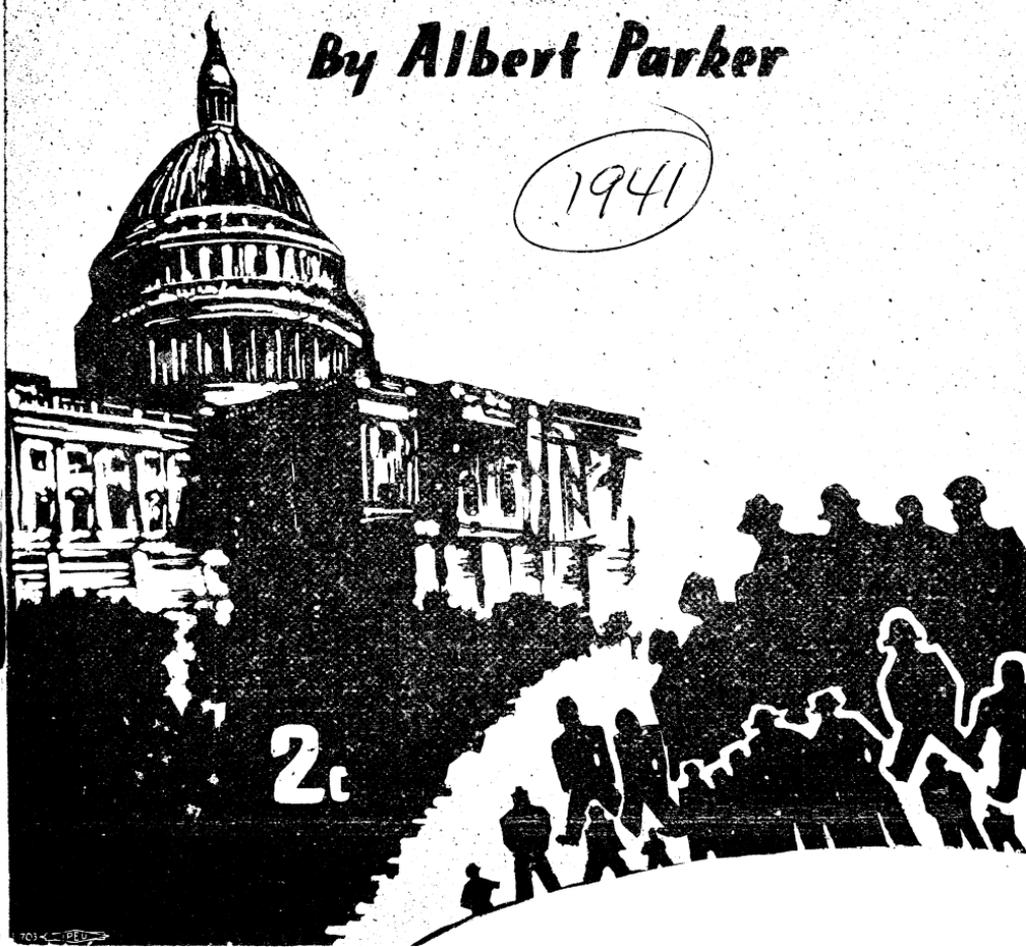


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# NEGROES MARCH ON WASHINGTON

*By Albert Parker*

1941



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# The NEGRO MARCH On WASHINGTON

By **ALBERT PARKER**

A committee of prominent Negroes, headed by A. Philip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Pullman Porters, is now engaged in furthering a march on Washington, which is scheduled to take place for July 1.

Ten thousand Negroes, it is planned, will join in the march, demanding an end to Jim Crowism and discrimination in the armed forces and industry.

Certainly, if ever there was a time for the Negro people to take action against Jim Crowism and discrimination, this is the hour.

Never before has the plight of the Negro stood out so sharply against the national scene, now loud with talk about democracy and the rights of minority groups—somewhere else. Not even in 1917, just before this country entered the first World War, was there such a contrast between the treatment of the Negro and the high and shining words used to describe the advantage of living under capitalist democracy.

And now, as in 1917, there are misleaders who say that this is not the time for action, that the Negro people should wait. "Wait," they say, "wait until later; don't take advantage of the crisis; let us show them how loyal we are, and they will treat us differently after the war is over."

