

# HOW THE NEGRO WILL VOTE

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THE enlightened policies of three Roosevelt administrations have developed a new relationship of interdependence between the urgent democratic needs of the nation and the special freedom goals of the Negro people. Both are at stake in the November elections—and the votes of Negro Americans will decisively influence the future not only of their own freedom and security, but in large measure that of the entire country and the world. The fact that this is so is a measure of the recent and profound change which has come about in the relations of the Negro people to the rest of the nation.

For nearly six decades prior to the first Roosevelt administration the controlling (not the true) interests of America ran counter to the democratic strivings of the Negro people. The brief and promising period of people's democracies which emerged in the South following the Civil War was brought to a premature end by the first Republican betrayal of the Negro people and the nation. In return for southern support for the candidacy of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, the "Party of Lincoln" turned traitor to the democratic goals for which Lincoln struggled, withdrew federal troops from the South, and abandoned the Negro people and their "poor white" allies to the tender mercies of the former slave-holding Confederates. Thus did the Republicans usher in an

extended period during which the dominant historical trends operated to prevent the integration of Negroes into the economic, political, and social life of America.

With the old planter class restored to complete control, there followed a period of KKK lynching and other forms of intimidation, "legal" and extra-legal disfranchisement, and the universal extension of Jim Crowism, all "justified" by the most widespread and systematic campaign of "white supremacy" propaganda the nation has ever seen. As a result, by the turn of the century the millions of once free Negro Americans had been pushed back into a state of semi-serfdom but little removed from their former status of slavery.

This subordinate position of the Negro in our society remained fairly well "stabilized" until the first World War, when the needs of wartime industry—coupled with the promise of greater freedom—caused one and two-thirds million southern Negroes to migrate to the great cities of the North. There followed a brief period of enlarged participation by Negroes in the economic, political, and social life of the country. But the hopeful prospect then born was rudely shattered by the postwar depression, and was virtually demolished by the great crisis of 1929 under Hoover.

The presidential elections of 1932 found the masses of Negro people hope-

lessly impoverished, subjected to a new wave of lynch terror in the South, Jim Crowed almost everywhere in the North, and largely excluded from the labor movement and from any effective participation in the civic and political life of the country. Few besides the small and isolated group of Communists and their sympathizers were then willing to stand and fight for full citizenship for the Negro people. *The Negro's struggles for full democratic rights had been decisively rejected by the dominant forces in our society; and it seemed of little concern to the nation as a whole that nearly 12,000,000 Negro Americans faced the immediate future without even the perspective of progressive social change.*

Under the national leadership of President Roosevelt this oppressive trend has been sharply reversed. The new trend now dominant (although by no means universally expressed) is toward furthering the progressive extension of Negro participation in the life of our American democracy.

First, there came the period of the "New Deal," when the economic chaos left by the "do-nothing" policies of Hooverism began to be relieved by a bold and comprehensive program of federal action to raise the living standards of the common man. Unemployment relief, public works, public health, and housing, adult education, school build-

ing construction, agricultural adjustment, farm and home security, youth projects—these effective steps toward the restoration of economic security for the masses of all Americans created the fundamental preconditions for any substantial change in the relations of the Negro people to the rest of our society. During the early 1930's there could have been no possibility of substantial progress toward Negro democratic rights without increased economic security for the great masses of white Americans.

In addition to relieving the economic plight of the nation as a whole, and thereby of millions of destitute Negro families, these early programs of the Roosevelt administration introduced a new and tremendously important principle of federal policy—the principle that *Negro citizens should share equitably in the benefits of social programs administered by the federal government.* This principle of no discrimination on grounds of race found explicit expression in the administrative policies of most of the New Deal agencies; and despite strenuous opposition, serious effort was made to enforce this policy, even in the South. As a result, the extent of racial discrimination was greatly decreased, the Negro's share in public services was enormously enlarged, and, most important of all, a definite and lasting break was made with the previous general acceptance of anti-Negro discrimination as a normal pattern of American life.

