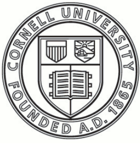

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# Black Women in the Labor Movement: Interviews with Clara Day & Johnnie Jackson

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# Black Women in the Labor Movement: Interviews with Clara Day & Johnnie Jackson

**Abstract**
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**Keywords**
racism, sexism, gender, race, African-American women, labor unions, Clara Day, Johnnie Jackson

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*Johnnie Jackson*

*Clara Day*

# Black Women in the Labor Movement

▪ *Interviews with Clara Day & Johnnie Jackson*

Black women in our society bear the double burden of racism and sexism. Though they participate in the labor force at about equal rates with white women, they face unemployment rates more than twice as high and are more likely to be part of the working poor.

*Working poor*. No other term better expresses the condition of women in our society in the 1980s. The majority of women work, and most of those who work are poor.

A 1981 study of working women combined the "near poor" with those who qualify by U.S. government standards as the "officially poor." This is what they found: 26% of white working women were officially poor and 22% were "near poor," for a real poverty rate of 48%. Among black working women, more than 35% were officially poor and another 26% were "near poor," meaning that more than 61% were actually poor. That was 1981. Though we do not have comparable figures for 1987 or '88, things are almost certainly worse now.

Labor unions, like all other institutions in our society, have participated in the racial and sexual discrimination which has made life so difficult for blacks and women. Yet black women are among the strongest and most consistent supporters of collective action through unions.

In Gallup Polls, for example, blacks generally (men and women)

are much more favorable toward unions than whites—with nearly three out of four blacks expressing support for unions, compared to only a bare majority of whites. Black women are nearly twice as likely to be members of unions than white women, and they have higher unionization rates than the labor force as a whole—20%, compared to 12% for white women and 17% for the entire labor force in 1986.

If women are to rise out of working poverty, they will have to unionize. And, if the American labor movement is to have a future, it will have to be "feminized"—more participation, more leadership and more influence by women. In these dual processes, black women, representing those whose need for unions is greatest, are likely to play a leading role.

To gauge how far along we are in these processes, *Labor Research Review* interviewed two black women union leaders from the Chicago area, Clara Day and Johnnie Jackson.

*Clara Day* began work as an information clerk at Montgomery Ward's warehouse in 1947 and moved up the ranks in the Warehouse and Mail Order Employees Union, Local 743, International Brotherhood of Teamsters. She is now a Trustee, business rep and Director of Community Affairs for IBT Local 743, representing some 30,000 members. Since 1974, she has been a national vice president of the Coalition of Trade Union Women (CLUW).

*Johnnie Jackson*, president of the Chicago Chapter of CLUW, began as a garment worker in the late 1940s in a shop represented by Local 76 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Until her retirement earlier this year, she was a staff rep for ILGWU's District Council 1, representing some 2,500 workers in five local unions.

**LRR: Let's begin with each of you telling us how and when you started in your industry or profession. What were the personal circumstances that surrounded your decision to seek paid work?**

**Clara Day:** It was like many women, especially and particularly black women. I started to help my husband get out of a hole, and, as many of us say many times, we got covered up in that hole. My husband was in World War II and when he came out at the end of the war, he was not able to make the fast money, as we called it, the money that the workers made in the defense plants. I went to work to help get out of a hole, and to help pay some of the doctor bills for my mother. Actually, I had planned to work

for only six months, but once I got started, then the need seemed to increase—the need to seek housing, to get the kids in school.

I had never worked before, and I started out at a large company. On this job we absolutely had invisible barriers with blacks and whites. There were no visible walls, but it was systematically segregated—the wash passes, the job areas, the lunch breaks. You could tell what time it was by the color of the people who were in the lunchroom or in the washroom, or even in the work areas, especially with the heavier work. As we talked occasionally, black and white, some of the white women said to me that they didn't mind working with blacks, but they didn't like the hard work that blacks did, so they would keep away from working with blacks so as to not have that heavy work—and when I say "heavy work," I mean physically heavy.

I got involved with the union. They were handing out leaflets at the door, and I would take them and take them home. My husband saw them and he said, "Oh, you're trying to get a union there." And I said, "Yes, they've been handing out the cards for some time." And he said, "Are you signing one?" I said, "Not yet." And he said, "Let me tell you one thing. I will never as long as I live work in a place where there isn't a union." So I signed the card.

But an interesting thing happened to us, the black women, there. This was a very long building, a block long or more, and in order to segregate the workers, they would have all the black people go a way down to punch in, even though we would come back and work in sections all along where we had passed. So, the union passed out a leaflet, which said that the black people, mostly women, are passing the areas in which they work and going to a segregated area to punch a clock. Just that one leaflet. The next day or two, I had a note on my card telling me that I had a new area in which I was to punch in. So that told me something right there and then. I hadn't ever worked, but I knew unions were good.

**LRR:** When would that have been?

**Clara Day:** '47. I started work in 1947. We finally got a contract after about 18 months of negotiating. I was on the negotiating committee, and I used to sit across that table and management used to put their feet up on the table and just say, "Okay, talk." They bargained in good faith, I guess you could say, but they just sat there and let us talk. We had the same issues every evening. We weren't making any money. I think I started out at 72 cents an hour.

