

# The Negro Question

By THE STROLLING REPORTER

**H**ARLEM has now become the National Capital of the Negroes in the United States. Instead of Harlem being considered as a local community it has taken on an international import. There is no need for anyone to refer to Harlem as a part of New York City. Negroes from all over the Western Hemisphere look upon Harlem as "Negro Heaven" without benefit of Father Divine. To them Harlem is what Mecca is to the Mohammedans.

Not only are they coming here from our own South but also from the Caribbean Islands as rapidly as transportation will carry them. The Negroes of the South would rather live in poverty in Harlem than on three meals a day in the South. To them it means political and personal liberty. They are free to go and come as they please. They are not barred from theaters, restaurants or any other public places of assembly. The parks and beaches are open to them. While the mass of the Negroes live in "ghettos," some large and some small, they will move anywhere an owner is willing to take them. There are no legal restrictions against them living in any part of New York City.

Harlem now has a population of approximately 300,000. It is bounded roughly by 110th Street (at the upper end of Central Park), the East River, St. Nicholas Avenue and the Harlem River, taking in some of the better sections of upper Manhattan.

Contrary to general report, every house a Negro lives in is not a slum dwelling, for in West Harlem some of the better type of tenements, as well as private homes, are found. The rundown dwellings are no worse than those filled by poor whites. There is, however, much congestion. This is due to their poverty and the fact that their color bars them from being accepted as tenants by many owners. The transportation facilities are most excellent, for the area is served by three subway lines as well as buses and crosstown street railways. Harlem Negroes have their own theaters and hotels. The most famous dance hall in all America—the Savoy—is in their midst. Their night clubs and "hot spots" are patronized largely by the white sporting element who usually frequent Broadway and the theatrical district. There is much poverty in the section, but it is unfortunate that the Negroes are being exploited by white reformers for the purpose of keeping themselves in the limelight by obtaining front page copy.

There is crime in Harlem but no more than is found in practically every community in the world. A small disturbance by Negroes is magnified into a race riot and the Negro uplifters make capital of it, even to the extent of seeking legislation to correct some evils on which they base the cause of

the trouble, usually bad housing and lack of playgrounds or recreation facilities. In spite of these charges there are many playgrounds, excellent schools, good police and fire protection, and the Health and Sanitation Departments pay particular attention to Harlem because of its congestion.

Some of the swankiest private homes have been turned into rooming houses to accommodate Negroes who cannot find apartments of their own. Many of the best planned parks in the country are found in this area with benches and walks as well as swimming pools and recreation centers.

Harlem is colorful. When Negroes have money they dress in the height of fashion, and on Easter day Seventh Avenue outshines Fifth Avenue. They know how to dress when they have the means. Their dark faces are accentuated by bright colors of their hats and garments. The dazzling "Sepia Gals" attract playboys from the Broadway section.

On the fringe of St. Nicholas Park is the famous Gold Hill. The high-grade dwellings there are occupied by colored actors and Negroes who are in business that gives them an income sufficient to pay the high rent on The Hill. There are many excellent musicians among them and they have some fine orchestras which are often engaged to play in the dance halls frequented exclusively by white folks.

As citizens Negroes take full advantage of Election Day. They have given up voting the Republican ticket exclusively and now split themselves among all the parties. Of the twenty-two Manhattan members of the Assembly in the State Legislature three are Negroes. One of them, who has been there for nearly ten years, is one of the outstanding members of the legislative body.

At a recent election for City Council, Clayton W. Powell, a minister of the largest congregation in Harlem, was elected. On the day after election he issued the following statement:

"Give us jobs and we will provide our own housing and support our families without recourse to relief or charity. Give us an opportunity of the freedom of movement so that we can live where we desire instead of being compelled to segregate ourselves in areas where we must live because we have not the freedom of movement."

His first statement slapped the reformers between the eyes, for here was a man who understood clearly that the need for charity is due to the lack of ability to produce for one's own self. It is unfortunate that Dr. Powell did not at the same time tell how it might be possible to provide more jobs for Negroes as well as for others.

His second statement is one which is a hope on his part. It is true that Negroes are not barred by law against living

anywhere in the City, yet when owners take them in, white folks begin to move away. This has caused many to insist that Negroes destroy real estate values. It is not the Negro who destroys the value but the fact that he is unable, because of his poverty, to pay the economic rent. Realty value is capitalized income.

