

WHAT CAUSED THE DETROIT RIOT? AN ANALYSIS

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What Caused the Detroit Riot? An Analysis by Walter White & Thurgood Marshall

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WHAT CAUSED THE DETROIT RIOTS?

SECTION I

by WALTER WHITE

In 1916 there were 8,000 Negroes in Detroit's population of 536,650. In 1925 the number of Negroes in Detroit had been multiplied by ten to a total of 85,000. In 1940, the total had jumped to 149,119. In June, 1943, between 190,000 and 200,000 lived in the Motor City.

According to the War Manpower Commission, approximately 500,000 in-migrants moved to Detroit between June, 1940, and June, 1943. Because of discrimination against employment of Negroes in industry, the overwhelming majority—between 40,000 and 50,000—of the approximately 50,000 Negroes who went to Detroit in this three-year period moved there during the fifteen months prior to the race riot of June, 1943. According to Governor Harry S. Kelly, of Michigan, a total of 345,000 persons moved into Detroit during that same fifteen-month period. There was comparatively little out-migration as industry called for more and more workers in one of the tightest labor markets in the United States. The War Manpower Commission failed almost completely to enforce its edict that no in-migration be permitted into any industrial area until all available local labor was utilized. Thus a huge reservoir of Negro labor existed in Detroit, crowded into highly-congested slum areas. But they did have housing of a sort and this labor was already in Detroit. The coming of white workers recruited chiefly in the South not only gravely complicated the housing, transportation, educational and recreation facilities of Detroit, but they brought with them the traditional prejudices of Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and other Deep South states against the Negro.

The sudden increase in Negro in-migration was due to labor scarcity which forced employers to hire Negroes, or be unable to fill government orders. The same circumstance—plus governmental and community pressures—created the necessity for modest upgrading of competent Negroes. One of the most important factors in bringing about such promotions was the unequivocal position taken by the top leadership of the United Automobile Workers—CIO.

According to the Research and Analysis Department of the UAW-CIO, the United States Employment Service, the Detroit Bureau of Governmental Research, and the Detroit branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the overwhelming majority of the 250,000 to 300,000 white in-migrants to Detroit during the year immediately preceding the race riot came from the South. There was no surplus labor in nearby industrial centers like Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Toledo, Akron, and Kansas City. Recruiting, therefore, was concentrated in the Deep South with the result that the already high percentage of Detroiters with South background was enormously increased. Here and there among these Southern whites were members of the UAW-CIO and other labor unions, churchmen and others who sloughed off whatever racial prejudices they had brought with them from the South. But the overwhelming majority retained and even increased

their hostility to Negroes. This was particularly noticeable when Negroes were forced by sheer necessity to purchase or rent houses outside the so-called Negro area. For years preceding the riot, there had been mob attacks dating back as far as the famous Sweet case in 1925 upon the homes of Negroes. In some instances there had been police connivance in these attacks. In practically no cases had there been arrests of whites who had stoned or bombed the homes of Negroes. During July, 1941, there had been an epidemic of riots allegedly by Polish youths which had terrorized colored residents in Detroit, Hamtramck and other sections in and about Detroit. Homes of Negroes on Horton, Chippewa, West Grand Boulevard and other streets close to but outside of the so-called Negro areas were attacked by mobs with no police interference.

Detroit's 200,000 Negroes are today largely packed into two segregated areas. The larger of these is on the East Side bounded by Jefferson on the South, John R. on the West, East Grand Boulevard on the North, and Russell on the East. This area covers approximately 60 square blocks. A somewhat smaller Negro area is on the West Side bounded by Epworth Boulevard on the West, West Warren on the South, Grand River on the East along a line running Northwest to West Grand Boulevard and Tireman—an area of approximately 30 square blocks. In addition to these two wholly Negro areas, there are scattered locations throughout Detroit of mixed occupancy in which, significantly, there was during the riot less friction than in any other area.

The desparate scarcity of housing for whites, however, limited Negroes in finding places to live outside of the Negro areas. The Detroit newspapers have contained for months many advertisements offering rewards for housing of any nature or quality for whites. Meantime, but little public housing was created to meet the tragic need for housing of both whites and Negroes in Detroit. Even this was characterized by shameful vacillation and weakness in Washington which only added fuel to the flames of racial tension in Detroit. The notorious riots revolving about the question of who should occupy the Sojourner Truth Housing project in February, 1942, are an example of this. These riots resulted when fascist elements, emboldened by the vacillation of the National Housing Administration which reversed itself several times on Negro occupancy, joined with pressure of real estate interests to bring to a head the mob violence which led to the smashing of the furniture and beating of Negro tenants attempting to move into the project.

