

THE ROLE OF CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS: A "MARSHALL PLAN" APPROACH

STERLING TUCKER*

Civil rights organizations have responded to the challenge of inequality in industry in a variety of ways. The task of advancing equal employment opportunity was for many years shared by the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Whereas the League was regarded as the Negro's "State Department," the NAACP was thought of as his "War Department." The League relied upon the conference table to bargain with employers, while NAACP officials concentrated a steady stream of verbal fire at recalcitrant labor unions and urged Negroes "not to buy where you cannot work." In the era between the two world wars, both organizations waged boycott campaigns, but these were not always effective.

The rise of "direct action" techniques in the late fifties and sixties did much to spur both employers and union executives to change their hiring and admission patterns. The success of Dr. Martin Luther King's bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, dramatized the new-found power of nonviolence. The appearance on the racial scene of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and of such organizations as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) forced a major wedge into the front of employment bias. Urban League officials, who had won only small gains in the past, now found themselves swamped with requests from employers who knew that if they did not seek out Negro applicants from the League, they would find pickets at their doorsteps from CORE and SNCC. When the NAACP and Negro religious leaders joined the direct action movement, the full weight of Negro opinion and persuasion was felt throughout industry with noticeable effect. For example, on August 26, 1963, on the day before the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, five Chicago banks jointly declared a new policy to enroll management trainees funneled to them by the Urban League.

Where efforts to hire Negro citizens lagged, the nonviolent lash was applied, often ingeniously and almost always with justice, by the direct actionists. During 1964, for instance, these kinds of protests were held:

* A.B., University of Akron, 1946; M.A., University of Akron, 1950; Member, D.C. Advisory Committee, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights; Executive Director, Washington Urban League.

- In San Francisco, CORE pickets paraded in front of the Bank of America office and staged a "bank-in" when initial hiring appeals were not heeded to their satisfaction. CORE workers delayed regular business by obliging tellers to change dollar bills into small change and then back again.

- San Francisco also experienced a "shop-in" by CORE workers who protested bias in supermarkets by filling carts with food and then "forgetting" to bring enough money to pay cashiers.

- In Philadelphia, the NAACP threatened to boycott Sheridan & Fitzgerald, whiskey distributors, if Negro salesmen were not hired. Some were hired. Similar action by CORE against a brewery in Utica, New York, also produced satisfactory results.

- In Pittsburgh, the H.J. Heinz Co. quickly agreed to step up hiring of Negroes after encirclement by a CORE picket line.

While local rights teams employed the moral "stick," their national counterparts used silk gloves on employers. Major auto manufacturers met with the NAACP's ubiquitous Mr. Herbert Hill and pledged themselves to renewed fair hiring efforts. Blue chip corporations began to donate funds more generously to the National Urban League, which was busy establishing a "Talent and Skills Bank" to identify, recruit and place skilled but unemployed or underemployed Negro workers in seventy-two cities. Some 5,000 were put to work in the first year, many of them catapulting from jobs swinging mops to technical trainee positions and top management posts.

Urban League officials quickly found their supply of trained Negro personnel exhausted. "Our Skills Bank is bankrupt," conceded T. Willard Fair, Miami's Urban League chief. The League's national office then analyzed the resumes of 35,000 Skills Bank applicants, ascertained the need for retraining programs, and in 1965 concluded a \$2.5 million pact with the Bureau of Apprenticeship Training of the Labor Department for aiding some 3,000 workers in eleven cities. With this federal aid, the cost of training to employers is being underwritten. Its trainees are being referred by Urban League branches.

Increasingly, other civil rights organizations are taking advantage of a number of federal programs to beef up the skills of Negroes and place Negro applicants. Chicago's Woodlawn Organization, which typifies many local groups, now holds a \$76,000 federal grant to recruit and counsel auto mechanics, clerk-typists, stenographers and welders. Meanwhile, to insure that job openings will be available for these trained personnel, the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund has involved itself in testing compliance of several nation-wide firms with provisions of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

I. A "MARSHALL PLAN" APPROACH

Beyond impartial hiring in personnel offices of the nation, civil rights organizations are pushing for special help for the disadvantaged. They maintain that the sudden adoption of color-blind hiring policies by businessmen after years of bias cannot adequately right old wrongs. Their hope is to see a massive infusion of funds into ghetto areas to energize all areas of Negro life. They reason that Negroes will be unable to assume good-paying jobs without improved schooling, better homes, strengthened familial relationships, special vocational rehabilitation and health and medical care.

This argument was eloquently advanced by Gerald Bullock in the *Chicago Defender* on August 28, 1963. He wrote:

If the American Negro community is ever to overcome the negative effects of centuries of oppression, it will have to be the beneficiary of a special rescue program. In the hovels, tenements, garbaged alleys and hallways of his enforced cultural isolation, the Negro grew up, generations of him, to witness the slow death of the American Dream. He could look back on nothing; he could look ahead to even less. He is the Man Farthest Down. It will take a longer rope to reach him, a stouter strand to pull him up. That is why I am for compensatory, positive racial discrimination.

