



The New York Public Library  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,  
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

**Blacks in the railroad industry collection**

1946-1954

Sc Micro R-3872

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Processed by Diana Lachatanere.

## Summary

**Creator:** Blacks in the Railroad Industry

**Title:** Blacks in the railroad industry collection

**Date:** 1946-1954

**Size:** .4 linear feet; 1 microfilm reel

**Source:** SCM77-43

**Abstract:** The Blacks in the Railroad Industry Collection is comprised of a variety of materials documenting the struggle of black railroad employees against ouster from the industry by collusive actions of the companies and the unions. While provenance seems to be uncertain, holograph notes on many of the documents appear to have been done by Robert Wood, editor of "The Railroad Workers' Link," a newspaper published by the Railroad Committee of the Communist Party. In addition, the few original items in the collection are addressed specifically to him or to the "Link."

**Alternative Form Available:** Collection available on microfilm; Scholarly Resources, Inc.; call number SC Micro R-3872

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## Creator History

The employment of black workers by the railroad industry dates to the years preceding the Civil War. Originally hired as a source of cheap labor and a means of keeping the wages of all railroad employees depressed, blacks were nonetheless employed in a variety of occupations, from engineers to unskilled

laborers. Despite this traditional employment of blacks by the railroad companies, a deliberate campaign to eliminate black workers from the railroad industry was waged by the labor organizations, with assistance from the companies, beginning in the late 19th century. This campaign was initiated with the formation of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, two of the major white craft brotherhoods. And, as the different railroad occupations became unionized, the unions joined the brotherhoods in their discriminatory practices. With jurisdiction over the majority of railroad employees, including station employees, shop workers, track laborers, and dining car employees, the unions, like the brotherhoods, excluded blacks from membership or relegated them to segregated locals and auxiliaries controlled by white locals. Within these locals and auxiliaries blacks were often denied the right of representation in conventions, had no voice in determining working conditions, were forbidden to process the members' grievances, and in some occupations were refused promotion in shops where white helpers were employed. For their part, the railroad companies offered little or no resistance to union discriminatory activities as long as such activities did not interfere with the economics of the railroad. When these activities did interfere, the companies responded with threats of increasing the number of black employees, particularly as strike breakers.

In 1910 the craft brotherhoods succeeded in breaking this stalemate with the railroad companies. Through strikes and threats of strikes they won labor agreements that resulted in drastic reductions in the kinds of jobs black workers could hold and the numbers of skilled black workers. These agreements, coupled with the job opportunities opened up by World War I resulted in a significant exodus of blacks from the industry. It was not until the Federal government assumed control of the railroads for national security reasons and instituted equal pay for equal work rules that the exodus was halted. While motivated more by a concern for the developing labor shortages in one of the nation's vital industries during wartime, the government order, nevertheless, had a positive impact on the position of black workers in the industry. After the war, however, the labor organizations renewed their efforts to eliminate black workers from the industry.

Working with the U.S. Railroad Administration, the brotherhoods succeeded in establishing work rules that resulted in both the displacement and exclusion of many black workers. This was compounded by a series of agreements negotiated by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and several railroad companies in 1937 and 1941. The 1941 agreement, also known as the Southeastern Carriers Conference Agreement and the 50-50 percentage agreement, was the most notorious of the agreements. It in essence allowed the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and the railroads to displace black locomotive firemen whenever a new train run was established, which could be done with uncontrolled frequency, as well as arbitrarily keep the numbers of black firemen down to fifty percent of all firing positions. In spite of its obvious discriminatory intent the agreement was signed by representatives of the National Mediation Board, the Federal agency with conciliation authority in the industry. This agreement was described by Herbert R. Northrup, author of several books on racial policies in the railroad industry, as the epitome of racial discrimination in the industry. Perhaps more than any other action taken by the unions and the railroads this agreement served to galvanize black employees into taking legal steps to safeguard their future in the industry.

Over the years, black railroad workers had made several efforts to protect their jobs against the unions' attempts to force them out of the industry. Although reluctant to form labor organizations at first, they instead sought to ameliorate their situation by appealing to railroad executives and stockholders. The latter, however, did not respond in any way that significantly changed black workers' position. As a result, they eventually recognized that forming their own unions would be the most effective means of protecting their jobs and began organizing themselves into all-black unions by the early 20th century.

