

African-American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal

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INTRODUCTION

When African-American workers broke labor strikes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were acting in opposition to established social norms concerning race, class, community, and the state. Imagine platoons of African-American men who ordinarily lacked protection of their most basic civil rights escorted by police into a hostile European-American community to take the jobs of European-American workers who were expressing their working-class consciousness through a labor union that excluded their fellow African-American workers. Scholars have interpreted African-American strikebreaking as an example of the ethnic stratification characteristic of the American working class (Bonacich 1976; Gutman 1962, 1987; Foner and Lewis 1979, 1980; Spero and Harris 1931). What was its political-economic context? That is the central question of this essay.

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Bonacich (1976), the first to systematically analyze strikebreaking by African Americans, emphasizes the demand side. She argues that employers used lower-paid African-American workers to break the strikes of higher-paid European-American unionists. Recent scholarship on American labor and urban history has placed more emphasis on the supply side. Case studies have shown how intensified racial discrimination and racial segregation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reduced class antagonisms in African-American communities, making race consciousness more powerful (E. Lewis 1991; Trotter 1985; Grossman 1989; Gottlieb 1987; Katzman 1973). In some African-American communities this heightened racial consciousness legitimized strikebreaking as an acceptable employment strategy (Gottlieb 1987; Grossman 1989). In effect, American racism made African-American workers more willing to break strikes, especially when the targeted union had a history of racial discrimination. This essay contributes to the literature by establishing some stylized facts about where and when African-American workers broke strikes that occurred between the Civil War and the New Deal. I also discuss changes in the supply of and demand for African-American strikebreakers during this period, including changes in racial consciousness among African Americans.

SOME STYLIZED FACTS

Statements made by contemporary observers indicate that strikebreaking by African Americans was common, but scholars later claimed that it was rare. For example, in 1905 Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), bitterly warned that "if the colored man continues to lend himself to the work of tearing down what the white man has built up, a race hatred far worse than any known will result. Caucasian civilization will serve notice that its uplifting process will not be interfered with in any way" (quoted in Marshall 1965: 19). In 1901 John Mitchell, president of the United Mine Workers, testifying before the United States Industrial Commission, stated, "I know of no element that is doing more to create disturbance in mining circles than the system of importing colored labor to take white men's place and to take colored union men's place" (quoted in Keiser

1972: 326). In 1913 Booker T. Washington (1913: 756–57) wrote, “Race prejudice is a two-edged sword, and it is not to the advantage of organized labor to produce among the Negroes a prejudice and fear of union labor such as to create in this country a race of strike breakers.”

By 1917 W. E. B. Du Bois shared this view (Meier and Rudwick, in Jacobson 1968: 41–48). Soon thereafter, an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 African-American strikebreakers were used to defeat the nationwide steel strike of 1919 (Foster 1920: 207). According to the Interchurch Report, “the successful use of strikebreakers” was a main cause of the failure of the unions, and these strikebreakers were “principally Negroes” (Commission of Inquiry, Interchurch World Movement 1920: 177). In that year a violent race riot erupted in Chicago, precipitated by a long history of racial conflict between unions and African-American strikebreakers, including the use of 10,000 of them during the 1904 stockyard strike (Tuttle 1969).

Later scholars claim that these are exaggerations, that the use of African-American workers to break strikes was rare. While noting that “there has hardly been an important industry in which colored labor has not at one time or another been used to break strikes,” Spero and Harris (1931: 131–32) conclude that “the number of strikes broken by blacks have been few as compared with the number broken by whites. . . . Employers in emergencies take whatever labor they can get and the Negro is only one of many groups involved. . . . The Negro always stands out in the crowd. His color makes this inevitable. The presence of a dozen black men in a force of strikebreakers appears to the strikers like a hundred.” Marshall (1972: 295), also after noting the use of African-American strikebreakers in the meat packing, steel, coal mining, automobile, and railroad industries, concludes: “The extent to which Negroes were used as strikebreakers probably has been exaggerated[,] . . . and while white workers also were used to break strikes in these industries, Negroes, seeming far more conspicuous, were far more resented.”

How extensive was the use of African-American workers to break strikes? Was there a racial component to the phenomenon, or were African-American workers simply among the many workers driven by labor market conditions and unemployment to find jobs during labor disputes? If strikebreaking by African Americans was

not extensive, as later scholars claim, then what explains the contemporary belief that African Americans were becoming a “race of strikebreakers”?

To answer these questions I have surveyed the secondary literature to collect information on when and where African-American workers broke strikes that occurred between the Civil War and 1929. The results of that search are used to generate some stylized facts about how widespread the practice was, and where, when, and why it happened. The results of the search are reported in Table 1, which lists the accounts that state that African-American workers were used to break a strike.¹

We do not know how numerous African Americans were in some of these incidents. For example, it is unclear how many were involved in the 1892 Homestead strike.² In the 1905 Chicago teamster strike they comprised most of the initial strikebreakers, but were later joined by large numbers of European Americans (Wright 1905). Still, African Americans were well represented in most of the cases listed in Table 1. Often they were the only ethnic group involved. Some extreme cases were the incidents in the central coal fields of Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana in the late nineteenth century, the Chicago stockyards during the early twentieth century, and the nationwide steel strike of 1919. It was not uncommon for employers to “import” hundreds, and even thousands, of African Americans for the express purpose of breaking a strike.

Since Table 1 relies on published accounts, it necessarily undercounts the actual number of times African-American workers broke strikes. In addition, the exact number of incidents listed in the table depends on how they are counted. The U.S. Department of Labor (USDL) defines a strike as a “clash of wills” between labor and management (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 1938: 8–9). This definition counts all widespread striking that emanates from a single labor-management conflict as but one strike. This applies to cases where a labor-management conflict results in several establishments being struck simultaneously (as in the 1905 teamster strike in Chicago), even when they are spread over many different locations (as in the 1919 steel strike). I have adopted the USDL definition to count the incidents listed in Table 1 because I want to compare strikebreaking by African Americans with the USDL time series on aggregate strike activity.³ By this method I count 141 incidents of strikebreaking by

African Americans between 1847 and 1929; 111 of these occurred between 1880 and 1929.⁴

Several stylized facts emerge from Table 1. First, most strikebreaking by African Americans occurred in the North, with concentrations in Pittsburgh; Chicago; the midwestern, southwestern, and Pennsylvania coal fields; docks in almost every major coastal city; and railroads across the nation and as far west as the state of Washington. The primary southern sites were Birmingham, Alabama (where African-American strikebreakers were involved in the coal miner strikes of 1894, 1899 and 1902), and New Orleans, Louisiana (where African-American strikebreakers were involved in the longshore strikes of 1903 and 1907 as well as the lumber strikes of 1911 and 1912). But on the whole, African-American workers were rarely used as strikebreakers in the South. Only 12 of the 141 incidents listed in Table 1 occurred south of Virginia.

