

A BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE
COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL ACTION

The Coordinating Committee began as a result of the journey down South last Spring of a mixed group to test the Supreme Court decision on the Irene Morgan case.

At the May meeting of the Manhattan Branch of the NAACP, two of the participants, George Houser and Conrad Lynn reported the experiences of the group that visited sixteen Southern cities defying the long tradition of Jim Crow on interstate bus transportation.

After the report, a number of members of the NAACP decided to embark on similar direct action projects in the metropolitan area. Early in June, our first informal meeting took place. It was decided that since the summer was approaching, our activity be directed towards fighting Jim Crow in recreation and resort facilities.

After a number of tests in various areas were made, we discovered that three bathhouses at Rockaway Beach, Long Island, were not admitting Negroes. On Sunday, the 22nd of June, we made our first test at the Park Inn Bathhouse and pool, the largest in the area. Two white persons purchases tickets for lockers and were sold tickets without any question; two Negroes immediately behind were refused admittance on the pretext that they were not members or guests of members of the bathhouse. Immediately following them, two other white persons behind them were sold tickets without any question.

The group then demanded to see the manager. We informed the management that we represented organizations that were determined to wipe out racial discrimination in the area. We pointed out the viciousness of this discrimination, its moral and its legal wrong, and that it was a violation of the New York State Bill of Rights, under which their license to operate had been issued. However, the management informed the Committee that they were determined and adamant to maintain their Jim Crow practices.

We told them that we would fight their policy of racial discrimination with all possible means, that we would establish mass picket line, attempt to have their license revoked and sue them for damages in court. The management seemingly ignored our stand and re-stated their refusal to admit Negroes on the phoney pretext that they were not members of the bathhouse.

The group then proceeded to an adjacent and smaller bathhouse called the New White House Baths where we conducted a similar test.

Here, too, we found that although the white members of the Committee were admitted without question, the Negro members were refused admittance. We then spoke to the Manager, impressing upon her our complete determination to end her practices of discrimination. We informed her that we were prepared to picket her establishment and attempt to have her license revoked.

Her reaction was to deny that her bathhouse had practiced Jim Crow and offered to admit the Negroes. The following week we returned to this bathhouse and found that Negroes were being admitted.

The same day, we returned to the Park Inn Bathhouse, conducted another test and found as before that Negro citizens were denied admission on the pretext that they were not members while the whites were readily admitted without any question concerning their membership. Once again, as in the previous week, we demanded to see the Manager, and once again the management took an extremely adamant stand. The Coordinating Committee now felt that we had a real fight, that we had to win, and proceeded to seriously prepare for a victory.

The following week we held a meeting in Jamaica and after a full discussion we decided that we were not interested in being involved in an adventure merely for the sake of publicity or self-expression for the participants of the group, but indeed, on the contrary, because we wanted to destroy Jim Crow and to directly win rights and benefits for the Negro people. We decided that it was necessary to involve many organizations for the purpose of establishing a mass picket line and demonstration in front of this Jim Crow bathhouse.

Our first step was to secure the support of James E. Allen, president of the New York State Conference of the NAACP who aided our work immeasurably by his support and that of the State Conference. At this point, we adopted our name, the Coordinating Committee for Social Action. We established a more formal organization and handed out assignments and responsibilities. Miss Ann Little, the secretary of the Manhattan Branch of the NAACP, was elected Publicity Director. Herbert Hill was elected Organizational Director, Bill Chidick, Financial Secretary, and Attorney Conrad Lynn as Legal Advisor.

Our membership spent the next week visiting other organizations for the purpose of obtaining sponsorship and participation of these organizations on our picket line.

Almost all of the members of our Coordinating Committee were members of various branches of the NAACP and we realized that the local branches of the National Association would have to be the nucleus for our group and its picket line. Because it was June and the NAACP local branches were not officially meeting, it was extremely difficult to contact the executive boards and the membership of these branches which should have been most actively involved in our work. However, through personal contacting, we had members of six branches at one or another participating or supporting our picket line. The branches were as follows: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Jamaica, Great Neck, Far Rockaway and New Rochelle.

On July 19th, a Saturday morning, after we had obtained the formal support of the American Jewish Congress, the Young Adults of the Siloam Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn, the Thorner Unit of Local 365 UAW-CIO, the Negro Painters Club of the AFL, the Committee for Racial Equality and most important, the New York State Conference of the NAACP, with the participation of the six aforementioned branches, we established our picket line.

After we had been picketing for a few minutes with banners stating the purpose of the demonstration and the names of the supporting and participating groups, police cars suddenly appeared. A captain told us that picketing was not permitted in Queens County and that he would not permit us to continue. Members of the Committee and Attorney Conrad Lynn informed the police captain that we had the right to picket anywhere in the United States, that we were determined to continue picketing and that he would have to arrest the whole picket line. The captain, obviously impressed by the militancy and the determination of the demonstrators, retracted his original statement that no one could picket in Queens County and said that he would permit us to continue picketing but restricted the area of the picketing so that not all entrances were fully covered.

Police were stationed a few feet apart along the area that we were picketing, while police cars lined up along the sides of the street. The picket line continued for seven hours with about 35 people on the line. We shouted slogans such as "Jim Crow Gotta Go!", "Boycott the Park Inn Baths", "This is not Mississippi, this is New York City", "Joe Louis Can't Go In - Why", "Keep the Fascist Way out of Rockaway", etc. etc.

A large crowd gathered on the boardwalk to watch us. A number of outsiders living in the community expressed agreement with us on our fight against Jim Crow and at times even joined our picket line. In the course of the day, a great many people refused to go in because of our protest demonstration.

