

A. Philip Randolph's Attempt at Equal Economic Opportunity: A Case Study

Joel Walker

On December 31, 1942, the counter intelligence section of the Seventh Naval District based in Jacksonville, Florida, distributed its monthly summary of subversive activities. On page two of the summary, under the heading “Activities Concerning Negroes,” was a small paragraph credited to the FBI. It read:

It has been reported that a movement known as the “March on Washington Movement” was active for about ninety days in Tampa, Florida, securing donations and enrolling negroes, the plan being to get enough people to march on Washington. It was stated that such an action would be the only way to get results insofar as the advancement of the negro race was concerned. The Movement is said to be headed by Norman LACEY, Chairman, janitor at the Maas Brothers Office Building and Matthew GREGORY, Vice-Chairman, local representative of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters’ Union. The Movement, which is reported to be closely associated with the Tampa Union of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People, is said to be dormant at the present time ... Indications are, however, that the Movement is becoming active in Northern States.¹

The paragraph did not mention A. Philip Randolph, the national president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and one of the driving forces behind the March on Washington Movement.

Nearly two years earlier, in January 1941, in frustration over the federal government’s lack of support for opportunities in the booming war industries and equality in the military, Randolph had begun to organize the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). Calling for grassroots action instead of political negotiation, the movement gained momentum among the black population as the July 1, 1941, date

for the event neared. In reaction to the fear of tens of thousands of African Americans marching on the nation’s capital, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 to ensure “the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin.” To investigate “complaints of discrimination in violation of the provisions,” the order established the “Committee on Fair Employment Practice.” In exchange for the order, signed on June 25th, Randolph called off the march.²

The Committee on Fair Employment Practice, more commonly known as the

Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), has been disregarded by most historians as a powerless and ineffectual agency, especially in the South. If this is so, however, then why is Randolph’s victory over FDR included in one form or another in many state high school history standards? And if Executive Order 8802 had no real effect, then why is it included as one of the 100 milestone documents in *Our Documents* (ourdocuments.gov)? These questions beg students to draw their own conclusions from the historical record.

What Effect, if any, did the FEPC have on the Civil Rights Movement?

The document of the Seventh Naval District describing the “subversive activities” of African Americans not only indicates the conventional view of discrimination and segregation but it goes a step further: federal authorities were monitoring the activities of civil rights organizations such as MOWM and the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It also implies that Randolph and the March on Washington Movement were not satisfied with the impact of the FEPC and that a march on Washington was still a possibility.

An episode at the Alabama Dry Dock and Ship Building Company, a manufac-

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EXECUTIVE ORDER

REAFFIRMING POLICY OF FULL PARTICIPATION IN
THE DEFENSE PROGRAM BY ALL PERSONS, REGARDLESS
OF RACE, CREED, COLOR, OR NATIONAL ORIGIN, AND
DIRECTING CERTAIN ACTION IN FURTHERANCE OF
SAID POLICY.

WHEREAS it is the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders; and

WHEREAS there is evidence that available and needed workers have been barred from employment in industries engaged in defense production solely because of considerations of race, creed, color, or national origin, to the detriment of workers' morale and of national unity:

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the statutes, and as a prerequisite to the successful conduct of our national defense production effort, I do hereby reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries ^{or related activities} because of race, creed, color, or national origin, and I do hereby declare that it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations, in furtherance of said policy and of this order, to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin;

And it is hereby ordered as follows:

1. All departments and agencies of the Government of the United States concerned with vocational and training programs for defense production shall take special measures appropriate to assure that such programs are administered without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin;

2. All contracting agencies of the Government of the United States shall include in all defense contracts hereafter negotiated by them a provision obligating the contractor not to discriminate against any worker because of race, creed, color, or national origin;

3. There is established in the Office of Production Management a Committee on Fair Employment Practice, which shall consist of a chairman and four other members to be appointed by the President. The chairman and members of the Committee shall serve as such without compensation but shall be entitled to actual and necessary transportation, subsistence and other expenses incidental to performance of their duties. The Committee shall receive and investigate complaints of discrimination in violation of the provisions of this order and shall take appropriate steps to redress grievances which it finds to be valid. The Committee shall also recommend to the several departments and agencies of the Government of the United States and to the President all measures which may be deemed by it necessary or proper to effectuate the provisions of this order.



THE WHITE HOUSE,
June 25, 1941.

