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Paul C. Diebold
Lakeridge High School

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LABOR ISSUES DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PANAMA CANAL

Paul C. Diebold

Dr. K. Hoppes
History 202 – History of US
Portland State University, Undergraduate School
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LABOR ISSUES DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PANAMA CANAL

The story of the construction of the Panama Canal began on November 17, 1869, with the completion of the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal was a moment of intense national pride and patriotic sentiment, a triumph felt by the entire nation of France. Praised above all others for his work on the Suez Canal was Vicomte Ferdinand de Lesseps, a French engineer who oversaw almost every aspect of the construction of the Suez Canal, in spite of his lack of experience. His motivation, his pride, and his passion to achieve success with the canal drove him past the traditional barriers of doubt and finances and enabled him to surpass the expectations of the world. Ferdinand de Lesseps “had no interest in making money," as he professed.¹ His interest was solely in the completion of the Suez Canal, and the completion of the canal was what he achieved.

De Lesseps managed and guided almost every detail of the construction of the Suez Canal, and, as described by historian David McCullough, went about his great project of the canal by fearlessly “overruling his technical advisors, defying the European bankers, and facing the scorn of the English prime minister, Palmerston, who called him a swindler and a fool and who saw the canal as nothing more than a cheap French grab for power in the Mediterranean.”²

² Ibid.
Still riding a wave of public support and admiration following the brilliant success of the Suez Canal, de Lesseps turned his gaze towards his next great project: a canal to bridge the oceans of the Atlantic and Pacific. For Vicomte Ferdinand de Lesseps, the failure of this venture ultimately led to the destruction of his fame, fortune, and national honor. The failure of the French to capitalize on their success at Suez and complete the construction of the Panama Canal was foreshadowed in the flaws and oversights of de Lesseps himself, who misunderstood the terrain, the climate, and the challenges present in the route through Panama that simply had not existed in the desert during the construction of the Suez Canal. Finally, after more than a decade of exhausting labor and rampant disease, de Lesseps’s canal corporation collapsed, leaving the French with nothing but a disgraced hero and a plethora of consequences.3

American interest in a Central American canal, for its part, had also begun shortly after the completion of the Suez Canal. In 1869, President Grant established the Inter-Oceanic Canal Commission with the objective of discovering a faster shipping route between the eastern and western shores of the North American continent. The resulting naval expedition to find such a new route lasted from 1870 to 1875, and concluded that a canal in Nicaragua was far more realistic than a canal through Panama, which was controlled by Colombia. Remarkably, the United States continued to favor a canal through Nicaragua over one in Panama until the administration of Theodore Roosevelt moved swiftly and decisively towards a canal in Panama in 1903.

Accordingly, on November 2, 1903, the U.S.S. Nashville arrived in the Port of Colon. The next day, in an almost bloodless revolution, Panama secured its independence from Colombia. The United States formally recognized Panama as a nation two days later, on the

3 Ibid., 124-203.
sixth of November. Soon after the successful overthrow of Colombian rule, on November 18, 1903, the United States and Panama signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, which gave the United States sovereignty over a fifty-mile wide area – the Canal Zone – all for an annual payment of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. After the purchase of the French canal company, Compagnie Nouvelle, for forty million dollars, the United States could finally begin work on the canal to connect the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific across the Isthmus of Panama.4

Construction of the Panama Canal began in 1904 under the direction of chief engineer John Wallace, whose approach to the project almost immediately encountered the challenges of disease and poor living conditions that had hindered the French canal effort decades earlier. Wallace’s efforts towards the construction of the canal were hindered in part by his inability to sufficiently organize the Canal Project. Under pressure to make tangible progress on the canal by politicians in America, work on the canal under the direction of Wallace was largely ineffective and inefficient. Moreover, digging of the canal under the direction of Wallace was done in the shadow of spreading disease and poor living conditions, which was enough of a deterrent to send approximately three quarters of American canal workers back to the United States.5

