

Liberty Ships and Jim Crow Shipyards

Racial Discrimination in Kaiser's Portland Shipyards, 1940–1945

JOHN LINDER

During the turn of the twentieth century, a time shaped by Jim Crow policies, unions won significant battles over workplace control. Unfortunately, many prioritized their power to favor perceived self-interest over equity and merit. The impact went far beyond employment itself. If the Black family breadwinner could not provide stable, adequate financial support for their family, it affected every other aspect of life. Little or no money coming in means no access to housing, no access to sufficient food, no health care, no money to send children to first-rate schools, no money to influence the political process, etc. — all of which predetermines that the penalties imposed by racism will be passed on to the next generation to be repeated there.

THE BLACK POPULATION of the Portland-Vancouver area grew tenfold during World War II, from approximately 2,000 in 1940 to more than 20,000 in 1945.¹ The new arrivals were part of a demographic tilt that brought millions of Americans west to work in the burgeoning war industries and the businesses that supported them.² In Portland, most sought work in three huge shipyards the Kaiser Company constructed to produce freighters, known as Liberty Ships, as well as aircraft carriers, tankers, and landing ships.

Most African Americans came to Portland from the South, leaving behind an average family income of less than \$500 a year for jobs that paid nearly \$3,000 per year at the height of the war boom. One thing they did not leave behind was Jim Crow segregation. Nearly three-fourths of the skilled jobs in the Kaiser shipyards were under the jurisdiction of Local 72 of



DURING WORLD WAR II, eight million Americans moved West seeking work in the growing war industries. In Portland, most sought work in Kaiser Corporation shipyards, constructed to produce Liberty Ships, aircraft carriers, tankers, and landing ships. In this 1943 photograph, the SS *Robert Newell* launches from the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation shipyard in Portland, Oregon.

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THIS CARTOON, published on June 29, 1943, in the *People's Observer*, a Black-owned newspaper in Portland, Oregon, highlights the bitterness felt by many African Americans who were being sent to fight a “war of democracy” against proponents of a “master race” while the U.S. government allowed and even promoted blatant discrimination at home.

Black workers. The federal government, more interested in maximizing war production than ending segregation, failed to enforce its own anti-discrimination order. Significant victories were won by Black workers and organizers who relied on mass action and the threat of mass action rather than the promises and proclamations of government and company officials.

the Boilermakers Union, which refused to admit Black members.³ While the shipyards were crying for skilled labor, qualified Black workers were consigned to laboring jobs or forced to join a segregated and powerless “auxiliary local.” Called on to build weapons for the “war for freedom” abroad, Black workers were systematically denied the most elementary freedoms at home.

This history sheds light on how today’s gross racial inequality — exemplified by the nearly seven-to-one ratio between White and Black average household wealth — is rooted not only in slavery but in systematic discrimination ever since.⁴ It also provides lessons in how both corporations and the government reinforce discrimination while claiming to do the opposite. Segregation in the Kaiser yards was initiated by the Boilermakers Union, but the Kaiser Company brought the union into the yards and followed its dictates to fire

“ONLY AS JANITORS”

The rapid increase in war production, beginning in 1940, held out the prospect that Black workers might finally establish themselves as a permanent part of the country’s industrial labor force. While war spending ended the Great Depression for Whites, however, jobless African Americans found that “No Help Wanted” signs at factory gates had been replaced with signs reading “Help Wanted — White.”⁵ Company officials were often equally blunt. The president of North American Aviation, asked by Black civic leaders about prospects for employment in his new bomber factory near Kansas City, Kansas, stated, “the Negroes will be considered only as janitors and in other similar capacities. . . . While we are in complete sympathy with the Negro, it is against the company policy to employ them as mechanics or aircraft workers.”⁶ More than half the openings in war industries were closed to African Americans, with the exception of shipbuilding, where 28 percent were closed. Most defense plants had no Black workers at all. In late 1940 and early 1941, the National Association for the Advance of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights organizations “held mass protest meetings, but the exclusion” of African Americans continued.⁷

Black leaders were quick to point out that U.S. politicians’ angry denunciations of Hitler’s master-race ideology were hard to square with the federal government’s tolerance of racism in its own front yard. Roy Wilkins, editor of *Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), wrote: “It is pretty grim . . . to have a black boy in uniform get an orientation lecture in the morning on wiping out Nazi bigotry, and that same evening be told he can buy a soft drink only in the ‘Colored’ post exchange!”⁸ The experience of mass layoffs and racist violence following World War I had taught African Americans not to wait for war’s end to resume the fight for equality; their leverage was greatest when they were needed in the factories and armed forces. A popular story circulated about a Black soldier on a Southern bus who “resisted the driver’s efforts to shift him to the Jim Crow section by taking off his coat and declaring, ‘Well, I’m fixing to go off and fight for democracy. I might as well start right now.’”⁹

A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union, rallied this sentiment when he called for 10,000 Black people to march on Washington, D.C., on July 1, 1941, to demand “the abolition of Jim-Crowism in all Government departments and defense employment.” Randolph mobilized the finances and membership of the Brotherhood to spread the call nationwide. The official call for the march, published in the brotherhood’s journal, *The Black Worker*, stated:



IN JANUARY 1941, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the largest union of Black workers in the country, called for a march on Washington to demand an end to discrimination in war industries and the armed forces. The March on Washington, D.C., Movement won passage of Executive Order 8802, banning discrimination by war contractors.

provision “obligating the contractor not to discriminate,” and established the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to ensure compliance.¹¹ Only then did Randolph “postpone” the march, but he maintained the March on Washington Movement to press for effective action by the FEPC and led rallies of more than 10,000 people in New York, Chicago, and St. Louis during the summer of 1942.¹²

