Freedom Under Pressure

How labor controls and violence limited civil rights in Alabama

SS24.AS.14b "Evaluate the role of new labor systems, Black Codes, and violence in stemming civil rights progress following Reconstruction in Alabama."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one way each labor system restricted freedom, circle one way violence restricted political rights, and number two details that show how these pressures reinforced each other.

A Job, a Debt, a Vote

1. Imagine being freed from slavery in Alabama in 1865, then hearing that a new law could punish you for lacking a job. Alabama's Black Codes included vagrancy and labor-contract rules that targeted the freedom of formerly enslaved people. Officials could fine someone judged to be a vagrant, and a person unable to pay could be made to work off the penalty. Contract rules also made leaving an employer before a term ended risky. These laws did not restore slavery, but they narrowed the freedom to choose work and bargain for wages at the very start of Reconstruction.

2. Federal action soon overturned many Black Code provisions, but control over labor did not end. Many Black families became sharecroppers, farming land owned by someone else in exchange for part of the crop. To buy food and supplies before harvest, they often borrowed against that crop. If debts remained after harvest, moving to a better opportunity became difficult. Alabama also leased prisoners to private businesses for work; discriminatory arrests and harsh penalties put Black Alabamians at particular risk. Sharecropping was not the same as convict leasing, yet both could keep workers from freely deciding where and for whom to work.

3. Political rights offered a possible way to challenge these conditions. The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, barred denying the vote because of race. Yet white supremacist groups in Alabama threatened and attacked Black voters and their allies, especially during elections. Such violence could keep people from the polls even when a law protected their right to vote. After federal Reconstruction ended in 1877, intimidation continued and protections weakened. With fewer Black voters able to influence government, officials faced less pressure to protect fair elections or challenge abusive labor practices. Economic dependence and political terror thus reinforced each other.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How could Alabama's Black Codes limit a freed person's choice of work?

2. Why could sharecropping restrict freedom of movement even after many Black Code provisions were overturned?

3. How could violence limit voting rights without changing the Fifteenth Amendment?

4. How might keeping Black voters from the polls help abusive labor practices continue?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you are organizing for civil rights in Alabama after 1877. In four or five sentences, argue whether you would focus first on protecting access to the polls or on improving workers' freedom to choose jobs. Use evidence from at least two paragraphs and explain why the other goal still matters.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.AS.14b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one way each labor system restricted freedom, circle one way violence restricted political rights, and number two details that show how these pressures reinforced each other. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How could Alabama's Black Codes limit a freed person's choice of work?	**Vagrancy fines could force someone unable to pay to work off a penalty, while contract rules made leaving an employer risky.**
2	Why could sharecropping restrict freedom of movement even after many Black Code provisions were overturned?	**A sharecropper who still owed money after harvest could find it difficult to leave for a better opportunity.**
3	How could violence limit voting rights without changing the Fifteenth Amendment?	**Threats and attacks could keep Black voters from the polls despite the amendment's protection against race-based voting restrictions.**
4	How might keeping Black voters from the polls help abusive labor practices continue?	**With fewer Black voters influencing government, officials faced less pressure to challenge discriminatory arrests or other abusive labor practices.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would focus first on protecting access to the polls. Threats could stop Black voters even though the Fifteenth Amendment barred denying the vote because of race. More voters might press officials to challenge discriminatory arrests and the leasing of prisoners for labor. Improving workers' choices would still matter because sharecroppers who owed money after harvest could struggle to leave for better opportunities.

Accept either priority if the response supports it with evidence from at least two paragraphs and explains why the other goal matters. Look for a clear distinction between legal voting rights and the ability to exercise them.