



## SLATE Summer Conference

### Job Discrimination

Skip Robinson

The three weeks from April 6th to April 26th saw a bloodless revolution take place in Champaign-Urbana, home of the University of Illinois. It was a relatively quiet revolution amongst the 40,000 inhabitants. In fact, except for a few lines, it wasn't even reported in the local press. But it was a real revolution. The events of those three weeks undoubtedly represent *the* turning point in race relations in Champaign. More was done in those three weeks to improve human relations than had been done in the last ten years.

The spark-plug of the revolution was the Reverend Joseph Graves, pastor of the Mt. Olive Baptist Church. About two or three months before he had become sufficiently fed-up with the racial discrimination in Champaign to want to do something about it.

The situation in employment at that time was roughly as follows: as a matter of conscious, deliberate policy, the businessmen of Champaign (and Urbana) had for years refused to hire Negroes for anything other than menial jobs--janitors, porters, elevator operators, stock girls, etc. There were two or three deviants, maverick businessmen who did employ Negro salespeople. But the overwhelming majority went along with the established pattern.

Long before 1950, groups of concerned citizens had approached businessmen in the Champaign area and urged them to employ on merit. There were numerous organizations and committees. There was the Friends' committee. There was the Student-Community Human Relations Council. There was the NAACP. There was the Council for Community Intergration. There was the Champaign Human Relations Commission--an official group established by the city of Champaign. All of these groups had one thing in common. They all worked on the basis of non-coercive persuasion. (The local chapter of the NAACP didn't insist upon this approach, but it was, in fact, impotent. It could never get a large enough membership to exert pressure.)

So, for ten years these groups pleaded in the name of human decency and Christian charity with businessmen. And for ten years virtually no progress was made. Over the ten year period some three or four girls were hired as checkers in supermarkets. Two or three girls were hired as salesgirls.

So, the Reverend Graves wanted to do something about the situation. Not just talk about it. Not just send delegations to talk with businessmen. Not just have letter-writing campaigns, not just get advertisements signed by a thousand people in the local papers (which was done in 1956) advocating merit employment. But do something. Namely picket and boycott.

The Reverend Graves discussed the idea of picketing with the CCI. They thought it a good idea. And he discussed it with the north end ministerial association (Negro ministers). And they thought it was a good idea. But nobody wished actually to picket in the concrete. They were all for it merely in the abstract. So nothing came of it.

Then the news came that the J.C. Penney Company was going to open a large branch in Champaign. Penney's advertised for help. The ads said, 'no experience necessary'. The north end ministers sent what they thought were qualified people to apply for jobs. Altogether, somewhere between fifteen and twenty Negroes applied for jobs, one a personable young lady with ten years sales experience and high recommendations from her former employer. Rumblyngs said that, as usual, no Negroes would be hired beyond janitorial and stock work.

On Palm Sunday, the Reverend Graves announced to his congregation that there would be a meeting the next day to decide what to do about Penney's. He contacted the other North End ministers.

On Monday, March 27th, the first meeting was held at Mt. Olive Baptist Church. About 40-50 people attended. They elected Graves chairman and elected an executive committee. They decided to picket Penney's if Penney's didn't hire a Negro before the opening on April 6th.

Rev. Graves and two white people--Miss Lee Evans and Bill Chalmers--talked to Mr. Myers, the manager of Penney's. He said that he had completed his hiring. He had hired two Negro men for janitorial work and one Negro stock girl. But no salesgirls. He said there were no qualified Negro applicants. He said he wanted only experienced help. The Rev. Graves asked him why he had not said this in his ad. He said he wanted to get a "cross-section. Graves said, "but you were only going to hire experienced help." Graves thought the man was lying. In fact, he was lying, because, (a) at least one of the Negro applicants had had previous sales experience, and (b) some of the white girls he hired did not have previous experience.

The Reverend Eugene Williams, pastor of Salem Baptist Church, representing the Champaign Human

Relations Commission, also paid a visit to the manager of Penney's. He got the same impression.

On the Saturday before Easter Sunday (i.e., on April 1), there was a second meeting at Mt. Olive Baptist Church. About 80-100 people attended. They decided in a concrete way to picket. They appointed committees to make signs, to arrange transportation, to round up potential pickets, etc.

