He apparently had urged Roosevelt to open his re-election campaign at a Teamsters Union conference because he counted on his officers to respond enthusiastically to Roosevelt's speech.⁵⁷ Johnson's complaint threatened to generate negative publicity that in turn might take away any political advantages Roosevelt had gained from his appearance. Given these pressures the union acknowledged that a mistake had been made at the hotel that night, and it promised to do better in the future.

This one incident then offers us a new way of looking at race relations in a larger AFL affiliate in the 1940s. What emerges is not a simple history of exclusion or discrimination, but rather a history of struggle. Black members in the Teamsters existed, and when they encountered discrimination, they fought against it within their union. In the changing environment of the 1940s black Teamsters could wield stronger pressure on the national leadership to respond to their complaint. Sometimes, as in the case of Theodore Johnson, their efforts brought them satisfaction.

Notes

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 2. Horace Cayton and George S. Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939); Sumner Rosen, "The CIO Era, 1935-55," in Julius Jacobson, ed., *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (New York: Anchor Books, 1968), 188-208.
 3. Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75, (December 1988), 786-811; Bruce Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile During World War II," *Journal of American History*, 80 (December 1993), 952-988; Bruce Nelson, "Class, Race and Democracy in the CIO: The 'New' Labor History Meets the 'Wages of Whiteness,'" *International Review of Social History*, 41 (1996) 351-74; Michael Goldfield, "Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism During the 1930s and 1940s," *International Labor and Working-History*, 44 (Fall 1993), 1-32; Rick Halpern, "Interracial Unionism in the Southwest: Fort Worth's Packinghouse Workers, 1937-1954," in Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Organized Labor in the Twentieth Century South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 158-83; Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Kevin Boyle, "'There Are No Union Sorrows That The Union Can't Heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940-1960," *Labor History*, 36 (Winter 1995), 5-23. Articles highlighting the new revisionist school include: Herbert Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mineworkers of America," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 2, no. 2 (Winter 1988), 132-200; Herbert Hill, "The Problem of Race in American Labor History," *Reviews in American History*, 24, no. 2 (June 1996), 189-208; Clarence Walker, "How Many Niggers Did Karl Marx Know? Or a peculiarity of the Americans," in Walker, *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 1-33.
 4. William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 115.
 5. Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (1931: reprint New York: Atheneum, 1974); Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944); Herman D. Bloch, "Craft Unions and the Negro in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Negro History*, 43, no. 1 (January 1958), 10-33; Herman D. Bloch, "Labor and the Negro, 1866-1910," *Journal of Negro History*, 50, no. 3 (July 1965), 163-84; Marc Karson and Ronald Radosh, "The American Federation of Labor and the Negro Worker, 1894-1949," in Julius Jacobson, ed., *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (New York: Anchor Books, 1968), 155-87; Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), especially, 64-103, 136-269.
- New work on race and the AFL unions includes: Eric Arnesen, "Following the Color Line of Labor: Black Workers and the Labor Movement Before 1930," *Radical History Review*, 55 (Winter 1993), 58-87; Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History*, v. 26, no. 1, (March 1998), 146-174; Daniel Lerwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Keith P. Griffier, *What Price Alliance? Black Radicals Confront White Labor, 1918-1938* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994).
6. Harris, *The Harder We Run*, 77-94. For general background on Randolph and the

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, see: Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Joseph F. Wilson, *Tearing Down the Color Bar: A Documentary History of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

7. Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Work on the United Mine Workers Union includes: Stephen Brier, "Interracial Organizing in the West Virginia Coal Industry: The Participation of Black Mine Workers in the Knights of Labor and the United Mine Workers, 1880-1894," in Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reeds, eds., *Essays in Southern Labor History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 18-43; Joe W. Trotter, Jr., "Class and Racial Equality: The Southern West Virginia Black Coal Miners' Response, 1915-1932," in Robert Zieger, ed., *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 60-83; Joe W. Trotter, Jr., *Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in South West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Alex Lichtenstein, "Racial Conflict and Racial Solidarity in the Alabama Coal Strike of 1894: New Evidence for the Gutman-Hill Debate," *Labor History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1995), 63-76; Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987).

8. Nell Irvin Painter, "Black Workers from Reconstruction to the Great Depression," in Paul Buhle and Alan Dawley, eds., *Working for Democracy: American Workers From the Revolution to the Present* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 67.

9. That such struggle and protest did take place is the argument of Eric Arnesen's review article, "Following the Color Line of Labor: Black Workers and the Labor Movement Before 1930," *Radical History Review*, 55 (Winter 1993), 53-88.

10. Ira De A. Reid, *Negro Membership in American Labor Unions* (New York: The National Urban League and the Alexander Press, 1930), 138-39. Writing on roughly the same time period, Peter Gottlieb reached a

similar conclusion. In 1987, he asserted, "The skilled black iron- and steelworkers, who had gotten their positions before the migration, were usually non-union men, as were most of the black teamsters in Pittsburgh." Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 147. While this is true, it is also true that given the non-union atmosphere of the time and particularly of Pittsburgh, most white Teamsters were non-union as well. In reference to the anti-union atmosphere in Pittsburgh and the poor state of the Teamsters organization there see the correspondence of Daniel J. Tobin, the Teamsters president, particularly, Daniel J. Tobin to P. J. Berrel, May 31, 1929, Series I, Box 4, in *The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America, Papers, 1904-1952*, MSS 9, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin, (hereafter cited as IBT Papers).

