A Survey of the Problems of the Negro Under the New Deal
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This session marks for us the beginning of three days of candid inventory of the position of the Negro in our national economic crisis. Even cursory analysis of the plight in which America's Negro population finds itself today will reveal this inventory to be a most necessary task. We have not met here to engage merely in academic discussion. The problem is too near to us for this. And, therefore, we face this task with the highly serious purpose of formulating not only an accurate survey of conditions as they exist but as well with the purpose of developing through discussion a more correct solution of the problem.

It will be evident, before long, that we who are here are not of one mind. If that were so, we would have little need for such a meeting, but could instead proceed immediately upon a program of action on which all agreed. To the contrary, there are represented at this conference many divergent views. Thus, nothing could be more welcome than the presentation of these views, completely and fully. This we, who have planned these meetings, hope to achieve.

In this scheme my task is relatively simple. I am not here as a scientist to chart a path for Negroes to follow on the way out of our national crisis. Rather my rôle is that of one who poses the question, "What shall our program be?"

I will not attempt a denial of the fact that my question will carry with it the flavor of my own opinion and my own experience. One thing is certain, however: no rules of courtesy compel the delegates here to agree with me or even to remain cynically silent. The first word is mine. But the last word is yours.

We as Negroes are a minority group, easily indentifiable for purposes of exploitation. Ours is a slave heritage, with a common experience of three hundred years of varied oppression. For the masses of us there have always existed in America sub-standards of living, perpetuated in part by the denial to us of civil rights and the constant presence of prejudice.

Today we find ourselves subject as other groups of workers and farmers, to economic exploitation within a capitalist nation, but as well doubly exploited because of the accident of race. In the early period of the capitalist development of the nation it has been relatively easy for us to yield to the demands of our exploiters for something more than is asked of white workers. Now in the sixth year of an unusual and catastrophic economic depression, this added tax exceeds our endurance. Indeed, the basic price demanded of all workers becomes unbearable.
It is particularly significant that we make this survey of the problems of the Negro at this half way mark of the New Deal administration. This administration has had two years in which to unfold itself. It pledged an end to poverty and the beginning of a permanent prosperity. It affirmed its belief that a planned economy could be created within a capitalist nation which would carry with it none of the toll of human sacrifice and human poverty so characteristic of capitalist development until the present time. Implicit in this promise was the assurance of economic equality of Negroes. We may now compare this promise with present performance.

At once the most striking fact to be observed is the tremendous growth in the number of Negroes of both rural and urban centers who have been compelled to seek relief despite the continuous operation of New Deal devices allegedly calculated to reduce unemployment, increase wages, and raise the standard of living of the American working class. The unemployment census of October, 1933, showed 2,117,000 Negroes in families receiving relief, or 17.8 per cent of the Negro population. In January, 1935, one and a half years later, the conservative estimate of the FERA showed 4,000,000 Negroes to be in families receiving relief, or nearly 30 per cent of our population. In Southern sections of the nation the percentage of Negroes on relief is uniformly shown to be from two and one-half to three times larger proportionately than is the Negro population in this section. Although we represent less than 10 per cent of the total population of the United States, the number of Negroes on relief is today more than 20 per cent of the total number of relief families for the United States.

It must not be supposed that the figures just cited give a complete indication of the depth to which the Negro in America has fallen as a result of six years of a national economic depression. Indeed it is frankly admitted by government officials that tens of thousands of Negroes in both urban and rural centers, particularly in the agricultural centers of the country, are denied jobs and relief. In many Southern counties the proportion of Negro tenants on relief was low while the proportion was high in the total population. In Marlboro County, South Carolina, for example, 92 per cent of the Negro farm operators were tenants while only 32.3 per cent of the Negro farm operators on relief were tenants. In Dallas County, Alabama, although 75 per cent of the population is Negro, only 69 colored boys were enrolled in CCC camps as contrasted with 155 whites. Reports of the FERA covering eighteen sample counties in the eleven Southern states indicate the same general characteristic noted for the two counties just mentioned.

In discussing the problem of Negroes on relief, it is not enough to note discrimination which operated to exclude them from relief benefits. Equally as serious is that discrimination which establishes for them, with full knowledge of the federal government, a standard of living
lower than that established for whites. While this tendency is most marked in Southern states where standards of living for Negroes are from 30 to 50 per cent lower than standards for whites, it is not limited to the South. Today, in cities North and West the Negro relief client is the victim of sub-standard relief aid.