Executive Order 8802, perhaps the most important victory for civil rights since the Fifteenth Amendment, was won through mass action and the

While billions of the taxpayers’ money are being spent for war weapons, Negro workers are being turned away from the gates of factories, mines and mills — being flatly told, “NOTHING DOING.” Some employers refuse to give Negroes jobs when they are without “union cards,” and some unions refuse Negro workers union cards when they are “without jobs.”¹⁰

As the date for the march approached, predictions of the turnout rose to 100,000, and Roosevelt moved into full gear to stop it. Both Franklin Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt met with Randolph and other Black leaders, but they held firm in their demand for an end to discrimination in the war industries and armed forces. On June 25, one week before the scheduled march, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination “in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin,” ordered that all government defense contracts include a

threat of mass action by African Americans. Before the march was called, Randolph and other civil rights leaders could not even get an appointment to see Roosevelt, whose priority was war production, not ending discrimination.¹³ This helps explain why the FEPC often appeared to be fighting with one hand tied behind its back. Attacked by southern Democrats and lacking consistent support from the Roosevelt administration, the FEPC never had the power to force the most hard-nosed employers and unions to desegregate. The conflict that would soon erupt in the Kaiser shipyards demonstrated that FEPC attempts to enforce Executive Order 8802 were trumped by the desire of both Kaiser and Roosevelt to avoid any action that might slow the shipyards’ record-setting launches.



PRESIDENT FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT addressed employees of the Oregon Shipyard in 1942. In the foreground from the left: Gov. Charles Sprague, Henry Kaiser, Edgar Kaiser, and Roosevelt. Kaiser was the nation’s preeminent military contractor. Oregonship launched freighters faster than any shipyard had before or has since.

LIBERTY SHIPS AND JIM CROW SHIPYARDS

In January 1941, with a contract to build cargo ships for Britain to replace those being sunk by German submarines, Henry Kaiser and his son Edgar Kaiser leased eighty-seven acres on the Willamette River and broke ground for the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation, commonly referred to as Oregonship.¹⁴ Henry Kaiser had no shipbuilding experience, but as the leader of the Six Companies consortium that built the Boulder, Bonneville, and Grand Coulee dams, he had a reputation as a man who could get things done — the “Atlas of Industry,” as *Fortune Magazine* dubbed him.¹⁵ After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Kaiser Company built two more shipyards, one on Swan Island and one in Vancouver, Washington.¹⁶

The shipyards operated twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and generated an insatiable demand for steel plate and labor. Beginning with no shipyard workforce of his own, Kaiser turned to the Metal Trades Department of the American Federal of Labor (AFL), the coordinating body for thirteen unions in the shipyard trades, to help him recruit skilled workers and begin construction of the yard.¹⁷

In May 1941, with only 66 workers employed at Oregonship, Kaiser signed a contract with the Metal Trades Department and the Portland Metal Trades Council. A year later, with only 191 workers employed at the Vancouver yard and none at Swan Island, Kaiser and nearly all the other major West Coast shipyard owners, Kaiser chief among them, signed a regional “master agreement” with the Metal Trades Department.¹⁸ These closed-shop contracts required workers to join the appropriate AFL union — to “get union clearance” — as a condition of employment, but workers had no voice or vote in choosing the unions. Before the war, Boilermakers Local 72 had no funds and fewer than 200 members. Two years later, the local had close to 60,000 members and collected dues from nearly three-fourths of the shipyard workers in the skilled trades, making it the “largest local union in the world.”¹⁹ Kaiser had essentially created Local 72, and in the process locked Black workers out of most skilled jobs.

The Boilermakers union typified the craft unions that comprised the majority of the AFL. With the exception of a brief period after its founding in 1886, most AFL unions representing skilled workers excluded African Americans from membership, treating them as competitors who threatened the jobs and privileges of the skilled, White, male workers who comprised its base. Randolph’s repeated appeals to the AFL to hire Black organizers and to refuse membership to unions that barred African Americans were met with calls for “patience” from AFL officials and statements about the



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FOLLOWING THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR, Kaiser opened yards in Vancouver and on Swan Island, and workers from throughout the country flooded into the Portland-Vancouver area to fill the new jobs. Here 15,000 to 18,000 people are gathered at Multnomah Stadium in Portland on February 12, 1942, to receive applications for the Boilermakers Union. The union controlled nearly 75 percent of the skilled jobs in the shipyards and refused to admit Black members.

need to “educate” White workers, rendered hypocritical because those same officials refused to fund any education.²⁰

Black workers were only able to join unions in large numbers after dissident AFL leaders, recognizing the necessity of organizing all workers in any given industry into a single “industrial” union, formed the Congress for Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1935 and split from the AFL. In 1936 and 1937, the CIO conducted the most successful organizing drive in U.S. labor history. By occupying factories in sit-down strikes and fighting pitched battles to defend their picket lines, workers in auto, steel, and other basic industries won union recognition. The CIO recruited all workers, regardless of race; no attempt to organize basic industry could have succeeded otherwise. Between 1935 and 1940, Black union membership grew from 100,000 to 500,000.²¹

Despite these successes, nearly all of the AFL unions representing skilled workers maintained their color bars, weakening themselves in the process.²² At the 1937 Boilermakers International Convention, delegates' two dominant concerns were competition from the CIO and from Black workers. A delegate from Newport News, Virginia, complained that in shipyards there, the White wage scale ranged from 38 to 94 cents an hour while the Black wage scale ranged from 14 to 20 cents an hour, "with the white man doing the same work." The delegate concluded, "I ask you delegates to consider this very serious question, because it means organization or no organization in the shipbuilding industry."²³ The divide-and-rule approach evident in the employers' racist wage scales was reinforced by a union policy that could be described as "divide-and-be-ruled."

