

Race ethnicity and unions term paper examples

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Abstract

The labor unions have provisions and features which allow for more discrimination based on race and ethnicity. They were historically detrimental to minority workers, especially the Blacks. This paper will focus on the historic vulnerabilities of the minority workers, specifically the Blacks and the Chinese workers during the 1800's. These vulnerabilities pose a dangerous risk to the continued manifestation and persistence of discrimination among minority workers.

This paper, therefore, intends to illustrate the ways by which labor unions put the Blacks and the Chinese workers to a great disadvantage in the past. This knowledge would be essential in generating new measures and means to reduce racial discrimination in the labor unions and in labor organizations and employment, in general.

Introduction

America seems to be a haven of labor. They can be proud of their most productive workers throughout history. These workers are the foundation of their highly progressive economic structures. Yet, the issue of worker's discrimination also remains. Throughout the Age of Industrialization up to now, minority construction workers have been given unfair treatment and unequal opportunities. (Hunter, 1997, p. 1) Even when there are labor unions, this discrimination persists and it usually controls the supply of labor to the detriment of the workers' economic and personal advancements.

Labor discrimination against minorities is a national problem. At the same time, the memberships in labor unions continued to decline, especially

among production employees in metropolitan areas. The structural changes and the geographic shifts in the U. S. economy can be taken as a major factor for the decline in union membership. According to Mosca & Pressman (1995, p. 1), manufacturing employment has left states such as Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania and has moved to the Carolinas, Texas, and other sunbelt states where union membership is low.

Barack Obama's new spending proposal reduces the chances of workers to find work if they are not members of labor unions. While he believes that this will lead to new jobs for construction workers, the political hand for this directive is clear. Labor unions supported his candidacy. However, this does not guarantee that black construction workers can expect more jobs than the white American workers. This plan also does not have a strong and clear means of eradicating unemployment. (Grey, 2011, p. 1) Obama's new proposal has a wage-rate provision that cocoons labor unions from competition on construction projects and economists see this provision as "artificially inflating wages at the cost of keeping others unemployed." (2011, p. 1)

Historically, labor unions have requested the government for special shields from competing non-union agencies, specifically in the skilled work and construction sectors. This resulted to a systematized racism. For instance, at the time of the Depression Period, the Davis-Bacon Act mandated that the existing wages be paid on all national construction projects. In hindsight, this law was originally passed to protect white, unionized construction workers from the North against the black, non-union construction workers from the

South who were being bid under the table through the unions. Labor unions continued to prevent discrimination by preserving this law even when this law has no worthy economic or social intentions.

Rampant discrimination has expanded in the union hiring halls. Construction industry unions have been given special privileges under the labor laws to exclusively operate hiring halls and referral arrangements to supply labor on construction projects. The hiring-hall systems in establishing trades labor agreements turn to employers' recruitment of individual workers referred by the union. Unluckily, discrimination disbars many minorities from becoming true union members in the first place. This ultimately deprives them of apprenticeship training which finally leads to jobs.

Historical Cases of Minority Workers: African Americans and Chinese Workers

While unions have been instrumental in democratizing American labor, some of them have been very racists. Some of them did not provide minorities the opportunities for economic advancement and civil rights. (Moreno, 2010, p.

1) There were ways by which these unions used race as an economic tool.

The period before the Civil War, labor leaders' acclaim for " free labor" really meant " wage slavery" for white workers. (2010, p. 1) The minorities only inched through effective strikes after the New Deal when the U. S. federal government allowed for the " fair representation" for black workers. Then, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted. (Moreno, 2010, p. 1)

Labor unions were always on the borderline of either promoting or damaging racial harmony among various workers in the country. They sometimes enforced racial discrimination while they also welcomed the minorities into

<https://assignbuster.com/race-ethnicity-and-unions-term-paper-examples/>

their ranks at some times. (2010, p. 2) Because they need to be perceived as egalitarian, the Blacks generally have attained better accommodation than the other minorities. While the Blacks have to fight for their rights to join labor unions, they also recognized the power and influence they could advance with their union affiliations.

Cases Against Blacks

As early as the 1880s, black workers' place in labor unions proved to be for convenience. The racial issues of the workers were usually used to intentionally create strikes and weaken the union's solidarity. (Hunter, 1997, p. 1) The Knights of Labor were open to black workers during the peak of racism in the United States. On the other hand, the AFL unions kept blacks out even when they were racially inclusive. (1997, p. 1) It actually started during the 1880s with a non-discriminatory policy but its founder realized that the union can use blacks as a "convenient whip placed in the hands of the employers to cow the white man." (1997, p. 1) In a way, labor unions perpetrated the historic fear that the Negro workers would usurp the jobs from the Whites.