With work on the Panama Canal marred by the terrible conditions of the Canal Zone, Wallace resigned his post. His successor, John Stevens, was much better prepared to tackle the challenges of constructing both the Panama Canal and the Canal Zone itself. Stevens


5McCullough, 438-458.
immediately set about improving the standards of living of canal workers, and with the help of
Dr. William Crawford Gorgas, the chief sanitary officer of the Canal Project, undertook a
massive mosquito-eradication campaign in order to reduce the spread of disease among canal
workers. By prioritizing the task of making the Canal Zone a habitable location for workers,
Stevens managed to set the course of the Canal Project back on track and enabled canal
management to focus on the engineering difficulties of constructing the canal, rather than on the
conditions in which the work was done. Though Stevens only remained the chief engineer of the
Canal Project for less than two years, his groundwork for the Panama Canal proved vital to the
ultimate success of the canal. When Stevens, too, resigned his post, he was replaced by the final
chief engineer of the Canal Project, Colonel George Washington Goethals of the U.S. Army,
who continued the successes and innovations introduced to the project by Stevens. Though
Goethals’s style of management was strict and unforgiving, work on the canal continued
relatively unimpeded.⁶

The canal project, once completed, was widely regarded as a success. The canal was
praised among others by Theodore Roosevelt, who proclaimed that “our fellow-countrymen on
the Isthmus are working for our interest and for national renown in the same spirit and with the
same efficiency that the men of the Army and Navy work in time of war.”⁷ The success of the
United States in building the Panama Canal came at the necessary moment in history, a moment
when revolution, technological and medical advances, and the rising prominence of a new
western power converged to make the canal a reality. The Panama Canal signaled newfound

⁶Ibid., 459-512.

⁷Theodore Roosevelt, Message of The President on The Panama Canal: Communicated
to the two Houses of Congress, December 17, 1906 (South Milwaukee: The Bucyrus Company,
1907), 29.
American power in a world quickly divided into factions, war, and alliances, and became the
great national triumph the French could never accomplish.\textsuperscript{8}

However, the story of the construction of the Panama Canal is much more complex than a
heralded national triumph, the failure of the French effort, or the genius of the team of engineers,
designers, and overseers that guided the American attempt at a canal to its ultimate success. This
story involved sickness and disease, dangerous working conditions, and a compensation system
that thoroughly segregated American workers from their non-white counterparts.

The idea of the gold and silver payrolls was not conceived exclusively by the American
administrators who oversaw the construction of the canal, but rather the gold and silver
definitions were part of the policies carried over from the days of the Panama Railroad. In 1904,
the Canal Project “adopted the railroad’s policy of different payrolls, gold for American citizens
(somewhat higher than pay rates in the Unites States) and silver for noncitizens (somewhat
higher than rates prevailing in the Caribbean basin).”\textsuperscript{9} However, establishing the gold and silver
work force that would come to define the discrepancies in the living and working conditions of
white and nonwhite canal labor was not a simple task. Roughly one-third of the U.S. workforce
on the Panama Canal was southern, but the Jim Crow segregation prevalent in the southern
United States during the early twentieth century still managed to translate into a segregated
Canal Zone society.\textsuperscript{10} Presented with an environment and cultural diversity altogether absent in
the United States, most white laborers leveraged their positions as skilled tradesmen and as a
white minority to gain higher wages and more attractive working conditions. The unionization

\textsuperscript{8}Parker, 253-461.

\textsuperscript{9} Conniff, 32.