When we study the trends of the occupations of Negroes on relief rolls, we find adequate substantiation of the charge that in urban and industrial centers Negro unskilled and unorganized workers are those hardest hit by decreased unemployment. Thus, an analysis of forty urban centers shows 105,346 female Negro servants on relief as contrasted with only 42,504 white. Among the male unskilled workers in these forty urban centers the 64,972 Negro unskilled workers on relief represent roughly 33 per cent of the total, although Negroes are roughly 14 per cent of the total population for these cities.

Over the radio a few nights ago the Speaker of the House of Representatives declared that under the present system of government we must prepare ourselves to accept as a fact the permanent unemployment of 5,000,000 or more persons able and willing to work. This statement finds agreement among outstanding economists of the present era. Thus, the fact of excessive disproportionate unemployment among Negroes coupled with the fact of rankest discrimination in the administration of relief gives us serious cause to wonder what proportion of this permanent army of unemployed and poorly-cared-for American citizens will be Negro. We have cause also to survey New Deal mechanisms which promised prosperity but brought us to this appalling condition of poverty.

Because of the importance of agriculture in Negro life it will be well for us to consider first the problems raised for the Negro farm population by the New Deal. As a group, Negroes are more agricultural than the white population. In 1930, 39.4 per cent of the Negroes lived on farms as compared with only 22.8 per cent of the white population. Moreover, the standard of living of our Negro farm population was indescribably low. Of all Negro farm operators in eleven Southern states in 1930, less than 20 per cent were owners and managers while 70.2 per cent were croppers and share tenants. The 40 per cent reduction in cotton acreage and particularly similar reduction in other basic crops have driven from 250,000 to 500,000 farm tenant families out of commercial production. To these must be added another 100,000 agricultural workers who will not be needed to help chop and pick Southern cotton and work in the production of other basic crops. This mass unemployment of agricultural workers has borne heavily upon Negroes because of their large representation among the classification of croppers and share tenants. Despite the fact that Section 7 of the cotton acreage reduction contract is supposed to have provided against displacement of tenants, widespread displacement has occurred. Accompanying tenant evictions has been the widespread
and flagrant violation of other sections of the Triple A acreage reduction contract.

This week in Washington plantation bosses came in hordes to acclaim the Triple A program. Several weeks before, these same bosses had urged their Negro and white tenants to cast their vote in favor of the continuance of the Triple A. They told the glowing story of increased prices received for farm products. They did not tell the story of wholesale robbery of their tenants, of wholesale tenant evictions, of terrorism against the organization of Negro and white agricultural unions or of the lowering of the standards of living of the masses of the farm population. At the head of this farm was Edward O'Neal of Alabama. On his large plantation in Lauderdale County, Alabama, I rode for miles last summer. It was peopled by ragged Negro tenants receiving scant allotments of corn meal and fatback during the harvesting time and receiving nothing else. It was on this plantation that I unearthed numerous complaints of tenants who claimed never to have seen government cotton checks to which they were entitled. It was this gentleman about whom Chester Davis, Director of the AAA, placed a friendly arm and posed for a picture this week. It was this gentleman who in turn led the bosses in praising the New Deal for farmers. Whether tenants were black or white the landlords squeezed from them progressively more and more of the goods which they produced. Tenants have been denied every legal remedy.

Allegedly to meet this problem there has recently been proposed by Senator Bankhead of Alabama, a new bill establishing a system of small farms for tenant farmers. The new Bankhead Bill is widely heralded by progressives as the South's solution of the tenant problem. The announced purpose of the bill is "To create the Farmer's Home Corporation, to promote more secure occupancy of farms and farm homes, to correct the economic instability resulting from some present forms of farm tenancy, engage in rural rehabilitation, and for other purposes."

Perhaps the best way to describe the bill is first to set forth the benefits which its friends feel the bill will confer upon tenant farmers and agricultural workers and then to describe the dangers which opponents of the bill who consider themselves the real friends of the sharecroppers see in it.

