

THE FAIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES COMMITTEE IN ATLANTA: SOUTHERN WHITE REACTION TO ANTIDISCRIMINATION LEGISLATION DURING WORLD WAR II*

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Since the birth of the United States, racial equality has been one of the most divisive issues for the nation. Not until the end of this century were African-Americans given any sort of equal employment opportunity nationwide. The journey that brought about this change was a long and tense one. Along the road were such events as the Civil War and the civil rights movement. It was during World War II, however, that the federal government began experimenting with legislation against discrimination in the workplace for the first time. In 1941 in response to black protest and severe racial discrimination in the government agencies and defense industries, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt passed Executive Order 8802. In this Order, President Roosevelt stated that employers, unions, and government agencies involved in employing or training workers for the defense industry could not discriminate by race, creed, color, or nationality. Moreover, government contracts with defense industries were to contain a clause forbidding discrimination. Through the Executive Order Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to enforce the antidiscrimination clause.¹ An examination of the cases brought before the Atlanta branch of the FEPC shows two things: a blatant disregard by Atlanta area employers and

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government agencies of the antidiscrimination provisions of Executive Order 8802, and the negative reactions and attitudes towards the FEPC itself.

Events leading up to the issuance of the Executive Order had been building since the end of slavery. Economic conditions for blacks in America had been terrible since their emancipation. This fact was especially true in the South. In researching Negro employment trends, political economist Donald Dewey found that "in the fifty years before World War II, the relative position of the Negro workers in Southern industry actually deteriorated."² During the depression, the black population in the United States was one of the hardest hit groups. Later, as new jobs began opening rapidly because of the war preparedness program of 1940-41, an economic recovery came. The recovery, however, seemed limited to the white population. Between April and October of 1940, the unemployment rate for whites dropped from 17.7 to 13 percent while the figure for blacks remained static at 22 percent.³

Although the onslaught of World War II brought with it a high demand for employees in defense industries, there was not a corresponding increase in the demand for black employees. Malcolm Ross, the FEPC's last chairman, cites a study that gives an indication of the extent of the discrimination towards blacks during this time. A report was conducted in five cities, three Southern and two Northern. The results in the South showed that of Southern whites, only 7 per cent were willing to give Negroes as good a chance for jobs as whites. In the North, 19 percent favored giving blacks an equal chance for employment. Regarding equal wages, 12 percent of whites in the South were willing to give black workers equal wages for equal work; 31 percent of Northern whites supported equal wages. Additionally, 69 percent of white workers in the South felt that Negroes in the plants would have a negative effect. In the North 37 percent of workers had a problem

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with Negroes working in plants. These figures show, in a small way, the degree of discrimination faced by Negro workers even during a time when employment needs were great in defense industries.⁴

Discrimination was prevalent in corporations and labor unions, but it was not limited to private organizations. Ironically, government agencies in charge of managing manpower for the defense effort practiced discrimination as much as any organization. The obvious discrimination within the federal bureaucracy compounded with the discrimination in the armed forces made the black community feel desperate and bitter towards the government.⁵

By 1941, the black community had organized in protest against the discriminatory treatment. Thus, the most immediate cause for the issuance of Executive Order 8802 was the threat of a massive black protest called the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). Led by A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters' Union, the movement threatened to sponsor a huge protest march on the nation's capital. Fearing the international embarrassment that a protest of 100,000 black American citizens would cause, Washington officials agreed to negotiate. On 18 June 1941 Roosevelt met with Randolph and Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When persuading Randolph and White to call off the march proved futile, Roosevelt agreed to consider the demands of the black movement. After six days of discussion between the march leaders and presidential representatives, an executive order was finally agreed upon and the march was cancelled.⁶

Unfortunately, the original executive order and FEPC were so weak that they had little to no effect. The Committee was placed under the authority of the War Manpower Commission

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(WMC), whose chairman Paul V. McNutt was indifferent to the FEPC and obstructed its work whenever he could.⁷ A small staff and budget also limited the effectiveness of the committee. Malcolm Ross, who served as chairman of the committee for a time, describes his first impression of the FEPC's office:

When I first visited the offices of the Fair Employment Practice Committee, in the spring of 1943, I climbed up the stairs of an abandoned fraternal hall on U Street in the heart of Washington's Negro district. There was room enough for the small staff to rattle around, but there was an air of defeatist gloom heavy as Washington's precocious summer heat.⁸

In May 1943, however, a major breakthrough occurred for the FEPC. After two years of a turbulent and rather weak existence, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9346 which created a new committee. This new FEPC was granted an independent status, which meant that McNutt would have much less influence on the Committee. Roosevelt, in this new executive order also called for new field offices to be established and a half-million-dollar budget was granted.

