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This is September 24, and we are interviewing Reverend James Lawson in his office; September 24, 1969, Series 9.

David Yellin: Well, how about your running for the school board. I think maybe that might have some bearing, don't you think? How did that come about? Did you initiate that, or did someone…?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I was chairman of the NAACP Education Committee. It's a number of people that encouraged me to run for education office, and of course I was continuing a long interest in public education, and have addressed myself often to the subject. So, in terms of public office for myself, probably the Board of Education would be one place where I would have some inclination to hold a public office. So, I -- with some encouragement from various people, I filed in the last day in the position where it seemed as though there would be perhaps some chance of a Negro being elected. Originally I was in the position, (muffled) now, but in the position with (muffled), then chairman, or outgoing chairman. Originally there were four of us in that position, but of course only two of us made any kind of effort to campaign, and that was Bosworth and myself. And I don't know if that's because there was some feeling in the white community that the other two should not, and they were encouraged not to.

David Yellin: They were both white?

Joan Beifuss: Who were the other two?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, I have forgotten their names now.

David Yellin: I think it was position 6 (muffled), I kind of halfway remember, maybe.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: But, in any case that's essentially how I ran. Of course at the same time Willis was running for mayor. E.W. Williamson was also running for the Board of Education, and there was a third one I think (muffled). I have forgotten who that was now. Of course, no Negro again was elected, and the incumbents ran again, 2 or 3 votes to 1 (muffled).

David Yellin: A citywide…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: A citywide election, but it's a general election, and each citizen votes for five people. You have to run for a position because that was done in order to keep the Negro off the Board, because if all five positions, you just took the five top figures on the election, you see a Negro could get in, and you end up (muffled) to the county court.

Joan Beifuss: Was this that summer (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, so, but by dividing up the position and making every candidate declare for a position rather than for the Board, this means that the Negro vote would not be sufficient to vote someone in.

David Yellin: How much campaigning did you do, and how did you do the campaigning?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I did a fair amount of campaigning I guess. I did a certain amount of (muffled). I went out with different caravans. I spoke at different ones of party meetings, or house meetings across the city. I had some radio time. I didn't get any TV time, but I did get some radio time. And of course then there were two or three meetings where an effort was made to elect the -- to have Board candidates come and talk. The Better Schools Committee and (muffled). Some would include at least two or three of those meetings, and we all appeared on that. These were not too big of meetings (muffled). Of course the tragedy in the city of Memphis is that the biggest city budget, which is the school budget, affecting directly the greatest numbers of people, some 125,000 children, that that election is buried under the mayoralty election and the council (muffled) election, plus a host of others. I think in that particular election there were some 144 candidates in various positions, which meant that in the priorities of peoples' minds where that Board election is on the ballot, it's way down in the midst of things anyway, but in the priorities this is very, very bad if we were committed to genuine and serious education, I would think that that city election for the Board of Education would be pulled out from the general city election and put into some special category, where education would really become a focus point for the city. After all, that represents the major public issue related to the future of our city and nation, namely our children. But here again, it's buried in the public estimation in terms of priorities.

David Yellin: Where did your -- how did you get money to (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well there were donations from different people essentially, primarily donations. I had a little bit, it wasn't enough because for a big campaign you would need to put it in the paper, and we didn't have any money for that. Ads, we just had enough for a little leaflet, and a few ads on the radio, but beyond that, not very much. Of course the, here again, the point is that no one has ever been elected -- that's not quite true -- but only one person in the last 30 or 40 years has been elected to the Board of Education from the people. There were five incumbent members of the board. All five of them were originally appointed by someone, or they were elected by the board to replace someone. Only Francis Coe is on the board originally because the people elected her to the board.

David Yellin: You mean this present board.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: This is right, and the other 4, all on there because of a political appointment, which is, and in 30 or 40 years Francis Coe is the only person who has succeeded in being elected to the board from the people. Now this is a very, very important fact, and it also shows you why, in large measures the Board of Education in

Memphis is one of the slowest vehicles in the city to be affected by the change.

David Yellin: Now is this…let's see now Bosworth was elected against you.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: He was appointed by Mayor Ingram as Chairman of the Board.

Joan Beifuss: When did it become elective.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Hmm?

Joan Beifuss: You mean it was an appointed board up until…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I mean by this, they are now incumbents, but they are incumbents not because the people chose to put them there, but because a political decision put them there. In other words, Bosworth is an incumbent now, but he was originally appointed as chairman when the chairman was appointed by the mayor, because the chairman of the board up until just this last year, last time when I ran, up until that year, '67, the chairman was appointed by the mayor. Now by a legislative act, the chairman is elected by the board.

David Yellin: Yes, and Mrs. Seessel was appointed.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: She replaced someone. Edgar Bailey replaced someone, and all of those were political decisions. This is what I am making. So that the Board of Education, if the Board of Education is not very responsive to the people, it is primarily because it's buried in such a way (muffled).