Fearing that the CIO would organize "the Negro" and anticipating increased shipyard work, the Boilermakers delegates authorized segregated auxiliary locals, stipulating "that the membership of the colored men be confined to such separate locals."²⁴ The rules governing the auxiliaries leave no doubt that their purpose was to control Black workers while denying them full union membership. Auxiliaries were under the supervision of White locals and were not allowed to choose their own business agents or form grievance committees. Auxiliary members received only one-half as much in death and disability benefits as did White members. Worst of all, Black workers were barred from transferring to other locals, could not be employed as apprentices, and could not be promoted to higher job classifications without the approval of the White local and the international union president.²⁵ As Thurgood Marshall wrote several years later, the only thing equal about the auxiliary unions was the dues paid.²⁶ Auxiliaries also ensured that Black workers would be first to lose their jobs when the war ended. Responding to several White workers in Los Angeles who feared that auxiliaries would divide Black and White workers, a Boilermakers' business agent argued that if Black workers became members of the regular union, they would retain their membership after the war, whereas the auxiliaries would be dissolved.²⁷

RESISTANCE

Discrimination by Boilermakers Local 72 received national attention in the fall of 1942, after the Kaiser Company, facing a severe labor shortage, sent recruiters throughout the country. Thousands of workers poured into the Portland area, among them African Americans who discovered on arrival that they were excluded from most skilled jobs by the Boilermakers



ON SEPTEMBER 30, 1942, five hundred men from New York arrived in Portland, Oregon, to work in the Kaiser shipyards. Thirty-nine of those recruits were Black. A photograph of the "Kaiser Karavan" train was published on that day in the *Oregonian*.

Union and the Kaiser Company. In an angry letter published in the August 7 *Oregonian*, Rev. J. James Clow, Portland president of the NAACP, protested the Boilermakers' exclusion of six Black workers. "We are constantly called upon to forget everything, to concentrate upon winning this war," he wrote, but some people "seem unable to forget their race prejudice for the duration."²⁸

On September 30, 1942, the first "Kaiser Karavan" arrived in Portland.²⁹ The train carried 490 men, recruited from New York City, of whom 39 were Black.³⁰ According to historian Frederic Lane, when the Kaiser organization began hiring in New York, "they were reminded [by federal manpower officials] that they must not discriminate, and in consequence filled some cars of their westbound trains with Negroes."³¹

By this time, approximately 3,000 Black people had arrived in Portland by their own means, more than doubling the city's Black population and challenging established patterns of domination and subservience. Even before the first train arrived, the growing Black population was met with hostility. A mass meeting of 500 Albina residents demanded that no more African Americans be housed in their district, blaming them for increased crime.³² "We Cater to White Trade Only" signs sprung up in restaurants and taverns.³³ The Portland Central Labor Council protested the importation of "undesirable" workers "from other sections without regard to local conditions" and sent a letter to Henry Kaiser demanding that no more workers be hired unless they were cleared through representatives of appropriate unions and assigned to the appropriate crafts.³⁴

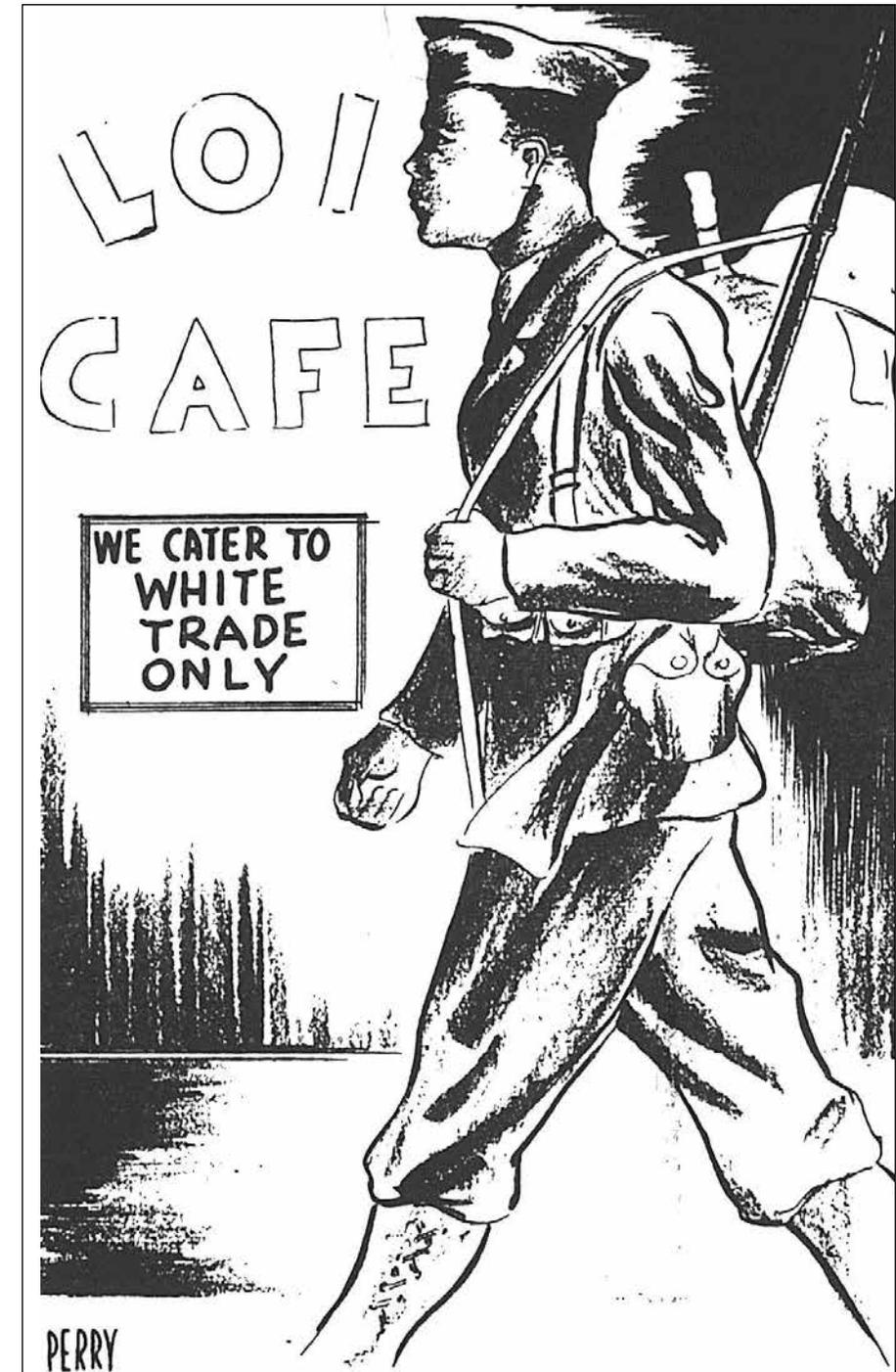
Shortly after the Kaiser Karavan arrived, seventy-five Black workers living in Hudson House, a huge dormitory complex for single men near the Vancouver shipyard, voiced their own protest against Kaiser's hiring practices. In what became known as the Hudson House Resolution, the workers stated:

*We, the Negro people employed by the Kaiser Company, maintain that under a false pretense we were brought from east to west to work for defense, and we demand, within due process of law, the following rights: (1) to work at our trades on equal rights with whites; (2) to go to vocational school or to take vocational training on equal rights with the whites.*³⁵

The workers charged that when they were signed up in New York, they were classified according to their skills, but when they arrived in the shipyards, they were assigned to work as unskilled laborers receiving less pay than agreed on in New York.³⁶ "We can work at common labor in New York," one worker said. "When we signed up we were promised the opportunity to get something better. If there's nothing but common labor for us we ask to be sent home."³⁷

These workers had not just come west for higher wages. They knew that the war industries would bust as quickly as they were booming; even the Liberty ships were built to last only five years. Although wages were higher

"**WE CATER TO WHITE TRADE ONLY**" signs began appearing in businesses in Portland following an increase in African Americans who came to work in wartime industries. The cartoon on the right, published on September 30, 1943, in the *People's Observer*, shows a Black U.S. soldier walking past one of the signs.





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JOSIE LUCILLE OWENS, was a welder in training for skilled positions offered to Black workers in Kaiser's Richmond, California, shipyard. Trained workers often were denied opportunities to use their skills in the Kaiser yards in Portland. Eventually, many Black workers were employed as welders, most often after being forced to accept membership in Jim Crow auxiliary locals.

than they had been during the Depression, inflated prices combined with a war-time wage freeze left Richmond, California, shipyard workers with weekly savings of about six dollars.³⁸ A few workers might buy a house or a little land with what they would save, but most would be left with only one bankable asset after the war — their skill. An experienced welder or machinist would be in demand following the war, and Black workers were determined to have an equal opportunity to learn and apply these skills.

On October 17, the *Oregonian* reported that “spokesmen for nearly 100 New York Negroes who were imported to work in the Kaiser company shipyard at Vancouver, Wash., Friday said that the Negro workers might fail to report to

work Monday unless they are given definite assurances that alleged discrimination against them will cease.” The spokesmen “contended that approximately half their number are qualified for journeymen’s scale, but are able to get only helper or laborer jobs.”³⁹ Following these protests, Kaiser began employing a number of Black workers at skilled jobs, initially without any union clearance, utilizing a clause in the contract permitting companies to hire workers without union clearance when the union could not supply sufficient numbers. Eventually, most unions granted some form of clearance to Black workers.⁴⁰ In general, the exclusion of Black workers depended on the skill level of the trade. The Laborers Union, whose members did heavy, unskilled work, was about one-third Black, and the Scalers and Cleaners Union was about 20 percent Black. The Machinists Union and the Molders Union, representing skilled workers, excluded Black workers from membership while collecting dues from a handful of Black helpers in exchange for temporary work permits that could be revoked at any time. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) was an exception among the skilled trades; concerned about winning public support for unions, it accepted many Black members and had several Black leadmen and shop stewards. The Boilermakers, with jurisdiction over 72 percent of the skilled jobs, continued to deny any union clearances to Black workers.⁴¹ On October 21, the Portland Metal Trades Council sent a letter to Kaiser Company demanding that Black workers promoted since October 16 be returned to their former positions. A front-page headline in the *Oregonian* read: “Negro-Yard Difficulty Nears Crisis: Boilermakers Union Chief Protesting Kaiser Promotions.”⁴²

Hoping to avert a crisis, representatives of the Kaiser Company, the U.S. Maritime Commission, the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, the Portland Metal Trades Council, and other parties held a conference in Portland on November 10 and 11. They unanimously agreed that their organizations would abide by both the letter and spirit of Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 and pledged, “there will not be permitted, either by management or by labor, any limitation or restriction against workers because of their race, creed, color or national origin in the processes of recruitment, upgrading, training or any other phase or condition of employment.”⁴³ Despite their pledge, the Boilermakers lost no time in evading the agreement by chartering a segregated auxiliary local, No. 32-A, in December. The auxiliary had no meetings, no elections, and no union hall, but it provided a fig leaf for the Boilermakers to claim that they would clear “any man regardless of race, creed or color” — all he had to do was sign up with the auxiliary.⁴⁴

