



DEFEND
The **NEGRO**
SAILORS

of the **U.S.S. PHILADELPHIA**

by **Albert Parker**



Defend the Negro Sailors On The U.S.S. Philadelphia

By ALBERT PARKER

A number of Negro sailors, serving as mess attendants on the U.S.S. Philadelphia, now stationed at Long Beach, California, could not stand it any longer.

The discrimination, insult and abuse they suffered aboard ship because they were colored, had become almost intolerable.

Fifteen of them got together towards the end of September, 1940, and decided they would have to do something. They needed help, and they had learned from experience that there was no use in appealing for it to the officers commanding the ship, because they were the very ones who were responsible for what was going on. They felt they could get support only from the outside.

They Wrote A Letter

So they sat down and wrote a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation's leading Negro newspapers. They told the world about the horrible Jim Crow conditions under which colored sailors suffer. They appealed for all possible help in changing these conditions.

Their letter, printed in the *Courier* of October 5, tells the following story:

"On enlisting, we are given the same mental and physical examination as the white sailors and were given to believe that we have the privilege of choosing any branch of the service the Navy offers. This is not true.

"With three months of training in making beds, shining shoes and serving officers completed, we are sent to various ships and stations of the Navy.

"The white sailor, after completing his training period, is not only eligible for the branch of service he has chosen, but he is automatically advanced in rating and his pay is

increased to \$36 a month without even having to take an examination.

"In our case, we have to be in the service a full year at \$21 a month before we are eligible for advancement rating. It is also necessary for us to take a competitive examination. Even if we pass, it doesn't mean necessarily that we will be rated and have our pay increased to \$36 a month.

"On this ship, out of a crew of 750, there are 18 colored boys, ranging in ages from 18 to 25. They are fresh out of high school and some have a year of college education.

"Their work is limited to waiting on table and making beds for the officers . . .

"In the last nine months there have been nine mess attendants given solitary confinement on bread and water.

"Five of the nine were given brig time because of fighting and arguments with other enlisted men. From this you will probably think we are a pretty bad bunch. We are not.

"With the treading on and kicking around we receive here (without being able to do anything about it), every last one of us becomes bitter enough to fight a member of our own family.

"We, the mess attendants of the Philadelphia, are not merely stating these facts because of our own plight. In doing so, we sincerely hope to discourage any other colored boys from joining the Navy and make the same mistake we did.

"All they would become in sea-going bell hops, chambermaids and dishwashers.

"We take it upon ourselves to write this letter, regardless of any action the Naval authorities may take or whatever the consequences may be.

"We only know that it could not possibly surpass the mental cruelty inflicted upon us on this ship." And the letter ends with their signatures.

"Fred Louis, Floyd C. St. Clair, Floyd W. Owens, Theodore L. Hansborough, Byron C. Johnson, Robert Turner, Arval Perry, Otto Robinson, E. Bosley, Jesse Willard Watford, George Elbert Rice, John William Ponder, James Porter, Shannon H. Goodwin, James Edw. Ponder."

Remember, they were still in the Navy. They were still under the domination of the officer caste commanding the

ship, and therefore still at their mercy! The fact that they wrote and signed the letter under these conditions is the best possible indication of the desperation to which they had been driven.

It was in this dramatic way that these 15 boys gave to the world its first open and signed picture of the degrading system of Jim Crowism that rules the Navy and its ships.

The Officers Threw Them in Jail

The dictatorial, Negro-hating, labor-hating officers of the ship were outraged. These colored men had written a letter and mailed it to a newspaper! Mutiny! The officers moved against it with the speed and violence of a mob organizing a lynching.

All the men who had signed the letter were arrested. An "investigation" was instituted. Two of the men, Shannon Goodwin and Byron Johnson, were thrown in prison. They now face court martial.

The rest of the men are prisoners-at-large on the ship, not allowed to leave it, held for further "investigation" which the commanding officer is conducting in order to force the boys to tell who is the "brains" behind the letter.

We know little more about what has happened since then. The boys on the ship are denied the right of communicating with friends. The whole affair is shrouded in secrecy. Nothing is written about it in the boss press. No public statements have been made about the case by the officers of the ship or anyone from the office of the Secretary of the Navy. We don't even know the exact nature of the "charges" against the boys.