David Yellin: Well now, because you were involved in your own campaign, you then didn't take too great a part in the others, or did you? As far as Willis running for mayor, and?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, I helped Willis as well. I did a fair amount of campaigning for him. In fact, in all of my own pushing of myself and all of my speech making, I pushed Willis as well everywhere.

Joan Beifuss: You belong to the Shelby County Democratic Club?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes.

Joan Beifuss: From the time you came in here?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, not necessarily. I did not necessarily formally belong, because I did, you know I do have a membership, but I make a donation and I go to some of the meetings, yes.

David Yellin: Well, and as far as you can recall then there's not too much you can recall about that election.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, I can recall, for example, that most of the incumbents based upon some pushing that I did publicly, all said that there should be open board meetings when the board would discuss things in the open, which was one of my platform tickets. The board hasn't bothered to do that, however. They still have their executive session, and then they will meet and hear citizens, but they will not discuss with the citizens anything. And another thing I also pushed for was the board trying to involve the public in the process of decision making, which is what, of course, the board hasn't tried to do. And of course, this is one of the -- I maintain -- one of the primary failures of the educational system across the country, not just in Memphis. The fact that the boards of education do not try to encourage the participation of PTAs and the teachers, and the pupils in the educational process (muffled). And then very often the board members themselves are very unaware of what ought to be done, and what they are doing. There is voting. If the superintendent says build this school they build it. They don't bother to read very many documents. I know in some of my conversations with the board for the NAACP I was astonished that they didn't know the Coleman Report, and hadn't read it. Frances Coe was about the only member of the board who kept up with educational principles and studies going on in the country. They didn't know school news. I sat in a meeting when I first came to Memphis with the board and Superintendent Stembert, and Frances Coe was the only one who knew southern school news. The other board members I was talking, you know, they didn't even know about it.

David Yellin: I would imagine that is one of the reasons about the school lunch program.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Sure. They are busy (muffled). They are not really interested in the school system to that extent, so they don't need to spend that much time studying, or reading, or thinking.

David Yellin: Well do you think that, just as a point, the school board should be more full-time than they are?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I don't know if it's necessary for it to be full-time, but I certainly think that the Board of Education ought to be people who have a much greater sense of priority about the educational task in the United States, and specifically in the city of Memphis. I think, for an example, that it is fairly shameful that we live in a university city with so many colleges, and yet we don't have an educator on the Board of Education.

David Yellin: Yeah.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's astonishing. Schools of education and Ph.D.'s in education and everything else all around, and yet we have never had an educator on the

Board of Education.

David Yellin: Yeah. That may stem from the idea of the civilian military thing. You know you have civilian control as opposed to military -- I don't know It's just…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I think it's something else. I think that this indicates the extent to which the Board of Education has been essentially a political matter, and not an educational matter, and the citizens have not been encouraged to try to have a board that would be most professional in terms of their dealing with the problems of education.

David Yellin: All right, where do we go from here now?

Joan Beifuss: (muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, incidentally one of the things that also I pushed when I ran for the board was that a high level study of the Memphis educational system and the future needs of the system should be made, that that should be some kind of citizens committee that made such a study with professional staff of some kind with the intention of trying to develop some kind of a long-range plan for education. Of course, that is something that is still desperately needed. The Board of Education still builds a school, such as Elsie Rhodes School, and within a year after they build the school they are adding mobile classroom units. They have done this all across the city, almost every new school is obsolete about the time they finish building it. Well that seems to me to be a vast wastage of money, and energy.

David Yellin: It is true on a university level, too, if it's any consolation to you.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, but in a university level though, I would say that the universities have been for so long basically deprived that so many of them are trying to catch up. I mean they're way, way, way, they've been way, way, way behind. But here is, you are building a school in a new neighborhood, a new housing development. You build a school today, and tomorrow you have to add mobile units. Well, why don't you have some kind of projection. After all this planning that is going on in the business community, they are probably available among the realtors and the bankers, such housing projections. So, therefore, when you build, why don't you build thinking in terms of not today, but today and 5 years from now or 10 years from now. And certainly national educators have been projecting the educational needs in terms of classroom space for some years now. They have been projecting, you know, where we're going to be in 1970, and where we're going to be in (muffled).

David Yellin: Who resists this? Do you think the school superintendent and his staff, or…?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I'm not really sure where the resistance (muffled).

David Yellin: Or it costs too much money they can't justify spending that much money

because it is not here and now, which is what people want to pay for.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: But then we pay for it, because we are paying for it. We are paying for it by the decay of schools, by the overcrowding, by the school dropout rate. We are paying for it every single day. People are paying for it.

Joan Beifuss: Yeah, I'm sure. It's the same kind of reason they didn't put a garbage disposal system in the city.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I think it has something to do with the way in which we project ourselves. Of course I, along this line, too, you see, this whole business of quality education to me is an important issue, and the ways in which we are building schools, I think in themselves indicates a wastage. Because I think there are a lot of educators now that indicate that you can have some building of schools in complex sections, where you can really use the facilities. If for example, a Central High with a gymnasium, only the people at Central High use that gymnasium. It is very possible these days to build school complexes in such a fashion that you have a large number of people use the science labs, or the language labs, the gymnasiums, the auditorium, rather than building an auditorium just to suit one school, why not build it to suit a neighborhood of schools. I mean this in itself you see would help the capital dollar.

