

# WHY I BECAME A COMMUNIST

*The saga of a Negro teacher's awakening. From child worker to university educator, Doxey Wilkerson tells the story of how he found his way in politics.*

*On June 19 Doxey A. Wilkerson, noted Negro educator, resigned his positions as associate professor of education at Howard University and as education specialist with the Office of Price Administration to join the Communist Party and become its educational director for Maryland and the District of Columbia. NEW MASSES has asked Mr. Wilkerson to tell its readers why he took this step. We are pleased to present his article, which will be published in two installments. Readers who would like to write Mr. Wilkerson about his article can address him c/o Communist Party of Maryland, 201-03 W. Franklin St., Baltimore 1, Md.—The Editors.*

I JOINED the Communist Party as the logical and impelling next step in a series of experiences which pointed inexorably toward that end. My feelings as a Negro American, considerable study of social theory, direct observation of social relationships in many parts of the country, increasingly extensive activities in the trade union movement and in numerous progressive organizations, all served to define social values and to develop social insights, the inevitable outcome of which, *at some time*, simply had to be affiliation with the Communist Party.

I joined *at this time*, leaving a challenging professional career to become a full-time Party functionary, because of a powerful urge to render maximum service to the winning of the war. It becomes increasingly clear that this war has assumed a character which opens up new vistas of freedom for the millions of "little people" of the world. To the well informed, it is also clear that no civilian organization in our nation has more completely subordinated its own special interests to all-out and effective promotion of the nation's victory program than the Communist Party. Having passed the age of military service, I entered the service of the Party because of the conviction that therein lay the opportunity for my maximum civilian contribution toward victory and the building of a constructive and durable peace.

This, in brief, is why I joined the Communist Party—npw. Perhaps an autobiographical approach to my subject will help to make these reasons clear.

THE experiences of my childhood and adolescence did much to shape the attitudes of social protest which later became driving forces in my life. My mother and step-father (with whom my early life was spent) were poor, and both worked hard



Doxey A. Wilkerson

to support the family, to assure my education, and to accumulate the property which now sustains them in old age. I recall that, while still a child, I resented especially the back-breaking labor of my mother. She was then, and still is, a cheerful, vigorous, deeply religious person, who found solace in the faith that, "the Lord knows what is best." Yet, somehow, it just did not seem right that *she* had to work so hard.

My early experiences as a child worker did much to sharpen my consciousness of race. When about nine or ten years of age, I sold newspapers on the down-town corners of Kansas City, and also worked a short while as a golf caddy in an exclusive country club. The usual newsboy fights over competitive street-corner "economic interests" frequently assumed the character of minor race conflicts, the whites against the Negroes, with appropriate epithets being hurled *both ways*. It was during this period that I had my hardest childhood fight with a white boy, this time over the relative prowess of Jack Johnson and Jess Willard, who were about to fight for the heavyweight championship. The golf caddy job I lost when the club manager learned he had hired a Negro.

I recall that, along with such childhood experiences as these, there were frequent frustrations at being barred from Jim Crow theaters I wanted to attend. Then, too, the vivid accounts of increasing southern lynch horrors, brought regularly to my home through the Negro press, did much

to crystallize rather bitter childhood prejudices against "white people."

Later boyhood work experiences tended to broaden my developing attitudes of social protest. At fourteen, during the summer months, I worked ten hours a day on the receiving end of a rip-saw in the Forrester-Nace box factory. I still recall how the factory wheels continued to buzz in my head for hours after I had returned home. During the last two years of high school, I worked as a porter in a millinery shop, and also delivered papers for several hours a day. Although the combined jobs paid "good money," they deprived me of many school, social, and athletic experiences which I cherished.

IT WAS when I was seventeen, immediately after my first year in college, that my identification with the working class and hatred for its exploiters began initially to assume conscious form. I worked that summer in the dark, damp, stinky hide-cellar of the Morris Packing Company. For several weeks I suffered excruciating pains in my eyes upon coming out into the sunlight, and seldom found relief until night-fall. By the time I returned to college in the fall, I had lost twenty pounds in weight.

There was no union at the Morris plant; indeed, I and my older fellow-workers hardly knew what a union was. But we did know that we were over-worked and under-paid, and further, that something should be done to improve the abominable physical conditions under which we labored. Our dissatisfaction was expressed in nothing more constructive than vehement and eloquent cursing of our straw-bosses and the company. Nevertheless, that summer in the hide-cellar made me keenly conscious of this (for me) "new" truth: there are workers and employers, and their interests are not the same. This premise conditioned most of my later thinking on social issues.

