We Do Our Part-But... (1933)

In this article, Ira DeA. Reid reaffirmed the patriotism of African-Americans and decried the exclusion of the vast majority of African-American workers from the industrial codes formulated by the National Recovery Administration. As the New Deal progressed and more direct interventions into the economy were attempted, this pattern of excluding African-Americans continued. Consider why the New Deal, dependent as it was on the Democratic majorities in Congress, did so little to help African-Americans.

Ira DeA. Reid

1. THREE million Negro workers, more than half of the total number of Negroes who must labor for their livelihood, will not be covered by the industrial codes now being formulated by the NRA!

2. How are these domestic and personal servants, laborers and other workers to be protected? In New Orleans 700 Negro domestic workers have organized to have the Blue Eagle's wings spread over kitchen, laundry and servant quarters. Is the country's fourth largest field of employment to be ignored? Is this worker to be a lone, lorn creetur in this new set-up?

3. These three million black workers are the backbone of the Negro consumer market. For them there is no immediate rise in wages. For them an immediate rise in prices will mean additional insecurity and suffering. Furthermore, in certain areas where there have been uniform minimum wages established for white and black workers employers have replaced Negroes with whites rather than pay them the same wages.

4. Too long have we heard the soporific pronouncements of labor leaders on economic equality for black workers. The utterances of new voices frequently cause us to smile knowingly. We know, however, that we economic patriots are spending our strength with over-matching waves unless we heed the warning of Frances Perkins' recent statement on differential wages. She said:

5. "The low rates of 25 cents and 27 cents per hour of the two Southern districts are presumably based on the predominance of Negro labor in those districts. But Negroes are also consumers. Their purchasing power is needed to provide different markets for the products of agriculture and industry. Their cost of living is not lower than the living costs of the whites; it is rather that they live differently and on a lower standard. A sound, national industrial system cannot be based upon a capitalization of these lower living costs. . . and increased wages that will not unfairly compete with the wages of the white laborer is essential to achieving this end."

6. As consumers Negroes need protection. Remove the differential wage, eliminate the company store and commissary from competition with private enterprise, establish minimum wages for the domestic occupations in which Negroes are employed--and something still remains undone. Negro areas are ones in which some of the most undesirable merchandising practices are conducted. The Negro consumer finds his neighborhood stores cluttered with a large supply of inferior and cheap goods at prices that are high under any standard. These goods include food,
housing and clothing, commodities of all sorts. Furthermore, the goods being cheap means that they are produced under undesirable conditions of labor and distribution. The elimination of these cheap goods would, of course, diminish the purchasing power of the average Negro consumer. The continuance of such merchandising practices as have accompanied the distribution and sale of these goods, including some nefarious practices of partial and installment payments, would violate both the spirit and the letter of NRA standards. There is a price for economic recovery--is it to be paid?

7. Because of the hours of employment of the large number of Negroes employed as personal and domestic servants, the Negro consumer has purchasing habits that would be distinctly inhibited by any regularization of the hours of the local shopkeeper. Though no studies have been made on this phase of consumer activity, it is well known that the most active buying hours among Negroes are after 6 P. M. Likewise, the barber shop depends upon the late afternoon and evening trade for its largest income. Such steps, therefore, as are taken to regularize the operations of the merchandising agencies must take into account these consumer habits of Negro workers--habits conditioned by the nature of their employment.

8. Chaos is come again with the unions. We believe in collective bargaining. We should like to participate in the collective action of all workers but organized labor in the United States has repeatedly kept the word of promise to our car and broken it to our hope. Today 24 national trade unions exclude us from their ranks and proscribe us in our employment.

9. Seven killed--7 wounded--1 flogged! "Murder for the job," says The Nation. This is the clue to the problems of Negro firemen who sought to hold their jobs on certain Southern railroads in 1932. They did their part in stabilizing employment.

10. Telegram: "Negro employees of Federal Barge Line operated (Continued on Page 285) by War Department went on strike in East St. and St. Louis on August 22nd in protest against intolerable work conditions. Investigator reports men were compelled to remain on duty from 12 to 15 hours before being checked out at night though paid only for work actually done sometimes as little as two hours. They were compelled to buy meal tickets from restaurant designated by Superintendent. Were refused hearings on complaints against discrepancies in hours, work and pay. Were intimidated by police summoned by Government representatives."

11. There are 865,000 Negro farm owners and tenants who view with justifiable skepticism the possibility of their full participation and protection in the farm loan scheme. Their suffering is no mere word. They have seen. They have felt. Despite the crooning and drooling paternalism of a recent magazine article on the Negro farmer, he knows too well that Santa Claus has not yet hit Dixie.

12. We are famished at the feast of mere ballyhoo, for we realize that clamorous Negro labor knocks with its million hands for that firm action that would remove its blight as the canaille of the labor market. The NRA should seek to remove and in no way should condone a basic economic discrimination and fear that has long feebled the pulse of American industry.

13. 'Tis true, 'tis pity; and pity 'tis 'tis true--We Do Our Part--BUT. . . .