Shortly after this, they talked to Myers again. Still no change.

On Wednesday evening (April 5th), a training session was held at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. At this session, some Negro members of the campus NAACP chapter attended. They had picketed various places in Chicago. It was pointed out how easy the picketing of Walgreen's had been last year. How there had been no violence, not even any threat of violence. This built up the morale of the group. They decided definitely to picket the next day.

Meanwhile, the downtown business community was all stirred up. There was a meeting Wednesday night (April 5) of the Chamber of Commerce and managers of leading department stores. They wanted to have a meeting with the Negro leaders, but the meeting never got arranged. (There was a problem of contacting all the parties and arranging an appropriate time. I think this indicates that the businessmen didn't take the picketing threat seriously. They either thought that it would never come off at all, or that it would last only for a few hours.)

On Thursday, April 6, at 8:30 a.m., a last minute conference was held with the manager and the district manager of Penney's, who was there for the ribbon-cutting. Nothing came of it. At 9:25 a.m., the Mayor cut the ribbon, the store was opened and the picketing began.

The pickets the first day were all Negro. This was planned, so that no one would be able to say it was a bunch of "outsiders" from the University. About one fourth of the pickets were U of I students, supplied by the campus NAACP. The rest were townspeople.

Another meeting was held Thursday night (again at Bethel AME Church) to decide whether or not to go on. They decided to continue with the picketing indefinitely. They integrated the line on Friday. The first white person was an English literature major graduate student named Nadine Wallace. Soon came two student government officers and the old and new presidents of the University YMCA.

The mayor of Champaign, Emmerson Dexter, entered the picture on Friday and again on the following Monday. He tried to get the Negro representatives to pull the pickets off the line. He made vague promises of talking with businessmen. Nothing came of the meetings with the mayor, and the mayor dropped out of the picture.

Later that week, probably on Thursday, a summit conference was held between the Negro representatives and five or six leading businessmen and the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce. The businessmen engaged in a series of classical maneuvers. The reason for this uncreative, negative reaction of most of the business leaders seems to be twofold. First, many of them are genuinely prejudiced. They really believe "the Negro" to be at best a shiftless ne'er-do-well, and at worst a vicious beast. They really fear that if they were to hire Negro salesgirls, they would steal money from the cash registers, foul up the accounts, and drive away customers in droves.

For some of the businessmen, this prejudice is compounded with the feeling that discrimination is normally wrong and that this stereotyped picture is false. These men are in conflict. On the abstract level, they are for merit employment, but when it comes to hiring specific Negroes, they cannot bring themselves to do it.

In some cases, as one of the Negro leaders put it, "the actor has over-whelmed the man," and they have actually convinced themselves that they have no prejudice, that they really do want to hire Negroes, but that none of the applicants are qualified, or as one businessman put it, "none of them could speak English."

A second source for the negativism is quite unrelated to the specific question of racial integration. From time immemorial a small group of merchants has run Champaign. These men are quite sure that their unchallenged rule is best for the community and is, indeed, indispensable to the moral health of America. But now they find their leadership challenged, their judgment questioned.

They are challenged and questioned, moreover, by the two most suspected segments of the community (almost, one might say, the Untouchables), namely, the Negroes and the liberal University people. This they regard as a subversion of the proper hierarchical order. No one has a right to tell a businessman how he shall run this business.

Some of the business leaders, thus, seem in part to be fighting simply to maintain the abstract principle of sovereignty of the businessmen. No doubt, they sincerely feel that if they give in on this point, the non-business segments of the population will become emboldened and the eventual result will be socialism.

Indeed, it is one of the minor mysteries of the campaign that there has been no serious attempt to brand the movement as "Communist led." The usual few crackpots had, of course, been out there taking pictures and making idiotic remarks. But apparently the whole movement was too patently grassroots, too unmistakably a genuine Negro movement to make it worthwhile to try to seriously raise the "Communist" scarecrow.

