

SS137.mp3

David Yellin- This is tape 2 with Pete Sisson August 14th 1968.

Pete Sisson- But anyway Mr. Pete Brown which was a special representative from this particular union the American Federation of municipal, state and county employees came to Memphis and he was the first one that seemed to be a rational person you know. He didn't come in with a big stick trying to put knots all over your head. He sat down and talked about the situation with you.

David Yellin- And if you don't mind Mr. Sisson can you repeat what I think we missed at the end about I asked you the question of whether you were here to assist them and...

Pete Sisson- no I wasn't there to assist, I was there as the commission of public work representing the management side of this issue and the people of Memphis. Because all in all my policy had been that I did not object to the employees belonging to an organization. Whether it is a union organization or a paternal organization or a church organization and I would certainly meet with any representatives of the employees or the employees themselves at any time they desire to work out any problems. But as part of my program I had developed a set work groups with the approval of a civil service commission which stated that if you come to work drunk the first time you go home, if you come the second time you are suspended three days, the third time that you come to work within a year intoxicated you could be subject to dismissal.

David Yellin- (muffled).

Pete Sisson- Right but it was spelled out in black and white and was posted so that everyone will know. In addition to this some of the other policies that we established were placed down in black and white and working with Mr. Brown we came to an agreement on all the areas in which there may be employee dissension and except in one, or except in two. Number one was that Mr. Brown wanted a signed contract with the city of Memphis and number 2 he wanted the dues check off. These were two items that as the commission of public works I had no authority to do. I did submit to our city commission this proposal and it was rejected.

David Yellin- Those two points?

Pete Sisson- Yes, the others I carried out as my policy. Yes this was operational procedure and this was within my jurisdiction.

David Yellin- Is there such things as,.....

Pete Sisson- But as to entering in a signed contract the city attorney staff advised me that we were not permitted by law to do this and if I were to do it on my own that this would be a (muffled) act and I would be subject to dismissal, recall, whatever you want to call it but I did present this to city commission and it was rejected.

David Yellin- Was it rejected unanimously?

Pete Sisson- Well, it was rejected 4 to 1 because I supported it.

David Yellin- You supported it.

Pete Sisson- I supported it yes.

&Can I ask you what was the basis for their rejection?

Pete Sisson- Well I think that there were two things maybe. One is maybe the legal technicality. They didn't feel that we had the authority to enter into a contract and the second thing was that the dues check off was really the goods of the union. Without a dues check off they couldn't have a strong union, because the people wouldn't pay the money.

David Yellin- These particular people.

Pete Sisson- These particular people.

David Yellin- Everyone was aware...

Pete Sisson- Right. And this was rejected.

David Yellin- And the other provision.

Pete Sisson- Well there were two provisions, well there were several things, but the main provisions were the signed contract and the dues check off.

&What were the discussed or brought up as to whether they should present the option of this dues check off to the potential union members?

Pete Sisson- No.

&(muffled).

David Yellin- Had passed it would that have circumvented or superseded the law against them doing it? Or was it by the charter?

Pete Sisson- So I understand and this was given from, this was a legal opinion and this was submitted to the union too...

David Yellin- ion other words as part of the charter of this city they were not allowed to do this.

Pete Sisson- We had the authority to enter into a dues check off agreement, there was no question about this, the question was whether we could enter into a contract with them and the commissioners elected not to go into a dues check off situation.

David Yellin- Now by the same token why did you support it?

Pete Sisson- I supported it for this reason that under the proper conditions that I think the union could really assist and help making the department an official department and accomplishing what we are trying to do where if you didn't have the agreement you were going to continually have agitation and work problems and (muffled) problems and all of this. And it was basically an organization problem. You get that behind you, you may lock heads once a year or something like this but from then on you usually could have a good department. At least this is the way it had worked in other parts of the country and I will guarantee you if anybody had looked I did. I didn't tell anybody I was looking but I sure did accumulate a large...

David Yellin- Did you go or did you call?

Pete Sisson- Not only did I go but I corresponded by telephone, anytime there was a strike I called, what was the problem?

David Yellin- And you probably spoke to Mr. Brown who had regular experience.

Pete Sisson- Yes, not I will tell you this I told Pete Brown, well anyway they came in and thought they were going to use the old muscle you know, they weren't going to accept this they were going to use the old muscle.

David Yellin- This is after the commission turned you down.