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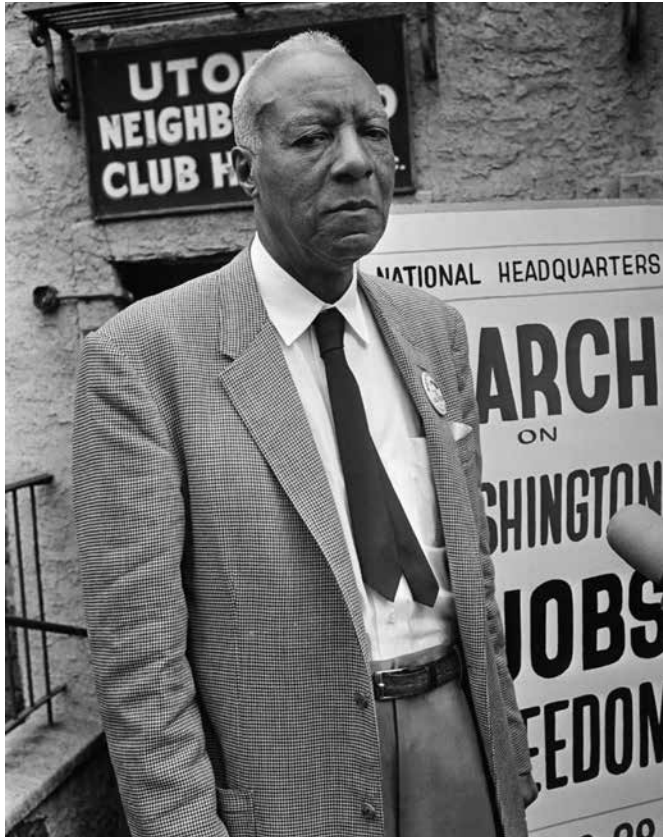
OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION
Southeastern Regional Office
Atlanta, Georgia.

The Chairman of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice announced today that:

"The proposed solution for settlement of difficulties at the shipyard, Alabama Drydock & Shipbuilding Company, drawn up by the conference committee on May 28 and subscribed to by David R. Dohlap, J. M. Griser and W. T. Daly for the company; by Charles Hanson, J. L. Bouche and Elijah Jackson for the International Union of Marine & Shipbuilding Workers of America (CIO); by E. J. Trimble and Clarence Mitchell for the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice; and by Burton P. Morley for the War Manpower Commission has been approved by the chairman of the U. S. Maritime Commission, the chairman of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy and the Chairman of the War Manpower Commission.

"All steps necessary will be taken by the War Department to maintain public order and the production of ships at the Alabama Drydock & Shipbuilding Company. Under the arrangement confirmed by the heads of the interested agencies, Negroes will be upgraded in all skills necessary for bare hull construction on ways 1 through 4 of the Alabama Drydock & Shipbuilding Company and these ways will be set aside for bare hull construction by Negro workers."

(Chairman of President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice is Monseigneur Francis E. Haas.)



A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters is pictured here on August 15, 1956, in Chicago, Illinois.

turer of Liberty Ships in Mobile, Alabama, was representative of the ambiguous effects of the FEPC. In the first year and a half after America's entrance into World War II, Alabama Dry Dock did employ a substantial number of African Americans (7,000 of the 25,000 employees were black). But African Americans were given low-paid, non-skilled jobs, while the skilled positions were held by white workers. During the spring of 1943, the FEPC worked to correct this situation and proposed that Alabama Dry Dock set aside two *ways* for Negro welders during ship construction (a *way* was the term used for a specific work area where a large number of workers built a certain part of the ship). Although these ways would be segregated, it meant that African Americans would have the opportunity to be promoted into the more skilled, higher paying positions. In a surprising turn of events, Alabama Dry Dock went beyond the FEPC proposal and, during the night shift on May 24, 1943, placed trained black welders on *four* ways, integrating them alongside the white welders.

Through the graveyard hours, white reaction to the black welders was minimal. It was not until an hour and a half into the day shift that all hell broke loose. White workers rioted in a violent and horrific rage directed towards all black workers and not just the welders. For days after the initial riot, tensions were high at both the factory and in the Mobile community. Even with the military called to restore order, there were continued problems. Many black workers refused to return for fear of being

TEACHING ACTIVITY

Two documents are reprinted here that relate to these events: Executive Order 8802 and the proposed May 28 settlement.³ Teachers should explain to high school students the details of Randolph's threat of a march on Washington and FDR's issuing of Executive Order 8802. Have them read the Executive Order, interpret its meaning, and predict its possible effects. After this discussion, explain the context of the events at Alabama Dry Dock: the FEPC's suggestion to open two segregated ways for African Americans, the company's integration of four ways on May 24, 1943, and the resulting riot. Hand out the proposed May 28 settlement with instructions to formulate a possible answer to the question "What effect, if any, did the FEPC have on the civil rights movement?" Below are some leading questions for each of the documents.

