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Inside Labor

'Moment Of Truth' For Unions

WASHINGTON, D.C. — At least one of President Nixon's inner circle is swinging hard at the hard hats — and when he hits, he hits. He's big. He's black. He carries a long, deceptively innocent title which nonetheless has a longer, tougher built-in club. It can affect tens of billions of dollars worth of government construction.

He is the 45-year-old Art Fletcher, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Workplace Standards Administration.

The other day Art Fletcher, who once played end for the Los Angeles Rams and Baltimore Colts, tackled the entire labor movement. In effect, he warned the Pentagon that there would have to be more black workers on all of its construction projects.

Later that day, Mr. Fletcher, who is one of Mr. Nixon's favorite dinner guests be it in the State Dining Room or the East Room (and I've encountered him on the second floor at some gatherings), told a caller that he was ready to crack down on the labor movement if more blacks were not admitted to the top income constructive unions. And other unions as well.

BARRIERS TO BLACKS

He said he was examining his "options." He added that he was collecting "evidence" to prove that union hiring halls were keeping blacks from employment. And so, said he, were union seniority lists. If necessary, he said with characteristic blunt finality — like picking up an over-the-line pass and running head down — he would go to the Justice Department for action against the hiring halls. He would attempt to set aside seniority lists on which promotions into higher paying job classifications are based.

These were his replies when the caller had asked what he meant when he had said that "the moment of truth" had come for American labor.

He had told a congressional subcommittee that he had "found that business and industry want to comply. All they want to know is 'tell us what you

want us to do and we'll do it.'" He also had said that he was taking a hard look at "a whole industry that operates under exclusive hiring contracts. It may be that every company in that industry is not in compliance because of the labor contracts. We're really just moving into it to be bluntly frank."

He would not disclose which "entire industry" but other sources disclosed he meant beer brewing.

'BOSSES' CRITICAL

Mr. Fletcher and the labor movement's top leaders are at thorny odds. AFL-CIO President George Meany himself went out of his way at a recent Sheet Metal Workers international convention to retort to a series of similar charges of blocking the blacks from unions and high paying hourly rated jobs.

Mr. Meany's position is that the "only way minority groups could come into the skilled trades is by the apprenticeship route." They must learn the trade, says he. Then he whipped at his critics.

"There are some people who make a profession of being civil righters," Mr. Meany said a week before Mr. Fletcher cut loose, "who want to right the wrongs, as they say, of many years past. They want something that might be described as instant qualification that instantly qualifies a member of the minority group as a member of one of our unions and as a mechanic."

BLUNT REJECTION

Mr. Meany added that "the unions will not buy" instant qualification. The nation's top labor chief reported he had told this to George Romney, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

To take in half-qualified black young workers would be "a fraud on the trade" and "a fraud and a delusion to the young Negro applicants, because if they became members under those circumstances, they could not work on the job that required a full skill, either as a plumber, electrician, sheet metal worker, engineer, or anyone else."

The labor chief said that the AFL-CIO is recruiting applications through "Operation Outreach" in 70 major cities and have had "well over 7,000 minority applicants, 60 per cent of them in the so-called highly skilled trades . . ." The Philadelphia plan, said he, is a "phony."

ANGRY SPEECH

This resentment against consistent critics also was reflected in a recent angry speech unleashed by the carpenters' union president Maurice Hutcheson.

" . . . in spite of all our policy statements," said Mr. Hutcheson, "in spite of all our sincere efforts, in spite of all our successful working programs, in spite of all our desires to have a larger and better trained labor force, we are constantly harassed by bureaucrats and so-called 'liberals.' We make jobs available and jobs go unfilled. We offer training programs and no one shows up."

Then he attacked the critics of the construction unions as being "not one bit interested in obtaining work or training . . ." for "those members of the minority they pretend to speak for and help . . ."

PERSONAL REASONS

Mr. Hutcheson charged these critics were using the issue for personal publicity or to advance themselves politically and "to cover up for their own inadequacies."

Mr. Hutcheson further charged these critics were motivated by reasons "not related to the problem."

And it is quite a problem. It will get noisier as the war fronts get quieter — and the destruction of the enemy abroad is replaced by reconstruction of the cities at home.