

FIGHT AHEAD ON DESEGREGATION

A distinguished Negro educator outlines the next steps in the battle to implement the Supreme Court decision to desegregate the schools

By Doxey A. Wilkerson

THE Negro people have been fighting against gross discrimination in education for many decades—through petitions, delegations, protest meetings, legislative lobbies, and enormous fund-raising campaigns. In recent years, under the leadership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, their emphasis has been on legal action to win “equality” of educational opportunity in the Negro separate school. Some important victories have been won—notably in increasing teachers’ salaries, lengthening school terms, extending school plant and equipment and winning admission to the graduate and professional departments of state universities.

The cases decided by the Supreme Court on May 17, 1954, mark a new high level of this struggle. Arising in black-belt counties of South Carolina and Virginia, and in Kansas, Delaware and Washington, D. C., they called, not for spurious “equality” between separate white and Negro schools, but for the complete abandonment of the Jimcrow school system—for the integration of white and Negro children in the same schools. . . .

Let there be no unclarity on this point: The decision outlawing segregated schools was wrested from the Supreme Court and the Eisenhower administration through powerful democratic struggles by the united Negro people and their allies. It was a great democratic victory of the people; and its social and political implications are far-reaching, indeed.

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Think what full implementation of the Court’s decision could mean. Some 9,000,000 white children and 2,600,000 Negro children now attending segregated elementary and secondary schools in the South would be brought together in the classroom and on the playground. This itself would be a telling blow against racism. Hundreds of thousands of white and Negro teachers would merge their professional associations for a common approach to common problems. White and Negro parents in thousands of communities would begin to work together in the P.T.A.’s. And this process of building Negro-white unity could be extended to scores of thousands of youths and their teachers in hundreds of Southern colleges and universities. The impact of this development could do much to undermine the whole structure of Jimcrow laws and practices in all fields.

Plots to Defy the Court

But this legal victory is still to be realized in practice. All the Supreme Court has done thus far is to *proclaim* that segregated schools are unconstitutional. Implementing decrees have yet to be won and even then the struggle actually to *abolish* segregated schools will be long and bitter. Moreover, that struggle cannot be confined to the educational front alone. There will have to be powerful and winning assaults against Jimcrow practices in the even more fundamental areas of job discrimination in industry, semi-feudal survivals on the plantations and ghetto housing in the cities. But struggles on these different fronts mutually support one another; and the recent decision of the Supreme Court enhances the effectiveness of them all.

If anyone thought last May that “it’s all over but the shouting,” his illusion must have been thoroughly shattered by the Dixiecrat counter-offensive against the Supreme Court decision. The opposition is determined and sinister, and is now beginning to merge with the “cold war” McCarthyite-fascist attacks against all civil liberties.

When beginnings were made in the fall of 1954 to integrate the schools of Washington, D. C., Baltimore, Maryland, and Milford, Delaware, the white and Negro pupils and their parents accepted the change without incident. Desegregation was proceeding until Bryant Bowles and his so-called “National Association for the Advancement of

Georgia Incident

I SPENT many years working in the schools of the South; and I know first-hand how segregated schools operate to worsen the conditions of *all* the people. Let me cite one little incident which vividly symbolizes the whole problem.

Driving across rural Georgia one rainy morning, I approached a group of Negro children trudging along to their ramshackle, one-room "school" on the countryside. They were forced to step off the highway into the mud in order to let a white school bus go by; and I heard the white youngsters jeer and hurl epithets at the Negro children as the bus sped along toward the well-equipped, consolidated white school in the nearby town.

Follow these youngsters into their respective schools, week after week, year after year. Note the distorted and divisive things they learn about race relations—not only from their lessons, but even more from spending a good part of their lives in a system which shunts Negro children aside, like pariahs, into impoverished caricatures of schools.

Is there any wonder that one group of children grows up saturated with the poisonous nonsense of "white superiority," and the other with bitter resentment over the insults and special handicaps imposed by the Jimcrow system?

How useful this system of dividing the southern white and Negro masses must be to those whose profits and political power are based on the oppression of both!