Recognizing a trap, many Black workers fought the auxiliary. “200 Negroes Oppose Union: New Auxiliary Plan Meets Disapproval,” read a

headline in the January 31, 1943, *Oregonian*. Julius Rodriguez, chairman of the recently formed Shipyard Negro Organization for Victory (SNOV), explained that leaders of the Hudson House protest had formed the SNOV, which included the New Yorkers who lodged the initial protest and another 400 Black shipyard workers. "If faced with the alternatives of joining the auxiliary or being discharged, the Negroes still will refuse to join and will 'continue the battle from the outside,' Rodriguez asserted."⁴⁵

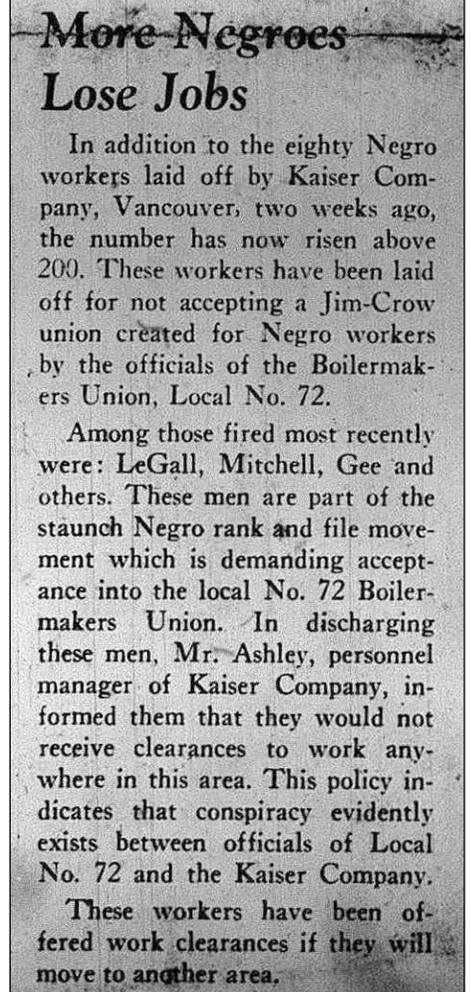
Local 72 officials used the auxiliary to drive Black workers out of skilled jobs in the shipyards. Following the union's demands, Kaiser personnel gave stop-work cards to Black workers employed as welders and in other classifications under Boilermakers' jurisdiction and told them that they would have to join the auxiliary. Company records showed that between January and November 1943, a total of 345 Black workers were discharged, or fired, after they refused to join the auxiliary; 217 were rehired within a week, presumably after joining the auxiliary.⁴⁶ Estimates of the auxiliaries' membership ranged between 600 and 800, but workers were often reluctant to admit to being members.⁴⁷

In April 1943, Lee Anderson filed suit in Multnomah County Court against Local 72 and Oregonship. Anderson, a forty-two-year-old man from Winslow, Arizona, had moved to Portland in March 1942. He worked as a laborer on swing shift at Oregonship while taking welding courses at a government training school from 12:30 at night to 7:30 in the morning. After he had 300 hours of training, he was told by the instructor to go to the union hall to get cleared as a tack-welder, the least skilled welding job. When he got to the hall, his White classmates were all given cards, while he and another Black worker were denied them. In testimony before the FEPC, Anderson recounted how Earl Ingram, president of Local 72, had told him, "For your benefit, in the Constitution and By-Laws of the Boilermakers Union, under no circumstances will a Negro be allowed in the Boilermakers."⁴⁸ After he had 500 hours of training, Anderson returned to the Boilermakers' hall and was again sent packing. In January 1943, a supervisor at Oregonship promoted him to a welder's position. The job lasted all of four hours before company officials told Anderson that he was being pulled off for non-union clearance and suggested he join the auxiliary. "I told them that was out. . . . Because I wasn't joining no dirty discriminatory setup like that where I had no rights at all." When company personnel tried to get Anderson to go back to his old job as a laborer, he recounted telling them, "if I go back and couldn't work as a welder, I wanted no part of the shipyard." He quit and found a job building the Vanport housing project, his 500 hours of training as a welder

having earned him a grand total of four hours work.⁴⁹

The *People's Observer* newspaper championed Anderson's case. Launched in June 1943, the *Observer* was published and edited by William H. McClendon, a shipyard worker who had earlier published the *Portland Observer* and revived it at the behest of SNOV members. The *People's Observer* advocated "courage, militancy, and aggressiveness" in the struggle against discrimination in the shipyards, condemning both the racists and those "pseudo-liberals" in the Black community who advocated acceptance of the auxiliary.⁵⁰

In the midst of this conflict, the CIO demanded that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) void the closed-shop contracts between Kaiser and the AFL unions because, having been signed before any appreciable workforce was hired, the contracts undemocratically denied workers the right to choose their own bargaining agent. The NLRB, following its own rule that closed shop contracts required approval from 50 percent of the employees in a workplace, charged Kaiser with entering into illegal bargaining agreements and ordered elections for workers to choose their union. AFL officials did not dispute the facts but charged the NLRB and CIO with disrupting war production. Roosevelt urged speedy settlement of the dispute, and in the summer of 1943, Congress passed a rider preventing the NLRB from interfering with any contract that had been in existence for over three months. Knowing



ON JULY 21, 1943, the *People's Observer* newspaper reported that the Kaiser Company fired over two hundred Black workers for refusing to join the segregated auxiliary union, which was subservient to the White local and would be dissolved after the war.

full well that the major AFL shipyard union was excluding Black workers, Congress vitiated its own labor laws and in so doing destroyed a golden opportunity to enable both union democracy and equal opportunity in the shipyards.⁵¹