Second, early strikebreaking by African Americans was confined to a small set of industries. Ninety-three percent of the incidents before 1910 occurred in the iron, steel, coal mining, meat packing, railroad, and longshore industries. With the exception of meat packing, each of these industries had extensive southern branches that employed and trained large numbers of African-American workers who could be used as strikebreakers to threaten northern unionists. Employers in the meat packing industry hired primarily unskilled workers, so it was feasible for them to threaten workers in this industry with strikebreakers who had no prior experience at packaging meat (Tuttle 1969: 419; Spero and Harris 1931: 265–66).

Third, over time strikebreaking by African Americans spread to more industries and cities. Only 61% of the post-1910 incidents occurred in the set of industries that dominated the pre-1910 pattern. Incidents spread to industries such as construction, lumber, garment, aluminum, food, phosphates, restaurants, metal trades, brick making, paper box, fur, and laundry.

Fourth, African-American strikebreakers were used in almost every major confrontation between capital and labor. They were used in the Jay Gould strike of 1886, which the Knights of Labor won and rode to fame.⁵ They were used in the Homestead steel strike of 1892, the Pullman railroad strike of 1894, the stockyard strikes of 1904, the Illinois Central railroad strike of 1911, and most of the major confrontations that followed World War I, in-

Table 1 Black strikebreaking

Year	Industry	Firm(s)	Location	State	Citation
1847	Iron/steel	Tredegair Iron Co.	Richmond	VA	Marshall 1967: 7
1853	Railroad	Erie RR	—	—	Licht 1983: 245
1855	Longshore	—	New York	NY	Spero and Harris 1931: 131
1856	Longshore	—	New York	NY	Foner and Lewis 1981: 527
1862	Railroad	Michigan Central RR	—	—	Keiser 1972: 315
1863	Longshore	Erie RR; Hudson River RR	New York	NY	Man 1951: 396
1863	Longshore	—	Albany	NY	Foner 1974: 14
1863	Longshore	—	Boston	MA	Foner 1974: 14
1863	Longshore	—	Buffalo	NY	Foner 1974: 14
1863	Longshore	—	Chicago	IL	Foner 1974: 14
1863	Longshore	—	Cleveland	OH	Foner 1974: 14
1863	Longshore	—	Detroit	MI	Foner 1974: 14
1865	Building	—	New Orleans	LA	Jacobsen 1968: 134
1866	Ship caulking	—	Boston	MA	Jacobsen 1968: 98
1870	Steel	—	Pittsburgh	PA	Gottlieb 1987: 90
1874	Coal	—	Hocking Valley	OH	Harris 1982: 20
1874	Coal	—	Brazil	IN	Gutman 1962: 256
1874	Coal	—	Freeburg	IL	Gutman 1962: 264
1874	Coal	—	Clay County	IN	Gutman 1962: 264
1874	Coal	—	Massilon	OH	Gutman 1962: 264
1875	Coal	—	—	PA, OH, IN	Gutman 1962: 264
1875	Iron/steel	Pittsburgh Bolt Works	Pittsburgh	PA	Dickerson 1986: 14
1875	Iron/steel	Clark Mills	Pittsburgh	PA	Kellogg 1914: 428

1877	Coal	Chicago, Wilmington, and Vermilion Coal Co.	Braidwood	IL	Keiser 1972: 315
1878	Iron/steel	Black Diamond Mill; Clark Mills	Pittsburgh	PA	Tucker 1909: 602
1878	Iron/steel	Moorhead Mill	Sharpsburg	PA	Tucker 1909: 602
1878	Coal	–	Coal Creek	IN	R. Lewis 1987: 87
1880	Coal	–	Ohio Tuscaras Valley	OH	Jacobsen 1968: 98
1880	Coal	Albia Coal Co.	Monroe County	IO	Bergman 1945: 41
1880	Coal	–	Rapid City	IL	Bergman 1945: 41
1880	Coal	–	Springfield	IL	Bergman 1945: 41
1884	Coal	Columbus and Hocking Coal & Iron Co.	Hocking Valley	OH	Cotkin 1978: 143
1886	Coal	–	Grape Creek	IL	Keiser 1972: 318
1886	Coal	–	Joliet	IL	Kessler 1952: 252
1886	Coal	–	Lemon	IL	Kessler 1952: 252
1886	Coal	Franklin Coal Mines	Coshocton	OH	Kessler 1952: 254
1886	Meat packing	Armour	Chicago	IL	Keiser 1972: 319
1886	Metal trades	–	Springfield	OH	Kessler 1952: 253
1886	Railroad shop	Southwest RR	St. Louis	MO	Kessler 1952: 253
1886	Railroad	Jay Gould	Western Arkansas	AK	Kessler 1952: 255
1887	Hotel	–	Chicago	IL	Kessler 1954: 34
1887	Longshore	National Steamship Line	New York	NY	Barnes 1915: 8
1888	Coal/iron	Solar Iron Works	Pittsburgh	PA	Dickerson 1986: 14
1888	Coal	Northern Pacific Coal Co.	Roslyn	WA	Campbell 1982: 148

Table I—Continued

Year	Industry	Firm(s)	Location	State	Citation
1889	Coal/iron	Solar Iron Works	Pittsburgh	PA	Dickerson 1986: 14
1889	Coal	Rochester & Pittsburgh Coal & Iron	Punxsutawney	PA	Kessler 1952: 254
1891	Coal	Oregon Improvement Co.	Newcastle/ Franklin	WA	Campbell 1982: 150
1891	Coal	American Coal Co.	Mystic	IO	Stern 1977: 63
1892	Iron/steel	Carnegie	Homestead	PA	Cayton and Mitchell 1939: 6
1892	Coal	Henry Clay Frick C & C Co.	—	—	Spero and Harris 1931: 210
1893	Railroad	Louisville & Nashville RR	Birmingham	AL	Worthman 1969: 380
1893	Coal	—	Weir City	KS	R. Lewis 1987: 91
1894	Coal	Tennessee Coal, Iron, and RR Co.	—	AL	Barnum 1970: 19
1894	Railroad	Pullman Co.	Chicago	IL	Foner 1974: 104
1894	Meat packing	—	Chicago	IL	Tuttle 1969: 411
1895	Coal	Henry Clay Frick C & C Co.	—	—	Spero and Harris 1931: 210
1895	Coal	—	Southern West Virginia	WV	R. Lewis 1984: 52
1895	Longshore	Ward Line	New York	NY	Spero and Harris 1931: 199
1895	—	—	Chicago	IL	Osofsky 1966: 42
1895	Railroad	Louisville & Nashville RR	Birmingham	AL	Worthman 1969: 380
1896	Coal	Colorado Coal & Iron Co.	—	—	Spero and Harris 1931: 213
1896	Machine works	Brown Hoist & Conveyer Co.	Cleveland	OH	Kusmer 1976: 70
1896	Coal	—	Weir City	KS	Spero and Harris 1931: 210