After we got a contract, the union asked me to come down and run the branch office. I started out as an office manager, handling grievances, collecting the dues, etc. That's how I got started with the union. That was more than 30 years ago.

**Johnnie Jackson:** What happened with me was that it was hard living on one income, especially when I had a child that had been burned when she was very young and she needed quite a lot of medical attention, and, of course, medical expenses were kind of high at that time [1948]. So I needed a job and I was interested in clothes, so I got a factory job making garments. I enjoyed sewing, and I still do. That's how it came about that I wanted to work and have a personal income also, because I wanted to do the best I could for my family. It was a union shop when I went into it.

**LRR: What kinds of problems have you faced from the employer as a black and as a woman, and how has that changed up to now? What kinds of things did the union do to help?**

**Clara Day:** Where I worked there were two sections. There was an absolute white white-collar section; then there was a mixed section—not an integrated section, but a section where both black and white worked. We finally organized that white-collar section that was all white because the union had negotiated contracts over here that was more money than these so-called important people were making. When they realized the money was there, then it wasn't so important to be segregated. So they wanted to be part of us.

The union caused this particular job, and I imagine many others, to really be integrated, to bring blacks into the mainstream. We would hold meetings with our stewards, who had to be together and who had a common bond because they were trying to get a contract. They realized that they were not there to date or marry, but to get good working conditions and wages for themselves and their families. So with that, they began to learn to like and respect each other—some that never touched bases before. Over the period of two or three contracts, we got that whole 2,800 people integrated. We did it through job posting. We got a contract that said you've got to post a job. Here these folks [blacks] got a chance to sign for those jobs, and if the contract says you get it, you know, you got it.

These are some of the things that the union did. The union—I call it one of the greatest civil rights workers. Even before King's

time, they were there with the union contract, which caused a systematic integration of jobs. It brought people together to understand each other, and to realize that they lived, they died, they hurt, they bled, they were just human.

**Johnnie Jackson:** I'll give you a for instance. When I took on one of the shops as a staff rep that had always been serviced by a Jewish rep, several times that same week several members came to me and said, "Oh, the manager is hiring people off the street and he's giving them more money than he's giving me and he's telling me to go back to my country." So when I went over to see the manager, I asked him was he trying to get through a message to me to go back to wherever he thought that I came from. I explained to him: "Some of the employees in this shop know me and some don't. They don't know whether to trust me or not, but I'm here to service them and I'm going to try to do the best I can." Well, he was very upset at that time by me speaking in that fashion to him. So he said, "Well, I have a meeting with your boss, and I think I'll talk to him." And I said, "Well, it's a beautiful day out, and by the time you walk those four or five blocks over to the restaurant to meet with him, I'm sure that you'll feel much better." So I made Lou Montenegro, who is my director, aware of the situation, and he spoke to the manager concerning it, and after that whenever I'd have a problem, the manager and I could sit down and discuss it and work it out amicably. Really, that particular company was the only one that I had any confrontation with about being a black woman. And that did work out.

**LRR: How did you initially get involved in the union, and what problems have you faced in progressing toward leadership roles? Who or what helped you overcome these problems?**

**Johnnie Jackson:** When I was working in the shop, we had a shop steward there who a lot of times didn't take up the problems of the employees, and I would talk to her concerning it, and I would help her. So she asked me to be on a committee, and I began helping her with grievances and whatever problems the members would have in the shop. So, then, when it was time for us to select a new steward, the people wanted me to be their steward, and that's what I tried to do—represent the people.

Because a lot of times, like when we'd sign a new contract and there would be retroactive pay, when I would get my check and look at it, I knew it was wrong and I would take the check back to the employer and tell him my check was wrong. I told him that

if everyone's pay had been done in the same manner, it was all wrong, and I didn't want my check corrected until everybody's was rectified. A lot of times back then, in coping with the steward, management would rectify the steward's check and forget about the other people.

Then, I was elected to the executive board and I participated on the executive board just as a regular member. I wasn't president or secretary. They wanted to send someone to Roosevelt University for labor education, and they suggested that I be the person to go. When I completed the labor education program, the union called me in and told me they would like for me to come on staff, and so at that time [1971] I was elected to come on staff.

**Clara Day:** What helped me progress in the union? Lots of hard work and don't mind the long hours. I think as a woman, and as a black woman, you just have to prepare yourself to work harder at the job, to give more of yourself to the job in order to receive a two-thirds recognition that a man, a black or white man, would receive.

And, though I had experience, I found myself getting involved in support groups. It can be very lonely trying to move up the ladder by yourself, and most times you are by yourself. I was the first black to be hired with my union. Now, out of a total of about 50, I'm Number 3 in seniority, but I can't say I advanced faster than those that came after me. It seemed to have been easier for them. When I try to analyze it and try to decide if it is deliberate, I think what makes the difference is that networking with the leadership of any job, who most times are male and white. There is the stopping by the bars, or the stopping by the card game, and they get to know these people, or they get to feel responsible for the ones that they stop out with or the ones they drink with or play cards with. And I guess it's deliberate, but not necessarily, working for the friends.

