

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-29
Affirmative Action

846 Broadway - Lot #49
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Discrimination in employment because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin was theoretically outlawed with the enactment of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. Ten years and more than a half dozen pieces of federal legislation later, the government is still trying to make the goals of Title VII a reality. Today companies like Western Electric must do more than just show that they do not discriminate, they must submit Affirmative Action programs to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Western Electric, as stated at all levels of the corporation, is committed to a policy of Affirmative Action. Donald Procknow, the company's current president, stated in January 1974, "...Based on my belief in WE's ability to meet great challenges successfully I anticipate confidently the day when our equal opportunity goals are fully realized."

At the same time, on a more local level D.L. Hilder, General Manager of the Merrimack Valley Works, said, "Our objective is...to insure that the work force profile will clearly reflect a meaningful distribution and utilization of minority group employees and to provide the full realization of equal opportunity through continuous affirmative action programs."

It didn't take me long to learn that although the company is committed to affirmative action, there is not a very affirmative reaction to the company's program on the shop floor. In fact, there is, on the shop floor, a great deal of, so far, passive hostility toward the company's affirmative action policies.

I was surprised at first by the quantity and quality of the racial antagonisms I encountered. We may be moving to a time of greater racial understanding but there remains in the shops a great reservoir of racial hostility. Most white people I met at work didn't refer to black people as such. At best they were Negroes, or those coloreds. There were an incredible number of racial stereotypes and jokes about blacks, which were likely to crop up in the most unexpected circumstances.

For example, one afternoon in the midst of what started out as a political discussion about George McGovern, Richard Nixon and Watergate, a defender of Nixon was pointing out that Nixon only lost one state, Massachusetts.

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The other person pointed out that he lost Washington D.C. as well. The Nixon supporter started to laugh and said, "What do **you** expect, who lives in Washington--colored people. All those coloreds are on welfare, no wonder they voted against Nixon." Nixon and Watergate were abandoned as a woman responded to this remark, saying, "You know that's right. We were down there in our car and a bunch of those colored people started throwing rocks at us."

Another day I was talking with a couple of women about the Red Sox. One said she thought Reggie Smith was a good ballplayer, even if he was chocolate. Without pausing, or dropping a beat, the conversation continued.

Spanish surnamed people didn't receive much better treatment in most of the conversations I heard. There are approximately a dozen different Spanish speaking nationalities represented in the work force at Western, but on the shop floor they are almost always referred to as those Spanish, Puerto Ricans or Spics, regardless of their nationality.

Just as with blacks, Spanish speaking people as a topic were likely to come up from nowhere. One evening while I was working upstairs we were sitting and having a smoke during a break when an attractive young Spanish woman walked by. As she passed, Pete, the fellow sitting next to me, said, "Boy, I'd like to get in her pants, but if my father even found out he'd kill me."

One morning we were downstairs talking about baseball and someone mentioned how lazy the Puerto Rican players were. That was all that was needed to start a full-blown discussion of the negative characteristics of Spanish-speaking people. The conversation ended with one of the fellows saying, "These Spanish people, they don't want to get ahead. They like their sex; they like to have fun; they like to have a good time, and that's all." The speaker boasted that he knew what he was talking about because he had worked with them.

The language on the shop floor is often harsh and uncomplimentary. Language, however, can be deceptive because it does not always accurately reflect feelings. People in the shops may not employ the more socially accepted phrases like black and Spanish speaking when referring to minority group members. This does not mean, however, that they necessarily harbor more negative or less positive feelings toward minority group members than those people who use more socially acceptable language.

For many of the people I knew at work the word "colored" was a descriptive term with which they had grown up, and which they often unfortunately persisted in using regardless of their feelings.

This, of course, doesn't mean that everyone **is** hostile either in language or action toward individual minority group members. There are some people who, I'm sure, do not harbor deep racial prejudices. There are even larger numbers of people, probably the majority of people in the shops, who although they may not particularly like blacks or Spanish speaking people are not mean, vicious or unfriendly toward specific minority group members.

People also have a way of differentiating between groups and individuals. I don't know how many times I heard someone say something like, "Oh sure, I like Gladys, everyone does, she's not like the rest of those coloreds."

Similarly, a person I knew who had nothing good to say about Spanish speaking people was very helpful to a Cuban woman who worked near us and was taking company-sponsored English classes. He seemed to genuinely enjoy the experience of helping her practice her English. With all the general racial antagonism that exists, what people I knew seemed to bitterly resent is, what they consider the company's bending over backward for minorities.

