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**“THE SELMA OF THE NORTH”: RACE RELATIONS AND CIVIL RIGHTS  
INSURGENCY IN MILWAUKEE, 1958-1970**

by

Patrick D. Jones

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(History)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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# A dissertation entitled

"'The Selma of the North': Race Relations  
and Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee, 1958-1970"

submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

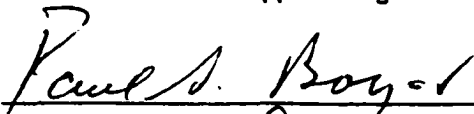
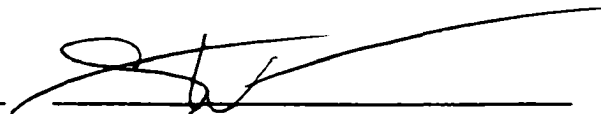
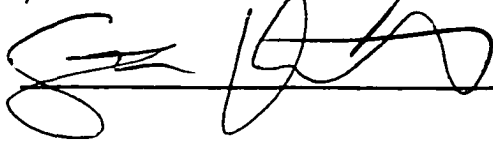
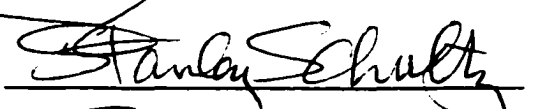

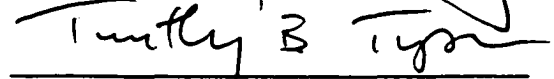
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Signature, Dean of Graduate School

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*"We need more light about each other.  
Light creates understanding,  
understanding creates love,  
love creates patience,  
and patience creates unity."  
- Malcolm X*

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Ultimately, this project was a collaborative effort between a young, aspiring historian concerned with the state of race relations in the United States and interested in telling a northern Movement story, and the Milwaukee African American community, which was gracious enough to trust me with their experiences, their stories and their aspirations. Over the many hours I spent with this diverse cross-section of people, their courage, conviction and dignity in the pursuit of racial justice endlessly inspired me. I have labored long in their honor, for the sacrifices many of them made to help the United States live up to its most noble ideals. It is they who deserve credit for anything that seems worthwhile in the following pages. I take sole responsibility for any shortcomings.

### Map of Milwaukee



Milwaukee County Department of Transportation, 1970

## **“Crossing Over”: A Preface**

*Question: “What’s the longest bridge in the world?”*

*Answer: “The 16<sup>th</sup> Street Viaduct – It connects Africa to Poland.”*  
*- Popular joke in Milwaukee, Summer 1967*

Two Hundred civil rights marchers gathered at the north end of the 16th Street Viaduct in Milwaukee on Tuesday, August 29, 1967.<sup>1</sup> The bridge crossed the Menomonee River, the city’s “Mason-Dixon Line,” linking and dividing the largely African American North side from the predominately white, working-class South side. The marchers held a city permit to conduct an open housing rally at Kosciuszko Park,<sup>2</sup> located a few blocks into the South Side’s Polish neighborhood, only a few blocks from the hall where three years earlier hundreds of local people had enthusiastically welcomed Alabama Governor George Wallace during the Democratic presidential primary. The

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<sup>1</sup> The following narrative relies on various news accounts and personal interviews with participants. For more information see *Milwaukee Journal* (MJ), 8/30/67, p. 1; *Milwaukee Sentinel* (MS), 8/30/67, p. 1; *Milwaukee Star* (Star), 9/2/67, p. 1; and *Milwaukee Courier* (Courier), 9/2/67, p. 1. In addition, see Betty Martin interview with Arlene Zakhar, 1/20/84; Vel Phillips interview with Patrick Jones, 12/3/99 and 4/20/99; Joe McClaine interview with Patrick Jones, 12/3/89 and 3/29/99; Prentice McKinney interview with Patrick Jones, 1/11/99 and 3/27/99. For a full exploration of the open housing campaign in Milwaukee, see Chapter 7.

<sup>2</sup> Kosciuszko Park is named in honor of Tadeusz Kosciuszko. Born in Warsaw in 1746, Kosciuszko came to the United States in 1776 to join the American Revolutionary War. He gained fame as a military strategist and rose to the rank of Colonel in the American Army. Kosciuszko accompanied George Washington on his triumphant return to New York in 1783. He returned to Poland in 1784 to help form the Polish Army to fight against Russian occupation and led the “Kosciuszko Uprising” in 1794. For his service to the American Revolutionary cause, many Polish Americans proudly honor Tadeusz Kosciuszko as a “freedom fighter” and the symbol of alliance between Poland and the U.S.

previous evening, more than five thousand white spectators had pelted civil rights supporters on a similar trek with rocks, debris and obscenities.

The mood was tense as the demonstrators began their three-mile journey over the factories, smokestacks, coal piles, loading cranes and railroad yards that made up Milwaukee's industrial base. Members of the local NAACP Youth Council, along with their advisor, a young white Catholic priest named James Groppi, led freedom songs and Black Power chants to try to steel their supporters against what lay ahead. Thirty white Milwaukee police officers flanked the demonstrators while eleven cars, one police wagon, and reporters and television camera crews from the three major networks trailed closely behind. A line of young African American men clad in fatigues and gray sweatshirts emblazoned with the words "NAACP Commando" walked in formation between the marchers and police. As the group neared the other side of the bridge, they could hear a low, growling clamor rise ahead of them.

The first thing the civil rights activists passed when they entered the South Side was Crazy Jim's used auto lot. Several hundred young white toughs had gathered there and rock and roll blared from loudspeakers. An effigy of a white priest, defaced with a swastika, swung by the neck from a rope. The crowd leered at the passers-by, hurling threats, jeers and obscenities. Two of the counter-protesters held up a Confederate flag while others waved signs that stated: "White Power," "Bring Back Slavery," "Trained Nigger," "I Like Niggers: Everybody Should Own a Few," "Work Don't March." A detachment of police rushed forward to head off trouble. With the national and local media nervously watching and recording, the marchers passed the raucous throng at Crazy Jim's without incident.

Beyond the auto lot thousands of angry white spectators lined the sidewalks opposite marchers and filled the blocks around the park. Some wore stickers that said, "Wallace: Stand Up for America." Bottles, eggs, rocks, wood, firecrackers, urine and spit began to fly. Shouts of "Get yourself a nigger," "We want slaves," "E-I-E-I-E-I-O, Fr. Groppi's Got to Go" and "...kill... kill... kill... kill..." could be heard. Police commanders quickly passed out shotguns, rifles and gas masks to the officers protecting the march. The demonstrators defiantly moved forward, working their way through the menacing crowds protected by both well-armed police and unarmed Commandos. Fr. Groppi told the young marchers, "Keep cool. Walk fast. Girls in the middle. Don't be afraid. If we were afraid to die we wouldn't be good Christians." Police shoved their way through crowds of white spectators at every intersection. At the nearby Police Safety Building, local law enforcement officials conferred with leaders of the Wisconsin National Guard about a possible call-up of troops. Civil order seemed to dance on edge.

As demonstrators continued toward their destination, a convertible with tags from Crazy Jim's and loaded with taunting kids holding signs and the swinging effigy slowly passed by the marchers; the white spectators erupted in cheers. Then, in the passion of the moment, more than one thousand whites poured out into the intersection of 11<sup>th</sup> and Lincoln Streets and rushed the civil rights demonstrators. The surge caught police off-guard. The mob swarmed over marchers, newsmen and officers. Rampaging whites beat huddled and fleeing demonstrators, and battled openly with the Commandos who had stepped forward to meet the attack. Several angry young whites rocked a police car while others threw objects and used their fists. Bedlam had broken out on the South Side of the 16th Street Viaduct.



Riot-clad police moved quickly to regroup and quell the racial disturbance by pumping shotgun blast after shotgun blast into the air above the crowd. Other officers lobbed tear gas into the mob then moved in to disperse them. Most of the whites scattered and police corralled the civil rights demonstrators onto a side street. Officers tried in vain to convince the marchers to call off their rally. Instead, Groppi defiantly declared, "We won't move out of our shell. We'll stay here until the National Guard comes and we can march like free American citizens." Someone then broke into the Movement standard, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," and suddenly the whole crowd was moving again. Without legal power to challenge the activists, police scrambled to surround the marchers and escort them down the middle of the street to the park.

When the group reached Kosciuszko Park, white spectators reassembled and closed in around police and demonstrators. Fr. Groppi rose and told the marchers that had made it to the picnic area, "You've shown you're willing to die for freedom." He encouraged them not to hate the angry white spectators but to "feel sorry for them." Just as he said, "Jesus Christ died for brotherhood..." an explosion seriously injured three civil rights supporters. Responding to the danger, Groppi and the YC led marchers in a hasty and haphazard retreat toward the viaduct. Feeding on the air of panic, a core of 600 angry whites continued to pursue and attack the battered activists as they scurried toward safety. The marchers endured one last vicious barrage of bottles and debris as they passed by an even bigger crowd at Crazy Jim's.

Teargas still hung in the air when the civil rights demonstrators finally reached the safety of the 16th Street Viaduct. Journalist Frank Aukofer, who was at the scene,

thought the marchers looked like "refugees from a battle." Signs of combat were everywhere: wounded demonstrators carried home by dazed comrades; a seminarian with blood streaming down his face; dozens nursing bumps and cuts and bruises; and a pervasive sense of bewildered fright. As these beleaguered civil rights foot-soldiers slowly regrouped and made their way back across the viaduct, police continued to grapple with angry whites at the entryway to the South Side behind them.

Once on the North side of the viaduct, eight police officers escorted marchers back to the Youth Council's Freedom House a few blocks away. As they got off the dilapidated bus that Fr. Groppi drove to demonstrations, several protesters shouted that police had not given them sufficient protection. A large crowd from the neighborhood gathered and soon began to throw bottles and rocks at the outnumbered police. Some said they heard a gun shot from a nearby house. Officers shot teargas into the crowd in an attempt to regain control. Suddenly, dozens of young people came pouring out of the Freedom House with flames at their backs. Groppi rushed inside to see if any others remained inside. Police claimed a passing car threw a firebomb into the civil rights headquarters and refused to allow firemen near the blaze because of the reported sniper in a nearby abandoned house. Youth Council members and Fr. Groppi believed that a teargas canister shot deliberately into the house by police caused the fire and that this was a further attempt by city officials to disrupt their quest for freedom.<sup>3</sup> By the time the

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<sup>3</sup> A booklet published by the national NAACP Youth and College Division on the open housing campaign in Milwaukee states, "Early Wednesday, August 30<sup>th</sup>, some Youth Council members returned to the Freedom House and found a tear gas canister and shotgun shell in the gutted cottage. Police claim no tear gas was thrown into the civil rights headquarters." Yet, on August 30, Fire Chief Edward Canavan told reporters that his department's investigation concluded that a fire bomb, not a teargas shell, ignited the fire at the Freedom House. Canavan argued that it would have taken a teargas canister several hours rather than several minutes to start the fire. See, "March In Milwaukee," NAACP Youth and College Division, 1967, MNAACP Papers; MJ, 8/31/67, p. 9.

police permitted firefighters to battle the blaze, the NAACP Youth Council Freedom House was engulfed in flames.

\* \* \*

Over the past decade, historians and other scholars have profoundly altered our understanding of the Southern civil rights movement.<sup>4</sup> John Egerton, Aldon Morris and Patricia Sullivan pushed back the beginnings of the Movement at least as far back as the New Deal and World War II.<sup>5</sup> John Dittmer's Local People and Charles Payne's I've Got the Light of Freedom made clear that beyond the well-known leaders, national organizations, and television cameras, local circumstances drove the struggle for racial equality.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Glen Eskew's But for Birmingham focused on the interaction between national events and local campaigns.<sup>7</sup> The steady stream of civil rights memoirs and biographies has continued to enrich our view with intimate and dramatic personal stories. Most recently in this vein, works on Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer by

<sup>4</sup> For the most current southern civil rights historiography, see Charles Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History*, volume LXVI, No. 4, November 2000, pp. 815-848.

<sup>5</sup> John Egerton, Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994); Aldon Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change (New York: Free Press, 1984); Patricia Sullivan, Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights In Mississippi (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Other excellent recent local studies include, Glenda Alice Rabby, The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Kim Lacey Rogers, Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement (New York: New York University Press, 1993); Adam Fairclough, Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972 (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995); David Cecelski, Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Glen Eskew, But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997).

Joanne Grant and Chana Kai Lee have underscored the central, but often overlooked, role of women in the Southern struggle.<sup>8</sup> Mary Dudziak's groundbreaking study of civil rights and Cold War politics has begun to link the domestic movement for racial justice to broader national and international trends.<sup>9</sup> And finally, in Radio Free Dixie Timothy Tyson begins to reconfigure Black Power as an enduring concept with roots stretching back decades before it became a popular slogan during the mid-1960s.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these exciting advances in the literature on the Southern movement, historians have yet to forge comparable scholarship on civil rights activism in the North.<sup>11</sup> In the past, urban historians like Gilbert Osofsky, Kenneth Kusmer and Arnold Hirsch

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Grant, Ella Baker: Freedom Bound (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998); Chana Kai Lee, For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Other excellent recent memoirs and biographies include, Ben Green, Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore: America's First Civil Rights Martyr (New York: Free Press, 1999); Daniel Levine, Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Cynthia Griggs Fleming, Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); John Lewis, Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); Andrew Manis, A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999); Juan Williams, Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary (New York: Times Press, 2000). Three good recent books on women in the movement, more generally, are Bettye Collier-Thomas (ed.) and V. P. Franklin (ed.), Sisters In the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Constance Curry (ed.), Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement (Augusta: University of Georgia Press, 2000); and, Lynne Olson, Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement From 1830-1970 (New York: Scribner, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); See also, Thomas Borstelmann, The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Brenda Gayle Plummer, Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996); Penny Von Eschen, Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anti-Colonialism, 1937-1957 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Michael Krenn, Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945-1969 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> For a similar argument, see Jeanne Theoharris, "'We Saved the City': Black Struggles for Educational Equality in Boston, 1960-1976," *Radical History Review*, No. 81, Fall 2001, pp. 61-93.

have written extensively about the origins and evolution of urban “ghettos” in the North.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, vigorous debates by a diverse array of scholars have focused on the workings of the modern welfare state and the rise of a persistent and racialized urban “underclass” since WWII.<sup>13</sup> None of these works has focused directly on the African American freedom movement in the North.

There has been some important new work on specific aspects of race relations in the North during the postwar era that does bear on the civil rights movement.<sup>14</sup> For

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Kenneth Kusmer, A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Arnold Hirsch, Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> On the history of welfare, see Linda Gordon, Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare (New York: Belknap Press, 1995); Jill Quadagno, The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War On Poverty (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Michael Katz, In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America (New York: Basic Books, 1987). On the “underclass,” see William Julius Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Michael Katz, The Undeserving Poor: From the War On Poverty to the War On Welfare (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990); Christopher Jencks, Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty and the Underclass (New York: Harper Library, 1993); Herbert J. Gans, The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy (New York: Basic Books, 1996); William Julius Wilson, When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Locally, very little research has been done on race relations and civil rights activism in Milwaukee. Joe Trotter’s Black Milwaukee, which ends at the Second World War, remains the only significant study of the African American community in Milwaukee. See, Joe Trotter, Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Frank Aukofer, an urban beat reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal* during the civil rights era, wrote a journalistic account of civil rights activism in Milwaukee in 1968, but the work is incomplete and fails to place the local Movement within a broader historical context. See, Frank, Aukofer, City With A Chance (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1968). In addition, a smattering of doctoral dissertations and masters theses deal with particular aspects of Milwaukee’s racial history. On education, see Jack Dougherty, “More Than One Struggle: African-American School Reform Movements in Milwaukee, 1930-1980,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, August 1997, and William Dahlk, “The Black Educational Reform Movement in Milwaukee, 1963-1975,” MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 1990; On the 1967 riot, see Karl Flaming, “The 1967 Milwaukee Riot: A Historical and Comparative Analysis,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1970. On the history of the city’s Social Development Commission and the development of community action programs in the city, see Mark Braun, “Social Change and the Empowerment of the Poor: Poverty Representation in Milwaukee’s Community Action Programs, 1964-1972,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1999; On the intersection of race, religion and Cold War politics in Milwaukee during the 1950s, see, Kevin Smith, “‘In God We Trust’: Religion,

instance, James Ralph followed Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when they came North to Chicago during the mid-1960s and Gerald Horne has written about the Watts riot in Los Angeles in 1965.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton's American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass and Stephen Grant Meyer's more comprehensive As Long As They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods highlighted the confrontational politics surrounding urban residential segregation in the North.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Sugrue's award-winning The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit focused on the intersection of work, housing and race relations. Sugrue suggested that the liberal New Deal coalition was more fragile in the urban North than previously thought and that white backlash began long before George

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The Cold War, and Civil Rights In Milwaukee, 1947-1963," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999; On African American migrations to Milwaukee from the South, see Paul Edward Geib, "The Late Great Migration: A Case Study of Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970," MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, May 1993; On the short-lived chapter of the Black Panther Party in Milwaukee, see Andrew Richard Witt, "Self-Help and Self-Defense: A Reevaluation of the Black Panther Party With Emphasis on the Milwaukee Chapter," MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 1999; For a history of the Milwaukee Urban League, see Michael Ross Grover. "'All Things to Black Folks': A History of the Milwaukee Urban League, 1919 to 1980," MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 1994. On highway construction and racial dislocation, see Patricia House, "Families Displaced by Expressway Development: A Geographical Study of Relocation in Milwaukee," MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1968. For other secondary or tangential works on race and Milwaukee, see the full bibliography at the end of this dissertation. No one, though, has attempted to mine the voluminous primary resources that are available to create a more full and complex portrait of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee.

<sup>15</sup> James Ralph, Jr., Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago and the Civil Rights Movement (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Gerald Horne, Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995). For another fascinating look at race and politics in Chicago, see Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard Daley: His Battle for Chicago and the Nation (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Stephen Grant Meyer, As Long As They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

Wallace brought his racialized politics to cities like Milwaukee.<sup>17</sup> William Van DeBurg's New Day In Babylon explored the cultural and psychological side of Black Power in the urban North and Komozi Woodard's A Nation Within A Nation examined cultural nationalism and Black Power Politics in Newark.<sup>18</sup> In Parish Boundaries, John McGreevey emphasized the "Catholic encounter with race" in the twentieth century urban North.<sup>19</sup> Still others, like Robert Formisano and J. Anthony Lukas and, to a lesser degree, Sugrue and Meyer, have written sympathetically about white opposition to the Movement without fully exploring, in-depth, the organizing and civil rights activism that spurred these white responses.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the important new insights put forth by each of these works, none of them, with the exception of Ralph's, looks directly at civil rights insurgency. The Movement in the North shared a consciousness with those who struggled in the South, but took place within and responded to a distinctive context. The industrial base of the economy with its strong labor movement, the presence of white ethnic groups, the dominance of the Catholic Church, the centrality of physical space, the relatively secure

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> William Van DeBerg, New Day In Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Komozi Woodard, A Nation Within A Nation: Amiri Baraka & Black Power Politics (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> John McGreevey, Parish Boundaries : The Catholic Encounter With Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Formisano, Boston Against Busing: Race, Class and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); J. Anthony Lukas, Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families (New York: Random House, 1985). During the early 1970s, a debate over the "new ethnicity" also added to our understanding of white resistance to civil rights in the urban North. In particular, see Michael Novack, The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies (New York: MacMillan Company, 1971); Andrew Greeley, Why Can't They Be Like Us? America's White Ethnic Groups (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1971).

African American right to vote, and the diffuse nature of discrimination – all of which were peculiar to the North – critically affected the development of the civil rights movement in Milwaukee and other Northern industrial locales. While earlier writers have helped me understanding how large-scale forces have shaped the racial contours of American cities, they have yet to place civil rights activism within this framework in an attempt to figure out how social change occurred and how the North's racial caste system persists.

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In Milwaukee during the late 1950s and 1960s, a distinctive movement for racial justice emerged from unique local circumstances. A series of indigenous leaders led a growing number of local people in campaigns against employment and housing discrimination, “de facto” segregation in public schools, the membership of public officials in discriminatory private organizations and “police brutality.” Although the Milwaukee movement espoused many of the tenets of “Black Power” --years before that slogan echoed across the Mississippi Delta-- its most prominent leader was a white Catholic priest, Father James Groppi. In campaigns that were morally complex, politically realistic, and sometimes effective, local activists like many of their counterparts in the South, professed peace but provoked violence. Employing non-violent direct action, they confronted racial inequality, pushed it into the public spotlight and forced the entire city to respond. Their provocative tactics aroused a violent reaction from many local whites. The story of the Movement in what one journalist called “the



Selma of the North" is as compelling--and remains as revealing--as any in the nation.

Even so, Milwaukee continues to be one of the most segregated cities in the country.<sup>21</sup>

*The Selma of the North* demonstrates the importance of local stories to the civil rights movement and highlights the links between national events and local movements. My research also delineates the interconnections between Northern and Southern movements for racial justice and extends the findings of recent scholarship on Black Power. Moreover, it builds on new works that have reconfigured the relationship between non-violent direct action and armed self-defense as well as research that has uncovered the often hidden origins of the urban crisis and white backlash. In these ways, though it is rooted in a careful sifting of a complex history, *The Selma of the North* speaks directly to contemporary racial and urban dilemmas.<sup>22</sup>

The failure of the movement in Milwaukee, if it can be fairly called a failure, was part of the larger and continuing failure of this nation to come to grips with its enduring chasm of race and caste. Betty Martin, a NAACP Youth Council member for most of the 1960s, remembered the walk across the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Viaduct in late August of 1967 as one of "the most frightening experiences" of her life. "[To] not know if you are going to get out alive or not because you had never experienced anger like you had experienced it by going across that viaduct..." she recalled, "and then to be pinned down with fire going over your head. With [police] actually shooting over your head down on 15<sup>th</sup> and Vliet at the Freedom House and then to be bombed, and then the house catching afire..." But as fearful as they were of what they might find on the other side, Betty Martin and 200 other

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<sup>21</sup> For a more contemporary look at race relations in Milwaukee, see Jonathan Coleman, Long Way to Go: Black and White In America (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997).

**courageous Milwaukeeans made the long journey across that bridge with the hope of creating a more just and equitable community. Similarly, today, as difficult and frightening as it may seem, we also need to cross that bridge, to confront our collective history, and to broach the persistent tragedy of race in American society.**

**“Attack At New Butler”:  
An Introduction to Race Relations in Milwaukee**

On the evening of July 27, 1922, thirty-six African American workers from Chicago relaxed after a long day of work on the Milwaukee railroad. In the midst of a nationwide strike, Chicago Northwestern Rail Road and Milwaukee Railway imported the black laborers to replace unionized white workers as pitmen, clerks, waiters, cooks and general laborers. The company housed the African American workers and other strikebreakers in a series of boxcars at the rail yard in New Butler, Wisconsin, a small community just outside of Milwaukee. As many of the men tried to sleep, Jack Wilson, the black chef, sat in the cook car reading the newspaper. A few unarmed company guards patrolled the area outside. Several hundred yards away, a crew of white foremen and white gang bosses slept in another set of boxcars.<sup>1</sup>

A few miles away, at the New Butler headquarters of the Fraternal Order of Eagles, striking white union workers held a meeting. The laborers were angry that the railway company had recently decided to import black strikebreakers from Chicago despite the pleas of Daniel Hoan, Milwaukee’s Socialist mayor. After the meeting ended at 9:00pm, dozens of armed strikers made their way toward the enclave of resting replacement workers. A half an hour later, the men emerged from a wheat field that ran

along the northeast side of the tracks shouting and shooting hundreds of rounds into the boxcars where the black workers slept. The first shots penetrated the cook car, missing Jack Wilson's head by inches before embedding in the ceiling and wall. Immediately, dozens of half-clad black men flooded out of the boxcars, disappearing into nearby woods. Wilson claimed to have heard "100 to 150 shots" and "could see Negroes jumping out of windows and doors and crawling under the cars for protection."

According to William Washington, a black porter, "[It] seemed like a million men yelling. Then I heard shots fired. I knew there was target practice going on somewhere. It was too close for me. I up and beat it. Everybody else done the same thing at the same time. We all had just one idea, to get away from there." As African American workers escaped, the marauding white terrorists rushed through the boxcars, over-turning tables, smashing dishes, destroying beds, shredding clothes and spoiling the next day's rations. Outgunned company guards were helpless against the mob. By the time police arrived, the rail yard stood eerily quiet once again. One black worker sustained serious injuries in the attack when he fell from a boxcar window and nearly thirty others received glass cuts and other moderate injuries. Curiously, the nearby white strikebreakers were left untargeted and unharmed in the violent outburst. Police failed to make any arrests in connection with the incident.

Local reaction was swift. Newspaper accounts and local law enforcement officers played down the seriousness of the attack. Union officials blamed the violence on the company for importing black strikebreakers. Chicago and Northwestern executives, in

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<sup>1</sup> The following brief narrative of the attack at New Butler is culled from several news reports. See, *Milwaukee Leader*, 7/28/22, p. 1; *MJ*, 7/28/22, p. 1; *MS*, 7/28/22, p. 1; *Wisconsin Daily News*, 7/28/22, p. 1; *Milwaukee Leader*, 7/29/22, p. 1; *MJ*, 7/29/22, p.1; *Milwaukee Leader*, 8/1/22, p. 1.

turn, blamed the violence on striking workers and offered a \$50 reward for information leading to the arrest of strikers or sympathizers. The company also rushed “156 special agents, 155 riot guns, and 75 revolvers” to the New Butler rail yard as a hedge against further assaults. The day before the incident, Mayor Hoan, who had consistently opposed the introduction of black “scab” workers in the city,<sup>2</sup> reminded W.H. Finley, the president of the railway company, that “the importation of colored laborers in time of strikes as in St. Louis, Kansas City, New Orleans and dozens of other American cities brought about bitter race hatred and led to disgraceful race riots which has blackened the names of those cities everywhere.” Hoan begged Finley not to contribute to local racial animosities and warned him that the city of Milwaukee “will feel compelled to hold your company personally responsible as accessory to any race riots which may result.”

The mob violence at New Butler outraged Milwaukee’s small black community. Writing on behalf of the Milwaukee chapter of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the African Communities League, the City Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, the Milwaukee NAACP, the Milwaukee Urban League, and the Sixth Ward Political Club, John Alexander, president of the local UNIA told Mayor Hoan, “We, the colored citizens of Milwaukee are seriously opposed to the Milwaukee and Northwestern railroads importing Negroes from Chicago and other cities to fill strikers’ positions” and criticized rail companies for “using us for a tool to further their cause.” At the yard, 18 African American strikebreakers expressed their feelings when they failed to report for work the following Monday. Shortly thereafter, on August 2, 1922, striking

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Hoan also supported separate black unions in Milwaukee, federal anti-lynching legislation, and opposed the expansion of the Ku Klux Klan into Milwaukee later in 1922.

workers accepted a settlement proposal from President Warren Harding and headed back to work, effectively rendering all protest moot.

In 1922, African Americans were still decades away from coming to Milwaukee in large numbers, but many of the same tensions and conflicts that would animate race relations in the city during the civil rights era already existed. Milwaukee was as it would be after the Second World War: a white working-class city where ethnic sensibilities were sharp and the infusion of a new African American population easily provoked fear and reaction from the majority. Fr. Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council, then, did not create the racial antagonisms that they enflamed on August 29, 1967, when they crossed the 16th Street Viaduct and headed for Kosciuszko Park. Rather, the civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s waded into a deep river whose powerful currents stretched back to at least the 1922 attack at New Butler.

Through WWII, steady industrial growth and successive waves of European immigration made Milwaukee a patchwork of tight-knit “white ethnic” working-class neighborhoods. Germans and Jews lived on the city’s north and west sides. Poles and other working-class central Europeans dominated the area South of the Menomonee River. American-born whites of Old English ancestry shared the East Side with still more Germans. Italians settled along Brady Street and the Irish took root in the Third Ward. These distinct neighborhoods revolved around a particular sense of community. That sense was delineated, first, along interlocking lines of ethnicity and religion. In addition, it was rooted in geographic space, or “turf,” a specific number of blocks that a particular

group dominated. Community was also shaped by the industrial work most white ethnic immigrants in Milwaukee performed as well as their membership in labor unions. Most embraced a strong sense of family, authority and patriotism, adhering to a strict Christian morality, though perhaps more Old Testament judgement than New Testament grace.

Unlike many other northeastern and Midwestern cities, white, protestant English-speaking immigrants did not originally dominate Milwaukee until they were forced to share their culture and power with new immigrants at the turn-of-the-century. Instead, a diverse array of immigrants from Europe came to Milwaukee early on, ensuring a unique blend of ethnic cooperation and conflict. Almost all that came were white. Many spoke languages other than English and strove to preserve Old World heritage and a “traditional” way of life. The Catholic Church dominated the religious life of Milwaukee immigrants, with the Lutheran Church a strong second. In addition, small but significant numbers of Jews, Orthodox Christians and other mainstream Protestants worshiped throughout the city. Until the 1950s, the primary lines of tension and division were ethnicity, religion and language; race was not a significant factor in Milwaukee’s civic life.

Milwaukee’s blue-collar character emanated from the city’s industrial economy. During the first half of the twentieth century, Milwaukee ranked as high as second among the twenty largest U.S. metropolitan areas in terms of the percentage of its workforce in manufacturing.<sup>3</sup> Allis-Chalmers, Bucyrus Erie, Harley-Davidson, Harnischfeger, A.O.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Schmandt, John Goldbach, and Donald Vogel, Milwaukee: A Contemporary Urban Profile (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 181.

Smith and OMC Evinrude worked with iron and other metals to make machinery parts, engines, motorcycles and other large manufactured goods. Allen-Bradley, Johnson Controls and Square D. Corporation specialized in electrical manufacturing. Universal Foods, Kohls, Roundys, Sentry and Usingers filled the bellies of generations of Milwaukeeans while the Miller, Pabst and Schlitz breweries topped-off thousands of mugs nationwide. Leather tanning and meatpacking also thrived. For many laborers in these industries, work was often difficult, underpaid and grueling. But the persistent strength of Milwaukee's industrial economy also created the opportunity for many poor white immigrants to ultimately get a toe-hold on economic security.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the labor movement and white left enjoyed strong support and real political and economic power in Milwaukee during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> In 1910, Milwaukee elected Daniel Hoan, a Socialist, as mayor. The Social Democratic Party in Milwaukee advocated a platform of clean municipal government, expanded city services, and strong support of organized labor. Their pragmatic approach to city government earned them the nickname "the Sewer Socialists." With the exception of a brief stint during the Depression and Second World War when a sequence of Progressive Party and liberal Democratic Party candidates won office, the

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<sup>4</sup> John Gurda, The Making of Milwaukee (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999); Harry Anderson and Frederick Olson, Milwaukee: At the Gathering of Waters (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Publishing, 1981); Bayard Still, Milwaukee: The History of a City (Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1965); Joe William Trotter, Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> On race, the Social Democrats colluded with organized labor to advocate and maintain a city-wide bar on the importation of black strikebreakers by Milwaukee industries from outside locales. On one level, this was an attempt to avoid the racial violence visited upon other industrial centers. Yet, at the same time, the Social Democrats failed to push labor unions or employers to eliminate discrimination against black workers.



Socialists maintained the mayoral seat until 1960, although their influence in the Common Council began to weaken much earlier. In 1958, *Fortune Magazine*, commenting largely on the administration of the city's last Social Democratic mayor, Frank Zeidler, voted Milwaukee the second-best-run city in the country; Daniel Hoan received similar accolades three decades before.<sup>6</sup> Organized labor and the Social Democrats helped many white working class Milwaukeeans to prosper.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this progressive and radical tradition, though, Milwaukee also enjoyed a reputation as a culturally conservative city. Traditional values and a strong sense of family dominated the city's self-perception. Until the 1960s, Milwaukee had a comparatively low crime rate and fewer incidents of urban unrest; there was even a healthy amount of civic chauvinism as politicians, business leaders, and citizens proudly repeated over and over, "We're not like other cities." Milwaukeeans, often viewed as provincial by outsiders, were proud of their tradition of civic engagement and retained a faith in established institutions as the proper mechanisms for change. Milwaukeeans preferred a slow, studied approach to municipal problems. "Since the era of the early progressives at the turn of the century," state historian William Thompson noted, "the people of Wisconsin had come to believe in the power of legislation and in the idea that good laws enforced by honest and vigorous public servants could resolve virtually any problem involving discrimination and the exploitation of one group by another."<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> *The Baffler*, No. 13, Winter 1999, p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*; Harry Anderson and Frederick Olson, *Milwaukee: At the Gathering of Waters* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Publishing, 1981); Bayard Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City* (Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> William Thompson, *The History of Wisconsin: Volume VI: Continuity and Change, 1940-1965* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988), p. 336.

was certainly true of most Milwaukeeans. This go-slow approach, though, would frustrate local African Americans decades later as they sought full equality and “Freedom Now!”

Even though white working-class immigrants dominated Milwaukee, a small but circumscribed African American community existed, and even thrived, during the period before the Second World War. The black population in Milwaukee remained extremely small until the 1920s (see Table 1). Prior to 1910, less than one thousand African Americans lived in the city. The need for labor during WWI, which spurred thousands of African Americans to migrate to Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland, also fueled the expansion of Milwaukee’s black community but at a slower rate.<sup>9</sup> In 1910, 980 African Americans, or roughly one-fourth of one percent of the city’s total population, lived in Milwaukee. By 1920, the number had more than doubled to 2,229, and then it tripled between 1920 and 1930 to 7,501. Yet, African Americans still accounted for less than one and one-half percent of the city’s total population. During the Depression and war years of the 1930s and early 1940s, Milwaukee’s black community grew more slowly, adding only one thousand more inhabitants. Following the Second World War, though, the local African American community skyrocketed.<sup>10</sup>

By 1940, through a mixture of choice, economic necessity, discriminatory real estate and loan practices, and overt racism, more than ninety percent of Milwaukee’s

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<sup>9</sup> Milwaukee has been described as a “secondary” stop during the Great Migration. Many African Americans who came to Milwaukee first spent time in another city, like Chicago. Historian Paul Geib has argued that the Milwaukee expansion might better be described as a part of “the late great migration.” See, Paul Geib, *Journal of Negro History*, Fall 1998, pp. 229-248.

<sup>10</sup> Charles O’Rielly, *The Inner Core North: A Study of Milwaukee Negro Community* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1963), p. 2.

black population was concentrated within a seventy-two block area of the central city bounded by Juneau and Brown Streets on the south and north and Twelfth and Third Streets on the west and east (see map 1). The area quickly became known as the “inner core.”<sup>11</sup> White Milwaukeeans outside of the inner core staunchly resisted the encroachment of black people into their neighborhoods and real estate agents, banks, and local, state and federal authorities also worked to maintain the racial status quo in housing.

Residential segregation also meant inferior housing for the vast majority of Milwaukee blacks. Roughly three percent of local African Americans owned their homes, while most of the remaining 97 percent rented homes or apartments from landlords - almost always white - inside the inner core. Housing in the core was among the oldest in the city, absentee-owned, deteriorated and neglected. A disproportionate number of black families lived in overcrowded, dilapidated dwellings which often violated building codes. Broken stairwells, bad wiring, out-of-date plumbing and leaking roofs were common. A Works Progress Administration survey of Milwaukee housing in 1939 found that only seven percent of inner core homes were in good physical condition while more than three-fourths were substandard.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The area known as the “inner core,” in fact, was originally a part of Milwaukee’s Gold Coast. As wealthy people left the area, their large homes were sold and subdivided into rooming houses or one and two-bedroom apartments. Germans and Jews occupied the area prior to the influx of African Americans beginning around WWI. In 1940, the inner core remained roughly half white, but it had already become known as a “Negro district.” When affluent whites moved, they either rented the properties themselves or sold them to loan associations, realtors, and other “slum investors.”

<sup>12</sup> O’Rielly, pp. 43-64; Thomas Imse, “The Negro Community in Milwaukee,” MA Thesis, Marquette University, 1942, pp. 10-16 and 46-47; Thompson, pp. 309-314.

As the black community developed in Milwaukee, residential segregation translated into segregated public schools. School board officials abetted these housing trends by instituting policies that maintained the emerging racial imbalance in city schools. Inner core schools, like the surrounding housing stock, were disproportionately old, overcrowded and run-down. Black teachers rarely received assignments outside of predominately African American schools.

Social life in Milwaukee was also historically segregated. As historian Joe Trotter has detailed, while a vibrant black community thrived along Walnut Street - with restaurants, nightclubs, theaters, offices and stores - African Americans faced blatant forms of discrimination in restaurants, theaters, health services, recreational facilities and hotels outside of the inner core. Many businesses used harassment, refusal of service, poor service and overcharging as mechanisms to discourage black patronage. Inter-racial couples claimed frequent harassment and discrimination. Racial bias could also be detected at insurance companies, banks, real estate agencies, public utilities, social welfare organizations and in law enforcement. Newspaper coverage regularly included stereotyped coverage of African Americans that both mirrored and reaffirmed discriminatory treatment of black people.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the industrial base of the city, most Milwaukee African Americans worked in the unskilled, manual labor and service segments of the economy prior to WWII. Black people labored as household workers, janitors, porters, launderers, cooks, elevator operators, waiters, cleaning women, bootblacks, etc. White people in Milwaukee held many personal service jobs usually deemed "Negro jobs" in other cities.

Hiring discrimination by employers, membership restrictions in labor unions and widespread competitive fears among white workers kept blacks out of all but the most menial or dangerous industrial jobs. In 1941, as Milwaukee industries geared up for the Second World War, over one-third of all local black workers were unemployed, compared to only two percent of the white population. In short, most African Americans in Milwaukee occupied low-paying jobs that were extremely vulnerable to economic downturns.<sup>14</sup>

As the black community grew in Milwaukee, though, a small middle-class emerged. A tight circle of clergymen, dentists, doctors, lawyers, attorneys, shop-keepers, tavern-owners, cafe operators, barbers and beauticians all owed their livelihood to the segregated black community that they served or to the tenuous relationships they cultivated among prominent whites. In 1924, Ardie and Wilbur Halyard established the Columbia Savings and Loan Association, the city's first black-owned bank. A few Milwaukee African Americans held minor administrative positions in the educational and academic system. Some worked for voluntary associations concerned with poverty and minority groups. A handful received appointments to government boards or commissions, and none held political office. In large measure, white leaders preferred African American leaders that they knew and felt were "acceptable" to the status quo.<sup>15</sup>

A variety of black organizations, clubs and church groups attempted to address the numerous challenges facing the growing African American community in

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<sup>13</sup> Trotter, pp. 116-119.

<sup>14</sup> Trotter, pp. 39-79; O'Reilly, pp. 65-80; Thompson, pp. 315-319.

<sup>15</sup> Trotter, pp. 80-114; Thompson, p. 367.

Milwaukee. As in other northern cities, the local NAACP and Urban League played the primary role in these efforts. Middle class and professional black leaders worked through these institutions to provide recreational activities for young people, improved medical and public health services, and improved housing conditions and jobs for unemployed blacks. These groups relied upon community contacts, behind-the-scenes negotiation and a faith in established institutions, particularly the courts, to achieve their goals. While these organizations aided many black Milwaukeeans, neither seriously challenged racial discrimination or the white power structure in Milwaukee prior to WWII.<sup>16</sup>

The confluence of these factors ensured that the black community in Milwaukee remained politically powerless, economically impotent, largely ignored and completely marginalized through the 1950s. African Americans did not possess the numbers to command political power or to make politicians responsive to their needs. Likewise, black businessmen did not husband enough resources to bargain from a position of strength with other economic players. Nor did African American workers occupy any significant positions within the powerful labor movement. In fact, the life-chances of most Milwaukee African Americans in the period before WWII remained severely limited. A 1946 Citizens' Governmental Research Bureau study of Milwaukee's black population found that relative to whites, Milwaukee African Americans suffered from dramatically higher rates of infant mortality, poverty, welfare dependence and criminal

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<sup>16</sup> See, Milwaukee NAACP Papers and Milwaukee Urban League Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; Thompson, p. 321; Trotter, pp. 80-114.

convictions, and lower rates of employment, homeownership, and educational attainment.<sup>17</sup>

Following the Second World War, the racial dynamics of Milwaukee changed dramatically. The increased need for industrial labor attracted thousands of African Americans, poor Appalachian whites and displaced rural workers to the city. Following the ebb in African American migration during the Depression-era 1930s, 13,000 black people relocated to Milwaukee during the 1940s, an increase of 146 percent. During the 1950s, the African American population again nearly tripled to 62,458 and by 1970 105,088 black people lived in Milwaukee. By 1960, African Americans made up roughly eight and one-half percent of Milwaukee's total population and topped ten percent of the total in 1965. All together, the black community grew over 700 percent in twenty-five years, rising from less than 2 percent of the population in 1945 to nearly fifteen percent in 1970. The majority of these new migrants were under the age of thirty and birth rates remained comparatively high, assuring a disproportionately young population. Tensions were perhaps inevitable, but white Milwaukee, with its ethnic pride, moral traditionalism, and tendency toward xenophobia, was dramatically unprepared to deal with the large and rapid black influx.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gurda, p. 359.

<sup>18</sup> O'Reilly, p. 2. It is also important to note that this increase, as dramatic as it was, was probably even greater in magnitude than official census data reveals. As William Thompson has pointed out, census enumerators were often hesitant to approach African American homes or apartments, instead relying on estimates from nearby business-owners. At the same time, black people were sometimes unwilling to report the actual number of residents in overcrowded dwelling because it violated city building codes. The Milwaukee Urban League estimated that the true number of African American residents in Milwaukee during the 1940s and 1950s may have been under-reported by 2,000-6,000. See, Thompson, pp. 309-310.

The impact of this rapid expansion of the black community on the inner core was equally dramatic. The most immediate problem was overcrowding in the already severely stressed and deteriorating housing market. While white homeowners, realtors, banks and government officials continued to conspire against African American renters and homeowners to maintain strict racial boundaries<sup>19</sup>, the inner core steadily pushed north and west from its original location. Neighborhoods on the frontiers of this expansion changed rapidly as more affluent whites abandoned these neighborhoods for the suburbs. By 1960, the inner core extended from Juneau Avenue to Capitol Drive between Holton and Twenty-Seventh Streets - an area six times larger than the mile-square area it occupied in 1950. White ethnics on the city's South Side stood firm against any encroachment of African Americans across the Menomenee River.

The need for labor during the late forties and early fifties finally opened up the industrial segment of the economy to African Americans. Black pioneers also found employment for the first time as trolley operators, police officers, brewery workers, teachers, nurses and downtown salespeople. Overall, though, advancement was slow and black workers continued to suffer from hiring discrimination, union restrictions, and unequal wages and benefits.<sup>20</sup> A 1952 survey in Milwaukee revealed that of the more than 4,700 black people employed in Milwaukee, only ten were professional workers, 47 held clerical positions, and 345 were skilled laborers.<sup>21</sup> The pace of change could not

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<sup>19</sup> In fact, even though the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed the use of restrictive covenants in housing in 1948, it took three more years for the Wisconsin Supreme Court to prohibit the practice locally.

<sup>20</sup> The median household income of all families in Milwaukee during the 1960s was nearly \$7,000. By contrast, the median African American household income during the same time period was roughly \$4,000. See, Braun, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, p. 331.



keep up with the sheer volume of young, new migrants looking for work. Young African Americans faced a particularly rough labor market and disproportionately high unemployment rates. Each year, community leaders looked for new ways to battle chronic unemployment during the summer months.

The inner core showed numerous signs of stress and strain from the rapid population increase. Though the urban crisis had been developing for many decades, the rapid influx of African American migrants after WWII overwhelmed Milwaukee's inner core and accelerated urban decay. Housing conditions continued to be overcrowded and grossly substandard. The inner core's aging structures and a general lack of resources for needed improvements caused entire neighborhoods to blight. Many residents joked that so many inner core houses were becoming decrepit in the 1950s that there was getting to be a shortage of blacks to live in them. With high unemployment and poverty rates on top of poor housing conditions, social problems in the inner core blossomed. Community institutions could not keep up with demands. Economic, social and spiritual decay spread; crime rates and drug use escalated; the presence of police grew; and confrontation simmered. Newly announced plans for a highway connecting suburban residents with downtown businesses and cultural institutions promised to exacerbate these trends by cutting a swath through the inner core and eliminating hundreds of low-income housing units.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The construction of Highways 43 and 94 between 1960 and 1967 fueled suburbanization and the deterioration of inner core neighborhoods. During that period, 14,219 inner core housing units were razed for the construction of a six-lane highway without equal provisions enacted to relocate this disproportionately poor and black population. More than one-half of the families displaced by freeway construction in the 1960s were African American. Frederick Olson has noted that freeway construction resulted in the growth of suburbs at a rate three times faster than the growth of the city. For a more thorough examination of these trends, see, House, p. 76; Olson, pp. 66-76.

Politically, the growth of Milwaukee's black population in the post-war years and their concentration in a small geographic area held the promise of greater political power as had been the case in other northern cities.<sup>23</sup> By the 1950s, Milwaukee's Tenth and Twelfth wards, which covered large areas of the inner core, had become known as "Negro districts." In 1946, LeRoy Simmons, an African American Democrat, won an Assembly seat representing the Sixth District, ultimately serving four terms. The district quickly became a "safe" seat for both Democrats and African Americans, with Isaac Coggs and later Lloyd Barbee succeeding Simmons as the only African American in the state legislature. Coggs served six terms in the state Assembly and later moved on to the county board. Barbee spearheaded the school desegregation campaign in Milwaukee before entering the legislature in 1964. But election to the city's Common Council and County Board proved much more difficult than capturing one seat in the state Assembly. In 1956 Vel Phillips became the first African American and the first woman to sit on the Common Council, but it took twelve more years before another African American joined her. Voter registration rates remained chronically low among Milwaukee African Americans<sup>24</sup> and black electoral power in the city and state continued to lag well into the 1960s and beyond despite rising population figures. Without a well-organized and

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<sup>23</sup> In Chicago, for instance, there was a black "sub-machine" that received patronage from the Daley administration in return for political support. In Cleveland, a coalition of whites and blacks led to the election of Carl Stokes, the first African American mayor of a major American city, in 1968. See Estelle Zannes, Checkmate In Cleveland: The Rhetoric of Confrontation During the Stokes Years (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1972); Carl Stokes, Promises of Power: A Political Autobiography (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).

<sup>24</sup> Vel Phillips suggested that many southern migrants to Milwaukee refused to register to vote when she worked for the League of Women Voters during the 1950s. She believed that their refusal resulted from the violence they had faced in the South when trying to exercise the franchise. She also suggested that because most new migrants lacked formal education, many felt intimidated by the registration and voting process. See Phillips interview.

mobilized black electoral presence, African American candidates faced significant obstacles to political office. At the same time, white elected officials could feel secure that no political cost would result from neglecting African American concerns and inner core problems.<sup>25</sup>

Black community leadership did not change much from the pre-war era. A small group of middle-class black professionals continued to speak for the community and curry favor from prominent whites. The NAACP and Urban League pursued a steady strategy of quiet negotiation, mild political pressure and acculturation. But as a new civil rights consciousness emerged, nationally, during the mid and late-1950s, the clamor for change, particularly among young people and new migrants grew. Internal fissures emerged between young people and old, new migrants and those that had been born in Milwaukee, between those that thought change was coming and those that thought the pace should quicken. Frustration with the slow rate of change gave rise to calls for new leadership, new tactics and new strategies among some. The circumstances were increasingly ripe for the emergence of a fresh, militant style of black leadership in Milwaukee.

At the same time as the influx of African Americans transformed the inner core, the flight of more affluent white residents to suburban areas outside the city's grasp

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<sup>25</sup> Gurda, pp. 360-361; Thompson, pp. 322-323; Phillips interview. The lack of political power stood in sharp contrast to other northern cities that experienced a larger and earlier migration of African Americans. For instance, in Chicago, even though Mayor Richard Daley sought to maintain racial separation within the city throughout his career, the presence of a large black population forced the Democratic machine to make certain concessions to this constituency. In fact, a black "sub-machine" existed which wielded moderate power. See Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard J. Daley: His Battle for Chicago and the Nation (New York: Little Brown & Company, 2000).

further fueled Milwaukee's changing racial dynamics. Some whites left traditional urban neighborhoods for the "crabgrass frontier" in search of larger homes, more green spaces and greater safety for their growing families. Others sought to escape declining property values, faltering urban public schools, rising crime rates, poverty and blight. Many were simply unwilling to live near a rapidly growing population of African Americans, a group they often associated with urban decline and plummeting property values. Highway construction and federal home and business loan policies supported this move and magnified its effects.

The impact of this "white flight" was disastrous for those residents and low-income neighborhoods that were left behind. Suburbanization exacerbated racial segregation in Milwaukee through the creation of an "iron ring" of 18 overwhelmingly white communities safely outside the geographic grasp of city leaders. With little affordable housing, scant public transportation, and a variety of formal and informal discriminatory real estate practices, suburban mobility remained out of range for most poor, working-class and African American Milwaukeeans. Milwaukee businesses followed white residents to the outskirts of the city. Between 1960 and 1970, central city jobs in Milwaukee declined by ten percent while the number of jobs outside the central city grew at a rate of 75 percent. While this downturn affected all areas of the inner city, it translated into particularly difficult job prospects for black workers. Charles O'Reilly found that during this period African American men in the inner core were three times more likely to be unemployed than male workers who lived in other parts of the city.<sup>26</sup> Taken together, the exodus of affluent whites and the loss of many businesses

undermined Milwaukee's tax base at precisely the time that the city needed more resources to deal with the influx of a large, impoverished population. The short-fall, in turn, resulted in under-funded social services, rising crime rates, the deterioration of public schools and a growing number of boarded-up homes and vacant lots in the inner core. In short, suburbanization left a legacy of enormous social problems for Milwaukee, including hyper-segregation and large concentrations of poverty and inequality. Though this historical arc had several aspects that were unique to Milwaukee, in many respects these changes trace the postwar history of urban America.

These demographic and economic changes sharply altered life in traditional white, working-class neighborhoods in Milwaukee. Economic forces prevented many poor and working-class whites from following their more affluent neighbors to the suburbs. And some blue-collar residents, particularly on Milwaukee's South Side, opted to remain in traditional neighborhoods. Catholic parishes, neighborhood schools, and the corresponding cultural life revolved around a unique sense of community that was intimately tied to geography.<sup>26</sup> The residents of these one-time stable neighborhoods now found themselves in an increasingly imperiled situation. They held jobs and union membership, and perhaps even owned a small home, but many of the economic, social and cultural markers that had anchored their way of life seemed to be increasingly unmoored during the post-war era. New migrants with unusual cultural traditions, deteriorating urban infrastructure, rising crime rates, social and religious liberalization, rising taxes, automation and economic uncertainty all encroached upon their lives. To

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<sup>26</sup> O'Reilly, pp. 70-79; Braun, pp. 31-33.

<sup>27</sup> Gurda, pp. 157-319 ; Olson, p. 151.

these Milwaukeeans, the rapid influx of poor and working-class African Americans clamoring for civil rights seemed like a threat to their homes, their jobs, their unions, their schools, and to their traditional way of life. Many white Milwaukeeans, like most white Americans of their time, fell prey to stereotypical and discriminatory ideas about African Americans and race relations. The lack of direct experience that most white Milwaukeeans had with black people compounded misinformation and spread fear. Rather than seeing African Americans as the victims of economic transformations and widespread racial discrimination, many inner city whites chose to see black migrants as the cause of the urban decay and social disintegration that appeared to follow them.

By the late-1950s, then, Milwaukee contained the necessary preconditions for significant racial conflict. More affluent second and third generation white ethnics, along with a growing number of businesses, had left the city limits and taken their much needed tax dollars with them. Inner core and working-class white neighborhoods within city boundaries continued to deteriorate as a host of economic and social forces preyed upon them. African Americans sought to break through the web of discrimination that maintained the inner core and racial inequality, while working-class whites got ready to defend their old neighborhoods, their jobs and their schools. Within this cacophony of demographic and economic change and pervasive social tension, Milwaukee city leaders struggled to find new solutions to a deepening urban crisis.

The clearest indication of the divisive power of these new racial politics came during the 1956 mayoral campaign between Frank Zeidler, long-time incumbent and Social Democrat, and Milton McGuire, conservative Democrat and president of the

Common Council. Throughout the 1950s, Zeidler had challenged Milwaukeeans to absorb the latest wave of immigrants, proposing among other things an ambitious new public housing project. Many white Milwaukeeans associated public housing with the influx of new black residents and opposed it. Real estate brokers exploited these fears by circulating rumors that mayor Zeidler planned to import African Americans into their neighborhoods. During the campaign, McGuire revived these old rumors and added new ones. One smear claimed Zeidler's oldest daughter was married to a black man, a taboo among most Milwaukee whites. Another accused Zeidler of posting billboards throughout the South that invited black people to move to Milwaukee.<sup>28</sup> During a debate on public housing, McGuire - whose campaign used the slogan "Milwaukee needs an honest white man for mayor" - opposed building more low-income housing units, stating, "I will call a spade a spade. If there is more housing, more people will move into Milwaukee. The only thing that has kept... Negroes from coming up here is the lack of housing." Even *TIME* magazine, no friend of the Socialists, defended Zeidler against the charges calling McGuire's campaign "The Shame of Milwaukee." Zeidler won re-election by a slim margin but decided not to run again in 1960 citing the bitter racial acrimony engendered throughout the city during the 1956 campaign. Zeidler's successor, business Democrat Henry Maier, staked out a "go slow" approach on civil rights and urban renewal.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> According to business reporter Jim Arndorfer, "This rumor, which first surfaced in taverns across the city in 1952, was believed by tens of thousands of people. With Zeidler campaign supporters getting jeered as 'nigger lovers,' the Milwaukee Federated Trades Council asked unions in ten Southern states to look for these mythical billboards. Not surprisingly, no signs were found; nor were the rumormongers." See, Jim Arndorfer, "Cream City Confidential: The Black-Baiting of Milwaukee's Last Pink Mayor," in *The Baffler*, number 13, Winter 1999, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Arndorfer, pp. 69-77; *TIME* magazine, April 2, 1956; Gurda, p. 363.

It was rare for race to play such a prominent role in Milwaukee politics during the 1950s. While most city leaders acknowledged a generalized problem with urban decay and blight, few, if any, focused special attention on the unique challenges facing African Americans in the inner core. Many sought comfort in the fact that Milwaukee's urban ills paled in scope compared to other large northern cities. When public officials did discuss the inner core or African Americans, they invariably explained away inequality as a problem of "acculturation." This view held that new African American migrants did not possess the basic skills and cultural knowledge necessary to succeed in the urban North. The acculturation model emphasized the physical, cultural and familial bases of the inner core's problems, implying that they emanated solely from within its bounds and could be dealt with by measures limited to that area. By focusing exclusively on internal factors, the acculturation model failed to assign any responsibility to white Milwaukeeans for racial inequality. It also minimized the large-scale changes that were ravaging inner-city neighborhoods and ignored racial discrimination as a significant cause of African American inequality. In short, the acculturation model argued that inner core problems could be cured without any disruption of the existing ways most Milwaukeeans and city institutions worked. Given this consensus, it is not surprising that little significant change came to the inner core during the 1950s, particularly through existing institutions.

Nevertheless, there were also signs that a new and more militant generation of civil rights leaders was on the rise, a group that would embrace non-violent direct action to achieve racial justice. During the 1950s, Vel Phillips completed law school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, worked for the League of Women Voters and won



election to Milwaukee's Common Council as the first African American and first woman. Lloyd Barbee also finished his law degree in Madison and worked as president of the Wisconsin State NAACP and as an advisor to the Governor's Commission on Human Rights. Calvin Sherard came home from the military, settled in Milwaukee as a worker at AMC and, began to talk to his co-workers about the unfair employment practices of inner core businesses. Fr. James Groppi and dozens of other young white Catholic seminarians learned first-hand about the struggles of African Americans in the inner core by working with children at St. Martin's summer day camp. At the same time, a cross-section of liberal white Milwaukee clergymen began to pay more attention to the problems of the inner core and lay the foundation for an organization called the Greater Milwaukee Conference on Religion and Race. These individuals and others would form the backbone of Milwaukee's civil rights insurgency during the 1960s.

But change would not come easily in Milwaukee during the 1960s. The deterioration of the urban landscape had no easy or swift solutions. The factors that caused these shifts would provide the backdrop against which racial politics in the city would play out over the next decade. These factors set the stage for a dramatic and confrontational new chapter in the history of race relations in Milwaukee, a history that speaks to the larger transformation of American life. White and black residents were deeply divided by geography, history, experience, perception and self-interest. Beginning in 1958, though, a movement for racial justice swelled in Milwaukee. Slow to catch fire initially, the growing civil rights insurgency ultimately compelled thousands of local residents, black and white, as well as their allies from across the country, to take to the streets for equality and freedom. Like the black migrants at the new Butler rail yard

in 1922, the protesters met white mob violence. Thousands more local whites moved to stop this movement or at least to slow the rate of change. The result was a tumultuous and often violent decade of race relations and civil rights activism in Milwaukee. The story reveals much about the struggle for racial justice in the North and the unfinished business of racial justice in American cities today.

## Chapter 1

### **“Not Vengeance But Justice”: The Murder of Daniel Bell and the Beginning of Protest Politics in Milwaukee’s Black Community**

Sunday, February 2, 1958, was a wintry day in Milwaukee. Snow covered the ground and temperatures dipped below zero. At about 8:30pm on that frosty evening, a 22-year old African American man, Daniel Bell, slowly steered his car through the inner core toward home. As he navigated the route, he might have been thinking about the birthday celebration his family and friends had thrown for him the previous night; the music, the food, the dancing and laughing. If he found himself in a more pensive mood, he may have pondered the journey he and his ten siblings had made from rural Louisiana several years before. Looking for opportunities, the Bell family began to migrate to Milwaukee in the late 1940s. Daniel Bell made the move as a teenager in 1952.

The Bells faced numerous struggles in the urban North. One of the most formidable obstacles to success, Daniel’s sister Sylvia Bell White recalled, was their lack of education. None of the Bells could read or write well. This made it difficult to ride the bus, fill out job applications, and to read newspapers and unfamiliar place names. Sylvia Bell recalled being denied a position at one local factory not because she lacked the requisite skills or experience, but because she did not possess a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Bell White interview with Patrick Jones, 8/28/00.

For her brothers, it also meant the inability to secure a formal driver's license. In Milwaukee, the state required drivers to pass a written exam as well as a road test. Even though they could all handle a vehicle safely, if the Bells were going to drive in Milwaukee, they would have to do it without legal sanction. As a result, each had received citations from the Milwaukee police for driving without a license. By that cold February night in 1958, police had cited Daniel Bell five times previously and had even held him in jail on one occasion for the offense. Whatever Bell was thinking that night, he was trying to avoid another ticket as he moved along West Wright Street. We'll never know, of course, what thoughts filled Daniel Bell's head that night as he drove home, but we do know what happened next.<sup>2</sup>

As Bell made his way toward the intersection of W. Wright Street and N. 7<sup>th</sup> Street, two white uniformed Milwaukee motorcycle patrolmen, Thomas Grady and Louis Krause, stopped, smoked a cigarette and talked.<sup>3</sup> Krause later testified that as the two men stood together at the curb, Grady told him he needed to make more arrests that night, so he was going to check on some vacant homes and "arrest some niggers."<sup>4</sup> As Daniel

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<sup>2</sup> White interview.

<sup>3</sup> The following narrative is culled from the "Facts of the Case" section of a 1983 appeal of a civil suit brought against the city of Milwaukee by Daniel Bell's father, Patrick Bell, Sr. Until 1978, the events remained murky and disputed. According to court records, "In 1978 [officer] Krause went to successor District Attorney E. Michael McCann and revealed that he and Grady had lied about what occurred during the Bell shooting in 1958." Krause's testimony formed the foundation of an inquiry into the case and the criminal prosecution of officer Grady. On August 29, 1979, Thomas Grady pleaded guilty to homicide by reckless conduct and perjury in connection with the Daniel Bell inquest. He was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, and was paroled after three years. See, United States Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit, Patrick Bell, Sr. vs. City of Milwaukee, 9/4/84, pp. 10-20. For another overview of the Bell case see, Sylvia Bell White and JoAnne LePage, Her Brothers' Keeper: A Sister's Quest for Justice, an unpublished manuscript in the possession of the author, pp. 161-176.

<sup>4</sup> This quotation is based on the testimony of officer Krause in 1978. Grady denied making the statement but his employment records show that his superiors had criticized him for having too few arrests. A report from his probation officer in 1980 claimed that Grady had admitted using racial slurs in the 1950s. See,

Bell passed through the intersection and by the officers, Grady noticed that Bell's vehicle lacked a taillight and gave pursuit with Krause trailing close behind. Bell promptly pulled over and the patrolmen followed suit. As Grady dismounted his bike and approached the car, Daniel Bell swung open his door, jumped out of his vehicle, and ran east on W. Wright Street. Officers Grady and Krause pursued Bell on foot, shouting "Halt!" and firing several warning shots from their revolvers into the air. When Bell turned north on N. 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Krause commandeered a passing vehicle, ordered the driver to do a quick u-turn in the intersection, pick up Grady and follow Bell. The three men sat in a row across the front seat, the two officers still clenching drawn guns. The driver of the car pulled over to the curb just ahead of Bell and officers Grady and Krause scrambled out to give chase. At that moment, Bell hopped a snow bank and ran between two homes located on the 2600 block of 6<sup>th</sup> Street. Grady, running ahead of Krause, mounted the snow bank and shouted for Bell to stop running. As he closed in on Bell, Grady extended his right arm toward the fleeing young man and, with the tip of the muzzle touching the fabric of Daniel Bell's jacket, fired a single shot into his upper back. The bullet traveled upward, broke Bell's neck and entered his head. Grady holstered his firearm and took off his gloves to feel Bell's outstretched wrist for a pulse. He looked up at Krause and said, "I think he's dead." Krause removed his glove to feel Bell's jugular vein on his neck. Detecting no sign of life, he replied, "I guess you're right. He's dead."

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United States Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit, Patrick Bell, Sr. vs. City of Milwaukee, 9/4/84, p. 11; White and LePage, Her Brothers' Keeper, p. 169.

Krause would later testify in court that Grady sloughed off the shooting death by saying, "He's just a damn nigger kid anyhow."<sup>5</sup>

The gunshot that killed Daniel Bell was the signal shot for the freedom movement in Milwaukee. As the coming decade unfolded, the dozens who marched downtown to protest his killing would become thousands who followed Father James Groppi across the 16th Street Viaduct into the brick-throwing mobs from the Polish South side. With the advantage of several decades' hindsight, the police officer's assessment--"He's just a damn nigger kid anyhow"--mirrored the sentiments of vast numbers of white citizens in Milwaukee. The white people who read about the killing in the *Milwaukee Journal* the next morning did not throw urine, chant "send the cannibals back to Africa," or firebomb the NAACP office, the way some of them would in the years to come. But the Bell killing--and the official indifference and popular complacency that confronted those who protested it--pointed to issues that would remain salient: police brutality, community mobilization, the limits of protest politics. It underlined not only the powerful, community-based activism of African Americans but also the political role of "white ethnics" in transforming American politics, not in Milwaukee alone but across the urban centers of the North and Midwest that increasingly would become a discouraging metaphor for the intractable racial chasm in American life.

As the officers huddled over Bell's body, Grady pulled out a small pocketknife from his jacket, but Krause warned him it was too small. Grady closed the knife, returned it to his jacket and produced a larger one. As Grady searched for the right knife,

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<sup>5</sup> Again, this statement is based on court testimony by Krause. Grady denied making the statement. See, Patrick Bell, Sr. vs. City of Milwaukee, p. 11.

Krause walked to a nearby house to phone the district station. As he stood at the door waiting for someone to answer his knock, Krause watched Grady place the knife in Bell's right hand and close the fingers around the weapon. After he returned to the scene of the incident, the two officers had a conversation which "dealt with the story they would tell people in charge, officials, on what happened."<sup>6</sup>

Police officers and detectives quickly began arriving. Detective Sergeant Edwin Shaffer immediately asked Krause "What happened?" and Krause responded, "Sarge, we shot a guy." Shaffer told Krause to go sit in his car. Another detective asked Grady how far he was from Bell when he shot him. He marked the spot Grady indicated with a piece of ice and measured it at a distance of 23'-9." While Detectives talked to Grady, officers canvassed the neighborhood for witnesses, took measurements and made a diagram of the scene. Officers recorded the names and addresses of several people that night, but apparently no one interviewed by police saw or heard anything. The story Grady related to his superiors at the scene reflected the agreement he and Krause had reached. They decided to say that as Bell fled the scene, knife in hand, he yelled, "You won't catch me, I'm a hold-up man!"<sup>7</sup> In addition to the exclamation and weapon, Grady further claimed that he believed Bell fit the description of a man wanted for armed robbery as listed on a recent police bulletin, and that he had shot him as a "fleeing felon."

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<sup>6</sup> Based on the testimony of officer Grady. See, Patrick Bell, Sr. vs. City of Milwaukee, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> The excuse served a purpose. In Wisconsin, armed robbery was a felony. The law allowed police officers to chase and even shoot a person if it is believed that the individual is a "fleeing felon." See, White and LePage, Her Brothers' Keeper, p. 170. According to court documents, Krause contrived the declaration. See, Patrick Bell, Sr. vs. City of Milwaukee, p. 12.

Back at the station, Grady and Krause spoke with various police officials about the incident and each were told to write a report. The two officers were kept apart while they wrote their reports. Both incorporated the falsified narrative they had agreed upon. Detectives opened an official file on the case, including several reports that reflected Grady and Krause's explanation of the shooting. Police officials then released the story to reporters.

On Monday, February 3, Milwaukeeans opened their newspapers to a front-page account of the Daniel Bell shooting. Both the *Journal* and *Sentinel*<sup>8</sup> relied almost exclusively on the Grady-Krause reports and the statements of the police press liaison. Milwaukee residents heard the falsified version of the incident, emphasizing the presence of the knife and Bell's alleged description of himself as a "hold-up man." In addition, both mainstream papers detailed Bell's criminal record since 1952, the year he had moved to Milwaukee as a teen and emphasized Grady's claim that Bell fit the description of a recent burglary suspect. Detective McClintock announced that victims of recent robberies would be asked to view Bell's body to confirm or refute his purported statement that he was a hold-up man. The *Journal* did also state that Daniel Bell's relatives believed he ran from police because he was fearful of arrest for driving without a license.<sup>9</sup>

For most white Milwaukeeans, there was no immediate reason to question the accounts of Daniel Bell's death that appeared in their morning papers. Milwaukee's crime rate, while rising, had historically stood well below that of other comparable

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<sup>8</sup> Milwaukee did not have an African American newspaper during the late-1950s.

<sup>9</sup> MJ, 2/3/58, p. 1; MS 2/3/58, p. 1.



American cities. Its police department had received national recognition for effectively ensuring a safe, livable environment, ideally suited for families. These factors were often marshaled with pride by news editors, politicians, business leaders, judges, clergy, parents and citizens as evidence of Milwaukee's civic virtue.

Over the course of the 1950s, moreover, a growing number of white Milwaukeeans began to voice concerns over the rapid influx of African American migrants to the city and the attendant stress they believed the newcomers placed on housing, employment, city services and crime rates. Newspaper stories about crime in the inner core were commonplace. Many white Milwaukeeans reading of the Bell case probably accepted the implicit link in the newspaper accounts between crime, race and Daniel Bell's peculiarly self-incriminating behavior that night.

The Bell family, however, did not accept the official accounts of their brother's death. The night of the killing, Sylvia Bell stood before her mirror brushing her hair when the ten o'clock television newscast announced that Daniel had been shot by police after fleeing the scene of a traffic stop with a knife. The television image of the knife in Daniel's right hand told her immediately that something was askew: Daniel's pocketknife was sitting in the bathroom at their home and Sylvia and her brothers knew that Daniel was *left*-handed. Sylvia telephoned her brother Patrick, who, along with his other brothers, picked up Sylvia and proceeded to the police station, seeking answers. Sylvia recalled a tense and intimidating atmosphere at the station with numerous uniformed officers escorting them, several with guns drawn. The officers brought the family to a police office, explained the incident and presented the knife. As two of her

brothers identified Daniel's body,<sup>10</sup> Sylvia approached the Sergeant, "the big man in the white shirt with the big brass," stating, "No, sir, he did not have a knife. Here's my brother's knife right here." She later testified in court that the officer demanded she give over the knife, but she refused, explaining, "I am not going to give you anything because my brother did not have a knife in his hand. And he's *left* handed anyway!" The exchange reportedly degenerated from there with one Bell brother being heard to say, "Oh, you think it's open season, like on rabbits. We are going to start shooting a few of you cops." Sargent Shaffer allegedly responded, "You can't tell you niggers nothing. Get out of here or I will throw you in jail." The Bell family then left the police station, distraught, frustrated and angry.<sup>11</sup>

The morning after the shooting, Grady's and Krause's story began to unravel as the internal investigation proceeded. At a meeting at District Attorney Robert McCauley's office, Patrolman Grady introduced a new wrinkle into his story, telling the DA that Daniel Bell had "slashed" at him with a knife and that he had shot Bell from an approximate distance of six feet. The officer who had interviewed Grady at the scene of the shooting contested these assertions, stating that Grady had told him that he had shot Bell from a distance measured at 23'-9" and that he had not mentioned being menaced with the knife. According to his testimony, DA McCauley and the police Captain then conferred privately for a few minutes. When the Captain returned, he handed the officer

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<sup>10</sup> According to Sylvia White Bell, the toll of Daniel's death went beyond his specific loss. The shock of identifying their brother's body caused two of her brothers to go "insane." One brother, Jimmy, worked at the Cudahy packing plant cutting off the heads of hogs. He began to think that they were killing people at the plant. Both brothers were institutionalized and have struggled with the issue for the rest of their lives. See, White Interview; White and LePage, Her Brothers' Keeper, p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> White Interview; See also, Patrick Bell, Sr. vs. City of Milwaukee, p. 13.

the reports and said, "Your reports are not consistent." He then suggested the officer change his report and map to include the slashing and reconcile the differences in distance. The officer refused. The Captain then reported to the police Inspector who also pressured the officer to change his report. Again, the officer refused. McCauley reviewed all of the reports for about twenty minutes and then said, "These damn reports have to be consistent. I can't do anything with the case like this." The Captain then reportedly threw the reports down, stating, "Bring me one story and it had better be the truth!" The officer still refused to alter his report and diagram, and left to attend Daniel Bell's autopsy. Officers Grady and Krause did produce new reports which amended their initial testimony.

Following the meeting in the DA's office, McCauley, Grady, Krause and a police-media liaison spoke to local reporters for 35 minutes. Newspaper articles on February 4 reflected this modified version of the incident. The *Sentinel* quoted Grady as saying, "We were about six feet apart when he turned and lunged at me again with his knife. I stepped back and he turned and started to run again. Then I shot." Despite the conflicting and shifting testimony from the previous meeting, McCauley opted to maintain a solid, unified front in defense of the two officers. "Under the circumstances," he told reporters, "I see no reason at present for a coroner's inquest. In my opinion, the officer had a right to shoot." The *Journal* article also quoted the DA stating, "Grady was in imminent danger of his life or serious injury due to the knife slashing of that man." The paper did point out, though, that "[no] mention of Bell's slashing at Grady with a

knife was made in the written reports by Grady and Krause shortly after the shooting. The DA said he did not have the written reports [at the interview].”<sup>12</sup>

The next day, the story unraveled a bit more. None of the recent hold-up victims brought to view Bell’s body could make a positive identification.<sup>13</sup> In addition, a set of new reports, dated February 2, surfaced that included the slashing allegations. Police did not offer these reports to the press until February 5. The *Milwaukee Journal*, in fact, noted that two days earlier when the press asked the detective bureau if other reports existed, the response was “No.” Finally, a third wrinkle complicated matters when the Bell family’s lawyer, Milton Murray, brought forward two new civilian witnesses, Wesley McCloud and Edward Hammond. In an interview with the DA, both men stated that they had not seen Bell threaten Grady with a knife. The cumulative effect of all of these loose strands prompted McCauley to call for a formal coroner’s inquest into the shooting of Daniel Bell.<sup>14</sup>

The inquest took place on February 14, 1958. District Attorney McCauley authorized Sheriff Ciemens Michalski to appoint a six-member “Blue Ribbon” panel to preside. Michalski’s selections represented a fairly mainstream cross-section of prominent white Milwaukeeans: Philip Robinson, vice president of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, George Haberman, president of the Wisconsin State Federation

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<sup>12</sup> MS, 2/4/58, p. 1; MJ, 2/4/58, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> According to Vorpapel’s testimony, Detective Woelfel sent him to see “Em,” a recent hold-up victim, and encouraged him to get her drunk before bringing her to view Bell’s body. He did bring her in, but did not attempt to ply her with alcohol. “Em” did not identify Daniel Bell as her accoster. This testimony might suggest a broader cover-up in the Bell case that extended beyond the two immediate officers involved. At this point, though, there is no further corroborating evidence to make a final determination.

<sup>14</sup> MJ, 2/5/58, p. 1 and 3; MS, 2/6/58, p. 1, pt. 2. See, also, Patrick Bell, Sr. vs. City of Milwaukee.

of Labor, Eli Esser, vice president of a local furniture firm, John Sisk of Bankers Life Company and former Marquette football star, real estate broker Edward Klapinski, and Ralph Hogan, a Milwaukee school custodian. No African Americans sat on the panel. The day of the proceedings, officer Grady stuck to the story he and Krause had concocted, but again amended his testimony, reducing the estimated distance at which he shot Bell to conform with the autopsy report: “[We] were very close, maybe inches away from the end of the gun.” Charles Wilson, the superintendent of the state crime laboratory, testified that, in fact, the muzzle of Grady’s gun touched the cloth of Bell’s jacket when fired. The police officer that had interviewed Grady at the scene remained steadfast in his version of events. Ten other Milwaukee police officers, though, supported Grady and Krause’s fabricated story.<sup>15</sup> In the end, the testimony of so many police officers in support of their comrades outweighed the questions raised by Hammond’s and McCloud’s testimony, as well as the discrepancies in Grady’s distance calculations. The inquest panel cleared patrolman Grady of wrongdoing, stating that he had “justifiably shot and killed” Daniel Bell in “the reasonable execution of his duty as an officer making a lawful arrest, and in self-defense.”<sup>16</sup>

The inquest verdict appeared to close the Daniel Bell case, but other eyes were also on the events and not everyone in Milwaukee agreed that the verdict settled matters. Within the local African American community, as the Bell case moved to its conclusion,

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<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that ten other police officers participated in a formal cover-up of the Bell shooting. That issue remains unclear from the available evidence. Rather, it simply means they received their information about the incident from officers Grady and Krause, who were perpetuating the pre-arranged fabrication. When these officers arrived on the scene, Grady had already placed the knife in bell’s hand.

<sup>16</sup> MJ, 2/5/58, p. 1 and 3; MS, 2/6/58, p. 1, pt. 2. See, also, Patrick Bell, Sr. vs. City of Milwaukee.

skepticism , anger and frustration grew, prompting some to action. On February 7, a delegation from the Milwaukee NAACP, met with Police Chief Johnson to discuss the incident in a secret meeting at the Safety Building. The delegation raised several questions about discrepancies and inconsistencies in the police officers' stories.<sup>17</sup> Chief Johnson remained a steadfast supporter of Grady and Krause throughout the proceedings.

Community protest was not confined to the NAACP. Calvin Sherard and Charles Thomas, local industrial workers and community activists, formed "The Citizen Committee to Protest the Case of Daniel Bell." The day after the inquest verdict came down, Rev. T.T. Lovelace,<sup>18</sup> pastor of the Mount Zion Baptist Church, Milwaukee's largest African American congregation, spoke to fifteen people at a meeting called by Sherard and Thomas. The gathering received coverage in both of the city's daily newspapers. Lovelace, a conservative, middle-class minister, called the fatal shooting a "dastardly attack." It was "unfortunate and something should be done." He stated that the case needed attention "not just as a matter of vengeance, but justice." Echoing the sentiments of the Bell family, Rev. Lovelace suggested that Daniel Bell had committed "perhaps a minor offense" and then "made the mistake of his life by running. Here is a boy, who, to me, was taken advantage of. It is said he had a knife, but I am not so sure of that." He and Sherard and Thomas announced that a mass public meeting would be held the following Thursday at Mount Zion to discuss the case and potential action.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "Memorandum on Conference with Chief of Police – Howard O. Johnson," No Date, Milwaukee NAACP Papers, Box 2, Folder 16, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>18</sup> According to Calvin Sherard, Rev. Lovelace took a particular interest in the Daniel Bell case because he claimed the he had also been the victim of improper treatment by local white police officers in the core. See, Calvin Sherard interview with Patrick Jones, 2/17/01.

<sup>19</sup> MJ, 2/16/58, p. 5.

This initial meeting did not proceed without difference of opinion, though, and the fissures that surfaced here between local black community leaders would deepen as civil rights activity in Milwaukee escalated over the next decade. The immediate details of the Bell case brought these activists together, but differences of philosophy and strategy existed. Sherard and Thomas saw the killing as an example of racial injustice within the police force and in the administration of the law for local African Americans. Sherard went as far as to question whether white police officers could fairly enforce the law within the inner core. Both men advocated a march and demonstration. Rev. Lovelace, uncomfortable with such confrontational tactics, believed that the immoral and unlawful behavior of some African Americans lay at the root of racial problems in the city. He urged African Americans to improve themselves and not consider themselves the subject of systematic prejudice.<sup>20</sup>

On Thursday, February 20, approximately 450 black Milwaukeeans attended the second meeting where they heard from eleven speakers. According to newspaper accounts, the crowd sat silently through a series of hymns, prayers and exhortations by Rev. Lovelace to “improve the general behavior of the Negro community,” but erupted into cheers when local African American Assemblyman Isaac Coggs said, “I cannot see any justifiable reason why a man running from a police officer has to be shot in the back.” He added, “You don’t have to be a Philadelphia lawyer to see many holes in that case.” Another speaker pointed out that no black person had been named to the inquest panel while someone else added that District Attorney McCauley had no African Americans on his staff of 18, despite the fact that black people made up 40% of all arrests

in Milwaukee. Calvin Sherard asserted that police had, in fact, consistently shown prejudice in enforcing the law. More than anything else, the meeting gave vent to a variety of related frustrations within the local black community swirling around the Bell case. The organizers had clearly tapped into something deeper and broader than the immediate facts of the killing. The Bell case, became emblematic of a more general critique of race relations in Milwaukee.<sup>21</sup>

The solutions and suggestions for action that speakers offered at Mount Zion were equally disparate. Assemblyman Coggs and Attorney George Brawley urged the gathering to voice their displeasure at the ballot box. Brawley chided the audience by citing the fact that less than 16,000 of the roughly 30,000 African Americans of voting age in the city of Milwaukee were registered: “We talk about the poor Negro in the South who doesn’t have the opportunity to vote. What about the poor Negroes in the North? Do you get out and vote when the opportunity comes? If you don’t vote to protect yourselves, you have no right to attend this protest meeting or any other meeting to protest anything.” Coggs followed up by mentioning that the DA and Sheriff were elected officials and thus potential targets of black voter protest in the next election. Though he urged a reprimand of patrolman Grady, Rev. Lovelace again laid much of the blame for the incident at the feet of local African Americans, not at systematic discrimination or individual racism. He called for “an ounce of prevention” through greater respect for law and order among African Americans. He asked the crowd, “Can it be that the way we deport ourselves at times we are committing suicide? We have

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> MJ, 2/21/58, p. 20.



created in the general populous disgust, shame and fear.” He encouraged black Milwaukeeans to “quit rioting among ourselves” and to “stop slashing each other to pieces.” Even though a temporary consensus reigned around the Bell case, fundamental interpretive, philosophical and strategic differences lurked just beneath the surface. Even so, by a show of hands, most in attendance pledged to attend another meeting the following Monday where steps would be taken to form a “giant organization” to speak effectively for Milwaukee’s black population in times of crisis.<sup>22</sup>

Following the second mass meeting at Mount Zion, the various camps began to part ways. Some continued to meet at Mount Zion Baptist Church behind the more cautious leadership of African Americans like Rev. Lovelace and Clarence Parrish. At a meeting held on Monday, February 25, an estimated 300 community members agreed to establish the “Institute for Social Adjustment” to deal with problems facing African Americans in Milwaukee. According to Rev. Lovelace, the Institute would help rehabilitate black people who had violated the law; help orient rural and immigrant blacks to the “standards and customs” of a large city; try to get at least 5,000 African Americans to join so that the group could make an impact on local politics; and form a “tavern committee” to deal with black people who became “problem cases” while drinking. In addition, the group drafted a resolution and sent it to the Milwaukee Police which suggested that any officer who took the life of a person in a “questionable

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

shooting” should receive a reprimand not less than a form of suspension. The resolution also praised the department for a tradition of “impartial law enforcement.”<sup>23</sup>

The following Friday evening, the Lapham-Garfield Neighborhood Council (LGNC), outlined a five-point program to attack problems confronting Milwaukee’s African American community. In October of 1957, representatives of 62 local civic, fraternal, social and religious organizations, representing a collective membership of over 5,000, had founded an umbrella organization as an outgrowth of concern over the mass arrest of African American youth during a north side crime wave that year. Grant Gordon, founder and owner of Columbia Savings & Loan, Milwaukee’s first black-owned bank, along with his wife Lucinda, a pillar of the Milwaukee NAACP since the 1940s, headed the Council. At the group’s first public gathering on February 28, Gordon cited Bell’s death as an impetus to action: “If there had been more understanding and trust between our community and the community at large, Daniel Bell would be alive today.” He added, “We cannot bring Daniel Bell back to life, but we can improve our relationships so that this type of incident will not happen again.” He called for increased educational, recreational and employment opportunities for Milwaukee’s black population and said the group would work to develop more adult leadership to work with youth in the area, secure better housing, and obtain representation in city governmental bodies. Mayor Zeidler also spoke at the gathering and urged greater “mutual trust” as the foundation for improved race relations in the city.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> MJ, 2/25/58, p. 8. Rev. Lovelace unexpectedly passed away from a heart attack on 4/14/58. With his death, the Institute for Social Adjustment fizzled, although the sentiments he espoused continued to play a significant role in community politics for some time.

<sup>24</sup> MJ, 3/1/58, p. 7.

Still elsewhere, a more militant group of 170 activists and community members, behind the leadership of Calvin Sherard, met at the New Hope Baptist Church on Monday, March 17. New Hope's pastor, Rev. R. L. Lathan, announced a "prayer protest" the following Sunday at MacArthur Square in front of the courthouse. Participants were to meet in the afternoon at the corner of W. Vliet Street and N. 6<sup>th</sup> Street and then march a short distance to the square to pray for "justice and the good of all mankind." Organizers hoped to attract 2,000-3,000 community members to the event and stressed that the "pilgrimage" was not restricted to African Americans, but rather was open to "anyone who believes in justice." Rev. Lathan added that he had "a great respect for the law" and that "my only desire is to root out the evil and corruption in the law enforcement department." He further criticized Chief Johnson for refusing to fire officer Grady. Assemblyman Coggs endorsed the "prayer protest" by drawing a dramatic parallel between southern racial violence and Daniel Bell's death, stating, "There is no difference between shooting Dan Bell in the back than killing Emmett Till in Mississippi." Following a burst of applause, he added, "and there wasn't much difference in the picking of the jury either."<sup>25</sup>

The New Hope contingent's proposed "prayer protest" provoked the most significant community reaction. Many local African Americans and whites no doubt supported the plan and this is evidenced by the strong attendance and reportedly enthusiastic response of community members at the group's meetings. On the other extreme, at the March 17 meeting, Rev. Lathan revealed that he had received an anonymous death threat because of the proposed march. The most widespread and

sustained opposition to the “prayer protest,” though, came from established, moderate African American leaders, including Rev. Lovelace and Grant Gordon, who felt uncomfortable with the New Hope group’s more strident rhetoric and confrontational tactics. Vel Phillips, Milwaukee’s lone African American Common Council member and a long-time Milwaukee NAACP leader, told newspapers, “I feel that even those who have the constitutional right of free assembly and their leaders... should weigh heavily the stake of assembling a group of people for peaceful purposes because their efforts might well get out of hand due to certain lawless elements.”<sup>26</sup> She did not elaborate on the identity of these “elements” and no evidence exists to corroborate the claim, but numerous other mainstream black leaders repeated the general sentiment of her remarks.

Initially, Rev. Lathan remained defiant, mockingly lashing out at his critics within the black community: “Kill Tom – you say all right; Kill John – all right. All you think of is ‘poor little me.’” According to Lathan and his followers, the time had come for Milwaukee African Americans to vigorously assert their rights and demand justice.

On March 21, three prominent African American ministers – Rev. Melvin Battle, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Rev. E. B. Phillips, pastor of Galilee Baptists Church, Rev. Cecil Fisher, chair of the Milwaukee Housing Authority – paid Rev. Lathan a private visit in an attempt to dissuade him from going forward with the announced “prayer protest.” The ministers urged Lathan to preserve the dignity of the clergy by confining prayer to its “proper place” within a church. They also reasoned that it was better, politically, for African Americans to express sorrow at the recent slashing of a

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<sup>25</sup> MJ, 3/17/58, p. 1, part 2; MJ, 3/18/58, p. 1, part 2.

<sup>26</sup> MJ, 3/24/58, p. 10.

white officer as he attempted to thwart the abduction of a local African American woman than to criticize police for their conduct in the Bell case. Finally, the three ministers warned Rev. Lathan that there might be unfavorable repercussions if the crowd could not be handled. Following the meeting, Lathan announced that he had relented and called off the “prayer protest,” announcing in its stead a prayer meeting at New Hope the same day. He told the press that his decision was “in the best interest of both Negroes and Whites.” He also reiterated the fear that some “influences” might have crept into the event that might have gotten out of hand. He said he feared the group would be “smeared” as subversive if it went ahead with the planned march.<sup>27</sup>

That spring, a mass meeting did take place at New Hope Baptist Church. Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, a Birmingham civil rights minister, charter member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Rev. Lathan’s cousin, spoke to the gathering and encouraged them to continue their fight against racial inequality in the North. Calvin Sherard recalled that after the meeting, he, Rev. Shuttlesworth, Rev. Lathan, Sylvia Bell and about 50-75 others conducted a short protest march on Walnut Street.<sup>28</sup>

The Bell case was only one example, albeit the most tragic, of an increasingly contentious relationship between African Americans living in the core and the Milwaukee police. A series of after-hours clashes in 1959 focused renewed public attention on the core and the need to develop more effective means to cope with the struggles and stresses of the Milwaukeeans living in that area. Mayor Frank Zeidler appointed a committee to study and make recommendations on the “social problems” of

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<sup>27</sup> MJ, 3/21/58, p. 1, part 2.

<sup>28</sup> Sherard Interview; White Interview. See also, White and LePage, Her Brothers’ Keeper, pp. 177-178.

the inner core. At the initial organizing meeting on September 3, Zeidler told community leaders that he had “long felt that the problems in the core of the city are growing and need faster and greater action than the community has given them.” He identified a variety of problems needing attention:

...physical deterioration of this core, excessive traffic, overcrowding of people, littered streets and alleys, lack of adequate play space and green spots, concentration of low-income families, presence of problem families, large numbers of aged families, presence of fragmented families, presence of bad forms of recreation, high rate of crime, insecurity of people on the streets, and group resistance to the police in their performance of their duties.

More than 100 public officials, community leaders, specialists and authorities worked together on the report. The Mayor’s Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City issued its Final Report to the Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, complete with fifty-nine recommendations, on April 15, 1960. Whatever its flaws, the Zeidler Report, as it came to be known, represented the largest official study of the city’s African American community in Milwaukee’s history and indicated a greater awareness of the area than had previously been acknowledged.<sup>29</sup>

The Zeidler Report relied on statistical data culled mainly from city agencies to make its analysis. It emphasized the physical and family bases of the core’s problems, implying that the root causes emanated from within the core alone and thus could be dealt with by measures confined to the core. The report failed to acknowledge external causes, like white supremacy and systematic discrimination. Instead, the Zeidler Report argued

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<sup>29</sup> “Statement of Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, at Meeting on “Social Problems of the Core of the City,” Thursday, 9/3/59,” in Mayor’s Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City, Final Report to the Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, 4/15/60, pp. 1-32.

that “Physical rebuilding of the area and acculturation of many of its citizens are the key problems.” In addition to bricks and mortar, the authors urged the city to inaugurate a variety of programs to help assist Milwaukee’s African Americans to better make the transition to urban life.<sup>30</sup>

On those issues black people considered most pressing, the Zeidler Report offered only vague and cautious recommendations. For instance, on education, the committee asserted that “there is adequate educational opportunity available to the residents of the core area. But there is a need to increase the motivation of individuals to avail themselves of the existing opportunity.” The Report remained silent on the pattern of segregation in Milwaukee’s public schools, on its policy of “intact busing,”<sup>31</sup> and on desegregation as a solution. On employment, the Report put forth only a vague statement about ending discrimination, but provided no details about how that might be achieved. Instead, the authors emphasized job-training, education and part-time summer employment for high school students as the primary remedies for the economic struggles of core residents. Finally, on housing, while the report did implicitly acknowledge racial discrimination in real estate and lending practices, it failed to call for an open housing ordinance. As an alternative, the authors proposed a “Covenant of Open Occupancy,” a

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<sup>30</sup> Mayor’s Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City, Final Report to the Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, 4/15/60, pp. 1-32.

<sup>31</sup> Due to the overcrowding in Milwaukee’s public schools, particularly in the inner core area, the school system embarked on a plan to expand and rehabilitate existing structures to accommodate more students during the late-1950s. “Intact busing” refers to the Milwaukee Public Schools policy of maintaining segregation at white receiving schools for African American students temporarily relocated while construction proceeded.

voluntary agreement by property owners to not practice racial discrimination in the renting or sale of housing or engage in panic selling.<sup>32</sup>

Almost as soon as Zeidler received the Report, though, his tenure in office ended. His successor, Henry Maier, inherited the problems of the inner core. A pro-business, pro-growth Democrat, Maier spent the previous decade in the state senate before taking over the reins at city hall. Later, while under fire for his handling of race relations in Milwaukee, Maier would claim that he had been a leader in civil rights during his days in the senate. Early in his mayoralty, however, he showed little interest in African Americans or the problems of the inner core.<sup>33</sup>

A savvy politician and rising star within the ranks of Democratic mayors, Maier may have ignored issues of race in Milwaukee because of politics. African Americans did not make up a significant proportion of the new mayor's base. In fact, while Maier easily defeated Congressman Henry Reuss in the 1960 election, those wards with the largest number of black voters – the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> – gave him his weakest support. Given the widespread racial prejudice among white Milwaukeeans, it stands to reason that the new mayor might not have been willing to aggressively address the needs of African Americans for fear of alienating key components of his electoral coalition.<sup>34</sup> As a

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<sup>32</sup> Mayor's Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City, Final Report to the Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, 4/15/60, pp. 1-32.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Maier would go on to preside as Mayor of Milwaukee for the longest term in city history, an astonishing 28 years. See, Henry Maier, Challenge to the Cities: An Approach to a Theory of Urban Leadership (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 44-45; Henry Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous: An Autobiography (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1993), pp. 38-40.

<sup>34</sup> Since 1948, the national Democratic Party faced a widening schism between southern white conservatives, which had been the bedrock of the party in Congress, and the growing power of the urban African American vote in the north. This tension ultimately fragmented the national party. Similarly, Democratic politicians in northern cities faced increasing tension between white, ethnic working-class



student of government, Maier shunned city-only efforts to address urban ills. As a result, he criticized the Zeidler Report for focusing on only one part of the city. Beyond that, he let the report languish on his desk.<sup>35</sup>

Five weeks after the study committee presented its report to Mayor Zeidler, the *Milwaukee Journal* began publishing a ten-part series, titled, “The Negro in Milwaukee,” which offered a slightly different take on the inner core.<sup>36</sup> The newspaper assigned twelve reporters, “including several specialists in a variety of fields,” to put a human face on African American experience in Milwaukee by spending time in the inner core, interviewing local people and writing about what they saw. The result differed from the Zeidler Report in several key ways.

By including a myriad of black voices, the *Journal* series emphasized issues most important to local African Americans: housing, education, and employment. The series began with a frank challenge to the immigration-acculturation model preferred by most whites:

This modest statistical alteration in the city’s racial composition [the rise in the black population from 1.5% to +5% between 1940 and 1960] has created problems and aroused emotions disproportionate to the extent of the change.

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voters, a traditional stronghold for the party, and the expanding African American vote. Mayor Henry Maier struggled with this division throughout his career. For an overview of these politics at the national level, see, Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>35</sup> MJ, 6/13/60, p. 1; MJ, 6/14/60, p. 1; See also, *Wisconsin Blue Book, 1960*, p. 21; Ralph Whitehead, Jr., “Milwaukee’s Mercurial Henry Maier,” in *City*, 6 (March-April, 1972), pp. 10-20; Frank Aukofer, *City With A Chance* Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1968), pp. 9-10; Sarah Ettenheim, *How Milwaukee Voted, 1848-1968*, UW Extension, Institute of Governmental Affairs, Milwaukee Office (1970), pp. 24 and 128.

<sup>36</sup> See ten-part series, “The Negro In Milwaukee,” MJ, 5/23/60, through 6/2/60.

...Because the increase has come from among Americans with darker pigmentation than the majority, it has produced problems that differ only in degree from those experienced in other northern cities.