At the University of Kansas, despite the Jim Crow barriers which the institution maintained, I learned an important lesson about race relations: not all white people hate Negroes. I developed warm friendships with a number of white fellow-students and several professors, sincere democrats all, who were quite as bitter as I at the injustices accorded Negro students on the campus. It was then, with their help, that I began my career as a crusader—for admission of Negroes into athletics and the swimming pool, against racial segregation at musical concerts, against occasional

prejudices one encountered in the classroom.

Probably the greatest impetus to my social education came through associations on the "cabinet" of the University YMCA. The "Y" secretary was an honest and courageous progressive, who profoundly stimulated the social thinking of his "cabinet." "Y" cabinet discussions and activities broadened the area of my social sympathies to embrace far more than questions of race conflict. They brought me many stimulating contacts with the developing national student movement, through conventions in Milwaukee, Estes Park, and elsewhere; and initiated a train of serious thought and study concerning the ethical basis of my social motivations.

ONE further student experience which did much to shape the pattern of my social thought and behavior was joint-editorship of *The Dove*, a self-styled "liberal journal of campus opinion." Now *The Dove* was anything but a "peaceful" publication. Its initial staff—nine white fellows, a Japanese and myself, including several members of the YMCA cabinet—sought no less than to blast the forces of evil from our campus and the world at large. We exposed unsavory fraternity combines in student politics, fought for the abolition of campus "Jim-Crow," lambasted professors who espoused reactionary doctrines in their classrooms, and even extended our crusading to broader issues of state and national affairs.

*The Dove* created quite a furor. University authorities forbade its sale on the campus—with the result that sales more than doubled at the campus borders. Kansas legislators denounced the University administration for harboring the young "radicals" who were its editors. The iconoclasts, George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken, gave it their blessings in the *American Mercury*. The liberal, William Allen White, was a sort of patron saint. On one occasion, the Chancellor of the University, anxious about the possible influence of anti-*Dove* sentiment upon the institution's revenue from the state, formally requested that *The Dove* withhold a pending issue for several days until the Legislature had voted upon the University budget. The editors were honored to grant the Chancellor's request.

Among other outcomes—and, of course, there were others—my college experiences gave me a keen sensitivity to the many injustices of our society, and, of even greater importance, an impelling zeal to "do something" about them. This crusading urge still abides, although its mode of expression has gone through several stages of development.

THE dominant interest of my professional career, covering sixteen years at Virginia State College and Howard University,

has been the adequacy—or rather, the inadequacy—of public provisions for the education of Negro children. It is an interest which led naturally to much broader fields of study and action. It was characterized by three major periods of development.

First, there was the period of investigation and publication. Incident to a variety of professional activities, I travelled constantly throughout Virginia, and was shocked at the disgraceful neglect of public education for Negro children in most areas of the state. I began to conduct surveys and to publish articles contrasting Negro and white school conditions. Implicit was the somewhat naive assumption that to expose this flagrantly undemocratic state of affairs would lead the "good people" of Virginia to insist upon its correction. I soon learned better.

On one occasion, incident to a state senator's reaction against a study I published, which ranked the counties and cities of Virginia according to relative degrees of racial discrimination in public education, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction called the president of my college to

Richmond to discuss my crusading activities. He told the president that if Wilkerson did not stop this sort of thing, he (the superintendent) would not be able to support him. The president duly informed me of the superintendent's threat, but he made no effort to insist, as my superior officer, that I cease my obnoxious activities. Whether this was because he knew I would not conform, or because he secretly approved of my position, I have never been quite sure.

This incident is but illustrative of many others which soon made it quite clear that investigation and publication alone would not suffice to enhance public provisions for the education of Negro children. Something more impressive than scientific appeals to reason and conscience seemed to be required.

SECOND, there came the period of agitation and organized pressure. I began to exhort Negro citizens to petition their school boards for better schools for their children; to send delegation after delegation demanding improvements, and when rebuffed, to send more delegates still. On



"Laundry Woman," oil painting by John Biggers. Part of an exhibition of Hampton Institute students on view at the Museum of Modern Art until November 28.



one occasion, when the bigoted superintendent of Chesterfield county schools sought to destroy the accredited status of the Negro high school as he was about to leave for another post, I helped citizens organize a petition campaign which got the signature of every Negro taxpayer in the district and led to the defeat of the superintendent before the Board of Education.

The use of political pressure came to be a favorite theme of mine during this agitational period. On one occasion, after I had been exhorting the Negro people of Halifax county to pay their poll taxes and vote for men who would provide adequate schools for their children, the elderly county superintendent arose with tears in his eyes to plead with "our good Negro citizens" not to heed the advice of this alien upstart from the North, to "trust in the Lord, and a hundred years from now things will be entirely different."