Officers Will Try Them

The court martial, when it takes place, will be conducted behind closed doors. Goodwin and Johnson and the others will not be permitted to use lawyers from the outside. The case will be tried and it will be heard by the very same officer caste against whose methods the men protested in the first place. We can be certain that the verdict they hand down will not be against themselves. They will surely not find themselves guilty of Jim Crowism!

Indeed, the only reason they're holding the trial, per-

secuting these boys and trying to crush their spirit is because they want to cover up their own guilt on this score, and intimidate other Negroes to such a degree that they will be afraid to speak up about it in the future!

They Cannot Hide the Truth

But while they may be able to shut the mouths of the heroic Philadelphia boys for a time by arrests, court martials and jail sentences, they cannot hide the truth. It is out, and more is being learned about the ugly picture every day as colored sailors from other ships rally to the defense of the Philadelphia mess men and swear to the truth of what they charged the officer caste.

The South On Board Ship

Stop for a minute now and consider the conditions of the Negroes in the far South.

In the South it is the practice to segregate the Negro, to push him off to the side. He is shunted into a separate part of town, in the worst houses.

In the Navy the Negro is segregated in one part of the ship. The only place where he is accepted is in the kitchen, although white enlistees are able to choose the branch of the service they want.

“A Sea-Going Chambermaid”

In the South it is the practice to discriminate against the Negro in handing out jobs. Only laborers' jobs are open to him, or positions as lackeys and flunkies, and always at the lowest pay. He isn't permitted to go very far in schools, to learn a skilled trade or profession.

In the Navy too the Negro faces job discrimination. He can become only a “sea-going chambermaid, bell hop or dishwasher,” where he is called on to perform the most menial and tedious tasks. The Philadelphia letter, substantiated by others, shows that he has the worst paying job, and that his chances for advancement in pay and rating are the smallest. White sailors get valuable “training in numerous trades and skills” which they are able to use in later life. A Negro can train himself only to become a waiter or valet.

Insult, Abuse, Persecution

In the South it is the practice to insult and degrade the Negro, to relegate him to some position as an inferior.

In the Navy too the Negro mess attendant faces a constant stream of insult and abuse:

"The white officer is usually the type to persecute. He can and does make your career difficult for you, because he knows that you cannot defend yourself.

"Our Negro sailors, should be warned never to show a spark of intelligence if they want to spend four years in the Navy. Everyone does his best to keep a smart Negro 'in his place.' If one doesn't mind being insulted by his superiors, if he is the kind that wants to be the rag under the white man's feet, if he is willing to stand by while others make ratings, then he is the type the navy wants. He is the type that will make a success as a messman." (From an article by an anonymous Negro sailor in *The Crisis*.)

Tin Gods with a Whip

Richard C. Watts, Donald Moran and William Seabrook, three Negro sailors on the U.S.S. Sampson, offer additional evidence in their letter in the *Courier*, November 9:

"We are subjected to being roughly spoken to three-fourths of the time, cursed at sometimes, without even a murmur or resentment coming from us. In case of resentment we are put on report, restricted, fined or sent to the brig for being insubordinate to a superior officer, etc . . .

"Wherever we turn we hear the words, 'Don't do this,' or 'Don't do that,' or you don't get liberty for a week. We are not wanted to talk to each other when an officer is around, and in general, an officer is to be treated as though he were a god or king . . .

"The majority of the officers seem to think that we Negroes are just a race of illiterates who have to have someone standing over them with a whip all the time and tell them what to do. They are the kings, we are the flunkies . . . whatever they say or do to us is above reproach as far as they are concerned."

Barred From Officer Posts

In the South a Negro is never permitted to rise to any high post in the community or in the government.

In the Navy a Negro, contrary to popular belief, cannot become a petty officer or chief petty officer. According to the *Crisis* article quoted above:

"The highest rank that can be obtained is officers' cook or steward, and even though a steward, one is still looked upon as a mess attendant . . . After all, he is a mess attendant. Just a mess attendant. Or shall we say 'officers' boy.'"

No Voice Whatsoever

In the South it is the practice to deny the Negro the right to participate in elections, and in general to permit him no voice in making the laws or determining the conditions of the community.

In the Navy too the Negro has no voice, can't protest, has no right to ask for a change in conditions, has to obey the laws in the making of which he has no part.

"We have no side to our story, and if we have it, it doesn't do any good anyway, so we just keep our mouths shut," say the Sampson sailors.

In the South the Negro is denied his rights by a system of brutal terrorism, lynching and violence, and jail sentences on the chain gang.

