

# **AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE NEW DEAL**

## **Social and Labor**

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The flow of immigration to America and urbanization has existed long before the 19<sup>th</sup> century but was at its peak in the 1900s and onward because many people seek for the wealth and bright future that was promised in America, making cities denser with people from all over the world and other parts of the country (18.3 million in 1890 to 25 million in 1900<sup>1</sup>). By the end of World War 1, more than 750,000 blacks had settled<sup>2</sup> and worked in Northern cities; though the other 10 million still lived in the South.

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed, revealing flaws within the economic system; within 28 days, from September 3 to December 1, the stocks' value dipped down by \$26 billion<sup>3</sup>. With such chaos, many people took their money out of banks; but since the banks used the deposited money to invest and the stock plummeted, many banks couldn't give back the money to their customers. Within the first 10 months of 1930, 744 banks closed<sup>4</sup> taking with them the money that many Americans put in. After the crash, many people stopped purchasing products to preserve money as much as they could; this caused a strain on industries because they had no income due to under-consumption. To counteract this situation, companies fired many employees; by 1933 the unemployment rate in America was at 24.9%. Given that the mass immigration of blacks to cities, they had more coming their way, up to more than 50% unemployment<sup>5</sup> rate of the African American population.

Despite the efforts of President Hoover, not much had improved, he believed that the government must have a limit in involvements. "You know, the only trouble with capitalism is

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Daniels, *Not like us: Immigrants and minorities in America*, 24

<sup>2</sup> Daniels, 85

<sup>3</sup> Mintz, *1920s Timeline*, Digital History

<sup>4</sup> Bill Ganzel, *Bank failures*, Wessels

<sup>5</sup> Lee Sustar, *Blacks and the Great Depression*, Socialist Worker

capitalists; they're too damn greedy<sup>6</sup>.” And then in 1933, President Roosevelt took the president office; he launched the New Deal (first: 1933, second: 1935) with the goal to Relief, Recover and Reform America. The New Deal had many programs that fixed the economy such as the NRA.

President Roosevelt's primary mission was to bring America out of its Depression, so he directed his focus and vision towards the overall economy situation; due to this, some of his programs lacked concern for minorities. In other words, the Depression was seen as first priority and other matters were secondary. Many historians have criticized the President's policies because it left out minorities, especially African American, even though he had the ability to execute such tasks. Despite such setbacks and obstacles that the President had to face while trying to solve one of America's biggest problems in history, his policies provided a stepping stone to equality for African Americans and future civil movements.

Sociologist Guy B. Johnson argued in his article “*Does the South Owe the Negro a New Deal?*” that ever since the Emancipation up to 1935, the South had used many measures to suppress the African American population; so much that it had prevented the South from growing and taking any steps out of the Depression<sup>7</sup>. This obsession led to the decline of the America's rate of change in its current status, prolonging everyone's suffering; thus, the South must accept the social change and “give the Negro a new deal<sup>8</sup>”. While Guy Johnson argued that the New Deal would simultaneously benefit the *Negro* and the South, thus the nation, John P. Davis – a journalist, lawyer, and activist – argued that the New Deal was having a negative effect on the majority of African Americans. In particular, John Davis evaluated the labor aspect by showing us what the New Deal was doing to the black workers: the NRA exclusion, the violation of “*rights of tenants*

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<sup>6</sup> George Brown Tindall, David Emory Shi, *America : a narrative history*, 1085

<sup>7</sup> Guy Johnson, “*Does the South Owe the Negro a New Deal?* ” in *New Deal Thought*, by Howard Zinn, 310

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, 316

*under crop reduction contract*” by the AAA, and the general discrimination found in public work programs<sup>9</sup>. According to John Davis, the New Deal had no effect, if not worsen the status of the *Negro* by highlighting the discrimination in New Deal programs.

