

It's a Mystery — White Workers Against Black Workers

BY BILL BIGELOW AND NORM DIAMOND

In previous units of *The Power in Our Hands*, students examined attempts to build solidarity between workers of various backgrounds and in different positions in the workforce. The context for these efforts was escalating management control over the workplace. A major obstacle to that solidarity has been and remains racial discrimination. Racism is so deeply embedded in our society that it is often experienced by our students as part of human nature. In “It’s a Mystery,” we probe some of the social factors that contributed to racial hostility in the 1920s.

One focus of this lesson is to explore why unions participated in discriminatory practices. As the book’s Introduction points out, unions are not only vehicles through which workers attempt to better themselves and their society, they can also embody some of the elements of the society that their members have a stake in changing.

Goals / Objectives

1. Students will understand some of the factors that contributed to racial hostility in the years immediately following World War I.
2. Students will learn that some unions, too, were not exempt from racism.

Materials Needed

- One set of clues to Student Handout A: “It’s a Mystery: Clues.” (Before beginning, be sure to cut these into individual clues.)
- Student Handout B: “It’s a Mystery: Questions” (enough for each student).

Time Required

- One class period and time for students to read aloud and discuss writing assignments.

Procedure: Day One

1. Ask students to sit in a circle.
2. Tell students that they are about to solve a mystery together. The mystery is: Why did racism against Black people in northern cities become so much more hostile and violent during and right after World War I than it had been previously?

Explain that as a group students will try to understand this phenomenon by looking at what happened in one typical midwestern city. (“Midwest City” is based on events that took place in Dayton, Ohio. Similar conditions prevailed in many northern cities.)

3. Read or paraphrase the following for students:

Before World War I there had been racism in Midwest City — Black people did

not have the jobs or social opportunities available to whites. But there was little official segregation: Black people could eat in most restaurants, go to movies, or live in most neighborhoods. With World War I all this changed. Suddenly the only eating places open to them were a Black-owned restaurant and the railroad station. Most hotels also closed their doors to Black people. They were even barred from white-owned theaters and movie houses.

Before the war there had been no large-scale organized hostility toward Black people. But by the early 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was one of the most powerful organizations in the city. Klan members rode up and down major streets on white horses each Saturday night. More than 10,000 people attended Klan rallies at the county fairgrounds.

So why this sudden hostility? Was it something the Black residents of Midwest City had done? Something they hadn't done? Or did it have entirely different causes? Here lies the mystery.

Each of you will be given at least one clue that will help solve the mystery. Every clue is important and can, in various ways, be used at least once. You may tell your clue to the rest of the class but you may not show it to anyone else.

As you progress, you might select someone to write down and display the group's ideas.

4. Distribute Student Handout B: "It's a Mystery: Questions" to each student. Review the questions on the handout to ensure that each student is clear about what is required. Note: The starred questions ask for opinions. Students do not need to use the clues in their answers to those questions.
5. Distribute the clues, giving one to each student.
6. Ask students to "solve" the mystery on their own. It may be valuable to review with them some of their conclusions about group decision-making techniques from the [Lawrence lesson](#), if you have done that with students. As in the Lawrence role play on the 1912 "Bread and Roses" strike, you should stay completely out of the discussion unless they reach an impasse or are extremely frustrated. In this case, you might suggest that a particular student with a crucial clue speak up.
7. Afterward, use the "Question Sheet" as the basis for discussion. This is also an excellent opportunity to discuss class dynamics — positive and negative — in students' solution of the mystery.

Some points to be brought out in discussion:

What major changes took place in Midwest City in the period before and after World War I?

From 1915 to 1916, as war raged in Europe, orders placed for war materiel boosted Midwest City's industrial production by two-thirds. African Americans came North searching for the jobs being opened by this production boom. Midwest City's Black population grew from 1,800 in 1910 to 9,000 in 1920. The influx of new workers created a housing shortage as capital went into war production, not new homes. Competition for scarce housing was acute and prices rose accordingly. Many Black people who came to Midwest City moved into neighborhoods where poor whites, generally immigrants from Eastern Europe, had lived. Employers used Black people as strikebreakers in many cities, although not in Midwest City.

