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“We Won’t Go Back Until Emerson is White”¹: The Emerson School Strike of 1927 and the
Press

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¹ The Monitor, Oct 14, 1927.

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“High School Band Leads Revolvers in Parade,” read a headline of the front page of the Gary Evening Post on September 26, 1927.³ That day, six hundred white students walked out of Emerson School in Gary, Indiana. Emerson was a combined elementary and high school, encompassing students from their entrance into school to graduation. Prior to September 1927, six Black students attended the almost all-white Emerson. That summer, the Gary school district transferred eighteen Black students from the all-Black Virginia Street School into Emerson before the school year began.⁴ The walkout had been planned at a student meeting the Friday before. On September 26th, six hundred students met in the Gary auditorium, walked out of the school, and paraded down Broadway.⁵ The strike lasted for four days, and on the third day, over 1,300 students participated out of around 2,800. The strike was almost completely run out of the school auditorium, and on September 30th, the city council met with the school board to discuss new plans for an all-Black high school. The white student strikers returned to class, and the eighteen new Black students, along with three of the six original Black Emerson students, were forced to return to Virginia Street School.⁶

There is little written record of this student strike, and most of it exists as newspaper articles. Two scholarly works mention the Emerson School strike, and both are focused on larger issues within Gary. Ronald D. Cohen’s “The Dilemma of School Integration in the North: Gary, Indiana, 1945-1960” mentions the Emerson School strike in reference to the integration of Gary

² The Monitor, Oct 14, 1927.

³ “High School Band Leads Revolvers in Parade.” Gary Evening Post, September 26, 1927.

⁴ Mohl, Raymond A, and Neil Betten. “The Evolution of Racism in an Industrial City, 1906-1940: A Case Study of Gary, Indiana,” 1974. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2717140?read-now=1>, 55.

⁵ “High School Band Leads Revolvers in Parade.” Gary Evening Post, September 26, 1927.

⁶ Mohl, Raymond A, and Neil Betten. “The Evolution of Racism in an Industrial City, 1906-1940: A Case Study of Gary, Indiana,” 1974. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2717140?read-now=1>, 55.

schools in 1947. The article contains several items of note in relation to the 1927 strike. One of the most important points Cohen makes surrounds school integration in Indiana. He notes that Gary was the first northern city to really champion school integration, and that it was an unlikely city for this choice.⁷ Gary schools had always been segregated via residential boundaries, as well as school board policies. When this was challenged through the admittance of eighteen Black students to Emerson, the school board reinforced the already existing de facto segregation that had made Emerson a majority white school.⁸ The other major fact that Cohen mentions is that the neighborhood in which Emerson had been located was predominantly middle class and on the wealthier northern side of Gary.

The walkout is also referenced in Neil Betten's and Raymond A. Mohl's "The Evolution of Racism in an Industrial City, 1906-1940: A Case Study of Gary, Indiana," which includes the strike within a larger context of segregation in Gary. US Steel, which employed a majority of the city, recruited Black workers from the south during what was later called the Great Migration beginning in WWI.⁹ This is important, as Betten and Mohl note that elements of racism mainly emerged from the city's elite, "realtors, professionals, businessmen, officials of US Steel-- the most established and Americanized segment of the community."¹⁰ The school board was headed by US Steel Superintendent William Gleason, as well as Superintendent of Schools William Wirt, and both served a role in the response to the school strike.¹¹

In addition, Betten and Mohl echo Cohen in noting that there was a class element to the makeup of Emerson School. They write that Emerson mainly was attended by the children of the

⁷ Cohen, Ronald D. "The Dilemma of School Integration in the North: Gary, Indiana, 1945-1960," 1986. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27790972>, 163.

⁸ Cohen, Ronald D. "The Dilemma of School Integration in the North: Gary, Indiana, 1945-1960," 1986. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27790972>, 163.

⁹ Mohl, Raymond A, and Neil Betten. "The Evolution of Racism in an Industrial City, 1906-1940: A Case Study of Gary, Indiana," 1974. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2717140?read-now=1>, 51.

¹⁰ Ibid, 53.