When it comes to the aspect of African American regarding the New Deal, there are two main factions, one argues that President Roosevelt’s policies were insensitive towards black communities because they were left out of many programs and some programs even violated their rights; one of the most famous people representing this side is Eleanor Roosevelt. She criticized the President’s policies, supported black activism, and also supported anti lynching. Due to this, Eleanor Roosevelt received many death threats<sup>10</sup>. The other argues that due to the current circumstance, the President’s policies are justifiable because the economy needed saving as fast as possible, if it wasn’t for his decisions, America would have been in slumps. Furthermore, President Roosevelt needed the Southern Democrats’ support in order to execute his plans. It is clear that the Southern Democrats had a discriminate attitude towards the African American population; they threatened the President that they would revoke their support for him if he issued any program that benefits blacks. Knowing the country’s status quo and the importance of the Southern Democrats’ support, the President had no choice but to reconcile and compromise with the South.

After the emancipation, Southern African Americans still got exploited in the form of sharecroppers and their rights had not improved much; their rights had also been violated by the Jim Crow law and segregation in cities was very common in both the North and the South. Many whites did not want to alter the status quo regarding the race relations and integration in the work force, so there were many riots driven purely by hatred; again, Blacks’ rights and protection were

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<sup>9</sup> John Davis, “*The New Deal: Slogans for the Same Raw Deal*” in *New Deal Thought*, by Howard Zinn, 318-320

<sup>10</sup> Paul Sparrow, *Eleanor Roosevelt’s Battle to End Lynching*, Forward with Roosevelt

violated. Then came the depression, the majority of citizens suffered, including blacks. When the New Deal came out, many of its programs, while not perfect, set an important ground for blacks. This paper will discuss both positive and negative effects that the New Deal had on the African American population.

First, we will be discussing about African American labor and the flaw of the New Deal. After launching the New Deal, President Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration which enabled thousands of unemployed men to work<sup>11</sup>, relieving their financial issues. The employed got to build roads, bridges, airport runways and many public works. President Roosevelt was seen as a source of hope because not only he helped the country by building more infrastructure, but he also helped people – the men – become workers. Despite the good intentions, many African Americans did not whole-heartedly support the New Deal programs concerning labor reform. In the South, while the relief programs were in place, sharecropper landlords would go as far as to charge the *Negro* all the food and supplies that the relief office provided them with; these actions would defeat the programs' own goal of relieving. Many southerners deemed that the African Americans that worked for the programs were “spoiled”. This also showed that the Southerners were still blaming blacks for their losses after the Civil War, particularly in man power; the approach above was to limit the benefits for Southern blacks as much as possible.

Take CCC as a subject for discussion. In the original document, it stated that: “*That in employing citizens for the purposes of this Act no discrimination shall be made on account of race, color, or creed.*”<sup>12</sup> While it did live up to its clause of employing people of all races, it is the

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<sup>11</sup> Gloria Skurzynski, *Sweat and blood: A history of U.S. labor Unions*, 75

<sup>12</sup> *Emergency Conservation Work Act (1933)*

actions of the people who ran the system that would determine its value; in this case, it was the CCC National Director Robert Fechner. He ordered to separate blacks and whites into different camps<sup>13</sup>. Although the wages, conditions and supplies were the same for both blacks and whites, the fact that segregation was still in practice says that African American were nowhere seen as normal employees. Also, African Americans were placed in less prioritized projects like parks, while in contrast, whites got their hands on the more crucial ones. This also means that the managers did not trust in the abilities of the African American workers and they also did not want the “legacy” and contributions of blacks to live on.

Another example is the NRA; in Southern tobacco plants and other intensive works, the *minimum wage standard* suggested strongly to employers that substituting machines to man power would decrease wage spending while gaining more efficiency and income in the long run<sup>14</sup>. To the African American workers, this implied that their work was unneeded so they would be fired right after the machines were implemented into factories; even if the machines needed people to guide it, the most certain chance is that the operators are white. These decisions were as same as saying that the African Americans labor is not supported by the New Deal, so it was common for many African Americans to not support the programs, in which excluded them from the working environment.