11. Dennis C. Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 141.

12. *Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Stablemen and Helpers of America*, [1915], Reports of Officers, 33-34; Thomas Hughes to John Devring, June 1, 1916; John Devring to Thomas Hughes, June 3, 1916, June 4, 1916; June 6, 1916, Series I, Box 23, IBT Papers.

13. National Teamster Union records indicate that before 1920 Local 266's charter had been given up, but they do not indicate why. It should be noted small local unions, like Local 266, frequently went in and out of existence. From 1915 to 1920, the IBT's records show that 714 joint councils and local unions were chartered, but at the same time 540 locals lost their charters. *Proceedings of the Tenth Convention of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Stablemen and Helpers of America*, [1920], Reports of Officers, 23 and 27.

14. *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Convention of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Stablemen and Helpers of America*, [1940], Reports of Officers, 50; and *Reports of the General Secretary-Treasurer, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Stablemen and Helpers, 1937 to 1946*, 4.

15. *Ibid.*, see for instance the following reports: January 1938, 10; March 1938, 3; April 1938, 13; August 1940, 15; September 1940, 4; April 1941, 3.
16. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population, v. 3 The Labor Force, Part 5 Pennsylvania-Wyoming*, (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1943), 55.
17. U.S. Census, *Sixteenth Census, 1940*, 55; U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Special Reports: Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904), 678-81; John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1982), 242.
18. Ralph Lemuel Hill, "A View of the Hill—A Study of Experiences and Attitudes in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania From 1900 to 1973" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1973; University Microfilms, A Xerox Company: Ann Arbor, Michigan), 87. Census figures also appear to back up this charge, see U.S. Census, *Sixteenth Census, 1940*, 97. For an overall picture of what types of work African American men held in transportation in this general time period, see Howard David Gould, "A Survey of the Occupational Opportunities For Negroes in Allegheny County" (M.A. Thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1934), 5-7, 21-24 & 38.
19. Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 89-112. Dennis C. Dickerson provides a similar description of how black workers found themselves consigned to the most undesirable jobs in Pittsburgh's steel industry, see: Dennis C. Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 12-24.
20. Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*, 98.
21. Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*, 146-51.
22. *Ibid.*, 151-52.
23. Albert Dietrich to Thomas E. Flynn, September 2, 1947, Local 609 File, Series II, Box 54, IBT Papers.
24. U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Special Reports: Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904), cviiv & 480-763.
25. See for instance an editorial from the union's leadership entitled, "Colored Teamsters," *International Teamster* (then known as *Magazine of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters*), v. 3, no. 10, (August 1906), 25-26.
26. There are no definite figures available on black membership in this union. The IBT itself did not keep such records. The estimate I am drawing from is in French Eugene Wolfe, *Admission to American Trade Unions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1912), 123-24. A much more negative set of figures can be found in Ira De A. Reid, *Negro Membership in American Labor Unions* (1930, reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 5, 52, 102, and 130-38. I believe that De A. Reid's survey was badly flawed and so I have better faith in Wolfe's figures. For total membership figures, see Robert D. Leiter, *The Teamsters Union: A Study of Its Economic Impact* (New York: Bookman Associates, Inc., 1957), 33.
27. Accounts of integrated teamster locals in the North and border states include accounts from IBT organizers: William Ashton to Thomas Hughes, December 23, 1912; January 19, 1913; February 15, 1913; December 3, 1913; September 5, 1914; June 23, 1915, May 25, 1916, May 31, 1916, August 10, 1920; and August 19, 1920, in Series I, Boxes 1-2, and John Devering to Thomas Hughes, March 28, 1923, Series I, Box 26; Daniel Murphy to Thomas Hughes, March 11, 1915; Daniel Murphy to Daniel Tobin, March 19, 1923, Series I, Box 38, all in IBT Papers. Secondary accounts describing integrated northern locals include: *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 9, 1905, p. 1; R. R. Wright, Jr., "The Negro in Times of Industrial Unrest," *Charities* 15, no. 1 (October 7, 1905), 71-72; Letter from James S. Wallace to *The New York Age*, August 30, 1906, excerpt reprinted in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, v. 2 From Reconstruction Era to 1910* (1951; reprint Secaucus: The Citadel Press, 1972), 843-44.
28. For a general description of how these segregated locals related to each other in New Orleans, see: *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Convention of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters*, [1907] (Indianapolis: Cheltenham Press, 1907), 230-32. A description of joint bargaining is in: Patrick McGill to Thomas

Hughes, September 17, 1910 and October 24, 1910, Series I, Box 37, IBT Papers.

29. Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 2-9 and 213-15.

30. *Constitution and By-Laws of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America, Adopted at the Convention held in Washington, D.C., September 9th to 14th, Inclusive, 1940*, 4-5.