¹¹ Ibid.

middle class and of elite skilled US Steel workers, with very few recent immigrant southern and eastern Europeans.¹² Contextually, this makes sense— Blacks who moved to Gary settled in an area in the south end of the city referred to as “The Patch,” which housed mainly eastern and southern European immigrants. Emerson’s majority white student body was certainly middle class, and it was considered “prestigious,” due to this. In contrast, Betten and Mohl note that the school the Black students transferred from and eventually transferred back to was Virginia Street School, an all-Black primary school with no athletic facilities, libraries, or other necessary school equipment.¹³

Betten and Mohl also note the effects of the response to the school strike and the decision to build an all-Black high school (Roosevelt High School). The NAACP opposed the decision to return students to the Virginia Street School, and it was soon after declared unfit for students and unequal to local white schools by a court. Gary’s response was to build a new all-Black elementary school.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the NAACP opposed the establishment of Roosevelt High School. It attempted to prevent construction of the school with a temporary injunction but was unsuccessful. Betten and Mohl also note that the fight against the establishment of Roosevelt High School betrayed the divisions within Gary’s Black community. The segregated school received support from Black politicians, as well as the Gary chapter of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).¹⁵ The segregated school also received some support from the city’s Black youth, who preferred a segregated school to desegregated schools, like Gary’s Froebel School, where Black students were often subjected to discrimination from white students.¹⁶

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 60.

¹⁵ Ibid, 61.

¹⁶ Ibid, 62.

Apart from these two papers, few other scholarly works mention the Emerson School Strike. Historian Thomas Sugrue, who is considered to have written the most important and comprehensive history of civil rights in the north, does not write about it in his book, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*. However, the book, which contains a chapter on school segregation, provides insights into Gary, and more broadly, Indiana's school systems. Sugrue writes that education was important in Black communities, which looked at the educational boom in the 1920s-1960s from an outside view. In the south, many counties did not have high schools for black students, while Blacks born in the north had rates of school attendance almost the same as whites.¹⁷ Yet, many districts regularly classified Black students as “intellectually inferior,” and many all-Black schools taught a “watered down” curriculum, which was probably similar to what was taught in the Virginia Street School.¹⁸

The state of Indiana was an outlier in terms of school segregation, according to Sugrue. It was one of only three states, New York, Kansas, and Indiana, which allowed the construction of all-Black schools and explicit school segregation. Meanwhile, most districts created “subterfuges” to remove Black students from dominant white schools, often through assigning schools to certain redlined neighborhoods.¹⁹ In this context, Betten and Mohl note that the state of Indiana had no laws officially segregating or desegregating schools prior to 1922, when it passed legislation recognizing and accepting segregation of schools.²⁰ Thus, the city council and school board of Gary were legally able to segregate Emerson school and force out the Black students.

¹⁷ Sugrue, Thomas J. *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*. New York, NY: Random House, 2009, 170.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 171

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 172.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 54.

These secondary works on school segregation and racism in Gary and in the north in general allow for an understanding of the context for the Emerson School strike, as well as the response to it. Using this information as a base to begin with, a further primary source analysis allows for further exploration of the strike, how it was portrayed in the press, and the response. While generally all press was critical of the strike, newspapers cited different reasons for their disapproval. It is difficult to find support for the strike, likely because explicit school segregation was rare in the north. Yet, the mainstream white press covered the strike differently from the Black press. The mainstream white press tends to critique the goings-on of the strike but refers to the racist motivation for it in neutral terms, only referencing the facts. In contrast, the Black press writes more opinionated articles on the strike's racist origins. While both are critical of the student strike, the mainstream white press critiques the students' disregard of authority while the Black press frames the strike in terms of racism.

A majority of the white press took care to frame the students in direct opposition with the district authorities. On Wednesday, September 28th, the third day of the strike, the Richmond Item reported that, "Student leaders issued a statement declaring the strike would not be ended until the school authorities acceded to their demands of removing the Negro students."²¹ In this, student leaders issued a statement targeted at school authorities, one proclaiming that they would not return to school until the authorities followed their demands. This frames the students and school authorities as part of a fight against each other, two sides and two factions.