\textsuperscript{10} David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, \textit{The Production of Difference: Race and the
of white labor also increased the power of white workers in the Canal Zone, and along with it
developed “a southern-style division of labor where whites supervised and blacks did the heavy,
dirty, disagreeable, yet increasingly skilled work.”\textsuperscript{11} White labor enjoyed the benefits of a
growing American economy as well, and the relatively weak interest in Canal Zone work from
skilled workers within the United States left those willing to brave the rainforest and the
dangerous work in a strong position to bargain for higher compensation and for what historian
Michael L. Conniff labeled “exceptional fringe benefits.”\textsuperscript{12} American workers increasingly
sought to capitalize on their perceived value to the construction efforts, and white labor unions
that represented American canal workers even went so far as to hire lobbyists in Washington to
push the demands of white workers into the agendas of congressional lawmakers.\textsuperscript{13}

To combat the willingness of white workers to strike or slow down work on the canal, the
administrators of the Canal Zone used the vast numbers of black laborers to their advantage,
capitalizing on “the threat of replacing [white workers] with West Indian blacks.”\textsuperscript{14} But more
effectively, American labor managers applied the lessons of capitalist management in the United
States to help deter strikes from breaking out among white workers. Canal managers treated the
problem of labor disputes seriously, and “employees might find themselves fired and
blacklisted… if they engaged in labor activism.”\textsuperscript{15} Beyond the threat of job loss, strikes and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 87.
\end{flushright}
other forms of interference with work in the Canal Zone were jeopardized by the presence of a highly-trained police force that maintained order within the zone.\textsuperscript{16}

Due to the low retention rates among canal labor, the managers of the canal developed a consistent pool of black labor that drew largely from the West Indies, which they could utilize when more laborers were needed for the Canal Project. Because of the vast number of black laborers that immigrated to Panama to work on the Panama Canal, “authorities devised a \textit{sui generis} system of segregation based upon race and nationality. It began as a simple color line, but soon took on more complexity, with graduations for American blacks, Europeans, whites, West Indians, and Panamanians.”\textsuperscript{17} But the establishment of a segregated Canal Zone society ultimately conflicted with the administrators’ use of the threat of black labor to quell the unionization and the subsequent strikes and work delays staged by gold roll employees. The managers of the Canal Project “expected to find [blacks] a tractable and pliant source of labor,” but were met by increasing resistance from West Indian laborers as the construction of the Panama Canal progressed.\textsuperscript{18}

The maintenance of the gold and silver work force in the Canal Zone was necessary to convince white workers that they continued to hold the dominant role in society as they had in the United States, but the disproportionate number of black laborers in comparison to white workers on the Canal Project convinced many silver employees that they were being purposefully excluded from the benefits of the gold force on the sole measure of race and ethnicity.

\textsuperscript{16} Ib\textit{id}.

\textsuperscript{17} Ib\textit{id}., 43.

Yet the appeal of higher wages was not enough to combat the low levels of worker retention that plagued the construction of the Panama Canal and sapped the project of the skilled laborers as blacks and whites sought easier work and safer working conditions elsewhere. Especially key to the recruitment of skilled labor and managers from the United States was the set of perks and benefits that over time were allotted to gold employees. Without the separation of all of Canal Zone society into the gold and silver forces, it would have been impossible for the administrators of the Canal Project to achieve a segregation so complete “that there was virtually no contact between persons of different races outside of working hours.”

However, during the early years of the construction of the Panama Canal the gold designation was not exclusively reserved for white American workers. For some time, American management of the Canal Project often used the gold definition as incentive for skilled black laborers, and for the entirety of the construction of the Panama Canal gold employees were overwhelmingly white Americans, but exceptions might be made for “a few Panamanian and West Indian trustees.” In fact, the criteria for becoming a gold employee was never outlined by American canal officials, likely because officials could not justify gold and silver distinctions without the mention of ethnicity as the greatest defining feature of gold and silver employees. By hiding the nature of the gold and silver forces and dismissing questions about the necessity of establishing a segregated Canal Zone society, officials managed to mitigate the consequences of discriminating against the majority of the Canal Zone workforce on the basis of race and prevented a backlash from black laborers in response to the racist policies adopted by American officials during the construction of the Panama Canal.


