

Civic Strategies

A. Philip Randolph's Attempt at Equal Economic Opportunity: *Riot at the Alabama Dry Dock and Ship Building Company: A Case Study*

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 printed 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 grass-roots action instead of political negotiation, MOWM gained traction and momentum within the black population as the July 1, 1941 date for the event neared. In reaction to the fear of tens of thousands, if not more, African Americans marching on the nation's capitol, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 providing for "*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 of this order*" it established the "*Committee on Fair Employment Practice.*" In exchange for Executive Order 8802, signed on June 25th, Randolph called off the march.(2)

The Committee on Fair Employment Practice, or 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 why was Executive Order 8802 included as one of the 100 milestone documents in *Our Documents* (ourdocuments.gov) if it had no real effect? These very questions beg your 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 referenced above describing the subversive activities of Negroes 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 MOWM 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 manufacturer of Liberty Ships in Mobile, Alabama, is 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 they were 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 Alabama Dry Dock placed trained Negro welders on *four* ways, integrating them alongside the white welders.

Through the grave yard 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 victims of the violence. On May 28, a settlement was proposed by the FEPC stating that “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 the documentation of this event, they typically have interpreted it as having 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 were still segregated, 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 of action 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.”(3) 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? In our modern age of immediate gratification and unwillingness to compromise it is difficult to see that the rate of progress sometimes is 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 or not 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.

Multiple documents along with Executive Order 8802 are found on this web page (FEPC link). With high school students explain 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. Let students have access to all the documents in the link or choose selected documents with instructions to the students to formulate a possible answer to the question "***what effect, if any, did the FEPC have on the Civil Rights Movement in the South?***" It is suggested that students write a paper with an introductory paragraph stating their answer to the above question in the form of a thesis statement, two or three paragraphs supporting their thesis based on the documents, and a concluding paragraph restating their point.

Below are some leading questions for a sample 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 have this order effected 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.

- *Playing into Hitler's Hands*: What is the opinion of this writer? Which side does the writer favor, the white workers or the African American workers?
- *Official May 27 Press Release*: Does this document support the African American welders? Why or why not? Notice the incomplete line in the third paragraph. Why might that line be incomplete?
- *Edited Draft of May 27 Press Release*: Is this original draft more or less supportive of the African American welders than the final release? Why or why not?
- *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?
- Ultimate 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>).]

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.

End 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, (ARC Identifier 300005); General Records of the United States*

Government Record Group 11; National Archives at Washington, National Archives and Records Administration.

(3) *Dissenting Opinion from Harry Briggs, Jr., et al. v. R. W. Elliott, Chairman, et al., Civil*

Action No. 2657 (ARC Identifier 279306); U.S 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.