

Negro People's Conventions

by Doxey Wilkerson

THERE is urgent need to revive those mass political demonstrations of 80 years ago by which the recently-freed Negro masses of the South helped beat back the reactionary threat confronting America immediately following the Civil War. The time is ripe for another nationwide series of Negro "Peoples' Conventions."

During 1865-67, following Union victory in the Civil War and the death of President Lincoln, there began under President Johnson a series of "reconstruction" measures designed to "put the Negro back in his place" and stamp out the liberating achievements of the War.



Reaction In 1865

The former slave-holders and leaders of the Confederacy were being returned to power in the South, their property holdings restored, and their crimes against the nation wiped off the record by widespread presidential pardons. State constitutional conventions (with poor whites and Negroes excluded) were held to enact the so-called "Black Codes," which sought to return the Negroes to slavery in all but name.

This was the period of "Presidential Reconstruction," and while it lasted the nation was on the verge of losing all the progressive goals for which the people had rallied to fight and win the Civil War. The newly-born liberties of the Negro people were rapidly being torn away.

But the freedmen were in no mood to accept the reactionary program being thrust upon them. They fought back, militantly, in a dozen different ways — including delegations and letters of protest to the federal government; refusal to accept long-term labor contracts or return to the plantations; and organized demands for and the direct (sometimes violent) seizure and holding of lands which they considered rightfully their own. Their most dramatic and effective struggles came through the series of Negro Peoples' Conventions held in most of the southern states during the summer and fall of 1865.

Many thousands of former slaves, together with pre-war "free Negroes," gathered in these con-

ventions to take stock of the reactionary onslaught directed against them, and to formulate unity programs of action for the defense of their democratic rights. Some of their memorials "to the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress Assembled" are among the genuine classics in the long struggle for political and economical democracy in America.

The Negro Peoples' Conventions represented the first concerted political action by the Negro masses of the South. They gave organized expression to a powerful mass movement directed against the reactionary policies of the Johnson Administration and the "Black Codes." It was as a direct outgrowth of this movement that Frederick Douglass led a delegation to the White House, in February, 1866, to plead with President Johnson for enforcement of the 13th Amendment, and for equal rights for Negroes. But Johnson evaded the issue and made clear his alliance with southern reaction.

In turning to leave, Douglass said: "The President sends us to the people and we go to the people." This they did, and their political agitation was a big factor in drawing tens of thousands of northern and southern white allies into the struggle against postwar Bourbon reaction. Thus were laid the political foundations for that progressive period of "Congressional Reconstruction" which Howard Fast interprets so brilliantly in *Freedom Road*.

Reaction In 1945

Again in 1945, following our recent victory in the European War and the death of President Roosevelt, the forces of reaction in our country have launched another major attack upon the democratic achievements of this people's war. They are attempting again to "put the Negro back in his place."

The national FEPC is being blocked at every turn. Most all of the many state "FEPC" bills have been defeated—and only the

quick and concerted action of the strong labor-progressive forces of New York saved the Ives-Quinn bill from a similar fate. The poll tax repeal bill faces a certain filibuster in the Senate.

Mass lay-offs in war industries are throwing Negro men and women out of jobs in grossly disproportionate numbers, and anti-Negro employers are already planning for reconversion on a lily-white basis. Racial tensions are growing more and more acute in the South, and a new wave of anti-Negro violence threatens to greet our veterans coming home from the war.

This resurgence of reaction is spear-headed by big business and landlord interests; and, as always, it presents a serious threat to the security and freedom, not only of Negroes, but of the masses of all Americans.

We're Fighting Back Again

Just as was true some eighty years ago, the Negro people—now far more mature, better organized, and aided by powerful allies—are again challenging the "postwar" onslaught of reaction. Again we are fighting back.

Witness last Saturday's unity conference in Washington, where representatives of thirty national organizations met to draw up and launch a coordinated program of militant political action.

Witness that magnificent crowd of 20,000 New Yorkers who assembled at last Monday's Negro Freedom Rally to shout their defiance of reaction and their determination to stand together and fight.

All this is good, but it is not enough. The current attacks of reaction can be beaten back—and they will! But it will require the maximum mobilization of all the democratic forces of our nation for concerted and militant struggle.

Our people are ready and eager for precisely this form of political action, even more than was true in 1865. Let us revive the Negro People's Conventions!

— Worth Repeating —

PRIDE IN THEIR PLANES by the boys who steer the B-29s is told by a reporter, St. Clair McKelway, who was with these forces, and says in the current (June 30) *New Yorker*:

The B-29 crews want their airplanes to look new and shiny all the time. The B-29s are silvery, without camouflage paint of any kind, and the crews laboriously smooth out tiny wrinkles on the exteriors and polish the silver skins far beyond necessity. Any night in the Marianas, you can find B-29 crew members fooling around a perfectly airworthy B-29, fussing with it as an older generation used to fuss with the new car out in the garage after dinner.