But to do what these Uncle Toms urge would be to close our eyes to what happened last time. In 1917 the Negro people followed this advice, with tragic results. A larger proportion of Negroes than whites went into the army. They gave up their lives, they suffered insult and discrimination both in the American training camps and abroad in the A.E.F. And when it was all over, they were forced back into the same old Jim

Crow strait-jackets, Negroes who dared to continue wearing uniforms were lynched, and the Negro people did not have a single right or privilege in addition to those they had before the war.

Maybe the Negro misleaders can afford to wait, those who have soft jobs in the government, or are angling for them as a reward for their advice to sit and wait, or—that small top layer of Negroes—who live well.

The Negroes dare not wait. The condition of the average Negro worker is getting worse. Nobody has all the figures—no government agency is anxious to collect them—but everyone knows that Negroes just aren't getting jobs in any numbers or of any importance in the booming war industries.

The old saying, "last hired, first fired," applies as much as ever in the present expanding industrial picture. Most of the comparatively few jobs which Negroes are getting are the lower paid occupations abandoned by workers getting employment in the strategic industries. Those jobs Negroes do get in the big industries are limited to the menial categories. The heads of big corporations controlling airplane and similar production have openly stated they refuse to hire Negroes except as janitors and similar categories. Most of the other corporations, more discreet, say nothing, but follow the same policy.

### ***Cost of Living Going Up Fast***

This would be bad enough for the Negro at any time, but it is critically serious because of the economic background against which it is taking place.

The cost of living is going up. As a result of profiteering and curtailed production of consumers' goods, food, shelter and clothing cost more. The increased taxes to raise more money for the war machine hit the Negroes; before long these taxes will include sales taxes on everything workers use and income taxes on practically everyone working. All this is a heavy burden for the workers lucky enough to have half-way decent jobs. For the Negro people it is truly crushing.

Relief and WPA appropriations are being slashed. The argument that some workers have gotten jobs is being used to justify cuts in the individual relief allowances of those who aren't getting jobs. The argument that there is less unemployment is being used to justify discontinuance of most WPA

projects, although they employ the people who haven't been able to get jobs. Since Negroes were the group that suffered the most in the depression, and since they find it hardest to get jobs today, these reductions in relief and WPA hit them the hardest.

In addition to being denied work, Negroes are being denied the right to learn how to work at skilled and semi-skilled jobs. The usual argument of the officials in charge of the training schools is that there is no use in "wasting the training" when Negroes won't be able to get jobs afterward to utilize the training. To complete this picture, it should be remembered that one of the many alibis of employers who are put on the spot is that they can't find Negroes "qualified to handle skilled work."

In short, because the Negro is locked out of the war boom and because at the same time he is being forced to share the costs of the war program, his plight doesn't remain the same but grows constantly worse.

### ***Military Jim Crowism.***

They won't take the Negro into the factories, but they take him into the armed forces. But not as an equal. He can die for democracy but he can't have it in life.

In the army, Negroes are separated off in segregated regiments. Roosevelt has said that it is in the interests of "national defense" that the Negro should be segregated this way; apparently he feels that a Jim Crow army can best carry on the kind of war for democracy that he wants.

Segregated regiments mean separate eating quarters, separate sleeping quarters, separate seats at the theaters; no Negro officer in command of white soldiers, practically no Negro officers in command of even Negro troops.

In the navy, the Negro is segregated too—into the kitchen. He can serve only as a mess attendant or cook or flunky. Regardless of his training or his inclinations, these are his only field of operations in the navy.

And if he objects, if he even writes a letter to the Negro press protesting the Jim Crow treatment he receives, as 15 sailors on the U.S.S. Philadelphia did a few months ago, then he is thrown into the brig and faces court martial and discharge "for the good of the service." This is what has already happened in peace time; in war time such a mild protest would

be called mutiny and would almost certainly be punished with execution.

Negroes long clamored for admission into the air corps; finally they got—a segregated all-Negro squadron. Negro doctors asked admission into the army; they were admitted—but limited to attend to Negro troops. Other branches of the services, such as the marines, coast guard, are still closed to the Negro. If the government should open them, it would be on the same Jim Crow basis as the others.

### ***What Military Segregation Means***

The Uncle Toms have their little piece to say about this too: "Why fret about this?" they ask. As F. D. Patterson of Tuskegee Institute put it:

"We are asking for a lot of things that are not of immediate importance though they aim at noteworthy ideals. One that is of apparent import to a lot of people is that we should be integrated in companies and regiments with white soldiers, claiming that the discrimination of the nation's soldiers on the grounds of color and race is a breach of democratic procedure. All that is admirable, but what we should be concerned with at the moment is an opportunity to serve in any capacity . . ."