1898	Iron/steel	Illinois Steel Co.	Chicago	IL	Keiser 1972: 320
1898	Coal	Pana Coal Co.	Pana	IL	Keiser 1972: 321
1898	Coal	Chicago-Virden Coal Co.	Virden	IL	Keiser 1972: 322
1898	Coal	St. Louis and Big Muddy Coal Co.	Carterville	IL	Keiser 1972: 321
1899	Coal	St. Louis and Big Muddy Coal Co.	Carterville	IL	Greene and Woodson 1930: 132
1899	Coal	Big Four	Weir City	KS	R. Lewis 1987: 92
1899	Iron/steel	Bessemer	Birmingham	AL	Worthman 1969: 397
1899	Longshore	–	New York	NY	Northrup 1944: 142
1899	Iron/steel	–	Sharpsburg	PA	Greene and Woodson 1930: 139
1900	Building	–	Chicago	IL	R. Wright 1905: 69
1900	Longshore	–	Baltimore	MD	Northrup 1944: 144
1900	Iron/steel	Midvale Steel Co.	Philadelphia	PA	Greene and Woodson 1930: 139
1901	Longshore	–	San Francisco	CA	Northrup 1944: 152
1901	Steel	US Steel Corp.	Pittsburgh	PA	Spero and Harris 1930: 251
1902	Coal	Tennessee Coal, Iron, and RR Co.	–	AL	Greene and Woodson 1931: 130
1903	Longshore	Southern Pacific	New Orleans	LA	Rosenberg 1988: 80
1904	Meat packing	Swift; Morris; Armour & Co.	Chicago	IL	R. Wright 1905: 70
1904	Meat packing	–	St. Joseph	MO	Fogel 1970: 24
1904	Meat packing	–	Sioux City	IA	Fogel 1970: 24
1904	Meat packing	–	Omaha	NE	Fogel 1970: 24
1904	Meat packing	–	Kansas City	MO	Fogel 1970: 24

Table 1—Continued

Year	Industry	Firm(s)	Location	State	Citation
1904	Meat packing	—	Fort Worth	TX	Fogel 1970: 24
1904	Coal	Tennessee Coal & Iron Co.	Birmingham	AL	Worthman 1969: 403
1905	Trucking	Marshall Field; Montgomery Ward; Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co.; Farwell; Johnson Chair Co.	Chicago	IL	R. Wright 1905: 71
1906	Longshore	—	Brooklyn	NY	Greene and Woodson 1930:
1907?	Longshore	—	New Orleans	LA	Rosenberg 1988: 124
1907	Longshore	—	New York	NY	Northrup 1944: 142
1907	Steel	Sligo Iron & Steel Mill	Connellsville	PA	Dickerson 1986: 9
1909	Railroad	Georgia RR	—	—	Hammett 1975: 474
1909	Steel	Press Steel Car Co.	McKees Rocks	PA	Dickerson 1986: 10
1910	Trucking	—	New York	NY	Johnson 1930: 114
1911	Building	Government Printing Office	Washington	DC	Washington 1913: 757
1911	Lumber	—	—	TX, AK	Foner 1970: 53
1911	Railroad	Illinois Central RR	widespread		Northrup 1944: 78
1912	Lumber	American Lumber Co.	Merryville	LA	Foner 1965: 252
1916	Railroad	Pullman Standard	Chicago	IL	Tuttle 1969: 418
1916	Garment	—	Chicago	IL	Chicago Commission 1922: 43 ¹
1916	Longshore	Baltimore & Ohio RR; Pennsylvania RR	Baltimore	MD	Spero and Harris 1931: 193
1916	Meat packing	Armour & Co.; Swift; Morris	E. St. Louis	IL	Fogel 1970: 32

1917	Aluminum	Aluminum Ore Co.	E. St. Louis	IL	Foner 1974: 137
1917	Garment	–	Chicago	IL	Spero and Harris 1931: 193
1917	Sugar refining	Franklin Sugar	Philadelphia	PA	Greene and Woodson 1930: 282
1918	Garment	–	Chicago	IL	Tuttle 1969: 421
1918	Hotel	–	Chicago	IL	Tuttle 1969: 421
1919	Food	Corn Products Refinery	Argo	IL	Tuttle 1969: 424
1919	–	–	Detroit	MI	Zunz 1982: 373
1919	Longshore	Oscar Daniels Shipyard	Tampa	FL	Flynt 1968: 86
1919	Longshore	–	San Francisco	CA	Northrup 1944: 152
1919	Meat packing	–	Chicago	IL	Tuttle 1969: 431
1919	Phosphate	–	–	FL	Flynt 1968: 79
1919	Steel	–	widespread		Johnson 1930: 48
1919	Railroad	–	–	TX	Foner 1974: 145
1919	Building	–	–	NY	Franklin 1936: 299
1920	Garment	–	Chicago	IL	Chicago Commission 1922: 415
1920	Restaurant	–	Chicago	IL	Chicago Commission 1922: 430
1921	Meat packing	Armour	Chicago	IL	Herbst 1971: 65
1921	Garment	–	Philadelphia	PA	Spero and Harris 1931: 338
1921	Meat packing	Morris & Co.	Chicago	IL	Spero and Harris 1931: 280
1921	Metal trades	Timken Co.	Detroit	MI	Spero and Harris 1931: 140
1921	Meat packing	–	widespread		Fogel 1970: 34
1922	Coal	–	–	PA	Greene and Woodson 1930: 261

Table 1—Continued

Year	Industry	Firm(s)	Location	State	Citation
1922	Railroad	—	widespread		Reid 1969: 116
1922	Railroad shop	Pullman	Chicago	IL	Herbst 1971: 101
1923	Brick making	Sayre-Fisher	Newark	NJ	Spero and Harris 1931: 141
1923	Longshore	—	New Orleans	LA	Spero and Harris 1931: 190
1924	Coal	—	—	WV	Greene and Woodson 1930: 262
1925	Coal	Pittsburgh Coal Co.	—	WV	Greene and Woodson 1930: 262
1925– 1930	Paper box, fur, garment laundry	—	New York	NY	Reid 1930: 168
1926	Fig/date packing	—	Chicago	IL	Spero and Harris 1931: 141
1927	Coal	—	—	WV	Reid 1930: 168
1927	Coal	Pittsburgh Coal Co.	—	PA	Gottlieb 1987: 168
1928	Coal	—	—	OH	Spero and Harris 1931: 132
1929	Longshore	—	Boston	MA	Reid 1930: 168

cluding the steel strike of 1919, the railway strikes of 1922, and the coal strikes of 1924–27.