However, the school authorities within the conflict would not follow student demands. The Vidette-Messenger of Porter County in Indiana, quoting the national United Press article for the 28th, wrote, "Apparently the strikers are being backed by their parents and the school authorities remain firm in the demand that negro students be admitted to Emerson because of the

²¹ "800 Students Join Gary Protest Strike," The Richmond Item, Wed Sept 28, 1927.

overcrowded condition of other schools.”²² The strikers, supported by their parents, are regarded as opposing school authorities. While they are pressured by the students to segregate Emerson school, they will not budge. In addition, the idea of “remaining firm” in this context emphasizes the fact that the strike has been going on for several days and the students have fought with the school authorities for many days. It is also important to note here that the newspaper’s reporting on race in the strike appears fairly neutral. It mainly seems to be stating the facts— that Black students are transferred to Emerson due to overpopulation and overcrowding at other schools in the district.

The language framing students in opposition to authorities reveals the newspapers’ regard for authority. On the 29th, the Times in Munster quoted the Chicago Journal: “The students, having registered their complaint, would do well to return to their studies and leave the ironing out of the problem to the calm judgment of the school authorities.”²³ The students have registered their complaint with the authorities, and they have fought against them. Thus, the Chicago Journal writes, they should return to their studies and the resolution to the problem should be enacted by the school authorities. Within this, however, the school authorities are said to have “calm judgment.” In other words, they are reasonable and have the experience to make rational decisions. If the authorities have “calm judgment,” then conversely, the students lack this— they are irrational and chaotic in their plan and implementation of the strike.

In painting the students as defiant towards the school authorities, the papers often used words with strong bias. For example, the Idaho Daily Statesman, quoting the Universal Press, reflected that “The strike of Emerson high school students to force school officials to draw the color line grew Wednesday....”²⁴ The Idaho Daily Statesman refers to the strike as having the goal of

²² “Gary Students Again Walk Out From Emerson Classes.” Vidette-Messenger of Porter County, Sept 28, 1927.

²³ “Gary School Strike,” The Times, Munster, Indiana, Sept 29, 1927.

²⁴ “Student Strike Grows at Gary,” Idaho Daily Statesman, Sept 29, 1927.

“forcing” school officials to segregate students. The word “force” has strong connotations— it suggests that the students are attempting to coerce or pressure the school authorities to do their bidding. In the larger picture, this sounds incongruous, since the authorities are adults that have power, and the students are younger and do not have power in the district. One interesting detail of the article is that the paper claims there as been no “rowdyism,” and that the students have not “... made their aversion to the negro students a personal matter.”²⁵ The article writes that the actions of the white students have not been directed at the Black students on a personal level. Combined with the paper’s not about students “forcing” school officials to make demands, the paper seems more indignant about the fact that the white students are protesting against officials, while minimizing the presence of racism towards specific students.

Some papers even criticized the school board for allowing some of the students’ poor behavior. In an article titled, “What Other Editors Think,” published the day after the resolution of the strike, the Indianapolis quoted an editor who wrote, “Dispatches say that the Members of the board have been ‘negotiating’ with the strikers. If it’s that kind of board, the pupils ought to win.”²⁶ This critique almost mocks the school board. It hints that the school board is lacking in the authority it *should* have, and it suggests that if the school board is ineffective enough to even consider working with the striking students, then perhaps the students should win. In addition, it frames the students and the school board as two opposing factions that are making compromises to each other through the idea of “negotiation,” which is in quotation marks, suggesting that it is not a sort of true or formal negotiation because it is with students, who are not supposed to have influence over the school board. The editor continues, “The only way for a school board to treat a situation of that kind is to announce... that the leaders will be expelled for

²⁵ “Student Strike Grows at Gary,” Idaho Daily Statesman, Sept 29, 1927.

²⁶ “What Other Editors Think,” Indianapolis Times, Oct 1, 1927.

insubordination....”²⁷ The idea of insubordination suggests a defiance of authority or a refusal to obey the decisions of others. The editor believes that the school board should expel insubordinate students, which is a more drastic action that would demonstrate its authority.

