

Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs

ORAL INTERVIEW

WILLIAM LATTIMORE

ROBERTA McBRIDE, INTERVIEWER

MARCH 11, 1969



Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan



Lattimore, William

Interviewed by R. McBride, March 11, 1969

McBride: Mr. Lattimore, I'm out to see you on just about the last day of August, in the year 1967 and I want you to turn your memory back to the early 30's. We want to hear about your experiences in the union and in the auto industry.

Lattimore: I might start off by saying, Mrs. McBride, that I joined the old auto workers union in 1932. I was working then at the Chevrolet Gear and Axle Plant #3 from 1932 to the early part of 1935. I was discharged from the Chevrolet plant for activities in trying to start a union - for union activities. The old auto workers union was in several of the plants throughout Detroit at that time. Months later after the discharge I got a job at the Dodge main plant. Worked from 1935 until 1942 when I went on the staff of the UAW as a legislative representative. In between that time many things happened. Might say that in the early days of 1935 I joined the old AIWA under Richard T. Frankenstein where we paid twenty five cents per month for union dues. Then came the UAW in 1937 and along with it the sit-down strike.

McBride: Did you participate in the sit-down strike?

Lattimore: I stayed in the plant several hours and decided to go home but returned to cheer on the people who were sitting down in the plant. In 1937, I was elected a steward, a chief steward, in the Dodge Foundry and was active in the union and became a leader and the chairman of the Negro group, the anti-discrimination group. At that time we were sort of frustrated as Negro union members because of the many - because the white elements within the Dodge plant refused to accept the Negro brothers and sisters as equals.

McBride: You mean that when you join the UAW you don't automatically become perfectly fair in your treatment of all other persons, including Negroes?

Lattimore: Well I think you're right and especially at that time, let me say, the UAW, as all things, has grown since 1937. I would say that many hurdles have been removed as far as the Negroes that are coming into the industry now; they have better jobs. There are Negroes within the skilled end of the auto industry, which was unheard of at that time. The only jobs that Negroes had in 1937 in the Dodge plant were jobs in the foundry, the core rooms, the janitor departments and the spray booths. We organized a group of Negroes calling ourselves the Dodge Local Union Progressive Group and were able to upgrade Negroes in the early 40's to jobs on production lines and jobs throughout the plant, and also women going on the assembly line.

McBride: To the war plants?

Lattimore: Yes.

McBride: Did that kind of a move take place in other locals too?

Lattimore: Yes, I would think so. I heard that they had the Negro groups in other plants that were progressive, that attended the union meetings and attended the caucuses in order to develop the right sort of thinking in the minds of some of the leading local union members in order to go along with upgrading Negroes to various job classifications.

McBride: Now, when I think of Local #3 I think of two or three famous episodes, as the one in which Rev. Horace White was involved. You were present at that?

Lattimore: Yes, I was. Mr. White along with other Negroes in the community felt that the Negroes had to be made cognizant of the fact that the union was our only salvation and that we as Negro members had to lead the other frustrated Negroes not to be strike breakers but to join the union, and be a part of the union and be active; this was the only salvation: by being active, by convincing white members that we were part of this industrial revolution. Mr. White played a tremendous role in explaining to the Negroes not to be strike breakers during that strike. In one incident one of the Negro brothers got up on the sound truck and said, "We're all part of this, let's welcome these strike breakers and let's make them part of the union;" and these people joined our picket line and became part of the union structure at that time.

McBride: That was a group of Negroes that were coming into the picket line to break the strike?

Lattimore: That's right. They were brought in by several groups and also by company people to break the strike, and there were some few hundred of them and we were able to convince them to stay out of the plant in order to - so that we could win recognition for our union.

McBride: Now there was a strike at Dodge in 1939? At Chrysler?

Lattimore: Yes. At Dodge plant was a 54-day strike, Mrs. McBride. I remember very well, very vividly, because of the weather, we had 30 days of zero weather. I think it was, in my opinion an ill-timed strike by the leaders of our local union and at that time I might say that the Negro group which I was the chairman of asked for five cents an hour over and above the general wage increase that was one of the proposals of the union. This was laughingly called the "dirty nickel" because it was for the foundry workers that we were asking for this nickel, the work and and working conditions being so intolerable in the foundry.

We convinced the union local people that this five cents extra should go to the foundry workers. We lost this strike. There, too, we had a problem of Negroes jumping over the fence going into the foundry. And this progressive group I spoke to you about - there were Kirk Davis, Kirby Jones, myself and a few other Negroes who I cannot name at this time - their names escape me - who jumped over the fence and talked to these Negro workers down in the foundry and we all marched out together. However, as I say, it was an ill-timed strike. We lost most of our demands, we were able to get a two cents increase across the board and of course we didn't get the dirty nickel.

McBride: Has the dirty nickel ever been a part of any contract since?