—D. A. W.

ghetto housing imposed upon Negroes by the banks and real estate corporations. It has long been used to circumvent laws "prohibiting" school segregation in the North—with the result that there are hundreds of Jimcrow schools in New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Los Angeles and other Northern cities with large Negro populations. The Dixiecrats are strengthened in their defiance of the Supreme Court decision when a bigot like New York City Superintendent of Schools William Jansen tries to rationalize this practice as "natural segregation. . . ."

Against this background of legislative skulduggery, racist persecution and mob violence, the attorneys for the Wall Street-Bourbon alliance proceed, with gentlemanly decorum, to petition the Supreme Court to allow them to handle this troublesome question of desegregation in their own way—and time!

Where Does Eisenhower Stand?

Arguments were scheduled for December 6, 1954 on what decrees the Supreme Court should issue to implement its ruling against segregated schools; but they were postponed after Mississippi Senator Eastland blocked confirmation of Federal Judge John Marshall Harlan's appointment to the vacancy on the Court. Eastland's protracted tenure in the Senate is based on the Jimcrow disfranchisement of most of the citizens in his district; and he is understandably disturbed over this appointment of the grandson and namesake of the one Supreme Court justice who dissented in the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896 (which gave legal sanction to the "separate but equal" doctrine). . . .

Although oral arguments were postponed, briefs were filed by all parties to the five desegregation cases involved; and "friend of the court" briefs were entered by the United States attorney general, the American Veterans Committee and at least five Southern states not directly involved in these cases. The N.A.A.C.P. brief urges the Supreme Court to order complete school integration by September 1955, with a leeway of one year provided in cases where special administrative difficulties are met. In general, the briefs by Southern states urge the Court to let the federal district courts (located in the South) handle all problems of implementation, with only general directions from the Supreme Court; and they call for a "gradual" approach to desegregation.

Attorney General Herbert R. Brownell's brief appears to support *both* these opposing positions. On the one hand, it includes many fine-sounding statements of principle, in seeming support of the N.A.A.C.P. On the other hand, the specific decrees which the attorney general's brief asks the Supreme Court to issue would leave things pretty much in the hands of the federal district courts, in obvious support of the basic position of the Southern states.

This looks like a clever bit of double-talk. Attorney

White People" intervened to organize mob violence in defiance of the law. Bowles appealed to hoodlum elements in the communities by shouting the slogans of Hitler—calling Negroes "dupes" of Communists and "leftwingers," charging that N.A.A.C.P. "bosses are Jews" and whipping up emotional fervor "to save the white race." And he succeeded, *temporarily*, in disrupting the process of school integration. . . .

Open defiance of the Supreme Court ruling is expressed by the governors of several Southern states. Governor Hugh White, of Mississippi, for example, told the *Pittsburgh Courier* (December 11, 1954): "We're not going to pay any attention to the Supreme Court's decision."

The political leaders of four states—South Carolina, Louisiana, Georgia and Mississippi—have put through laws which authorize them to turn public schools over to private agencies or local school boards or municipalities for continued operation on a segregated basis. Their fear and hatred of democracy is so intense that they would destroy *all* public schools in order to preserve their cherished and highly profitable system of racial segregation.

Plans are openly discussed in political and educational circles to gerrymander school district boundaries to conform to segregated white and Negro residential areas and to authorize school principals to give transfers-out to individual white pupils who happen to get caught in "Negro districts" and *vice versa*. This device supplements the

General Brownell is well aware of the historic white supremacist role of the Southern federal district courts to which he would give final authority to approve state plans for the integration of white and Negro schools. Why, then, did he fail to propose a definite time limit, like the N.A.A.C.P.'s September 1955? Are his fine statements of principle designed to serve as window-dressing while the Bourbon rulers of the South proceed, through the lower courts which they dominate, to sabotage the Supreme Court decision by means of endless litigation and "gradualism"?