Pete Sisson- I told them listen man, you can put a gun to my head and pull the trigger and I couldn't do any more. They come in with some problem and I say listen. I go as far as I can go, I told them that wall was too high for me to climb. And as a result we got along fine.

David Yellin- They believed you.

Pete Sisson- Yes they believed me. When I told them something that was it even though we had a little maybe had a little vibration I always came out on top as long as I was commissioner.

David Yellin- They (muffled)n at your word.

Pete Sisson- This is right, they had one shot at me and that is (muffled) years. Other wise they had to work with me because I was the chief whether they liked it or not. Now, but anyway we got a pretty good repoire going.

&I have one question here, was the reason the commission other than you the other members of the commission was the reason they objected to a dues check off because they objected to a union?

Pete Sisson- This I couldn't answer. There were a number of reasons and unless you are on the governing board you can't appreciate it and when particularly you are on a body that is both legislative and administrative there are so many forces pulling in so many directions that I can't tell why? All I know is that I tried to do what I thought was best for the people of Memphis and what I thought would do to make a

good (muffled). And I think the record it self will show that the department fared fairly well during this time.

David Yellin- So again you supported it because you felt this would be more efficient operation for the city of Memphis.

Pete Sisson- Yes, now let me, I might, I was never without problems and in fact I had to stay on top of this things all the time. I did have a good deal of community support from the negro community which helped me. Now to give you some examples of some of the problems I have had in addition to the ones I told you. We were, we had the 4 hour bonus period, we paid for 44 hours a week. Our schedule was set up to work for 40 hours a week so if you finished early you went home. So normally we worked 32, 34, 35 hours a week. But the other side of that coin was that if you didn't finish it took you longer than 40 hours to finish that thing then you worked that other 4 hours, well you earned that 4 hours instead of getting it free. Well we went for a long time and never had to do this but this one particular time where we got into a bad spot and so we had to work on Saturday 4 hours in the morning to finish this thing up. And I had one particular barn side of Scott St. Saturday morning there were about 50 employees that didn't show up. Now this wasn't 50 or 60 people, this was 50 people that challenged me. When this was reported to me I called my staff in, my personal staff in my office and we hired 50 people and we sent them down on, they reported in Monday morning down on Crump Blvd. and Wellington that morning. We put them in a truck and we drove them out into Scott St. and they got there just as they were calling the roll and they said Jones you weren't here Saturday you go home Sam you take his place and I put 50 employees and sent those 50 home for 3 days for not showing up. Well they laughed about it you know this was funny. But for the next three or four months I didn't have any absenteeism But Mr. P did what he said he was going to do.

David Yellin- Again real clear....the 44 our in other words if everybody worked the full week you paid them 44h ours.

Pete Sisson- 44 hours.

David Yellin- So that when the time did come for them to really work 44 hours they wouldn't get over time or they wouldn't...is that what you are saying?

Pete Sisson- I am not saying that exactly. What I am saying is that they were paid for 44 hours a week, that during their regular route this route was set up so that they could finishing 40 hours a week, that if they finished it earlier they could go home and they got paid the 40 plus the other 4.

David Yellin- Which they got all the time?

Pete Sisson- Right, but if in their regular route that we schedule for 40 hours that for some reason or another they can't finish it in 44 hours, I mean 40 hours they had to work into this 44 to get it but that pertained only to their regular....now if we had other work to be done that was in addition to their route work they got paid for it.

David Yellin- I see but your records indicate that most of the time they worked less than 40 hours a week?

Pete Sisson- Less than, much less.

David Yellin- When it was balanced out they really weren't even working 40 hours, that is what you are saying?

Pete Sisson- Much less, much less.

David Yellin- Saturday was sort of to help you make up that extra 4 hours.

Pete Sisson- It was an incentive bonus and then if they didn't do it they knew they had to work and if they knew they had to work they would get out there and work a little harder. In this particular business that employee can slow it up or speed it up regardless of what he wants to do if he gets (muffled) edgy he can drag you up and down the drain. But anyway we had...

David Yellin- I want to say for the record say that I have never seen better workers and that really is the truth.

Pete Sisson- Well we had, even though we (muffled) times (muffled).

David Yellin- Whenever we had any occasion to ask not special but even just little things they were most polite.

Pete Sisson- Yeah well getting even closer to the strike situation the summer before well actually this happened in 68.

David Yellin- Yes that was 67.

