

MARCH 11, 1965 (3)

Report on demonstration at the Capitol Club, Little Rock, Arkansas

Background:

There is a cafeteria in the basement of the State Capitol, Little Rock, which has always maintained segregation. After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, Negroes tried to be served there and were refused service. After this, a private club, called the Capitol Club, was formed and only members were allowed to eat there. A suit has been filed through the NAACP Inc. Fund contending that the cafeteria was made into a club only to keep Negroes out and that in fact it is not a club at all. Any white person can eat there without membership cards. The suit was filed eight months ago and has not been followed up. One of the major reasons for this is the fact that the plaintiffs have not pushed the court to hear the case. Two white SMOG workers, Arlene Wilgoren and Nancy Steiler, attempted to eat at the cafeteria a number of times and were served without question. Our contention at the demonstration was, therefore, twofold (forgetting the symbolism that the cafeteria is in the basement of the Capitol building): 1) the "Capitol Club" is not in fact a private club - that it is a public accommodation since white people are served without membership; and 2) that the mere existence of a private club on public property supported by ALL taxpayers is illegal under the Equal Protection Provision of the 14th amendment as well as provisions of many Civil Rights Acts.

On the demonstration itself:

On March 11, 1965, a group of 32 people, including Philander Smith College students and SMOG staff went to the Capitol Club for lunch. The guard at the door refused to let them in on the basis of the fact that they did not have membership cards. The white members of the group insisted that they had eaten there without cards and wanted to eat again with their friends. The guard did not seem to know what to do except to try to keep them out. After a minute or so, he asked one of the non-demonstrators to get the State Police down there. In the meantime, the group managed to block the entrance somewhat. Many people who would ordinarily be eating there did not try to get through. Others had to find membership cards somewhere and push and shove their way through.

And then the State Troopers arrived. They made a passageway for "members" by pushing us against the wall and continued to lean against us to keep us there. The secretary of state, Kelley Bryant, then arrived on the scene and asked us to step aside and talk about it. We told him we had come to eat and not talk, whereupon he told us he could not let us eat there. This went on for a while. There followed a short conference inside the cafeteria and then Major Mack Thompson of the State Police addressed us. He told us he didn't want any trouble and that we should step aside and talk about it, but in any event we had to clear the aisles. He said, "We don't want no Alabama here and I don't think you do either, but if we have to have one, we are prepared to give it to you." When we again refused to move, he proceeded to give us just that. The order was given: "OK, move 'em outa here.", at which point, approximately 15 or 20 troopers pushed, shoved, kicked, hit, slapped and threw bodies down the hall. Anyone whose there by chance, such as newsmen, photographers and just onlookers, were also treated in the same manner since no warning was given. A girl was thrown to the floor and kicked - somehow she lost her shoe; a boy was slapped in the face; a girl was hit by a trooper's fist, etc., etc. The group ended up at the opposite end of the hall where driver's licenses are given out. The secretary of state, Bryant, spoke to us again. He told us that if we left peacefully he would send us the names of the people on the committee who lease the Capitol Club. We agreed to leave peacefully (we did not promise not to come back). On our way out we met the second group of about 12 people and we decided to walk around to the other door and try to get served again. About ten of us made it down to the basement - the troopers got the rest of us rest of us at the top of the stairs. Most of the group turned around to leave. Bill Hansen made his way through and sat on the stairs. Troopers lifted him up and threw him against the wall. As he was getting himself up, a trooper hit him with a blunt instrument

on the head. At this point the group that had been downstairs was being shoved up the stairs by the state police. About three or four people tried to lift Bill and carry him outside (he was unable to walk right away), but each time they seemed to have him, the troopers were pushing, shoving, etc. and they lost their grip. We were finally shoved out the door, at which point, Bill lay on the concrete. Someone called a doctor, while the rest of us formed a circle around Bill and sang "We shall Overcome". After a doctor did not arrive within five minutes, we decided to drive Bill to a hospital. Four or five went in the car and the remaining 40 people marched back to the SNOC office (about a mile away) singing Freedom Songs. At the office, people expressed a desire to march on the Capitol that afternoon to protest the beatings. The next hour and a half was spent getting more students to march and making signs for picketers.

The March:

Around 200 people gathered at 3:30 that afternoon to march from the SNOC office to the State Capitol. We marched through the rain, some carrying umbrellas, singing Freedom Songs. When we arrived, we marched around the area in front of the Capitol although no attempt was made to enter the building. We then stopped and were addressed by three or four people. At one point we knelt and prayed. Just at that moment approximately 25 state troopers marched up the stairs and stood in front of the doors leading into the Capitol, all of them holding nightsticks 2 feet long. We were told later that all doors to the Capitol were closed at that time (they remained closed for about 15 minutes - until we left. No one could leave the Capitol at that time either). (One bit of editorializing here - the doors of Justice closed again to black citizens). We promised to return the next day.

That evening Bobby Harrison, the chairman of the Little Rock Student Movement, called Bryant about the possibility of negotiations. Bryant was very much in favor and told Harrison to call his secretary in the morning to make a definite appointment. He said definitely that he would see him some time Friday afternoon. Some of us met with Bobby later that evening and we decided it would be better if a delegation went instead of just one person. This was agreed upon and the people were chosen. Demonstrations were called off for Friday in light of this new development. When Bryant's secretary was called, she wasn't there and neither was he. She called back around noon and told us Bryant was out of town on a speaking engagement. This was obviously a lie, but there was not much we could do about it at that time. It was also too late to call demonstrations on again.

Harrison spoke to Bryant again Saturday and was assured that a meeting would be arranged. If one is not definitely arranged by Monday or Tuesday, demonstrations will be resumed.

