



**ROOTS**  
OF **BLACK**  
Winston-Salem

# 1945-50: Blacks Enter Into Mainstream

After World War II, blacks began making their re-entry into politics, different jobs and into the area of organized labor, which set the way for many of our present day blacks to enter into the mainstream.

The time period from 1945 to 1950, although small in number, was long on accomplishments of blacks in the city. During this time period a black was elected to the Board of Aldermen, the first black to be elected to a public office in the South since Reconstruction.

Dr. Kenneth R. Williams, chancellor emeritus of Winston-Salem State University and the first black alderman to be elected, told the Chronicle of his experience and of the conflicts as well as accomplishments during his time in office.

Dr. Williams also discusses the role he played in the strike against R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

In looking at the strike by the Local 22 United Tobacco Workers Union, we see black workers of R. J.

Reynolds Tobacco Company concerned about low wages and inferior working conditions. They took a stand to bring about changes.

The Chronicle found that the strike against R. J. Reynolds is still a very delicate subject today, almost 32 years later. One leader of the strike refused to discuss the issue for reasons not revealed.

However one gentleman, a retired Reynolds employee, William Hayes, willingly discussed his recollections of the strike, and his part as a participant.

One man who is presently working for R. J. Reynolds said frankly that he didn't want to discuss the strike because he feared for his job.

"That's still a touchy subject and I'm not going to risk my job for something that happened that long ago," the man said.

In the area of economics, Winston-Salem saw its

first black credit union organized in 1946. W. M. Nesby, the founder of Victory Credit Union, is deceased but we received enormous help from his wife Clara Nesby.

Mrs. Nesby scrounged around and found the numerous scrap books she had kept about her husband's accomplishments and his work at Victory Credit Union.

Mrs. Nesby first started keeping a scrap book about the credit union when her spouse won a scholarship in Chicago. She kept the books to keep him informed of the happenings while he was away. Her scrapbooks turned out to be the most accessible and informative records to be found at this time.

This week we also featured Dr. H. R. Malloy who in 1948 performed a rare and delicate operation on a baby born with his intestines outside the body. Dr. Malloy's successful operation brought him fame and recognition in the medical field.



Fitch's Funeral Home, Predecessor Of Hooper's

## Long-Remembered Strike Lasted 38 Days

On May 1, 1947 members of the local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agriculture and Allied Workers Union of America went on strike against R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. When the strike was called, a majority of the black workers walked off the job.

The main issue that was the focal point of the dispute between the union and Reynolds was wages. The union wanted an increase of 15 cents an hour and the company was only willing to go as high as 5 1/2 cents an hour.

The strike, which lasted for 38 days, helped to reduce the production of the world's third largest tobacco industry by 80 per cent. The strike cost Reynolds a million dollars a week with over a half of its labor force on strike.

The union won a National Labor Relations board election in 1943. It was certified in 1944 as the sole bargaining agent for all production and maintenance employees of the company.

The membership of the union was 80 per cent black. Blacks also comprised 50 per cent of the company's labor force. When the union called for the strike, a majority of the black workers walked out.

According to a newspaper account of the strike, out of Reynolds 10,000 employees, only 150 white employees were not at work. The plants still ran and were operated by workers who remained on the job. Blacks and whites who remained on the job became targets of heavy pressure to cooperate with the strikers or the company.

In addition to an increase in wages, the strikers also wanted an adequate health and group insurance plan, paid for by the company, 10 cent differential instead of 5-cent for night workers, full union security, automatic progression to the top of the wage scale, changes in some job ratings to correct inequities and time and a half pay for

### Retiree Recalls Strike

Retired Reynolds employee William Hayes remembers the tobacco strike well but he admits to being fuzzy on some of the dates. Mr. Hayes describes his experience as follows.

"We had a shop steward who we would tell all our grievances to. Each department had a steward who would report your grievances back to the union. People in the union would go around and elect employee names and ask them to join the union."

"R. J. Reynolds told the union that they charge the union 25 per cent of the \$1.00 to collect union dues. The union didn't accept that so we would have to go to the office and pay dues. It was 25 cents a week."

"The union would also bargain for better conditions. We wanted the same bathrooms, water fountains and same doors. Before the strike we had colored doors and white doors, meaning if you were black you could only come or go through that door."

"We wanted a union, and the strike was to convince Reynolds that we wanted a union. We wanted better conditions, higher wages, better relationships between the company and employee and group insurance."

"When they called the strike the workers already at work left and the ones coming on for the next shift didn't go. We took turns picketing. We would each picket about two hours a day. We sang songs, carried signs and marched. Two thirds of the employees went on strike."