David Yellin: And it's the best use of the real estate.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: This is right. At this stage in the game, American education is the most expensive education in the world. It is very, very doubtful that the future educational task in America. unless we decide that we're going to cut the military budget and put more of that money into education, it's very doubtful if we are going to be able to fulfill the educational task -- the way we've been doing it in the past. Well, you've asked the question of Willis's election and all. Of course it showed me a number of things. One, it showed me -- I guess the main thing it showed me, that the Negro in Memphis was not yet very mature.

David Yellin: All right, you made the statement -- explain.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's right. Well, I mean by that that in spite of the efforts that have gone on in Memphis at the point of politics and civil rights, and racial justice, and employment, and what not, essentially the Negro failed in that election because he was not willing to vote for another Negro. And this would not have been much different if it had been, or if it had been Ben Hooks, or someone else. Because the way Willis's opponents helped to keep him from showing well, was essentially spread rumors, that he took money from Loeb. Well, you know this was blatant nonsense and most politicians who knew A.W. Willis, knew that that wasn't true. But, this was spread around, and it was quite deliberately spread, and it was spread by blacks as well as white, though it may have originated among whites as a part of strategy, it was spread by great numbers of blacks.

David Yellin: All right, I'm still…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: So that's one thing. Another reason that I would say this is because I'd found that a lot of middle class Negroes were quite jealous. I mean they didn't vote for Willis or work for Willis because they couldn't conceive of one of their peers being elected as a mayor. It wasn't because they knew him, they knew Loeb better, or Morris better, or Ingram better. They didn't know them. I mean they would say such silly things as you know, "Willis won't speak to me sometimes on the street." Well since when did the mayor speak to them on the street in the city of Memphis. You know, Willis was the first guy they could say, "I went to school with this guy. He lives on Mississippi Boulevard; I saw him in church last Sunday." He's the first guy who has run for mayor that they could indicate that they knew anything about him.

David Yellin: Now they were resisting this?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, and they say this was legitimate. But I say it was simply the fact that they could not bring themselves as a Negro, to vote for another Negro for mayor.

David Yellin: Now why is that, in your opinion?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Because…

David Yellin: Self consciousness?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I say the lack of self-awareness, and self-dignity, and pride. It's precisely what the Memphis Negro has been taught for years -- the whole divide and rule pattern, the old pattern that you're black and you're not any good, therefore, and that black can't do it. You still have much of that same feeling towards the Negro professional. One of the reasons why Memphis has 250,000 black people in it, has so few black doctors, dentists, lawyers, is precisely because this has been known for a long time as a graveyard town for the professional Negro.

David Yellin: Now because of this very same thing.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Same principle. Yeah, a Negro doctor can't do as much for me as a white doctor. This has been a very strong feeling, and it is only now beginning to break up.

David Yellin: It's the white syndrome.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Why sure. Even when you had sufficient numbers of Negro -- now when you had in the last few years, you know, more Negro doctors, as an example, M.D.s, you'll still find Negroes in this town who will sit in segregated waiting rooms, waiting for a white doctor.

David Yellin: Yeah. Is it somewhat the same idea that this man who, the Negro man who was accosted, Mr. (muffled), the recent murderer here, is purported to have said, "I would have shot him, but it isn't right for a black man to shoot a white man." I mean I don't know whether that fits or not. That's what he's supposed to have said.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I doubt that, but that's all right.

David Yellin: Well, whoever made it up at least.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah. I doubt that.

David Yellin: Writes good dialogue.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Maybe that's a piece of propaganda he put out. No, it's not really that. I mean I can't speak for that particular man, but you see, I mean the whole bent of racism has been aimed at telling the Negro that he is less than human. And, one of the reasons it's been so difficult for us to get Negroes to wake up, and to begin to work together for social change, has been primarily because he has not had a sense of his own personhood, dignity, and freedom.

David Yellin: So the propaganda about the Negro was really directed at the Negro, not so much -- well the whites. And the Negro came to believe (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, part of the control, the part of the social control system of segregation and racism is to make the victim of your racism believe he isn't anything, so that he will control himself.

David Yellin: Yeah.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: This is why one of the main teachings of Martin King right through the years was this whole idea that he called "somebodiness." You are somebody. The effort to impart a sense of dignity, I mean what now is being called in the black revolution, black pride, black consciousness, black awareness, black manhood. All of this you see is a part of a very historic theme in the Negro community, which we have known full well that we had a major task of counteracting the crippling disease of racism in our own midst, namely at the point of helping black people to somehow sense that they were and are human being children, free, endowed with inalienable rights and with dignity.