Those supporting the bill regard it as a virtual fulfillment of the old Reconstruction promise of 40 acres and a mule, although this particular number of acres is not set forth. Incidentally, it should be noted that it was pressure from sharecropper and tenant union sources which persuaded some of the Senate liberals to introduce what amounts to a maximum acreage clause for each state into the bill. That Section reads as follows:

Section 4 (a) (4) The Corporation shall limit the loan made to any purchaser to the amount that will provide a farm to be limited in area to the size of an average farm in the State where the land is
located as determined by the preceding Federal Census. . . .

Those who favor this bill feel that it will eliminate the trend toward tenancy in the South and produce a contented small farm operator on the order of the European peasant. A second argument is that this bill, by giving the Negro ownership will somehow give him the right to vote. Some even feel that the ownership of real property will place the Negro over a period of years on a more equal social basis with whites. They claim that it will break up the sharecropper system. Some feel that at least it is a more kindly way of taking care of surplus farmers and farm laborers than relief, casual labor or landlord furnishings. On the other hand, more conservative elements favor the bill as a bulwark against radicalism.

Opponents of the bill have answered these very high sounding and persuasive arguments in this fashion: They regard these vague hopes of the liberals as absolutely utopian and unreal. "Why should the mere possession of a piece of paper upon which the government has a heavy mortgage change the status of the Negro farmer in the South?" they ask. Negro owners do not vote in the South today any more than do the sharecroppers. The white landlords will find no difficulty in controlling a Negro peasantry tied to the land by debt and tied to these same landlords who control all marketing channels as well as all jobs. They will find means of keeping the Negro from voting except when they want him to, as they always have since 1890. The recent fiasco regarding the cropper's share of the plow-up checks and the failure of Section 7 to prevent evictions demonstrate the futility of hoping for equitable local administration of federal laws.

The proponents of the bill apparently pin their hopes for a fair administration of this bill on the board of five who are to direct its details. They forget that it is the local officials rather than the national who really control the policies in the field.

Three points arise against the proponents' contention that the bill will be the entering wedge in the breakup of the sharecropping system. First, landlords as a group prefer sharecroppers to wage laborers except in certain highly mechanized localities. This is because the sharecropper system furnishes a more stable working population, available at all times and entirely dependent on the landlord. Second, credit and ownership of land and equipment are concentrated in the hands of the landlords, who control the only source of wealth from which the farm population can secure an income. Third, the insecurity of income under the terms of the Bankhead Bill as well as the heavy debt load will make the majority of sharecroppers feel that their tenancy, bad as it is, offers more security than ownership in these terms.

The opponents of the bill feel that there are additional effects which are even more serious than those already mentioned. So far as any one can tell, the only source of income for these former sharecroppers is work on the nearby plantation—the
same old story of credit for necessities at the plantation—high interest rates and a debit balance on the books at the end of the year. In addition to this debt to the landowner, which is an old story of the sharecropper, he will have a debt to the government. The bill provides that the debt may run for 60 years, creating a bondage for two generations, and chaining tenants to the soil even more firmly than they have been chained by the debt slavery of the furnishing system.

Those who believe that these farmers can make a living and repay their debts as owners without recourse to day labor should consider several basic factors which would seem to make this an impossibility.

1. There is no provision in the bill which guarantees the former tenant any better land than he formerly farmed. On the contrary the bill explicitly provides that “beneficiaries of the program . . . become established upon lands now under cultivation.” This opens an opportunity to landlords, insurance companies and absentee owners to get rid of lands which are no longer profitable, in other words, submarginal.

2. The size farm provided for in the bill has never provided a decent livelihood for either Negro or white farmer in the South.

3. The bill does not make clear what farm products are to be used for a cash income, but the wording of section 4 (e) and the AAA program indicates that such staple crops as cotton and tobacco will be strictly controlled and cannot be relied upon to produce a larger income than they are furnishing poor farmers at present. Diversification of crops has been attempted in the South over a period of 30 years and has failed partly because workers’ purchasing power is too low to absorb these products.

4. This bill provides no protection to sharecroppers against discrimination because of race, color, organizational affiliation or activities, or political beliefs. It will be used to drive a deeper wedge into the race prejudice which separates Negro and white on the same economic level.

5. Finally, the opponents of the bill regard it as an exceedingly clever device for “taking care of” “surplus” farm population, in such a way as to remove them from relief rolls and still keep them in bondage at the beck and call of the plantation owner, providing him with a reservoir of cheap labor at government expense.