WAGES AND MARKETS

Is there any logic to these patterns? Bonacich (1976) argues that prior to the Wagner Act of 1935, racial discrimination by European-American workers and their unions split American labor markets along racial lines, permitting employers to use low-paid African-American workers to discipline higher-paid European-American unionists. One might be skeptical of the idea that racially split labor markets characterize this period, especially given the lack of evidence on explicit racial wage differentials in northern labor markets (Whatley 1990; Perlman and Frazier 1937; U.S. Department of Labor 1921). However, there are at least three reasons to believe that the split labor market framework is useful.

First, in the North there were implicit differentials in the wages paid to European Americans and African Americans. Differentials often took the form of exclusion from preferred jobs, such as foremen, skilled and white-collar jobs. Implicit wage differentials also took the form of lower rates of promotion for African Americans as well as the absence of wage premiums to compensate for the undesirability of the jobs that many of them were forced to take (Whatley and Wright 1990; Maloney and Whatley 1992).

Second, while a difference in the wages paid to European Americans and African Americans is a sufficient condition for the existence of split labor markets, it is not a necessary condition. Racial discrimination by unions is adequate. Even if unions were not successful at securing higher-than-competitive wages for their European-American members, African Americans would still have an incentive to break strikes if it got them better jobs. For example, many railroad brotherhoods excluded African Americans by constitutional clause (Du Bois 1902: 158–63; Northrup 1944: 2–5). The Sons of Vulcan excluded African-American workers until African-American strikebreakers broke the union during an 1875 strike in Pittsburgh (Spero and Harris 1931: 249; Cayton and Mitchell 1939: 5). Building-trade unions in Chicago refused to admit African-American workers until African-American tradesmen broke a strike in 1900 (R. Wright 1905: 69–70). Even when unions did not exclude African Americans by constitutional pro-

vision, locals often consisted of racially prejudiced workers who made it difficult for African Americans to obtain membership. After 1900 the AFL began accepting racially segregated locals after amendments to its constitution permitted the Executive Council to charter separate African-American unions if "the situation warranted" (Northrup 1944: 8).

Third, an implicit differential in the wages paid to European-American and African-American workers also existed behind a regional wage differential. Most African Americans worked in the South, where real farm wages were 40% to 50% below those in the North. Gavin Wright (1986) has shown that northern and southern labor markets were not well integrated during this period, and that for various reasons labor market networks between the northern United States and Europe were more developed than channels to the south. Most southern industrialists and landlords depended on large amounts of cheap labor, so they had no interest in facilitating the outmigration of workers, and most northern employers had access to an ample supply of unskilled immigrants from Europe, at least before World War I and the Immigration Restriction Acts of the 1920s restricted the flow. The fact that most strikebreaking by African Americans occurred in industries that had southern branches suggests that African-American strikebreakers were arbitrating the split between northern and southern labor markets. The pattern was one of equally productive but cheaper African-American workers replacing or threatening to replace European-American workers who were trying to increase their wages above what the national labor market would bear.

For example, the African-American workers who broke the Chicago building strike in 1900 were tradesmen from the South who had been forced by union exclusion to take domestic and personal-service jobs in Chicago (R. Wright 1905). The African-American strikebreakers who broke the Sons of Vulcan union in 1875 were recruited from the steel mills of Richmond, Virginia. In 1881, after reorganizing as the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Tin Workers, the union voted to admit African-Americans and set out to unionize those in Richmond to prevent their further use as strikebreakers (Spero and Harris 1931: 249). As early as 1878 the steel companies of Pittsburgh systematically recruited African-American strikebreakers from southern mills. Employers used these recruits again, along with local residents, to break

the 1892 Homestead strike (Spero and Harris 1931: 250–51). In fact, Spero and Harris claim that nearly all the African-American strikebreakers used in the steel industry of Pennsylvania during the 1870s and 1880s had prior training in the South (1931: 250).

The same applies to coal mining. The African-American strikebreakers brought into the Hocking Valley coal fields in 1874 came from the mining districts of Memphis, Louisville, and Richmond (Gutman 1962: 260). In 1884 they came from Richmond (Foner and Lewis 1979: 210). The mine operators of Virden, Illinois, recruited African-American strikebreakers from Alabama in 1898 and met with protests from the Afro-American Labor and Protective Association of Birmingham (Foner and Lewis 1979: 200).

We know that African-American strikebreakers recruited from the South did not eliminate the differences in wages paid to European Americans and African Americans, and in this sense they may have been pawns in the larger battle between capital and unions (Bonacich 1976; Spero and Harris 1931). Often, however, African-Americans secured better jobs when they broke strikes, and in this sense they were acting in their own interest.⁶ Since strikebreaking by African Americans occurred when it was economically advantageous for both employers and African-American workers, we should be able to improve our understanding of it by looking at the influences of demand and supply.

DEMAND

Did employers demand all kinds of workers to break strikes, only to find themselves sometimes with recruits who were predominantly African-American? Or did employers seek out African-American strikebreakers? And if so, why? Northern employers reached all the way across the Atlantic Ocean for their supplies of cheap industrial workers, yet went south for strikebreakers. Why?

One possible answer to this question is that northern employers looked south for strikebreakers when they could not find an adequate supply of them in the North. Native white northerners considered recently arrived immigrants from Europe as threatening to their unions as African Americans. For example, in 1885 the Knights of Labor, resenting the way coal operators in Pennsylvania imported trainloads of foreigners to break their strikes, lobbied through Congress a contract labor law forbidding anyone to prepay

the transportation of an immigrant to the United States in return for the promise of his services (Higham 1984: 38). By the early twentieth century the AFL had moved so far from its immigrant past that it adopted an uncompromisingly restrictionist position concerning immigration policy (*ibid.*: 49).

Of course native white unionists had every reason to exaggerate the presence of immigrants among strikebreakers. The tendency to exaggerate immigrants was probably greater than the tendency to exaggerate African Americans because there was the possibility that immigration could be restricted if enough popular support could be generated. A survey of the *National Labor Tribune*, a major labor weekly published in Pittsburgh, shows that immigrant strikebreakers were indeed singled out for comment but that in reality recently arrived immigrants and native whites became strikebreakers for the same reasons. Immigrants appeared to have a higher propensity to become strikebreakers because they had a higher probability of being unemployed newcomers not yet constrained by community strictures against breaking the strikes of local workers (Ehrlich 1974).

Northern employers may have looked south for strikebreakers during those labor disputes that erupted when the level of immigration from Europe was low. During the 1890s the level of immigration from Europe was about half the level of the preceding decade and one-third the level of the next. I found 29 incidents of strikebreaking by African Americans during the 1890s, more than in any other decade. They were used in the Pennsylvania steel and coal industries; the midwestern, southwestern, and northern Appalachian coal fields; and in the Chicago steel, meat packing, and railroad industries, among other places. Almost all of them were recruited from southern states, and while their numbers were small compared with the numbers recruited between 1900 and 1930, they may have represented the beginnings of a network integrating northern and southern industrial labor markets for African-American workers. They may have also demonstrated to both employers and unionists that African Americans were effective strikebreakers.