David Yellin: Well could, it's just a question, could racism exist without the victim being that deeply (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, no, no, and this is precisely see what's going on. I mean one of the reasons for the hysteria in the white community is that increasingly the white community is becoming aware that the victims of racism are no longer accepting it, no longer accepting the propaganda. So, this is why for a long, long time you see the

phrase used of a Negro who seemed to get out of his place was "uppity."

David Yellin: Yes, that's one of the things I heard coming here. The second day I was here.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: So that the man who began to express his dignity, or woman who began to express themselves and their feelings, you know, it was said that they you know were not really doing what they were supposed to be doing. They were just not (muffled) what they're supposed to be as Negroes.

David Yellin: Yes, yes. They didn't act, yeah…

Joan Beifuss: Have you read that some of the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps often suffered (muffled)? He makes that point that (muffled)…

David Yellin: Yeah, oh that Bettenheim I think.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Bettelheim.

David Yellin: Bettelheim, yes.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Of course it also showed negroes were unsophisticated in Memphis because after all, one of the things that's been sweeping the whole world among you know, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and in America as well among the Negroes and increasingly among Puerto Rican Americans, Spanish Americans, and what not -- Spanish-speaking Americans, has been the whole idea, you know, that in order to have a true representative of our hopes and dreams, and feelings, we have got to have one of our own kind (muffled). Someone else can't really represent at this stage of the game how we think and how we feel, and cannot be trusted to be our voice in these places. I mean this has been a primary drive why the Africans can say, (muffled) to have any trained government administrators, but so what. We have got to make our own decisions, our own mistakes, and no longer can decisions being made here in Kenya be made by someone in London, or in Moscow, or in Washington. They have got to be made here in Cairo and Nairobi, and Elizabethville. I heard this all across Africa when I traveled there in '56. I'm in east Africa, and you know, one black African who had a law degree, only one who was a doctor. I don't remember how many college degrees, not very many, but here they were clamoring and demanding, and in fact having in '56 forced the British government to speed up the timetable for Africans to move into the centers of government life and power. (muffled) For all these persons to say, "You know, well (muffled) I would say that you know, that A.W. was better qualified than any man that was running. Here, after all, he was an articulate lawyer who had been in the legislature, who had engineered a fair variety of the steps towards desegregation in the city, who in the legislature the only one black person who was able to put together coalitions that created the poverty program. The minimum wage law that made capital punishment a major issue in this state, and then lost by just a small margin, who had educators who did his research for him, and brought them into the political scene to do

his research for him, and then used that research to try to get meaningful legislature. A *Time* magazine, or it was or it was *Look* magazine in fact that called him perhaps the best politician that Tennessee had seen, (muffled), or you know, something like that. Their appraisal of what he did in the legislature all right, well. If that doesn't help to qualify a man to rule a city, but one does.

David Yellin: Something occurs to me in your appraisal of the Negro people, are you saying they should not have been the way they were?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh no, no, no, I understand why, but I suspect that I thought that we were further along.

Joan Beifuss: That's what I was going to do, you were surprised, (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I thought that the process of changing had gone further than that.

David Yellin: You were reading papers outside of Memphis.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I was thinking that we were much further along. Now I think we are now than we were then, but I was thinking that we were further along, and that it would be possible, you see, to get the much greater rally around a black mayoral candidate. I mean I personally -- it just happened to be A.W., but I think you know that if it had been any number of people who were running, I would have still supported him, and I think essentially felt the same way, although in the case of a few people who have been in the public limelight like Jesse Turner, Ben Hooks, A.W., Sugarman, Vasco Smith, and a number of others. I mean in their case it seems to me that the black community should have been able to do much better for any one of them than what we did.

David Yellin: Well then, why wasn't Memphis farther along, or as far along as you thought? I mean are there reasons other than …?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I guess we do need to say that there hadn't been the kind of total black involvement at any time in the history of Memphis such as occurred in 1968. In other words, I mean we had had demonstrations of one kind or another, but none of these really confronted the black man in Memphis with himself with this question. Because, a lot of people in my own mind, I would say misinterpret the whole nonviolent movement in the South. They say well King was appealing to the conscience of the white man. I think there are a lot of folks in the South who would testify that in the workshops, which I conducted persistently, a major theme that I made was this -- that our need to organize and confront racial segregation is as much a prophetic word to the Negro, as it is a prophetic word to the white. Because the Negro is still expecting that change is going to come from the system, rather than change coming because he gets himself together and initiates the change, or because he decides he's free and a man and begins to act upon that freedom.

David Yellin: Or he's expecting the "master" to do it for him.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right. In this case it is quite true, I think, those who think that there will be a Divine Intervention apart from human…

David Yellin: Well, I meant the plantation master.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh the plantation master, oh, possible…the whites.

Joan Beifuss: I was going to say, at the time that the Shelby Democratic Club was wielding certain political power in the city, which I suppose would be the early '60s, was even that a kind of a wielding power by a very small group in the black community? Did the total black community get involved with the political work of the Shelby County Democratic Club ?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh no. Well of course you can't expect the total black community to get involved in anything.