Lattimore: Yes.

McBride: Is that right?

Lattimore: Yes. We were able to, in 1941, receive the five cents over and above the rest of the workers for the foundry workers. The thing caught on. The dirty nickel caught on. After the organization in Fords in 1941 they asked for a five cents dirty nickel for their foundry workers. So you see, we really started something in Dodge.

McBride: Now, I believe you had an active part in one of the historic conventions of the UAW, the Grand Rapids Convention?

Lattimore: Yes. I happened to be made the chairman of the Negro Caucus in Grand Rapids. There we were trying to get a board member, a Negro board member-at-large. This convention was highly political. At that particular time people were asking the delegates, and I think the majority at that time was asking for defeat of Walter P. Reuther. Mr. Alan Haywood came into the convention and talked to the leaders in caucus, of course, to make a compromise that Mr. Frankenstein, who I worked for, would be the vice president, the first vice president, and Mr. Reuther would be the

second vice president. In the melee the board member-at-large issue got lost. I think at that time we had enough people convinced that had it not gotten lost in the shuffle we would have had a Negro board member-at-large. And as you know we did not get a Negro board member until 1963 convention in Atlantic City.

McBride: The man who was elected to the Executive Board, the Negro member, I understand, started out at your local union?

Lattimore: Yes. Jack Edwards. Jack Edwards was a member of my local union in 1939 and left a few years later and got hired at the Lincoln plant and came up through the ranks as a committeeman and also chairman of the bargaining committee at Local 900 and also there to UAW International staff representative and now to his present job as a Board member. I think Jack could well say that his beginning was from the mighty Dodge Local #3.

McBride: You spoke of the Grand Rapids Convention as being a very political convention. I've heard it said that the UAW is a very political union and I believe that you've been active in politics with the UAW.

What were some of the jobs you had that did involve that responsibility?

Lattimore: Well, let me put it this way, I was a coordinator of the 1st and 13th Congressional District PAC.

McBride: Which stands for?

Lattimore: Political Action Committee. Speaking of the politics in the community, my job then was to work with the delegates in the community and also see that labor's position was well known to the community and also get out the vote within the 1st and 13th Congressional District.

McBride: It seems to me that today, people run into difficulty as far as the union and its political endorsements are concerned. I often hear the union criticized for not endorsing the person, so I'm told, who is a choice of the Negro community. Is that a new feature, or were you always

having problems of that nature back in the days when you were the coordinator?

Lattimore: I think more so now, Mrs. McBride, because of the many issues that are confronting the Negro and in dealing with the Negro community now you have these frustrations on housing, adequate housing for Negroes, proper educational facilities, the total economic picture that faces Negroes and the various active Negroes within a community that have various ideas as to how you remedy these conditions. I would say that the Negro leader in the community dealing with politics for the union must carry two things; one is a knowledge of his community, and the people within the framework that he is working with and too, he must understand how to deal with the various groups within the community. I think once this happens and he brings the story, the real story, to the community without getting involved personally and I think this happens where many of the union leaders, per se, within the community get involved personally within the community politics, then he becomes so involved and so wrapped up he loses sight of the real job that he is put into the community to do.

McBride: You worked for the International for several years but you're now working for the U.S. Government. How come you made the change?

Lattimore: Well, there were several reasons. One basic reason, I might say, is because I think that down through the years, it is my opinion, that I had made a contribution and I felt that it was about time I either get into a different field or received a promotion commensurate with my long years of standing. This did not happen so I chose to go elsewhere.

McBride: Does that mean that color is a handicap in the union in advancing to a top post?

Lattimore: I think you could say that by and large the UAW has made a great contribution in the field of promotions of Negroes and minority

groups within the plants. But I think they have to take another look at the Negroes who have made a great contribution within their own structure. By that I mean many of the International representatives that are now part of the UAW have been overlooked as regional directors, as, yes, and as officers, if you please, of the UAW. This does not mean that all of the top officers feel this way but I think that many of the top officers of UAW should take a long look at creating the very thing that they are fighting across the table for - fighting for better jobs in the skilled trades for Negroes. Management looks at them with a jaundiced eye because they haven't elevated many Negroes to the top echelon of the UAW. While they are the most democratic union in the world, they fall short where it comes to carrying the image of promoting the Negroes to top jobs within the International Union.

McBride: Now you feel the Federal Mediation Service is a satisfactory place to work in terms of the progress that is possible for a Negro member to make?

Lattimore: I think this, that it's a very satisfying job because of acceptance. I think that, here again, you have to view a job of this particular caliber as an acceptance of both parties feeling that the mediator is there and would be helpful to both sides, labor and management. I might say that I've gotten this acceptance from both management and labor. This is a deep feeling of satisfaction. In our service we have with us, in our short time of Negroes being active in the Federal Mediation Conciliation Service as mediators, we have Willoughby Abner who is an assistant to the Director of our Department. A very short number of years ago, you know, Federal mediators, as far as Negroes were concerned, were unheard of.