Below I report regression results that support this view. To address the issue of immigrants as strikebreakers, I regress the annual percentage of strikes that failed to achieve their stated goal (FAIL) on the annual level of European immigration (IMM) and the annual

rate of unemployment (UNEMP) for the years between 1890 and 1929.⁷ Variations in the rate of unemployment do not explain much of the variation in the percentage of strikes that ended in failure (the coefficient on UNEMP is small and statistically insignificant). Immigration levels, however, had a significant impact on strike outcomes. For every 10,000 immigrants that entered the United States in a given year, 1.78% more strikes failed in that year. Apparently an employer's ability to thwart the goals of strikers depended more on the general availability of newly arrived immigrants from Europe than on the general level of unemployment.⁸

$$\text{FAIL} = 28.58 + .1519 \text{ UNEMP} + 1.78 \text{ IMM}, \quad R^2 = .267$$

(6.69) (.39) (3.62)

Did northern employers tend to look south for African-American strikebreakers when levels of European immigration were low? To address this question, I regress the annual number of incidents of strikebreaking by African Americans (BS) on the annual percentage of the industrial labor force engaged in strikes (PCLF) and the annual level of European immigration (IMM) for the years between 1890 and 1929.⁹ PCLF is a proxy for the level of demand for strikebreakers. It measures the general intensity of labor-management conflict and should be positively correlated with strikebreaking by African Americans. IMM picks up the general availability of immigrants and should be negatively correlated with strikebreaking by African Americans if immigrants and African Americans were substitutes in the pool of potential strikebreakers.

$$\text{BS} = 1.61 + .7895 \text{ PCLF} - .1480 \text{ IMM}, \quad R^2 = .450$$

(2.79) (5.16) (-2.03)

The regression shows that variations in the percentage of the labor force engaged in strikes explain a lot of the variation in strikebreaking by African Americans over time. Basically, African-American workers were used to break strikes when there were many strikes to break. More importantly, however, strikebreaking by African Americans was negatively related to the level of immigration, suggesting that African Americans were indeed substitutes

for immigrant strikebreakers. While I caution the reader that the sample of incidents of strikebreaking by African Americans is small, these regressions provide some evidence that the demand for African-American strikebreakers was influenced by the level of labor-management conflict and the availability of recently arrived immigrants from Europe.

Was there a racial component to the demand for African-American strikebreakers, or were they desirable as strikebreakers for the same reasons newly arrived immigrants were desirable? Both were desirable as strikebreakers because they were outside the mainstream of American life. African Americans were outside the mainstream because of American racism, and in that sense race was significant. Also, racial antagonisms among American workers reduced the likelihood that African-American strikebreakers and European-American strikers would fraternize.

Beyond these considerations, there is also the possibility that the importation of African-American strikebreakers increased the probability that a strike would turn violent, which often meant that a police power would intervene to protect life and property. Employers used strikebreakers as a last resort—as an act of desperation when faced with a determined and recalcitrant union. State interventions to protect the social peace almost always strengthened the employer's hand because it was his property and his strikebreakers needing protection.

Examples of this abound. In the early 1870s the mine owners of the Hocking Valley of Ohio, realizing that the local communities were backing a union's bid to control jobs, formed an association to which each employer contributed money for "colonizing the Negroes" (Gutman 1962: 256; Spero and Harris 1931: 210). Four hundred to 500 African-American strikebreakers were recruited to defeat the union. The strikebreakers were driven from the valley by angry residents, only to return when the governor dispatched the militia to prevent further violence. In 1877 angry European-American miners in Braidwood, Illinois, violently drove away 400 African-American strikebreakers and their families. Two days later they returned under the protection of the Illinois state militia. Similar interventions occurred in Vermilion County, Illinois, in 1886. In 1898 the national guard was dispatched to Pana, Virden, and Carterville, Illinois, to protect 600 African-American strike-

breakers who were housed in the mine districts and surrounded by hostile communities (Keiser 1972). In the Chicago stockyards in 1894, employers fed and housed 10,000 African-American strikebreakers, while outside angry strikers derailed trains and fought gun battles with the Chicago police and the state militia (Tuttle 1966: 194). These are not isolated incidents. African-American strikebreakers were involved in 9 of the 24 most violent labor disputes in America (Taft 1966). Why?

Herbert Gutman conducted numerous studies of union activity in the coal fields of Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana, where African-American workers were often used as strikebreakers and where violence often erupted. Mine operators in these small and isolated communities had trouble controlling jobs and their property because the local police were often controlled by the community. The introduction of African-American strikebreakers seemed to incite the kind of violence that precipitated a call for police intervention from a higher authority (such as the county or the state), where local workers had much less political influence.¹⁰

While much of the violence against African-American strikebreakers occurred in such communities, much of it occurred in larger cities as well, where workers had less influence over the local police power. Although not directly addressing the issue of strikebreaking by African Americans, Gerald Friedman's (1988) comparison of the labor movements of France and the United States is suggestive. According to Friedman, the state's position on labor matters explains much of the difference in the strategies of the French and American labor movements during this period. In France, if the state were called upon to intervene in a labor dispute, it often sided with labor, whereas in the United States it usually sided with employers. As a consequence, successful French unions practiced open membership, hoping to attract enough workers to disrupt the social peace and force the state to intervene. In the United States, successful unions restricted membership to small groups of strategically located skilled workers who could quietly and effectively strike for long periods of time without disrupting the social peace. The historical record suggests that when U.S. employers used African-American strikebreakers, they increased the probability that a strike would turn into a race riot that would require state intervention to restore order.¹¹

SUPPLY

On the supply side, we would like to know if the supply price of African-American strikebreakers was lower than that of other potential strikebreakers. We know that southern wages were lower than northern wages and that African-American workers were relegated to the lowest rungs of the southern job hierarchy. We also know that transportation improvements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reduced the cost of getting southerners to the sites of northern labor conflicts. Unemployment, lower wages, and exclusion from unions combined to create a reserve of African-American workers who were likely to view strikebreaking as an employment opportunity. In addition, it has been suggested that southern African Americans did not have full information about what was at stake when they became strikebreakers. They are often characterized as ignorant rural folk who knew little about factory life and union struggles, and who sometimes fell victim to false advertisements that failed to mention that they were being recruited to break a strike (Spero and Harris 1931: 120; Tuttle 1969: 419, 426; Washington 1913: 755–58).¹²

Direct evidence of deceptive advertising exists. Advertisements for African-American workers in Kansas City, Kansas, and Birmingham, Alabama, were clearly parts of campaigns to recruit strikebreakers for the labor disturbances in Pana, Illinois, in 1898 and Weir City, Kansas, in 1899. These advertisements failed to mention that a strike was in progress, emphasizing instead higher wages, steady work, and advance travel money (Foner and Lewis 1979: 201, 207). Deceptive advertising was so widespread among operators in the Illinois coal fields that in 1899 the state legislature passed a bill making it an offense to import labor procured through false advertising (Keiser 1972).