Scoundrels like Patterson try to make it appear that full equality is a "noteworthy ideal," but certainly not "of immediate importance." This is where they do their most treacherous work. Because full equality in the armed forces is an *immediate* necessity if the lives and safety of the Negro soldiers are not to be thrown wantonly away!

Segregation in the army serves a double role. First, it serves to remind the Negro soldier at every moment that, although he is learning how to handle a gun, he is still regarded as a second class citizen and is still considered not good enough to mingle with white soldiers.

Secondly, it lays the basis for life-and-death discrimination against the Negro soldier. Negroes in separate regiments can more easily be assigned to dirty work or extremely dangerous work than they could be if they were with white soldiers in mixed regiments. It is much easier to pick out a Negro regiment as a "suicide squad" than to pick the same number of individual Negro soldiers out of several mixed regiments for the same job.

The story of the fall of France is full of cases where the

French general staff threw away the lives of the Negro colonial troops. They were thrown into the breach to die by the thousands when the general staff wanted to save the lives or the morale of white soldiers. There is no need to repeat the horrible details of that story here. It has been told just recently in the Negro press.

In short, unless the Negro wins full equality in the armed forces, his condition will not remain the same, but get worse.

### ***Kind of Action That Failed***

Since the present war crisis began, numerous attempts by Negro leaders have been made to secure an end to Jim Crowism in industry and the armed forces.

Postcards have been mailed. Telegrams have been sent. Petitions have been signed and delivered. Fine speeches, loud speeches, have been made. Conferences have been held, many of them. Committees have gone to Washington, where they have seen the President and they have seen the Congressmen. Congressional and state legislative investigations have been demanded. Bills abolishing discrimination in industry have been presented in Congress and passed by state legislatures. Orders have been issued by the heads of federal departments abolishing discrimination. The National Defense Council, under Knudsen, banned discrimination by employers executing government contracts. The Office of Production Management, through Hillman, has written a letter to all such employers urging the end of racial discrimination in hiring. Negro gentlemen, supposedly to protect the interests of the Negro masses, have been appointed to serve in advisory capacities in several governmental departments.

In spite of all this expenditure of time, energy, money and effort by protesting Negroes, and all the government gestures, nothing substantial has been accomplished. The Negro people suffer from Jim Crowism as much as they ever did.

Nor need any Negro be surprised that this is so. Requests for improvement in the status of the Negro have been overlooked or stalled or rejected because the ruling class and its representatives in Washington felt that they had nothing to fear and nothing to lose if they did not grant the requests.

Washington saw that the leaders of these Negro committees and conferences and organizations were willing to do most

of their fighting "around a table," were not trying to involve the masses of Negroes in action or struggle, and were promising in advance that, regardless of what happened, they would always be loyal to American democracy, including its continued Jim Crowism.

Since that was the case, the rulers of the country were neither afraid of the petitions and the speeches and the resolutions, nor ready to take any steps outside of vague promises and the appointment of more Negro "advisors" to act as a front for their Jim Crow agencies.

### ***Randolph's Idea of the March***

It is against this picture that we can best understand and evaluate A. Philip Randolph's recent series of articles in the Negro press, calling for a march on Washington of 10,000 Negroes to protest against Jim Crow conditions; the establishment of the "Negroes' Committee to March On Washington For Equal Participation In National Defense"; the "Call to Negro America" issued by this committee; and the march itself.

### ***Crisis Deepening***

That Randolph should write such a series of articles—which state substantially the facts we have outlined above—is an important sign of the depth of the crisis confronting the Negro people. In the last year Randolph has spent more time and energy speaking and writing in favor of all-out aid to Britain, than he has spent on anything else. If he now turns to devoting some time to advocating a march which by its very being constitutes an annihilating indictment of the democratic pretensions of the American imperialists, the rising tide of resentment among the Negroes must be high indeed!

Randolph has correctly described the national industrial and military situation:

"The whole National Defense Set-up reeks and stinks with race prejudice, hatred and discrimination . . .

"Responsible committees of Negroes who seek to intercede in behalf of the Negro being accorded the simple right to work in industries and on jobs serving National Defense and to serve in the Army, Navy and Air Corps, are given polite assurance

that Negroes will be given a fair deal. But it all ends there. Nothing is actually done to stop discrimination.