In 1935, the Wagner act, also known as the National Labor Relations Act, came. It enabled workers to negotiate their working conditions, wage, time, etc.... with their employer. The act's goal was to boost *industrial democracy*, to show that to build a democratic nation, democracy must start from work places. Both the act and President Roosevelt were in favor of Unionism because

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Medina, *Civilian Conservation Corps, Racial Segregation, and the Building of the Angeles National Forest*, KCET

<sup>14</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A century of American labor*, 73

with it, workers could rely on each other and have their voices heard. But while Unionism had the tone of *unity*, it only lived to some extent that it sounds like. For the whites – native born Americans – Unionism meant that they benefitted from the negotiations; but many Unions, such as the Carpenters, the Plumbers, and the Rail Road Brotherhood excluded African Americans and other race, so they did not have abilities like the union members. Many Unions justified their “*selective membership policy*” by emphasizing how blacks are often used as strikebreakers<sup>15</sup>. Worse, many riots in industries broke out, normally driven by whites with hatred for immigrants and blacks. These white workers would always have the upper-hand because their Unions had their back while the minorities had nowhere to fall back on. Some argued that because these minorities came in, they were *potentially able* to steal their jobs and so they must get their Unions to defend them. We can see that many people took the NLRA to their advantages – for good reasons such as the case of NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin steel Corp, and some used the Act to oppress the African Americans and minorities.

Many African American leaders, particularly labor related, were outraged concerning the problems of many blacks soldiers had to fight for America during World War 1 in segregated units then came back just to have their labor rights violated, such as working in segregated areas, similar to fighting in separate units, and being *organizationally* discriminated. This pressure made President Roosevelt established The Fair Employment Practices Commission in 1941, which ensures the fair employment in the defense industry disregarding race. Yet he only went as far as the defense industry, he did not address the issue of military segregation (but Eleanor Roosevelt supported the idea) because his secretary of war argued that it would decrease the morale of white soldiers. Setting that aside, the FEPC established an environment where blacks weren't

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<sup>15</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for blacks*, 170

discriminated – which, at the time, a model of *industrial citizenship* for black workers. And the FEPC was not the only program that enabled blacks to be employed equally. The PWA, for example, enabled blacks to acquire skilled jobs on construction projects. For black music composers and artists, the FMP (Federal Music Project)<sup>16</sup> funded their performances, which greatly decrease unemployment while provide entertainment for all people.

Now we will move on to discuss about social impacts that the programs of the New Deal had on African Americans. Anti-lynching movements played a big role in how a lot of people evaluate President Roosevelt's decisions. African American lynching wasn't new; in fact, it has been practiced most prominently during *Reconstruction*, driven both by the sense of justice and racism<sup>17</sup>. In October 1934, Claude Neal, an African American farmer was tortured and castrated brutally by a mob then killed because of raping and killing a white woman. At this point, many Americans were outraged and disgusted of the act due to its inhumanity. The death of Claude Neal motivated the public to favor anti-lynching; as an opponent of lynching, Mrs. Roosevelt worked with the NAACP to uphold the anti-lynching bill. In 1935, Mrs. Roosevelt urged her husband to publicly support the *Costigan Bill*<sup>18</sup>. Under the circumstance of Southerners holding the New Deal and the Social Security Act hostage, President Roosevelt refused to do so; the Bill died quietly while it was on the President's table. This event showed the complexity of what the President had to deal with. On one hand, he had to handle the depression, on the other hand, he had to evaluate any moral decisions. As stated in the introduction, the President's goal was to end the depression, so he had to compromise with the South.

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<sup>16</sup> David Woolner, *African Americans and the New Deal: A Look Back in History*, Roosevelt Institute

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Burke, *Without Due Process: Lynching in North Carolina 1880-1900*, 3

<sup>18</sup> NAACP history: *Costigan Wagner Bill*



Even so, some New Deal programs did aim to help black communities by establishing more schools and colleges. Education has been vital to all citizens because it defines a nation's morale. During the Depression, thousands of teachers went unemployed and hundreds of thousands of people needed education<sup>19</sup>, so the FERA's – the Federal Emergency Relief Administration – educational program employed 17,879 teachers, in which, 5,476 were African Americans; and out of 570,794 people enrolled in the emergency classes, about 270 thousand were African Americans<sup>20</sup>. With this program, not only blacks had jobs but also received education. In addition, the FERA also established its college scholarship, which provided \$20 per month for 12 percent of students enrolled in every non-profit colleges and universities; "*Negro and white institutions have benefitted alike under this program.*"<sup>21</sup>"