The progressive labor policies of the Roosevelt administration, embodied in such legislation as the National Labor Relations Act and the Wage-Hour Act, likewise made a basic contribution toward changing the social-economic-political status of the Negro people. And in long-time perspective, there is probably no more fundamental contribution the Roosevelt administration has made toward Negro freedom than the promotion of a strong and vital trade union movement—its membership in the past eleven years has grown from three to fourteen million—in which hundreds of thousands of Negro workers have come to form new bonds of comradeship with their white fellow workers.\*

The Roosevelt administration's conscious attack upon the economic and political backwardness of the South brought the first real twentieth century challenge to those oligarchic controls which have so long oppressed the great masses of white and Negro Southerners. The President dramatized the South as the "Number One Economic Problem of the Na-



**"That Man in the White House will stop at nothing to get votes!"**

tion." He called its system of plantation exploitation "feudalistic." Programs of industrialization and agricultural reform were initiated. The President himself actively campaigned in 1938 against several of the most vicious southern demagogues, stimulating the development of a new labor and progressive movement in southern politics which has already retired a long succession of die-hard reactionaries from public life. Now, largely as a result of these and related policies, the South is experiencing a "New Reconstruction" which promises, in time, again to free millions of southern Negroes (and whites!) from that super-exploitation and reactionary political domination which constitute the nation's heritage from the unfulfilled tasks of the Civil War.

**I**T is during this third ("Win-the-War") Roosevelt administration that the Negro people have moved most rapidly toward their historic goal of full democratic rights. First, and most basic, have been policies and programs designed to integrate Negro workers into the expanding war industries of the nation, and among them none has been more dramatic and important than the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice. Launched just at the historic turning point of this great war—late June 1941—the unprecedented FEPC has been a major factor in prying open new employment opportunities for Negro workers.

Perhaps even more significant has been FEPC's success in establishing the principle that Negroes (and other minority groups) have the right to employment and advancement "without discrimination on account of race, creed,

or national origin." It is highly significant that in FEPC's many hearings and investigations only once (in the still unsettled southern railroads case) have employers openly challenged the principle upon which this agency was founded. Although employment discrimination continues in practice, it has now lost its respectability. The all-important principle of no employment discrimination on grounds of race has definitely been established for the first time in the history of American industry.

In every one of FEPC's successive crises, President Roosevelt has come forward vigorously to defend this new instrument of American democracy. When WMC Commissioner McNutt suspended the railroad hearings and nearly wrecked the committee in the spring of 1943, the President (upon his return from Casablanca) reconstituted the FEPC on a firmer basis and ordered the hearings to proceed. When Comptroller-General Warren ruled, during the fall of 1943, that FEPC directives were merely "advisory" and lacking in real authority, the President promptly reversed his ruling and ordered compliance with FEPC's orders. When, in the late spring of 1944, Senator Russell introduced his amendment to destroy FEPC as a non-statutory agency, the President immediately recommended a budgetary appropriation to validate the committee, and fought for its approval by Congress. When the recent Philadelphia transit strike confronted FEPC with the most serious challenge of its hectic career, the President (then in the South Pacific) ordered out the Army of the United States to enforce FEPC's directive for the upgrading of eight Negro transit workers to platform jobs.

There have been other significant Roosevelt policies designed to improve the wartime status of Negro workers. Army and Navy contracts for war production specify that industrialists shall adhere to nondiscriminatory employment practices. The War Labor Board has handed down the unprecedented decision that the wages of white and Negro war workers shall be equal. Largely as a result, an estimated million or more Negro war workers are employed in industries from many of which they were almost or entirely excluded before the war. Moreover, the notable efficiency with which Negro war workers now perform many highly skilled technical, administrative, and supervisory jobs has blasted forever the myth that Negroes are poorly adapted to the requirements of modern industry.

In numerous agencies of the federal government many thousands of Negro workers are employed where none but a white face was ever seen before. And these gains in federal employment have not been restricted to menial positions, but have been especially pronounced in clerical, professional, and even executive appointments.