"It seems to be apparent that even when well-meaning, responsible, top government officials agree upon a fair and favorable policy, there are loopholes, and subordinate officers in the Army, Navy and Air Corps, full of race hatred, who seek its contravention, nullification and evasion."

Randolph has had to recognize the impotence and weaknesses of the current Negro leadership and their methods, even though he has many words of praise for them:

"Evidently, the regular, normal and respectable method of conferences and petitions, while proper and ought to be continued as conditions warrant, certainly don't work. They don't do the job."

And, on the same theme, in another article:

"Negroes cannot stop discrimination in National Defense with conferences of leaders and the intelligentsia alone. While conferences have merit, they won't get desired results by themselves."

Randolph states the need for organization and action by the Negro masses:

"Power and pressure do not reside in the few, the intelligentsia, they lie in and flow from the masses. Power does not even rest with the masses as such. Power is the active principle of only the organized masses, the masses united for a definite purpose."

And then he calls for action in the form of a march of 10,000 Negroes to Washington:

"On to Washington, ten thousand black Americans! Let them swarm from every hamlet, village and town; from the highways and byways, out of the churches, lodges, homes, schools, mills, mines, factories and fields. Let them come in automobiles, buses, trains, trucks and on foot. Let them come though the winds blow and the rains beat against them, when the date is set. We shall not call upon our white friends to march with us. There are some things Negroes must do alone. This is our fight and we must see it through. If it costs money to finance a march on Washington, let Negroes pay for it. If any sacrifices are to be made for Negro rights in national defense, let Negroes make them. If Negroes fail this chance for work, for freedom and training, it may never come again. Let the Negro masses speak!"

## **Why We Support the March**

The Socialist Workers Party, the Trotskyist movement in this country, was among the first to hail the progressive character of the proposal to march on Washington. We stated our position as follows:

"A militant march on Washington, the national capital of Jim Crowism, a march made up of thousands of Negroes who will be able to get there only because hundreds of thousands of others support the march morally and financially. — this would really strike fear into the hearts of the administration and the bosses! It would really put a spoke in their wheel at the time they are shrieking about 'national unity' (at the expense of the workers) and taking the last steps prior to full entry into the war! It would give a real jolt to all the propaganda about a war 'for democracy,' put the issue of Jim Crowism on the high plane where it belongs and organize the forces for a finish fight for full social, economic and political equality!

"Correctly carried out demonstrations would also establish the Negroes as a force to be reckoned with by the conservative leaders of trade unions in the AFL, who are guilty of Jim Crow practices and could be used as a wedge for breaking down bars against Negro membership in those sections of the labor movement wherever they still exist.

"Nor should it be forgotten that a correctly carried out struggle of this kind, even if *actively* supported at the start by only a minority of the Negro people, would be an inspiration and a source of new hope and courage to millions of other Negroes; would help to deepen and extend the local struggles of the Negroes throughout the North; and would undoubtedly serve to set off in the direction of organized struggle millions of Negroes in the South who are awaiting action from their brothers in other parts of the country, and who need only an inspiring example from the rest of the working class to set them into action on a wide scale at last.

It should be obvious from this that our support of a march on Washington does not depend on any of Randolph's ideas at all. We support a militant action, not Randolph's reasons for it. We do this in the same way that we would support a strike of the union of which Randolph is president, in spite of our sharp differences with Randolph on many basic questions.

That is to say, our support of the march, while full and wholehearted, is not uncritical. We feel it our duty, as part

of our fight for full social, economic and political equality for the Negroes, to indicate mistakes and shortcomings where we see them, and to urge Negro militants to correct them.

It is in this sense that we make our criticisms of the Committee organized to put Randolph's proposals into effect, its "Call to Negro America," and its general policy.

### ***How the March Was Organized***

Randolph says again and again in his articles: "Let the masses speak." But the masses had nothing to say about the composition of the Committee or its functions. This Committee has taken on itself the sole right of determining the slogans to be used and the work to be done in Washington.

A representative conference should have been called together before the final plans were adopted. At such a conference, representatives of different organizations that want to participate in the march could have worked out policy and strategy and elected a leading committee. This would have enabled participating organizations to help work out the policy, instead of putting them in a position, as Randolph has done, where they have only the choice of carrying out the Randolph Committee's decisions or just not participating. Such a conference would have increased not only the publicity for the march, but it would also have improved the morale of those participating. The Negro workers would then really have felt that this was *their* march; something that is not truly accomplished by the mere device of excluding white workers.