One of the first of these unions was the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen and Locomotive Firemen which was formed in 1912. Between 1917 and 1939, other unions were formed, among them,

the International Association of Railway Employees, the Colored Trainmen of America, and the Southern Association of Colored Railway Trainmen and Firemen. However, numerous problems confronted these unions. Perhaps the most pervasive was the lack of necessary political and economic power to force the railroad companies to negotiate with them in good faith. Consequently, the all-Black unions were unable to win significant wage increases or to effectively protect their members' jobs.

The creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in 1941 was looked upon by blacks in the industry and others concerned with the racial policies of the railroads and the labor organizations as an opportunity to strike down the discriminatory labor agreements and employment policies of the industry. The hearings, which were not held until 1943 due to industry opposition, charged twenty-two railroads and four unions with discrimination. The railroads, while admitting the charges, defended their employment policies on the grounds that many of the questionable labor agreements had been negotiated with the assistance and approval of the government agencies and that the practices were in keeping with the customs and practices of the areas that the railroads operated in. The unions, on the other hand, did not bother to attend the hearings, although seven sent written replies to the Committee.

Following the hearings, twenty railroads and several unions were ordered to cease their discriminatory practices. Additionally, those unions and railroads that were signatories to the 1941 Southeastern Carriers Conference Agreement were ordered to set aside the agreement. In response, the participants to the agreement refused to comply, denying the legal jurisdiction of the FEPC. The matter was then referred to President Franklin Roosevelt who appointed a committee to mediate the dispute. The committee failed to achieve results, thus negating the legal and psychological impact of the FEPC hearings. Unwilling to act because of the exigencies of war and the powerful economic and political forces supporting the railroad companies, President Roosevelt did not order the industry to comply with the FEPC's orders. Similarly, the 1941 U.S. House Special Subcommittee on Education and Labor hearings on fair employment practices legislation had few concrete results. The hearings, which were chaired by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. investigated the industry's Jim Crow practices. As with the earlier FEPC hearings, the unions refused to admit any wrongdoing in their policies towards black railroad workers.

During this same period, blacks also sought recourse from the industry's and unions' discriminatory employment practices through the courts. They were aided in their legal struggles by attorneys Charles H. Houston and Joseph C. Waddy of the Washington, D.C. firm of Houston, Hastie and Joseph C. Waddy, and Archibald Bromsen of New York. These lawyers played a prominent role not only by legally challenging the railroad companies and unions in several lawsuits, but in organizing black railroad men to protect their jobs. Through their initiatives the officials of five unions (Colored Trainmen of America, Association of Colored Railway Trainmen and Locomotive Firemen, International Association of Railway Employees, Dining Car Railroad Foodworkers Union, and Southern Association of Railway Trainmen and Locomotive Firemen) united to form the Negro Railway Labor Executives Committee (NRLEC) in 1948. The objectives of the Committee were to collect, formulate and disseminate information concerning black railroad employees and to determine effective actions to be taken. The NRLEC did not itself initiate any court actions, however, it supported the lawsuits that were filed by union members, published a newspaper -- the NEGRO RAILWAY LABOR NEWS, presented testimony in court and at government hearings, and in general, took an activist role.

Among the numerous legal actions which black railroad employees brought against the unions and railroad companies beginning in 1939, two in particular were noted as having turned the tide in favor of blacks: Steele versus Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company and Tunstall versus the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen. Both cases attacked the 1941 Southeastern Carriers Conference Agreement and established the right of fair representation and relief against discriminatory contracts. The decisions were ignored for several years by the Brotherhood and the railroad companies,

nonetheless, they had an impact upon future public policy affecting the railroad industry.

While the majority of the lawsuits were directed at Southern railroad companies, Northern and Western railroads were also guilty of discriminatory practices. Public pressure to eliminate discrimination, however, played a more crucial role in these regions and resulted in the passage by state legislatures of fair employment practice legislation and the establishment of state Fair Employment Practices Committees.

