

Southern Youth Congress Organized In 13 States; Ready For Vote Fight

By EDWARD E. STRONG

The Southern Negro Youth Congress—the new progressive movement in the South today—originated as the result of a conference called in Richmond, Va., in February 1937.

Over five hundred eager young people gathered from the 13 Southern States and unanimously agreed that there was a need among them for some permanent organization concerned with the most vital needs of youth, jobs, education, civil rights, and recreation.

Thus the Southern Negro Youth Congress was formed. It was not to be a membership organization, but a coordinating agency for youth groups already existing in the South—a pooling of their mutual strength to secure, for example, more jobs, or better recreational facilities, or, in some cities, the right to vote.

Intensive Struggle

The Richmond conference was followed by two years of intensive activity and struggle against numerous odds.

First of all, the Southern Negro Youth Congress was new. It had to prove to the South that it was a stable movement going somewhere, and not just another bubble of agitation in the lives of the Race.

The success of the Congress in organizing 5,000 tobacco workers in the Richmond factories, winning for them \$250,000 annually in wage increases proved beyond a doubt that the young people were serious about their determination to improve their economic status.

The movement faced, too, a short-

lived suspicion that here was a new rival attempting to oust the older, more experienced adult leadership in the South. The Congress, however, earnestly sought and succeeded in obtaining the cooperation of the South's foremost educators, ministers and businessmen.

The annual conferences of the Southern Negro Youth Congress have been sponsored and attended by the South's most prominent Race members.

At present, Dr. F. D. Patterson of Tuskegee is head of its adult advisory board. Sponsors of its third conference, recently held in Birmingham, included Dr. Alain Locke, Mrs. Mary Bethune, Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Dr. Forrester B. Washington, Dr. Marshall Talley and others.

Setup in 13 States

Today the Congress has established itself as not only the most progressive movement among Race youth in the South, but also as the most important movement among youth in America. Its 40 councils are organized in 13 Southern states.

In Birmingham it has played an active part with the N.A.A.C.P. in the first right-to-vote movement. Alabama has seen in two generations. In New Orleans Congress young people have just concluded a successful petition campaign, securing \$5,000 signatures to keep a beach open for the Race citizens.

The Congress has launched three Negro Community theatres which are interested in presenting a true picture of Race life on the stage and in giving young artists a chance for development. These theatres are in Richmond, New Orleans, and Birmingham.

Besides its social program for jobs, education, health, and the ballot for Southern Race youth, the Congress is making a contribution to the cultural awakening of the South.

In Birmingham last May, the Congress sponsored both a music festival and the first all-Southern exhibit of paintings and sculpture by young Race artists. According to present plans this work will become more and more a major part of the Congress program.

Future Looks Hopeful

The future of the Southern Negro Youth Congress looks hopeful. The white South is developing its own progressive movements which confront practically the same problems as the Race youth.

A case in point is the movement against the poll tax and for the extension of the franchise in the Southern states in which members of the Race as well as many white liberals are engaged.

At each of the three conferences of the congress there has been a small but vitally interested group of young white Southerners. They no longer rely on traditional prejudices against the Race, and are out to find the truth for themselves.

They come from the colleges, the Y's, trade unions and from liberal groups like the Council of Young Southerners. They are willing to see the Race progress because this means the progress of the entire South.

Thus in the eyes of white as well as Race progressive thinkers, the Southern Negro Youth Congress is helping to stimulate and to direct one of the most significant movements on the American scene.