

I have jumbled the names of all the workers concerned because many of them are still in the plant; the arm of the company is long, and I might have inadvertently revealed something the company didn't already know. The names of management figures are given exactly, however, and whatever immortality they may gain from this story, they are welcome to it.

V.C., April 1973



Willie Brainard wanted to work in the repair gang. He had sweated away five years of his life on the furnaces and he saw new kids being hired from the streets every spring and put on as repair helpers with no seniority in the department at all. He could fix cars, remodel a house interior, repair a radio — Why couldn't he be a repair helper on a much cruder job and do just as well as an eighteen-year old with no mechanical ability at all?

Willie was twenty-eight years old, six feet tall, about 225 pounds of mostly muscle. The color of his skin, which shouldn't have anything to do with this story at all — but does — was black.

Well, he did get in the repair gang and a dozen other furnace men did, too. It took practically a revolution for him and them to do it, but they did it.

To understand the way they did it, you have to understand the blast furnaces—and Lackawanna.

The blast furnace department was a hard place to work. It was hell itself before the union came in, back when you couldn't even sit down for five minutes after cleaning the cast. Even if you were big and strong (and not every furnace man was as tough as Willie), your chest would heave and your knees would shake from the effort. You couldn't sit down because there weren't any seats to sit on. Sometimes the guys would find an old plank and lay it on a pile of coal or something like that and use it for a bench. Then Montgomery, the general foreman, would come by and make you throw the plank in a slag ladle. And you'd