The editor continues their critique of the school board, writing that, “Any talk of compromise is silly. There is nothing to compromise, for the question merely is whether the school board is to run the schools in an orderly manner as it sees fit, or whether the pupils may establish their own government there.”²⁸ They first establish that any potential for compromise is absurd, and that there is nothing on which to compromise. Instead, they note, the question more concerns whether the school board is able to run the schools in an orderly fashion and maintain its authority or whether the pupils will gain enough authority (through compromise) to run the district themselves. The editor does include a note on race which is opinion-based, rather than the neutrality that most of the white papers employ, yet they then reframe their article as mainly based on the school board. The editor seems actually in support for segregated schools and suggests that Black students would do better in an all-Black school but then writes, “But that is wholly beside the question, which is whether in Gary the schools are to be managed by those whose duty it is to manage them, or by irresponsible children.”²⁹ In this, the editor suggests that the actual racial focus of the strike is beside the point. Rather, they return to asking whether Gary schools will be run by the adult authority or by children who are “irresponsible.”

Other articles downplay the involvement of racist sentiment in order to frame the strike in terms of a defiance of authority. According to the Times in Munster, “No levelheaded person will believe, as will be said, that the Klu Kluxism which has poisoned Indiana politics has also poisoned the youthful mind but the precipitate action of the students reveals a disregard for

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

authority, for conference and an orderly procedure....”³⁰ The Times denies the official, organizational presence of the second Klu Klux Klan in the strike or its according racial sentiment. In addition, it also denies the possibility that the second KKK has influenced the students in order to position the disrespect of school authorities by the children as the major issue of the strike. For reference, the second KKK was much smaller in 1927 than it had been in the earlier 1920s, and it played a large role in local politics in Gary. In the past, it had been an almost mainstream anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, and anti-Black movement, but it declined in size after a violent rape/murder case committed by Grand Dragon David Stephenson become public. Stephenson was from Indiana,³¹ which may explain why the paper would attempt to distance the events of the strike from the KKK. Yet, it would be correct to assume that the racial sentiments of the Second Klan still remained within Gary’s white, non-immigrant population.

From the inception of the strike, mainstream daily papers often labeled the strike as a “revolt,” suggesting it was an act of defiance against an authority. Revolting, by definition, is an act against an authority or person in power. On the first day of the strike, September 26, 1927, papers introduced the event as a revolt, rather than a strike. The headline of the Gary Evening Post read, “High School Band Leads Revolters in Parade,”³² and it only included the word “strike” in quotation marks. The newspaper’s hesitancy to label the event as a strike suggests its unwillingness to take seriously their “strike” as an organized and premeditated event, although it did mention that it was the result of a student meeting the week before. The word “strike” would have provided the event with legitimacy. In contrast, labeling the student walkout as a “revolt” would indicate that it was a rebellion, potentially one which was unplanned and took place in the

³⁰ “Gary School Strike,” The Times, Munster, Indiana, Sept 29, 1927.

³¹ Gordon, Linda. *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*. New York; London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018, 252.

³² The Gary Evening Post, Sept 26, 1927.

heat of the moment. Using this word was not only more sensationalist, but it also indirectly painted the walkout as a defiance of authority.

Later into the student strike, when newspapers were more willing to consider it a strike, they still used the word “revolt.” A September 28th article from The Richmond Item, but written by the national level Associated Press, titled “800 Students Join Gary Protest Strike,” read, ““The presence of more than 20 Negroes, and the reports that more were to be entered, caused a revolt yesterday among the white pupils.”³³ This article recognizes that the strike was an ongoing event, and that it lasted into its third day, which gave increased legitimacy to the strike. At the same time, however, it still uses the word “revolt,” with its assigned connotations of rebelliousness against authority, and through the establishment of a cause-and-effect scenario with the cause as the presence of the Black students, the article suggests that the new walkout was unplanned. Other newspapers phrase the word in more dramatic terms. On September 29th, the Times in nearby Munster, Indiana wrote that students had been in an “open revolt” that week,³⁴ which emphasizes the word and the connotations that accompany it.

Newspapers also more directly used the word “revolt” in contrast to school authorities. On September 30, the Times from Munster wrote that the strike “...was brought about by the student body revolting against the action of school authorities in enrolling eighteen more colored students in the East Side school.”³⁵ This more obviously framed the students in opposition to authorities. They were rebelling against the decisions of the authorities who ran both the school and the district.

A few of the papers used descriptions of the students to suggest a violation of authority. For example, The Daily Republican-Register in Mount Carmel, Illinois wrote, “All but several

³³ “800 Students Join Gary Protest Strike,” The Richmond Item, Wed Sept 28, 1927.

