

October 8, 1949

The Facts of the Robeson Affair

About September 28 the undergraduate Forum Board, without any consultation with college officials, invited Paul Robeson to speak on the campus on the afternoon of October 6. We learned, later, that the Forum Board's invitation was seconded by the Student Council by a 6 to 5 vote, after a protracted discussion. The Oberlin Review reported Mr. Robeson's acceptance in its issue of September 30. Late the same day a Forum Board member applied for permission to use Finney Chapel for the meeting. The matter was referred to the Prudential Committee.

On Saturday morning, October 1, Paul Willen, Chairman of the Forum Board, consulted me about the meeting for the first time. I pointed out to him a number of problems in connection with such a meeting, including the possibility of disorder and violence and possible harm to Oberlin's historic reputation and interest in the improvement of race relations and understanding.

On Monday, October 3, the Prudential Committee held a special meeting and approved the action indicated in the following statement (which was not made public until noon, October 4, at the request of the Forum Board, which stated that it wished to consult Mr. Robeson's representatives as to the conditions imposed):

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"Since the Forum Board, a student organization, without consultation with those responsible for the use of college facilities, has invited Paul Robeson to the campus to express his views, the College thinks that a reiteration of its policy on matters of this sort is necessary.



"Oberlin College has traditionally supported the cause of free speech and public discussion of controversial issues. The College must assume a responsibility to assure that all sides of public issues be represented. A true forum procedure would necessarily mean the presentation of other views in addition to those expressed by Mr. Robeson. In this particular situation it is our judgment that the presentation of the opposite view should be made at the same time. Therefore Oberlin College will grant to the Forum Board a platform on which Mr. Robeson can be heard on a forum basis upon the express condition that an equal opportunity be given on the same program for a person or persons who may hold divergent views. Details as to the arrangements are to be worked out by the Forum Board in consultation with a committee consisting of Messrs. D. M. Love, Blair Stewart, W. D. Holdeman, and L. S. Ries."

On Tuesday, October 4, it was announced that the Forum Board had secured Reverend Horace White, Pastor of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Detroit (a former student in the Oberlin Graduate School of Theology) to appear at the meeting as the other speaker with Mr. Robeson.

On Wednesday, October 5, Mr. Robeson's representatives in Cleveland issued this statement:

"Paul Robeson is coming to Cleveland after tremendous demonstrations in Los Angeles and Chicago. In these cities the people came together and the public officials cooperated in a most impressive reaffirmation of the right of a great artist to be heard and appreciated.

"Our committee is proud to welcome Mr. Robeson to Cleveland where we are confident he will be received in the same spirit and the results will be here, as in the cities where he has already appeared, a greater unity of Negro people and their white allies for reaffirmation in these trying times of the basic democratic rights of all.

"Our committee is grateful to the student body of Oberlin for its invitation. Our committee feels that the spirit of the invitation is in accord with the objectives of Mr. Robeson's national tour.

"Injecting into the Oberlin invitation the appearance of controversy, however, is not connected with affirming and reaffirming the rights of an artist to be heard and the need of all citizens to come together to guarantee fuller democracy.

"That right and that need are not subjects for debate. The Cleveland Committee, therefore, with greatest good will toward the student body of Oberlin College, feels that it must decline the invitation. We are sure that another time Mr. Robeson will gladly accept an invitation to sing on the Oberlin campus."

Despite this declination by Mr. Robeson, the Forum Board proceeded to hold the meeting in Finney Chapel on the afternoon of October 6, Mr. Hugh DeLacy, Chairman of the Progressive Party of Ohio, substituting for Mr. Robeson, and the Reverend Mr. White appearing as originally scheduled. The subject of the meeting was "The American Negro and Civil Liberties Today."

William E. Stevenson

