

## Berkeley's Example

*Berkeley, California*

DENIED the use of a public auditorium in San Francisco and Oakland, the Negro Labor Council, seeking a hall for a Paul Robeson concert, requested the Berkeley Board of Education for permission to use the magnificent new Berkeley Community Theater. On May 6 the board met to vote on the request. Mrs. Eileen Ready, chairman, and member A. K. Sackett voted "no" on the ground that to permit the noted singer to appear in the school auditorium would be "giving support to communism which we are fighting in Korea." But three members of the board voted "yes": Mayor Laurence L. Cross, who is also minister of a local community church; Mrs. Mildred Brown, and David P. Smith, active Republican, who laid down the sole condition—which the Negro Labor Council was glad to meet—that no political speeches be made at the concert.

The majority vote in favor of permitting Robeson to appear created a city-wide furor. Hundreds of letters supporting the majority decision were sent to board members and to the press; on the other hand, veterans' and other patriotic organizations publicly attacked the three who had voted favorably. J. Frank Coakley, district attorney of Alameda County, warned: "If Mr. Robeson were to appear in a public school building, it is possible that a disturbance might occur that would result in injury to persons and damage to property for which your school district and the city of Berkeley would be liable." But Mayor Cross replied that he had full confidence in the ability of the Berkeley police to maintain order, and Police Chief John Holstrom added that his men would carry out their responsibility to "maintain public peace and prevent injury."

In response to pressure, Mrs. Ready, as chairman of the board, called a special open meeting for May 10 to review the case. More than 1,200 Berkeley citizens crowded into the board chamber to participate in the proceedings.

The first item on the agenda was the reading of a letter from the district attorney which said, in part: "Your board could reconsider the matter and rescind

Tuesday night's action whereby the application was granted. . . . It is common knowledge that Mr. Robeson has made certain inflammatory and highly provocative remarks and that his appearance in other parts of the country have precipitated riots and disturbances of the peace."

Members of the board then made public statements explaining their position. It was clear that no member had as yet changed his mind. Mayor Cross commented forcefully on the district attorney's letter. "I consider this letter as one which is inciting to riot. I have full confidence in the ability of the police to maintain order. Paul Robeson appeared in a concert in San Francisco only a few months after the Peekskill [New York] trouble and there was less disturbance than there would be at a Presbyterian prayer meeting."

David P. Smith asked the audience to indicate by show of hands how they stood on the majority decision to grant Robeson the hall. The vote was at least four-to-one in favor. Smith then said:

I am concerned over the spread of communism, but I do not believe we can stop it by such action as those of you in the opposition would have us take. Since World War II 600,000,000 people have been won over by the Communists without the Red Army having fired a single shot. There are still hundreds of millions wavering. . . . We cannot win this fight by guns or bullets. . . .

Why then are the Russians winning this battle for the hearts and minds of people? One of the major factors is that although we preach freedom regardless of race, color, or creed, unfortunately we do not always practice it. . . . If we turn down this noted singer, the action would be proof to the people of India and Indo-China, even to minority groups here, that Paul Robeson was denied a place to sing because he is a Negro. I beseech you . . . to prove to the world by example that democracy does work.

After the board members completed their statements, comment was invited from the audience. About fifty people spoke, most of them in support of the board majority. Several veterans—both Negro and white—read petitions signed by fellow-veterans urging the board to stand by its decision. One veteran stressed that "to allow free expression of ideas in a building dedicated to the memory of our war dead would indicate

that their deaths in fighting for the principles of democracy were not in vain."

A school teacher declared: "Robeson has a special place in the cultural life of this nation. As a high school student I heard recordings of his Shakespearean roles. I checked our library shelves the other day and found three books written about him. If we deny him the chance to be heard, isn't it only a short step toward removing his recordings from the library shelves and finally toward burning books. . . ?"

A minister thus summed up the danger involved in excluding Robeson:

To my mind the real threat to democracy lies not in the ideas which Robeson may have, but in the use of the *fear* of communism as a justification for the undermining of all the constitutional safeguards of individual rights. It was precisely this supposed danger from Communists first, and other minorities later, which the Nazis used to silence all opposition while they hacked away at the very foundations of government in Germany.

The reason I deplore the type of argument used in the district attorney's letter is that it says in effect: our democratic processes are not strong enough to withstand the threat of force and violence—hence we must abandon them in favor of the use of force and violence ourselves. . . .

The meeting adjourned at midnight with the board's majority vote in favor of permitting Robeson to sing standing unchanged. On May 23 Mr. Robeson appeared, as scheduled, before a capacity audience. There was no trouble.

ALICE S. HAMBURG

## In An Early Issue

As a follow-up to Hugo Ernst's article *Labor Views the Campaign*, which appeared in the May 10 issue, *The Nation* will soon publish a statement on the same general subject by George M. Harrison, grand president of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks (A. F. of L.), one of labor's most influential spokesmen. With the Harrison statement will also appear a summary of the views of a number of other labor leaders on the great issues of the 1952 campaign.

The Nation June 7, 1952

## AROUND THE U. S. A.

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