Whereas the Zeidler Report seemed to pronounce from on high and at a safe distance from its subject, "The Negro in Milwaukee" reoriented the discussion of the inner core from the street level by resisting numerical abstractions for real stories from actual people.<sup>37</sup>

The *Journal's* willingness to listen allowed them to hear new things. A truck driver and his family told how they recently migrated from Arkansas where they worked as sharecroppers. Telula Mae Walker explained that despite scoring the highest result on a job skills test, she did not receive a job because she did not belong to the union which barred her from membership. A building inspector toured dilapidated housing in the inner core. Unlike the Zeidler Report, which sidestepped systematic discrimination in its analysis, the *Journal* series did not obscure the facts of racial discrimination or segregation. For example, the article on employment began with a blunt, matter-of-fact statement: "Job discrimination against Negroes is widespread in Milwaukee." No doubt, then, the series confronted many white Milwaukeeans with a new glimpse of African American experience in the core and challenged their basic assumptions about race. While the *Journal* did not offer specific recommendations, it did imply that the problems facing core residents, and the challenges confronting policy makers were much more fundamental than the Zeidler Report had suggested. In this context, the measures suggested by the mayor's commission seemed insufficient to the task at hand. The

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<sup>37</sup> At times, the series did read like a story of "strangers in a strange land," exploring and uncovering new things in a foreign place and among foreign people.

*Journal* series did not suggest an immediate breakdown in race relations in Milwaukee, but the authors prophetically warned that halfway measures and further dilly-dallying by civic and political leaders could have serious consequences for the city.

If the Bell case and its aftermath alerted Milwaukee to the crisis of the inner core, it also revealed the limits of direct action in Milwaukee during the late 1950s. Those advocating more forceful and aggressive action to achieve racial justice in the city remained a relatively small group. Organizing efforts following the inquest verdict brought to light not only the shallow pool of popular support for direct action, but also the serious divisions among black leaders over goals, tactics and strategy. The immigration-acculturation model, so prevalent among whites also continued to be popular among traditional African American leaders. If the Zeidler Report reflected a myopic complacency, and if the new mayor was no firebrand for reform, they mirrored much of Milwaukee. While most black Milwaukeeans readily acknowledged the presence of racial problems in the city, many continued to hold fast to the hopeful idea that steady progress through negotiation and accommodation was preferable to confrontation and demand. All of that, however, would change in the early 1960s.

## Chapter 2

### **“You Can’t Get Anything for Nothing”: Early Non-Violent Direct Action in Milwaukee, 1961-1963**

At a July 26, 1963 meeting of the fledgling Social Development Commission (SDC), a metropolitan area-wide organization set up by Mayor Henry Maier to address persistent urban problems in Milwaukee, Fred Lins, President of Lins-Hess Sausage, Inc., and a county appointee to the SDC, told a *Milwaukee Journal* reporter that some way should be found to keep the “ignorant poor” from migrating to Milwaukee. “You can’t just point the finger at the black man,” he said. “There are Mexicans and ‘poor whites’ coming in, too. I may be wrong in my thinking on this, but I’ve talked to a lot of people and there seems to be agreement. They [the new arrivals] are taking advantage of the citizens of Milwaukee; there must be ways of keeping them out. If you could stop people who come in and immediately go on relief, it would save money for the taxpayer. I’m a taxpayer and I don’t like high taxes.” Although Lins did point the finger at other groups, his primary concern was the danger he associated with impoverished black Milwaukeeans. He explained, “My business is in the core and my home is on the line. To the educated Negro, you can’t feel hostile. It is the uneducated that cause the trouble. We have got to educate them.” He continued, “The Negroes look so much alike that you can’t identify the ones that committed the crime.” Lins suggested that young African American boys be enrolled in a kind of “police corps, like the school crossing guards,” to help maintain order. “It might

work,” he said, “if you could get some of the intelligent ones. An awful mess of them have an IQ of nothing.”<sup>1</sup>

Lins’s comments set off an anti-racist firestorm in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) demanded the resignation of the sausage-maker or his removal by the appropriate public officials. When white civic leaders, including the Mayor and County Supervisor, failed to take action and instead defended Lins, civil rights advocates mobilized. Over the next few weeks they conducted a series of mass meetings, marches, pickets, a “phone-in” and even the city’s first sit-in. The actions resulted in dozens of arrests. In opposition to Lins and his defenders, the previously fragmented local African American leadership came together in an unprecedented show of public unity. In the end, while Lins retained his position on the SDC, the campaign to oust him underscored growing frustration among civil rights activists and demonstrated their increasing willingness to employ disruptive direct action tactics in the fight against racial inequality.

The Fred Lins controversy capped an important early phase of non-violent direct action in the black freedom struggle in Milwaukee between 1960 and 1963. Following the Daniel Bell murder and the faltering attempts to organize a community response around the issue of police brutality, a variety of individuals and organizations worked to maintain the protest spirit by targeting employment discrimination and housing inequality. While no unified *movement* for racial justice emerged, and differences over issues, tactics and styles remained beneath the surface, by 1963, the Milwaukee movement had in fact taken an important step in its development. The percolating protests of the early 1960s created new leadership in the black community and temporarily united the generations of civil rights activists. The protests of this

transitional period highlighted enduring issues of racial inequality and official inaction by city leaders as activists settled on an approach to social change that combined grievance with non-violent direct action. In addition, southern civil rights events dramatically altered the local context within which these campaigns evolved. Faced with a more assertive effort to achieve African American freedom in Milwaukee, as well as increased national pressure to act, some white city leaders began to pay attention to the inner core and to the struggles of black people even as they continued to avoid taking significant actions to ameliorate them.

This early phase of non-violent direct action in Milwaukee, often overshadowed by the more dramatic displays of protest and reaction in the city a few years later, laid the groundwork for a mass-based movement for racial justice. Early campaigns spearheaded by the Wisconsin NAACP, the Milwaukee chapter of the Negro American Labor Council, and MCORE served as the bricks and mortar in the local Movement foundation. While the Fred Lins controversy culminated this phase, it began with less explosive and less transitory issues.

As the contours of race relations in Milwaukee began to shift in the wake of the Daniel Bell case, developments at the state capitol in Madison further contributed to the rising tide of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee. During the late spring of 1961, the Wisconsin State Conference of NAACP Branches, the Wisconsin State Human Rights Commission, Governor Gaylord Nelson and Milwaukee Assemblyman Isaac Coggs, the state's lone African American legislator, began to craft a broad "human rights bill." The bill included two key civil rights provisions: a strong fair housing law with an effective enforcement mechanism, including fines

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<sup>1</sup> MJ, 7/26/63, p. 1.

and jail time for violators, and a plan to reorganize the state Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC).

The major catalyst of this bill was Lloyd Barbee, a young African American attorney living in Madison.<sup>2</sup> Both Barbee and Coggs understood that housing was one of the major civil rights issues confronting Wisconsin's African American residents, particularly in Milwaukee. Other members of the coalition had their own reasons for supporting the bill. For instance, Governor Gaylord Nelson, a liberal Democrat committed to civil rights, sought to wrest control of the state FEPC from the business-dominated State Industrial Commission and consolidate civil rights enforcement within one agency more closely aligned with his position.

On June 1, after several organizational meetings, Barbee wrote to Assemblyman Coggs that all the necessary ducks were in a row and that the legislator "should introduce the Commission of Equal Opportunity bill with its housing and denial of rights provisions at the earliest possible moment."<sup>3</sup> From there, Coggs proceeded to introduce the bill into the Assembly where it began to snake its way through the chaotic committee system of the Wisconsin state legislature. Over the next few days, substantial opposition to the bill emerged in the form of numerous amendments and parliamentary maneuvers designed to kill or cripple the legislation.

Faced with this mounting opposition, Barbee and the State NAACP announced a protest demonstration on the steps of the capitol for Friday, June 13.<sup>4</sup> The protest drew over 200 mostly African American supporters. The largest group of demonstrators came from Beloit with Reverend Oliver Gibson, pastor of the Beloit Wesley Methodist Church. Gibson had moved to

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<sup>2</sup> A more detailed biography of Lloyd Barbee appears in Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> MJ, 5/23/60, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Barbee to Branch Presidents, 6/8/61, Barbee Papers, SHSW, box 13, folder 17

Beloit the previous year from Little Rock, Arkansas, where he served a congregation for four years and had been an active leader in the anti-segregation fight. Rev. Gibson instructed demonstrators to march in a “quiet, dignified manner.” Protestors carried signs with slogans that read, “All Men Are Created Equal – So Give Them Equal Rights” and “In Alabama They Walked. In Mississippi They Sat. In Wisconsin We Stand for Human Rights,” an indication that these northern activists were keenly aware that their struggle was related to the civil rights campaigns building in the South.<sup>5</sup>

Several speakers, including Rev. Gibson, Assemblyman Coggs, and Rebecca Barton, Executive Director of the Governor’s Commission on Human Rights, spoke in favor of the legislation. The highlight of the day for those assembled, though, came when Governor Nelson mounted a rhetorical assault on the forces of opposition. He first attacked the state Industrial Commission which oversaw the state Fair Employment Practices Division, stating,

Although the Industrial Commission can hold hearings and issue orders enforceable in the courts, they seldom use these tools. Furthermore, you have only to look around you to see that the results they obtain are too meager for the size of the problem. Negroes do not have fair opportunities as sales girls, skilled workers, professionals, municipal employees. There are also large numbers of qualified Negroes who are denied job opportunities because of color.

Nelson voiced strong support for a bill that would outlaw discrimination in the sale of real estate and that gave regulatory powers in the field to the Human Rights Commission. He blamed failed progress on real estate interests whom, “have some false notions about the proposals... They feel it would hurt their business. The reverse is true, as can be proved by statistics and opinions

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<sup>5</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 6/13/61, p. 1.



from seven other states with similar legislation.” He also blamed the failure to gain legislative approval on entrenched bureaucratic and business opposition. “The time is late, but the need is great,” he concluded. “We can take a great step toward providing freedom and justice for all, toward fulfilling the American enterprise.”<sup>6</sup>

Most of the attention to the civil rights bill focused on the fair housing provision which faced its greatest organized opposition from the Wisconsin Real Estate Brokers Board (WREBB), an official state agency created to license and supervise real estate brokers. Through vigorous lobbying, the WREBB had killed several earlier attempts to ban housing discrimination.<sup>7</sup> They used their power once again to try to squash this latest effort. In essence, the Brokers argued that their main obligation was to their clients and that they were not in a position, professionally or ethically, to make value judgements about the stipulations homeowners might place on the sale of their property. As far as they were concerned, their role was to carry out those wishes to the best of their ability, no questions asked. Moreover, the WREBB contended that the proposed fair housing legislation unfairly singled out brokers for prosecution.<sup>8</sup> In reply to Assemblyman Cogg’s formal request for a fiscal note from the WREBB estimating enforcement costs for the measure, the Board replied,

In at least the last six years, there has never been a formal or informal complaint registered with this Board concerning any question of race, color, creed, racial origin or ancestry with relation to a real estate transaction, and further, since there has not even been an inquiry on this question, it is necessary to estimate that this bill would not have any financial effect on the budget of this agency.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Jacobson interview with Patrick Jones, 11/1/99. *Madison Capital Times*, 7/31/61, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *MJ*, 7/31/61, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 7/31/61, p. 5.

Bill supporters saw this as a dodge. In response, Barbee wrote:

Until now we were not aware that you were equipped to handle complaints regarding racial or religious discrimination. Housing discrimination complaints are made to NAACP branches in Beloit, Kenosha, Madison, Milwaukee, and Racine in alarming numbers. If your agency is willing to process any or all of these complaints, as your fiscal note implies, we will be happy to forward them to you.

We are curious as to what disciplinary action your agency can take against a realtor who practices racial or religious discrimination. Are you prepared to revoke the license of such a person?<sup>10</sup>

Barbee never received a reply from the WREBB, which enjoyed broad support among individual legislators and many citizens. The bill looked certain for defeat.

Despite the successful protest demonstration on the thirteenth, which garnered media attention throughout the state, opposition to the bill remained strong. Some legislators objected to a provision that required alleged violators to appear before a three-member panel selected from the Human Rights Commission and voted 46-43 to kill the original draft. Immediately, Coggs submitted a new bill to outlaw housing discrimination with enforcement to be handled through the existing court system. In the State Senate, Republican Senator Leo O'Brien of Green Bay kept the bill bottled-up in committee.<sup>11</sup>

As the civil rights bill languished in the legislature, the summer legislative recess approached. The capitol buzzed with last-minute activity, including a hotly contested measure to alter the state sales tax. If the housing bill was to move forward, the legislature's hand would have to be forced. The coalition which had formed in favor of fair housing considered three

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<sup>10</sup> Lloyd Barbee to Wisconsin real Estate Brokers Board, 8/15/61, Barbee papers, SHSW, box 13, folder 17.

<sup>11</sup> MJ, 7/31/61, p. 4.

options: a lobbying day at the capitol to press their demands, a sit-in at the capitol rotunda to dramatize the issue, or the establishment of a “tent city” on the capitol lawn.<sup>12</sup> At a July 8 rally and meeting in Beloit, the coalition announced their decision to begin a sit-in at the capitol in Madison until legislators took action on the civil rights bill. The Southern freedom movement served as a model and inspiration. “It is time for us to make the sacrifices as people like Rev. Martin Luther King and people all over the South are doing,” Coggs wrote. “They are sacrificing their lives and time in jail for the cause of freedom.”<sup>13</sup> Barbee made a similar link, calling their effort, “the first demonstration of this type to be held in the North.”<sup>14</sup> The previous year, in Greensboro, North Carolina, four young African American men had reignited the Southern African American freedom movement by challenging local segregation at lunch counters with a series of dramatic sit-ins. Within weeks, the sit-in movement swept the South, generating considerable national and international media coverage. The Southern sit-ins burst through the impasse created in the wake of the Brown decision in 1954 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 by the rise of “massive resistance” among southern white segregationists in virtually every state. The daring of the Southern activists captivated Northern civil rights advocates, unleashing a burst of direct action. Madison was but one example.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lloyd Barbee to Conference Officers and Branch Presidents, 6/15/61, Barbee Papers, SHSW, box 13, folder 17.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum from Assemblyman Isaac Coggs regarding Bill 665-A, 7/3/61, Barbee Papers, SHSW, box 13, folder 17.

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd Barbee to Branch Presidents and State Conference Offices, 7/31/61, Barbee Papers, SHSW, box 13, folder 17; The veracity of this claim is hard to determine at this point in our historical understanding of the northern civil rights movement. More research is needed to determine whether the Madison action was indeed the first sustained northern sit-in. Clearly, the Madison sit-in, if not the first, was one of the first major northern sit-ins in the wake of similar actions the previous year throughout the South.

<sup>15</sup> On the sit-in movement, see, William Chafe, Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); On “Massive Resistance,” see, Numan Bartley, The Rise of Massive Resistance (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State

Armed with the support of Governor Nelson, the Commission on Human Rights, and Assemblyman Coggs, 16 self-proclaimed “Liberty Lobbyists,” twelve white and four black, silently entered the capitol at 10:00am on July 31, 1961, and took seats on folding chairs positioned at each of the sixteen columns inside the rotunda. Each demonstrator wore a small, homemade badge that read, “We’re here for Wisconsin human rights legislation.”<sup>16</sup>

The Madison sit-in reflected the “dignified,” “responsible” tenor of civil rights activism in the pre-Birmingham era. Leaders of the demonstration gave strict instructions to sit-in participants. Overall, the protest was to be a “peaceful, dignified demonstration emphasizing human worth and solidarity of purpose of those who engage in demonstrations, and the righteousness of their cause.” An instruction sheet set down a variety of solemn guidelines for sit-in participants: “Participants should refrain from loud talking and moving around. Speak quietly, if at all. Sit or stand straight at all times. Use chairs or camp stools, if available. Otherwise sit on the floor or stand.” The communiqué, which credited Southern activists with pioneering this type of demonstration, underscored the nonviolent philosophy. “Those who participate must agree not to strike back if attacked,” it explained. “It is hoped that this method, with emphasis on order and non-violence will work in Wisconsin, and stir the consciences of Wisconsin citizens and their elected representatives.” Unlike later demonstrations, the Madison sit-in did not seek confrontation, disruption or arrest, but instead bore silent witness to racial injustice in Wisconsin.<sup>17</sup>

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University, 1969); Neil McMillen, The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1944-1964 (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

<sup>16</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 7/31/61, p. 1; MJ, 7/31/61, p. 1; MJ, August 1, 1961, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 7/31/61, p. 1 and 4.

Behind the scenes of this tightly organized effort, other challenges confronted the organizers. Tom Jacobson, a young attorney charged with rounding up participants, recalled that many liberal white Madisonians who supported the action initially declined to participate for fear of arrest. Jacobson and Barbee, working as a team, pressed their friends into action and even took a more unorthodox approach to filling seats. As Jacobson recalled, “We went out and rounded up some winos, bought them some booze, sat them in the folding chairs and said, ‘Be there. Don’t worry about it. We’ll take care of the whole situation.’ So, we really scuffled to get the first sixteen.” Despite these early troubles, the tide quickly turned. Jacobson recalled, “When [they] didn’t arrest us, everybody wanted to be a part of it... I mean everybody.”<sup>18</sup> By the second day of the sit-in, more than 60 members of the Madison NAACP and about a dozen UW students, mostly from the left-leaning Student’s Council on Civil Rights, volunteered to keep up the campaign. In addition, a growing number of delegates from various Wisconsin NAACP chapters pledged their support. Newspapers across the state kept tabs on the protest at the capitol.<sup>19</sup>

Momentum quickly built for the demonstrations as a series of high profile community members joined the protest. On August 1, Governor Nelson’s sister, Janet Nelson Lee, joined the Liberty Lobbyists, knitting needles in hand. Several prominent local ministers, a former UW-Milwaukee student body president, Assemblyman Coggs’s four-year-old daughter and a few UW-Madison professors lent their bodies to the cause.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most symbolic new recruit to the sit-in, though, was 86-year-old Anna Miller, a 50 year resident of Madison, and the

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<sup>18</sup> Jacobson Interview.

<sup>19</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/1/61, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/2/61, p. 1; *MJ*, 8/2/61, p.

daughter of two former slaves. Newspapers quoted Miller as saying, “You have to do things like this. You can’t get anything for nothing... We may not do any good at all with this particular bill, but you’ve just got to let people know about these things.”<sup>21</sup> Patrick Lucey, Madison State Democratic Chairman and future Wisconsin governor, sent his “heartfelt congratulations” to the demonstrators in a letter which read, “I once thought that only legislators with southern accents opposed civil rights legislation. It now appears that Wisconsin’s most renowned Dixiecrat is Senator O’Brien from as far North as Green Bay.” He urged state Republicans, who overwhelmingly opposed civil rights legislation, to celebrate the centennial of the inauguration of their party’s first president, Abraham Lincoln, by supporting the bill.<sup>22</sup>

By the fourth day, the sit-ins began to pay off. As Liberty Lobbyists passed the 100-hour mark of their vigil, they received news that the civil rights bill would be reported out of the Assembly Public Welfare Committee the following week.<sup>23</sup> Buoyed by this victory, the sit-in continued to swell. Over the weekend, 243 people, including members of the Milwaukee and Beloit NAACP branches, joined the vigil.<sup>24</sup> The editors of the local newspaper, *The Capital Times*, called the sit-in “a heartening display of courage and concern for needed civil rights laws in this legislative session.”<sup>25</sup> A few days later, the demonstration gained the endorsement of Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the national NAACP. In a telegram to Barbee, Wilkins commended the “foresight, courage and perseverance” of sit-in participants, assuring them the

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<sup>21</sup> MJ, 8/3/61, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> MJ, 8/2/61, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/4/61, p. 1 and 4.

<sup>24</sup> MJ, 8/7/61, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/9/61, part 2, p. 1.

NAACP stood “firmly” behind their efforts.<sup>26</sup> By August 9, the tenth day of the sit-in, more than 500 people had participated in the vigil.

In the state Senate, a group of Democrats forced the civil rights bill out of a committee for a divisive floor debate. While the ultimate fate of the legislation was a foregone conclusion, the maneuver compelled senators to go on record about the issue. Republicans led the opposition to the bill. Senator O’Brien criticized the sit-in for not following the legislative process and told his colleagues that the Catholic Provincial Conference, which did not support fair housing, “guided” his decision in the matter. A.A. Law of Kiel did not believe Wisconsin had a housing problem and feared that the bill would only stir up racial animosity. Similarly, senator Earl Morton of Kenosha said he resented being told who he could sell his property to<sup>27</sup> and that if the bill passed other legislation would be required to “put whites back on an equal basis.” Senator Jerris Leonard of Milwaukee launched the most pointed attack, calling the measure “disgusting,” a “terrible piece of legislation” with “no right on the floor.” He declared the sit-in “illegal” and said sit-in supporters “make me sick.”<sup>28</sup>

A contingent of liberal Democrats attempted to counter this opposition. Senator Horace Wilkie of Madison called the bill “the most important progressive legislation this session.” He attacked O’Brien, claiming that the Republican leader had forced the sit-in by refusing to permit the legislation out of committee. Eau Claire senator Davis Donnelly bitterly complained that Leonard’s remarks “could very well have been made in the Mississippi legislature.” Richard

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<sup>26</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/11/61, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> In fact, the law did not apply to individuals, only real estate brokers.

<sup>28</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/9/61, p. 1; *MJ*, 8/9/61, p. 14.

Zaborski, of Milwaukee, warned, “The world will look down on Wisconsin as one of the backward states and not what it was under the old days of LaFollette.”<sup>29</sup>

In the Assembly, a floor fight broke out among six Milwaukee Democrats over the housing provisions. Robert Huber of West Allis led the fight against the bill. “I can see the day,” he said, “that legislation of this kind will be passed, but because of the intemperance on both sides this has become a dangerous atmosphere.” Huber urged real estate brokers to draft a compromise measure to their liking. Isaac Coggs responded that Democrats who opposed the bill, particularly from Milwaukee, were simply looking for excuses to vote against it. Sherman Sobocinski, in turn, criticized Coggs for telling a newspaper reporter that he had attitudes like a member of the White Citizens Council. He claimed Coggs was not sincere in his efforts and encouraged educational programs to eliminate discrimination instead of fair housing legislation. Content to let their colleagues on the other side of the aisle fight it out among themselves, no Republicans spoke during debate.<sup>30</sup>

On August 11, the Assembly and Senate defeated the civil rights bills. The next day, wearing black armbands, the 16 “Liberty Lobbyists” marched out of the capitol rotunda. One demonstrator, looking up at one of the four allegorical mosaic panels, quietly remarked, “It looks as if the only way we’ll ever get “Justice” in Wisconsin is to scrape it off the wall.” Despite the legislative loss, though, activists remained heartened by their efforts. In all, over 700 people had participated in the 13-day protest. “There was a time when legislators wouldn’t even admit there was a housing discrimination problem in Wisconsin,” a hopeful Lloyd Barbee told reporters. “At least they recognize the problem now. I also believe the public has a better understanding of the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/11/61, p. 1.



situation because of the sit-in.” Rev. Aubrey Young, Chairman of the Governor’s Commission on Human Rights, also sounded an optimistic note, saying the demonstration “indicated a growing public recognition of the need for laws to guarantee basic constitutional rights.”<sup>31</sup>

The Madison sit-ins, though they occurred 80 miles west, contributed to the rising civil rights sentiment - and the escalating white backlash - in Milwaukee. With the majority of the state’s black population living in Milwaukee, some of the strongest support for the measure emanated from the inner core; and, conversely, some of its most staunch opposition came from the city’s South Side. More than 30 members of the MNAACP, led by Rev. Lathan, traveled to Madison to take part in the housing protest. After all, it was “their” fight being waged by “their” assemblyman. As a result, many interested eyes gazed West to the capitol. Some supporters felt that events in Madison reflected the unwillingness of whites in power to address pervasive racial injustice. Media coverage of the 13-day sit-in brought the issue home, not only to Milwaukee’s black population, but also to whites. This served to reinforce resistance to civil rights as much as to bring sympathetic new awareness and attention to the cause. “I think without a doubt that the field of housing has become one of the greatest challenges to civil rights today,” Alderman Vel Phillips, who also had participated in the sit-in, observed. “Those who say we don’t need such laws are not looking at the problem full face.” In 1962, Phillips would begin her own crusade for an open housing ordinance within the Milwaukee Common Council. Finally, the bitter fight among Milwaukee Democrats in the Assembly and Senate highlighted the deep divisions within

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<sup>31</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/12/61, p. 1.

the city limits over housing and race, and hinted at the open conflict that would engulf the city during open housing marches six years later.<sup>32</sup>

Though the height of the furor was still years ahead, the Madison sit-ins introduced fair housing as a central issue to the civil rights struggle in Wisconsin. It also produced two significant leaders, Lloyd Barbee and Tom Jacobson, who would continue to play major roles in Milwaukee's civil rights struggle over the next several years. In addition, the vigil highlighted the interconnection between state politics and local struggles for racial justice and revealed the expanding willingness among some community members to force civil rights action through organized pressure tactics and "respectable" protest.

Following the defeat of the civil rights bill, Lloyd Barbee and Tom Jacobson both decided to move to Milwaukee. Enlivened by their protest vigil at the capitol and inspired by the accelerating national movement for racial justice, the two young lawyers felt that Milwaukee afforded them the best opportunity to continue their crusade. As a result, in the Fall of 1961, Barbee and Jacobson hung out their shingle on the city's north side.<sup>33</sup>

The Milwaukee that greeted Barbee and Jacobson in 1961 had not stood still since the Bell incident. In the wake of the fractious organizing campaign that followed the coroner's inquest, a small group of African American industrial workers coalesced around the leadership of Calvin Sherard. From 1960 through 1963, Sherard led a succession of organizations that challenged employment discrimination in Milwaukee. These efforts led to the city's first sustained direct action campaign for civil rights. The successes and failures of these two

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<sup>32</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 8/8/61, p. 10; *MJ*, 8/8/61, p. 5; *Madison Capital Times*, 8/10/61, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Lloyd Barbee interview with Patrick Jones, 11/21/98 and 1/30/99; Interview with Jacobson.*

organizations, the Crusaders Civic and Social League and the Milwaukee chapter of the Negro American Labor Council, reveal important insights about civil rights activism in Milwaukee during the early 1960s.

Calvin Sherard was born in Atlanta, Georgia, the son of a Baptist minister. At the age of twelve, Sherard read a book about the African American labor and civil rights leader, A. Philip Randolph. "It was his fight for jobs and economics," he said. "I felt that that was the foundation [for racial equality], jobs and economics." Randolph continued to be an influence on Sherard for the rest of his life. After high school graduation Sherard moved to Cleveland to live with his brother. There, he got "a good job" with American Motors and became active in the labor movement. After a stint in the military during the mid-1950s, Sherard settled in Milwaukee in 1955 where he again worked for AMC. Sherard began to notice that most of the businesses in the inner core were owned by white people and that they hired only a handful of African American workers. He began to talk to his co-workers about this problem and found out several agreed with his assessment. This group believed black people should hold more economic power in their communities and began to organize.

Sherard and his friends formed the Crusaders Civic and Social League out of their frustration with the cautious response of established African American community leaders to the Bell shooting. "Sherard had some guys and they wanted to go down in flames [after the Bell incident]," Jacobson recalled. "They were totally upset by the way blacks that were deserting and selling out to whites were undercutting them." According to Jacobson, prominent black ministers "were saying the 'Negro talk' that we should be cleaning ourselves up instead of going

out and demonstrating... Sherard was very embittered about that.”<sup>34</sup> According to Sherard, “There was no [African American] leadership. When an issue came up where there should’ve been a response from the Afro-American community, there was no response.”<sup>35</sup> So he and his allies formed the Crusaders. While the group accepted whites as members, only African Americans could hold positions of power.

As industrial workers, the Crusaders focused primarily on economic issues, advocating their own variety of economic nationalism. Most businesses operating on the city’s northwest side at the time, particularly in the main shopping district on Upper Third Street, were white-owned and rarely employed black workers. The Crusaders believed that expanded black business ownership and increased African American employment were the keys to black success in Milwaukee. In particular, they argued that businesses located in the inner core ought to hire from within the local community. If, for instance, a store did 60% of its business with African Americans, then the Crusaders felt that 60% of the workforce at that business should be African American. In this way, businesses would be putting resources back into the community from which they drew the bulk of their profits.

The Crusaders first targeted a popular ice cream parlor on North Avenue. About a dozen members of the group picketed the store. “We picketed the ice cream parlor,” Sherard recalled, “because it was a small place and we knew we had to have a victory in our first campaign.” A group of local churchgoers showed up to support the picketers and hold signs. The ice cream parlor owner quickly relented and agreed to hire more African Americans.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Jacobson interview.

<sup>35</sup> Sherard interview.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

The Crusaders targeted local issues, but often connected them to larger national struggles. In 1960, the Crusaders conducted a sympathy picket of Milwaukee Woolworth stores to show support for the southern student sit-in movement that was spreading across the South. “Even though the Milwaukee stores were integrated,” Sherard said, “it was still part of the chain that discriminated against Afro-Americans in the South.” That same year, Sherard began negotiations with the core’s largest national grocery chain, A&P, to increase African American employment at three northside stores.<sup>37</sup>

The Crusaders’ brightest day in the public spotlight came in the fall of 1960 following another clash between African American youth and police. On October 29, as approximately 1,100 young African Americans filed out of a rock n roll concert, late-night clashes between Milwaukee cops and black youth degenerated into what the *Milwaukee Journal* called “a wild 40 minute fracas.” Police claimed the altercation began when 22-year old Joseph Batcher cursed police, struck an officer, then asked others in the crowd “for help.” The youths involved told a different story. According to Alvin Moorer, one of the young people arrested by police that night, “Police just cut loose on us and started beating on us.” Robert Brill, the manager of the theater where the concert took place, said, “What started it all, in my opinion, were all those Milwaukee policemen lined up in front of the theater.” In the end, a hail of rocks and bottles injured five officers and police arrested seventeen blacks.

At a mass meeting the next night, three of the arrested African American youths explained, “We were waiting to be paid and afterwards we left the theatre behind the crowd of

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<sup>37</sup> Flier, titled “Mass Rally Defends Negro Youth Against Police Brutality,” in John Gilman Papers, Box 1, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; For verification of sympathy pickets in Milwaukee against Woolworth’s, see MJ, 5/29/60, p. 8. The article mentions similar pickets in Racine and Madison. See also, Sherard interview.

patrons. As we got outside among the crowd, a policeman shoved me. I told him not to. He took out his blackjack and clubbed me several times over the head. He then threw me into the police wagon.” One of the young men claimed that the policeman who beat him said, “I’ll show you how to handle these colored people.” Another explained that when he asked what charge he was being arrested for, the police officer replied, “I don’t know yet, but we’ll have one by tomorrow.” The meeting resulted in a public airing of the boys’ views, but little else. In the end, three African American and one white youth received sentences of up to two years in jail. No action was taken against any of the officers involved.<sup>38</sup>

The Crusaders called another public meeting at Rev. R.L. Lathan’s New Hope Baptist Church on December 5, to protest “police brutality” against local African Americans and to criticize African American leadership. As picketers stood outside the church holding signs reading, “Commie Plot to Discredit Police Dept.,” “Pro-Communist Meeting,” “The Reds Want to Create Race Hatred,” and “Calvin Sherard Go Back to New York City,”<sup>39</sup> almost 200 people sat inside listening to three of the arrested youths relate their version of events. After the boys spoke, Ali Anwar, the Crusaders’ Field Secretary, told the gathering that the young people had been beaten by Milwaukee police and that local leadership had failed to act in their defense. The fissures that had emerged during the Bell organizing effort resurfaced in the form of an angry condemnation by a group in the crowd. Anwar challenged the group, asking, “Are they [African American leadership] giving you leadership? No. In a crisis you can’t find them anywhere.” Sherard attacked black civic groups as “nothing but social clubs.” He said African American

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<sup>38</sup> MJ, 10/29/60, p. 1; Flier, titled “Mass Rally Defends Negro Youth Against Police Brutality,” in John Gilman Papers, Box 1, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, Calvin Sherard was not from New York and had never lived there.

leaders used their “intellect to keep the lower Negro classes in hand.” His call for a new organization in Milwaukee to hear African American complaints of injustice met with widespread applause. The local NAACP, American Civil Liberties Union, Human Rights Commission rejected the Crusaders’ charges, labeling the group “irresponsible” and “precipitous.”<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, earlier that year, on May 27, 1960, more than 1,000 delegates from 26 cities met in Detroit, Michigan, and rallied behind African American labor leader and civil rights activist, A. Phillip Randolph, to found the Negro American Labor Council (NALC). The new organization intended to pressure the labor movement to take a more active approach to civil rights. Like the original March On Washington in 1941, the NALC restricted membership to African Americans, sought to bar communist infiltration, and vowed to use “pressure tactics” to combat racial inequality. While at the national level the NALC focused mainly on pressing the AFL-CIO leadership to adopt a “racial code of conduct” for its unions, like many civil rights groups, local chapters largely defined their own agenda within the broad parameters of the parent organization.<sup>41</sup>

A Milwaukee delegation attended the founding convention of the NALC in Detroit. By the end of 1961, the Crusaders Civic and Social League had morphed into the Milwaukee Negro American Labor Council (MNALC), with Sherard continuing to lead in the new organization. “We thought that we would identify with that group to get national recognition,” Sherard

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<sup>40</sup> MJ, 12/6/60, part 2, page 2; MS, 12/6/60, part 2, page 1; MS, 12/7/60, part 2, page 9.

<sup>41</sup> MJ, 5/27/60, p. 14; MJ, 5/29/60, p. 5; MJ, 5/30/60; For an overview of the NALC founding as well as its activities at the national level, see, Paula Pfeffer, A Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 214-239; Jervis Anderson, A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1972), pp. 305-306 and 309-310. Little work has been done on the NALC at the local level.

explained. "So, we changed the Crusaders into the Negro American Labor Council."<sup>42</sup>

The new group's emphasis on labor and employment issues mirrored Sherard's and his followers' philosophy, while Randolph's organization also provided Milwaukee activists with a national structure. A Milwaukee chapter of the NALC might even evolve into the new kind of civil rights organization Sherard and Anwar had suggested at the December mass meeting. Hooking the Crusaders' wagon to the NALC had obvious advantages for its members.

In July, the newly formed Milwaukee NALC (MNALC)<sup>43</sup> called a meeting to discuss the hiring practices of businesses enjoying substantial African American patronage. Sixty black high school students also attended the meeting and were told, "the area's youth has been without leadership, and neglected too long." Students required not merely admonitions to educate themselves, but they needed "employment within the business establishments that are located in the [African American] community." The young people agreed to distribute leaflets and be available to picket. At the same time, MNALC leaders designated three local A&P stores as their first project. Almost immediately, Sherard set up a meeting with the store's personnel manager to discuss the group's concerns, but words did not yield results.

On Friday, August 3, twelve African American high school students began a two-week picket of three northside A&P stores. Later, police arrested Sherard and other MNALC picket leaders for "disorderly conduct" during the protest. They were the first civil rights-related arrests in Milwaukee. On August 24, the MNALC and A&P announced an agreement to increase African American hiring at the three stores. According to Sherard, A&P management agreed to

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<sup>42</sup> Sherard interview.

<sup>43</sup> There was also an NALC chapter in Chicago at this time. In 1963, they prodded Motorola to open its ranks to African Americans. See, James Ralph, Northern Protest, p. 18.



hire more black clerks to coincide with the percentage of black patronage. He also announced agreements to have African Americans enter the management training program and to hire qualified journeymen in the meat department. "We will augment our Negro hiring wherever our contractual obligations with the union permit," A&P's personnel manager said. "We have tried to work with the Council and will continue to work with them."<sup>44</sup>

Buoyed by what seemed an initial success, the MNALC began to press its employment fight with other local businesses. At the end of August, they announced an agreement with another core grocery chain, Kroger-Kramble, to hire more black workers.<sup>45</sup> In early September, Calvin Sherard wrote to George Pazik, Executive Director of the Upper Third Street Businessmen's Association, on behalf of the MNALC. "We are not satisfied with the employment of Negroes in any of the business establishments on Upper Third Street," Sherard wrote. "We will give business establishments on Upper Third Street, that only employ a few Negroes, the opportunity to show some real interest in the community that supports them by increasing the number of Negroes in their outlets that do business on Upper Third Street in the very near future, or risk losing the support of the community." Pazik did not immediately respond to the MNALC letter, but Sherard did meet with the business association the following week.<sup>46</sup> In addition to pressuring white-owned businesses to increase African American hiring, the MNALC sponsored a forum with black businessmen on September 16 "to discuss their mutual problems." Those present discussed ways to stimulate support for black-owned business. Sherard emphasized the need for African Americans to enter business on a much larger scale to

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<sup>44</sup> MJ, 8/4/62, p. 9; Star, 8/25/62, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Star, 9/1/62, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Star, 9/8/62, p. 1.

stem the outflow of money from the community in the form of salaries and wages to white workers who neither lived in the core nor shopped in its stores.<sup>47</sup>

Meetings and rhetoric did not yield concrete results, though. The NALC campaign had shined a light on employment discrimination in Milwaukee, but the actual employment numbers in targeted stores had not changed fast enough. On October 6, pickets reappeared at the three northside A&P super markets. Sherard told the press,

We had an agreement with A&P, but they failed to live up to their promise to start hiring Negroes. We started negotiating with A&P three years ago. They have hired a few Negroes but not the percentage we would like to see. One Negro on the payroll does not solve discrimination. As long as this situation exists, we intend to protest, to picket.

MNALC pickets appeared at the stores each Saturday to pressure A&P to increase its minority hiring faster. MNALC member, Cleo Adams, remembered walking around Third Street wearing a sandwich board stating, "We Don't Shop at A&P!" The pickets resulted in perhaps the earliest civil rights arrests in Milwaukee's history, and, consequently, they also provided Jacobson and Barbee with their first legal case since moving to Milwaukee.<sup>48</sup>

White labor unions resisted the MNALC at every turn. Representatives of Local 444 of the Retail Clerks International Association complained to the Mayor's Commission on Community Relations (MCCR) that the MNALC's demands threatened their members' seniority. E.M. Stadelmann, Secretary Treasurer of the union, defended A&P's slow hiring progress to the commission. "The company you are picketing is in no position to hire anybody now,"

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<sup>47</sup> Star, 9/22/62, p. 1; Sherard interview.

<sup>48</sup> Star, 10/6/62, p. 1; Star, 11/3/62, p. 1; MJ, 10/30/62, part 2, p. 1; Cleo Adams interview with Patrick Jones, 3/4/00; Jacobson interview.

Stadelmann argued. "They have a contract with us that protects the seniority of their present employees. We don't care if the workers are white or black. We are concerned with whether they have seniority. If they have seniority, they work. You can picket until hell freezes over." In effect, the union sought to protect the economic privileges that white workers had built up over a number of years in a labor pool that had historically barred black workers. The catch-22 for black workers, then, was obvious. Sherard rebuffed the union officials' argument: "I told them we are not here to do a wrong, but to correct a wrong. If you had employed Afro-Americans there would be some Afro-Americans with seniority... We are here to correct that." Comeff Taylor, the African American head of the MCCR, told Sherard that while they agreed with the goal of increased hiring of black workers in core businesses, the MCCR opposed the group's direct action tactics. Instead, they urged the MNALC to work with established agencies to increase African American employment. "If the Negro is to make progress, he must assume primary responsibility himself," Sherard replied. "No agency is going to do it for him."<sup>49</sup>

Probably the greatest obstacle to the MNALC's success came not from white unions or moderate public commissions but from local African Americans who failed to honor picket lines. "Some of them didn't have transportation [to another store]," Sherard explained, "some of them didn't agree with us, and some of them just didn't want to drive." One local African American man told him, "I'd like to come out and participate, but if I get out there I'd lose my job." Sherard replied, "Well, we would like to have your support and to support the people who *will* get out there. Just don't sit on the sidelines and don't do anything. You can participate and be a supporter."<sup>50</sup> But by late November, an exasperated Sherard publicly complained that local

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<sup>49</sup> Star, 11/3/62, p. 1; MJ, 10/30/62, part 2, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Sherard interview.

African Americans were “committing financial suicide on their own community. It’s disgusting to see black faces going through picket lines set up to get them jobs. Just stay out of the A&P for two weeks and when you walk in next time, that meat you buy will taste better.”<sup>51</sup> Without the support of local African Americans, the MNALC strategy was doomed to fail.

There were other signs that the MNALC was out ahead of most traditional black leaders in Milwaukee. In December of 1962, the *Sentinel* published a six-part series, titled, “The Negro Speaks,” focusing on “Negroes who command respect from others of their race.”<sup>52</sup> The profiles included only older, traditional African American leaders, all of whom lived outside of the core, but “have not separated themselves from the problems of their people living there.” Each of the interviewees shared a belief that significant improvement in race relations could come only through a cooperative effort by blacks and whites. Overall, the series painted a rosy picture. Respondents acknowledged that problems existed, particularly in the area of housing and employment, but none mentioned police-community relations, the intact bussing policy of the Milwaukee Public School Board, the recent 19-1 defeat of a fair housing ordinance in the Common Council, or overt racism and discrimination in hiring and unions. Most believed the situation was improving steadily. The outgoing president of the MNAACP, attorney Clarence Parrish, told *Sentinel* reporters, “I don’t think there is a major racial problem in Milwaukee, but we have an economic problem.”<sup>53</sup> Lucinda Gordon, Community Relations Director for the Milwaukee Urban League (MUL), called the inner core an area where the “most exciting” things can happen. She held out hope that it might become “a laboratory of intergroup relationships”

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<sup>51</sup> Star, 11/5/62, part 2, p. 1 and 4.

<sup>52</sup> MS, 12/10/62, part 2, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> MS, 12/15/62, part 2, p. 1.

that would show the way for the whole city.<sup>54</sup> Corneff Taylor, who had opposed the MNALC pickets, sounded a cautionary note. He did not believe there had been a race problem in the city when he moved to Milwaukee in 1952, but after ten years as Executive Secretary of the MCCR, he was convinced there was a need to “disturb the status quo,” although no need to “cause a stir on the surface.” Worried that a developing militancy among newer African Americans in the city might prove explosive, Taylor felt “that the municipal government must assume responsibility to head off any problems. You can’t put your head under the sheet and say it isn’t here.”<sup>55</sup>

Sherard and other MNALC members viewed this resistance as the result of class differences within the black community. “Afro-Americans at that time who considered themselves middle-class sometimes didn’t identify [with working-class and poor black people],” Sherard explained. “They were fearful of the opposition they might get from their caucasian counterparts so they didn’t identify with the grassroots struggle.”<sup>56</sup>

Part of the lack of support for the MNALC also stemmed from a broader debate taking place within the local African American community over the philosophy and tactics of the Nation of Islam (NOI), the Black Muslim sect led by Elijah Muhammed and Malcolm X. During the summer of 1963, as the MNALC campaign crescendoed, the NOI began a state-wide membership drive in Wisconsin, focusing primarily on the large black population in Milwaukee. Dozens of NOI members moved to the city from Chicago, held educational rallies, exhorted from street corners, sold copies of “Muhammed Speaks,” at busy intersections, and reportedly

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<sup>54</sup> MS, 12/14/62, part 2, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> MS, 12/10/62, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Sherard interview.

converted “hundreds” of new adherents.<sup>57</sup> The drive ignited a vigorous debate within the local community over the teaching and philosophy of the group. The *Star* noted that most local African Americans “readily agree [with the Nation of Islam] that the caucasian has taken them for all they’re worth, hung their fathers and raped their mothers.”<sup>58</sup> Others appreciated the group’s attempt to build-up African American economic power, their accent on race pride and their more militant style. One local paint sprayer stated, “Muslims are doing more, materially, for the Negro than any other Negro supported organization.” But others criticized the NOI as anti-Christian and violent, and for advocating a philosophy of racial superiority and separatism. An inner-core housewife claimed, “The Muslims are causing nothing but trouble. They preach race hatred. I am certain nothing ever born of hatred can flourish.” While general opposition remained strong, most African Americans seemed to have held a more ambivalent view of the Black Muslims, as NOI adherents were often called. “Muslimism is a good idea,” one local teacher argued. “Don’t misunderstand. I am not a Muslim, and I am certain I never will be. However, at least they are making whites aware that the Negro has the potential for insurrection.” She concluded on a more critical note, stating, “The Muslims will never reach their true objectives. There are too many objectionable ideas in their laws.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the *Star* concluded,

While most of us delight in the strides we as a race are making, we wish to continue as citizens of the United States regardless of our color, and not set ourselves up as something separate or better... Go out and fight for your rights

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<sup>57</sup> *Star*, 8/3/63, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Star*, 5/18/63, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

and freedoms as individuals and as a race of people, but in the end, remain in the true fold of free men. Remain and American – a Negro American.<sup>60</sup>

This debate intersected with the work of the MNALC. Ali Anwar, one of Sherard's main lieutenant's in the group, was an outspoken adherent of Orthodox Islam. His name indicated his faith to the public in news articles and on TV. Many black Milwaukeeans no doubt failed to appreciate the considerable distinctions between Anwar's faith and that of the NOI blitzing the community and thus lumped them together. Many often criticized the MNALC's economic campaign as "separatist" and "anti-white." Interestingly, the NOI criticized the MNALC for not going far enough in advocating black *ownership* of inner core businesses. So, in part, resistance to the MNALC's work came from the group's identification with Islam and black nationalism.<sup>61</sup>

The national Negro American Labor Council backed the Milwaukee branch as they persisted in the face of opposition and indifference. On November 4, Lola Bell Holmes, the national vice-president of the NALC, told a MNALC gathering that money spent by Milwaukee African Americans living in the "slums" bought beautiful homes for white businessmen. She urged local NALC members to force white businessmen to increase black employment. "If they say this is not the right way," Holmes stated, "ask them what the right way is. We have waited, knocked on doors and begged. Picketing is the only way. To sit, wait and pray like our parents did, expecting it to come to them, didn't work. The Negro must move in masses." She continued, "If we are hurting them, we say, 'So what?' We have been hurting for centuries. If they don't want a boycott, let them open their doors. How can we believe in their talk of brotherly love? Where a black face shops, we must see a black face working. This shows us

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<sup>60</sup> Star, 5/4/63, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Star, 6/1/63, p. 3; Sherard interview.

brotherly love.” Holmes reiterated Sherard’s argument that black economic empowerment led to independence and autonomy for African Americans: “Give the Negro economic opportunities and you will see the end of slums. We must have full employment in our neighborhoods so we can end ADC [Aid to Dependent Children]... We’re tired of being degraded by ADC. We must be permitted training to prepare for the age of automation. Your kids are not mentally and physically prepared to be educated because of your economic inability to take care of them. There is plenty in this world for everyone. When you get economic opportunities, than everything else will fall into place.” Holmes’s visit and her comments received prominent news coverage on the first page of the local section in the *Milwaukee Journal*.<sup>62</sup>

A few weeks later, the MNALC finally won public support for its campaign against A&P from both the local and state NAACP. State MNAACP chairman, Edward Smyth, stated, “The fight waged by Calvin Sherard, head of the NALC, to gain more employees in A&P food chains is a worthy one and the type of action the NAACP should take.”<sup>63</sup> The state conference passed a resolution supporting the MNALC and suggesting that they would explore the possibility of a state-wide boycott of A&P stores. According to Sherard, “When the NAACP finally came out and endorsed us, more people began to look favorably upon what we were doing and support us. They saw us differently.”

Bolstered by the NAACP’s actions, in mid-December, the MNALC released a list of seven more core stores that it recommended African Americans boycott. In the end, though, despite small gains in employment for African Americans at A&P and other inner core stores,

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<sup>62</sup> Star, 11/5/62, part 2, p. 1 and 4.

<sup>63</sup> Star, 11/24/62, p. 1; Star, 12/1/62, p. 1.



the MNALC could not overcome the obstacles in its path, particularly the lack of support from local African Americans. Though they did secure the first black bank-tellers on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, the first African American butchers and store clerks at A& P and Kroger food stores, Tom Jacobson concluded, “You had a very small pocket that said enough was enough and wanted to push for change. You always have those few that are willing to put their bodies right out there for freedom and justice, but the community didn’t follow them.”<sup>64</sup> Many years later, Calvin Sherard expressed disappointment that the MNALC’s initial successes had not been extended. “At least we got on the payroll and had jobs in our community where we spend money. But now we need to own and control the businesses in our community. If we don’t it goes into the hands of people who don’t stay there and don’t spend any money there.”<sup>65</sup>

For a short time, then, between 1960 and 1963, the Crusaders and the MNALC played a leading role in the city’s emerging civil rights movement.<sup>66</sup> The story of the MNALC offers an important continuity with the civil rights activism that followed Daniel Bell’s death and provides further evidence of a rising activist spirit among some African Americans. This activism pressed the concerns of black people living in the core into the public spotlight and stoked the growing pressure on the city’s white civic leaders. By appealing to young African Americans and involving them in their direct action campaign, the MNALC anticipated the explosive awakening

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<sup>64</sup> Jacobson interview.

<sup>65</sup> Sherard interview.

<sup>66</sup> The MNALC continued to picket local stores until 1965, targeting Sealtest Dairy and a bank on Third Street. Sherard and the MNALC also supported the school de segregation campaign in Milwaukee. Sherard left Milwaukee in late 1965 for Detroit. Years later, he explained in an interview with the author that, “[Local people] got satisfied with things by going into stores and seeing Afro-Americans working. I guess they thought that was the whole show. I got disgusted and moved to Detroit.” Sherard worked for Chrysler in Detroit and continued to be active in the NALC through the UAW Trade Union Leadership Conference.

of young people in the civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee. Calvin Sherard's leadership highlighted the interconnection between racial inequality and economic issues. The Crusaders and the MNALC, made the case that employment and economic justice were central to the more general goal of racial equality. The history of the MNALC, though, also reaffirmed the tensions and schisms within Milwaukee's black leadership over direct action and black nationalism. Most importantly, perhaps, the MNALC's actions represented the first attempt at a sustained direct action campaign in Milwaukee. Those efforts showed that more militant tactics could be effective in generating considerable media attention and, at least modest results. They also made the point that black people in Milwaukee wielded collective economic power *if* they could stay unified; in 1962, that remained a pretty big "if." At the same time, the picketing and boycotting of the MNALC also revealed the limits of direct action in Milwaukee during the early 1960s. Resistance by white businessmen and union leaders, disinterest from local government officials, internal community opposition from conservative black leaders, and public apathy, all proved potent obstacles.

To be sure, there were signs of growing anger and frustration within the black community over racial inequality. But in 1961 and 1962, these issues did not ignite the passions of local African Americans and move them to action. Perhaps employment discrimination did not inspire most black Milwaukeeans to take the personal risks necessary for a direct action campaign. Maybe more education on the issue was needed before rallying grassroots support. It is possible that the charges of "communism" and "separatism" leveled at the national and local NALC deterred potential supporters. Most Milwaukee African Americans may have supported traditional community leaders who encouraged them to oppose the MNALC's tactics. It is also possible that black people in Milwaukee did not believe racial inequality in the local economy

was as dire as the MNALC portrayed it. No doubt many clung to the hope that while the economic situation in Milwaukee might not be great for black people, steady progress was being made and more change would come through hard work and continued negotiation.

Whatever the reasons for their limited success, the MNALC marked a further step from the Bell activism. As Tom Jacobson put it, “[the MNALC] was really the first demonstration here in Milwaukee where they really hit the streets and went to jail for their freedom.”<sup>67</sup>

1963 proved to be a pivotal year for the freedom movement in Milwaukee and across the nation. The year got off to a rocky start locally. On January 1, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, the MCCR and Mayor Maier issued a report titled, “The Negro in Milwaukee: Progress and Portent, 1863-1963.” The report congratulated Milwaukee on the progress it had made in “improved employment conditions” for African Americans. Many of the numbers that it cited, though, did not live up to the MCCR’s claim that “giant steps” had been made. Between 1950 and 1960, for example, the number of black electrical engineers increased from one to 17; cashiers, one to 36; accountants and auditors, zero to 15; telephone operators, zero to 38; electricians, zero to 11; bookkeepers, eight to 30; and, tool and die makers, two to 16. The report also revealed that a total of 85 black Milwaukeeans worked for the city, including only one architect, one lawyer, one foreman, five fire fighters, 30 policemen, 12 nurses, five librarians and 23 secretarial and clerical workers. Moreover, among the 7,500 African American women at work in Milwaukee during the early 1960s, there were 88 typists, 46 secretaries and 24 stenographers. Perhaps most shocking, given the source of all this back-patting, of the roughly 30,000 adult African Americans in Milwaukee, only 7 served on city boards, commissions and

committees. Not embarrassed by these very modest advances, the commission concluded with a straight face, "We can be proud of our record." The report said nothing of persistent discrimination in hiring and union membership throughout the city.

Similarly, while "Progress and Portent" acknowledged a housing problem, it emphasized what it considered encouraging news:

Members of the growing Negro higher-income group... quite naturally desire to own homes in *good neighborhoods*. These *better locations*, often predominately white, since 1950 have gradually let down their barriers against the purchase of property by Negroes. As a result, there has been a noticeable movement of Negro families from Milwaukee's central section or "core area." [emphasis added]

In explaining why the vast majority of local blacks still lived within the core, the report first cited a preference "to live near friends and friendly institutions" before mentioning "restrictive practices which confine Negroes within the older and more or less designated area." By way of solutions, the MCCR stayed close to the acculturation model, suggesting only two programs to help black youth adjust to urban living. Nowhere did the report mention overt discrimination or racial stereotyping as a problem needing to be overcome.<sup>68</sup>

That same month, the Ford Foundation rejected a \$16 million grant application from the city of Milwaukee to attack urban social problems, instead awarding funds to Oakland, New Haven, Boston and Philadelphia. The Director of Public Affairs for the foundation, Paul Ylvisaker, told the *Milwaukee Journal* that the city's application lacked, "convincing evidence that leadership in the Milwaukee community was deeply enough committed so that this would

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<sup>67</sup> Jacobson interview.

<sup>68</sup> "The Negro In Milwaukee" Progress and Portent, 1863-1963," Milwaukee Commission on Community relations, January 1, 1963, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Pamphlet Collection, Madison, Wisconsin.

become a community project and not just a Ford Foundation project... We have insisted from the start that the mayor of each city take the lead.” The *Journal* noted the Ford Foundation’s reluctance to make a grant “unless it was convinced that a mayor whose city’s project helped Negroes is willing to stand up and face a charge that he is a ‘nigger lover.’”<sup>69</sup> Mayor Maier denounced the piece, calling it “the most vulgar journalism I have ever seen.” Maier claimed the largest roadblock to receiving grant money was not his unwillingness to stand up to homegrown racism, but rather the city’s lack of one, unified “central authority” to coordinate the project.<sup>70</sup> In either case, the episode fueled an increasingly widespread belief among African Americans that the Mayor was not committed to racial justice in Milwaukee.

By the middle of the year, events in Birmingham, Alabama, and other southern cities catapulted the civil rights movement back into the media spotlight, making race relations *the* major national concern. The era of “polite,” “respectable” demonstrating was coming to a close, and a new phase of more militant direct action began to dawn across the civil rights landscape. Local civil rights struggles became inexorably intertwined with national events, and Milwaukee was no exception.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., decided to mount a campaign against segregation in Birmingham at the end of 1962.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Star, 1/19/63, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Maier, Challenge To Cities, pp. 47-48; Henry Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous, pp. 39-41.

<sup>71</sup> For a detailed account of the Birmingham campaign, see Taylor Branch, Pillar of Fire: America In the King Years, 1963-1965 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), pp. 1-170; David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), pp. 231-286; Andrew Manis, A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Revered Fred Shuttlesworth (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1999). For a full treatment of the interplay between the local and national movements in the context of

The impetus for the Birmingham action grew out of the organization's failed efforts in Albany, Georgia earlier that year. There, local police chief, Laurie Pritchett, had studied King and Gandhi's writing on non-violent direct action, and knew how important national media attention was in keeping pressure on localities. Nothing excited the media more than white violence against peaceful demonstrators. Indeed, King's philosophy depended on such images to elicit white sympathy and support. By meeting non-violence with non-violence and shipping demonstrators to remote jails outside the city, Pritchett neutralized King's tactics. The campaign ended with a face saving agreement between city and SCLC officials that did little to dismantle Jim Crow in Albany. Following the Albany debacle, King and SCLC desperately needed a victory to shake off mounting despair within the movement, as well as growing doubts about King's leadership. Some within his own circle doubted that nonviolence could ever work. Many young activists began to heed the militant scoffings of black nationalist leaders like Malcolm X. King wanted to push the federal government into the civil rights struggle. For that, though, King needed a nationally and internationally notorious racial crisis, and so SCLC turned towards the South's most segregated city.

Birmingham had long been ruled by last ditch defenders of segregation like fiery police commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor. It was also a city with a mean streak: a predilection for violence. Black people had christened it "Bombingham" because of the frequency of racial violence there over the previous decade. "Bull" Connor and his comrades viewed the moderation of men like Laurie Pritchett as a fatal weakness. Connor and the Birmingham KKK could be counted on to respond ferociously to any challenge to segregation.

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Birmingham, see Glenn Askew, *But For Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

SCLC launched its Birmingham campaign on April 3 with a manifesto by local civil rights leader, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, detailing the grievances of Birmingham African Americans and calling for desegregation. At a mass meeting that evening, King vowed to lead an economic boycott of downtown stores, accompanied by demonstrations, until "Pharaoh let's my people go." These boycotts began the next morning and continued for several days. On April 8, snarling German shepherd dogs halted a small group of demonstrators, led by King's brother, A.D. King. A news photographer captured the dogs' assault on one demonstrator and the picture appeared throughout the world. As a result of police brutality, King decided to lead a march on Good Friday despite a court injunction against him. Connor obliged by turning fire hoses and dogs on the demonstrators as his troops arrested them, ensuring television networks a lead story on the evening news. King spent the bulk of his time in solitary confinement writing the famed justification of his non-violent strategy, "A Letter From A Birmingham Jail."

King's arrest and the powerful images emanating from Birmingham meant the president, and the nation as a whole, could no longer duck the challenge of the movement. Almost immediately, Kennedy telephoned King's wife, Coretta, to reassure her that everything would be done to protect her husband. In newspapers and on televisions across the country, the Birmingham crisis dominated the news for days, confronting whites and blacks with the uncomfortable reality of Southern segregation and racial violence.

Milwaukee was no different. Both mainstream newspapers, as well as the city's lone African American paper, carried harrowing front page stories about Birmingham. The local NAACP, with the aid of the YC, the UAW and the MNALC, supported a national effort to picket

local Woolworth stores<sup>72</sup> as a sign of solidarity with Birmingham activists.<sup>73</sup> Over the next few weeks, as tensions in Birmingham continued to escalate with dogs and hoses next being turned on school children, Milwaukeeans continued their sympathy efforts. On May 11, an interracial group of over 100 people heeded another urgent plea from the national NAACP "for all freedom loving people to join hands in an effort to move the president's office to relieve some of the pressures of segregation in the South."<sup>74</sup> They demonstrated their objections with two hours of picketing around the safety building and city hall. Sociologist Lerone Bennett, Jr., in town to address the local NAACP chapter, spontaneously joined the picket line following his speech. Shortly after these nationwide sympathy demonstrations, Attorney General Robert Kennedy dispatched riot troops outside Anniston and Montgomery.

But Birmingham was not the only civil rights fire in Alabama that the president struggled to smother during the summer of 1963. Compounding the challenges presented by the Birmingham situation, Alabama governor George Wallace vocally and publicly declared that he would defy the president's orders and block a slated attempt to integrate the University of Alabama.<sup>75</sup> For a few weeks, the war of words between the chief executive of the nation and the chief executive of the state of Alabama escalated. On Tuesday, June 11, in a calculated act of media-friendly defiance, Wallace made his famous "stand" in a University of Alabama doorway,

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<sup>72</sup> Milwaukee NAACP officials acknowledged that local Woolworth stores had not discriminated against black workers or patrons. Nevertheless, they picketed because Woolworth was the store that King and his supporters had been protesting when Birmingham police arrested them.

<sup>73</sup> "Jailing King Sparks Milwaukee Pickets to Act Locally," *Star*, 4/27/63, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> "Milwaukeeans in Protest of Birmingham Inhumanity," *Star*, 5/18/63, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> For a full exploration of George Wallace's racial politics and the University of Alabama stand-off, see Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).



temporarily blocking the enrollment of two black students. Kennedy sent in federal marshals for a show of force. Almost as soon as the cameras clicked off, Wallace moved from the doorway and the parties struck a compromise agreement to admit the two students.

That night, President Kennedy addressed the nation on television and radio after federalizing state guardsmen to protect the students at the University of Alabama. “The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city,” the President acknowledged. “Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives... It is a time to act in the congress, in your state and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives. Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.”<sup>76</sup> Kennedy announced that he would introduce civil rights legislation to congress and push for its passage. As if to punctuate the president’s warning like a sucker punch to the gut, shortly after midnight the night of Kennedy’s dramatic speech, white supremacist, Byron DeLaBeckwith assassinated Medgar Evers, long-time civil rights leader and Mississippi NAACP Chairman, in the driveway of his home. Evers’s assassination heightened the clamor for change.

Alabama, though, was not the only civil rights hotspot making the news during the summer of 1963. A series of racial conflagrations simmered and erupted at a variety of “secondary” locations. Milwaukee residents opened their newspapers, daily, to dramatic stories and photos of civil rights activity in Danville, Virginia, Cambridge, Maryland, Chicago, New York City, Harlem, Los Angeles and elsewhere. The pace of the struggle seemed to quicken as civil rights activists across the country engaged in more aggressive assaults on racial inequality with more frequent uses of direct action. In turn, local white reaction also ratcheted up, often

with bloody consequences. The prevalence of these clashes spurred an increasing unease across the country, particularly in the urban North. Fear gripped the nation as it looked on at what increasingly came to look like “Negro revolt.” Capturing this anxiety, Vice President Lyndon Johnson warned that “a time bomb is ticking” in America’s streets. Responding to Johnson’s comments, an article in a widely reprinted Associated Press news series on the civil rights turmoil, titled “The Deepening Crisis,” bluntly stated, “Reports from white and Negro officials in federal, state and municipal governments, from civic, social and religious leaders and from citizens in the street, point to one conclusion: There is grave danger that the bomb will explode in major racial violence.”<sup>77</sup>

Increasingly, opinion makers and civic and social leaders began to fear that this bomb might go off in the urban north. Rev. Gardner Taylor of Brooklyn’s Concord Baptist church cautioned: “Miscalculation of the moment of truth which is upon us could plunge New York, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles into a crimson carnage and a blood bath unparalleled in the history of the nation.” Just south of Milwaukee, Alvin Prejean, deputy director of the Chicago Urban League, insisted that all of the ingredients for explosion are to be found in Chicago, among other northern cities: “Negroes are pushing and whites are pushing back. People here used to talk about those poor people down in Birmingham. Now they are talking about them here.”<sup>78</sup>

In this charged atmosphere, a growing mood for action on civil rights swept the nation. Dr. James Nabrit, Jr., president of Howard University encapsulated this new spirit within the

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<sup>76</sup> Excerpt of Kennedy’s speech printed in, *MJ*, 6/12/63, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> *MJ*, 7/29/63, p. 1 and 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

civil rights community: “We are sick of evasions, weary of excuses, fed up with promises and want action now, liberty now, freedom now.”<sup>79</sup> A coalition of national civil rights groups, including SCLC, the NAACP and CORE, among others, accelerated their organizing plans for a new “March on Washington,” slated for August 28 in the capitol. Developments across the country only heightened the immediacy and urgency of the march. The mood was not confined to the civil rights community, though; these smoldering racial politics also moved the president to action.

Other, more ominous signs, though, indicated that the struggle for racial justice and civil rights still faced steep opposition. The most significant and troubling indicator of this fact was the continuing violence aimed at civil rights activists and their supporters. In addition, most Southern mayors dissented from the mayors’ convention’s 5-point program with a refrain often-repeated by Southern white politicians and civic leaders throughout the civil rights era: states rights. They viewed pending civil rights legislation as “an encroachment on local responsibility by the federal government.”<sup>80</sup> Moreover, according to Gallup polling data, from May to July, the percentage of Americans believing the president was pushing “too fast” on civil rights rose from 36% to 48% among all respondents<sup>81</sup> and from 41% to 54% among white respondents only.<sup>82</sup> Instead of consensus, then, recent national events seemed to deepen the national rift over race.

Local opinion makers and civil rights activists in Milwaukee echoed the national voices in their reactions to recent national events. The editors of the *Milwaukee Journal* called

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>81</sup> The 48% was the highest figure to date in Gallop polling on this issue.

<sup>82</sup> MJ, 8/11/63, p. 12.

Kennedy's remarks, "the most dramatic and moving condemnation of racial discrimination by anyone who ever occupied the White House."<sup>83</sup> *Sentinel* editors argued, "June 11, 1963, may well be marked as a day of climax in the Negro equality drive... After such a day, any doubt that this nation is in the midst of a most serious social upheaval must be removed."<sup>84</sup> The *Star* concurred, calling the president's remarks, "one of the greatest moral speeches of all time."<sup>85</sup> None of the newspapers, though, directly linked Kennedy's challenge to the local scene. Milwaukee activists underscored the president's moral outrage and his call for action by again participating in a nationwide "sympathy" demonstration in honor of the slain Evers.<sup>86</sup> Thirty African Americans and six whites marched from the safety building down Wisconsin Avenue carrying signs that read, "Finish Medgar Evers' Work in Wisconsin," "Stride Toward Freedom," and "Medgar Evers is Dead, Make Freedom Live Here." Milwaukee NAACP branch president, Edward Smyth told reporters that the march was held "to focus attention on the injustices and the need for corrective action above the Mason-Dixon Line as well as down south."<sup>87</sup> The MNAACP and the newly formed Near Northside Non-Partisan Committee (NNNPC) also began organizing Milwaukeeans to travel to Washington, D.C., for the March On Washington. The local conscience had clearly been stirred, but the focus, particularly among whites, but also among many Milwaukee African Americans, remained on problems outside of Milwaukee.

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<sup>83</sup> MJ, 6/12/63, p. 24.

<sup>84</sup> MS, 6/13/63, p. 10.

<sup>85</sup> Star, 6/15/63, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> Sympathy marches for Evers also took place in Madison and Racine. See, MS, 6/15/63, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> See, Star, 6/15/63, p. 1; MJ, 6/15/63, p. 3; MS, 6/15/63, p. 5; MJ, 6/16/63, part 2, p. 8.

If ever there was an opportunity for bold local leadership on civil rights, the summer of 1963 provided it. Instead of seizing the moral authority conferred by recent events, though, Henry Maier stepped awkwardly into the fray. The same day that Kennedy urged the nation to action, Maier urged the MCCR to “go slow” on civil rights. In a 45 minute speech in which he frequently pounded the table, the mayor stressed a “step by step” approach and “long-term programming,” warning against “precipitous” action on civil rights. In a subtle rebuff to the mayor’s remarks, commission chairman Msgr. Franklyn Kennedy<sup>88</sup> encouraged the MCCR to follow the suggestion of the president by adopting a resolution to the Common Council asking for a city-wide fair housing ordinance. Commissioners Grace Kelly and Walton Stewart, though, blocked the proposal and Maier dismissed any city-only ordinance as “one dimensional thinking.” Attorney Robert Hess challenged the mayor, saying, “It’s all right to speak the rather trite remark that we must have programs while doing away with the brush fires, but those working on programs for 1980 forget that what was a brushfire yesterday may become a real conflagration.” The MCCR did approve a vague resolution “recognizing the intense interest of the citizenry in the unrest resulting from current racial demonstrations.” Without advocating specific measures, the commission resolved that “no one in this city shall enjoy less than his full rights as an American citizen and that everyone shall have a chance to succeed in proportion to his performance.”<sup>89</sup>

Maier’s speech caused a significant stir throughout the community, as well. In the newspapers, the *Journal* editorialized, “Milwaukee has never had adequate civil rights leadership

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<sup>88</sup> Msgr. Kennedy had been an active advocate of civil rights for many years. Following WWII, he led a fight to desegregate the American Bowling Congress headquartered in Milwaukee.

<sup>89</sup> MJ, 6/13/63, part 2, p. 1; MS, 6/13/63, part 2, p. 1.

from city hall. It lacks it completely now. Mayor Maier's admonition to the [MCCR] to go slow on civil rights is further indication of the refusal of the mayor's office, and the city government, to face up to the problems that are becoming more critical in this and every large American community. It is ironic that on the same day that President Kennedy and Vice-President Johnson (in Milwaukee) were urging vigorous action in the civil rights field, Milwaukee's Mayor was discouraging such action."<sup>90</sup> The *Sentinel*, on the other hand, called the mayor's critics "emotional, impatient, impractical and uninformed" and argued that "100 years in this country teaches us that there is no miracle of law or moral persuasion which can overnight achieve an ideal integration of the black and white races... It can be done only 'step by step' as the mayor declared."<sup>91</sup> The *Star* was not as kind: "For too long, our mayor has attempted to justify 'his' non-progressive action with appointments of 'fact finding boards,' and 'do committees' that take literally eight months (sometimes longer) to 'do' nothing. Even obviously needed bills, such as 'open occupancy,' receive a 'no comment' response from our non-aggressive mayor."<sup>92</sup> The following week, the paper compared Maier's approach to John C. Calhoun's defense of slavery.<sup>93</sup>

Local African American community leaders took considerable umbrage at the Mayor's remarks, as well. In Washington, D.C., for a White House meeting of 300 national Democratic leaders to elicit support for the president's civil rights program, Alderman Phillips asserted that

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<sup>90</sup> MJ, 6/14/63, p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> MS, 6/19/63, p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> Star, 6/29/63, p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> Star, 7/6/63, p. 4.

Mayor Maier was out of step with liberals all over the country.<sup>94</sup> Back in Milwaukee, a follow-up meeting between the disgruntled alderman and the mayor “degenerated into bickering.”<sup>95</sup> “It is rather perplexing to hear that our mayor would tell anyone to go slow on giving me my rights,” Rev. B.S. Gregg similarly admonished.<sup>96</sup> The head of the MNAACP declared, “We are tired of approaches, period. We want results.”<sup>97</sup> Even the usually cautious Wesley Scott of the Urban League warned, “I predict that demonstrations will come [to Milwaukee] unless some action is taken.”<sup>98</sup>

Maier’s foot-dragging began to activate even less politically motivated segments of the African American community. At the end of July, a group of thirty-four prominent black leaders placed an advertisement in the local press to express “grave concern” with “the apparent negative reaction of official Milwaukee to the present rightful demands of this country’s Negro population.” Among the issues highlighted in the “Statement of Concern” were fair housing, better employment opportunities, increased union membership, less segregated neighborhoods and greater political representation. It was signed by a fairly star-studded (by Milwaukee’s standards) and comprehensive array of the city’s traditional African American leadership. These were not militants, but doctors, clergy, businessmen, educators and attorneys. By and large, they did not approve of or engage in direct action, although the public placement of the statement indicated a greater immediacy among this group of usually cautious leaders. The letter

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<sup>94</sup> Star, 7/13/63, p. 5.

<sup>95</sup> Star, 7/30/63, p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Star, 7/22/63, p.4.

<sup>97</sup> MJ, 6/17/63, part 2, p. 10; MS, 6/17/63, part 2, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> MS, 6/20/63, p. 1; Star, 6/22/63, p. 1.

represented a sober attempt to rally public support and place pressure on the mayor to act more vigorously to ensure equal rights for African Americans in Milwaukee.<sup>99</sup>

As in 1960, the national civil rights movement became suffused with a new militancy after the Birmingham protests. Like the Greensboro sit-ins, the Birmingham demonstrations epitomized the change in mood and became a major stimulus for direct action campaigns across the country. No longer content with incremental change, activists embraced “Freedom Now!” as their slogan. A new spirit of angry defiance and heightened expectations pervaded the movement. While still committed to non-violence, civil rights leaders increasingly warned of “explosive cities” and “long, hot summers.” Birmingham also added leverage to local efforts to challenge racial inequality. It gave courage to activists and unified African American leadership, while scaring white officials (and some cautious black leaders) into a greater awareness of the potential stakes of inaction. In the North, Birmingham precipitated an outpouring of sympathetic direct action and marked the moment when the full force of the Movement finally came to urban centers above the Mason-Dixon line. Summing up these changes, black journalist Lerone Bennett, Jr., observed, “the burning militance of the Birmingham leaders... pinpointed a revolutionary shift in the attitudes of the Americans called Negroes.”<sup>100</sup>

Nationally and locally, one of the groups that benefited most by the post-Birmingham shift within the movement was the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Set up originally in 1942 by James Farmer and a group of Quaker pacifists who belonged to the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), CORE aimed “to eliminate racial discrimination,” vowing to use “inter-

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<sup>99</sup> Star, 7/27/63, p. 1. The ad also appeared in the two daily newspapers on July 25.

<sup>100</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Mood of the Negro,” *Ebony*, XVIII (July, 1963), p. 30.



racial, non-violent direct action” to achieve this end. Members of the organization participated in sit-ins at Chicago restaurants during the early 1940s, sponsored the Journey of Reconciliation in 1947 and the 1961 Freedom Rides to demand an end of segregation on interstate transport. As the movement mood shifted from moderation to militancy, many civil rights activists, particularly in the North, flocked to join CORE chapters. These chapters engaged in dozens of direct action campaigns challenging racial inequality in all of its forms. From 1962 to 1964, CORE challenged King, the SCLC, the NAACP, and even SNCC for leadership of the movement. In the wake of Henry Maier’s ill-received remarks, the fledgling Milwaukee CORE branch (MCORE) became the driving force of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee for the next two years.<sup>101</sup>

In early July, a group of Milwaukee activists formed a local CORE chapter.<sup>102</sup> “CORE was an available and more militant organization,” John Givens, Chairman of MCORE from 1963 through 1965, explained. “If you were into the movement, you knew about the busses... There was no CORE chapter here, so we started one.”<sup>103</sup>

The MCORE also grew out of frustrations with the more cautious approach of existing civil rights groups in Milwaukee. Givens, who along Tom Jacobson had acted as advisor to the NAACP Youth Council before joining MCORE, explained, “The militancy that we showed

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<sup>101</sup> See, August Meier and Eliot Rudwick, CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement (Urbana, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

<sup>102</sup> The original members of CORE that are currently known, include: Willis Baker, 27, male, African American, insurance company supervisor and student at Marquette University; John Givens, 27, male, African American, American Motors Corporation worker and UW-Milwaukee student; Cecil Brown, Jr., 37, male, African American, former state Assemblyman; Elner McCraty, 24, female, African American, an Milwaukee Public School teacher; Tom Jacobson, 25, male, white, attorney; Leslie Johnson, 30, male, African American, auto production inspector; Arlene Johnson, 28, white, female, spouse of Leslie Johnson. Givens replaced Baker as MCORE Chairman shortly after the Lins controversy broke. McCraty left Milwaukee on 9/27/63, to join the Peace Core in Africa.

against discrimination in employment [at Big Boy] was too much for the NAA[CP]. The older people in the branch said, ‘Oh, my God! We can’t have this.’ They wouldn’t participate in the demonstrations. They didn’t do anything... When we took to the streets and the NAA[CP] couldn’t handle that, instead of fighting that and getting into internecine wars, we [Givens and Jacobson] just moved over to the CORE chapter.”<sup>104</sup> Willis Baker had a similar experience: “Some of the so-called Negro leaders in Milwaukee discouraged me from starting a CORE chapter here. There is too much condemning of the New Negro in the United States by the people who used to be the leadership.”<sup>105</sup> As sociologist Aldon Morris has pointed out, it was common throughout the movement during this period for more militant activists to carve out independent space, what Morris calls “parallel institutions,” in order to avoid conflict with older, more cautious African American leaders and to pursue their direct action strategy.<sup>106</sup>

Several of the charter MCORE members had activist experience. John Givens directed a 1963 NAACP Youth Council protest against a local Big Boy Restaurant. Tom Jacobson played a crucial role in the Madison fair housing sit-in and also participated in the MNALC and YC actions in Milwaukee. Police had arrested Elnor McCraty three times as a member of CORE in St. Louis while protesting employment discrimination at local restaurants. Similarly, Willis Baker had led a successful CORE-sponsored campaign to increase minority hiring in a Cincinnati supermarket chain and to desegregate an all-white bowling alley.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> John Givens interview with Patrick Jones, 11/17/99.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> MJ, 8/29/63, p. 4.

<sup>106</sup> Aldon Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change (New York: Free Press, 1984), pp. 40-76.

<sup>107</sup> On McCraty, see, MJ, 9/8/63, part 2, page 1; On Baker, see, MJ, 8/29/63, p. 4.

Military service also played a formative role in the development of several male MCORE leaders. From 1959 to 1961, Givens served in the US Army, stationed in France. “What it became was a fresh concept, a new way of looking at yourself,” he remembered. “When I came home, I started to see a lot of new things and I was really ripe for the civil rights movement. I came home in '61 and quickly got involved as advisor to the NAACP Youth Council.”<sup>108</sup> Willis Baker clashed with a white superior officer over segregation in his air force barracks.<sup>109</sup> From the opposite side of the color bar, Richard McCleod, a 27-year old white history graduate student at UW-Milwaukee, said he first noticed racial discrimination in the navy: “The only Negro in our division on the ship couldn’t go to the movies or bars with us in Norfolk, Virginia.”<sup>110</sup>

At least two of the charter MCORE members cited childhood experiences as a part of the explanation for their civil rights commitment. Elnor McCraty recalled her mom standing up to Jim Crow laws in St. Louis. As a kindergartner, McCraty participated in a demonstration with her aunt to get more black clerks hired at a downtown store.<sup>111</sup> Similarly, John Givens credited his father and grandfather for instilling in him a defiant spirit and a willingness to confront racial injustice: “The military ripened me,” he told me, “but my grandfather stopped a lynching in Arkansas. So, I grew up in an atmosphere where I didn’t take nothing off of nobody. I didn’t care what color you were. If you were wrong, you were wrong. My daddy said to me that if a

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<sup>108</sup> Givens interview.

<sup>109</sup> MJ, 8/29/63, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> MJ, 8/30/63, part 2, p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> MJ, 9/8/63, part 2, page 1.

white ever called you a ‘nigger,’ knock his eye out because he can’t see anyway. But, if you were alright, you were alright. It didn’t matter to me.”<sup>112</sup>

The eager militants of the MCORE did not have to wait long for an opportunity to act. On July 26, less than a week after the MCORE had been formed, a series of remarks made by a member of the Community Social Development Commission (SDC) and reported in the *Milwaukee Journal* ignited a controversy which would significantly alter the dynamics of Milwaukee’s civil rights struggle.<sup>113</sup>

The SDC perhaps best embodied Mayor Maier’s “go slow,” “step-by-step,” “long-range planning” approach to urban social ills. Maier argued that the SDC was his attempt to “implement the Zeidler Report” because, in his words, action could not be taken to address the problems highlighted in the report because “no agency existed with jurisdiction over multi-functional social problems.” Maier made clear early on that the SDC “was not to be merely a race relations group,” but would deal with all urban social ills in an integrated, concerted effort.

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<sup>112</sup> Givens interview.

<sup>113</sup> Announced in 1962, the SDC faced several obstacles to its establishment. The organizational structure consisted of a joint and equal partnership between city and county government, the public and vocational school boards, and the United Community Services, each appointing representatives to the board of the new entity. Presumably, members would possess a knowledge of urban social problems and be sympathetic to reasonable attempts to ameliorate them. The initial stumbling block to the creation of the SDC came from the county government, which doubted whether it had legal authority to participate in the inter-governmental group or appropriate funds for it. Complicating this tricky process of coordinating the various loci of local power were the demands, on the one hand, of many civil rights advocates who wanted immediate action on the inner core alone, and those, on the other hand, that opposed any use of tax money to attack social problems in the city, particularly those facing African Americans, primarily. This political dynamic would confront Maier throughout the civil rights era.

Moreover, the racial conflict that erupted at the end of July, 1963, had not been the first. In May, 1962, with all but one of commissioner named, but no African Americans appointed, the commission faced the possibility of a boycott by the very constituency many believed the SDC was designed to aid. In a last minute effort to head off this crisis, the Common Council appointed Alderman Vel Phillips to a spot on the SDC.

Maier argued that these impediments and the failure to get the new commission up and running by early 1963 had resulted in the city losing the Ford grant, rather than the claim that he would not stand up to the charge of “nigger lover,” as had been reported. Ultimately, on March 20, 1963, the final stumbling blocks were removed and the SDC took life, although its troubles were hardly put behind it.

The mayor resisted the idea that there were unique problems confronting African Americans in the core, implicitly rejecting race or racism as an important factor. Instead, Maier explained the idea behind the new organization as a “new concept for the Milwaukee community – a joining of hands, a marshaling of forces to bring to bear all available resources in an attack on urban social ailments wherever in the community they might exist, whether their victims were young or old, black or white.”<sup>114</sup> Many looked to the new group with great hope.

It was at one of the first meetings of this new group that sausage-maker Fred Lins made his infamous comments about African Americans and poor migrants to Milwaukee. Later, Lins claimed he had been quoted out of context and that his comments flowed from a beating that his son had received at Rufus King High School at the hands of two African Americans the previous year. He did concede that some of the things he said were “unfortunate” and “ill-advised,” but he also insisted that he was not prejudiced and could serve “impartially” on the SDC.<sup>115</sup> At the same time, though, his words clearly showed that he held stereotypical views that obviously would color the way he viewed issues presided over by the SDC.

To the members of the MCORE, Lins’s statements reflected racism and precluded him from serving on the SDC. In calling for his ouster, interim MCORE Chairman Willis Baker told reporters, “When a man in his position makes a statement of this nature, I feel he should be asked to resign from the commission. I think he is detrimental to the actual goals for which the commission was set up.”<sup>116</sup> Three days after Lins’s comments appeared in the newspaper, an

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<sup>114</sup> For an overview of the founding of the Social Development Commission, see, Henry Maier, Challenge to the Cities: An Approach to a Theory of Urban Leadership (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 43-58; Henry Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous: An Autobiography (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1993), pp. 37-50.

<sup>115</sup> MJ, 9/8/63, part 2, p. 1; MJ, 9/10/63, part 2, p.1; MS, 7/30/63, part 2, p. 1.

<sup>116</sup> MJ, 7/28/63, part 2, p. 1.

inter-racial group of 25 MCORE members, including Wisconsin State NAACP Chairman, Lloyd Barbee, began picketing outside Lins-Hess Sausage, Inc. The protesters carried signs which read, "You Are Wrong Mr. Lins," "CORE Says Resign," and "No Bigots On Public Bodies." MCORE also sent two letters to County Board Chairman, Eugene Grobschmidt, stating that Lins's views "contributed to the worst kind of racial stereotyping" and requesting the resignation of Lins, "so that it will not be necessary...to consider taking additional non-violent action in this matter."<sup>117</sup> On July 30<sup>th</sup>, the *Journal* reported that Grobschmidt had stated that if the statements were true, he would remove Lins from the SDC.<sup>118</sup> On August 20<sup>th</sup>, nearly a month after the original incident, MCORE reiterated its request in yet another letter to the county supervisor. Grobschmidt did not reply to any of the MCORE correspondence. Finally, on August 27, after meeting with Lins directly but not with MCORE representatives, Grobschmidt announced he would not ask Lins to resign from the SDC. In justifying his decision, the supervisor explained, "I'm not going to ask him to resign because of his personal beliefs." He dismissed the controversy as a "closed matter."<sup>119</sup>

Grobschmidt's willingness to see Lins's side of the issue, without a similar empathy for the civil rights workers confounded members of MCORE. John Givens remembers that as a transitional point: "We were naïve because we thought that in this great democracy, if you found this evil and you pointed it out, they would do something about it. So, we were really taken aback when they didn't get rid of him [Lins]. And that is what led to the arrests..."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> MS, 7/29/63, part 2, p. 7; MJ, 7/30/63, part 2, p. 1; MS, 7/30/63, part 2, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> MJ, 7/30/63, part 2, p. 1.

<sup>119</sup> MJ, 8/27/63, part 2, p. 1; See also, "CORE Press Release," August 28, 1963, Thomas Jacobson papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>120</sup> Givens interview.

As 104 Milwaukeeans traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in the historic March On Washington, a new phase in Milwaukee's black freedom struggle opened. Nine protesters launched Milwaukee's first sit-in outside Grobschmidt's office in the County Court House. Under Elner McCraty's direction, the demonstrators – 5 white and 4 black, and all wearing cardboard badges saying, "Freedom Now!" – quietly took chairs in the office and began to read. As they sat down, a radio carried news of the Milwaukee delegation in Washington, D.C. A MCORE statement reiterated the protesters demands: "Lins is incapable of looking at the real problems of our community in an objective light and therefore can serve no useful purpose on the commission." McCraty told reporters, "We plan to stay until Grobschmidt asks Lins to resign." The supervisor responded, saying, "It's going to take till hell freezes over. I'm not going to ask him to resign for expressing his convictions." Baker rebutted, stating, "Our contention is not that he [Lins] does not have the right to his opinion, but that he is not qualified to serve on any board interested in social development." When police tried to remove the demonstrators from the room, Baker went limp, resulting in the demonstration's first arrest.<sup>121</sup>

The next day, protesters returned to Grobschmidt's anteroom. Police Sargent Harry Reichert warned demonstrators, "You can stand, walk around or leave. You have one last chance." Three MCORE members – McCraty, David Novick and Richard McCleod – refused to leave, so police arrested them on charges of "disorderly conduct." Outside the courthouse, 7 pickets carried signs reading, "CORE Says Resign Mr. Lins" and "CORE Says Mr. Lins Is Wrong." Willis Baker joined the pickets after being released from jail. He told them, "Mayor

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<sup>121</sup> MJ, 8/28/63, p. 1; Star, 9/7/63, p. 1.

Maier declared August 28 as Freedom Day in Milwaukee. If that was Freedom Day, I'd rather be a slave."<sup>122</sup>

On August 30, four MCORE representatives, led by John Givens, met with Eugene Grobschmidt for what the *Journal* described as a "polite but tense" discussion of the Lins impasse. Thirty blocks away at the Wisconsin Baptist Center, 180 people attended a rally to welcome home the Milwaukee delegation from the March On Washington and to condemn Lins. When asked how the March would effect Milwaukee civil rights activities, Ed Smyth pointed to a list of 30 new volunteers and said, "I think we've seen the results right here." Calvin Sherard urged the gathering to convert its new energy into local action. After the rally, 20 people walked to the courthouse to join the 25 picketers already on the scene. As negotiations continued inside the county boardroom, 25 picketers marched into the building singing freedom songs and stationed themselves outside the conference room. When the meeting ended without any noticeable progress between the two sides, 6 MCORE members immediately resumed their sit-in. Police promptly arrested all six, using dollies to cart the uncooperative protesters out.

There was a playful spirit among the demonstrators. In one of the campaign's more comical moments, ten MCORE members serenaded four civil rights prisoners with a rendition of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" sung into the safety building air shaft. That night, jail authorities sent 35 women prisoners, including two civil rights demonstrators, to bed early for singing and clapping along with civil rights demonstrators parading outside. Among the selections sung by the 15 picketers and their 35 back-up prisoners were, "We Shall Overcome" and "Give Me That Old Freedom Spirit."

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<sup>122</sup> MJ, 8/29/63, p. 1.



On numerous occasions, MCORE and the County Supervisor did not see eye to eye. Once, an exasperated John Givens said, “We honor Mr. Lins’ constitutional rights. George Lincoln Rockwell [head of the American Nazi Party] has the right to his opinions. Would you appoint him to the commission?” Grobschmidt replied, “If he lived in Milwaukee, I think he would be entitled to consideration.” Exchanges like these sum up the seemingly unbroachable chasm that separated the two sides.<sup>123</sup>

By August 31, the MCORE protest was gaining strength and picking up support as it went along. That night, in a stunning display of African American community unity, 250 people attended a MCORE mass meeting at the Wisconsin Baptist Center. Rising attendance signified growing grassroots support for a more aggressive civil rights presence in Milwaukee. At the meeting MCORE leaders announced a “phone-in” to jam courthouse phone lines the following Tuesday. This allowed community members unable or unwilling to participate in direct action to voice their support. In addition, the local ACLU and NAACP chapters announced efforts to aid the protest by raising bail money for arrested demonstrators. In the evening’s most dramatic gesture, though, six prominent black leaders – Alderman Phillips, MNAACP Chairman Ed Smyth, MCORE leader John Givens, MNALC head Calvin Sherard, and Assemblyman Isaac Coggs – stood in succession to denounce Lins’s statements and demand his removal. The Lins controversy had, for the moment, provided a rallying point for Milwaukee’s civil rights community. Differences of tactics, class and pacing that had kept community leaders divided during earlier efforts, were papered over by the immediacy of the Lins situation.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> MJ, 8/31/63, p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> MJ, 9/1/63, p. 1; Star, 9/7/63, p. 5.

Following the Labor Day holiday on Monday, MCORE shifted tactics. While picketing continued at the courthouse and safety building, supporters of MCORE swamped the courthouse switchboard with protest calls. The “phone-in,” according to one clerk, created a “serious tie-up,” making it “very difficult to get an outside line.” He claimed the protest had resulted in 120 calls, two-thirds supportive of the MCORE campaign, one-third opposed to it. That same day, the national office of CORE in New York declared Milwaukee “a civil rights disaster area.” In Grobschmidt’s home city of South Milwaukee, an Episcopal Priest, Father William Miles, offered a prayer that the County Supervisor “see” that “prejudiced” persons should not serve on public bodies. He told his flock before joining the MCORE pickets, “It is a shame that our city has no Negroes living here.”<sup>125</sup>

After Grobschmidt again reiterated his support for Lins, MCORE decided to target Mayor Maier. Because the SDC was Maier’s creation, MCORE members hoped to pressure him into removing Lins. The group began as it had with Grobschmidt, by sending a letter asking the mayor to clarify his views in the case. On September 12, in a letter to MCORE, Maier refused to repudiate Lins. The mayor stated that he believed Lins had been quoted out of context and that his views “were not contradictory to the goals of the community social development commission.” John Givens reacted to the mayor’s stand by saying, “I’m very upset. If the chief public official of the city is going to take a position as weak as Mayor Maier has, how can you expect the commission to do any better? If this is the mayor’s step by step approach, then it is obviously a step backwards.” Incensed, 44 MCORE members attended the SDC meeting that day to again demand Lins’s resignation. The commission announced that a hearing on the

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<sup>125</sup> MJ, 9/3/63, p. 1; Star, 9/7/63, p. 5.

controversy would be held on September 20. Feeling at least partially vindicated, the protesters marched throughout the building singing freedom songs and chanting.<sup>126</sup>

The next day, Mayor Maier further clarified his views. He told a *Journal* reporter that, in fact, he did not possess the authority to remove Lins, “If I take no personal responsibility, it is because I feel I have no responsibility. I do not make these appointments and I have no real power.” Alderman Phillips immediately rapped the mayor’s inaction, stating, “Once again our chief executive has failed to meet the issue head on, has failed to give the kind of leadership which is expected of him and which Milwaukee deserves.”<sup>127</sup>

On Monday, September 16, the same day Milwaukeeans opened their newspapers to the horrific bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptists Church in Birmingham which left four little girls dead and 23 injured, 14 MCORE members began a sit-in at the mayor’s office to protest his “refusal to take immediate action” in the Lins case. The group also presented the mayor with a petition which read, “We find your reply unsatisfactory in that while you say you disagree with Lins’ ‘stark statements.’ You assume he was quoted out of context. Mr. Mayor, can you think of any context in which those remarks, in the mouth of a public official, would be acceptable? We can’t.” Again, they pleaded with the mayor, as “father of the social development commission,” to “remove the cloud of indignation” hanging over the commission by removing Lins. Maier did not budge, but he did agree to meet with MCORE representatives.<sup>128</sup>

In a repeat of events a few weeks earlier at the County Supervisor’s office, a delegation of MCORE negotiators met with the mayor at his office in City Hall early on the morning of

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<sup>126</sup> MJ, 9/4/63, part 2, p. 1; MJ, 9/12/63, p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> MJ, 9/13/63, p. 1.

<sup>128</sup> MJ, 9/16/63, p. 1; Star, 9/16/63, p. 2.

September 17. Like the August 30 confab with Grobschmidt, the meeting merely offered each side the chance to reiterate its views. “Although the mayor claimed that he could do nothing about the situation,” a frustrated Givens told reporters afterward, “it is well known that he has never had the problem of expediting resignations on issues that he considers important.” He went on to explain, “The reaction of the mayor and Grobschmidt shows where their allegiance really lies – not with the people of Milwaukee as a whole, certainly not with minority groups, but with the absentee slum landlords and biased employers who have benefited from and contributed in the impoverishment of minority groups.” He concluded that, “Lins must go in order to clear the air so the commission can do more than simply defend the status quo.” In response, Maier issued a statement that claimed MCORE was “demanding an authoritarian approach which legally I cannot take and morally I would not take.” He went on: “I tried, evidentially unsuccessfully, to give them a perspective of what is quietly and undramatically happening in Milwaukee. I tried to give them my perspective. I got the feeling, however, that their attributions to Mr. Lins were of more importance to them than constructive positive action in really working on the city of Milwaukee’s sociological problems.” He concluded, stating that the important thing was that the commission “get on with its work.”<sup>129</sup>

The Lins controversy highlighted a fundamental racial impasse in Milwaukee. Members of MCORE believed they had made a reasonable demand for the removal of Lins given the nature of his comments and the mission of the SDC. MCORE also believed that they had made a good faith effort to pursue their goal, at least initially, through respectable means: letters, negotiation and pickets. City officials likewise believed in the fundamental reasonableness of their position. They saw in Lins one of their own, a respectable white businessman and

community leader who had, admittedly, made some unfortunate statements, but that was essentially decent at heart. In large measure, they shared his views. They believed they had risen above the initial passions unleashed by the remarks to arrive at a more accurate assessment of the situation. Neither side in the conflict was willing to compromise. Each side, in turn, viewed the other's obstinance as the chief obstacle to solving the impasse. The Lins conflict highlighted the fundamentally different experiences and perspectives that animated white and black Milwaukeeans. This tension would extend throughout the entire civil rights era.