31. "No Color Line in Teamsters' Union," *The International Teamster*, v. 40, no. 1 (December 1942), 10.

32. *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Convention [1940]: International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Stablemen and Helpers of America, Held at Washington, D.C., September 9 to 14, 1940*, First Day, 50. *Proceedings of the Fifteenth Convention [1947] of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America*, First Day, 114.

33. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Origins of Nonviolent Direct Action in Afro-American Protest: A Note on Historical Discontinuities," in Meier and Rudwick, *Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience* (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1976), 326-27.

34. "Donates \$500 for Negro Defense," *The International Teamster*, v. 40, no. 3 (February 1943), 28-29.

35. "Minutes of Meeting of General Executive Board, Held in the Drake Hotel, Chicago, Ending August 26 [1944]," printed in *The International Teamster*, v. 41, no. 11 (October 1944), 31-32.

36. *New York Times*, September 24, 1944, p. 1.

37. Theodore Johnson to Thomas Flynn, telegram, September 23, 1944, Local 609's Correspondence File, Series II, Box 54, IBT Papers (hereafter cited as Local 609 File, IBT Papers).

38. Thomas Flynn to Theodore Johnson, September 28, 1944, Local 609 File, IBT Papers.

39. B. F. Gibson, Chairman and Fred Holmes, Secretary, Greater Pittsburgh, Citizens' Coordinating Committee to Daniel J. Tobin, September 28, 1944, Local 609 File, IBT Papers.

40. For background on the Citizens' Coordinating Committee see the pamphlet the group distributed, "Fact-Finding Institute on

Training and Employment at Centre Avenue Y.M.C.A.," February 21, 1942, in file marked Coordinating Committee on Employment 1942, Box 9, Charles O. Rice Papers, 1935-1976, UE Archives, University of Pittsburgh. I am indebted to David L. Rosenberg, Curator of Labor Collections at the UE Archives for bringing this pamphlet to my attention. Other background on this group can be found in Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Survey of Racial Conditions in the United States," "Pittsburgh Field Division," August 15, 1942, in Robert A. Hill, Ed., *The FBI's RACON: Racial Conditions in the United States During World War II* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 232-33.

41. The FBI had been careful to document the links between the Coordinating Committee and the National Negro Congress. The Bureau viewed the National Negro Congress as simply a front organization for the Communist Party and so the ties between the Congress and Coordinating Committee apparently seemed suspicious to the Bureau. See, *The FBI's RACON*, 232-34, 439. For overviews of the Congress and organizational growth in the 1930's, refer to: Harris, *The Harder We Run*, 110-13; Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal For Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: Volume I: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 244-65.

42. Roscoe Lewis, "The Role of Pressure Groups in Maintaining Morale Among Negroes," *The Journal of Negro Education*, v. 12, (Summer 1943), 464-73; Robert C. Weaver, "Whither Northern Race Relations Committee?" *Phylon*, v. 5, (Third Quarter 1944), 205-18; and Lucy Barber, Chapter 4, "'This March is Off': The Negro March on Washington and Its Cancellation, 1941," in "Marches on Washington, 1894-1963: National Political Demonstrations and American Political Culture," (Ph.D.. Dissertation, Brown University, 1995).

43. Richard M. Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution," *Journal of American History*, 55 (June 1968), 96-97. See also, Harvard Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War," *Journal of American History*, 58, no. 3 (December 1971), 661-81.

44. Sitkoff, *Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War*, 664-75.

45. *New York Times*, July 18, 1943, p. 29.

Regarding the 1945 employment study see, Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible*, 159.

46. "\$6,000,000 Drive Goes Over," *International Teamster*, v. 40, no. 3 (February 1943), 25.

47. Arthur J. Edmunds, *Daybreakers, The Story of the Urban League of Pittsburgh: The First Sixty-Five Years* (Pittsburgh: Urban League of Pittsburgh, 1983), 89-91.

48. Report by Pittsburgh Office of the FBI, April 25, 1941, Reel 1, Frame 519-23; and Report by Pittsburgh Office of the FBI, June 29, 1942, Reel 1, Frame 1078-1082, *FBI Files on the National Negro Congress* (Microfilm Edition by Microfilm Scholarly Resources, Wilmington, Delaware, 1987).

49. Report by Pittsburgh Office of the FBI, June 29, 1942, Reel 1, Frame 1078-1082, *FBI*

Files on the National Negro Congress.

50. Report by the Pittsburgh Office of the FBI, November 20, 1943, Reel 2, Frame 180, *FBI Files on the National Negro Congress*.

51. Albert Dietrich to Thomas E. Flynn, October 6, 1944, Local 609 File, IBT Papers.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Thomas Flynn to Albert Dietrich, October 24, 1944, Local 609 File, IBT Papers.

54. Thomas Flynn to Fred Holmes, November 1, 1944, Local 609 File, IBT Papers.

55. *Ibid.*

56. "Flynn Hits Labor Relations Board," *International Teamster*, 42, no. 2 (January 1945), 7-8.

57. Daniel J. Tobin, "Roosevelt Was Teamsters' Friend," *The International Teamster*, v. 42, no. 6 (May 1945), 4-13.