We may turn now to a consideration of another important New Deal mechanism—The National Recovery Administration. Negro industrial workers in common with all industrial workers were promised the establishment of codes of fair competition which would provide shorter working hours and higher wages. The shortening of hours, it was declared, would create the absorption of industrial unemployment. Increased wages, it was promised, would increase buying power of our industrial population.

It seems obvious that in dealing with mass unemployment, declining real wages, and stagnant production, the NRA could have had only one
of two reasonable objectives. On the one hand, it might have purposefully intended to modify our profits system to give wage earners a more equitable proportion of the national income, *i.e.*, a larger slice of the pie, or on the other hand it might have had the objective of increasing the size of the pie.

Either one of these objectives, without action on the part of the NRA to eliminate the atypical condition of Negro labor, cannot be achieved. The first possible objective means drastic limitation of so-called laissez-faire industry. The immobility of capital and labor in the South is exactly the vicious economic condition which such an objective would seek to cure. It is, therefore, precisely among Negro workers that effort at cure should be first begun, because they are the group receiving the smallest parts of the national income and the group most easily to be preyed upon by employers. But the NRA has admitted as a significantly realistic necessity the continued brutal exploitation of Negro industrial labor, especially in the South. This, of course, negates the first objective.

But even the second possible objective open to the NRA, namely, enlarging the pie by the smoothing out of obstructions in the way of the smooth flow of profits into the hands of employers, makes it of prime importance that geographical, occupational, and other essentially Negro differentials be eliminated. A properly organized profits economy does not indefinitely permit an immobile and, in this sense, excessive supply of unorganized workers. It envisions the relatively quick removal of illiteracy and low standards of living, realizing that such factors must impede production and the flow of purchasing power into the hands of the buying public. Such an objective, if honestly pursued, would recognize the inevitability of cut-throat competition through the inversion of profits-seeking, in that industrialists, unable to compete on a free and competitive basis, would seek to take advantage of the unprotected wage slaves of the South. Such an inversion means the perpetuation of socially inferior organization and production methods as now exist, for the competitive exploitation of a large part of the population tends to keep down the whole population. In short, the existence of wide-spread Negro poverty must sooner or later contradict white prosperity.

It is clear then that for either humanitarian or for the purely selfish reasons of the profit-seeker, NRA's first task was and is to guarantee to Negro industrial workers real wages sufficient to meet a decent living standard over a definite period of time. This, NRA has not done.

There is little relationship between the minimum wage rates set in codes and real labor income at best even for white workers. For Negro workers there is none at all. Hourly wage rates or rates per unit of output multiplied by the hourly maxima found in a code certainly do not give us even the actual money wage of the worker whom the code covered. In the tobacco industry—to cite but one of many examples
—average hours are far below those established in the NRA under which the industry now operates. For Negro workers, chiefly found in stemmeries, the average work week as shown by a complete study in November, 1934, was well under 30 hours instead of the 40-hour maximum established. Thus, a false and misleading picture of the actual effect of the tobacco code will be gotten from an attempt to use its paper minima and maxima. Nor is this the whole story. Tobacco companies maintain a large artificial surplus of Negro man power which they import from the deep South. Not only do they prevent workers from working more than 2 and 3 days a week, but as well during many weeks there is no work for any of the workers. Thus, paper minima and maxima in codes become even more mythical as reflections of the actual money wages of workers when annual income is sought. And these same traits of part-time work and irregularity of work are especially true for other industries where Negro labor predominates in the South.

Even before the code leaves Washington to be administered by an industry-controlled code authority, supplemented by a cumbersome NRA compliance division, meaning has become so emasculated out of code rates that they bear no relationship whatsoever to real labor income. And for Negroes the multiplication of differential upon differential makes the result for them just about 50 times as muddled as it is for white workers.

Let me at this time present a kind of evidence which will answer the argument that differentials have been narrowed between Negro and white workers, between the North and the South, between large and small political subdivisions. Even so great an optimist as General Hugh S. Johnson had to confess that the 14 cents an hour minimum rate established in the Laundry Trade Code for the Southern area was not a decent living wage. But he insisted that this wage substantially improved the former laundry wage. But for the laundry industry and for the rest of the service trades comprising an employment of over 2,000,000 workers, representing in the South principally Negro employees, even the compliance division of NRA admits there has been virtually no compliance. Thus, alleged narrowing of differentials is shown to be a mere paper shibboleth. Nor may we find any different compliance experience for Negro workers in other manufacturing industries.