MASS FIRINGS AND THE FEPC HEARINGS

Despite the severe labor shortage, the Kaiser Company complied with the Boilermakers' demands that it fire Black workers who had not joined the Jim Crow auxiliary. The first large-scale discharges occurred on July 14, 1943, when Kaiser fired 80 Black workers in its Vancouver yard for "non-union clearance."⁵² When Kaiser laid off 120 more men later in July, the *People's Observer* accused the company of conspiring with Local 72 to fire three key Black activists, who were informed by Kaiser's personnel director that they would not receive clearances to work anywhere in this area.⁵³

The SNOV and NAACP responded immediately. Rodriguez and Clow traveled to Washington, D.C., where they met with the FEPC and national officers of the NAACP. When he returned, Clow addressed a rally of nearly 1,000 Black shipyard workers at Hudson House.⁵⁴ In August 1943, the SNOV and the Portland NAACP filed a complaint with the FEPC, leading to hearings in Portland on November 15 and 16. The record of the FEPC hearings provides a rich source of personal testimony by the victims of discrimination and a case study in buck-passing by its practitioners. Statements by shipyard worker Raymond Gee demonstrates that, above all, Black workers wanted to gain the skills and experience needed to achieve a foothold in the skilled trades:

About four months after we were out there, we demanded to be working as the regular welders. As I said before, we were tacking. That is, we were just helping the ship fitters put a slip here and dog there and such as that. On a Sunday morning, approximately April 19th, we went down to Mr. Hunt's office. That is the superintendent of welding. And we asked that we be allowed to do regular welding. Mr. Hunt told us, he asked us, were we satisfied with the pay we were getting, weren't we getting \$1.20 an hour, the same as everybody else? We told him that was not the main issue. The main issue was that we wanted to learn the whole art of welding the same as anybody else. We wanted an equal opportunity. Mr. Hunt told us in these very words, "War or no war, as long as I am superintendent of welding in this yard, you will not work along side of a white man."⁵⁵

Apparently, a company official told Hunt to back down, because a little while later, he permitted Gee and his coworkers to resume regular welding,

demonstrating the pressure Kaiser was under from Black workers who were demanding that the company follow the law.

In their complaint, the SNOV and NAACP alleged that in addition to enforcing discriminatory stop work orders issued by the Boilermakers, Kaiser also practiced unlawful discrimination in many cases where union membership was not an issue. The company denied work to a skilled Black draftsman "solely because of his race and color." No Black employees held foreman positions in any of the three yards, and only a few were employed as leadmen. The company maintained all-Black work crews under the supervision of Whites.⁵⁶

Edgar Kaiser and the company's lawyer claimed that their hands were tied by the union when it came to upgrading and training Black workers because the issue of union clearance was strictly an internal union matter; company intervention would be a violation of the National Labor Relations Act. Local 72's representatives contended that they wanted to help Black workers advance but were forced to deny them union membership because of the international's constitution and bylaws. The union's expressions of concern for Black workers were clearly fraudulent, but there is validity to the claim of domination by the international. Fearing that their power would be eroded by "this great mass of new members" who "knew little or nothing about Unions or Union procedure, and unfortunately didn't want to learn," the international officers directly governed at least ten "subordinate" locals nationwide, including Local 72.⁵⁷

The Boilermakers International sent no representatives to the hearings but expressed its views in a telegram from Vice-President Charles MacGowan, stating, "We have no specific knowledge of any Negroes being held out of work, but Negroes and Whites alike can return to work if and when they pay their dues as provided by the Constitution of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Shipbuilders and Helpers of America, including the Auxiliary constitution."⁵⁸ The international assumed the legitimacy of the auxiliary, ignoring that its discriminatory character was at the heart of Black workers' grievances. After the FEPC issued its findings in favor of the Black workers, the international, evading responsibility for its own role in fueling racial hostility, threatened that if upgraded Black workers faced attacks from Whites, the FEPC "will have to bear full responsibility for racial outbreaks that will shock the nation — if not the world."⁵⁹

In its findings, issued on December 9, 1943, the FEPC stated the motivation behind Kaiser's discrimination was "entirely irrelevant"—no labor contract could stand above the Executive Order banning discrimination:



SCALERS at the Oregon Shipbuilding Corp.'s north storage yard pose for a photograph on March 12, 1944. With millions of men in the armed forces, the war industries were forced to employ older workers and those they had excluded in the past — women and African Americans.

The Companies admit that they are and have been following the policy and practice of refusing to hire Negroes in skills subject to the jurisdiction of the Boilermakers' Union . . . and the policy and practice of discharging Negro employees certified as not in "good standing" by these Unions, notwithstanding the Companies have had notice and knowledge that Negroes are not admitted to membership in these Locals. . . .

The Companies contend that they are bound to follow the aforesaid practices because of the closed shop provision of a contract known as the "Master Agreement." . . . This contention cannot be accepted. . . . Regardless of the measure of the Union's responsibility in this case, the power to hire and fire remains with the Companies, and their obligation to eliminate the obvious and

*admitted discrimination because of race or color in hiring and firing is primary and fundamental. . . .*⁶⁰

The committee directed the Kaiser companies to "desist from refusing to hire and discharging Negroes who fail to secure clearance from said unions" until the commission informed the companies that the unions had eliminated their discriminatory practices.⁶¹

The FEPC had no judicial power to enforce its ruling, but court decisions in two other states supported Black workers who were opposing other Boilermakers auxiliaries. The California Supreme Court ruled that the auxiliaries were "the equivalent of a complete denial of union membership." In Providence,

Rhode Island, where the Boilermakers' local had admitted Black workers as full members, the international replaced the local's officers and demanded that Black workers join an auxiliary, despite opposition from a majority of White workers. The Black workers sought and won a court injunction that declared the practice of segregating them into an auxiliary local "illegal and void."⁶²