### ***There Is Still Time***

Nor can Randolph object that "there wasn't time for that; we'd have wasted valuable time." This is not true. There was plenty of time for it between the time Randolph first presented the proposal in January and the time the hand-picked Committee issued the call in May.

Furthermore, at the time this is written, during the first week in June, less than a month before the march is to take place, there is no evidence that the masses, even on the eastern seaboard, have yet been reached and aroused by the organizers of the march. Most workers haven't even heard about it.

It is to be hoped that, in spite of the slow beginning, the masses and especially the workers in the trade unions, will be

mobilized to support the march during the weeks that still remain. The Socialist Workers Party is doing what it can to influence advanced workers to participate in this action. But if the march fails because of lack of support from the workers, it will be directly attributable to the bureaucratic organization of the whole affair.

In spite of many militant words and phrases, the "Call To Negro America" suffers from the same half-heartedness that has characterized the other attempts by "respectable" Negro leaders to win concessions.

Certainly one of the key questions to be faced by any movement in the question of the war and the capitalist demand for "National Unity." The exploiters mean that the workers should stop asking for higher wages and better conditions until the war is over. For the Negroes "National Unity" means suspension of the fight for equal rights until after the war is over.

The Randolph Committee has no forthright answer to this question. Instead, it says:

"But what of national unity? We believe in national unity which recognizes equal opportunity of black and white citizens to jobs in national defense and the armed forces, and in all other institutions and endeavors in America. We condemn all dictatorships; Fascist, Nazi and Communist. We are loyal, patriotic Americans, all.

"But, if American democracy will not defend its defenders; if American democracy will not protect its protectors; if American democracy will not give jobs to its toilers because of race or color; if American democracy will not insure equality of opportunity, freedom and justice to its citizens, black and white, it is a hollow mockery and belies the principles for which it is supposed to stand."

### ***Too Many Ifs***

Why all those ifs? Don't the Committee's members know very well what is going on? Is there any real doubt in their minds as to exactly what is happening to the Negro? Hidden behind the ifs is a potential surrender of the fight for the rights of the Negro people. The bosses will think: "Never fear; this is only another bunch of people who are urging us to be good, but who are pledging their loyalty in advance."

Because the Committee is afraid to take an out-and-out position on this key question, it weakens the effectiveness of

the march. There can be only one correct answer to "National Unity": unity of the Negroes with the white worker against their common enemy and exploiter.

This is not the only instance of the Call for the march making concessions to the ideas looked on with favor by the ruling class. In another place it says:

"However we sternly counsel against violence and ill-considered and intemperate action and the abuse of power. Mass power, like physical, when misdirected, is more harmful than helpful.

"We summon you to mass action that is orderly and lawful, but aggressive and militant, for justice, equality and freedom.

"Crispus Attucks marched and died as a martyr for American independence. Nat Turner, Demark Vesey, Gabriel, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass fought and died for the emancipation of Negro slaves and the preservation of American democracy."

Our criticism of this section of the Call should not be mistaken to mean that the Socialist Workers Party is in favor of "ill-considered and intemperate action" or anything of the kind. Not at all.

But who is served by this reassurance that everything is going to be nice and respectable and within the "lawful" bounds established by the ruling class and its anti-labor, Jim Crow legislatures and courts?

If we are going to talk about history, let us talk about it correctly. Did King George the Third think that Crispus Attucks' action was "lawful"? Did the slaveholders of Virginia think that Nat Turner was "orderly"?

The trouble is that the Randolph Committee members are too much concerned about what the powers that be may think about them. And as long as that is true, they lead a half-hearted fight, in spite of all their talk about aggressiveness and militancy.

Considerations such as these may seem trivial on first glance, but they help to determine the character of the entire march, and those who want a successful and meaningful march must think about and correct them.

### ***What Shall the Marchers Demand?***

The central demand of the Committee is that Roosevelt issue an executive order abolishing discrimination in all gov-

ernment departments, the armed forces and on all jobs holding government contracts. This Roosevelt will be asked to do when he is asked to address the marchers. The local demonstrations are supposed to ask their city councils to memorialize the president to issue such an order.

To fully understand this proposal, one should read the article written by Randolph himself, explaining the theory behind this demand. Printed in the April 12th *Afro-American*, it began this way:

"President Roosevelt can issue an executive order tomorrow to abolish discrimination in the Army, Navy, Air Corps, Marine, and on all defense contracts awarded by the Federal Government, on account of race or color, and discriminations against colored people would promptly end." (Our emphasis).