More recently, at the White House Planning Conference on Civil Rights held in Washington in November 1965, A. Philip Randolph, the conference chairman, called for the infusion of \$100 billion into the ghettos of America. Most national rights leaders are in substantial agreement with this pronouncement. It is their feeling that a nation which can invest \$40 billion in interstate highways and \$20 billion in a moonshot and which invested \$17 billion to restore war-torn Western Europe after the Second World War, can invest generously in the cause of advancing the lot of its own Negro citizens.

On June 10, 1963, a year before the riots which exploded in the Negro ghettos of Harlem, Jersey City, Rochester and Philadelphia, the National Urban League called for a domestic Marshall Plan for Negro citizens. The League warned that incidents in the South were "mild in comparison with those on the verge of taking flame in the tinder box of racial unrest in the Northern cities." The statement of the League's Board, which now has prophetic ring, was that, "in these teeming ghettos, hundreds of thousands of Negro citizens, struggling beneath the mounting burden of automation, overcrowding and subtle discrimination, are reaching the breaking point."

Although the domestic Marshall Plan which the League advocated

was criticized as "reverse discrimination," this criticism has not impeded men of vision from applying its techniques in many areas across the nation. Under myriad banners and by a dozen different names special effort programs to ameliorate the lot of the poor and the underprivileged are appearing on our American horizon.

President Johnson, within a few months after he took office, inaugurated a Marshall Plan approach to the problems of chronically depressed Appalachia. Ironically, the residents of this area were not members of a minority group. Indeed, many of them are ninth and tenth generation white Americans who had been left out of the mainstream of economic improvement. But they, too, were at the bottom of the pyramid. Like Negroes and Puerto Ricans, they had been placed at a disadvantage by circumstances beyond their control. Only a massive program could change these circumstances.

We live in a nation in which nearly 10 million dwelling units are dangerously deficient; in which our health and educational plants are seriously outmoded; in which we are short of teachers, engineers, doctors, scientists, artists and men of letters; in which our physical environment—the air we breathe and the water we drink are being steadily degraded; and where a fantastic gap has arisen between our needs and our physical resources, not because we lack abundance, but because we lack the will to put it to work. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith, former Ambassador to India, has urged pouring \$250 million of federal money each year into urban and rural educational "problem districts," backed up by a national teaching corps of 12,000 skilled instructors. Education would be further improved, in the view of author Michael Harrington, by a GI bill to assure education for all the youth of America. "The most useful work young people can perform for society is to go to school and get the education needed to become productive citizens," Harrington has said. His plea takes on a critical note when one realizes that some one million youngsters between sixteen and twenty-one years of age are out of school and out of work, half of them Negro.

Even now civil rights groups are engaged in great efforts to keep young people in school. They constantly repeat the message that hopeless heritage of the past need not apply to the future. While the crumbling and worn high schools of the central cities are replaced by the new structures called for under the Marshall Plan approach, leaders visit the youngsters to remind them that they are not forgotten—to remind them they can still "make it." These same agencies have been the focal point for volunteer tutorial and field trip programs which encourage and sustain the educationally deprived. Those who have dropped out are caught up into the federally financed apprentice training or back-to-school programs mentioned above.

Within the neighborhoods, parents are urged to demand better schools for their children. They know from bitter experience that lack of skills makes a discriminatory job market even more difficult. Moreover, leadership training is combined with other programs in the neighborhoods—legal services, consumer education—to take the slums out of the people even before they are able to get out of the slums. Civil rights groups push citizen participation. They are both the spur to demands and the link with other forces working toward a better community.

Another step being urged by most civil rights leaders and progressive economists to alleviate the Negroes' present economic plight is the establishment of a National Work Corps to give useful employment to the millions of unemployed men desperately in need of pay checks and dignity. Taking hundreds of thousands of men off relief and putting them to work building public works requires a vast operation which cannot be met strictly by local, county, or state welfare agencies. To take 140,000 youngsters off the streets under the federal War on Poverty is most assuredly a stride forward; but these job camps do not begin to satisfy the needs of all our lost youngsters, much less those of jobless men between thirty-five and sixty who are out of work and hope. A National Work Corps could assist in building hospitals, clinics, medical schools, settlement houses, roads and bridges, mass transit systems, public and middle income housing, water and sewage treatment plants, day-care centers, welfare institutions, nursing homes, schools, colleges, public buildings, parks, and innumerable other projects.