Evidence of the polarizing impact of the Lins controversy extended beyond the parties directly involved. Support for the MCORE protest continued to grow. Meetings regularly drew forty to fifty participants, and mass rallies routinely pulled in several hundred supporters. Newspapers and television coverage continued to be sympathetic. In an editorial titled, "Fred Lins Must Go... Yesterday," The *Milwaukee Star* argued, "Lins could probably win, hands down, any political office in the South with his bigoted ideas. Milwaukeeans, however, will not stand for it."<sup>130</sup> Prior to the mayor's public display of support for Lins, local television station 6, WITI, chided Maier's lack of leadership: "The effectiveness of a worthwhile Commission could be lost... Where is our leadership in this community? Can't we expect our elected officials to at least make an attempt to solve this controversy? Our heads of local government are saying nothing. The Community social development commission was formed out of City Hall. Mayor Maier was directly involved in its formation. Shouldn't we hear from the mayor on this

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<sup>129</sup> MJ, 9/17/63, p. 1.

<sup>130</sup> Star, 9/7/63, p. 4.

dispute?"<sup>131</sup> Moreover, in a further display of community organization and solidarity, a group of 14 lawyers met at Attorney Clarence Parrish's office to offer free legal aid to arrested protesters. Similarly, a group of liberal, north shore whites formed the Equal Rights Defense Fund to raise bail money for MCORE members.<sup>132</sup> African American leadership remained uncharacteristically united in their effort to oust Lins.

Other signs, though, pointed to deep resistance to MCORE's campaign. Following their arrest, several MCORE activists began to receive hate mail. Some came from hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis. One such letter read, "Nigger – if you don't like it here – get out. Go back to the jungle and swing by your tail. This is just the beginning – from here on it gets worse."<sup>133</sup> John Givens told reporters that the group had received over 400 pieces of hate mail and that he, personally, had received over 100. The mail included pamphlets, periodicals, letters, postcards and sheets bearing pasted pictures of monkeys with racist captions. Similarly, at the picketing site outside the courthouse, the *Journal* reported, "Comments of passers-by were mostly mildly hostile to the marchers, except from Negroes." One group of young white men, in a typical display of derision, shouted, "Equality for whites!" For some whites, while they could understand and forgive Lins's transgressions, they could not understand or accept the direct action techniques of the MCORE. In late-September, South Side state senator Casimir

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<sup>131</sup> "Leadership By Elected Officials Lacking In Solving Civil Rights Controversy," WITI-TV, 9/6/63, Tom Jacobson Papers, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

<sup>132</sup> MJ, 9/6/63, p. 3.

<sup>133</sup> MJ, 9/9/63, p. 7.

Kendziorski proposed a state law prohibiting sit-ins altogether. The bill angered many labor leaders and never got anywhere.<sup>134</sup>

Following the failed meeting with the mayor, MCORE members went back to work, immediately reinstating their sit-in outside the mayor's office. That night, as demonstrators sat eating hamburgers, six police officers arrested and carted off 16 protesters, this time charging them with "aggravated disorderly conduct." The warrant justified the arrests by calling the MCORE tactics "coercive" and "intimidating." But local activists persisted. Ten returned to the Mayor's office on Wednesday. Maier told reporters that he had ordered the removal and arrest of protesters out of grave concern about "custodial regulations." Eight more MCORE members continued the sit-in on Thursday as the slated SDC hearing approached.<sup>135</sup>

The Lins controversy climaxed with more of a whimper than the bang many activists expected. Commissioners skirted the potentially explosive showdown by postponing the open hearing indefinitely until the MCCR looked into the case and issued a report. By passing the buck to the MCCR, the SDC sought to avoid an embarrassment and, perhaps, diffuse the issue by stalling. The night's sole drama was provided by an even more impressive show of African American community solidarity than at the August 31 MCORE rally. Despite the change of plans, thirteen prominent black leaders, representing every major civil rights group in the city, stood one by one to condemn Lins and the inaction of the city's white political leadership, and to support a resolution offered by Alderman Phillips demanding Lins's removal from the commission. The resolution failed by a vote of 8-1. MCORE announced the end of their protest

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<sup>134</sup> MJ, 9/30/63, part 2, p. 3; For response of two labor unions see untitled memos, circa September 1963, in Tom Jacobson papers, Milwaukee County Historical Society.

<sup>135</sup> MJ, 9/17/63, p. 1; MJ, 9/18/63, p. 1; MJ, 9/19/63, part 2, p. 1.

against Lins on September 21. While the group had not been successful in achieving their immediate goal, the controversy fundamentally altered the dynamics of civil rights struggle in Milwaukee.<sup>136</sup>

From 1958 through 1963, profound changes had taken place in the area of race relations. To most white Milwaukeeans in 1958, African Americans were largely invisible. Most whites did not live near African Americans, nor did they work alongside one another. When black people did appear in their minds, it was usually as a menace or nuisance. African Americans came to signify for many white people all of the problems facing a rapidly changing industrial city like Milwaukee. The two groups had little mutual experience and seemingly no common history. It is not hard, then, in this context, to understand how these people developed stereotypical views about African Americans and why, when confronted with their presence, they would rally around the one thing that most distinguished the two groups: skin color.

Similarly, traditional African American leadership remained cautious and conservative well into the 1960s. Enmeshed with the white power structure, many took an optimistic view of African American prospects in the city. While these leaders acknowledged that problems existed, they preferred quiet negotiation to confrontation. Many expressed righteous indignation over racial inequality in the South, while ignoring the equally abysmal plight of most African Americans in their own city. When they did focus in on these problems from their pulpits, commissions and boards, all too often they blamed new migrants for their own problems, rather than discrimination.

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<sup>136</sup> MJ, 9/21/63, p. 1; Star, 9/28/63, p. 3



Beginning in the late-1950s, though, the city began a slow process by which Milwaukeeans, both black and white, became increasingly aware, first of the “problems of the inner core,” and second of the “civil rights crisis” in the city. Following the Daniel Bell case, a small band of community members attempted to challenge what they viewed as police brutality and official acquiescence. Their attempt to organize a protest march wrecked on the shores of local opposition, both within and without the black community. These efforts highlighted a growing spirit of opposition and militancy, while also underscoring the limits of direct action in Milwaukee at the time. Over the next five years, things would change dramatically.

The national civil rights context made local circumstances increasingly conducive to more aggressive activism. The Birmingham turmoil, Wallace’s open defiance of federal authority, and the tragic murder of Medgar Evers in Mississippi all brought a new immediacy to civil rights issues across the country. President Kennedy’s speech officially sanctioned accelerated action on civil rights. In addition, simmering racial conflict in several northern cities challenged the notion that civil rights was a regional issue. These changes heightened the expectations of thousands of black Americans while placing pressure on local governments to take swift action to ameliorate racial problems in their area.

At the local level, Milwaukeeans slowly began to awaken, some willingly, some not so willingly, to the racial inequality in their own backyard. A series of attempted protest campaigns – the Bell case, the Madison fair housing sit-in, the MNALC economic boycotts, and the Lins controversy – forced public attention on the inner core, confronting civic and political leaders with the possibility that more dramatic confrontations could happen. Clearly, the militant civil rights spirit was spreading in Milwaukee and a new, more aggressive African American leadership group, committed to direct action, was emerging to challenge the approach of

traditional leaders. Official indifference, even in the face of what appeared to be blatant racial stereotyping by a member of the SDC, accelerated these trends, galvanized racial militancy and unified black leadership, at least for the time being. Increasingly, local organizers drew on grassroots support for their direct action efforts. The Lins case represented the final stage in this early evolution.

In 1958, most Milwaukeeans believed, “it can’t happen here.” By the beginning of 1963, an increasing number of people worried that “it might happen here” if action was not taken to address the city’s racial chasm. After the Lins controversy and sit-ins, the question no longer seemed relevant. The question was not whether racial strife and direct action tactics would come to Milwaukee; They had. The question became, What would happen next? Could civil rights activists keep their momentum? Could they build on the successes of past campaigns to build a vibrant movement to challenge racial inequality in Milwaukee by forcing city leaders to act? Or would official action temper the growing activist spirit? What issue, if any, could keep activists unified? It wouldn’t take long to find out the answers.

### Chapter 3

#### **“So We Will Have to Persuade Them”: The Campaign to End Segregation in Milwaukee’s Public Schools**

At 8:30am on Monday, May 24, 1965, 30 civil rights demonstrators arrived at the Brown Street Elementary School to protest racial segregation in Milwaukee public schools. As the protesters picketed and sang, three busses idled along the curb, waiting to transport African American pupils to the overwhelmingly white Hi-Mount School and Hawley School. Suddenly, a group of nine demonstrators, led by Lloyd Barbee and a former nun, Marilyn Morheuser, broke ranks and scurried in front of the lead bus where they linked arms and began to sing freedom songs. Milwaukee police promptly moved in and arrested the nine protestors in front of local news cameras. As officers closed the doors of the patrol wagon, two more women left the picket line and sat down in front of a second bus, blocking its exit. They, too were arrested.<sup>1</sup> A Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC) press release called the new tactic “a human chain-in, designed to focus public attention and censure on this city’s unique and flagrant abuse of Negro children’s human rights.” It went on to explain, “Intact busing of Negro children from overcrowded, inner core schools is worse than de facto segregation, which the Milwaukee School Board has refused to recognize and remedy. The policy... is a more blatant refusal to conform to the 1954 Supreme Court decision than any subterfuge yet

attempted by Mississippi or Alabama.” The civil rights coalition’s release concluded with a threat: “Let the demonstration be a warning to the city that we will continue picketing, sit-ins, lay-ins, chain-ins, and any other kind of ‘ins’ until the intransigent school board caves in... Apparently, they won’t do anything on their own initiative, so we will have to persuade them.”<sup>2</sup>

Between May 24 and June 16, MUSIC members attempted to make their case against school segregation by continuing to block school buses with “human chains.”<sup>3</sup> Activists showed a degree of mischievous sophistication in their approach. Journalist Frank Aukofer recalled that “MUSIC members, using automobiles like a civil rights Afrika Korps, kept police on the run by popping up at different schools without warning, then picketing or blocking school buses by forming human chains in front of them. Often reporters and television cameramen would be at the scene of a demonstration before the police arrived.”<sup>4</sup> In a further effort to dramatize the issue, some protesters bound themselves together with actual chains. On June 16, as 85 pickets looked on, 50 protesters completely encircled a school bus at Siefert Elementary School. Police arrested 20 persons, including 15 women and five men.<sup>5</sup> By then, MUSIC’s “human chain-in” campaign had resulted in 61 arrests - including Barbee, Groppi, Morheuser, and

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<sup>1</sup> Courier, 5/29/65, p. 1; MJ, 5/24/65, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> MUSIC Press Release, 5/24/65, Barbee Papers, box 13, folder 11; Countdown Newsletter, vol. 1, no. 3, 5/65, MUSIC Papers, box 1, folder 1; Intact busing was also tried in both Cleveland and St. Louis, but it was stopped.

<sup>3</sup> Again, the MUSIC Papers and Barbee Papers contain miscellaneous press releases, fliers and statements from this period.

<sup>4</sup> Aukofer, p. 61; Rev. Ionia Champion also remembered the “hit-and-run” tactics of MUSIC activists at this time. See, Ionia Champion interview with Patrick Jones, 1/24/00.

several other clergymen - and a flurry of national media attention, including a feature on the Huntley-Brinkley television news program.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1963 and 1965, education emerged as a critical civil rights battleground in Milwaukee. The campaign against segregated public schools evolved from a one-man crusade into a large-scale grassroots campaign supported by several thousand local people. Activists attempted to ply city officials with reason and negotiation, but quickly moved to legal action, confrontation and arrest. The school desegregation movement unified the African American community behind a sustained direct action campaign and focused disparate activist energies within the civil rights community on a single issue of racial injustice. The campaign propelled new leaders and new organizations to the forefront of the Milwaukee Movement.

The school desegregation campaign revolved, mainly, around the leadership of Lloyd Barbee. Even as the Milwaukee Negro American Labor Council and the Milwaukee Congress of Racial Equality grabbed most of the headlines in 1963, Barbee quietly worked behind the scenes to put education reform at the forefront of civil rights insurgency in the city. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, on August 17, 1925, Lloyd Barbee learned early the sting of racial inequality. As a boy, Barbee walked to school past several all-white schools aware of qualitative differences between those institutions and his own destination. Strict formal segregation in the city kept an inquisitive Barbee from the books in the Memphis public library. But the racial incident which stood out among

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<sup>5</sup> MJ, 6/16/65, pt. 2, p. 1; Star 6/19/65, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Barbee to NBC, 5/25/65, Barbee Papers, box 12, folder 6.

his boyhood memories was the time Memphis's "Boss" Crump refused to let renowned labor leader A. Philip Randolph speak within the city limits. Barbee credited that experience with opening his eyes to the lengths to which established white authority would go to protect racial hierarchy.<sup>7</sup>

These everyday indignities combined with his upbringing to form a fiery, fighting spirit. Barbee cited his father, Ernest Barbee, as the inspiration for his crusading vision despite the apparent obstacles of southern life in the 1930s and forties. Ernest Barbee would say to his son, "Be right or get right, and when you are right, go ahead." His son took those words to heart and joined the local NAACP of his own volition at the age of twelve.<sup>8</sup>

Other events, later in life, also played a critical role in Barbee's development as a civil rights leader. From 1943 through 1946, Barbee served in the United States Navy. His life aboard ship afforded him the opportunity to read books that helped him understand the racial discrimination he had experienced growing up in Memphis. Barbee's naval duty in the Great Lakes also allowed him to make frequent visits to family members in Milwaukee and Beloit, where he observed the complicated dynamics of race relations in northern cities. Following his military service, Barbee attended LeMoyne College in Memphis where he received a B.A. in 1949. He moved to Wisconsin that year on a scholarship to attend law school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as one of only a handful of African American students on campus. At both LeMoyne and in Madison, Barbee steadfastly refused to join any segregated organizations. "I considered

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Barbee.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

myself a human being... I was against all barriers.”<sup>9</sup> After only one year at UW, Barbee dropped out of school, in part because of the racism he encountered from both professors and fellow students. Over the next few years, Barbee worked with the local NAACP chapter as well as a variety of campus and community groups concerned with civil rights. Hardly a radical, he spent a brief period as National Field Secretary for the student division of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), a liberal, Cold War political action committee. Barbee ultimately returned to school and earned a law certificate in 1955 and an L.L.B. in 1956 from the UW Law School.

His second stint at the UW was not without obstacles, though. Despite his excellent academic record, Barbee found it difficult to locate a firm willing to accept a black lawyer, a situation he chalked up to racism within Madison’s celebrated liberal, white community. The situation forced Barbee to open a private law practice in Madison in 1959. He also served as a legal consultant to the Governor’s Commission on Human Rights, as the President of the Madison NAACP from 1955 to 1960, and as Chairman of the Wisconsin State Conference of NAACP Branches from 1961 through 1964. In 1964, he was elected to the state Assembly representing Milwaukee’s inner core. By the 1961 fair housing sit-in in Madison, Barbee had accumulated considerable experience in the field of civil rights, as well as a reputation for action.<sup>10</sup>

Other people’s assessment of Barbee differed greatly throughout his career. He was fiery and bitter, elitist or intellectual, forceful or rigid, confrontational or courageous, depending on the observer. Certainly everyone acknowledged that Barbee was a

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<sup>9</sup> Dahlk, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Barbee; Biographical sketch in Barbee Papers, SHSW.

maverick. According to Tom Jacobson, “[Barbee] wasn’t a grassroots leader like Fr. Groppi. He was more of an intellectual, a strategist with a vision.”<sup>11</sup> While Lloyd Barbee did not possess the personal charisma to turn out hundreds of local people for a school boycott, he knew how to put together a structure with a network of people who could plan, organize and pull off such an event. Barbee plied them with his intellectualism; he had a good argument.

Following the Supreme Court’s historic Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, which outlawed legal segregation in southern public schools, Barbee joined a generation of lawyers and activists who debated whether the court’s ruling might be extended to the northern context where segregation existed in fact rather than in law. According to Barbee, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP’s chief legal counsel from 1938 to 1961 and the main architect of the Association’s legal attack on southern segregation in education, hesitated to challenge de facto segregation in the North because he was doubtful of victory. After Robert Carter replaced Marshall as the NAACP’s Chief Counsel in 1961, Barbee recalled that Carter and his staff were more interested in the northern segregation battle. At the 1961 national convention, NAACP delegates passed a resolution directing local chapters to work to “ensure the end of segregated public education in fact or by law by all means possible.”<sup>12</sup> By 1963, the NAACP had filed 18 legal suits against segregated urban school systems. The NAACP claimed a significant early victory in the 1961 New Rochelle, New York, decision in which the court found not only segregation in the local public schools, but also intent to segregate by the school

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<sup>11</sup> Jacobson interview.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Orfield, Must We Bus?, p. 363.



board and ordered a remedy. Because intent was often difficult to prove in de facto segregation cases,<sup>13</sup> the NAACP did not win many of the early large city cases, most notably in Gary, Kansas City and Cincinnati. The changes within the national NAACP and the mounting legal challenges to segregation in northern cities provided a seedbed for civil rights activism around the issue of education throughout the urban North and West.<sup>14</sup>

By 1963, then, de facto school segregation had emerged as a significant civil rights issue in several northern cities. During that summer, NAACP and CORE helped mobilize direct action campaigns in 70 cities throughout 18 northern and western states.<sup>15</sup> Opponents of desegregation in the North used the concept of “neighborhood schools” to defend the status quo. The unequal racial distribution in schools, they argued, lay in housing patterns beyond the purview of local school boards or the courts. Many opposed bussing, despite the fact that many white parents already bused their kids to other schools through open enrollment policies. Others feared that an influx of African American students in predominantly white schools would lower standards. Most desegregation opponents instead advocated compensatory education in urban African American schools and an open transfer policy, which permitted parents to place their children in other public schools, space permitting. Advocates of desegregation argued that segregation, no matter the reason, damaged black students’ opportunities, as well as their psyches.

Barbee went further than some by arguing that segregation also hurt white students in a

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, segregated housing patterns were often blamed for segregated schools. Because housing patterns were outside the purview of school officials, this was not grounds for a court ordered remedy.

<sup>14</sup> See, Orfield, Must We Bus?; Wilkinson, From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration, 1954-1978; Barbee interview.

<sup>15</sup> *TIME* Magazine, August 8, 1963, p. 30.

multiracial democracy. Therefore, schools had to desegregate, even if that meant busing. Many civil rights activists also felt uncomfortable with the term “de facto” segregation because, they claimed, many northern urban school systems took steps to ensure racial discrepancies. For example, district lines were drawn to maintain racial separation, resources were distributed unevenly, and black teachers usually were placed only in African American schools. As a result, civil rights activists felt that the neighborhood school defense amounted to a bit of slick hokum which covered white racism.

More personal reasons also account for Lloyd Barbee’s interest in education as a civil rights issue. Barbee knew intimately the link between race and education in Milwaukee because several of his cousins worked as teachers in the Beloit and Milwaukee public schools. As a serviceman on leave with these family members, he heard firsthand of their frustrations. In addition, Barbee believed a strategic rationale existed to justify an attack on segregated education first. According to him, a well-educated black community was crucial to progress in other fields, particularly employment and housing. If Milwaukee African Americans received high quality, non-discriminatory public education, they would be better situated to earn good jobs. Decent employment would, in turn, improve the economic standing of local blacks and thereby make it easier for them to gain the purchasing power necessary for them to buy homes outside of the inner core.<sup>16</sup> Third, Barbee believed enough concerned parents existed in

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that Barbee did not think these other issues, particularly housing and employment, did not also need to be addressed in the context of the local civil rights movement. Indeed, while his primary activism focused on education, he also participated in efforts to end employment discrimination, housing discrimination and many other forms of discriminatory behavior toward Milwaukee African Americans.

Milwaukee to provide grassroots support for a movement to end segregation in public schools. Fourth, if it came to the courts, Barbee strongly believed that Milwaukee provided a much stronger case than in other northern cities. He felt sure that he could establish that Milwaukee schools were intentionally segregated through board policies and actions. Finally, Barbee thought that the city's relatively small African American population in the early 1960s made integration without white flight possible. Taken together, these personal dynamics, along with the changing national climate fueled Lloyd Barbee's efforts in Milwaukee.<sup>17</sup>

When Barbee and Tom Jacobson made the move to Milwaukee from Madison in 1961, Barbee began what was initially a one-man effort to challenge de facto segregation in Milwaukee's public schools. That did not mean, though, that race and education reform had not been previously intertwined in local politics. As Jack Dougherty, a historian of education policy in Milwaukee, has explained, there had always been "more than one struggle" for race-based educational reform within Milwaukee's African American community. Until the early 1960s, these efforts had focused on compensatory education at inner-city schools and increased hiring of black teachers throughout the system. Barbee's efforts, then, did not represent the first attempt by local black people to organize for school reform. His wholesale attack on de facto segregation did signify a shift on the issue of race, reform and public education in the city, a shift not everyone in the black community initially agreed with.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Barbee interview.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Dougherty, More Than One Struggle; See also, William Dahlk, "The Black educational Reform Movement in Milwaukee, 1963-1975," MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1990.

Barbee was not a natural, charismatic, grassroots leader capable of moving large numbers of people through the sheer power of his personality. His approach was more methodical and deliberate. From the outset, Barbee said, "It was clear that this was going to be a long-haul fight."<sup>19</sup> He realized that ultimately the issue would probably have to be resolved in the courts; that over a period of years they would need to build and bring a legal case. In the meantime, he believed that school desegregation advocates had to work on other fronts to support the long-term goal of legal victory. Barbee sought to mobilize a coalition of community groups and individuals. They would need to gather the necessary data to back up their claims against the school system. Once this basic structure was established, the school desegregation proponents could act. Barbee initially wanted to navigate established pathways of power to press his case. He tried to negotiate with state and local officials who oversaw education policy and to rely on reason and persuasion. At the same time, he hoped to create external pressure on these institutions and individuals by publicizing the issue. Finally, if necessary, civil rights activists would tighten the screws on school officials by initiating an escalating direct action campaign. Each phase of this campaign became a part of a broader, overall vision of social change where direct action, negotiation, propaganda, and legal action all worked toward a common goal. If nothing else, Barbee was a thorough organizer who liked to cover all the bases.<sup>20</sup>

Barbee first attempted to enlist the support of the Milwaukee NAACP (MNAACP). As state chairman of the organization, it was imperative that Barbee

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<sup>19</sup> Barbee interview.

<sup>20</sup> Barbee interview.

establish local support from the Milwaukee branch for his efforts. Moreover, while national NAACP leaders had indicated their support for Barbee's drive to end segregated public education in Milwaukee, they also made it clear that he needed to obtain the backing of the local affiliate. To that end, in 1961, before he moved to Milwaukee, Barbee wrote to attorney Clarence Parrish, President of the MNAACP, about the prospects for attacking school segregation in the city. Signaling a lack of commitment on the issue, Parrish failed to respond to the State Conference Chairman's inquiry. According to Barbee, Parrish later told him that he believed no deliberate segregation existed in Milwaukee public schools and that conditions for local African Americans were improving. In any case, the MNAACP failed to act on school segregation during Parrish's tenure.<sup>21</sup>

While a shift in national NAACP leadership provided Barbee with a more supportive climate for his education struggle, a change in local leadership aided his campaign, too. In December, 1962, Edward Smyth, an African American realtor, replaced Parrish as President of the MNAACP. Smyth, who would provide solid leadership during the Lins controversy the following year, supported an attack on segregation in Milwaukee's public schools. Smyth's backing helped Barbee receive a hearing before the full Executive Board of the MNAACP. Smyth's receptivity, though, only gave Barbee a foot in the door. The State Chairman would have to convince skeptical board members to back the desegregation campaign.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Barbee interview; Dahlk, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

A significant portion of the MNAACP Executive Board opposed Barbee's education proposals. Barbee recalled that only two board members, Vel Phillips's husband, Dale, and Roy Wilson, strongly supported him. Wilson's backing proved fleeting, but Phillips' continued for the duration of the anti-segregation campaign. Board members did not oppose the goal of desegregation, but felt uncomfortable with Barbee's confrontational style, preferring instead quiet, dignified negotiation and legal action. According to Barbee, board members feared a direct public assault on segregated education might spoil race relations and disrupt their ties to the white power structure. Two factions emerged within the MNAACP during this period. One group, led by James Dorsey, the "dean of Milwaukee's black lawyers," flat out opposed Barbee's confrontational tone and his willingness to use direct action tactics as a part of a broad strategy. The other faction, led by Ardie Halyard, understood Barbee's approach and quietly supported him, although they, too, were personally uncomfortable with his tactics. Ultimately, Barbee received the grudging support of the MNAACP Executive Board. With the local chapter publicly on board, national officials also extended more vigorous support.<sup>23</sup>

As he sought the backing of local NAACP officials, Barbee pieced together a research team, consisting mainly of social scientists from UW-Milwaukee and Marquette, to investigate schools in order to build a case to take to the school board and to the public. A number of individuals also played a significant role in a growing school desegregation coalition. Marilyn Morheuser, an ex-nun, became Barbee's chief lieutenant. In addition, Morgan Gibson, the state NAACP's Education Chairman, Carole

Malone, Leslie and Arlene Johnson, and John Givens of MCORE, Cecil Brown of MCORE and NNNPC, Calvin Sherard of the MNALC and Tom Jacobson, all were actively involved in the education campaign from the beginning. These individuals solicited support of other groups and began the long process of educating the community about the education issue through the media, leaflets, rallies and speeches.

In July, 1963, two events brought the education issue to public attention. A group called "The Young Lawyers" invited Barbee to speak about civil rights. During the speech, he charged the Milwaukee public school system with intentional segregation. Later he recalled, "I told them...they could walk from where we were meeting and go straight west and turn and be where the [school] board was. My thought about the speech was just to motivate them to work at home, that was all."<sup>24</sup> His remarks caused a stir among the overwhelmingly white audience and garnered local media attention. A few days later, Barbee sent a letter to State Superintendent of Schools Angus Rothwell on July 8, charging the Milwaukee school system with promoting segregated education and asked him to order desegregation.<sup>25</sup> At a preliminary meeting on July 25 between Rothwell and NAACP officials, including Barbee and Robert Carter, NAACP representatives requested four things:

1. That Rothwell recognize the existence of de facto segregation.
2. That he recognize its harmful effects on children.
3. That he order the elimination of de facto school segregation throughout the state, and
4. That he assist local school boards in devising plans for integrating schools speedily.

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<sup>23</sup> Barbee interview.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Barbee to Rothwell, 7/8/63, Barbee Papers, box 14, folder 12.

Rothwell responded that compulsory mixing of races in Wisconsin schools would be a complete reversal of present school policy. He also said he needed proof of illegal segregation in Milwaukee schools before he could act to eliminate it. Rothwell did promise to make a detailed reply to the requests in writing after a study. The meeting garnered local media attention.<sup>26</sup>

Following the meeting, Rothwell sent out a questionnaire about race and education to school superintendents in Milwaukee, Madison, Racine, Kenosha and Beloit, the major African American population centers within the state. On September 5, presumably after receiving and reviewing the responses, Rothwell made a detailed reply to the NAACP's requests. In a letter to Barbee, Rothwell stated that his office had found "no evidence" of intentional segregation by Milwaukee school officials. The State Superintendent argued that the Milwaukee "situation" resulted from a residential pattern and that placement of pupils or altering of district boundary lines with a view to changing the racial constitution of the schools "could very well be interpreted as being a violation of" Wisconsin statutes. Rothwell did urge five systems to decrease class size and assign more counselors to core schools. He concluded by reaffirming his own interest in the problem of racially unbalanced schools and called attention to the free transfer policy and the creation of a special committee to look into the matter by the Milwaukee Board of School Directors as hopeful signs of constructive action.<sup>27</sup> In his reply, Barbee accused Rothwell of "sidestepping the issue," and "pushing the problem under the rug." In his

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<sup>26</sup> MS, 7/26/63, p. 1; MJ, 7/26/63, p. 1; Barbee interview.

<sup>27</sup> Rothwell to Barbee, 9/5/63, Barbee Papers, box 14, folder 3.



view, improving existing schools without integration was “merely putting more frosting on already segregated schools and does not give the children the advantage of an unsegregated education.”<sup>28</sup>

At the local level, the early prodding of the school desegregation movement faced similar resistance. Harold Vincent, Superintendent of Milwaukee Schools, replied to Rothwell’s questionnaire by reiterating his support of the neighborhood schools concept and by stating unequivocally that the Milwaukee Public School System offered “equal educational opportunity” throughout the city. On August 6, though, in response to the growing public ruckus, the Milwaukee Board of School Directors formed the “Special Committee on Equality of Educational Opportunity,” more commonly referred to as the “Story Committee” for its Chairman, Harold Story, a “gruff, white-haired attorney with a penchant for legalism.”<sup>29</sup> Conservative school board president, Lorraine Radtke, appointed 7 directors to the committee, four conservatives and three liberals.<sup>30</sup> The Story Committee concentrated, initially, on the “problems of inner core schools.” They planned to hold hearings into the “legal, educational, and sociological” aspects of the issue with the ultimate goal of producing a report, with recommendations, for the full school board.

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<sup>28</sup> Barbee to Rothwell, 9/7/63, Barbee Papers, box 14, folder 3.

<sup>29</sup> Aukofer, *City With A Chance*, p. 51. Barbee remembered Story as “well-liked by conservatives and those in the Catholic Church.” See Barbee interview.

<sup>30</sup> Chairman Harold Story, John Foley, Margaret Dinges and Ed Krause made up the conservative majority on the special committee. They supported the “neighborhood school” model and consistently opposed measures to desegregate public schools. Cornelius Golightly, UW-M professor of Philosophy and the school board’s sole African American, Elizabeth Holmes and John Pederson, were considered liberals and supported school desegregation.

While the Milwaukee Board of School Directors did study the issue, it was clear early on that the majority of the board members had already made up their mind. At committee meetings and in public utterances, school officials made their desire to uphold the status quo clear. For instance, when the greater Milwaukee Conference on Religion and Race, whose members included the city's leading clergymen, requested that the board take action on the issue, Radtke sarcastically suggested that the group did not represent the views of members of their congregations. Similarly, board officials put together a one-sided bibliography, containing only material supportive of the majority's opinion, to guide school members in the school desegregation matter. This aggressive and unyielding stance produced a deep fissure between the majority and minority factions on both the School Board of Directors and the Story Committee. Ultimately, the two sides ceased all communications. It also virtually guaranteed hostile relations between civil rights advocates and the board majority.

Following Rothwell's rebuff, the Barbee-led coalition turned its attention to the Story Committee as a lever for change. Barbee wrote the Chairman of the new committee requesting the opportunity to appear before the group. Story invited NAACP representatives to address the committee during the "sociological" phase of the hearings. Because the committee was presently studying the education and administration of central city schools, though, the appearance would not be for several months. In the same letter, Story said that committee members could not be sure of Barbee's claim of racial imbalance in public schools because the board did not collect such data. As a result, Barbee and his allies set out to collect the data themselves. Moreover, Story underscored the need for compensatory education and reiterated his belief that the Milwaukee School

Board of Directors had “no functional responsibility to eliminate the conditions of housing and employment that are largely the source of such handicaps.”<sup>31</sup> Barbee replied sharply that “compensatory education, no matter how massive, cannot eliminate segregation in our schools.”<sup>32</sup>

As Barbee waited to hear from the Story Committee between mid-September and early December 1963, he continued to organize and the school desegregation movement in Milwaukee began to pick up steam. While Barbee continued to play the most significant leadership role, he was supported by an emerging local movement - a growing coalition of individuals, organizations and resources dedicated to challenging segregation in Milwaukee’s public schools. Just as the Lins controversy heated up, crystallizing civil rights divisions within the city, MCORE and the state and locale NAACP announced a formal alliance. MCORE’s participation, coming at the height of its influence, gave the desegregation movement grassroots legitimacy because it was the only Milwaukee civil rights organization with the proven ability to turn out local people for a direct action campaign.<sup>33</sup> The Near Northside Non-Partisan Committee (NNNPC) also formally endorsed Barbee’s efforts. The support of popular community groups lent grassroots credibility to Barbee’s claims. In addition, Barbee enlisted the aid of two UW-Milwaukee professors to lead a team of volunteers to gather the necessary data on Milwaukee public schools to make an effective case to both the public and to the Story

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<sup>31</sup> Story to Barbee, 9/10/63, Barbee Papers, box 14, folder 3.

<sup>32</sup> Barbee to Story, 9/18/63, Barbee Papers, box 14, folder 3.

<sup>33</sup> Givens interview; Barbee interview.

Committee.<sup>34</sup> By December 1963, then, the school desegregation movement in Milwaukee had begun to build momentum. The outlines of a broad-based civil rights coalition were taking shape, a small but growing group of committed individuals and organizations stood ready to help, and they were now armed with hard evidence to support their claims of segregated education in the city's public schools. As winter approached, civil rights activists felt that they were in position to make a strong case before the Story Committee.

Initially, most Milwaukeeans had never heard of de facto segregation and paid little attention to the rumblings. Both major newspapers applauded the formation of the special committee and counseled a reasoned, good faith approach. While acknowledging that problems did exist in core schools, the newspapers were willing to give the Milwaukee School Board of Directors and the Story Committee the benefit of the doubt. At the capitol, Governor Reynolds announced that his office would study the possibility of busing in Milwaukee, but nothing ever came of it. In Milwaukee, Mayor Maier and the Common Council remained silent.<sup>35</sup> In September, the Milwaukee Teacher's Education Association gave a "special salute to those teachers in the inner core schools whose work and efforts have been 'under fire' by unjust criticism in recent weeks." The MTEA also assured Vincent and his staff that they supported him "100%" in "maintaining Milwaukee's fine record." Later, local 79 of the American Federation of

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<sup>34</sup> When Barbee first charged the Milwaukee school system with racial imbalance, Story replied by stating they he could not be sure of Barbee's claims because the school board adhered to a "colorblind" policy and kept no statistical records of the racial make-up of Milwaukee schools. As a result, Barbee and the NAACP conducted its own survey.

<sup>35</sup> No doubt, Maier was hesitant to confront civil rights issues aggressively. He rationalized his inaction by claiming he had no authority over educational issues.

Teachers passed a resolution supporting school desegregation. In October, June Shagaloff, national Education Director for the NAACP, publicly urged the school board to abolish de facto segregation and become a model for other cities. Overall, though, the education issue had not yet registered on the city's collective radar; much work remained to be done by civil rights advocates.

In early December, Story announced that the special committee would finally begin studying the sociological aspects of the school system on December 10.<sup>36</sup> At that meeting, Barbee presented the committee with a 77-page report and petition representing the bulk of the group's work to date. In essence, the report underscored the Supreme Court's ruling that segregated schools were inherently inferior, regardless of whether the racial imbalance was intentional or de facto.<sup>37</sup> In addition, it stated that "Whites as well as Negroes are being handicapped by segregation in their understanding of reality and in their social relations - two fundamental areas of child development for which schools are responsible." The state and local NAACP defined integration as a 15-40% African American student body in each school. According to their 1963 data, one high school, two junior high schools and eleven elementary schools were more than 90 percent black. Four other elementary schools were 60-90% black, and two high schools, one junior high school and four elementary schools had an African American enrollment of 50 percent and rising. "The problem is obvious," Barbee said. "The time has come for solutions."

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<sup>36</sup> MJ, 12/11/63, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> While the Supreme Court had deemed de jure segregation inherently inferior and thus illegal, it was less clear whether their historic 1954 ruling extended to the de facto segregation found in the North. In fact, the nascent case law on the issue suggested that proof of racial imbalance in schools was not enough to mandate a court-ordered remedy. It was also necessary to show that segregation resulted from the intentional actions of the school system.

Barbee offered a number of steps that the Board of Directors might take to alleviate

de facto segregation:<sup>38</sup>

- Acknowledge the problem and establish a clear-cut policy to integrate the schools
- Allow African American students to transfer into white schools
- Rezone districts to increase racial balance
- Select new school sites in locations that ensure greater diversity
- Assign African American teachers, administrators and other school employees to schools throughout the system

The report referred committee members to seven plans already in use in other cities as a guide for board action. Barbee also issued two deadlines to the committee. By January 30, 1964, the Milwaukee School Board of Directors was to establish a clear integration policy, allow African American students to transfer into white schools, and end “intact busing.” “Intact busing” referred to a policy in which children at overcrowded schools or at schools closed for construction were transported by bus to other schools where they were kept “intact,” that is separated from the classes and students at the “receiving school.” If the Board of Directors took these initial steps, the NAACP would give them until September to devise a more comprehensive plan for integrating the schools. If the Board of Directors failed to meet these demands, the state and local NAACP and its allies threatened a “direct action campaign,” including demonstrations and legal action.

Representatives of MCORE and the NNNPC also appeared briefly before the special

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<sup>38</sup> Many of these measures seem moderate from today’s perspective. At the time, though, many whites viewed them as fairly radical steps and generated much controversy. Also note that busing was not one of the suggested remedies at this point. Barbee had said that if busing was the only way to desegregate, then the end justified the means, but busing did not appear in the report as a proposal or demand. As the education issue dragged on, many would charge the school desegregation movement with advocating a

committee on the tenth. They supported Barbee's demands and presented their own findings and statements in favor of school desegregation. Story told the civil rights representatives that the report would have to be studied in detail before the special committee could respond to their demands. He invited the three groups to return on January 21 to answer questions from committee members.<sup>39</sup>

Between the December 10 and January 21 meetings, several developments occurred in the school desegregation campaign. On December 16, WTMJ-TV aired a 30-minute program titled, "Special Report: School Segregation in Milwaukee," which focused on objections to the neighborhood school system as it presently worked in the city.<sup>40</sup> The day after Christmas, the Milwaukee school administration announced that it would take its own "racial census" of the public schools to assess NAACP claims. Desegregation proponents hailed the move as a victory.<sup>41</sup> On Saturday, January 11, 1964, the Executive Board of the Wisconsin NAACP began to lay plans for the next phase in the campaign by voting to follow the lead of other northern cities and organize a boycott of Milwaukee public schools if the Milwaukee School Board of Directors failed to act. "It was clear," Barbee said, "that there needed to be a boycott or some big demonstration and we couldn't just go and try to sit-in all of those schools because we didn't have the

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widespread busing program. Politicians exploited the issue for personal gain, and misinformation and miscommunication spread and compounded the problem.

<sup>39</sup> Special Committee on Equality of Educational Opportunity Minutes (Hereafter referred to as "Story Committee Minutes"), December 10, 1963, Radtke Papers, SHSW; Barbee interview.

<sup>40</sup> MJ, 12/15/63, p. 332; MJ, 12/17/63, pt. 2, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> MJ, 12/26/63, p.1.

manpower.”<sup>42</sup> By convincing thousands of local students to withdraw from school for one day, school desegregation activists hoped to display popular support for their cause and force school board action through disruption. The state NAACP board also authorized demonstrations and legal action to bring about integration. Of course, public sparring also continued in the press. In late December, Story attacked the NAACP’s proposals, stating “As I read their report, it would abolish the neighborhood school system as it operates here.” From that point forward, preservation of the neighborhood school became the guiding principle for the Board of Directors and Story Committee majorities. Barbee countered that the system would be “altered,” not destroyed, in order to “reflect a racial balance, rather than an imbalance as it does now.”<sup>43</sup>

By the January 21 meeting, tensions on both sides of the education debate ran high. At the beginning of the gathering, with 300 community members looking on, Story invited Barbee to join committee members at the head of the table to answer questions. Barbee took his place, but refused to proceed unless the special committee offered representatives of all three civil rights groups a seat at the table and a voice in the question-and-answer session. Story, in turn, would not agree to this procedure. Barbee then left the meeting room, followed by 25 supporters. The civil rights activists gathered in the hall of the school administration building and sang “We Shall Overcome.” Two men hoisted Barbee to their shoulders and the whole group made off down the hall singing and chanting. Back inside the meeting room, Story proceeded to address questions, “for the record,” to an empty chair he referred to as “Mr. Barbee.” That night,

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<sup>42</sup> Barbee interview.

<sup>43</sup> MJ, 12/24/63, pt. 2, p. 1.



representatives from the state and local NAACP, MCORE, NNNPC, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Milwaukee Commission on Equal Opportunity met at the African American branch of the Elk's Club to discuss what had happened and how to proceed.<sup>44</sup>

The breakdown at the January 21 meeting proved to be a pivotal moment in Milwaukee's school desegregation campaign. Civil rights activists had become increasingly frustrated with the Story Committee's approach. Their refusal to formally acknowledge the existence of a racial imbalance in Milwaukee's public schools exasperated many desegregation proponents and led them to believe that the Story Committee was not negotiating in good faith. In the context of the recent Lins conflagration and the Mayor's "Go Slow Speech," the board's inaction seemed to indicate further evidence that Milwaukee's public institutions were not responsive to the concerns of local African Americans. As a result, activists increasingly embraced a more militant and confrontational approach to the issue. MCORE and the NAACP refused future meetings with the special committee, calling them "fruitless." The period of reason and negotiation had ended, while a new period of direct action began.

Barbee understood the crucial nature of these events. As local historian of education, Robert Dahlk, has explained, Barbee understood the crucial nature of these events. When the campaign began, his ultimate goal was system-wide racial balance. He believed that the school board could be compelled to stake a public pro-desegregation stance and to take some modest steps to ameliorate the inequality. Barbee thought the more difficult struggle would be to get the board to implement a full-scale, system-wide

desegregation plan. In retrospect, he acknowledged that if the board had taken a compromise position short of system-wide racial balance that much of the community support for his campaign would have dissipated. Milwaukee School Board officials made scant effort to accommodate the coalition, though they did make two token gestures: of twelve newly hired African American teachers, the school board placed six in white schools; and, children being bussed intact would be allowed to eat lunch at receiving schools. Barbee believed that school board conservatives did not view him or the civil rights coalition seriously during the fall and winter of 1963-64. They viewed him as a "lightweight," he said, and thought the threat would dissipate if they held fast to the neighborhood schools concept. After all, they believed that the policy was not only right, educationally, but also supported by a majority of voters. The school board and special committee, though, underestimated the depth of frustration within the African American community over segregated schools. Rather than defusing or demobilizing the situation, board inaction unified the civil rights coalition and galvanized community support for the desegregation campaign.<sup>45</sup>

In late January, the school desegregation campaign received a further boost when Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., visited the city to voice support for the local movement. During a press conference at General Mitchell air field, King told reporters that residential segregation should not be used "as an excuse for perpetuating de facto segregation" in the schools. He also endorsed demonstrations to pressure school boards to action. That night, King addressed a capacity crowd of 6,000 at the Milwaukee

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<sup>44</sup> Barbee interview; MJ, 1/22/64, pt. 2, p. 1; Star, 1/25/64, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Barbee interview; Dahlk, p. 42.

Auditorium. In the night's only moment of protest, 20 members of MCORE stood and turned their backs to the stage while Mayor Maier spoke. They also draped a banner over the balcony rail that read: "Our Mayor can't be a roadblock of civil rights." The gathering indicated the spreading grassroots support for civil rights in Milwaukee, at least at the national level, as well as the increasingly militant spirit of some local activists.<sup>46</sup>

January 30 came and went with no significant attempt made by the Milwaukee school board to meet the coalition's demands. As a result, civil rights groups conducted a series of demonstrations and threatened a mass withdrawal of students unless the demands were met. Civil rights leaders initially focused on the problem of intact busing. In its 1967 report, Racial Isolation in the Public Schools, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights explained that the intact busing policy in Milwaukee had been established in 1957 "when the school system began busing Negro children to predominately white schools." Previously, white students that were bused to other white schools had been integrated. The Commission also reported that black children in Milwaukee were returned home for lunch even if the cafeteria was available at their white "receiving schools." Moreover, because of the way district lines had been drawn to maintain racial segregation, a number of African American students lived closer to their white receiving school than to their official "neighborhood school."<sup>47</sup> To those opposed to segregated public schools, intact busing was the most flagrant example of the school board's determination to preserve the racial imbalance.

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<sup>46</sup> MJ, 1/27/64, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 1/28/64, pt. 2, p. 1; Star 1/25/64, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, City With A Chance, p. 54.

On February 2, almost four years to the day after the historic Greensboro sit-ins, thirty pickets, mostly African American, marched at the 12th Streets and 20th Street Schools, which sent children on intact busing, and at Sherman School, which received bused children. Barbee, Rev, Gregg, Givens, Coggs, Rev. Luscious Walker, Director of the Northcott Neighborhood House, as well as members of the MNAACP, MCORE and NNNPC participated. In addition to the pickets, approximately 350 people, again mostly African American, marched to the school administration headquarters to protest the school board's inaction. Leaflets distributed by MCORE and MNAACP members said: "De facto segregation seriously contributes to the high rate of educational retardation and dropouts among Negro students. Social scientists are agreed that it demoralizes Negro youth by developing feelings of rejection, hostility and self-hatred. And bigotry grows in all-white schools. How can democratic values be taught in segregated schools?"<sup>48</sup>

As Barbee explained to a community meeting in February, the picketing had three aims. First, intact busing focused community attention on a concrete example of segregation in Milwaukee schools. It made a complex and somewhat obtuse issue real and tangible. Second, civil rights leaders hoped pickets would bring school board policies that promoted or maintained racial imbalance out into the open. And third, demonstrations provided a useful way to educate community members and parents about racial inequality in Milwaukee's public schools. Picketing at the intact busing sites lasted two weeks with a fourth school, Hi-Mount, added. According to news reports, demonstrations averaged between 10 and 40 participants each day. Throughout this early

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<sup>48</sup> Star, 2/8/64, p. 1; MJ, 2/3/64, p. 1; Sentinel, 2/3/64, p. 1.

phase of direct action, the majority of pickets were African American. Overall, MCORE provided the largest source of protesters, more than the MNAACP or churches.<sup>49</sup>

Grassroots white reaction varied at the initial protest sites. In general, most white Milwaukeeans remained oblivious or indifferent to the school desegregation campaign. On the first day of picketing, however, dozens of tense white parents drove their children to school, then watched the protest from their cars. One parent explained that if any incidents occurred, he would pull his 10-year-old child out of school immediately. This parent mirrored white community leaders' response by focusing on the tactics of the protesters, rather than the issues the picketers sought to dramatize. The same day, fifteen white teenagers booed civil rights demonstrators and carried signs that read, "2-4-6-8 We Don't Want to Integrate." A few days later, police removed eight white mothers after they forcibly blocked the path of picketers. Another counter-demonstrator distributed petitions opposing the "involuntary transfer [of students]... from neighborhood schools... primarily for the purpose of eliminating racial imbalance." Civil rights activists also began to find "hate literature" at and near picketing sites that played on long-standing racial stereotypes and suggested that the movement for racial justice was inspired and directed by communists. Indeed, throughout the civil rights era in Milwaukee, charges of communism were often leveled at demonstrators.<sup>50</sup>

An incident during the February 4 demonstrations revealed the tenor of the direct action campaign and the movement, in general, at this time. At the 12th Street site,

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<sup>49</sup> Barbee interview; Star, 2/15/64, p. 1; MJ, 2/3/64, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> MJ, 2/3/64, p. 2; MJ, 2/5/64, p. 1; MJ, 2/8/64, p. 1.

Milwaukee's two African American Assemblymen, Rev. Lathan and Isaac Coggs, left their picket line and attempted to board a school bus. Police officers blocked the two men and a brief scuffle ensued between Lathan and police. No arrests were made, but the incident did receive press coverage. Barbee criticized Lathan for a lack of restraint and Ernest Green, Chairman of MCORE Demonstrations Committee, told pickets: "We will not tolerate any attempts to board buses or enter schools. Anyone who violates these rules will be asked to leave the picket line. There is no place for violence in MCORE activities." Up to this point, organized protest remained highly organized and supervised. Participants received training in non-violent direct action techniques and had to agree to abide by strict rules. The goal of these respectful and dignified protests was to draw a stark contrast between the discriminatory practice, in this case segregated schools, and the peaceful demeanor of participants. In addition, civil rights leaders did not want their tactics to overshadow the main issue. Less than a year later, though, Barbee and other school desegregation activists in Milwaukee would reject such restraint and invite arrest.<sup>51</sup>

The city-wide boycott Milwaukee's civil rights leaders began to organize that spring was a part of a national trend. By the fall of 1963, de facto segregation in northern public schools had become a significant civil rights issue. Between June of 1963 and May of 1964, at least seven major cities experienced large-scale, city-wide school boycotts to protest segregation.<sup>52</sup> Previously, smaller cities like Syracuse and Englebrook

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<sup>51</sup> MJ, 2/4/64, p. 1; MJ, 2/5/64, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> From my preliminary analysis of northern school boycotts, most appear to have been organized by an umbrella organization. The NAACP offered legal aid in most locales, while local CORE chapters often headed up the direct action mobilization.

had held single-school boycotts. In June, 1963, though, Boston activists held the first city-wide boycott. In November, Milwaukee's neighbor, Chicago, gave the tactics nationwide publicity when more than 200,000 students stayed away from school in protest.<sup>53</sup> The movement crested in February 1964, with a second boycott in Chicago and Boston, and similar demonstrations in New York City and Cincinnati. Another school boycott in New York followed in March, two more in Kansas City and Cleveland, in April, and finally in Milwaukee on May 18.<sup>54</sup> While Milwaukee civil rights leaders operated within unique local circumstances, they were also aware of and responding to trends at the national level. This interconnection could be seen in more concrete ways, too.<sup>55</sup> In the spring, MCORE leaders wrote to Chicago CORE asking for help organizing the Milwaukee boycott. Similarly, Tom Jacobson traveled to New York City to sit on planning meetings for the school boycott there. And throughout the school desegregation campaign, the national offices of the NAACP and CORE stayed in close contact with its local branches in Milwaukee, supported their school activism and lent advice, training, and other resources as needed.

Although most Milwaukee civil rights leaders had united behind the boycott idea, they still needed widespread public support in order to make it a success. On March 1, the coalition held a mass rally at St. Mark's African Episcopal Church to explain to

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<sup>53</sup> For a detailed overview of both the school desegregation movement and the more general civil rights movement in Chicago, see James Ralph, Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> Rudwick and Maier, CORE, p. 248.

<sup>55</sup> In particular, Barbee stated that he was aware of the Chicago, New York and Cleveland boycotts and that they provided inspiration and a model for local action. See, Barbee interview. Also, Milwaukee newspapers regularly covered school boycotts and other school-related activism in other northern cities.

community members why a boycott was necessary, how it would work, and to find out the extent of public support for it. The overflow crowd of approximately 600, most African American parents of school children, clapped and shouted their support for the why and how of the plan. At the end of the rally, nearly every person present stood to show their support for the boycott. More than 70 individuals signed up for committee work to help organize the effort. In the end, civil rights leaders had the community mandate that they sought. They could now proceed.<sup>56</sup>

At the same meeting, coalition civil rights organizations agreed to formalize their coalition by creating an umbrella organization, the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC),<sup>57</sup> to move against de facto school segregation. MUSIC members were both unaffiliated individuals and representatives of established organizations. Most MUSIC members were African Americans, at least early on. MUSIC membership never reached more than 100, but it could mobilize thousands of citizens when needed. Original organizers included leaders of the state and local NAACP, MCORE, NNPC, and the Elk's Civil Liberties Committee. Later, the Milwaukee chapter of SNCC, the Milwaukee Negro American Labor Council, the Wisconsin Baptist Convention, Milwaukee Citizens for Equal Opportunity, the Marquette Faculty Association for Interracial Justice, Student Equality Fellowship (UW-Milwaukee), the Ninth Senatorial District Young Democrats, Americans for Democratic

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<sup>56</sup> MJ, 3/2/64, pt. 2, p. 7; Star, 3/7/64, p. 1; Star, 3/14/64, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> The original name for the organization was the Milwaukee School Integration Committee (MSIC). Barbee claims that some of the other early leaders new of his love for music and so changed the name to reflect that interest and honor him. By inserting the word "United" into the name, civil rights leaders created a much more melodic acronym: MUSIC.



Action, Students United for Racial Equality (SURE) (Marquette), and the Milwaukee Democrats for Freedom joined MUSIC.

The formation of an independent civil rights vehicle made sense on a variety of levels. First, it formalized the affiliation between various local civil rights organizations and presented a united front to school officials. In addition, MUSIC provided an effective vehicle, with lengthy tentacles into the community, through which mass action could be organized and mobilized. Lastly, a separate, independent organization helped moderate the tension between young militants and the more conservative old guard leadership, and between the competing member organizations. As Barbee recalled, “We had to lay the groundwork of an umbrella organization to combat some of the weaker elements of the local NAACP... [and] because CORE wasn’t going to knuckle under the NAACP and the NAACP wasn’t going to let SNCC or CORE be in charge.”<sup>58</sup> MUSIC operated outside the purview of any one organization, and thus retained the freedom to operate as local conditions dictated, without the fear that any single group could veto mass action approved by the majority of its members. As sociologist Aldon Morris has pointed out, it was often necessary for civil rights activists to create this type of “parallel institution” in order to carve out an independent local space for action.<sup>59</sup>

While MUSIC membership remained fluid, a distinct leadership core, or “inner cabinet” shaped the organization and its decisions. Barbee was the most influential leader, and the principal decision-maker. Marilyn Morheuser served as the group’s main

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<sup>58</sup> Barbee interview.

<sup>59</sup> Barbee interview; Aldon Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change (New York: The Free Press, 1984), pp. 40-76.

organizer and administrator. Calvin Sherard worked as the MUSIC office manager until his departure from Milwaukee in 1965. Rev. B.S. Gregg served as Treasurer. Tom Jacobson acted as MUSIC's legal tactician.<sup>60</sup> Other significant MUSIC leaders included Carole Malone, Leslie and Arlene Johnson, John Givens, Cecil Brown, Rev. Louis Beauchamp, Rev. Charles Luhn, and Rev. Henderson Davis. For important, broader decisions, MUSIC leadership sought community input and authorization. This usually meant a large, open rally at the MUSIC headquarters at Rev. Gregg's St. Mathew's CME Church.<sup>61</sup> Discussion would be held, and then a vote taken. Early on, during the direct action phase, weekly MUSIC meetings drew between ten and thirty people. After 1964, when the militance of MUSIC had escalated and leadership wanted to keep their plans from police, planning and decision-making came from a deliberately small group.

In the wake of the St. Mark's rally, an increasing number of African American organizations and individuals voiced their support for the boycott. Vel Phillips, who had heretofore kept quiet on the education issue, publicly stated that she supported the boycott and would work in one of the planned "Freedom Schools" with her husband Dale. Perhaps more importantly, by the end of March, 33 of the roughly 50 African American churches in the city had volunteered their facilities for Freedom Schools.<sup>62</sup> At the national level, both June Shagaloff and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, and James Farmer of CORE, voiced support for MUSIC and the boycott. After reading a report on

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<sup>60</sup> After 1964, Jacobson's influence and participation would decline as he and Barbee parted ways. Jacobson interview; Barbee interview.

<sup>61</sup> While Rev. Gregg played an active role in the school desegregation movement and lent his church facility for meetings, he also recalled that many of his church members were uncomfortable with the tactics and strategy of the campaign. See, Rev. B.S. Gregg interview with Patrick Jones, 11/10/99.

<sup>62</sup> MJ, 5/2/64, p.1; Star 3/28/64, p. 1.

Milwaukee schools prepared by Shagaloff, Wilkins reportedly called Milwaukee school segregation “the worst in the nation.”<sup>63</sup>

Despite this growing support, a large segment of the local black community remained uncommitted, perhaps even dubious, about the proposed boycott. Many parents felt uncomfortable defying established authority and others had mixed feelings about pulling their children out of school. Some reflected a more general apathy. If Milwaukee schools were, as some said, better than other communities, over all, then why condemn them? If education was so important, then why remove kids from school? Was it fair or right to use children in an argument among adults? These questions needed answers before many local black parents would commit to the boycott.

Over time, community support for the school withdrawal grew, largely due to MUSIC’s grass roots education and organizing campaign. MUSIC members literally went door-to-door, church-to-church, tavern-to-tavern to enlist the support of the community. They passed out informational leaflets designed to settle lingering questions and quell parents’ worst fears, gave dozens of speeches, held rallies, meetings and dances for students, and sponsored workshops for parents, teachers and volunteers.<sup>64</sup> MUSIC leaders sponsored two pre-boycott marches and a visit by comedian and civil rights

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<sup>63</sup> Star, 5/23/64, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> The MUSIC Papers, MNAACP Papers and Barbee Papers all contain various artifacts (leaflets, mailings, press releases, notes, etc.) from the organizing effort that went into the first boycott.

activist Dick Gregory.<sup>65</sup> The African American press also helped drum up support for the boycott through numerous feature articles and editorials.<sup>66</sup>

There was also a tremendous amount of logistical work to be done before a city-wide boycott could come off. It is easy to forget the potential organizational nightmare that an action like this presents an umbrella group that was little more than a confederacy of cooperating and competing smaller groups. Space needed to be secured and arranged for Freedom schools. Teachers needed to be found and trained. Grade-specific curriculum had to be developed. Transportation and health care provisions had to be organized. Phones needed to be manned, and the seemingly never-ending avalanche of questions had to be answered. This all took time, energy and coordination.

Many MUSIC activists agree, Marilyn Morheuser deserves much of the credit for the boycott's success. According to Lloyd Barbee, Morheuser "probably did more 'nuts and bolts' administrative and organizing work than any other individual."<sup>67</sup> Born in St. Louis, Morheuser had worked previously as a teaching nun, although she found the stricture of her vows too confining for her blossoming interest in civil rights. She moved to Milwaukee in 1962 and soon thereafter received a dispensation from the Pope to leave her order. Morheuser lived in the inner core, became an editor of the *Milwaukee Star*, and plunged into civil rights. She served as MUSIC's first Secretary, as well as the Chair of the Curriculum Committee for Freedom Schools. Some described the former Catholic

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<sup>65</sup> Star, 5/16/64, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Marilyn Morheuser worked as an editor for the *Milwaukee Star* after she left the Catholic Church. As a result, the direct link between MUSIC and the newspaper is clear. Throughout the school desegregation campaign, the Star remained a steadfast and vocal supporter of virtually every facet of the MUSIC strategy.

<sup>67</sup> Dahlk, p. 48; For a basic characterization of Morheuser, see interviews with Barbee, Gregg, Jacobson, and Givens.

nun as authoritarian and patronizing. Others called her courageous and proficient. Like Barbee, Morheuser possessed a single-mindedness and a crusading spirit. Regardless of what people thought of her personally, Marilyn Morheuser, more than anyone else, directed the organizing effort needed to conduct a large-scale school boycott.<sup>68</sup>

Even as MUSIC experienced overall success in its efforts to rally community support, dissenting black voices did exist. For instance, at the initial rally at St. Mark's Church, Robert Taylor, an active Republican and Barry Goldwater supporter in 1964, opposed the boycott. Taylor, though, had little support within the community.<sup>69</sup> E'Allyne Perkins, an MPS teacher and President of the Milwaukee Council of Negro Women, also spoke out against the boycott. In September of 1963, she had urged MCORE to abandon the Lins protest and concentrate on solving African Americans' problems, like black students beating up white students, fights after football games, vandalism, juvenile delinquency and parental apathy.<sup>70</sup> Later, in a March 1965 letter to the *Star* about the boycott, she criticized emotional preachers, unqualified black leaders and excessive drinking and pool-playing by African American men. Perkins's opposition to the boycott mainly reflected gendered class divisions within the black community.

Perhaps the most prominent African American opponent of MUSIC's boycott was James Dorsey. One of the first black attorneys in the city, Dorsey was active in the local NAACP and played a leadership role in some early civil rights activities, including a

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<sup>68</sup> MJ, 4/19/64; MJ, 5/17/64; *Star*, 2/26/66, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> MJ, 3/2/64, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> MS, 9/20/63, p. 1.

1941 NAACP “March for Jobs” and a campaign for non-discrimination in hotel accommodations. Despite losing in 1936, 1940 and 1944, Dorsey was the first Milwaukee African American to receive an Aldermanic nomination. In 1964, he became the first black County Court Commissioner. Dorsey was also active in the Catholic Church and enjoyed relationships with several prominent white Milwaukeeans. By the 1960s, Dorsey was both a fixture in the community and an elder statesmen within black leadership circles.

In late April, Dorsey announced his opposition to the boycott. In what was a classic iteration of the old guard position, Dorsey listed three main arguments against the demonstration. First, he underscored his belief that all African American children should be in school. The boycott, he said, encouraged disrespect for the law as well as the authority of teachers and principals. Second, Dorsey argued that the boycott might fuel a white backlash and pointed to the rising support among whites in Wisconsin for George Wallace in the 1964 presidential primary election. Third, Dorsey lamented that the traditional NAACP strategy had been jettisoned for more militant means. In a letter to the *Milwaukee Journal*, he said that the boycott stirred race hatred and that the MNAACP had “slipped into the rut of emotional rabble rousers.”<sup>71</sup> Dorsey’s social status, age, his broad acceptance by whites, and close ties with the Catholic hierarchy and white legal community might all help to explain his resistance to the boycott.<sup>72</sup> His resistance, while embodying the same class fissures as Perkins’s comments, also underscored the generation rift within the local African American leadership. There was evidence that

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<sup>71</sup> MJ, 4/29/64, p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Courier, 5/24/66, p. 1; MJ, 8/20/66, pt. 2, p. 1; Star, 5/14/66, p. 1. See also, Dahlk, pp. 49-50.

opposition to the boycott, at least within the black community, did not run deep. The day before the boycott, E'Allyne Perkins, James Dorsey and Judge Christ Seraphim<sup>73</sup> sponsored an open meeting to rally opposition to the boycott. Only 46 people attended.<sup>74</sup>

Among white Milwaukeeans, most remained oblivious to the school issue. White city leaders again focused on the tactics rather than issues; the boycott itself became the issue. Many claimed the boycott was illegal. Others argued that by keeping children out of school, civil rights leaders would hurt the very people they claimed to be helping. Others simply thought MUSIC leaders were "using" children and that they should be arrested and thrown in jail. Both the *Journal* and the *Sentinel* editorialized against the boycott. The boycott also brought Mayor Maier out into the public on the issue. Overall the Mayor had remained aloof during the school controversy, citing the Milwaukee School Board's jurisdiction over education policy in the city. In early May, though, Maier urged MUSIC to call off the boycott and offered to appoint an independent panel to mediate between MUSIC and the school board, to seek "a better public understanding of the points at issue, upon which there apparently is much confusion." MUSIC leaders agreed to mediation, but not to call off the boycott. The board ultimately refused the offer by a vote of 9-6, along with a rather mild statement recognizing "the racial imbalance that exists in our core area schools."<sup>75</sup> Other city officials made threats.

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<sup>73</sup> Dorsey and Seraphim were close friends. Seraphim served as a pallbearer at Dorsey's funeral. Judge Seraphim presided over several cases involving civil rights protesters in Milwaukee during the 1960s. He developed an anti-civil rights reputation for severely rebuking not only individuals before the bench who had participated in direct action, but also the whole civil rights movement.

<sup>74</sup> *Sentinel*, 5/18/64, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, a conservative member of the school board put the resolution forth. When the vote took place, though, he voted "present," instead of "yes" or "no." It is unclear from the available evidence what his motives were at the time.

District Attorney McCauley told parents and students they would be breaking the compulsory education law if they participated. He also suggested that poor parents might lose AFDC benefits if they took part. Harold Vincent told teachers who supported the boycott that they risked losing pay. In short, the full array of official city leadership opposed the boycott; none opposed the racial imbalance in the public schools with the same fervor.

Civil rights issues and white reaction were further sharpened in the spring of 1964 when segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace heeded the calls of a strong Wisconsin John Birch Society and entered the state's presidential primary on March 7.<sup>76</sup> He kicked off his campaign in Appleton, Wisconsin, the hometown of former Senator Joseph McCarthy. Facing Wisconsin Governor John Reynolds as a stand-in for President Johnson, the contest quickly turned into a referendum on civil rights. Newspaper accounts framed the election as a choice between "liberalism" and "segregation." For one month, Wallace transfixed Wisconsinites as he traveled the state pedaling his politics of division. Wallace transformed the direct appeals to racial bigotry that he employed in the South into coded language tailored to the anxieties of various northern white constituencies. He warned blue-collar workers of the devastating impact the pending Civil Rights Act would have on trade union seniority. He told suburbanites that open housing measures would dramatically change their neighborhoods. Although he did not mention the school segregation issue in Milwaukee directly, he did argue that the Civil

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<sup>76</sup> For a full overview of Wallace's career, as well as the 1964 presidential primary campaign, see Dan Carter *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995). On the 1964 primaries, see, pp. 202-215.



Rights Act would take away the rights of citizens to run their own schools. He augmented these masked racial appeals with further anti-government appeals and red-baiting.

An impressive array of community leaders rose to oppose the candidacy of Wallace. None of the local newspapers, nor any of the state's weeklies supported the Alabama governor. Prominent Democratic Party officials, labor leaders and religious authorities all encouraged Milwaukeeans to vote against bigotry by voting for Reynolds. AFL-CIO leaders sent letters to over four hundred Wisconsin affiliates branding Wallace "a carpetbagger, a bigot, a racist, and one of the strongest anti-labor spokesmen in America."<sup>77</sup> State Democrats also published a pamphlet juxtaposing pictures of Governor Reynolds and President Johnson with images of police dogs attacking civil rights activists in Birmingham.<sup>78</sup> Even Republican leaders, who stood to gain most, politically, from a strong Wallace showing came out publicly against the Alabama segregationist. The wide ideological spectrum of official opposition to Wallace's campaign, though, indicated that there was something to fear.

A closer look revealed a strong current of support for the Alabama segregationist. Wallace received warm and enthusiastic welcomes at appearances in La Crosse, Manitowoc, and Madison.<sup>79</sup> At small-town luncheons and service clubs, local businessmen and professionals consistently applauded his remarks. The State Chamber of Commerce abetted Wallace's efforts by announcing its opposition to the Civil Rights

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<sup>77</sup> *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 11, 1964, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Carter, p. 205.

<sup>79</sup> MJ, 3/31/64, p. 1; MJ, 4/2/64, p. 1.

Act at the end of March.<sup>80</sup> Below the desperate pleas of community officials, local voices sounded a supportive note for Wallace in the letters page of the *Journal*. One writer explained, “Gov. Wallace supports true Americanism. Mr. Wallace is a Christian man. He hates no one but he is strongly opposed to the socialist welfare state.”<sup>81</sup> Even the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission got in on the act, sponsoring a full-page ad in local newspapers the day before the election, titled “Civil Rights Bill or Federal Power Grab?” The ad argued that “the Socialists’ omnibus bill... constitutes the greatest grasp for Executive Power conceived in the 20th century.”<sup>82</sup> The South Side of Milwaukee had also been the sight of staunch opposition to the 1961 fair housing bill in the state legislature. In response to these and other indications, representative Clement Zablocki (D) returned home to encourage South Side Poles to vote against Wallace. Similarly, President Johnson hurriedly dispatched Postmaster General Gronouski, former Wisconsin State Tax Commissioner, to rally South Side support. And Wallace gave movement leaders and white officials at least one area of agreement; On March 28, the state and local NAACP along with MCORE sponsored a small protest march against the Alabama Governor’s campaign.<sup>83</sup> A week later, 150 local civil rights supporters picketed, sang and chanted as Wallace spoke to a mainly hostile crowd at Marquette University.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> MJ, 3/23/64, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> MJ, 3/26/64, p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> MJ, 3/6/64, p. 12.

<sup>83</sup> MJ, 3/29/64, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> MJ, 4/4/64, p. 1; Star, 3/11/64, p. 2.

The most stunning moment in the local Wallace campaign came on April 1, when the Alabama Governor appeared before an overflowing crowd of more than 700 enthusiastic supporters – mainly Serb-Americans and Polish-Americans - at Serb Hall on the city's South Side. Bronko Gruber, an ex-Marine and Milwaukee tavern owner, arranged the appearance with the hope of giving Wallace "a fair hearing." Wallace entered the room to cheers and choruses of "Way Down Upon the Swanee River" and "Dixie" sung in a mix of Polish and English. Racial friction started early when two African Americans refused to stand during the "Star Spangled Banner." Gruber pointed out the two men and the audience quickly peppered them with boos, catcalls and shouts of "Send them back to Africa."<sup>85</sup> The men and about ten other civil rights advocates left the hall. As Gruber introduced Governor Wallace, Rev. Leo Champion, an African American minister at the small Jerusalem Baptist Church and a supporter of the school desegregation drive, stood and shouted "Get your dogs out!" several times. According to Dan Carter, at that point the mood turned "from threatening to near-homicidal."<sup>86</sup> Faced with a jeering crowd, Champion and two associates filed out of Serb Hall. At that moment, a smiling Wallace strode on-stage and launched into his usual litany of attacks. At the same moment that Postmaster General Gronouski attempted to sway an audience of 100 Polish Americans against Wallace a few blocks away, the audience at Serb Hall interrupted the Alabama Governor's remarks 34 times with cheering and applause. It took Wallace over to escape the adoring crowd. Following the South Side gathering,

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<sup>85</sup> MJ, 4/2/64, p.1; MS, 4/2/64, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> Carter, p. 206.

which reporters called “the most enthusiastic” of any in the state, Wallace stated that if he ever had to leave Alabama, “I’d want to live on the South Side of Milwaukee.”<sup>87</sup>

On election day, Wallace garnered 24.5% of the vote statewide and 31.3% of the tally in Milwaukee, a shocking result that catapulted the segregationist Governor to national political attention and signaled the rising tide of white, racial backlash in the country. Wallace would go on to attain similar success in presidential primaries in Indiana and Maryland over the next several weeks. Most of the governor’s support within Milwaukee emanated from the overwhelmingly white, working-class South Side, as well as more affluent white suburbs along the North Shore and to the West.<sup>88</sup> In large part, the large Wallace vote indicated deep-seated resistance to civil rights by local whites. Many white Milwaukeeans indicated a belief that liberal leaders handled civil rights poorly and that racial change was moving too fast.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, a substantial GOP crossover vote also fueled the surprise outcome. Wisconsin had relatively fluid voting law for primaries. Many Republicans, no doubt, voted for Wallace in an attempt to embarrass sitting Governor Reynolds. Moreover, Reynolds had alienated working-class voters by raising taxes and supporting open housing legislation. Third, a low black turn-out in inner core districts also contributed to Wallace’s success in the primary. It is unclear exactly why so few local African American voters exercised their right to cast a ballot against an avowed segregationist come North to stir up trouble in their own back yard, but it appears that many viewed Reynolds as an inactive governor on civil rights.

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<sup>87</sup> MJ, 4/2/64, p.1; MS, 4/2/64, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> For a full statistical breakdown of the Milwaukee vote, see MJ, 4/8/64, p. 14.

<sup>89</sup> MJ, 3/10/64, p. 1.

This appears to be supported by the fact that many of the black voters who did turn out, cast votes for other state and local offices, but did not mark any candidate for the presidential primary race.<sup>90</sup>

While only a sidelight in the school desegregation campaign, the Wallace primary race did indicate some important trends for civil rights in the state. In particular, it highlighted the deepening schism within the community over civil rights and further illustrated to Milwaukee civil rights organizations the depth of white resistance to their cause. Moreover, Wallace galvanized white resistance to civil rights in the city by exploiting fear. The reaction of South Siders to Wallace's rhetoric foreshadowed the racial violence that would erupt in the city during open housing marches in 1967-68. Finally, the Wallace campaign, and the startling support he garnered in Milwaukee underscored the changing political dynamics of northern cities, pointing toward the broad-based political transformation occurring among "white ethnic" and white suburban voters during this time. Here are the roots of the new conservatism that would come into full bloom after 1968.<sup>91</sup>

But Wallace was not the only one working hard to derail civil rights in Milwaukee. Just prior to the boycott, on April 24, Harold Story seemed to slam the door on MUSIC's proposals. He announced that the only change that the school board could legally make was an "open enrollment policy." Currently, the board had a "free transfer

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<sup>90</sup> For an interpretive report of the data, see MJ, 4/12/64, p. 28.

<sup>91</sup> On the emergence of a new conservatism in American politics, see Dan Carter, The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Kevin Phillips, The Emerging Republican Majority (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969); Lisa McGirr, Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

policy” which allowed student transfers to schools with openings - for good reason.

School officials did not deem a desire for integration as a “good reason,” although they did accept white parents’ desire to get their children out of a transitional or predominantly African American school as one. As a result, civil rights organizations complained that white parents received transfers in far greater numbers than black parents. Under an “open enrollment policy,” a transfer would be granted for any reason - space permitting.<sup>92</sup> Story ruled out all other integration proposals, stating, “What the NAACP is asking for is in complete violation of the law. It’s almost sacred in our democratic concept of things that we do things without reference to race, religion and all the other things.” He called a policy statement favoring integration “only words.”<sup>93</sup>

On May 18, 1964, the tenth anniversary of the Supreme Court’s historic Brown v. Board of Education decision, the first MUSIC boycott took place, largely without a hitch. Barbee estimated that approximately 15,000 elementary, junior high and high school students withdrew from school and about 11,000 attended one of 33 “Freedom Schools” set up mainly in small African American church basements and extra rooms throughout the inner core.<sup>94</sup> Harold Vincent put the withdrawal figures at 11,000.<sup>95</sup> At the Freedom Schools, which MUSIC leaders had renamed for famous African American leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Crispus Attucks, Marian Anderson, and James Baldwin, four

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<sup>92</sup> There was not nearly enough open space in other Milwaukee public schools to make open transfer policy an effective means to desegregate public schools. In addition, as MUSIC officials would later argue, it also placed the primary burden for integrating schools on parents instead of on system administrators.

<sup>93</sup> MJ, 4/25/64, p. 1; MS, 4/25/64, p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> One Freedom School took place in much grander confines: All Saints Cathedral, the home parish of the Episcopal Bishop of Milwaukee, Donald H.V. Hallock.

<sup>95</sup> MJ, 5/19/64, p. 1.

new concepts temporarily replaced the traditional “three R’s.” Teachers emphasized ideas of freedom, brotherhood, justice and equality. They explored African American history - often for the first time - the concept of the boycott, racial myths, human relations, non-violent direct action, and the civil rights movement, generally. Students wrote poems and journals, drew pictures, engaged in role play, sang and danced, wrote letters, debated and discussed.<sup>96</sup> In all, roughly 320 college students, businessmen, blue collar workers, retired teachers clergymen, college professors, professionals, and even a few public school teachers, volunteered as Freedom school instructors. MUSIC literature explained that teachers were to “help students understand that the withdrawal is not a rebellion against schools, teachers, principals or authority, but rather an organized, orderly, united effort to get better schools.”<sup>97</sup> Parents of boycotting students also pitched in, providing transportation, serving meals, and in a few instances, teaching. Parents and activists picketed at 13 different sites the day of the boycott, as well. Dick Gregory returned to Milwaukee to support the protest. He attended a Freedom School where he encouraged students to become active in the civil rights movement, then he joined 35 people in a picket line at the school administration building. The day was capped off with a “Freedom Day Hootenanny” that evening to celebrate the boycott’s success.

Overall, the one-day boycott unfolded in a smooth and orderly fashion, a tribute to MUSIC leadership and organization. It provided a significant victory for the civil rights community, in spite of widespread official opposition to the plan. The large

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<sup>96</sup> MUSIC Papers, MNAACP Papers and Barbee Papers all contain lesson plans, curriculum, assignments, and other documentation of the Freedom Schools.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, City With A Chance, pp. 57-58.

numbers of participants also indicated broad community support for the school desegregation campaign and provided a base for further efforts. MUSIC leaders hoped that by lifting over 11,000 voices in protest that they might pressure the board to finally act. The support of thousands of young people also hinted at a new base of support for civil rights activism in Milwaukee. And, ultimately, the Freedom School model inspired later alternative schools in the city.

Reaction to the boycott was generally positive, even among many who had opposed it. MUSIC organizers were understandably enthusiastic about the turn-out. Barbee told reporters, "I think the boycott is a tribute to the courage of the parents and students who faced up to the intimidation of the school board and school officials. This repudiates those who said we would lose our white friends. We have lost white liberals and gained liberal whites." Morheuser echoed Barbee's sentiments, stating, "The boycott couldn't help but be a success because the cause was so just. We are now ready to move forward." Even moderate black leaders, like Corneff Taylor, said, "I am impressed with the orderliness of the students, which suggests to me that people are taking this more seriously than was first anticipated."<sup>98</sup> Similarly, the *Milwaukee Journal* conceded, "Whatever may have been the wisdom of the school boycott Monday, the conduct of it was splendid. It was well organized and well controlled. It testifies to the basic amount of good will in the community that not a single disorderly incident was reported. The demonstration of this point may have been its best effect."<sup>99</sup> Vincent tried to blunt the success of the boycott by minimizing absentee figures. He claimed there had been a

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<sup>98</sup> MJ, 5/18/64, p. 1.

<sup>99</sup> MJ, 5/19/64, p. 16.



substantial amount of illness, including an outbreak of measles, and also pointed out that Monday was a Jewish holiday (the Feast of Weeks). Moreover, Vincent suggested that many parents had kept their children away from school not in support of the boycott, but out of a fear of “possible incidents.”

Despite the overall success of the boycott and the generally positive response it garnered, MUSIC experienced some turbulence after May 18. Because it was not a membership group, but a loose affiliation of individuals and independent organizations formed initially to coordinate the boycott, MUSIC leaders had a difficult time maintaining its coalition. Two post-boycott developments underscore the fractious nature of mass-based coalition politics. Immediately following the school withdrawal, James Dorsey, in a published statement, resigned from the MNAACP. Dorsey, who had been a pillar among the old guard in the MNAACP for several decades, called the boycott “ill-advised” and claimed it “would put Milwaukee back ten years in the field of race relations.” In a pointed attack on MUSIC, Dorsey charged that the MNAACP “allows itself to be dictated by other so-called civil rights groups.” He said he hated to see the MNAACP “falling in line with other civil rights groups that use techniques other than legal redress.” Because of his status within both the black and white communities in Milwaukee, Dorsey’s words carried weight and further indicated the schism between traditional community leaders and younger civil rights leaders.<sup>100</sup>

At the same time that MUSIC leaders defended themselves from Dorsey’s charges, MCORE became enveloped in a factional dispute which would cripple the group and stem its effectiveness within the local civil rights movement. The Lins case had

pushed MCORE to the forefront of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee. By 1964, MCORE had achieved substantial notoriety and factions began to emerge due to competing agendas and clashing power designs. At high tide, MCORE regularly drew 300-400 people to its meetings at St. James Church, and an increasingly diverse and inexperienced group of community members clamored to participate. These meetings grew tumultuous with frequent disruptions and strife. In part, these conflicts reflected challenges facing any movement institution dealing with success and a rapidly expanding membership. As new members poured into the chapter, organization, leadership and discipline became more difficult to maintain.<sup>101</sup>

But the MCORE split also grew out of a personal rift between John Givens and Cecil Brown, Jr, the former Assemblyman with a penchant for rubbing people the wrong way. Brown and his allies, who included Jeanetta Robinson and her mother, Claretta Simpson, criticized the prominent role Tom Jacobson, a white, Jewish man and close friend of Givens, played in MCORE. They used Jacobson's race as a pretext to build opposition to Givens' leadership. The Givens faction, which included Jacobson and Leslie and Arlene Johnson, felt that the "boycott committee" had accomplished its task. They feared that MUSIC would lose its identity as a separate civil rights organization if it did not withdraw. Withdrawal did not, according to this group, preclude further work on the school desegregation issue or with other members of the coalition. This position partly reflected a rivalry that had developed between Barbee and Givens, the two main civil rights leaders at the time. Givens and his supporters worried that Barbee might use

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<sup>100</sup> Star, 5/23/64, p. 1; MJ, 5/20/64, p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> Givens interview.

MUSIC as a political vehicle for his own ambitions. Cecil Brown opposed the proposed withdrawal from MUSIC because he thought it would weaken the school desegregation drive. Brown deftly wielded parliamentary procedure to disrupt Givens' leadership at MCORE meetings. Tired of the infighting, Givens decided not to run for re-election and in October, the Givens faction voted to dissolve MCORE. Brown maintained that the group lived on under his leadership. To resolve this schism, the national CORE took over temporary trusteeship of the local branch on August 9, 1964. After his exit, Givens ended his participation in direct action and became a labor specialist at AMC. In the late 1960s, he became the first African American appointed to Henry Maier's staff, where he ultimately ran the Model Cities Project.<sup>102</sup>

In spite of the strained cohesion of the group, MUSIC worked on several fronts in the aftermath of the school boycott. In the most immediate sense, MUSIC defended dozens of students who participated in the boycott against punishment by principals, teachers and other school officials. Parents reported to MUSIC that their children faced detentions, suspensions and failed grades for their activism. On their behalf, MUSIC met with school officials in an attempt to reduce these penalties. In most cases they were successful in reducing the terms of the punishment if not canceling it out altogether. Moreover, MUSIC sponsored a series of "Freedom Camps" for students and "Freedom Institutes" for parents and organizers during the summer.<sup>103</sup> Lastly, MUSIC leaders

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<sup>102</sup> Givens interview; Star, 6/20/64, p. 3; MJ, 6/14/64; MJ, 6/21/64; Star, 10/17/64, p. 18; Star, 10/24/64, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> At the Freedom Camps, an integrated group of high school students spent a weekend together studying civil rights issues in Milwaukee and organizing a student group to take action on them. One participant stated, "For the first time in my life, I realized that I have a responsibility to become personally involved in the civil rights movement." Another commented, "This is the first time I've ever been with Negroes for any length of time." See, Star, 6/6/64, p. 1 and 6/13/64, p. 3.

discussed their options as they waited for a response from school board officials to the recent boycott.

School officials did not wait long to respond to recent events. When they did, they clearly had not gotten MUSIC's message; they remained rigid and unmoved. The Story Committee adopted open enrollment and a policy statement declaring, "the hope of short- and long-term accomplishment for central city schools lies in massive compensatory education." They rejected all other proposals, plans and arguments. Later, the school board adopted both proposals, its *only* concession during the whole campaign. Again, the majority cited defense of the neighborhood school concept for its opinion. They could also feel supported by an array of other factors: State Superintendent Rothwell's stance; a confidence that a majority of white Milwaukeeans, their primary constituency, supported their view; a feeling that Barbee and MUSIC lacked tenacity; and the May 1964 Supreme Court decision which let stand the Appeals Court decision in the Gary case. Radtke took the lead in defending board policy in a series of speeches and public statements condemning civil rights activists and stating that what she called "forced integration" would not take place. She also rapped local clergy who took part in the boycott, arguing that it was not their job to act as a "political bloc." Then, in June, while addressing the Milwaukee Ministerial Association, she said she would like to see "the Negro" develop a course of their own. "I would like to see him excel," Radtke claimed, "in areas which have not been thoroughly developed by white people. I think that the Negro has a great deal to offer our culture in the fields of the arts - music, drama, painting and sports. He should develop his skills to the utmost. He should be original in his approach to living. He should realize that he need not imitate the white man to fulfill

his culture.”<sup>104</sup> In a futile act, three board members - Golightly, Pederson and Holmes - submitted a “minority report” before the vote that charged the special committee with “gross dereliction of duty.”<sup>105</sup>

Civil rights leaders reacted with frustration, exasperation and a brewing outrage. Ed Smyth told reporters that the decision “gives substance and validity” to the belief that the school board and its special committee hold a “conservative, hostile and antagonistic attitude toward the idea of integrating schools in Milwaukee.” Similarly, Rev. Gregg complained that the Story Committee and school board’s emphasis on compensatory education “does not get at the problem.”<sup>106</sup> Others were miffed because the board refused to even acknowledge the existence of school segregation as a problem for schools, let alone take cursory steps to address it. Many MUSIC leaders felt that they had been hitting their heads against a brick wall; that their good faith efforts to reason, negotiate and demonstrate had gone utterly unheeded. Barbee ominously stated that the special committee had lost its chance to use “the last few ounces of prevention. Now it will take a pound of cure.” Throughout the summer and fall of 1964, the mood changed within the MUSIC leadership. Confidant that the Milwaukee School Board would make no concessions, MUSIC was increasingly resigned to a protracted legal fight. The feeling that school officials simply did not understand segregation or care for African Americans also led to heightened militance among desegregation activists.

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<sup>104</sup> In a seemingly ironic twist, Radtke’s statement contains elements of the Black Power/Black Nationalism ideology that would burst forth a few short years later.

<sup>105</sup> Star, 7/4/64, p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> Courier, 7/3/64, p. 1.

Reaction also came from the national level. At the NAACP conference taking place in Washington, D.C., June Shagaloff, who had been in close contact with Barbee throughout the campaign, referenced the Milwaukee situation during her speech, saying, "The cry, 'Save Our Neighborhood Schools,' that is raised, means 'Save Our White Neighborhood Schools.'"<sup>107</sup> Later, at the same convention, the NAACP passed a resolution stating "De facto segregated public schools can no longer be accepted or excused as the inevitable result of segregated housing or other factors. School officials have an educational and legal responsibility to eliminate segregated schools, regardless of cause, to the fullest extent possible."<sup>108</sup>

Pervasive frustration within Milwaukee's school desegregation movement did not lead to defeatism, but rather to a reassessment of strategy and a redoubling of activism. At the same time that young, white northern college students descended upon Mississippi to aid SNCC's "Freedom Summer" campaign, MUSIC leadership plotted its own next move. The group settled on a two-pronged attack. First, they decided to prioritize the legal challenge to school segregation. They were not alone. In several northern cities, direct action campaigns had met with a mix of ambivalence, opposition and silence from school officials. As a result, during the summer of 1964, roughly one dozen suits against urban school system awaited court action. In Milwaukee, by June, it had become clear to MUSIC leaders that negotiation and protest had failed to sway either the special committee or the full school board. The two sides reached an impasse, each entrenched

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<sup>107</sup> Barbee Papers, box 13, folder 10.

<sup>108</sup> Resolution #26, National NAACP 55th Anniversary Convention, 6/27/64. Copy in Barbee Papers, box 13, folder 11.

in their view and fortified by their constituents. Filing suit, MUSIC leaders believed, might indicate their seriousness and resolve to school officials. Moreover, in the likely event that the school board continued to refuse any responsibility over school segregation, the courts might compel them to act. From the outset, Barbee had known that legal action would probably be required to resolve the school segregation issue. The time had now come to move forward.<sup>109</sup>

Almost immediately following the Story Committee's decision, MUSIC went to work on the suit. To aid in the massive task, MUSIC formed a research committee headed up by a team of local university sociologists, educators and social science experts - Erwin Rynder, Hugo Engelmann, Steven Ross, and Earl Johnson of UW-M, and Joseph Tamney of Marquette.<sup>110</sup> The committee conducted a series of studies on the impact of segregated schooling in Milwaukee and brought together similar studies made in other northern cities.<sup>111</sup> While MUSIC activists worked behind the scenes to pull together the necessary information to file suit in federal court, Lloyd Barbee and June Shagaloff used the threat of a suit for maximum rhetorical advantage in the press.

By late summer, Barbee had crafted what he believed to be a winning legal strategy. In September, he told the MUSIC Research Committee that the suit was to be an "omnibus suit" in that a broad range of allegations would be raised concerning de facto segregation instead of focusing on one or two. In addition, Barbee stressed that the Milwaukee suit would differ from the Gary case by hitching the evils of segregated

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<sup>109</sup> Sentinel, 6/27/64, p. 1; MJ, 6/27/64, p. 1.

<sup>110</sup> Star, 9/19/64, p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> Barbee Papers, box 13, folder 6.

education in Milwaukee to the board's knowledge that the conditions existed and their refusal to take action to deal with them. Finally, the suit would be brought on behalf of a group of white parents, as well as African American parents, to show the deleterious effects of segregated education on all students. A federal suit, though, was a long-term strategy that would take time to unfold as it winds through the court system. In the meantime, they would have to continue to pressure local school officials to act.<sup>112</sup>

The second prong of MUSIC's revised strategy was a sharp escalation of direct action. To date, MUSIC had applied an incrementalist approach to their protesting. For the most part, they had maintained a restrained, non-confrontational stance. By the summer of 1964, more and more members of MUSIC believed the tone of their direct action efforts would need to be more confrontational if they hoped to provoke a response from local school officials. Between June and July, MUSIC leaders conducted a series of internal meetings and discussions to determine what actions, precisely, they should take. But civil rights leaders also realized they could not proceed alone. "For any action that we will initiate," Barbee said, "parents' suggestions, cooperation and understanding are necessary." To rally community support, MUSIC held a series of parents meetings in July. Participants in these internal and external discussions suggested a variety of actions that could be taken when school reopened in September. They sought to involve parents, teachers and administrators in their activism, along with students. Some advocated another boycott. Others urged a mass protest rally for both parents and students.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Minutes of MUSIC Research Committee Meeting, 9/17/64, Barbee Papers, box 13, folder 6.

<sup>113</sup> Star, 7/25/64, p. 1; Barbee Papers, box 12, folder 5.



Before MUSIC had finished its own direct action plan, a newly energized branch of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (MSNCC), headed by Cecil Brown, Jr., began its own direct action campaign, a move that made waves within the local school desegregation movement. Brown, who also served as the Education Director of the NNNPC, had formed MSNCC in the spring of 1964 as a direct action vehicle affiliated with the NNNPC. MSNCC had laid dormant until the summer of 1964 because of the prominence and popularity of MCORE and MUSIC. When MCORE split and went into trusteeship, though, Brown and his followers turned to the MSNCC branch as a new vehicle for their activism. Following the May boycott, MSNCC picketed six African American ministers for refusing to allow their facilities to be used for Freedom Schools and for barring MUSIC representatives from speaking to their congregations. Many of the black community's most prominent black ministers were targeted, including R.L. Lathan of New Hope Baptist, W. J. Calvin of Mt. Zion Baptist, E.M. Kelly of Metropolitan Baptist, E.B. Phillips of Greater Galilee Baptist, J.A. Lathan of St. Mary's Baptist, and H. M. Beecham of Canaan Baptist. Protesters carried signs which read, "Uncle Tom Preachers Must Go" and "When we wanted freedom, Rev. Kelly said no."<sup>114</sup> MUSIC leaders remained cool to the protest. While generational and strategic differences existed between MUSIC leadership and several ministers, local churches remained an important network for organizing. Then, on August 4, twenty MSNCC members who had been picketing outside the school administration building, marched inside and disrupted a Story Committee meeting by singing freedom songs. As they left,

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<sup>114</sup> Star, 6/6/64, p. 3.

they chanted, “Jim Crow Must Go!”<sup>115</sup> In early September, ten MSNCC members conducted a similar protest at a meeting of the full school board. Brown, Morheuser, and Rev. Leo Champion, took part. Lloyd Barbee watched from the audience but did not participate.<sup>116</sup> The MSNCC pickets and disruptions received significant press. In an on-air editorial, Bob Heiss of WTMJ-TV summed up the opinion of many prominent white Milwaukeeans: “The young people who are participating in an admirable cause did the cause nothing but harm Tuesday night by their ill-advised actions. If they wanted to present an objection to the committee they should have done so through the correct channels.”<sup>117</sup> This was precisely the kind of exposure MUSIC leaders hoped to avoid by maintaining tight organizational reigns on direct action. These differences go a long way toward explaining MUSIC’s hesitance to endorse or participate in MSNCC’s actions. Some civil rights leaders criticized Brown and MSNCC as divisive and undisciplined, citing the church pickets and school board interruptions. Others saw Brown and his followers as admirably committed to the cause despite their questionable judgment. Overall, MSNCC activism and MUSIC’s ambivalent response further highlighted the complicated dynamics of coalition politics at this time. While MUSIC remained at the head of the school desegregation struggle, they did not fully control their constituent parts. MSNCC functioned for a few short months. In the spring of 1965, MCORE reemerged back on the local civil rights scene.

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<sup>115</sup> MS, 8/5/64, p. 1; Star, 8/6/64, p. 1.

<sup>116</sup> MJ, 9/2/64, pt. 2, p. 4; Star, 9/5/64, p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> WTMJ-TV editorial (printed version), 8/10/64, Henry Maier Papers, box 44, folder 10.

The national call for a moratorium on civil rights demonstrations during the fall election season tamped down what might have been a growing predicament for MUSIC leaders. At the end of July, national leaders of the NAACP, SCLC, the Urban League, the NALC, CORE and SNCC issued a call for a “broad curtailment, if not total moratorium of all mass marches, mass picketing and mass demonstrations.” National civil rights leaders feared that further activism might fan the flames of a growing “white backlash” against the civil rights movement and thereby increase the vote for Goldwater and other segregationist candidates. In Milwaukee, local civil rights leaders met the statement with little enthusiasm. E. Gordon Young, the young attorney who had replaced Barbee as head of the Wisconsin NAACP, stated that while the state organization would abide by the call, “I really don’t agree with the policy.” Barbee also resisted the plea, stating, “If there was a moratorium on bigotry, I would be in favor of a moratorium on demonstrations.” John Givens told reporters, “My view is that civil rights is a fight for freedom... It is not a fight to be a Republican or a Democrat.” In the most stinging local rebuke to the national call, Terry Kirkland, Second Vice-Chair of MSNCC railed, “Milwaukee SNCC will not be bound to the Uncle Tom sellout of some of the civil rights leaders.”<sup>118</sup> The national call caught Milwaukee activists at a difficult point. At the same time that school board inaction had fueled a more militant spirit and a plan of action seemed to be coming together, national leaders concerned with national goals wanted to stem local activism. The Wallace campaign in Wisconsin had demonstrated to Milwaukee civil rights activists the magnitude of the potential white backlash vote. Ultimately, despite the sharp local rhetoric and after the brief MSNCC direct action

flourish in late August and early September, MUSIC and most of the Milwaukee civil rights community grudgingly abided by the national moratorium. As a result, little direct action took place in the city until the spring of 1965.