20 Conniff, 33.
In spite of the racist undertones in the construction of the Panama Canal, current historical interpretations of the Panama Canal are divided between their focus on the remarkable feat of engineering, construction, and planning that the canal proved to be, and the conditions of labor that prevailed throughout the construction of the canal. Early historical research into the Panama Canal and its construction largely focused on the successes of the canal project in creating one of the largest and most complex structures in existence.²¹

Furthermore, these works glorified the construction of the canal, casting it as a fantastic tale “about the transformation of a malaria-ridden swamp into a tropical utopia.”²² One such example of an idealistic interpretation of the construction of the Panama Canal was Frederic Haskin, who confessed that the purpose of his work was “to tell the layman the story of the Panama Canal" and claimed that, "The Panama Canal is the greatest engineering project of all history.”²³ However, though these early works were generally written in the period after the successful completion of the canal, they also touched on the racial tension found throughout the construction of the canal. It was almost impossible not to note the contribution of non-whites to the construction effort: according to Haskin, West Indians “contributed about 60 per cent of the brawn required to build the Panama Canal.”²⁴

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²¹For example, see Frederic J. Haskin, The Panama Canal (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1914); Logan Marshall, The Story of the Panama Canal: the Wonderful Account of the Gigantic Undertaking Commenced by the French, and Brought to Triumphant Completion by the United States; with a History of Panama from the Days of Balboa to the Present Time (Philadelphia: L.T. Myers, 1913); W. Leon Pepperman, Who built the Panama Canal? (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1915).


²³Haskin, 23.

²⁴Ibid., 154.
In line with the common societal beliefs of his time, Haskin went on to claim that “most of [the West Indians] worked about four days a week and enjoyed themselves the other three.”

By choosing to believe in the perceived laziness and ineptitude of colored workers, these early historians gave insight into what were probably the views of American workers and supervisors on the gold and silver segregation system used during the construction of the Panama Canal. However, these works often relied heavily on the accounts of American supervisors of the Panama Canal, and the story of the construction of the canal from the eyes of black laborers was left conspicuously absent from these early historical accounts of the canal.

The second group of historical interpretation pertaining to the Panama Canal fully explores the segregation and racial separation that accompanied the Panama Canal project, in addition to the general conditions of workers and the history of the construction of the canal from the viewpoint of the workers responsible for its construction. For historians such as Julie Greene, the canal project was as much a “conquest over the tens of thousands of men and women in the Canal Zone and in the Republic of Panama” as it was a triumph of modern engineering and technology.

In order to create a set of convincing historical arguments, this group of historians stressed the system of division among white and non-whites, skilled and unskilled labor:

25Ibid., 154-155.


27Greene, The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal, 4.
distinction of silver and gold workers. As Michael L. Conniff argued, “Americans did not admit that they practiced Jim Crow segregation because it was not permitted under the U.S. Constitution. Rather, they used the gold-silver system to disguise it. For their part, silver workers had difficulty fighting segregation because they were not citizens.”

For both white and black workers on the Panama Canal, this clinging inequality was an undisputable fact. The discrepancy in the value of white and black laborers to the management of the Panama Canal was made clear by the resources canal supervisors were willing to expend on the part of each group. White American workers constituted only about one-fifth of all canal workers but were “treated fifteen times better in the way of free social facilities, sports, and amusements than was the black West Indian, who represented as much as three-quarters of the population.” In stark contrast to the benefits enjoyed by gold roll workers, black workers on the silver roll received little besides monetary compensation for the more dangerous and physically exhausting work they performed. In 1914, the last year of construction on the Panama Canal, 353 black workers died as compared to 61 white workers. Between the dangers of disease and injury on the job, “the black laborer who had not spent time in the hospital was the exception. Many were in and out three, four, five times. Nor do the records show the numbers of men who were permanently maimed.” At the sites of the heaviest digging, death was not an uncommon occurrence among black laborers. Explosions, many caused by prematurely-detonated charges, were the cause of many deaths. The worst accident involving explosives killed twenty-three men, yet still the digging continued, regardless of the sacrifice made in

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28 Conniff, 5.