Nonetheless, these cases are exceptions rather than the rule.¹³ The majority of African-American strikebreakers were neither rural nor deceived. Most of them had prior work experience in southern factories, which is why they were effective strikebreakers. Even the deceptive advertisements in Kansas City advertised for “nothing but first-class men,” who should “bring their tools well tied up” (Foner and Lewis 1979: 207). The deceived African-American miners who were recruited from Bir-

mingham, Alabama, to break the strike in Pana, Illinois, in 1898 were later transferred from Pana to the company's mines in Weir City, Kansas, where they broke another strike (Spero and Harris 1931: 210–12). Likewise, the African-American strikebreakers that operators recruited into the western coal fields of Washington in the 1890s were brought from Braidwood, Illinois, where they had recently broken another strike (Cotkin 1978; Stern 1977; Campbell 1982). Their ideology was clearly antiunion, carved out of a history of exclusion from European-American unions.

The major exceptions occurred in the Chicago stockyards, where employers systematically recruited African-American strikebreakers from among southern rural folk (Tuttle 1966: 193, and 1969: 419, 426). But even here there is evidence that the recruits were not uninformed. For example, when the meat packers union struck in 1894, it was in sympathy with the American Railway Union (ARU), which had recently struck the Pullman Railroad Company. African-American workers broke both strikes because it was generally known that the constitution of the ARU excluded African Americans. In fact, during the strike African-American strikebreakers established their own ARU—the Anti-Railway Union (Harris 1982: 41). Clearly, these were not ignorant rural folk unable to assess their situation.

Following World War I, northern employers recruited African-American strikebreakers in much larger numbers and often from nearby northern communities, not from the southern countryside. For example, during the Chicago stockyard strike of 1921, Morris and Company opened an employment office in the middle of the city's African-American community (Grossman 1989: 225). During the 1919 steel strike, the 8,000 African-American strikebreakers used by the Chicago steel companies were all recruited on State Street, in the heart of Chicago. So many African-American workers lined up for the opportunity to break the strike that 500 of them were turned away (Spero and Harris 1931: 229–62). During the 1927 miners strike in Pennsylvania one of the largest companies involved secured 25% of its African-American strikebreakers from Pittsburgh, 25% from West Virginia, 18% from the rest of Pennsylvania, and 14% from Michigan and Ohio. Only 7% came from the South (Spero and Harris, 1931: 230–31).

RACE AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

It is important to note that as late as the 1920s most African Americans in the North were only one step removed from the southern countryside. Many of them returned to the South seasonally, and some returned permanently after acquiring a targeted income (Gottlieb 1987: chaps. 2, 5, 7). Their decisions to become strikebreakers were informed choices, rationalized by a complex and changing worldview that balanced their experiences as industrial workers, farmers, and African Americans.

Spero and Harris argue that their decisions to become strikebreakers were shaped, to a large extent, by the interests of the African-American middle class, not by their interests as African-American workers. They argue that middle-class organizations like the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) encouraged African-American workers to become strikebreakers because they sought to peddle an antiunion ideology to European-American elites in return for political and economic favors. Spero and Harris are most critical of the Urban League for recruiting African-American strikebreakers in New Jersey, Chicago, and Detroit and “personally marching them past the pickets” (Spero and Harris 1931: 36–43; Tuttle 1969: 426–27). Recent scholarship on this point has been less critical of the African-American middle class, emphasizing instead how intensified racial discrimination and segregation after World War I made race consciousness more powerful in many African-American communities. Within this context, strikebreaking by African-American workers evolved as one of many broadly supported strategies designed to “uplift the race.”

A full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. However, case studies show how broad-based community support for strikebreaking evolved as a pragmatic response to the opportunities and resources available to each African-American community. Neither workers nor middle classes were unanimous in their opinions. Each interested party assessed the situation, sometimes deciding against strikebreaking, sometimes deciding in favor, but always acting in their own interest.

In Chicago, for example, a few African-American churches were pro-union, but most agreed with Bishop Archibald J. Carey that “the interest of my people lies with the wealth of the nation

and with the classes of white people who control it” (quoted in Grossman 1989: 230). On the other hand, the Chicago *Defender*, the most influential newspaper in African-American Chicago, reflected the pragmatism of most African-American leaders. An extensive survey of its pages finds that “some editorials advised black workers to join unions; others recited the virtues of company loyalty. . . . It praised the concepts of trade unionism and collective bargaining; opposed strikes; considered AF of L unions discriminatory, and left-wing unions too radical; advised blacks to join unions if they would be treated as equals; and considered strikebreaking as legitimate, especially during periods of high unemployment and as a means to enter into industries from which blacks had been previously excluded” (ibid.: 233).

In Pittsburgh, the local chapter of the National Urban League took a neutral position during the 1919 steel strike and even organized a forum for William Z. Foster, a union organizer, to debate African-American antiunionists. It also refused to encourage the importation of African-American strikebreakers and instead urged the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers to appoint African-American organizers. The Urban League also refused to send job applicants to striking coal mines during the labor disputes of 1925–28. During these same disputes the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a major African-American newspaper in Pittsburgh, supported the United Mine Workers and advocated interracial unionism (Gottlieb 1987: 172).

Yet the African-American workers of Pittsburgh broke strikes anyway, primarily because the benefits were substantial and the costs insignificant. Benefits often included improvements in employment, wages, job status, and employers’ perceptions of African-American workers’ productivity and loyalty. On the other hand, strikebreaking had few costs for African-American workers because they had not yet decided to make Pittsburgh their home, they did not live in European-American communities, and they did not work in European-American job networks (Gottlieb 1987: 159–77).

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the social context was different, and so was the strategy. Conscious of their small numbers and fearful of violent reprisals, African-American residents organized a broad-based consensus in opposition to a rumored plan to use African-American strikebreakers in the 1922 railroad strike. “The

local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The Milwaukee Urban League and the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs endorsed a resolution (drawn up by the local Garvey organization) which stated in part: "The Negro citizens of Milwaukee . . . are opposed to any railroad importing Negro labor to take the places of strikers. . . . All Negro organizations in Milwaukee are using every means and effort to prevent the employment of Negroes for such purposes and ask cooperation of city officials and citizens'" (quoted in Trotter 1985: 57).

What is perhaps most significant about these cases is that in each a black community openly debated the costs and benefits of strikebreaking. While the label "scab" had punitive powers strong enough to censor such debates in most European-American communities, it often had no such power in African-American communities, especially when the targeted union had a history of racial discrimination. In this sense, the full social cost of being a strikebreaker was lower for an African-American worker living in an African-American community than it was for a European-American worker living in the mainstream.¹⁴ American racism had come home to roost in the form of a resident African-American labor force that was often willing and able to break a local strike at a moment's notice.

