

War Brings New Status For America's Negroes

Industry's Complex Problem in
Meeting Demands for Job Equality



"WINGS" FOR NEGRO ARMY PILOTS: Their class made history for their race

Government's relaxation of color line in services and civilian departments

America's own color problem is forcing itself into the open. It is only a small brother to the race situation which stood in the way of British war preparations in Burma and India. But it shouts from headlines and has set many a war agency to hunting the answer to the questions it poses.

Negro workers, barred from the cafeterias of a new Government building by Virginia segregation laws, protest and win admission from the War Department after a tussle with a guard. They refuse to move into the back seats of Virginia busses en route to the building and win a relaxation of that State law. In Detroit, white workers walk out when Negroes are hired; a riot occurs when Negroes are moved into a new housing project in a white community. In New Jersey, Negro soldiers are killed at an Army camp in a clash with white military policemen.

The Government, endeavoring to meet the problem by raising the economic stature of the Negro, creates committees, changes regulations. The Army admits Negro candidates for officer training to the same schools as whites. It is training Negro pilots for the Air Force. Negro officers will command Negro troops. The Navy opens new types of service for the Negro in the Marine Corps, the Coast Guard, inshore establishments, Navy yards and construction crews.

In many fields, the Government is leading the way in hiring of Negroes, putting them into skilled jobs in Navy shipyards, arsenals and Government departments. Many a Negro girl is moving out of Washington kitchens into Government offices.

But the broader opportunities of private industry are what the Negro is seeking. The big migrations of the last war won him a place in the steel, meat packing, shipbuilding and automobile industries. Now he is trying to win places in all ranks of many types of industry so that when the aftermath of war hits it will be easier



WAR WORKER: Government hiring leads the way for him to keep the foothold.

None of the big migrations such as swept through the South in the last war has occurred this time. But as job opportunities have shown themselves, Negroes have moved from New York to munitions plants and shipyards in New England, from many places to Philadelphia and Newport News shipyards, in smaller numbers to Detroit, Pittsburgh and the West Coast.

Thus far, jobs have opened slowly. Training schools often are closed to them, preventing their getting the skills needed for war work. The schools say they don't train Negroes for types of work for which Negroes have not been hired in the past. Plant personnel managers say they can't get trained Negroes.

So far, the shortage of man power has not become sufficiently acute to force open the plant doors for the Negro in any great number. But Negro leaders argue that it would be a great boost to the morale of the black men if the jobs were offered to him voluntarily, not as a last resort and because America found it could not turn out the goods to win the war without him.

However, theories about activating the democratic principle and even Government pressure have less to do with changing hiring habits than does the growing shortage of man power. There now are 3,000,000 unemployed, many of whom never will work again, either through inability or indisposition. Among these are almost 500,000 Negroes both able and willing to work. Some could go into a job now. Others need training. Many others are doing work less skilled than that for which they were trained, or are capable.

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President Roosevelt stepped into the middle of the problem a year ago. The law providing federal funds for job training specified that the teaching should be given without discrimination because of race. Mr. Roosevelt ordered, in a proclamation, that this be followed up by the contracting agencies. All contracts specify no discrimination in hiring. And the President created a Committee on Fair Employment Practice to investigate complaints of discrimination and "take appropriate steps to redress grievances which it finds to be valid."

A Committee worker who went through an aviation plant in those early days says the personnel manager pointed proudly to a long line of young, white, strong workers that the company had recruited throughout the Midwest. "They were splendid," the Committee worker said, "but his city had had lots of people on relief, still had many on WPA. The company had (1) failed to cure unemployment in its own community; (2) failed to take people off relief; (3) created a housing problem by importing labor; (4) created a bad morale problem among Negroes and Spanish-Americans by refusing to hire them; (5) enrolled as plant workers men of military age who were needed by the Army and Navy; and (6) robbed farmers of labor."

The Committee, here and elsewhere, found that there had been discrimination against Negroes. It held hearings, published findings, ordered firms to change practices. Some firms did a complete about face, opened jobs to Negroes straight down the line. Negro employment went up in those communities.

It generally went up elsewhere after a visit by the Committee, for a month or so. Then it would level off. "Token employment," one Committee worker called it. "They simply hired a few Negroes so they could say they were complying with the presidential order and closed their doors against the rest."

The Committee has no power to follow up. It gives publicity to a complaint through its hearing and findings. But there its authority stops. The contracts say there shall be no discrimination. But the Committee cannot enforce its orders. Only the Army, the Navy or the Maritime Commission—which make most of the contracts—could compel the contractor to comply. And the Army, the Navy and the Maritime Commission are interested only in getting the quickest possible delivery of the goods they have ordered. They are not willing to dabble too much in the inner

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workings of a firm's employment policies.

Committee inquiries have turned up many odd facts. Robert Smith, a Negro graduate of Ohio State University, a consulting and electrical engineer, applied for a job with an aviation concern in New Jersey. He was told the only jobs the plant had for Negroes were in the foundry, that it could not hire Negro electricians. He needed work so badly he took a job as laborer in the foundry, later filed an application with other employes for training in the Paterson Vocational School. The foundry foreman refused to refer him.

Before the Committee got into the case, the company informed it of changes in hiring and training policies to include Negroes. But the Committee ordered that Robert Smith be given a job in line with his qualifications. This was one of eight cases in the New York area in which the Committee ordered that discrimination be done away with. Another case, from California, developed that a Negro, certified by the Civil Service Commission as a master plumber, could not take the job offered because Negroes were prohibited from living in the town in which the job was.

In the North, the Committee's biggest job was getting Negroes into plants. The employers were unacquainted with the Negro as a worker. In the South, they knew him as a worker. The difficulty was getting him into kinds of jobs he had not been traditionally associated with, and getting him upgraded or trained for skilled jobs.

Plants like the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Co. had used Negroes for many years. One of its Negro riveters, "Pony Bill" Williams, set a world's rivet-driving record with 2,275 rivets in 8 hours back in 1916. He made \$75 that day, ate two pounds of meat for lunch. It cost him \$1.25. He still works for the firm. So do his three brothers, two half-brothers, a nephew and a niece.

But shipyard welding has become associated with the electrical trades, so far as unions are concerned, and this has stood in the way of turning Negroes into welders. In Washington, the heads of both AFL and CIO are friendly to the introduction of Negroes into unions. But many locals object. In the main, the CIO, with a tighter rein over its locals, has made more headway among the Negroes than the AFL. But instances have arisen in both organizations in which locals have walked out, or sat down, because Negroes were hired.

Dr. Robert C. Weaver, chief of the

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Negro Employment and Training Branch of the War Production Board, says social problems get twisted into the employment picture. "Very often," he said, "the first question asked our workers is: 'Do you believe in intermarriage?' Can you tell me what that has to do with employment? We are interested in getting jobs."

The Japanese tried propagandizing among Negroes before Pearl Harbor. One Japanese in New York had a complete file of Negro leaders and in one way or another made contact with them to present the racial arguments of Japan.

But the Japanese had little appeal for the Negro. Their personal relations had never been congenial. They had competed for the same types of jobs on the West Coast.

Consequently, the main current of Negro thought remained solidly American, anti-Japanese, certainly anti-Nazi. But a double-V program started by a Pittsburgh Negro newspaper has gained followers. It calls for a double victory: Over America's enemies outside the nation; and the winning of broader rights for the Negro inside America.

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