

BLACKS, WOMEN HARDEST HIT BY LAYOFFS

Is Superseniority the Answer?

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Before the recent layoffs, the Continental Can Company in Harvey, La., had 50 Black workers on the payroll. After the layoffs, there were only two Black workers left, because all the others had been hired after 1965. In Fremont, California, the recent auto layoffs removed all of the women from the assembly line because they only recently won the right to work there. These are only two cases in an ever growing list.

As the recession deepens, everyone is afraid of losing their jobs. Blacks and whites, women and men, everyone is worried about keeping the bills paid up and food on the table. Close to one out of every 10 workers has been laid off, and the lines at the Unemployment Office grow longer every day. There is no one, however, more worried than minority and women workers. They were the last hired, and often could get jobs only on a part-time basis or in small marginal businesses that are going bankrupt. Now they are the first laid off, and the first to be forced on unemployment or welfare.

The present situation is not new or unique, it is just more serious than before. Black and women workers have always had particular trouble getting jobs, especially decent jobs, because of discrimination by the employers. Black unemployment has been roughly twice that of whites since W.W.II. Furthermore, those jobs they do get are often the least well paid, and the least desirable in the society.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, in 1973 white men averaged \$194 per week while Black men averaged \$149. White women averaged \$118, while Black women averaged \$108. While men averaged \$171, women only earned \$113 per week. The pattern of discrimination against non-white and women workers is pretty clear.

THE FIGHT AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

In 1964, however, the Civil Rights Act was passed and Title VII forbade companies from discriminating on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex. Of course, this act didn't immediately stop all discrimination in hiring or job classifications. However, since it was passed, minority and women workers have been hired

in much greater numbers, often because they took the initiative to sue large companies for violating the Civil Rights Act.

Now that the economy is declining and the layoffs have come, however, these workers are losing the gains they made since 1964. It is an established practice, won by the struggle of the trade unions, that workers are laid off according to their seniority.

The longer a worker has stayed with the company, the more secure his or her job becomes. This practice was an important victory for working people because it meant the boss can't just pick and choose those he doesn't like and lay them off first. It provides an objective basis for job security.

However, since minority and women workers were only hired recently, as a result of long court cases, they don't have much seniority. That means they are the first to be laid off. There they are, back in the unemployment lines again.

There is a lot of resentment growing between white and black, women and male workers over this situation. Recently some minority and women workers have filed court cases challenging seniority as a basis for layoffs.

They are claiming that the seniority system is perpetuating past discrimination. They argue that if the seniority system remains intact then it is the minority and women workers who are punished for having been discriminated against. They are demanding some form of superseniority (years arbitrarily added to their own seniority) which would keep a certain percentage of minority and women workers in the plant regardless of their seniority.

If such cases are won and upheld in the courts, it would mean that some minority and women workers would be passed over for the layoffs, and white and male workers would be laid off first.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR DISCRIMINATION?

Before we can judge the fairness or unfairness of this solution, we need to find out who is responsible for the discrimination, as well as who is responsible for the layoffs. That is the only way we can get to the root of the problem in order to solve it.

The answer to both of those questions is clearly the big bosses: the capitalists, who, few as they are, control all the wealth of the nation. In the last issue of the Organizer, we described how the layoffs and reduction of production are an attempt by the owners to back out of their own mistakes and problems by making us pay. They are reducing the working class to meager unemployment benefits just so they can continue to make their same rate of profit.

But how are the capitalists responsible for discrimination? Why should they care what color or sex their workers are? In fact, management wins twice from racist and sexist policies.

First, they win by paying minority and women workers low wages -- they make an extra profit on that work, and they also drive everyone's wages down through competition. Secondly, by encouraging racial and sexual divisions, (making white and male workers think they have

something to gain themselves by racism and sexism) the owners prevent the working class from joining together.

They know that once the working class stands united against the capitalists the working class can win. So they try to keep white and black, women and men fighting each other so they won't turn against the capitalists themselves.

SUPER—SENIORITY THE ANSWER?

As we look at the general crisis in unemployment, then, we have to make sure that our solutions put the blame and the cost on the right people: the capitalists. Neither unemployment nor discrimination can be ended unless the entire working class, white and black, men and women, stand together to oppose both.

We have to be careful that our solutions help to unite all of us against the main enemy, the bosses. We won't solve unemployment by taking jobs from one group of workers and giving them to another group. All we will do is aggravate the already deadly racial tensions, and put off that much longer the chances of the whole working class standing together and demanding what is every worker's right: a decent job at a living wage.

Finally, if we simply try to redivide what few jobs there are, we would be playing right into the hands of the capitalists. They would still get to implement their layoffs and as an extra bonus they would increase the fighting within the class. And as has already been seen, the more divided the working class, the stronger the capitalists!

When we talk of building unity, though, we must mean real unity, unity that fights against racism and sexism wherever it is found. We won't solve the problem of discrimination and building unity by letting the companies go through with laying off all their newest workers.

Minority and women workers can't be made to pay for the recession. To ignore the special problems of these workers is another way to destroy our potential unity. If the class as a whole, white and black, men and women, doesn't fight against the special oppression of minority and women workers, then we will always be a class divided against itself.

The trade union leaders have spoken against super-seniority cases by singing the praises of the seniority system. But they make no effort to speak to the special crisis faced by minority and women workers. Our leaders haven't fought to apply the seniority system equally to all workers.

Seniority must be on a plant-wide basis, and we must do away with separate and discriminatory seniority lists. Seniority must be the only basis for upgrading, including into the skilled trades (apprenticeships are, after all, nothing more than extended training), and not who you know. The unity the trade union leaders call for is fake because they turn their backs on the problems of a large part of their class, who are continually discriminated against.

WHAT IS THE REAL SOLUTION?

Giving super-seniority to minority and women workers is not a solution. It makes other workers pay for the discrimination and irresponsible economic policies of the capitalists. Accepting the layoffs as long as they are carried out on the basis of seniority is no solution either. That just places the burden on one section of the class, and encourages those with high seniority to divorce themselves from the problems of the rest of the class.

Both discrimination and the problems of unemployment can only be solved by the whole class standing together. White and male workers must fight the layoffs from the beginning, even though they are not the hardest hit. We must fight the layoffs and discrimination by making the companies pay for their own policies.

The only solution to the present crisis is for all workers, white and black, men and women, to fight for a government guaranteed adequate income for all to be paid for by a tax on corporate profits, and an end to all layoffs. We must fight for a short work week, with full pay. They said the 40 hour week and 8 hour day were utopian demands, but they were won by a united and militant working class.

There are no short cuts today out of this crisis. But there is a solution, and we can win it as long as we always keep in mind who is responsible for the crisis, and who our real friends are.