

SS304.mp3

This is the 5th series of tapings.

David Yellin: I think if we could, Reverend Lawson, perhaps the best way to get started on this session, which we hope will take up the sanitation strike, is when did the strike first come to your attention? I was almost going to say officially, but you know of course you knew about it February 12th, did you know anything about it beforehand?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, the strike of course was a spontaneous thing. There was no planning for it, and there was not even prior preparation. Now true enough, by February the 12th, obviously the men had organized their union. That job, of course, took 3 or 4 years, and at least one injunction of the city was used against T.O. Jones and the others who were the nucleus. And of course those men were fired at one time, dismissed from their jobs. But of course the whole process of what was going on in the public works department was something that T.O. Jones had made a number of us aware when he was first began, he began to talk to a number of us about this.

David Yellin: You mean he specifically came and talked to you?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: He came specifically to talk, you know, during the period that he was working. He came to a number of political meetings and what not, and kept a number of us quite well aware.

David Yellin: You're talking about the injunction (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's right, that he was working on getting a union established in the public works department. So, I think most knowledgeable black leaders were aware of this, because he communicated it to us and worked with the NAACP and other groups. So, we were aware of it, but February 12th was nonetheless spontaneous. There was no preparation for it. The men made the decision themselves. Essentially it was a democratic vote, based upon the experience of going to the barns on a rainy day, February 12th, and finding that they could either go home and not receive any pay, or go out and work while the white supervisors in any case could sit in the barns and drink coffee and receive the whole day's pay.

David Yellin: Now the meeting of the 11th, which was a very critical one in which...were you aware of this at all? I mean I am just trying to get the record straight.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I was not aware of it. Was there a union meeting?

David Yellin: Yes, sir.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: On the 11th?

David Yellin: On the 11th, and that's when T.O. Jones made the request of Blackburn,

and came back and reported that they would not come and talk.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: So then the day, oh I see. So the strike began the 12th, but they actually stopped work the 11th then.

David Yellin: Well the 11th was a Sunday.

Joan Beifuss: A Sunday night, the meeting.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: (muffled). No, I did not know of any Sunday night. It was a union meeting of course. It was their own meeting, and they would not have normally contacted us, I don't think, because they had been meeting up to that time without having told us specifically when they were meeting.

David Yellin: So that your being aware of this was just the fact that you were aware of things happening in the black community, it wasn't any kind of a special...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, we didn't know about it. I don't know if he had invited any community people to that 11th meeting. This is the first time, as far as I know, this is the first I know of it.

Joan Beifuss: (muffled). How about when Bayard Rustin was in the first week in February, when he came in for the labor, the AFL-CIO meeting.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: What about that?

Joan Beifuss: Did you talk to him then?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Therefore, just so, he came for a very specific meeting here. He wasn't here for any community project.

(muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: COPE meeting.

Joan Beifuss: Yeah, but as you know that charge was made that Bayard Rustin had come in ahead of time.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, well that's nonsense. Yeah, that's just junk.

David Yellin: Okay, I'm trying to get to pinpoint your entry into it.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, well I can tell you, February the 12th was when I became aware of it. I spoke then during that period to one or two councilmen about it, and...

David Yellin: Specifically.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, quite specifically to, oh Jerry Blanchard I know, Downing Pryor. I may have spoken to several others. I know I talked extensively to a number of people about the thing.

Joan Beifuss: As early as February 12th?

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

David Yellin: The first day.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: The first day it began.

Joan Beifuss: On the phone you mean?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah, chiefly on the phone. Of course it became it was the topic of conversation all across the black community on that day. Other people began to rally in terms of the relief, but I as such did not go down, deliberately did not go, and worked primarily from behind the scenes for those first few days.

David Yellin: Now, do you care to elaborate on why you deliberately...?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well part of it I had a big meeting coming up. Well, that's not quite right. I had just finished a big meeting the 6th or the 9th. I was going to say I had a big meeting in February, but that was over. I have forgotten now really what my rationale was. It may have been I had two or three speaking engagements, and I didn't want to really get engaged in it. But, I think it was chiefly this, the feeling that I would work to see if it would get itself resolved before I would get involved in it.

Joan Beifuss: Could you say what your big meeting was, the 6th or the 9th?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well Black Methodists for Church Renewal. We organized that meeting the 6th through the 9th.

Joan Beifuss: It didn't meet here, though did it?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, it met in Cincinnati. So, in any case I made calls and talked to people, and I followed it, the events. It became clear that Loeb was going to be very much of a racist. I was also quite (muffled) at this time anyway because of the two men who had been caught in the hydraulic gears, that fall before, and so I already felt that there shouldn't be any waste of time, that the city should resolve it quickly and let go of that. I did not really go to -- I did not go to any meetings up until that time, and did not go to a meeting until they had the hearing, which was when, about Thursday the 22nd.

David Yellin: 22nd, yes, 11 days (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Fred Davis committee. As I recall, I said things from the pulpit about the march, about rather the strike in support of it.