The AFL craft unions strengthened itself as a racist association. In 1902, the influential black historian and spokesman, W. E. B. Du Bois, revealed that forty three (43) national unions had no black members and 27 similar unions barred black apprentices, which made its colored apprentices to a minimum. Du Bois spoke against the disbaring and boycotting of black workers to join unions and the practice of importing ignorant Negro-American laborers in cases of labor emergencies. (1997, p. 2)

Historically, the employers capitalized on racial segregations by enjoining Negro workers as those who would break the strikes. During a significant incident in 1917, East St. Louis employers in Illinois hired Negroes from the South to accept low paying jobs in order to influence wages down. This made an exclusive white labor union to strike back. The racial tensions rose. In July, 1917, a riot occurred as the Whites attempted to drive the Negroes out of the local community. This incident led to the death of 40 Negroes and 9 white Americans. (Reynolds, 2009, p. 1)

These labor union policies were not effective. By disbaring the black workers, they were assured that there still remained a workers' group that company owners could resort to in order that wage hikes are affected or to put pressure on in cases of strikes. At the turn of the new century, union leaders initiated a non racial discrimination and forge solidarity among the lines of workers' causes, in general.

Blacks eventually found their place in the labor union through the industrial unions in the CIO, a significant civil rights group during the 1930s up to the 1950s. The CIO unions accommodated racial groups before other segments of the whole society. This was made possible because of the sheer number of the black workers in the construction industry. Black workers made up about 85, 000 steelworkers. (2009, p. 1) The CIO members called each other "brother" and "sister" even when they have different races. In a problematic situation in 1941, the black union members, composing about 20% of the labor population at Ford River Rouge plant in Michigan, joined the strike called by the United Auto Workers. They helped win the issue of being given

recognition by their respective companies. These black workers participated in the strike even when their Ford employer hired them at good wages. They did not turn their backs on the union nor became loyal allies of their employer. In 1945, there were at least 500, 000 blacks members who enlisted under the CIO unions. (2009, p. 1)

After the Second World War, the racial barriers were further broken down. The workplace has been made more equitable for the black workers vis a vis the general society. This was due mainly to the strong labor movement. While educational institutions still segregate blacks and many blacks workers were not yet provided with the right of suffrage, the black workers who were consigned from the unions through contracts were taken as white workers. They needed not to fight against their employers or be subjected to arbitrary dismissal. These events, in turn, resulted to the solid pro union among black workers. The Blacks became the most likely groups to become unions in the 1950s. (2009, p. 1)

Cases Against Chinese

Like many others races who wanted the better life in the United States, the Chinese workers had their taste of labor discrimination and exploitation during the 1860's. Their journey took many decades before they would get welcomed in the general American society. (" Courage, Determination Forged Foundation for Chinese-American Labor," 2012, p. 1)

While the first wave of Chinese migrants were openly accepted by the American society, the much larger group of coolies, unskilled laborers who arrived in the U. S. in the mid 1800's were met by hostility. (Chang, 2004, p.

20) In 1851, there were 25, 000 Chinese workers in California; most of them were engaged with the San Francisco's " Gold Rush" area. During that time, majority of the Chinese in the U. S. were living in the area. They clustered into groups. They worked hard and lived frugally.

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, the American nation multiplied its efforts to create an almost 1, 800-mile railroad from Omaha to San Francisco. This was considered an “ unprecedented feat of engineering and human will that became the greatest construction project the world had ever known.” (2012, p. 1)

The Chinese workers' hard labor consists mainly of constructing this huge structure without the help of chain saws and steam shovels. It consisted mainly of backbreaking labor for them and their mules. They had to cut trees to clear the way and milled the lumber to create ties, trestles and other structures. These workers broke rocks and hauled dirt to build grades as well as laid ties and track. The stiff challenge also included a competition among two construction companies, which implied more forced and grueling labor for the Chinese workers. (2012, p. 1)

The Chinese workers, however, were regularly subjected to threats, violence and losses. They had little or no legal protection. They were forced to give back a large portion of their wages to labor agents and they had to pay a \$20 per month “ foreign miner's tax,” which left them with little reward for their hard work. (2012, p. 1)

Chinese workers were also barred to secure American citizenship. They were prohibited from testifying in court. They were also subjected to state-sponsored discrimination which denied many of their supposed inherent rights and opportunities. In 1862, the Californian state government discouraged immigration and the use of Chinese labor. (2012, p. 1)