Despite that, if we look at the broader picture, the *Work Relief* programs only aided the people who hadn't a job; because of such goal, there was no guarantee, in the long run, that the working blacks would be able to keep on facing troubles and overcoming it. With such concern, the Social Security Act was signed in 1935. President Roosevelt stated that:

“We can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life, but we have tried to frame a law which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Harry Hopkins, *Spending to save: the complete story of relief*, 113

<sup>20</sup> Robert Weaver, “*Opportunity: Journal of Negro life*” in *The Great depression and New Deal*, by Mario DiNunzio, 200

<sup>21</sup> Weaver, 201

<sup>22</sup> Franklin Roosevelt's statement in *The Great depression and New Deal*, 203

As a person – both employers and employees – received wages, a small percent of it gets deducted, as a mean of contributing to the system. One percent from 1937 – 1942, two percent from 1943 – 1948, and three percent after December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1948<sup>23</sup>; that money would later benefit the workers when they get old; also, it goes toward healthcare. Nowhere in the Act implied or stated that African Americans and other minorities are excluded from the program. In fact, the *Social Security Act* mention that the program is for *all* eligible citizens. *Title I* and *Title II*, which discusses about old age benefits and grants, contains the following:

*TITLE I-Grants to States for old-age assistance, Sec.2. (4):* “provide for granting to any individual, whose claim for old-age assistance is denied, an opportunity for a fair hearing before such State agency.”<sup>24</sup>

*TITLE II-Federal old-age benefits old-age reserve account, Sec. 202. (1):* “If the total wages determined by the Board to have been paid to him... were not more than \$3,000, the old-age benefit shall be at a monthly rate of one-half of 1 per centum of such total wages.”<sup>25</sup>

*TITLE I, Sec.2. (4)* has an emphasis on the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, all citizens must be treated equal under the law; in this case, the Act extended its coverage to “any individual”, which means that blacks have the right to appeal, should their benefits be revoked with any unjust reason. By including the (4) clause, the Act, in a sense, upheld the rights of minorities indirectly. *TITLE II, Sec. 202. (1)* also stress that all working people will benefit equally according to the policy, which prevents any unjust benefit due to racial differences.

The Act also provided all citizens the aid for unintentional unemployment, the bolster for dependent children and widowed mothers, the support for blind individuals, and the maintenance of public health work without the concern of race and ethnicity. Not only that the Social Security Act secured many Americans’ life, it also boosted the idea of equal opportunities for all citizens

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<sup>23</sup> “*The Social Security Act*” in *The Great depression and New Deal*, by Mario DiNunzio, 203

<sup>24</sup> “*The Social Security Act*”, 204

<sup>25</sup> “*The Social Security Act*”, 206

disregarding their background. For African Americans specifically, their future is secured and at that present, they got the government officially granting them rights and benefits that they deserved. Indeed, never before had a large population of African American had the ability to walk side-by-side with the whites in terms of social services; only in hard times can everyone see that blacks and whites are the same, struggling for job and maintaining a decent life.

It is evident that the New Deal had flaws; many the programs straight out excluded African American and some even allowed organizations – such as the NLRB – to discriminate blacks. But by no means had the President tried to exclude the African American population from the programs; it must be understood that due to the fragile support from the South, President Roosevelt's decisions must meet their demands to accomplish his goals. In the broader picture, the majority of the population's body entrusted the President with the mission to end the Depression, so he couldn't take any risks that might prolong the Depression and let his supporters down. If he had not done what he had, it is certain that the destruction magnitude of the Depression on Americans are unmeasurable. His programs were to counteract that outcome, and the price to pay (mistreatment of African Americans) was relatively small. Even though African Americans did not receive much support by the New Deal, it can't be denied that the blacks gained a good amount of benefits. The New Deal set a base layer for people to build on for future Civil Rights because it enabled blacks to gain some form of equal opportunity in the form of a "flower bud". With the care and support from future generations of activist, the bud would one day bloom.

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