29 McCullough, 578.

30 Ibid., 582.
human lives to maintain the furious pace of work during the digging of the canal. As the work went on, men learned how to better prevent these tragedies, but the Canal Zone was dangerous in many more ways than the spectacular explosions and deadly diseases that gained much of the attention. Particularly for black workers, death was such a regularity of work in the Canal Zone that fatalities were usually noted in a few lines among the pages of the *Canal Record*, the published journal of the Panama Canal.

Universal human mortality during the construction of the canal may have never been so dramatically displayed than through the violent accidents and explosions that characterized work on the Panama Railroad and within the Culebra Cut, but records of canal fatalities indicate that even death itself was a burden shared unequally between black and white canal workers. The death rate for white canal workers ran between six and a half and sixteen deaths per thousand employees, while the death rate amongst black workers fell between eight and forty-six per thousand laborers. Historian Michael L. Conniff placed a revised mortality estimate for black workers on the Panama Canal at approximately ten percent, based on the poor record keeping of the canal, which often failed to account for changes in name, occupation, and residency.

In addition to the poor working conditions experienced by black laborers, the living quarters and other facilities designated for use by silver roll employees were a far cry from those of white workers. Poor treatment of black workers, moreover, was ignored and left unnoticed by most of the white population. An account by Poultney Bigelow of a conversation with a

33 Newton, 144.
34 Conniff, 31.
Jamaican canal worker served to highlight the general absence of knowledge whites in the Canal Zone had acquired about the condition of black laborers:

On landing at Colon I started for a stroll of inquiry and soon fell into conversation with a splendid specimen of manhood, a negro such as would have been recruited with pride into the Tenth United States Cavalry. He said that he was trying to get back to Jamaica. He was a sick man, could walk with difficulty, his system weakened by malarious fever. Naturally I expressed surprise that he should be returning to Jamaica when the cry of Colon was for negro labor! He said he came here for work, but had been deceived—he found the place unfit to live in; he found that the wages which had been promised to him, $1.50 in gold, were paid in silver equal to $0.75; he found that these wages were not paid punctually, but after two weeks, and sometimes more.35

Had this black laborer been the sole recipient of such discriminatory treatment to warrant his return to Jamaica, this dialogue might be discounted as an anomaly, but historical knowledge of the living and working conditions of the black canal worker show that this sort of experience was not uncommon amongst silver roll employees. Bigelow’s narrative corroborates this view, proceeding shortly thereafter to note with surprise that “indeed the Jamaica negro spoke truth—the steamer which sailed next day took away 400 negroes, all returning to Jamaica in disgust.”36

In spite of such occurrences, however, white Americans in the Canal Zone and in the United States continued to remain ignorant of the daily injustices experienced by the segregation of Canal Zone society and by the function of the gold and silver roll system, which compounded and entrenched discriminatory practices against blacks into the fabric of the organizational structure of Canal Zone life, work, and pay.


36 Bigelow, 10.
Attempts by Canal Workers to unionize and strike were largely broken down by a few key factors: the presence of a large labor pool that Canal Zone managers could utilize both as the number of laborers needed fluctuated and in the event of a strike, the unwillingness of workers of different ethnicities to cooperate in seeking better pay and a higher collective standard of living, and the power wielded by American managers and maintained by the well-trained police force of the Canal Zone that allowed Goethals to take a hard line against any organization or group that obstructed the breakneck pace of construction critical to the Canal’s ultimate success. The maintenance of these strategic advantages was hardly a secretive government agenda; during the course of hearings conducted by the Senate Committee on Interoceanic Canals, William H. Burr, a member of the Isthmian Canal Commission, remarked that “it is perfectly safe and good policy to get as much of that labor as you can; but I think this, Senator, that there must be on the Isthmus a surplusage of labor. Otherwise we will have interminable strikes and everything in the nature of a strike.”37 Further demonstration of these tactics came during the strike undertaken by highly-skilled steam-shovel operators soon after Goethal’s appointment to the position of Chief Engineer. Though Goethals, at the time, was beginning the difficult task of assuming control of the intricacies of the Canal Zone after the abrupt departure of Stevens, he still demonstrated his unwillingness to bend to the demands of disgruntled workers with a steady supply of willing strikebreakers at his back. Although the strike lowered “excavation to a quarter of its previous level,” Goethals approached the situation tentatively and unhurriedly, quietly hiring a number of other qualified workers until work could go on without the participation of the striking steam shovel operators. When the strikers finally