In May 1867, many Chinese workers could not take it anymore. While the railroad tried to fiercely finish the Summit Tunnel through the mountains' crest, 6, 000 Chinese workers went on strike. They demanded the same higher pay and shorter hours given to white workers. They also demanded a termination of what the Sacramento Union newspaper told as “ the right of the overseers of the company to either whip them or restrain them from leaving the road when they desire to seek other employment.” (2012, p. 1)

Hundreds of Chinese workers met death in construction blasts, cave-ins, and avalanches. Some of the survivors went back to mining or pushed for railroad construction work in other parts of North America (the American west and Canada). Others went back to California to experience disrespect, humiliation and inequality, even within the labor unions. This condition lasted for many years.

Conclusion

In general, American labor unions failed to confront the issue of racial discrimination in the 19th century. They anticipated that the exclusion might be of advantage to white union members for a short period of time only. They saw it as an instrument of weakening union power in the long term because employers would eventually draw on lower-cost black workers,

specifically in order to break strikes. The issue of race was left for national and local unions. This also reflected the more or less basic feature of organized labor in the United States - racially egalitarian labor leaders who had small influence on the national and local unions that consisted of labor federations. These unions had greater tendency to take the black workers by enforced exclusion. (Moreno, 2010, p. 15)

In the long process, the white workers have realized that the exclusion of black workers undermined the solidarity of their labor causes. They also understood that this made it more difficult for their unions to successfully negotiate successfully with their respective employers. They acknowledged this vulnerability since they feared of an even worse effect/s of sharing their labor organizations with black workers.

The problem of racial discrimination in labor unions in the country was not resolved. This was actually outgrown by the process of industrialization and the remarkable increase of minority workers in the general work force. The story of racial discrimination in the U. S. labor movement attests to the belief that labor unions merely acted as cartels which tried to control the labor supply and increase wage prices.

An evident, identified and culturally disfavored minority group gave a convenient excuse for racial exclusion. However, the power of the labor unions were also subscribed under the general powers of the state and by the moment these unions have acquired the needed political power, the blacks had already insisted their ways into the industrial workforce. Hence, the major problem of the labor unions became the discrimination within

instead of the exclusion. This has spawned the policy of “ affirmative action.” (2010, p. 16) Lastly, the macroeconomic costs of labor unions reduced the ranks of private sector unions. This put to an end the “ syndicalist phase” of the labor unions in the U. S. Then, organized labor turned its focus on the public sector, where varying historical and economic elements exist.

Big Labor has strongly stood on top of the civil rights movement in ensuring equal opportunity for all workers. However, the progressive talk is never a good substitute for a more stable and concrete action. Labor organizations must take dynamic steps to reduce the systemic racial discrimination which has persisted since history and still pervades some of the local workforce. The union movement should clean its own house by “ breaking down the barriers to racial equality and economic justice.” (Hunter, 1997, p. 1)

In the meantime, several symptoms of inequality still persist in today’s labor force. The local governments have tried to solve these problems by mandating racial quotas, objectives and timetables in publicly financed projects. Taken as “ quick fixes,” these measures are established in order to guarantee a percentage of minority workers the chance to work on local jobs. However, these “ quick-fixes” are principally weak and constitutionally suspect. (1997, p. 1) They also increase the costs of construction and do not address the basic problem of allowing discrimination against minorities to exist.

Works Cited:

Chang, Iris. *The Chinese in America. A Narrative History.* 2004. Penguin.
ISBN 0-14-200417-0.

<https://assignbuster.com/race-ethnicity-and-unions-term-paper-examples/>

Grey, Ronald. "How to Lose Construction Jobs Through Racial Discrimination." All Right Magazine. October 11, 2011. Accessed on 31 May 2012 .

Guffey, Cliff. "Courage, Determination Forged Foundation for Chinese-American Labor." 2012. American Postal Workers' Union Website. Accessed on 31 May 2012 < http://www.apwu.org/laborhistory/04-3_chineserailroadworkers/04-3_chineserailroadworkers.htm>.

Hunter, Robert P. "Union Racial Discrimination is Alive and Well." September 8, 1997. Accessed on 31 May 2012 .

Moreno, Paul. Unions and Discrimination. 2010. Accessed on 01 June 2012 < www.cato.org/pubs/journal//cj30n1-4.pdf>.

Reynolds, Morgan. A History of Labor Unions form Colonial Times. July 17, 2009. Ludwig von Mises Institute. Accessed on 01 June 2012 < <http://mises.org/daily/3553>>.