It is difficult for Negroes to get jobs, for there are very few employers who will take them; some will not hire them under any conditions, while others give the reason that their white employees would refuse to work with them. Thus many competent workers are barred because of their color. They are, however, engaged in menial work such as sweeping floors, cleaning cellars (in other words, all the dirty work), or acting as messengers or doormen.

In the past few years many of the younger generation have taken up stenography and typing, passed Civil Service examinations and are employed in various municipal departments.

Politically, the Negroes have fared better. Several of them are judges in our lower courts, one is a Civil Service Commissioner, another is a member of the Municipal Housing Authority. One of the outstanding men who sat in the Constitutional Convention three years ago was a resident of Harlem. On a number of occasions when he took the floor to explain some points in constitutional law he was applauded by the members of the convention. He is an able man and a fine orator. The district he represented was about 50% white.

There are Negro police and firemen as well as letter carriers and employees in the Department of Sanitation. At the last session of the New York State legislature, labor unions were forbidden to bar Negroes from membership. Nevertheless, according to a statement from the head of the Negro YMCA, not over 1,000 Negroes living in Harlem are employed in defense industry.

That many of our Negroes need help under the present conditions is admitted generally. It is unfortunate, however, that there are pressure groups in the community who frequently issue statements in relation to the Harlem situation.

Recently a report was made by the City-wide Citizens' Committee on Harlem, part of which follows: "An iron law of rent [*sic*] takes from the Negro families the most they can pay, regardless of what they can afford. At all income levels from \$500 to \$3,000 Negroes paid higher average rents than white families. According to one study, rent absorbed 30% of the Negro family income. There are cases where tenants paid 50% or more of their income. Numerous studies emphasize the high rents paid by Negroes for accommodations. . . .

"The low income of the Negro is the most serious aspect of his housing problem. Half the Negro families in Harlem have incomes under \$837 per annum. While the housing problem of the lowest income group is the product of a discrepancy between income and rent, the blades of this scissors

are closer in the case of the Negro. The disparity between rent and income is greater here, the income lower, the rent extracting a higher proportion of that income. Low income is responsible for lodging, congestion and crowding. The housing problem would be relieved by per capita increase in Negro income. Then, the housing problem would resolve itself into a problem of providing houses. But, with half the families having incomes less than \$837 annually, one can hardly be optimistic about the solution of the housing problem via housing alone. A capacity to pay rent must be created as well. A double-edged attack on the problem is essential to approach its full solution. In the meantime, housing must be provided as soon as practicable to meet the needs of those thousands of Negro families who can and are willing to pay the rent in public housing projects, but are not given the opportunity."

The same report indicates that in the last quarter of a century, Harlem's Negro population rose 600%, while the area expanded only 20 blocks north and south and three blocks east and west.

While it is true this report recognizes that the low wage of the Negro is a factor in his family life, what reformers usually stress is that he is compelled to pay from 30 to 50% of his income for rent and then conclude that the Negro is discriminated against and that white folks pay a lower rent for similar accommodations. Here again is misleading information though it is true on the *edge* of Harlem owners of property are inducing their white families to remain by offering them a lower rental. They do not want Negro tenants, the reason being that they want to retain their property equities.

The law of supply and demand in Harlem is working true to form. A demand for shelter always increases the cost. The solution then would be to lessen the demand in this particular district. This is not peculiar to Harlem but to any other part of the world where there is a demand exceeding the supply.

One of the remedies offered by the Citizens' Committee is that the state provide shelter at a price the Negroes can afford, which means subsidies and charity housing. This is not a solution. While it would benefit those moving into the subsidized houses, it would not prevent others from coming to the district.

The announcement by the OPA that there would be a ceiling on prices gave another opening to the Harlem uplifters to prove that the Negroes were overcharged on foodstuffs (they either did not know, or ignored deliberately, the fact that there is no ceiling on foodstuffs yet, September 1942). The report they issued during August of this year was to the effect that purchases of certain foodstuffs cost \$5.88 in Harlem as against \$5.58 in other parts of the city. They therefore concluded that the Negroes were being overcharged 6%.

