

The Importance of Seniority

by BAYARD RUSTIN

The escalating dispute over job seniority rights is a tragic but altogether predictable consequence of the hard times confronting American workers. Periods of intense racial competition have always emerged simultaneously with depressions, panics, and general economic instability. And while Americans are today far less likely to be motivated by blind race hatred, they nonetheless continue to perceive social phenomenon in racial terms.

Black workers, the disproportionate victims of massive layoffs, are embittered at their white colleagues, whom they see as beneficiaries of patterns of discrimination. White workers, rejecting in totality the presumption that they constitute a privileged elite, bristle at demands that they--the have-littles of society--should sacrifice for the discriminatory practices of their employers and the policy failures of the federal government.

There is, then equity to both arguments. Or to put it another way, Black and white workers alike stand to lose from the perpetuation of an intolerable high level of unemployment. The only winners will be the most affluent and powerful forces of society--those who, whether consciously or otherwise, have a vested stake in pitting working people at each other's throats.

The days when industrialists would import Black strikebreakers by the trainload to supplant unionized whites may be well in the distant past. Likely as not, Blacks are now an integral part of those unions which management once tried so determinedly to destroy. But conservatives, whether in business or in government, have devised more sophisticated means of driving workers apart. Race is still an essential part of this strategy. And we must keep this point in mind when examining the seniority debate.

Thus my principal objection to proposals that seniority clauses be abrogated in the name of affirmative action is that such a move would severely damage the entire labor movement by weakening one of its most cherished achievements. Seniority is not a mark of privilege, it is a necessary right, won at no little cost, which protects workers from the whims and prejudices of an employer.

Primary among those who benefit from seniority are middle-aged and older workers, who themselves comprise a group that suffers a high degree of discrimination. Even now substantial numbers of older workers are being furloughed in non-unionized plants by employers anxious to replace higher-paid veterans with low-salary young workers. What future does a 50 and 60 year old worker have in today's economy? a question well worth pondering.

In some instances, of course, unions have decided, through the democratic approval of its members, to initiate work sharing schemes and other formulas to minimize the impact of layoffs. Some industries, garment manufacturing is one example, have employed work sharing formulas for years. Another important reform is the practice of granting to Black workers who were once refused employment because of discrimination back seniority rights dating to the time of their initial rejection. Implicit in cases where Black workers are protected by back seniority is the principle that white workers who had nothing to do with their employer's discrimination will not be penalized.

At the same time, I cannot support proposals for across-the-board wage cuts, reduction of benefits, or shortened work weeks as a basic means of dealing with the unemployment problem. Intentionally in some cases, unintentionally in others, the proponents of a general lowering of living standards have fallen victim to one of the most destructive myths about American society: the notion of an affluent secure working class. The most convincing evidence to the con-

trary lies in the most recent jobless statistics: 14 percent for blue collar workers; over 21 percent for construction workers. These are hardly reflections of wealth or security.

Furthermore, I am convinced that the acceptance of anti-worker and anti-union formulas signifies a weakening of resolve to achieve real economic transformation. There are already a few in the civil rights movement who are resigning themselves to another ten years of economic deterioration. Some misguided individuals even believe that a prolonged depression offers opportunities to advance the cause of racial equality through the institutionalization of the principle of an equitable sharing of poverty.

Such defeatism makes even more difficult the already formidable struggle for economic change. Blacks and whites can debate forever the question of who should sacrifice in an economy of scarcity. While we debate, those who have always profited from worker division will be on the sidelines cheering on. Their stake is not in who wins or loses, but only that the struggle pitting worker against worker continue.



WAGON FOR THERAPY-- Nat Adler, Clark County Public Administrator, presents Rambler station wagon keys to Al Brown, far right, board president of Fitzimmons House, Inc., a halfway house for drug addicts. A gift from the county, the vehicle will be used for therapeutic purposes for the patients. Standing by are Robert (Bob) Masley, member of the executive board and personnel committee of Fitzimmons House, Inc., and Assemblyman Zel Lowman, D-Las Vegas, rear, president of Southern Nevada Drug Abuse Council.

UNLV Reduces Dropout Ratio

While most American colleges are suffering a high dropout rate, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas has found a way of reversing the National trend.

Using a method called "intrusive counseling," UNLV has been able to reduce its rate of attrition among freshmen from 45 per cent down to an amazingly low 6 per cent in only two years.

Dr. Robert Glennen, the university's vice president for educational services, describes the dramatic technique and UNLV's success with it in an article published in the recent College Student Journal, distributed nationally. Already, he says, he has received a number of inquiries from college counselors around the country for more information.

Glennen defines intrusive counseling as a method of academic advisement which doesn't wait until students ask for help. Instead, the intrusive counselor takes an active interest in the needs, attitudes and problems of students before they run into difficulties in their academic careers.

Glennen writes that in 1972, UNLV established a University College to house all entering freshmen and transfer students. Academic counseling and student records were centralized and a number of faculty members were recruited from the various departments who were willing to become involved with students in a close student-faculty relationship.

"The counseling program did not just concentrate on those students who were on probation or receiving low grades," Glennen states. "Every student was seen at least once each semester."

When mid-term grades were turned in by the faculty, students receiving deficiencies were asked to see their counselors in an attempt to reverse their academic fortunes.

A Learning Resource Center was established which provided tutoring in all subjects, intensive programs in reading and writing, books and audio-visual materials for study skill development.

Special efforts were also made to congratulate honor students, give them encouragement and provide them with information on scholarships, special honors and independent study opportunities.

The results? There was a 9 per cent increase in the number of students making the deans' honor list. Another 25 per cent increased their academic performance to a B average or better. In addition, there were 325 fewer students on academic probation, 46 fewer students suspended from the university for poor academic performance, and 25 fewer withdrawals.

"There are more students continuing in school from semester to semester," Glennen reported. "This is particularly important at a time when nationwide trends reveals a decrease in students."

Interestingly, there has been a decrease in the number of freshmen needing assistance from the psychological clinic, indicating to Glennen that many problems have been resolved by counselors before they become crisis situations.

VOTING from page 1...

Franklin pointed out another problem with consolidation. "Residents of North Las Vegas can run for the Las Vegas City Commission and vote for a commissioner. Also, residents of Mt. Charleston and Blue Diamond can vote for a city commissioner, and they are not even in the city. This proves to me that the legislature deliberately disenfranchised these 4500 residents to keep Blacks off the city-county commission in the future."



Bob Duckett



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