They kept the Negroes waiting for twelve minutes. (The Negroes interpreted this as a deliberate attempt to make them nervous; they had decided to walk out if the businessmen didn't show up within the next sixty seconds.) The businessmen addressed the ministers as "boys", which irritated them. They tried to flatter some of them. They made references to contributing money to one of the Negro churches. (References to money

that had been contributed and money that would be contributed.) Then one of them dropped the hint that they might fire all the Negro janitors, said that the whole thing "might blow up in your faces." Finally, one of them (In fact, the same guy who had been taking the "hard line") lost his temper and referred to them as "niggers". According to the legend that has since become very popular, one of the ministers almost slugged him on the spot and had to be restrained by other members of the group.

The point to note here is that from the very beginning the Penney problem was a community problem and was recognized as such. There are two versions: according to one, the Chamber of Commerce group was against Penney's hiring Negroes. Penney's manager was willing, but scared. According to the other, he could not do it unless the others agreed to hire also. I think the first interpretation is the correct one.

The picketing continued. On Sunday, April 15, D.P. Moore, a Chicago lawyer, who was in town to address a student convention at the U of I Law school, walked the line for an hour. This made a favorable impression on

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the local ministers, and when they announced it at a meeting on Tuesday, April 18th, (at St. Luke's Colored Methodist Episcopal Church) it had a good effect on the crowd's morale. Also, some faculty-wives walked on the picket line and this created an impression. On Wednesday April 19, there was a highly successful rally held in the Champaign City Building on behalf of Fair Employment Practices Legislation then pending in the state legislature. There was a large, overflow crowd. Also two Negro state senators spoke and enthusiastically supported the picketing.

On Friday, April 21, between 6 and 7 p.m., the six Negro ministers, in their ecclesiastical garb, walked on the picket line. There were also eight secular pickets on the line. This made an imposing line of fourteen people. The picket line had been getting stronger, anyhow. Originally, there had been two or three persons at a time, sometimes only one. But in the last week, there had been an average of five or six. And the numbers were increasing steadily. Three U of I faculty members had also joined the picket-line.

The boycott of Penney's was becoming more effective. So far as we knew, no Negroes whatsoever went into Penney's after the first two days of picketing. Many white people also supported the boycott. (Incidentally, no official boycott was ever called, because of a probably unconstitutional but nevertheless existent anti-boycott law in Illinois.) We were told that Negroes constituted between 6% and 7% of the projected business of Penney's, and that they could not sustain the patronage loss for more than three months without serious consequences.

During this entire period, there was a great deal of informal discussion between various white persons and the manager of Penney's. Some white ministers tried to mediate the dispute, but the Penney's manager was very evasive, and they never even got to talk to him. In talking to another minister, who went in to talk to him, the manager said that he had been told that the Communists were behind the picketing and expressed a tentative agreement with the charge.

On Tuesday, April 25th, a meeting was held in Salem Baptist Church. Then was a huge, overflow crowd. This meeting was the high point of militancy. The Rev. Graves announced a plan for a mass picketing on Saturday. He wanted to get a hundred or so people to meet at the West Side Park at 11:30 a.m. and then march on the center of town at 'high noon'. They would picket five or six stores for two hours and then withdraw from all but Penney's. It was also announced by another Negro minister that this was just a prelude to a real show of force that would take place a week or so later. The leaders also urged a boycott of all stores that refused to hire Negroes.

It should be noted at this point, that there were in all likelihood informers present at all the meetings, who would immediately run and tell the downtown businessmen what had transpired. The ministers knew this and kept referring to them as "Judases."

While the meeting was going on at Salem Baptist Church, and as widespread student backing for the effort was gaining audible steam, the manager of Penney's was already getting ready to change his position. He discussed this matter with a Negro City Councilman named Kenneth Stratton--who had, by design, kept completely out of the picketing affair.

A final peace conference was held at 9:30 a.m., Wednesday April 26th, with the manager of Penney's. He agreed to hire a Negro within ten days and to have her on the floor by a week from Saturday. The pickets were pulled off the line.

On the morning of Thursday, April 27th, the Negro leaders had a conference with the manager of the local Sears, Roebuck. He agreed to hire a man. On Thursday afternoon, they had a conference with the two largest local department store managers and with the manager of the local W. T. Grant store and the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce. Each agreed to hire a Negro.