³⁴ “Strikers Hold Mass Meeting and Decide They Won’t Go Back,” The Times, Munster, Indiana, Sept 29, 1927.

³⁵ “Four Day Revolt is Ended By Students.” The Times, Munster, Indiana, Sept 30, 1927.

recalcitrant leaders of the white faction had returned to school today,”³⁶ in reference to the later part of the second day of the strike. “Recalcitrant” suggests a stubborn or headstrong defiance of authority. The word generally has negative connotations, and *The Daily Republican-Register* assigns it specifically to the leaders. This hints that while most of the students are actually considered fairly obedient, as they have returned to their classes, the leaders of the strike, specifically are the ones instigating the strike, and the resulting defiance of authority. In addition, the *Chicago Tribune*, covering the next day, wrote, “... the youths pictured themselves as crusaders.”³⁷ This suggests that the students considered themselves on an intense campaign for some sort of vigorous change, and that this was happening against an establishment, an authority.

In addition, the papers critiqued the actions of the Gary students, suggesting those actions were disorderly and defiant. The *Times* in Munster described the walkout of the students on the 28th, writing that the students were “Screaming, singing, and war-hooping, they filed out of the school building reiterating their demand....”³⁸ This description elicits an idea of chaos, and in imagining the scene, of disrespect, since the students walked by classrooms and places of learning as they filed out of the school. Concerning the day earlier, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on a school board meeting, using vivid terms to describe the actions of the students. It read, “Student strikers at Emerson High school, Gary, Ind., confronted the city school board at a meeting last night and demanded the ousting of 24 colored students.”³⁹ The paper described the facts as they pertained to race in the strike: that the students met with the school board, and established that they wanted Black students to be segregated from Emerson school. Yet, it did not use neutral tones to describe the actions of the students— they “confronted” the school board,

³⁶ “Students Go On Strike When Blacks Admitted,” *Daily Republican-Register*, Mount Carmel, Illinois, Sept 27, 1927.

³⁷ “Striking Gary Pupils Demand Pledge of Board,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept 28, 1927.

³⁸ “Gary School Strike Now in Its Third Day,” *The Times*, Munster, Indiana, Sept 28, 1927.

³⁹ “Striking Gary Pupils Demand Pledge of Board,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept 28, 1927.

and they “demanded” something from it. These words have negative connotations; there is a sense of violence in the idea of confrontation. In addition, when put into perspective, the word “demanded” in reference to the school board becomes strongly worded, since the students were asking something of an authority which was supposed to have power, while they were not supposed to have any standing in the district.

Two newspapers covered the strike on September 29th, and the students’ actions that day in a similar manner. They both referred to a speech made by School Superintendent William Wirt, which warned students over the age of sixteen that they would be expelled if they continued to strike. Both use word choices that suggest disrespect and disorder. The Muncie Evening Press wrote, “The students greeted both the proposals for settlement and the announcement of Superintendent Wirt with howls of derision.”⁴⁰ The word “derision” is defined as mockery, which connotes disrespect, especially considering Superintendent Wirt was *the* major authority in the district. The same day, the Casper-Star Tribune quoted the Associated Press: “Hisses, catcalls, and boos greeted William A. Wirt, superintendent of schools, today when he warned...”⁴¹ This portrayal of a chaotic and jeering response to Wirt’s appearance, similarly to the Muncie Evening Press article, illustrated that the students were disrespectful to a major authority.

While most of the white press described the racial element of the student strike in neutral terms and conversely framed it in terms of youthful defiance, there were some exceptions. An editorial from the Decatur Herald on September 28th read, “Nobody is born with prejudice. All are learned— and the teachers of these unfortunate dislikes are not young persons but older ones...”⁴² In this, the author directly uses the word “prejudice,” which refers to the racism

⁴⁰ “Peace Hopes Fail in Gary H.S. Walkout,” Muncie Evening Press, Sept 29, 1927.

⁴¹ “Klan Blamed for ‘Strike,’” Casper Star-Tribune, Sept 29, 1927.

