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51
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So Robeson joined the people's fight

THE first thing you feel when you meet Paul Robeson is a sense of bigness. Not just the bigness of his large physical presence and deep, resonant voice, but a bigness of mind and spirit which is visible in his rather sad, thoughtful face when he sits silent, and irresistible the moment he begins to speak.

I went to ask him to tell something of his life and how he became one of the greatest fighters of the working-class movement of the world.

Paul Robeson was the son of a Methodist minister in Princeton, New Jersey, one of five children. He was born in 1898.

Although New Jersey is one of the Northern States, it is utterly Southern in character, and Princeton is traditionally the university of the Southern aristocrats.

He said to me:

You people don't realise what life is like for millions of Negroes in such places.

"Princeton was as different from New York as Hitler Germany was from England; one big concentration camp, where we had no rights and one might be shot for objecting to be pushed off the pavement."

Paul's eldest brother wanted to go to Princeton University, but was told, by President Wilson no less, that it could not open its doors to Negroes.

His second brother would not accept his "place" in society, and because he hit back his father sent him out of town. He was a danger to himself and his family.

Robeson remembers him with special admiration and affection.

HOWEVER, Paul Robeson got to the University of New Jersey, and took his law degree and played football for the university. But already the theatre was the main interest of his life.

When he was a student he began acting and singing to make a little money and before he left law school he had his first success in "Emperor Jones."

He came to England in 1922, and with Mrs. Patrick Campbell, brought "Emperor Jones" across in 1925, and in 1928 made his first great popular success in "Show Boat."

From then he has been world famous.

"For many years," he said, "I was just like many other artists. I felt deeply the lack of civil rights of my own people, but I thought my fame and success was my contribution to their struggle."

"Only gradually I began to see that although I was doing all right, ten million of my fellow Negroes in the South lived on the edge of starvation."

"I realised that white people who were nice to me felt that showed how broadminded they were about Negroes. I salved their conscience—and my people were none the better for it."

ILIVED mostly in England then, and was an active member of the League of Coloured Peoples, singing and speaking at their meetings.

"Yet I became more and more dissatisfied with myself and with my art."

"It didn't seem I was getting anywhere by singing negro spirituals to the same audiences of comfortable people. I could only go on making more dough, and I wasn't interested."

"I even talked of retiring"—and one of his rare and radiant smiles spread over Robeson's face at the thought of his own absurdity.

He went on to talk about the films he made, and "Sanders of the River"—"putting all my feelings about my people into the part, and thinking I was doing a good job for them."

But when he saw the film in America, he understood why friends had asked: "How could you do it, Paul?" It was a brilliant piece of imperialist propaganda.

Robeson denounced the film, turned over all he made from it to Negro relief organisations, and has several times tried to buy it up and have it destroyed.

And then he received a challenge



Paul Robeson draws a self-portrait in an interview with SHEILA LYND

IT was at a meeting of the League of Coloured Peoples. An old Negro fighter, Arnold Ward, criticised them all for being too much taken up with student problems and urged them to take more seriously the shameful conditions of the Negroes in South Africa.

Ward challenged them to "go take a look" at Africa—and added, "and then go to the Soviet Union and see how they have ended racial discrimination forever."

Paul Robeson took that speech to heart: he decided to go take a look at both countries. "Robeson goes to the Jungle" was the jeering comment of the newspapers of the day.

"When I crossed the border from Poland into the Soviet Union," he told me, "it was like

stepping into another planet. I felt the full dignity of being a human being for the first time"

He loved what he found there so much that, until the war, he returned to Russia for each new year.

And he sent his son to school there, leaving him in the care of his wife's mother, who lived in Moscow for several years, worked there, and is as warmly devoted to the Soviet people as Paul himself—and as young Paul, who is now studying advanced physics at university in America.

In Moscow he began to study Marxism, and told me how entrancing he found "Capital" and all Marx's writings.

HE would have settled in Moscow for good, but friends told him: "If you believe in Socialism you have a job elsewhere."

The first job that came to his hand was in Republican Spain.

Robeson visited Madrid and sang in camps and hospitals.

"I saw Hitler and Mussolini's planes burying those people in the ruins of their homes, one beautiful Easter morning," he

said, "and I never felt so proud of being part of the human species as when I saw the heroism of the people of Spain."

Those experiences brought him right into the struggle, where he has been ever since; singing to striking miners; speaking for Negro boys threatened with the electric chair on flimsy evidence from black-haters; defending the colonial peoples everywhere; working with the Congress of Industrial Organisations and finally in the Progressive Party with Henry Wallace, in the effort to stem and turn the tide of reaction in America.

Paul Robeson has put his art fully at the service of the people, and as a result, he says, "my art has deepened too."

TO him, the unity of the colonial and the white people is the key question for workers today.

"How can white workers not be concerned," he said, "at low wages and vile conditions in the colonial countries, when these conditions menace their own standards the whole time?"

"And where does capitalism get its strength to hold down its own white working class? From the wealth and power it draws from the colonies."

"If you in Britain knew how busy American capital is, ousting British capital from Africa—and doing it through the Marshall Plan you are supposed to be grateful for—you would realise that your true friends are those hungry, rightless South African Negroes and not the rich men of Wall Street."

"If you are allies to those oppressed black people they will learn politics the faster, and learn the meaning of Socialism."

"And once they have learnt that, do you think they could ever be induced to fight the Soviet Union or any of those countries in the world where men can stand up and be free?"

"Yet America needs black men, as well as Europeans, to fight her war with Socialism. She is determined to fight the new war to the last European and the last Negro."

This is the message that Robeson tirelessly drives home—that neither white nor black can be free till they work for freedom together.

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