The Negro's experience with the PWA has been no better than his experience with the AAA and NRA. Negro workers in the building trades have been driven to the wall. They have been denied employment on public works projects and singled out in the South for sub-standard wages. Even under the new Works Relief Bill we find the establishment of work relief scale for families of five as low as from $10 to $17 a month for four 30-hour weeks. This is a concession by the federal government to Southern opposition to the payment to Negroes of wages of thirty cents an hour. What hope can we have for the improvement of
the lot of the Negro as long as the federal government joins with private employers in imposing upon Negroes by law and administrative practices sub-normal standards of living?

A word must be said of the plight of domestic workers under the New Deal. Continued increases in the cost of living with no provision made or attempt for the improvement of the wages and labor condition of household employees has resulted in a lowering of their standard of living. Here again the fact that nearly one-fourth of the gainfully employed Negroes are domestics makes the problem crucial.

The present burdens we bear in a period of national economic crisis might find some excuse if there emerged promises of a more equitable treatment of the Negro in the future. But when we view future plans of the New Deal, the plight of the Negro is as dismal as it has been in the past. Seeped through these plans is the well-defined philosophy that Negroes must be left to develop in a ghetto of their own quite apart from the white population. Whatever the words of the administration may be, there remains the fact that Negroes are bluntly denied admission into lily-white subsistence homesteads, even at the town of Norris, owned and controlled by the federal government under the auspices of the TVA. As well this program of lily-white reconstruction permeates all other plans for rural rehabilitation, slum clearance, and low-cost housing. Thus, looking about fifty years into the future development of New Deal planned economy nothing is presented for the Negro except maintenance of his inferior status by government fiat.

There can be little doubt that the inequalities experienced by the Negro masses under the New Deal stem from economic and not racial causes. The lack of organization among Negro workers, their inarticulateness and immobility have contributed their share to our dilemma. These factors have made easy exploitation by the employer group and an employer-dominated national and local government. In our struggle for economic survival we have been further embarrassed by the unfriendly attitude of the leadership of organized labor in America. The American Federation of Labor, The Railroad Brotherhoods, and others, since their inception, have followed the policy of Jim Crowism based upon the premise that Negroes are unorganizable. Two years of the New Deal administration with its numerous major strikes have proved the falsity of this declaration, for we have seen tens of thousands of Negro workers both agricultural and industrial risk their lives in strike struggles for better labor conditions.

I have sought so far to canvass a series of vital problems for your consideration during the remaining session of this conference. Obviously, there have been omissions and obviously my statement of the problem lacks the clarity which will be possible at the conclusion of your deliberation. It is my sincere hope that this survey, stressing as it has, the super-exploitation of Negroes, will not be misunderstood to indi-
cate that white workers have gone unscathed during the past two years. To the contrary, it seems quite obvious to me that most of the processes affecting Negro workers and farmers have their counterpart in the lives of the white working class.

The problem of achieving a solidarity of Negro and white workers becomes one which principally concerns us. Coupled with that problem is the one of rendering articulate, to the highest possible degree, the complaints, the aspirations, and the demands of the masses of Negroes in America whose condition is shown to be so indescribably miserable. In conclusion let me say this: Our search for the solutions of these problems is bound by no intellectual limitations. If it be said that these are problems which time alone can solve, then our answer must be that it is time we begin to seek a solution.

We are not limited to the scope of any present system of national economy. Capitalism is only a few hundred years old; as feudalism is dead so may it die. I believe the conclusion will be inescapable that there must be an immediate change in emphasis from protection of private property to protection of human beings from misery and poverty. In the words of a report of the New York East Methodist Episcopal Church it may be said: “The twenty-five months of strenuous effort under the New Deal to reform the system has only proved that it is beyond reform. The conviction grows, therefore, that capitalism must be discarded. The tenderness with which the sacred cow of private profits has been protected while suffering has been indescribably inhuman, indicts both the intelligence and character of our nation.”