Meanwhile, an independent action had been going on at a Goldblatt's department store located in a shopping center at the western edge of Champaign. The ministers had been told that the manager was sympathetic, or at least very nervous about the situation. They talked with him, and he promised to hire some Negroes, in due time--no specific time. The ministers contacted him a couple more times. He interviewed some girls and hired three on Friday, April 28th and they were on the floor selling on Saturday, the 29th. Subsequently Goldblatts hired four more Negroes, so that there were now seven.

All the other stores also came through, although in one case there was some duplicity on the part of an assistant manager. The owner had to intervene to make sure that the girl was hired.

On Thursday, April 27th, there was a wind-up meeting of the group. The leaders announced suspension of all picketing activities for the time-being. They formed a permanent organization called the Champaign-Urbana Improvement Association.

As far as white participation went, the more idealistic and liberal members of the white community increasingly rallied behind the North End movement. This support had come chiefly from those associated with the University, altho white ministers had also been active. A number of faculty members and faculty wives walked on the picket line and many more volunteered their services to be used when necessary.

The whole Penney incident had a profound effect upon the more idealistic whites in the area. Many of these people had a very deep sense of guilt and an acute awareness of the disastrous effect segregation is having upon America's image in the world, particularly among the non-Caucasian nations. These idealistic whites have had a deep sense of frustration at being unable to do anything about discrimination and an almost desperate hunger for some kind of meaningful, concrete action.

The Penney picketing had provided a meaningful type of action that is having as deep an effect on the white participants as it is upon the Negroes.

The Negro community found a new self-respect, new determination, and a new sense of dignity. And so a social revolution occurred in Champaign-Urbana. It was a bloodless and rather quiet revolution. But, nevertheless, a revolution it was. The events of the past month mark the turning point in the history of Champaign-Urbana race relations.

What has happened? In terms of the immediate material situation, six of the leading business establishments in the Champaign area have either actually hired or are in the process of hiring Negro sales personnel.

More important than these material gains, important though they are, is the psychological or, if you will, spiritual change that has transpired. The Negro community has acquired a new sense of dignity and purpose.

Young people now have some incentive to finish high school and to prepare themselves for skilled employment. Adult leaders of very high ability have emerged. The community is united and organized.

The Negroes also know a secret--only it isn't a secret, because the white businessmen downtown know it too. The Negroes know they have the power to seriously cripple any business firm in the Champaign area that persists in practicing segregation.

This power is in a large part due to the strong support the Negroes can count on from important segments of the white population. The Negroes and the more idealistic, liberal whites together constitute a consumer bloc that no businessman can afford to alienate.

This "open secret" is the fundamental reality behind the pressing maneuvering. The campaign for equal opportunity has now entered a new phase of "good feeling," in which everyone is busy patting everyone else on the back and filling the air with praises of the virtues of the Champaign-Urbana citizenry.

There is a general inclination to soft-pedal the events of last April, to pretend that the whole thing was sort of an unfortunate mistake, based upon a breakdown of communication. There was never really the Negro leaders and the white businessmen--just some semantic difficulties, the story goes.

Both the Negro leaders and the white businessmen, however, know better. They know that there really was a disagreement, and they know how it was resolved. The Negroes know perfectly well what the weapon was that opened up new jobs to them. They have seen first the amazement and then the dismay in the eyes of the white businessmen. They know that the downtown businessmen would rather integrate than face a recurrence of the picketing and the consequent loss of patronage.

The battle is, of course, far from won. Most of the white businessmen now know that they cannot afford to practice total segregation. Most of them now know that they must make at least the gesture of token integration. But to what extent they will take the next step from token integration to sincere acceptance of the idea of merit employment is not yet clear.

We are now in a period of watchful waiting. The Negro leaders are testing the intentions of the various white businessmen. Wherever a sincere effort toward honest merit-employment practices is made by the business community, the Negro leaders will be content. But wherever, after a reasonable period of time, there remains segregation or only the window-dressing of token integration, you can bet that the picket-lines will reappear and the withholding of patronage begin again.

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