capitulated, they became an example to other workers contemplating unionization and strikes, forced into low-level jobs until they could work their way back up amongst the highest-paid workers in the Canal Zone.\textsuperscript{38}

Canal management’s success in suppressing union activity in the ranks of its workers was more easily achieved in instances where the men causing the agitation or obstruction of work were regarded by the Americans as replaceable and interchangeable with the large numbers of West Indians willing to accept jobs in the Canal Zone. A clear demonstration of this superior position of Canal Zone management came in early 1907, when approximately one thousand Spanish workers struck with the goal of forcing management to accept a wage raise for workers in the Culebra Cut. The Zone police quickly subdued the violence that flared from the ranks of the strikers and the organizers behind the strike, and the incident quickly ended without serious delays in the work being done on the canal at the time of the strike.\textsuperscript{39}

The American press, however, chose mostly to ignore the subject of labor issues that arose during the construction of the Panama Canal. Whether this lack of coverage was a byproduct of a general American will to continue construction of the Panama Canal at full pace or whether the absence of Canal Zone labor disputes in American media represented the apathy of the American public towards the conditions of the Canal worker, the fact remains that the general population of the United States had little information regarding Canal Zone work with which to concern themselves. News regarding labor unrest during the construction of the canal failed to receive significant press, though articles in American newspapers often noted the departures of United States officials as they conducted observational visits to the Canal Zone.

\textsuperscript{38} Parker, 399.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 390.
For example, an article dated May 1, 1908 in *The New York Times* was submitted under the title:

“Samuel B. Donnelly, Secretary of the Board of Arbitration of the Building Trades, will sail for Panama next Monday on a mission the exact nature of which he will not at present disclose.”

The reasoning behind the under-coverage, however, remains decidedly simple in light of the motivations of the American press. Forced by monetary necessity to cater to the interests of the general public, American news and media sources likely steered away from focus on labor issues within the Canal Zone based on the widely-held American belief that canal workers had better jobs, higher pay, and more desirable benefits than their counterparts in the United States. In shaping the society that developed within the Canal Zone in ways that included the gold and silver roll system and the development of a wide range of recreational opportunities for workers, Americans participating in the construction of the canal inadvertently convinced the American public that the Canal Zone constituted a white man’s paradise; logically, therefore, reports of union activity and labor unrest within the ranks of canal workers likely struck most Americans as unwarranted and as unnecessarily endangering to the successful progress of work on the Panama Canal. According to an article in the New York Times, dated Nov. 18, 1910, shortly before President Taft landed in Panama to begin his inspection of the Canal Zone, the demand made by fifteen hundred American workers for a rise in wages was quickly dismissed. American officials chose to reject the demands of the workers and “declined to grant the [pay] increases, not considering any justification necessary for such action,” but noting that the typical wage level in the Canal Zone “is 60 cents an hour which is from 10 to 30 cents higher than in the United States.”

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40 “Taft Starts for Panama: He will try to Settle Some Troubles on the Isthmus,” *New York Times*, 57:18,360 (May 1, 1908), 2.
States.” The reasoning of the American officials in this instance appears to run in parallel to the attitude of the American public, and the belief that “10 to 30 cents” in additional wages and no lack of added benefits more than made up for the drawbacks of work in the Canal Zone probably served to dissolve remaining American interest in the priorities and demands of canal workers.

