

**The Job  
Strategies  
of Black  
Steelworkers  
in the 1960s  
and 1970s**

**by John Hinshaw**

# S

INCE BEGINNING WORK in the heavy industries of the North during the late 19th century, black workers have faced severe discrimination. Industrialists and, to a lesser extent, the major trade unions of the era first excluded African Americans from the workplace, and then, once permitting them in, relegated them to the hottest, dirtiest, and worst-paid jobs. More recently, while conditions for both black and white workers significantly improved after the 1930s due to unionization of the electrical, steel, and metal-working industries, black workers continued to face persistent discrimination.<sup>1</sup> By the 1960s and 1970s, this racial division of labor had begun to weaken in some industries — for example, in the Pittsburgh area’s steel industry.

While the obstacles set in place by employers were the most important factors in holding black workers back, both employers and unions must share the blame for the structure of the seniority system used to determine advancements. Until the early 1970s, steelworkers advanced up “Lines of Progressions” (LOPs) on the basis of seniority in their departments — not due to seniority plant-wide. Most employees began work as laborers with hopes of moving up these career ladders toward better jobs, which in general were more specialized. Some of the LOPS offered virtually unlimited opportunity, while others dead-ended after only two or three rungs. Yet, transferring to an LOP in another department with more opportunities meant losing the seniority acquired in the first LOP.

In part due to complicity among supervisors and many union officials, black workers often found it difficult to transfer out of departments where blacks had traditionally worked and into departments — and into those LOPs — that offered better opportunities. And because most LOPs in “black departments” were short, with fewer specialized jobs, African Americans reached the ceiling for promotions faster, with fewer opportunities, than whites. Black steelworkers’ frustrations with the seniority system resulted in numerous legal challenges, ending ultimately in a 1973 affirmative action “consent decree” that required employers to base promotions on plant seniority, and not on departmental seniority.

Unionization, the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, and the consent decree were all important, though flawed, tools for fighting racism. If employers were racist, so were many white unionists, and federal civil rights laws were not strong enough to end the forms of racial discrimination that had thrived for decades in the steel industry. Thus, despite seniority and civil rights legislation, black workers continued to pursue upward mobility via the

traditional avenues of personal advancement, often with the aid of other steelworkers — especially black steelworkers. Black workers displayed enormous flexibility in negotiating between the longstanding racism of steel managers and the limited but real solidarity of existing trade unionism. The result was that African American workers developed complex strategies for upward mobility through individual initiative and the actions of employers, their union, and fellow workers.

Although it is outside the scope of this article, it is important to note that black workers’ struggles in the mills influenced the entire black community. The quest for equal rights on the job influenced the broader civil rights struggle, the resources available for community institutions, and the education of workers’ children. This essay investigates the nature of job discrimination in the steel industry as it began to weaken, and black workers’ creative responses to institutionalized discrimination.

## Employer Racism

If discrimination could be gauged solely by numbers hired, then steel firms, since the middle of the 20th century, have been overtly discriminatory. In the 1950s and 1960s, 7 to 8 percent of the industry’s workforce was black, which is roughly the proportion of blacks to whites in the Pittsburgh region.<sup>2</sup> The issue was not that companies such as U.S. Steel did not hire blacks, but that companies did not *promote* their black employees. Most black steelworkers remained sequestered in departments known in the mill as “black” ones — blast furnaces, open hearths, general services (labor), transportation, and masonry.<sup>3</sup> For example, in 1967, only 4 percent of blacks at U.S. Steel’s National Tube Works in McKeesport were unionized office workers and only 6 percent were considered “skilled” workers, while half were semi-skilled and 40 percent were laborers or janitors. All non-union office workers were white. The power of seniority rights can be seen in the fact that where black workers had no union protection, as in non-union office, technical, or supervisory jobs, they were almost universally denied employment opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, black steelworkers were twice as likely as whites to remain in unskilled categories.<sup>5</sup>

Blacks advanced into skilled positions in white departments only after years of persistence. One of the first blacks to become a “roller” (among the most desirable production jobs in the steel industry) in the mills of the Monongahela River Valley was Alfred Macon, who was also active in rank-and-file radical politics in the 1970s. In 1965, Macon was hired in the foundry of U.S. Steel’s Edgar Thomson Works in Braddock, where he “caught pure hell.” In 1967, he was laid off at “ET,” but, by a “stroke of God’s goodness,” rehired at the slab mill. He was in the right place at the right time, and as people retired, he advanced quickly until, in

**Blacks advanced into skilled positions in white departments only after years of persistence.**

John Hinshaw, whose 1995 doctoral dissertation at Carnegie Mellon University is “Dialectic of Division: Race and Power Among Western Pennsylvania Steelworkers, 1937-1975,” has been a union organizer and has taught history at Bates College in Maine, Carlow College in Pittsburgh, and elsewhere. He currently is a researcher at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. He is also co-editor with Paul Le Blanc of *U.S. Labor in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Fragmentation and Insurgency* (Humanities Press, 1997).