After World War I, what problems faced Midwest City residents for which whites may have blamed Black people?

Competition for jobs grew fierce. Unemployment — for Black people and whites — was high. After the war,

as many as one-third of Midwest City's workers were without work. Some companies even fired white workers in favor of hiring African Americans — hoping for a more compliant non-unionized workforce. Soldiers returning home found jobs and housing much harder to come by than when they had left. Many companies reduced wages in an attempt to keep profits high.

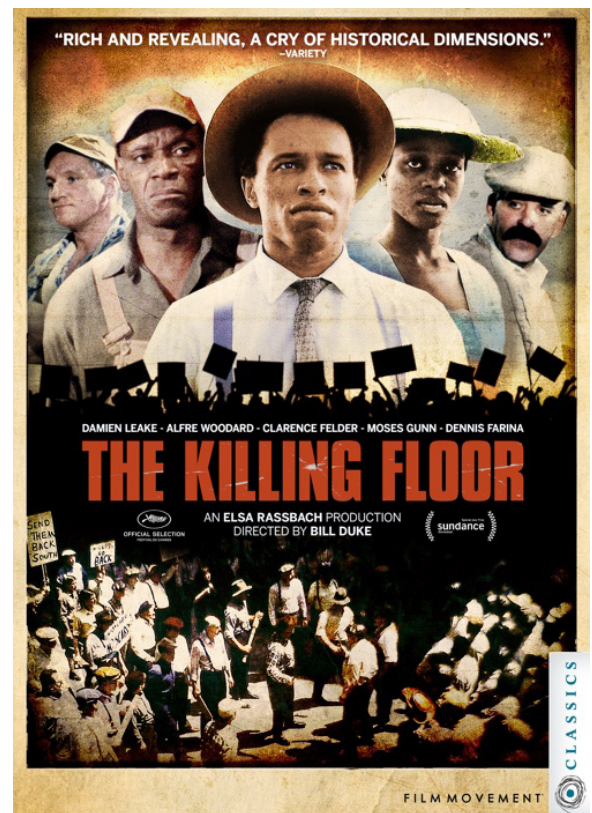
Crime grew in Midwest City after World War I. However, there was no evidence whatsoever that Black people were more heavily involved in criminal activities than were whites.

Are there better explanations for each problem?

Clearly employers helped create and then played upon divisions between Black and white workers. Advertising specifically for “colored workers” at a time of high white unemployment was bound to create racial antagonisms — as was firing white workers and replacing them with Black workers. During the war, companies even sent trucks to the South seeking Black workers. African Americans could hardly be blamed for leaving oppressive, Jim Crow conditions in the South when they were likely to find higher paying jobs and better working conditions in the North.

White unions were not blameless. Had they put a higher priority on building unity between workers rather than on protecting the racial purity of their crafts, some of the conflict between Black people and whites might have been reduced.

Scarcity of housing was no one individual's fault. The quest for the highest possible profits led those with capital into war industries and away from the housing industry. Likewise, the overall decline in jobs following the war was the bust side of the capitalist boom and



bust cycle, and no single individual or group could really be blamed.

The increase in crime had its roots in the numerous social problems that arose immediately following the war.

Why were Black people singled out as scapegoats for many of these problems?

They were easily identifiable. In addition to skin color, they differed from the long-time white Midwest City residents in speech, dress, and manner. Also, employers had an interest in keeping racial tensions high and did little to discourage those who blamed the newcomers for the recent problems.

8. Ask students to think of times in their lives when they were victimized by “scapegoating” or witnessed another individual or group being blamed for something for which they weren’t responsible. Have them list a number of instances. Afterward, encourage students to share examples with each other.