The New York State Commission Against Discrimination (SCAD) was one of the first (1945) and one of the strongest fair employment practices committees established. Headed by Elmer A. Carter, the Commission succeeded in ending the restricted membership of the brotherhoods and the unions during the late 1940s. And, in the early 1950s, SCAD was able to get three of the largest eastern railroads (New York Central Railroad System, Pennsylvania Railroad, New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad) and four labor organizations (Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, Order of Railway Conductors of America, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers) to pledge their cooperation with the Commission in its efforts to end discriminatory hiring practices on the railroads. Similar actions were taken by other state commissions.

While the impact of the legal victories won by the black employees together with the activities of the state FEPC's resulted in some progress towards changing the racial policies of the companies and the unions, overall, the employment picture for blacks in the railroad industry did not significantly improve up through the 1950s -- the period documented by this collection. Changes in hiring practices, promotions, and assignments to skilled categories were not effected as late as the 1960s, with the result that the majority of black workers remained in predominately service oriented and labor occupations.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The BLACKS IN THE RAILROAD INDUSTRY Collection, 1946-1954) is comprised of a variety of materials documenting the struggle of black railroad employees against ouster from the industry by the collusive actions of the companies and the unions. While provenance seems to be uncertain, holograph notes on many of the documents appear to have been done by Robert Wood, editor of THE RAILROAD WORKERS' LINK, a newspaper published by the Railroad Committee of the Communist Party. In addition, the few original items in the collection are addressed specifically to him or to the LINK.

The papers have been divided into six series: CORRESPONDENCE, UNIONS AND UNION-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS, WRITINGS, LEGAL DOCUMENTS, MEMORANDA, AND PRINTED MATERIAL. The collection does not form a cohesive unit; rather it is an artificial collection of materials seemingly gathered for research and information purposes. It has, therefore, been organized by subject or type of document; within that sequence the papers have been arranged chronologically.

**Arrangement:** Collection organized into six series: I Correspondence; II Unions and Union-Related Organizations; III Writings; IV Legal Documents; V Memoranda; VI Printed Material

## **Key Terms**

### **Subjects**

African American labor union members

African American lawyers  
African Americans -- Civil rights  
African Americans -- Employment  
Discrimination in employment -- United States  
Industrial relations -- United States  
Racism -- United States  
Railroads -- Employees -- Labor unions -- United States  
Railroads -- United States -- Employees  
Working class -- United States

**Names**

Houston, Charles Hamilton, 1895-1950  
Powell, Adam Clayton, Jr., 1908-1972  
Negro Railway Labor Executives Committee  
United States. Congress. House. Committee on Education and Labor. Special Subcommittee on Labor

## Container List

b. 1 f. 1 r. 1 Correspondence 1949-1950, undated

The CORRESPONDENCE file is composed of a miscellaneous group of letters to and from various individuals. The majority of the letters are mimeographed and were intended for wide dissemination. One of these is a letter from Archibald Bromsen stating the Federation of Southern Colored Locomotive Firemen Unions' position on the proposal by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen to modify the 1941 Southeastern Carriers Conference Agreement. The letter is accompanied by a copy of the agreement. Also, in this file is a typed copy of a speech by Charles H. Houston which was sent to Wood with a cover letter from Henry Lee Moon's secretary. The speech, entitled "The Legal Struggle for Protection of Minority Workers' Rights on American Railroads" was presented at the 1949 annual conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

### Unions And Union-Related Organizations

Included in the UNIONS AND UNION-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS series are documents from the Negro Railway Labor Executives Committee, the Railroad Employees Association Against Discrimination, and the United Transport Service Employees. There are also several membership rosters from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a few black lodges affiliated with the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen of America, an unidentified union or unions of black dining car employees, and both black and white union members under the jurisdiction of the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

b. 1 f. 2 r. 1 Negro Railway Labor Executive Committee 1948-1949

The materials from the Negro Railway Labor Executives Committee (NRLEC) consist of a 1948 press release and minutes from meetings in March and April 1948 and February 1949. The 1948 minutes and press release relate to the formation of the NRLEC and the publication of the *Negro Railway Labor News*, the Committee's official organ. The documents show the active role played by Charles Houston, Joseph Waddy and Archibald Bromsen in establishing the NRLEC.