Executive Order 8802: What did President Roosevelt "reaffirm" in the Executive Order concerning the hiring of minorities in defense industry jobs? How did he plan to enforce this declaration and what department did he create to enforce it?

Definitive question: If President Roosevelt declared there would be no discrimination in the defense plants and he created the Fair Employment Practices Committee to enforce this declaration, then how would this order have affected the defense industry work place? Describe what "no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries because of race, creed, color, or national origin" would look like in a typical defense plant.

FEPC Proposed May 28 Settlement: How did the proposal suggest the conflict be settled? Was the agreement good or bad for African American workers? Does this segregated settlement look anything like the typical work place the students described after interpreting the Executive Order?

Definitive question: What effect, if any, did the FEPC have on the civil rights movement?

[An expanded electronic version of this activity can be found in Docsteach.org under the title *Confronting Work Place Discrimination on the World War II Home Front* (<http://docsteach.org/activities/15866>).]

victims of the violence. On May 28, a settlement was proposed by the FEPC stating “Negroes will be upgraded in all skills necessary for bare hull construction on ways 1 through 4.” It also designated that these four ways be only for Negro workers. The proposal was approved on Saturday, May 29th. On Monday, nearly all of the black workers at the plant returned, yet the situation remained tense for days afterwards.

When students are presented with documentation about this event, they have typically interpreted it as having had no effect on civil rights or on improved conditions for African Americans in the South. Their argument is usually based on the fact that the working conditions remained segregated. Students perceive that civil rights was an all or nothing situation. Yet to the skilled black welder who, prior to this agreement, was being paid a janitor’s salary pushing a broom and now was using his talents earning a welder’s pay, this was an immense step forward. As a civil rights’ strategy, integration was not at the forefront until the *Brown v. Board* cases, specifically the *Briggs v. Elliott* case out of South Carolina where the dissenting federal judge, J. Waties Waring, stated that “segregation is per se inequality.”²⁴ Prior to *Brown*, while *Plessey v. Ferguson* was still in effect, the overt strategy was that if things were to be separate they needed to be equal. Although the ultimate goal may have been full integration, the immediate objective for leaders such as A. Philip Randolph was equal economic opportunity.

The FEPC certainly did not succeed in bringing equal opportunity to America, especially in the South, but the question is what effect, if any, did it have? With today’s culture of immediate gratification and unwillingness to compromise, it may be difficult to see that the rate of progress can sometimes be measured in degrees and that large victories are often built on

smaller ones. Randolph’s success in getting Executive Order 8802 issued by FDR, the Order’s establishment of the FEPC, and whether the FEPC had an effect on the future of the civil rights movement offers an open-ended discussion on how change over time occurs and on the concept of cause and effect.

The FEPC came close to becoming a permanent agency during the Truman Administration but a large voting bloc in Congress prevented it. Shortly after the dismantling of the Committee, President Truman did issue Executive Order 9981 banning segregation in the military. Was A. Philip Randolph satisfied with the results attained by his March on Washington Movement? Perhaps not, as he was a driving force of another march on Washington, this one occurring in 1963. 🌐

Notes

1. *Monthly Summary of Subversive Activities, Seventh Naval District, December 31, 1942*; Formerly Classified General Correspondence; Records of the U.S. Naval Districts, Record Group 181, National Archives at Atlanta, National Archives and Records Administration.
2. *Executive Order 8802*, issued by Franklin Roosevelt on June 25, 1941, is held in the General Records of the United States Government Record Group 11; National Archives at Washington, National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives Identifier 300005).
3. *Office of War Information Announcement* (of the agreement ending the conflict at Alabama Dry Dock) can be found in Speeches by Members of Regional Office Staff and Other Material; Records of the War Manpower Commission, Record Group 211; National Archives at Atlanta, National Archives and Records Administration.
4. *Dissenting Opinion from Harry Briggs, Jr., et al. v. R.W. Elliott, Chairman, et al., Civil Action No. 2657* (National Archives Identifier 279306); US Civil Cases Files; District Court for the Eastern District of South Carolina; Records of the District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21, National Archives at Atlanta, National Archives and Records Administration.

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