Little direct action, though, did not mean no local action on the civil rights front. To be sure, most civil rights activists shifted their attention to the campaign. Goldwater, who opposed the Civil Rights Act, fair employment and housing legislation, the War On Poverty, and integrated schools, provided a common rallying point for civil rights activists. In Milwaukee, local issues mingled with the national campaign. The Republican party exploited the racial politics of the school desegregation movement by placing ads in local newspapers and on billboards which stated, "Let's Keep Our Children In Our Neighborhood Schools - Vote Goldwater." Civil rights activists viewed this as an attempt to incite anti-black feelings in an effort to garner votes. They countered by picketing an October speech by Goldwater in Milwaukee and by demonstrating outside the Milwaukee County Republican Party headquarters a few weeks later in an attempt to have the ads removed. The party refused. The main drive within the inner core, though, was a broad voter registration and education campaign.<sup>119</sup>

Also in the fall of 1964, a group of prominent African American leaders persuaded Lloyd Barbee to run for the state Assembly to replace long-time inner core representative, Isaac Coggs, who had recently won election as supervisor from the same district. In his acceptance letter to the group, Barbee promised that, if elected, he would "initiate comprehensive legislation in the fields of civil rights, welfare and civic

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<sup>118</sup> MJ, 7/30/64, p. 2; MJ, 8/2/64, p. 28.

<sup>119</sup> Star, 10/10/64, p. 1; Star, 10/3/64, p. 1.

improvement.”<sup>120</sup> Barbee’s campaign literature emphasized his leadership of the Wisconsin NAACP and MUSIC and pushed integrated schools, open housing, increased unemployment benefits, and strong legal protection against police brutality as his main policy issues. He easily won election to office.<sup>121</sup>

During the spring of 1965, national events again interceded in the local civil rights struggle in Milwaukee. That January, in a push to dramatize the need for federal voting rights legislation, Martin Luther King and SCLC announced a voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama. Over the next two months, civil rights activists expertly tried the patience of Dallas County Sheriff “Big” Jim Clark through a crescendo of demonstrations and protests. Clark, a violent segregationist like Bull Connor in Birmingham, could not resist the temptation to bludgeon marching African Americans into submission.

Following the murder of 26 year old Jimmy Lee Jackson in March by a state trooper in the nearby town of Marion, King announced a dramatic march over 54 miles from Selma to the state capitol of Montgomery. Despite a ban imposed by Governor George Wallace, six hundred marchers set out from Selma on March 7, led by King’s aide Hosea Williams and John Lewis. As marchers moved onto US80, dozens of television cameras and print journalists recorded their progress. When the marchers reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, just outside Selma, Jim Clark’s men and one hundred state troopers, set upon the civil rights demonstrators with tear gas, batons, chains, electric cattle prods and charging officers on horseback. Americans across the country witnessed the whole event on national television and in their newspapers. They responded as King had hoped they

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<sup>120</sup> MS, 6/6/64, p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Barbee campaign materials in Barbee Papers, box 5, folder 1.

would, with horror and anger. Telegrams demanding federal intervention rained into the White House. Thousands of citizens pressured their congressional representatives to act. Over four hundred Jewish, Protestant and Catholic clergy left for Selma to bear witness and express solidarity with the marchers. Tens of thousands of sympathizers marched and demonstrated in cities and towns throughout the United States. In one brutal miscalculation, Jim Clark and his followers created a national constituency for the Voting Rights Act.<sup>122</sup>

In Milwaukee, civil rights activists responded to the Selma tragedy in much the same way as their counterparts in other areas. On March 13, a throng of 2,600 people, half of them African American, marched to the county courthouse for an hour-long rally.<sup>123</sup> Rabbi Dudley Weinberg told the gathering, "It's hard to know where Selma, Alabama, is. Selma is a state of being." Lloyd Barbee said this state of being existed in Milwaukee and across the country: "Even though we don't have physical murder, thousands are being murdered psychologically, socially and emotionally everyday." He concluded by encouraging those at the "Freedom March" to become active in the local civil rights movement.<sup>124</sup> Prior to the mass rally, on March 9, a smaller group of 30 people gathered at the Post Office for a prayer protest. Three young Milwaukee residents - Peggy Quinn, Mary Brumder and David Novick - all recently returned COFO workers in Mississippi, led the demonstrators. Sympathy marches also took place in Madison,

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<sup>122</sup> For a detailed overview of the Selma protests, see David Garrow, Protest At Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (New Have: Yale University Press, 1978).

<sup>123</sup> The Selma sympathy march in Milwaukee was spearheaded by MCORE in compliance with a call from the national office. Quickly a broad array of civil rights groups, churches, civil and social groups lent their support. See Courier, 3/20/65, p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> Courier, 3/20/65, p. 1; MJ, 3/14/65, p. 1.

Kenosha, Appleton and DePere.<sup>125</sup> At the Madison rally, Governor Knowles lent his support. Selma-related activism in Milwaukee was capped on April 3 when 300 people marched to the federal building for a memorial service dedicated to Viola Liuzzo, the civil rights worker murdered in Mississippi.<sup>126</sup>

Milwaukee was also represented among the hundreds of sympathetic clergymen and activists who descended on Selma in the weeks following the violent clash at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The *Star* noted that a group of 14 local African Americans had gone South, but failed to give any details about their identity. MNAACP and MCORE voted to send Rev. Leo Champion to Selma as their emissary.<sup>127</sup> Champion carried the Wisconsin state flag with him and hoped to present it to the governor in protest against police violence and in solidarity with local civil rights activists. In addition, a group of white clergy from Milwaukee - 4 Catholic priests, 2 nuns, and 2 Protestant ministers - also heeded Dr. King's call. While there, they participated in marches, demonstrations, training sessions and ecumenical prayer services. The white clergy came back from Selma energized and committed to combating racial injustice at home. Almost immediately, they each dove into local civil rights struggles in Milwaukee. Fr. James Groppi became the Second Vice-Chairman of MUSIC and began to engage in civil disobedience. These white clergymen would form one part of the nucleus of a new group of civil rights activists in Milwaukee and would help lead the local movement in new

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<sup>125</sup> In Appleton, 450 demonstrated. In DePere, at St. Norbert College, 100 marched. At UW in Madison, 300 came out and in Kenosha 350 people gathered to express their opposition to events in Selma. See, MJ 3/14/65, p. 2.

<sup>126</sup> MJ, 4/4/65, p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> Rev. Champion's wife, Ionia Champion also traveled to Selma, several days before her husband, in fact. She remembered getting to know Viola Liuzzo from working in the same office. See, Champion interview.

directions. Fr. Groppi, in particular, would emerge as arguably the single most important civil rights leader in Milwaukee between 1965 and 1968, a period that would earn the city the appellation “Selma of the North.”<sup>128</sup>

Conspicuous in their absence from Selma, though, were local African American clergy. The *Star* picked up on this and wrote a scathing editorial, stating, “Milwaukee Negro clergymen are letting the community down.” Editor Walter Jones went on to write,

Although preaching the cause of freedom and equality from the relative security, comfort and safety of their Milwaukee pulpits every Sunday morning, the clergymen have turned a deaf ear to the suggestion that as leaders they have an obligation to God, the nation, and themselves to back up their words with action.

Negro ministers have chosen to ignore the bloodbath drenched upon their black brothers in Selma two weeks ago, and repeated in Montgomery this week, evidently assuming that participation in a peaceful demonstration here exempts them from any further physical involvement.

The piece also claimed local black clergymen had offered only “flimsy” excuses for their inaction. Jones concluded by stating that “The pathetic attitude of the Negro ministry here was made even more vivid by the participation of the local white clergy... Must the white clergy lead the Negro to freedom on their coattails?”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> For the recollections of Milwaukeeans in Selma, see Champion interview; Fr. Mathew Gottchaulk interview with Patrick Jones, 4/15/99; Patrick Flood interview with Patrick Jones, 3/13/00.

<sup>129</sup> *Star*, 3/20/65, p. 5.



Following the Selma campaigns, another wave of school activism took place in cities across the North and West.<sup>130</sup> At the same time, Milwaukee officials began to gain a reputation within the national school desegregation movement for extreme inaction. A report by the NAACP failed to list Milwaukee among cities that had made gains in the northern school drive, instead placing them on the list of “do-nothing” cities. The report indicated that whereas other cities had taken effective steps to eliminate de facto segregation and other discriminatory practices in the previous few years, Milwaukee remained out of step with the rest of the nation. In response to NAACP- and CORE-sponsored programs and litigation, thirteen school systems in the North and West took action to achieve greater desegregation in 1965, raising the number to 41 school systems that had taken effective action since the northern campaign began in 1962. For instance, Cleveland, St. Louis and Kansas City each abandoned intact busing. Kansas City also adopted a new teacher placement policy. Baltimore initiated a non-discriminatory busing policy and ended discriminatory zoning practices. The school board in New Haven, which had yet to act, passed a resolution recognizing the educational harm of de facto segregation and promised change. Similarly, special citizen committees in Denver and St. Paul urged the adoption of plans to alleviate racial imbalance in public schools.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> June Shagaloff of the NAACP claimed that school desegregation campaigns were on-going in 24 northern and western cities during the spring and summer of 1965. Through newspaper accounts, mainly, I have been able to find evidence of school related activism in the following cities: Cincinnati, Grand Rapids, Flint, Indianapolis, Oakland, Wichita, Seattle, Tacoma, San Francisco, Portland, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Kansas City, New Jersey, Baltimore, St. Louis, Denver and St. Paul.

<sup>131</sup> The NAACP Report was detailed in *Star*, 9/11/65, p. 1. See also, *Star*, 9/18/65, p. 5.

At the local level, the school desegregation campaign increasingly took place within the context of broader civil rights activities that further sharpened both the issue of racial inequality in the city and the reaction to it from the majority of the city's whites. During the Fall and winter of 1964-65, a fair housing bill, sponsored by Lloyd Barbee, began to make its way through the state Assembly. Housing, more than any other issue, brought out resistance to civil rights in Milwaukee, particularly on the predominantly "white ethnic" South Side. Representatives from that area led the opposition to the bill. Similarly, police-community relations continued to deteriorate. Over the previous year, a citizens group attempted to press the issue publicly by forcing the Milwaukee Police force to hold hearings and account for its actions. Chief Harold Breier resisted all attempts to raise the issue, a stance that fueled frustration within the local black community.<sup>132</sup> Taken together, these streams fed both civil rights activism and white reaction in the city.

The extended time off from direct action during the fall and winter of 1964-65 gave Barbee and MUSIC the chance to further re-evaluate their strategy in the school desegregation movement. Optimism that the school board might take even modest steps to redress segregation continued to fade and a more confrontational approach emerged. School board elections in early April left the balance of power unchanged and further deepened this pessimism. By spring, a renewed direct action plan began to take shape.<sup>133</sup> In a letter to the Milwaukee School Board of Directors dated May 2, Barbee noted, "A year has passed since the school board refused to adopt a policy recognizing the injustice

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<sup>132</sup> The police brutality issue and housing issue will be dealt with in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

<sup>133</sup> MUSIC Minutes, 4/9/65, Barbee Papers, box 13, folder 6.

of segregated, unequal education and to plan realistically to correct the problems in this city.” He warned that without progress an escalated direct action campaign would begin. By May 15, “the citizens of this city shall once more dramatize the evil of injustice perpetrated on Milwaukee children by the administrators and directors of the Milwaukee public school system.”<sup>134</sup> The school board referred Barbee’s letter to the Story Committee which, in turn, rebuffed requests by MUSIC officials to discuss the demands. Instead, Chairman Story explained to Barbee that the committee had taken action the previous June by instituting an open enrollment policy and a program of compensatory education.<sup>135</sup> The committee and school board took no further action by May 15. Two days later, the Executive Board of MUSIC voted to organize a second school boycott in Milwaukee the following fall and approved a direct action program against the school board. Barbee told reporters, “We will have an all-summer long program of direct action. If the school board doesn’t get off the dead center of inaction, we’re going to see to it that Milwaukee has the kind of boycott this nation has never seen - in both scope and duration.” The following week, MUSIC began its three-week “human chain-in” campaign outside several inner core schools.<sup>136</sup>

A reinvigorated MCORE chapter abetted MUSIC demonstrations with a direct action campaign of its own. On May 2, national trusteeship of the local CORE branch ended with the election of Rev. Leo Champion as Chairman.<sup>137</sup> The move meant the end

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<sup>134</sup> Barbee to Milwaukee Board of School Directors, 5/2/65, MUSIC Papers, box 1, folder 1.

<sup>135</sup> Barbee to Story, 5/9/65, Barbee Papers, box 12, folder 6; Story to Barbee, 5/21/65, Radtke Papers, box 2, folder 3; See also, Star, 5/15/65, p. 1.

<sup>136</sup> Courier, 5/22/65, p. 1; MJ, 5/18/65, pt. 2, p. 12.

<sup>137</sup> MJ, 5/3/65, p. 17.

to the factionalization that had plagued the organization and the triumph of the Cecil Brown faction over John Givens' allies, most of whom had left MCORE. Brown continued to play a pivotal role in MCORE and would ultimately be elected Chairman the following year. On May 4, 20 MCORE members disrupted the monthly school board meeting with prayer and singing.<sup>138</sup> The next day, five MCORE members,<sup>139</sup> led by Champion and Brown, staged a sit-in outside the office of Harold Vincent. The peaceful protest lasted two days.<sup>140</sup> In late May, 9 MCORE activists conducted a "sing-in" outside the home of Harold Story.<sup>141</sup> On May 24, the same day that MUSIC's "human chain-ins" began, 13 MCORE members, led by Rev. Champion, interrupted a Story Committee meeting with a "prayer protest." Finally, on May 29, a second sit-in outside of Superintendent Vincent's office resulted in five arrests.<sup>142</sup> MCORE activists also participated in MUSIC demonstrations, so the line between civil rights organizations was more fluid than a merely institutional account might suggest.

Official reaction to the heightened direct action campaign was mixed. Majorities on the school board and the Story Committee reiterated their belief that intact busing was necessary, temporary and "educationally sound." Harold Vincent claimed integrating classes at receiving schools was "administratively unfeasible," even though it had been

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<sup>138</sup> *Star*, 5/8/65, p. 3; *Courier*, 5/15/65, p. 1.

<sup>139</sup> The five MCORE members were Brown, Champion, Loretta Noah, Barbara Gibson and one who refused to give their name to police or journalists.

<sup>140</sup> *MJ*, 5/5/65, p.1; *MJ*, 5/6/65, pt. 2, p. 4; *MS*, 5/6/65, p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> *MJ*, 5/22/65, p. 1.

<sup>142</sup> *MJ*, 5/29/65, p. 3.

successfully accomplished in several other cities.<sup>143</sup> The board agreed and most local whites assented without question. Judge Christ Seraphim, who presided over the cases of several civil rights demonstrators and had labeled the first boycott a “goofy stunt,” told several protesters in court, “You can’t get civil rights by doing civil wrongs.” For his part, Mayor Maier, in an effort to defuse the situation, called for a broad “official” study of the school controversy by a group of experts. He suggested that an organization such as We-Milwaukeeans or the Conference on Religion and Race should take the initiative.<sup>144</sup> The city’s mainstream editorial writers tended to be of two minds on the renewed activism. In what had become, at this point, a familiar refrain, most criticized the confrontational tactics, even if they agreed with the overall school desegregation movement’s goals. For instance, a *Milwaukee Journal* editorial, titled “Illegal Actions No Help In Settling School Problem,” argued, “Throwing oneself in front of a school bus is a reckless, if dramatic, way of making a point. The civil rights demonstrators who engaged in this illegal action... have not advanced the cause they champion.”<sup>145</sup> Similarly, the *Journal*’s sister station on TV, WTMJ-TV, called the human-chains “ill-advised.”<sup>146</sup> Opinion-makers, though, also criticized school official’s continued inaction. Further down the column in the same *Journal* editorial, it stated, “The school board bears

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<sup>143</sup> It is hard to say what might have happened had Milwaukee school officials integrated classes. Frank Aukofer has argued that there were indications that white parents may have protested or resisted, perhaps even violently. This might help explain school board inaction over the issue. If so, it underscores the school board’s willingness to be sensitive to the views of the white majority at the expense of the black minority.

<sup>144</sup> MJ, 6/17/65, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>145</sup> MJ, 5/28/65, p. 18.

<sup>146</sup> WTMJ-TV editorial (print form), 5/25/65, Henry Maier Papers, box 44, folder 11.

a good part of the blame for this. It has barely recognized that racial imbalance exists in the schools and, up to now, has refused to do anything about it.” Many Milwaukeeans appeared to look on with increasing exasperation at the lack of progress between school board officials and civil rights leaders. WITI-TV editorial writers captured this sentiment in late June when they stated, “We’re faced with this impossible impasse. So, where do we go from here? Well, how about a change... a change in personalities? Perhaps, we’d stand a chance of accomplishing something if there were different people to tackle the problem.”<sup>147</sup>

On June 18, MUSIC leaders agreed to stop blocking buses.<sup>148</sup> That same day, Lloyd Barbee filed suit in U.S. District Court on behalf of 41 students and their parents - African American and white - asking for a decree to end de facto segregation in Milwaukee public schools.<sup>149</sup> The suit, one of twenty before courts nationwide at that time, charged that the school board had drawn boundaries along racial patterns in housing, that black teachers were assigned to predominately black schools, that school transfers were made more easily available to white students, and that intact busing perpetuated segregation.<sup>150</sup> A few weeks later, Milwaukee civil rights activists joined seven other cities when MUSIC sent a nine-page letter of complaint to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, detailing charges of discrimination and segregation and

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<sup>147</sup> WITI-TV editorial (print form), 6/23/65, Henry Maier Papers, box 44, folder 11.

<sup>148</sup> MJ, 6/19/65, p. 3.

<sup>149</sup> MJ, 6/19/65, p. 1; MS, 6/19/65, p. 1; Star, 6/26/65, p. 3.

<sup>150</sup> Barbee interview. For an exhaustive breakdown of the court case, see the Lloyd Barbee Papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Barbee, the consummate lawyer, maintained copies of seemingly every document, correspondence, study, motion, brief, and scrap of paper associated with the case. The collection runs well over 200 boxes strong and continues to grow periodically.

requesting the withdrawal of federal funds from Milwaukee Public Schools. Over the next year, the federal suit would consume more and more of MUSIC's energy, but MUSIC still had work to do in the short-term.

By the end of the summer, MUSIC leaders turned their attention to organizing a second school boycott. On August 28, 800 "orderly but noisy" civil rights demonstrators marched nearly four miles from the Lloyd Street School to MacArthur Square for a rally. As they approached the square, marchers were greeted by 30 pickets carrying signs asking, "Is this another Communist controlled demonstration?" In fact, more than 50 local civil rights, church, welfare, fraternal, and civic groups sponsored the "March Toward Freedom and Independence" to commemorate the second anniversary of the March On Washington and to highlight racial inequality in Milwaukee, particularly in jobs, housing, and education. MUSIC leaders also hoped it would re-energize the Milwaukee school desegregation movement at the beginning of the third year of planned protest. As Barbee explained, "The main thing is... we want our citizens to focus on local problems and local solutions rather than engaging in Afghanistanism - like problems and solutions in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana." The rally featured entertainers, floats, a motorcade and speeches by Barbee, Dick Gregory and Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegate Fannie Lou Hamer.<sup>151</sup>

MUSIC members spent most of September and early October doing the everyday organizing necessary to pull off a second city-wide boycott, this time for several days. Again, they went door-to-door and bombarded the media to explain the boycott and rally

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<sup>151</sup> MJ, 8/29/65, p. 1; MS, 8/29/65, p. 1.

support.<sup>152</sup> Marilyn Morheuser scrambled to line up enough space to house Freedom Schools and teachers to put together a new curriculum. MUSIC organizers also had to coordinate transportation, meals, sanitation and nursing. On September 16, Barbee finally announced that the boycott would take place on October 18 and would last for at least one week.<sup>153</sup>

Reaction to the proposed boycott revealed deep divisions within the city over civil rights. Most Milwaukeeans preferred to avoid another school withdrawal. A general feeling of exasperation at both the increasing militance and confrontational style of MUSIC leaders and the stubborn unwillingness of the school board to take even cursory steps to address the racial imbalance in public schools pervaded. WTMJ-TV editorialists summed up the feeling of a large segment of the community when they said the boycott impasse “pitted irresistible force against immovable object.”<sup>154</sup> WITI-TV opinion-makers concurred, arguing that such a “hard-headed, stubborn approach” to school integration by both sides “will solve nothing.”<sup>155</sup> *The Journal*,<sup>156</sup> *Sentinel*, and *Courier* all opposed a second boycott; only the *Star* supported it. *The Journal* called it a “reckless mission”

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<sup>152</sup> Again, the MUSIC Papers and the Barbee Papers contain a variety of organizing materials from this period.

<sup>153</sup> There was some internal distention within MUSIC leadership over the duration of the boycott. Some did not see the utility of a long-term withdrawal. The point could be made in a few days. Moreover, they argued, truancy laws kicked in after four days of absence. Ultimately, boycott leaders would compromise by calling off the boycott after 3 and 1/2 days, just short of the truancy law. See, MJ, 9/19/65, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>154</sup> WTMJ-TV editorial (print version), 10/12/65, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 11.

<sup>155</sup> WITI-TV editorial (print version), 9/30/65, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 11.

<sup>156</sup> *The Journal* did run a ten-part series, “Reading, Writing and Race,” which explored the school desegregation issue from a variety of perspectives. While compassionate to the struggles and frustrations of inner core residents, the series stopped short of offering any comprehensive solutions to the problems. The series ran in the *Journal* from 9/5/65 through 9/16/65.



that harmed children and broke state truancy laws.<sup>157</sup> The new school board Chairman, attorney John Foley,<sup>158</sup> called the boycott “bad for the city” and vowed not to be “coerced” into action by an “illegal act.”<sup>159</sup> The District Attorney promised to prosecute boycott leaders, parents and students under the state’s truancy laws.<sup>160</sup>

State-level authorities sought to sidestep the issue altogether. When asked about the boycott at a press conference, Governor Knowles indicated that it was a local problem in which he had “no particular right to intervene.” Similarly, State Superintendent Rothwell declined to rule on whether Freedom School curriculum met state standards, a move that might have ended the legal wrangling over truancy. In both cases, state officials avoided a sticky political issue by deferring to local authority.<sup>161</sup>

Local supporters of the October boycott generally felt it was regrettable, but necessary, given the intractability of the school board.<sup>162</sup> The stubborn recalcitrance of the school board majority even began to alienate moderate groups like the Milwaukee

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<sup>157</sup> MJ, 9/18/65, p. 12.

<sup>158</sup> The election of John Foley as President of the school board was, itself, viewed by civil rights activists as a further sign of the resistance of school officials to any form of change. As the election approached, many within the community saw it as an opportunity to select a leader who might better bridge the gulf between the civil rights community and the board majority and broker a compromise. When the board elected Foley, a staunch supporter of neighborhood schools and proponent of Radtke’s policies, it made a loud statement of business as usual on the school board.

<sup>159</sup> MJ, 9/29/65, p. 1.

<sup>160</sup> The legality versus illegality of the school boycotts and Freedom Schools was actually a disputed issue. MUSIC leaders did not believe the DA’s claims carried much legal weight and called his bluff. While the DA continued to bluster on about possible legal action before, during and after the boycott, it appears to have been largely a scare tactic. No prosecutions ensued.

<sup>161</sup> MJ, 10/19/65, p. 1.

<sup>162</sup> Even the *Star* expressed some initial misgivings about another boycott, unsure of what it would accomplish. When civil rights groups went ahead with the plan, though, the *Star* quickly lent many encouraging words. The ultimately endorsed the second boycott.

Commission on Equal Opportunity (MCEO), the Milwaukee Committee on Community Relations (MCCR), and the Milwaukee Urban League. Twenty-one groups ultimately sponsored the second student withdrawal.<sup>163</sup>

As the boycott date approached, divisions deepened, and rhetoric sharpened, white community leaders outside of the school board frantically searched to no avail for a way to head off the boycott. The last best hope to stave off a school disruption occurred in early October, when We-Milwaukeeans announced plans to ask for cooperation from the school board to permit a professional study, with recommendations, of the Milwaukee public school system by outside experts. Maier seized on the announcement and urged MUSIC to cancel the boycott and support the study.<sup>164</sup> Official Milwaukee rallied around the proposal as the only way out of the boycott impasse. MUSIC agreed to support the study, but refused to call off the boycott, stating “the proposed study in no way meets the minimum conditions necessary for our withdrawing plans for an extended boycott.”<sup>165</sup> To MUSIC leaders, the study represented a last-ditch ploy to stave off direct action, rather than a genuine attempt to address the problem. Just days before the scheduled boycott, the Story Committee voted unanimously to support the We-Milwaukeeans study proposal; Later, the whole school board gave its OK.<sup>166</sup> We-Milwaukeeans and the school board each agreed to foot half of the bill for an outside research firm to conduct a comprehensive study of the Milwaukee public school system. MUSIC leaders viewed

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<sup>163</sup> MCCR Resolution, 9/3/65, Radtke Papers, box 1, folder 13; Cudahy to Radtke, 9/23/65, Radtke Papers, box 2, folder 3.

<sup>164</sup> Maier Press Release, 10/8/65, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 11.

<sup>165</sup> Barbee to Maier, 10/11/65, Barbee Papers, box 12, folder 6; Maier to Barbee, 10/12/65, Barbee Papers, box 12, folder 6.

the move as politically expedient and not evidence of a true willingness to confront segregated schools. In essence, they saw it as too little, too late.

At the same time as We-Milwaukeeans stepped up with their study proposal, Mayor Maier also worked on other fronts. On October 13, in a speech to the MCCR, Maier laid out the broad outline of what he called a “War On Prejudice.” In short, Maier encouraged the MCCR to come up with an “intensive, year long experimental program to help change the distorted image that some people have of members of minority groups.” The aim of the WOP, according to Maier, was to “show that prejudice and discrimination are as un-American as Communism.” In making his point, the mayor took a swipe at the civil rights activists:

Any one-dimensional approach which aims at producing racial justice only through turmoil concentrates on only one aspect of the subtle and complex factors which, in sum, make up ‘discrimination’... To the man who lives in the slum, to a man who lacks a job and can’t get one, to a man whose only legacy to his children is a heritage of bitter poverty, the noisy efforts and loud cries of some are full of sound and fury but not meaningful.

But the mayor’s proposal was long on rhetoric and short on concrete plans. He stated that he realized the limits of the “legalistic approach” and hoped instead, to make discrimination unpopular by blasting racial myths through what amounted to a voluntary public relations campaign. In essence, the mayor argued that what was needed most in Milwaukee was a new civic attitude on race. Moreover, he stated that the War On Prejudice should concentrate on “teaching newcomers how to live in a modern, complicated city and how to adjust to the expectations of their neighbors in such simple,

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<sup>166</sup> MJ, 11/3/65, p. 1.

day-to-day problems as home maintenance and basic sanitation.” To that end, he urged an expansion of “acculturation programs,” presumably to help African Americans behave better. Maier also made vague promises to create more jobs for inner city residents. In addition, he stated that the effort, if it was to work, had to be a metro-wide, cooperative effort between city and suburbs. “When 98% of the Negroes of Metropolitan Milwaukee are segregated in the central city, walled off by lily white suburbs, there is certainly need for more action in this area. We indeed have the largest percentage of Negroes confined to the central city of any metropolitan area in the nation.”<sup>167</sup>

Maier’s War On Prejudice did not get very far, at least initially. The MCCR sent back a request to the mayor for greater details<sup>168</sup> and, in turn, the Mayor backed off of the plan.<sup>169</sup> Some scoffed at the War On Prejudice as a political gimmick; It sounded good, promised much, but delivered little. The MCCR by this point had gained a reputation among civil rights organizations as a “do-nothing” group and Maier had been defined in their eyes through his “go slow” speech the previous year. To be fair, the plan did begin to sketch out the view of civil rights from the perspective of an embattled inner city mayor dealing with the exodus of resources as individuals and businesses began to flock to areas outside urban boundaries. Metropolitan-wide politics would become increasingly popular throughout the country in the decades after the civil rights movement declined. At the same time, though, Maier had been consistently rapped for

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<sup>167</sup> Text of Henry Maier’s Address to the Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations, 10/13/65, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 11.

<sup>168</sup> MJ, 11/10/65, pt. 2, p. 10.

<sup>169</sup> MJ, 11/12/65, p. 1.

his inaction on race issues in the city. The MCCR had also recently publicly criticized the school board for its resistance to change. And, the city increasingly suffered, locally and nationally, from the perception that white city leaders refused to confront and address racial discrimination. It is possible, then, that Maier put forth his election-eve plan in order to give the appearance that he was active in race relations without advocating any proposal that would significantly rile his white constituents, and thereby garner some votes while also inoculating himself from further criticism. Whatever the case, the WOP languished for months before being acted upon.

As the *We-Milwaukeeans* study received attention and Maier offered his WOP to the MCCR, another controversy engulfed the proposed boycott. At the end of September, support mounted within several inner core Catholic parishes and among Catholic clergy for the boycott and Freedom Schools. On September 28, twenty-four priests released a statement supporting the second boycott.<sup>170</sup> On October 10, the Sunday bulletin at St. Boniface announced that parishioners had voted 321-66 (or 83% to 17%) in favor of the boycott and agreed to join four other inner core parishes - St. Benedicts, St. Elizabeth, St. Francis and St. Gall - in support of it.<sup>171</sup> The parishes jointly announced their intention to conduct Freedom Schools on church grounds.<sup>172</sup> The Archdiocesan school board initially voiced no objections to the plans.

The clergy had reason to believe there was precedent for their actions. For instance, there had been no public repercussions in 1964 when a group of priests and

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<sup>170</sup> Priests Statement, 9/28/65, Bleidorn Papers, Cousins Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, box 7, folder 4.

<sup>171</sup> Eugene Bleidorn, *In My Time* (self-published memoir, 1994), p. 68.

<sup>172</sup> Press Release, 10/7/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 7, folder 4.

nuns protested George Wallace's appearance in Milwaukee. Nor had there been any Church reaction to Fr. Groppi's growing leadership role within MUSIC or his recent arrest as a part of the "human chain-ins." Moreover, the Greater Milwaukee Conference on Religion and Race, which included Archbishop Cousins, had reluctantly supported the one-day withdrawal in 1964. Inner core clergy hoped church officials would continue to take a permissive stance toward activism.

The inner core pastors' announcement went unchallenged for one week. Then, on October 14, Monsignor Edmund Goebel, the Archdiocesan Superintendent of Schools, forbade Catholic pastors and principals from participating in the boycott.<sup>173</sup> The decree, though, created more confusion than it cleared up: Did Msgr. Goebel have the authority to restrict individual clergy from participating in the boycott? Did it mean that Church facilities could not be used for Freedom Schools?

The following day, Bishop Roman Atkielski, acting head of the Archdiocese while Archbishop Cousins attended the Vatican Council in Rome, deepened the confusion. In a letter to each of the inner core pastors, Atkielski referenced a letter from District Attorney Hugh O'Connell supporting his opinion that the boycott was illegal. He warned that parents and clergy risked "prosecution by civil authority" if they took part and concluded by stating that no parish facility was to be used for the boycott.<sup>174</sup> When asked by reporters whether the clergy could participate individually in the boycott, the Bishop reportedly stated that his order prohibited participation by any priest, nun or brother. Since that specific command was not conveyed through official channels in

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<sup>173</sup> Edmund Goebel to Reverend Father, 10/14/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 7, folder 4.

<sup>174</sup> Roman Atkielski to Eugene Bleidorn, 10/15/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 7, folder 4.

writing, but was reported only in the media, inner core clergy did not feel bound by it.

As Fr. Eugene Bleidorn, Pastor of St. Boniface, recalled, “We took our guidance from the official communication to us, and not from an unofficial interpretation in the daily press.”

Other pastors told reporters that “the order ran counter to the conscientious judgment of these priests most closely involved in the problem.”<sup>175</sup> Inner core clergy felt that

Atkielski had sacrificed moral ground to legalism and vowed to continue their support of the boycott until a direct prohibition against individual participation came down. On the 16th, the clergy joined several hundred people in a prayer vigil at the school administration building.<sup>176</sup>

Over the final few days before the scheduled boycott, a hail of conflicting and contradictory statements by church officials failed to settle the matter.<sup>177</sup> The confusion had resulted from both the communication breakdown within the Archdiocesan Church structure in Cousins’s absence, and the strategic adherence to formal communications by inner core clergy. Fr. Mathew Gottchaulk, the pastor of St. Francis and spokesmen for the clergy, attempted to broker an agreement with Bishop Atkielski. The Bishop refused to rescind his order, but he did allow the priests to release a statement to the press. The press release said that inner core parishes would run Freedom Schools if children showed up on Monday. Because they had committed facilities, personnel and support to the boycott two weeks previously, “we feel that it is unreasonable to withdrawal at this late hour.” Of the conflict with the Bishop, they argued,

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<sup>175</sup> Bleidorn, *In My Time*, p. 69. See also, Flood interview.

<sup>176</sup> MJ, 10/16/65, p. 1.

<sup>177</sup> Fr. Bleidorn kept a list of the statements. Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7.

We respect him as holding an office from the hand of Christ. But it is with sorrow and regret that we declare that we do not think he understands the facts of the situation as they are.

Accordingly, in our own consciences, we do not see his directions, based upon legal opinion, as morally binding with the force of Christ's words.<sup>178</sup>

The statement made front page news in the Sunday morning newspaper and some Milwaukee Catholics complained that the priests acted in direct disobedience to Church authority. Many of the clergy involved in the conflict, though, saw the Bishop's lack of objection to the statement as a victory for freedom of conscience.<sup>179</sup>

The elation quickly gave way to disappointment. On Sunday morning, the chancellor of the Archdiocese, Msgr. Leo Brust, called Fr. Gottchaulk and stated that the printed statement was direct defiance of ecclesiastical authority. After another long meeting, the inner core pastors reluctantly withdrew their parishes from the boycott: "... since the prohibition has become a specific command of religious authority as such, and its violation interpreted as a direct defiance of ecclesiastical authority, we submit in obedience to the command of the Bishop... We also feel the obligation to protest the restriction put upon our freedom of action...Those working in the inner city should be allowed to make their own moral judgments and to act upon them."<sup>180</sup> The pastors also placed an ad in local papers explaining their view of the controversy to the community-at-large. The "Open Letter to Our People" stated, "With every protest short of direct disobedience and with the conviction that we are substantially betraying our people, but

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<sup>178</sup> Priests' Press Release, 10/16/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7.

<sup>179</sup> MJ, 10/17/65, p. 1; MS, 10/17/65, p. 1.

<sup>180</sup> Pastors' Press Release, 10/17/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7.



with the hope that we have not done so, we revert to the basic training we have been given and reluctantly close our parish facilities to the use of the Freedom Schools.”<sup>181</sup>

With one aspect of the Catholic Controversy seemingly closed, another brushfire continued to burn. Conflicting reports again created doubts about individual participation by priests and nuns in Freedom Schools off Church property. Having received no official ban, some priests and nuns chose to participate in Freedom Schools off Church property as a matter of conscience. On Monday morning, the first day of the boycott, more than 500 students and parents showed up at St. Boniface expecting to attend Freedom School there. In an effort to contain the situation and stall until an alternative plan could be devised, Fr. Groppi led the students in singing<sup>182</sup> and chanting before marching them to an alternative site.<sup>183</sup> Later that night, Groppi led a march of 265 African American young people 38 blocks to the home of school board President John Foley, where they again sang freedom songs and chanted slogans.<sup>184</sup> Mathew Ahmann, Director of the National Conference for Interracial Justice, telephoned the inner core pastors to warn them that national press coverage of events in Milwaukee gave the impression that priests were openly defying their Bishop’s orders and encouraged them to end that impression. Fr. Bleidorn attempted to contact Atkielski and Msgr. Brust, asking that they make a joint statement with the four inner core pastors denying that any priest had been disobedient. Brust and Atkielski refused to put their names on the statement. In self-defense, the

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<sup>181</sup> Print Version of ad, 10/17/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7.

<sup>182</sup> Among the various Freedom Songs sung by the protesters that day was a twist on a classic: “Ain’t Gonna Let No Bishop Turn Me Around.”

<sup>183</sup> MJ, 10/18/65, p. 1.

<sup>184</sup> MJ, 10/19/65, p. 1.

priests issued the announcement without their superiors' support.<sup>185</sup> During the phone conversation regarding the joint statement, Msgr. Brust ordered Fr. Groppi to stop participating in the boycott. Groppi reluctantly complied with the direct order, but other nuns and priests continued to teach and work in Freedom Schools.<sup>186</sup> The next day, Fr. William Whelan, of St. Gall's, was similarly ordered to stop his activities. He also complied. The boycott ended on Thursday.<sup>187</sup>

In a city with a Catholic population that topped forty percent, the incident was not insignificant.<sup>188</sup> Many Milwaukeeans viewed their world, and in this case civil rights, through the prism of the Church. The Catholic controversy generated significant national and local media attention. Fr. Bleidorn received dozens of letters from across the country and both CBS and NBC sent television crews to cover the boycott.<sup>189</sup> For the four days directly preceding the student withdrawal, Milwaukee newspapers carried headlines about the ongoing conflict. While the ecclesiastical jousting no doubt brought increased attention to the boycott and Freedom Schools, it also shifted the emphasis, at a critical juncture, away from the details of de facto segregation in Milwaukee public schools, and toward a more general debate over the role of the clergy in non-violent direct action and civil disobedience. Barbee and other MUSIC leaders feared that the conflict had

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<sup>185</sup> Pastors' Press release, 10/19/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7.

<sup>186</sup> Atkielski to Bleidorn, 10/19/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7; Bleidorn to Atkielski, 10/19/65, Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7.

<sup>187</sup> "Catholic Controversy Chronology," Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7.

<sup>188</sup> In fact, historian John McGreevy has called Milwaukee "the site of the most sustained Catholic encounter with race." See, John McGreevy, Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 197.

<sup>189</sup> Bleidorn Papers, box 4, folder 7; MJ, 10/18/65, p. 12.

overshadowed the important civil rights issues at the heart of the boycott.<sup>190</sup> To be sure, the controversy signaled a growing role for the Church in local civil rights politics, a trend that would continue for the remainder of the decade, but also the way internal religious conflicts could overshadow the discussion of racial inequality.

On October 18, the second school boycott took place in Milwaukee. According to school records, an extra 7,300 students missed school. The figure dropped to 4,756 on Tuesday and hovered just above 4,000 on Wednesday. Vel Phillips, who headed up MUSIC's food distribution program, estimated that around 5,000 students attended one of the 26 Freedom Schools on the first day of the boycott.<sup>191</sup> Freedom School curricula emphasized African American history, a subject absent in virtually every public school at the time, as well as the concepts of "freedom," "equality," and "democracy." MUSIC also sponsored a direct action campaign to compliment the boycott. In addition to picketing the school administration building during the day, Fr. Groppi led 265 young people on a 38 block march to school board President Foley's home where they picketed and sang. 50 others who had been conducting a similar protest outside the residence of Archbishop Cousins met them there. Mayor Maier said the demonstration, in front of a private home, exhibited a bigotry that "almost smacks of Ku Klux Klanism in reverse."<sup>192</sup> Barbee responded by calling the mayor "bankrupt" on civil rights, stating that the mayor's "record for civil rights leadership speaks for itself and it ranges from a mere whisper to a whining whimper." Maier retorted by calling the personal attack a

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<sup>190</sup> Barbee interview.

<sup>191</sup> MJ, 10/18/65, p. 1; MS, 5/19/65, p. 1.

<sup>192</sup> MJ, 10/20/65, p 1A; Courier, 10/25/65, p. 1.

“pettifogger’s device” and saying, “It’s an easy matter to cloak yourself with righteousness and let others work out the bothersome details of how to accomplish something positive and concrete.”<sup>193</sup> On Tuesday night, 313 young people, stretching for more than a block, snubbed their nose at the mayor by parading outside of his apartment. After 3 and a half days, boycott leaders ended the protest, citing fatigue among leadership as well as a desire to preempt the legal threats of the D.A.<sup>194</sup>

How successful was the second school boycott in Milwaukee? According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, the student withdrawal “solved nothing.” If the criteria was school board action, then the *Journal* editorial writers were dead on. The boycott did not prompt school board officials to take any new steps to address the racial imbalance in Milwaukee public schools. Yet, activists judged it a comparable success to the first boycott. Barbee claimed success because the action had drawn considerable attention to the school desegregation issue. In addition, the boycott had stirred city leaders beyond the school board. Both sides also pointed to attendance figures in their assessments. School officials noted that the figures were lower than the first boycott and further declined over the three days. There was also a growing discrepancy between public school absences and Freedom School participation, an indication that some students simply used the boycott as an excuse for a day off. Barbee claimed the diminishing numbers were the result of “intimidation.” During the boycott, city officials employed 49 truant officers, well over the norm, and more than 100 extra police officers to round up boycotting

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<sup>193</sup> MJ, 10/20/65, p. 3.

<sup>194</sup> See news coverage in the *Journal* and *Sentinel* from 10/18/65 through 10/22/65. In addition, see coverage in the *Courier* and *Star* on 10/23/65.

students not attending Freedom Schools.<sup>195</sup> In addition, Barbee claimed anti-boycott teachers and administrators pressured students not to participate. He also suggested that the Milwaukee police Department leaned on African American ministers to discourage support, a charge law enforcement officials denied. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the direct action momentum within the school desegregation campaign had slowed by the fall of 1965 and the status quo remained essentially unchanged. If change was going to come to the Milwaukee public school system, it was increasingly apparent that the courts would have to order it.

But MUSIC leaders had one more significant direct action burst left in them. During the spring of 1965, school board officials had announced the sites for two new inner core schools - MacDowell Elementary and Parkman Junior High School. In his May ultimatum to school board officials, Barbee indicated that MUSIC leadership found the sites unacceptable because they would be primarily African American and thus would perpetuate and extend racial segregation. If the board failed to change the sites to promote desegregation, MUSIC vowed to target the schools as a part of its renewed direct action campaign. Despite this threat and the escalation of direct action at the intact busing sites, the school board approved construction at the MacDowell and Parkman sites in September.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> The Milwaukee Police also later reported that the boycott had cost the force an extra \$13,628. As a result, they approached the Common Council for additional funding, a request it granted. Some would argue that the depletion of city resources also placed pressure on city officials to act on civil rights issues. See, MJ, 10/27/65, p. 1.

<sup>196</sup> MJ, 9/8/65, p. 28.

Following the October boycott, MUSIC sought to use the energy generated in the wake of the boycott to make good on its promised action. On December 5 and 6, civil rights activists conducted an all-night vigil at the MacDowell construction site. At 7:30am, 22 demonstrators linked arms and blocked the entrance to the construction area. As workers began to arrive, five of them - two African American - shoved their way forcibly through the line. Soon after, a pick-up truck, intent on entering the site, drove into the human chain, pushing some of the protesters back three feet. Fearing an escalation of the conflict, police asked demonstrators to move or be arrested. When protesters failed to budge, policemen began arresting demonstrators. Several went limp and fell to the ground while officers carried them off to the patrol wagon. As police arrested 11 people, the others moved to the side and began singing freedom songs. Among those arrested were three clergymen and a number of young people. In a press statement, MUSIC explained the reason behind their protest: "This construction is typical of northern style 'separate but equal' schools - schools well placed in neighborhoods which will obviously become racially imbalanced. Here the neighborhood school myth is unveiled for what it is meant to produce: Negro schools and white schools that operate outside the framework of democratic society."<sup>197</sup>

Over the next two weeks, protests continued at the MacDowell site, ultimately resulting in 21 arrests, as activists continued to physically block construction. On December 8, three demonstrators tried to block cement trucks from dropping their loads. The next day, 20 year old Robert Bundy chained himself to the construction gate for six hours in an attempt to impede work on the school. On the 10th and 14th, protesters

chained themselves to forklifts. There was an element of hi-jinx to these protests as activists attempted to create diversions to aid in the efforts of others. On the tenth, for instance, vehicles driven by local clergymen raced up to one side of the MacDowell site, brakes screeching, in an attempt to draw the attention of local authorities as four protesters slipped through the gate on the opposite side of the site to block construction equipment. Similarly, on the fourteenth, one activists ran around the site as a decoy while another quickly used the confusion to slip a chain around himself and a forklift. The MacDowell protest ended on December 17 when 350 people took part in an “Equal Opportunity Day” march from the MacDowell site to the school administration building.<sup>198</sup>

Compared with other MUSIC actions, community reaction to the MacDowell protests was muted. Most white civil and political leaders remained silent as physical confrontations escalated at the site. School board officials, backed by the city development department, termed MUSIC’s claims about the schools “totally and demonstrably false,” arguing that the school would, indeed, draw a racially mixed student body. They based this opinion on urban renewal plans in the area, they claimed would keep whites from fleeing as they had in other areas. Frank Aukofer, the urban affairs reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal*, though, wrote that the claims of school board officials were “loaded with ifs.” According to his calculations, the new school would be roughly 78% African American and 22% white.<sup>199</sup> Broader population shifts in the city

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<sup>197</sup> MUSIC Press Release, 12/4/65, MUSIC Papers, box 1, folder 6.

<sup>198</sup> MJ, 12/18/65, p. 1; MS, 12/18/65, p. 1.

<sup>199</sup> MJ, 12/19/65, p. 34.

over the previous decade also seemed to call into questions the school officials' long-term claims. Whatever the details, the issue remained clouded.

National civil rights leaders continued to keep a watchful eye on Milwaukee demonstrations and voice their opinion. In early December, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke at UW-Milwaukee and criticized northern white liberals who were angered and moved to action by southern racial violence but ignored the same racism in their own communities. As evidence of Milwaukee's resistance to racial justice, he pointed to a billboard he passed on the way to his speech featuring a photo of King at the Highlander Folk School, a training ground for labor and civil rights activists, with captions reading, "King at a Communist training school"<sup>200</sup> and "JOIN THE MILWAUKEE CITIZENS' COUNCIL."<sup>201</sup> Similarly, on December 8, James Farmer, in town to deliver a series of

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<sup>200</sup> This billboard was a "classic" example of white resistance to civil rights. It appeared throughout the South and on postcards. It offers a clear instance of the way anti-communism was marshaled against the forces of racial justice. For a full exploration of the interconnections between Cold War politics and the civil rights movement, see Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Thomas Borstelmann, The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>201</sup> Star, 12/4/65, p. 3; In the wake of the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, prominent white citizens throughout Mississippi formed groups called the "White Citizens Council" in order to organize and mobilize opposition to desegregation and basic equality for African Americans. They were an integral part of what several historians have come to call "Massive Resistance" of whites throughout the South to civil rights gains, and the Brown decision in particular. The Citizen Councils were made up, primarily, of middle and upper class whites: lawyers, businessmen, doctors, newspaper editors, politicians, etc. They used politics, surveillance, propaganda and economic reprisals as their primary weapons. While Citizens' Councils did not countenance racial violence, officially, some have argued that they helped create a more permissive climate in Mississippi that fostered violent acts by more extreme groups, like the KKK. In this way, they argue, Citizens' Councils and the Klan were simply two-sides of the same phenomenon. So, the use of the term in Milwaukee was a direct challenge to civil rights and a link to southern white resistance to racial justice. In the same way that Milwaukee civil rights activists were aware of, identifying with and responding to the southern movement, so, too, it appears, northern opponents of racial change were aware of, identifying with, and responding to southern white resistance to civil rights. For a full discussion of the Citizens' Council and "Massive Resistance," see, Numan Bartley, The Rise of Massive Resistance (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1969) and Neil McMillen, The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1944-1964 (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971).



speeches, joined pickets at the MacDowell site. That night, Farmer affirmed the protesters' right to demonstrate and told the 700 Milwaukeeans who had gathered at Congregation Sinai in Fox Pointe, that new schools "must not be [built] to perpetuate segregation."<sup>202</sup> The next day he held a number of "street corner" meetings with local African Americans then told about 50 people at the Epworth Episcopal Church, "I weep when I think what we are doing to our children by sending them to segregated schools. I shudder when I think of the damage that is being done to them."<sup>203</sup> Then, in late January, former King aide, Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, in town to help MUSIC raise bail money for recent arrestees, labeled intact busing "criminal" and called Milwaukee's inner core, "the worst I've seen in 15 years in the civil rights struggle." Of the MacDowell protests, he said, "There's no more room for objectivity. If you live in Milwaukee, you have to be involved. You either participate for or against. There's no longer a no man's land... Not everyone here has the temperament to be chained to a forklift truck, but those that don't have the temperament shouldn't knock those that have."<sup>204</sup>

Barbee's heated rhetoric and threatening declarations, though, even with national support, increasingly outpaced grassroots support for such action. In the months following the MacDowell campaign, MUSIC leaders attempted to keep the activist momentum flowing. For instance, Marilyn Morheuser, who had been arrested at the MacDowell site, opted to serve a brief jail term rather than pay a modest fine.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> MJ, 12/8/65, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>203</sup> MJ, 12/9/65, p. 9.

<sup>204</sup> Aukema, Barbee, Morheuser to Walker, 1/4/66, MUSIC Papers, box 1, folder 1; Star, 2/5/66, p. 7.

<sup>205</sup> Morheuser's decision made her the first person to serve jail time for participation in the civil rights movement in Milwaukee.

Morheuser's move received some media attention, but it failed to energize popular support for the movement as she had hoped. In addition, MUSIC leaders formed PACE, Parents Action Committee on Education, which continued to actively pressure school board members to desegregate public schools. Barbee would continue to turn to PACE from time to time as the court fight against segregated schools evolved, particularly when he needed a dose of grassroots support to bolster his efforts. In addition, MUSIC opposed a school bond issue that funded new school construction during the spring of 1965. MUSIC leaders contended that the funding would go toward establishing more segregated schools and thereby perpetuate discrimination. The measure passed easily at the polls. Finally, in March of 1966, after being postponed twice,<sup>206</sup> MUSIC conducted a third "selective" boycott, this time of North Division High School.<sup>207</sup> Attendance figures indicated further erosion of support for the school desegregation movement, or at least for the direct action phase of the school movement. Moreover, an even greater discrepancy between school absence numbers and Freedom School attendance figures suggested that many used the protest as an excuse for a day off.<sup>208</sup> As a result of the North Division selective boycott, MUSIC leaders dropped plans for further boycotts. Shortly thereafter,

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<sup>206</sup> MUSIC leaders postponed the North Division boycott, they said, primarily because of a fear of reprisals against participating students. With a selective boycott, a smaller number of students took part and could be more easily identified, isolated and punished. MUSIC leaders sought to minimize recriminations against children who honored the boycott.

<sup>207</sup> At this time, Sterling Stuckey worked with MUSIC as the Freedom school specialist. Lerone Bennett was also set up to aid another planned boycott at Lincoln elementary. MUSIC leaders ultimately cancelled the Lincoln protest, though. Nonetheless, Milwaukee was attracting the attention, thought and action of some of the leading young African American minds in the country at the time.

<sup>208</sup> MJ, 12/5/65, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 12/29/65, p. 1; MJ, 1/26/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

MUSIC leadership decided to cease all direct action in order to concentrate exclusively on lawsuit research.

For his part, Barbee increasingly became a legislator and a litigator, rather than a demonstrator. To be sure, in the short-term, Barbee continued to issue sharp condemnations of school officials and bold, perhaps overblown threats of further direct action, but he could no longer back up his pronouncements with widespread local support. As a result, his role in the Milwaukee civil rights struggle changed, but it did not end. In many ways, the school desegregation movement ended up where it began: as a one-man crusade by Lloyd Barbee. To be sure, he maintained a small team of researchers that helped him gather evidence for the case. And Marilyn Morheuser continued to work closely with Barbee on the legal front. But Barbee also guarded the case and maintained tight control over it. While he accepted some support from national NAACP legal counsel, Barbee officially listed himself as counsel of record and not the NAACP, a move that rankled national officials. As a legislator into the 1970s, Barbee continued to be a strong advocate for a host of progressive political reforms. In the wake of the civil rights movement, he would state that he fought for “human rights” and not simply “civil rights.” Barbee’s main fight, though, remained school desegregation and he continued to pursue the issue through the courts for over a decade. Finally, in 1976, a federal court judge ruled that Milwaukee public schools were, indeed, segregated. Two years later, the court ruled that the segregation was the result of intentional policies by the

school board and ordered the sides to come up with a remedy. Barbee and Milwaukee school officials agreed to a broad-based desegregation plan, including limited busing.<sup>209</sup>

Why did the school desegregation movement decline in 1966? In part, direct action had run its course as an effective tactic. In the best sense, direct action had achieved at least part of its goal. While it had not forced the school board to take significant action to end the racial imbalance in schools, it had created awareness of the issue and educated the community about the problem. In lieu of concrete results, though, legal action appeared to be the only option in 1966 and so the campaign, as in many other cities, moved into the courts.<sup>210</sup> Also, because of the central importance of Lloyd Barbee to the school desegregation movement in Milwaukee, part of the decline resulted from his leadership style. While he was skilled and respected, Barbee was not a charismatic, grassroots leader able to mobilize large numbers. As legislative duties, his law practice and research for the federal suit increased, Barbee had decreasing time for organizing. This contributed to the drop-off in support for MUSIC and its efforts. In addition, because the school desegregation issue was complex, it became difficult to maintain grassroots support, particularly without any significant victories. Moreover, much of the organizational apparatus that had sustained the school desegregation movement in

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<sup>209</sup> For a full documentary overview of the school desegregation case, see the Barbee Papers, all 200+ boxes of them! Also, see Dougherty, More Than One Struggle and Dahlk, The Black Educational Reform Movement in Milwaukee, 1963-1975."

<sup>210</sup> Direct action often relies on escalating tactics. As established authority fails to act, protesters up the ante by engaging in more and more militant acts of civil disobedience. It was unclear in 1966, after the MacDowell protests, where to go next with direct action tactics; how to top chaining oneself to construction equipment. In addition, more militant civil disobedience tactics were an increasingly hard sell to MUSIC leaders and activists, not to mention community members and civic leaders.

Milwaukee had dissipated or dissolved by 1966. MSNCC was purely a temporary vehicle. MCORE remained on the scene for another year and a half, but it shifted its focus away from direct action campaigns and toward “community organizing,” a partial acknowledgment that urban racial ills required sustained, long-term attention. In 1967, MCORE disbanded after another internal controversy involving Cecil Brown, Jr. Similarly, the MNAACP remained, but it was not a mass-based organization. Even MUSIC itself, proved ephemeral. Because it was not a membership group, when the direct action phase subsided, affiliated organizations returned to their primary missions or turned their attention to other civil rights issues.<sup>211</sup> Lastly, new issues and new leadership had begun to emerge in Milwaukee’s civil rights movement by the mid-1960s. As one leader waned, another leader waxed. From 1966 through 1969, Fr. James Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council would command center stage in Milwaukee’s struggle for racial justice. So, direct action energies did not disappear in the city. Instead, new people and new issues channeled them in new directions.

What, then, did the school desegregation movement accomplish in Milwaukee? First, as Jack Dougherty and Robert Dahlk have detailed, a series of minor concessions did result. The school did allow black students who were bussed to eat lunch at their receiving schools. In addition, they adopted an open enrollment policy<sup>212</sup> and increased

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<sup>211</sup> Technically, MUSIC remained alive as an organization into the 1970s. But it was primarily a shell, consisting of Barbee and his legal research team.

<sup>212</sup> No doubt, the open enrollment policy did enable students to more easily transfer to a new school, but whites still used it to flee transitional schools faster than black students used it. See, MJ, 9/14/65, pt. 2, p. 1; MS, 9/25/64, p. 1; *Amos*, p. 792.

appropriations for compensatory education.<sup>213</sup> Furthermore, by 1967, administrators assigned more black teachers to white schools. Second, while it did not create a lasting civil rights organization, the school desegregation movement organizing efforts did cultivate a pro-civil rights coalition as well as a new core of activists and leaders. In particular, a new black leadership core began to emerge. Carole Malone, Larry and Nathaniel Harwell, Lauri Wynn, Flo Seefeldt, Dwayne Tolliver, Nathan Harwell, Evelyn Davis, Amanda Coomer, Jeanetta Robinson and many others went on to be active in education and other civil rights issues. MUSIC organizing efforts also awakened young people, Catholics and liberal whites, in general, to the cause of civil rights in Milwaukee. These individuals and organizations gained valuable experience working together to pull off a large-scale protest. They would go on to form a crucial basis for future civil rights struggles in the city. In this way, the school desegregation movement illustrated that African Americans and their allies could organize and protest and bring significant pressure to bear on local authorities. Third, the school desegregation movement provided a broader education for both the civil rights movement in Milwaukee and the community as a whole. It educated the community, both white and black, to the complex dynamics of segregated public education in the city. It also educated the movement about the depth of white resistance to civil rights in the city at both the grassroots and the institutional level. In essence, the Milwaukee civil rights movement matured over the course of the school desegregation movement. Civil rights leaders and organizations increasingly understood what it was like to try to get social change moving in the city.

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<sup>213</sup> Among the compensatory education measures enacted were reduced class sizes, more counselors and social workers added to inner core staffs, orientation centers for new children in Milwaukee to ease the

They learned how to approach it given the possibilities and limitations of the local context and came to believe that the way to get action was to create tension and confrontation, to force the issue. As Frederick Douglass had stated almost 100 years prior, “Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.”

Milwaukee civil rights activists took this lesson to heart after the school desegregation movement. From then on, the local movement increasingly relied on dramatic public confrontations, what Dr. King called “creative tension,” to prompt change.

And finally, what does the school desegregation movement teach us about civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee? First, it highlights de facto segregation in urban public schools as an important civil rights issue throughout the urban North and West during the early and mid-1960s. While shaped by local circumstances and local leadership, the Milwaukee campaign to end the racial imbalance in schools also operated within and reacted to a broader national movement. At the same time, MUSIC underscored the difficulty of organizing and sustaining a direct action campaign around the complicated issue of urban education, particularly when school officials were so consistently unyielding. As a result, it highlighted the need to work on various fronts: through negotiation and reason, direct action, litigation and agitation. Third, the school desegregation movement revealed the wide gulf between the experiences and perceptions of white and black Milwaukeeans and the need to bridge that chasm if substantial change was to occur. Similarly, the education campaign exposed the deep-seated and widespread resistance among many whites in Milwaukee to confronting racial inequality in their city. It became clear that the status quo was deeply entrenched. This, in turn, helps us

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transition. The school board claimed it spent twice as much money in 1965 than in 1964 on compensatory

understand the shifting allegiance of urban white voters during this time period and the emergence of the new conservative majority that would mature in America over the next three decades.

Overall, much had changed in Milwaukee between 1963 and 1966. The decline of the school desegregation movement did not signal an end, but rather a beginning of civil rights insurgency. Over the next three years, the city would be rocked by a series of demonstrations and protests, led by Fr. Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council. So, instead of a clear break or ending, new insurgency evolved out of old battles. In this case, the school desegregation campaign played a formative role in the burgeoning efforts to combat housing and employment discrimination, and police brutality. Around Barbee and MUSIC, then, were the seeds of what would happen next. There were continuities even though the seeds would blossom into something very different than MUSIC.

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education. See Dahlk, p. 68.



## Chapter 4

### **White Collar, Black Power: The Emergence of Fr. James Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council**

In Selma, Alabama, in early 1965, the combination of righteous cause, inspired leadership, courageous followers, and unjust brutality came together once more. Responding to weeks of violence and unrest which culminated with the beating of several hundred peaceful protesters by Alabama state troopers on “Bloody Sunday,” Martin Luther King, Jr. issued a national call for an ecumenical outpouring of support for the Selma to Montgomery march he and the SCLC were planning. Thousands of northern white clergy from all denominations, including hundreds of Catholic priests and nuns from more than 50 dioceses nationwide, heeded that call. Selma combined Christian “witness” with ecumenical protest in what Roy Wilkins called civil rights movements’ “the last great parade.” Religious historian John McGreevy has called Selma the “culmination of Catholic participation in the civil rights movement.” For a contingent of young Milwaukee priests, it was both a culmination and a dramatic new beginning.<sup>1</sup>

One week after the death of Pittsburgh housewife Viola Liuzzo at the hands of white racists in Alabama, Frs. James Groppi, Mathew Gottschalk, Patrick Flood and Austin Schlaefer, along with Milwaukee *Journal* reporter, Frank Aukofer, set off for

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<sup>1</sup> See Garrow, Protest At Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); McGreevy, Parish Boundaries, p. 155-158.

Selma. A group of Milwaukee nuns traveled separately and a smattering of other local religious also participated in the protest. Groppi, Aukofer and the other Catholic clergymen stayed with local people at the George Washington Carver Housing Project, the center of the Selma movement. They worshiped each morning at St. Elizabeth's, a small black mission church. Aukofer said the scene in Selma had "aspects of an intense religious retreat. The atmosphere reeked of brotherhood and righteousness. Those who were there had a feeling that what they were doing was so right that they had to prevail."<sup>2</sup> The Milwaukee clergy attended marches and rallies, learned about the techniques of militant non-violent direct action, registered voters, conducted teach-ins with parents, knelt in inter-faith prayer protests, and got to know the community.<sup>3</sup>

One Montgomery rally, featuring Martin Luther King, Jr., was particularly memorable for the Milwaukee group. Frank Aukofer described the scene at the church that night: "It was so packed that some people were literally hanging from the rafters. I was perched high on a narrow window sill. Hundreds of others crowded outside around windows and the door." When King arrived, the roar of the crowd "almost lifted the roof off. It was like standing near the exhaust of a jet airliner." King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, one of King's main lieutenants, and James Foreman, then head of SNCC, each delivered a rousing speech to the enthusiastic throng. One San Francisco reporter said the scene reminded him of a Beatles concert. After the rally, the group marched to the state capitol for a prayer vigil; the Milwaukee priests walked toward the head of the line. As they approached the steps of the capitol building, a large contingent of state troopers stepped

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<sup>2</sup> Aukofer, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Gottschaulk interview; Flood interview.

forth to block the group's path. During the initial surge by police, Fr. Flood received a blow to the head. A stand-off ensued with clergymen and other religious people kneeling in protest, refusing to budge without a prayer on the capitol stairs. Fr. Daniel Mallette of Chicago, the spokesman for the group, read from St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews. When he asked for discussion, Fr. Groppi was the first to speak up, saying, "God is the father of us all and we are all brothers in him. We have an obligation to help our brothers... If we go to Church on Sunday and preach the doctrine of Christ and then do nothing... we are hypocrites." The state police finally relented, permitting three priests to mount the stairs and offer a prayer. As the group walked back to the church, Aukofer recalled Fr. Groppi saying, "That's something I've always wanted to do - sit down in the heart of the segregationist South with a group of priests and ministers in an ecumenical protest." Fr. Gottschaulk retorted, snappily and with a smile, "You just have a martyr complex is all."<sup>4</sup>

Groppi was not alone, though. Each of the Milwaukee clergymen was infected by the fervor and spirit of what they experienced in Alabama and brought it home. A popular topic of discussion in Alabama had been: "Why Selma? And why Montgomery? Why not in your own back yard? What are we doing here when there are problems back home?"<sup>5</sup> The Milwaukee clergy, and particularly James Groppi, took this challenge to heart and returned with a new sense of urgency and activism emboldened by faith. "It became an important consciousness raising event for us," according to Fr. Flood,

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<sup>4</sup> Aukofer, pp. 91-95; See also, Flood interview; Gottschaulk interview; "Groppi Lecture at East Library," 2/15/84; MJ, 3/17/65, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Aukofer, p. 94.

“because you were right straight up against the powers of segregation and really raw evil. So, that riveted us and made us totally committed to the cause. It was a great school of learning... [and] that became the basis for Jim when he came back [to Milwaukee], for the demonstrations, and for how to create a movement.”<sup>6</sup>

Between 1965 and 1967, a dramatic new phase of the civil rights movement began in Milwaukee. As the school desegregation campaign moved into the courts, a more militant form of civil rights insurgency evolved behind the unlikely leadership of a white Roman Catholic priest and a band of passionate and dedicated inner-core youth. Fr. James Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council (YC) confronted new issues with new tactics and a strategy that reflected the changing racial dynamics of the time. Their leadership would shape and define civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee for the remainder of the direct action era.

This new phase of activism and leadership in Milwaukee, though, did not represent a sharp break from the past, but rather an evolution out of those circumstances. Lloyd Barbee and MUSIC had planted the seeds that would blossom in new ways than the school desegregation campaign. To a large extent, both the YC and Fr. Groppi cut their activist teeth in MUSIC. They learned valuable lessons about leadership, tactics and strategy, as well as the extent of white reaction. They would put this knowledge to use over the next few years in new ways, on new issues and in new contexts.

One important difference between the southern and northern civil rights movements was the central role of the Catholic Church and Catholic clergy as both

supporters and opponents of racial justice in the North. In New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Milwaukee and elsewhere, priests, nuns and Catholic lay-people played a critical and growing role in local civil rights struggles. At the same time, other Catholics in those same cities served as a bulwark *against* change. It was left to Church authorities to walk a careful line between the two camps. John McGreevy singled out Milwaukee as the “site of the most sustained Catholic encounter with racial issues” in the post-war period.<sup>7</sup>

The unprecedented wave of European immigration to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century brought with it a sharp surge in the American Catholic population. Demography alone dictated that the Catholic Church would become a dominant institution in many Northern cities. In Milwaukee, for instance, Catholics made up between one third and one half of the total population during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century and parochial schools enrolled roughly one-third of the city’s students. As laborers and their families from Italy, Greece, Poland, Lithuania, Croatia, Ireland, Slovakia and elsewhere flocked to Milwaukee, the urban landscape became transformed into a patchwork of tight-knit, sharply delineated and insular white, ethnic neighborhoods; Germans and Jews on the North side, Italians along Brady Street, Poles and other Central Europeans on the South Side, and the Irish in the Third Ward. At the center of these local neighborhoods usually stood the local Catholic Church. For many of these immigrant Catholics, the Church literally organized life. Neighborhood boundaries

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<sup>6</sup> Flood interview.

<sup>7</sup> McGreevy, p. 197.

often coincided with parish boundaries.<sup>8</sup> The local church also provided for the material needs of its parishioners through schools, insurance programs, counseling, acculturation programs, free meals to the poor, emergency shelter, and a variety of social activities. Moreover, throughout the twentieth century, Milwaukee Catholics held prominent positions in businesses, unions, politics and civic organizations. The Church both ordered Milwaukee Catholics' reality and defended their interests.

The Catholic Church remained a hierarchical and authoritative institution, though. Milwaukee Catholics by and large embraced a narrow and rigid theology and tolerated little dissent. According to Fr. Eugene Bleidorn, pastor of St. Boniface, most Milwaukee Catholics of the postwar generation were taught the "Baltimore Catechism," based on a popular book used in Catholic schools throughout the country. The "Baltimore Catechism" was based on "memorizing a bunch of questions and answers. Memorize the rules to live by... Pray, Pay and Obey were the key words... and don't worry about the rest. That was where most Catholics' religious formation came from at that time. They had no sense of social justice or that love your neighbor was just about as important as love God."<sup>9</sup> Church doctrines did not change and obedience to religious authority was paramount to most Church members. In a very real sense, then, the Catholic Church ordered every aspect of urban Catholics' lives. As a result, it became, for many, the single most important lens through which they viewed and understood the world.

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<sup>8</sup> As a result, the Church fostered an intense connecting to *place* - a specific piece of "turf", the neighborhood - among its adherents. As a result, when housing emerged as the primary northern civil rights battleground, many white urban Catholics vehemently opposed change. For a full exploration of the housing issue in Milwaukee, see Chapter 7.

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Bleidorn interview with Patrick Jones, 11/21/98.

Because the black population in Milwaukee remained relatively small until the mid-1950s, race played only a minor and occasional role in Church activities. Catholic authorities opted for a fairly hands-off approach to race relations.<sup>10</sup> When they did weigh in, it was usually in the name of maintaining the status quo. For instance, as late as 1963, a Milwaukee priest wrote to the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice lamenting that “We would love to join you in the March On Washington but the Chancery office has said that it is very ‘rash and imprudent’ and has forbidden all priests [from] participating.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in the Spring on 1965, conservative Catholics blocked an appearance by John Howard Griffith, author of Black Like Me, at a local Catholic youth convention.<sup>12</sup> As the percentage of African Americans in the city steadily rose, though, the Church found it difficult to escape the divisive politics of race in urban America.

Just as the influx of poor African Americans and rural whites into northern cities and the concurrent flight of affluent whites to suburbs transformed urban politics, it also

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<sup>10</sup> There was a small, but long-standing Catholic commitment to the African American community in Milwaukee’s inner core dating back to 1886. In the twentieth century, the Capuchin Friars deserve special note for their work within Milwaukee’s black community. Their efforts evolved into a permanent Catholic mission to African Americans at St. Benedict the Moor Church. St. Benedict’s ran a school for African Americans and later a hospital which attracted many local community members. During this period, Catholic work among African Americans in Milwaukee focused on conversion and social programs. Most white Catholics treated African Americans as an “immigrant group.” For a full overview of this early history of Catholicism in Milwaukee’s inner core, see Steven Avella, “Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960: Seed-Time for Change,” in Steven Avella, editor, Milwaukee Catholicism: Essays On Church and Community (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in McGreevy, p. 197.

<sup>12</sup> Liberal church members ultimately arranged an alternative appearance for Griffith. See, Rosemary Thielke, “Muddled Like Me,” *Ave Maria*, 101, April 3, 1963, pp. 5-7; “Milwaukee Vindicates Griffin in a Public Show of Fairness,” *National Catholic Reporter*, no. 1, February 17, 1963, p. 2; See also relevant news coverage of the incident in the *Milwaukee Journal*, *Sentinel*, and *Star* in January and February of 1963.

fundamentally changed the Catholic Church. In Milwaukee, as in other places, a new suburban Catholicism began to take root during the 1940s and 1950s. Those whites that had moved outside the city limits were more affluent and educated than previous generations, and they wanted more of the same for their children. Church authorities responded by creating a ring of new parishes outside the reach of the city and building a spate of new Catholic schools.

At the same time, growing unease spread throughout the increasingly working-class and poor white parish neighborhoods that these affluent whites left behind. As suburban Catholics and their neighbors made good on the promise of America, urban white ethnic Catholics and their neighbors worried about declining home values, crumbling urban infrastructure, rising crime rates, and the beginnings of a long economic slide toward deindustrialization. The rapid growth of the black community and the spread of demands for fair treatment in housing, at work and school, seemed a threat to many of these urban white Catholic's traditional way of life. Consequently, they pressed clergymen and Church authorities to defend their interests against both real and perceived threats.

Within the city's inner-core parishes, urban demographic shifts played out differently. Unlike other denominations, Catholic churches are rooted in geography; parishes are defined by geographic space, not by the congregation. When populations shift significantly, a church does not move with its flock, but seeks to continue its mission among the community's new residents. In Milwaukee during the 1950s, five parishes - St. Boniface, St. Benedict the Moor, St. Elizabeth, St. Francis and St. Gall - felt the brunt of the city's racial transition. These churches lost much of their traditional base



as whites fled ethnic neighborhoods for the security of suburban living. In their stead, African Americans, a group without a strong Catholic history, moved in. Many core parishes saw their membership drop precipitously during this period. Widespread poverty and urban blight further challenged inner core parishes.<sup>13</sup>

If these parishes were to survive, they needed to stay relevant to the communities in which they lived. Priests and nuns in these churches had to develop new strategies to attract adherents. They needed to reach out to those around them, understand their condition and strivings, and seek to speak to that experience. That meant, by necessity, a greater understanding of African Americans and urban race relations.

But the same rootedness that had cost inner core parishes their old base also afforded white clergy opportunities. Unlike most white Protestant and Jewish churches in Milwaukee,<sup>14</sup> inner core Catholic churches allowed priests and nuns to live and work in African American ghetto communities and thereby gain a firsthand view of black life and community. At the same time, local African Americans could tutor clergy on racial issues. As a result, a strong bond began to develop between these five parishes, their clergy and the increasingly black communities around them. Catholic churches became safe havens and provided refuge and resources for black Milwaukeeans in an urban world that could often seem harsh and uncaring.

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<sup>13</sup> Avella, "Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1960."

<sup>14</sup> There were some liberal Protestant churches and reformed Jewish synagogues which also reached out to urban blacks. For instance, Grand Avenue Congregational, First Methodist, Friedens Evangelical and Reformed, Calvary Presbyterian, First Baptist and St. Paul's Lutheran admitted African Americans into membership and participated in MNAACP and MUL programs and activities. Similarly, Temple Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun and Congregation Shalom were particularly outspoken civil rights advocates. See Kevin Smith, "In God We Trust': Religion, the Cold War and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999, pp. 281-287.

By the late 1940s and 1950s, the five inner core parishes began to attract some African American members. The promise of a better education for their children brought many black Milwaukeeans to the Catholic Church. St. Benedict the Moor<sup>15</sup>, St. Francis and St. Boniface all ran parochial schools and at least one, St. Boniface, opened its doors to non-Catholics in a specific attempt to attract local African Americans. St. Benedict's hospital, one of the few that tended to Milwaukee's black population without discrimination, also no doubt gained the Church adherents. Finally, the host of social programs sponsored by the churches - meals, shelters, acculturation programs, and youth activities - also filled a very real need for community members and demonstrated Catholic compassion.<sup>16</sup> By the early 1960s, St. Benedict had a 90% African American membership; St. Boniface, 75%; St. Francis and St. Gall each had an African American majority; St. Michael, St. Leo and St. Elizabeth all had a substantial black minorities.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, until the civil rights movement and the Second Vatican Council, most local African American Catholics remained culturally and politically conservative. Inner core parishes emphasized conversion and social programming, but did not challenge racial discrimination head on. Few black Catholics took leadership roles in civil rights activity, choosing instead to work on schools, traditional religious instruction, and institution building. James Dorsey, who opposed the organizing efforts of the MNALC, MCORE and MUSIC and headed up the Catholic Interracial Council of

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<sup>15</sup> Comedian Redd Foxx and the future Mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington, attended school at St. Benedict.

<sup>16</sup> Many of the programs and services offered by the inner core parishes were open to Catholics and non-Catholics. This, no doubt, also built up trust and loyalty for the Church within the local community.

<sup>17</sup> MJ, 8/10/63, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 9/4/65, p. 11; Neuberger interview.

Milwaukee, was perhaps the most renowned and influential black Catholic in the city.

Nonetheless, at the dawn of the modern civil rights era, Milwaukee did support a small, but vital black Catholic community.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Catholic Church did not hold the same allure for younger African Americans that it had for their parents. This was in part because the Catholic Church in Milwaukee lacked any significant black leadership. In addition, though, the Church's failure to work on local grassroots issues outside the Church, particularly civil rights, also alienated young people. So, for the Catholic Church to appeal to a new generation of urban African Americans, it would have to transform itself once again, this time from a compassionate church to an activist church.

As these demographic shifts forced a re-evaluation of the Catholic Church's relationship to African Americans, national and international reform movements would transform urban Catholicism during the 1960s. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s and gaining strength after the Second World War, the Vatican encouraged greater involvement of lay people in the mission of the church. "Catholic Action," as it was called, spurred a variety of localized movements.<sup>18</sup> In the United States, "Catholic Action" mainly took the form of small study groups. In 1938, though, it set off in new directions after an Oklahoma priest named Donald Kanaly introduced the teachings of Fr. Joseph Cardijn to a clergy summer school for social action in Chicago. Cardijn, a Belgian friar, lived and wrote in response to the devastation of his country during WWI

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<sup>18</sup> For a more extensive overview of "Catholic Action," see, Jay Dolan, The American Catholic Experience (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), pp. 408-409, 415-416.

and with the hope of helping Catholic lay people rebuild their lives and communities.

According to Fr. Eugene Bleidorn, a strong Cardijn adherent in Milwaukee,

“Observe, Judge and Act” was the humane way to exist [according to Cardijn]. You do an analysis of your life and of the lives of those around you, then you make an observation about how people are living, their values. Observation is not my opinion but what in fact they are doing, what in fact they are saying. Having picked up what you think is an objective point of view, next you make a judgement. Is that a good way for the human race to flourish? Or is it not? Would this be for the common good or would it not be for the common good? If the two are in harmony, then there is not much to do about it except live that way yourself. But if there is disharmony there, then there is an action choice... What action should we take to bring it in line?<sup>19</sup>

This new technique, whereby people would systematically observe and judge a situation in light of the gospel, and then act, was called the “inquiry method.” Small groups of people based on age, sex and occupation met weekly, discussed important social issues and ended each gathering with a concrete decision to act. The Cardijn Movement quickly spread from its nerve-center in Chicago throughout the Midwest and across the nation.

What distinguished the Cardijn Movement from other “Catholic Action” movements at the time was this emphasis on action over education. “The action part was the most important part,” explained Fr. Bleidorn. “It was easy to sit around and talk, but to decide based on the facts and judge what to do was the key.”<sup>20</sup> Fr. Patrick Flood agreed, stating that the Cardijn Movement taught us “its alright, it is correct to be involved in politics.”<sup>21</sup> The key was to develop a sense of responsibility and action on

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<sup>19</sup> Bleidorn interview.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Flood interview.

the part of the laity. This challenged the traditional conception of “Catholic Action” which underscored the need for lay people to act, but only under the control of the Church hierarchy. In Milwaukee, “Catholic Action” formations were a stronghold of integration and social justice activism. Many of the leading African American members of MUSIC, including Carole Malone, Larry and Maxine Jeter, Lowell and Gloria Thomas, and Larry Harwell all came out of the Catholic Action tradition. <sup>22</sup>

The Cardijn reform impulse beat particularly strongly in Milwaukee.<sup>23</sup> By the early 1940s, Fr. John Russell Beix helped form several “cells” of the YCS and YCW movements at local seminaries. According to local Catholic historian Steven Avella, sympathetic young priests like Fr. Vernon Kuehn, Fr. Eugene Bleidorn, Fr. Francis Eschweiler and John Michael Murphy “recruited a small, but tightly knit, corps of young adherents who were eager to bring Christ to [the community.]”<sup>24</sup> The popularity of these programs spurred Fr. Beix to establish the “Cardijn Center” on the upper floor of a deserted flophouse on North Water Street in February of 1949. The Center sponsored lectures and adult education programs, provided meeting space for Catholic Action groups, and included a bookstore as well as a supply of contemporary religious articles and art work all aimed at activating local Catholics. Among the hundreds energized by these efforts were seminarians Patrick Flood and James Groppi, both of who would play a major role in civil rights activism in Milwaukee during the second half of the 1960s.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Dahlk, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> For a more lengthy exploration of the Cardijn movement as it evolved in Milwaukee, see Avella, “Milwaukee Catholicism, 1945-1965,” pp. 154-159.

<sup>24</sup> Avella, p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> Bleidorn interview.

During the early 1960s, many of the reform movements moving through the Church were brought together at the Second Vatican Council in Rome. Pope John XXIII convened the Council in an attempt to reevaluate The Church's role in the world. Delegates from all across the globe participated in these historic talks, first in 1962, then in 1965 under the direction of Pope Paul VI. Out of these meetings came a series of statements and resolutions allowing for various alterations in Church ritual: Priests now faced the congregation; vernacular replaced Latin; folk guitars and other contemporary music arrangements appeared on alters; churches were constructed in the round; many priests and nuns, particularly the young, shied away from "Father" and "Sister," opting instead to be addressed informally by their first name. In addition, Vatican II signaled a new conception of the relationship between Church and community. The Councils encouraged a move from a "hierarchical to a servant Church," from an authoritative structure to a common community of laypeople and clergy. Priest Senates and Parish Councils were the primary outgrowth of this thrust of the Councils. Vatican II also suggested the Church shift from an institution set apart from the world, to one intimately concerned with modern life. Vatican II reaffirmed the Christian duty to the "lowliest" and the obligation of Catholics "to improve, not simply reject" the modern world. And finally, the Councils urged the Church to move from a western to a more global and ecumenical vision.<sup>26</sup>

To reformers and liberals, like those in the Cardijn Movement or those in inner core parishes, the Second Vatican Council appeared to offer official sanction for their

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<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the Second Vatican Council, see Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, pp. 424-426; McGreevy, pp. 155-173; See also, interviews with Frs. Bleidorn, Flood, Gottschaulk and Neuberger.

dissent. As Patrick Flood remembered, “All these currents within the Catholic Church said, ‘Hurray to Vatican II! We’ve won. Everything we believe in has come to pass.’”<sup>27</sup> What that meant on the ground in Milwaukee was that an increasing number of priests and nuns were sympathetic to the struggles of their parishioners and to the issues of social justice, generally, and they believed they had the sanction of Church authority to back them up. To traditionalists, though, the changes in Vatican II were too much, too fast, and it provoked reaction. A rift opened between American Catholics who supported the new reform effort and those who opposed it. This schism mirrored a similar cultural trend in American society, generally.

The various forces of change and reaction within the Catholic Church came to a head during the civil rights movement. At the same moment as Church authorities in Rome challenged members to reevaluate their roles in contemporary society, a national focus on race and urban poverty in the United States provided a way for liberal clergy to put their new doctrine into action. For younger nuns and priests, the civil rights movement provided the hot moral center for their new religious identity in an era of “applied Christianity.” For those parishes located within inner core neighborhoods, the call to civil rights seemed unavoidable.

Vatican II appeared to sanction this activist spirit by speaking directly to the issue of race relations and civil rights in America. In April 1963, Pope John XXIII condemned racial discrimination in Pacem in Terris. In October of that same year, a group of U.S. Bishops asked for further clarification on race from Rome. In 1964, Pope Paul VI met

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<sup>27</sup> Flood interview. Fr. Bleidorn, Gottschalk and Neuberger expressed similar sentiments in their interviews, as well.

with Martin Luther King, Jr., and President Lyndon Johnson in a further show of support for civil rights.

Fr. James Groppi emerged out of this Catholic cacophony of reform, renewal and reaction. James Groppi was born in 1930 to Italian immigrant parents in Bay View, on the city's South Side. Groppi credited his father as the initial inspiration for his commitment to racial justice. Giocondo Groppi, who had come to Milwaukee as an immigrant in 1913, "never allowed racial remarks or ethnic jokes or slurs... [if] someone used a term like "Polack" or "Nigger" he would voice his disapproval... 'That is like calling an Italian a 'Dago.' he would say."<sup>28</sup>

Groppi's commitment to civil rights was also rooted in his experience growing up on Milwaukee's South Side. The Groppi family lived and owned a grocery store in Bay View, an area dominated by working-class Irish and Slavic immigrants. Groppi recalled feeling isolated and bullied as a youth and he would often say he knew what it was like to be an "outsider." Groppi complained that "even the Church was guilty of discrimination" against Italian-Americans in his South Side neighborhood. Italians were apparently so unwelcome at the local Irish-dominated Catholic Church that a group of Italians had to bring in their own priest each Sunday for an alternative mass in the back of a shoe store.<sup>29</sup>

But Groppi was quick to note that his experience paled in comparison to the "terrifying discrimination" faced by African Americans. Referring to his parents'

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<sup>28</sup> See, "Father Groppi," typescript of the first chapter of an autobiographical sketch. Undated, but circa 1971. Groppi Papers, SHSW, box 14, folder 7, p. 6-7. Hereafter referred to as "Groppi Autobiography."

<sup>29</sup> See "Groppi Autobiography," pp. 7-8. See also, James Groppi interview with Frank Aukofer, 10/13/67 in Aukofer Papers, SHSW. In addition, Groppi's friction with the local Church may help explain, in part, the foundations of his later criticism of the Church.



experience as immigrants, Groppi said, “the Italian was in pretty bad shape. But nothing as far as the black man is concerned. I don’t like these comparisons between various ethnic groups and the black man because there are so many differences. Just the black man’s color was enough.” He went on to say,

An Italian is white and that’s everything... Being raised in an Italian community does not make a man understand what another group such as the black man in this country goes through. You can get some similarities. For example, the Jewish people. You’ll get some Jewish people who really have a great deal of empathy because many of the people who have escaped, for example, the concentration camps in Germany have come here and they look at the black man and they have a greater understanding. Yet you’ve got others that step on people below them for the purpose of acceptance. Now this is true with Italians. Some of the worst bigots in this country are Italians who have gone through terrific suffering in the past. And yet they’ll turn around and step on black people.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout adolescence and early adulthood Groppi found himself pulled toward religion. He told reporter Frank Aukofer, “I didn’t see anything around. To me, life, in order to have meaning, had to have religion. The brevity of life is one thing that always hit me - the shortness. You’re here today and you’re gone the next day. You’ve got to do something in this short expanse of time in order to make eternity meaningful.” In 1950, at the age of 20 and with only tepid support from his parents, James Groppi entered the Mt. Calvary Seminary in rural Southeastern Wisconsin.<sup>31</sup>

In 1953, Groppi transferred his religious studies to St. Francis Seminary, located a few miles from his boyhood home. It was during his years as a seminarian at St. Francis

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, pp. 89-90.

<sup>31</sup> Groppi’s two year stint at Mt. Calvary was the only extended period of time that he spent away from Milwaukee until he was 40 years old.

that Groppi's interest in race relations and the African American community congealed. During the school year, Groppi experienced day-to-day racism and prejudice. "There were instances of prejudice that were terrible, really horrible," he remembered. "Nigger talk. Nigger jokes." He was particularly outraged when some of his classmates put on a minstrel show.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, Groppi spent three successive summers, beginning in 1956, working with other young seminarians at an inner core summer camp for children, almost all of whom were African American. Capuchin priests, who had a long-standing commitment to the local black community, ran the camp at Blessed Martin Parish near the Hillside Housing Project. Groppi's wife, Margaret Rozga, later recalled that the experience at the youth camp "personalized a lot of the issues" [of racism] for him.<sup>33</sup> Patrick Flood agreed, explaining,

For us, in the 1950s for the first time we came into contact with and directly experienced discrimination and racism. We took care of children in the mornings and then we called on families in the evenings and we would discuss this and help the families. That whole experience brought about a conversion experience, you could say, or a change of will in all of us where we became in the mid-to-late fifties very committed to social justice around the issue of race.<sup>34</sup>

From that point forward, Fr. Groppi's reaction to racism and discrimination would be immediate, emotional and personal, not abstract or intellectual. For Groppi the face of a young African American girl stung by a racial slur held "the pain of Jesus Christ as he

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<sup>32</sup> Groppi interview with Aukofer.

<sup>33</sup> In the early 1970s, James Groppi left the Catholic Church and married Margaret Rozga. Quoted in David Chang, "White Priest, Black Power: Civil and Religious Disobedience in the Activism of Fr. James Groppi," unpublished graduate paper, in author's possession.

<sup>34</sup> Flood interview.

hung on the cross. It was the pain of rejected love.”<sup>35</sup> During this same period, Groppi worked as a leader in the local CWM while Flood spent time in the CFM. It was this small nucleus of committed Catholic clergy and lay people that then got caught up with the civil rights movement.<sup>36</sup>

In 1959, Groppi completed his work at the seminary and was ordained a Catholic Priest. Although he requested an assignment in Milwaukee’s inner core, the Archdiocese sent him to St. Veronica, a primarily white, working-class parish located in a South Side neighborhood similar to the one where he grew up. Groppi’s parish responsibilities at St. Veronica, which included the religious education of high school students, did not afford opportunities to address racial inequality directly, with one significant exception. During his tenure as an associate pastor, housing authorities announced that they were considering constructing low-income public housing units in the area. When a group of St. Veronica’s parishioners gathered to discuss the proposal and consider a response, it became evident that their primary fear was an influx of African Americans. Groppi, outraged by the blatant displays of racism he witnessed, rebuked the group. For the next ten Sundays, he preached against racism from the pulpit in what can only be described as a one-man protest. Groppi’s actions, understandably, strained relations with the congregation.<sup>37</sup>

In 1963, the Chancery granted Fr. Groppi’s wish by transferring him to St. Boniface Church in Milwaukee’s inner core. St. Boniface proved to be a supportive

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<sup>35</sup> “Groppi Autobiography,” pp. 14-15.

<sup>36</sup> Flood interview.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

place for Groppi's growing interest in civil rights. The pastor, Fr. Eugene Bleidorn, was a sociologist and high school social studies teacher, as well as a priest. He had been greatly influenced by the Cardijn Movement and ran the Cardijn Center in Milwaukee for a stint during the 1950s. Like Groppi, Bleidorn understood the struggles of local African Americans and sought out ways to help. Throughout his tenure as pastor, Bleidorn consistently supported Fr. Groppi's involvement in civil rights activism, from the pulpit to the press. The other young associate pastor at St. Boniface, Fr. Michael Neuberger, also shared Groppi's commitment to young people and ran a series of youth activities at the church. These programs, combined with St. Boniface's close proximity to N. Division High School, afforded Groppi the opportunity to continue to cultivate close relationships with many young African Americans in the neighborhood. Later, Fr. Patrick Flood also joined the staff at St. Boniface. It is not surprising, then, that St. Boniface emerged as the primary "movement center" in Milwaukee during the late-1960s.

One Capuchin friar at Blessed Martin, Fr. Mathew Gottschalk, played a particularly important role in the civil rights development of several young Milwaukee priests, including James Groppi and Patrick Flood. As Flood recalled,

[Fr. Mathew was] a young priest who wore a beard down to his belly button and used to walk the streets all the time. He knew the inner city as a sociologist as well as a clergyman. He knew all the families. Everybody knew him... he was really an authority on that population in Milwaukee.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Flood interview.

When asked about his long-standing interest in race relations, Fr. Mathew replied, “I was always a pseudo-scholar [of the civil rights movement]. I took several courses at Marquette [on race] in the Sociology Department but I wanted to broaden my experience.”<sup>39</sup> That led Gottschaulk to engage the local black community more directly. Fr. Mathew also reached out to a small circle of young priests. Flood explained that Fr. Mathew taught them all “what it means to be involved in the discrimination in the African American community at that time and what that meant to people, what it did to families, and what it did to children.”<sup>40</sup> When the southern civil rights movement made national news during the late-1950s and early 1960s, Fr. Mathew rounded up his young friends and decided they needed to check it out for themselves.

These experiences brought the young clergymen face-to-face with southern-style racial inequality. In 1961 and again in 1963, Fr. Mathew led a group of Catholic priests - Fr. Flood, Fr. Groppi, and Fr. Austin Schlaefter of St. Francis Church - South to bear witness to racial discrimination. “We went and visited areas where people were involved in [civil rights] and there was a Catholic church,” Flood explained. “And usually the Catholic church was getting it on both sides. In the South, to be Catholic wasn’t the greatest thing on earth anyway, and they [Catholics] were also working with the black community.”<sup>41</sup> That same year, Fr. Groppi traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in the March On Washington.<sup>42</sup> During the summer of 1964, Fr. Groppi drove to

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<sup>39</sup> Gottschaulk interview.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*; Gottschaulk interview.

<sup>42</sup> “Groppi Autobiography,” pp. 19-20.

Jackson, Mississippi, with Nathan Harwell, a young African American man from Milwaukee, to work with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party on voter registration. The pair took books, clothing and food for the local people. While there, Harwell and Groppi also “integrated” several restaurants.<sup>43</sup> The next spring, the five Milwaukee priests set off to Selma.

Those southern travels proved transformative for all involved. For Groppi, part of the change came from the confrontation with racial violence and fear. Speaking about his 1964 trip to Mississippi, Groppi said,

We crossed the line into Mississippi. Going down to Jackson we passed a plant where workers were letting out, white workers were letting out. They saw Nate and myself in the car. I was wearing a Roman, a clerical collar, at the time. It didn't matter. A Wisconsin license plate, black and white, front seat. They chased us down the highway. I am telling you, I was afraid. I took out my rosary and I prayed from Memphis to Jackson without stopping. We didn't stop. You couldn't go to the bathroom. You couldn't. You were afraid to stop to get something to eat. Nate and I were all alone. It was the beginning of our movement.<sup>44</sup>

The rude confrontation with southern racial violence forced the young clergyman to clarify his commitment to the movement. Summing up the impact of his various southern excursions, Groppi explained the process as a conversion, “...what happened was that as you went along in the movement you got swallowed up in the cause. And the

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<sup>43</sup> On February 15, 1984, one year before Groppi's death, there was a slide show presentation and Youth Council/Commandos reunion at East Library in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Groppi attended and shared his recollections of the movement as slides came up. The reference to Harwell's trip came from this source. Hereafter, I will refer to this transcript as “Groppi Lecture at East Library.” It appears Fr. Groppi may have taken other trips South, as well. Later in the East Library lecture, Groppi alluded to a trip South with DeWayne Tolliver, but no details were provided. It is unclear whether this was the same trip that Harwell participated in, or a separate journey altogether.

<sup>44</sup> “Groppi Lecture at East Library,” 2/15/84.

cause was the cause of righteousness. Pretty soon your fear was gone. Nothing mattered any more. The cause consumed you and the cause was more important than your life.”<sup>45</sup> The powerful dynamics of faith and social justice had come together and coalesced into an increasingly activist spirit.

