

Delta Shipyard Strikes

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Over the course of World War II, women and black people would make employment gains nationally as men were shipped off to battle on the frontlines, leading to labor shortages, and the military industrial complex proliferated.

In 1940 alone, the Louisiana Employment Services placed 57,000 people in war industry jobs. As war mobilization absorbed the ranks of the unemployed and ended the Depression, it also allowed for the discontinuation of New Deal relief programs. Blacks, who faced widespread discrimination in hiring, were simultaneously pushed off of the welfare rolls. By March 1942, New Orleans' blacks made up half of the 11,000 families still on federal relief and the majority of 6,000 local families who lost relief due to cutbacks, but lacked access to any type of employment.



Women at Delta Shipyards. Source: The Times-Picayune / NOLA.com, courtesy of Mildred Aupied.

Facing a national labor shortage, and an urgent need for skilled workers, the Federal Government funded industrial training programs. The Orleans Parish School Board offered classes for black workers in shoe repair and motor mechanics, but refused to expand training for skilled industrial employment, even when 600 applicants applied for the training. The Urban League received an additional 2,000 applications, prompting Xavier and Southern Universities to offer courses. Training was one hurdle, employment was another; while Higgins Industries offered opportunities for black workers, the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), reported that Delta Shipyards workforce of 6,000 included only sixty blacks.

Women, particularly white women, fared better in entering the workplace, but their presence was a flashpoint for tensions about race and sex. In August 1943, a white foreman threatened to kill black workers after accusing Aaron Reed, a black worker who had recently been promoted to crew leader, of winking at a white woman worker. 300 black workers gathered at the plant manager's office in protest and to demand protection. In February 1944, white guards beat black truck driver George Cooper, a WWI veteran, accusing him of trying to run over a white woman in the shipyard. The beating was one of three assaults that month, and the most severe. 2,000 black workers staged a walkout in response, shutting down Delta's yard. The Teamsters AFL Local 270 backed the strikers, forcing Delta's management to guarantee the safety of black workers.

Sources

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Workers at the Delta Shipyards. Source: World War II Museum.

While early organizing efforts in the war years focused primarily on access to the industrial jobs of a mobilizing nation, and the safety of black and other minority workers in the plants and shipyards once hired, calls for expanded opportunities and higher wages increased as national labor shortage increased a sense of job security. In November 1944, the Teamsters local 270 at Delta struck again, this time for higher wages. During the strike, upgrades for black welders, the product of years of negotiations by New Orleans' Urban League and the FEPC, were postponed as leverage. In February 1945 Delta's management conceded and authorized pay raises and quietly upgraded the welders. As with so many of World War II homefront battles for inclusion, the victories came towards the end of the conflict. As the war effort was demobilized, hard won access to jobs and economic gains were abruptly lost.



Delta Shipbuilding Co. launching its first Liberty Ship, the William C.C. Claiborne on March 28, 1942. Source: World War II Museum, courtesy of Earl and Elaine Buras.

The organizing that won those gains, however, created a platform for the next wave of activism. In 1942, the People's Defense League, formed as a coalition of religious and labor leaders led by Rev. A.L. Davis, Moses Turner of the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen of America, William Spooner of the International Longshore and Warehousemen's Union, and Ernest Wright of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Association. The League's militant pursuit of black voting rights gained substantial support in 1944 from the CIO's national push to increase voter registration in the South. New Orleans' CIO director Fred Pieper negotiated for mass registration of rank and file labor with the Old Regulars of the Democratic regime, but failed to get their support. The People's Defense League would spend the next decade continuing that fight.