March 15, 1965
Arlene Wilgoren

On Thursday, March 18, 1965, Dr. W.H. Townsend, chairman of the Council on Community Affairs, called Kelly Bryant, secretary of state, to request a meeting with him regarding the "Capitol Club, Inc." Mr. Bryant, who had previously promised us negotiations meetings, told Dr. Townsend that he was not the man to see - that he should speak to Clarence Thornbrough, chairman of the Board of Directors of the "Capitol Club, Inc." Dr. Townsend then called Mr. Thornbrough (who is also Governor Faubus' Executive Secretary). Mr. Thornbrough told him that he would be glad to meet with him, but that it would make no difference one way or the other. He already knew that the answer would be NO. Dr. Townsend decided not to make an appointment.

That afternoon (March 18th), 13 Negroes and 2 whites attempted to eat at the Capitol cafeteria in the basement of the Capitol building. They approached the entrance, whereupon the guard told them they could not go in. Kelly Bryant and the members of the State Police were inside the cafeteria. Bryant came out and asked the demonstrators to leave the hall and follow him someplace else to talk. Leaders of the demonstration, James Jones and Ben Grinage, of SNCC, refused to leave. They told Bryant that they had come to eat and that if he had something to say, they could talk right there. Bryant said that if the demonstrators would not leave peacefully, that they would have to use other means to clear the hall. When asked about these other means, he would not explain. The captain of the troopers then took over and as he was talking to Jones, approximately 15 to 20 troopers prepared for an attack (fixed helmets, got clubs ready, etc.) Upon an order, the troopers attacked the demonstrators jabbing the front part of the group with billy clubs and cattle prods. (Troopers specifically jabbed some of the male demonstrators, the obvious leaders of the group, in their sexual parts). They knocked several demonstrators to the floor and against the wall. They continued to beat demonstrators with clubs, cattle prods, fists and feet until they were outside the building. The group then formed a picket line in front of the Capitol which lasted about an hour.

On Friday, March 19, 1965, 33 returned to the Capitol cafeteria requesting service. There were 3 Univ. of Arkansas students in this group. The guard stopped the group at the entrance and refused to let them in. The captain of the troopers came out and spoke to the group for about five minutes. After the demonstrators refused to leave, he gave the order to approximately 25 to 30 troopers who then attacked in a pushing motion. The group of demonstrators at first stood firm and resisted the attack. The group was split when bystanders in the back hit some demonstrators and troopers jumped over the front line of the group into the middle, swinging clubs. A number of the demonstrators were thrown to the floor and kicked and beaten before they could get up. During the demonstration, an unidentified bystander hurled some Mustrad oil gas (a poisonous liquid which burns the skin and gives off a gas which causes nausea and choking) at the demonstrators. Howard Himmelbaum of SNCC was hit by the liquid in the back. The hall was immediately filled with this irritating gas which helped move the demonstrators out of the building. Troopers continued to jab, kick and hit demonstrators until they were finally out of the building. Eight people were injured during the demonstration. They were taken to the Arkansas Baptist Hospital for treatment where they were handled, in general, discourteously. Of the 8, 4 were taken immediately: Himmelbaum, who was treated for burns; Marji Holeman, a white high school student, who was treated for nausea caused by the gas and continuous blows to her stomach from clubs; Curtis Grady, who had been beaten and kicked several times on the left side, had X-rays taken; and Bill Whitfield (U. of Ark.), treated for a severe blow on the head. The other 4 people were ignored for about an hour and a half. They finally gave up and went to a private doctor for treatment - most of them for blows to the head or back. All 8 were released in the afternoon. (12 members of the State Police were hospitalized for gas inhalation).

After the demonstration, Jim Jones, Ben Grinage and Bob Whitfield, went to see Kelly Bryant about the cafeteria and police brutality. When asked why demonstrators were not arrested instead of beaten up if they were breaking any law, he said that they did not want to make any arrests since "that was what you want." He began to talk about Negroes

in general - he claims he knows a lot about colored people because many work for him being as part of his job is maintenance of the building. He also waved a newspaper clipping about how a white person was stabbed by a group of teenage Negroes in a New York subway car and said "He could use this." He did not explain how. That was about the extent of that meeting.

On Saturday, a group of white and Negro ministers met to discuss what action they could take regarding the whole situation. They learned from Major Thompson of the State Police that the policy was being changed. Demonstrators would be arrested instead of beaten up if they came back to the cafeteria. The ministers decided to take some action on their own about the cafeteria and police brutality. They planned to meet with Governor Faubus on Monday. They also thought that part of the group might try to be served.

On Sunday, March 21, it was announced on the dated news that the Capitol Cafeteria would be closed on Monday because of the demonstrations and that it would probably remain closed until the suit was heard. (We declared a Victory, but not publicly).

On Monday, March 22, the ministers (now having grown 50 strong, headed by four bishops (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist and A.M.E.) went to the Capitol anyway. Two members of the group went downstairs to make sure the cafeteria was closed and then the group went to the governor's office to present him with a petition. Since he was not in they left it with his executive secretary. The petition read, in part:

We, the undersigned, . . . petition you to use your office to direct that the cafeteria in the state Capitol be opened immediately to all the citizens of Arkansas irrespective of race, color or creed.

The Capitol cafeteria has been one of the few remaining segregated eating places in the entire city of Little Rock. As long as any state facility now or in the future, remains segregated, our Capitol stands as a symbol of division and injustice.

Governor Faubus has made a number of statements regarding demonstrations and the closing of the cafeteria:

"The cafeteria was made into a club to keep out demonstrators and interlopers."

"The Capitol Club was closed because we were afraid someone would get hurt."

"I have no objection to Negroes eating in the Capitol cafeteria. The trouble is, if you let them eat there, they'll ask for something else." (Editorial comment: "How right you are, Mr. Faubus!").