Joan Beifuss: I mean it is my understanding that the Shelby County Democratic Club was pretty grassroots because it was set up with black captains, and…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: At that time it was much stronger than it is now. The grassroots effort and all has, in a sense, really decayed with time as course. It needs vast renewal. But, certainly during that period, the early '60's, the Shelby County Democratic Club was the major black political force in the city. Now it probably still is, from the point of view of numbers, but of course the loss to Loeb -- the Willis/Sugarman defeats last year have been primarily interpreted as the demise of the Shelby County Democratic Club, but it is probably still the strongest black political group in the city.

David Yellin: Now you say black political group (muffled)…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Both numerically and otherwise.

David Yellin: Now why is politics so significant here, elsewhere it wasn't politics that did anything for the black person was it? I mean anywhere, Birmingham was not politics.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, but politics were very important. I mean there was confrontation certainly. Well, I think that the thing that's -- there was confrontation certainly, and there was also always political ramifications of every effort. But I think this, that in Memphis, the leadership came chiefly, the ideal leadership, the leadership came chiefly from lawyers who gravitated primarily to the political rather than to the confrontation. In other words, they tended to move more around the political organization rather than around the getting grassroots confrontation, direction action moving, yes.

David Yellin: The social. Yeah, and that's very important. Now, one other thing that I would like to get clear, when you said before about the fact that in Memphis in a sense, did you mean in Memphis there was never a crisis really around which the Negro should/could rally.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right, yeah.

David Yellin: So that when the white community saw Little Rock, they said it will never happen here, and they were very zealous and careful to not let things happen here.

Joan Beifuss: Yeah, and they kind of shifted.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, when I say, I want to say more than a crisis, because in a way the Little Rock crisis did not engage very many black people in facing reality themselves.

David Yellin: Now, is that black people in Little Rock?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: In Little Rock I mean. So, when I'm talking about crisis, when I talk about major competition, I'm talking more about something like the strike in '68, which in a sense produced the kind of cathartic process in the Negro. It helped to radicalize his thinking about himself. It involved mass participation on the part of the Negro. Not simply in terms of the marches, but particularly in terms of the economic boycott.

David Yellin: And you, I mean by mass you mean in various socioeconomic levels. Not just (muffled)…?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right. I mean the whole effort in '68 brought out -- well, just for example, on the 21st of March, the evening of the 21st of March we had -- not the evening of the 21st of March, but the evening of the 22nd, which was to be the first big work stoppage day, when Martin King was coming back the first time. You remember it started snowing. We had several inches of snow on the ground by 7:30, but also by 7:30 we had over 150 black school teachers sitting together to talk about how we could help tomorrow succeed. Well, I mean that had never happened in this city. School teachers, black, getting involved in something this controversial, and saying they were going to stay away from school themselves, and that they had been encouraging their students to stay away. Well, that indicates -- this is what I'm talking about. This meant, therefore, when you talk about 150 schoolteachers who came out in the middle of the snow to talk about their role, and to insist that they were going to play that role together, well this indicates the extent of which even the middle class group, because they represent the biggest segment of the middle income group in Memphis, for black people in Memphis. Its extent to which even they, see, that group was deeply engaged in trying to understand what all this represented.

David Yellin: Do you think that this awareness, that you misinterpreted -- and I don't think it was an error on your part as such, but that wasn't there when you thought it might have been there, was that due in any way to this middle class group who seemed to want the status quo, or at least didn't want to, I guess the only word I can think of, is rock the boat any more than necessary.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, one thing of course I have to say that one thing that did happen to the middle class group is that when the police broke up that large march with mace on February…

David Yellin: 23rd, you mean that first one?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That first march, February 23rd. They maced any number of preachers and other middle class people. And these were all people who were only walking down the street enjoying themselves and having a good time about it, and when that mace hit them, they didn't know what happened, but it made them realize in a large measure the depth of the problem. Because here they were peaceful, enjoying themselves, in a good mood, suddenly BAM!

David Yellin: Judge Horton getting kicked out…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, right. Judge Horton getting kicked out of the Poplar 100 Club. So I meant that meant right away that a lot of them -- a number of major middle class people in this town had their whole minds changed. I mean Ralph Jackson is the perfect illustration of this.

David Yellin: He said it, he said it, too.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Sure, he was the perfect illustration of this.

David Yellin: He said, "Thirty years of conservatism went down the drain."

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Exactly, right -- and being a responsible Negro leader.

David Yellin: And the civil rights men here.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Sure.

David Yellin: All of those people. Well, I think -- is there anything that has to hold this up, Joan, from going right to the strike, because I think we do have the background? So, in other words, maybe the question that I asked last night that probably is not answerable is not answerable because of what you have just said in some ways, that in a sense it is hard to distinguish or to delineate or to describe the Negro leadership because the Negro community as such wasn't sophisticated enough to have leadership that they would follow. Is that putting it?