Poorly written, material hard to grasp, conclusions poorly drawn

A member of the Municipal Council who is closely connected with these reformers at once introduced a resolution in the Council urging the Mayor to build a public market in Harlem so that the Negroes could save money on their foodstuffs. He should know better. The building and site of such a market would be tax-free as municipal property, but the site would prove rather expensive. There would be no saving to the Negroes. Prices of foodstuffs, like clothing and shoes, is a matter of shopping.

Statements that the prices in Harlem are higher than elsewhere simply arouses a feeling among the Negroes that they are being robbed by the white shopkeepers. The groups behind these "investigations" are not all Communists or Socialists, but their actions are creating a feeling among many that the State should go in for providing shelter and food for the poor, instead of removing some of the obstacles that prevent men from getting jobs that will give them a return sufficient to provide for their own needs.

Since Dr. Powell has recognized the Negro problem insofar as jobs are concerned, it might be well for him to consider how the Negroes might get their employment, thereby decreasing the pressure on Harlem. The Negro is an agricultural worker. We have no farms in Harlem. He was employed in the cotton fields, the sugar plantations and the truck farms of the South, but the conditions under which he was compelled to live soured him against his lot. He is the chief of labor, yet the Southern employers failed to recognize this and allowed him to emigrate from the South.

If the Negro workers and sharecroppers of the South received better treatment, they would be able to live there in comfort and provide for their families instead of coming to the North where jobs for them are few at all times, and where their presence has a tendency to flood the labor market. Their increasing influx into Harlem is causing antagonism against them even though it is unwarranted. After all, you cannot change human nature. Men will fight for their homes and their jobs against what they call "interlopers."

The life of the sharecropper is not an envious one. The landowner takes from him all that he can possibly produce, and no matter how hard or how long the Negro and his family work, at the end of the year he is still in debt to the landowner.

In the past few years the Southern states have recognized the need of better education. More schools for them are now being provided and the Negroes are beginning to understand something about our form of government. They read the Declaration of Independence and find it does not apply to them so far as the South is concerned. Yet in spite of all their drawbacks we now have Negro physicians, lawyers, scientists, architects, builders. Only a short time ago one of their scientists had discovered a process for making synthetic rubber. His services were at once secured by Henry Ford. Their education, however, has made them feel that they are a part

of the general government and that their treatment should be equal. No segregation and no "Jim Crow" cars. This, however, the South will not recognize. Governor Talmadge of Georgia recently declared that "we will treat the Negro decently but he can't go to our schools, nor can he live next door to us. We will continue segregation."\*

This is one of the chief reasons why the Negro is leaving the South (to the disadvantage of the Southern states where the Negro is the principal supply of labor) and coming to the North where they flood the labor market. That they cannot get jobs is not so much because of discrimination but because the employer undoubtedly looks upon white labor as more efficient.

It might be well if Dr. Powell and the editors of the Negro press would give some attention to the land question, for after all land is the source of all jobs and out of the land comes everything we require.

A recent report made by a prominent Negro stated, "The Negroes of the South are only permitted to work the poorest land, yet we know that there are millions of acres of rich land in the South." Why can't the Negro work this land? The answer is self evident. It is held out of use by speculators for higher prices, and in the past few years the Federal Government has paid landowners for not growing crops. As we see it, the Negro problem is a land problem. Few of them are employed in our factories and mills, and in the building industry they are a rarity.

There is no doubt there are many in the community who will oppose this point of view as to how Negroes might get jobs but the fact still remains that it is absurd to expect a community to provide jobs for everybody who wants to live there. We tried it with the WPA and it wasted hundreds of millions of dollars.

The trek of the Okies and the Arkies into California created much dismay there. Their labor, however, was utilized at once in harvesting the food crop but shelter had to be provided for them and this was accomplished by cooperation between the state and the federal government. The migration was due to the dust bowl in the Southwest where the farmers were driven off their lands because of lack of rain and irrigation. Fortunately for them, and for California, most of the migrant workers are now employed on war work. There is no war work in Harlem but much talk, mass meetings, reports of Citizens' Committees—but no solution. Perhaps some of the Negro leaders may give serious thought to the land question, always bearing in mind that land was made to be used and not to be held out of use for speculative purposes.

Back to the land will be a start toward the solution of the Negro problem.

\* Governor Talmadge has since met with a severe political setback, having been defeated in the recent Georgia primary elections.