1970, he was eligible to be a roller once again — whenever the production schedule allowed. However, the turn foremen manipulated the shifts so that he was never scheduled for turns.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, when Frank Moorefield, a second-generation mill worker, transferred into an all-white department at U.S. Steel's Homestead Works, many workers were hostile and acted like the department's 160-inch mill was their "private property." Moorefield tried to speak to them (particularly the older workers), but the standard reply was, "What is this nigger doing?"<sup>7</sup>

Of the many jobs and departments that managers reserved for white workers, the most plainly white jobs were those of craftsmen and maintenance workers. These skilled workers made up about one-quarter of a mill's workforce and generally enjoyed steady, well-paid, and relatively easy work. John Hughey, a native of Rankin, was typical of many black unionists deeply angered by the overtly racial division of labor in steel. Hughey observed that on a blast furnace the temperature was "2,200 degrees, and you faint in the fire. [Managers] didn't hardly want to give you a coffee break. And you see four white people come up there to fix one job ... and they work three hours to put up one rail. And you could not work in that crew. And they could get all the overtime they wanted. That's why they bought boats and two homes and why blacks stayed" in what was considered the "black" residential area

of nearby Braddock. Like many long-used to dual identities as unionist and black unionist, Hughey, nonetheless, strived to represent both black and white workers in the union positions he held throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

Maintenance work remained a "white island" in large part because management refused to recruit African Americans as apprentices. In 1961, the Civil Rights Committee of the United Steel Workers Union observed that management "continue[d] to exclude Negro workers" from apprenticeship programs.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, in 1966, there were just 735 black craftsmen among the 23,000 employed in the Pittsburgh steel industry.<sup>10</sup> In 1967, the president of the local at the Clairton

Works estimated that there were only 15 blacks among the 800 maintenance workers in that mill.<sup>11</sup> Even in the 1970s, the number of black craftsmen increased painfully slowly. At the Homestead Works in 1973, blacks made up 5.8 percent of all apprentices, although they were 11 percent of all employees.<sup>12</sup> Blacks faced barriers to becoming skilled production workers. Edmond A. Holmes recalled that after he became a leverman in Duquesne's primary mill, a semi-skilled position, whites became "very, very, very hostile." When he became interested in more advanced jobs, he found that the job vacancies were suddenly filled or that his applications disappeared at the employment office. His foreman looked "for excuses to give you citations — any little thing."<sup>13</sup> This was a common experience. Otis Bryant remembered the BOP

shop foreman often told him to sit on a bench and "eat your lunch" — for an entire turn, while "they did my work [in order] to keep from teaching me how to do it."<sup>14</sup>

### Union Racism

Local unions often reinforced the racial discrimination of employers in the post-Civil Rights Act era. The U.S. Steel-USW labor agreement established "labor pools," in which workers with more seniority could "bump" workers with fewer years in a mill. Frequently, white unionists put mostly "black jobs" in the labor pool, which, when layoffs came during the industry's slow periods, allowed white workers to keep working in what had been "black jobs." Many black workers continually feared being bumped into the labor pool or to being laid off,<sup>15</sup> and in some cases — in 1963, for example, at the Homestead Works — blacks appealed to the union about such unfair practices.<sup>16</sup> When the National Tube Works in McKeesport furloughed 11.5 percent of its workers during 1967, about 38 percent were black.<sup>17</sup> The labor pool, which gave additional security to workers further up the LOPs, worked against African Americans, for whom laborers' jobs were not just a last resort.