However, issuance of the new order and the development of a stronger antidiscrimination committee did not guarantee an end to racial discrimination. Despite the governmental mandate, many years of institutionalized discrimination needed to be overcome. Discrimination continued despite Executive Orders 8802 and 9346 as evidenced by the volume of complaints brought to the newly created FEPC office in Atlanta. Officials at the FEPC branch in Atlanta were confronted with many complaints by blacks concerning employment discrimination by Atlanta area employers. Two Atlanta area companies, Bell Aircraft Corporation and the

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Aircraft Division of Firestone Rubber and Tire, had numerous complaints filed against them.

The Bell Aircraft Corporation in Marietta was an aircraft assembly plant manufacturing bombers. It opened in 1943 and produced two B-29s that same year.⁹ A report dated 16 May 1945 showed that the plant employed a total of 23,491 people, of which 1,785 were non-white.¹⁰ The second company, Firestone, was a privately owned, privately operated plant. It held a contract with the Navy Department for the manufacture of a vital part of Naval Aircraft. According to a WMC report, this Aircraft Division as of January 1944 had 359 employees, eleven of whom were non-white.¹¹ The complaints brought against these two companies manifested the Southern white culture's attitude towards the executive order and the FEPC.

First, complaints brought to the Atlanta FEPC show that despite the antidiscrimination clause in government contracts, many defense industry employers continued in their discriminatory practices. For example, complaints of unequal wages were numerous. One black woman filed a complaint against Bell Aircraft because of the differences between black and white women in classification, and as a result, wages. This complainant charged that women hired as productive workers were being given classifications. White women were classified as type "A" employees, while Negro women were classified as type "B". Because of this different classification system, she alleged, white women were enabled to receive a higher rate of pay than black women for the same work. Further, she was informed by a labor counsellor that white female production helpers could be paid as high as 75 cents per hour, but the maximum pay for Negro women in the same work was 55 cents per hour.¹²

Other complaints show that there were definite differences in the treatment of black and white employees. In many

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cases when blacks resisted unfair treatment, they were fired. For instance, one complaint against Bell Aircraft was made by four men who had been fired from their jobs after complaining about moving a very large crate. Although there had been both black and white workers in the room at the time, only the black workers were ordered to move the crate; and only the black workers were fired.¹³

Complaints made to the FEPC confirmed the observation made by Ernestine Slade, a former employee of Bell Aircraft in Marietta. Although Slade was thankful for the opportunities offered at Bell and the pay that was three times greater than she could find in domestic work, she found that, in general, the only jobs available for blacks were in menial positions. For example, Slade observed that most black women worked in the cafeteria, and most black men worked as janitors.¹⁴

Often only menial jobs were offered to blacks despite the fact that applicants may have had very high qualifications. For example, George Hulen Andrews had been a teacher of radio theory, construction and code at Bethune-Cookman College. He had also been a vocational instructor in radio and electrical work for the CCC. When the radio class at Bethune-Cookman College was phased out due to diminishing enrollment, Andrews decided to answer an advertisement he had seen in the newspaper for Radio Mechanics at Bell Aircraft. When he applied, however, he was told that Bell was only hiring Negroes as laborers.¹⁵

Cases like these were especially prevalent among black women. Many black women in the South faced situations like that of Gwendolyn L. Ray. Ray had worked in the Navy Yard at Philadelphia as an Aircraft Inspector for seven months. Afterwards, for over two years she had worked as an Inspector Packer at the Frankfort Arsenal in Philadelphia. However, when she interviewed later at Bell Aircraft, the only position offered to her was that of a maid, despite the fact Ray was responding

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specifically to an advertisement in the newspaper for a skilled job.¹⁶

Cases filed at the Atlanta FEPC office show the reaction of many white Southerners to the FEPC and its purpose. For example, A. Bruce Hunt, regional director of the FEPC, describes the reaction of Firestone Company representatives at a conference with FEPC and the Department of the Navy. He states that the conference was "entirely fruitless." The Company acknowledged its violations of Executive Order 9346 which included having a paid training program at a local white school; not employing Negro trainees; and refusing to employ Negroes in any skilled capacity, employing them only as janitors, laborers, and material handlers. Further, the representatives refused to alter their employment policies to make them consistent with the executive order and the contract with the Department of the Navy. R. V. Carson, Personnel Director for the plant, argued that although blacks were only hired as unskilled workers, there had never been a problem acquiring white applicants for skilled jobs. As a result, he was not convinced that there was any real discrimination occurring within their employment procedures.¹⁷

