This is tape #3 of the interview with Dan Powell, November 19, 1971 with Carol Lynn Yellin and Joan Beifuss interviewing.

Carol Lynn Yellin:  And you were leaving off with the Farris/Morris story, and…

Dan Powell:  Well, my opinion/my theory is that Willis was put in the race, probably paid somewhere between close to $100,000 by the Morris forces to try to pull 50-60% of the black vote away from Bill Ingram, on the theory that if he did this, then Morris would be in the runoff with Loeb, that Ingram could not make the runoff without about 60% of the black vote.  And, if you go back and look at the returns that year, if Willis had pulled 60% of the black vote, Bill Morris would have been in the runoff.  Now Morris faced a similar problem this time, but we won’t get into that.  But, Willis didn’t sell in ‘67, and this marked the final decline in the Shelby County Democratic Club.

Joan Beifuss:  But, over a period of eight years, would you say that it was only at the very beginning, like ‘59 to ‘63 that the Democratic Club really exercised any kind of power?

Dan Powell:  The Democratic Club exercised power in its earlier days when it was behind candidates that had a good image in the black community.  The Shelby County Democratic Club came into being in ‘59, partly as a result of the work that the labor movement had done in here.  As I told you a while back, it was obvious that Tip Taylor was going to run against Kefauver in ‘60 -- to us as far back as late ‘58, all during ‘59.  Therefore, the Negro vote became increasingly important.  For every 100 blacks that you got registered and got to the polls, you had reason to believe that Kefauver would get 95-97 votes out of the 100.  So, every effort was made by the labor movement down here.  We came in with Earl Davis, who is on our national staff, and he worked in the community here, on black registration, and developing black political organization.  Now it was out of this that came Willis’s candidacy for the Public Service Commission in ‘57 against Bill Farris and (muffled).  The feeling was that if the blacks put up a candidate and they have a chance to win, they will register and vote.  And, ‘59 is one year away from the Kefauver race.  So, we poured a lot of money and a lot of time and a lot of effort into Memphis.

Joan Beifuss:  Who are your black people who are leading that kind of a campaign?

Dan Powell:  Earl Davis and Phil Weightman are the minority field people on the national COPE staff.  Both of them had worked in Memphis in previous years.  And Earl spent a considerable amount of time early in ‘59 in here developing this situation.

Joan Beifuss:  Is he working then with Willis and Sugarman at that time?

Dan Powell:  He was working with Willis and Sugarman.  Now Willis and Sugarman in ‘59 are ranked political amateurs.  Davis is the expert, and Davis is showing them how
to put this thing together. So, the organization is set up, blacks are registering, and an
effort is made behind Sugarman. While Sugarman doesn’t win, he runs a respectable
race. He polled, as I recall over 37,000 votes, which was an excellent vote, and an
excellent showing. Now in ’60, of course the thing that we were interested in in ’59 was
not so much Sugarman getting elected to the City Council, but in developing a voting
here, because we believed that the black vote would be a pro-Kefauver vote, and a liberal
vote. In ’60, the black vote went about 98.5% for Kefauver against Tip Taylor. We
spent a lot of money in here on election day in ’50 to get out the black vote. Now what
we did, we did not turn this money -- and this became a source of friction between the
labor movement and Willis and Sugarman -- we did not turn the money we spent in here
over to Willis and Sugarman. We did not say, here’s $50,000, here’s $20,000, whatever
the sum might be, you go out and hire the workers. Earl Davis was in here. He says to
Willis and Sugarman and substance, we will pay for the workers, you hire them and we
will pay for them, and this is the way it was handled. Now you can waste an awful lot of
money in the black community if you don’t know who you’re dealing with, and this is
one way not to waste money, is when you pay the worker you have a reasonable
knowledge that he worked, or reasonably good knowledge that he worked. Now they
didn’t like this. They wanted us to just give them the money and let them handle it, and
this became a point over which there was friction in the future.

Carol Lynn Yellin: And even unto this day.

Dan Powell: Yeah.

Joan Beifuss: Is there really realization then that in this amalgam of labor, liberal, and
black, that it’s quite possible that the aims of each group are not exactly the same? Are
Willis and Sugarman trying at the same time to build their own black political power
group, that doesn’t necessarily follow the labor liberal line?

Dan Powell: Oh yeah. I don’t think there’s any question about this. I think that they
were trying to build themselves politically -- not so much in ’59 and ’60 -- I think maybe
then they still had stars in the eyes. But certainly by ’64 when Willis was first elected to
the state legislature. This man got very, very ambitious after he got elected to the state
legislature, and he saw himself in Congress even. And, part of the trouble in the
redistricting that Grider had came as a result of Willis’s efforts to try to redistrict down
here where he could run against Grider and beat Grider.