Selma played a particularly critical role in linking the southern movement these clergy had witnessed to the persistent racial inequalities in Milwaukee. At a rally in St. Boniface shortly after his return from Alabama, Fr. Groppi told a gathering of more than 200 people, “In the South there is a constant working to overcome [racial discrimination]. This is something we need to learn in the North... Bigotry is not confined to any one state. It is present here in Wisconsin.”<sup>46</sup> In a real sense, the Catholic clergy that returned from Selma stood at the confluence of the various reform tributaries that had flowed through the Catholic Church since the 1930s. Selma illustrated the new church with a conscience, it connected the southern with the northern movement, and it seemed to fulfill the reform spirit that had captured the Church. For northern clergy rooted in the changing dynamics of urban parishes, the lessons were clear and profound.

But there was another side to this civil rights revolution taking place within the Catholic Church. At Selma, traditionalists were alarmed by what they saw. While liberals felt that Catholic clergy were fulfilling their Christ-like duty to social justice by participating in civil rights demonstrations, traditionalists felt priests should be praying, not protesting, obeying the law and not associating with what they perceived as “beatniks” and “communists.” Selma, for many white urban Catholics, also signified a

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> MJ, 4/4/65, p. 2.

culmination, but of all the factors they perceived to be threatening to their traditional way of life. As the commitment to civil rights deepened and broadened among some Catholics, so too, reaction and resistance grew among others. For inner core parishes, the call to social justice seemed fairly clear: join the civil rights movement. The meaning of that call was less clear, though, in working-class white parishes. Theological and social liberals had called into question the traditional roles of clergy and women religious, challenged authority, suggested new parish forms and advocated a broad engagement with social issues. This led many into the civil rights movement, which was, in the North, largely rooted in geography and spatial arrangements. Many urban Catholics, though, particularly white ethnics, stayed close to traditional immigrant Catholicism.<sup>47</sup> To them, discussions of social evil paled in their minds beside fears of plummeting property values, the abandonment of traditional communities, and the beginning of broad-based economic problems. The influx of African Americans, and the goals of the civil rights movement, seemed to fuel each of these threats. Many felt that representatives of the very institution that had fostered their sense of neighborhood and security now sought to sacrifice them on the altar of integration. In short, many white urban Catholics felt betrayed by “their” church.

To many white Catholics in Milwaukee, Fr. Groppi embodied these two threats simultaneously. On the one hand, he represented the reform impulse within the Church, with its challenge to authority, tradition and obedience; He was a religious traitor. On

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<sup>47</sup> While the Catholic reaction to civil rights was concentrated within the white working-class, traditionalists of all stripes shared some of their views. For instance, many older generation black Catholics also opposed the new activists spirit. In particular, people like James Dorsey opposed the use of non-violent direct action to achieve racial equality. They viewed this as one point in a broad break-down of authority in American society and within the Church.



the other, Groppi also symbolized the threat posed to their jobs, neighborhoods, unions, schools and clubs by civil rights; He was a race traitor. For many white Catholics, civil rights and the reform impulse got tangled up together, indistinguishable in some regards, one leading to the other. They saw in a priest like Fr. James Groppi the distillation of what they feared and despised in the Church and in society and they fought it. As a result, Groppi became a lightning rod for two of the most contentious issues of the era: race and religion.

By the mid-1960s, then, Catholic authorities in Milwaukee and other northern cities faced a serious dilemma. On the one hand, a growing number of priests and nuns were becoming active in the civil rights movement out of conscience. On the other hand, a significant percentage of the Church's core white constituency opposed civil rights. The fissure, which had begun with the new reform movements of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, cracked wide open during the racial turmoil of the 1960s.

After Selma, Milwaukee Catholics played a larger and more visible role in civil rights marches and demonstrations. Throughout the Fall of 1965 and Spring of 1966, reporters noted with curiosity the growing appearance of dark habits and white collars at civil rights demonstrations in the city. For instance, newspaper accounts of the MUSIC-sponsored "Freedom March" in August of 1965 noted that Catholic priests and nuns made up roughly 1/2 of the 500-600 total demonstrators. In October, dozens of Catholics helped staff and run Freedom Schools during the second school boycott.

Behind the scenes, Catholic civil rights activism also continued. Many inner core Catholics continued to work at the grass roots level to support and aid the people in their communities. Activism also accelerated the association between the five inner core

parishes. According to Patrick Flood, “Priests and nuns in those five parishes came together into a very strong and committed community because of those boycotts and civil rights.”<sup>48</sup> Following the school boycott controversy, Archbishop Cousins called a meeting with inner core clergy. While Cousins noted that he did not always agree with Fr. Groppi, he did support Groppi’s freedom to follow his conscience in pursuit of his religious work. Out of that meeting came a plan to formalize the link between the inner core parishes by establishing the Council on Urban Life (CUL). The CUL would provide an important base of support and organizing for Fr. Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council (YC) during civil rights demonstrations.

Civil rights, and Selma in particular, had also activated northern white clergy, more broadly, to the cause of civil rights. When Groppi and the others returned from Alabama, they met up with hundreds of other Milwaukeeans, Catholic and otherwise, who had been moved to action by news from the South. Protestants and Jews also had heard King’s call and responded. The shocking events in Alabama energized liberal groups in almost every Milwaukee denomination who took to the streets in sympathy with those in the South. Church organizations also began discussing the issues and asking what they might do to help, both in the South and at home. Not all agreed on the causes of racial inequality in Milwaukee, or on the solutions or tactics necessary to overcome it. But, there was a growing consensus that a problem existed and that it required action from the religious community. Elements in virtually every church stood by, willing to help the cause of civil rights in Milwaukee. By 1965, then, in addition to youth activation, there was a solid network of white clergy in Milwaukee committed to

civil rights. Catholics, by virtue of history, theology, numbers and leadership stood at the forefront of that movement. The public participation of white clergy in local civil rights activism heightened the ethical dimension of the black freedom struggle in Milwaukee.

There was also a small but important circle of African American ministers that had emerged as forceful advocates for racial justice in Milwaukee. Rev. B.S. Gregg of St. Mathew Colored Methodist Episcopal, Rev. R.L. Lathan of New Hope Baptist Church, and Rev. Leo Champion of New Jerusalem Baptist Church confronted racial injustices not only with words but also with direct action. Lathan had supported the Daniel Bell march back in 1958 and Gregg and Champion had participated in MUSIC demonstrations. Each continued to support an aggressive approach to civil rights.

Groppi brought back with him from Selma the spirit of militant non-violence. “Non-violence is a tremendous Christian spiritual doctrine,” he said. At the dramatic rally in Montgomery, Groppi remembered being inspired by King’s argument for non-violence:

...One of the things that he said there was, that impressed me as the most beautiful sermon I ever heard and that was that “you can spit on me. You can call me nigger. You can throw me in jail. And I won’t spit back. And I won’t call you honky. And I won’t fight back. You can put me in jail and you can kill me. And I won’t try to defend myself by doing that to you. Do whatever you want to me and do whatever you want to my followers and I will love you. I’ll love you if you put me in the grave, no matter what you do.” That was Dr. King. And that was his philosophy... He would say that hate was psychologically destructive and that the only way that you were going to survive, psychologically, in this movement, was through the adaptation of nonviolence. Not only as a tactic. That nonviolence was love, as a philosophy of love. And he said that is a state

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<sup>48</sup> Flood interview.

in life. That none of us will ever attain to its greatest perfection, but it is a state that all of us must continually strive to attain. Through all of that hate and all of that tension [in Milwaukee], all those marches and everything that came out, we tried to adhere to that.<sup>49</sup>

Groppi also told of being deeply moved by the sight of a young black student in Alabama who, while being viscosly clubbed and whipped by policemen, simply kept repeating to his brutalizers, "I love you." For the young priest this was "the ultimate in sacrifice and courage" and it combined his religious conviction with his commitment to social justice.<sup>50</sup> Groppi also learned the value of confrontation as a tactic for social change. He and the other young white clergy in Selma had been confronted by the shocking reality of racial violence in the South. That confrontation forced an internal struggle over where they stood in relation to racial violence and discrimination. What King called a "creative tension" had been established. In order to resolve the tension, the priests had to make some choices. They chose to act through non-violent direct action in support of civil rights. The confrontation, then, had produced a transformation. Groppi and the YC would apply this strategy of militant non-violence and confrontation in Milwaukee during the Eagles Club protest and open housing marches with dramatic results.

Upon his return to Milwaukee, Groppi immediately plunged into the school desegregation movement. In the Spring of 1965, Groppi was elected Vice-Chairman of MUSIC and began to take on a more active and public presence in the group's direct action campaign. On June 4, local authorities arrested Groppi and four other clergymen for blocking a bus with a human chain at the Seifert Elementary School. The incident

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<sup>49</sup> "Groppi Lecture at East Library," 2/15/84.

<sup>50</sup> Courier, 3/27/65, p. 1.

won the young priest the respect of many in the local black community, including members of the YC. In October, Groppi stood at the center of the Catholic controversy over the second school boycott. And finally, in December, police arrested Groppi again, this time for blocking construction equipment at the McDowell site. With this heightened activism came increased media attention. By the Fall of 1965, local newspapers no longer felt it necessary to introduce Groppi, referring to him knowingly as a “local civil rights leader.”

Rapidly changing national and local circumstances also fueled the shifting dynamics of the movement in Milwaukee. Nationally, the tenor of civil rights activism was fast moving away from the disciplined non-violence that King and others had advocated. Disputes over tactics, philosophy and leadership rattled the movement and a more militant and confrontational style began to spread.<sup>51</sup> This spirit culminated in 1966 when Stokely Carmichael coined the slogan “Black Power” during the Meredith March. At the same time, the national movement increasingly turned its attention to the urban North. King announced plans to bring SCLC to cities like Chicago and Philadelphia in an attempt to prove that non-violent direct action was still viable in the face of growing criticism from more radical, and youthful activists. Moreover, in 1965, only weeks after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law, the Watts neighborhood of Los

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<sup>51</sup> These tensions played out in specific ways: In the wake of the MFDP challenge in Atlantic City in 1964, many activists questioned the efficacy of working through established institutions; African Americans challenged the role of whites within the movement, particularly in leadership positions; Black nationalism emerged; Women rebelled against gender discrimination they felt within established organizations; Conflicts between northerners and southerners flared.

Angeles erupted in massive racial violence.<sup>52</sup> When the fires ceased, 34 were dead, 1,032 injured and 3,952 arrested. The violence undercut the optimism that had risen with legislative achievement and inaugurated an angry period of rioting in dozens of cities between 1965 and 1968. Stories of racial violence in the North and South confronted readers of local papers almost daily. Frustration and rage swelled within segments of every urban black community as white officials and onlookers worried, “Can it happen here?” Violent chaos fanned white reaction against civil rights “lawlessness.” And, finally, in 1965, the United States began its direct military involvement in Vietnam with “Operation Rolling Thunder,” an escalating bombing campaign of North Vietnam. Over the next few years, the conflict in Southeast Asia would grow and, in the process, get tangled with civil rights, spurring widespread reaction at home and deepening existing domestic divisions. Taken together, these national events heightened local tensions in Milwaukee and provided fertile ground for more radical activism to emerge.

Similarly, changes at the local level also help explain the shifts within Milwaukee’s civil rights movement. More than anything else, the continued inaction of local civic leaders fueled growing frustration and anger among many activists. The School Board remained steadfast in its unwillingness to correct racial imbalances in the public schools despite the mountainous evidence provided by MUSIC and the urging of several moderate and liberal community leaders. The Common Council similarly refused

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<sup>52</sup> Watts looms large in the popular and historical mind when we think about racial violence in 1965. This reputation is no doubt deserved. But, the Watts conflagration was not the only racial flare-up during the summer of 1965. Rioting in Chicago resulted in 80 injuries, 123 arrests and 2,000 National Guardsmen placed on alert. Similarly, racial unrest in Springfield, Massachusetts ended with 44 arrests. See, Ralph, Gerald Home, Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Ralph, Northern Protest.

to act on housing and employment discrimination. Mayor Maier, for his part, continued to focus on his “War On Prejudice” as the primary way to solve the city’s problems. He embraced a city-versus-suburbs rhetoric that was aimed at deflecting responsibility for urban racial problems, like housing, to the affluent suburbs. Maier argued that suburbanization had significantly reduced the urban tax base, making it impossible for city government to deal with the mounting problems they faced. Many felt that Maier often used this rhetoric as an excuse to take no action at all on civil rights. By contrast, civil rights activists grew impatient with traditional methods of redress. Petitions, meetings, hearings, negotiations, reports, articles, speeches, and peaceful demonstrations all seemed to have failed. A growing number of Milwaukee African Americans searched for new avenues to change. As MUSIC activism declined, many felt that the broader civil rights struggle should be continued beyond the school issue and that the fight should be more aggressive.

In the crucible of the school desegregation movement and amid fast changing national and local circumstances, the Youth Council and Fr. Groppi came together to lead this new phase of civil rights activism in Milwaukee.<sup>53</sup> In the spring of 1965, the YC elected the young priest their advisor. The alliance brought together the energy and spirit of African American youth, the charismatic leadership of Fr. Groppi, and the institutional legitimacy of the NAACP and organized religion. For many Milwaukeeans, though, it seemed peculiar that a group of inner-city black youth would connect with a white, Catholic priest for militant civil rights leadership. Yet, the links were clear to those who had been paying close attention.

For Groppi, the YC offered an institutional vehicle to formalize and focus his work with young people in the core outside of the formal authority of the Catholic Church. In addition, Groppi held a special affinity for black children stretching back to his work at the Blessed Martin summer camp and possessed the ability to speak their language and relate to their experiences. Journalist Frank Aukofer recalled this special connection in Selma:

...Fr. Groppi had little interest in publicity. He was much more interested in the black children who populated the shacks on the dirt streets of the Negro section of Selma... One minute he would be there, the next minute he would be gone - down a dusty side street, heedless of his own safety, to sit on a rickety porch or in the dust of a grassless yard to play with the little black children. Few shied way from him.<sup>54</sup>

Groppi's experience working with poor African American kids starkly highlighted for him the human impact of racial inequality. The priest also believed that civil rights activism was a way to provide poor, inner-city black youth with a constructive outlet for their frustration and anger, as well as build leadership skills and self-esteem. And, Groppi had known many of the YC members for years before he joined them as advisor.<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, the YC had been searching for an advisor to fit their growing activist spirit. Across the country, young people had flooded the civil rights movement and injected it with energy and militance throughout the 1960s. Locally, MUSIC organizing, in particular, had activated inner core students. Their endless meetings,

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<sup>53</sup> Groppi already served as the NAACP's state youth chairman.

<sup>54</sup> Aukofer, pp. 91-92.

<sup>55</sup> Bleidorn interview; Neuberger interview; Flood interview; McKinney interview; McClain interview; Velma Coggs interview with Patrick Jones, 3/27/99; Groppi interview with Aukofer.



lectures, fliers, dances, rallies, “Freedom Institutes,” “Hootenannies,” and “Freedom Camps” educated young African Americans to racial inequality in their city. MUSIC also told them that they had a crucial role to play in changing those conditions. For many young people, participation in a MUSIC school boycott was their first taste of race rebellion. The NAACP Youth Council embraced this activist spirit.

A small nucleus of young activists had worked since the early-1960s to move the NAACP YC from its traditional focus on membership recruitment and social activities to militant direct action. As the southern movement gained national attention, their approach held sway. The YC’s first successful action came in 1963 when several dozen members picketed three inner core Big Boy locations for employment discrimination. Their brief picket, patterned on similar protests by the Milwaukee Negro American Labor Council, forced a settlement with the owner, Ben Marcus. Following the campaign, though, John Givens resigned as YC Advisor because a majority of the leadership of the adult branch opposed the YC’s direct action tactics. This institutional resistance kept the activist embers burning low in the YC until MUSIC arrived on the scene and in the schools.<sup>56</sup>

In 1965, the YC, under the direction of Direct Action Chairman DeWayne Tolliver, participated in the school desegregation struggle behind the sponsorship of MUSIC. In addition to joining the boycotts, YC members marched, picketed, sat-in, attended planning meetings, made phone calls, went door-to-door, sang, chanted, and passed out flyers, all in the name of ending segregation in Milwaukee’s public schools.

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<sup>56</sup> Jacobson interview; Givens interview; MS, 3/26/63, p. 8; MJ, 3/26/63, p. 14; “Why We Demonstrate,” Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council flyer, circa March 1963, Milwaukee NAACP Papers, SHSW, Madison, Wisconsin. MS, 3/28/63, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ 3/28/63, pt. 2, p. 2; Star, 4/6/63, p. 2.

Just as MUSIC had provided Barbee the cover of “a parallel institution” for his activism, it also gave YC members an activist outlet away from the adult branch. As the school desegregation campaign evolved in a more militant direction, the YC began to play an increasingly prominent role. In May, police arrested YC members, including Tolliver and Nathan Harwell, for their part in the prolonged demonstration against construction of the McDowell School. Again, on June 4, police arrested Harwell, along with five clergymen, including Fr. Groppi, for blocking a school bus with a human chain at Seifert Elementary School. Following the second school boycott, it was Tolliver and the YC who announced plans for continued demonstrations, including marches to the homes of Mayor Maier and School Board President, John Foley. And, finally, in December, YC members and Fr. Groppi led the MUSIC-sponsored civil disobedience campaign at the MacDowell site. By the Fall of 1965, then, the NAACP YC had taken up an important leadership role in the local movement.

But why did the YC select a young white Catholic priest and not one of the many black ministers? At that time, Milwaukee’s African American clergy had not proven themselves in the eyes of YC members. Many ministers, in fact, opposed direct action and had criticized the leaders of MNALC, MCORE and MUSIC for using it as a tactic. Others verbally supported the movement, but had not gotten actively involved. Conversely, although white and Catholic, Fr. Groppi had proven his dedication to civil rights insurgency through his willingness to confront racial inequality in Milwaukee, head-on, and at personal sacrifice. According to Velma Coggs, an early YC member, the June 4 arrests at the Seifert Elementary School played a pivotal part in their decision to ask Groppi to be YC advisor. Coggs claimed that several prominent African American

ministers were also supposed to take part in the protest and get arrested. At the last minute, though, they balked and did not show up. Groppi, on the other hand, arrived and submitted to arrest. In the following weeks, he continued to prove his commitment to civil rights, a fact not lost on observant YC members.<sup>57</sup>

And there were other reasons for this unique alliance. Many YC members felt comfortable with Fr. Groppi's leadership because they knew him for years through his work in the inner core. Paul Crawford suggested a more practical reason. "Here you had youth," he said. "You had uneducated kids that tried to do something for the community. They needed guidance. They needed advice. They knew what they wanted to do, but even in terms of the press, can you imagine somebody standing in front of the press... there's no way. So, Groppi would do that. He was the vehicle. We had no one else, so we had to utilize him."<sup>58</sup> Personal or practical, both Groppi and the YC shared a commitment to a more militant and confrontational civil rights stance.

The tactics and philosophy of the YC reflected the views of their advisor. While the organizational structure was roughly democratic, most YC members followed Groppi's lead.<sup>59</sup> Ed Thekan, a Commando, estimated that the YC membership, on average, was equally divided between young men and women, in part because Groppi recruited directly from the school at St. Boniface.<sup>60</sup> The YC embraced the confrontational non-violent direct action that their advisor had learned from King. They

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<sup>57</sup> Cogg's interview; See also, McClaine interview.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Crawford Interview with Arlene Zakhar, 4/25/84.

<sup>59</sup> In fact, YC decisions were voted on by a group of nine officers. Fr. Groppi advised them on issues, but did not vote.

<sup>60</sup> Ed Thekan interview with Arlene Zakhar, 2/22/84.

sought out ways to foster “creative tension” within the community, flush out racial discrimination and force people to choose sides and act. In addition, the YC under Groppi’s direction refused to work in formal coalition with other groups as MUSIC had done. Groppi explained,

We had our own organizational attitude. And that is why we did not form coalitions... we didn’t have the patience for it... The decisions were made by [the YC]. They were an action group and the attitude was, look, we are going to do it. You want to come with us, fine. If you don’t want to come with us, that’s all right, too. But we didn’t have any time to talk about what we should do and what we should not do. When it was a question of whether we should act or not act, we acted.<sup>61</sup>

Even as the YC and Groppi led MUSIC protests at the MacDowell and North Division School sites, they also worked to bolster their support and cultivate leadership among inner core young people. The blending of the political with the spiritual was a key component of this effort. According to Groppi, the first thing he did as YC Advisor was sign up all three hundred and fifty students at St. Boniface as members. He also wove the Movement into most of his sermons and teachings. “[The civil rights movement] was our religious training,” he recalled. “I did not teach a theology of the afterlife as much as I made the Gospel message relevant to the needs of the people in that community. I thought the best way to do that was to get involved in the civil rights struggle.”<sup>62</sup> In addition, during the Spring of 1966, Groppi and the YC established a “Freedom House” in a dilapidated old slum house on 5th Street in one of Milwaukee’s most impoverished black neighborhoods. The YC explained the reasons behind the

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<sup>61</sup> “Groppi Lecture At East Library,” 2/15/84.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

house in a fund-raising letter: "Most of us have been raised in blight, and we know what it means to be Black and Poor. Our brothers need us badly there. Our purpose is to identify ourselves completely with the poor and to serve in every way that we know. Housing, education, employment, voter registration, etc., will be part of our activity."<sup>63</sup> Richard Green, a future Commando, put more simply: "It was a place we could all get together and talk about things."<sup>64</sup> The Freedom House served, along with St. Boniface, as a movement center. Fr. Groppi and several YC members, and later a number of Commandos, lived in the house. According to Groppi, "The way we used to organize, I used to move out of the rectory because I always felt that the rectory was a kind of fortress that kept you away from your community. And in order to reach the community, you had to get out of there... So, the 5th Street Freedom House, some of the Commandos and a few of the Youth Council members had to live there and pretty soon some really good leadership developed."<sup>65</sup>

By late 1965, it was clear that the NAACP Youth Council and Fr. James Groppi had moved to the center of the black freedom struggle in Milwaukee. The organizing efforts of Lloyd Barbee and MUSIC during the school desegregation campaign provided fertile ground for a new generation of civil rights leaders to emerge. Their organizing efforts in schools, at dances and in the street activated hundreds of local children and young adults in the cause of racial justice. Similarly, Fr. Groppi found in civil rights activism the fulfillment of the reform spirit moving through the Catholic Church during

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<sup>63</sup> Fund-raising letter from the YC, April, 1966, Bleidorn Papers, box 7, folder 3.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Green Interview with Arlene Zakhar, 4/19/84.

<sup>65</sup> "Groppi Lecture at East Library," 2/15/84. See also, *Courier*, 8/20/66, p. 1.

the fifties and sixties. In addition to his race and religion, Groppi's charismatic leadership, crusading vision, and special connection with inner core youth made him a powerful symbolic figure. When hundreds of poor inner core young people joined with Fr. Groppi in the NAACP Youth Council, civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee changed dramatically. For the remainder of the direct action era, Fr. Groppi, the YC, and later the YC "Commandos," set the pace for race relations in Milwaukee.

## Chapter 5

### **“We Are Not Extremists”: The Campaign Against the Eagles Club and the Fight to End Police Brutality**

In 1922, striking white railroad workers met at a Milwaukee Eagles Club to plan their attack on sleeping black strikebreakers in New Butler. In 1965, the Eagles Club again stood at the center of a major racial conflict in Milwaukee. On the evening of Sunday August 28, 1966, 150 civil rights activists, led by Fr. James Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council (YC), set out on a six mile trek from the YC's Freedom House on poverty-stricken N. 5th Street to the home of Circuit Judge Robert Cannon on the 7800 block of W. Wisconsin Avenue in the affluent western suburb of Wauwatosa. It was the YC's tenth consecutive night of increasingly volatile, but peaceful, protest against the liberal jurist's membership in the “Caucasian only” Fraternal Order of Eagles. They knew what awaited them across the city line.<sup>1</sup>

The march began peacefully, with a somewhat festive atmosphere among the participants. Groppi and several young African Americans led the procession behind a large American flag. Several parents carried small children on their backs and shoulders. One young black man, stripped to the waist, had scrawled “Black Power” in charcoal across his shoulders, a sign of the shifting terrain within the local civil rights movement.

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<sup>1</sup> The following overview of the August 28, 1966, march to Wauwatosa was culled from local newspaper coverage. See, MJ, 8/29/66, p. 1; MS, 8/29/66, p.1; Star, 9/3/66, p. 1.

Demonstrators clapped, chanted civil rights slogans and sang freedom songs as they made their way up Wisconsin Avenue. As the group passed by the Eagles Club headquarters near Marquette University, marchers shouted, "Eagles Must Go!" To that point, no incidents had occurred. The 50 Milwaukee police and 50 county Sheriff's deputies escorting the demonstrators on foot, motorcycle and in cars, though, indicated that the situation was not as secure as it initially seemed.

At N. 50th Street, the cozy surroundings of tree-lined streets and well-manicured lawns turned into a carnival of white reaction and racist hate teetering on the brink of chaos. Huge crowds of white onlookers, many angry, others just curious, had gathered and the tenor of the march quickly changed. Almost immediately, obscenities and shouts of "Kill the white nigger lovers" and "Kill 'em, kill 'em! This is a white man's town. We don't want any cannibals here!" peppered the marchers. At the city limit, Milwaukee police handed over protective duty of the now 250 civil rights protesters - 25% of whom were white - to 70 Wauwatosa policemen clad in full riot gear. Tension crackled from the city line to 78th Street where Judge Cannon lived. As the marchers reached their destination, they faced a group of five counter-pickets carrying a Confederate flag and signs reading, "Burn, Barbee, Burn!" and "Groppi Is a White Uncle Tom."<sup>2</sup> Quickly, 14 more counter-pickets joined the group - which called itself "The Boys From Tosa" and was led by a white factory worker named LeRoy Saeger - holding signs which read, "Keep Tosa White," "How Well Is Welfare?," and "Groppi, Go Home." The counter-demonstrators were raucously cheered on by the group of over 4,000 angry white on-lookers that lined over ten blocks of Wisconsin Avenue, sometimes



standing five and ten deep on the sidewalk. The crowd pressed menacingly against police lines, shaking fists and heckling the civil rights demonstrators. Some spit at marchers. Others threw stones, cherry bombs and debris. Shouts of “We don’t want the niggers in Wauwatosa,” “Niggers go home,” and “Send them back to the Congo” could be heard. A solid wall of sheriff’s deputies, reinforced by a squad of newly activated steel-helmeted National Guardsmen from the 32nd Division, carrying unloaded M-1 rifles and carbines with fixed bayonets, kept the two groups of demonstrators separated. Several hundred more guardsmen, lined shoulder-to-shoulder along both sides of Wisconsin Avenue for several blocks, struggled to hold back the taunting white crowd.<sup>3</sup> Attorney Tom Jacobson, who represented Groppi and the YC at the time, recalled the scene many years later, “Honest to God, it was just like you see in the movies with the hostile reaction to the kids trying to go to school down South. We had people throwing eggs and rocks and yelling, ‘There’s that nigger-loving fucking lawyer. We’re gonna kill him.’”<sup>4</sup>

Sensing the potential for violence, Groppi and the YC picketed for only a half-hour before returning home. It took a flying wedge of 40 sheriff’s deputies to clear a path for the embattled civil rights demonstrators after they prayed and headed home. Police cars trailed and preceded the group, and guardsmen flanked the outer perimeter. As marchers reached the Milwaukee line and police protection transferred back to

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<sup>2</sup> News reports also indicated that police confiscated a number of other signs containing obscenities.

<sup>3</sup> In total, 477 guardsmen from four units of the 32nd Division moved into the suburb on the orders of Governor Warren Knowles. Over three hundred saw active duty on the streets that night while another 100+ awaited orders a few blocks away. It was the first use of troops in a civil rights crisis in Wisconsin’s history.

<sup>4</sup> Jacobson interview.

Milwaukee city officers, “a wave of people swept across lawns and down the middle of the avenue to catch up.” In that moment of transition and chaos, it appeared that a melee might ensue as angry whites overtook the civil rights activists. During the rush, a cherry bomb, which had been lobbed at the demonstrators, hit a 52-year-old woman from Waterloo, Iowa, bloodying both of her legs. The police quickly regrouped, though, arresting five whites and separating the sides, narrowly averting more serious violence.

Despite the violent apposition they knew they would encounter, Fr. Groppi and the YC had decided in early 1966 to target the local branch of the Fraternal Order of Eagles, a national organization that restricted its membership to “Caucasians.” With 5,400 members, the Milwaukee chapter of the Eagles Club was the second largest local in the country. Every type of white person belonged to the Eagles. Blue-collar industrial workers, labor leaders, politicians and business professionals all mingled at Eagles events. Consequently, it became an important network for the city’s power brokers. In this way, membership was an imperative for ambitious local leaders. In 1966, Eagles Club membership included 17 circuit and county judges, 10 of 24 county supervisors, the District Attorney, County Treasurer, circuit court clerk, 10 of 19 aldermen, the City Attorney, City Treasurer, City Comptroller, City Clerk, and the Executive Secretary of City Elections. In addition, Congressman Clement Zablocki, who represented the city’s South Side, as well as Mayor Maier, belonged and Republican Governor Warren Knowles held an honorary membership. Henry Reuss, who represented much of the

city's black population, quickly quit the club after the YC brought the issue to public attention.<sup>5</sup>

The YC and Groppi saw the Eagles Club policy as a source of grave injustice. To them, the restrictive membership criteria, alone, was bothersome and wrong, a legitimate source of protest. More specifically, though, the YC wondered how public officials could be counted on to fulfill their duties impartially if they belonged to a group with a racist policy. They asked the community how African Americans could expect to get unbiased treatment from judges, politicians, labor leaders and business executives if they maintained their membership in the Eagles Club. In this sense, the YC argued, the Eagles club was not a private association, and thus exempt from civil rights laws, but a quasi-public group under those laws' jurisdiction.

The YC was not the first to challenge the Eagles's "Caucasians only" clause. In July of 1964, the liberal Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations voted to seek removal of the policy. They asked Bruno Bitker, Chairman of the Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the United States Civil Rights Commission (USCRC), to request that the USCRC look into the policy with an eye toward changing it. A few weeks later, Bitker told the MCCR that the commission would not seek elimination of the policy because the Civil Rights Act "does not contemplate or provide for the commission to interfere in the activities of a private fraternal organization."<sup>6</sup> During that same summer, the local chapter of the Jewish anti-defamation group, B'nai B'rith, cancelled a dinner at the

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<sup>5</sup> Aukofer, pp. 97-98.

<sup>6</sup> MJ, 7/9/64, pt. 2, p. 5; MJ, 7/28/64, p. 17.

Eagles Club ballroom because of its policy.<sup>7</sup> The following January, an African American man urged the Milwaukee County Democratic Party to stop using the Eagles Club for its meetings and fund-raisers. After skirting the issue, initially, the Democrats did cancel an upcoming dinner at the club.<sup>8</sup> MUSIC had also gotten into the act. On May 9, 1965, the school desegregation group picketed the Eagles Club to protest their membership policy. They also targeted the club's manager, Milan Potter, who also served on the School Board and had recently waged a divisive campaign to save the city's neighborhood school policy. In a letter to the Executive Secretary of the club, Lloyd Barbee had wrote, "The Eagles Club... in addition to discriminating against Negroes in its Constitution, is now subsidizing a segregationist on the Milwaukee School Board of Directors."<sup>9</sup> And, finally, in early January of 1966, a lone black member of the local United Auto Workers Union, James Stovall, braved frigid temperatures to picket his union for meeting at the Eagles. None of these efforts were sustained.

In late February, YC members picketed outside the Eagles Club on Wisconsin Avenue. The protest continued through mid-March but television and newspaper reporters virtually ignored them.<sup>10</sup> The demonstrations remained peaceful and without incident, except for one occasion. On March 16, roughly 180 pickets marched along the sidewalk outside the Eagles Club as over 1,000 persons streamed passed to attend a St.

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<sup>7</sup> MJ, 1/28/65, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> MJ, 1/28/65, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 2/5/65, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd Barbee to Edward Lane, 5/3/65, Barbee Papers, box 12, folder 6.

<sup>10</sup> It is unclear why the YC protests received such scant attention from the media, initially. Perhaps, like Martin Luther King and SCLC in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, it was because the pickets attracted little white reaction or conflict. Or, maybe newpeople did not believe the issue was a legitimate civil rights cause because it focused, in part on the membership policies of a private club.

Patrick's Day dinner sponsored by a local Catholic Church. When police officers tried to break the picket line to enable a marching band to enter the hall, a scuffle broke out between plain-clothes officers and a few protestors. The incident resulted in the arrest of three YC members.<sup>11</sup>

The YC had a hard time making its case clearly to the public. The lack of media attention added to this difficulty and the end result was a muddled message. Reactions to the YC's protest focused primarily on the membership policy and ignored the issue of local public officials' affiliation with the group. The Milwaukee Eagles Club consistently defended its freedom, as a private organization, to set the terms of its membership policy however it liked. They also threatened to seek a court order to halt the YC demonstrations,<sup>12</sup> calling the NAACP a "left wing extremist organization, part of a coalition of left-wing extremists seeking to create tension and conflict in this community."<sup>13</sup> The Eagles did attempt to hedge a bit by claiming that they had tried to get the policy changed at the national level to no avail. Most of the public officials involved claimed that they deplored the white-only policy, but would not quit, opting instead to "work from within" to change the discriminatory clause. In a show of support for the Eagles, Mayor Maier refused to terminate his membership and upheld the club's right to set its own policy. He did seek political cover, though, by announcing that he

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<sup>11</sup> MJ, 3/17/66, pt. 2, p. 1; Star, 3/19/66, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> MJ, 4/1/66, pt. 2, p. 11; The suit also sought to prohibit KKK demonstrations. Apparently, three men who identified themselves as Klan members showed up during the YC picketing to "observe."

<sup>13</sup> Resolution printed in *Milwaukee Eagle*, 3/19/66, p 1; See also, MJ, 3/16/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

would not renew his membership in *any* private organization when they expired.<sup>14</sup>

Even some liberal civil rights advocates questioned the wisdom of challenging the Eagles policy when more pressing issues, like employment and housing, remained on the table. To them, however lamentable, the law seemed clear on this issue. The YC did register a victory when the Milwaukee County Labor Council announced that it would not hold future meetings at the Eagles Club until the restrictive policy was changed. Yet, in a display of the gulf between union leadership and some of the rank-and-file over civil rights, local 444 of the retail clerks union immediately voted to continue meeting at the Eagles Club. Disc Jockeys at WAWA radio also agreed to stop sponsoring dances for African Americans at the Eagles Club.<sup>15</sup>

It became evident to Groppi and the YC that they needed to alter their approach to the Eagles Club protest in order to clarify their position on public officials. As they considered how to do that, a series of civil rights-related bomb blasts rocked the city. On July 1, a homemade explosive rocked a South Side linoleum store owned by John Gilman. Gilman was a long-time leftist and had served as Executive Secretary of the Wisconsin Civil Rights Congress.<sup>16</sup> A month later, on August 9, another homemade

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<sup>14</sup> The Mayor and his advisors clearly scrambled to respond to the YC's protest. Political aids to the Mayor weighed the risk of alienating white voters in the city against the appearance of supporting a racist policy. In the end, they concluded, "From the standpoint of political tactic, it seems unwise to attack an organization of the stature of the Eagles by resignation on the ground that it discriminates, because the 'heat' it can generate outweighs the good it can achieve." There is a bundle of documents related to this discussion and decision in the Maier Papers, box 44, folder 13.

<sup>15</sup> MJ, 3/3/66, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 3/24/66, pt. 2, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> John Gilman interview with Patrick Jones, 9/5/01. See also, MJ, 7/1/66, p. 1. John Gilman is a lifetime resident of Milwaukee. He told me that he was decorated eleven times for his service in WWII as an Army infantryman. He appeared before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) on two occasions during the 1950s, once for his work as head of the Milwaukee Civil Rights Congress and the second for his work on the Rosenberg Committee. Gilman said that the government thought he was angling for Community Party leadership.

bomb tore apart the offices of the MNAACP. According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, “The explosion knocked down doors, blew out windows, knocked plaster off the walls and started a series of small fires which firemen extinguished with hand pumps.”<sup>17</sup> No injuries resulted from the blasts.

At the end of September, Milwaukee police arrested two local men, Robert Schmidt and Roger Long, and charged them with the bombings. Both men belonged to the Wisconsin KKK<sup>18</sup> and had worked for the George Wallace campaign in Wisconsin in 1964. Schmidt served as Secretary-Treasurer of the Milwaukee Citizens Council, a group that opposed civil rights.<sup>19</sup> The following day, police nabbed Turner Cheney, Grand

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Gilman claimed that his store was bombed by an alliance of Wisconsin KKKers, John Birchers and Minutemen. In addition, Gilman stated that he led the police to an individual who informed on the three perpetrators of the bombing. He said he had information that they also planned a bombing in Chicago around the same time, but it never came off. The immediate cause of the blast at his store, Gilman said, was a letter that he wrote to the *Daily Worker* the previous week protesting the refusal of the military to bury Robert Thompson in a military cemetery because he was a communist. He also referred to the fact that he lived on the South Side of Milwaukee, had been active in political protest his whole life, and supported integration. Gilman stated that South Side whites thought that he “had it all wrong” on race and that integration and civil rights was a “bad track for the country to be on.... As far as they were concerned, the blacks, the communists and the Jews were all the same. Whereas in the 1950s I was attacked for my leftist politics, in the sixties it was my support for civil rights.” John Gilman’s personal papers are extensive and can be found at the Wisconsin State Historical Society archive. His story appears to merit further research.

<sup>17</sup> MJ, 8/9/66, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> A June 19, 1967, report in the *Milwaukee Journal* referred to Long as the “former grand titan of the Wisconsin Klan.” There were signs of increased Klan activity in Wisconsin and Milwaukee in the months preceding the bombings. On June 18, 1965, a burning cross appeared on the lawn of an African American family who had recently moved into a majority-white neighborhood. Then, in July of 1965, the KKK announced that they planned to “open an office” in Wisconsin. In response, Mayor Maier denounced the Klan, saying “The KKK has historically been anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-Negro, anti-Polish, anti-German, anti-decency. I’m sure the citizens of Milwaukee will reject this un-American organization.” NAACP leaders also reported Klan activity in Lake Ivanho and Beloit. Six members of the American Nazi Party also showed up at a speech by Fr. Gropi in Racine in January 1967. Both the Klan and Nazis appeared at open housing demonstrations in late 1967 and early 1968. See, “Isaac Coggs to Henry Maier,” 7/4/65 and “Maier to Coggs,” 7/6/65, in Maier Papers, box 44, folder 13; MJ, 3/10/67, pt. 2, p. 11. On the open housing campaign in Milwaukee, see chapter 5.

<sup>19</sup> MJ, 9/25/66, p. 1; MJ, 9/26/66, pt. 2, p. 10; Star, 10/1/66, p. 1. The Milwaukee Citizens’ Council placed a large billboard across the street from Martin Luther King’s 1965 UW-M speech that read “King is a Communist.” Newspapers also reported that the Milwaukee Citizens Council attempted to affiliate with

Dragon of the Illinois KKK, in connection with the incident.<sup>20</sup> Cheney and Long were convicted of the crimes, while Schmidt received partial immunity in exchange for his testimony against Cheney.

The blasts significantly heightened racial tensions throughout the city. Civil rights leaders charged that the explosion was a deliberate attack on the NAACP and local efforts for racial equality. The head of the MNAACP urged local African Americans, “not to retaliate,” claiming “rioting or going into the streets won’t do any good.” Lloyd Barbee was less restrained, calling the blast “a planned effort to destroy a symbol of established civil rights activity” and refusing to join NAACP leaders in seeking “community calm.” “We’ve been calm long enough,” he declared. “All the bigots and all the madmen are not in the South. We have an ample supply here in Milwaukee.”<sup>21</sup> Roy Wilkins, head of the national NAACP, telegraphed Maier demanding “vigorous action to apprehend persons responsible for bombing office of Milwaukee branch of NAACP and prosecution under Wisconsin statutes.”<sup>22</sup> Mayor Maier called the bombing “one of the most reprehensible acts which can be committed by any human being against another” and moved to “assure all responsible citizens that their person, their homes and their businesses will be protected.” With a worried eye on possible retaliation, he concluded by stating, “I am not going to permit Milwaukee to become another Watts or

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the White Citizens’ Council in Jackson, Mississippi. It is unclear whether the affiliation was accepted or not.

<sup>20</sup> MJ, 9/25/66, p. 1; Star, 10/1/66, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> MJ, 8/9/66, pp. 1 and 10.

<sup>22</sup> Western Union Telefax from Roy Wilkins to Henry Maier, 8/9/66, in Maier Papers, box 44, folder 13.



another Chicago.”<sup>23</sup> The *Milwaukee Journal* called the bombing a “cowardly” and “deranged” act and a host of local religious and political groups condemned the attack.<sup>24</sup>

On the morning after the bombing of the NAACP offices, Milwaukeeans awoke to news that several YC members, most in their late-teens, had armed themselves with a loaded carbine and stood guard at the “Freedom House.” A picture on the front page of the *Milwaukee Journal* showed 19-year-old Dennis McDowell holding a carbine. The article quoted Fr. Groppi saying that the armed self-defense was his idea after the Freedom House and St. Boniface rectory received several telephone threats of further violence. “I will not remain non-violent in the face of some bigot coming at night and placing a bomb beneath the window,” he said. “That is where my non-violence ends.”<sup>25</sup>

The YC’s protection of the Freedom House highlights the sometimes hidden history of armed self-defense within the civil rights movement. As historian Timothy B. Tyson has shown in his biography of North Carolina civil rights leader Robert F. Williams, non-violence and armed self-defense often worked “in tension and in tandem” throughout the modern African American freedom struggle. Although an advocate of non-violent direct action, when faced with hostile raids by KKK members in Monroe, North Carolina, Williams and other local civil rights activists, many of whom were WWII veterans, armed themselves and repelled the attacks.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in Birmingham

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<sup>23</sup> “Statement By Mayor Henry W. Maier Regarding Bombing of NAACP Headquarters,” August 9, 1966, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 13.

<sup>24</sup> MJ, 8/10/66, p. 22. For various statements of condemnation, see Maier Papers, box 44, folder 13.

<sup>25</sup> MJ, 8/10/66, p. 1; MJ, 8/11/66, pt. 2, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> See, Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

during the SCLC-sponsored campaign to end segregation, Colonel Stone Johnson protected the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth's church with what he called "a non-violent .38 Special."<sup>27</sup> The NAACP itself had accepted armed self-defense as an established right since its founding in 1909. In the aftermath of the bombings in Milwaukee, Fr. Groppi told YC members that they could use non-violence as a tactic in civil rights demonstrations while not adhering to it as an absolute principle of their cause. "I've always believed in self-defense," Fr. Groppi said. "You know how cowardly the Klan is. They always strike at night. And this is Klan type activity... This sort of thing is so sneaky and so dirty that I believe in self-defense in a case like this."<sup>28</sup> There are dozens of stories like these throughout the history of the civil rights movement. Most have been submerged under the more popular and less controversial narrative of non-violent direct action. It is becoming increasingly clear, though, from historical research that while non-violence remained the preferred public tactic of the movement into the mid-1960s, armed self-defense often lurked just below the surface.

At the same time as they armed themselves, the YC began selling buttons with the slogan "Burn Baby Burn" on them as a fundraiser. The slogan was chanted by rioters in Watts and had become increasingly popular among African Americans in other cities, as well. The Milwaukee YC was the only NAACP group in the country known to use the slogan, formally. According to Nate Harwell, the YC sold over 100 buttons. "Everybody loves 'em, he said. "They are going very well." Fr. Groppi told the press, "The buttons

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<sup>27</sup> Colonel Johnson made his remark at a gathering of civil rights activists in Birmingham, Alabama, at Christ's Deliverance Ministry, 6/3/01. A recording of the event is in the possession of the author.

<sup>28</sup> MJ, 8/10/66, p. 2.

are a symbol of the struggle for freedom and a reminder of what happened in Watts.”<sup>29</sup> The head of the MNAACP, though, opposed the slogan and contacted Roy Wilkins in an effort to halt their sales. Henry Maier also pressured the national organization to rein in its Milwaukee youth chapter. Wilkins ordered the group to stop selling the buttons.<sup>30</sup> In a letter to Mayor Maier’s Chief Administrator, John C. Newcomb, Wilkins wrote, “...the sale of ‘Burn Baby Burn’ buttons is not indicative of a stand for law and order. We here in New York -- off the record -- were as astonished and dismayed as you must have been when we learned of this sale and of the sponsor.”<sup>31</sup>

The YC’s actions following the blasts shifted the attention of many white Milwaukeeans away from the bombings and to the civil rights group’s reaction. The image of young, angry inner-city black men arming themselves against racist terror alarmed many white onlookers and seemed to confirm their worst fears about the intentions of movement leaders.<sup>32</sup> An editorial by WITI-TV captured this sentiment:

TV6 is well aware of the problems of our central city people... frustrating, sometimes desperate problems that must be solved. But, the answers will not be found by making threats... or spouting off with fiery thoughtless

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<sup>29</sup> *MJ*, 8/10/66, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *MJ*, 8/11/66, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Roy Wilkins to James C. Newcomb,” 8/15/66, Maier Papers, box 125, folder 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ironically, the right to self-defense in protection of private property was well-established in the United States and in Milwaukee. It is unlikely that the sight of a white family guarding its home would have unleashed the same type of response. This suggests a racial double-standard over “the right to bear arms.” In fact, after unidentified assailants shot into the Wausau home of David Harris, the Grand Dragon of the Wisconsin KKK, on October 8, 1966, Robert Long, who had been charged with the earlier bombings in Milwaukee, stood guard with a .38 caliber police revolver. Milwaukee newspapers reported Harris stating, “This means war. They won’t walk away from the next one. They’ll be carried away. If they want night riders, I can get some good ones. We have some experienced men available.” Neither Harris’s inflammatory rhetoric, nor Long’s armed defense of the home met with public censure in the same way that Groppi and the YC did. See *MJ*, 10/8/66, p.1.

statements or by flaunting firearms. We can never forget that Milwaukee... like any community... has a few hotheads around who are likely to jump at any excuse to start something. For the good of everyone in Milwaukee, let's stop asking for trouble.<sup>33</sup>

Milwaukee *Journal* opinion-makers concurred, writing, "It only furthers the destructive aim of the bomber to start brandishing firearms and parading inflammatory slogans on lapel buttons. The Watts slogan cannot be sugar coated as merely expressive of freedom aspirations in the Milwaukee context; it expresses nothing but more hate and violence like the bomber's."<sup>34</sup> Mayor Maier and Governor Knowles also rapped Groppi and the YC. Syd Finley, representing the national NAACP, asked a crowd of 150 - two-thirds African American - at Mt. Calvary Church for restraint and calm, but was quick to add that the NAACP had advocated self-defense since its founding in 1909. "Self defense is your right," Finley said. "I say to any white bigots: You want to step up and hit me, don't expect me to turn the other cheek."<sup>35</sup> In response to rising complaints about the actions of Fr. Groppi, Archbishop Cousins met with the young priest. After their meeting, Cousins told the press, "a man assigned to a specific work should be allowed to work in that field. I think that [Groppi's] action comes in the area of city ordinance. If he is violating any ordinance, then I think he is doing wrong." Shortly thereafter, the District Attorney announced that the YC and Fr. Groppi had not violated any local law.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Maier Papers, box 44, folder 13.

<sup>34</sup> MJ, 8/11/66, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> MJ, 8/12/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Aukofer, p. 100.

In mid-August, only a couple of weeks after Chicago civil rights activists faced violent resistance from local whites in Marquette Park,<sup>37</sup> Fr. Groppi and the YC decided to try a new approach to their Eagles Club protest. During the week of August 13, the YC sent letters to Circuit Judges Robert Cannon and Robert Hanson, and to County Judges Christ Seraphim and John Krueger asking that they resign from the Eagles Club. The YC hoped that by targeting these public officials, they would clarify their stance. They were confident that one or more would resign in embarrassment. In quick succession, though, Judges Seraphim, Hanson and Cannon refused the demand, while Judge Krueger said he would not renew his membership, but not because of the club's discriminatory policy.<sup>38</sup>

In response, the YC began picketing Judge Cannon's home in suburban Wauwatosa on August 19. The Council targeted Cannon, in particular, because of his liberal record and public support of civil rights. They thought he would cave in to their demands more quickly than the other judges would. This, they hoped, would start a wave of defections from the discriminating club. The conflict in Wauwatosa, though, pitted three sets of rights against one another: First, the right of the YC to peacefully demonstrate. Second, the rights of the judges to belong to private clubs of their choosing, regardless of membership restrictions. And third, the rights of the judge and his neighbors to live in peace and tranquility. As a result, the YC protest was anything but clear-cut. There remained considerable room for disagreement and conflict. The YC

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<sup>37</sup> The Chicago protest, like most others around the country at this time, revolved around open housing. The Milwaukee protest seems to be perhaps the only significant protest against discriminatory private membership policies.

<sup>38</sup> MJ, 8/20/66, p. 9.

expected to confront Judge Cannon. What they did not bargain for was a confrontation with thousands of hostile whites.

For eleven straight nights, Fr. Groppi loaded up an old, beat-up bus that St. Boniface owned and ferried civil rights demonstrators to the sidewalk in front of the large brick colonial house in the suburbs. The YC led pickets, prayer vigils, and parades. They chanted anti-Eagles Club slogans and sang freedom songs. Their numbers grew steadily from 30 to more than 250 over the full course of the protest. But the YC underestimated Judge Cannon's resolve. The jurist stood firm in the face of the protests, stating, "I will remain in the Eagles as long as I live." Cannon argued that he could best work to change the Eagles policy by fighting from within the organization to change it.<sup>39</sup> The YC responded in a letter that stated, "You have chosen to rationalize and ignore the issue we raised.... By retaining your membership in the club, you have identified yourself with this policy of segregation, specially since the Eagles have proven that they will not strike this odious clause from their constitution."<sup>40</sup>

As the judge dug in his heels and the demonstrations continued in Wauwatosa, white reaction also grew vociferous. Over the first few nights, roughly 100 white onlookers and counter-demonstrators showed up. Their numbers mushroomed into the thousands by the following weekend. The crowds stretched for several blocks down Wisconsin Avenue. With each passing day, the hostility and intensity became more menacing. Tom Jacobson remembered Fr. Groppi calling him on the second day of picketing to ask if he would represent the YC as legal counsel because Groppi feared

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<sup>39</sup> *TIME* Magazine, 9/9/66, pp. 23-24.

<sup>40</sup> "Nathaniel Harwell to Judge Robert Cannon," undated, Groppi Papers, box 11, folder 2.

violence and arrests would soon result in Wauwatosa.<sup>41</sup> Most of those that came out just watched. But others hurled shouts and obscenities, like “Nigger lover!,” “Go back to the zoo, nigger,” “Nigger, go back to the jungle” and “Kill ‘em, kill ‘em! This is a white man’s town. We don’t want any cannibals here!” Others held signs stating “Groppi, Go Home,” “Keep Tosa White” and “Burn, Barbee, Burn.” A few spit or threw eggs, bricks, cherry bombs, rocks and debris. Several robed Klansmen showed up to keep an eye on the demonstrations.<sup>42</sup> And an increasing number of Wauwatosa police officers and Milwaukee County sheriff’s deputies, in full riot gear, struggled to maintain public order. Frank Aukofer covered the protests for the *Milwaukee Journal*. He recalled,

After about a week, it began to resemble a carnival. The youth council would arrive on the St. Boniface school bus, driven by Fr. Groppi. White spectators would either be waiting or would arrive shortly after. The crowd was always well salted with goons. Off to the side, a concessionaire sold popcorn, soft drinks, and candy bars from one of those neon lighted white trucks with windows in the sides.<sup>43</sup>

After nine days of swelling crowds and increasing violence, Wauwatosa Mayor Ervin Meier asked Governor Knowles to dispatch the National Guard to protect the civil rights demonstrators. It marked the first time in state history that the National Guard was called out during a civil rights demonstration. Guardsmen patrolled the streets around Judge Cannon’s home for three nights. The first night over 400 soldiers were called to duty.

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<sup>41</sup> Jacobson interview.

<sup>42</sup> MJ, 8/24/66, pt. 2, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Aukofer, p. 101.

The second night over 500 were needed. By the third night things had calmed down and only 100 Guardsmen were called to the scene.<sup>44</sup>

The merits of the YC's argument were lost on many of the white Wauwatosans and their allies throughout the city. To those that already saw the general migration of African Americans to the city as a threatening "invasion," the Wauwatosa protests appeared to be the realization of their worst fears: a group of poor African American children descending on their quiet, tree-lined neighborhood. As a result, many of the most reactionary white onlookers articulated in their shouts and actions a kind of racialized defense of their neighborhood: "Keep Tosa White!" "This is a white man's town," "We don't want the niggers in Wauwatosa," "Niggers go home," and "Send them back to the Congo." Others did not feel that a priest should be leading protests of young children in the streets, but belonged in a church, praying. Such actions, they said, only encouraged lawlessness, disobedience and violence. Still others opposed the YC's tactics. As in past campaigns, the demonstrations and the demonstrators themselves became the primary issue for many whites. As Aukofer said, "The public, instead of focusing on the issue itself, focused on the dramatization of the issue."<sup>45</sup> Fr. Groppi defended the YC's tactics, arguing, "Agitation is necessary. No one has ever been handed his rights on a platter. Frederick rote that any man who wants equality without

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<sup>44</sup> See extensive daily coverage in the *Journal, Sentinel, Star and Courier*, from August 19, 1966, through the first week of September. Milwaukee was not the only locale to see demonstrators march into suburbs during 1966. Just prior to the Wauwatosa protests, National Guardsmen were called to suburban Chicago to protect civil rights demonstrators. See James Ralph, Northern Protest.

<sup>45</sup> Aukofer, p. 102.



agitation is like a man who wants rain without thunder, or the sea without the roaring of its waves, or crops without plowing.” He added, “agitation is my motto.”<sup>46</sup>

Local officials and opinion-makers were also quick to react to the demonstrations in front of Judge Cannon’s house. The *Milwaukee Journal* editorialists lamented, “There is shame in the fact that a state which enacted a forward looking law to open public accommodations to all races in 1895 now must summon its national guard to keep hundreds of whites from venting their intolerance on a group of peaceful Negro demonstrators.”<sup>47</sup> Mayor Maier attacked civil rights activists for picketing private residences. In a public statement, Maier affirmed the general right to protest, but also stated, “This community will never condone the organized harassment of a man and his family in their home, regardless of whether the family is white or Negro. In short, neither demonstrators nor counter-pickets belong in residential areas at night... The argument here is over tactics, not principle.”<sup>48</sup> In what was perhaps the YC’s biggest coup, Probate Judge Michael Sullivan resigned from the Eagles Club in the wake of the Wauwatosa confrontation, stating that it was his opinion that membership in a segregated club was inconsistent with his oath of office.<sup>49</sup> Circuit Judge Robert Hansan, on the other hand, stated that if he had to choose, he would rather be an Eagle than a judge. Hansan, who

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<sup>46</sup> FBI report on Fr. James Groppi, 1/10/68, p. 4, Fr. James Groppi FBI File, part 1.

<sup>47</sup> MJ, 8/29/66, p. 18. In another editorial on 8/30/66, MJ editors suggested that the violent reaction of whites in Wauwatosa may have been inspired by similar events in Chicago around the same time. They wrote, “The white mobs have been drawn to the scene purely for the sake of violence, participants in some sort of insane fad that has developed as an outgrowth of the recent Chicago incidents...”

<sup>48</sup> Undated statement by Mayor Maier, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 13; MJ, 9/1/66, p. 1. Behind the scenes, Maier also began to prepare for the possibility of racial violence in Milwaukee.

<sup>49</sup> MJ, 9/9/66, p. 1; MJ, 9/15/66, p. 30.

had served as national president of the Eagles, claimed that the “opinions of extremists dominate Milwaukee’s civil rights debate while the views of the overwhelming majority are ignored.”<sup>50</sup>

The NAACP remained divided over the issue. Both the MNAACP and the national organization opposed the Eagles Club policy and lent public support to the YC’s demonstrations. In April, the YC introduced a resolution at the regional NAACP youth conference asking all branches in the region to support a boycott of the EC in their home cities.<sup>51</sup> In September, national officials announced that the protest would be carried to six other states: Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, West Virginia, and Kentucky. They subsequently sent notices to 247 Youth Councils asking them to direct action against public officials who belong to private clubs with racial restrictions.<sup>52</sup> Behind the scenes in Milwaukee, though, the YC protests in Wauwatosa enjoyed little support from the adult branch. Because they were discreet organizations, though, the MNAACP had no authority to curtail the YC’s actions.

Liberal groups rallied to the YC’s defense with a flurry of resolutions and press releases. For example, the Council on Urban Life issued a news release that stated, “We agree with the NAACP Youth Council that it is unconscionable for a person holding an office of public trust to also hold membership in a racially restrictive organization. This is especially true of judge who by his office represents the impartiality of justice.” The group went on to defend the YC’s tactics: “Picketing is within the constitutional and

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<sup>50</sup> *Milwaukee Eagle*, 3/28/66, p. 1; *MJ*, 9/2/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Star*, 4/2/66, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *MJ*, 9/2/66, p. 12.

moral traditions of our nation. Perhaps many of those in the crowds which come to protest the peaceful picketing of the Youth Council have forgotten that much of their job security and their comfortable incomes were gained in large part as a result of the same kind of activity. We cannot deny the right to picket.”<sup>53</sup> To many liberals and leftists, the Wauwatosa campaign underscored the way racial discrimination was embedded in Milwaukee’s political and economic power structures.

Others were conflicted. Many sympathized with the YC’s position and opposed the white hostility in Wauwatosa, but also bristled at the YC’s confrontational tactics. Overall, there was a widespread feeling that no matter what the merits of the protest, initially, events in Wauwatosa had spiraled out of control. WTMJ-TV captured this sentiment in an on-air editorial:

The demonstrations in front of Judge Robert Cannon’s house may have had solid objectives, but they were reached long before this... The results since then are negative, dangerous and ugly.

What we now have is a situation inviting physical danger -- even if it does not come from any violent thoughts of the demonstrators. It has drawn to the Wauwatosa scene not only the morbidly curious who always get in the way, but the bigoted. Is this an objective desired by the pickets?

Wauwatosa authorities have done a good job of protecting the rights of the marchers and the property of Judge Cannon’s neighbors. But can the NAACP’s demonstrations really believe the Caucasian clause of the Eagles Club is worth the risk of violence and tragedy. Are there not greater racial injustices worth demonstrating against?<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “News Release: Catholic Archdiocese Council On Urban Life,” 8/31/66, Bleidorn Papers, box 8, folder 2. In addition to the CUL, MUSIC, the Star, the *Courier*, the *Catholic Herald*, the Greater Milwaukee Conference On Religion and Race, the MCEO, Councilwoman Vel Phillips, the MCOE, the MNALC, the Marquette Faculty Association for Interracial Justice, the Southeastern Wisconsin Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, St. Boniface Parish, the Wisconsin Commission on Human Rights, and The Milwaukee County Labor Council also publicly supported the YC and Groppi.

<sup>54</sup> Print version of WTMJ-TV editorial, 8/26/66, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 13.

Given the recent bombings in Milwaukee, which were still unresolved, and the racial violence in Watts, Chicago, Cleveland and elsewhere, it no longer seemed worth the risk to many Milwaukeeans.<sup>55</sup>

Events in Milwaukee also garnered national and even international attention. Fr. Groppi received hundreds of letters during the protest. More than one third came from states outside of Wisconsin and other countries like Canada, Pakistan and Australia. The *New York Times* covered the Wauwatosa demonstrations and also ran a favorable story on Fr. Groppi titled, "A Picketing Priest." The article quoted Groppi, saying, "I will picket with the Negro. I will go South with him, and I will hang with him if need be."<sup>56</sup> TIME Magazine also took note of events in Milwaukee. Their piece, which included a small map of the inner core, described Groppi as "more of a Messiah than a leader" to the YC.<sup>57</sup> The Associated Press put out similar stories over the wire. In a pattern that would persist, local and national media coverage, at first attracted by racial violence and National Guardsmen, quickly trained in on Fr. Groppi. It seemed peculiar to see a white Catholic priest leading young African Americans in civil rights demonstrations.

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<sup>55</sup> On September, 3, 1966, the Governor of Illinois called more than 2,250 National Guardsmen to the Chicago suburb of Cicero to protect Martin Luther King, Jr., and other open housing advocates. At the same time, National Guardsmen in Dayton, Ohio, patrolled the city's predominately black West side in an attempt to quell racial violence. That same day, National Guardsmen stood by in Benton Harbor, Michigan, in the event that police in Jackson, Michigan needed help easing racial tension there. On September 7, 500 African Americans in Atlanta, Georgia rioted after police shot a black suspect wanted for car theft. The disorder resulted in 63 arrests and 15 injuries. Overall, there was racial violence in dozens of cities in 1966, including Cleveland, Ohio, Jacksonville, Florida, South Bend, Indiana, Cordele, Georgia, Omaha, Nebraska, Des Moines, Iowa, Lansing, Michigan, Pompano Beach, Florida, Newark, New Jersey, Brooklyn, New York, Menlo and San Francisco, California. See, MJ, 8/14/66, pt. 5, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *New York Times*, 8/30/66, p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> TIME Magazine, 9/9/66, p. 23.

The civil rights commotion in Milwaukee fed a noticeable upsurge in activity among far right organizations in Wisconsin. Klan groups festered in Milwaukee, Lake Ivanho and Beloit. Six members of the American Nazi Party showed up at a speech by Fr. Groppi in Racine in January of 1967. The *Milwaukee Journal* ran an article about the formation of TACT (Truth About Civic Turmoil), one of several John Birch Society front organizations dedicated to telling about what it called the “civil rights fraud.”<sup>58</sup> Local newspapers, radio and television stations all noted a significant increase in hate literature in Milwaukee in the months after the Wauwatosa protests. The MCCR issued a statement decrying the influx of racist propaganda. Anti-Semitic and white supremacist pamphlets appeared in mailboxes and on windshields and back porches. At UW-M, students found copies of a superhero comic book called “Here comes Whiteman: Jews Commies Tremble... Nigger Criminals Quake in Fear...Liberals Head For The Hills...”<sup>59</sup> Mayor Maier received copies of a 15-page red-baiting pamphlet titled, “Martin Luther King: Spokesmen for the Enemy.”<sup>60</sup>

The eruption in Wauwatosa prompted several attempts at a solution. A group of fifty local Catholic, Protestant and Jewish clergymen met with the YC to support them on the issue, but also to encourage them to stop their demonstration.<sup>61</sup> Archbishop Cousins,

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<sup>58</sup> MJ, 3/13/66, pt. 2, p. 19. It is important to note that the John Birch Society had its origins in Wisconsin and enjoyed numerous links to Milwaukee. For instance, the Allen-Bradley Corporation contributed significant funding to the group. One of its chief executives also served as a leader in the group. See, Gilman interview.

<sup>59</sup> “Here Comes Whiteman” comic book, Bleidorn Papers, box 5, folder 4.

<sup>60</sup> Dr. Billy James Hargis, “Martin Luther King: Spokesman For the Enemy,” in Maier Papers, box 44, folder 17.

<sup>61</sup> MJ, 8/27/66, p. 1.

at the urging of Governor Knowles, called in Fr. Groppi for a talk. While he personally opposed the continuation of the Wauwatosa demonstrations, he supported the priest's right to follow his conscience within the bounds of the law.<sup>62</sup> Alderman Vel Phillips and the City Tax Commissioner, Vincent Schmit, suggested that the Eagles Club's discriminatory policy might exclude it from the 66% tax exemption it enjoyed as a fraternal group.<sup>63</sup> The city of Wauwatosa and Governor Knowles attempted to ban nighttime demonstrations in the suburb.<sup>64</sup> Joseph Fagan, Chairman of the State Industrial Commission, held three days of "fact-finding" hearings on the question of discriminatory policies by private clubs.<sup>65</sup> All of these efforts, though, went for naught.

State Attorney General Bronson LaFollette, grandson of Progressive icon Robert LaFollette, also got involved in the dispute. Unlike the Governor and local suburban politicians, LaFollette preferred a negotiated set of guidelines for demonstrations that would protect both the right of protest as well as domestic tranquility. The YC opposed an initial set of guidelines agreed to by Wauwatosa and Milwaukee County officials as an unconstitutional infringement on their right of assembly.<sup>66</sup> The next day, though, LaFollette announced that an agreement had been reached to limit protests in Wauwatosa. The action represented a pyrrhic victory for the Attorney General. The agreement, which applied only to the situation in Wauwatosa, came hours after the YC decided to shift its

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<sup>62</sup> MJ, 8/30/66, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Star, 10/15/66, p. 1; Courier, 9/17/66, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> MJ, 8/30/66, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> MJ, 8/27/66, p. 1; MJ, 8/31/66, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> MJ, 8/31/66, p. 1.

protests to the home of County Judge Christ Seraphim in Milwaukee. A few days later, they picketed the home of South Side congressional representative, Clement Zablocki.<sup>67</sup> Both demonstrations were short-lived and uneventful.

Next came a formal attempt at mediation by UW-Milwaukee Professor Nathan Feinsinger. Feinsinger worked as a labor mediator and offered to smooth out differences between the NAACP and Eagles Club. Initially, the attempt looked promising. Fr. Groppi and the YC agreed to a temporary moratorium on demonstrations while Feinsinger worked toward a negotiated settlement.<sup>68</sup> In late-September, Feinsinger announced a breakthrough: a meeting in New York on October 19, between Roy Wilkins and a small group YC representatives, and D.D. Billings, the national President of the Eagles Club.<sup>69</sup> Before that meeting came off, though, another controversy flared which would again change the dynamics of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee.

At a news conference on October 4, 1966, Fr. Groppi announced that the YC had formed “a militant commando force” to aid in the group’s civil rights activism. Groppi explained, “This is a direct action force that goes into very tense situations, that’s very militant... They will be a police force. They will not be armed.”<sup>70</sup> The following day,

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<sup>67</sup> MJ, 9/3/66, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Star, 9/10/66, p. 3. While the YC agreed to halt demonstrations at the homes of prominent Eagles Club members, they did not stop their protests all together. About 65 civil rights supporters marched in front of the Eagles Club on September 28 to protest a meeting there by the Citizens for Decent Literature. On October 13, the YC and MUSIC picketed again in opposition to an award banquet honoring out-going school chief Harold Vincent. The next night, the YC joined Marquette students - over 300 civil rights demonstrators in all - in protest of a school dance held at the Eagles and attended by more than 2,700 students. The Marquette Eagles protest also marked the first appearance of the NAACP YC Commandos at a demonstration.

<sup>69</sup> MJ, 9/2/66, p. 1; MJ, 9/4/66, p. 1; MJ, 9/20/66, p. 16; MJ 10/2/66, p. 1; Star, 10/8/66, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> MS, 10/5/66, p. 1; MJ, 10/5/66, p. 1; Star, 10/15/66, p. 1.

local newspapers carried photographs of several young African American men, clad in black berets, black ascots, green army fatigues and black boots.<sup>71</sup> Responding to charges that the “Commandos” were an example of “extremism” on the part of the YC, Groppi stated, “We are not extremists. We are militant. We are a vigorous direct action group. I don’t think this is extremism.”<sup>72</sup>

The creation of the “Commandos,” as they came to be known, emanated from several sources. In large measure, it was a reaction to the bombing of the NAACP office in August and the violent attacks on YC members during the Eagles Club protests in Wauwatosa. In addition, YC members felt that local law enforcement did not always protect civil rights demonstrators in the face of violent white opposition. Prentice McKinney, a future Commando leader, recalled that during open housing demonstrations Milwaukee police had a habit of “slipping with the teargas” and throwing it at civil rights protesters.<sup>73</sup> Other YC members regularly complained of aggressive and sometimes violent behavior toward them by officers. The Commandos reflected this lack of faith in local law enforcement and the desire of the YC to protect their own, many of whom were

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<sup>71</sup> Later, the uniform of the Commandos would change to lettered gray sweatshirts because most of the members could not afford the more elaborate clothing. In addition, the national NAACP preferred a uniform that clearly identified the Commandos as an NAACP group. See, McClain interview; McKinney interview; Aukofer, p. 103. Commando uniforms were also an attempt to inject greater militancy into the movement as well as to project a bold, tough image to the public. But more than that, they also served a practical purpose. Dwight Benning explained, “We felt that we could be distinguished from the crowd. If we had on the same thing that the crowd had on then they couldn’t tell us from anybody else. By us having uniforms they could spot us in a minute and know who to go to. We even asked that the police come to us before they go into the line...” Quoted in Julius Modlinski, “Commandos: A Study of a Black Organization’s Transformation from Militant Protest to Social Service,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Social Welfare, UW-Madison, 1978, p. 77.

<sup>72</sup> MJ, 10/6/66, pt. 2, p. 1; Courier, 10/8/66, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> McKinney interview; McKinney repeated a version of the same story during the “Groppi Lecture at East Library,” 2/15/84.



children. Finally, the formation of the Commandos was a further attempt by Fr. Groppi to cultivate leadership and self-respect among poor, young African American men in the core and to channel their rage in constructive ways. According to Groppi, "The Commandos... were a very chauvinistic group. There were no women that were in the Commando group. It was looked at as a very macho thing."<sup>74</sup> Ed Thekan, one of the only white Commandos, explained,

It was men and there was a perceived need, I think, to identify with the black male who had in many instances been emasculated... Downgraded by the white society. Women seemed to go further in the black community, in education, they go further in the job structure and so on and so forth. Here is a case to exemplify the black man as being the leader in the sense of protector."<sup>75</sup>

The Commandos fulfilled three primary roles in the Milwaukee movement. In the most immediate sense, they formed a protective shield around civil rights demonstrators against hostile whites and rogue police officers. Dwight Benning, the first captain of the Commandos explained,

We decided we should take it upon ourselves to defend these people [the marchers]. You know, we asked them to march; now we had to protect their lives against people that we feared were biased toward us. We were youth, but we took it upon ourselves to stand out and be noticed, like the militia, to protect our people from harassment from the various crowds.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> "Groppi Lecture at East Library," 2/15/84.

<sup>75</sup> Thekan interview.

<sup>76</sup> Modlinski, pp. 75-76.

Ed Thekan agreed, “We met with a lot of hostility. And the police did not necessarily separate us from the hostile crowds as quickly as they could have. There was a need there for a line of Commandos or a protective shield to keep their verbal abuses, their physical punches, and their rocks and bottles as far away from our marchers as we could.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, the Commandos enforced order on the picket lines and in marches. Non-violent direct action required strict discipline, and many young African Americans did not believe in it. It was easy for some to become angry and lash out in the face of flying epithets, obscenities, bricks and cherry bombs. Robert Granderson recalled,

You know a lot of times different people got in the [marching] line just to raise hell, and a lot of times the people that were marching with them would raise hell to the outsiders; you know, say if he’s walking along drinking a soda or something, they’d throw the can [out of the line]. This is what we’d try to stop.<sup>78</sup>

Granderson also emphasized the need for discipline among police officers, too:

A lot of times, the police would infiltrate the line. They would come into the line, they would put stuff in people’s pockets; they would jump out of their cars and snatch people out of the line if they’d have a warrant or something. We got this understood with them that this wasn’t going to happen.<sup>79</sup>

Later, during open housing protests in Milwaukee, Commandos also occasionally conducted their own demonstrations when a situation seemed dangerous.

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<sup>77</sup> Thekan interview.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*; McKinney and McClain expressed very similar recollections in their interviews with the author.

The Commandos adhered to a biracial philosophy and practiced what several members called “not-violence.” According to Joe McClain, a Commando leader, “‘Not-violence’ meant we didn’t carry weapons and we didn’t start nothing, but we also didn’t take nothing. If the police or the white crowds came after us or the marchers, we weren’t afraid to mix it up. We fought back.”<sup>80</sup> Prentice McKinney agreed, stating,

We had a philosophy. [King’s] was non-violence. [The Commandos] was, “I am not-violent.” There is a distinct difference, OK? I’m not violent. But if you hit me, I am going to take care of myself. See Dr. King at that point was teaching people non-violence, passive resistance. They dump sugar on your head, they kick you in the butt, they drag you, they beat you, submit to it. We had a little bit too much vinegar.<sup>81</sup>

This “not-violent” philosophy was also practical. “There was no way you could have adapted a violent philosophy on the South Side,” Fr. Groppi explained. “You would have been hamburger. [So, non-violence] was a necessary survival method.” He continued,

You see, it is very difficult to go out to the streets where people like Prentice and Jimmy [two Commandos] had been fighting with their fists and surviving in a violent sort of way their entire life, to say, look, we are going to be non-violent. I mean, it was just not the survival code. But [non-violence] was a method that we used... If we were going to save ourselves as human beings, if we did not want to become what our opposition was, we had to adapt [King’s] philosophy. We struggled for it. And sometimes we were successful. Sometimes we failed.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> McClain interview.

<sup>81</sup> “Groppi Lecture at East Library,” 2/15/84.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.; McKinney related the same essential remarks in his interview with the author.

Often, lying just behind the public face of non-violent direct action and unarmed “not-violence” was the presence of weapons. On the second day of the Wauwatosa protests, as white reaction and the potential for violence grew, Fr. Groppi and Tom Jacobson loaded up the old bus with YC members, many of whom would go on to become original Commandos. Nervous tension filled the air. The previous day, Groppi had called Jacobson to ask if he would join the group and represent the YC in the event of arrests. He confided in the young civil rights attorney that he was fearful of white violence at Judge Cannon’s home. Jacobson agreed to help. When the two men boarded the bus, they reminded the young demonstrators that they had agreed to practice non-violence. Jacobson informed them that he could only represent them and defend their rights if they did not adhere to that philosophy. “If you have any weapons, you need to get rid of them now before we leave,” he said. No one stirred. Again, he started, “I’m going to get off the bus and come back on.” Jacobson exited the bus and Fr. Groppi walked up and down the aisle. Clink. Clink. Clink. Brass knuckles, knives and chains all appeared in a pile. Jacobson was shocked, but relieved that the youths had relented. Ed Thekan explained, “You were dealing with street people who basically found a need in their own daily lives to protect themselves from whatever. You know, threats, assaults, etc. So, they carried a bicycle chain, or...a switchblade or whatever was hot that day. But you could see where that wasn’t required on the picket line.”<sup>83</sup> Throughout the rest of the direct action era in Milwaukee, non-violent direct action would coexist alongside a more shadowy version of armed self-defense.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Thekan interview.

<sup>84</sup> Jacobson interview; “Groppi Lecture at East Library,” 2/15/84.

Public image was central to the thinking behind the formation of the Commandos. Ed Thekan claimed, “The word ‘Commando’ itself was sort of a threatening word. I think it was chosen specifically for that. I believe it was a good choice. They weren’t just rubber stamps. Or they weren’t just to pacify the crowds.”<sup>85</sup> Commando uniforms were also an attempt to inject greater militancy into the movement as well as to project a bold, tough image to the public.<sup>86</sup> The Commando mystique also helped them recruit. Again, Thekan explained, “It started off with about 15 young men and it grew. There was, I don’t know, a charisma, I guess, of a group, if you can speak of it that way, that just fed on itself.”<sup>87</sup>

Originally, the Commandos were a sub-group of the YC. Virtually all of the initial members also belonged to the YC. Nathan Harwell and DeWayne Tolliver, for instance, two early leaders of the YC, were founding members of the Commandos. Both met at St. Boniface and each looked to Fr. Groppi for guidance. It is important to keep in mind the loose organizational structure and membership criteria that the YC employed. In part out of secrecy and in part out of a lack of interest, neither group kept minutes of meetings, nor did they follow a concrete set of by-laws or articles-of-incorporation. Ed Thekan recalled,

Walk in the door and you sign a card. Even if you didn’t have the \$2, Father would say, ‘Fine. You are a member. We will put in for you.’ It

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<sup>85</sup> Thekan interview.

<sup>86</sup> Uniforms also served a practical purpose. Dwight Benning explained, “We felt that we could be distinguished from the crowd. If we had on the same thing that the crowd had on then they couldn’t tell us from anybody else. By us having uniforms they could spot us in a minute and know who to go to. We even asked that the police come to us before they go into the line...” Quoted in Julius Modlinski, “Commandos: A Study of a Black Organization’s Transformation from Militant Protest to Social Service,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Social Welfare, UW-Madison, 1978, p. 77.

<sup>87</sup> Thekan interview.

wasn't a question of those who could afford it and those who couldn't afford it. So although I think most organizations have formality to that, ours was somewhat loose. You have to understand we were dealing, in many cases, with kids as young as 14 and 16.<sup>88</sup>

The YC and Fr. Groppi developed the strategy and made decisions about when and where to march. The Commandos would then plan how best to “police” those demonstrations. In essence, the Commandos evolved out of the YC “line captains.” Again Thekan explained, “When you go out [to a demonstration] with 20 individuals, you only need two people to captain. When you go out with 100 individuals, two will not do.”<sup>89</sup> Groppi agreed: “The Commandos, when it started, was a very small group... They were developed to become marshals of the demonstrations.”<sup>90</sup> As the job got bigger, the need for a more formalized unit also evolved. Over time, the Commandos would develop an increasingly distinct personality from the YC. But early on, there was a fluidity between the two groups.<sup>91</sup>

The NAACP YC Commandos was not the only militant self-defense organization within the civil rights movement during the mid-1960s. In late 1964, an organization called the Deacons for Defense and Justice formed in Bogalusa, Louisiana, to protect local civil rights activists in the face of widespread Klan activity.<sup>92</sup> The Deacons for

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> “Groppi Lecture at East Library,” 2/15/84.

<sup>91</sup> See also, Modlinski dissertation; McKinney interview; McClain interview; Squire Austin interview with Patrick Jones, 10/7/99.

<sup>92</sup> Lance Hill, “The Deacons for Defense and Justice: Armed Self-Defense and the Civil Rights Movement,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Tulane University, 1997.

Defense received considerable media attention in Milwaukee newspapers. Similarly, the same month that Groppi announced the formation of the Commandos, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale established the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California, to combat police brutality. Unlike the Commandos, both the Deacons and the Panthers carried weapons. Even within the NAACP there were other examples of “commando” groups. Mark Rosenman, acting National Youth Director for the NAACP, told Milwaukee reporters that three other NAACP commando units existed at the time of the Milwaukee group’s founding, one in New England, one on Long Island and one “working in four southern states.”<sup>93</sup> Later, in June of 1967, Milwaukee newspapers reported on a white-helmeted group of 150 African American youths in Tampa, Florida, which helped police soothe tempers following two days of rioting in the city’s black community. That same month, African Americans in Dayton, Ohio, followed Tampa’s lead.<sup>94</sup> What tied all of these groups together was that they grew out of the specific needs of local circumstances, particularly the appearance of anti-civil rights violence from whites and a general antipathy between local law enforcement and urban African Americans.

The formation of the Commandos was just one aspect of the YC and Fr. Groppi’s more general embrace of Black Power. In its broadest sense, the Black Power movement strove to express a new African American consciousness. It flowed out of earlier struggles for racial justice, but its meaning was vigorously debated. During the

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<sup>93</sup> MJ, 10/6/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> Unlike the other examples, police in Tampa and Dayton embraced the youth patrols and, in fact, worked with them. In Tampa, for instance, police put five of the patrollers on their payroll as a permanent part of

mid-1960s, Black Power became a slogan that meant different things to different people. To some, it represented race dignity and self-reliance. Others thought of Black Power in mainly economic terms. Black Power encouraged the improvement of African American communities, rather than working for integration. It also looked to black cultural heritage and history for the roots of African American identity. To cultural nationalists, Black Power related primarily to the arts and cultural expression. They tried to develop a new black aesthetic in poetry, drama, dance, music, writing, painting and film. Like the idea of “consciousness,” Black Power artists like Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal emphasized the centrality of self-representation and creative autonomy. Behind the afros and dashikis and other signs of race pride was the idea that beauty and self-esteem were critical to power relations as well as to self-image and self-expression. Black Power musicians like James Brown and George Clinton captured this spirit in lyrical exhortations like “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” and “Liberate Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow.” Furthermore, most Black Power advocates felt a necessity for black people to define the world for themselves, in their own terms, free from white control or domination. For some, this took the form of a political struggle against racism and imperialism, and a more confrontational, demanding style. Many Black Power militants, like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, increasingly identified with pan-African struggles for liberation around the world. With this political evolution came a growing repudiation of non-violent direct action and an embrace of armed self-defense, or even offensive violence as a “revolutionary tool.”

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the city’s police community relations board. In Dayton, African American youth rode alongside regular officers in squad cars. See, MJ, 6/16/67, p. 4; MJ, 6/17, 67, p. 8.



The influences on Black Power were myriad. The roots stretched back to the slave revolts of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, through Radical Republicanism, and on to Garveyism and the March On Washington Movement. Its waters ran deep. More recently, Robert F. Williams, the Monroe, North Carolina, civil rights leader and advocate of “armed self-reliance” articulated a distinct vision of Black Power during the 1950s.<sup>95</sup> In addition, Malcolm X, the fiery proselytizer for the Nation of Islam lent Black Power much of its rhetoric, style and attitude.<sup>96</sup> As head of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael popularized Black Power as a pugnacious new political slogan. During the Meredith March in 1966, Carmichael staged a series of confrontations with Martin Luther King over the direction and tactics of the movement. These clashes inspired a new generation of adherents.<sup>97</sup>

As Black Power grew, it caused heated debate and produced resistance from many whites and several prominent African American organizations, including the NAACP. Some criticized Black Power for what they perceived to be its “anti-white” message, arguing that it ran contrary to the integrationist ideal of American democracy. Others looked at Black Power as an invitation to lawlessness and racial violence and felt it undermined established authority. Still others thought that Black Power did not offer a constructive solution to the increasingly desperate plight of African Americans, particularly in cities.

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<sup>95</sup> Timothy B. Tyson, Radio Free Dixie.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom; Clayborn Carson, In Struggle.

<sup>97</sup> On Black Power, more generally, see, Tyson, Radio Free Dixie; William Van DeBerg, New Day In Babylon; Komozi Woodard, A Nation Within A Nation.

In Milwaukee, black and white newspapers printed dozens of stories about the new civil rights consciousness. They displayed pictures of leaders like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, of gun-toting Black Panthers in California, and urban rioters in Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles and elsewhere. Articles emphasized the incendiary rhetoric of national Black Power practitioners and stressed its menacing qualities. Editorialists and letter-writers argued over the merits of Black Power while most conservative and far-right white leaders condemned the new ideology out of hand. Over all, Black Power contributed to a rising tension throughout the city and the growing backlash against the civil rights movement.

By the winter of 1966-67, the YC and Fr. Groppi had clearly adopted the Black Power ideology. At marches and rallies, civil rights activists chanted Black Power slogans, held Black Power signs and wore Black Power t-shirts. The sale of the “Burn Baby Burn” buttons, the armed defense of the Freedom House, the formation of the Commandos as well as their uniforms, strategy and style were all products of the new Black Power consciousness.

At St. Boniface, priests placed banners in both Swahili and English around the church, they laced sermons with Black Power rhetoric and Fr. Groppi refused to wear colorful priestly vestments during mass, preferring instead to wear black on the alter as a sign of racial solidarity.<sup>98</sup> Groppi also used mass to teach neighborhood children about

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<sup>98</sup> “Groppi In Black for Yule Mass,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 1/3/67, p. 7; Karen Kelly, “The Scene - Milwaukee,” *Community*, October 1967, p. 3; An AP story on Groppi datelined May 21, 1967, related the following exchange at St. Boniface regarding Groppi’s vestments. Groppi asked a little girl, “And why am I wearing black today? Tell them again.” “Because it’s a beautiful color,” she said. “Because it’s a beautiful color,” Groppi repeated. “Wonderful. It is a beautify color. All colors are beautiful - black, white, red, yell - all colors. And why is that?” “Because God made them,” said a child. “Because God made them,” said the priest. For transcript of the AP story, see Groppi Papers, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

the tenets of Black Power. He would often talk about black self-determination in religious terms: “The Lord ain’t gonna help you and he ain’t gonna help me unless we get out there and help ourselves. Jesus Christ was a civil rights worker. The greatest civil rights worker, greater than anyone here...” Similarly,

You must involve yourself as Christ did. The peace of Jesus Christ was the peace of inner conviction. He preached the peace of human dignity. He never meant that creative tension should be removed from earth. He didn’t say that He came to bring peace to earth - that’s part of the white lie - but rather to cast a sword upon the earth. You must be revolutionaries. Christ was a revolutionary. That’s why he ended up on the cross.<sup>99</sup>

Fr. Groppi invited young people to gather around the altar where they sang spirituals and discussed current civil rights issues. Journalist Frank Aukofer recalled one particular service on October 13, 1967, attended by one Commando and about a dozen young YC members. They began by singing “Mary Had a Baby,” “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” and “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.” Groppi then proceeded with a “dialogue homily” about brotherhood and civil rights. After the mass, YC members began chanting “Black Power’s coming, Black Power!” Groppi interrupted and the following discussion ensued:

Groppi: “What do we mean by Black Power? Does it mean black people over white people?”

Young people: “No, equal! It means opportunity.”

G: “All right, do black people have much money?”

YP: “No.”

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<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, p. 85.

G: "Then what do we call it, what kind of power do we call it?... money power, economic power."

YP: "And in the political field and in the social..."

G: "Political power. What do we mean by political power?"

YP: "In the political field, we want some black people in office and not just white people."

G: "What do we mean by educational power?"

YP: "We want to get a good education."

G: "What's one aspect of our education we don't get?"

YP: "Negro history."

G: "Black history - all right, good."

Following this line of discussion, the young people, most in 6th, 7th or 8th grade, chanted again, "Move over whitey, Black Power!" They ended the service by singing "We love everybody in our hearts." Groppi's attempt to make the liturgy relevant to the experiences of the young black children he worked with was one important manifestation of Black Power in Milwaukee.<sup>100</sup>

These and other unique features of Black Power in Milwaukee highlighted the way Groppi and the YC fitted national Black Power ideology to their particular local circumstances. To many, the sight of a white Catholic priest leading chants of Black Power from the alter and the picket line no doubt seemed peculiar. And it was. The leading role of Fr. Groppi as a Black Power advocate and spokesman ran counter to the growing racial separatism of Black Power in other areas. In addition, the Commandos

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<sup>100</sup> Fr. Groppi interview with Aukofer; See also, Aukofer, pp. 83-84.

persistent embrace of inner-racial cooperation and “not-violence,” as well as their refusal to brandish weapons, publicly, even as a symbolic act, also set them apart from many other local Black Power organizations. In essence, then, the YC and Commandos adapted Black Power to the unique dynamics of Milwaukee’s social relations in order to make it relevant to their lives.

Official reaction to the formation of the Commandos was swift. Milwaukee *Journal* editors called the announcement of the new unit, “disturbing news” and compared them to the “Hitler Youth” and “the Red Guard of Communist China.” The paper concluded, “The impasse [between the races] will only be made more bitter and more frustrating by the formation of this or any other commando force. Let’s have an end to them in Wisconsin.”<sup>101</sup> The *Sentinel* concurred, stating,

A band of vigilantes - and this is what the NAACP Commandos really are - might have a place in a community where the processes of law enforcement have broken down, where citizens must band together to protect themselves. Milwaukee is not such a place. Making the NAACP youth into a military cadre can only exacerbate the unfortunately and unnecessarily strained relations between the Negro community and our police department, which is all the uniformed force we need.<sup>102</sup>

The *Star* covered the story, but failed to comment editorially on it, while the city’s other African American newspaper, the *Courier* asked, “Will the Commandos existence add to the ‘domestic tranquility’ or some egos? Will they excite, incite or possibly ignite? Or will their role fulfill their stated purpose? The *Courier* and many members of the

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<sup>101</sup> MJ, 10/12/66, p. 24.

<sup>102</sup> MS, 10/7/66, p. 22.

community have very grave concerns about the wisdom of a Commando unit.”<sup>103</sup> The Milwaukee County Labor Council also opposed the group by a vote of 225-1.<sup>104</sup> And a state Assemblyman, Republican Louis Cecil, called the Commandos “a Hitler-like group” and demanded Attorney General LaFollette crack down on them. LaFollette responded, “You may be assured that we will handle matters as the circumstances require.”<sup>105</sup> Despite the broad opposition to the Commandos, the national NAACP backed the formation of the group, noting that other chapters had similar units. The local adult branch, though, privately opposed it. According to Prentice McKinney,

It was the old plantation mentality... The older community – the NAACP, respectable leadership – had an investment in the system. They understood that there was discrimination, but they had learned to get along and live with it and not rock the boat. We were the young turks. We were having no part of it. We were standing up against it. We were defying it, which put their position in jeopardy because the system would look at them and say, ‘Why can’t you control them?’ And they tried...<sup>106</sup>

In the end, though, the adult branch was powerless against the YC because it operated as a distinct NAACP group.

Most white Milwaukeeans reacted to the Commandos with a mix of surprise, fear outrage and opposition. For many whites, the Commandos conjured up images of marauding young black men undermining the rule of law and spreading racial violence. Taken together with the explosive string of recent events in Milwaukee and across the

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<sup>103</sup> Courier, 10/15/66, p. 1.

<sup>104</sup> MS, 10/6/66, p. 5.

<sup>105</sup> MJ, 10/7/66, p.1.

country, there was some basis to their fears. The civil rights movement had begun a dramatic change, broadening its concerns to include urban education, housing, welfare, police-community relations and employment. No longer were young civil rights activists asking nicely for basic civil rights and social equality. "We were about action," Prentice McKinney remembered. "I mean, we were teenagers and we said, 'This ain't right. Let's do something about it.'"<sup>107</sup> More and more were making threatening demands under the banner of Black Power. Racial violence was sweeping the nation's cities and urban tensions remained high across the North. Many whites, and even some moderate and conservative African Americans, felt that the movement had moved away from dignified peaceful protest to confrontation. To them, urban violence seemed random, undirected and, ultimately, counter-productive. Many did not understand or were ignorant of the experiences of black people in the inner core, particularly the antipathy many blacks had for local law enforcement. These whites looked on with growing fear of what might come to Milwaukee.

Perhaps the most significant reaction, at least in the short-term, came from the Eagles Club leadership. In a telegram to Roy Wilkins, D.D. Billings stated that he would meet with national NAACP officials, but would not meet with members of the YC or Commandos. Moreover, he said he would not meet with the national officials if they did not repudiate the new commando unit.<sup>108</sup> In response, Wilkins wrote,

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<sup>106</sup> McKinney interview.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> MS, 10/9/66, p. 1; MJ, 10/9/66, p. 1.

You call upon me as national executive director of the NAACP to “disown” our Milwaukee youth unit... I cannot do this. Our Milwaukee youth unit is not violating any of the general programs set forth by the NAACP. Although its methods may strike some persons as being unorthodox, the situation to which it addresses itself in 1966, namely, a racial expulsion clause in the membership of, of all groups, a fraternal society, is also extraordinary for this day in this nation.<sup>109</sup>

With that exchange, Professor Feinsinger’s attempts to mediate a solution to the Eagles Club impasse fizzled.

In the end, little had changed at the Eagles Club. The protest did net a few withdrawals of membership and even fewer cancelled meetings, but by and large the status quo remained. Fr. Groppi and the YC had successfully pointed to another instance of racial inequality in Milwaukee, but they achieved little that was concrete. Their work against the restrictive racial policies in private clubs did win them national recognition. At the NAACP convention in Boston in July of 1967, the Milwaukee YC beat out more than 500 other youth councils across the country to win the Isabel Strickland Memorial award for “the most distinguished service in the fight for freedom.” Similarly, Fr. Groppi received an award as “the most effective, outstanding advisor of any youth council in the country.”<sup>110</sup> Their activism and notoriety also paid off with increased membership. By the summer of 1967, the YC counted 100 regular members and the Commandos numbered more than 30.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> MJ, 10/20/66, pt. 2, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> Star, 7/22/66, p. 1; MJ, 7/14/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> MYC and Commando membership increases came in waves. After the Wauwatosa protest and the open housing protests of 1967-1968, both groups experienced a significant spike in interest. Similarly, when the YC relocated their Freedom House, they began to attract new members from the surrounding neighborhood.



The chain of events that began with the bombing of the NAACP office and extended through the Wauwatosa protests and the creation of the Commandos had further frayed relations between the YC and the Milwaukee police. The appointment of Harold Brier as Chief of Police in 1964 further frayed the relationship between the department and young, inner-core residents. Brier grew up in a working-class family on Milwaukee's South Side and joined the force in 1939 at the age of 28. The former head of detectives was bull-headed and liked things to be orderly.<sup>112</sup> A 1911 law that gave the Chief of Police lifetime tenure in office made Brier virtually untouchable politically and largely free from oversight. The same statute mandated that only "freeholders" - or those owning a home - could bring former complaint against a police officer. This rule effectively prohibited complaints from roughly three-quarters of the African Americans in Milwaukee. With rising crime rates in the inner core, Milwaukee police took an increasingly hard-line approach to law enforcement in black neighborhoods.<sup>113</sup> With a greater police presence and more arrests came more conflicts. Because more than 98% of the city's police force was white and working-class at the time, and did not live in the areas they patrolled, few officers understood the struggles of inner-core residents. Black residents, in turn, complained that police officers were too harsh, overly aggressive or petty and often failed to wear badges. A series of skirmishes between young African

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<sup>112</sup> MS, 2/16/64, p. 1; MJ, 2/16/64, p. 1.

<sup>113</sup> There is evidence that this crack-down also occurred in Puerto Rican neighborhoods as well. According to the October 12, 1966 minutes of the MCCR, two Catholic priests who worked in the Latino community told the commission that over the past few months police had cracked down on anyone standing on street corners. Most of those involved were young Puerto Rican men and boys. They noted that a series of recent incidents had created a great deal of resentment toward the police among some Spanish-speaking residents. The priests claimed that police officers did not understand Latino culture and warned that the potential for danger existed if action was not taken to quell the tensions. See MCCR minutes, 10/12/66, p. 5.

