

The Jefferson School

By **Doxey Wilkerson**

As I look over this first term at the Jefferson School of Social Science, I am impressed by the fact that few teaching experiences in my 16 years of professional work ever gave me such a "lift" or so strengthened my confidence in a progressive future.

The students in my courses in "The Negro in American Life" and "The Negro in American History" are all seriously concerned about the future of American democracy—and eager to do something about it!

These two groups of students include both white and Negroes—mostly whites; and both men and women—mostly women. They represent a wide range of occupational pursuits.

Differing widely in age, background and day-to-day interests, they all hold one purpose in common — to strengthen American democracy through the extension of Negro democratic rights.

WHY STUDY THE NEGRO

These students' reasons for undertaking the study of Negro life and history vary widely as to particulars, yet emphasize their community of interest. The following statements are illustrative — and highly revealing.

A famous Negro actor wants to learn how "to combat race prejudice successfully in the most intelligent way." A white bookkeeper seeks "to understand how better to fight for the full integration of the Negro people into the American nation."



A teacher is eager "to get my pupils, who are mostly white, to work with the Negro people." Another teacher wants understandings that will aid in the work of an Interracial-Interfaith Committee to which she belongs. A journalist seeks "a better understanding of the Negro problem mainly to help in interpreting news stories.

MATERIAL FOR A BOOK

A musician wants background material for a book on *American Negro Music*. A warehouse administrator seeks help "with a problem of 80 Negroes and whites working together." A white pharmacist wants understanding which will enable him to work effectively in "a hospital where a majority of the personnel is Negro."

As is characteristic of the more than 3,000 citizens who clamored for admittance to the Jefferson School program of studies as a whole, the students in my two classes are there for very definite and practical reasons. That is why it is such a joy to work with them.

I came to realize long ago that students learn what they do, not necessarily what the teacher wants them to learn. Thus it is that I am heartened by the many unexpected—and frequently off-the-immediate-subject-comments of the highly articulate citizens who comprise my two classes. They are reacting to, and hence learning, the thing with which they are concerned today.

They are impressed by the striking parallel between the transformation of the Civil War into a war for the freedom of the slaves, as a necessity for national survival; and the comparable transformation of World War II into a liberation war, with similar implications for the

extension of Negro democratic rights. The meaning of this people's war for all men becomes clearer.

They see the many racial discriminations in New York City as expressions, in varying degree, of precisely the same basic pattern of oppression by which southern landlords proceed to the super-exploitation of both the white and Negro masses. Thus they recognize more than ever the urgency of Negro-white unity in the struggle for common goals.

Noting the Supreme Court's recent reversal of its 1935 decision in the Texas white-primary case, and recalling the obstructionist role of the Supreme Court during the progressive days of Reconstruction, they understand better the real issues involved in President Roosevelt's fight to reconstitute the Supreme Court several years ago. They also see the necessity for mass struggles to create a political climate in which courts will render progressive decisions.

They observe the historic and current changes in the relations of the Negro people to the rest of the nation; and what is even more important, they see the basic economic and political forces, reflected in the struggles of the people, from which these changes emerge. Thus they gain—and give to their teacher—renewed confidence in the continued march of the Negro people and the nation as a whole toward greater freedom.

It is unpleasant to contemplate the early end of my relations with these groups of students at the Jefferson School. My main consolation lies in the fact that a new term will begin shortly—with new groups of stimulating fighters for democracy for all men.