Some empirical support for this view is provided in Figure 1. There I display the aggregate time series on the intensity of strikebreaking by African Americans—the proportion of strikes broken by African-American strikebreakers.¹⁵ I also display the annual level of immigration.¹⁶ These series confirm my earlier finding, namely, that African Americans and newly arrived European immigrants were substitutes as strikebreakers. The degree to which the two series are inversely related is remarkable. The spike around World War I in the intensity of strikebreaking by African Americans is caused by the low levels of European immigration during the war. However, when immigration resumes after the war, the intensity of strikebreaking by African Americans remains high, settling at a level that was approached only once before the war, in the late 1890s when European immigration had slowed to a trickle.¹⁷

The greater intensity of strikebreaking by African-Americans in the 1920s might reflect the fact that employers knew future

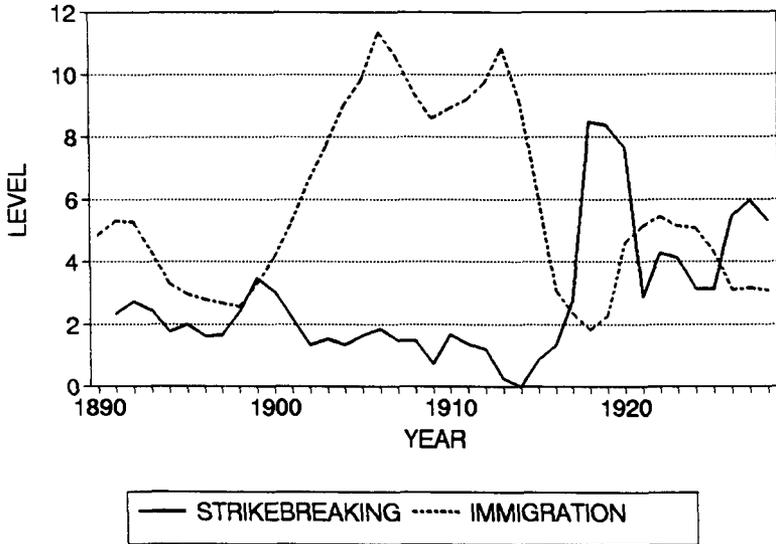


Figure 1 Intensity of black strikebreaking and the level of European immigration

levels of immigration from Europe would be low and so revised their demand strategies accordingly, including the cultivation of stronger loyalties with nearby African-American communities that could be called upon to provide strikebreakers during times of industrial unrest. On the supply side, increasingly race-conscious African-American workers living in communities that cushioned them from the stigma of scabbing needed very little encouragement, especially when the striking union had a history of racial discrimination.¹⁸

These changes in the supply of and demand for African-American strikebreakers bolstered a new militancy among African-American workers that comes to look more and more like an institutionalized, broadly supported threat of strikebreaking.¹⁹ African-American middle-class organizations used the threat to pressure European-American unions to end racial discrimination. For example, at the 1918 Urban League convention on discrimination the cost and benefits of strikebreaking was a major item of discussion. Some delegates wanted the league to go on record as encouraging African-American workers to break strikes. As a

compromise, the conference issued veiled threats, saying African-American workers should cooperate with European-American unions “whenever conditions are favorable” but, when necessary, “band together with employers and organized labor alike” (quoted in Harris 1982: 70).

By 1924 the threat was no longer veiled. In a letter to the AFL the NAACP wrote:

Negro labor in the main is outside the ranks of organized labor, and the reason is, first, that white union labor does not want black labor, and secondly, black labor has ceased to beg admission to the union ranks because of its increasing value and efficiency outside of unions.

We face a crisis in inter-racial labor conditions; the continued and determined race prejudice of white labor, together with the limitation of immigration, is giving black labor tremendous advantage. The Negro is entering the ranks of semi-skilled and skilled labor and he is entering mainly and necessarily as a “scab.” He will soon be in a position to break any strike when he can gain economic advantage for himself. [quoted in Spero and Harris 1931: 144–45]

The advantages of strikebreaking ended with the passage of the Wagner-Connelly Act of 1935. When the act proposed to require employers to rehire all striking employees after a labor dispute was settled, both the NAACP and the National Urban League protested: “While we deplore the necessity of strikebreaking[,] . . . it is a weapon left to the Negro worker whereby he may break the stranglehold that certain organized labor groups have utilized in preventing him complete absorption into the American labor market” (quoted in Wolters 1970: 184). Their strategy was to include in the Wagner-Connelly Act an amendment that would deny discriminating unions benefits from the act. This did not happen.

In a broader sense, when the New Deal politicized the level of American wages, African-American protest organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League were forced to change their strategy from one of confrontation with organized labor to one of conciliation. When the nation debated a lower minimum wage for African-American workers as part of the National Recovery Act, a step that would have induced employers to hire more African-American workers but at the expense of officially stigma-

tizing them as second-class citizens, the Urban League had no choice but to be strongly opposed. Delegates to the 1933 convention resolved that they were “unalterably opposed to differential wage codes . . . based on the color of a worker’s skin. . . . One cannot honest(ly) and sincerely prosecute the cause of the Negro worker without recognizing the importance of collective bargaining. . . . We should see that the black laboring masses become inoculated with the labor point of view. No intelligent social program can straddle this issue” (quoted in Wolters 1970: 104).

Broad-based community support for strikebreaking was officially dead. However, from years of strikebreaking and threatening to break strikes African-American workers came to hold jobs in precisely those industries with a legacy of union strength. As part of the New Deal they would become members of those unions, and for them the race conflict would continue within the union hall. As for those African-American workers still laboring in the South, an important component of the network integrating African-American southerners into northern industrial labor markets disappeared overnight.

CONCLUSION

Strikebreaking by African Americans was not particularly extensive, but we really have no benchmark. One hundred eleven incidents (a gross underestimation) between 1880 and 1929 is not a small number, especially when one realizes that the incidents occurred in those sectors at the forefront of industrial unionism. The significance is even greater when one notes the large numbers of workers involved in some of the twentieth-century incidents, and when one notes that these incidents occurred during the height of Jim Crow segregation and the popular proliferation of racist ideologies. Immigration from Europe could be restricted, but the migration of African Americans from the South could not. Backed by a clearly articulated threat of strikebreaking and a history to prove that the threat was real, African-American workers represented a visible challenge to the control that European-American workers enjoyed over their jobs and wages—a challenge that European-American workers found difficult to ignore. The impact of this threat on worker-management relationships, on the decline of union membership, and on the decline in the rate of labor turn-

