



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

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OPINIONS

THE RIGHT TO WORK

RACIAL ECONOMICS

It is curious to see how the problem of disfranchisement is more and more becoming the problem of work in the South. There was a time when these were supposed to represent opposite poles of thought and aim. Let us follow, however, some recent southern arguments.

The Columbia State is not satisfied over the present disfranchisement laws of Southern Carolina. It says:

"The main qualifications for suffrage in the State constitution of 1895 are that the applicants for registration shall be able to read and write any section of the constitution or show that he has paid taxes on property assessed for taxation at \$300 or more.

"According to the census of 1910, there were 20,372 Negro farm owners in the State and, presumably, practically all of these pay taxes on property assessed at as much as \$300. Many Negroes in addition to these own houses and lots in towns and cities and a few pay taxes on personal property assessed at \$300.

"About 38 per cent. of the Negroes in the State are illiterates. The remaining 62 per cent. are literate, more or less.

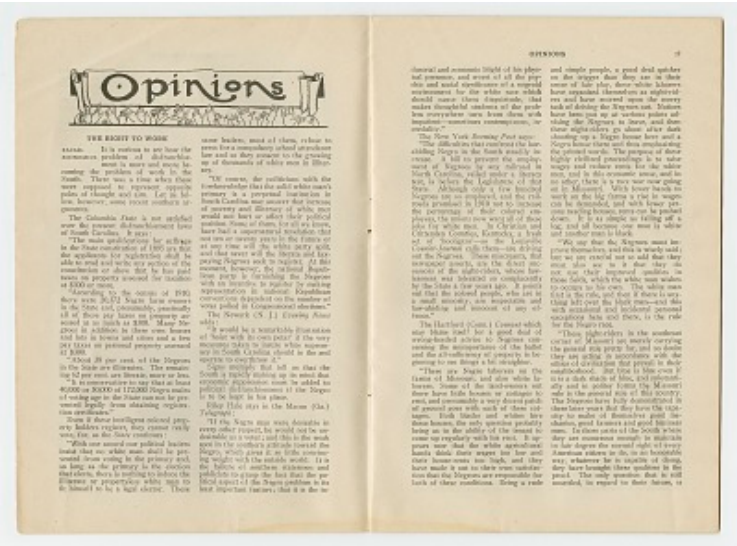
"It is conservative to say that at least 40,000 or 50,000 of 172,000 Negro males of voting age in the State can not be prevented legally from obtaining registration certificates."

Even if these intelligent colored property holders register, they cannot really vote, for, as the State continues:

"With one accord our political leaders insist that no white man shall be prevented from voting in the primary and, so long as the primary is the election that elects, there is nothing to induce the illiterate or propertyless white man to fit himself to be a legal elector. These same leaders, most of them, refuse to press for a compulsory school attendance law and so they consent to the growing up of thousands of white men in illiteracy.

"Of course, the politicians with the foreknowledge that the solid white man's primary is a perpetual institution in South Carolina may answer that increase of poverty and illiteracy of white men would not hurt or affect their political position. Some of them, for all we know, have had a supernatural revelation that not ten or twenty years in the future or at any time will the white party split, and that never will lead the literate and tax-paying Negroes seek to register. At this moment, however, the national Republican party is furnishing the Negroes with an incentive to register by making representation in national Republican conventions dependent on the number of votes polled in Congressional elections."

The Newark (N.J.) Evening News adds:



"It would be a remarkable illustration of 'hoist with its own petar' if the very measures taken to insure white supremacy in South Carolina should in the end operate to overthrow it."

Signs multiply that tell us that the South is rapidly making up its mind that economic suppression must be added to political disfranchisement if the Negro is to be kept in his place.

Riley Hale says in the Macon (Ga.) Telegraph:

"If the Negro man were desirable in every other respect, he would not be undesirable as a voter; and this is the weak spot in the southern attitude toward the Negro, which gives it so little convincing weight with the outside world. It is the failure of southern statesmen and publicists to grasp the fact that the political aspect of the Negro problem is its least important feature; that it is in-

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-dustrial and economic blight of his physical presence, and worst of all the psychic and social significance of a negroid environment for the white race which should cause them disquietude, that makes thoughtful students of the problem everywhere turn from them with impatient--sometimes contemptuous, incredulity."

The New York Evening Post says:

"The difficulties that confront the law-abiding Negro in the South steadily increase. A bill to prevent the employment of Negroes by any railroad in North Carolina, veiled under a literacy test, is before the Legislature of that State. Although only a few hundred Negroes are so employed, and the railroads promised in 1910 not to increase the percentage of their colored employees, the unions now want all of these jobs for white men. In Christian and Crittenden Counties, Kentucky, a fresh set of 'hooligans'-so the Louisville Courier-Journal call them-are driving out the Negroes. These miscreants, that newspaper asserts, are the direct successors of the night-riders, whose lawlessness was tolerated so complacently by the State a few years ago. It points out that the colored people, who are in a small minority, are respectable and law-abiding and innocent of any offence."

The Hartford (Conn.) Courant which may blame itself for a good deal of wrong-headed advice to Negroes concerning the unimportance of the ballot and the all-sufficiency of property is beginning to see things a bit straighter.

"There are Negro laborers on the farms of Missouri, and also white laborers. Some of the land-owners out there have little houses or cottages to rent, and presumably a very decent patch of ground goes with each of these cottages. Both blacks and whites hire these houses, the only question probably being as to the ability of the tenant to come up regularly with his rent. It appears now that the white agricultural hands think their wages too low and their house-rents too high, and they have made it out to their own satisfaction that the Negroes are responsible for both of these conditions. Being a rude and simple

people, a good deal quicker on the trigger than they are in their sense of fair play, these white laborers have organized themselves as night-riders and have entered upon the merry task of driving the Negroes out. Notices have been put up at various points advising the Negroes to leave, and then these night-riders go about after dark shooting up a Negro house here and a Negro house there and thus emphasizing the printed words. The purpose of these highly civilized proceedings is to raise wages and reduce rents for the white men, and in this economic sense, and in no other, there is a race war now going on in Missouri. With fewer hands to work on the big farms a rise in wages can be demanded, and with fewer persons needing houses, rents can be pushed down. It is as simple as falling off a log, and all because one man is white and another man is black.

"We say that the Negroes must improve themselves, and this is wisely said; but we are careful not to add that they must also see to it that they do not use their improved qualities in those fields, which the white man wishes to occupy as his own. The white man first is the rule, and then if there is anything left over the black man-and this with occasional and incidental personal exceptions here and there, is the rule for the Negro race.

"These night-riders in the southeast corner of Missouri are merely carrying the general rule pretty far, and no doubt they are acting in accordance with the ethics of civilization that prevail in their neighborhood. But blue is blue even if it is a dark shade of blue, and substantially and in politer forms the Missouri rule is the general rule of this country. The Negroes have fully demonstrated in these later years that they have the capacity to make of themselves good mechanics, good farmers and good business men. In those parts of the South where they are numerous enough to maintain in fair degree the normal right of every American citizen to do, in an honorable way, whatever he is capable of doing, they have brought these qualities to the proof. The only question that is still unsettled, in regard to their future, is

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