Despite these judicial rulings and the FEPC's harsh condemnation, the Boilermakers reaffirmed their auxiliary policy at their 1944 convention, although they modified it to grant auxiliaries representation at conventions of the international.⁶³ In May 1944, Local No. 72 again demanded discharges of Black workers in the Kaiser yards "for non-payment of dues" to the auxiliary, and Kaiser again complied.⁶⁴

Henry Kaiser and Edgar Kaiser publicly proclaimed the importance of ending discrimination in order to meet the needs of war production but bowed to the demands of Boilermakers officials. Had the Kaisers instead followed the law, they would have confronted both the institutional power of Boilermakers officials and racism among White workers, many of whom had never worked alongside Black people. In August 1944, Kaiser management at Swan Island promoted Roland Veney, a Black electrician who had studied electrical engineering, to the position of leadman of a mixed-race crew, responding to "a directive issued by the FEPC . . . and enforced by the Maritime Commission." Eighty percent of the White electricians walked out in response, declaring, "We white men will not stand for a Nigger to be our boss." As reported by "A Worker," in a letter to the editor, "the strikers returned to work the following day, after being told to do so by the union."⁶⁵

While the work stoppage demonstrated racism among White workers, company supervisors apparently encouraged these attitudes. The Swan Island worker's letter stated: "The root of the strike can easily be traced to the company. The supervisor on one occasion before a hearing of the F.E.P.C. stated that in his opinion no Negro should be upgraded higher than a journeyman. . . . Four leadmen (company men) participated in the walkout." None of the strike leaders were disciplined.⁶⁶ By enforcing the Boilermakers' Jim Crow practices, Kaiser Corp. sent an unspoken message to its supervisors that discrimination was acceptable.

Had Kaiser Corp. refused to fire Black workers, it would have reinforced the best elements among the workforce. White workers were by no means unanimous in supporting discrimination and were influenced by contact with Black workers, attitudes of company and union officials, and the nature of the war itself. Shortly after the electricians' strike, Maynard Olsen, a White electrician who helped lead the strike and had just been inducted into the Navy, apologized for his actions. Explaining that he had been influenced by the racism of other White workers, Olsen told Walter Carrington, a Black electrician

NEGROES IN PORTLAND: What Is Their Postwar Outlook?

BY RON MOXNESS
Staff Writer

"ONE of the widespread consequences of this war is the growing determination among citizens, white and minority peoples everywhere to win for themselves a share of the freedom for which the allied nations are fighting."

This is the great quest of our time. To insure that freedom is not overthrown in any part of the world, we cannot be on one side abroad and the other at home. We cannot expect small nations and men of other races to credit the good faith of our professed purposes and to join us in international collaboration for future peace if we continue to practice an ugly discrimination against a small segment of our own population. It is the duty of each of us to do our part, which is, our 12,000,000 Negro citizens.

The late Wendell L. Willkie.

WENDELL WILLKIE'S concern for the rights of American Negroes has found factual support in the research of Dr. Gunnar Myrdal, famous Swedish economist, who studied America's No. 1 racial problem for four years at the invitation of the Carnegie Foundation.

Referring to the treatment of the Negro in America's "most conspicuous sin," Dr. Myrdal said that for the colored people all over the world, whose rising influence is Asiatic, the spread of "hate in their wounds."

Eric Johnson, president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, has said bluntly that in his travels over the United States he has found race and group hatred increasing to an alarming degree. He decried as "the greatest evil of our time" the spread of group hatred and said they will kill off not only a small minority of the American population, but the majority, he asserted, if not cured and remediated by constant and expanded efforts.

Only recently Oregon has found itself the target of criticism for its opposition to the return of the Japanese. The city of Portland has been singled out by several observers, some of them writing in national publications, for its discrimination in industry, housing and business against the American Negro.

Talks by the writer with housing and employment officials, social workers and Negro and white persons in

Homes and Employment in Postwar Days For at Least 50 Per Cent of 20,000 Now Living Here One of City's Big Problems



Arlene McNeil, who has been employed as production laborer at Oregonian, plans to look back to the Oregon Trail when the war ends, and return to her former home in Jackson, Miss.

guided by the wisest thought that most of the Negroes will go back home leaving the city untouched by racial "problems."

Yet estimates of the number of Negroes who will remain in the area after the war range from 50 per cent to as high as 80 per cent, leaving wide spread unemployment they will seek other jobs or end up "unemployed."

UNEMPLOYMENT.
Viewed as Certain When Peace Arrives

Only recently, A. L. Live, right, chief field representative of the war manpower commission and executive director of the American Council of Race Relations, reported in Portland that the Pacific Northwest had arrived at the crossroads of

or slum areas or trying to keep them in industrial sections," he asserted. "Experience in the south has shown the need to the community at far more than would be the case if less prejudice is shown and more good will and fair play."

Portland's Negroes, in spite of previous and outstanding social conditions, have done a good job of adjusting to the war and other war weapons, while other local Negroes have won honors as flyers and soldiers and at sea.

Reginald A. Johnson, Negro executive-director of the National Urban League, pointed out after a close study of the west coast's Negro population that the Pacific Northwest had arrived at the crossroads of

Negroes. Another 5000 were living in Vancouver as of November 1, 1944, approximately one-fifth of that vast project. Negroes housing officials estimated, computed about 10 per cent of greater Vancouver's population of about 78,000, nearly 8000.

Recent changes in the employment figures have undoubtedly altered these figures slightly. The Urban League's Johnson estimated the Negro population here at approximately three per cent of the Portland-Vancouver area—2.34 per cent, or 13,300 of metropolitan Portland and 1.60 per cent of Portland city proper.