In the Navy the Negro is denied his rights by a system of imprisonments-at-large, court martials and jail sentences at hard labor.

"Only in the Balcony"

Even in the North the Negro is restricted and discriminated against socially. In most cities he is barred from restaurants, from "white" dance halls and from seats in theaters except the balcony. It goes without saying that the Negro's treatment in this sense is much worse in the South.

"Time To Do Something About It"

In the Navy too the Negro is restricted and discriminated against socially.

"In our Naval churches—both Protestant and Catholic—discrimination is openly practiced. When conditions are so bad that people who say they are believers of God, are choicy about who sits next to them, then it is time that we pray and start to do something about it," say the Sampson

men. And:

"On smaller ships in the Navy, the mess boys really do not have a place to eat their food properly. He either has to stand up or sit down on the deck to eat, while the rest of the crew have designated tables, where they may sit, talk, properly masticate and enjoy their food."

The *Crisis* article reports that at the Norfolk training station when dances and special functions are held on board ship, white sailors may bring their girl friends, Negroes may not.

Navy Secretary "Regrets"

For the South there are the 14th and 15th Amendments which are supposed to protect the rights of Negroes, but of course the Bourbon authorities make no pretense of abiding by them.

For the Navy too there is an amendment to the Selective Service Act which prohibits discrimination against drafted or enlisted men in the armed forces because of race or color. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox announced before it was passed that he regrets the situation but Negroes can be accepted in the navy only as mess attendants. After its passage, he said he was still sympathetic, but the problem was "insoluble," meaning that things would continue as they had been going.

Down To Sea

For Wall Street and Bourbons

Add it all up and what does it come to?

In the name of "a war for democracy and freedom and equality" the ruling class of this country is asking the Negro to go down to the sea in ships and offer up his life under exactly the same conditions that prevail in that part of the country where the Negro is most systematically denied democracy and freedom and equality!

Roosevelt Finds it "Satisfactory"

This system of Jim Crowism is not confined to the Navy alone. It is part and parcel, not only of American life as a whole, but of all the armed forces as a whole. And such it was declared to be, in spite of the provisions of the Selective

Service Act, by no less than the Commander-in-Chief of all the armed forces, President Roosevelt.

"This policy (not to intermingle colored and white)", he said, "has proved satisfactory over a long period of years, and to make changes would produce situations destructive to morale and detrimental to the preparations for national defense."

Real Conditions in the Army

This is how Roosevelt's "satisfactory" policy looks in action "over a long period of years" in the army:

"In those branches of the service where Negroes are admitted they are segregated into Jim Crow regiments, and Negro soldiers are not permitted in the same regiments as white . . .

"Negroes are barred from enlisting in most of the branches of the service. This practice prevents them from exercising free choice in designating the branch of the service in which they wish training, as white enlistees are permitted to do.

"Negro Engineers is only another name for labor battalions.

"The few cavalry regiments of Negroes are principally used as chambermaids for cadets' and officers' horses and equipment at the military academy and the various service schools.

"Negroes are permitted in the infantry where the greatest number of casualties occur, and to a limited extent, the artillery, the quartermaster corps and the medical corps.

"But they are not admitted into the air corps, the marine corps, the tank corps, the coast guard, the signal corps, the chemical warfare service. These branches of the service are completely lily-white. No colored men may enlist in them, no colored men in other branches may even transfer to them as white soldiers are often permitted to do . . .

"Negroes in the infantry are used principally for two kinds of work: as laborers in the labor battalions where they dig trenches, fortifications and latrines, or as suicide squads in the most dangerous sections of the front.

"Only a small percentage of the Negroes are permitted to become officers, and they are Jim Crowed, too. Regiments which are all Negro are usually officered by whites, not

Negroes, and white regiments are never officered by Negroes. Negroes are not wanted in the higher councils of the Army, where the Jim Crow policies are formulated. Only one has ever risen higher than the rank of colonel, and this exception was dictated by the momentary political needs of the Administration, not because of any fundamental change in the rule." (From Resolution On Military Policy and the Negroes, adopted by the Socialist Workers Party, printed in the *Socialist Appeal* of Nov. 9, 1940.)

Roosevelt Approves Jim Crowism

All this of course places Roosevelt and the ruling class in an embarrassing position. They may be able to fool some workers with the idea that they are preparing us to fight a war for democracy, instead of a war for Wall Street's profit, but what Negro worker would be foolish enough to believe that a Jim Crow Army and a Jim Crow Navy can fight a war for real democracy?

