

# PAUL ROBESON — INSPIRER OF YOUTH

JOHN LEWIS

**L**ADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I should say my fellow freedom fighters, let me begin by congratulating FREEDOMWAYS and all of you tonight for having this affair to honor Paul Robeson at such a fitting moment in our history and its critical juncture in the Civil Rights Movement. For two generations of Americans, Paul Robeson represented the entire Negro people of this country. He was a spectacular hero who seemed to have been born lucky: first, an All-American football star, a Phi Beta Kappa scholar, and, in the twenties and thirties, an internationally famous actor and singer.

Paul Robeson was a tall, suave, handsome, rich man who was actually chosen to represent all America in a CBS production of "A Ballad for Americans." But then he began to emerge as not just America's favorite Negro artist. During his years of life and travel in London, he met African leaders in exile, such as Kenyatta and Nkrumah. He went to the Soviet Union. He began to speak for Negro rights—for human rights. He talked and listened to the representatives of the Communist Party. He called for direct action to solve our problems at a time when it was not popular, even extremely "unfashionable." Some white people seemed to think that Paul Robeson betrayed them. Some began to say, "Now look, he's being ungrateful, look what we've done for you, and you've turned against us."

He also scared away the so-called responsible Negro leadership. Robeson was ostracized, unable to sing or travel. This man, who had made people happy throughout the world, and was everybody's favorite Negro, was soon a hated man. And then began years of persecution by Senator Eastland, and the House Un-American Activities Committee. Yet, Robeson didn't waver. For him, being a Negro, meant no compromising of important principles. It meant taking unpopular stands despite the opposition of the responsible Negro leadership and "white liberal" friends. He might have kept quiet as so many other Negro celebrities have done; he might have taken it

---

*John Lewis is National Chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.*

easier, and kept his friends happy, but he couldn't. *Tonight, as we salute Paul Robeson, we salute more than a man, we salute a cause. We salute the dreams and aspirations and the hopes of an oppressed people whether they be in Selma, Alabama, in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Vietnam.*

In many ways, we of SNCC are Paul Robeson's spiritual children. We, too, have rejected gradualism and moderation. We, too, have called for nationwide protests and massive organizing of ordinary people. We, too, have met African leaders, and we, too, have made enemies of some of our erstwhile supporters. We, too, have been told to wait, "be patient," go slow, and be a little more moderate. We, too, have been accused of being radicals, and of "Communist influence" and for the same reasons as Robeson. Such accusations are inevitable when you speak out independently and radically. Such accusations are an attempt to discredit an organization by those who fear they can no longer control that group or pocket the revolution. They are part of a program to isolate one element in this great struggle, in this great revolution (in this case the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), from the other respectable groups of our society. We recognize this program as such, and reject it as such. We will maintain our independence of any political party or influence, but this includes The Establishment also. Why and what was so dangerous about Paul Robeson? What is so dangerous about SNCC? It is our faith in the numberless poor and uneducated black people in the South, our belief they must be free and decide their own political destiny. This belief was manifested when we of SNCC helped to establish the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which has now challenged the right of the five segregationist Congressmen from Mississippi who were "elected" last fall, not by all of the people of Mississippi, but by a relatively *few* people. You will remember that 68 delegates of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party came to Atlantic City last August to challenge the regular Democratic delegation. You may remember last January 4 when the right of the five Mississippi Congressmen to be seated was challenged. And 149 other Congressmen cast votes which indicated their support of that challenge. But many people do not know that the challenge has continued. Hundreds of sworn depositions have been taken in Mississippi supporting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and showing that Negroes are prevented from registering to vote in Mississippi by varied forms of intimidation, harassment, and discriminatory testing

devices. These depositions are now being reviewed and soon they will go to a Congressional sub-committee for consideration. That committee is scheduled to make a report to Congress this summer and a decision taken on whether or not to recommend that Congress aid the fight for representative government for all the people of that state. In the struggle for justice, freedom, fair play, and human dignity, nothing is more important than this Mississippi challenge. And I urge all you people to support it in every way possible. I can think of no more fitting way to pay homage to Paul Robeson than by supporting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and its challenge.

Meanwhile, we are continuing our program in the deep south—in Arkansas, in Southwest Georgia, in Mississippi, and Alabama. These are the programs organizing the people, the black oppressed people in the south around the vote, freedom schools, community centers and public school boycotts for equal education. In Alabama we are now working in several new counties—all of them rural, all of them areas of great intimidation and harassment. In Lowndes County, for example, not a single Negro was registered to vote as of last month, but there are 12,000 Negroes and 3,000 whites living there. It was in Lowndes County that Mrs. Viola Liuzzo was shot-gunned to death. And we know that the Klan is increasing its supply of arms there and elsewhere in the south. Alabama students are still being arrested by the hundreds. Whatever kind of voting bill is passed (and we hope it will be strong), whatever kind it is, we know that life ahead for the Negroes who seek to vote in Mississippi, Alabama, in southwest Georgia, and in Louisiana will be hard. We need a bill, a strong voting bill that will provide guarantees for "free elections" in the South. If our government can demand "free elections" in Saigon, we can demand free elections in Selma, Alabama; Jackson, Mississippi and throughout this country! They tell us to be afraid of "Communist infiltration," that we are too radical, that we are irresponsible and "destructive." I think I know what Paul Robeson would have said to them—"No," he would say. And I would like to quote some of his words, from his book, *Here I Stand*. These words seem prophetic, when he said:

*"We have the power to achieve our goal; what we, ourselves, do will be decisive. It is easy for the folks on the top to take a calm, philosophical view, to tell those who bear the burden to restrain themselves and wait for justice to come. And Lord knows, my peo-*

*ple have been patient and long-suffering, but patience can wear out. The plain fact is that a great many Negroes are thinking in terms of now, and I maintain that the goal of 'Equal Rights Now' can be achieved. I say that the Negro action can be decisive. I said that we ourselves have the power to end the terror and to win for ourselves peace and security throughout this land. We ask for nothing that is not ours by right, and here lies the great moral power of our demand. It is the admitted rightness of our claim which has earned for us the moral support of the majority of white America. We have the right, and above all, we have the duty to bring the strength and support of our entire community to defend our lives and property of each individual. Indeed, the war, itself, will move a hundred times quicker whenever it is apparent that the power of our numbers has been called forth. The time for pussyfooting is long gone. Positive direct action will develop in the grass roots and spread from community to community, and the building of that unity is a task which each of us can undertake wherever we are."*

Mr. Robeson, we hope to honor you best by performing that task. Tonight we honor a man. Tonight we salute and honor a great cause which is personified in the person of Paul Robeson.