Previously, the Public Workers Administration had built the Brewster Project of 701 units in 1938 to which the United States Housing Authority had added the Brewster addition of 240 units completed in 1940 and 1941. All these provided housing for only about 3,000 Negroes, however.

From all other public housing projects erected in Detroit, Negroes were totally excluded, although Negroes and whites had lived together in complete amity in some of the areas on which these public housing projects, erected through the taxation of Negro as well as white Americans, were built.

Equally contributory to the explosion which was to come has been the attitude of the Detroit Real Estate Association. Mention has already been made of the opposition of the real estate interests to public housing in Detroit. Their contention was that such housing as Detroit needed should be created by private interests. But by the time private interests were ready to begin erection of homes and apartments for the greatly augmented population of wartime Detroit, priorities on building materials were put into effect. Meantime, every train, bus, or other public conveyance entering Detroit disgorged an ever increasing torrent of men, women, and children demanding places to live while they earned the war wages Detroit factories were paying. Overcrowding, lack of sanitation, a mounting disease rate resulting in absenteeism and a severe tax on the hospital and clinical facilities of Detroit were bad enough among whites. Among Negroes it resulted in a scandalous condition.

JOBS

Early in June, 1943, 25,000 employes of the Packard Plant, which was making Rolls-Royce engines for American bombers and marine engines for the famous PT boats, ceased work in protest against the upgrading of three Negroes. Subsequent investigation indicated that only a relatively small percentage of the Packard workers actually wanted to go on strike. The UAW-CIO bitterly fought the strike. But a handful of agitators charged by R. J. Thomas, president of the UAW-CIO, with being members of the Ku Klux Klan, had whipped up sentiment particularly among the Southern whites employed by Packard against the promotion of Negro workers. During the short-lived strike, a thick Southern voice outside the plant harangued a crowd shouting, "I'd rather see Hitler and Hirohito win than work beside a nigger on the assembly line." The strike was broken by the resolute attitude of the union and of Col. George E. Strong of the United States Aircraft procurement Division, who refused to yield to the demand that the three Negroes be down-graded. Certain officials of the Packard Company were clearly responsible in part for the strike. C. E. Weiss, Personnel Manager, George Schwartz, General Foreman, and Robert Watts of the Personnel Division, urged the strikers to hold out in their demand that Negroes not be hired or upgraded. Weiss is alleged to have told the men that they did not have to work beside Negroes. At the time this report is written, Weiss, Schwartz, and Watts are still employed by the Packard Motor Car Company. The racial hatred created, released, and crystallized by the Packard strike played a considerable role in the race riot which was soon to follow. It also was the culmination of a long and bitter fight to prevent the employment of Negroes in wartime industry. These had been innumerable instances, unpublicized, in the Detroit area of work stoppages and slow downs by white workers, chiefly from the South, and of Polish and Italian extraction. Trivial reasons for these stoppages had been given by the workers when in reality they were in protest against employment or promotion of Negroes. A vast number of man hours and of production had been irretrievably lost through these stoppages. John S. Bugas in charge of the Detroit office of the FBI, states that his investigations prove that the Ku Klux Klan at no time has

had more than 3,000 members in Detroit. Other investigations by officials and private agencies corroborate this fact. But the Klan did not need to be a large organization to cause serious disruption of war production in Detroit, because of the circumstance already mentioned—the increasing percentage of Southern whites who went to Detroit to work during 1942 and 1943.

The Willow Run Bomber plant is typical in this connection. This plant employed in July 45,000 workers. An analysis of its employes revealed that 30% came from outside the Detroit area, and 20.3% were last employed outside of Michigan. Between 40% and 50% of those employed in July, 1943, at Willow Run came originally from the Deep South. In July, practically all of the new hires were Southern. The labor turnover at Willow Run has been exceedingly high. So too has been the number of work stoppages whose real cause is opposition to employment of Negroes. Because of wartime censorship, it was impossible to ascertain the number of such episodes or the loss of production caused by it. But it is reasonable to assume that the experience at Willow Run has been characteristic of a large number of other Detroit plants. The activities of the Ku Klux Klan under the name of the Forrest Club of which "Uncle Charlie" Spare seems to be the spokesman, has had its numbers and agents industriously organizing anti-

The Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U. S. Department of Labor lists the strikes in Detroit to prevent employment and upgrading of colored workers for the three-month period March 1, 1943, through May 31, 1943. This record shows that 101,955 man-days or 2,446,920 man-hours of war production were lost by these stoppages. The record is as follows:

March 1, 1943 through May 31, 1943				
Company	Beginning date	Number of workers involved	Man-days idle	Issue
1. U. S. Rubber Company.	March 19	1,064	3,955	Hiring colored workers and demand for separate sanitary facilities.
2. Vickers, Inc.....	March 25	40	60	Colored help placed in Production Department.
3. Hudson Motor Car Co....	April 20	15	45	Hiring of colored plant guards.
4. Hudson Naval Arsenal...	May 17	750	750	Refusal to work with colored tool-maker.
5. Packard Motor Car Co.	May 26	26,883	97,143	Upgrading of colored workers.

Negro sentiment among those with racial prejudice against the Negro in several of the Detroit plants. "Strikes" against the employment or promotion of Negroes can be traced to these agitators in the Dodge Truck plant, the Hudson Arsenal, the Packard Plant, and other plants. The Klan has been

active in Detroit as far back as the early 20's. Early in the 20's it almost succeeded in electing a Mayor of Detroit. It was shortly after this disaster was averted that a series of attacks upon the homes of Negroes took place, culminating in the Sweet case in 1925. Following this case tried before Judge Frank Murphy and in which the defendants were represented by the late Clarence Darrow, the Klan in Detroit dropped out of existence, along with its demise in other parts of the country. But agencies with similar methods and ideologies succeeded it. Though shortlived, a vicious successor was the notorious Black Legion which was characterized by Professor Elmer Akers, of the University of Michigan, in 1937 in his "A Social-Psychological Interpretation of the Black Legion" as a movement of "Vigilante nativism," which began as an offshot of the Ku Klux Klan.

Originally conceived to secure and insure jobs for white Southerners, the organization soon expanded its fields of activity to include putting down by violence, if necessary, all movements the Black Legion decided were "alien" or "un-American." After the conviction of its leader, Virgil F. Effinger, former Klansman, for the murder in 1936 of Charles A. Poole, a Detroit Catholic, the 4-year-old, crime-besmirched Black Legion virtually expired, but was followed quickly by others of similar purpose and method, among them The National Workers League (held chiefly responsible for the Sojourner Truth riot which saw the League's Parker Sage, Garland Alderman and Virgil Chandler indicted but never tried on charges of seditious conspiracy) which is reputedly financed in part by Nazi Bund and Silver Shirt money.

Gerald L. K. Smith, former assistant and protegee of the late Huey Long, has been long active in stirring up discord and dissension in the Detroit area. His activities in America First, anti-union, and other similar groups have been greatly increased in effectiveness by his also being a Southerner trained in the art of demagoguery by Huey Long, and provided with a fertile field due to the predominantly Southern white psychology of Detroit. Active also have been the followers of Father Coughlin, some Polish and Italian Catholic priests and laymen, and others who, wittingly or otherwise, have utilized anti-Negro sentiment for selfish and sometimes sinister objectives in much the same manner that the Nazis utilized anti-Semitism in Germany during the late 20's. Ingrained or stimulated prejudice against the Negro has been used as much against organized labor as it has been against the Negro. Employers and employers associations have been apathetic to the storm which was brewing. Apparently they were interested only in the size and continuation of profits. It has been frequently charged and not disproved that some of the employers have financed or contributed heavily to some of the organizations which have organized and capitalized upon race prejudice as a means of checking the organization of workers in Detroit plants.

DETROIT LABOR UNIONS AND THE NEGRO

One of the most extraordinary phenomena of the riot was the fact that while mobs attacked Negro victims outside some of the industrial plants of Detroit, there was not only no physical clash inside any plant in Detroit but not as far as could be learned even any verbal clash between white and

Negro workers. This can be attributed to two factors: first, a firm stand against discrimination and segregation of Negro workers by the UAW-CIO, particularly since the Ford strike of 1941. The second factor is that when the military took over, the armed guards in the plants were ordered by the Army to maintain order at all costs and to prevent any outbreak within the plants. There is possibly a third factor, namely, that on Monday, June 21st, and to a lesser extent on succeeding days, Negroes were unable to get to the plants because of attacks upon them when they sought to return to work by roving mobs chiefly composed of boys between the ages of 17 and 25.