⁴² “Prejudices are Taught,” the Decatur Herald, Sept 28, 1927.

demonstrated by Emerson students. In addition, they write that this racism is taught to the students by older people (for example, their parents). They also condemn that racism, calling it an “unfortunate dislike.” In addition, they suggest that the racism enacted by the students would not exist without an influence from older people: “Left alone, the instincts of youth are more worthy, even when impracticable and troublesome.”⁴³ If they did not have this outside influence, the students would not have developed racist sentiments. Yet, it does refer to a defiance, noting that youth are “impracticable and troublesome.” The Indianapolis Times also published an editorial from another newspaper which criticized the racist motivations of the student strike, asking, “May we not expect Emerson high school of [Gary] to adopt a fiery cross as its official emblem?”⁴⁴ A fiery cross was representative of the second Klu Klux Klan, and thus, implies the racism present in the strike. The tone appears critical—almost as though the paper is attempting to scandalize its readers, which was possible, considering the relevance of the Stephenson Case to Indiana.

Yet, the Indianapolis Times also published an editorial which seemed in favor of the strike, going beyond the neutral terms most white newspapers used to describe race. The editorial, copied from the smaller Peru Tribune in Miami County, Indiana, read, “There is no use in dismissing the strike of Emerson high school students in Gary as an ordinary childish rebellion against authority.”⁴⁵ This newspaper downplayed the defiance aspect of the strike, and it wrote, “It is impossible for the two races to mingle intimately without merging. It is unthinkable that the black and white races should merge. But the former propagates about twice as rapidly as the latter.”⁴⁶ To summarize, the editorial hints that the members of the Black and white races could

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ “What Other Editors Think,” Indianapolis Times, Oct 7, 1927.

⁴⁵ “What other Editors Think,” Indianapolis Times, Oct 6, 1927.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

not associate together without merging, and that that was inconceivable. It also suggests that Black women had children at a faster rate than white women. The editorial elicits eugenics-era fears around birthrates and muliracial children to evidence the claim that schools should be segregated. It continues, “Below the Mason-Dixon line the whites have the situation pretty well in hand— an iron hand. In some cities elsewhere, Indianapolis for instance, the reverse of this situation is almost true.”⁴⁷ The idea of having something “in hand” assigns positive connotations to Jim Crow laws in the south because it suggests that they are on top of the situation. The editorial also references Indianapolis, in the same state as Gary, to suggest that the segregation it supports is not happening in urban areas of the north.

In contrast to the white press’s critique of defiance of authority, the Black papers framed the student strike primarily around race. On October 8th, an editorial in the *New York Age* stated, “We find 600 arrogant nincompoop students declaring they are too good to associate in their classes with Negroes.”⁴⁸ The paper labeled the students as too “arrogant,” and as believing themselves to be above Black students, immediately establishing the case around the racist sentiments that caused the strike. While white students are out of school, the *New York Age* editor writes, “... the colored boys will be doing things of real benefit to humanity.”⁴⁹ This uplifts the work of the Black students, and it makes them respectable. They are attempting to receive a decent education, which benefits humanity, while the white students care more about the strike than they do their own education. In addition, the editorial finishes by questioning, “is the Nordic theory so weak that it must be upheld?”⁵⁰ Within this, the editorial provides a critique of eugenics, suggesting that the white students are trying to uphold their preconceived notions of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “The Gary School Strike,” *The New York Age*, Oct 8th, 1927.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

superiority by forcing the Black students out of the school, rather than proving their own superiority through schoolwork.

Other Black newspapers focused on the twenty-four Black students at the school, how they must have felt, and how the white students targeted them. The Monitor, from Omaha, Nebraska, wrote, “Last week, two dozen young Negroes of Gary, Indiana were mortified by the 1,357 young whites of Gary, probably more painfully than any adult Negro ever lynched by rabid adult whites.”⁵¹ This reference to lynching victims draws a violent picture, which emphasizes its portrayal of the intense fear and embarrassment the Black students must have felt during the student strike. It also emphasizes that the Black students are youth, and so they are growing and developing an understanding of racism while targeted by other racist youth. The Monitor also illustrates the strike in terms of how white students aimed their racism at Black students, stating, “Law or no law, the Emerson pupils whispered, gestured, glowered at the dusky newcomers.”⁵² The note on the law has to do with Indiana’s school segregation laws. The quote outlines how the white students victimized the Black students, defining the gestures through which they expressed their racism and disapproval of the presence of the Black students. It also quotes the signs held by white students, some of which read “we won’t go back until Emerson is white” and several used the n-word,⁵³ a word with extremely racist connotations, which further would have created fear for the Black students.