Black unionists had little luck in abolishing this abuse of labor pools. In 1965, the chair of Local 1557's Civil Rights Committee protested to his executive board that the local seniority agreement discriminated against black workers.<sup>18</sup> At the Jones & Laughlin Steel Co. mill on Pittsburgh's Southside, Jim Grover and Carhenia Evans, two black members of the grievance committee, charged that labor pools were manipulated by white unionists and managers to keep blacks out of desirable departments. Blacks were kept in the labor pool because the J&L contract permitted laborers to have seniority only in the labor pool, even if they steadily worked in one department. As the USW recognized, because "many of our own people in J&L prefer" this racist arrangement, the national union refused to intervene.<sup>19</sup> As late as 1970, black unionists and members of the NAACP were demanding that steel firms end this manipulation of labor pools.<sup>20</sup>

For many black workers, "the union was like the establishment."<sup>21</sup> Charles Lee Jr. observed that even in the 1960s at U.S. Steel's Duquesne Works, the union concurred in management's assessment that "if you was a laborer, you're a laborer"<sup>22</sup> (meaning blacks should always remain laborers). Another steelworker, Albert Reid, insists the union also "discriminated against blacks" at the Homestead Works.<sup>23</sup> Yet Alex Powell, who worked at ET, observed that "without [the] union, blacks would've never gone up the promotion sequence."<sup>24</sup> When another steelworker, John King, entered ET's blast furnace in the 1950s, the position of "second helper" was, he said, "as far as a black man could go"; but in the 1960s, the union "changed it around so we could start moving up."<sup>25</sup> Frank Moorefield recalled that by the 1970s in the Homestead Works, his union representative in charge of handling grievances simply told Moorefield's supervisor "he gets the job," and Moorefield was advanced into the position.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in a unionized workplace, some blacks could realize advancements, which helps explain why so many chose to remain in the industry.

**The labor pool... worked against African Americans, for whom laborers' jobs were not just a last resort.**

But despite some white unionists' solidarity with black men, blacks overall did not rely on the union; consequently, African Americans continued to employ a variety of personal strategies to keep their jobs. Lee Robinson, for instance, who began working at U.S. Steel's Clairton Works in 1942, found Christianity to be a solace. Until he retired in 1983, he was "able to cope with many things and just take it," he said. "And other things, I felt I should speak out.... Individually of myself, if I ran into some situation I knew wasn't right, I'd go to my foreman. He'd see my end of it. He'd more or less try to adjust it."<sup>27</sup>

Booker Kidd befriended a white supervisor — Kidd refers to him by a term used commonly to deride whites of Slavic descent — who helped him advance in the mill. "He was a good 'hunky.' I'll say this again, he was *good* — he had no partiality about nothing."<sup>28</sup> Such "individualistic" strategies provided both an important alternative to, and complement for, collective forms of struggle, such as the USW. Indeed, individual gains were deeply rooted within the network of African American support groups. John King recalls workers in his department talking with each other about the best strategies for advancement.<sup>29</sup> In the early 1960s, Duquesne resident Earl "Pete" Williams had a network of men who looked out for him and made sure that he got promotions. As he said, "those people made me."<sup>30</sup>

Many blacks found it difficult to negotiate the boundary between the union and management. Although black workers ignored or fought their union, many did so with regret. Edmond Holmes had to appeal to U.S. Steel to protect him from the connivances of his foreman and union "grievanceman," but he did so with reluctance. As he put it, although it "makes me sound like a company man... I would rather go in some cases to the company than to the union.... They'd give better deals." In Holmes' view, the "company was not on my side," but the "union was not set up to protect the black, period."<sup>31</sup>

Although many blacks had become alienated from the union by the late 1960s, black unionists played an important role in the struggles of black workers. Black unionists at Homestead attacked the local for helping management to hold them back in the labor pools.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, black unionists at Clairton, Duquesne, and Homestead used the 1964 Civil Rights Act to pressure the USW to represent the seniority rights of black workers in management's promotion procedures.<sup>33</sup> These militants belonged to the Ad Hoc Committee of Concerned Black Steelworkers, as well as to the Labor and Industry Committee of the NAACP, and the Negro American Labor Congress. By 1970, black unionists at U.S. Steel's Carrie Furnace in Rankin had broken down departmental seniority, and plant-wide seniority was instituted.<sup>34</sup> African Americans' victories in local unions, as well as class action lawsuits by workers in the Mon Valley, Birmingham, Alabama, and Baltimore helped clear the way for the celebrated consent decree of 1973.