Carol Lynn Yellin: That was in ’66?

Dan Powell: Yeah.

Joan Beifuss: So you’ve got kind of a normal friction existing even when you’re
cooperating, right?

Dan Powell: Right. Well, this was a result of Willis’s ambition. I remember once at a
party I was talking to, I think it was Russell Sugarman, Russell said would you support
me, theoretical question -- would you support me against Grider?  I said no.  Why?  I said because I don’t think that you would be a better congressman than Grider, but it had nothing to do with color.

Joan Beifuss:  Is it possible that Willis’s motives, if it’s possible to judge that, are not as much personal ambition as they are race ambition?

Dan Powell:  Well, when you begin to talk about a man’s motives you are very speculative.  I don’t know.  My experience with Willis has been it was personal ambition, personal gain.

Joan Beifuss:  So does, now does this kind of little frictiony thing then carry over when the strike starts between the (muffled)?

Dan Powell:  Well by the time of the strike Willis and Sugarman are no longer political influences in the community.

Joan Beifuss:  But their friends are, I mean the people that have worked with them.

Dan Powell:  Their activity in the strike was extremely limited.

Joan Beifuss:  Well of course Sugarman, that’s understandable of Sugarman at that point, but I always kind of wondered where Willis was exactly.

Carol Lynn Yellin:  Was Willis bitter?

Joan Beifuss:  Was he sulking in his pen somewhere?

Carol Lynn Yellin:  Was he, as a result of the obvious lack of support in the black community, reciprocating?

Dan Powell:  No, I don’t think so.  I don’t know what it was.  Willis was certainly not in a position of leadership.  He may have felt that he had been repudiated in the black community.

Carol Lynn Yellin:  He was in the state legislature.

Joan Beifuss:  Well, in effect he was repudiated you know.

Carol Lynn Yellin:  He was in the state legislature still, was he not?

Dan Powell:  Yeah, he was defeated for the state legislature in ‘68 as I recall.

Joan Beifuss:  August of …

Carol Lynn Yellin:  So he was still in a position to speak about the various legislation
that was going through the state legislature -- the anti-riot, and anti-strike.

Joan Beifuss: Well he did, and point of fact he was -- he pushed a, he was trying to push a minimum wage bill through over in Nashville.

Carolyn Yellin: No, but I’m saying the legislation that grew out of the strike that had to do with the anti-riot laws, and the various, some in fact quite punitive -- that even the *Press-Scimitar* early on in the strike said, well that’s just too punitive, they’d better try for negotiated some sort of negotiation rather than all the fines for union leaders. Do you recall that?

Dan Powell: I recall a number of bills that were (muffled).

Carol Lynn Yellin: And Joe Pipkin’s bills that were going through the…

Joan Beifuss: Well, Dan, then when the strike starts and the black community starts coming in, and in fact the ministers pick up control of the black community there, or kind of the forefront…

Carol Lynn Yellin: In fact the scenario was following your, it was following your scenario almost wasn’t it with the, the support that it immediately did earn.

Dan Powell: Yeah.

Joan Beifuss: But is this the first time that the black ministers had come to the forefront as they did?

Dan Powell: As far as I can remember it is. The black community was more solidified behind this strike than they had ever been before, except behind say Kefauver or against Goldwater in ‘64.

Joan Beifuss: Were you surprised that it turned out to be the ministers that stepped in and picked up that slack?

Dan Powell: No, not really because here the people involved are parishioners.

Joan Beifuss: Had you worked with Lawson very much?

Dan Powell: I had known Jim for years before this. I had known Jim since he came to Memphis, and of course I had known of him before he came to Memphis.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Had he ever been involved in a labor situation before?

Dan Powell: As such, I can’t recall.

Carol Lynn Yellin: This was a new alliance.
Dan Powell: Yeah.

Joan Beifuss: Okay, well then would you just talk for a few minutes about what you remember in those specific days. You were just saying about in that first march you were marching with Bill Lucy. Would you just…

Carol Lynn Yellin: And we told you to wait until we got on the tape.

Dan Powell: Well, in this march, I was next to Bill. This was the first King march, the one you know that was broken up.

Joan Beifuss: Let me stop you before you even start here. Were Wurf and Champa here that day? Because I can find -- we don’t see any kind of material that mentions either Wurf or Champa.

Dan Powell: I am sure Champa was here, and I think Jerry Wurf was here.

Joan Beifuss: You know how the reporters usually single them out whenever they were any place, and there doesn’t seem to be anything.