On the topic of the Emerson School Strike, the Enterprise in Seattle criticized the idea of segregated public schools, as well as suggesting what Black parents might tell their children in response to the strike. The Enterprise wrote on October 14th, “that the separate PUBLIC school

⁵¹ The Monitor, Oct 14, 1927.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

in your country is almost as dangerous as slavery.”⁵⁴ One of the important things within this statement is the emphasis of the word, “public,” since school is supposed to be a public amenity. Considering that public amenities were so segregated in the Jim Crow south, a legacy of enslavement, the Enterprise links the actions of the white student strikers with slavery. This recognition brings added weight to the strike in terms of recognizing the explicit racism that is innate in it, as well as the history that racism comes from.

The Enterprise also includes a note advising Black parents in Gary on how to instruct their children to react to the student strike. It reads, “Hope Gary colored parents will teach their children not how to fall out with white children, but how to get along. You can catch more flies with molasses than with vinegar, in school or at home.”⁵⁵ This again frames the strike in terms of race, but it also encourages Black parents to instruct their children not to fall into conflict with white children. The phrase about molasses and vinegar suggests that this will be more effective in convincing the student strikers that school segregation is a poor idea.

Other papers criticized the Gary school system itself. The New York Amsterdam News wrote, “Now we are seeing some of the results of the famous Gary system— intolerance, indiscipline, and race hate”⁵⁶ on October 5th. In this, a lack of discipline and racism go hand-in-hand. Yet, other quotes from the article frame the indiscipline as an aspect of a strike that is ultimately motivated by racism. The article continues, “What kind of school system is it that allows fifteen hundred children, supposed to have been taught Americanism, to flout the authorities, go on a strike, all because of the presence of two dozen negro pupils.”⁵⁷ Similarly to white newspapers, the New York Amsterdam News critiques the district for allowing the student

⁵⁴ “Your Mind is on Gary,” The Enterprise, Seattle, Washington, Oct 14, 1927.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Democracy in Gary,” New York Amsterdam News, Oct 5, 1927.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

strike, putting the white students and the authorities in opposition. Yet, this is understood as a subset of the larger issue of racism, which is hinted at through the phrase, “all because.” Unlike the majority of white papers the main part of the critique seems to be a critique of the racist motivation for the Emerson school strike, rather than how the strike was conducted.

The white press is critical of defiance of authority in the Emerson School strike and focuses on the factual side of its racist motivation (with a few exceptions), while the Black press frames race at the center of the strike. This analysis focuses on the strike from September 26th-30th, but it is also important to note that the strike has a legacy, which includes the fact that Emerson had multiple other school strikes for segregation. As late as December of 1927, there are newspaper records of another strike which protested the fact that the Black students had not been moved out of Emerson by that time.⁵⁸ For context, the school district had agreed to three months to transfer the Black students out of Emerson, and the strike was near, but not at, the end of that span of time. There was a petition at Emerson twenty years later when the school district chose to integrate both Emerson and the all-Black Roosevelt School. Yet, this time, the white press was much quicker to condemn the strike as more than just defiance of authority. Ronald D. Cohen writes, “The petition was immediately ‘branded as undemocratic, un-American, and un-Christian’ by the city’s establishment,” according to the Gary Post-Tribune.⁵⁹ While this statement does not frame the protest in terms of race directly, it is much stronger criticism than many of the white papers employed in 1927. When surveyed by state authorities in 1962, it was found that out of forty-two schools, eighteen had an all-Black student body, twenty had an almost all-white student body, and only four schools were mixed. The Emerson School strike

⁵⁸ “The Week: Burn Them Again Gary Back Talk,” *The Chicago Defender*, Dec 24, 1927

⁵⁹ Cohen, Ronald D. “The Dilemma of School Integration in the North: Gary, Indiana, 1945-1960,” 1986, 169.

lives on as a record of white students vehemently opposed to school integration. Thirty five years later, it would seem they got their wish.

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