Another example of the negative responses the FEPC faced by corporations can be seen in the reaction of Olin T. Flournoy of Bell Aircraft to charges of racial discrimination. One case consisted of complaints by several black men who felt they were unfairly removed from jobs on the catwalk washing and replacing globes in the ceiling. They felt that if they had remained in that capacity they would have been entitled to a higher classification and thus a higher hourly wage. However, all Negro men were removed from this job capacity, but the white men remained. In trying to defend the action, Flournoy stated that it was his opinion that blacks and whites should not be assigned to the same job on the catwalk at the same time because he was sure racial tension would mount and someone would be thrown off. Although

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he had already stated that at one point both black and white men were on the catwalk together, he later denied this fact in his report to the FEPC.¹⁸

The negative attitude toward the FEPC is further displayed by the resistance of local federal agencies in Atlanta to ceasing discriminatory practices. The United States Employment Service (USES), a sort of governmental job placement service during the war, was part of the War Manpower Commission during this time period. Their main function was to recruit and issue referrals to applicants in defense industry jobs.¹⁹ Although charged to uphold the goals of the FEPC, this agency in the South collaborated with corporations to continue racial discrimination in employment opportunities.

The main way the Atlanta USES collaborated to help corporations with discriminatory practices was in its job placement services. Again, cases involving the Bell Aircraft Corporation and the Firestone Company provide excellent examples. These cases also provide more information about the extent to which corporations were discriminating against blacks.

In 1944, the FEPC had two separate complaints come to the Atlanta office, one regarding Bell Aircraft, the other Firestone. Although they involved different corporations, the complaints were documented as one case against the USES in Atlanta. The first complaint was submitted by Charles Curtis, Jr. Curtis was a black man with extensive experience as a sign painter, including operating his own sign painting business. When he saw an advertisement in the newspaper for male and female artists able to do lettering and poster work, Curtis immediately applied. The advertisement told applicants to apply at the USES office of the War Manpower Commission. But when Curtis asked for a referral card to Bell Aircraft in the poster work category, Arthur C. Holbrook, junior interviewer for the office, would not issue one to

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him. Instead, he was encouraged to apply directly at the Bell employment office. Curtis did this and was rejected. Curtis then returned to the USES office to inform Mr. Holbrook that he had been rejected and to show him the original newspaper advertisement. At that point, Holbrook stated to Curtis that the advertisement appeared in the white column. In the future, Holbrook advised, Curtis should look in the colored column for employment opportunities.²⁰

In the case against the USES, FEPC Regional Director Hunt cited two errors regarding the handling of Curtis. First was the refusal of Holbrook to issue a referral. Second was the violation of the USES's own pledge to make sure that all USES-WMC advertisements be designed to attract all qualified workers without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin.²¹

A similar complaint involved seven people who had completed training at the Washington Aircraft School. They attempted to get referral by the USES for employment at Firestone after seeing a Firestone advertisement in the daily news for jobs for which they had been trained. The USES, however, would only give referrals for unskilled jobs such as janitors, even though these were not the jobs for which they were applying. Upon inquiry at the USES office, they were told that the only work orders they had from Firestone for Negroes were for janitorial positions. Despite the advertisement in the paper, the interviewer insisted that the USES could only fill jobs by orders as they were sent in by the employers. Additionally, the USES interviewer began a dialogue on how Negroes were not responsible workers, quit their jobs as soon as they made any money, and would not accept jobs that were placed before them.²²

This was not the first complaint the FEPC had heard regarding separate work orders for Negroes and whites being given to the USES by Firestone Company. The FEPC had already

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notified the USES to submit a Form USES 510 to the Firestone Company requesting Firestone not to submit orders for workers which indicate race, creed, or color. According to the USES, the Firestone willingly cooperated and after the problem had been called to their attention, the Firestone Company had been compliant. However, when Hunt made a follow-up visit to the Atlanta USES office and examined the records of orders from the Firestone Company, he found that in the majority of instances where names of referrals had been listed, their race had also been listed. He also found that according to the records, not one Negro had been referred to Firestone. Despite the willingness of the Firestone Company to comply with regulations, the USES office continued to make referrals according to the original racial specifications of the employer. The complaint filed afterwards by the group of seven black applicants further proved the USES's disregard for the policies and orders of the FEPC.²³