Americans and police officers took place outside inner core nightclubs and bars during the spring and summer of 1967. Some local black leaders pressed for the hiring of more African American patrolmen. Brier, in turn, scoffed at community leaders' suggestion of a police-community relations board.

Harold Brier turned the city's Vice Squad against civil rights activists. The Vice Squad had historically been used to monitor the activities of left-wing political groups, radical immigrant groups and to regulate vice throughout the city. During the 1960s, Chief Brier did not sympathize with the local civil rights movement and saw non-violent direct action primarily as a threat to civil order. The "Tactical Squad," as most called it, consisted of about six to eight detectives who kept tabs on movement activities. Officers wrote down license plate numbers at rallies, demonstrations and church services. "We would hold rallies at St. Boniface," Prentice McKinney remembered, "and [the Tactical Squad] would go along and take everybody's license plate number. They would not hide. They'd get out of their car and just walk along... you'd come out of church and here's cops standing across the streets blasting pictures. The harassment was not hidden." Police took hundreds of photographs of marchers and YC members, trailed Fr. Groppi, the YC and the Commandos day and night and reportedly had a special room at the police station dedicated to their civil rights monitoring.<sup>114</sup> Fr. Groppi later explained,

[Milwaukee Police] followed us for something like six months. Everywhere we went! You got up in the morning, they were there. You went to visit your family, they were there. You went out to a restaurant, they were there. You took someone to a movie, they were there. You had a dance at the parish... We took home the young black girls from those

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<sup>114</sup> Phillips interview; McKinney interview; McClain interview; Coggs interview.

dances at St. Boniface, the Commandos came long, because we always walked those girls right up to their doors, the squad car was right behind us. And I'll tell you, at that time, we were preaching black, male leadership. And those young men got angry.<sup>115</sup>

Prentice McKinney summarized their relationship with the Tactical Squad: "We called them the Goon Squad. Their job was to monitor the activities of the NAACP YC, especially those people who were viewed as leaders."<sup>116</sup>

During the mid-1960s, "police brutality" had also become an increasingly potent civil rights issue. Disturbances in Watts, Cleveland, New York and many other places had either been directly precipitated or indirectly fueled by a clash between local law enforcement and black community members. A growing proportion of urban African Americans viewed local police as "the enemy." In inner core communities across the Northeast and Midwest, fuses ran short and flare-ups occurred. Increasingly, social scientists and policy-makers linked police brutality and urban violence. More and more, civil rights activists discussed the nexus between poverty, crime and law enforcement and organized to "defend" their communities.

In Milwaukee, police-community relations became a significant public issue over the summer and fall of 1966. After another incident in May, Rev. Lathan and Rev. Champion threatened trouble "like Watts" in Milwaukee if city officials did not act to

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<sup>115</sup> "Gropi Lecture at East Library," 2/15/84.

<sup>116</sup> McKinney interview. Prentice McKinney also related an even more dangerous situation. "They [Milwaukee police] made their position clear," he said. "They would arrest you and if the opportunity presented itself they would blow you away... I was walking down the street, by myself. The Tactical Squad pulled up. A guy leveled a shot-gun. He said, 'McKinney, one day I'm going to blow you away.' I said, 'The only thing that I can say to you is that they make two coffins, not one.' OK? That was the attitude prevailing constantly. People were intimidated."

relieve inner core tensions.<sup>117</sup> A few days later, Assemblyman Lloyd Barbee, in Washington, D.C. for a White House conference on civil rights, said during a panel discussion that the pattern of harassment and intimidation by police in Milwaukee was “as bad as it is in Mississippi.” He claimed that Milwaukee authorities had tapped his telephone and followed him in unmarked cars because of his work against segregation in public schools.<sup>118</sup> In July, Alderman Phillips publicly clashed with Chief Brier when police officers photographed civil rights activists who had come to support Phillips’s open housing efforts at a Common Council meeting. She called the incident “intimidation and harassment of the highest order.” Brier defended the policy as necessary and within the law.<sup>119</sup> In August, a group of inner core pranksters painted “Burn Baby Burn” on the side of a local police station.<sup>120</sup> Under these circumstances, many Milwaukee police officials viewed the formation of the Commandos in October as provocation.

The feelings were mutual. Following the NAACP bombing, Milwaukee police began to guard the Freedom House. Police officials claimed they were acting to protect Fr. Groppi, the YC and the Freedom House after numerous threats. They cited YC statements and their armed defense of the Freedom House as evidence of the need for

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<sup>117</sup> MJ, 5/31/66, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> MJ, 6/2/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>119</sup> MJ, 7/20/66, p. 14. A majority of the chairmen of the Common Council’s committees opposed a ban on police photographers at meetings. The Milwaukee County Labor Council supported the ban. The fire and police commissions passed a largely symbolic resolution opposing the indiscriminate taking of photographs of civil rights activists. Ultimately, though, the Common Council upheld the status quo. See also, MJ, 9/6/66, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 9/7/66, p. 21; MJ, 9/8/66, pt. 2, p. 16.

<sup>120</sup> MJ, 8/15/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

police protection. In addition, the Freedom House had become a popular place for neighborhood youths to congregate. YC members, though, claimed that police arguments used safety and protection as a pretext for surveillance. According to Groppi, YC members and Commandos, plainclothes officers in unmarked cars sat outside the Freedom House from sun-up to late at night taking photographs and notes and hassling young people for petty offenses.

A series of seemingly minor arrests in September of 1966 set off a public storm between the groups. On Monday, September 5, police arrested four YC members for shooting dice near the Freedom House. Officers confiscated just over one dollar in the arrests. Fr. Groppi accused the Milwaukee Police Department of “harassment” and told reporters, “We don't know if we're being protected or attacked.” He questioned the tactics employed by the officers, too: “The thing that disturbed us is that the thing could have been settled very easily if somebody would have just contacted us. I would have broken the game up. Now they took them downtown, finger-printed them, mugged [photographed] them, all for a \$1.35 crap game.” Groppi concluded by stating, “We don't need this kind of protection.” Brier responded saying, “If Father Groppi were really interested in protecting the place from bombing, he would not have revealed that it was being protected.” The YC sent a letter formally asking for an end to police protecting of the Freedom House.<sup>121</sup> Brier replied, “In our opinion, you need protection and protection you're going to get, whether you like it or not. My advice to you is to not violate the laws and you won't have any problems.”<sup>122</sup> In court, Judge Seraphim, who

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<sup>121</sup> MJ, 9/6/66, p. 1; MS, 9/6/66, p. 1; Star, 9/10/66, p. 1; Courier, 9/10/66, p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> MS, 9/30/66, p. 1.

had become the target of the YC's Eagle's Club protest, now sat in judgement over the four dice players. He called the Freedom House a "den of thieves" and suggested that Fr. Groppi "teach a respect for law instead of picketing." In response, Groppi said,

We didn't come here to alienate ourselves from the community, or the people in the community. This is why we came into the blight area. Several of our members have been in trouble with the police in the past. We don't try to hide this fact. Many of our members have never been in trouble with the police whatsoever in the past. Some of them have had several years of college.<sup>123</sup>

Later that month, a second incident occurred when police arrested a young woman outside the Freedom House and charged her with littering after she discarded a cigarette butt on the ground. Four YC members were also arrested for "interfering." Nathan Harwell, one of those involved in the incident, claimed officers made critical remarks to the young people, including, "I hope you riot, then I can shoot off a few" and "I hope you have to go to Vietnam." Although the city attorney refused to prosecute the group, police held them in jail over night. In response to the incident, *Milwaukee Journal* editorialists groused, "Unless the law is enforced uniformly, outside the Freedom House and everywhere else in town, this sort of thing can be regarded only as deliberate harassment, a shocking misapplication of the police power."<sup>124</sup> Fr. Neuberger, one of Groppi's colleagues at St. Boniface told a group of Catholic Worker members that Milwaukee police were often "unnecessarily harsh" when dealing with inner core teens. "It's the community which allows that situation too exist that will be responsible for the

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<sup>123</sup> Courier, 9/10/66, p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> MJ, 9/30/66, p. 14; MS, 9/30/66, p. 1.

riots we will have,” Neuberger stated. “The community has shown that the only time it will listen is when we do something wild enough.”<sup>125</sup>

Following the failed meeting between Milwaukee police officials and YC representatives, YC members voted, in a satirical move, to provide Chief Brier with the same protection. Nathan Harwell explained, “We would like to thank Chief Brier for the fine protection he has given the Freedom House. We’re going to protect Chief Brier’s house very equally and without prejudice. We’re going to take pictures and protect the chief... We think it’s our responsibility and duty to protect him.” YC members conducted two all-night “protective vigils” at Brier’s house on September 30 and October 1.<sup>126</sup> The following Friday, the newly formed Commandos, in full uniform, took over guard duty at the sight. At the press conference announcing the Commando unit, Groppi quipped, “We want to make sure it [the Chief’s home] doesn’t get bombed.”<sup>127</sup>

The Freedom House was not the only sight of police-community conflict in the core. Bars and other after-hours night spots also continued to attract discord. On September 10, in one of a string of incidents, a jeering crowd of more than 200 young African Americans threw rocks and bottles at two white policemen as they tussled with a black prisoner accused of stealing money from another bar patron.<sup>128</sup> Increasingly, young African Americans in the core challenged police authority. With this break-down, civil order in the inner core appeared vulnerable.

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<sup>125</sup> MJ, 10/1/66, p. 3.

<sup>126</sup> MS, 9/30/66, p. 1; MJ, 10/1/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> MS, 10/6/66, p. 5; MJ, 10/6/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>128</sup> MJ, 9/10/66, p. 1

As tensions outside the movement continued to boil, conflicts within the movement also simmered. Moderate and conservative elements in the state and local NAACP came to increasing odds with the youth branch over tactics and strategy. In a confrontation that took place mainly outside of the public eye, many of the older generation of NAACP leadership opposed and criticized the armed defense of the Freedom House, the volatile marches into Wauwatosa, the embrace of Black Power by YC members and the formation of the Commandos. Furthermore, many complained that the Wauwatosa demonstrations marred a recent membership drive in Milwaukee. At the state conference in November, these divisions again flared. Militant delegates rebuffed attempts by moderate and conservative members to rebuke the YC. Instead, they passed a resolution praising the group's activism and extending both financial and moral support. The rancor also caused a leadership struggle within the adult branch in Milwaukee. Rev. Walter Hoard, who represented the older and more moderate leadership group, narrowly held off an insurgent campaign by attorney Terrance Pitts for branch president. Pitts, who detailed a more activist approach to local civil rights, had the backing of the YC. While the leadership remained in the older generation's hands, younger delegates served notice that a more militant spirit had infiltrated the NAACP. In 1967, the YC propelled civil rights activism in Milwaukee, not the adults.<sup>129</sup>

There was also friction within the ranks of the YC and Commandos at this time revolving around Fr. Groppi's role in the YC. In early April, 1967, "some officers of the

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<sup>129</sup> A series of articles relating to the internal NAACP schism appeared in local newspapers between October 1966, and April 1967. See, also, McClain interview; McKinney Interview. In July of 1967, a similar leadership struggle took place at the national NAACP convention in Boston. A group of "young turks", largely dissatisfied with the conservative approach of the traditional leadership, attempted, unsuccessfully, to wrestle away control of the board of directors. See, MJ, 7/12, p. 14.



local, state, and regional [NAACP] youth groups who are generally older members” publicly accused Groppi of controlling, not advising, the Milwaukee YC. In a move that mirrored the broader state rift, the group further accused Groppi of being too militant.<sup>130</sup> Fr. Groppi responded by asking the full YC membership for a vote of confidence at the next meeting. Nearly 50 members gave Groppi a unanimous vote of support.<sup>131</sup> One week later, angry YC members threw stones and chunks of brick at the car of Thomas Leubenow, the *Milwaukee Journal* reporter who first reported the internal rift.<sup>132</sup>

An underlying tension over Groppi’s leadership in the YC and his relationship to the Commandos persisted throughout the remainder of the direct action era. To a certain extent, it was unavoidable; a white Catholic priest serving as a Black Power advisor to a militant civil rights group, in 1967 and 1968, was necessarily controversial. Groppi, himself, expressed deep ambivalence about his role in the YC and often repeated his desire to cultivate young black leadership from within the community. On another level, though, the tension was clearly a reaction against decidedly Groppi-centered local and national media coverage. Journalists assumed that Groppi made all decisions for the YC and that he was *the* leader of the Milwaukee movement. Too often, they chose to focus on the heroic white religious figure and ignore the many African American faces being

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<sup>130</sup> MJ, pt. 2, p. 1

<sup>131</sup> This move seems to have been mainly a tit-for-tat reaction from moderate and conservative elements within the state NAACP for the recent challenge to their leadership at the November conference. Much of the opposition came from people outside the Milwaukee YC or Commandos. Admittedly, a few older Milwaukee YC members complained that Groppi was listening too much to his white legal team during the Eagles protest. Groppi explained this by stating that the volatile circumstances necessitated the meetings and that YC members were welcome to attend meetings. Groppi maintained the support of the overwhelming majority of the local YC and Commandos throughout this incident. The incident with Thomas Leubenow seems to confirm the fierce loyalty many YC members felt for Fr. Groppi. In retrospect, the incident does not appear to have presented a serious leadership challenge to Groppi.

pushed into the background. In fact, an eight-member executive committee made binding decisions for the YC after extensive discussion. Groppi sat in on all meetings, regularly gave his advice and the group often followed it, but he did not have formal voting power. Similarly, Fr. Groppi attended most Commando meetings, but acted only as an advisor. According to Shakespeare Lewis, who joined the Commandos in 1967,

The only time he'd [Groppi] say something in the [Commando] strategy meeting was if somebody asked him for his opinion. Otherwise, he'd sit and listen and do exactly as he was told. But people on the outside say Father Groppi's leading them niggers down there. But people just didn't know.<sup>133</sup>

The relationship between YC members, Commandos and Fr. Groppi was organic and personal and lines of authority were vague. By the Spring of 1967, though, Fr. Groppi had become a minor media celebrity and some of the YC members and Commandos felt jealous.

A more serious incident occurred in May 1967, when Dwight Benning, the original leader of the Commandos, Dennis McDowell, one of its founding members, and another young man told the district attorney that the YC and Fr. Groppi planned a riot. They said meetings had taken place and riot plans drawn up, complete with maps of the inner core. They also claimed that Groppi had helped make homemade bombs and gasoline explosives. Groppi denied the charges. The comments received substantial media coverage, though, and contributed to the overall racial tension in the city at the beginning of the summer. To those that opposed the civil rights movement and looked

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<sup>132</sup> MS, 4/9/67, p. 1; MJ, 4/9/67, p. 1; Star, 4/15/67, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Modlinski, p. 81; See also, McKinney interview; McClain interview; Austin interview.

upon Groppi and the YC as a “lawless bunch,” the riot charges, true or false, only confirmed their suspicions and fueled their reaction. Upon closer scrutiny, the youths’ story did not hold up and they admitted that they had fabricated the charges in anger because they wanted to continue protesting the Eagles Club. Groppi felt the situation was too tense.<sup>134</sup>

Like most northern cities, Milwaukeeans approached the summer of 1967 with nervous anticipation. Each of the previous two summers had produced significant urban racial violence and many wondered aloud: Will it happen again? Will it happen here? Tensions ran high in Milwaukee, too. Over a few short years, race relations and civil rights insurgency in the city had been transformed. Activists had moved from a faith in established institutions and the use of reason and negotiation as their primary weapons, through dignified and disciplined protest, and finally to confrontation and civil disobedience. Similarly, many Milwaukee whites had evolved from ignorance and indifference of racial issues to concern and mild resistance, to open opposition and, in the most extreme cases, violence. Divisions ran deep and the atmosphere was charged for conflict.

Much of the action, locally, continued to swirl around the issue of police-community relations. In late-April, black youths pelted two white police officers with stones as they fought with three African American teenagers.<sup>135</sup> That same month, police

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<sup>134</sup> MJ, 5/19/67, p. 1; MS, 5/19/67, p. 1; MJ, 5/20/67, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 5/25/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>135</sup> MJ, 4/21/67, p. 1.

arrested Rev. Leo Champion and Rev. Luscious Walker for interfering in the arrests of several inner-core residents.<sup>136</sup>

These flare-ups culminated when police clashed head-on with Fr. Groppi. In early May, police arrested Fr. Groppi on charges of obstructing officers and resisting arrest when the priest intervened in a dispute between youths and police outside the Freedom House. Police officers claimed that Groppi kicked, shouted profanity and encouraged onlookers to “Start the riot. Start the riot.” Police also stated that a group of young African Americans pelted them with bottles, bricks and debris, resulting in minor injuries to three officers. Fr. Groppi called the allegations a “dirty lie.”<sup>137</sup> A few days later, Groppi again clashed with police. “I was driving back [to St. Boniface] and the police followed me. Right on the property of St. Boniface,” Groppi remembered. “Now, I tell you, it wore me to such an extent that... I jammed the car into what I thought was reverse. And I stepped on the gas. And by accident, I hit park... and I jumped out of the car. I told them to get off of Church property. And the man turns to me and spits.” The situation was tense, but Fr. Groppi was not defenseless. “By that time,” he said, “I got control of myself. You know, it was a hot summer night. And at that time on 12th Street there were all houses across the street from the parish. Black families were sitting on their... ‘You all right, Father? You need some help?’ I said, ‘Yeah, come on over.’ So

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<sup>136</sup> MJ, 4/4/67, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 4/19/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>137</sup> “Angry Priest,” AP Story, 5/18/67. Found in Groppi Papers, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

all these porches empty out, and the people came over. And as soon as the squad car saw the fellows, they pulled out.” Police ticketed Groppi for obstructing traffic.<sup>138</sup>

In the wake of these incidents, Chief Brier finally agreed to meet with Fr. Groppi and six members of the YC. The delegation told the Chief that police were following and “harassing” them. Groppi warned Brier that the series of minor skirmishes and constant surveillance had escalated tensions nearly to the point of a riot. Brier responded to the Groppi’s charges by stating, “It seems to me that you have caused that tension with your statements. In 27 years on the police department, we’ve always had friendly relations in that area until you came along... If you preach to your people that they are to do good things instead of bad, the tensions will disappear.” Groppi retorted, “You just keep them off our back. If I have policemen on my back everywhere I go, I live in a Communist country... your presence is an intimidation.”<sup>139</sup> The meeting broke down amid fired-up passions. The next day, police captain George Sprague<sup>140</sup>, in charge of a large portion of the inner core, told reporters that he remained unconvinced that “large tensions” existed in the inner core.<sup>141</sup>

Even though the Mayor and Governor Knowles steadfastly supported Chief Breier and local officers, some local groups did try to head off the brewing conflict between police and black residents in the core. A group of thirteen moderate African American ministers met with Chief Brier to demand the hiring of more black officers and to

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<sup>138</sup> “Groppi Lecture At East Library,” 2/15/84; MJ, 5/19/67, p. 1.

<sup>139</sup> MS, 5/11/67, p. 1; MJ, 5/11/67, p. 1.

<sup>140</sup> According to news accounts, Sprague had been recently named chairman of a John Birch-related group called the Committee On Police Support (COPS).

<sup>141</sup> MJ, 5/12/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

encourage police to “understand the problems of Milwaukee Negroes.”<sup>142</sup> Several prominent social scientists and clergymen wrote to Mayor Maier stating that they were “strong in their convictions that the present stance of Mr. Breier and some of the policies of the Department constitute a major threat to peace in the core area.”<sup>143</sup> Lloyd Barbee introduced a measure to curb “police brutality” in the state Assembly.<sup>144</sup> Claiming that some young inner core African Americans threatened to bomb the homes of policemen and burn slum houses, the MCCR and SDC announced that they would hold public hearings on police-community tensions. Similarly, the Greater Milwaukee Conference on Religion and Race and the Organization of Organizations set up “listening posts” throughout the inner core to collect claims of “police brutality.”<sup>145</sup> In lieu of official action, the *Star* suggested “citizen curbs” on Milwaukee’s “conservative, almost all-white police department.” “This could take the form... of responsible citizens, armed with radio-equipped cars, to answer police calls with tape recorders, photographic equipment and general legal knowledge to curb the enthusiasm of certain bigoted officers.”<sup>146</sup>

The push for better police-community relations reached its public zenith on May 13, when the YC led thirteen organizations and 450 individuals on a march to the Public Safety Building to protest “police brutality” and “harassment.” The YC President and

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<sup>142</sup> *MJ*, 5/12/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> “Rev. E.R. Eschweiler, et. al., to Mayor Henry Maier,” May 13, 1967, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 7.

<sup>144</sup> *MJ*, 5/16/67, p. 13.

<sup>145</sup> *MJ*, 5/23/67, pt. 2, p. 4; *Star*, 7/1/67, p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> *Star*, 5/13/67, p. 6.

Vice-President, Fred Bronson and Fortune Humphrey, posted a resolution on the door asking the mayor to “call off Chief Brier and to restore sanity to police operations.” The notice further warned, “The black people of Milwaukee are controlled by a police force that is alien to them, that did not arise out of their community, that has little relation to the needs or desires of the community. This cannot continue.”<sup>147</sup>

More and more local leaders began to issue riot warnings. Almost every Sunday, Frs. Groppi and Neuberger hammered away at racial inequality and police brutality in Milwaukee. “The black man in Milwaukee lives in a police state,” Fr. Groppi claimed. According to Fr. Neuberger, “Police are constantly hounding Fr. Groppi and the [Youth] Council, pushing them into a corner, baiting them, almost encouraging them to do something wrong... The seeds are planted; the fire is under the pot.” Milwaukee, he added, was primed for “riot, bloodshed, suffering and mayhem.”<sup>148</sup> At a community meeting in May, Rev. Walker, Alderwoman Phillips, John Givens, representing the MNAACP, Larry Harwell of OOO, and several university social scientists echoed the priests’ sentiments, albeit in more restrained language.

Tensions were compounded in late-June when the YC and Commandos announced that they would next target racial discrimination in housing and work for an open housing ordinance. “We’re going to march,” Fr. Groppi told a rally at St. Boniface. “We’re coming off the reservation. We’re going to move where we want. We’re going to live where we want... Either we get what we want in this city, or we’re going to turn this city upside down. If it takes the national guard out all summer, that’s what the Youth

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<sup>147</sup> MJ, 5/14/67, pt. 2, p. 1; MS, 5/14/67, p. 5; Star, 5/15/67, p. 1.

<sup>148</sup> MJ, 5/8/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

Council's going to do." According to Groppi, open housing protests would not be confined to the inner core. "We're going to go down and see some of these white aldermen on the South Side... We're going to see some of those realtors in Wauwatosa. They love us out there. The Commandos say to me, 'Grops, When are we gonna go out to Tosa?' You know they say we can't picket out there. Well, we're going to Tosa, to Whitefish Bay, to Shorewood, and even out to Cudahy."<sup>149</sup> The YC began to hold regular open housing rallies at St. Boniface and began to picket the homes of aldermen who opposed an ordinance. At one of the gatherings, Groppi again threatened to cross Milwaukee's "Mason-Dixon Line" and head to the working-class South Side to achieve an open housing ordinance.<sup>150</sup> A few days later, the priest told the Common Council that without action on housing, Milwaukee could be turned into a "holocaust."<sup>151</sup>

With growing civil rights militancy and heightened rhetoric also came a quickening of white reaction. The mayor, Common Council, School Board and the bulk of the city's South Side legislators continued to form a bulwark against even modest racial change. More generally, a host of far-right organizations continued to crop up in opposition to civil rights. More ominously, in the spring of 1967, Klan members appeared at a rally for the recently burned-down Mt. Calvary Church and warned, "There'll be some bombings and some killings."<sup>152</sup> The *Journal* reported on an inner core white man that had trained his dog to attack African American children and an inter-

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<sup>149</sup> MJ, 6/22/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>150</sup> MJ, 7/23/67, p. 16.

<sup>151</sup> MJ, 7/26/67, pt. 2, p. 1; Courier, 7/29/67, p. 1; Star, 7/29/67, p. 1.

<sup>152</sup> Star, 3/11/67, p. 3.



racial family feud, including the exchange of gunfire, which plagued a transitional inner core neighborhood for several days in July.<sup>153</sup>

Once again, though, national events dramatically interceded in local affairs. On July 12, 1967, the same day that a Milwaukee jury found Fr. Groppi guilty of obstructing police, an incident between young black youths and police in Newark, New Jersey, escalated into four days of full-scale racial violence. New Jersey Governor Richard Hughes declared that the city was in “open rebellion, just like wartime.” When the gunfire, burning and looting subsided, and National Guardsmen moved in, 23 African Americans lay dead, more than 1,500 injured and 1,300 arrested. Police reported over 300 fires. Several blocks of Newark’s inner core neighborhood stood charred and ruined in over \$10 million of property damage. The Newark riot was the largest urban unrest since Watts. Two weeks later, before anyone could catch their breath to understand what had happened in New Jersey, Detroit erupted. On the morning of July 23, Detroit police raided an illegal black after-hours bar, handcuffed its patrons and forced them out. An angry crowd of African American observers gathered at the scene, and the police retreated in fear. The throng began burning and looting local businesses. Again, hundreds of National Guardsmen were called out to quell the disturbance. In the end, the three days of unrest cost 43 African American lives, 1,189 injuries and 7,231 arrests.<sup>154</sup>

The nation looked on in horror. Newark and Detroit worried everyone, particularly those living in cities. Suddenly, the whole urban calculus had dreadfully

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<sup>153</sup> MJ, 5/1/67, p. 1.

<sup>154</sup> Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam, 1968), pp. 84-107.

changed. Most Milwaukeeans, black and white, feared a riot and wondered if the same might happen in the inner core. A *Milwaukee Journal* headline declared, "Detroit Similar to Milwaukee." The city sat waiting, awkwardly trying to reassure itself that it wouldn't happen here, that Milwaukee was still uniquely exempt from the troubles that plagued other cities. Even the YC halted its open housing protests while newspapers and televisions covered the destruction in Detroit. Behind the scenes, though, city officials took no chances and began to prepare for the possibility of racial violence. Mayor Maier had been putting emergency procedures into effect for almost a year by the time Detroit exploded. Following the disturbances in Wauwatosa, police in seven Milwaukee suburbs united to "enforce order" in the event of further civil rights unrest.<sup>155</sup>

Rumors circulated that Milwaukee was next. The summer was hot. No one could be certain what would happen.

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<sup>155</sup> MJ, 9/11/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

**Chapter 6****“Or Does It Explode?”: The 1967 Civil Disturbance**

*What happens to a dream deferred?*

*Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore--  
And then run?*

*Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over--  
like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.*

*Or does it explode?*

*- Langston Hughes*

Rumors circulated in the inner core for weeks before it finally happened. The lack of any significant official response to the mounting list of demands laid forth by non-violent civil rights activists fueled popular frustration, anger and threats. People had whispered and worried and threatened. Racial violence in dozens of cities across the North and Black Power militance featured in newspapers, magazines and on TV buttressed the growing belief that it was only a matter of time before Milwaukee took a

place alongside other large American cities in the nation's "long, hot summer."<sup>1</sup>

Inner core residents swarmed the sweltering streets where people met and talked, where rumors were born and passed along, and where passions ignited and boiled over.

Third Street, where the violence began, had changed considerably since its heyday. At one time, Third and Walnut marked an active center to the black community. But by the summer of 1967, the nightclubs and restaurants, movie theaters, professional offices and retail stores that once thrived there had deteriorated and given way to a desperate collection of bars, discount stores, small groceries, relief agencies, a Nation of Islam temple and a growing collection of vacant spaces. Blight had surrounded, then devoured the heart of the African American community.

Racial violence began in front of a popular inner core nightclub late Saturday night, July 30, only a few days after the Detroit riot ended. As two black women fought on the sidewalk, a group of 350 gathered to watch. When policemen arrived to break up the fight, members of the crowd threw bottles and rocks at them. The officers quickly radioed for reinforcements and began to push the crowd down Third Street. The throng remained adamant and it took nearly fifteen blocks before it finally broke up. Broken glass, strewn garbage and a few broken windows were left in their wake.<sup>2</sup>

In a pattern that would repeat itself over the next few days, the daylight hours on Sunday remained calm, but stories continued to circulate and by sundown Third Street

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<sup>1</sup> By July, major racial violence had taken place in Nashville, at Jackson State University, in Houston, Tampa, Cincinnati, Buffalo, Niagra Falls, Atlanta, Boston, Cambridge, Philadelphia, Newark and Detroit and several other cities. In July, 103 cities experienced some level of racial discord. See, Meyer, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> MJ, 7/31/67, p. 1; MS, 7/31/67, p. 1; For an overview of the Milwaukee civil disturbance, see Aukofer, pp. 7-20; Henry Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous, pp. 63-92. In addition, the Henry Maier Papers contains the "Mayor's Official Riot Log" which provides a detailed narrative of events from an official perspective. Maier Papers, SHSW, box 43, folder 20.

came alive again with anger and anticipation. Unlike other cities, there did not appear to be a specific trigger for the racial violence that engulfed the center of the inner core. Some young people claimed it began when police roughed-up a group of African American youths outside a dance. Whatever the initial cause, by ten o'clock, a mob of nearly 300 moved along Third Street breaking windows and looting. Squire Austin, a Commando who lived in the heart of the turmoil, had been attending a civil rights rally when the disturbance began. He remembered,

The message we got, or the rumor we got, was that the police had beaten up a kid pretty bad over on Third and Walnut and a lot of people left the rally to see what had happened... that's when the looting and firebombing started coming up Third Street. Buildings were being bricked and windows in stores, just a mass of people destroying our neighborhood... It was getting bigger and bigger. The word started circulating. So many people were out in the streets. Any white person who might just be driving by on the street might not make it. They might brick their car. I saw a car hit a telephone pole and they just pulled the people out and beat them.<sup>3</sup>

Cars filled with young African Americans cruised Third Street, honking and yelling. Groups of people on sidewalks threw rocks, bottles, concrete, cans and garbage at passing vehicles. Several young people overturned a car. Police reported minor sniping and a Molotov cocktail. Rock-throwing residents prevented Milwaukee firemen from tending to a series of fires in several vacant inner core lots. Still other locals raced around urging calm and trying in vain to extinguish flames while the vast majority stayed indoors away from the disturbance. But at the three square mile epicenter around Third and Walnut, events were out of hand; a mob mentality had seized hundreds of local people while

more than one hundred police and fire officials struggled unsuccessfully to regain control.

Poor police-community relations added an extra dangerous dimension to the civil disturbance. "The scary part was that most of the police were white," explained Squire Austin.

Black police were very scarce. Most of the police were white, so we are dealing with a black-white issue. Police were not fond of black people as far as I was concerned so you had to be careful where you walked. Cops are scared. They're out there. I know they're scared. They don't know if a black person that is hiding behind a tree is gonna shoot and talk later, so you gotta be careful of that. That was the scary part. They can legally carry weapons and you can't. They can shoot you and they can be justified, so the best thing to do was get somewhere and stay where you were. Don't go anywhere. They had a lot of areas sealed off. There was just massive police everywhere.<sup>4</sup>

The tense, and sometimes violent, history between young inner core residents and Milwaukee police officers, perhaps made trigger fingers on both sides more tense.

Shortly before midnight, Chief Breier notified Mayor Maier about the outbreak of violence. Maier had planned for racial unrest since the Eagles Club disturbances in Wauwatosa more than a year before.<sup>5</sup> He quickly put his plan into action. Within a half hour, Maier had called his staff together, asked Governor Reynolds to place the National Guard on standby and notified presidential aide Joe Califano and Attorney General

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<sup>3</sup> Austin interview.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> As racial violence spread from Watts to Newark, Henry Maier studied the responses of public officials. In anticipation of a conflagration in Milwaukee, Maier had moved to consolidate authority and communication through his office. To that end, he set up a hotline connecting his office directly to the Governor's office. He authorized a plan of action and had city attorney research emergency powers. See, Maier Papers, box 43.

Ramsey Clark about the situation. Chief Breier set up a command post inside the Gimbel's Department Store parking garage. Maier received regular reports of escalating inner core violence over the next two hours. At the urging of Chief Breier and against the advice of the Fire Chief, the mayor initially held back his request to activate National Guardsmen.

As city officials struggled to coordinate a response, the worst incident of the Milwaukee riot played out on Center Street. John Tucker, the respected 55 year old janitor of suburban Shorewood High School, and his wife spent the evening at home baby-sitting two of their great-grandchildren. At about 1:30AM, as Tucker's grandson stood outside talking with neighbors, a white man in a station wagon passed by shouting profanities, threats and racial slurs. One neighbor claimed the man in the car shot at her. Tucker later testified that this compelled him to get his shotgun and proceed outside to protect his house and family. Tucker then exchanged gun fire with the man in the car. A few minutes later five white plainclothes detectives pulled-up in front of Tucker's house in an unmarked car. When the officers got out and approached the home, Tucker opened fire from inside. In the darkness and confusion, one shot hit 24 year old patrolman Bryan Moschea in the chest and throat, killing him. Another shot tore away part of detective captain Kenneth Hagopian's face. Four other policemen were wounded that night, including 25 year old John Carter who was left permanently blinded. Police lobbed teargas into the home and soon the entire structure was swallowed by flames. Tucker surrendered to police and was arrested. The next day, the bodies of Patrolman Moschea

and 77 year old Anne Mosley were found in the ashes. The Medical Examiner later ruled that Mosley had been accidentally shot during the incident.<sup>6</sup>

At 2:27AM, with two officers reportedly wounded, one missing and a number of small and large fires still burning, Mayor Maier formally requested help from the Wisconsin National Guard. At the same time, the Mayor declared a “state of emergency” throughout the city. The proclamation imposed a 24-hour curfew and closed all taverns, liquor stores, filling stations and “petroleum supply points.” Anyone who disobeyed the orders was threatened with immediate arrest and severe punishment. “Our chief concern is to restore law and order,” Maier warned. “This must be the concern of *all* our citizens. We cannot permit irresponsible hoodlums to destroy property and endanger lives. We cannot allow lawless vandals to deprive others of their basic rights.”<sup>7</sup> Later that day, the Common Council ratified the Mayor’s actions and granted him sweeping emergency powers to “do whatever is necessary and expedient for the health, safety, welfare and good order of the city in such an emergency.”<sup>8</sup> Another resolution banned the sale of ammunition, guns and other weapons for the duration of the crisis. Major General John Dunlop, commander of the 32nd Division, notified the mayor that the 1,200 troops he was assembling would not be ready until 7:30AM. In the meantime, more than 1,000 Milwaukee police officers, with the help of a mild drizzle, began to reestablish calm in the core. At 4:30AM, a police inspector offered Mayor Maier his assessment of the

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<sup>6</sup> MJ, 8/1/67, p. 1; MS, 8/1/67, p. 1; See also, Austin interview.

<sup>7</sup> “Proclamation,” 7/31/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20; “My Fellow Citizens,” Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20.

<sup>8</sup> “Resolution RE Proclamation Declaring That A State of Emergency Exists in the City of Milwaukee,” Milwaukee Common Council, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 6.



night's casualties and damage. "...six officers have been shot, which is verified; 3 citizens, 2 snipers, and 1 looter shot... these are not verified; much breaking of windows, looting, some fires. Fifth District Station was under sniper fire; all lights are out in station. Area of disturbance was roughly Holton to 20th, Capitol to Michigan." Police had made more than 180 arrests. At 4:50AM, Chief Brier reported, "Everything quiet."<sup>9</sup>

By the next morning, police and more than 500 National Guardsmen blockaded the area around the disturbance. Another 1,000 stood ready at nearby staging areas.<sup>10</sup> Troops in armored vehicles and combat gear patrolled the streets and most of the city remained desolate under the blanket curfew. Guardsmen ran special missions into the inner core to deliver milk and other basic provisions to cooped-up residents. Again, conflict subsided during daylight hours, but tensions continued to simmer. For the next several nights, police officers, firemen and National Guardsmen kept a lid on a series of minor outbreaks of violence, looting, bomb scares, sniping and arson. As the week progressed, the magnitude of the incidents decreased, prompting the mayor to loosen the emergency restrictions. On Wednesday morning, August 9, the curfew and the state of emergency came to an official end, but the damage, physical and psychic, had already been done.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the shoot-out at the Tucker home, there were two other potentially explosive incidents during the city's civil disturbance. On Monday afternoon, less than

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<sup>9</sup> "Riot Log," Maier Papers.

<sup>10</sup> By midnight, roughly 4,800 total Guardsmen had poured into staging areas from around the state.

<sup>11</sup> "Riot Log," Maier Papers; See series of articles in MJ and MS, July 31 through August 9, 1967. In addition, see coverage in the Star and Courier on August 6 and 13, 1967.

twelve hours after law enforcement officers had regained control of the inner core, police arrested Fr. Groppi and seven Youth Council members for curfew violations. They stopped the priest and young people as they traveled through the core to the Northcott Neighborhood House for a meeting with other African American community leaders. Groppi and Fred Bronson, the President of the YC, had been issued unofficial “credential letters” from Joseph Fagan, head of the Wisconsin Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations. The letters asserted that the bearer was one of several people working with the Industrial Commission to preserve order and prevent violence. Fagan later explained that the letters were “intended to assist them in getting through police lines. I sent one along to him [Groppi] on the theory that it might help him out because he has been of great help to the community and to us.” Police and other city officials refused to accept the authority of the letters and promptly arrested the civil rights activists.

While the incident was ultimately defused, it held the potential to undermine an already precarious calm and incite further violence. The incident sprang, in part, from a political rivalry between Fagan, an ambitious Republican, and the Democratic mayor. To Maier and many white on-lookers, though, the incident was also another example of Fr. Groppi’s and the YC’s willingness to flaunt the law and instigate racial trouble. In their view, the civil rights leaders claimed special privileges not entitled to them. Civil rights activists and many inner core residents, on the other hand, viewed the arrests as an attempt to target Fr. Groppi and the YC for their past activism even though, in this instance, they worked for calm and order. According to them, law enforcement officials were applying a dangerously stringent interpretation of the emergency measures. Fearing

that the case might provide a rallying point for disgruntled inner core residents, Mayor Maier privately dispatched an aid to the courthouse to broker a speedy hearing and a quick release without bail for the activists. The incident did not do much to build cooperation between civil rights activists and public officials.<sup>12</sup>

The second incident involved the death of a young African American man at the hands of local police. Exactly what happened to Clifford McKissick, an 18 year old college student without any significant police record, on the night of August 2 is still murky.<sup>13</sup> According to police reports, officers spotted McKissick and three other black youths throwing molotov cocktails against a paint store across the street from the McKissick home. As the group fled, police shot Clifford McKissick in the neck. Family and neighbors of Clifford McKissick claimed that the young man had been sitting on the family's front porch when shooting broke out and everyone scrambled for cover. Moments later, Clifford appeared at the back door, choking from the bullet wound through his neck. Police surrounded the home and all four young men surrendered. Clifford McKissick died on the way to the hospital. The County Medical Examiner ruled McKissick's death "justifiable."<sup>14</sup> The following Saturday, one hundred civil rights activists and community members marched to the Safety Building behind Fr. Groppi and the YC to protest the incident. A few days later, more than 500 local people turned out for Clifford McKissick's funeral.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> MJ, 8/1/67, pt. 2, p. 1; MS, 8/1/67, p. 1; MJ, 8/2/67, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> See, MJ, 8/3/67, p. 1; MS, 8/3/67, p. 1; Star, 8/5/67, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> MJ, 8/3/67, p. 1; MS, 8/3/67, p. 1; Star 8/6/67. See also, "Riot Log," Maier Papers.

<sup>15</sup> MJ, 8/7/67, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 8/8/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

In some respects the truth of the McKissick death was beside the point. A majority of whites felt that the outbreak of racial violence justified the use of extreme measures to reassert law and order; they backed the officers. For many inner core residents, McKissick's death was another in a long line of young black men killed by Milwaukee police with impunity; Fr. Groppi publicly stated that the killing was "needless" and resulted from the "wild and irresponsible use of firearms." It was not a long stretch of the imagination for most African Americans to believe that Clifford McKissick's death was not at all justified; their trust in the Milwaukee police had been eroding for years. The McKissick case, then, deepened anger within the black community and further sharpened racial antagonisms throughout the city.<sup>16</sup>

Local response to the civil disturbance in Milwaukee revealed the cleavages in the community over race relations and civil rights. Mayor Maier called rioters "hoodlums." Many whites condemned the violence, which confirmed their preconceptions of black residents as lawless and criminal. Some blamed civil rights leaders, particularly Fr. Groppi, for the troubles. One Milwaukee resident wrote to Mayor Maier, "There will be no end to the riots till the principal cause (Fr. Groppi) is removed."<sup>17</sup> Former Commando, Paul Crawford, recalled, "A lot of people say we instigated it, but we didn't. We more or less had warned officials... We told them that people weren't going to continue to be harassed in the community."<sup>18</sup> Chief Breier and the County Executive blamed the riot on "outside agitators," suggesting that the string of

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<sup>16</sup> Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous, pp. 76-77; Aukofer, pp. 12-14.

<sup>17</sup> "Ray Hinz to Mayor Maier," 8/4/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 26.

<sup>18</sup> Crawford interview.

urban unrest across the country was the result of a “communist conspiracy.”<sup>19</sup> These people focused primarily on the need to re-establish civil order with scant attention to the underlying urban ills that fueled inner core unrest. The major local media outlets and a number of civic leaders similarly condemned rioting, but also saw it as a strong indication that more vigorous official action was needed to address the problems of the inner core. Civil rights leaders and many African Americans viewed the outburst as the inevitable, if regrettable, result of building frustrations and anger in the face of chronic inequality and half-hearted official action. During a speech at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Fr. Groppi likened the actions of rioters to Hungarian Freedom Fighters and stated that the disturbance “was not a riot at all, but young black people rebelling in frustration and anger because they had been relegated to second-class status in American society.”<sup>20</sup>

Mayor Maier received significant local and national celebrity for his handling of the civil disturbance. Maier argued that the measures prevented “gatherings of the curious and troublemakers in potential conflict sites.” He further argued that the adoption of the city-wide curfew by several suburbs “demonstrated the interdependence of city and suburb.”<sup>21</sup> Hundreds of letters from Milwaukee residents and business owners poured in to the Mayor’s office praising his quick response to the crisis. Douglas Pollack, who lived along the city’s affluent North Shore, wrote, “I am certain that if you had not acted as quickly and as decisively as you did this morning there would have been a great deal

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<sup>19</sup> “Riot Log,” Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20; MS, 8/1/67, copy in Maier Paper, box 43, folder 7.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous, p. 89; MJ, 8/10/67, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous, pp. 69-70.

more chaos and suffering. By sealing off the troubled area and containing the lawless hoodlum element therein there will be far less property loss and fewer human tragedies.”<sup>22</sup> State newspapers sounded a similarly supportive note in their editorial pages.<sup>23</sup> National media also covered the Milwaukee riot and echoed the supportive tenor of local people. Journalists from NBC, ABC, UPI, AP, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Detroit News*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Chicago Daily News*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago American*, *The Village Voice*, *TIME* and *Newsweek* all covered the events in Milwaukee. Editorials, commentary and telegrams from civic leaders across the country touted Maier’s plan as a model for other cities.<sup>24</sup> The *New York Times* stated, “Like no other mayor of a northern city, Mr. Maier responded quickly with a tough, detailed plan for a curfew written last year. It had the city transformed within hours.” The *Chicago Sun Times* wrote, “Mayor Henry W. Maier views himself as a ‘municipal scientist,’ but behind his articulation of clinical solutions to his city’s ills lies the muscle of a German general.” The Mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina, sent a telegram commending Maier’s “foresight and judgment.”<sup>25</sup>

The civil disturbance attracted increased attention from federal officials, as well. The U.S. Attorney called Mayor Maier to investigate and confer. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders scheduled hearings in Milwaukee for late-August and the

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<sup>22</sup> “Douglas Pollack to Mayor Henry Maier,” 7/31/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 22. There are literally dozens of letters contained in Maier’s papers that express a similar view as Pollack’s.

<sup>23</sup> For an overview of state-wide editorial commentary, see, MJ, 8/6/67, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> At the time, many people criticized city officials in Newark and Detroit for not responding fast enough to the urban unrest in their cities. Some believed Maier’s response offered the promise of limiting destruction.

<sup>25</sup> MJ, 8/6/67, pt. 2, p. 1. Maier, *The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous*, p. 76.

FBI, which had been keeping tabs on Fr. Groppi, the YC and Commandos since the 1966 Eagles Club protest in Wauwatosa, increased their monitoring of the local scene.<sup>26</sup>

The riot did bring about an unusual degree of cooperation and unity among inner core civil rights and community organizations. At a meeting on August 1, approximately 100 leaders from a “broad cross-section of the Black community in Milwaukee” - including Fr. Groppi, Wesley Scott of the Urban League, Walter Hoard of the MNAACP, Fred Bronson of the YC, Walter Jones, editor of the *Milwaukee Star*, Melvin Hall of the SDC, Rev Lucius Walker of the Northcott Neighborhood House, and Ray Alexander of the Northside Planning and Development Council - met and formed the “Common View Group.” The group was “concerned about the long local history of smoldering racial conflicts, the immediate local crisis, and programmatic solutions to our problems.” On August 4, Common View issued a withering five-page indictment of city officials. “In the midst of the present confrontation,” the statement read, “the white power structure continues to ignore the need for meaningful communication with the black community. The structure also refuses to recognize the long time deep-rooted circumstances and inherent consequences of not establishing plans and programs to resolve the situation.” The report singled out Mayor Maier and his “War On Prejudice” as “superficial.” It called the city administration “segregated” and “paternalistic” and claimed white leaders had “circumvented the constant needs for equality of opportunity.” The Common View statement also outlined the problems facing inner core residents in education, housing and police-community relations. They termed Milwaukee public schools “grossly

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<sup>26</sup> Maier, *The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous*, p. 67; Fr. James Groppi FBI file. Obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and in the possession of the author.

inadequate” and complained that urban renewal really meant “black removal.” The statement ended by laying blame for the recent civil disturbance squarely at the feet of city officials: “The paternalistic attitude of the white power structure, in ‘knowing’ all of the answers as to what is best for the black community has been the major contributing factor which led to the present confrontation... Black people want control of their community.”<sup>27</sup>

The mayor viewed the racial disturbance as a vindication of his urban policy and moved to exploit the situation to move his agenda forward. Early on, Maier stated that he was not surprised by the burst of racial violence in Milwaukee and had in fact been preparing for that eventuality for at least a year. The desperate situation in the inner core, he said, was the direct result of cities’ urgent need for resources. He reiterated his belief that urban-suburban cooperation was crucial to solving these problems. In addition, Maier again highlighted the need for shared revenues at the state and local level. On August 3, the mayor told a group of over 100 Milwaukee business leaders that he would wage a “Crusade for Resources.” In remarks he would repeat several times, Maier told the gathering,

There’s no place to run, no place to hide, to escape from this responsibility. There’s no reason to run, no reason to hide if we all -- citizens of all walks of life -- work together to see that the resources of the metropolitan area, state and nation are mobilized to meet central city problems on their own terms -- as our number one domestic problem. None of the problems from housing to city housekeeping can be solved without providing a greater share of resources for the central city -- Milwaukee and all the other central cities of this nation... a nation that is

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<sup>27</sup> “Statement to the Milwaukee Community,” Common View Group, August 4, 1967, Frank Aukofer Papers, box 2. See also, MJ 8/5/67, p. 1; MS, 8/5/67, p. 1.



capable of putting a man on the moon must surely be capable of maintaining livable cities on earth.<sup>28</sup>

Over the next several weeks, Mayor Maier embarked on a media campaign to build support for his views and stave off criticism that he was not acting to combat the city's problems. In addition to local business leaders, he met with the Common Council as well as state and federal officials in an attempt to curry resources.<sup>29</sup>

The mayor's "Crusade for Resources" received warm support from most established leaders in Milwaukee. On the day after Maier addressed business leaders, the *New York Times* carried a full page ad, titled "A Statement of Concern About the Crisis of Our Cities," restating the mayor's plea for more federal help for central cities. The ad, paid for primarily by the Milwaukee Catholic Archdiocese, the Milwaukee American Jewish Committee, the Wisconsin-Upper Michigan Synod of the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church and the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee, stated, "This fight for resources must be won. Then can we find workable, permanent solutions to such pervasive, city-crippling problems as crime, poor housing, poor education, and chronic joblessness."<sup>30</sup> While most local media supported the mayor's crusade, not all were optimistic about its prospects. So far in Madison," one WITI-TV editorial griped, "about

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<sup>28</sup> "Mayor Maier's Remarks -- Meeting with Businessmen on Crusade for Resources," 8/3/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 8. Other similar speeches from that time period can be found throughout the Maier Papers, box 43; MJ, 8/3/67, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> On August 10, 1967, Maier proposed a "Four-Point Program" outlining "top priority" urban legislation and urged Governor Knowles to call a special session of the legislature to act on it. The Governor did not call for an emergency session and the legislature failed to act on most of the program, although it did ultimately allocate \$1 million in emergency funds to combat inner core problems.

<sup>30</sup> A transcript of "A Statement of Concern About the Crisis of Our Cities" can be found in the Maier Papers, box 43, folder 8.

all [Mayor Maier's] been promised are 'studies.' In most of the suburbs... he's received only hostility. Few outside of Milwaukee have shown any genuine interest or concern in the city's needs."<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the "Crusade for Resources," Maier directly challenged the Common View Group by assembling his own base of support in the black community. In part, this was no doubt an attempt to blunt criticism that he was out of touch with local African Americans. In the days following the civil disturbance, the mayor consistently criticized "so-called civil rights leaders" for their direct action strategy, implying that they had contributed to the unrest. At the same time, Maier avoided the Common View Group by meeting with a different set of 47 local African Americans. The group included ministers, union stewards, bartenders, barbers and businessmen. Members of Common View complained that Maier was trying to dictate African American leadership in Milwaukee. Rev. Lucious Walker told an audience in Pewaukee that the Mayor's group was "not in touch" with the African American community and that the mayor "wants to use them as a substitute for the real leaders."<sup>32</sup> Common View further claimed that the mayor was making his choices based on stereotypical thinking. When asked about the make-up of the mayor's group, one civil rights leader derisively added, "...and porters, swampers and janitors." Another group of inner core leaders - including a labor leader, welfare and antipoverty program officials, and the director of Milwaukee's United Community Services - protested that Mayor Maier's actions were an attempt to bypass

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<sup>31</sup> "No Place to Run - to Hide - to Escape from Central City Responsibilities," WITI-TV editorial, 8/4/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 8.

<sup>32</sup> "Comments By Lucius Walker in Pewaukee on Sunday," 8/9/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20.

the existing leadership of inner core civil rights and social service groups to divide the community. At the end of Maier's meeting, the group voted 44-3 to form a bi-racial council with the support of the Greater Milwaukee Conference On Religion and Race "to rise up in a time of crisis to meet the challenge." The commission, the mayor said, "will not be White Power. It will not be Black Power. It will be the power of the people." In response, Corneff Taylor of the MUL stated, "He's up to his old tricks of appointing a new committee whenever he finds himself in a situation that needs immediate attention."<sup>33</sup>

The next day, Mayor Maier met with the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance, a moderate group of 58 African American clergymen with long-standing ties to the mayor's office.<sup>34</sup> During the all-day conference, the two sides hammered out a 39-point program of action against Milwaukee's racial problems. Whereas the Common View proposals focused on actions that the Mayor could take, the "Statement of How (Milwaukee's Marshall Plan)" concentrated on measures that could be taken by other levels of government - the Common Council, the state of Wisconsin, the federal government. As Frank Aukofer noted, "Most of the points led off with the words, 'That the mayor seek,' 'That the county furnish,' 'That there be a federal program,' 'That the

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<sup>33</sup> Text of Maier's remarks to African American community members can be found in the Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20. See also, Aukofer, pp. 17-19; Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous, p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> Commando Richard Green remembered, "There weren't many ministers that we expected to get support from because they came from the old school. The mayor at that time had a group of black ministers who reported directly to [him] and he controlled that particular group and it was their responsibility to talk to their congregation and keep them in line. Then, after it [the open housing demonstrations] became a national thing and people were asking, 'Where are your black leaders? Where are all of your black preachers? Slowly but surely, they began to come in to give a little support.'" Prentice McKinney concurred, stating, "[Most black ministers] were invested in the system just like the others [established African American leadership]. See, Green interview; McKinney interview.

state establish'..." Fr. Groppi agreed that action needed to be taken at all levels of government, but complained that the mayor's plan emphasized what Maier could not do, instead of he could do. The two proposals reflected fundamentally different approaches to inner core problems and two competing political agendas. Ultimately, Maier continued to push his "Marshall Plan" while the Common View Group lost steam.<sup>35</sup>

The last major contender to weigh in on the civil disturbance was Archbishop William Cousins. To date, the Archbishop, who held sway over a Catholic population numbering greater than 699,000, had kept a public silence on the growing racial conflict in Milwaukee. Behind the scenes, though, he supported efforts for racial justice and had resisted strong pressure from within the Church to censure Fr. Groppi's activism. Following the riot, several close advisors urged the Archbishop to use the moment to issue a major civil rights address. On August 6, the Archbishop took to the airwaves of nine radio and four television stations to deliver a speech titled, "Community in Crisis and the Christian Conscience." While Cousins stated that "Wanton destruction, arson, potential murder can never be condoned," he also pointed out that "through them we have been dramatically made aware of conditions we might have ignored, of problems we might have continued to disregard." The Archbishop did not offer specific solutions to Milwaukee's problems, but he did urge Catholics to get involved: "If you are to be faithful to the directives of Christ, you cannot disregard nor be indifferent to your personal responsibility to live in harmony and charity with every segment of the society of which you are a part." Without referring directly to any specific individuals or

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<sup>35</sup> "Statement By Mayor Maier," 8/5/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20; "Statement of How (Milwaukee's Marshall Plan)," Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20; Aukofer, pp. 18-19. See also, MS, 8/5/67, p. 5; MJ, 8/7/67, pt 2., p. 1.

organizations, Cousins defended priests and nuns who had been moved to civil rights action by their conscience. "One fact must stand out," he said.

These priests and sisters point up by their unusual action the abject conditions of stark poverty and despair that affect so many of our Negro citizens. They see themselves as lending support to the efforts of those fighting for equal rights. They are members of the Church witnessing the interest of the Church in alleviating human suffering. They are not the cause of unrest; they are not responsible for existing conditions. If they were to withdraw completely from the scene, our minority and racial problems would still be with us. A swinging red light at a railroad crossing doesn't create the danger; it simply calls it to our attention.<sup>36</sup>

The Archbishop's vague and moderate tone reflected the divided politics he faced within the Church. His open support of civil rights activism represented a risky move with the potential to alienate large segments of the white Catholic population.

Following Archbishop Cousins's remarks, liberal clergymen across the city expressed similar views from their pulpits. Episcopal Bishop Donald Hallock issued a public statement demanding official action to ameliorate the desperate conditions of the inner core, including open housing, fair employment and desegregated schools. He also circulated a pro-civil rights statement to be read in Churches throughout the Milwaukee diocese. Dozens of ministers and rabbis throughout Milwaukee urged churchgoers to open their minds and hearts to a greater understanding of African Americans and the urban crisis.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Archbishop William Cousins, "Community in Crisis and the Christian Conscience," 8/6/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 8.

<sup>37</sup> WTMJ-TV editorial, 8/7/67; MJ, 8/7/67, p. 1.

But the response to this outpouring of pro-civil rights sentiment from many of Milwaukee's prominent religious leaders did not sit well with all parishioners and revealed the distance between pulpit and pew. In a split between leadership and membership that duplicated itself in churches, unions, political and social organizations, hundreds of Milwaukeeans wrote or called the Catholic Chancery to complain about Archbishop Cousins's remarks. A similar reaction greeted Bishop Hallock's remarks. One couple criticized him for "professing to speak for us" and for "aligning himself with the rabble-rousers and rioters."<sup>38</sup> The gap between church leaders and significant numbers of their parishioners underscored a widening cultural schism throughout the city.

The state of emergency in Milwaukee officially ended on August 8 when Mayor Maier delivered a major television speech to the citizens of Milwaukee. "The curfew will be over. The bans - the restrictions - will be gone," he announced. Maier took a diplomatic tact in the speech, reiterating his basic plan to secure greater resources from other areas of government: "The central city of Milwaukee can no more finance the crucial problems of poverty, ignorance, disease and discrimination with the property taxes of relatively poor people than the city of Milwaukee can finance sending a man to the moon." In addition, he pleaded for racial harmony in conciliatory tones and urged, "Never was there a more important time for everyone to get together with understanding to build a better city. I think it would be tragic if we decided that the answer is a bigger and better billy-club."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Harold and Mary Holland to Bishop Hallock," 8/8/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 9.

<sup>39</sup> "Mayor Maier's Report to the People on Recent Civil Disorders," 8/8/67, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 14; MJ, 8/9/67, p. 1; MS, 8/9/67, p. 1.

While the Kerner Commission ranked the Milwaukee civil disturbance the eighth biggest of the 164 total disorders reported nationwide in 1967, it paled in comparison to the most well-known riots in Newark and Detroit. In Milwaukee, racial violence claimed three lives,<sup>40</sup> caused 100 injuries (44 police) and prompted 1,740 arrests, most for curfew violations. In Newark, it left 25 dead, more than 1,000 injured and about 1,400 arrested. In Detroit, the site of nation's largest conflagration that summer, 43 died, 2,000 were injured and more than 7,000 arrested.<sup>41</sup>

But there were other costs, as well. In Milwaukee, racial unrest in the core resulted in more than \$570,000 in physical damage, compared to \$15 million in Newark and an estimated \$300 million in Detroit. When the costs of extra police and fire units, lost wages, production and trade are added, the true impact of the riot is incalculable.<sup>42</sup> And despite persistent charges that "outside agitators" and a "communist conspiracy" were to blame for the riot, a study by social scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee revealed a different portrait of participants. Overall, only 300 citizens were estimated to have taken part in the violence and looting; well over ninety-five percent of all local African Americans had *not* participated in the disturbance. In general, rioters were overwhelmingly young black men who lived in Milwaukee. Forty percent were migrants to the city, thirty-five percent were unemployed and more than twenty percent

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<sup>40</sup> There were three deaths directly related to the civil disturbance: Officer Moschea, Ann Mosley and Clifford McKissick. Malone's death was ruled accidental. In addition, another woman died during the Milwaukee riot as the result of a heart attack. Most accounts do not include the fourth death in overall tallies.

<sup>41</sup> Aukofer, p. 7; Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, pp. 56-68 and 84-107.

<sup>42</sup> Maier, The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous, p. 8.

could be classified as poor. A large majority lived in the core. There is no evidence that any civil rights activists took part in the disorder.<sup>43</sup>

While the state of emergency lasted for nearly ten days in Milwaukee, the high point of the conflict occurred during a five hour period on the first night. The mayor's swift response and the city-wide curfew was credited with limiting the disturbance; this was no doubt true. Yet, the city-wide measures also disrupted the lives of nearly 1.4 million people living in the metropolitan area. As a result, the impact of what was a geographically-limited outburst was greatly amplified. This, in turn, fueled a mix of fear, guilt and compassion among many of the city's whites. Some advocated greater resources and civic action to address conditions in the inner core. Others, perhaps a majority, supported greater repression by law enforcement and staunchly opposed the increased use of tax dollars for the urban poor.

The civil disorder in Milwaukee also boosted Mayor Maier's national image and helped him consolidate local political power. Maier effectively used the conflict to promote his urban policies. He received a generally positive response to both his riot plan and the "Crusade for Justice." Maier had proven himself capable of handling large-scale urban unrest, a trait that appealed to a growing number of white residents fearful that the outbreak of racial violence was only a beginning, not an end. As an indication of the mayor's broad base of support, Milwaukeeans re-elected Maier to a third term with over eighty percent of the total vote - the largest landslide in the city's storied political history. A significant portion of that unprecedented support came from white

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<sup>43</sup> See, Flaming, Karl, "The 1967 Milwaukee Riot: A Historical and Comparative Analysis," Ph.D. Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1970 and Karl Flaming, Who Riots and Why? Black and White Perspectives In Milwaukee (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Urban League, 1968).



Milwaukeeans who perceived the mayor as a defender of their rights against those of the encroaching African Americans.

In a more general sense, the civil disorder of 1967 highlighted the deep-seated racial problems in Milwaukee for a national audience. It served as a reminder to the community that other, more volatile elements existed in the core. In the process, it gave lie to the fact that Milwaukee was somehow unique or different from other large American cities. Milwaukee had officially and undeniably taken its place alongside dozens of other deteriorating urban centers. The story of Milwaukee was increasingly the story of America.

But how else did the civil disturbance in Milwaukee affect civil rights activism and the movement for racial justice? On the one hand, no known civil rights activists, leaders or organizations played a role in riot. Several Commandos believed that the unrest tore up the African American community, fanned white reaction and hindered the Movement. "I think it hurt the movement a little bit, personally," recalled Squire Austin, "because our basic strategy in the Movement was non-violent, to fight legally for what you want non-violently and through organized protest. The looting, the shooting, the burning, was totally against what we were all about."<sup>44</sup> When Fr. Groppi and several YC members did attempt to participate in community-based efforts to maintain peace and calm, Milwaukee police arrested them. And many blamed civil rights activism and the YC's confrontational style for the disorder. But to movement leaders, the riot was the long-expected result of the problems they had been talking about for years. Just as the mayor moved to use the situation to further his agenda, civil rights leaders moved to

exploit white fears and guilt to achieve their goals. Within a month, Fr. Groppi, the YC and Commandos initiated one of the most dramatic open housing campaigns in the United States. The campaign, which courted confrontation with angry white South Siders, lasted for more than 200 days and, at its height, set the community on “the brink of civil war.”

But there were also significant potential pitfalls to civil rights insurgency in the wake of the 1967 civil disorder. The upsurge of a reactionary “law and order” politics posed formidable - and growing - obstacles to the allocation of additional resources to beleaguered cities and to the passage of civil rights legislation, particularly on housing. The outbreak of violence in the African American core, also loosened the reins on violent behavior in general. During the upcoming open housing campaigns, thousands of white Milwaukeeans took to the streets to defend their neighborhoods against the threat of a fair housing ordinance. The result was racial conflict on a scale never seen in the city. Civil rights activists had to increasingly work within and respond to this hostile environment.

In 1968, the President’s National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder’s - commonly known as the Kerner Commission after its leader, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner - issued its final report on the string on racial violence in the United States between 1965 and 1967. The report found no evidence of a conspiracy or communists or other outside agitators, instead arguing that the unrest resulted from the “frustrated hopes” and “unfulfilled expectations” of inner city residents living in deteriorating urban African American communities. The Kerner Commission forcefully indicted white society as the cause of racial inequality:

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<sup>44</sup> Austin interview. See also, Green interview and Crawford interview.

**Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans.**

**What white Americans have never fully understood - but what the Negro can never forget - is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.**

The Commission also highlighted contentious police-community relations and widespread official inaction as significant contributing factors to urban violence. The report concluded with a stark warning: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal." The Kerner Commission called for massive governmental action, including "unprecedented levels of funding and performance," to reverse this trend. Already by 1968, though, it was unclear whether popular support existed for such a prescription.<sup>45</sup>

The Kerner Commission conclusions resonated with the power of truth in Milwaukee. Milwaukee had undoubtedly been plagued by a long history of racial inequality and white complicity. Police-community relations had deteriorated to a dangerous adversarial position. The extent and duration of official inaction bordered on the absurd. And all the while, conditions eroded to desperate levels. Hostility toward whites, distrust of political leaders, skepticism in established institutions, frustration, anger and rage all blossomed in Milwaukee's inner core during the years leading up to 1967. A small segment of the community no longer had faith in even the militant activism of Fr. Groppi, the YC or the Commandos; they turned to more violent means of expression and protest. Less than a month after the worst civil unrest in Milwaukee's

history, the issue of open housing would bring these factors to an explosive, and often violent, culmination.

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<sup>45</sup> Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), pp. 10, 2 and 1.

**Chapter 7****“Upside Down In Milwaukee’: The Open Housing Campaign and the Climax of Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee”**

*“Marching is not only a protest, it is a prayer.”  
- Fr. James Groppi, Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council Advisor*

On August 24, 1967, just two weeks after Milwaukee’s civil disorder, the Youth Council announced that it intended to extend its open housing crusade by marching to the South Side and across the city. The first foray into the overwhelmingly white, working-class neighborhoods was to take place the following Saturday; demonstrators would walk from St. Boniface Church to Kosciuszko Park, located several blocks from the South end of the 16th Street Viaduct. The day before the demonstration, local newspapers printed a map detailing the march route. On August 28, roughly two hundred civil rights activists gathered at St. Boniface for a rally. Demonstrators then set out across the Menomonee River Valley, “a natural boundary,” according to the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, “that has unnaturally kept most minority groups out of south side neighborhoods.”<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the viaduct, more than 3,000 local whites had come out to observe and oppose the open housing advocates. Many were simply curious. Some held signs that read “Polish Power” and “A Good Groppi Is A Dead Groppi.” Others yelled, “Niggers go home!” “Go back to Africa!” and “Sieg Heil.” Soon, stones,

bottles, garbage and chunks of wood accompanied the chants and signs. At a number of intersections, Milwaukee police officers formed a wedge to get marchers through the throng. At the park, an estimated 5,000 more angry white locals met the demonstration, resulting in an outburst of scuffling. The violence injured 22 people and police arrested nine. As the civil rights activists left Kosciuszko Park, though, Fr. Groppi promised that they would return the follow day. The YC and their allies made good on their promise by marching for over 200 consecutive nights in favor of a local open housing ordinance.

The struggle for racial justice in Milwaukee had been gathering strength since 1958 and now entered a dramatic new phase. The open housing campaign, which took on the most volatile issue in northern race relations, signaled the climax of civil rights insurgency in the city. It brought the Milwaukee Movement to nation-wide attention and made Fr. Groppi a nationally recognized civil rights leader. YC members and the Commandos also fashioned a unique form of Black Power that stood against the grain of many of the emergent trends in the national Black Power movement. To a significant number of civil rights activists nation-wide, the Milwaukee open housing campaign represented a final opportunity for an integrated, nonviolent, church-oriented Movement in the North to succeed. And young activists did, indeed, show that a sustained campaign could be carried out without degenerating into anarchic violence or racial separatism. But, it took a long struggle.

Most Americans believed that home ownership was grounded in an implicit set of property rights. The right of free association; to live where and among whom you

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<sup>1</sup> MS, 8/29/67, p. 1.

choose. The right of choice; to be free to dispose of property in any way the owner saw fit. The right of peace and tranquility; to avoid criminal behavior, urban decay, noise, traffic and other hazards of urban living.<sup>2</sup> Federal loan and mortgage policies reflected these assumptions by promoting racially homogenous neighborhoods and suburbanization at the expense of urban redevelopment and integration.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout American history, private property and home ownership have been at the core of an evolving conception of the "American Dream." The nation's founding documents enshrined private property and individual liberty as key pillars of American democratic republicanism. Until the end of the 19th century, a variation of Thomas Jefferson's Agrarian Ideal - which envisioned a democratic nation of independent and autonomous small land owners - dominated the American view of the good life. The opening of the West to homesteaders by the federal government deepened this commitment to private property and independent home ownership. With urbanization, home ownership and a strong sense of neighborhood - usually organized around ethnicity and religion - came to replace the Agrarian Ideal at the center of the American Dream. Suburbanization, in large part, was fueled by the desire of middle-class and affluent Americans to achieve this conception of the good life. Historian Stephen Grant Meyer has pointed out that pervasive phrases like "Home sweet home," "There's no place like home," "A man's home is his castle," "Good fences make good neighbors" and "...not in my back yard" underscore the tremendous significance of home ownership in American culture.

New Deal programs and idealism further solidified housing as a central feature of the reformulated post-war "American Dream." To middle- and working-class citizens, these policies held forth the promise of private home ownership. President Franklin Roosevelt frequently spoke of the ideal of a nation of free homeowners in his speeches, and he included the right to a decent home in his 1944 "Second Bill of Rights." This idealism resonated with urban white ethnics who had long struggled to buy homes in the city without the benefit of federally backed mortgages and loans. The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the G.I. Bill put homeownership within the grasp of thousands of middle-class and working-class Americans, often for the first time. For many, a home became the only significant asset that they owned; it represented real property and thus economic security. Most viewed these new federal benefits as entitlements earned through hard work and good citizenship. According to Thomas Sugrue, "Homeowners' rights were... a reward for sacrifice and duty." Indeed, throughout the early-post-war years and the Cold War, many U.S. policy-makers saw private home ownership as a key ingredient to American national security, self-sufficiency and stability. In these ways, home ownership became the center piece of the post-war American Dream.

See Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Thomas Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction Against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964," *The Journal of American History*, September 1995, p. 566.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, most poor urban residents found it very difficult to secure financing to refurbish dilapidated or decaying inner city dwellings - precisely the structures most in need of redevelopment. As a result, poor urban neighborhoods - usually made up of the city's oldest buildings - fell deeper into decay and disrepair. This, in turn, fueled the perception among many whites that black people were dirty, lazy and would not maintain their own homes. It was not a far leap, then, for these whites to then believe that an influx of African Americans into their neighborhood would result in a similar trend toward urban blight. They began to perceive the correlation of black residents and substandard housing with causation - that black people *caused* the urban decay they lived in.

While many black people no doubt also subscribed to this post-war conception of the American Dream, home ownership and open access to housing bore a special historical resonance for African Americans. During slavery, black people, themselves defined as “chattel,” were denied property rights. The unfulfilled promise of “forty acres and a mule” during Reconstruction condemned tens of thousands of African Americans (as well as an increasing number of poor rural white people) to landless poverty well into the twentieth century. In urban America, Black people not only faced residential segregation, but also significant barriers to homeownership. For example, in 1960, only 3% of Milwaukee African Americans owned their own homes.

Many white residents supported African American home owning rights as long as black people remained a significant urban minority limited to their own distinct neighborhoods. As urban black populations surged during the 1950s, though, many white residents came to view expanding African American neighborhoods as a threat. Some did not believe black people had earned the new entitlements in the same way whites had. Others associated African Americans with declining property values.<sup>4</sup> Still more thought black rights came at the expense of white rights and that public policy seemed increasingly at odds with white, working-class interests.

In addition to the promise of private home ownership, New Deal and Fair Deal housing policies also offered poor Americans expanded opportunities for basic shelter through federally-funded public housing projects. Federal Housing Acts in 1937, 1949 and 1954 allocated more than one billion dollars to localities for the construction of low-

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<sup>4</sup> Declining property values were usually the result of panicked selling by fearful white home-owners who undersold their property in order to flee the area. For one detailed report on this phenomenon, see “Racial Land Value Fear Refuted,” 3/11/60, Barbee Papers, box 10, folder 4.



income housing. These programs were often attacked on the grounds that they were “socialistic” and promoted racial integration. Because most New Deal programs left much of the implementation to state and local officials, cities across the urban north were plagued by a series of confrontations over the placement of public housing projects throughout the 1950s. Many white urban residents supported the ideals and values underlying federal public housing policies, but balked when that housing was placed in their neighborhoods. To them, public housing came to be synonymous with African American housing and urban decay. In response, thousands of white residents in cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, New York and Milwaukee mobilized to defend their neighborhoods and block public housing projects during the 1950s. As a result, low-income public housing projects became heavily concentrated in existing poor urban neighborhoods instead of spread throughout the entire community - a trend that exacerbated inequality and segregation. By the end of the decade, a number of local projects had stalled in the face of considerable social and political opposition.

As the northern civil rights movement accelerated during the mid-1960s, open housing emerged as the most violent and divisive issue in the urban North. A 1961 report by the National Commission on Race and Housing summarized the problem, stating, “There are probably not fewer than twenty-seven million Americans, or nearly one-sixth of the national population, whose opportunities to live in neighborhoods of their choice are in some degree restricted because of their race, color or ethnic attachments.”<sup>5</sup> This popular upsurge pushed the issue onto the national agenda. By 1965, President Lyndon Johnson became convinced that the problem of racial discrimination in housing was so

invidious and pervasive that legislation was required to root it out. He sought to capitalize on his hard-won successes in the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, as well as the growing urban unrest, to push for a federal open housing law as the centerpiece to the 1966 Civil Rights Act.<sup>6</sup> Legislators, backed by the influential lobbying power of the housing and real estate industries, argued that a prohibition against discrimination intruded on the rights of private property and personal choice. In the end, the House of Representatives passed a watered-down measure in August of 1966, but the bill died at the hands of a Senate filibuster led by North Carolina Democrat Sam Ervin.<sup>7</sup> Congress finally passed a strong federal open housing law in 1968 as a tribute to the recently assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr. Nevertheless, the federal retreat between 1966 and 1968 signaled deep-seated national divisions over housing and pushed the issue back to states and localities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Milwaukee Reader*, April 17-23, 1961, p. 5. See, Milwaukee NAACP Papers, box 3, folder 11.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the school desegregation decisions and voting rights initiatives, the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination in employment and public accommodations. While it was clear that segregated residential patterns affected where children attended school and where people could work, there was a reluctance to tackle housing discrimination at the federal level. The reluctance was based both on an acknowledgement of the volatile nature of the issue in many American neighborhoods as well as indecisiveness about the appropriate federal role in securing fair treatment for all people in housing. The post-Civil War constitutional amendments had clearly established a federal responsibility to prohibit discrimination in governmental functions like voting and public education. In moving against racial discrimination in private employment, the federal government had found a compelling national interest in removing impediments to national productivity and security. Whether a similarly compelling national interest was served through federal open housing legislation was the subject of significant debate throughout the 1960s.

<sup>7</sup> When the 1966 Civil Rights Act failed, Martin Luther King, Jr., stated that the demise "surely herald[ed] darker days for this social era of discontent." For an overview of federal efforts to enact an open housing law, see Meyer, pp. 203-209.

<sup>8</sup> The failure of federal legislators to come up with a strong open housing bill spurred a series of local open housing campaigns in the urban North during the mid-1960s. A number of these efforts resulted in significant racial conflict. In addition, the failure of federal legislation and the devolution of the issue to states and localities pit city against suburb, local government against state government. A federal measure would have had the virtue of setting a national standard to which all states and localities had to adhere, thus

From the first, housing discrimination was a significant issue for Milwaukee African Americans. Whereas some argued that black Milwaukeeans were steadily making economic progress on the back of the industrial economy, housing segregation appeared intractable. The inequality was self-evident in the local landscape and literally shaped most black people's experience. Restrictive covenants, biased federal loan and mortgage policies, discriminatory real estate practices, social custom and choice ensured the creation and perpetuation of the inner core. Overcrowding and dilapidation followed its slow north and westward expansion throughout the late fifties and 1960s. Yet, while official policies did "play a role in maintaining the dual housing market... the weight of the evidence demonstrates that they reflected a popular unwillingness on the part of whites to have African Americans living in their midst."<sup>9</sup> As the African American population shot up and the urban crisis deepened in Milwaukee, housing inequality became more acute and residential segregation became nearly total. A national report in 1965 revealed that Milwaukee suffered from the lowest "Suburban Negro Ratio" in the United States; 98% of all local African Americans lived in the main city - the largest concentration in the nation.<sup>10</sup>

While various institutional mechanisms and social custom usually maintained residential segregation without conflict, occasionally incidents did occur. In 1949, a

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eliminating the fractured conflicts that erupted between the different layers of government. For an overview, see Meyer, *As Long As They Don't Move Next Door*, chapters 10 and 11, in particular.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> MJ, 3/26/65, pt. 2, p. 8.

group of more than one hundred angry white residents at the Greenfield trailer camp, on the city's west side, mobilized to oppose the presence of Albert J. Sanders, an African American navy veteran, and his family. According to state historian William Thompson,

...many of them signed a petition declaring that "the Negro should not be permitted in a white camp." The crowd then moved to the Sanders' trailer, threatening: "If you stay here, we'll break up your car. We'll hurt you and your wife and your children, too." Although sheriff's deputies made it clear they would protect him and his family, and other residents encouraged him to stay, Sanders left the camp with his family for the night.<sup>11</sup>

As late as 1963, Matthew Anthony, a black arc welder, and his family returned from church to their new home in a predominately white west side neighborhood to find a flaming cross on their front lawn. A seventeen year old white adolescent confessed that he and four other neighborhood youths had committed the act after overhearing a group of white adults express indignation over the presence of an African American family in the neighborhood.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1950s, the housing debate in Milwaukee became increasingly racialized. Social Democratic mayor Frank Zeidler had advocated a progressive program

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<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the Greefield Trailer Camp incident was resolved when a group of prominent community groups and public officials, along with local residents, joined together to oppose the organized opposition to integration. Because the overall number of African Americans in Milwaukee remained low in 1949, the threat of black residents overwhelming white neighborhoods seemed unfounded. But, as the African American population quickly expanded throughout the 1950s and 1960s, inter-racial tensions over housing rose. For an overview of the entire Greenfield Trailer Camp incident, see Thompson, The History of Wisconsin, pp. 334-335.

<sup>12</sup> Star, 5/25/63, p. 1. The following month, a group of white neighbors planted a tree at the sight of the cross burning as a healing gesture and a sign of opposition to racial discrimination. One white neighbor expressed sorrow that "bigots are running around in our community." See, Star, 6/22/63, p. 3.

of slum clearance and highway construction to connect the suburbs with the downtown. At the same time, he insisted that public housing be built for all local residents that were either displaced by urban renewal projects or could not afford private-sector housing. Zeidler enjoyed a large base of popular support for his comprehensive urban redevelopment program and was handily re-elected three times between 1948 and 1960.

Public housing was not primarily a racial issue in Milwaukee through the first half of the 1950s. In fact, both the Hillside and Westlawn projects - the city's first - were integrated (although some whispered their fear that the projects might establish a "Negro colony" in the area). Public housing opponents at the time most often attacked the projects as "Socialistic," an especially potent charge given the power of socialists in city government.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, African Americans did not constitute a majority of the population even in areas where they were concentrated until the late-1950s. But, as the black population rose, so too did white racial fears.

During the first half of the 1960s, as the drive for public housing stalled, the campaign for open housing laws began to pick up steam in Wisconsin. As early as 1960, the Wisconsin NAACP drafted model open housing legislation aimed at the state

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<sup>13</sup> In 1955, Fr. Anthony Cogo, pastor of the Blessed Virgin of Pompeii Church in the city's largely Italian Third Ward, made the most direct assault on the mayor's urban renewal plan. Zeidler's slum clearance plan slated Blessed Virgin of Pompeii for demolition. A staunch opponent of socialism, Fr. Cogo hired a team of lawyers to defend his church from the wrecking ball by attacking the mayor's entire urban renewal plan as un-American and socialistic. Fr. Cogo's legal challenge brought Zeidler's program to a virtual halt by 1960. See, Kevin Smith, pp. 30-77.

legislature.<sup>14</sup> Liberal and civil rights organizations publicized housing discrimination and circulated “Good Neighbor Pledges” to Milwaukee homeowners.<sup>15</sup> The Milwaukee Urban League and the MNAACP worked to field housing complaints and place African Americans in available housing on a case-by-case basis. State legislative activity on open housing spurred opposition from a string of new property owners associations dedicated to defending “property owners’ rights” against “forced housing.” Hundreds of citizens filled out “stop forced housing legislation” cards and returned them to their representatives.<sup>16</sup> John Carroll, President of “The Citizen,” an organization dedicated to “better government,” took to the television airwaves to oppose “any open occupancy bill that seeks to destroy my personal freedom and abolish private property under the guise of ‘civil rights.’” “Under the ‘forced’ occupancy bill,” Carroll claimed, “the state controls to whom you may rent your home; the state controls to whom you can sell your home; and, in effect, controls who may play in your yard with your children.”<sup>17</sup> In 1963, the Milwaukee Board of Realtors endorsed the National Association of Real Estate Boards’ “Property Owners’ Bill of Rights” and distributed it widely in the city, including as a full-page ad in local newspapers. “The erosion of these freedoms,” the realtors warned, “will destroy the free enterprising, individual American.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Program: Annual Meeting of Wisconsin Conference, NAACP,” 5/28/60, Milwaukee NAACP Papers, box 10, folder 4.

<sup>15</sup> “Citizens Committee for Fair Housing Practices,” 1/19/61, Milwaukee NAACP Papers, box 3, folder 11.

<sup>16</sup> Examples of these cards can be found in Barbee Papers, box 34, folder 3.

<sup>17</sup> John Carroll, “On the Matter of Open Occupancy Legislation,” WITI-TV editorial, 11/2/63, Maier Paper, box 44, folder 9.

<sup>18</sup> MJ, 11/1/63, p. 23.

Responding to the growing evidence of housing discrimination, the State Industrial Commission established an office to review claims of racial bias in “housing, recreation, education, employment, health and social welfare.” The office lacked a strong enforcement mechanism and was stacked with political appointees committed to upholding the racial status quo. The failure of the Industrial Commission to aggressively challenge housing discrimination in Wisconsin fueled the 1961 sit-in campaign to consolidate state civil rights power in the Governor’s office and enact a strong open housing measure.<sup>19</sup>

In 1963 and 1964, state representatives again rejected various legislative measures that banned discrimination in the sale, rental or financing of private housing.<sup>20</sup>

Undaunted, Lloyd Barbee - now a member of the Assembly representing Milwaukee’s inner core - and other civil rights advocates reintroduced a strong civil rights bill in 1965. The real estate industry and South Side representatives again led strong opposition to the measure. In April, the Milwaukee Board of Realtors paid for a full-page advertisement in the *Journal* opposing all “forced housing legislation.”<sup>21</sup> In response, civil rights advocates placed more than 450 personal ads in the newspaper illustrating popular support for the open housing law and urging passage of the bill.<sup>22</sup> In Madison, 300 people attended a march and rally at the state capitol to support open housing.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed overview of the 13-day sit-in campaign at the state capitol, see Chapter 2.

<sup>20</sup> MJ, 2/13/64, p. 1; MS, 2/13/64, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> MJ, 4/23/65, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> MJ, 5/15/65, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> MJ, 4/30/65, pt. 2, p. 5.

Finally, on December 3, the Wisconsin legislature enacted a bi-partisan compromise measure supported by Governor Warren Knowles.<sup>24</sup> The new state-wide open housing law was limited to buildings with five or more units - 30% of the total housing units in the state - and exempted the vast majority of inner core housing. In addition, legislators granted enforcement powers for the law to the State Industrial Commission, which had faced past criticism from civil rights advocates. Even so, WTMJ-TV editorialists called the bill "a fair, middle of the road approach in attempting to solve a nagging problem of the state's bigger city's, mainly Milwaukee."<sup>25</sup> Despite the law's shortcomings, many open housing activists viewed the bill as a beginning. Because state officials would not go farther, however, Milwaukee open housing advocates moved their fight to the local level.

Vel Phillips led the legislative charge in the Common Council.<sup>26</sup> Born in 1924, Velvlea Rodgers grew up in relatively secure surroundings on N. 8th Street. Her mother taught Vel and her two sisters middle class propriety rooted in the church and her father, a small business owner, taught her the virtue of self-help and race pride. In high school, the hard-working Phillips won a college scholarship during a speech contest and attended Howard University. Howard introduced Phillips to a much broader spectrum of African American life. While there, she learned from esteemed black scholars like E. Franklin

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<sup>24</sup> Governor Knowles had originally opposed the open housing measure claiming there was no concrete evidence of housing discrimination in Wisconsin. In addition, he claimed that housing was a local issue to be taken up by city and county legislative bodies. The significant concessions included in the final draft of the law spurred a change of heart in the Governor's Mansion.

<sup>25</sup> "WTMJ-TV Editorial," 11/4/65, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 12.

<sup>26</sup> The following biographical sketch was culled from a series of interviews with Vel Phillips by Patrick Jones.



Frazier, Alaine Locke, and Howard Thurman.<sup>27</sup> In 1951, Vel Phillips became the first African American woman to earn a law degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she met her husband, Dale Phillips, a fellow law student. After law school, the couple moved to Milwaukee where they both played a prominent role in the local branch of the NAACP.

During the mid-1950s, Phillips worked for the League of Women Voters registering black voters throughout the inner core. These door-to-door visits brought the young lawyer into stark contact with the poverty and deprivation that many Milwaukee African Americans endured; The dilapidated housing conditions left a particularly deep impression on her. Phillips also had difficulty registering local black residents to vote and attributed the hesitancy on new migrants' experiences in the Jim Crow South. She credited her work with the League of Women Voters for influencing her decision to run for a seat on the Common Council in 1956.

That year, a long-overdue redistricting plan created new political possibilities for African Americans in Milwaukee. The plan carved out a new ward - the 2nd Ward - that was situated primarily within the inner core. While the new district contained a significant concentration of black voters, it was still necessary for candidates to garner a portion of the white vote to earn a majority. With the quiet support of mainstream black

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<sup>27</sup> While at Howard, Phillips and a classmate took the train into Washington, D.C., to see the cherry blossoms. Because it was Sunday morning, they decided to duck into the first church they came across. As they entered the church, the white minister stopped the service, pointed to the two black women and said to the ushers, "The two colored ladies appear to be lost. Could you please see them out and show them to the church for Negroes on Georgia Ave." Phillips credits that experience as one of the first she had had directly with Jim Crow.

leaders, including the MNAACP, Vel Phillips decided to seek the open 2nd Ward Common Council seat.

As a measure of the importance of race and gender politics at the time, Phillips felt compelled to shape her campaign to obscure her identity. She did not print photos on any of her campaign materials and legally changed her name to Vel - from the more feminine Velvlea - so that it could appear on the ballot. Phillips also made few public appearances, relying instead on the power of a good campaign organization, and hid news that she was pregnant until after election day.

During the April run-off, Phillips bested African American state assemblyman Le Roy Simmons, as well as two white candidates, Julian Nagel and Frank Kanauz. Concerned about the prospect of a contest between two black candidates, Nagel and Kanauz, who had finished third and fourth respectively in the run-off, decided to mount write-in campaigns. The two white candidates appealed directly to racial fears and gender bias. In the end, Phillips won the seat, but Nagel passed Simmons to finish second, less than 400 votes behind the winner. As the lone woman *and* African American on the Council, many saw Vel Phillips as the representative of all minorities in Milwaukee.<sup>28</sup>

Alderwoman Phillips initially worked for more public housing in Milwaukee. The year of her election, she proposed a 300 unit project in the 2nd Ward and met with

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<sup>28</sup> Vel Phillips election to the Milwaukee Common Council as the first woman and first African American was one of many “firsts” for her. She had already become the first in her family to go off to college and the first black woman to earn a law degree from UW-Madison. In 1958, as a delegate to the Democratic National Committee, Phillips became the first black woman in the United States to work in the policy-making body of either major party. Later, she would become the first black female judge in Wisconsin – as a juvenile judge – and the first person of color to win state-wide office - as Secretary of State in 1978.

little resistance. Two years later, when she proposed a similar development on the city's South Side, white opposition mobilized. Phillips argued that public housing should not be concentrated in the most run-down areas, but should be spread throughout the city. At a community meeting to discuss the proposal, more than 400 white South Siders cheered as one resident baldly stated, "We do not want the colored people on the South Side and believe me that's the whole thing."<sup>29</sup> By 1960, Milwaukee's entire urban renewal plan stood at a virtual stand-still. Unable to gain support for more public housing, Phillips turned her attention to the statewide struggle for open housing.

Between 1962 and 1967, Vel Phillips, introduced a strong city-wide open housing ordinance in the Common Council four separate times. The measure, which covered the sale, lease and rental of property, was defeated each time by a vote of 18-1, with Phillips casting the lone supportive vote. The outcomes suggested the significant obstacles facing open housing advocates in Milwaukee. Some public officials in Milwaukee argued that residential segregation was not the result of racial discrimination but of the inability of African Americans to afford higher rents and mortgages. To be sure, economic inequalities prohibited most African Americans from more affluent neighborhoods, and there were even civil rights advocates who believed employment and economic issues should be the leading issue of the movement. But, as early as 1952 a report from the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights reported that segregation in Milwaukee was "widely and openly practiced." That same year, and again as recently as 1966, city

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<sup>29</sup> Smith, p. 67.

probes found evidence of block busting among Milwaukee realtors.<sup>30</sup> Mortgage and lending practices as well as widespread popular opposition to integration in many white neighborhoods compounded the difficulty. Moreover, it was simply not politically sensible for other Council members to support open housing when popular opposition among whites ran so high. Finally, opponents of open housing were also given cover by City Attorney John Fleming's opinion that a local ordinance intruded on the jurisdiction of the state<sup>31</sup> as well as Mayor Maier's continued insistence on a county-wide law.

There were more indirect obstacles to open housing advocates' efforts, too. Between 1963 and late-1965, the main action on open housing in Wisconsin remained at the capitol building in Madison; no local political will existed because politicians and city leaders continually deferred to state action. Closer to home, the Fred Lins controversy, the school desegregation campaign, the Eagles Club protest and police-community relations successively held center stage in the struggle for civil rights. Events in Birmingham, Selma and at the March On Washington further diverted local civil rights energies to pressing national affairs. In a broader context, then, Vel Phillips' open housing efforts, though supported by most liberal and civil rights organizations, remained one issue among many.

By 1967, though, open housing had built momentum nationally and locally. The failure of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1966 - which was the first civil rights measure

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<sup>30</sup> "Block-busting" refers to a practice where realtors would sell a home to an African American family in a white neighborhood located on the fringes of a black neighborhood at an inflated price. They would then turn around and encourage white homeowners to sell their homes at a loss because, they said, the presence of African Americans would bring down property values. In addition to lining the pockets of real estate agents, the practice deepened racial animosities, fueled white flight and fostered segregation. See, MJ, 3/29/66, p. 1; MJ, 4/14/66, pt. 2, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> MJ, 7/1/66, pt. 2, p. 1.

introduced in Congress, but not passed, since 1957 - brought out simmering racial divisions within the Democratic Party. But urban violence in 1967, much of which had grown out of the general squalor of segregated black communities, put the open housing issue in a different context, prompting legislators and activists to again push for an open housing law. "One of the burning frustrations Negro residents carry with them in city ghettos," Roy Wilkins argued, is "the knowledge that even if they want to and have the means to do so, very often they cannot get out."<sup>32</sup> The Kerner Commission, which released its report on civil disturbances in March of 1968, indicted housing discrimination as a major reason behind urban violence, African American frustration, and racial strife.

Between 1965 and 1967, as state legislatures and city councils debated open housing laws, civil rights advocates in northern cities organized around the issue.<sup>33</sup> The most visible and violent campaign took place in Chicago, a short hour and a half drive from Milwaukee down the shores of Lake Michigan.<sup>34</sup> There, in 1965 and 1966, a contentious and fragmented coalition of local civil rights organizations and Martin Luther King's SCLC - "the Chicago Freedom Movement" - led a series of open housing marches through several white working-class neighborhoods. The demonstrations attracted national media attention when thousands of angry white counter-demonstrators at Marquette Park pelted non-violent demonstrators with a hail of bottles, rocks, cherry

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Meyer, p. 204.

<sup>33</sup> For a national overview of housing and race relations in the post-war era, see Meyer, *As Long As They Don't Move Next Door*.

<sup>34</sup> Meyer, pp. 183-188; For an overview of civil rights insurgency in Chicago, particularly the SCLC campaign, see Ralph, *Northern Protest*.

bombs and racist epithets. The Chicago Freedom Movement degenerated into internal bickering among local and national civil rights leaders and resulted in a hasty retreat from the city by King and SCLC after negotiating a severely compromised agreement with city officials. Many saw the failure of the Chicago open housing campaign as repudiation of King's and SCLC's non-violent strategy in the North.<sup>35</sup>

In Milwaukee, as the education and Eagles Club campaigns subsided and police-community relations simmered, Fr. Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council, like their allies in city's across the North, shifted their attention to open housing. As early as October 14, 1966, Fr. Groppi announced that the YC would next target open housing. "We think we have exhausted the demonstration against the school board and the Eagles Club," he told a group of clergymen in Appleton. "Next we are going to protest in the area of Negro housing."<sup>36</sup> The YC did not take action until March when they joined members of the Organization of Organizations outside Mayor Maier's home to protest a rent increase at the Parklawn housing project. In a new twist, as fifteen people marched, sang and chanted outside, six demonstrators entered the mayor's apartment complex in an attempt to talk to him directly. Maier said the tactic was evidence of the local civil rights movement's "lust for headlines." After the Common Council again voted down an open

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<sup>35</sup> King's retreat in the face of criticism from local Black Power advocates and massive resistance from white residents fueled this perspective. More and more, northern protest became racially exclusive, politically radical and increasingly violent. Interestingly, a year and a half later, the open housing campaign in Milwaukee would be seen as a lone example that an inter-racial, non-violent, church-based movement was possible in the urban North.

<sup>36</sup> MJ, 10/15/66, p. 8.

housing ordinance in June, Groppi promised more demonstrations during the upcoming summer and warned, "Either we get what we want or we turn this city upside down."<sup>37</sup>

From late June through late July, the YC and Commandos targeted six North Side Aldermen who had opposed the open housing ordinance despite the fact that they represented portions of the inner core. On June 19, an inter-racial group of sixty to eighty-five young people rallied at St. Boniface Church and then marched to Alderman Martin Schreiber's home on W. Auer Avenue, chanting "We want Black Power" and singing freedom songs. Signs read, "We Want Fair Housing," "Schreiber, Why?" "Down with Slum Landlords" and "We Want a 'Home Sweet Home' Too." As the group marched in front of the home, four YC and Commando representatives - YC President, Fred Bronson, Prentice McKinney, James Pierce and Lawrence Finn - rang Schreiber's bell. The Alderman invited the delegation inside to discuss the issue. During the half hour meeting, Schreiber told the open housing advocates that he opposed the city ordinance because the state of Wisconsin already had a law covering the issue. A frustrated Bronson told reporters afterward, "We're going to march all over the city to get that bill passed. If it takes all summer, all right!"<sup>38</sup> Aldermen Francis Dineen, Eugene Woehner, James Maslowski, Robert Ertl, Robert Dwyer, and even City Attorney Fleming, faced similar protests.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> MJ, 3/9/67, pt. 2, p. 1; *New York Times*, 9/13/67.