The next day, Sunday, the picket line was reestablished at ten o'clock in the morning, and continued again until about 3:30 in the afternoon. A man who had a refreshment concession in the bathhouse expressed his friendship with us and told us that the bathhouse management was losing a tremendous sum of money due to the effectiveness of our picket line. And incidentally, he proudly pointed to the Negroes that he employed. As an example of the many incidents that occurred: a young white girl who was approaching the bathhouse with the purpose of going swimming turned away after reading our signs and hearing our slogans. In about a half hour, she returned and joined our picket line. And whenever an automobile would drive up with prospective bathers desirous of entering the bathhouse, this girl who had just joined our picket line would run out into the street, jump on the running board and carefully explain why these bathers should not cross our picket line. In most cases she was successful.

The next Wednesday, the Coordinating Committee met once again for the purpose of devising ways and means of increasing the effectiveness of the picket line. For many members of our group, this was a

completely new experience and all of us participated in a fruitful discussion. We decided that since the area in which we were picketing was to a very great extent an Irish Catholic neighborhood, it would be valuable to have Irish-Catholic groups participating in the picket line. We decided to contact the Catholic Worker organization and the Harlem Friendship House, a Lay Catholic group. We also decided to distribute leaflets during the course of our picket line.

The attorney for the group had notified the Mayor's Committee on Unity of our action and had also filed a formal complaint with the license commissioner, demanding a suspension or revocation of license. At the same time, we began legal proceedings in the name of the aggrieved Negro citizens who had been refused admittance.

The following weekend, on the 26th, the picket line once again was thrown around the bathhouse, with the added participation of the group from the Catholic Worker and Harlem Friendship House who carried signs of a religious nature, such as pointing out that racial discrimination was unChristian and a sin. When we began to distribute our leaflets, a police sergeant informed us that we would be arrested if we continued because of a Park Department regulation. We decided to challenge this and one of the girls in the Catholic Worker organization volunteered to defy the police sergeant and distribute the leaflets. No arrest was made. The picket line was increased by many new participants carrying attractive signs and shouting catchy slogans.

When someone crossed our picket line, we would point our fingers at him and shout, "For shame!", "For Shame"; On this day, more people than before refused to cross our picket line. We knew that the management was losing a great deal of money, but they still refused to give in. The following day, an even larger picket line was assembled.

The following carefully planned dramatic event took place. A member of our Coordinating Committee is a captain in the U. S. Army Air Force. He approached the bathhouse and appearing to be confused by the demonstration approached the police sergeant and asked what was going on. The police sergeant told him what the demonstration was about and this Negro Army captain informed the sergeant that he was determined to gain admittance. When he approached the ticket window the barker barred his way, shouting "You can't come in, you can't come in!" The picket line began shouting "We demand an arrest, we demand an arrest!" The manager was forced to come out into the street, a huge crowd gathered intently watching.

Finally the police sergeant spoke to the manager and told him that he would have to arrest him as his refusal to admit the Negro captain was an insult to the uniform of the United States Army, whereupon the manager immediately invited the Negro Army captain into the bathhouse.

A short while afterwards several other Negro citizens attempted to gain admittance and were refused. When we demanded that the sargeant arrest the manager he said he would not. The picket line was maintained until late in the afternoon.

On the sixth of August License Commissioner Benjamin Fielding notified us that a hearing would be held on the 7th to revoke the management's license. At the hearing 15 witnesses appeared. The complainants, Miriam Eversley and George Howard, testified about the refusal of the bathhouse to admit them because they were Negroes. A number of white members of our group were called upon to testify in their behalf.

The sole defense of the management was that it was a private club for members only and that only members and guests of members were admitted. Herbert Hill, Organizational Director of the Coordinating Committee, promptly punctured this pretext by pointing out that he had been sold a ticket without being asked if he were a member. And that for all the days that he had participated in the picket line, white people were being continuously sold tickets without any questions asked, while Negroes were always refused on the pretext of non-members.

The License Commissioner ruled that if, as the Management maintained, the Park Inn Bathhouse was a private club for the use of members only, it did not need a license and therefore it would be taken away. He made the further ruling that as long as it was licensed to operate as a public institution, it must admit everyone who had the price of admission. He ordered them to immediately cease their Jim Crow practices and inform the management that if one more complaint was brought by the Coordinating Committee there would be an immediate revocation of his license.

The Committee had previously planned that if License Commissioner Fielding did not hand down a favorable decision we would picket his office and expose him. This was obviously now not necessary. Furthermore, the real significance of the License Commissioner's decision is that this is the first time in the history of New York State that a License Commissioner has admitted that he has the legal authority to revoke a license because of racial discrimination. This sets a valuable precedent in future battles against Jim Crow.

The next day a mixed delegation of our group was admitted to the Park Inn Bathhouse, Negroes being sold tickets as readily as whites. The phoney sign about membership had been removed. Further checks indicate that the management is selling tickets to all Negroes desirous of admission. A complete victory had been won at the largest and most modern bathhouse and swimming pool in the Rockaway area.

We next tackled Curley's bathhouse making the same kind of tests as in the past. The Negroes were denied admittance, the whites were admitted without question. Once again a formal complaint was filed with the License Commission. On Thursday, August 28th the Commissioner examined the manager of this Jim Crow establishment and issued the same cease and desist order as in the previous Park Inn Bathhouse case. A team of our group consisting of white and Negro members the next day were admitted without question. Also further reports indicate that all Negroes are being admitted. Here, too, a complete victory was won.

No other privately owned bathhouse open to the public practices Jim Crow in the Rockaway area. In all three situations that the Coordinating Committee for Social Action was involved, a complete victory had been won.