9. Ask students to choose one of the instances from their lists and write about it in story form. The stories should account for why the particular individual or group was made a scapegoat, what the real causes were for the grievance described, and how those being scapegoated responded.
10. Allow students to read their papers aloud. Encourage people to listen for patterns they hear in one another's stories in the read-around: What did they notice about situations described in class? In what circumstances does scapegoating seem to occur?

Why do people often neglect to confront the real causes for problems? What are effective methods of resistance that can be used by scapegoated individuals or groups?

11. [The Killing Floor](#), which aired on PBS in the American Playhouse series, is an exceptionally interesting account of union organizing in the Chicago stockyards and of the events surrounding the 1919 race riots in Chicago. We have used it frequently with students. It streams online for free.

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Student Handout A

It's a Mystery: Clues

In 1910 the Black population of Midwest City was 1,800.

In 1920 the Black population of Midwest City was 9,000.

Most of the Black people who came to Midwest City between 1910 and 1920 had no previous experience or skills in factory work.

With the production boom of World War I, there was a shortage of workers in Midwest City.

U.S. involvement in World War I ended in November 1918.

There was a severe housing shortage in Midwest City in 1917 and 1918.

When there is competition for scarce housing, rents and prices rise.

Fearing competition for their jobs, most unions in Midwest City did not allow unskilled workers to be members.

Before World War I, the Black neighborhoods in Midwest City had been quite small.

During World War I, Black people began moving into Midwest City neighborhoods that for some years had housed poor whites.

In several well-known strikes around the country, Black people, unable to get other factory jobs, had been hired by employers as strikebreakers, or “scabs.”

Union members feel strongly that when they are out on strike, other workers should not take their jobs.

To get most of the higher paying skilled factory jobs in Midwest City, a worker had to be in a union.

Between 1915 and 1916, industrial production in Midwest City increased by more than two-thirds.

World War I started in Europe in 1914, but the United States didn’t join the war until 1917.

Many of the new Black residents in Midwest City seemed different to long-time residents because they came from the South and weren’t used to city ways.

During times of high unemployment, people are often afraid of losing their jobs.

Companies often fired workers when they could find other people willing to work for lower wages.

Because of the low pay they were used to in the South, Black people in the North were often willing to work for lower wages than other workers.

When Black people were hired in Midwest City factories, employers usually gave them jobs that kept them separate from whites.

At the end of World War I, war production in Midwest City stopped and many people, Black and white, were thrown out of work.

Police in Midwest City reported an increase in crime in 1919.

Many white Midwest City residents returned from World War I, looking for jobs and housing.

Many companies sent representatives to the South during World War I, to recruit people to come to Midwest City to work in their factories.

Most of the new Black people in Midwest City came from the South.

During World War I, many of Midwest City's factories produced war materiel — guns, bullets, even airplanes.

Unemployment was high for all races after the war, but especially for Black people. In all, a total of 15,000 people — as much as a third of the Midwest City workforce — were looking for jobs.

To attempt to keep profits high, a number of Midwest City companies lowered wages after World War I.

There were numerous strikes in Midwest City during and after World War I.

After World War I, some companies in Midwest City advertised specifically for “colored laborers.”

Student Handout B

It's a Mystery: Questions

Every good detective needs to use deduction — making general observations from specific facts.

Answer the following questions as a group using the clues that you have. All clues must be used at least once in your answers. Remember — you may say your clue aloud but you may not show it to anyone else.

Questions that are starred are opinion questions. You won't need the clues to answer these.

1. What major changes took place in Midwest City from the period before World War I to after?

2. After World War I, what problems faced Midwest City residents for which whites may have blamed Black people?

3. Are there better explanations for each problem?

**4. (a) Why did some white people single out Black people as scapegoats for many of these problems?
(b) Do you think this was fair? Explain.***

5. Did unions benefit or suffer from going along with the discrimination?*