<sup>38</sup> MJ, 6/20/67, pt. 2, p. 1; *Star*, 6/24/67, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> MJ, *Star*, 7/1/67, p. 3; MJ, 7/6/67, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 7/11/67, pt. 2, p. 7; *Star*, 7/24/67, p. 1; MJ, 7/20/67, p. 17; *Star*, 7/29/67, p. 1.

Reaction to the initial phase of the open housing campaign was mild. The two daily newspapers buried coverage of the story far from the front page while editors at the *Star* wrote that the aldermen's "unacceptable excuses for continued fair housing opposition show them to be merely phony liberals, unqualified to representing Negro citizens" and commended the YC "for helping our Aldermen display their true feelings."<sup>40</sup> Both Vel Phillips and Assemblyman Lloyd Barbee encouraged civil rights activists at pre-march rallies at St. Boniface. Alderman Maslowski, on the other hand, called the YC protests "harassment," while his colleague, Robert Dwyer, argued that housing segregation in Milwaukee could only be solved through "voluntary cooperation between people of goodwill."<sup>41</sup> And, in a more ominous sign of things to come, on July 11, an irritated crowd of more than 100 white residents gathered across the street from Maslowski's home to taunt and jeer civil rights demonstrators.<sup>42</sup> On July 25, the Common Council waived rules to allow Fr. Groppi to speak to the group about the burgeoning open housing conflict. "Unless something is done about the uninhabitable conditions that the black man has to live in," Groppi warned Council members, "Milwaukee could become a holocaust."<sup>43</sup>

Fr. Groppi's admonition proved prophetic. The following weekend, civil disorder broke out in the heart of the inner core's commercial district. The 1967 Milwaukee riot dramatically changed the local political and social context for open housing advocates.

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<sup>40</sup> *Star*, 7/1/67, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *MJ*, 7/11/67, pt. 2, p. 7; *MJ*, 7/20/67, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> *MJ*, 7/11/67, pt. 2, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Star*, 7/29/67, p. 1.



As Mayor Maier sought support from civic leaders for his “39 Points,” Fr. Groppi, the YC and Commandos plotted a dramatic new phase in their open housing campaign. Targeting North Side Aldermen had not provoked significant media attention or public conflict like they had wanted. So, civil rights activists sought to capitalize on white fears and guilt by aggressively accelerating their direct action campaign.

To augment their power, the YC courted an alliance with Vel Phillips. Following the civil disorder, Fr. Groppi invited the Alderwoman to St. Boniface to discuss their plans. As Phillips remembered, “He asked me if I would mind having some help and I said of course not.”<sup>44</sup> For the YC, the move represented an attempt to coordinate their direct action campaign with the legislative process. “She was our mouthpiece,” Austin Squire recalled, “Legally, she knew where our rights were and she was a real asset. She was in the right position to make things work. When she came back and spoke to us and told us we were making progress, that really fired people up more.”<sup>45</sup> An alliance with Phillips also lent a degree of official sanction to their protest. For Alderwoman Phillips, it was clear that she had reached an impasse within the Council. In order for her fellow council members to act, the political calculus needed to be altered. Non-Violent direct action held out that possibility. By exerting external, popular pressure on Aldermen who had opposed the open housing measure, the legislative process might begin to respond and move.

The embrace of direct action by Alderwoman Phillips was significant. Vel and Dale Phillips were important members of the traditional, mainstream African American

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<sup>44</sup> Phillips interview.

<sup>45</sup> Austin interview.

leadership in Milwaukee. As a lawyer, legislator and prominent member of the MNAACP, Vel Phillips preferred a more “dignified” and deliberate approach to social change through established institutions. She had spent her professional career working through the courts and the Common Council to achieve racial equality. She had registered voters, attended fund raisers, worked on campaigns, brought suit, circulated petitions and run for office. As a result, Phillips’ support gave special sanction and a measure of political legitimacy to the direct action campaign. And once she publicly supported the marches, she then felt compelled to participate, particularly after they encountered so much violence. “They were fighting for my bill,” she remembered. “I felt like I had to go.”<sup>46</sup> She was arrested for the first time at a YC demonstration on August 31.

On August 24, Fr. Groppi announced that the YC and Commandos had decided to march across the 16th Street Viaduct into the heart of the city’s South Side. YC leaders planned a cross-town march ending with a mass rally at Kosciuszko Park. There, civil rights supporters planned to announce their “Declaration of Open Housing,” thereby

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<sup>46</sup> Vel Phillips did not participate in the first two nights of marching to the South Side. But, after seeing the violence and resistance, she decided to join the protest. Both her mother and husband opposed her participation as too dangerous. And in fact, the Alderwoman regularly received hate mail and threats for her work on open housing. During the coming direct action campaign, a bullet shattered one of the Phillips’ apartment windows, lodging in the face of their steel kitchen range. Phillips herself confessed that she hesitated to march out of concern for the safety of her two young children. Ultimately, though, the Alderwoman felt morally obligated to support the hundreds of young people, citizens and clergymen that were turning out to support her legislative effort. “I can’t fight the good fight as an alderman and be on hand for every demonstration,” she explained, “but there are times - if you believe in the right of protest and demonstration and open occupancy - that you have to show this.” The fact that the local movement remained inter-racial, non-violent and rooted in the church no doubt also facilitated Phillips’ embrace of the direct action campaign. See Phillips interview; MJ, 9/1/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

unofficially claiming into law what the Common Council refused. The YC promised that the initial march on Saturday would mark the start of sustained direct action campaign.<sup>47</sup>

There does not appear to be one clear source for this new strategy. Rather, it seems that it was an idea whose time had come. Fr. Groppi and the YC had periodically threatened to march into the South Side, but had never followed through. Following the riot, there was a clear consensus among civil rights leaders that a legislative impasse existed in the Common Council over open housing. Moreover, YC picketing at the North Side homes of five Aldermen had not produced significant media interest or public conflict as they had hoped. Civil rights advocates realized that something more dramatic needed to be done to change the political environment and force the Council to act. The moment further offered a unique opportunity to capitalize on white fear and guilt aroused by the riot.

It was also clear that a march to the South Side provided the best possibility for confrontation. Civil rights leaders knew that the South Side had provided the most solid opposition to open housing measures at both the state and local levels. They also understood that the white working-class residents could be counted on to react, probably violently. “Massive resistance” in Wauwatosa during the 1966 Eagles protest and more recently in Chicago lent credibility to this assessment.

In essence, the open housing campaign followed the pattern laid out earlier by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC in cities like Albany, Birmingham, Selma and Chicago. The YC hoped that “massive resistance” by white South Siders would again

flush racial inequality out into the public spotlight. “What determined a lot of targets for us was reaction, whether or not there would be a reaction” explained Prentice McKinney.

When we marched to the aldermen’s houses, the neighbors stayed indoors. They didn’t like us out there in a white people’s neighborhood but there was no uproar of real hostility. When we decided to march over the 16th Street Viaduct, that whole community reacted and they just said up front that we don’t want blacks here and we will move to the point of being violent to keep blacks from coming into our neighborhood. Obviously, that illustrated our point that the city and the aldermen were voting to keep this city segregated, that the city was basically racist.<sup>48</sup>

And the media was also integral. “Nobody black wanted to live on the South Side anyway,” said McKinney, “but we needed the exposure and the media to draw attention to why we were there. We didn’t march to the South Side because we wanted to buy a home... We needed the media to air it out to the people.”<sup>49</sup> By attracting media attention through confrontation, and offering themselves as nonviolent victims and witnesses, the group hoped to establish a “creative tension” that dramatized the open housing issue in Milwaukee and placed pressure on public officials to act.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Courier, 8/26/67, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> McKinney interview.

<sup>49</sup> Austin interview.

<sup>50</sup> In addition to these strategic and tactical justifications, there were also more practical and symbolic reasons for crossing the 16th Street Viaduct and heading for Kosciuszko Park. The South Side was a working-class area of the city, and thus affordable to many African Americans. The more affluent North Shore suburbs and many West or far South Side neighborhoods remained out of the economic range of most local black residents. In addition, the Menomonee River Valley formed the city’s “Mason Dixon Line.” Crossing that symbolic threshold poked through a significant psychological and physical boundary. Upon announcing their intention to cross the 16th Street Viaduct, the YC also made it clear that they intended to continue marching until the Common Council passed a strong, city-wide open housing ordinance. Local newspapers obligingly played their role in the plan by devoting front-page coverage to the announcement. The *Milwaukee Journal*, in fact, printed a map of the march route from St. Boniface to

It is safe to say that the YC and their allies expected a stiff response when they headed South. It is also clear that while the protest was planned, organized, and designed to provoke confrontation, civil rights activists got more than they anticipated on the South Side of the 16th Street Viaduct, particularly on those first two nights.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Milwaukee was the only major American city to suffer from a second major civil disorder in 1967. Squire Austin remembered those harrowing first marches,

First thing, I was scared. Really scared. I went through those neighborhoods going to work... I didn't have any problems. But when they knew a protest march of black people were coming in formation, they were scared. I didn't know what they would do. As we got closer and closer to National [Street], crossing the bridge seemed like it took forever, and you could hear them. You could hear the echo. You could hear the chants of White Power and it was really frightening and we knew that the police weren't going to protect us. So, we were really cupped arm-in-arm, everybody was really snug that first time we went over, sort of like a snake winding and the closer we got the more scared I got. The initial contact we had, the first time, was a lot of glass being thrown, beer bottles... [Police] actually had to clear the way, get people off the streets. We couldn't march on the sidewalks anymore and had to go into the street. That's when most people got hurt.<sup>52</sup>

Jesse Wade concurred,

It was a disaster. It was frightening, really frightening. Personally, I didn't know if we were going to get back. It was more than we expected, I would say, but we knew when we went that we were walking into

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Kosciuszko Park. With that, the pieces were in place for a dramatic new phase in the open housing campaign.

<sup>51</sup> As a reminder, detailed accounts of the first two South Side marches nights, on August 28 and 29, can be found at the start of this chapter and at the beginning of the Introduction.

<sup>52</sup> Austin interview.

danger... and we announced that we were coming and let them [white residents] get real prepared... We were testing out the powers that be.<sup>53</sup>

Fr. Groppi called the response a “white riot” and criticized Mayor Maier for not calling in the National Guard.<sup>54</sup> The *Milwaukee Journal* said the violence was the result of “shameful bigotry”<sup>55</sup> while the *Catholic Herald* termed it a “hate-in.”<sup>56</sup> WITI-TV editorialists said the incidents were “the ugliest display of mass hatred that has ever been witnessed in our city.”<sup>57</sup>

City leaders differed on who was responsible for the racial violence on the South Side. The *Milwaukee Journal* wrote, “If the civil rights demonstrators led by Father James Groppi were trying to show that our community is poisoned by hate, the point has been made... The shameful bigotry shown by whites... was a rejection of everything Americans and Christians should stand for. The sight of children with their parents joining in chants of hate was enough to sicken decent people.”<sup>58</sup> The *Sentinel* agreed: “There’s no minimizing the shame that Milwaukee should feel at the events of two recent nights. The city has been disgraced by the show of naked hatred, which must shock those

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<sup>53</sup> Jesse Wade interview with Arlene Zakhar, 5/1/84.

<sup>54</sup> *Catholic Herald*, 9/2/67, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> MJ, 9/30/67, p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> *Catholic Herald*, 9/2/67, p. 4. *Herald* editorial writers also offered one of the more colorful and poetic condemnations of the white violence. They wrote, “It was as if a sharp lance had finally pierced a nasty carbuncle on the Body, Mystical and political. Suddenly, out spewed a fetid mass of hate. An estimated 13,000 white human beings behaved as if they had fled their humanity - as if they had never heard of Jesus Christ and His commandment to love. Presumably and sadly, many were Catholics. If so, they became human and Christian dropouts.”

<sup>57</sup> WITI-TV editorial, 8/30/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 9.

<sup>58</sup> MJ, 8/30/67, p. 22.

who believe in the innate tolerance of all men.”<sup>59</sup> Most churches and liberal organizations agreed, and a majority of citizens polled by the *Journal* condemned white reaction.

But most civic and political leaders also believed the demonstrators had made their point and should not continue. Archbishop Cousins, for example, said that while the marches had “brought some reactions that are hard to condone,” “a second night of demonstration... served little or no purpose.”<sup>60</sup> That same day, Mayor Maier summoned to City Hall a group of 30 Milwaukee area clergymen - including several from the city’s South Side as well as a few black ministers - to help during the civil rights unrest. The clergymen endorsed the Mayor’s county-wide open housing ordinance and agreed to convene the Greater Milwaukee Conference on Religion and Race to rally support for the “39 Points.” Governor Knowles tried to find a group of Milwaukee business or civic leaders - perhaps We-Milwaukeeans - to mediate the dispute, but nothing came of it.<sup>61</sup>

Mayor Maier felt that the South Side marches squelched the chance for legislative action in the wake of the riot. “There was a chance,” he believed, “for a united effort to gain resources and meet the problems of the central city. However, the Groppi marches, ostensibly over a symbolic issue - central-city-only open housing - created a degree of violence and civic tension that destroyed the possibility.”<sup>62</sup> Maier believed that the marches hardened lines between people and races which actually made it harder to solve

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<sup>59</sup> MS, 8/30/67, copy in Maier Papers, box 43, folder 9.

<sup>60</sup> MJ, 8/31/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Maier, *The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous*, p. 94.

the city's problems. And even as the Mayor urged white residents to stay away from the demonstrations, he deflected the primary responsibility onto "provocative marchers."<sup>63</sup> He attempted to set Fr. Groppi apart from the issues and make him the object of hate by calling him a "man of violence." Mayor Maier also exploited the widespread misperception among white Milwaukeeans that the Commandos were violent by repeatedly referring to them as "hoodlums" and "street criminals."

Henry Maier further deflected criticism that he was not doing enough to ensure non-discrimination in housing toward the suburbs. "Shouldn't they have open housing where there are no Negroes?" he asked. "Wouldn't it be logical to have open housing in the suburbs to absorb some of the poor?"<sup>64</sup> Another time, he explained, "I would be delighted to have central city open housing if [the suburbs] would build 50,000 low income units to help break this up and help these people." What would really help Milwaukee African Americans, the Mayor claimed, was more state and federal money to stem economic decay and rebuild urban communities across the country.<sup>65</sup> According to Prentice McKinney, "Maier had a real conflict with the suburbs in that he said poverty is stuck here in the city. You want to criticize us, share it and let us move out there, but knowing full well that they weren't going to open the doors. It gave him a scapegoat... and you gotta remember... Maier has to represent the city that elects him."<sup>66</sup> The liberal Milwaukee Citizens for Equal Opportunity offered a more forceful criticism, stating,

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<sup>63</sup> "Mayor's statement to TV and Press," 9/1/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20.

<sup>64</sup> MJ, 9/16/67, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> MJ, 9/13/67, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> McKinney interview. Mayor Maier undoubtedly had a point about the need for shared revenues and responsibilities between different layers of government. But there was also ample reason to feel that he hid



... the city should assume leadership, not avoid it. As to Mayor Maier's claim that a city ordinance would result in an 'apartheid society,' all of our research into the effect of city fair housing ordinances in Wisconsin and elsewhere proves this statement to be false... Our society is segregated now and what we need are practical solutions, not continued attempts to shift the burden of responsibility to others.<sup>67</sup>

On Wednesday, August 30, Maier imposed a 30-day city-wide ban on marching between 4pm and 9am.<sup>68</sup> "Our target is not people who want to meet peacefully," he explained. "We must try to keep the extremists, who seem to want a civil war, from tearing at each other. We are trying to do all this without abridging entirely the rights to speak, to march and to parade and to demonstrate."<sup>69</sup> Fr. Groppi responded to the ban by saying, "I don't think he should have ever issued the proclamation. As far as determining our future action, we will have a Commando meeting and then our Freedom Rally at 6:00PM at St. Boniface."<sup>70</sup> As ACLU and MNAACP lawyers challenged the ban in court, a defiant YC challenged it in the street. The group led dozens of people through the city to city hall, then on to Mayor Maier's home and finally to a large rally on the property of the gutted Freedom House. Milwaukee police, equipped with riot sticks and helmets, had orders to arrest any infraction of the proclamation by the crowd of over 300. Just as Prentice McKinney began to introduce Alderman Vel Phillips to the gathering,

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behind his reasoning as a way to avoid taking a leadership role on a divisive political issue for fear of angering his primary constituency - the urban white working-class.

<sup>67</sup> "MCEO Press Release," 9/8/67, James Barrett Papers, Marquette University, series 3, box 1, folder 1.

<sup>68</sup> "Proclamation," Maier Papers, box 43, folder 20.

<sup>69</sup> "Press Statement," Henry Maier, 8/31/67, p. 2; "Journal Clips," Frank Aukofer Papers, box 2.

<sup>70</sup> Maier, p. 98.

police moved in to disperse them. The group greeted police with a barrage of rocks, debris and shouts of "Nazis!" and "Gestapo!" With events spiraling out of control, Phillips stood on the charred Freedom House porch shouting, "What the hell is going on here?" As police continued to break up small groups of people, Fr. Groppi, who had not attended the rally, walked up. After hearing what had transpired, Groppi shouted to police, "Why didn't you tell the people here to get on the property instead of beating those ladies with clubs?" In addition, he complained that Maier and Chief Breier were more willing to use force against African Americans than against white counter-demonstrators on the South Side. Over the next fifteen minutes, the crowd again swelled to 150. They sang, "We Shall Not Be Moved" and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around" and chanted, "We Hate coppers," "We Hate Maier," "Get Off the North Side, Cops" and "Take Em On the South Side." As protesters sang and chanted, police periodically darted across the street to arrest the slightest infraction; Justice Department officials stood by and watched. After forty minutes, police, now armed with shotguns, again descended on the crowd this time with orders to arrest the whole group. According to one member of MCORE, "[police] were not making many arrests but rather swinging those long night sticks hitting people in the head and back. It seemed as if they were more interested in punishing people, than maintaining law and order."<sup>71</sup> Fr. Groppi and a few Commandos slipped out the back door of the Freedom House and made their way to St. Boniface where they picked up the bus and returned to aid fleeing civil rights

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<sup>71</sup> Press Release by MCORE, 8/31/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 9.

demonstrators. In the end, officers arrested 58 people around the Freedom House property.<sup>72</sup>

The Thursday night rally began as a fund-raising event to collect bail and fine money for demonstrators. As Fr. Groppi spoke, though, he became more enraged by the Mayor's proclamation. "We're getting tired," he said. "Every time something happens, the Mayor issues another proclamation." Groppi argued that the latest decree was aimed at the YC for "exercising our American constitutional right of free assembly." He concluded by telling the crowd of over 430 - nuns, clergymen, black and white youths and adults - that some things were worth dying for. "Unless a man has his full dignity as a child of God," he said, "death is not so bad. Unless we are ready to die we have no business in the civil rights movement." Just then, Vel Phillips arrived and was swept onto the shoulders of several Commandos to a roaring cheer.<sup>73</sup> Fr. Groppi then asked the crowd if they were ready to march and they shouted, "Yeah!"<sup>74</sup>

During the ensuing march through the North Side, club swinging police again waded into the raucous demonstration, setting off another melee. Protesters smashed the window of a squad car, then tossed burning papers on the front seat. All told, Milwaukee police arrested 137 open housing advocates for violations of the Mayor's ban, including Fr. Groppi, Alderwoman Phillips, and 20 workers from the Inter-City Development Project and at least 25 who were under age 18. Later, hundreds of angry

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<sup>72</sup> MJ, 8/31/67, p. 1; MS, 8/31/67, p. 1; Star, 9/4/67, p. 1; Courier, 9/2/67.

<sup>73</sup> The Commandos, in fact, made Phillips an "honorary Commando," making her the only female Commando. Later, Commandos, Inc., would have a women's auxiliary, but during the direct action era no women became Commandos.

<sup>74</sup> MJ, 9/1/67, p. 13; MS, 9/1/67, p. 1.

African Americans pelted firemen as they tried to extinguish two suspicious inner core fires.<sup>75</sup>

On Friday, the beginning of the Labor Day holiday week-end, the Milwaukee open housing campaign began to attract national support. NAACP Field Secretary, Syd Finley, and Region III<sup>76</sup> Youth Director, Bill Hardy, traveled to the city to take part in another attempted rally and march. More than 400 open housing supporters sang, chanted, listened and rallied for nearly four hours while a team of attorneys drove to Madison in pursuit of a restraining order against the ban.<sup>77</sup> Shortly after ten o'clock, a judge in the capitol city denied the YC's request. The group at St. Boniface marched anyway and police once more moved in to stop them. After officers slugged one Commando to the ground, several marchers threw bottles and stones at the police. When officers then attempted to arrest the throwers, scuffles broke out. Police arrested Fr. Groppi for the second straight night along with 14 others; 19 were injured. The nearly 400 remaining marchers staged a brief sit-in at North Division High School until riot clad police dispersed them with their sticks. Demonstrators retreated to the supposed sanctuary of the St. Boniface parking lot while officers pursued them onto the grounds and shot several canisters of teargas that landed in front of the rectory and convent. Over the next several hours, nuns and parish staff administered wet towels to stinging protesters. Some angry YC members and Commandos called for retaliation while others

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<sup>75</sup> MJ, 9/1/67, p. 1; MS, 9/1/67, p. 1; Star, 9/2/67, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> Region III included Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and West Virginia.

<sup>77</sup> Lawyers representing the YC, including Jim Shellow, challenged the ban on constitutional grounds. They believed the mayor's curbs unduly restricted YC members' right to assembly.

condemned demonstrators who had thrown bottles and rocks.<sup>78</sup> One demonstrator, a retired army captain, died of a heart attack.<sup>79</sup>

Increasingly, the racial conflict in Milwaukee spun of its own accord, outside the bounds of organized demonstrations and planned confrontation; other dangerous embers burned. The same night that teargas canisters pursued open housing advocates into St. Boniface, 26 suspicious fires were set throughout the inner core; over the full holiday week-end, more than molotov cocktails started 100 fires.<sup>80</sup> Fire houses fielded dozens of other false alarms. Hostile crowds hindered inner core fire fighting efforts, injuring two and prompting police protection for fire squads. Several white-owned businesses boarded up their windows. One anonymous caller to the fire department threatened, "We're going to burn this town down." By the end of the month, more than 200 inner core fires - sometimes as many as 15 per day - had broken out since the civil disturbance.<sup>81</sup>

Over the long Labor Day week-end, the Milwaukee open housing campaign began to take on national proportions. Nationally renowned comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory joined the campaign. Sympathizers poured into the city from across the country, particularly on week-ends, and many began to call Milwaukee "the

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<sup>78</sup> Shortly after this incident, the Commandos reorganized because some members proved undependable. According to Frank Aukofer, the group became even tighter and more organized. Short haircuts became mandatory and no conks or other hair processing techniques were welcome. The group was also organized into squads with a loose chain-of-command and leaders were given military-style ranks. In part, this reflected a greater need for organization within the Commandos as the number of supporters for the open housing campaign grew. In addition, it reflected the fact that several Commandos had served in the military. See, Aukofer, p. 124.

<sup>79</sup> MJ, 9/2/67, p. 1; MS, 9/2/67, p. 2; Star, 9/9/67, p. 1; Maier, p. 99; Bleidorn interview.

<sup>80</sup> The Milwaukee Fire Department reported that the most of the Labor Day fires were the result of molotov cocktails. See Courier, 9/9/67, p. 3.

Selma of the North.” That week-end, demonstrators staged at least a half dozen long marches through Milwaukee and into two suburbs in an all-out effort to make the city a national focal point for open housing. On Saturday, September 2, Mayor Maier lifted the ban on evening marches. That afternoon, as Maier toured the inner core with local and national media to trumpet the progress being made combating urban ills, more than 1,000 inter-racial protestors, led by Fr. Groppi, the Commandos and Dick Gregory, set off on a 16 mile march to City Hall and then through the South Side. While thousands of white on-lookers again lined the streets south of the 16th Street Viaduct, no serious incidents occurred. After the demonstration, Fr. Groppi told remaining open housing supporters, “When we see that fair housing bill passed and on our desk, we might consider going home for a rest.” Later that night, more than 800 people marched around the North Side.<sup>82</sup>

On Sunday afternoon, more than one thousand open housing supporters walked through downtown and around the North Side. That night, nearly 800 mostly-black demonstrators again marched for two hours through North Side neighborhoods. On Labor Day, an inter-racial group of 650 open housing advocates paraded past Judge Christ Seraphim’s home and around his neighborhood in suburban Shorewood while a dozen YC members staged a sit-in at Alderman Dineen’s office.<sup>83</sup> At night, more than 1,300 demonstrators, in two groups - one led by Fr. Groppi, the other by YC President

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<sup>81</sup> MJ, 9/2/67, p. 1; MJ, 9/15/67, p. 1; MJ, 9/25/67, p. 1; MJ, 10/11/67, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> MJ, 9/3/67, p. 1; MS, 9/3/67, p. 1; Star, 9/9/67, p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> Many of the civil rights activists arrested for violating the Mayor’s ban appeared before Judge Seraphim. See, Courier, 9/9/67, p. 1.

Fred Bronson and Dick Gregory - marched through the North and West sides of town, including Wauwatosa. On Tuesday night, Dick Gregory, Fr. Groppi, the YC and Commandos led more than 500 civil rights supporters and several cars on a noisy three-hour North Side march.<sup>84</sup> On Wednesday, a 19-year old YC leader, Jean Matthews, led 50 YC members in an afternoon protest through downtown. In the evening, 1,000 people packed St. Boniface to hear a parade of speakers blast the Mayor and Common Council for their inaction on open housing. Dick Gregory encouraged march supporters to boycott Milwaukee's Schlitz brewery. Four hundred fifty demonstrators then walked six miles in five hours of protest. Police arrested 11 marchers for profanity, resisting arrest, assaulting an officer, obstructing an officer and carrying a concealed weapon.<sup>85</sup>

On Thursday afternoon, twenty-five YC members, led by 19-year old Prentice McKinney, staged a "sit and lie-in" outside Henry Maier's City Hall office, demanding to meet with the Mayor. Before leaving the office for another inner core press tour, Maier told the protesters, most of who were elementary and high school age, to stay as long as they'd like. In a telegram to National NAACP Director Roy Wilkins, Maier wrote, "I have issued orders that they [protesters] are to be protected, stay as long as they like. Purpose is to show the nation their bad manners and put lie to contention of police brutality and lack of police protection."<sup>86</sup> Police stood by but said they would not act unless Maier formally complained. By three o'clock, the crowd of demonstrators swelled to seventy-five, media arrived and the tenor of the protest became rowdy. Each new

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<sup>84</sup> MJ, 9/6/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>85</sup> MJ, 9/7/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> Henry Maier to Roy Wilkins, 9/7/67, Maier Papers, box 125, folder 5.

batch of participants drew loud applause and cheers of “Soul brother!” and “Soul Sister!” Prentice McKinney, playing to the young protesters as well as to reporters, called the Mayor a “nigger”<sup>87</sup> and taunted two riot-clad police for a half an hour.<sup>88</sup> Another Commando warned reporters, “We might bring Stokely Carmichael here and Rap Brown. If Mayor Maier says something about it we’re going to burn the town down.” When demonstrators tried to block the entrance of several police into the room, a scuffle broke out resulting in the arrest of McKinney and four others. According to *Journal* Mildred Freese,

While they watched [the police arrest McKinney and others] the teenagers sang, clapped and beat on the walls. They took coathangers off a coat rack and used them to rip chairs, and put a hole through a window. They went through a receptionists desk and threw the contents on the floor, ripped up paper and a dictionary and used lipstick to write on a \$400 aerial photograph of the city mounted on the wall. They grabbed memos, made paper airplanes and sailed them through the office.<sup>89</sup>

Another reporter wrote, “They slashed and ripped expensive leather chairs, seized the office switchboard, shattered a window and plastered the walls with city promotional stickers proclaiming, ‘Milwaukee - Great for Business, Great for Living’ and with ‘Black

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<sup>87</sup> McKinney later told reporters that he had used the word “nigger” in reference to Mayor Maier because “a nigger is a lowdown shiftless person.” See, *MJ*, 9/8/67, p. 16.

<sup>88</sup> McKinney also said, “Let him [Maier] stay in his office; for the first tie in Negro history the Negro has the honkie hiding.’ Tapping his plastic helmet, McKinney told one officer, “You look like a monkey with a banana.” To the other, he said, “You look like an orangutan.” He also repeatedly blew in their faces. See *MJ*, 9/8/67, p. 16; *Star*, 9/9/67, p. 1; McKinney interview.

<sup>89</sup> *MJ*, 9/8/67, p. 16.



Power' labels. Wastebaskets were emptied and tossed about the room. Cigarette butts littered the carpets."<sup>90</sup> The Mayor's office estimated damage in excess of \$3,000.

Newspaper editors at the *Milwaukee Journal* called the incident "a wild outbreak of destruction," the result of "hoodlum outrage."<sup>91</sup> The Journal Company's television news division, WTMJ, said that the incident was an attempt to "deliberately taunt police into action. And then again charge police brutality."<sup>92</sup> The Sentinel called on Archbishop Cousins "to prevent a Catholic church from being used as a center for inciting civil disorder and a priest from fanning the flames of hate and violence in a horrible perversion of Christ's teachings."<sup>93</sup> WITI-TV told their viewers, "This is proof... unequivocal proof... of the hoodlum element that exists in Milwaukee's so-called civil rights movement."<sup>94</sup> And a *New York Times* editorial claimed the outburst "undid all the good they had previously accomplished."<sup>95</sup> James Newcomb, the mayor's chief administrative officer, shifted the blame to Fr. Groppi. "This is not civil rights. It never was," he said. "I wish that every clergyman and nun who has clucked sympathy for Father Groppi's poor little youngsters had been here to watch the exhibition... It was a display I hope everyone in urban America will see on their TV screens tonight and tomorrow. It will give them an idea of the tactics being employed by a Roman collar in

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<sup>90</sup> MJ, 9/8/67, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>92</sup> WTMJ-TV editorial, 9/8/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 11.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Maier, p. 110.

<sup>94</sup> "It Was Not Civil Rights -- But the Deliberate Lawlessness of Hoodlums," WITI-TV editorial, 9/8/67, Groppi Papers, box 15, folder 11.

<sup>95</sup> *New York Times*, 9/13/67.

Milwaukee.”<sup>96</sup> Mayor Maier argued that the civil rights organization did not respect “law and order” and courted arrest because their movement was losing steam. He concluded with an appeal to liberals and what he called the “Militant Middle.” “It is about time,” he said, “that the Militant Middle of our society becomes organized in such a fashion that the cries of the extremists to both the right and the left can be rejected and that the community as a whole, whites and non-whites working together, can once again proceed on the path of progress.”<sup>97</sup>

Despite the bad press that came with the Mayor’s office sit-in incident, momentum continued to build within the open housing campaign. Over the first few weeks of contentious protesting, open housing advocates picked up a broad range of new support. Local, state and national liberal and civil rights organizations, as well as dozens of churches from all denominations, voiced their sympathy for the marchers and endorsed a city-wide open housing ordinance in Milwaukee.<sup>98</sup> Newspapers and television news programs across the country covered unfolding events in Milwaukee and Fr. Groppi became an increasingly identifiable national civil rights leader. Some speculated that

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<sup>96</sup> “Statement by James C. Newcomb on NAACP Youth Council Sit-In,” 9/7/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 15.

<sup>97</sup> Statement by Henry Maier, 9/7/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 11.

<sup>98</sup> I have accumulated a partial list of supporting organizations for the open housing campaign at this point: *The Milwaukee Journal*, *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, *The Milwaukee Star*, MCORE, MNAACP, the national NAACP, the League of Women Voters (who had received pledges of support from more than 60 local organizations), the Milwaukee Human Relations Coordinating Council, the Metropolitan Builders of Greater Milwaukee, the Social Develop Commission, the Milwaukee Citizens for Equal Opportunity, the Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations, The Young Democrats of Milwaukee, the Greater Milwaukee Conference of Religion and Race, Catholic Inter-racial Conference of Minneapolis, Catholic Knights Insurance, We-Milwaukeeans, the Milwaukee County Labor Council (AFL-CIO), the Wisconsin Welfare Council, Milwaukee Christian Family Movement, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, Milwaukee B’Nai B’rith, The Priests Senate of the Milwaukee Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the Council on Urban Life, and each of the leaders of the major denominations in Milwaukee.

Martin Luther King and H. Rap Brown would come to town to join the protests.

While the high-profile visits never materialized, King did telegram Groppi, praising his ability to “be militant and powerful without destroying life or property” and create “a middle ground between riots and sentimental and timid supplication for justice.” Like King in Selma, Fr. Groppi sent out an ecumenical call through the National Council of Churches and the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice for religious men and women to come to Milwaukee to bear witness to racial injustice through participation in the open housing demonstrations.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Bill Hardy, President of the Region III NAACP Youth Council and College Division, sent out an alert to all youth and adult units to support this “historic moment” in Milwaukee. The Chicago and Minneapolis-area Catholic Inter-racial Councils put out similar calls.<sup>100</sup> Much of the organizing was aimed at the coming week-end.

More than 1,000 people attended a rally at St. Boniface the night of the incident at Mayor Maier’s office. Jeanette Strong of Gary, Indiana, and Chairperson of the NAACP in Region III told the crowd she had sent a telegram to all units to join a “gigantic mass rally” in St. Boniface Church the following Sunday afternoon. Charles Evers, brother of slain Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers, criticized Milwaukee’s black clergy.

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<sup>99</sup> The telegram sent to the National Council of Churches by Fr. Groppi and the YC read, in part, “Thousands have been marching for fourteen days for fair housing in the city of Milwaukee. Five times the Mayor and the city council have refused to pass such an ordinance. Therefore, we would welcome the support of churchmen across the nation by personal presence and marching on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.” When Dr. David Hunter, Deputy General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, came to Milwaukee to make his own investigation, he commented that while there is “plenty of discrimination in the northern United States, discrimination has taken a particularly stubborn form here.” He further said that he knew of no other northern city where city officials had shown such an unwillingness to act. He recommended that massive support be given to the Milwaukee open housing campaign. See, *Concern*, 10/15/67, p. 6.

<sup>100</sup> See, Groppi Papers, box 11, folder 2.

“It’s a disgrace to Milwaukee,” he said, “that we don’t have more Negro preachers out there [marching].” Several speakers exhorted open housing supporters to expand the boycott of Milwaukee breweries to include, Schlitz, Pabst, Miller and Blatz. Syd Finley, who said NAACP branches in seven states had already passed proposals supporting the boycott, defended the policy, saying, “They [brewers] represent the economic power structure of your city and they are tied in with the administration.” After the rally, an inter-racial group of over 400 marched through the city’s East Side, then again to Judge Seraphim’s suburban Shorewood home.<sup>101</sup>

At 7:30 the next morning, civil rights demonstrators in five cars clogged the exit ramps of the North-South freeway near North Avenue, blocking rush hour traffic for thirty-five minutes. A car stopped in each lane and the driver got out and raised his hood. The WTMJ traffic reporter said that “hundreds” of cars were backed up by the protest for more than three quarters of a mile.<sup>102</sup>

The hard work of the YC and their allies across the country paid off. The following weekend, hundreds of civil rights supporters poured into Milwaukee to participate in open housing demonstrations. On Saturday, the thirteenth day of protests, an estimated 750 demonstrators - 200 from the Chicago Catholic Inter-racial Council - marched in front of jeers and taunts on Milwaukee’s South Side. The march covered nearly twenty miles over seven hours, through Kosciuszko and Humboldt Parks and home on Lincoln Avenue. On Sunday, more than 2,300 marchers - the largest of the entire Milwaukee open housing campaign - including national media, Dick Gregory, Fr.

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<sup>101</sup> MJ, 9/8/67, p. 1 and 16; MS, 9/8/67, p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

Groppi, the YC, the Commandos and the head of the Chicago NAACP, and hundreds of individual NAACP members, clergymen and religious women from more than a dozen states crossed the 16th Street Viaduct once again. The demonstration faced hundreds of white opponents on its trek, some carrying signs that read, "Kill the Black Devils," "Communists" and "Who Needs Niggers?" Chants of "Nigger" and "Wallace for President" competed in the air with choruses of "We hate Polacks" and "Move over whitey, blackey's coming in." Police made five arrests, including one Commando for blocking a police van and fighting with officers, but no serious incidents occurred.<sup>103</sup>

The outpouring of support for Milwaukee's open housing campaign fanned reaction among many local whites. Over the next few days, as civil rights activists continued to march peacefully through other sections of the city, white South Siders and their allies organized increasingly large counter-demonstrations. Both sides of the housing controversy engaged in a dangerous dance of march-counter-march, protest-counter-protest, on the streets of Milwaukee. On several occasions, the two groups narrowly avoided direct confrontation by a few city blocks or a thin line of riot clad police.

Following the dramatic and relatively calm mass demonstration by civil rights advocates on Sunday afternoon, hundreds of white South Siders grew violent and openly battled with police who needed six hours, several canisters of teargas and 20 arrests to disperse them. Several groups of counter-demonstrators called police "nigger lovers," threw firecrackers and made known their intention to fight civil rights marchers. The

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<sup>103</sup> MJ, 9/11/67, p. 1; MS, 9/11/67, p. 1; Star, 9/16/67, p. 1; *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 9/16/67, p. 7.

final altercation of the night came just after midnight when police turned back a group of whites headed North over the 16th Viaduct.

Monday, more than 200 white opponents of open housing attended a rally at Humboldt Park where Gerald Janka, a machinist from Racine and a self-proclaimed representative of the National Association for the Advancement of White People, told them, "We're setting up the platform for a white power march.. to the jungle where Groppi operates... We're going to end the black scourge." That evening, a mob of more than 1,000 hostile counter-demonstrators again met 650 open housing proponents south of the 16th Street Viaduct. Many held signs reading, "Polish Power," "White Power," "Black Slaves Forever," "Open Housing in Africa" and "Block Them Off, Nobody Goes South." Others chanted "E-i-e-i-e-i-o, Fr. Groppi's Got to Go!" and "We Want Slaves." Some white people wore swastika stickers, several threw bottles, bricks, rocks and debris at demonstrators and a number of civil rights marchers threw them back. The two sides clashed openly for fifteen minutes before police moved in to break it up, sending open housing supporters scurrying back to St. Boniface. When white counter-demonstrators attempted to pursue the marchers back over the viaduct, police blocked them. One man yelled, "we'll get them yet!" In the end, police made 32 arrests and at least three people were hurt. Mayor Maier said the city "verged on civil war."<sup>104</sup> The *Milwaukee Courier* complained that the failure of city officials to act had "brought the city to the precipice of an open war."<sup>105</sup> The *Catholic Herald Citizen* called Milwaukee "a city teetering on the

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<sup>104</sup> Henry Maier to Irwin Maier, 9/12/67, Maier Papers, box 45, folder 5.

<sup>105</sup> *Courier*, 9/16/67, p. 2.

brink of complete madness.”<sup>106</sup> Fr. Groppi simply told reporters, “If we had gone any further, they would have slaughtered us.”<sup>107</sup>

On Tuesday, many angry South Side whites now called themselves “White Power Rangers” and had organized into formal groups, like the Milwaukee Organization for Closed Housing<sup>108</sup> and Milwaukee Citizens Civic Voice. Initially, the 650 opponents of open housing intend to march to St. Boniface. When Milwaukee police officers blocked them from crossing Wisconsin Avenue, the group headed to Archbishop Cousins’ residence. Carrying signs that read “God is White” and “Fr. Groppi Rest in Hell,” the counter-demonstrators demanded the Archbishop censure the young priest. The group chanted white power slogans from the sidewalk as a half dozen representatives spoke with Cousins inside. The Archbishop told the leaders he would take their demands under consideration. As the protesters headed home, marchers taunted police and clashed with them in several minor disturbances.<sup>109</sup>

Wednesday night, September 13, several hundred civil rights demonstrators followed Fr. Groppi and YC leaders in a march to Alderman Martin Schrieber’s home to call for an emergency Common Council session to deal with the open housing crisis. At the same time, an estimated 2,000 white people joined counter-demonstrations on the South Side opposing open housing legislation. The counter-protest began when 200 people rallied at Kosciuszko Park, then headed for the 16th Street Viaduct protected by

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<sup>106</sup> *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 9/16/67, p. 3.

<sup>107</sup> *MJ*, 9/12/67, p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> The *MJ* reported that this group may have been organized with the help of a national field representative for the National States Rights Party, a John Birch and George Wallace vehicle. See, *MJ* 9/13/67, p. 18. *MJ*, 9/13/67, p. 1.

27 white teenagers wearing armbands that said “White Power Rangers.”<sup>110</sup> Along the way, the crowd - now 450 - met two members of the Chicago Nazi Party who passed out signs decorated with swastikas and the words, “Symbol of White Power.” The group crossed the viaduct and headed for Archbishop Cousins’ residence at the Chancery. Again they confronted the Archbishop and again he addressed the crowd. Speaking through a bullhorn, he said, “We’re making a mistake if we make this - one side or the other - a hate campaign. It’s not a question of one man It’s a two-way street. We ask your cooperation.”<sup>111</sup> The crowd applauded and began to leave. By the time the group reached the south side of the 16th Street Viaduct, though, their mood had changed and they began chanting “Fr. Groppi’s Got to Go!” As they proceeded up National Avenue yelling White Power slogans, more than 1,500 cheering white onlookers lined 16th Street. When the mob encountered a car being driven by an African American on 16th Street, they surged at the vehicle chanting, “Let’s get the nigger.” The driver sped away

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<sup>110</sup> In another strange symmetrical twist to open housing unrest in Milwaukee, one of the most visible leaders of the organized opposition was another young white Catholic priest, Fr. Russell Witon, of Port Washington. Witon grew up in the same neighborhood as Fr. Groppi and the two men had attended the same grade school and high school, although they apparently did not know each other. Witon opposed “forced housing” and the “means and methods” employed by the YC. Yet, even though he and his followers attempted to project a moderate stance, Fr. Witon’s comments often suggested a darker motivation. For instance, after a night of marching and a near confrontation with civil rights protesters on the streets, Witon told a crowd, “We are not going to let those savages - those black beasts - take our rights away.” He also challenged his followers to confront the Church’s role in civil rights. “It is the very devil that is behind these people,” he said, “and we have to pray for their souls.” Fr. Witon served, at least in the media, as an “anti-Groppi.” See, Aukofer, p. 126; *Texas Catholic Herald* 11/17/67, p. 1; *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 10/14/67, p. 8; *MJ*, 9/27/67, pt. 2, p.2.

<sup>111</sup> Later that week, Archbishop Cousins wrote directly to the laity of the Milwaukee Archdiocese through the editorial and opinion page of the *Catholic Herald Citizen*. In the letter, Cousins stated that while he did not agree Fr. Groppi’s every act or statement, “If Father Groppi were out of the picture, the NAACP Youth Council would not go out of existence. Its Direct Action committee would continue to determine tactics. Its large legal staff would still advise. The parent-organization would maintain its present position and lend its support. More to the point, the underlying causes of unrest pointed up the Youth Council would go on plaguing us. They existed long before Father Groppi’s advent.” In a reference to recent violence in the streets, the Archbishop wrote, “We are being diverted by emotion and mob psychology into fighting a straw figure while the real enemy goes unscathed.” See *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 9/16/67, p. 4.



as Milwaukee police launched teargas and smoke bombs into the throng. The white teens then turned on police officers, throwing bottles and rocks, and smashing store windows.<sup>112</sup> “The cursing mobs turned [several streets] into a battleground,” one reporter wrote. “Grey teargas... fogged the six block area, which was virtually sealed off by police. Streets were littered with rocks, bottles, beer cans and shattered glass as rioters pelted police cars and passing Negro motorists.”<sup>113</sup> It took several more volleys of teargas, smoke bombs and shotgun blasts to quell the disturbance.<sup>114</sup>

Signs of counter-organizing continued throughout September and early October. Two Nazi Party members announced plans to organize political opposition to open housing in Milwaukee on September 22. The next day, Nazis participated in a South Side rally led by Fr. Witon, a white Catholic priest from Port Washington who advised the Milwaukee Citizens’ Civic Voice. Fr. Witon called Fr. Groppi, “unchristian” and “unpriestly.”<sup>115</sup> In October, the KKK announced its own organizing drive. Newspapers carried reports of local activity by the National State Rights Party and the John Birch Society. Hate literature circulated widely.

The situation seemed dire in Milwaukee. “I think a major confrontation is inevitable,” one anonymous “leading citizen” told *U.S. News & World Report*. “The

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<sup>112</sup> At least 32 stores boarded up their windows after the South Side violence out of fear over continued property destruction. *MJ*, 9/15/67, p. 11.

<sup>113</sup> *MJ*, 9/14/67, p. 1.

<sup>114</sup> *MJ*, 9/14/67, p. 1; *MS*, 9/14/67, p.1; *Star*, 9/16/67, p. 1; *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 9/16/67, p. 1; *TIME*, 9/22/67, p. 4; *U.S. News and World Report*, 9/25/67, p. 24.

<sup>115</sup> *MJ*, 9/23/67, p. 4. While white reaction to open housing was vociferous and violent in Milwaukee, they did not appear to be too interested in joining the Nazi Party. A planned march by the neo-fascist group drew a mere 12 local supporters.

prejudice in Milwaukee is such that almost anything could set it off. I see two speeding freight trains bound on a collision course. Neither is trying to apply the brakes."<sup>116</sup>

A few days of calm followed what some called the South Side riot. Saturday, the 20th consecutive night of demonstrations, Dick Gregory led more than 650 marchers back to the South Side under heavy police protection. On Sunday, Fr. Groppi appeared on CBS-TV's news program, "Face the Nation." He told the audience, "The white man won't do anything for the black man until he is disturbed. He needs disruptive tension." In addition, he said that the Church ought to be the "most radical civil rights leader in the country" because "nothing attacks the teachings of Christ more than racism and self-righteousness." Responding to criticism of his role in the demonstrations, Fr. Groppi told the moderator he would leave his leadership position if it would help the open housing movement. The national NAACP Board of Directors telegraphed their support to Groppi and the Youth Council and condemned the mayor and Common Council for their lack of action. That night, more than 1,000 open housing advocates from across the country marched across the 16th Street Viaduct chanting "We're Gonna Be Your Neighbors!" As they proceeded down 16th Street, crowds of white people gathered and began catcalls and taunting; one teenager threw a bottle, but was promptly arrested. Signs in windows read, "Niggers and Clergy! Pray for forgiveness for destroying property" and "Niggers Don't Waste Your Time Marching -- Fix Up Your Homes and Yards!" Again, no violence resulted, but Gregory warned afterward, "Don't think those

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<sup>116</sup> *U.S. News & World Report*, 9/25/67, 24.

South Side crackers aren't mean or that they're backing down. They knew the police meant business today."<sup>117</sup>

The open housing marches sponsored by the YC and Commandos continued every day into the Fall of 1967. The number of supporters fluctuated from several dozen to several hundred, cresting on weekends and ebbing on weekdays. Turnout dwindled during the school year, but Fr. Groppi, the YC, the Commandos and their allies pressed on. "We will not stop our marches," Fr. Groppi and the YC promised. "We will not stop our direct action until we get a law."

One of the factors that continued to give the Milwaukee open housing campaign life was national, and even international, media attention. "When we hit the viaduct, we hit the news," Prentice McKinney recalled. "When we hit the news, the level of hostility and racism that was there took us national. Here's CBS, NBC. You'd go home and there we were on the national news. I mean the level of racism was just so high and you had other things going on throughout the nation. You had H. Rap Brown saying 'Burn Baby, Burn.' You had MLK saying nonviolence. And we were different."<sup>118</sup> Daily newspapers across the country carried stories about racial strife in Milwaukee. The three major television networks all had crews in town. In addition, *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report* and *Esquire* all ran pieces on the open housing campaign.<sup>119</sup> An editorial in the *New York Times* labeled Milwaukee "the most segregated [city] in the U.S."<sup>120</sup> *U.S.*

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<sup>117</sup> MJ, 9/18/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> McKinney interview.

<sup>119</sup> See, *U.S. News & World Report*, 9/11/67 and 9/25/67; *TIME*, 9/15/67 and 9/22/67; *Newsweek*, 10/2/67 and 11/20/67; *Esquire*, 11/67.

<sup>120</sup> *New York Times*, 9/13/67.

*News & World Report* asked, “Will Milwaukee Become Another Detroit or Newark?”<sup>121</sup> One Milwaukeean even wrote home to say that the Nigerian press was covering events in Milwaukee.<sup>122</sup>

The increased media attention made Fr. Groppi a minor national celebrity. Most stories focused on the curious fact of a white Catholic priest leading a Black Power movement. He became the leader, the young people became his flock. The attention often times obscured the role dozens of other people played in sustaining the open housing campaign in Milwaukee. Yet, Fr. Groppi’s image appeared on television screens in living rooms across the country and thousands heard his words. He began to get more and more requests to travel for speaking engagements. Groppi took many of them to help raise money for his civil rights efforts in Milwaukee. Thousands of letters from virtually every state in the U.S. poured into St. Boniface, the Mayor’s office, the Common Council and the Chancery passionately criticizing or praising the priest’s leadership.<sup>123</sup>

As marches and counter-demonstrations continued through September and October, city officials moved to address the crisis. In early September, Mayor Maier spoke before the Common Council and urged support for his night-time ban on marches. A few days later, Maier announced that he would support a city-wide open housing bill in the Common Council after 14 of 26 suburban communities passed their own law. He also sent a proposal to Madison for stronger statewide measures and more money for

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<sup>121</sup> *U.S. News & World Report*, 9/25/67, 24.

<sup>122</sup> *MJ*, 11/7/67, p. 3.

<sup>123</sup> See, Groppi Papers; Maier papers; Bleidorn papers.

urban development, but legislators rejected extra funds and did not act on housing.

At the country level, the legislative committee of the County Board of Supervisors refused to discuss county-wide open housing, saying it was a state matter.

The Common Council held its first Fall meeting - also the first since the outbreak of South Side violence - on September 12. Fr. Groppi and 75 other open housing supporters marched to City Hall to watch the proceedings. Alderman Phillips offered a new version of a city-wide open housing ordinance.<sup>124</sup> Three suburban communities - Germantown, Brookfield and Wauwatosa - had endorsed open housing, but none did more than advocate a stronger state law. By a now-familiar 18-1 vote, the Council voted to support the Mayor's emergency ban on marching and by the same tally refused to let Phillips reintroduce her measure before the legally specified 90-days had elapsed.

Two weeks later, with civil rights activists singing "We Shall Not Be Moved," Vel Phillips reintroduced the city-wide open housing ordinance. The Council immediately referred the measure to the Judiciary Committee for study. The Judiciary Committee held public hearings on October 16. 625 people jammed the Common Council meeting room. Alderman Rod Lancer, an announced candidate for Mayor, endorsed a proposal by Ben Barkin, the city's most prominent public relations executive. Barkin suggested that a sub-committee seek a compromise open housing ordinance.

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<sup>124</sup> Part of the opposition to the open housing ordinance that had been defeated four times previously was that enforcement powers were vested in the Social Development Committee, which many saw as a liberal, pro-civil rights organization. The revised bill introduced in September of 1967 moved enforcement to the city attorney and courts.

Such a plan, he argued, could boost the city's image as well as solve the crisis. Vel Phillips even called the plan "a ray of hope."<sup>125</sup>

At the same time, open housing opponents pursued an alternative solution. John Carroll and the Citizens Association of Wisconsin announced that they were gathering signatures on a petition calling for a city-wide referendum on the issue. The vote would trump legislative action through a more direct measure of the will of the people. Sponsors - and civil rights leaders - felt confident that open housing would go down to an overwhelming defeat in a popular vote. In short, the plan aimed at cloaking continued housing discrimination in a veneer of democratic legitimacy. Vel Phillips called it "another great dodge." The plan underscored the contradictory visions of democracy held by many black and white Milwaukeeans.<sup>126</sup>

New outbreaks of violence between demonstrators and police flared in early October. To be sure, by 1967, a long history of strained relations - stretching back at least to Daniel Bell's murder in 1958 - had already been firmly established between the overwhelmingly white police force and black inner core youth. Yet, the relationship between police and civil rights marchers was admittedly complicated. As Richard Green recalled,

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<sup>125</sup> MJ, 10/17/67, p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> Open housing opponents in several city councils and state legislatures moved to use the referendum to thwart open housing from 1965-67. In fact, a group of state legislators in Wisconsin flirted with introducing a state-wide open housing referendum in June of 1965. The effort fizzled when legislators passed the compromise open housing law in December. The Supreme Court ultimately made the issue moot when it ruled that popular will could not over-ride anti-discrimination measures in housing. See, Meyer, p. 182; Maier, p. 105; MJ, 9/23/67, p. 10.

I was arrested many times and some times [police] would say, "Hey. I support what you're doing and I'm only doing my job." And I could respect that... But we are talking about white officers who had worked the inner city for X number of years saying, "What you are doing is right"... but then you had those other kind who lived on the South Side and who were probably many of those folks who were throwing rocks and calling names and they looked for an excuse to rough us up. You never knew what to expect.<sup>127</sup>

So, while Milwaukee police clashed openly and often with civil rights activists during the Mayor's ban on marching, on other occasions, police officers incurred serious harm to protect demonstrators and their rights. But, as Prentice McKinney explained, when push came to shove, "This was Harold Brier's town. Just like Bull Connor down South... He kicked ass and took names. Either you went along and you were a good Negro or you had to deal with Breier, and Breier was no lightweight. He was the law and whatever happened to you it was going to be justifiable."<sup>128</sup>

Over the first month and a half of the open housing campaign, mutual distrust evolved into open conflict. The Commandos felt that police too often interfered with their attempts to maintain order in the marches. They believed many officers intimidated demonstrators in an attempt to interrupt marches. Others said several police officers taunted and threatened Commando leaders with the hope of goading them into fighting. Furthermore, demonstrators continually complained that many Milwaukee policemen did not wear badges during demonstrations, or wore black tape across their name and badge

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<sup>127</sup> Green interview.

<sup>128</sup> McKinney interview. Similarly, Squire Austin said, "It was like they [Milwaukee police] were siding with the people, the hecklers, the racism, the racist people that didn't want us on the South Side." See, Austin interview.

number. This made it hard to identify officers who brutalized demonstrators. Strict enforcement of the Mayor's ban on evening marches, resulting in dozens of arrests and skirmishes, further exacerbated animosity between the two groups. By early October, many Commandos felt challenged by police to establish their own authority and power through some sort of direct conflict.

On Sunday afternoon, October 8, more than 400 people participated in a "jovial" march led by Fr. Groppi and Dick Gregory. Later, a smaller group of YC members and Commandos went out looking for white counter-demonstrators. Police tried in vain to steer the two groups away from each other. Ironically, when they finally met across a North Side intersection, choruses of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" competed with chants of "Black Power."<sup>129</sup> An estimated 65 police officers armed with night sticks and helmets stepped in front of civil rights demonstrators and shoved them backward when the marchers began to cross the street toward their adversaries. As those in the rear pressed forward, marchers in the front had trouble retreating. Police then began swinging their clubs to disperse the crowd. The South Side protesters quickly left the scene, but a number of Commandos lined up opposite police while the remaining demonstrators chanted, "Eight fingers two thumbs, send those cops to Vietnam." Civil rights supporters ultimately reformed their ranks and pressed on. A few minutes later, Groppi and Gregory arrived and the march paused while leaders met. Meanwhile, demonstrators chanted,

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<sup>129</sup> The fact that the anti-open housing advocates sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" contained a certain irony that escaped most commentators at the time. The song was published during the Civil War by Julia Ward Howe - an abolitionist - in 1862 and was based on a popular marching song, "John Brown's Body." The original commemorated the failed raid on Harper's Ferry by the radical, white abolitionist John Brown. Over time, this racialized history has been largely forgotten and the tune has come to symbolize a more general patriotism and nationalism.



sang and taunted police. During the break, police officers left the scene and the march continued. After ten o'clock, police returned and demanded that the marchers get out of the street. When they refused, police again waded into the crowd with swinging clubs. Many marchers fought back. The *Journal* reported, "One Negro youth fell to the street as a policeman was taking him to a patrol wagon. The policeman slugged him several times, yelling at him to get up. He continued to hit the youth with his riot stick on his head and body as the youth cried: 'I'm getting up, man, I'm getting up!'" Police arrested 13, including Dick Gregory, and at least 75 protesters were treated at the hospital for injuries.<sup>130</sup>

The Sunday night incident enraged many YC members and Commando leaders. The next evening, the group planned an organized confrontation with police using the "box-in trap." According to Shakespeare Lewis, who was in charge of creating a subgroup of Commandos to carry out the plan, "The strategy was that when we tie up the traffic [at the intersection] we knew that the police was going to rush in. And when they rush in, we opened up [the marching line] and let them into the square [the center of the intersection] where we had blocked off traffic."<sup>131</sup> Once surrounded, Commandos would converge on the trapped officers and fight it out.

At the pre-march rally, the Commandos did not tell other demonstrators that they planned a confrontation with police. "We new this was coming but we didn't want the marchers going out there looking for this because it could have gone the other way," explained Lewis,

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<sup>130</sup> MS, 10/9/67, p.1; MJ, 10/9/67, p. 1; Star, 10/14/67, p. 1; Courier, 10/16/67, p. 1.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Modlinski, p. 91.

The police could have changed their plans and maybe not charged that night. Some of the marchers on some of the marches, we Commandos have taken weapons from the marchers - big knives, pistols. If they would have known there was going to be a confrontation they might have come prepared for anything; see, then there might have been people dying, because that way the police would have a reason to shoot them down.<sup>132</sup>

Fr. Groppi did introduce eight Commandos who had been injured by police at the previous night's demonstration. He told the audience, "Police, like most of white society, are infected with the disease of prejudice. When they go home at night, they talk about 'niggers.' They've marched for 42 days and they're getting mad. All they want to do is use that club on a black person." The priest promised that Commandos and YC leaders would no longer tolerate police brutality and would resist. "Call it what you want," he said, "but I call it Christian self-defense."<sup>133</sup>

Fr. Groppi, the Commandos and YC leaders set off through the North Side from St. Boniface with 275 open housing supporters. They sang freedom songs and chanted, "Send the cops to Vietnam" and "Burn, baby burn!" When the group reached the busy intersection at North Avenue and 20th Street, they began to march slowly across each intersection, blocking traffic. With the "box" established, cars began to back up for blocks in all directions. Eight policemen, in full riot protection, decided to rush the demonstration to break up the roadblock. As they did, Commando leaders yelled for marchers to open up and let police into the middle of the intersection. As the "box" closed back in around the officers, several Commandos rushed toward them. "The police started swinging fists and clubs when they saw they were trapped. The Commandos

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>133</sup> MJ, 10/10/67, pt. 2, p. 2.

responded and the fighting was hard and bad. While the police had helmets, we didn't and many [Commando] heads were knocked. Both sides had casualties who had to go to the hospital."<sup>134</sup> Civil rights marchers scattered as Commandos battled police. Several threw bottles, umbrellas and even a garbage can lid into the intersection. As more officers joined the fray, they collared and clubbed demonstrators indiscriminately and many marchers fought back with fists and rocks and even a lead pipe. When the fighting subsided, civil rights demonstrators made their way back to St. Boniface. 27 people received treatment at area hospitals, including six officers, and police arrested 11 more during the conflict. Commandos claimed the altercation marked the end of police intimidation and aggression in the open housing campaign.<sup>135</sup>

With each new violent episode in the streets, pressure mounted on the Common Council to act. The Open Housing sub-committee sequestered itself in the Governor's Suite at the Pfister Hotel from October 21-23. The sub-committee consisted of five Aldermen, including Vel Phillips, the President of the Milwaukee County Labor Council, the Director of the League of Women Voters, the President of the Milwaukee Board of Realtors, and one representative each from the YC, the Greater Milwaukee Committee and the Greater Milwaukee Conference on Religion and Race. During the three-day parlay, the real estate industry, which provided the backbone to formal opposition to open housing, remained quiet and debated the issue internally. In the end, they opposed any new measures stating that the existing state law was sufficient. After a final 19-hour marathon session, the sub-committee still failed to reach a compromise. Instead, they

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>135</sup> MJ, 10/10/67, p. 1; MS, 10/10/67, p. 1; Star, 10/14/67, p. 1; Modlinski, pp. 90-94.

offered three proposals that were presented to the full Judiciary Committee: 1) Enact a law that mirrored the current state law. 2) Enact a law that was stronger than the current state law. 3) Enact a law that exempted all rental property. Fr. Groppi griped, "We want that bill, not proposals." The Judiciary Committee refused to recommend any ordinance to the full Common Council and instead remanded the issue to committee for further study. The Judiciary Committee then delayed action on the issue completely until they could certify the 27,000 signatures that the Milwaukee Citizens' Civic Voice submitted demanding a city-wide open housing referendum.<sup>136</sup>

The impasse between marchers, counter-demonstrators, the Mayor and the Common Council continued for six more weeks. On November 25, a meeting between Fr. Groppi, Commando leaders and Maier failed when activists walked out after the Mayor appeared to skirt the open housing issue. Three days later, the Common Council authorized an April referendum on the issue authorizing a two-year ban on any statute. Then, on December 12, the Council passed an open housing ordinance that mirrored the state law by a vote of 13-6; both sides agreed it would have little impact on local housing or the on-going demonstrations.

Reaction from the civil rights community was swift. Vel Phillips, who opposed the ordinance called the move a "face-saving device, a way out" for her colleagues and complained, "Thanks for nothing. You are very much too late and very much too little." The MCEO newsletter lamented that "Milwaukee is proving to continue in the path that led a local black citizen as far back as 1941 to say, 'Milwaukee is a southern town that

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<sup>136</sup> Jeffrey Bartell and Edward Stege, "The Mediation of Civil Rights Disputes: Open Housing In Milwaukee," *Wisconsin Law Review*, 1968, pp. 1129-1191.

lost its way 100 miles north of Chicago.”<sup>137</sup> Fr. Groppi, who said the gesture was “tokenism and crumbs,” stated, “It reminds me of Mississippi. They’re fooling around here, insulting black people by insulting their God given constitutional rights.” The YC promised to march for “five years,” if necessary. And Walter Hoard, President of the MNAACP, summarized open housing advocates’ feelings when he said, “It has destroyed the hope many people had. It’s not just fair housing: it’s tied to everything in the struggle for equality.”<sup>138</sup> Opponents of open housing were incensed that any action was taken before the April referendum.

Reaction to the YC-sponsored open housing campaign within Milwaukee’s black community was not monolithic. Most agreed with Janis Carter, who as far back as 1963 argued that open housing was more self-determination than integration:

White people, egotistically, think the purpose of equal opportunity in housing is that we Negroes want to live next door to them.

Living next door to white neighbors is probably the furthest thing from our minds. We wish only to live where we choose in an environment conducive with our economics. This is what whites are fighting. They are fighting to keep us huddled together in the vilest ghettos possible.

Won’t someone please inform them we don’t give a tinkers damn about living next door to them? All we want is our constitutional right to live where ever our money affords us!<sup>139</sup>

But while the majority of inner core organizations, leaders and residents publicly supported the campaign, some, particularly older residents and traditional leadership,

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<sup>137</sup> “MCEO Newsletter,” 12/67, MCEO Papers, Milwaukee Country Historical Society.

<sup>138</sup> MJ, 12/13/67, p. 4. The MJ editorialized, “It is as if some evil force were compelling the aldermanic majority to sink the open housing question deeper into the mud every time they have to face it.”

<sup>139</sup> Star, 7/6/67, 7/6/63, p. 12.

privately questioned the YC's confrontational tactics. Prentice McKinney believed the rift had a generational dimension. "You had African Americans who were young, who were born in the North with a totally different set of values than their parents who were born in the South," he explained. "Who are less afraid of whites. More cognizant of the injustice, of the difference in treatment [in the North]. Who this country is placing demand upon to go in the service and to fight for this country. Who have virtually no employment opportunities - and their is real frustration there - and virtually all of them have police records.<sup>140</sup> The *Milwaukee Journal* noted similar class gap among local African Americans. And old tensions continued to simmer within the leadership ranks of the Milwaukee NAACP, as well as between the YC and the national office. "They did not [always] support our tactics," Richard Green explained. "They threatened to take our charter [at one point]... but it wasn't going to stop us from doing what we were doing. We felt there was a need for it, whether the NAACP supported us or not, or any other black organization. This was something that we felt we had to do for Milwaukee... so we had very heated talks with the national NAACP.<sup>141</sup> But some did criticize Fr. Groppi and the YC directly. Rev. Louis Beauchamp, speaking for the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance identified the direct action campaign as the primary reason that the Common Council had not passed an open housing ordinance.<sup>142</sup> In response, 75 demonstrators marched to Rev. Beauchamp's home on Capitol Drive chanting "What side are you on,

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<sup>140</sup> McKinney interview.

<sup>141</sup> Green interview.

<sup>142</sup> It appears that throughout the open housing campaign, Rev. Beauchamp reported to the Mayor's office on inner core activities, including meeting he attended with other ministers and local black leaders. See, "Confidential memo: Bert to Mayor," 11/17/67, Maier Papers, box 43, folder 12.

Rev. Beauchamp? What side are you on?"<sup>143</sup> But perhaps the greatest measure of community sentiment was the growing number of local people that came out to march with the YC. Yet, the severe reaction by white South Siders, coupled with the continued inaction of city officials, unleashed more anarchic and violent forms of inner core protest, best seen in the string of arsons and the greater willingness of marchers to fight back against police and counter-demonstrators. The YC promised to press on regardless of what others thought or did.

Broader community support for open housing also continued to grow through the fall and early winter. By early December, six suburbs had passed an open housing ordinance. The Japanese-American Citizens Organization, Manpower Incorporated, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the Wisconsin Council of Rabbis and the Milwaukee Jewish Council all offered more high profile, official support to the campaign. The spiritual heads of Milwaukee's Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Jewish communities issued a joint appeal to their members and city leaders for city-wide open housing. Two hundred delegates of the state AFL-CIO voted to condemn the inaction of Mayor Maier and the Common Council and 350 South Side residents and clergy ran a supportive ad in a local newspaper. Business leaders, feeling the effects of decreased tourism and downtown shopping, increasingly pressured city officials - often behind the scenes - to end the racial conflict.

Official organizational support often obscured a wide chasm between leadership and rank-and-file. Despite near unanimous support from Milwaukee's principle labor and religious leaders, grassroots opposition to open housing ran high. Many union locals

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<sup>143</sup> MJ, 10/20/67, pt. 2, p. 2.

passed resolutions opposing an open housing ordinance. Religious leaders that publicly supported the issue received hundreds of complaints and criticism from their members; church donations sometimes declined. Ralph Alton, the bishop of the Wisconsin Methodist Church, received such a barrage of criticism that he felt compelled to temporarily leave his home for safety. A survey of Milwaukee Lutherans found that church members opposed open housing by a margin of 3 to 1.<sup>144</sup>

But just as local support grew, so too did national attention and assistance. Newspapers and television stations across the United States continued to cover events in Milwaukee. Fr. Groppi kept travelling the country telling his stories.<sup>145</sup> Many Americans came to see Milwaukee as the center of the national open housing struggle. Others in the Movement viewed it as the last stand of an inter-racial, non-violent, Church-based movement in the North. Maier and Fr. Groppi also visited the nation's capitol in the Fall to testify before the National Commission on Civil Disorders. Groppi warned the panel that "more riots are possible."<sup>146</sup> Moreover, the NAACP national Youth and College association published and distributed an eighteen page booklet with numerous photos, titled "March On Milwaukee."

Much of the national attention continued to focus on Fr. Groppi and Mayor Maier. An exasperated Roy Wilkins compared Mayor Maier to "Pontious Pilate" for passing responsibility for open housing to other levels of government. *Newsweek* magazine

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<sup>144</sup> MJ, 12/9/67, p. 5. See also, *Concern*, 10/15/67, p. 6; "Is Civil Rights An Opening Wedge?" in *The Milwaukee Lutheran*, December 1967, Maier Papers, box 44, folder 17.

<sup>145</sup> In St. Louis, where Fr. Groppi and several YC and Commando leaders attended an open housing conference, the priest caused a minor national media stir when he used the word "fuck" on live television while describing the harassment he and other civil rights advocates had faced on Milwaukee's South Side.

<sup>146</sup> MJ, 9/21/67, p. 1.



referred to Fr. Groppi as “a priest gripped by that elemental Christian belief which ordains that all men must love each other.”<sup>147</sup> As Groppi’s stature as a national civil rights leader rose, so too did interest in Mayor Maier’s longer-term urban political strategy. Catholic parishioners in many American cities debated the role of the young Italian priest in Milwaukee’s civil rights movement while policymakers studied the merits of metropolitan politics, shared revenues and the need for an “urban Marshall Plan.”<sup>148</sup> In December and January, Fr. Groppi received a series of accolades. The national NAACP announced it would honor the priest in New York City in January for “the living demonstration he provides of the continuing need for interracial cooperation in the fight for freedom.”<sup>149</sup> Similarly, *Esquire* magazine named Groppi a “notable person” for 1967 and the Associated Press voted the priest “the newsmaker of the year” in religion.<sup>150</sup>

Like the local scene, perhaps the best measures of growing national support for the Milwaukee open housing campaign were the throngs who aided the movement. Thousands of individuals from around the city and across the nation flocked to Milwaukee’s inner core to participate in demonstrations.<sup>151</sup> Rallies and marches averaged

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<sup>147</sup> See, *Newsweek*, 10/2/67.

<sup>148</sup> In mid-December, a group of big-city mayors censured Congress for failing to respond to the problems of cities. They wrote, “The urban crisis, [about which] Mayor Maier of Milwaukee has been preaching across the country for several years with his demand for a great shift of national priorities to attack it, is not a figment; it is real. It is just as bad as anybody says it is, and it is worsening.” Quoted in Maier, p. 122.

<sup>149</sup> *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 1/13/68, p. 37.

<sup>150</sup> *Esquire*, November 1967, p. 133.

<sup>151</sup> As one extreme example of outside support, 75 year old Ignatius O’Connor from Boston came to Milwaukee in September and stayed for over three months. O’Connor, a life-long Catholic activist, had also attended the 1963 March On Washington and the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March, and in 1967 felt he needed to be in Milwaukee. See, *Marquette Tribune*, 12/13/67, p. 4.

several hundred supporters, dipped as low as 75 and peaked at 2,300 and as many as 40% of the marchers at any given event were white. Week-end rallies tended to draw larger numbers, more out-of-towners, and higher numbers of white participants. Membership in both the YC and Commandos also soared during the campaign and Fr. Groppi continued to be deluged by thousands of letters of support, encouragement and thanks. Like Selma, hundreds of northern white clergymen and women religious heeded Fr. Groppi's ecumenical call and traveled to Milwaukee to bear witness. As *Catholic Herald* reporter Thomas Smith described, "They come in the habits of nuns, wear the roman collars of priests or answer to the Protestant title of 'Reverend' or 'Doctor.' They came to join the battle for open housing."<sup>152</sup>

Yet, the gathering support for the YC's housing crusade confronted a deep well of white opposition. Thousands of local white residents had poured into the streets and hundreds of others had joined dozens of more organized efforts to halt the open housing campaign. But this opposition defied easy categorization. Resistance came from every section of the city and virtually every state, from all economic classes, each of the major religious denominations, and both major political parties. And they articulated their opposition in different ways.

The thousands of letters that Fr. Groppi received offered a unique window on the breadth of white opposition to open housing in Milwaukee.<sup>153</sup> The largest segment of

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<sup>152</sup> *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 9/23/67, p. 6.

<sup>153</sup> Thousands of letters can be found in Groppi Papers. While most came from Milwaukee or outlying areas, hundreds came from outside the city and state. A sampling of locations includes, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, Tulsa, Mississippi, Atlanta, Detroit, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Madison, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Durham, Anchorage, Pittsburgh, Roanoke, Houston, Appleton, and Birmingham. In addition, the Eugene Bleidorn Papers and Henry Maier Papers also include similar, but smaller, samples.

letters could be rightly termed “hate mail,” including death threats and charges of “nigger lover” and “traitor.” Of those that more accurately fell under the heading “constructive criticism,” perhaps a majority held firm to the “acculturation model” which stated that black migrants from the South did not possess the necessary skills to succeed in the urban North. A significant portion made accusations of communist-infiltration and outside agitation in the local movement, reflecting the pervasive Cold War politics of the time. Others were critical of Black Power, racial exclusion and black nationalism. A large number of white ethnics believed in an immigrant mythology. They asked, “Why should African Americans be given ‘special treatment’ when my parents, who were immigrants to this country, never received any help from anyone. They had to make it on their own, why can’t black people.” These people often forgot or ignored the special public measures that had helped many of them and their parents go to school, start a business, buy a home or get a job. Still others complained that open housing laws infringed on the property rights of white homeowners. Catholics continued to ask hard questions about the role of priests and nuns in political action. The conflict between progressive Catholics and traditionalists revealed a deeply divided Church. For many religious and non-religious alike, Fr. Groppi became the primary issue. Others expressed support for the overall goal, but opposition to direct action tactics. A segregated neighborhoods, a significant proportion of the letters appealed to racist or stereotyped thinking that cast African Americans as inherently lazy, immoral, stupid, dependent and violent.<sup>154</sup> And in the most intriguing trend, much of the correspondence articulated a

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<sup>154</sup> Like the historical debate over the poverty, some saw African American inequality as the result of racism and structural discrimination in a white supremacist society while others viewed it as the result of

sense of white solidarity that was in sharp relief from the long history of white ethnic rivalry and conflict in Milwaukee.<sup>155</sup>

The Milwaukee open housing campaign, which stretched on for 200 consecutive nights of marching, also represented an impressive organizing effort by hundreds of people. It was this structure, this conscious effort, which sustained a movement day in and day out despite considerable adversity. The center of this organizing effort was at St. Boniface Church.<sup>156</sup> St. Boniface, which the *Journal* called the church the “Marchers’ Mecca,” became a unique Movement center, perhaps unlike any other Catholic Church in the United States. It was an organic parish, democratic, experimental and committed to social justice through social action. In many ways, the Church personified the promise of reform laid out during the Second Vatican Councils. As Squire Austin explained, “St. Boniface was a live Church.”<sup>157</sup>

Virtually 24 hours a day, St. Boniface throbbed with activity. Commandos guarded the Church 24 hours a day and made sure no drinking, profanity, violence or

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racialized individual failings: black people were responsible for their own predicament because they were too lazy, immoral, dumb, dirty, dependent, violent, hyper-sexual, or ill-prepared to succeed.

<sup>155</sup> Before the rapid influx of African Americans to Milwaukee, ethnicity, religion and language severely divided white ethnic groups. Over the post-war period, white ethnic rivalries subsided. In part, this was a function of suburbanization and the break-down of distinct white ethnic neighborhoods in Milwaukee. In addition, though, letters to Fr. Groppi seem to indicate that the perceived “threat” that black people posed to white people in the form of increased competition for jobs, schools, housing and public resources, also fueled the decline of white ethnic identity and the embrace of a more general “white” self-identification. This shift, I believe, also ungirded the emergence of white “backlash” politics in the 1960s and 1970s. There is fascinating and important research still to be done if this hypothesis is to be fully fleshed out, but the initial indications are clear.

<sup>156</sup> The burned-out Freedom House was also a significant site for open housing activists. Across the door, someone had scrawled, “The police burned it down.” It was a favorite destination during North Side marches and a source of inspiration to many YC and Commando leaders.

<sup>157</sup> Austin interview.

gambling took place on the premises. The thousands of people who flocked to Milwaukee to participate in civil rights demonstrations came to St. Boniface. It was an educational laboratory where people came from all over the country, learned and took it back with them to their hometowns. St. Boniface served as “a refuge, rally hall, medical station, housing and transportation bureau and cafeteria. Its function is similar to Brown’s Chapel... in Selma, Alabama, which was home to civil rights demonstrators during protests there more than two years ago.”<sup>158</sup> In a one-week period, a small army of volunteers at the church treated more than 125 minor injuries, collected \$5,000 in donations, served 1,500 meals twice daily, recruited more than 300 homes for out-of-town visitors, and ran a “pick-up service” to shuttle demonstrators back and forth. Training in non-violent direct action was also provided. “We had a guy come in teaching us martial arts and he taught us self-defense,” Austin remembered. “We had classes on how to protect yourself if you are attacked with billy clubs and what parts of the body to protect so you don’t get hit on the head or in certain areas of the body that are vulnerable.”<sup>159</sup> Daily and weekly masses were packed and the line between Church and Movement was unclear; The Gospel infused the Movement and the Movement infused the Gospel. Behind the scenes, local public relations man, Ben Barkin, led a quiet campaign to solicit financial support from Milwaukee corporations and business leaders. A team of lawyers worked to free the endless stream of arrested demonstrators and thwart the various challenges to their right of assembly and peaceful protest.<sup>160</sup> Outside St.

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<sup>158</sup> MJ, 9/5/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>159</sup> Austin interview.

<sup>160</sup> Ben Barkin interview with Patrick Jones, 11/4/99.

Boniface, cameramen and reporters from all the major television stations, along with press, TV and radio personnel from Milwaukee milled around searching for a new angle. Down nearby side streets, police vans sat waiting for orders to join another march through the city. Tactical Squad members continued to keep tabs on civil rights activities. All of this required Herculean effort and coordination.

At the core of this mayhem were Fr. Groppi, the YC and the Commandos. Despite the media's over-emphasis on Groppi's leadership, there was a definite structure and protocol between the groups. Fr. Groppi and YC and Commando leaders<sup>161</sup> would meet daily - sometimes with their legal team - to decide what they would do that night. The Commandos would then plan the route of the march as well as protection.<sup>162</sup> Demonstration participants were not notified of the final plans until the pre-march rally. While Fr. Groppi served as a trusted aid and often offered his suggestions, he did not have a vote in either group. He often was over-ruled.<sup>163</sup> Yet, because of the deep personal intimacy between the young civil rights activists and their advisor, by and large there was agreement.

The organizing effort, tactics and leadership of the movement was not static, though. "The Commandos was an evolution," according to Prentice McKinney, "as was

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<sup>161</sup> Leadership in the Commandos was also somewhat fluid. While there were formal leadership positions leadership often flowed toward those with personal charisma regardless of official rank.

<sup>162</sup> Commandos even planned who would be arrested. According to Richard Green, "On a demonstration, we would schedule, if there was going to be a mass arrest tonight everybody knows who's going to get arrested, and everybody who wasn't fell back. Those who've got problems, who've got tickets and things like that don't get arrested tonight. So, if you were gonna get arrested for disorderly conduct, or breaking the Mayor's curfew, you were gonna go to jail... the [attorneys] were all set up. When they started arresting us, the attorneys were already downtown." See, Green interview.

<sup>163</sup> McClain interview; McKinney interview; Austin interview.

leadership within the movement itself.”<sup>164</sup> The open housing movement in Milwaukee was not one thing. It was in motion and changed over time in response to developing circumstances. From the beginning, there was an improvisational - some said disorganized - quality to the campaign. Fr. Groppi and the YC acted from the heart. They saw what they believed was an injustice and moved to change it. In doing so, they transformed the situation, which prompted the need to continually reassess their plan before moving on. As a result, the open housing campaign was often short on long-term planning.

Over the first few months of the open housing protests, the leadership dynamic within and between the YC, Commandos and Fr. Groppi changed significantly. The civil rights leadership core became smaller and more secretive as relations with Milwaukee police deteriorated so that they could keep law enforcement off guard about the details of their plans. In addition, as Groppi became a national figure, he traveled more and left an increasing amount of local responsibility to YC and Commando leaders. While still primarily focused on events in Milwaukee, the young priest’s time and energy was pulled in more directions, a burden that took a physical and emotional toll. Similarly, the media’s focus on Fr. Groppi’s charismatic leadership created jealousy, tension, and even periodic rifts between young civil rights activists and their advisor. “There was resentment against Groppi at times,” admitted Prentice McKinney, “but there was also resentment against me. Anybody that got to a leadership position, you have

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<sup>164</sup> McKinney interview.

people sitting over there that are not in the limelight but who are desirous of the limelight. So, there was this undercutting going on, always.”<sup>165</sup>

National media attention also brought hundreds of new supporters into the open housing campaign, posing a new set of challenges and opportunities. Whereas early marches attracted a few hundred, mainly local people, later demonstrations brought in thousands of outsiders, sometimes with little non-violent training. It was the task of YC and Commando leaders to organize and train this mass of protestors so that the philosophy and tactics of the open housing campaign could be maintained. It became more difficult to keep demonstrators “in line,” literally and figuratively; Not everyone bought into non-violent direct action, particularly in the face of South Side violence and police brutality. Similarly, swelling membership in both organizations altered the character of the YC and Commandos. Many of the new Commando recruits were physically tougher, more volatile and less disciplined than the original members. This created divisions. In addition, because many had served in the military, the organization formed ranks and a chain of command to cope with their numbers.

By December of 1967, the Commandos eclipsed the YC as the primary organizational focus of the demonstrations; They moved from an auxiliary security force to central leadership within the Movement, and then ultimately to an independent life apart from the YC and Fr. Groppi. This shift was apparent in news reports that

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<sup>165</sup> McKinney interview. Almost every Commando and Youth Council member that I spoke with mentioned the occasional jealousy and tension that accompanied Groppi’s media ascendancy. Most, though, were also quick to explain that the emphasis on Groppi was not his own doing, but a function of the media’s need to create leaders and to privilege a white Catholic priest over angry black youths. Moreover, as Black Power gathered strength within the movement nationally and locally, Groppi’s leadership role in Milwaukee faced new criticism. See, McClain interview; Austin interview; Wade interview; Green interview; Phillips interview; Barbee interview.



emphasized the growing importance of Commando leaders over YC leaders. In part, this was a natural evolution from Fr. Groppi and the YC's original desire to cultivate young, black, male inner core leadership through the Commandos. In addition, it sprang from Groppi's diminished time in Milwaukee and the practical reality of often violent demonstrations and the need to protect and organize a large following. Also, as school restarted, regular student involvement dropped and the Commandos played a larger role organizing the open housing demonstrations. Ultimately, they took over the formal leadership ranks of the YC.<sup>166</sup>

Over the course of the open housing campaign, the YC and Commandos evolved from an embrace of traditional non-violent direct action to self-defense. This shift was due, in part, to the massive resistance of thousands of local white residents and the seething frustration among young civil rights activists at the years of official inaction. The spiraling antagonism between marchers and law enforcement also contributed to the change. "It was a matter of survival," explained Prentice McKinney. "When the teargas came in and you had to run off and there's thousands of white people throwing shit at you and cops swinging at you, I mean, Big D [Dwight Benning] and I used to go back-to-back, he'd get my back and I'd get his and we'd just start wailing."<sup>167</sup> In addition, a series of outside challenges to the Commandos by civil rights activists who advocated

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<sup>166</sup> In addition to the reasons mentioned, there are other secondary reason for the shift. Commandos were, on average, older and more flamboyancy in their personalities. In many were attracted by the status and mystique that had grown up around the Commandos, a perception that emphasized black male power and leadership. The force of this collective personality could, and often did, easily overwhelm the younger activists of the YC.

<sup>167</sup> McKinney interview.

violence pushed them to a more militant stance.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, the move to self-defense reflected the influence of violence, generally, in American culture at the time: Vietnam, Black Power militance, assassinations, rising crime rates and widespread urban rioting. While the Commandos and YC never advocated the use of weapons, they did place a greater accent on self-defense as the open housing marches proceeded. Even Fr. Groppi defended outburst of violence by YC members and Commandos, and began to draw distinctions between their philosophy of “Not Violence” and Martin Luther King’s non-violent direct action. At a conference in Washington, D.C., he told a group that he was studying the usefulness of violence as a tactic. “The Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council Commandos are giving nonviolence its last chance. If it doesn’t work, I’m not saying what our future action will be... We’ve just about had it.”<sup>169</sup>

As the open housing demonstrations stretched on without significant progress, Fr. Groppi’s rhetoric became increasingly militant. At the end of September, he told the President’s Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders that African Americans turned to violence because other means had not gotten results. “When Rap Brown says that violence in the American system is as common as cherry pie,” he explained, “I don’t

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<sup>168</sup> At a September 11 rally, a group of 60-80 young black “toughs” - armed with sharpened sticks and rocks - tried to join a YC march. The Commandos ejected them from the protest. In mid-September, a group of young Milwaukee African Americans wearing sweatshirts that read “Deacons for Defense” arrived at a St. Boniface rally to challenge the Commandos leadership. The Deacons advocated a black nationalist stance and armed self-defense. After a brief conference, the Commandos told the Deacons they wanted no part of their group, but welcomed individual members to participate in open housing demonstrations as long as they adhered to the established rules. The group refused and joined with the Milwaukee Citizens’ Civic Voice to oppose the open housing campaign. As a result, members of the national Deacons for Defense came to Milwaukee in December to repudiate the local group and support the Milwaukee Movement. A week after the initial Deacons challenge, 25 “anti-white Negroes” from Chicago gathered at St. Boniface after a march to organize violent activity in Milwaukee. The group passed out images of Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael and told local activists that they should burn the city down, not march. Again, the Commandos invited the Chicagoans to participate in demonstrations, but only if they agreed to remain “not-violent.” See, MJ, 9/20/67, p. 6.

know who in the world can give him an argument because it is true.” He called violence “a constructive way of social protest” and said that in the face of persistent white apathy it was “morally and objectively justified.”

Over the following six months, Fr. Groppi moved in an increasingly radical direction, repeating and extending these comments to audiences across the country. Calling himself a “radical,” rather than a liberal because “a liberal leaves the room when the action begins,” Groppi questioned whether nonviolent direct action would be enough to “move white people to conscience” in Milwaukee. He told a Chicago audience, “‘We Shall Overcome,’ and ‘Black and White Together’ are still being sung in Milwaukee, but maybe we should sing ‘We Shall Overthrow.’” At a college in St. Paul, Fr. Groppi called the use of violence by the Commandos “self-defense” and said the YC’s motto was “Total liberation or death.” He praised Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael as “great men and great heroes” in the black community. In January, he explained the morality of African American violence by way of a comparison to Joan of Arc: “She led armies. She swung a sword. She killed people. She’s one of the greatest saints we have. You can talk to me about the evil consequences of violence and blood in the streets. You can talk and you can argue with me about violence as a technique... but if you talk about it morally, that is sheer hypocrisy.” He criticized the U.S. government for spending billions of dollars each month “killing innocent people in Vietnam” and then criticizing African Americans for using “the same technique.” That same month, in Dubuque, Fr. Groppi stated that riots were “a necessary aspect of the black revolution.” Two months later, the priest told a group of civil rights advocates in Providence that most “socially acceptable

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<sup>169</sup> MJ, 9/29/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

means for gaining freedom had failed for black Americans.” Moreover, Groppi said conditions had not “degenerated to riots,” but were “escalating into revolutionary acts.”<sup>170</sup>

As spokesman for the YC and Commandos, Fr. Groppi walked a fine line between understanding, explaining and advocating racial violence. Many in his audiences undoubtedly failed to draw the same fine distinctions as the young priest and saw the words as justification for more radical actions. Some viewed Groppi as a provocateur and others as a prophet of doom. He believed he was simply delivering a warning based on the circumstances as he saw and experienced them. The FBI, who as recently as the summer of 1967 debated whether Groppi even belonged in the “Rabble-Rouser Index,” now labeled him an “agitator” and expressed concern about what they saw as the priest’s growing “propensity for violence.” They tracked and recorded his movements, speeches and activism through the media, field agents and community informants. Yet, despite his numerous explanations and warnings, Fr. Groppi consistently adhered to the nonviolent ethos in his own life and activism. He came to see Black Power, particularly political and economic power, as the only way to stave off racial violence and full-scale “guerilla warfare” in the United States. “Communication is useless,” he said, “unless both sides have power. If you don’t have it, you have no voice.”<sup>171</sup>

The Milwaukee open housing campaign also responded to broader forces within the national civil rights movement. Black Power exerted an expanding influence over the Milwaukee demonstrations. Many African American activists, particularly young

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<sup>170</sup> Quoted in, FBI report on James Groppi, 1/10/68, Fr. James Groppi FBI file. Part 1.

<sup>171</sup> See, Groppi FBI file, parts 1 and 2.

northerners, defiantly turned away from traditional values and conventional tactics.

Widespread urban racial violence and a deepening war in Vietnam hastened the shift to black nationalism, armed self-defense, racial separatism and political radicalism. By 1967, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality pushed white members out of their ranks. Many angry young black people identified more with the incendiary apocalyptic rhetoric of H. Rap Brown than the idealism of Martin Luther King, Jr. Some criticized Christianity as a “white religion.” In July of 1967, the same month that nearly 100 civil disorders erupted across the country, one thousand delegates gathered in Newark, New Jersey, to attend the first National Conference on Black Power. The group passed resolutions supporting black self-assertion, armed self-defense, the formation of an African American youth militia and economic nationalism. “The question now is not of integrating into a white restaurant but of owning a black restaurant,” they argued, “not of running a liberal white candidate but a black candidate.”<sup>172</sup>

Though not impervious, the Milwaukee Movement stood in sharp relief to these currents and symbolized different possibilities. Fr. Groppi, the YC and Commandos tried to cut their own path between extremes by fashioning a form of Black Power that made sense within the local context. According to Squire Austin, “We intermingled with the Panthers and Stokely [Carmichael]. We sat down [with Stokely] and listened to him talk. We did that to broaden our minds as to what we were doing. But a lot of stuff they were doing we didn’t agree with.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Quoted in Meyer, p. 189.

<sup>173</sup> Austin interview.

To be sure, many of the traditional trappings of Black Power were apparent in Milwaukee. It could be seen at rallies and in mass at St. Boniface. It could be heard in the rhetoric of march leaders, and in the songs and chants and signs demonstrators carried. Youth Council members wore sweatshirts with slogans like “Freedom Fighters,” “Soul Brother,” “Soul Sister,” “Black Is Beautiful,” “Sock It to Me Black Power,” “Remember McKissick,”<sup>174</sup> and “Stop Police Brutality.” And it could be felt in the heightened militance of the protests. For most, it simply meant a source of unity, strength and pride. “Black Power meant confidence” to Squire Austin. “It was strong. Unity. Together. If I was out there [marching] by myself I would be weak and afraid. When you say Black Power, I got all of these people with me and I don’t fear nothing.”<sup>175</sup> Similarly, Prentice McKinney explained,

[Black Power] was significant in that it countered the sense of powerlessness. It countered the fact that “Black is ugly” and that “Black is powerlessness.” Whites were being scared of the term Black Power, but it was empowering for us to say, “Blacks have power. We are beautiful” and all those things that historically were never said and we never thought and that the older generation would have said “No, those white folks are going to get mad.” So, when Stokely Carmichael came out with that term, it was a new way of seeing yourself. It was empowering... [Black Power meant] we ain’t taking that shit anymore.<sup>176</sup>

Youth Council President, Fred Bronson, stressed that Black Power was not anti-white. “We’re not anti-white; we’re just pro-black. We defined Black Power for ourselves some time ago. To us, it means a struggle for political and economic unity and self-

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<sup>174</sup> Police shot and killed 18 year old Clifford McKissick during the 1967 civil disorder in Milwaukee.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> McKinney interview.

determination for the black man. But blacks cannot reach full economic strength alone. Whites control the money and the economic strength, and it's going to take white help to bring the black man to equality."<sup>177</sup>

Upon closer examination, though, there were important differences. Because the African American community in Milwaukee remained comparatively small and black people did not possess significant political power, it was important for the Movement to form coalitions with supportive whites. The leaders of the open housing campaign advocated a Black Power that did not appeal to racial exclusivity, but one that emphasized race pride and the use of economic, political and educational power to gain equal rights for African Americans. YC members also wore sweatshirts that read "Black and White Together," "We Love Fr. Groppi" and "We Love Everybody."<sup>178</sup> The same numerical disadvantage dictated that protesters embrace "not-violence." Fr. Groppi's role and the special place of St. Boniface further assured that the Milwaukee campaign stayed rooted in Christianity. In the end, the Black Power that emerged in Milwaukee emphasized racial consciousness over skin color. This is how a white Catholic priest, inter-racialism and Black Power could all fit together. As a result, many civil rights activists across the country saw the Milwaukee open housing campaign as an alternative.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, p. 138.

<sup>178</sup> According to Frank Aukofer, a banner hung in the basement of St. Boniface that also captured this inter-racial spirit. In the middle it read, "Black Power + White Power = Community Power." Straddling this equation on the left and right were two phrases, "United we stand" and "Divided we fall." See, Aukofer, p. 137.