David Yellin: That would be the Sunday of the 18th.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right, the 18th, and I spoke to whoever I could about people in support of it, and I urged Blanchard and one or two others to really get underneath it and get the thing solved. As I recall, I talked also to Fred Davis. I did not respond. I did not, as such, go to any of the union meetings, nor did I go to the, not the Masonic, but the temple, the Mason Temple with food or what not. I did make a trip over there to see how much food they had, and to see a little of the operation. This was before the 22nd. But other than that, that was only for my own benefit. Other than that I did not make any overtures until the 22nd.

David Yellin: Can I ask, why did you go to Blanchard? What had been your relationship with him?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, because I had a good relationship with him before the election. I had supported him in the election.

David Yellin: And you felt that he would be...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I had come to get acquainted with him, and Blanchard started -- well I don't want to. I don't want to put too much of this out, but Blanchard has said privately that I was responsible for him to beginning to take a hard look at some of these problems.

David Yellin: Well when did this happen?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well this was before he, this was when he was running. He came by just to get acquainted and to talk to me, and said, level with me, in which I said of course I will. And we had a frank encounter, and he says that was the beginning of his really trying to take a hard look at certain things. So, we had, in fact, from that election then gotten better acquainted. We had talked on the, I had worked behind the scenes on the election prior, because Netters, because of his republican connections had voted for James the first time, and I had seen to it that some people who needed to talk to Brother Netters to make it clear that he should vote for Pryor, (muffled) councilmen; and Blanchard and Pryor both consulted with me in the fall on that election of the chairmen, so I had worked with some people behind the scenes of it. So, therefore, I felt (muffled) Blanchard was one of the obvious people for me to talk to.

David Yellin: Now, this is a rather hard one, and that's why we wish we had talked to you sooner. Can you recall yours and your parishioners and people you had talked to, the kind of intensity, if you would, a feeling? Obviously there was some feeling about the strike, but...

Joan Beifuss: Early on.

David Yellin: Early, when you (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I think that from the very beginning there was very strong sympathy for the public works department men. I did not sense any kind of animosity towards either the idea of the union, or what not. I did not feel that in my congregation. It became very apparent from the remarks that people made that they felt it was time that these men got a little bit of justice.

David Yellin: Were there many in your congregation in the union?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I don't think I had any in the, I don't think I had a single one in the strike from my congregation as such. Not one that I know of.

David Yellin: But, of course, obviously what we're trying to get at is, at some time or another, something caught. Something caught on. We are trying to find out when exactly that was, or what the build-up was.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I would say that from the very beginning there was, you know, the empathy with these men, and there was a support for them. This became very clear from the numbers of people who rallied around them, from the number of ministers who went to the union meetings in those early days even. From the money, the offerings that were picked up for them at various churches, from the food that began to flow in.

Joan Beifuss: Were you in contact before the Fred Davis hearing with any of the union leaders, Champa or Wurf?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Not that I know of. Not that I know of...I did not. I really did not meet any of them, I did not meet Jesse Epps or Champa until Thursday at the hearing. And of course then people did begin to call to encourage ministers and others to show up at the hearing. And it was then that I decided to go on down to the hearing on Thursday.

David Yellin: Okay, now we're at February 22nd.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: All right, so we're at February 22nd. Now of course Fred was chairman of the public works committee. That committee was to hear various people from the union on the problem. When we arrived at 10:00 in the morning I guess it was, I got the decided impression from Fred and the other councilmen who were there for the hearing that they really didn't want to hear from preachers, and they did not want to hear from union officials. They wanted to hear from rank-and-file. I also got the very real feeling that they felt that the ministers and the union leaders were duping the rank-and-file, that the rank-and-file really did not want to strike, (muffled). Meaning the

council, the committee, the council committee.

David Yellin: You mean Davis and...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I am saying the council committee because they would keep saying, when are the men coming? You know, we didn't come here to hear this, we came here to hear rank-and-file people. So, we finally said okay, we're going to call the men who are at the union hall, so the call was made to the union hall at Firestone, and they were told to dismiss the union meeting (muffled).

David Yellin: Do you remember who made the call?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I think maybe Jesse might have made the call. Jesse or T.O. or someone. (muffled) one of those two I think made the call. They could tell you better than me who called, but the call was made, and so when this came up again then, we simply said, well if you want to wait a few minutes, they're on their way and they'll be here because we have called them. We thought you wanted to hear the union's commission. Well, it seemed to me very clear then that the committee's attitude was one of, you know, you leaders have deceived the men. The men are sheep and puppets, and you don't really represent what they are saying. Now, that shows the kind of stupidity that we were facing then, and (muffled) because the men had voted 1300 strong to leave their job, and they had left the job. I mean you couldn't get 1300 men to vote of any (muffled) to walk off their job unless they themselves wanted to do it. Certainly (muffled) under any threats or anything like that. But there was that attitude that became very clear in the hearing. So, right then and there my own mind began to see that we had to sort of (muffled) the hearing up, and after Jesse and T.O. had made very strong statements, the men finally got there, and they filed in, filled up the seats, began to fill up the seats. Then the councilmen, I don't remember who all, but the councilmen (muffled) began to yell out there was too many, they can't come, we can only have so many men in here. When that happened then, a number of us moved into the back and told the men to come on in and fill up the place. Jesse did this. I did it. I know Harold Middlebrook did it. (muffled) did it. Then we simply said to them, you were saying you wanted to see the rank-and-file, they're here, they're all coming in. So (muffled).

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