These questions take on special significance in the light of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's statement on the school segregation cases just a few days before the attorney general's brief was filed. The President told a press conference that he was sure the Supreme Court in formulating its implementing decrees would take into account the emotional strains and practical problems growing out of this issue. Georgia's Negro-hating Herman Talmadge, then governor, promptly hailed the President's statement as evidence that the Eisenhower administration is moving toward his way of thinking on this issue—and there is substantial reason to fear that he is right.

Republican Party campaigners made full use of the Supreme Court decision in their quest for votes in the 1954 elections. But now that the elections are over, there are ominous signs that the Eisenhower administration is trying to make peace with the Dixiecrats—at the expense of the democratic rights of the Negro people. And the same thing is true of leaders of the Democratic Party, who began the current session of Congress by making a "gentleman's agreement" with their Dixiecrat colleagues not to "divide the party" by pressing for civil rights legislation.

The People Will Uphold the Law

The people of our country dare not rely on these Big Business politicians to integrate white and Negro schools. The actual abolition of segregated schools must be won in the same way the Court victory of last May was won—through even more powerful mass pressures by the Negro people and their allies.

The fight to abolish segregated schools should be waged with confidence that the Supreme Court decision can, indeed, be translated into practice. It is entirely possible for the democratic forces of the people to overcome the diehard opposition of the Dixiecrats and their agents.

There is a very broad coalition of organizations which are formally committed to support of the Court decision. Among them are many predominantly white organizations *within the South*—including the Texas C.I.O., the Georgia Federation of Labor (A.F.L.), the Southern Baptist Church Convention, other Protestant and Catholic church bodies, the Southern Regional Council, the Southern Conference Educational Fund, some newspapers, and many civic, professional, student and other groups. On the national front there is an even wider range of groups which have spoken up on this question—including the

A.F.L., C.I.O., the Communist Party, U.S.A., the National Council of Churches, and many, many more. Added to these are practically all the organizations of the Negro people, North and South—forthright and militant in their demand for "*Desegregation Now!*" even in the face of actual and threatened lynch-terror. And the democratic, peace-loving peoples abroad are watching carefully to see whether our government lives up to the Supreme Court pronouncement which the Voice of America was so quick to beam to all the world last May 17.

This broad popular support represents a formidable obstacle to those who want to sabotage the Court ruling.

That is why most Southern governors refused to go along with South Carolina's Byrnes, Georgia's Talmadge and Mississippi's White in their open defiance of the Supreme Court decision but *say* their states will obey the law. They knew that the people of the South cherish their public schools, want them improved, are hostile to proposals for turning them over to private agencies and are disposed to abide by the ruling of the Supreme Court.

That is why the Eisenhower-Brownell administration finds it necessary—even though with double-talk—to *say* they are for desegregation. They feel the pressure of the democratic people's forces of our country; and they are especially sensitive to criticisms on the Negro question from abroad.

It is relatively unimportant whether these Southern governors, the President and the attorney general are "sincere." But it is extremely important that they feel compelled to take a public position in support of the Supreme Court decision. The same democratic people's pressure which forces them into this official posture can also force them actually to abolish segregated schools.

Indeed, desegregation is already under way. As the N.A.A.C.P.'s public relations director, Henry Lee Moon, points out in *The Nation* (December 18, 1954), by last fall "four major cities and more than two-score smaller cities and towns in seven states had begun the process of integrating their formerly segregated school systems." White and Negro Catholic and other parochial schools are likewise being integrated in several Southern states.

The white supremacist opposition to placing Negro teachers in charge of classes which include white pupils is being overcome in some of these localities; and it can be overcome generally by the urgent needs of the schools and the pressure of the people. The schools of our country—already short some 150,000 teachers—simply cannot dispense with the services of the 113,000 Negro teachers now employed in segregated schools. Moreover, the democratic people's forces which are able to compel desegregation in the schools will also have the strength to assure the integration of white and Negro teaching personnel.

The fight to abolish segregated schools is a winning fight. What we need most at this time is *united and demonstrative action* by the broad coalition of people's organizations which support the ruling of the Supreme Court. . . .