McBride: You were the first one in the area, weren't you?

Lattimore: I was the first one in the Detroit area. I was the third Negro Federal mediator in the United States. And in the short time of a decade, you might say, we have been able to put many other Negroes in spots in the Federal Mediation Conciliation Service. We're making progress; by that I don't mean that we're perfect here either. I think there is a question here and there on placing more Negroes in the Federal Mediation position.

McBride: Are mediators unionized?

Lattimore: Not necessarily so. We have mediators that come out of management positions, personnel, labor relations in management positions.

We have also Federal Mediators that are trainees; they are training to be mediators by virtue of classes, orientation classes that we carry on from time to time. We have two hundred sixty Federal Mediators throughout the country and I would say we are pretty well evenly divided, some from labor and some from management.

McBride: Do you have a union of mediators?

Lattimore: No we don't. I might say that this has been discussed.

McBride: Your son is wanting to make a correction here.

Lattimore: My son wants to make a correction by saying that I was the second Negro mediator.

McBride: You believe the UAW should be faulted for not promoting Negroes as rapidly as they deserve?

Lattimore: I think this is true and while I want to be fair, I think there were elements in the union, I think Mr. Reuther recognizes the political makings of the executive board of the International Union where there were board members who disagreed with Walter's thinking in this direction. I think to this day that there are some board members who still haven't woke up to the problems and needs of putting Negroes into responsible positions, so that they can take away this myth that Negroes

cannot function in top jobs.

McBride: What has been your experience in the mediation service?

Do you come up against much prejudice there?

Lattimore: Let me say this, Mrs. McBride, and I say this honestly, that I've worked in the service for the past six years and I have been welcomed by both management and labor unions and as you know, work with all of them and to my surprise I have been more accepted as a professional - much more than I was within the framework of the UAW

McBride: By UAW members?

Lattimore: By UAW members and by management, accepting the fact that here is a mediator who should know about labor problems and I think they look past the color and they want to see results, and I think I meet them at this level and I would go further to say that within the service where we only have a small quota of Negroes within the service we have made checks from time to time of the acceptance of the Negro mediator and I'm happy to say that not only does a Negro mediator have to gain acceptance but also a white mediator must gain acceptance of both parties because if he fails to get the acceptance of the party, parties, he cannot give a recommendation and cannot have the respect of the party, and I want to say that we're very happy especially here in the state of Michigan. I have been accepted by both management and labor as a mediator with acceptability.

Biog: Lattimore

Lattimore, William, U.S. Mediation Service, interviewed by R. McBride, Jan. 26, 1966

1. in post high school days (1932-33) was active in setting up a youth bureau, 656 East Jefferson, for unemployed youth. Worked with Eddie Tolan, and others.
2. worked in Dodge plant, was member of predecessor unions to UAW, and of Dodge Local 3, from beginning. Was active in Local 3 anti-Martin caucus, recalls he and other top persons in local purposely could not be located so that Martin could force turn-over of treasury from their local, UAW's largest at that time.
3. later worked for Region 1, and for International; was first Negro UAW legislative representative in Washington, 1942-1943. Then went to UAW National Aircraft Dept.
4. was head of Negro caucus at 1944 Grand Rapids convention. Had sufficient votes lined up to elect Negro Board member, Leon Bates being the person decided on. When became evident that Reuther was going to be defeated, Adolph Germer sent word to Murray. Murray started pulling strings to prevent Reuther's defeat and the Negro board member issues got lost... says when Negro is elected a regional director, that will be the day. Believes this most likely to happen in Region 1A.
5. In 1945, while still staff member in aircraft dept., headed Frankenstein's campaign for mayor, working with Henry Moon who was imported for the occasion.
6. Was clearly identified, in this period, with Anti-Reuther, Frankenstein faction. On Frankenstein's defeat in 1946, Lattimore was dropped from the staff. Returned to the plant for 6 months, a hard thing to do.
7. In 1947-? Wayne County CIO-PAC Coordinator for 1st and 13th districts; was on staff in 50's. Eventually got tired of seeing the people be trained promoted over his head, and quit the union to join ^{the} U.S. Mediation Service, where he was the second Negro to be employed, and the first in this area. Believes Reuther brothers to be entirely free of prejudice, and that, but for certain bigots on the Board, his UAW career, and that of others, would be much different.
8. Is particularly proud of his role in the mediation service in bringing the skilled trades strikes, in last round of negotiations, to a quick, mutually satisfactory close. Thinks it strange that as a mediator a Negro can handle a situation, where as a UAW staff member he cannot overcome prejudices of union members.
9. was active in 1940's in Metropolitan Council for Community Development (a predecessor of TULC)

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