

Preventing labor discrimination during World War II, 1942

Introduction

In early 1942, as men of working age enlisted in the military and war production accelerated, US industries experienced a labor shortage. President Roosevelt established the War Manpower Commission “to assure the most effective mobilization and maximum utilization of the Nation’s manpower in the prosecution of the war” (Executive Order 9139). The commission estimated that nearly seven million new workers would be needed in 1942. General Frank McSherry, director of operations for the WMC, declared that

employers can no longer afford to discriminate against Negroes and workers of other minority groups. . . . Aliens, where it is possible under government restrictions, must be considered for war production jobs. . . . We cannot afford to permit any preconceived prejudices or artificial hiring standards to interfere with the production of tanks, planes and guns.¹

This poster, published by the War Manpower Commission in 1942, highlights the need to draw laborers from all segments of the American population. It shows nine men working on a tank. Their last names suggest a variety of ethnicities and national origins: Cohen, du Bois, Hrdlicka, Kelly, Lazarri, Nienciewisz, Santini, Schmidt, and Williams. The text paraphrases President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 of 1941 forbidding discrimination “because of race, creed, color, or national origin” in defense production.

Excerpt

AMERICANS ALL

“. . . it is the duty of employers and labor organizers to provide for the full participation of all workers without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt

¹ Frank J. McSherry, “Manpower Problems and the War Effort,” July 7, 1942, *Vital Speeches of the Day* 8, no. 22 (1942), 702.

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Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and study the poster. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Explain the need to recruit seven million workers in 1942. Why was the existing workforce insufficient?
2. Why did President Franklin Roosevelt find it necessary to mandate that employers and labor organizations ensure full participation by all Americans? What forms of discrimination does this poster address?
3. Describe the types of employment discrimination that were proscribed by Executive Order 8802.

Extra: Note that women are not mentioned in Executive Order 8802, and that on the poster, only men are shown working. To what extent did the war alter the role of women in the workforce?

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Image



"Americans All," War Manpower Commission, Washington DC, 1942. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09530)