Joan Beifuss: Well wasn't it that there were a lot of small groups (muffled)…

David Yellin: There wasn't a place for a leader. The Negro community from that point of view didn't, in a sense, didn't want to go anywhere. They didn't think they were allowed to.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Many Negroes did not even go out and vote for mayor that day.

David Yellin: I mean and even before then, they weren't ready to follow any leader.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well they weren't, not to say that, they were greatly divided, and I think still the term to be used was they were not sophisticated. I cannot imagine, for an example, the Jewish community of New York not voting for Senator Javits. I just can't imagine it.

David Yellin: Yeah -- once he had the (muffled) to run…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: (muffled). This has been part of the reason why New York (muffled) strong Jewish political leaders, is because you have a strong Jewish community in New York, and I just can't imagine people of that community in New York voting against a Lehman or a Javits, which of course they did not, and do not.

David Yellin: In fact, my father was a republican in Philadelphia until Roosevelt, and the big reason to vote for Roosevelt was he is going to be good to the Jews. You know, I mean this was the criteria, and then, well you know…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well that's precisely why Negroes voted for Roosevelt, too. I mean there's nothing wrong with that.

David Yellin: Well then, why didn't anything like this happen in Memphis, I mean, you know we know this was so, but…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, you could bring that national effort right down to Memphis. Memphis was known in the Negro community for years as nationally as the stronghold of black republicanism.

David Yellin: Oh really?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Even in the Roosevelt era.

David Yellin: Memphis was?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Why sure, even in the Roosevelt era.

Joan Beifuss: I thought Clark controlled black (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, but you also had Lietenant George Lee, who was "Mr. Republican."

Joan Beifuss: Ben Hooks was a republican.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Ben Hooks is still nominally a republican. You had a strong republican trend you know in this city among Negroes, even with Roosevelt running. It's only since really the inception -- it's only really since the beginnings of the Shelby County Democratic Club and all, what 20 years ago, that you've started to get a strong Negro democratic voice in Memphis. And now of course, we are largely democratic. But that's, it seems to me that there is a real parallel here.

David Yellin: Well, all right, we've lost the election.

Joan Beifuss: Christmas is coming. Well, Jim, can you, if you can't define the black leadership in the groups in this sort of thing, or (muffled), what about at the time when you were confronting white leadership, what was your judgment of the white leadership here in the city in February? Where did the power lie in the white community? Because you must have assessed that.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, politically of course it was with Loeb. But knowing it, we also then tried to figure out how to best force Loeb to move, and we felt, obviously, that the way to do this was through the business community. I think in any American society where business is so important, we have to recognize that one of the power systems is obviously the business community. So, the business community has to be constantly -- it seems to be implicated in what you try to do.

Joan Beifuss: What about what you call the "old white liberal group" here, (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: We didn't as such try to consider them a power group, and I don't think we did.

Joan Beifuss: And you didn't consider the church, the white church?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, of course not. Definitely not the church.

Joan Beifuss: So, the only power people you considered of any big (muffled) business?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: (muffled) business. This -- we considered them in February of '68. This is who we worked with, and worked on.

Joan Beifuss: But Loeb, for instance, there was an awful lot of opposition to Loeb in the white community.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It really never got itself expressed (muffled).

Joan Beifuss: Yeah, but I mean politically.

David Yellin: Well, or something else maybe along the same line -- was the business group in Memphis a monolithic group? Were they divided?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No. Sure, they were divided, but eventually, particularly after February 23rd, business -- the business community did proceed to direct efforts at Loeb and the City Council towards getting the strike ended and towards dealing with the workers and the union. You know…

David Yellin: You think they did it, or they did it…?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No they did it, I know they did it. Oh yes, sure. In fact, you know, people like to talk about Loeb's integrity. Well, he's not a man of integrity because in March he had agreed to those conditions, which would settle the strike.

David Yellin: Which eventually settled the strike -- he had already agreed to them?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: He had agreed in March. I have forgotten the date now, but he had agreed in March to the conditions, which would have settled the strike.

Joan Beifuss: With whom?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: With various negotiators, then primarily from the business community, who were in direct conversations with me and with Jackson, and Epps, and others, and that he basically agreed and had agreed to the letter, which would be the agreement. And the newspapers had been contacted, and worked with by the business community, and made certain that they didn't blow it. Unfortunately, the headline writer for the *Commercial Appeal* did not know about this.

Joan Beifuss: Oh that was the (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It was the *Commercial Appeal* I think, and that next morning it had the word compromise, "Loeb compromised" or something like that. You'd have to look this up.

Joan Beifuss: But that was awfully early.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: And Loeb blew his cool. No, that was after -- it was the first week in March, it was something around the first part of March.

David Yellin: Yeah. That was also after the injunction, you know, March 5th, 6th, wasn't it?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I think that was some time in March. It was after …

Joan Beifuss: Okay, we (muffled) we got up through the Fred Davis council meeting, before the tape (muffled) that one night.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh we did?