The United States Supreme Court, all but two of whose members were appointed by Mr. Roosevelt, has handed down the truly historic decision that Negro citizens must be allowed to vote in the heretofore exclusively white primary elections in the southern states. It is notable that this 1944 decision completely reversed the ruling of the (for the most part) Republican-appointed Supreme Court in 1935, and that the one dissenting vote in the recent decision was cast by the Republican, Justice Roberts, who was not appointed by President Roosevelt.

There is general agreement that the integration of Negroes in the armed forces and the merchant marine is on a level far in advance of what prevailed during the first World War. Negro captains command mixed white and Negro crews on Liberty Ships bearing the names of famous Negro Americans. Negroes drive tanks, man anti-aircraft defenses, and carry forward the highly technical operations of the Signal Corps. The exploits of Negro pilots constitute one of the truly heroic chapters of this war. The Navy has been forced, for the first time in recent history, to admit Negroes into the ranks of fighting seamen and to train them as officers. Negro women serve their country in the WACS, they have recently been admitted into the WAVES and SPARS, and the former restrictive "Negro quota" in the Army Nurses Corps has at last been cast aside. Another progressive step in this area was the recently announced order against racial discrimination on the Army post exchanges. The significance of this blast at Jim Crow-

ism can be judged from the fervor with which the order is being attacked by poll taxers in the South.

Every one of these democratic gains for the Negro people has met with bitter and continuing opposition from the anti-Roosevelt forces of reaction. They were made possible by the urgent necessities of this people's war, the courageous and enlightened win-the-war policies of President Roosevelt, and the struggles of the Negro people, organized labor, and other progressive forces supporting the Roosevelt administration.

It is patent that the consolidation and further extension of the Negro's wartime gains is dependent upon the continued national leadership of the Roosevelt administration and the further integration of the Negro people into that broad coalition of all classes which constitutes the democratic camp of national unity. But there is far from adequate understanding of the still more significant fact that attainment of the foreign and domestic goals of progressive America is likewise dependent upon continued progress toward full Negro democratic rights. The most immediate and direct expression of this relationship is seen in the election contests which now dominate the American political scene. The votes of Negro Americans on November 7 will probably be decisive in determining whether that leadership, and hence the goals for which it is essential, will triumph in the fall elections.

The effective Negro electorate is politically far more mature than ever before. It is strategically concentrated in key industrial areas where the election contest is most closely drawn. Indeed, in each of eight states which could prove decisive in November (New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, New Jersey, Michigan, Missouri, and Indiana), the potential Negro vote is larger than the margin of votes between Willie and Roosevelt in 1940. Negro voters hold a balance of power in these states, and are in position to control their 202

electoral votes—three-fourths of the decisive margin in the presidential contest.

Moreover, although pro-Roosevelt sentiment runs deep among Negro citizens (as was indicated by the recent *Fortune* poll which showed that seventy percent of the Negroes in New York and Chicago were for FDR), their votes for Roosevelt and Truman decidedly are not "in the bag." The Negro people are sorely disturbed by still existing discriminations in employment, and especially in the armed forces. Many are disillusioned by the obvious concessions of the Democratic convention to poll tax reaction, and fail to see that the net results of that convention constituted a decisive defeat for the anti-Negro, anti-Roosevelt forces within the Democratic Party. Further confusion and uncertainty is spread among them by the Republican convention's demagogic promises of "pie in the sky," and the pro-Republican campaign of several of the larger Negro newspapers.

*This decisive Negro vote simply must be won for Roosevelt and Truman, and the only sure way to win it is to throw the whole power of organized labor and other pro-Roosevelt forces into the struggle for full Negro democratic rights—NOW. The extent to which this is done, and done quickly, can well be decisive in determining the future history of our nation and the world.*

Thus, not only have the progressive policies of three Roosevelt administrations brought the Negro people rapidly along the road to their historic goal of freedom, but they have also created an unprecedented situation in which the urgent democratic needs of America are largely dependent upon the further extension of Negro freedom. This new relationship of interdependence between the welfare of the Negro people and the country as a whole expresses more dramatically than any other single development the effective democratic leadership which Franklin Delano Roosevelt has given to the American nation.