In the end, the opposition to the FEPC as seen through the cases at its Atlanta branch saw to it that the committee would not survive beyond World War II. Southern Democrats in Congress felt that the Committee was a source of national disunity, and that it was an attempt by the federal government to force integration of the races upon the South. Because of these feelings, Southern Democrats were determined to destroy the Committee. Even before the war was over, Southern Democrats in Congress strove to eliminate the FEPC. Led by Senator Richard Russell (D) of Georgia, Southerners tried to pass an amendment to the independent offices appropriations bill in 1944 that would not allow a government agency that had existed for more than twelve months to receive funding unless specifically granted by Congress. Fearing that if this amendment passed the FEPC would be destroyed, Republicans in the Senate tried to exempt the Committee from this amendment. The exemption failed, but

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Republicans managed, after much debate, to secure the necessary appropriations to keep the Committee alive for at least one more year.²⁴

The next year, the war in Congress continued over the fate of the FEPC. Senator Russell continued to argue that the Committee was hurting war efforts because it was disrupting national unity by provoking Southerners. In the Senate, Theodore Bilbo (D-Miss.) and James Eastland (D-Miss.) attempted a filibuster to kill the appropriations bill authorizing \$446,200 for the FEPC. In the House, Southern Democrats in the Rules Committee refused to even send the bill to conference. Nevertheless, a much reduced budget of \$250,000 was granted, and the FEPC had its last chance for survival. With the reduced budget, the FEPC was forced to close all but 3 of its field offices and reduce staffing to 55. Essentially, the Southern Democrats had succeeded in shutting the FEPC down, because it did not have the funding to accomplish its objectives. As the war came to an end and the FEPC lost its protection as a war agency, the Southern Democrats and others Congressmen opposed to the committee finally succeeded in shutting it down completely by blocking all legislation for a permanent FEPC.²⁵

In conclusion, in its short life, the FEPC brought to light the extent to which Atlanta area employers and government officials were discriminating. The Southern white reaction to the FEPC as seen through cases at the Atlanta field office showed the deep-rooted racial feelings held by many Southerners and foreshadowed the bitter struggle of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Although the FEPC made few concrete gains, it marked a first major step toward ending discrimination based on color nationwide.

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NOTES

1. Harvard Sitkoff, *The Depression Decade*, Vol. 1, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York, 1978), 21-22; Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946*, (Baton Rouge, 1991).
2. Donald Dewey, "Negro Employment in Southern Industry," *The Journal of Political Economy* 60 (August 1952) 282.
3. Wynn, "The Impact of the Second World War on the American Negro," 46.
4. Malcolm Ross, *All Manner of Men*, (New York, 1948), 23.
5. James A. Nuechterlein, "The Politics of Civil Rights: The FEPC, 1941-46," *Prologue* 10 (Fall 1978): 172.
6. Sitkoff, 21-22.
7. William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War*, (New York, 1982), 117.
8. Ross, 19.
9. Donald J. Norton, *Larry: A Biography of Lawrence D. Bell* (Chicago, 1981), 133-134.

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10. Clarence M. Mitchell to Witherspoon Dodge, 16 May 1945, FEPC, Region 7, Closed cases of the FEPC, "Bell Aircraft Corporation" File 7-BR-541, Record Group 228, National Archives Southeast Region, East Point, Georgia. All subsequent endnotes referring to records from the FEPC come from the closed cases of the FEPC Record Group 228, National Archives Southeast Region, East Point, Georgia and shall be denoted by "FEPC" and their file name and number.

11. A. Bruce Hunt to Will Maslow, 13 April 1944, FEPC, "Firestone" File 7-BR-203, 204.

12. FEPC, "Bell Aircraft Corporation" File 7-BR-187.

13. FEPC, "Bell Aircraft Corporation" File 7-BR-162 & 7-BR-291.

14. Ernestine Slade, interview with Kathryn A. Kelley, 28 April, 1992 & 19 May, 1992, interview 28, Cobb County Oral History Collection, Sturgis Library, Kennesaw State College, Marietta, Ga.

15. Final Disposition Report, December 14, 1944, Case Number 7-BR-233, FEPC, "Bell Aircraft Corporation" File 7-BR-215, 224, 233, 284, 294, 324, 392, 399.

16. Final Disposition Report, May 16, 1945, FEPC, "Bell Aircraft Corporation" File 7-BR-541.

17. FEPC, "Firestone" File 7-BR-203.

18. FEPC, "Bell Aircraft Corporation" File 7-BR-210, 211.

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19. "2,000,000 Americans, War, and the U. S. Employment Service," *Employment Security Review*, 9 (July 1942): 6.

20. Dodge to Maslow, December 14, 1944, FEPC, "Bell Aircraft Corporation" File 7-BR-392.

21. Hunt to Dillard B. Lasseter, Regional Director WMC, June 23, 1944, FEPC, "USES" File 7-GR-218.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. Reed, 156-57; Neuchterlein, 181-83.

25. *Ibid.*, 183-86.