Western Electric remains, according to most people who work there, one of the best places to work in the area. So many workers are anxious to get their children, relatives or friends into the plant. A number of people told me that if you aren't a "minority" it is becoming increasingly difficult to get a job in the shops.

One night I was eating dinner with a couple of fellows when some Spanish speaking men sat down at a table near us. I didn't think anything of it until they left. Bill Mellen¹, an older fellow who was sitting next to me, was very upset. He said, "I understand the company is far behind in their minority hiring, and that the colored and the Spanish deserve a chance to work here, but they're going too far. The company pays for the Spanish to go to English classes. If they have any problems, need help, they give it to them. They give them preference in hiring. Now my kid wants a job in here, and he can't get one because they give preference to minorities. How about the company's obligation to me? Don't they have some obligation to me? I've put in 14 years here. I haven't asked for much. Now I want my kid to get a job, and he can't because they're hiring minorities. Sure it pisses me off, it would piss anyone off."

People believe that not only are minority members given preference in hiring, but they enjoy special treatment when it comes to promotions. A woman told me, "You know, when I started working here they used to have a test before you could become a tester. That was before they started hiring minorities. When they found out the minorities couldn't pass the test they dropped the test so that they could promote them."

Shortly before I left work several people were promoted. When the selections were made known, there were several people who were especially upset. One told me, "It's getting crazy around here. They're promoting coloreds, Spanish, women, lesbians, and switch hitters. It's this equal opportunity act, you gotta hit both ways if you want to make it any more around here."

John Downey was even more bitter and outspoken. He told me, "They've got a new slavery in here. It's the white man who's the slave now. In here if you're white, and especially if you're a man, you might as well forget about getting ahead."

One of the people who received a promotion at that time was a Cuban woman. She came over to our department after the announcement to talk with a few of the women who used to work with her. After she left, Alice Kelly told me, "You know,

1. All names in this piece have been changed.

Rosa is ok. When I was in her group I didn't like her at all. I didn't like a lot of those Puerto Rican women. They don't have attitudes like ours. This woman only came here from Cuba four years ago and she's just got a big promotion. Now there are a lot of people like me who have been here much longer, and we haven't got the promotions. The company just bends over backwards for these people and it isn't right. These Puerto Ricans they come in with an attitude. They know the company will bend over for them. They'll tell a supervisor that they don't want to do certain jobs, and they want other work. If we came in with an attitude like that they'd just get rid of us, but not these minorities. They get away with murder. The company bends over backwards for these people and it isn't right. They don't bend over for us.

"Some of them are ok, once you get to know them. Like this woman, she's alright. She had a tough time, back in Cuba. Castro took all her property, I guess she was pretty wealthy. They took a raft over to Florida and then came up here. She's got a college education. I like her, like I said, and we get along. But a lot of them have strange attitudes and I don't think it's right."

With everything that was said about minority employees, what seemed to agitate people the most was the preferential treatment minorities were perceived as receiving in the plant. While I worked downstairs a woman I knew complained about a Greek friend of hers not getting a special six week leave of absence that she requested to visit her relatives in Greece. Instead the woman had to quit, and if she wanted to come back to work at Western again she would have had to reapply, and lose her years of service. Doris, my friend, was very angry about this, and told me, "If Helena was Spanish or colored, they would have given her the leave of absence."

Another woman I knew who was working on the third shift, and had recently been surplusd into the second shift even though she wanted to remain on the third shift, told me, "You know, if I were colored or couldn't speak English I could get any G.D. shift I wanted."

The company has set up in house classes in English as a second language. The classes are offered to employees whose native language is not English. The object of the course, according to a company bulletin, is for people "...to be able to understand, speak, read, and write sufficient English to perform in entry level jobs, safely and proficiently." Enrolled workers are given two hours a week off from work to go to classes.

When I first heard about the course I thought it was a good idea and one which few people would get upset about. However, to my surprise a large number of people I met had something snide to say about the classes. One older Italian fellow said, "Can you believe it, they give those Puerto Ricans paid time off to learn English. When my father came here, he didn't speak any English. You think anyone paid him to learn it?" This program more than any other run by the company was singled out as an example of how the company doesn't do anything for "us", but does all kinds of things for the Spanish.

While I worked there always seemed to be rumors about minority employees receiving special treatment. The last rumor I heard was that the company was trying to protect minorities against layoffs. I was told to look at Article 28 of the new union contract.