Increased governmental surveillance and intervention, and the pent-up desires of African Americans, created the necessary pressure for change. By the end of the 1960s, the proportion of black steelworkers in the Pittsburgh region who were skilled had

increased from 10 percent to 14 percent.<sup>35</sup> Because the civil rights laws took effect just as National Tube was experiencing severe layoffs, affirmative action apparently had only marginal impact on the hiring and promotion of blacks at the McKeesport facility. The total number of workers at the mill fluctuated from 4,770 in 1966 to 3,235 in 1973. In 1966, National Tube shuttered its open hearth and Bessemer departments, which severely limited the number of workers the mill could hire.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the number of black workers varied from a high of 159 in 1966 to 72 in 1972. This data suggests that the position of blacks was improving slightly during the early 1970s, but whatever gains were made were still vulnerable to severe erosions due to the vagaries of the business cycle.

## Conclusion

Despite progress under new civil rights laws, African American steelworkers in the 1960s and 1970s faced pervasive discrimination. Most employers sent their black employees to "black" departments and discouraged them from transferring to those known as "white" departments in the mill. The union continued to permit this discriminatory division of labor, although more and more local unionists joined black workers in their fight for better jobs. According to Ray Henderson, a long-time civil rights and union activist at the Duquesne Works, U.S. Steel could have stopped racial discrimination, "any time it wanted.... It wouldn't have cost them a cent. But they were controlling two labor forces, black and white, and pitting one against the other."<sup>37</sup> Because many white workers became fed up with the corrupt seniority system, also because civil rights laws gave workers greater leverage over companies and unions, African Americans escalated their demands for social change. The 1973 consent decree began to undo decades of institutionalized racism, but it coincided with enormous layoffs that made racial resentments inevitable and rendered blacks' progress temporary. The "de-industrialization" that began in the late 1970s was filled with many bitter ironies. Perhaps the most poignant was that after years of struggle by African Americans to gain full access to promotion in the steel industry, thousands of potential jobs were swept away by the massive layoffs that accompanied the flight of steel capital from the Pittsburgh region. ❁

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For analysis of blacks in the steel industry, see Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Univ. of N.C. Press, 1939); Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Univ. of Ill. Press, 1987); Dennis Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* (State Univ. of N.Y. Press, 1986). For more general analysis, see William Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1982); Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Univ. of Ill. Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1960* (U.S. Printing Office, 1961), 40-1141-75; Richard L. Rowan, *The Negro In the Steel Industry* (Univ. of Pa. Press), 84-5.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lewis Ruck, "Origins of the Seniority System in Steel," seminar paper, Univ. of Pittsburgh (1977), 97.

<sup>4</sup> EEO Report, June 30, 1971, 1-11, box 179, National Tube Works Papers, Archives of Industrial Society, Univ. of Pittsburgh (hereafter "AIS").

<sup>5</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1960* (U.S. Printing Office, 1961), 40-1141-

75; *Census of Population: 1970* (1972), 40-971, 40-986-92, 1017-9; *Census of Population: 1980* (1983), 40-346, 40-400.

<sup>6</sup> Statement by Alfred B. Macon, 14 Feb. 1980, in author's possession. Courtesy of Denise Weinbrenner Edwards.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Moorefield, interview by Ray Henderson and Tony Buba, Summer 1992. Tony Buba and Ray Henderson have graciously allowed the author access to interviews for their film documentary, *Struggles in Steel: A History of African-American Steelworkers*.

<sup>8</sup> John Hughey and Jesse Larrington, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Shane to CRC, Oct. 2, 1961, box 6, file 9, "CRC, 1961," Hague Papers, United Steel Workers Archives (hereafter "USW Archives").

<sup>10</sup> Robert Dietsch, "Steel Urged to Increase Negro Staffs," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, May 22, 1968, box 7, file 20, "Newspaper Clippings, Jan.-Aug., 1968." Civil Rights Department (CRD), USW Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Notes by E. L. Clifford, May 11, 1967, box 16, file 28, "District 15, General Information, 1963-1967." CRD, USW Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Ruck, "Origins," 97-98.

<sup>13</sup> Edmond Holmes, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Otis Bryant, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>15</sup> The problem of labor pools was most acute in U.S. Steel's Fairfield Works in Alabama. Although there were 1,156 identifiable white jobs, only 10 ended in the labor pool. Of the 751 black jobs, 385 ended in the pool. See USDC Northern District of Alabama in Civil Action No. 66-343, USA vs USS et al (subaction of 70-906). Plaintiffs' Pre-Trial brief, 9-11, in Ruck, "Origins," 80. In 1962, the CRD was instructed to concentrate on "in-plant programs" to integrate labor pools into all LOPs. See Harold Keith, "USW Trio Maps New Answers to Old Problems," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 15, 1963, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Notes by Eugene Arrington, Oct. 3, 1963, box 2, file folder "Civil Rights-Frank Shane, 1961-1965," Miller Papers, USW Archives.