Pete Sisson- No must have been summer of 66. It was a year difference anyway, a year and a half difference really. But we had a rumor of there was going to be a strike. Now we had the rumor that there would be a strike once a month anyway, this was a continual rumor. But we were organized fairly well so that we kept our finger on what was actually happening and we would get into here and straighten them out and when you, if we didn't have troubles or we had gotten the report that we were supposed to have a strike and I don't remember this was in August.

David Yellin- Now this report didn't come from regular channels?

Pete Sisson- It came from my men, my, the people I the department.

David Yellin- It was subtle but they heard it?

Pete Sisson- Well, I guess I had as many employees in the union as the union had members almost. This is part of keeping in touch with what is happening,. Maybe some guy calls and wants to let you know that he is with you or something but then you get enough of this stuff and you get looking and you can see. But anyway we had the what appeared to be a pretty strong rumor that we were going to have trouble.

So I picked up the telephone and called Washington DC and Mr. Pete Brown and I couldn't find Mr. Pete Brown so I chased him all over Washington. For about 2 days, so finally I called him at home and I was with my little secretary out there and we got the telephone number somewhere you know. We called him at home and I told him Pete it sounds like we are having trouble down here, now I want you to get yourself down here and see what is happening. So Pete Brown came to Memphis, He came in to see me either Thursday or Friday and he said, oh we don't really have anything it is not all that bad said. So Pete said this is what we need now we have got to have dues check off or a contract and I told him now you know what the policy of the commission is. I will be glad to submit it to them again and you can tell me what I can do if we have got problems. If the men are unhappy about this or that or the other we will get this straightened out. And we talked there for while and then he left. He slapped me on the back and he says you don't have anything to worry about. I believe this was Friday afternoon or thereabouts. So Friday night they had this big union meeting and I know you remember it because it was played up in the head of the news media and his is really what can create problems for you man I will tell you. Anyway Pete gets up there and tries to stampeded the members, I hadn't figure out yet whether he was saying the commissioner for the commission but he was giving somebody the (muffled) and I suspecting it was me because I had to be the villain (muffled). But anyway when this, the news media interviewed me I always said that my job was to pick up the garbage. And we were going to pick up the garbage. It doesn't make any difference we are going to pick it up some way. But I had confidence in Mr. Brown and his (muffled) and I thought it would work out. So we sent out some 700 letters to people asking them to report in the following Monday for a job at the sanitation department. In the meantime I met with Pat Johnson who was he city attorney a number of times, I met with a friend of mine Sam Winetraubb whom I kept in touch with and this was I guess the way Sam was involved in this other one.

David Yellin- Were they the city attorneys who advised you at that previously?

Pete Sisson- Sam Winetraubb is a practicing attorney that is in the labor field he was not on the city attorney staff, he was a friend of mine and all during these three years or so I would check with him on problems that we had. My wife worked for the labor national relations board and Sam was the district officer or whatever it was.

David Yellin- Do you recall the city attorney that advised you that the city was not allowed to enter into a dues check off or a signed contract, William Manere?

Pete Sisson- No there were several. Pat Johnson of course presented it and Myron Hallie was in on it I don't know if Jim Manere was in on it or not. But they got several opinions and it all posed...

David Yellin- Within the city attorney's office this was well-known decisions.

Pete Sisson- Anyway in talking with Sam we decided that we would go in for an injunction and by the time he was working with me as a friend more than anything else. We went to over to mayor Ingram and he was a little reluctant to do this. Pat Johnson and I met him at his house on Sunday morning and finally he agreed. We prepared the papers the injunction was signed on midnight, Sunday at midnight and the strike started Sunday at midnight. And they picketed for a couple of hours they picketed the various facilities at night but eventually they went through their pickets before work time and we didn't have a our work stoppage.

David Yellin- How many of the 700 that you wrote out reported. (Muffled).

Pete Sisson- No it didn't work but we about 350 that reported to work, not reported to work but reported to go to work, to make application. But the employees went back since the union was served and they didn't actually go out and in the meantime I think Champa came down and several of the other international people came down beating their chest and all this sort of stuff. About a month later I met with them and we got on an even field and a good working relationship and all this.

David Yellin- And the injunction was withdrawn?

Pete Sisson- No we had the injunction in force.

David Yellin- And that is the thing that came in about February (muffled) t hen?

Pete Sisson- Right and we had a good working relations hip the department worked well no problems really, no major problems.

David Yellin- Was the injunction against certain union leaders by name is that the injunction?