If Randolph's statement means anything at all, it means that discrimination and segregation continue to exist in the government, the armed forces and in industry, only because the President hasn't issued an order abolishing discrimination and segregation.

Can Randolph really believe that? He must know that Jim Crowism does not depend for its existence on the lack of executive orders abolishing it. Jim Crowism exists because it serves the interests of the capitalist ruling class to keep the working class divided and split along racial lines.

We are ready to support the Randolph Committee's demand for President Roosevelt to issue an executive order abolishing discrimination. To force him to issue such an order would be a step forward in the struggle for abolition of racial discrimination. But only a step. Roosevelt's executive order would not be so very much more weighty than the laws and rulings and orders already on the books prohibiting discrimination. In spite of them, Jim Crow rides high.

Randolph should recall one of the statements he made when he first called for the march: "... even when ... top government officials agree upon a fair and favorable policy, there are loopholes, and subordinate officers in the Army, Navy, and Air Corps, full of race hatred, who seek its contravention, nullification, and evasion."

### ***A Presidential Order Isn't Enough***

How can Randolph square his January statement with

his statement in April that a presidential decree would "promptly" end discrimination?

He can't, and he doesn't try to. He ignores this very important point which means that he ignores the facts that touch the heart of the problem:

Industry is in the hands of an employer class which fosters and strengthens anti-Negro prejudices in order to be able to more easily exploit workers of all races.

Military training is in the hands of a hardened anti-labor and therefore anti-Negro bureaucratic military caste which is dedicated to the maintenance in military life of every form of racial discrimination that exists in civilian life.

The government is in the hands of a war-mongering administration that is notorious for its indifference to the needs and desires of the Negro people. The two big capitalist parties take turns when they are in power in kicking around legislation such as the anti-lynch bill and the poll tax bill.

In other words, far more important than the question of a presidential order which would merely echo other ignored laws and rulings, is the question of *control*.

An executive order abolishing discrimination would remain largely on paper, as long as control of industry, military training and the government remain in the hands of the enemies of the Negroes.

A movement that denies these facts or tries to ignore them cannot successfully lead the struggle for full equality. A movement that shuts its eyes or refuses to open them is good only for sleeping.

### ***The Workers, Black and White, Must Control Their Own Destiny***

Negroes must fight for more than a presidential executive order. They must fight for a program that will take control out of the hands of the enemies of the Negro people.

Employers controlling the war industries won't hire Negroes? Then have the government take those industries over, and let them be managed and operated without discrimination by committees elected by the workers!

Negroes need military training in this epoch when all major questions are decided arms in hand. But the army bureaucrats are bitterly anti-Negro and determined to "keep

them in their place." Therefore, Negroes must join the fight for military training, financed by the government but under control of the trade unions, based on full equality for the Negroes!

The government and the capitalist parties aid the bosses in segregating and discriminating against the Negro people, refusing to pass such elementary legislation as punishing lynching and granting the Negroes in the South the right to vote. Therefore aid in the formation of an independent labor party pledged to carry on the Negroes' struggles. An independent labor party pledged to establish a Workers' and Farmers' Government that would create a new society that would forever abolish poverty, war and racial discrimination!

Such a program, aimed at putting control of their destiny into the hands of the workers themselves, black and white—in military training, in industry, in politics—this *must* become the program of the militant Negro workers. This is the road to jobs and equality.

The Negro misleaders will say that this program is impractical and utopian. That is what Uncle Tom said about freedom for the slaves.

But the fighting program we propose is infinitely more realistic than expecting Roosevelt—the partner of the Southern Democrats, ally of the British Empire which oppresses Negroes on every continent—to abolish discrimination.

The Socialist Workers Party supports the march on Washington. We call on the Negro workers to bring forward in the march a really militant program. If this is done, the march on Washington, whatever its immediate results, would serve to be an important stage in the fight to change the world.

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***READ THE NEW PAMPHLET JUST OUT!***  
***NEGROES AND THE U. S. ARMY***

**By EUGENE VARLIN**

A devastating expose of conditions under which the Negroes lived and died during the last war, and showing how the same conditions are being prepared for the colored workers in this new war!

To read it is to understand that there is only one road for all workers—colored and white—Joint action against our common enemy, the Boss Class!