<sup>17</sup> EEO Report, box 82, "Affirmative Action Compliance Program" Binder, National Tube Papers, AIS.

<sup>18</sup> Robert E. Nelson to Joseph Sabo, Dec. 10, 1965, box 12, file 24, "District 15, 1967,"

CRD, USW Archives.

<sup>19</sup> Philip H. Scheiding to Bernard Kleiman, Dec. 22, 1966, box 14, file 2, "Jones and Laughlin, Msc, 1967," CRD, USW Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Kroger, "USW Protest Mapped in 3 Cities, Meets," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug. 1, 1970, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Woodington, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Lee, Jr., interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Reid, interview by Mr. Barrett, June 16, 1976, transcript, Homestead Oral History Project, AIS.

<sup>24</sup> Alex Powell, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>25</sup> John King, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Moorefield, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>27</sup> Lee Robinson, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>28</sup> Booker Kidd, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>29</sup> John King, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>30</sup> Earl "Pete" Williams, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Edmond Holmes, interview by Henderson and Buba, Summer 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Notes by Eugene Arrington, Oct. 3, 1963, box 2, file folder "Civil Rights — Frank Shane, 1961-1965," Miller Papers, USW Archives.

<sup>33</sup> Robert E. Nelson to Alex Fuller, March 7, 1966, box 10, file 9, "Clifford, Ernest L., 1966," CRC, USW Archives; Robert R. Hobson to Charlie Hampton, Jan. 9, 1969, box 21, file folder 17, "U.S. Department of Labor, General, 1966, 1969." CRD, USW Archives; Ruck, "Origins," 93; Sydney Lee Smith to Ernest Clifford, Aug. 8, 1973, box 44, file "Salway Smith Forging Charges," Homestead Local 1397 Papers, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>34</sup> John Hughey, interview by author, Aug. 5, 1993.

<sup>35</sup> *Census of Population: 1960*, 40-1141-75; *Census of Population: 1970*, 40-971, 40-986-92, 1017-9; *Census of Population: 1980*, 40-346, 40-400.

<sup>36</sup> "Affirmative Action Compliance Program" Jan. 4, 1973 and Jan. 5, 1973, binder, box 82, National Tube Papers, AIS.

<sup>37</sup> Ray Henderson, interview by author, Aug. 6, 1993, tape recording.

## PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

### Father Cox

Page 54 Courtesy of author

Page 55 *Top*, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania Archives; *middle*, photo by Paul Roberts, Editor; *bottom*, courtesy of author

Page 59 Courtesy of author

### The Strange Story of "Honest" John McLuckie

Page 61 *Top*, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, portrait by A.F. King, original oil on canvas, 30" x 25", c. 1890-1940; *middle*, Borough of Homestead; *right*, 1898, courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Page 62 Courtesy Rutgers Univ. Special Collections and Archives

Page 64 Courtesy Special Collections, University of Arizona Library

Page 67 Photo by Leonardo Varela Espinosa

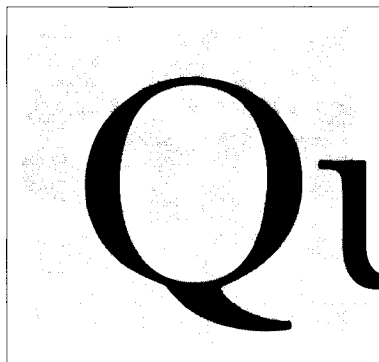
Page 69 Courtesy New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Gardner A. Sage Library Archives

### The Forgotten Pirate

All photos courtesy of the Pittsburgh Pirates

### Reviews

Page 83 Courtesy Charles McCollester



# Quilts

PATTERNS OF OUR PAST  
June 20 – November 30, 1997

Quilts designed with fabric and thread provide a stitched record that illustrates the rich texture of women's lives during the past 150 years. Featuring 19th and 20th century quilts from the collection of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, this exhibit explores the art and history of quilt making. Stories of quilters bring to life events, emotions, and experiences shared by women past and present.

On display in the Center Gallery, Fourth Floor



Senator John Heinz  
Pittsburgh Regional  
History Center

1212 Smallman Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15222 • Open daily 10 to 5 • Information: 454-6000