

Colored Girls in the Second Line of Defense

By *Mary E. Jackson*

WAR times create so many new situations in national and industrial life that we are learning that the attendant changes must be carefully studied and directed. The advent of the colored girl in the broad fields of industry is one of the most significant alterations. Long has she been denied economic opportunities and restricted to the field of domestic service, but now while the men of her race fight in the trenches, she is taking her rightful place in the 'second line of defense.'

Everyone realizes that both justice and efficiency demand that white and colored soldiers be treated alike. We are just beginning to awake to the necessity of giving colored girls fair wages and hours, sanitary working conditions, and preliminary training in order that they may make their contribution to the nation.

Formerly when the mill or factory owner was approached by an ambitious colored girl, he would say, 'I am sorry I have nothing to offer you. I have no personal objection to colored people and no doubt you could do the work, but you see my girls will not work with you. Colored and white will not mix.'

Thus was the colored girl barred from fields to which ambition urged and for which capability and training may have eminently fitted her. Even those most interested in the colored girl's development have not realized the deadening influence of this course. The domestic world has been considered the rightful home of the colored girl, although she has not been tried in other lines. Until she is given a fair opportunity in the world of work in this America of theoretically equal opportunities, it is surely undemocratic so to classify and restrict her.

While opportunities are open to-day that were formerly closed to the colored worker, yet even now the colored American woman who has given her brother, husband or lover, is denied the right to serve her country in many war activities. Until colored women have been accorded the right to compete in every line of endeavor for which training,

capability and adaptability fit them, we cannot hope to rank as an ideal for world-wide democracy. 'Production on demand' is the watchword of the hour. The employer cannot ignore or the white co-worker scorn the untried industrial and economic force found in the American colored woman.

More is involved than simply opening new opportunities. The women must be safeguarded in their new environments. 'Colored girls are entering industry!' exclaim race leaders enthusiastically when groups of women are discovered cleaning engines for the railroad, carrying lumber in the lumber yards, running power machines in clothing factories, working in steam laundries and thus in small groups taking on better paid and more desirable occupation. Each new occupation opened to a colored woman is a step toward recognition as a factor in industrial work. However, the new opportunity brings accompanying responsibilities and dangers. Taken from the



Mary E. Jackson

home, the grade school, the field of domestic service or agriculture, the colored girl is suddenly placed in a new world of action, thought and feeling. If she makes mistakes, as no doubt she will, those errors are due to inexperience and human weakness rather than to some racial defect. A cynical attitude toward her makes it more difficult for her to get a chance in the world of labor.

The former refusal of this country to accord the colored woman an opportunity for fair competition in the field of economic effort is resulting in present difficulties for employers, who in this time of necessity, are 'trying out' groups of southern migrants fresh from agricultural sections of the South. Had colored women living in northern industrial districts been already fully accustomed to the demands of time clocks, the whir and buzz of machinery, the consistent and inconsistent demands of employers and foremen, they would now be able to train the new comers. Industrial leadership would have been developed automatically and many knotty problems helped to solution by the trained colored

workers, who in their race pride, are always happy and willing to help their people.

The situation is now doubly difficult since both forewomen and work women must be hastily trained to meet the emergency. Leadership is one of the crying needs of the country to-day and opportunities should be developed for colored women. The supervision of colored workers by women of their own race has proven very satisfactory in places where it has been tried. They take a personal interest in the girls. Although for years the race has been criticised for inadequate leadership, little thought was given to training groups of young educated colored women for definite responsibilities as leaders. To a very slight extent we are beginning to educate women through training courses to take supervisory positions. Much more must be done along this line.

The colored girl will never make her best contribution either to American life or labor by being thrust into the least desirable jobs or into the poorest paid occupation, or by being discriminated against. Colored girls working in factories should be paid the same wages as white girls doing similar work, and should be given the added stimulus of a chance for advancement. Working conditions for the colored girl must be identical with those for the white. Nothing will be gained for capital or for labor by a continuation of the policy of under-rating and under-paying the colored worker.

If our country calls women to hold the second line of defense it must by virtue of that call enlist all of its women citizens, including colored women. If colored women are needed, nothing but the best that our country can give in preparation and opportunity will fit them to make their fullest contribution. Prejudiced workers who in the past have blocked the way to the colored woman's industrial

developments must now give way. Labor unionists may lay a fuller and stronger claim to democracy by standing squarely by the colored woman in her right to economic life, industrial liberty, and the pursuit of a well-earned happiness. No greater war challenge can be put to the white worker than that of asking her to support and encourage the colored girl as she enters new fields of activity. Employed women throughout the country must be brought to see that for some time the colored woman's success will depend very largely upon the attitude of her white co-worker.

Tremendous responsibilities rest upon race leaders to stimulate their girlhood to put forth its best effort in the hour of opportunity, and to warn the colored girl of the hazards of the untried fields into which her country's need beckons her. She must be made to know she is no longer in any sense a ward of America, but a citizen with the rights, duties, and responsibilities of citizenship. She must be expected to do not her bit but her biggest. Whether she is invited into the country's activities or not, it is perfectly obvious that she is needed and upon the recognition of this need she must act. This is her time to prove her worth, her value, in the broader fields of industrial life.

For more than two centuries the colored woman gave to this country an unrecognized contribution of love, loyalty and unrequited labor. Both the skilled and the unskilled woman labor of the South was for years the colored woman's. Neither in gold nor in gratitude has she been repaid for those years of faithful toil. Is this not the day for the nation to pay to the daughters of to-day its debt to the mothers of yesterday by throwing wide the door of economic opportunity that they may become skilled trained competitors in the land to which their mothers gave their all?



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