At the union's contract ratification meeting a shop steward from the second shift got up and said some of his people had asked him if Article 28 was inserted to protect minorities. The local's president assured the person that the exception had not been inserted to protect minorities, but to handle what the company considered certain business emergencies. (The contract states..."The company may, however, exempt from selection for layoff certain employees when such exemptions are necessary to avoid unreasonable departmental depletion")

With everything that had been said to me about minority employees, I was surprised that of the approximately 5,700 shop workers between grades 32-38, only about 265 are minority group members.² As is the case with women, the minority workers are predominantly found in the lowest work grade positions. There are approximately 188 minority workers comprising slightly less than 10% of 2200 32 grade workers. The percentage is less than 4% at the 33 grade level and less than 1% at the 35-37 grade levels.

The minority representation at higher levels is even smaller. Of the approximately 575 officials and managers, four -- three section chiefs and one department chief-- less than .7%, are minorities.

The Spanish surnamed Americans are, more than any other minority group, disproportionately underrepresented in higher positions. Although 180 of the 265 minority employees at grades 32 through 38 are Spanish surnamed, only nine of them are in positions above 33 grade. Furthermore, not one of the four minority employees in supervisory positions is a Spanish surnamed American.

The relatively few minority employees in the shops partially reflects the area's general population. Unlike many of America's large cities, the Merrimack Valley remains an area with a relatively small minority population. There are 230,000 people in the immediate statistical region and of those the minority population is 13,000 or approximately 5.5%. Nearly 85% of that minority population (11,000) is Spanish surnamed. In 1960 the Spanish surnamed population in the area was approximately 1500 people.

Seeing the statistics made me wonder about a number of things I had heard in the shops. Were minorities, I wondered, receiving preferential treatment? And why, if there are relatively so few minority workers, do people seem so resentful of the company's programs?

First, although the absolute number of minority employees is still fairly minute, the number of minority workers representing new hires is much greater. So even though minority employees may represent less than 5% of the graded work force, they may represent nearly 20% of new hires.

2. Blacks, Spanish surnamed people, orientals and American Indians are taken to represent the minority population.

I thought perhaps the same might be true for promotions. Even though minority employees might make up a negligible part of the existing supervisory personnel and higher graded shop positions, in recent promotions they might comprise a significant percentage. More minority employees are being promoted. However, for the immediate future their numbers will remain fairly small. For example, there were approximately 450 36 grade workers in 1973 and only six were minority group members. For 1974 the company projected the need for 136 new 36 grade workers and of those only three will be minority employees. A quick look over at supervisory positions where promotions are not as clearly tied to seniority shows that there will be some increase in minority group representation, but still not in large numbers. Therefore, even though the company has an affirmative action program, the number of people to be immediately affected is relatively small.

The objective reality may be that there are relatively few minority employees at the Merrimack Valley works presently and that there will not be a dramatic increase in their numbers in the immediate future. Nevertheless, working on the shop floor, one gets a very different view of reality. A common view in the shops is that increasing numbers of minority workers will be taking new jobs away from current workers' children, relatives, and friends; that minority workers will be given unjustified instant promotion; and that minorities generally receive preferential treatment. Both union and company officials are quite concerned about these feelings.

A union official told me he had repeatedly heard remarks from people on the shop floor about how blacks and Puerto Ricans with almost no service were given instant promotions, skipping the usual qualification-service-connected promotion scheme. He kept on telling people it was impossible and violated the labor contract but the rumors persisted. Finally he said he got so disgusted with hearing what he knew were unfounded rumors that he walked into the shops with \$50. He went around challenging people to show him a worker who had gotten such preferential treatment. He said he'd wager his \$50 against \$5 that they couldn't show him any instant promotions. He said that not one worker took him on the bet. However, he added, "I knew when I walked out of those shops that people still believed there were people getting instant promotions."

A company official who was quite concerned about the persistent rumors of favoritism, preferential treatment, and bending of rules to aid minorities, told me that practically all of what I had heard was unfounded. He said no tests had been dropped or rules changed to accommodate minority workers. Furthermore, he claimed that it wasn't true that unqualified minority workers or women were being promoted. However, he admitted that if two people were equally qualified the minority worker might be given preference.

With all the assurances that company and union officials give, large numbers of people still believe minority group workers are receiving all sorts of preferential treatment. It is too simple to dismiss these feelings as being unfounded, and reflecting nothing more than deep-seated racial prejudices. Admittedly some of these feelings do reflect racial antagonisms.