David Yellin: You mean with the 23rd…

Joan Beifuss: The 22nd, that would be the 22nd. But there was one thing that bothers me about that Fred Davis council meeting… I don't know quite how to put it, but in the theory of nonviolence, it seems to me what was done to Fred Davis at that council meeting was worse than (muffled) knocking him down. Just to me it was a (muffled) assault on Fred Davis's (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I agree. Well, I guess it should be said in a way, maybe, but that was a waste of time and energy. We were trying (muffled) to help Fred come to see his role as a black councilman. This is something he was never able to do then. He hasn't (muffled). It became an assault on him only because it was the kind of confrontation, you know, kind of his coming into seeing the truth that he didn't want to accept. And this has been the basic reason why it has been harmful to him. If he had learned from it, it could have made him probably the strongest black politician in the city.

David Yellin: You mean he had to come and forthrightly take his position as a black man…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Sure, well of course. There is strength…

David Yellin: Instead of being a liberal.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Instead of being a liberal who was first of all a city councilman, and secondly a black man, and thirdly concerned for the plight of these workers.

Joan Beifuss: But his claim was that his district, which he represented was good because (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: So what? They didn't neglect him. I know white people in the district (muffled). The fatal mistake he is making is that he is running to the white man, and the white man (muffled). It's nonsense, and he'd better get that…you know, if he's going to lose, and he's going to, I'm sure.

Joan Beifuss: (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well that's true, too.

David Yellin: And I would say he's in bad shape.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: He's going to be in bad shape because he can't get the white vote, not yet, not in the city of Memphis he can't. As a city, I have some astute politicians and political observers in his district tell me that. He has made a fatal mistake in that he is running for the white politician. He is running for the white vote, which you can't get.

David Yellin: Well, then after that time…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, that doesn't fully answer that question, but I would say though you see that this is in part the problem that when a confrontation occurs and a person is not willing to face reality and make his own changes accordingly, then it doesn't happen. He, in a sense, gets judged by the confrontation and (muffled) harmed. Maybe judged (muffled). So this is also true of Loeb. Loeb hasn't committed any of this to teach him anything at all. You know, (muffled) judge him extremely harshly one day, if it hasn't done so already.

Joan Beifuss: That's true. I (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: But, at the same time though, when 1300 workers are demanding justice and…asking for justice, and some of the people who are expressing identification with them, are people with whom you have worked in political spheres, a Negro politician cannot go around talking about "we" and "they," "you people." This is nonsense. Furthermore, you can't sit in a council meeting and pretend that maybe you black people are not really representing the wishes of the workers. So let's get the workers here first. These were the kinds of things he said. So I mean, for him to do that, immediately identifies himself with the power structure, with the city council, and not with the workers.

David Yellin: Well, was he working under the old order of, well the best way is to work this out, and as long as I can keep talking with them, and…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, but this is the point, he may have been trying to work in that, under that kind of a definition, but the whole part of what the black revolution and confrontation and movement represents is that the old form of politics must go.

David Yellin: And he wasn't ready to go.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: A black politician must be identified with the people.

David Yellin: And this is what you're saying then.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: He can't be first of all a clog in the machinery. He has to be first of all responsible to the needs of his own people, and the needs of the poor. This must be his first responsibility, and that his real strength is not going to come from his ability to manipulate that group, but his real strength is going to come when he sits there

and that council knows that he has got 1300 folks down in that auditorium. That's where the council is going to respect his power. This is precisely why the council, you know, it's precisely why white Memphis has come to respect certain ones of us. Because they say, you know, those guys…

David Yellin: He can deliver.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Those guys brought the downtown business world to a standstill. That's what speaks. And that's Davis, that's any black politician's strength.

David Yellin: Yeah, so that what you're saying it seems to me is that a politician has to be judged in the world of politics, how you can function. And that it was not that Fred Davis didn't want the same things that you wanted, he probably did, but his methods were not right for the time. And here he had an opportunity, and was in an enviable position, conducting the meeting and so on, and even if he had been accused of being unfair, that would have, he could have overcome that.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: If his colleagues had attacked him, you're too sympathetic, okay, let them attack him for that.

David Yellin: Yeah, that would have been his strength in the long run.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: But for his colleagues to come to his defense, that you folks are not treating him right, that's the kiss of death.

David Yellin: That's a very important -- yeah, that he wasn't able to…I guess Mr. Patterson has saw that a little more clearly based on what happened to Fred Davis. It's not his own perception.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Patterson sees it very clearly. It's why he comes to every march, every mass meeting, he's out in the community all the time.

David Yellin: And that's why he acts the way he does, and he provokes those…

Joan Beifuss: My sympathy went to Fred that night at (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, you know, mine did too because I had much higher hopes for Fred than that. You know, you can't…

Joan Beifuss: Well, Jim, at the end of that meeting the 22nd, when the committee said they couldn't make a recommendation to the full council, you were under the impression that that was an honest response?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah, sure. Before we left the city hall that day, we had talked with the committee both privately and publicly, and they had made their announcement publicly, what they would accept, and what they would recommend.