Though ultimately little was done to further improve the quality of life in the Canal Zone after the initial period of domestic focus promoted by Stevens as part of the groundwork for the canal’s construction, an investigation into the standards of living of canal workers was conducted by Gertrude Beeks, the Secretary of the Welfare Department of the National Civic Federation. Beeks observed the quality of life, recreation, and nutrition of workers in the Canal Zone and compiled her notes and opinions into an unbiased picture of the lives of canal employees as construction progressed on the Panama Canal. She noticed quickly that:

the quarters of the employees are of several types. There are houses for married employees, American whites, Europeans and West Indian negroes; barracks (for bachelors who are clerks or American mechanics) which contain several rooms, each holding from two to four men; dormitory barracks for Europeans, in which there are cot bunks—60, 72 or 84 in each house—and similar separate dormitory barracks for West Indians.

The report did little to avoid the truth about the subpar conditions that West Indians and other silver roll employees experienced, noting the cramped, dirty housing for black laborers and suggesting that the quality of the food had improved only as a result of the Beeks’ inspection

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42 Ibid.

itself. Beeks additionally discussed the labor structure of the canal, criticizing the system under which “the eight hour day… applies only to the 4,000 mechanics; then there are 33,884 laborers who work from 10 to 14 hours a day – at wages not mentioned – and these laborers seem to have few privileges in regard to… things which tend to make conditions more endurable.”\footnote{Ibid., 865.} Beeks’ final conclusion placed the blame for the poor conditions squarely on the shoulders of the American government, writing scathingly that “it is the treatment of these many thousands of unskilled laborers—they who actually dig the ditch—which gives food for thought and makes one wonder if this government, spending unlimited millions, can not do better for these, its employees.”\footnote{Ibid., 866.} Outside of the language of the report, however, Beeks’ contribution to the quality of life of the common Canal Zone laborer was minute, and poor conditions for unskilled laborers persisted for the duration of the construction of the Panama Canal.

Alongside Beeks’ failure to spark change in the lives of canal laborers, her report also failed to confront many of the inequalities created by the system of labor and life in the Canal Zone and reinforced by the gold and silver roll system maintained by canal administrators. Beeks’ report occasionally used the terms “black” and “West Indian,” but appeared to view black labor on the canal as a separate issue from “unskilled labor.” As a representative of a government without reason to concern itself with the quality of life of its noncitizen workers, Beeks had no external motivation to promote equality within Canal Zone society. Instead, as a representative of a government tasked with the responsibility of maintaining suitable conditions for its own native workers, Beeks’ attention was likely directed towards the improvement of the lives of white canal employees. Whether or not it ran parallel with Beeks’ own views on the conditions of the Panama Canal, Beeks’ report was ultimately most relevant to the officials who examined it.
through its critiques and observations of the quality of life of whites engaged in the construction of the canal.

While the poor standards of living of West Indians and other nonwhite laborers during the construction of the Panama Canal were widely recognized by the reports of figures such as Beeks and Bigelow, the government’s lack of acknowledgement and response to these issues was primarily allowed by fault of virtually nonexistent concern among the American public in regards to the conditions of black employees and the complaints of labor forces within the workforce of the Canal Zone. Any proponents of canal labor reform would have met the stonewall of the general willingness to believe in the Canal Zone as a near-paradise on earth, and Americans as a whole found it simpler to ignore any signs that the society constructed by American officials during the construction of the canal was only perfect at face-value. The benefits and facilities reserved for gold roll employees constituted a segregated paradise, but for Americans both within the Canal Zone and within the United States inaction remained the easier solution. The United States of the early twentieth century did not desire debate or discussion on the subject of inequality between canal workers, and the nation was certainly not willing to divert its attention from the successful completion of the Panama Canal towards issues of reform it was not ready to confront in a foreign land. Moreover, Americans were far from eager to center the subject of segregation around laborers for whom it held no responsibility, a nation it bore little obligation to, and a manufactured society that would quickly lose relevance in the minds of the American people soon after the completion of their first great achievement as an international power.