The backlog of these unmet construction needs soars into the billions of dollars. One cannot envision a more harmonious matching of human and physical resources than for unemployed men, say in Harlem, to help build a new clinic or day-care center made possible with federal funds. The suggestion reportedly under consideration by President Johnson to turn back billions of tax dollars to state governments ought to be adopted for municipalities.

II. WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

A domestic Marshall Plan cannot be advanced under government edict alone. Beyond the mere recognition by industrialists that fair hiring is obligatory and mandatory, theirs is a moral obligation to go beyond current legal limits in quest of the great society. Legal regulations promulgated by congressional edict will assist employers to correct historic injustices, but the rate of progress will be determined by each individual employer. Many companies, barred from fair hiring by local custom, anxiously awaited passage of a federal job law as a rationalization to declare: "I have to do it because of the law."

These employers will be aided immeasurably by the law; employers who see a moral issue in human rights will not wait for federal inspectors to add up their balance sheets. Some concerns, such as Pitney Bowes, have launched positive plans for seeking out, hiring, training and promoting capable Negro and other minority group workers.

If industrialists react to the new fair hiring law without a companion sense of moral compassion for the afflicted, patterns of employment will change more slowly than those of education. The rule of law is not intended merely to investigate complaints. If each case of job bias in America must be hammered out blow by blow and writ by writ, the new fair hiring law will prove to be but a monument to futility. Experts agree it is currently a weak law which has created a weak commission with little more than the powers of persuasion. But even when it is strengthened—as it seems it eventually will be—and the commission gets its second teeth, the burden of change will rest most heavily upon the businessman and the community.

Civil rights leaders recognize that no matter how they strive to end the "what's the use" attitude so characteristic of the poor, the effort will be in vain if employers do not make this moral commitment to end discrimination. Barriers must not be lowered; they must be eliminated. Token integration will not suffice. Large numbers of Negroes must be structured into the work force during the next five years. To employers seeking to comply with the letter and the spirit of the law, voluntary and civil rights groups will lend their utmost support. The Urban League will concentrate its efforts to make certain that conciliation and negotiation work. It will provide expertise to employers to insure that they grasp the rudiments of finding and selecting able candidates. Employers who resist the federal ukase, however, will find Urban League research departments issuing reports on the scant support of industrial democracy. They will find pickets at their door from SNCC and CORE. Hopefully, the civil rights agencies will be aided by federal equal opportunity commissioners themselves, who will institute sweeping investigations of industrial hiring patterns.

Imaginative programs will require the cooperation of industry, government and the civil rights groups if a man is to be able to walk in and get a job based on what he intrinsically possesses. He must be hired at his best skill level; he must be promoted at the same rate as his fellow employees. In certain industries it will be possible to take a second look at qualifications. During World War II, workers who did not meet every company prerequisite were often hired of necessity. Yet, the jobs were done and done well.

Civil rights groups must also attempt to feed Negroes into the

mainstream of business as entrepreneurs. The Interracial Council for Business Opportunity, founded in 1963 with the backing of the Rockefeller Fund and the New York and Ford Foundations, is an example of such an effort. It assists Negro businessmen who are under severe handicaps in obtaining bank loans, joining trade associations, getting supplier credit and expanding to areas outside of existing ghettos. Already programs are in existence in New York, Los Angeles, Newark and Washington.

But support for the day when Negro citizens find their way into the economic mainstream must come from all segments of society—from a total domestic Marshall Plan effort backed by industry, trade unionism, the schools, philanthropies, government, and the people.

There is no major rights leader who does not support the call for a broad alliance among all Americans, including spokesmen for labor and the intellectual communities, to secure the rights of all citizens and to eradicate poverty. President Johnson, in his historic address to the National Urban League in December 1965 in Washington, D. C., said that nothing less than "full assimilation" of our 22 million Negro citizens would suffice. If his vision is to prevail, as it unquestionably must, the Negroes' right to first-class status must be the principal task for those who would implement a national Marshall Plan.

Approaches other than the Marshall Plan technique have been attempted and have failed. Poverty and unemployment will not be eradicated piecemeal. Only a sustained, coordinated, and centrally-directed program to enrich our national life can be effective. The stakes are high. We cannot assimilate our Negro millions racially if we fail them economically. We cannot unify the nation and make equality a fact rather than a dream if we do not unleash our total resources for this crusade. The ways of the Marshall Plan are many and diverse. Positive hiring and training by businessmen is not enough. Our steps are limited only by our ingenuity, skill, and genius as a people. Those who earnestly seek to uplift the republic will not be weighted down by methodology.

In his first message to Congress, President Lincoln described the Civil War in terms that apply today not only to the emancipation of Negro citizens from the last vestiges of racism, but to all Americans in poverty. His words serve as a foundation for the Marshall Plan, which must become the framework of a new and more dynamic society—one free from the spectre of unemployment in the ghetto: "This is essentially a people's contact . . . it's a struggle to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weight from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life."