<sup>179</sup> According to the *Catholic Herald Citizen*, "[The hundreds of activists that come to Milwaukee] see in the events here a revival of the civil rights movement on an interracial front. Active in their own cities in

The tensions and contradictions in the Milwaukee open housing campaign's embrace of Black Power came to a pivotal culmination in late September of 1967. Many Milwaukee civil rights leaders began to worry that it might take the death of a white clergyman or a young protester - as had been the case in Selma - to stir the conscience of the nation and city officials. Some felt that the alternative was to lobby for federal intervention in Washington, D.C. To that end, Fr. Groppi, five YC Commandos and two other white clergymen<sup>180</sup> traveled to the nation's capitol to meet with liberal politicians and attend the "Conference on the Churches and Urban Tension" sponsored by the Methodist Church, which was trying to call national attention to the Milwaukee crusade.<sup>181</sup> At the evening session, which focused on the Milwaukee situation and featured Fr. Groppi and the Commandos, local Black Power advocates moved to expel national press from the presentation. It was clear that the activists opposed the idea of a white Catholic priest as the chief spokesperson for Milwaukee's open housing campaign. In addition, the Milwaukee civil rights activists also represented a challenge to the Black Power advocates belief that an inter-racial, non-violent Movement was a thing of the past. A long line of critics, including Marion Barry and Rufus "Catfish" Mayfield, rose to brutally castigate Groppi and the Commandos with a long list of derogatory names and Black Power barbs. Mayfield said, "Fr. Groppi has one thing wrong with him - his color.

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this area, they feel obliged to lend their moral, financial and physical support to a cause which they conceive of as a crusade for decency and justice." See. *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 9/23/67, p. 6.

<sup>180</sup> In addition to Groppi, the delegation included five Commandos - Richard Green, Lawrence Friend, Jerry Sims, Raymond Blathers and Charles Harper - Fr. Patrick Flood of the Council on Urban Affairs and Rev. David Owen of the Milwaukee Methodist Church.

<sup>181</sup> The conference and a planned prayer vigil were also endorsed by the Greater Washington Council of Churches, the Catholic Inter-racial Council of Washington, the Presbyterian Inter-racial Council and the Episcopal Society for Racial and Cultural Unity.



It's the same old case of whites using Negroes."<sup>182</sup> During the onslaught, Groppi said nothing, instead retreating to a corner of the room. The Commandos stepped forward, though, and explained that, in fact, *they* were the leaders of the Milwaukee Movement and Groppi was their advisor. They also reaffirmed their commitment to "Not-violence" and inter-racialism.

A series of testy exchanges between the contending sides followed. One Washington Black Power leader bristled at the Commandos defense and shouted, "You men had better get guns and use them." One Commando responded with a question of his own, "Do you have guns?" The man replied, "Yes, we have guns." "Where are you from?" "Los Angeles." The Commando then reportedly said, "We haven't heard anything from you in Los Angeles. Don't you have the guts to use them?" Another Black Power challenger demanded, "You had better get with us!" Commandos then began chanting, "You're too late, Baby! You're too late, Baby!" Charles Harper denounced the whole lot as "big mouths... who aren't doing nothing." It took a wedge of Commandos to get Fr. Groppi out of the session and to the scheduled press conference on another floor.<sup>183</sup>

Over the next two days, Washington-area Black Power advocates continued to try to divide between Fr. Groppi from the Commando leaders. While the group lobbied, leaders of Pride, Inc., a local Black Power group, suggested that, in fact, the Commandos were not really civil rights leaders at all because they allowed a white man to be their advisor. The group also attempted to block the participation of Groppi and the

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<sup>182</sup> MJ, 10/1/67, p. 12.

<sup>183</sup> *Concern*, 10/15/67, p. 8; MJ, 9/29/67, p. 1; MJ, 10/1/67, p. 1.

Commandos from a scheduled prayer vigil at the Washington Monument.<sup>184</sup> For a time it appeared that the appeals were taking effect. One Commando admitted,

I was made to feel even more inferior. I was humiliated so much that I found it difficult to speak. I saw that those cats had something, and I began to question the kind of non-violent, privately funded projects we have been undertaking in order to effect changes in the Milwaukee situation.<sup>185</sup>

Ultimately, the flap garnered more media attention than the open housing campaign or the prayer vigil.

In the end, the challenge further solidified the alliance between Fr. Groppi and the YC Commandos and reaffirmed their commitment to their own unique brand of Black Power. At a September 30 press conference at the Simpson Memorial Chapel in Washington, one Commando stated, "Fr. Groppi and ourselves are together. We would die together, even if it meant going to hell. This movement is black and white. It contains people of all colors. We do not turn anyone away who is seeking justice for the blacks and who is willing to work and sacrifice to bring it into existence." Another wrote as they left the capitol,

I advocate Black Power, but not to the point that it stops any people or any man from identifying himself with a Black Power movement, even if he

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<sup>184</sup> The criticism, severely undermined the Methodist Church's attempts to present a united front behind open housing and racial justice. As a result of the conflict, the conference broke into a black and a white caucus and very few African Americans turned-out for the prayer vigil. In the end, the attempt to publicize the Milwaukee campaign to a national audience fizzled. At the initial march, only 100 supporters participated, almost all of them white clergy.

<sup>185</sup> *Concern*, 10/15/67, p. 9. Even Fr. Groppi agreed with some of what the Black Power advocates said. He had struggled from the beginning to cultivate young black male leadership and often acknowledged the problematic nature of his leadership in the Movement and the media attention he received. In addition, circumstances in Milwaukee made it increasingly difficult to stay true to non-violence.

be white, yellow, or green. This is a strong conviction that must come from within the individual. Any man or woman who can cause a people to strive for betterment in truth, be he white or black, is an exceptional kind of man, because he must prove to the black and to the white that he stands for truth, be it on the white or on the black side. Such a man must be able to stand the humiliation on both sides and still stand. Father James E. Groppi is such a man and he is loved by black and white alike.<sup>186</sup>

When the Milwaukee delegation returned home, an inter-racial throng of several hundred met them at the airport, chanting “We love Fr. Groppi!” and “Freedom!” and singing their support for an integrated, non-violent movement. Later, at a St. Boniface rally, the delegation received a standing ovation as they reaffirmed the principles of their Movement. Vel Phillips called the inter-racial open housing campaign “Beautiful” and warned that Milwaukee might prove to be the “last ditch stand for non-violence, a last ditch stand for the church and a last ditch stand for an integrated movement.” Dick Gregory argued that black nationalists nationwide were becoming less anti-white because of the Milwaukee demonstrations. “What we are doing here in Milwaukee is convincing a lot of cats that black nationalism is not a color, it’s an attitude.” When Groppi rose to speak, a group of Commandos swept him onto their shoulders in triumph. “This was a dramatic declaration that the movement would continue non-violently,” one reporter wrote, “it would be integrated, and that Father Groppi’s position of advising the Commandos was in no way changed.”<sup>187</sup>

Fr. Groppi and the YC Commandos had weathered a serious storm. In response to the challenge posed by Washington Black Power advocates, the Commando leadership

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*; MJ, 10/1/67, pt. 2, p. 1; *Catholic Herald Citizen*, 10/7/67, p. 5; MJ, 10/9/67, pt. 2, p. 1.

had not only stepped forth to defend Fr. Groppi as a person, but they also went further to articulate an alternative vision of Black Power that remained non-violent, inter-racial and Church-based. The episode, then, illustrated both the challenge the Milwaukee Movement posed to the dominant formulation of Black Power at the time, as well as the difficulties of rebuilding the old civil rights coalition.

As fall began to turn to winter in Milwaukee, open housing advocates intensified the economic dynamic of their protest. The racial violence that began with the July civil disorder and continued through the first month and a half of the open housing campaign had leveled a serious blow against tourism revenues. In September, Dick Gregory had issued a formal boycott against several local breweries.<sup>188</sup> The boycott was intended to put economic pressure on local businesses to gain their support for open housing. By October, it was not unusual to hear marchers chanting “No more Schlitz” as they walked by inner core taverns. Sales declined out of solidarity to the boycott and because many tavern-owners feared reprisals if they continued to sell targeted beers. NAACP chapters in seven states and CORE affiliates in 13 states adopted resolutions supporting the Milwaukee boycott. On October 3, 200 demonstrators marched to the Schlitz and Blatz brewery to accentuate their protest. The Mayor’s economic development advisor said the

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<sup>188</sup> The boycott emerged as an off-the-cuff suggestion, at first, and evolved into a formal campaign. Some questioned the choice of Schlitz. According to Frank Aukofer, Schlitz “was a leading force for civic betterment and had, in fact, contributed money to civil rights causes and programs to alleviate the problems of Milwaukee’s black ghetto.” Ben Barkin, who worked as a public relations executive for the company, said that Schlitz was the first Milwaukee brewery to hire African Americans in significant numbers. Aukofer suggested that Gregory probably did not know this history and probably chose the brewery because, with its slogan “The beer that made Milwaukee famous,” it symbolized the city. See Barkin interview; Aukofer, pp. 131-132.

protest was “bad for the city’s image.” One inner core Schlitz distributor told the *Wall Street Journal* that his orders had sunk from 90 cases to one case per week.<sup>189</sup>

In November, the YC expanded its economic protest. The YC urged Milwaukee African Americans and their allies to boycott Christmas shopping and traditional holiday decorations. The aim of what civil rights advocates called “Black Christmas” was to accent the spiritual side of the holiday and to focus more pressure on business leaders to get involved with the open housing issue. As Fr. Groppi explained, “No housing bill, no dollar bill. That is the only language the man downtown understands.” Most business leaders and civic officials opposed the campaign out of economic self-interest. The *Milwaukee Courier* called the protest “unrealistic” and African American business owners in the inner core complained when the YC refused to exempt them from the boycott. John Givens, the former Chairman of MCORE, opposed the boycott, explaining, “In a community like Milwaukee’s inner-city, you’ve got a lot of Christmas’s where people have done the very best that they can do and got whatever little bit they could get, so now we are going to propose a Christmas that is going to be black, in which they don’t get anything. I see enormous psychological damage in that and I won’t participate.”<sup>190</sup>

As a part of the Black Christmas campaign, civil rights marchers made a point by parading through the downtown shopping district and into some of the major department stores. They sang “I’m Dreaming of a Black Christmas” and “Freedom Bells” and chanted “Black Christmas” and other Black Power slogans. In response, the Milwaukee

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<sup>189</sup> *Wall Street Journal* 11/12/67, p. 1; *MJ*, 9/13/67 p. 1; *MJ*, 9/26/67, p. 1.

<sup>190</sup> *Wall Street Journal* 11/12/67, p; *Courier*, 11/18/67, p. 2; Givens interview.

chapter of the Deacons for Defense joined with the Milwaukee Citizens' Civic Voice to create "Yule Patrols" to "protect" downtown shoppers from open housing protesters, a move that probably heightened fears, rather than diminished them. On December 18, the 20 members of the Yule Patrol, wearing white armbands with the words "Merry Christmas," confronted roughly 200 Black Christmas demonstrators in the major downtown shopping area. YC members shouted "Uncle Tom" at the Deacons for Defense while the Yule Patrol replied "Go follow your white slave master." Beyond the contesting chants, though, no incident occurred.<sup>191</sup>

Many reports indicated that business was off significantly in the downtown shopping area during the holiday shopping season. The *Wall Street Journal* wrote that the Black Christmas campaign promised to "leave a coal in the stocking of many a downtown merchant." Their analysis suggested that retail, restaurant and theater patronage were all down an average of 20-30% over the previous year. Hotels and motels reported a 20% drop in business since the July civil disturbance, restaurants a 25% dip and convention inquiries a 40% decline. The *Milwaukee Journal* said day time sales remained steady, but night time sales in the core were off by 25%. It was unclear, though, to what extent the impact was the result of the Black Christmas campaign. Undoubtedly, months of racial violence had put fear in the minds of many white shoppers who then declined to come downtown because they believed it unsafe.<sup>192</sup>

The Black Christmas campaign definitely had an effect on the inner core. According to journalist Frank Aukofer, the protest was "highly successful in that it kept

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<sup>191</sup> MJ, 12/19/67, p. 22.

<sup>192</sup> *Wall Street Journal* 11/12/67, p. 1; MJ, 11/9/67, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ 12/18/67, pt. 2, p. 2.

the inner core area bleak for the holidays.” Few residents strung holiday lights or extensive Christmas displays. Some put out images of a black Jesus, instead. It is unclear to what extent the lack of holiday decorations was the result of community support for the Black Christmas campaign and to what extent it emanated from a fear of retaliation. Rumors of threats, violence and intimidation by Commandos against those who did not go along with the protest swirled through the inner core. The Commandos denied the allegations.

The Black Christmas campaign culminated at midnight mass on Christmas morning. Fr. Groppi, wearing only his black vestments, asked the integrated standing-room crowd, “I wonder how many of the 27,000 people on the south side who signed that petition [opposing open housing and calling for a referendum] realize they are playing the part of the innkeeper in turning out Christ? I wonder what the members of the Common Council think tonight when they hear the words, ‘No room in the inn,’ and when they vote against open housing?” The mass ended with a series of Christmas carols “with a little bit of soul added.” Afterward, 425 supporters took to the streets for a two-hour march through the North Side, the 120 consecutive day of open housing protest in Milwaukee.<sup>193</sup>

The YC and Commandos continued to lead marches into March, but the Milwaukee open housing campaign began to lose steam after the holiday season. The number of supporters at rallies and demonstrations fluctuated between several hundred and a few dozen while the proportion of white participants grew to 40-70%. With the Wisconsin winter freeze setting in, school in session and open conflict in the streets

diminished, national media attention strayed to other pressing issues, particularly the war in Vietnam. In addition, the December compromise had tempered some passions in the city over the issue.

Even within civil rights circles, the open housing campaign began to wane. Fr. Groppi, still travelling extensively, began to drift into other issues. Martin Luther King asked Groppi and the Commandos to participate in the upcoming Poor People's Campaign. Another death of a black man at the hands of Milwaukee police stirred new conflict between police and the African American community. In February and March, the Commandos supported a series of protests at inner core schools over the absence of black history textbooks and the lack of "soul food" in cafeterias. Urban League Chairman, Wesley Scott, suggested that the Commandos might be hired as guards at schools and in the core. Internal divisions also emerged within the Commandos which would ultimately lead to a split between those still advocating direct action and those wanting to move into community organizing. Mayor Maier continued his "Crusade for Resources," now focusing on securing federal monies through the Model Cities Program.<sup>194</sup> In March, Fr. Groppi resigned as direct action advisor for the MNAACP, followed quickly by the resignation of Walter Hoard as President of the MNAACP. The move signaled a return of the local NAACP branch to more traditional, moderate leadership.

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<sup>193</sup> *The Marquette Tribune*, 1/5/68, p. 3; MJ, 12/21/67, p. 4; MJ, 12/26/67, pt. 2, p. 4.

<sup>194</sup> The Model Cities Program was a massive federal program to fund efforts aimed at combating slums and revitalizing urban neighborhoods.



During the same period, the primary focus of the campaign shifted to the impending city-wide open housing referendum scheduled for April. Civil rights supporters, acknowledging that victory was probably impossible, feared that the referendum might spur a new round of conflict between extremists on both sides, further damaging the city's national reputation. On March 4, though, an ACLU lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the referendum finally made its way to Federal Judge Robert Tehan. Tehan ruled, "in an historic decision with implications for cities all over the country," that the city could not hold a referendum that would prohibit passage of an open housing measure. In turning away the measure, Judge Tehan called the referendum "patently unconstitutional if enacted into law" and said it would "do great irreparable injury not only to the plaintiff and his class [African Americans] but to the city as a whole" by encouraging "further racial unrest" and "a longer, hotter summer in 1968." He went on to explain,

Without question the record reveals that the resolution is intended to and, if passed, will secure to those desirous of discriminating in the area of housing their 'right' so to do for a period of two years at least... The record contains uncontroverted testimony that if the resolution is enacted into law, the Common Council will abide by it by refusing to consider any open housing legislation while it remains on the books. Council members would be happy to consider themselves bound by this expression of the will of the people, constitutional or not, and refuse to act."

City officials decided not to challenge Tehan's ruling.<sup>195</sup>

Following the ruling, the YC and Commandos decided to suspend their open housing campaign on March 14, the 200th consecutive night of protests. Alderman

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<sup>195</sup> MJ, 3/5/68, p. 1; MS, 3/5/68, p. 1; Courier, 3/9/68, p. 1; Aukofer, p. 135.

Phillips and Fr. Groppi led 325 supporters, one final time, through North Side neighborhoods. "Open housing isn't the only civil rights struggle," Richard Green said. "In order to obtain all our equal rights, we're going to have to work on all our problems, such as employment, education and what have you." With that, Milwaukee's dramatic open housing campaign appeared to come to an anti-climactic end.<sup>196</sup>

The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, provided a last chapter to the Milwaukee open housing movement. In the wake of King's death, a spasm of racial violence ripped through dozens of American cities, but not in Milwaukee. At a requiem mass at St. Boniface, Fr. Groppi told the gathering,

I know tensions are going to rise in our community. It's not really a question at this time of what we would want to do, it's a question of what Dr. Martin Luther King would want us to do. Dr. King was a nonviolent man. Many of us disagreed with him... [But] at this time we must do what he would want us to do - he being of the nonviolent philosophy, I think this is the honor we owe to him.<sup>197</sup>

In addition, YC members and Commandos visited local taverns to encourage them to close their doors out of respect to King.

On the following Sunday, 7,000 local residents attended a formal memorial service sponsored by the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance. Because Mayor Maier was a featured speaker, the YC and Commandos boycotted and held their own service in Garfield Park. Fr. Groppi continued to urge the younger, more militant crowd to remain nonviolent. Then, on Monday, April 8, an estimated 15,000 persons participated in a

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<sup>196</sup> MJ, 3/15/68, p. 1; MS, 3/15/68, p. 1; MJ, 3/16/68, p. 14.

<sup>197</sup> Quoted in Aukofer, p. 142.

memorial march through the inner core and downtown Milwaukee. While a few young people broke dozens of windows along the route, the march remained overwhelmingly orderly, especially compared to incidents in other cities. The demonstration was also one of the largest held for the slain civil rights leader anywhere in the nation. Frank Aukofer credited the Commandos with maintaining order. “[They] did the yeoman duty in policing the march,” he said. “They kept the ranks dressed, chased youngsters who threw rocks, guarded stores where windows had been broken, and generally maintained order while city police stayed inconspicuously in the background.”<sup>198</sup>

Shocked that the nation’s leading advocate of nonviolence had been brutally slain, Congress quickly moved to pass the 1968 Civil Rights Act, which featured a strong open housing measure. President Johnson signed the bill into law three days after the Milwaukee memorial march. Seizing the political moment, Mayor Maier, who had steadfastly opposed a city-wide law, endorsed a local ordinance that mirrored the new federal bill. According to Vel Phillips, “[The Mayor’s switch] smacks of what white America has done to black America for centuries. It’s gutless and heartless at the same time.” On April 30, the Common Council, which had seven new members after the April 2 election, surprised most people by passing a city-wide ordinance that *surpassed* the federal law and covered an estimated 90% of all Milwaukee dwellings. Fr. Groppi called the Council’s vote “a significant victory” and said, “We’re not forgetting we had to pay for the victory at a great price. A lot of people went to jail. A lot of people got sore feet.” Vel Phillips was cautiously optimistic: “The council has given me hope. Maybe

the white power structure recognizes the frustrations of the black community.” What 200 consecutive nights of marching and dozens of incidents of racial violence could not accomplish, the murder of Martin Luther King and the threat of wholesale violence apparently did.<sup>199</sup>

While the Milwaukee campaign ultimately secured a strong, city-wide open housing ordinance, it also spurred other positive gains for local African Americans. The campaign forced many people to confront and work to solve inner core problems that had been mounting for years. No longer could the white power structure ignore the struggles of black people in Milwaukee. Over time, they became increasingly responsive. This brought tangible results, as well. By July of 1968, 26 communities in or near metropolitan Milwaukee had passed open housing laws; the County Board of Supervisors also approved a measure. The Wisconsin state legislature allocated \$4.75 million for special programs, most in the inner core, and stipulated that people in the community be given a voice in how the funds would be used. Similarly, the Commandos received state and federal funding to work with young black men who had just been released from jail or prison. The Mayor convinced the Common Council to approve a proposal for the national Model City program, a move that signaled that the city had finally, and officially, recognized the problems of racial inequality and poverty in Milwaukee. Maier also reorganized the Commission on Community Relations to work

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<sup>198</sup> MS, 4/8/68, p. 1; MJ, 4/8/68, p. 1; Aukofer, pp. 142-143.

<sup>199</sup> Courier, 5/4/68, p. 1; Courier, 5/11/68, p. 2; Aukofer, pp. 143-144; Bartell and Stege, “The Mediation of Civil Rights Disputes: Open Housing In Milwaukee.”

on his “War on Prejudice,” including opening offices in poor communities throughout the city. In 1968, the mayor appointed John Givens, the former head of the Milwaukee chapter of CORE, as the first African American to serve as a mayoral assistant. And, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce committed resources to find summer jobs for inner core youth and permanent employment for chronically unemployed workers.<sup>200</sup>

Yet, problems persisted. Mayor Maier argued that “There was a chance [after the riot], I believed, for a united effort to gain resources and meet the problems of the central city. However, the Groppi marches, ostensibly over a symbolic issue - central city-only open housing - created a degree of violence and civic tension that destroyed the possibility.”<sup>201</sup> No doubt, the open housing campaign brought resistance to the fore, deepened racial divisions and entrenched the more radical elements on both sides of the issue. But, it is unclear to what extent city officials, given their woeful history of inaction on the problems of the inner core, would have in fact acted in significant ways. In addition, relations between Milwaukee police and local African Americans remained severely strained. White Milwaukeeans in large numbers also continued to oppose the introduction of black people into their neighborhoods. They focused on the tactics of demonstrators and the symptoms of poverty and racial inequality - as they had in past civil rights campaigns - rather than on the root causes of the urban crisis. As a result, the clamor for “law and order” grew louder. Most white residents remained willfully ignorant of African American history and experience in their city. Ignorance, fear and

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<sup>200</sup> Aukofer, pp. 137-146; Maier, pp. 122-125.

<sup>201</sup> Maier, p. 94.

misperception combined to quicken the flow of white residents out of the city and to the suburbs. Lastly, loan and real estate practices continued to be skewed, racially, and the overall lack of resources among most black Milwaukeeans limited their housing mobility, even with the newly won right; the struggle continued.

In the end, the open housing campaign represented the climax of the direct action era in Milwaukee's civil rights movement. It unified the local black community and showed that a prolonged, integrated, "not-violent" and church-based movement could be sustained in the urban North, as it had been in the South. Dick Gregory called the Milwaukee campaign a "testing ground for similar activities around the country."<sup>202</sup> Amid growing black nationalism, racial separatism and organized violence, the Milwaukee Movement stood out. In this regard, despite the massive resistance of thousands of local whites, the frustrating inaction by city officials, and the unresolved inequalities in other areas, the open housing campaign offered hope in an atmosphere that seemed increasingly hopeless. It issued a challenge to the ascendant formulation of Black Power, nationally, and suggested another way might still be possible. Fr. Groppi, the NAACP Youth Council and the Commandos, who had all achieved significant celebrity for their work, successfully aroused the conscience of the nation to the evil of segregated housing. For many, Milwaukee became the focus of the national open housing movement. Like Selma, the campaign was a call to conscience for white clergymen and women religious across the country, particularly throughout the North. Ultimately, it seems fair to say that the 200 nights of demonstrations in Milwaukee had played a role in the passage of the strong federal open housing measure included in the

1968 Civil Rights Act. Indeed, according to Stephen Meyer, an authority on segregation and housing in the post-war era, “Without the exposure of white resistance by the militant, direct action of Operation Open City in Chicago or Fr. Groppi’s marches in Milwaukee, many northern whites would have continued to believe that racism existed only in the South.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Quoted in Meyer, p. 196.

<sup>203</sup> Meyer, p. 210.

## Chapter 8

### **“This is No Longer a Protest, This is a Revolution”: The Decline of Direct Action in Milwaukee, 1968-1970**

On Sunday, September 21, 1969, Fr. James Groppi led a coalition of welfare mothers, social workers, college students, poor African Americans and Latinos in a march from Milwaukee to Madison to protest proposed cuts in the state's welfare budget. Republican Governor Warren Knowles had called a special session of the legislature the following week to consider his proposal for more aid to urban anti-poverty programs. As the “Welfare Mothers March” made its way toward the state capitol, many local people brought homemade casseroles, breads and fruit to sustain the poverty advocates. Farmers and churches opened their doors each night to the weary protesters. John Dequardo, Waukesha County Deputy Sheriff, who joined the marchers as they moved through his territory, sported buttons he received from demonstrators saying, “I support a guaranteed adequate income for all Americans” and “Welfare Rights Now!” and another with the insignia of a Milwaukee Latin American youth organization. When the protesters left Waukesha County, Dequardo told Fr. Groppi, “Give ‘em hell Father,” while his white partner raised his fist in salute. Others were not so gracious or supportive. A man standing outside an Oconomowoc tavern shouted, “Fight poverty, get a job!” Many local businesses locked their doors and set out “Closed” signs as marchers strode by. One tavern owner closed up instead of allowing marchers to seek shelter from sub-50 degree



temperatures and a driving rain. In Hubbleton, Wisconsin, the entire business district shut down for the day and Waterloo residents directed “considerable hostility” toward the demonstrators.<sup>1</sup>

As the state capitol came into sight, the ranks of the Welfare Mothers began to swell to over 100 from an average of 35 during the week. On Sunday, September 28, the marchers made their way toward the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus for a planned rally on Library Mall. Hundreds of supporters joined their ranks, including dozens of welfare recipients from across the state. More than 1,000 people - many UW-Madison students - turned out to greet the weary protesters and hear mothers on welfare demand that the legislature restore funds to programs aiding the poor. Diane Neitzel, president of the Washington County Welfare League, told the crowd, “We are the people - all of the people... These cuts are aimed at the children and we fight for them.” A Mexican American welfare mother from Milwaukee spoke in broken English and fought back tears as she questioned the priorities of a state budget that allocated millions of dollars for airline and transportation services, but only 16 cents per meal for adult welfare recipients. Fr. Groppi told the crowd, “There’s something wrong with a country that places so much emphasis on the military and cannot feed its own children.” He further promised, “We did not march 90 miles for nothing. We will be as nice as we can be and as mean as we have to see that something is done for the children of the mothers on the march. Whatever we have to do, we’re going to do... We’re tired of getting crumbs off

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<sup>1</sup> Courier, 9/20/69, p. 1; MJ, 9/23/69, pt. 2, p. 1; MJ, 9/24/69, pt. 2, p. 8; *Madison Capital Times*, 9/25/69, p. 2; MJ, 9/25/69, pt. 2, p. 12; *Madison Capital Times*, 9/26/69, p. 2; MJ, 9/27/69, pt. 2, p. 3; *Madison Capital Times*, 9/27/69, p. 1; *Wisconsin State Journal*, 9/28/69, section 3, p. 3

[the legislature's] table of abundance. We're going to knock that table right out from under them."<sup>2</sup>

Following a similar rally at Library Mall on Monday, an estimated 3,000 people, stretching for more than two and one half blocks, marched up State Street to the capitol building to make their case to the legislature. The demonstrators, following the lead of Fr. Groppi, several Commandos and a group of Latino "Brown Berets," circled the Capitol building, chanted "Power to the People" and snarled traffic. Local police officers watched as the protesters mounted the capitol stairs and entered the building through the West-side doors. Fr. Groppi told the throng, "We have taken over the Capitol building. We have captured the building. We need people to bring in food. We don't intend to leave." The crowd responded with cheers, peace signs and more choruses of "Power to the People." Assemblyman Barbee was the only legislator to meet the group inside the capitol. He welcomed them and said "Don't worry about accusations of stopping the legislature's work. The legislature has not done any significant work all year." He went on, saying, "I am happy to see you recognize the need for change and that you're using your own rules to bring about change, rather than the system's rules." Groppi and Jesus Salas, director of the United Migrant Opportunity Services, then led demonstrators to the doors of the Assembly Chamber as several hundred others filled the upstairs gallery. Finding the heavy leather doors locked, Fr. Groppi and Salas summonsed a group of Commandos and Brown Berets who proceeded to knock them down with a few well-

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<sup>2</sup> MJ, 9/29/69, pt. 2, p. 1; *Wisconsin State Journal*, 9/28/69, section 3, p. 3; MS, 9/29/69, p. 1 and 12; See also, Dismas Becker interview with Patrick Jones, 11/19/98 and 1/27/99.

placed shoulder charges. The doors broke from their hinges and slammed to the floor allowing nearly one thousand protesters to stream inside.<sup>3</sup>

The protest quickly took on a carnivalesque atmosphere. According to reports in the *Milwaukee Journal*,

Where the clerks normally sit and record the day's events, angry welfare marchers strode on the desk top, leading songs, chanting slogans and making speeches amidst loaves of bread, jars of peanut butter and mayonnaise and packages of baloney.

The thronelike chair where the assembly speaker should sit was occupied, at various times, by mothers, squirming children and orators who were using it and the speaker's podium for something to stand on. The last occupant was a bushy haired young man, leaning back with his feet folded comfortably on the rostrum, making a call on the speaker's telephone.

In front of them milled the people, sometimes as many as 1,200, counting the jammed galleries.

Speaker after speaker rose to talk about the plight of poor people in Wisconsin. As they spoke, paper airplanes made from legislative documents sailed through the air, college students strummed guitars and welfare mothers chased after their children. Following a brief attempt by legislators to enter the room, the Speaker of the Assembly moved to adjourn the session and most lawmakers fled the building. The welfare protestors occupied the Capitol building for a total of 11 hours before being ejected by law enforcement officials around midnight. The takeover was an unprecedented chapter in the history of the Wisconsin legislature.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Madison Capital Times*, 9/30/69, p.1; *The Wisconsin State Journal*, 9/30/69, p. 1; *MJ*, 9/30/69, p. 1; *MS*, 9/30/69, p. 1; Becker interview.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

The next day, as welfare marchers again circled the Capitol, hundreds of National Guardsmen with fixed bayonets kept order while angry legislative leaders, most of them conservative Republicans, vowed to kill the Governor's emergency poverty measures and make Fr. Groppi pay. Turning to a long-ignored 1848 law, Assemblyman James Sensenbrenner, Jr., introduced a measure declaring Groppi in contempt of the legislature and ordering him to jail for six months or until the legislative session ended. Fr. Groppi's supporters argued that legislators had circumvented due process and Lloyd Barbee complained that to "sock it to a priest is as low as you can go." The priest's opponents claimed the move was necessary to preserve order and stave off anarchy. In the end, the Assembly voted 72-24 in favor of the contempt citation.<sup>5</sup> By that point, though, local police had already arrested Fr. Groppi at a nearby Catholic Church for disorderly conduct. As officers led him away, he said, solemnly, "Pray for me."<sup>6</sup>

The Welfare Mother's March represented a final gasp of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee. Following the open housing demonstrations, the militant phase of the civil rights movement quickly declined. By 1970, Milwaukee activists increasingly moved in new directions. Between the end of the open housing campaign and the Welfare Mothers March, civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee waned.

There were a variety of reasons for this shift. Overall, the national and local political climate had changed. Much of the public had wearied of more than a decade of

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<sup>5</sup> Ten days after the Assembly's vote, a federal judge overturned the Assembly citation and freed Groppi. An appeals court disagreed, but in 1972 the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the Assembly had violated the priest's rights.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Groppi ultimately served more than a month in jail and the experience rattled him. According to Fr. Dismas Becker, it "killed his spirit." See, MJ, 10/2/69, p. 1; MS, 10/2/69, p. 3; MS, 10/3/69, p. 1; Becker interview.

social and political upheavals and wished for more stable times. Years of social conflict, civil disorder and growing radicalism bred reaction and backlash against the liberal mood of the early and mid-1960s. “Law and order” politics overcame liberal reform. The dashed hopes of the Great Society coupled with the expansion of the war in Vietnam engendered more radical responses to domestic inequalities, including race relations. Growing economic malaise further fueled these new responses on both the political right and left. Law enforcement officials consolidated their powers in an effort to infiltrate and disrupt liberal and leftwing activists networks.<sup>7</sup> In 1968, Richard Nixon captured the White House by exploiting these deep-seated divisions within American society ushering in a new period of political conservatism that has lasted through the present.<sup>8</sup>

There were other reasons for the decline in civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee and other cities, too. The dominant Black Power trends that Milwaukee activists had resisted during the open housing campaign increasingly engulfed the local black community after 1968. A significant portion of the African American community had

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<sup>7</sup> Nationally, political repression was most famously embodied in the COINTELPRO program of the FBI which targeted a variety of organizations and individuals in an effort to infiltrate, disrupt and discredit the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement and many other progressive efforts in America. See, Nelson Blackstone, COINTELPRO: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) and Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret War Against Domestic Dissent (Boston: South End Press, 1990). Locally, the *Milwaukee Courier* reported in the Spring of 1968 that the Milwaukee Police Department tested and considered purchasing a new armored tank with gun ports along the sides and four gun turrets in front. The vehicle could also be electrified to shock anyone touching the outside and emit a high frequency noise intolerable to humans. See, *Courier*, 3/23/68, p. 1. Fr. Groppi's FBI file also makes clear that FBI agents and informants were keeping a close tab on civil rights and anti-war activists in the city.

<sup>8</sup> See, Kevin Phillips, The Emerging Republican Majority (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969); Sara Diamond, Roads to Dominion: Rightwing Movements and Political Power in the United States (New York: Guilford Press, 1995); Godfrey Hodgson, The World Turned Right Side Up (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Dan Carter, From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race and the Conservative Counter Revolution (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1996).

given up on non-violent direct action and inter-racial cooperation, further dividing the black community and alienating liberal white allies. Wracked by divisions, no single issue could unify large numbers of local people for sustained civil rights campaigns as they had over the previous decade. In the same way that Fr. Groppi had moved on to new challenges, many of the young African Americans that had provided the backbone and energy for civil rights insurgency had moved in new directions. Several important YC members got older, outgrew the group and went on to college or full-time employment. Similarly, the Commandos evolved into an institutionalized social service organization. Finally, many who had embraced civil rights activism began to turn to other issues. The anti-war movement, in particular, captured a large proportion of the activist energies in Milwaukee during the late 1960s and early 1970s among black and white residents, as did the flowering of various other social movements during this period. Women's rights, Chicano Power, gay liberation, environmentalism, the American Indian Movement and other progressive struggles fragmented the American left making political coalitions more difficult.<sup>9</sup>

In the short-term, though, Fr. Groppi and a group of Commandos that were loyal to him participated in the SCLC-sponsored Poor People's Campaign in the spring of 1968. Dr. Martin Luther King conceived the Poor People's Campaign as an inter-racial movement of the nation's poor. He envisioned thousands of impoverished Americans

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<sup>9</sup> See, Todd Gitlin, The Sixties: Years of Hope Days of Rage (New York: Bantam, 1993); James Miller, Democracy Is In the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin. America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

descending on Washington, D.C., to make their claims against the federal government and demand a reorientation of legislative priorities. Before King's death, he asked Fr. Groppi and the Commandos to help organize and lead the Midwest contingent to the protest. After King's death, the SCLC promised to follow through with their fallen leader's "last crusade" despite evidence that a majority of white Americans opposed the Poor People's Campaign out of fear of racial violence.<sup>10</sup>

From February through May of 1968, Fr. Groppi and the Commandos helped recruit participants to the Poor People's Campaign in Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Mississippi. At one point, Fr. Groppi flew to Atlanta to greet 500 marchers as they arrived there. Appearing with Coretta Scott King, Ralph Abernathy, Stevie Wonder and Diana Ross and the Supremes, Fr. Groppi told the crowd of 10,000, "We're going up to Washington and march around the capitol the same way Joshua marched around Jericho, and before we give up, the White House is going to come crumbling down."<sup>11</sup> In May, several Commandos flew to Detroit with the priest to join the Midwestern Caravan to the Poor People's Campaign, officially led by Martin Luther King's younger brother, Rev. A.D. King. Because A.D. King was largely an absentee leader, the Commandos took on the primary responsibility of managing the contingent and maintaining order. Following one preliminary rally in Detroit, demonstrators returned to Cobo Hall to find police officers readying to tow away the marchers' stalled communications car. Several Commandos quickly circled the car and

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<sup>10</sup> For a full overview of the Poor People's Campaign, see, Gerald McKnight, The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Unacknowledged May 1968 news clipping in Fr. James Groppi FBI file, part 2.

blocked the police action, explaining that a new battery was on its way. As the standoff built, the two sides exchanged harsh words and a series of threats. When a battalion of mounted police arrived and civil rights activists still refused to budge, a 15-minute melee broke out, with mounted police clubbing marchers and reporters indiscriminately. The “Detroit Incident,” which resulted in 16 injuries, was the only serious violent confrontation involving Poor People’s Campaign demonstrators during the entire protest.<sup>12</sup>

In Washington, D.C., Fr. Groppi met with the U.S. Attorney General on June 4, and threatened to tie up traffic and create a dramatic confrontation with government institutions if legislators did not act. The Poor People’s Campaign, though, fizzled under persistent rain, police repression and a general lack of organization. At “Resurrection City,” the makeshift encampment of poverty protesters, internal unrest mushroomed. According to historian Gerald McKnight, “Turf battles, drunken brawls, protection rackets, and petty theft became common occurrences.” FBI informants inside the city identified Milwaukee Commandos as one of the four groups taking advantage of the deteriorating circumstances and claimed they were armed with “knives, guns or clubs.” When police finally moved in to disband Resurrection City, Groppi and the Commandos peacefully returned home.<sup>13</sup>

Back in Milwaukee, the tight coalition of YC members and Commandos that had sustained the open housing campaign disintegrated. During the spring of 1968, a sub-

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119; FBI “Supplemental Correlational Summary,” 9/30/70, p. 7, Fr. James Groppi FBI file, part 2.



group of the Commandos moved away from direct action and toward community service. As early as September of 1968, three Commando leaders - Hank Walters, James Pierce and Johnnie Davis - approached Julius Modlinski at Marquette University to help them find jobs.<sup>14</sup> According to Jesse Wade,

There were like 6 or 7 of us moving around the universities trying to figure out how we could get some programs started for those guys that they [police] started picking up and putting in jail because a lot of those people who had been marching went to jail who had warrants out for them, but still came out and marched knowing that if they got caught they were going to jail. So we noticed that there were a lot of parolees and probationers out there... So, we began to mobilize in that area.<sup>15</sup>

Modlinski worked with several Commandos in 1967 on a summer youth employment and recreation program and he directed the group toward a more formal social service approach to civil rights that ultimately resulted in the formal separation of the Commandos from the YC and Fr. Groppi. Over the course of the Fall and Winter, as the open housing campaign raged, ten Commandos worked with Modlinski, Wesley Scott of the Urban League and Joe Fagan of the state Industrial Commission to craft a new plan of action. On November 8, the group met with several inner-city school principals to discuss the possibility of developing youth programs. In January, the Commandos submitted a proposal to the state for funds - \$160,176 - to start "Commandos, Inc." Shortly thereafter, they received \$47,000 for a six-month trial program to counsel African American parolees. The group dubbed the effort Commandos Project I (CPI). As Jesse

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<sup>14</sup> For a full overview of the development of the Commandos, Inc., and the Commando Project I, see Julius Modlinski, "Commandos: A Study of a Black Organization's Transformation from Militant Protest to Social Service," Ph.D. Dissertation, UW-Madison, 1978.

<sup>15</sup> Wade interview.

Wade remembered, “[we] had to prove to the fathers of the city that we weren’t just a storm-trooping group.”<sup>16</sup> Increasingly, this nucleus of Commandos turned their attention away from open housing and toward youth development and the ex-offender program. In April of 1968, CPI conducted a series of meetings with county, school and local business leaders to discuss recreational programs for inner core youth. In September, by a party line vote of 4-3, with Republicans providing the opposition, the state legislature approved six more months of funding for CPI. Then, in February of 1969, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce put CPI on more solid long-term footing by allocating \$216,000 to the youth and ex-offender programs. CPI continued its community service programs into the late-1970s.

Some Commandos and other civil rights observers criticized Commandos, Inc., as co-optation by the system. Prentice McKinney called it a “buy-out.”<sup>17</sup> Fr. Dismas Becker, another white priest active in civil rights activism agreed. “A lot of the people who were a part of [civil rights insurgency] got institutionalized,” he explained. “Basically, it was the government’s best weapon. They got those people that were causing the trouble and gave them an institution to run... The Commandos Project I. A lot of them went into community service and the fire went down. The civil rights doors closed.”<sup>18</sup> A number of Commandos preferred that the group stay independent of the “system” and continue to focus on direct action. Many of these people remained loyal to Fr. Groppi and worked with him on new campaigns when needed. For those involved

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> McKinney interview.

<sup>18</sup> Becker interview.

with CPI, though, the program offered the chance to do long-term community work on issues they cared about while also getting paid. According to Paul Crawford, “The original idea was to hire all the Commandos, really, because there were so many guys out of work.”<sup>19</sup> Regardless of these internal dynamics, the establishment of Commandos, Inc., signaled a distinct move away from civil rights insurgency for the Commandos and toward a more institutionalized form of community service.

Meanwhile, in November of 1968, Fr. Groppi resigned as advisor to the NAACP Youth Council. In part, the decision grew out of continuing criticism of the white priest’s role as the leader of the civil rights organization. Even though Milwaukee had stood against the dominant national tide of racial separatism and Black Power during the open housing campaign, those trends eventually overwhelmed the local scene. Both Milwaukee black newspapers embraced cultural nationalism and welcomed the priest’s ouster. A debate raged over the relative merits of the white priest’s involvement in the local African American freedom movement. Fr. Groppi publicly denied claims that he had been forced out of the YC, instead telling reporters that he resigned to organize his parish “along the lines of militant social action involvement.” Furthermore, he said that the YC had become self-sufficient and, if done well, his job as advisor had always been “self-liquidating.” In addition, by the Fall of 1968, Fr. Groppi had become a significant national leader, increasingly involved in the anti-war movement and devoting a decreasing amount of time to YC activities. As a result of this split, the YC virtually disappeared from public notice after the open housing campaign. The group staged brief demonstrations for increased job opportunities at inner core laundries, supported Groppi-

led protests against the Allen-Bradley Company and later worked with the short-lived Milwaukee Black Panther Party to protest racial discrimination at a local movie theater, but, at best, the YC quickly became a marginal player in local racial politics.<sup>20</sup>

Even as the direct action coalition that had sustained the open housing campaign disintegrated, specific issues still had the potential to mobilize short bursts of civil rights insurgency. In between the open housing protests and the Welfare Mothers March, employment discrimination at the Allen Bradley Company spurred a series of demonstrations. Employment discrimination had continued to plague the inner core community ever since the initial organizing efforts of the Milwaukee Negro American Labor Council almost a decade previously.

The case began in March 1968, in Washington, D.C., at the annual governmental affairs meeting of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), a professional association of thirty of the nation's largest black newspaper publishers.<sup>21</sup> According to the *Courier*, the publishers called the meeting to "discuss what they could do toward bettering the black man's condition in this country."<sup>22</sup> On the second morning, Vice President Hubert Humphrey delivered a prepared statement lauding the Johnson Administration's civil rights accomplishments. Later that day, the publishers convened a

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<sup>19</sup> Crawford interview.

<sup>20</sup> Yet, the distinction between Groppi and the YC was not as clear as this might seem. The YC continued to meet at St. Boniface and turned to Fr. Groppi for advice and support whenever necessary.

<sup>21</sup> At this time, most professional associations remained racially segregated. As professor James Jones put it, "If it has the word *National* in the title, that means it is the Negro association. If it says *American* it is the white one. So, the *National Bar Association* is the professional association for black lawyers." Similarly, the NNPA was the main professional association for black newspaper publishers.

<sup>22</sup> *Courier*, 3/23/68, p. 1.

private meeting to discuss Humphrey's remarks. As was his style, President Johnson decided to unexpectedly drop in on the afternoon meeting. Following a few brief remarks by the President, Ken Coulter, the brash, young publisher of the *Milwaukee Star*, immediately raised his hand. Johnson politely agreed to take his question. Coulter calmly rose to his feet and asked, "This morning, the Vice-President came and spoke and I asked him a question. I was hoping I might ask you the same." He retold a horror story about the Allen-Bradley Company, Milwaukee's largest employer and a major manufacturer of motor controls and electronics components. Allen-Bradley, who received in excess of \$30 million in federal contracts, employed a paltry 25 black workers out of a total labor force of 7,500. In addition, the company refused to make any efforts toward recruiting or retaining African American, Jewish American or Latino workers.<sup>23</sup> From Coulter's perspective, Allen-Bradley clearly was not in compliance with federal executive orders relating to employment discrimination. "I asked Vice-President Humphrey what he was going to do about it, and he babbled," Coulter caustically admonishing the President. "So, I now ask you, What is the federal government going to do about this non-compliance with the executive orders?" Johnson looked searchingly around the room, stretched out his finger toward one of his assistant counselors and said, simply, "Do something."<sup>24</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the Solicitor of Labor summoned James Jones, a young African American lawyer in the Labor Department, to his office and commanded him to issue a

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<sup>23</sup> The Allen-Bradley Company was located in the heart of Milwaukee's fast-growing Latino community on the city's near South Side.

<sup>24</sup> Courier, 3/23/68, p. 1; James Jones interview with Patrick Jones, 3/16/97.

complaint against Allen-Bradley. Jones asked, "On the basis of what?" He later recalled "We had a few files and bits and pieces of things, but you just can't go and sue someone because somebody is complaining. You have got to have sufficient evidence to make a case." The Solicitor of Labor had Jones in a trap, though. He replied, "You once told me that you could close your eyes and grab any of the companies that do business with the government and debar them because they're all out of compliance. Well, now is your chance. Jones, realizing his predicament, asked, "Where is this coming from?" "I got word from the White House," came the reply. "The President said do something about Allen-Bradley." Left without much choice, Jones agreed to take the case. With a small staff of three lawyers, Jones boarded an airplane to Milwaukee and began to pull together a case. With that, a federal inquiry into fair employment practices at Milwaukee's largest employer began. It was a landmark case in that it was the first attempt by federal officials to enforce the long string of non-discrimination executive orders dating back to Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>25</sup>

Following his showdown with the President and armed with his assurance of federal action, Ken Coulter returned to Milwaukee and immediately held a press conference reiterating his claims of racial discrimination and unfair employment practices at Allen-Bradley.<sup>26</sup> Neither the *Journal* nor the *Sentinel* carried the story, but the two African American newspapers provided extensive, front-page coverage. Coulter's own paper wrote, "If we of Milwaukee are to avoid what is being now termed a long, hot

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<sup>25</sup> Jones interview.

<sup>26</sup> John Gilman claimed that Allen Bradley was a long-time supporter of the John Birch Society. He said one of the company's presidents was a former John Birch Society National Chairman. He also recalled John Birch literature in Allen-Bradley's lunchroom. See, Gilman interview.

summer, we must get these unemployed Negroes on jobs, because in so doing, they will not have time to 'Burn, Baby, Burn,' but will 'Work, Baby, Work' and 'Learn, Baby, Learn.'"<sup>27</sup>

In April, Jones and his team sent a notice of proposed debarment to Allen-Bradley executives, detailing the charges brought against the manufacturer and the potential ramifications of continued non-compliance. The notice accused the company of failing to fulfill its fair employment obligations as a federal contractor based on the terms of President Johnson's Executive Order 11246. In particular, while the notice made no claim of overt discrimination in hiring, it did highlight the general lack of minority employees at the company and the failure of Allen-Bradley to take "affirmative action" to remedy this discriminatory pattern as mandated by the order.<sup>28</sup>

Federal lawyers pointed to the impact of Allen-Bradley's long-standing "friends and family" hiring policy as their primary concern. In short, the company had, for several decades, maintained a preferential hiring procedure whereby friends or family members received priority in employment decisions with a recommendation from a current employee. It is also important to understand that Allen-Bradley operated a union shop. Anyone hired by the company had to join the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), local 1111. While the UE enjoyed a reputation as a left-dominated union, it also kept cozy relations with the employers at Allen-Bradley. In addition, the UE's majority white membership, who had come to dominate the company's employment pool in an earlier era, did not welcome the possibility of equal

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<sup>27</sup> Star, 3/23/68, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Jones interview; *New York Times*, 5/25/68, p. 70.

employment opportunity among the races.<sup>29</sup> After all, these white workers received tangible employment privileges from the discriminatory system: jobs, seniority and decreased labor market competition. As James Jones explained, “[UE] leaders, supposedly liberal, were as bigoted as anybody else at the time, mainly. The reason was that their members were largely bigoted. And the reason for that was that members had a certain preferred status for already being aboard and white.”<sup>30</sup> Management, then, did not simply impose the friends and family policy on workers or the union. Rather, the policy emerged as a mutually beneficial agreement between management, union leadership and rank and file white workers. Thus, the UE, despite its left reputation, accepted the friends and family policy as a membership perk for its constituency and, in this way, helped support and perpetuate a discriminatory labor system. In the end, the policy provided an effective mechanism to screen local African Americans and Latinos from the work force. While company officials formally terminated the friends and family policy a year prior to federal action, the government’s lawyers argued that the company had not taken “affirmative action,” as mandated by executive order, to remedy the present and continuing effects of the past discriminatory policy.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See, *United Electrical Workers, Radio and Machine Workers of America Papers, Executive Committee Minutes, 1920-1968*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Hereafter referred to as UE Papers. Also, for a general history of the UE, see Ronald Filippelli and Mark McColloch, *Cold War in the Working Class: The Rise and Decline of the United Electrical Workers* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Jones interview.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, Allen-Bradley did not advertise in local newspapers. Also, it refused to use the free placement services provided by the MNAACP, MCORE, MUL and other groups that advocated for local communities of color.



Despite its complicity in the friends and family policy, UE leadership at local 1111 quickly moved to a public stance of support for the federal action. On May 26, the UE issued a statement to the press demanding that Allen-Bradley agree to a non-discrimination clause in their labor agreement.<sup>32</sup> The union's support emanated from practical considerations more than any moral or ethical considerations; they feared the loss of jobs that would come from the loss of government contracts. In a memo to its membership, the executive committee explained,

If this charge is not disproven by the Company, the effects ON THE WORKERS IN THE PLANT could be disastrous. The only ways apparent that the disaster could be avoided would be... if the government finds that the Company does not discriminate, or... if the Company would pledge (probably in writing) to hire more minority group people in the plant as soon as possible.

The union officials estimated that up to 1,500 current jobs would be lost if federal officials debarred Allen-Bradley. The company went on to suggest a private settlement to the conflict: "We request that the Company, and this Union, meet as soon as possible to negotiate an amendment to our Agreement so that it includes a non-discriminatory hiring clause."<sup>33</sup>

Union leaders faced immediate resistance from its membership over their public support of an anti-discrimination clause. First, workers expressed concern that an increase in minority hiring would threaten jobs. This was most dramatically illustrated in

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<sup>32</sup> UE News, 8/11/68, p. 1; MJ, 8/11/68, p. 1; MS, 8/15/68, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Letter titled, "Collision Course," EU Executive Committee to general membership, 6/19/68, p. 1, UE Papers, UE newsreel.

a series of rumors that swept the plant in July and August of 1968. In a memo to the general membership, titled, "Rumors-Confusions," union leaders wrote,

There are some individuals, and some groups of individuals, who, for their **OWN SPECIAL INTERESTS**, are trying to muddy the waters with rumors and distortions. They are trying to undermine the efforts of this Union to negotiate a reasonable settlement of these issues. They don't care about the workers in the plant who would lose their jobs or receive pay cuts through downgrading and transfers if the Union fails. Don't allow yourselves to become victims of their tripe. Their attempts to confuse you are deliberate.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, local 1111 leadership also responded to persistent fears of "reverse discrimination," "quotas" and a wide-spread desire to protect seniority privileges by rank and file white workers in the face of a rapidly changing labor market. At root, white workers feared the loss of the special privileges they had enjoyed because of their race at the expense of African American, Jewish and Latino workers. UE leaders, while understanding the political benefits of public support for change, also had to navigate this treacherous sea of racial animosity, fear and reaction.<sup>35</sup>

As federal officials and union leaders grappled with Allen Bradley and their team of 60 lawyers, a small group of African American and Latino activists began a direct action campaign against the company. In July, Fr. Groppi and the NAACP YC joined the

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<sup>34</sup> Rumors-Confusion," UE News, 8/26/68, UE Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Several years of civil rights confrontation in Milwaukee also stoked white reaction. Moreover, the economic climate of the late-1960s also contributed to deteriorating race relations in Milwaukee. Beginning in the mid-1960s, suburbanization, automation and deindustrialization began to take an initial toll on the industrial base of many Midwestern cities, including Milwaukee. The prosperity that had supported both the ethnic, white working-class and the black migration suddenly started to dissipate. For example, on January 19, 1968, just two months before Ken Coulter's confrontation with the President, the Federal Reserve Chairman announced, "the American economy is in the worst shape its been in since 1931." See, MJ, 1/19/68, p. 1.

brewing controversy. Fresh from their open housing victory, the civil rights activists announced, on August 6, that they had decided to launch a direct action campaign against Allen-Bradley to end job discrimination. Fr. Groppi told local and national media that picketing would begin outside the company gates unless Allen-Bradley promised to hire more minority workers. "Allen-Bradley neither said they had a program nor had any desire to hire black people," he explained. "That is why we feel we are justified in taking direct action."<sup>36</sup> Groppi also suggested that the company should "have a number [of black workers] comparable to the percentage of Negroes in Milwaukee, about 12 percent."<sup>37</sup> In a new twist on Milwaukee civil rights activism, a group of Latinos, primarily Mexican American, also formed a direct action organization and joined forces with the YC, forming a powerful local coalition dedicated to ending discrimination at the large South Side manufacturer. Under the leadership of Armando Orellana, the Milwaukee Latin-American Union for Civil Rights (MLAUCR) demanded that Allen-Bradley hire Latinos based on their proportion in the community, about five percent.<sup>38</sup>

On August 17, 275 African American, Latino and white demonstrators gathered at St. Boniface for a rally. The group heard speeches by Groppi, YC President, Lawrence Friend, Commando direct action chairman, Joe McClain, and Bill Robinson, vice-president of the UAW local 1486 at the International Harvester plant. Following the rally, the protest supporters set out for the South Side. The demonstration grew to more

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<sup>36</sup> Courier, 8/10/68, p. 4. Similar statements appear in materials located in Groppi Papers, boxes 14 and 15.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, 8/11/68, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> MS, 8/12/68, p. 1; MJ, 8/14/68, p. 1.

than 400 as they marched in front of the company gates. The scene was repeated over the next few days without serious incident.<sup>39</sup>

The impact of the direct action campaign was significant. With pickets, demonstrations and a few disorderly conduct arrests came a new wave of local and national media attention. Milwaukee's two mainstream newspapers had failed to give more than cursory coverage to the case between March and July. But they published 19 articles on the Allen-Bradley case in August alone, the majority of which focused on the actions and statements of the coalition.<sup>40</sup> Fr. Groppi's statements prompted the *New York Times* to run a lengthy article on potential picketing at Allen-Bradley.<sup>41</sup> With heightened media attention came increased local awareness and outrage which spurred further pressure on Allen-Bradley executives to act. As James Jones recalled, "[The civil rights coalition] generated important community pressure by demonstrating. The newspapers and media covered it. Their direct action supplied the media story that only the black press had carried previously. So, they drummed up the political firestorm necessary to get Allen-Bradley moving."<sup>42</sup>

After a series of meeting, hearings, considerable wrangling over a series of proposals, and under renewed threats of debarment, federal officials and Allen-Bradley lawyers hammered out a mutually acceptable agreement on April 24, 1969. Fr. Groppi, speaking on behalf of the YC, called the agreement "too weak" and "just a lot of words

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<sup>39</sup> Courier, 10/17/68, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> The MJ ran articles on August 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21. The MS published pieces on August 12, 15, 16, 17, 21, 22 and 23.

<sup>41</sup> *New York Times*, 8/11/68, p. 41.

<sup>42</sup> Jones interview.

and we're not interested in words." He further stated, "We want information. We want to know how many blacks and Latins the company employs and where they are working." As a result of their disappointment with the agreement, Fr. Groppi and more than a dozen YC members and Commandos briefly picketed the company again in August of 1969. Dr. Benjamin Spock, the noted baby doctor and ardent anti-war activist, joined the protest. The brief spate of picketing turned ugly when a group of white workers attacked several demonstrators as they blocked their entrance to the plant. As a result of the melee, police again arrested Fr. Groppi and three other activists on charges of disorderly conduct.<sup>43</sup> Latino community leaders maintained a more upbeat outlook. Armando Orellana stated, "We consider the ruling... a victory for the Latin American people. We are encouraged. More Latin Americans are working for Allen-Bradley." Orellana also suggested that because of the decision against Allen-Bradley other Milwaukee businesses had become more concerned about their executive order obligations.<sup>44</sup> In retrospect, James Jones concluded, "Without the pressure of local people, I don't think this would have happened."<sup>45</sup>

Fast on the heels of the Allen-Bradley demonstrations, a group of Milwaukee welfare mothers and social workers approached Fr. Groppi through the Council on Urban Life to lead their protest of the proposed cuts in the state budget. The welfare reform movement in Wisconsin mirrored a national political trend during the late-1960s and early 1970s. President Richard Nixon, federal lawmakers and welfare rights advocates

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<sup>43</sup> MJ, 8/19/69, p. 1; MJ, 8/22/69, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Business Week*, 1/11/69, p. 90.

<sup>45</sup> Jones interview.

tussled over the direction and content of these reforms for several years. A renewed acknowledgement of persistent poverty collided with a growing national fiscal crisis and a “new conservatism” to make for contentious politics.<sup>46</sup> In Wisconsin, state legislators spearheaded an effort to trim benefits to the poor. The move outraged civil rights leaders, poverty advocates and liberal politicians throughout the state, but particularly in Milwaukee, where a disproportionate number of poor people lived. The link between racial discrimination and poverty was clear to many activists. “Most people saw the connection between welfare reform and racism,” Fr. Dismas Becker explained. “While the majority of people on welfare were not black, proportionally there were more black people on welfare than white people. So, people made the connection that poverty and minority-ism were [linked]. And it was also a lack of job opportunities. The result of racism was poverty.”<sup>47</sup>

As the march from Milwaukee to Madison proceeded, the campaign appeared to be picking up steam with growing popular support. In large measure this was due to Fr. Groppi and the Commandos’ participation. Because of the group’s participation in the open housing campaign, they had the ability to draw significant public attention to the issue. According to Becker, though, “The thing exploded [when Groppi] went to campus and gave a talk there encouraging students to join them and 3,000 students joined them. That just magnified and terrified everyone when they saw 3,000 people walking up State

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<sup>46</sup> Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, Poor People’s Movements: How They Succeed and Why They Fail (New York: Random House, 1979).

<sup>47</sup> Becker interview.

Street.”<sup>48</sup> With the takeover of the Assembly chamber, the Welfare Mother’s March lost the head of steam it had built over the previous two weeks of planning, organizing and peaceful marching. Immediately, the media and public opinion turned harshly against the demonstrators. Again, Fr. Becker explained:

[The impact of the takeover was] negative, very negative. We were working to put together a good coalition of people to pressure [the legislature]. The Governor was on our side and it basically tied the hands of the Governor because it became so political and people were so upset by this rowdy crowd that he wasn’t able to do anything... Groppi had essentially taken over the seat of government and the legislature met across the street, in essence a government in exile if you want to put it that way... I said to [Groppi] ‘What are you doing here? This is no longer a protest, this is a revolution.’ And he just shrugged it off. We lost everything there.”<sup>49</sup>

While the Welfare Mothers March linked to the protest politics of the previous decade, it also underscored the changed dynamics of the late 1960s. While Fr. Groppi led the campaign and a number of loyal YC members and Commandos participated, the priest no longer operated from a formal institutional base outside the Church. In addition, the significant participation of Latinos in both the Allen-Bradley demonstrations and the 1969 march to Madison suggested the fast changing urban demographics of race and ethnicity. No longer would city politics play out along simple lines of black and white. A growing influx of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Latin American populations would complicate the coalition politics in most large northern cities, including Milwaukee. Moreover, the massive infusion of student participation in the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

takeover of the Assembly chambers indicated the degree to which Vietnam and the anti-war effort had eclipsed civil rights as the galvanizing activist issue of the day. Welfare activists also confronted the new politics of white backlash as conservative political leaders moved to curtail the liberal gains of the previous decade and a fatigued public increasingly opposed confrontational direct action tactics and the growing radical spirit. The liberal moment had passed and a new era of conservatism and “law and order” dawned. Reform possibilities diminished in proportion to these altered political trends. According to Fr. Dismas Becker,

[The Kennedy Administration and Johnson Administration] were really liberal and liberalism stimulates protest. Nixon came in and was much more [conservative]... and people didn't see the opportunity there. Federal money was thrown into communities and was basically used as a divider between the different political forces. Then that money dried up... It was a trough. Good people, but needy people got money. Then, not so good people got a lot of money [and civil rights activism declined.]<sup>50</sup>

Civil rights activism in Milwaukee, of course, did not simply revolve around the NAACP Youth Council, the Commandos or Fr. James Groppi; there were many others struggling for racial justice in a myriad of ways. Vel Phillips and Orville Pitts, the second African American Common Council member, continued to work on a variety of issues through traditional political channels.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Lloyd Barbee kept raising his voice for racial justice and “human rights” in the state legislature. Moderate local civil rights groups attempted to register black voters to increase African American political

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



power. For his part, Mayor Henry Maier still pushed his metropolitan-wide political agenda as well as his “Crusade for Resources.” In addition, the Organization of Organizations (OOO) fought to secure federal and state monies earmarked for urban renewal and civil rights and to make local institutions live up to the promise of “maximum feasible participation of the poor” in the use and distribution of that funding. And, there were innumerable formal and informal expressions of race pride, cultural national, community organizing and economic independence within Milwaukee’s African American community.

Perhaps the most significant organization to emerge out of the changed circumstances of the late-1960s and early 1970s was the short-lived Milwaukee chapter of the Black Panther Party (MBPP). Established in 1969 only to be dissolved by the Central Committee of the national organization that same year due to “counter-revolutionary leadership” then reincorporated again in 1971, the MBPP embraced racial separatism and armed self-defense. While the MBPP never became a significant force in the city, it did institute a number of social service programs for inner core residents, including free busing to prison for convicts’ family members, a free health center, a free daycare center, an egg cooperative, a community blood bank and a free breakfast program for poor children. The MBPP also published a newsletter, monitored local police activities and performed other practical services for inner core black residents, like

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<sup>51</sup> Vel Phillips jokingly asserted that Pitts’ election to the Common Council created an instantaneous “Black Caucus” in city government. In fact, as the only two African Americans on the Council, the two representatives did often consult one another about issues of concern to inner core residents.

filling in potholes, finding temporary housing for African American evictees and pressuring local businesses to hire more minority workers.<sup>52</sup>

In many ways, though, one chapter of the civil rights movement had clearly closed in Milwaukee while a new one had opened. The era of direct action - of civil rights insurgency - had ended and a new phase in the black freedom struggle began. Civil rights activists in Milwaukee had effectively seized the moment, identified a set of problems facing local African Americans, organized around them, achieved some gains and suffered some defeats, and in doing so had transformed the political landscape. By 1970, the local and national contexts had changed dramatically and the struggle needed to reassess its goals, strategies and tactics by responding to the altered circumstances. This new phase of political activism was no less important than the era of direct action, but it was distinct. By 1970, the era of sustained, militant direct action ended in Milwaukee and an era of community organizing, cultural and electoral politics began.

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<sup>52</sup> For a full overview of the Black Panther Party in Milwaukee, see Andrew Witt, "Self-Help and Self-Defense: A Reevaluation of the Black Panther Party with Emphasis on the Milwaukee Chapter," MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1999.

### **“We Are Destined...”: A Conclusion**

On February 28, 1990, Milwaukee Alderman Michael McGee announced the formation of the Black Panther Militia. The group’s manifesto, like that of the original group in 1965, turned the promise of America’s founding document on its head. “We are destined,” it said, “for incarceration, death and complete and absolute sadness, instead of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness promised by the Declaration of Independence.” In March, McGee threatened all-out guerrilla warfare in Milwaukee – including sniper attacks, severed electrical wires and burning tires on freeways – if government officials did not direct millions of dollars toward economic development, health care and emergency employment programs in the inner core by the end of 1995. “The kind of fight I’m talking about bringing to Milwaukee,” he said, “is the kind that once it starts here, it’s gonna spread throughout the country. It’s the white establishment’s worst nightmare. You can’t cope with an internal enemy, underground, tied up into the fabric of society. So that means that any black anywhere could be a sympathizer or a member – and I’ve got white members.”

But Michael McGee did not appear to be a typical radical situated along the fringes of society. Happily married for twenty years and the father of nine children, he had much to lose. McGee earned a bronze star for his service in Vietnam and worked with a variety of established institutions on community development before being elected

to the Common Council in 1984, where he represented the inner core. During the ensuing years, McGee became frustrated with the inaction of local government in the face of an ever-deepening urban crisis in Milwaukee. By 1990, he decided that more confrontational tactics were needed to prod the city's power structure to action.

Michael McGee's incendiary comments and apocalyptic vision brought the urban crisis in Milwaukee renewed national attention. Some people dismissed his threat as the misplaced rantings of a lunatic. Others were enraged and recoiled at the suggestion of violence as a means to change. Many, though, took McGee's promise seriously. Regardless of what people thought about Michael McGee, the Black Panther Militia, or their warning, it was impossible to deny that the urban crisis that had animated thousands of local people during the 1960s, continued to rage unabated in Milwaukee's central city.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

The story of race relations and civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee during the 1960s forcefully illustrates that there was, indeed, a "Northern movement." That Movement was aware of and responding to the Southern movement for racial justice, but it grew primarily from the peculiar circumstances of the urban North. In Milwaukee between 1958 and 1970, a series of indigenous leaders, local organizations and coalitions coalesced around a series of issues - employment, public education, the membership of public officials in private clubs, police-community relations, housing and welfare rights - to challenge racial inequality. Their principal tactic in these campaigns was non-violent direct action, though they evolved toward "not-violence" and riots did occur. Milwaukee

civil rights activists hoped to use an increasingly confrontational direct action strategy to pressure established institutions to respond to the problems facing inner core residents. Along the way, they provoked “massive resistance” and street violence from thousands of white Milwaukeeans.

At its national zenith during the open housing campaign, the Milwaukee Movement seemed to many the last stand of the liberal, non-violent, inter-racial, church-based challenge to the American racial caste system. As the national Movement increasingly embraced a vision of Black Power that included violence, racial separatism and black radicalism, Milwaukee civil rights activists stood against the tide by fashioning their own version of Black Power rooted in local circumstances. While the dominant national trends ultimately engulfed Milwaukee, too, the story confirms recent scholarship that suggests Black Power was not as monolithic as we have conceived it and that its roots stretch back well before it became a popular slogan in 1966.

The Milwaukee Movement demonstrates the significance of local stories to civil rights history and highlights the way dramatic large-scale economic and demographic changes affected social relations in urban America. Milwaukee civil rights activism during this period suggests the possibilities and limitations of nonviolent direct action as an effective tactic for change, but also underscores the deep well of white reaction that fueled political backlash and the emergence of a new racially-driven conservatism. Finally, it uncovers the complex dynamics of African American community leadership and activism while also revealing the way local, state and national institutions interacted through the politics of the urban crisis in America. The story of civil rights insurgency in

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman, pp. 6-23.

Milwaukee, then, begins to fill a conspicuous gap in the existing historiography of race relations and the modern African American freedom Movement.

It is difficult to assess the successes and failures of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee during the 1960s. For instance, while activists ultimately succeeded in forcing the Common Council to pass a relatively strong citywide open housing ordinance, the temporary exemption of two-unit flats barred African American access to a significant portion of the city's housing. Even with full coverage after 1974, housing discrimination persisted, in part because of the informal aspects of real estate practices that make the industry hard to regulate, as well as continuing racial bias in loan and mortgage decisions. Similarly, the protracted legal battle against segregated public schools in Milwaukee was not tried until 1973-74, more than eight years after Lloyd Barbee brought suit in 1965. It took two more years for the judge to rule that segregation did exist. After the School Board appealed the decision, the U.S. Supreme Court remanded the case to district court to decide if the segregation in Milwaukee's schools had been intentional and, if so, to determine its present effects. In 1978, the federal district court ruled that public school officials had intentionally acted to perpetuate the racial balance in Milwaukee schools since 1950 and that the effects of these policies were currently citywide. Even after a 1979 settlement, the results were unclear. Of the 8,500 students reassigned to new schools to combat segregation, 80% were African American. At the same time, white parents increasingly fled the public system or moved to lily-white suburban school districts outside the grasp of the Milwaukee city school system.

In addition, other large-scale trends continued to foster racial inequality in Milwaukee despite the tangible gains of the civil rights era. Suburbanization and

deindustrialization ravaged the inner core and pushed its boundaries northward and westward during the 1970s, 80s and 90s. The national economic malaise of the 1970s and the Reagan-era policy of urban neglect perpetuated widespread African American poverty and social decay at the root of the urban crisis. As a result, author Jonathan Coleman wrote in 1997, that Milwaukee "... has one of the nation's highest rates of black-to-white unemployment, one of the highest rates of black teen pregnancy, one of the highest turndown rates for minority loan applications, one of the lowest percentages of black owner-occupied housing, and one of the highest percentages of black living below the poverty line."<sup>2</sup> These circumstances provided the seedbed for a new black radicalism in Milwaukee, including the Black Panther Militia and Alderman Michael McGee's threatening declaration in early 1990.

Perhaps more than tangible gains, though, Milwaukee civil rights activists succeeded in another way. What unified civil rights activism during the 1960s was an underlying struggle to convince white Milwaukeeans and the existing power structure that the problems of the inner core were legitimate, that they emanated chiefly from racial discrimination and systemic inequality, and that they required significant and sustained action. White people had long viewed the growing African American community as a cancer on an otherwise idyllic city. They often pushed responsibility for complicated urban problems onto this embattled minority population. As historian William Thompson has suggested, the Milwaukee civil rights movement "insisted upon... the acceptance of the idea that black people were an integral and essential part of the city."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, p. 395.

In this way, despite the seemingly tragic lack of concrete results, the Movement did finally force the city's entrenched white power structure to reckon with the problems of the inner core and the growing urban crisis and at least begin to address them. While popular resistance remained, it was no longer possible for civic, political or business leaders in Milwaukee to simply ignore the legitimate claims and grievances of African Americans in the inner core.

\* \* \*

Most of the leading civil rights figures in Milwaukee continued to work for racial justice even after the direct action era faded. Vel Phillips worked on a variety of inner core issues in the Common Council until 1971. She went on to become the first female black judge in Wisconsin, the first person of color elected to state-wide office in 1978 – as Secretary of State - and an active leader in several Milwaukee civil rights organizations. Lloyd Barbee kept pressing the school desegregation lawsuit and pushed a wide array of “human rights” issues in the Assembly until the end of his tenure in 1976. Fr. Groppi became an important anti-war activist and worked on numerous other progressive issues, locally and nationally. During the early and mid-1970s, he appeared with Marlon Brando in northern Wisconsin to support the rights of indigenous people, appeared at international peace conferences in Montreal and Paris, and traveled to Ireland at the request of a Catholic bishop to support the growing drive for Irish independence. After leaving the priesthood in 1972 - a move common among activist priests of the 1960s - Groppi married in 1976, became a Milwaukee city bus driver and organized a statewide union before succumbing to brain cancer in 1985. John Givens, the former



head of the Milwaukee Congress of Racial Equality, became a labor negotiator at GMC and was ultimately the first African American appointed as an advisor to the Mayor of Milwaukee. Similarly, Calvin Sherard, who led the Milwaukee Negro American Labor Council's economic boycotts during the early-1960s, left Milwaukee for Detroit where he worked with the United Auto Workers union and the A. Philip Randolph Institute. Mayor Henry Maier pressed for shared revenues and a metropolitan-wide politics until his tenure in office ended in 1986. Many of the Youth Council members and Commandos grew up and moved on to college or full-time employment, often in social services or government. Dozens of priests, nuns and ministers returned to their churches where they promised to continue to work for change. And, a large segment of the ordinary people that supported civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee by participating in marches, demonstrations and rallies were profoundly affected by their experiences and remembered that time as the most exhilarating and meaningful time of their lives.

At the dawn of the 21 century, race continues to be, perhaps, the most salient and pressing issue facing community leaders in Milwaukee. While there have been certain gains, pervasive racial inequality remains. According to the 2000 U.S. census, black people make up 38% of the total population of Milwaukee and can be found in all segments and at all levels of local society, but their representation is still not proportional.<sup>4</sup> Yet, during the 1990s, the Common Council selected its first African American President. A black Chief heads the Milwaukee Police Department and the

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<sup>4</sup> According to the 2000 census, minorities make up 55% of the total Milwaukee population with Latinos accounting for 12% and Asian Americans numbering 3%. The Latino community is concentrated in the neighborhoods just South of the Menominee River valley, forming a human buffer between the still largely white working-class South Side and the African American Northwest Side. The Asian American community is scattered throughout the city. See <http://www.jsonline.com/news/census2000>.

Eagles Club Ballroom is a music venue - "The Rave" - where young people and musicians of every race gather to listen, play, dance and frolic. At the same time, the downtown area has experienced a business and entertainment resurgence that is no doubt good for all residents in some ways, even as it diverts needed resources away from inner core programs.

But, the over-riding reality of race and African American experience in Milwaukee continues to be dominated by poverty and inequality. Census data reveals that Milwaukee is the second most segregated city in the country. Most black residents still live in or near the inner-core; the South Side remains overwhelmingly white, as do the North Shore and Western suburbs. Even at the height of the mid-1990s economic boom, unemployment rates soared to over 30 and 40 percent in the most depressed inner core neighborhoods. Chronic poverty led to crime, drugs and violence and bred hopelessness and despair. Wisconsin currently incarcerates ten African Americans for every one white person, a statistic that doubles the national average and leads among all states. Recent articles in what is now the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* detailed the "re-segregation" of Milwaukee public schools during the 1990s and the bleak graduation and truancy rates in the inner core. Milwaukee citizens have yet to elect an African American mayor and black political participation remains low. Henry Maier's vision of revenue sharing and metropolitan-wide political cooperation remains unfulfilled. And, this past December, in an eerie reminder of the Daniel Bell case, 29 year old Mario Mallett died in Milwaukee police custody under suspicious circumstances. Mallett was the thirtieth

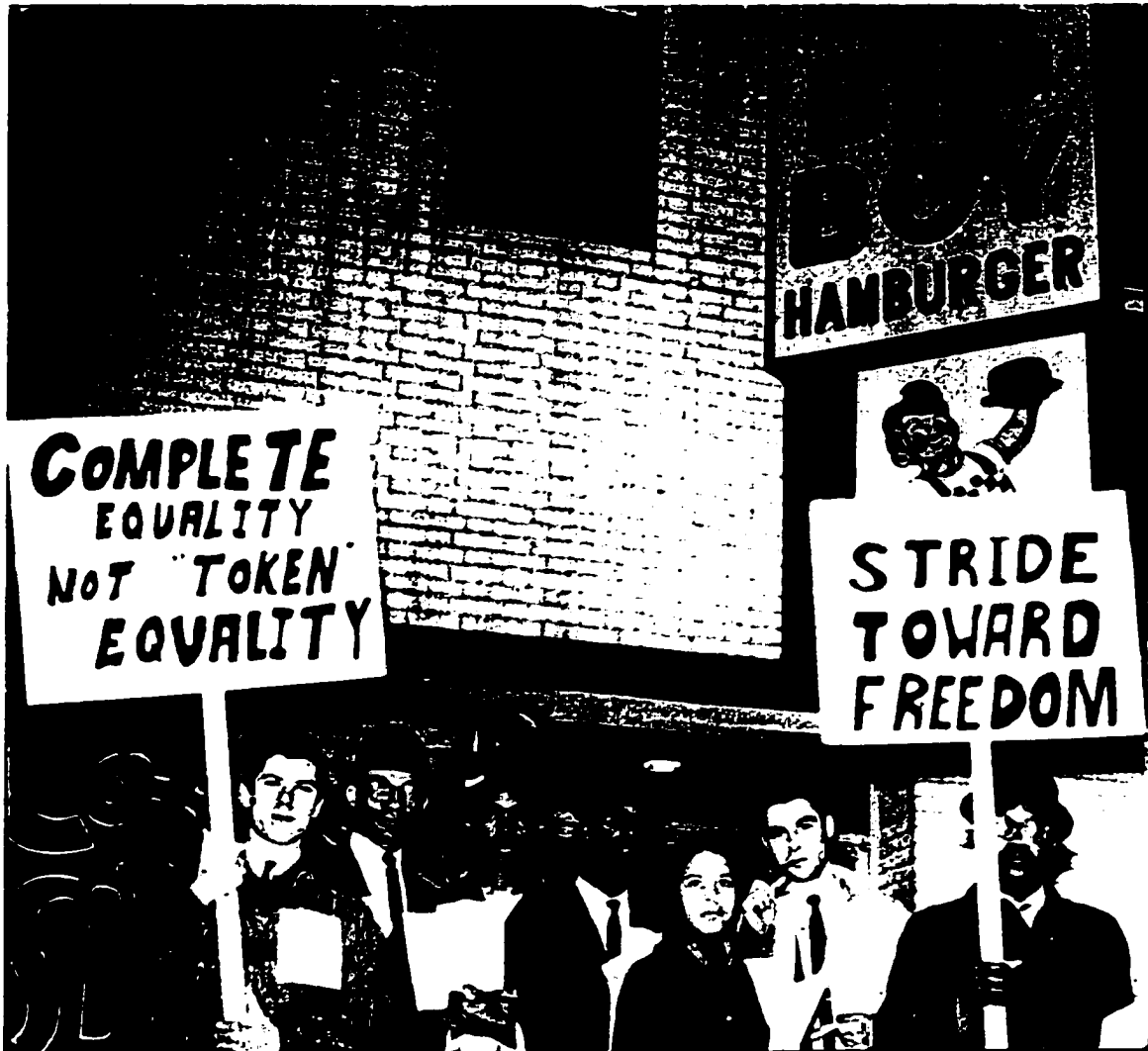
person – almost every one a black or Latino man – to die in contact with local law enforcement since 1990.<sup>5</sup>

The 16th Street Viaduct is now officially called the Groppi Unity Viaduct, but most people are unaware because the plaque is too small to read as you drive by in a car. St. Boniface was razed in the mid-1970s to make way for an expansion of North Division High School and the old Commandos Project I sign has finally come down from outside its old inner core headquarters. During the 1960s, civil rights insurgency emerged out of the dire circumstances facing most inner core black residents and the repeated inaction and indifference of both established black leadership and the entrenched white power structure. A new racial crisis is brewing in Milwaukee and many community leaders, black and white, are again not moving vigorously enough to head off the growing urban crisis before it erupts. Some people have been hollering about deepening racial inequality for a while now, but few have listened. Perhaps it is time for civil rights advocates and supporters of racial justice to again come together and *bridge* the gap.

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<sup>5</sup> *Madison Insurgent*, February 2002, pp. 1 and 5.

**Appendix:**  
**Photographs of Civil Rights Activism in Milwaukee**



In 1963, the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council picketed outside three inner core Big Boy restaurants to protest against employment discrimination. The demonstration took place during the early phase of direct action politics in the city.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Lloyd Barbee File.



In 1963, two Milwaukee women express their feelings about the violence unleashed against civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama, by Police Chief Eugene "Bull" Connor. Milwaukee activists held a number of sympathy demonstrations to support prominent southern civil rights campaigns.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Lloyd Barbee File.



Members of the Milwaukee Congress of Racial Equality picket the Board of Realtors in January 1964. During the early 1960s, the Milwaukee Congress of Racial Equality played a pivotal role in several local civil rights campaigns, including the Fred Lins controversy, the school desegregation campaign, and the open housing protests.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Classified File 6797.



In 1963, the Milwaukee Congress of Racial Equality staged the city's first sit-in after Fred Lins, a local sausage maker and member of the Social Development Commission, made a series of racist remarks to the press. Police officers used dollies to physically remove demonstrators from the scene.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Lloyd Barbee File.





Attorney Lloyd Barbee participates in the 1961 fair housing sit-in at the state capitol in Madison. After moving to Milwaukee that same year, Barbee led the fight against segregated public schools and served as a state Assemblyman from 1964-1967, representing the inner core.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Lloyd Barbee File.



Milwaukee United School Integration Committee members picket outside of one inner core school as students look on. Between 1963 and 1965, the school desegregation campaign progressed from reason and negotiation to more confrontational direct action tactics, like "human chains."

Source: Milwaukee County Historical Society, "Demonstrations" File.



Three nuns protest segregated schools and the candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace for the Democratic Party's Presidential nomination in 1964. During the school desegregation campaign, a significant number of Catholic priests and nuns began to participate in civil rights activism.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Classified File 6797.



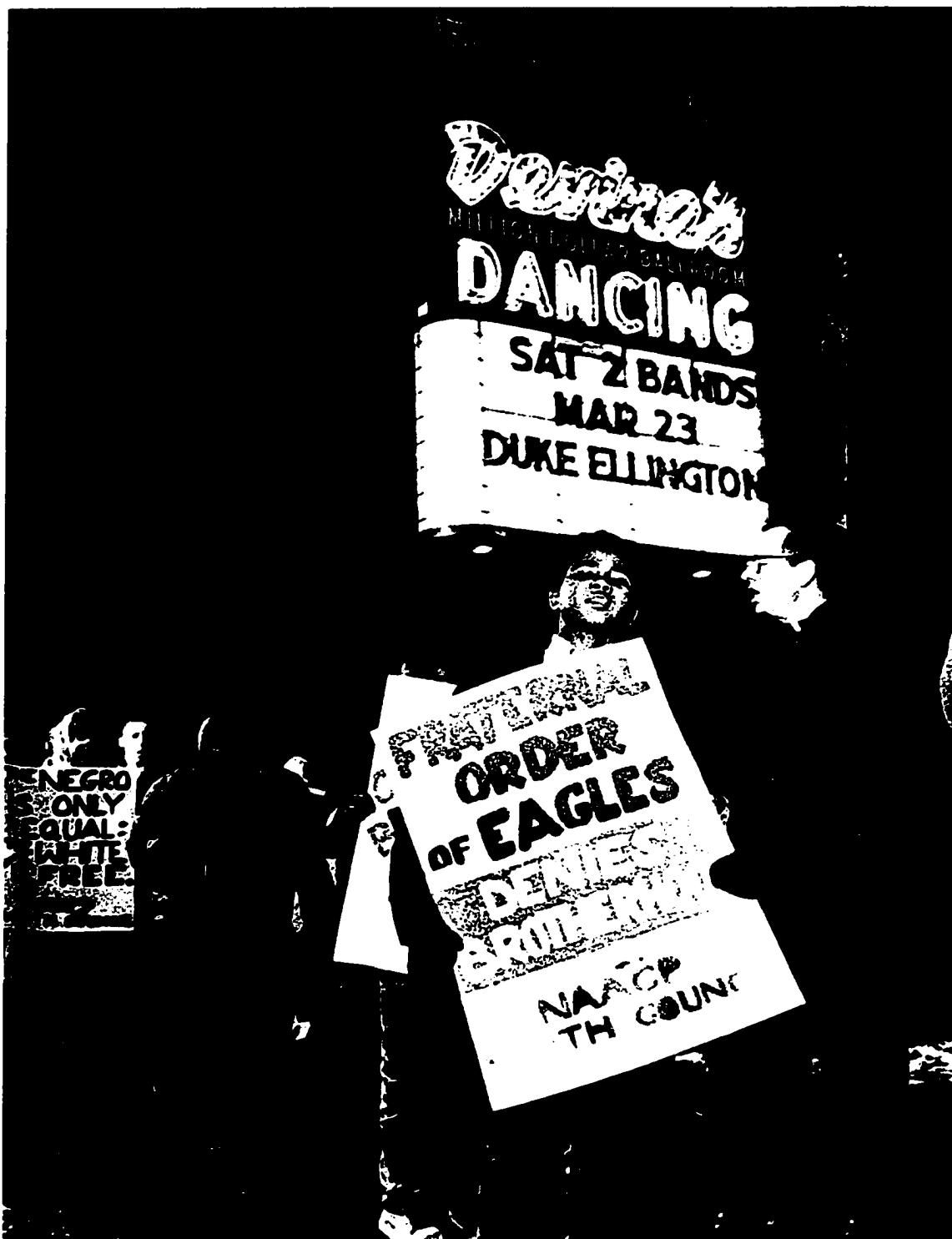
**Fr. James Groppi leads inner core school children in freedom songs and civil rights chants during the second city-wide school boycott in October 1965. Groppi first emerged on the Milwaukee civil rights scene during the MUSIC-sponsored school desegregation campaign.**

**Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File.**



Fr. James Groppi leads a small contingent of children in a MUSIC-sponsored march. During the school desegregation campaign, Groppi and inner core youth began to forge a powerful alliance that would blossom after 1965 when the NAACP Youth Council asked the young priest to serve as their advisor.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File.



A Youth Council member parades in front of the Eagles Club while Fr. Groppi and other Youth Council members look on. In 1965 and 1966, the NAACP Youth Council led a campaign against the "Caucasians-only" membership policy of the Fraternal Order of Eagles.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File.



The sight of nuns wearing their habits marching alongside inner core youth became common during the Milwaukee civil rights era.

Source: Cousins Catholic Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



**Religion infused the Milwaukee civil rights movement. Here, Fr. Groppi performs a street mass with a member of St. Boniface Parish.**

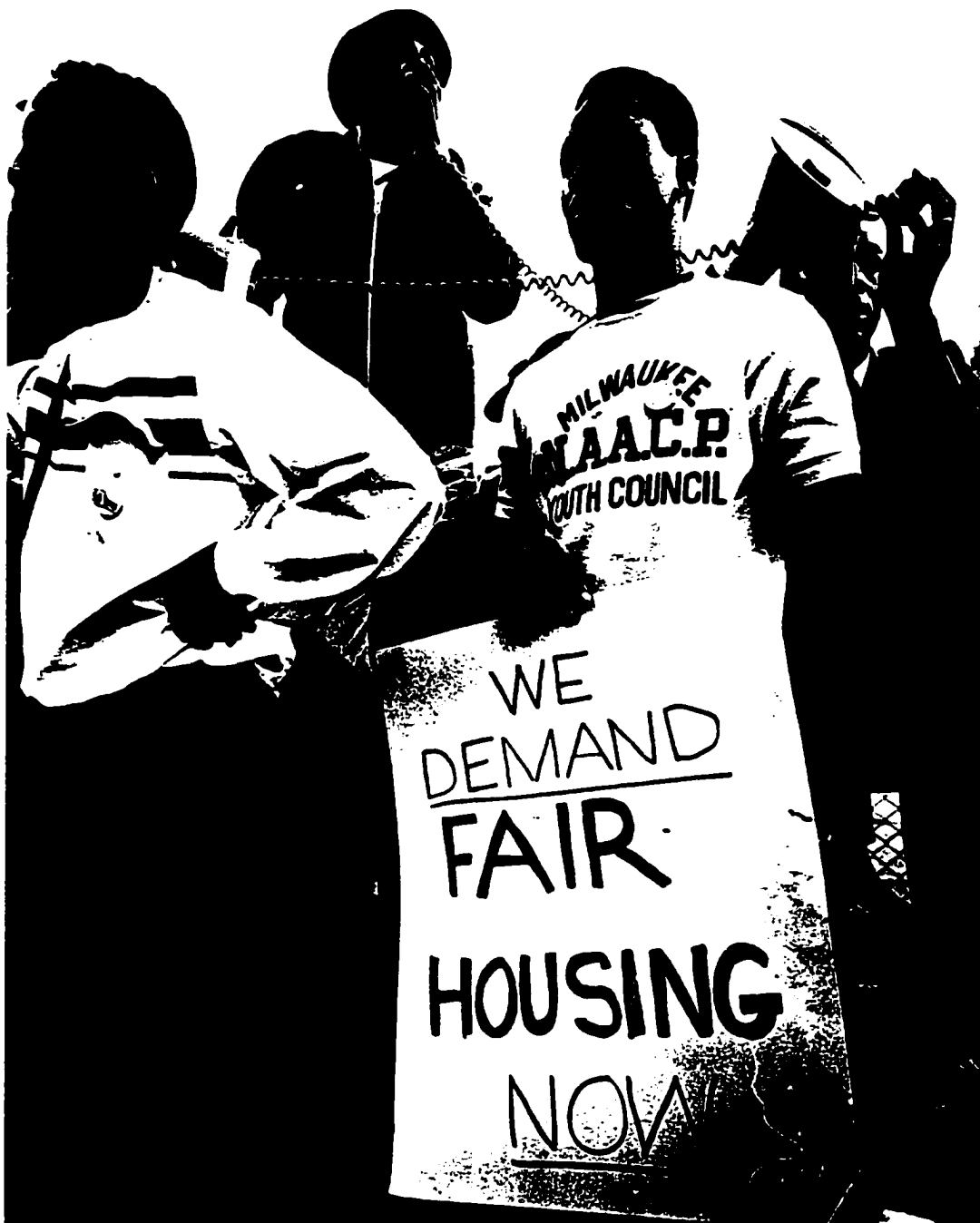
**Source: Cousins Catholic Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.**





Fr. Groppi also used the Church to organize young people behind the cause of racial justice. Through "dialogue homilies," he sought to engage inner core youth by linking the Gospel with the Movement.

Source: Bleidorn Papers. Cousins Catholic Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



Civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee climaxed during the 1967-1968 open housing campaign. The issue catapulted the city into the national limelight.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File.



**HEATED  
3 ROOM APARTMENT  
FOR RENT**  
ED. 2-1479      CALL:  
6: to 9: P.M.  
*under White management*

Many Milwaukee property owners refused to rent to African American tenants. As a result, Milwaukee quickly became one of the most segregated cities in the United States.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Lloyd Barbee File.



On August 29, 1967, after the second consecutive night of open housing marches to the predominately white, working-class South Side, Youth Council members returned to find their Freedom House ablaze. Police claimed a firebomb thrown from a passing car caused the fire; Youth Council members said a police teargas shell did the damage.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File.





Fr. Groppi, Alderman Vel Phillips and dozens of Youth Council members rally on top of the St. Boniface bus before an open housing march. Groppi often drove Youth Council members and Commandos to demonstrations in the old, beat-up vehicle.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File



The NAACP Youth Council Commandos, who advocated "Not Violence," planned strategy and security for the open housing campaign in the basement of St. Boniface.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File



Fr. Groppi and several inner core youths join hands and sing a "freedom song" during a demonstration. Music was an ever-present component of civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File





**Fr. Groppi and Commando leaders walked at the head of each open housing march. Faced with significant hostility from white residents and police, the Commandos' primary responsibility was the protection of demonstrators.**

**Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File**



The NAACP Youth Council led 200 consecutive nights of open housing marches through virtually every neighborhood in the city. Well-armed Milwaukee police officers usually escorted the civil rights demonstrators.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File



Many of the open housing marches, particularly to the South Side, turned confrontational and violent. Youth Council members and Commandos complained that it was not always clear which side of the conflict Milwaukee police were on.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File



Police arrested Fr. Groppi nine times between 1965 and 1969 for his civil rights activism. It was Groppi's willingness to sacrifice for the cause of racial justice that attracted Youth Council members to him.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File



When the Youth Council and Commandos led open housing advocates across the 16th Street Viaduct to the South Side, thousands of local residents took to the streets, some curious, others angry.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File



Milwaukee civil rights activists make a statement during one of their many marches.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File



**Fr. Groppi and a formation of Commandos outside St. Boniface Church.**

**Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File**



Three Youth Council Commandos gather around campaign literature for Alabama Governor George Wallace in 1968. Wallace's success in Wisconsin signified the deep resistance among many whites to civil rights gains.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File





Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968, Milwaukee civil rights leaders led more than 15,000 mourners in the largest march in Milwaukee civil rights history. The peaceful demonstration contrasted with the violence that rocked many American cities after King's death.

Source: Milwaukee County Historical Society, "Demonstrations" File.



**In 1969, Fr. Groppi led a coalition of black and Latino welfare rights activists on a march from Milwaukee to Madison to protest proposed cuts in the state welfare budget. When they got to the state capitol, nearly one thousand activists took control of the Assembly chambers for eleven hours.**

**Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File**



Fr. Groppi addresses a chaotic scene at the state capitol building as a frustrated lawmaker stands by his side. Following the protest, the legislature used a long-forgotten 1848 law to order the priest's arrest for "contempt of the Assembly." The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately decided that the move violated the priest's due process rights.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File



Fr. Groppi raises his fist in solidarity with welfare rights advocates as they seize the Assembly chamber. The Welfare Mother's March signaled a more radical form of protest that many white Wisconsin residents did not support.

Source: State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archive, Fr. James Groppi File

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**Rev. B.S. Gregg**  
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**Joe McClain**  
**Prentice McKinney**  
**Michael Neuberger**  
**Vel Phillips**  
**Wesley Scott**  
**Calvin Sherard**

### **Other Interviews Used**

**NOTE: Special thanks to Professor Walter "Bud" Weare at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who generously donated a number of interview tapes and transcripts that a graduate assistant, Arlene Zakhar, conducted for him in 1984. Here is a list of the interviewees:**

**Eugene Bleidorn**  
**Velma Coggs**  
**Mike Connors**  
**Paul Crawford**  
**Tyrone Daniels**  
**Patrick Flood**  
**George Gerhorz**  
**Richard Green**  
**James Groppi and Vel Phillips television interview**  
**James Groppi Lecture at East Side Library**  
**Loretta Jones**  
**Anthony Maggiore**  
**Betty Martin**  
**Marilyn Clark Mindimoye**  
**Kathleen Moylan and Flo Seefeldt**  
**Cynthia Pitts**  
**Juanita Renteria**  
**Rev. Kenneth Smith**  
**Ed Thekan**  
**Jesse Wade**  
**Loretta Webster**



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