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"An Equal Opportunity to Make A
Living - and a Life: The FEPC and
Postwar Black Politics by
James Wolfinger

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James Wolfinger

On a cold evening in February 1948, seven hundred Philadelphians, mostly African Americans, turned out for a city council meeting. They packed the chamber's galleries to witness a debate on the hottest political topic in the city: the proposed creation of a local Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). Proponents of the organization cast their arguments in the rhetoric of democracy and fairness. Richardson Dilworth, a Democratic Party leader, told the council and the crowd that the FEPC was part of a larger "campaign for tolerance." Reverend E. Luther Cunningham of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) argued that only a local FEPC could address the "fascist discrimination" that plagued Philadelphia. Both men echoed a running theme in the city's largest black newspaper, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, which called the FEPC "a great moral issue." A fair employment committee, in the paper's words, would constitute "the very bedrock of democracy . . . [and its passage would be] the true measuring rod of [people's] attitude on the fundamental principle of equality of opportunity for all men." The vast majority of the crowd cheered the speeches of Dilworth, Cunningham, and others who took the floor on behalf of a fair employment agency.¹

That city council meeting offers a springboard for this article's examination of the campaigns for city and state FEPCs in Pennsylvania. From 1945 to 1955, African Americans held rallies in Philadelphia, staged marches on the state capitol, and used the black press to demand that the state and its largest city put an end to workplace segregation. This push for an FEPC at the local and state level highlighted several issues: the centrality of job rights to the postwar black community, the hope African

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1. Clippings from *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, *Philadelphia Daily News* in scrapbook 1 and scrapbook 1949: Campaign for a FEPC Law, box 21, Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) Papers, Philadelphia Jewish Archival Center, Philadelphia, PA (hereafter JCRC Papers); *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 29, 1945.

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