

1941 Executive Order 8802

"For it is only within the framework of democracy that labor and minorities can achieve freedom, equality, and justice."

—A. PHILIP RANDOLPH

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

ON June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802. It banned discriminatory employment practices by unions or businesses engaged in defense-related work. To ensure fair labor practices in the defense industry, Executive Order 8802 also created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). This committee was charged with the power to investigate employment complaints. It also had the ability to offer redress to victims of employment discrimination.

Roosevelt's support for Executive Order 8802 was lukewarm at best. His consideration for its provisions only came after being confronted with the possibility of a planned march on Washington, D.C., by some 100,000 African-Americans, the purpose of which was to protest rampant discriminatory practices found both on federal defense jobs and within the military. The leader of the proposed March on Washington was black union leader A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. After learning of the impending march, Roosevelt sent delegates to meet with Randolph in an attempt to forestall it. They returned with an adamant reply from Randolph—prohibit discriminatory practices or face the political embarrassment of thousands of African-Americans on the Capitol's doorstep. Roosevelt reluctantly agreed to target unfair hiring practices among defense contractors, as well as create an oversight committee—the FEPC—to ensure enforcement. Yet, he refused to address one of Randolph's prime objectives—an executive order ending the military's policy of segregating black and white soldiers.

The possibility of well-paying wartime jobs lured thousands of African-Americans from the South to the country's shipyards and weapons plants. Yet,

discrimination followed past segregation policies, as most African-American job-seekers were hired for low-end jobs rather than offered employment building planes and other military hardware, as their white co-workers were. Though migrating blacks continued to be encouraged by the possibility of war-related employment, companies holding defense-related government contracts were not always willing to comply. To strengthen the oversight capabilities of the FEPC, as well as increase the committee's ability to deal with violations of Executive Order 8802, in 1943 Congress increased the FEPC's budget. By 1945 a full 200,000 African-Americans were employed by the defense industry, a threefold increase over four years earlier.

Though the quality of employment was still in dispute, the increase in employment opportunities within the defense industry was certainly significant. Since the onset of unionized labor, African-Americans had met resistance from unions and employers. For years, African-Americans who attempted to organize black laborers were met with violence. One of the most appalling examples was the violence that occurred in Phillips County, Arkansas, in 1919. In late September of that year, sharecroppers and tenant farmers had gathered at a local church to organize the black Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America. Two white officers came to the church, ostensibly looking for a bootlegger. Confusion ensued. Before it was over, one officer lay dead from gunshots and the other was wounded. The next day over two hundred armed white men from Mississippi flooded Phillips County, intent on vengeance. The violence continued unabated for three days, resulting in the shooting deaths of possibly two hundred African-Americans. Eventually, the military restored order. Whites justified the bloodshed by charging that

the unionizing effort of blacks was in actuality a ploy to dispossess white farmers.

In stark contrast, under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was officially recognized in 1934 as the bargaining agent for black porters. It became the first all-black labor union recognized by a U.S. corporation. However, the struggle had been uphill, as Randolph battled the discriminatory practices of the powerful American Federation of Labor (AFL). Executive Order 8802, thus, was the first inroad on the long journey of equal employment.

In 1948 President Harry Truman recommended a civil rights package that included the establishment of a permanent FEPC, a federal

antilynching law, and the abolishment of the poll tax—legislation not welcomed by southern members of Congress. Filibustering in Congress ended hope of the bill's success and brought a halt to the work of the FEPC. Though the provisions of Executive Order 8802 were short-lived, its impact was far-reaching. Prior to its inception, twenty-six American Federation of Labor unions barred African-Americans. By the end of World War II, over 600,000 blacks were members of AFL unions. In 1955 Randolph became the first black vice-president of the newly merged AFL-CIO. In 1963 the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen was the only remaining union that banned the membership of blacks.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMENT

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 government 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:

There is established in the Office of Production Management a Committee on Fair Employment Practice. . . .

Franklin D. Roosevelt
The White House,
June 25, 1941.

Executive Order 8802 provided African-Americans with never-before opportunities for employment in the defense industry.