I find myself networking, belonging to organizations, support groups and, of course, in the early 1970s came the Coalition of Labor Union Women, which gave moral support to all of us. But before that time, we served on whatever committees we could— you know, like the League of Women Voters, who at that time was not really a feminist group. (I recall them telling me in the '60s that to be a board member, I had to use my husband's name. I had to be "Mrs. Joseph," and I couldn't be "Clara." And I said to them nobody would know who you're talking about with "Mrs. Joseph," everybody knows me as "Clara." But the League, of course, is now a feminist group, and they all are first-name folks,

and it makes a difference.) I got involved with civil rights groups. When you're discriminated against as a woman and as a black, with chains on both ankles, then you almost resort to anything to help you to overcome that lonely, desperate barrier that you can't understand why you were put off and keep being put off.

I'm somewhat like those who say that unions were basically male-dominated and women didn't belong. Women weren't dealt with in the same manner, and even though they've come a long ways now, there still is lots of education that needs to be done with trade unions.

However, when we say that, we say in the same breath that trade union women, in spite of some of the hardships and barriers we face and some of the discrimination that we face, we fare much better than our non-union sisters. We're far advanced in receiving equality, in having a voice, simply because we do have a negotiated contract and we have a voice to help improve that contract, to get language in there that relates to our problems.

**LRR: What do you see as the main problems confronting women workers? What are unions doing and what do they need to do to help overcome these problems?**

**Clara Day:** I'm thinking of some of the barriers that cause women to not be able to get into the mainstream. We could not stop for a meal with our colleagues because we had to go home to take care of the children. If you have a baby-sitter, that baby-sitter has to go home; or you can't afford to keep the baby-sitter any longer. So we must get home, to take care of the children, to take care of the house.

Unions are involved now more than ever as far as child care is concerned. I think that that is one area that both women and unions should push for—child care to release women to be able to take on a job and to be able to take a promotion. It will cause employers to give promotions because they know the woman will be able to stay on the job and will not have to run to take the child to the dentist, to the clinic, or to take care of the schooling. We should push for legislation for child care, for flextime, even for a shorter work week—which I think is needed for the population in general, but certainly it would help women particularly.

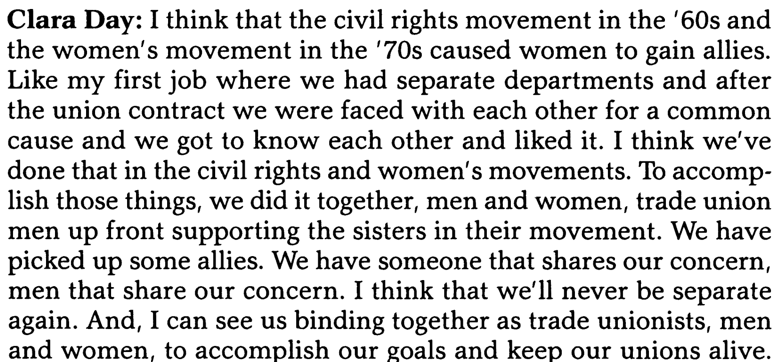
Also what needs to be done in the future is to take more interest in the wording of the union contract as it relates to women. More contract language. I think we ought to, as women, make that more available to our leaders. And, most of all, I think we ought to be there negotiating that contract and seeing that this language is in the contract.

After CLUW was born in 1974, women began moving in all sorts of fashions within their unions, moving into areas where they'd never been before. I don't know that it was like the civil rights movement in the South when King was marching. But I guess it's the same with any sort of movement: The squeaky wheel gets the oil. And I guess we must make it known and we must rattle some chains ourselves to cause a contract that covers some areas which we need. We must not have to rush home all the time because stopping and having a conference, a caucus, is where you really broaden your knowledge. But if you don't have child care at home, you must go home.

**Johnnie Jackson:** My union is expanding opportunities. When they have elections, they are electing women as vice presidents to our international. And they are promoting women on staff and things like that. Right here in our office one of our organizers was just promoted to be the political education director. I think that our union is one of the most progressive unions there is.

**LRR: How do you see the American labor movement changing in the future, and what role do you see women playing in making these changes?**

**Johnnie Jackson:** I see women making a big change because women are capable of doing most any job that a man can do. And they're getting out in the forefront. It's taking a little time, but they are proceeding and they are making steps forward. When I first started on staff, there was only one woman vice president on the international executive board, and now we have four women vice presidents. So we are making progress. It's happening every day, it's gradual, small and by degrees, but it is happening and it will continue to happen more so.



**Clara Day:** I think that the civil rights movement in the '60s and the women's movement in the '70s caused women to gain allies. Like my first job where we had separate departments and after the union contract we were faced with each other for a common cause and we got to know each other and liked it. I think we've done that in the civil rights and women's movements. To accomplish those things, we did it together, men and women, trade union men up front supporting the sisters in their movement. We have picked up some allies. We have someone that shares our concern, men that share our concern. I think that we'll never be separate again. And, I can see us binding together as trade unionists, men and women, to accomplish our goals and keep our unions alive. ■