"I was crazy about the union. It made Reynolds a better place to work."

all work over 40 hours a week.

R. J. Reynolds was founded in 1875 by Richard Joshua Reynolds. In 1890 the company had a capital of \$350,000. After making Camel cigarettes in 1913, sales and assets of the company began expanding.

Between 1939 and 1947, the worth had increased to \$232 million. In spite of unionization in 1944, the average hour earnings for workers were 85 cents. This was 11 cents less than the

average hourly wage of the tobacco manufacturing industry.

According to newspaper accounts, at the time of the strike blacks occupied the lowest jobs and mechanized production was confined to whites. The local 22 helped to achieve some gains for workers at Reynolds.

In 1946 the union helped to establish the eight-hour day and the 40-hour week. They helped to contract \$300 per year to each worker's pay and an average increase of 12 cents per hour.

It is estimated that more than 8,000 workers went on strike. They received support both locally and nationally. However R. J. Reynolds countered the strike by giving special privileges to the workers who stayed on the job.

Reynolds gave bonuses to those who would work during the strike. Thousands of strikers received eviction notices from their homes because they couldn't pay their rent. The unemployment checks of seasonal workers were delayed.

Strikers were unable to withdraw funds from their savings at Wachovia Bank because R. J. Reynolds had a large interest. It was also made difficult for strikers to get loans on their insurance policies.

Also several white leaders of Local 22 were identified as avowed communists when the union officers refused to sign the non-communist affidavits required of union leaders by the Taft-Hartley Act. Because of this, R. J. Reynolds refused to bargain and the 38 day strike was settled on company terms.

Blacks returning to work found many of their jobs being done by machines, so many blacks were laid off in part to mechanization.

In 1950 the union lost its certification and Reynolds has never been organized since.



Dr. Kenneth R. Williams

## Williams Shatters Barrier

In 1947 Dr. Kenneth R. Williams was elected to Winston-Salem Board of Aldermen, making him the first black to be elected to a political office in the South since Reconstruction. Dr. Williams spent two two-year terms in office.

Williams said, "I did not plan to develop a career in politics." Dr. Williams said that he was asked

to run for Alderman by local citizens. He said he was not affiliated with the local 22 Food and Tobacco union.

"The union did endorse me but that was after I had decided to run," Williams said.

His primary reason for running, was to get involved and be a representative for the black community. Dr. Williams ran on a platform for better housing, increased employment, better streets and for the assumption of greater responsibility by the city for its black citizens.

While in office Williams said that he was able to accomplish some of his goals but not as much as he would have liked.

"During my terms in office, blacks entered the fire department and police departments," Williams said. "We made definite improvement in housing, with the construction of the Kimberly Park Terrace while I was in

office." Dr. Williams said that other units in public housing were started and that the streets were improved.

A couple of weeks after Dr. Williams took office the Local 22 called a strike against R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

"With most of the blacks on strike and with the whites continuing to work, the strike became not so much an economic, but a racial issue," Williams said.

Dr. Williams said that the Food and Tobacco Union had made little or no effort to organize the white employees of Reynolds. He said that the union was taking advantage of the fact that there were more black employees at that time.

"After a few weeks, with little or no settlement, the union was paying no heed to the people on strike," Dr. Williams said. "The union exploited the blacks and many of their jobs were eliminated by machines."

"I'm not saying that re-echanization was a deliberate attempt by Reynolds to get rid of the blacks, but to increase its efficiency, but at the same time jobs held by blacks decreased considerably after the strike," Dr. Williams explained.

The union and said that Reynolds was attempting to dictate policies to the black community.

## Battle Shifts From Abroad To Home

World War II ended in 1945, and America's blacks began another sort of battle on the home front: that of winning equal rights in their own country.

impeded racial progress in some areas. When the war ended, so did many excuses for segregation.

In 1946 President Harry S. Truman appointed a

bi-racial committee to study the needs of civil rights. The group published a report entitled "To Secure These Rights" supporting

blacks' rights to equal opportunity and calling for an end to segregation. At the same time the armed forces abolished racial quotas and opened all jobs to all personnel regardless of their race.

The new integration policy of the United States was solidified by the

fighting in Korea. General Matthew ridgeway integrated blacks throughout his East command, and by 1951 nearly one third of the combat troops was black.

Individual states were less progressive than the federal government in recognizing the rights of blacks.

had caused some integration to take place in the armed forces, for example - but the nature of the war

less progressive than the federal government in recognizing the rights of blacks.