over in the 1920s deserves more attention than it has heretofore received.²⁰

NOTES

- 1 I cannot claim to have a complete list, but I have tried to follow all the leads in the secondary literature. The search ended in the summer of 1988. Only the first citation is included in Table 1. Most incidents had multiple citations, some as many as five or six. The citation listed simply reflects the order of the search.
- 2 Spero and Harris claim that African-American workers were not numerous (1931: 251), but Cayton and Mitchell claim they were significantly represented (1939: 6).
- 3 To make the two series comparable one should count all strikebreaking activity that was related to a single clash of wills as one case of strikebreaking, no matter how widespread it was. I deviate from this slightly. I give more weight to widespread incidents that were related to a single clash of wills by counting them as two cases of strikebreaking. The correction allows the time series to account for widespread strikebreaking while minimizing distortions between this series and the USDL time series on strikes. It overcounts the number of times African-American workers were involved in a clash of wills by six or seven, but I felt widespread strikebreaking had to be given more weight than relatively isolated incidents.
- 4 This grossly underestimates the number of establishments and communities that experienced the phenomenon. For instance, Spero and Harris (1931: 226) list 11 mining companies that used African-American strikebreakers in the 1925 West Virginia strike. I count this as one incident of strikebreaking. For some purposes we would want to know the number of establishments and communities that experienced the phenomenon, but it is impossible to measure this with any degree of accuracy.
- 5 Jay Gould used African-American strikebreakers, but the Knights of Labor simply unionized them. It has been estimated that in 1886, 90,000 to 95,000 of the 700,000 members of the Knights were African Americans (Kessler 1952).
- 6 Only a small fraction of the African-American industrial labor force in the North secured jobs as strikebreakers. The greatest employment gains were indirect, in that strikebreaking shocked existing racial employment patterns and opened new firms, industries, and occupations to African-American workers. For examples of these kinds of employment gains, see Tuttle 1969: 417; Cayton and Mitchell 1939: 3–9, 228; Northrup 1944: 79–81; and R. Wright 1905.
- 7 FAIL is taken from Griffin 1939: 91. UNEMP and IMM are taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975: 105, 106, 135. The years are restricted by the coverage of the UNEMP series that begins in 1890. IMM is in 10,000ths. The model is first-order autoregressive. Student t-statistics are reported in parentheses.
- 8 Italian strikebreakers were used in the Chicago stockyard strike of 1904

with “a padrone escort to the stockyards” (Tuttle 1966: 193). Immigrants were often used to break the strikes of African-American unionists. Immigrant strikebreakers were used against African-American unionists in the Alabama coal fields in 1904 and 1908 and in the Appalachian fields in 1895 (Worthman 1969: 403; Lewis 1984: 37, 52). Also see Kessler 1954.

- 9 The BS series is derived from Table 1. The PCLF series is taken from Griffin (1939: 61). The model is first-order autoregressive. Student t-statistics are in parentheses.
- 10 In Gutman’s words: “Take the example of the use of state troops in industrial disputes. Such actions may have resulted from the low status and power the industrialist had in his local community. Unable to gain support from locally elected officials and law enforcement groups and unable to exercise coercive power in the community, he reached upward to the state level, where direct local pressures were felt less strongly” (1985: 256). For concrete examples, see Gutman 1960, 1962, 1976, 1985. Also see Keiser 1972.
- 11 The use of strikebreakers of any kind increased the probability that violence would erupt, but racial antagonism seemed to add fuel to the fire. For example, during the 1877 coal strike in Braidwood, Illinois, operators first tried to use European-American strikebreakers. No violence broke out. These strikebreakers were eventually fired because they would not work. Four days later 300 African-American strikebreakers were escorted into town by the county sheriff, and the local newspaper predicted that Braidwood would “come out of the cloud” (Gutman 1987: 175). Another example is the 1884 Hocking Valley strike where only 50 of the 1,500 imported strikebreakers were African-American. The European-American strikers were surprisingly restrained, viewing the strikebreakers as “misguided and uninformed, but morally innocent, . . . pitiable men robbed of their basic human dignity.” The strikers refused to attack these European-American strikebreakers because they saw them as fellow victims of a harsh economic system (Cotkin 1978: 143–45, 147–48, 150; R. Lewis 1984: 48).
- 12 Booker T. Washington articulated this “rural perspective” in 1913 when he wrote, “The average Negro who comes to town does not understand the necessity or advantage of a labor organization which stands between him and his employer and aims apparently to make a monopoly of the opportunity of labor. He is more accustomed to work for persons than for wages. When he gets a job, therefore, he is inclined to consider the source from which it came . . . and does not understand and does not like an organization which seems to be founded on a sort of impersonal enmity to the man by whom he is employed” (1913: 756–57).
- 13 For cases where some deceived African-American workers refused to break the strikes they were recruited to break, see Spero and Harris 1931: 210–11; Gutman 1962: 256–64; and Kessler 1952, 1954. Even in these cases the recruits were not from the countryside.
- 14 Montgomery (1987: 371) writes about wartime strikes: “Neighborhood solidarities were especially conspicuous during the upsurge in workplace struggle. . . . The vast working-class neighborhoods of the early twentieth century could make life unbearable for scabs, mount large funeral processions for slain strikers, and involve entire families in marketplace as well as

- workplace struggles.” African-American strikebreakers often did not face these community-based constraints.
- 15 Ideally, we would want to measure the propensity of African-American workers to break strikes—how willing they were to break strikes. This is impossible to measure with the available data. The intensity of strikebreaking by African Americans is a reduced-form measure that captures both supply and demand propensities once it is purged of business cycle effects. The series is calculated as follows: First, I calculate the proportion of strikes broken by African-American strikebreakers by dividing the annual number of incidents of African-American strikebreaking by the annual number of strikes (Griffin 1939: 66–67). I purge this ratio of business cycle effects by dividing it by the annual level of unemployment. The series is multiplied by 10,000 to make its level comparable with the level of immigration, which is also displayed in Figure 1.
 - 16 The annual level of immigration is divided by 10,000 to make it comparable with the series on the intensity of strikebreaking by African Americans. Since we are interested in trends, annual fluctuations are smoothed out by displaying the three-year moving averages of both series.
 - 17 The relative intensity of strikebreaking by African Americans in the 1920s is probably higher than that indicated in Figure 1 because many of the incidents in that decade were widespread events that are underrepresented in the time series on strikebreaking by African Americans. In addition, the incidents in the 1920s occurred in a wider variety of industries and cities (see Table 1).
 - 18 In 1928 Ira De Reid believed that African-American workers were becoming less willing to break strikes (Foner and Lewis 1979: 526–28). Some observers may have believed this because the number of incidents of strikebreaking by African Americans declined during the 1920s. The number declined, however, not because African-American workers were less willing to break strikes, but rather because European-American workers were less willing to go out on strike. See Griffin 1939: 66–67.
 - 19 The new militancy took other forms as well, one of which was the independent black-union movement (Foner 1974: 147–52). This strategy was feasible where African-American workers were well represented in a sector, as was the case with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (Harris 1982: chap. 4).
 - 20 Bonacich (1976: 44–45) made a similar plea, but to no avail. Recent influential works on labor history during the 1920s hardly mention strikebreaking by African Americans or the threat of it. See, for example, Montgomery 1987 and Jacoby 1985.

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