Nor can Roosevelt easily conceal this fact: His endorsement of Jim Crow policies in the armed forces puts a stamp of approval on Jim Crowism everywhere, because it is based on the theory that the Negro is inferior and should therefore be separated from the rest of the population. Thus, Roosevelt's open acceptance of this policy is a go-ahead signal to everyone else, to the employers in industry, to the relief officials, to the restaurant and theatre owners, and to the reactionary leaders of some trade unions to go on Jim Crowing them, with the excuse that the government is doing it too.

Weakens War Mongers' Propaganda

This weakens Roosevelt's case about a "war for democracy" so far as the Negroes are concerned, and thus threatens the "national unity" that all the politicians have been talking about and which they feel is necessary if they are going to be able to win the war and establish themselves as masters of the world and its colonies and markets and sources of profit.

Some innocent people might expect that in the face of this they would eliminate Jim Crowism from the armed forces, or at least cut down on it, if only because such a step might help them in their war plans.

The Capitalists Are Afraid

But they dare not do it! If they did, they would threaten the whole rotten system of Jim Crowism they have established in civilian life in order to keep the workers divided so that the bosses can exploit them easier.

If they did it, they would have to admit what everyone knows is the truth: that Negroes are the equals of whites, with full right to equality in all divisions of the army, navy, air force and their commanding staffs. If this is true in the armed forces, why isn't it just as true about jobs in industry, relief, housing, and every other sphere of life outside the Army?

As the Socialist Workers Party pointed out in its resolution on Military Policy And The Negroes:

"THE CAPITALIST FEAR THAT NO NEGRO TRAINED TO HANDLE A GUN WOULD PEACEFULLY GO BACK TO THE OLD LIFE OF DISCRIMINATION, SEGREGATION, DISFRANCHISEMENT AND INSULT, AFTER TRAINING IN AN ARMY WHERE HE WAS TREATED AS AN EQUAL WITH WHITE SOLDIERS."

And thus it becomes clear that Jim Crowism in the armed forces strengthens Jim Crowism on the outside, and that Jim Crowism on the outside re-inforces Jim Crowism in the armed forces.

A Blow There is a Blow Here

This means that a blow struck at Jim Crowism in the armed forces is a blow at it everywhere and in all its forms.

It means that the struggle of the Philadelphia sailors is the struggle of all workers, colored and white, that they are fighting for the cause of all labor. It means that we must support them, not only because of our sympathy for their brave resistance against powerful odds, not only because they are the innocent victims of oppression—but also because the issue involved is even greater than the personal one concerning their fate, the issue of full rights and equality for the Negro people in the struggle to unify the working class against their exploiters and oppressors.

It means also, once we recognize the complicated origin of the Jim Crow laws in the armed forces, that we can expect no help or mercy or justice for the boys from either the of-

ficers on the ship, or the Secretary of the Navy, or the President of the United States—because they are all arrayed on the other side, on the side of the Friends of Jim Crowism.

Organize a Fighting Campaign

If the boys are to be saved, if Jim Crowism in the armed forces and elsewhere is to be rooted out, it can come only through an independent vigorous and fighting campaign on the part of those who suffer most from Jim Crowism, the Negro people and the labor movement.

The Error of Not Joining

In their fight against Jim Crowism, however, the sailors of the Philadelphia and Sampson make a mistake which those of us on the outside, who want to help them must not follow.

They hope to fight against segregation and discrimination by urging Negroes not to join the Navy.

“We sincerely hope to discourage any other colored boys who might have planned to join the Navy and make the same mistakes we did.” (Philadelphia letter).

“We would advice you, under present conditions, not to enlist in the U. S. Navy . . . We say to you, Mother and Father, if you have a son who desires to join the Navy, please discourage him . . . show him this letter . . . Don't send your boy to the recruiting station.” (Sampson letter)

Of course, we don't criticize this idea from the viewpoint of the officers of the Navy who oppose it because it may interfere somewhat with their recruiting plans. We understand that this idea is raised in protest against the Jim Crow policies of the officers and can have and do have nothing in common with them.

But we consider this course of action incorrect because it cannot accomplish the things for which we and the Philadelphia sailors are fighting. It is almost impossible to win any kind of important fight by a policy of abstention, by turning one's back on the scene of battle.