David Yellin: This is the council committee.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, they had gotten the city council to agree to a meeting the next afternoon to hear their report, to receive their report, which was one of the things that we asked for, and demanded. So, we actually left, in fact we decided to leave then Thursday night, Thursday evening because we were persuaded that the city council would meet the next day and would receive the report, and (muffled).

Joan Beifuss: Had there been talk of sitting in that night at the council?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes. We had talked initially about the possibility we might just stay here until such time as we get redress from the city council.

David Yellin: All right, now if I may, here you were in the confrontation on the 22nd with Fred Davis, with this committee and so on, then how or who took over? Did you take over then? When you said "we" decided this, to sit then decided to go home, how did that happen? Can you recall?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, in a way, a group of us did emerge with Jesse Epps in helping to run the meeting. Of course when the council members kept saying, "Well, we want to see the rank-and-file, we want to hear some of these individual workers tell us (muffled," you know saying therefore that you (muffled). Of course we moved quickly to get the men from the hall over at Firestone over to City Hall. Once they started coming into the auditorium and the council chambers, then Fred Davis and others began to say, "Well, there are only so many seats here, they're not going to all be able to come in so some of them are going to have to wait outside." Well when that began to happen then, Zeke Bell, and Harold Middlebrook, and one or two others of us, immediately went to the door and proceeded to tell the men to come on in and we proceeded to direct them (muffled), and we made it very clear at that time to Fred and to his committee and to other members of the council there that you were making these insinuations about our integrity. You wanted to have them here, we've called them, they're here, and they're all coming in. As many of them we can get in here, they're getting in here. So we had them fill up the whole place then. And then of course, after we got them all there, it was then that Fred started this routine of (muffled), and it was then that I started to chant, "you're there because we put you there."

David Yellin: You mean that was a chorus (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I started (muffled) to pick it up. And after that died down, he said, in a way I have to walk, he stopped (muffled) he started that we had to walk two sides of the street, and I yelled out, "you can't do it!" And I got others to do it, to say the same thing. And, we would echo this, then you can't do it, you're either going to stand with us -- you're either going to stand for justice or you're not. You can't be on two sides of the street. Of course he was trying to say that I'm a councilman, I'm also a Negro, and therefore that means I'm with you, and I'm with the city council. (muffled)

that jazz.

David Yellin: Do you think thinks might have been different had he taken the cue?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Sure, oh yes. If he'd have taken the cue and moved from there, yeah undoubtedly different, then he'd have been the hero.

David Yellin: Possibly the next day would not have happened, which then set on the chain of events and so on.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I should say this, of course by the time we left the meeting, Fred though shaken, was in accord. We were of one accord when we left there Thursday afternoon. Thursday evening. When we left we were all of one accord. Fred's subcommittee brought in as much as we thought we could get. And the terms, which would have been satisfactory for a settlement. And we thought this was true.

David Yellin: Right, then what happened.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: In this period of time, of course, we, a number of us got with Fred back and forth behind the scenes, and…

David Yellin: This is at the council?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, at this sub-committee meeting, and tried to indicate to him what the problems were. We tried to make him see why we were so rough with him. Also, it wasn't anything personal, just simply he had to decide who he was serving. And so, by the time this finished, the committee had met behind the scenes and came out with their recommendations to us. Of course, we told them very clearly we're not going to leave until we hear what you're going to say, and until we know there's going to be a city council report committee meeting to hear your report. Well, we got (muffled), but then of course we paused, then the council members had contacted the other council members, to agree upon a meeting for Friday, before we left. When they tried to get individual workers up in front, Jesse then questioned the workers publicly. Of course the workers shouted responses to the questions, and -- did you walk out? Yes. And what not, and what not. What do you want, they shouted out, do you want this, and they would say yes and what not. So, and then we said, you're not going to, you know, you can speak to T.O. Jones, you can speak to me, you can speak to some of the other people who are negotiators for the union, the members of the grievance committee, or the strike committee, but you can't, we are not going to let you call (muffled). That's why they've elected us, to exactly speak for them. And, so. Then, you know, we just simply changed (muffled). We changed the agenda. Well, what happened behind the scenes undoubtedly was that when we left we had the sub-committee (muffled) in favor of that committee's report. Well I assume that what happened after that then was that Loeb took a look at this thing and went to work on the city council. So, when the city council met in an executive committee meeting Friday morning, Friday afternoon then when they called the public meeting to order with us, which was the reason they had called the

meeting in the first place, they didn't hear the sub-committee report. They instead had worked out a resolution that in the executive session, and that resolution was read. It was adopted with opposition from the three, I think the three Negro councilmen. I have forgotten. (muffled) and the meeting was adjourned.

David Yellin: Right there with all the people?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right then and there. They did not ask for any presentations from any of us. They didn't ask for a union presentation. Well, when this happened then, we tried to get -- all the lights were turned off. The mikes and all. I saw Jerry Blanchard up there and I asked him to try to get us a mike, which he tried to do and couldn't get one.

David Yellin: This would be a good place to stop, if you don't mind because we are coming to the end.

END OF RECORDING