Pete Sisson- Yes it was against the union it was against the leaders by name and then everybody else injuncted. But it named everyone from a shop steward in the national offices and all this stuff.

David Yellin- We are about to go yes.

Pete Sisson- (muffled), but anyway we had a good relationship but their union was suffering because of funds. International support a local except so long and then if it is not self sufficient well they will go somewhere else where the grass is greener.

David Yellin- So the international started to support the local here?

Pete Sisson- Well they had been carrying them for some time but they were going to the red, they didn't have enough paying members to support an organization.

David Yellin- Would it have been by this time of February 1968 the local felt they had to make a (muffled) or the national would withdraw their support?

Pete Sisson- I think there could be some possibilities of that, I don't...

David Yellin- Something to look into.

Pete Sisson- I don't know, I don't know, I do know that the main issue was the dues check off.

David Yellin- And what then, this really didn't come as a surprise with anybody who had become familiar with..

Pete Sisson- Well right, now see union activity in that department in fact in city government had been going on for 15 years. I mean it had been there all along. Everyone else has been able to cope with it. The thing in this administration in my opinion couldn't cope with it.

David Yellin- How is that sir?

Pete Sisson- If they had moved on the front end instead of waiting until these people got out they could have coped with it.

David Yellin- you mean they knew the strike was coming?

Pete Sisson- Yes they knew.

David Yellin- They had anticipated it?

Pete Sisson- They knew two weeks ahead of time, they had a delegation that met with them a day or so before the strike, the delegation asked them to come down and tell them what they were going to do and they refused.

David Yellin- February 11th when Mr. Jones went (muffled).

Pete Sisson- Yes or whoever he went to or some I understand. But they refused see and if they had rolled with them a little bit they would have never gotten into this situation. Now this is just opinion and it is Pete Sisson's opinion and I have nothing to back it up really that I feel strongly that they could have averted or at least minimized any work stoppage that they had. They may have had problems in the department in fact I personally believe they are not through with their problems yet. But whether this was premeditated or whether this was guided by the national organization or whether it was a last ditch pitch no one knows unless you roll on that side of the buggy and of course I don't. But what happened the fact that he let these employees get out. Now they had enough, at least I had enough employees that I could have kept a real strong working crew there, I may have lost a couple 100 but I wouldn't have lost the majority of them. And then the others would come back when they saw the others didn't go out.

David Yellin- Now Mr. Sisson one question please before you have to go and this again is an opinion and we will respect the fact that...how come Mr. Jones by himself at this point without the help of the national union, or international union at this time was able to muster the majority of 1,300 people A, a good number of them to come to the meeting Sunday night and B, Monday morning to stay out?

Pete Sisson- Well first place Mr. Jones had the support of the international union.

David Yellin- He did, ok.

Pete Sisson- He had the support. Number 2 he had the support of the AFL of CIO labor campus. This he had in fact unless someone could pay Mr. Jones he couldn't have lasted himself really. But anyway he did bring down X number of employees and how many there were I don't know. I know that all during my term they kept talking about 900 or some fixed figure for the very first day we went into office until way on down the line when we went out but when the show had come if he could get a couple hundred of them together he was doing good and of that couple of hundred there may be 50 that are not employees and had just come and then another 50 that weren't paying dues, and this type of thing. Anyway now and purely from opinion They were able to get the employees out. The city was made to be the better. The fact that mayor Lobe was then mayor and the fact that he had poor relationship with the negro community then he was projected as the devil and this is what helped bring people out. Once they went out this is what brought your ministers in and your other people in because here was the great white father mistreating the little man and if they had a strike and Pete Sisson had been the mayor you wouldn't have that. Now we may have had a strike and we may have had an ugly situation and it may have been bounced around.

David Yellin- All the elements for Spring tragedy are there.

Pete Sisson- Where there because they had something they could make the villain and that was him. And this was something that they could talk him and the negro community and every house wife, they could back. If Bill Ingram had been there, but this face of it wouldn't have worked and probably what you would have had instead of the negro community being upset you would probably have the white community upset at Ingram for not taking care of the employees. This is a personal opinion and like I told you before the men that were on the front line of this affair and I am talking about Patterson and Starks and some of those were the people that actually helped me and keeping it under control.

David Yellin- But now they figure they couldn't.

Pete Sisson- Now they went the other way and it was basically because of Lobe.

David Yellin- Right, well I am very grateful to have...(Tape End)