KILGORE.
Negroes Decrease in Shipyard Work

Arriving at a "conservative" estimate, Johnson said that at least 10,000 Negroes could be expected to remain in Portland or Vancouver and said this figure represented about 2777 heads of families in the labor market for postwar employment.

The 1300 employed by railroads and hotels, and the 271 on other than shipyard work, represent to some degree a permanently employed group. This would leave approximately 1400 heads of families to be absorbed into available community employment," he said. He asserted this would require retraining, and re-adjustment to a peacetime economy.

Carl Kilgore, chief of personnel for Kaiser Vancouver shipyard, which employs the greatest number of colored persons and that as of April 1 a total of 4100 Negro men and women were at work in the Vancouver yard.

"Swan Island employs 915 Negroes, which makes 4683 working in the three yards in a city of 78,000," he said.

Surveys of Negro employment show that for the postwar period.

Portland's Negroes, in spite of previous and outstanding social conditions, have done a good job of adjusting to the war and other war weapons, while other local Negroes have won honors as flyers and soldiers and at sea.

Reginald A. Johnson, Negro executive-director of the National Urban League, pointed out after a close study of the west coast's Negro population that the Pacific Northwest had arrived at the crossroads of



Many Negroes were recruited from the east and mid-west in a drive for shipyard workers. In above photo, some from Oklahoma are shown registering at downtown hiring hall in Portland.

THIS ARTICLE, published on June 17, 1945, in the *Oregonian*, paints a grim picture of post-war employment prospects for African Americans. Even before the war ended, the Kaiser yards laid off 2,000 Black workers. Smaller shipyards in the area were more openly discriminatory than the Kaiser yards, and outside the shipyards, only 1.1 percent of the workforce was African American. Employers surveyed held little hope for Black workers, except perhaps as janitors or if White labor was unavailable.

who had fought for Veney's promotion, that, as the *People's Observer* put it, he could not "fight with his life for his own freedom . . . knowing that he had thwarted another man from enjoying that same basic privilege — freedom."⁶⁷

Chauncey Del French, an Oregonian who led a pipefitting crew in the Vancouver yard, relates how working with a Black man altered the racist views of three White crew members from the South. When John Willie, a powerful Black man from Arkansas, joined their crew, the three started complaining. French assigned them to work with Willie to move an extremely heavy, twenty-foot length of pipe across the yard and up two decks. When they finished the job, one of the three approached French and explained why the three, who had never "worked shoulder to shoulder with a Negro" and were ready quit, had changed their minds. After the three White men placed a board under one end, just to see if they could lift it, Willie easily picked up the other end himself with one hand! When they reached the

staircase, Willie took off and returned with a block-and-tackle, or pulley. The White worker who related the story wondered what Willie was thinking because the only place he could hang the pulley was a gun stand higher up than they needed to go, so Willie explained that they could haul the pipe up to the stand and then slide it down the stairs far more easily than carrying it up them. “Brains, that’s what he’s got” the worker concluded. “He’s all man, an’ he kin work with us anytime, anywhere.” Had French shared the racist views of the men under him, the outcome would certainly have been different.⁶⁸

VICTORIES: SOME MOOT, SOME LASTING

In May 1945, sixteen months after the FEPC ordered Kaiser to stop firing workers who refused to join the auxiliary, the company indicated it would do so. By that time, however, it was largely a moot victory, because shipyard workers were being laid off in large numbers as the war was drawing to a close. “Negroes in Portland: What is Their Postwar Outlook?” asked a feature article in the June 17, 1945, *Oregonian*. The answers were grim. The war years had seen no tangible advances in Black employment outside the shipyards. Most employers interviewed by the *Oregonian* stated bluntly that they would only hire Blacks as janitors, or if White labor was unavailable — an unlikely scenario, given the thousands of Whites who would be returning from military service and looking for work.⁶⁹

The end of the war also brought an end to the FEPC; Congress cut its funding in 1945 and terminated it altogether in 1946. Its job of winning equal employment opportunity certainly had not been completed, but the government no longer needed Black labor or was as fearful of Black unrest.

Lee Anderson’s case never went to trial. Lawyers for Kaiser and the Boilermakers filed enough motions to stall the case and drain the resources of the NAACP, which was backing Anderson’s efforts. Records at the Multnomah County Courthouse show no legal action after September 21, 1943, and the case was dismissed in 1951.⁷⁰ Segregated unions remained legal until the civil rights movement won passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

CONCLUSION

It was not inevitable that the majority of Black shipyard workers would remain locked out of skilled trades for the duration of the war. If the Kaiser Company had prioritized equity in employment and its contractual obligations under Executive Order 8802, it could have permitted workers to elect their own bargaining agent. Most of the smaller Seattle shipyards, those not covered by the “master agreement,” signed contracts with the CIO Industrial Union

of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America, leading to much greater equity both during and after the war.⁷¹

As the shipyard industry’s sole customer, the federal government exerted control over the entire operation. The Navy and the U.S. Maritime Commission chose the location of the yards, the design of each type of ship, and the time allotted for construction, often with Roosevelt’s direct involvement. Above all, government officials signed and canceled contracts, giving them a tremendous amount of weight that could have been thrown into enforcing Executive Order 8802. The FEPC never exercised its power to call for the cancellation of contracts with companies that were in violation of the order.

The work of breaking down color bars imposed by corporations and unions ultimately fell to Black people and their allies. When he proposed the March on Washington, Randolph wrote: “Only power can effect the enforcement and adoption of a given policy. Power is the active principle of only the organized masses, the masses united for definite purpose.”⁷² During the war years, Black workers did not have enough power to effect the enforcement of policies they had won, but the struggles they launched began building the power that would successfully challenge Jim Crow in the Civil Rights era.

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