b. 1 f. 3 r. 1 Railway Employee Association Against Discrimination 1953-1954, undated

The Railroad Employees Association Against Discrimination (REAAD) was a New York based organization, formed in the early 1950s. The documents include two mimeographed letters and a press release concerned with the Long Island Railroad's employment policy for blacks. Additionally, there is a *REAAD News Bulletin* and other documents which provide information about the REAAD's program.

b. 1 f. 4 r. 1 United Transport Service Employees-CIO 1949, undated

The United Transport Service Employees-CIO materials consist of two newsletters for October 1949 reporting on the activities of the various locals within the union, and a leaflet recruiting members among Pennsylvania Railroad employees.

b. 1 f. 5 r. 1 Membership Rosters 1949, undated

### Writings

WRITINGS consists of an untitled thirty-six page typed draft of an article with editorial corrections and additions in what is assumed to be Robert Wood's handwriting. The draft may have been written by Wood, however, clear authorship is uncertain as Wood's name as the author has been crossed out. The subject of the typescript is the role played by the all-white railroad unions in excluding blacks from the railroad industry by forcing the railroads through strike threats and contract clauses to either fire or not hire blacks.

b. 1 f. 6 r. 1 Untitled Manuscript

b. 1 f. 7 r. 1 Legal Documents 1949

The LEGAL DOCUMENTS folder contains a carbon copy of a motion filed by Charles H. Houston, Joseph C. Waddy and Oliver W. Hill in the case of Willie J. Rolex et al versus the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Company (ACLRC) et al. The document, a motion for an "injunction pendente lite," was directed at enjoining the ACLR and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen from enforcing the Southeastern Carriers Conference Agreement of 1941. Attached to the motion are several affidavits and the points and authorities in support of the motion.

### Memoranda

Memoranda (cont.)

b. 1 f. 8 r. 1 U. S. House Of Representatives Special Subcommittee On Education And Labor 1949

The MEMORANDA were prepared for the 1949 U.S. House of Representatives Special Subcommittee on Education and Labor hearings, chaired by Adam C. Powell, on fair employment practices legislation. The memos deal with a number of issues dating to 1917, including wages of black workers, attempts by white unions and the railroad companies to drive blacks out of the industry and racial employment policies during the First and Second World Wars. There are also two chronologies of the discriminatory acts practiced by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen against black workers. These documents were incorporated into the official government record of the hearings, which was published in *Hearings before a Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Printing Office, 1949).

Printed Material

PRINTED MATERIAL consists of a pamphlet, newspapers, fact sheets, press releases, and clippings. The pamphlet, *Let Freedom Ride The Rails* was published in 1954 by the National Negro Labor Council. It briefly covers the 1943 Fair Employment Practices Committee hearings on the railroad industry, the employment status of black workers, the role of the railroads, the unions, and the Federal government in denying employment opportunities to blacks, as well as the efforts of blacks in seeking redress of their grievances through the courts, and the National Negro Labor Council's program of action.

The newspapers include three complete issues of the *Negro Railway Labor News* (1948-1950) and one complete issue each of *The Railroad Workers' Link* (July 1950) and *The Black Worker* (April 1949). Because the latter two were single issues only, they have been filed with the *Press Releases and Newspaper Clippings*. This series also contains clippings from those and other black newspapers, in addition to several clippings from the *Railroad Workers' Page* of the *Daily Worker*, 1949-1950.

b. 1 f. 9 r. 1 National Negro Labor Council 1954

b. 1 f. 10 r. 1 Negro Railway Labor News 1948-1950

b. 1 f. 11 r. 1 Fact Sheets 1946-47, 1953, undated

The *Fact Sheets* contain two fact sheets dealing with the status of black workers in the railroad industry.

b. 1 f. 12 r. 1 Press Releases And Newspaper Clippings 1948-53, undated

Among the press releases is one of a speech given by Charles Houston at the 1949 National Urban League annual conference, entitled *Foul Employment Practice on the Railroads*.