We Don't Stay Out of Industry

In many national defense industries today, a policy of discrimination is the rule. Negroes are either barred completely or hired only as laborers and porters. What do we do? Refuse to “join the industry”? Not at all! We expose and at-

tack the Jim Crow practices and we organize protests and demonstrations and exert all possible pressure to force the bosses to admit Negroes into all sections of industry, skilled and unskilled.

If we were to say: "Because you discriminate against Negroes, we'll get even by refusing to work for you," the bosses would only laugh at us. We would be playing right into their hands.

We Don't Refuse WPA Jobs

Or it could even be put this way: Suppose relief officials who were supposed to certify jobless workers for WPA jobs were found to be guilty of denying Negroes their just proportion of the jobs, and on top of that giving them only the dirtiest jobs at the lowest pay and the longest hours. Would we say: "Because you follow this policy, we'll refuse to 'join' WPA"? Or would we organize mass demonstrations and picket lines to force the lily-white officials to grant Negroes their fair share of jobs, both skilled and unskilled?

Draft Rules Out Boycott

And if there ever had been any possibility of affecting official military policy by a campaign of urging Negroes not to join the armed forces, which we strongly doubt, today now that the conscription bill is the law of the land, it is a certainty that it would be completely ineffective. For with the draft, the officer caste are going to get men for their armed forces anyhow, drafted men if not enlisted men. By itself, this rules out the effectiveness of a boycott policy.

Besides, what good would it do the men who are already *inside* the Navy if people on the outside don't join? Will this change the conditions which the present sailors are forced to live under? To ask the question is to answer it.

Do We Want Military Training?

But there is a more important consideration that rules out any proposal to refuse military service. We can best understand this by asking ourselves another question: Do you want, do we need military training in the land and sea forces?

Today the whole world is at war, or preparing for it. The United States itself is becoming one big military camp. The

events so far of the war itself prove that all decisive questions can be settled only by force, only by the use of arms.

Pacifists Are Helpless

Pacifists who fold their arms and turn the other cheek, labor fakery and reformists who say things are getting better gradually and if we live long enough everything will be all right for everybody—these people are helpless in the face of a decaying social order that forces greater misery on the masses every day and that can be replaced with a decent system of life only by the decisive victory of the working people.

In addition, there is the instructive history of the Negro people in this country to which we can point. Long and bitter years of chattel slavery were brought to an end only as the result of a victorious armed conflict.

How the Slaves Were Freed

Turning the other cheek would never have freed the slaves from the armed slaveholders. The struggles of the Negroes for equality in the South after the Civil War won a measure of recognition only insofar as their demands were backed up by fighting units of Negro militia—and their rights were finally taken from the them only by the force and violence of the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist bands.

Only by militant struggle will the Negro ever be able to win rights of full equality in this country.

Workers Need Military Training

All workers, Negro and white, need military and naval training today. If we are going to be able to protect our interests against our enemies in this country and abroad, we've got to know how to fight. And in the modern world, when everything is mechanized, it isn't enough to just know how to shoot a gun—we've got to learn all the complicated aspects of the military arts, on both land and sea.

It is not training to which we object, then, but to the way that training is handled, managed and controlled.

It is not the training we object to, it is the control of that

training by the officer caste who follow a deliberate anti-Negro, anti-labor policy.

End Control by Officer Caste

As long as the officer caste controls the destiny of workers learning the military and naval arts, we know that the armed forces will be used not in the interests of the workers, but against them, not for the abolition of Jim Crowism, but for its perpetuation.

This means that if we are to get military training to help ourselves and not our enemies we must enter the fight to remove control of military training from the hands of the reactionary officers.

Union Control of Military Training

In whose hands, then, shall we place the control of the destinies of the men getting military training? In their own hands! In the hands of the working class who have nothing to gain by throwing away workers' lives in a war for Wall Street is profit! In the hands of the workers' own organizations, the trade unions!

Union control of military training—to remove the power of the officers to kick Negroes around and segregate them: *that* is the way to fight for the elimination of Jim Crowism in the armed forces!

Union control of military training—to remove the power of the officers to arrest and courtmartial men because they ask adjustment of their grievances: *that* is the way to fight against a repetition of the Philadelphia case! Union control of military training—to train the workers themselves, colored and white, to become officers, so that the ranks may have their own leaders on whom they can depend: *that* is the way to assure equal rights to all the workers.

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