There was a kindred spirit at Virginia State College with whom "political pressure" was even more of an obsession than with me. Together, we organized in Petersburg the League of Negro Voters, dedicated to the task of encouraging Negro citizens to pay their poll taxes and vote. Subsequently, the League has spread to encompass most of the state. Significant of its possibilities was an incident at the local court house, where we had been tabulating the potential Negro voting strength in the various wards of the city. After watching us for several days, a curious county official came forward to inquire, none too courteously, what we were doing. We explained in full, whereupon there developed a metamorphosis in his demeanor. "Well, Mr. Wilkerson and Mr. Jackson," he said, handing us his card, "I am up for re-nomination as county treasurer in the Democratic primaries, and I hope you gentlemen will not forget me."

My record as a "bad Negro" continued to grow at the State Department of Education. Following an Emancipation Day address in Sussex County, where the Negro-white school differential was greater than anywhere else in the state, the local superintendent reported that I was trying to incite the Negro masses to rebellion. On another occasion, the then State Supervisor of Negro Education—who, incidentally, was neither an educated man nor an educator—reported an "inflammatory" address he had heard me deliver, and expressed grave doubts that my activities should much longer be tolerated. Not long afterward, I relieved Virginia officialdom of my annoying presence and went to the freer intellectual and political climate of Howard University.

FINALLY, there came the period in which I began to view the problems of Negro education in terms of a larger and more significant frame of reference: the universal struggle of the masses of underprivileged

people, both white and Negro, for liberation from the bonds of their exploiters. Many influences contributed to this stage of my professional development.

My nation-wide investigations of educational conditions impressed me with the close interrelation between denials of educational opportunity and political freedom, on the one hand, and the economic exploitation of the people on the other. Especially in the mill-towns and plantation areas of the deep South is this pattern of relationships most clearly evident.

One spring I spent several weeks driving through the rural South, making a direct study of the social-economic "setting" of the Negro school. Among other places, I visited the Mississippi delta, on whose broad, flat plains of rich black earth two principal "crops" are grown: Negro children and cotton, both cultivated for the same purpose—profits. Even in early April, the wretched Negro school shacks were closing down, to permit the children to go into the fields. They would re-open in mid-summer—"lay-by" time, when the cotton needed no further cultivation—only to close again in the fall when the children returned to the fields to harvest the crop.

I talked with planters, with white and Negro tenants, with teachers and county superintendents, with school board and other public officials. I began to sense how the whole oppressive plantation society was caught in the grip of an inherently exploitative economy of which the "lay-by" schools were but a superficial expression.

IN THE little mill-town of Clinton, S. C., I observed the industrial counterpart of this relationship. Upon visiting the white high school, I was impressed by the sallow faces and drowsy expressions of the children. The very courteous principal explained that many of them were excused from school early in the afternoon to go to work in the mills, where they remained until late at night. I visited the mills, where only a very few Negroes were employed, and all of them in custodial capacities. I saw there the frail and undernourished white girls tending long lines of looms—at wages of from ten to twelve dollars a week. I learned that the mill-owner also owned the bank and much of the real

estate in Clinton. It appeared that he also owned the local government, for his nephew, the mayor, spent most of his time working as a bookkeeper in the mill.

Here was a society built upon economic foundations which simply could not tolerate real democracy. It became increasingly clear to me that the special problems of Negro education—indeed, all the special problems of the Negro people—were rooted in an economy whose very existence was dependent upon human exploitation. I began to see that, in order to protect their profit-seeking interests, the rulers of the semi-feudal South *must* resist with all their might any substantial extension of democracy in education, in government, in social relationships, or in employment—either to the Negro people or the great masses of whites. This insight helped me better to understand how fascism comes into being—as the ruthless attempt of a ruling financial oligarchy to suppress the democratic aspirations of the people.

My early interest in better schools for southern Negro children had led me quite some distance, and the end still lay far ahead. Studies of Negro school conditions in southside Chicago, Harlem, and elsewhere in the North revealed educational-economic-political relationships which differed only in degree from those more crudely evident in the mill towns and on the plantations of the deep South. Campaigning for federal-aid-to-education legislation brought me into conflict with such undemocratic forces as the New York State Economic Council, whose agent told the Senate that much needed federal financial assistance for the education of white and Negro children would be un-American—indeed, "communistic." Close association with several famous "academic freedom" cases, in which honest and able university and public-school teachers were persecuted because of their unorthodox views on political and economic issues, served but to strengthen my insight into the nature of those reactionary forces that were seeking to dominate the country.

The final stage in the development of my social point of view and pattern of action was now close at hand.

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(To be continued)