The Detroit riot brought into sharp focus one of the most extraordinary labor situations in the United States. Prior to the Ford strike of 1941 many Negroes in Detroit considered Ford their "great white father" because the Ford plant almost alone of Detroit industries employed Negroes. When the UAW-CIO and the UAW-AFL sought to organize Ford workers, their approach at the beginning was a surreptitious one. The unions felt that the very high percentage of Southern whites in Detroit would refuse to join the Union if Negroes were too obviously participating. But when the strike broke, far-sighted Negro leaders in Detroit took an unequivocal position in behalf of the organization of workers. A serious racial clash was averted by the intercession of thoughtful whites and Negroes. Following the winning of the NLRB election by the union, it began to take a broader and more unequivocal position that all workers and union members should share in the benefits of union agreements irrespective of race, creed, or color.

During the recent riot, R. J. Thomas, president of the UAW-CIO proposed an eight-point program which was widely published, and which helped to emphasize the basic causes of the riot. These points included: (1) creation of a special grand jury to investigate the cause of the riots and to return justifiable indictments, with a competent Negro attorney appointed as an assistant Prosecutor of work with the grand jury; (2) immediate construction and opening of adequate park and recreation facilities. Thomas called it "disgraceful that the City's normal, inadequate park space was permitted to be overtaxed further by the influx of hundreds of thousands of new war workers;" (3) immediate and practical plans for rehousing Negro slum dwellers in decent, Government-financed housing developments; (4) insistence that plant managements as well as workers recognize the right of Negroes to jobs in line with their skill and seniority; (5) a full investigation by the special grand jury of the conduct of the Police Department during the riots; (6) special care by the courts in dealing with many persons arrested. Those found guilty should be severely punished, and there must be no discrimination between white and Negro rioters; (7) the loss of homes and small businesses, as well as personal injuries, is the responsibility of the community, and the city should create a fund to make good these losses; (8) creation by the Mayor of a special biracial committee of ten persons to make further recommendations looking toward elimination of racial differences and frictions, this committee to have a special job in connection with high schools "where racial hatred has been permitted to grow and thrive in recent years."

VACILLATION ON FAIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICE COMMITTEE

A contributory factor to the breakdown of discrimination in employment in Detroit was the issuance on June 25, 1941, by President Roosevelt of Executive Order 8802 under which was established the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice. Although limited in personnel, budget and authority, the FEPC as the affirmative expression of a moral principle had strengthened the efforts to eliminate discrimination in Detroit war plants. Members of the FEPC staff had carefully investigated charges of discrimination in Detroit areas. In a considerable number of cases negotiation with employers by FEPC representatives had resulted in the abolishing or lessening of discrimination. Employers, employes and labor unions knew that the Federal Government was opposed to denial of the right to work or to be upgraded on account of race, creed, color or national origin.

But in the summer of 1942, the FEPC was robbed of its independent status and placed under the control of the War Manpower Commission. The conviction in Detroit and other places began to grow that the FEPC was being quietly shelved and that the government no longer was insistent that discrimination in employment be abolished. This conviction grew as the FEPC became more and more inactive due to the failure to provide it with a budget for many months during the summer and fall of 1942 and during the period when it was stopped from functioning affectively.

Conviction crystallized into certainty when early in 1943, the Detroit railroad and Mexican hearings were indefinitely postponed. This certainty was fixed more definitely in the public mind by the long delay in selecting a new Chairman of the FEPC and defining its status and the nature of the sanctions with which it would be armed. As the FEPC lapsed into total inactivity fear of Federal action died among those who were guilty of discrimination. Anti-Negro organizations and individuals renewed and increased their agitation against the employment and upgrading of Negroes. Despair deepened in the Negro communities as they saw hordes of Southern whites imported into Detroit, provided with such housing as was available including tax-supported houses, apartments and dormitories, speedily upgraded to the better paid jobs while Negroes who had lived in Detroit for many years were still shut out.

Morale and morals of Negroes were affected adversely as they saw the one agency which had been created to do away with discrimination emasculated. Those Negroes who were employed found themselves with money they could not spend for decent houses or other improvements in their living standards. Some invested in War Bonds and insurance; others threw away their money in riotous living because they had been robbed of hope.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

Politically minded public officials have winked at the activities of agencies like the Klan, the Black Legion, the National Workers' League, the followers