These feelings are real and deep seated, and historically seated in the area's ethnic cleavages. The Merrimack Valley in the late 1800's and early 1900's was the recipient of several waves of ethnic migration. Large numbers of Irish,

Italians, Poles, Eastern European Jews, and French Canadians came to the area to work in the textile mills and the shoe shops.

These were distinct ethnic communities with deep ethnic antagonisms. Old newspapers are full of reports of how ethnic antagonisms flared into violent disruptions.

Many of the old timers in the plant talk about the old days and the strong ethnic churches and gathering places like the Irish Hibernian Halls. Today the ethnic divisions and antagonisms are much less strong. They have been replaced by racial antagonism.

Although racial prejudices should not be dismissed, they are not the only reason for worker opposition to affirmative action. One cannot overlook the fact that many people feel that they will be asked to pay a real and immediate price for the advancement of minority group members. There are not an infinite number of opportunities open at Western Electric or anywhere else for that matter. Many of the people in the shops believe that these opportunities will be further diminished by the company's affirmative action programs.

This society has discriminated against racial minorities, but it is also true that it has not been particularly generous toward ethnic Americans. Great numbers of people working in the shops are first, second, or third generation immigrants,

Many of the people I met at work have told me stories about parents or grandparents who came to the area's textile mills and shoe shops speaking no English. They were paid low wages and given no assistance as they struggled against an often hostile environment. It is not surprising then that people whose parents or grandparents suffered through an unsupportive environment would be bitter toward people who are receiving what they perceive as advantages that their parents did not enjoy, and which they themselves are not being given.

Unfortunately much of the antagonism people feel is directed toward the minority groups themselves who are cast as the villains. Affirmative action places minority workers in an often uncomfortable position. I wondered how they felt about the situation. I met very few minority workers while I was at Western. There were none where I worked on days. Now, a year later, there are four. There were two minority employees in my area on the evening shift.

I tended not to ask the few blacks or Spanish-speaking people I met specifically about their feelings on the racial situation in the shops, just as I rarely asked whites I knew about these matters. What I have reported are things I heard people talking about spontaneously.

So I have very little information about the minority population's feelings. One Cuban woman I met told me she didn't speak English so well so she spent most of her time with other Spanish-speaking people. A black fellow I know said one night that if he heard one more person at work tell him how one of their best friends was colored he was going to scream.

The only real information I have of how a minority worker felt is from a woman I got to know after I stopped working. She was quite frank both about her own personal feelings and about what she thought things were like. She said she felt there were a lot of prejudiced and bigoted people at Western Electric. She told me she felt the company was putting black and Spanish-speaking people in a nearly impossible situation. She said, "Sure there's racism and hatred in here, and the company has added to the hostility. If they had done what they should have done in the first place rather than just running around saying they were an equal opportunity employer, you wouldn't have nearly the problem you've got today. They didn't do anything until the Equal Employment Commission came in and told them to get off the pot, to get some more minorities in here. So now they're bringing in the minorities, cramming them down people's throats. That's why there's so much hatred in here. It made an already bad situation worse."

As a society we may not be sure how we want to handle "the minority problem" but the courts and Congress have decreed that, in the area of employment, companies shall no longer have a free hand in deciding how they shall proceed against racial discrimination. A company like Western Electric can no longer meet the requirements of the law by simply stating that it is an equal opportunity employer. Companies are now being required through a program of affirmative action to make up for what has been a history of either intentional or unintentional discrimination. Quotas for hiring and promotions at all levels must be set and met. Yet, this necessary program has some negative aspects, such as the pitting of workers against each other. Minority employees are unfairly cast in the role of the villain. In many white workers' minds minority employees are villains engaged in an effort with the company and the government to take away the few advantages they have.

Much of the racial hostility in the shops is based on the perception that minority group members are being given preferential treatment which others do not receive. If the majority of the workers are hostile and bitter about the company's affirmative action program it is regrettable but understandable. Their anger cannot be fairly dismissed as simply reflecting deep seated racist feelings. Much of their anger stems from their anticipation that they will be made to suffer for this social change.

Many of the people I met believe that in employment, as elsewhere, they are asked to pay disproportionately for social change. Wealthy people in this society are often isolated at home, in schools, and at work from "the minority problem". Lower middle class people are not.

Richard / B. B.

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