Dan Powell: Did you go back and look at newspaper files on it? Maybe they weren’t, but I am sure they must have been because this was the biggest thing that had happened in the strike up to this point.

Carol Lynn Yellin: This was the week after the snowstorm, and this was the march…

Joan Beifuss: The mini riot (muffled).

Carol Lynn Yellin: But go ahead and tell about William Lucy. He was here, we know because you were marching next to him.

Dan Powell: Yeah, and we were towards the outside of the line as we were going up Beale on the other corner at Main.

Joan Beifuss: Toward the front of the march?

Dan Powell: And they began to break the windows.

Carol Lynn Yellin: How far up were you toward the front?

Joan Beifuss: Were you on Main Street?

Dan Powell: No, we hadn’t quite reached Main, right at the verge of Main. And the window breaking was a little ahead of us at first, and just before they turned it around. As they turned it around, and Bill had saw what happened, he was very upset because he
felt that this was the end of a powerful push that we could have made if they hadn’t of resorted to breaking the windows. And when we broke ranks it was really danger then of a real stampede in the streets with that many people, and the police pushing them back and firing tear gas. So, Bill grabbed me and tried to get me over to the, out of the street where the crush was, over to the wall of the building, and we moved then across Main Street, and as we got on the other side of Main Street, the west side of Main Street, we ran into this black woman and she was crying. She apparently wasn’t hurt, but for some reason she was crying. And Bill in all of his grief about the strike, I mean about the demonstration being broken up because a few people had foolishly resorted to the violent tactic of breaking windows, Bill became concerned with this woman, tried to comfort her, got out of the way of the group and got her back in a doorway, and then we proceeded on and we ran into the police and we couldn’t get back to the temple because of the police lines, and then we …

Joan Beifuss: Where were you going, south on Main?

Dan Powell: We went up to Front Street and started down that way, and we were blocked then. Then we got a cab and went on up to the Peabody and ran into Tommy Powell at the Peabody, and then we went back to the temple with Tommy. We went around a back way.

Joan Beifuss: In a cab?

Dan Powell: No, in Tommy’s car. And, we had to park about two blocks east of the temple, and we worked our way into the temple from the back. And, as we got in the shooting started outside -- the police, and then they threw gas into the temple.

Joan Beifuss: Were you in the temple when they threw gas?

Dan Powell: Yeah, well we were in the office building.

Carol Lynn Yellin: When you say the shooting started, you mean the shooting of the tear gas, or the?

Dan Powell: Tear gas, and the throwing of rocks, and there were some shots being fired.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, was this sniper shooting, or was it police shooting?

Dan Powell: Part of it was police shooting. I don’t know whether there was any sniper shooting or not, but you could look out the window in the office building in the street, and the police were shooting gas, and some of them were shooting guns. And then they filled the temple with gas. And I remember, I believe it was Billy Kyles, his wife and kids were in there. We all had to evacuate the temple because, I mean the office building because the gas was getting too strong in there. We got out then.

Joan Beifuss: What did Bill Lucy feel at this point then, that the whole thing was just
Dan Powell: Yeah, he felt that the strike had been badly damaged by the -- well this breaking of windows and the violence would work strongly against us.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Were you in a position where you couldn’t see the front of the march or see Martin Luther King?

Dan Powell: No. You see King had already turned. We were in about the, oh I guess a block or a block-and-a-half behind the front of the march.

Joan Beifuss: Because you know what we have never found out, in all the people we have talked to, in all this recording or what not, we have never found out how King got from the march down to the Rivermont. People have said, you know, a car picked him up and all this other thing, but we have never found out exactly who picked him up. Isn’t that funny that just this whole period just gone there.

Carol Lynn Yellin: We heard he went down…

Joan Beifuss: We heard all kinds of things. He went down McCall Street to Front Street.

Carol Lynn Yellin: McCall Street to Front Street, and a truck presumably.

Joan Beifuss: Yeah, but then we heard he went in a car. I mean there is no…

Dan Powell: Well, it was just about McCall when the march was turned back.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Now, one of the questions I was going to ask you -- you say you got a cab. Was your cab driver black or white?

Dan Powell: As I recall he was black, though I am not sure.

Carol Lynn Yellin: This is what I was wondering. What cab would be cruising, or I mean the idea of finding a taxi -- that seems like the neatest trick.

Dan Powell: Well you see, we got the cab on Front Street.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Yeah, but even so, weren’t there lots of people looking for cabs, or how were you lucky enough to find one?

Dan Powell: I presume that there were. I don’t recall, except that we hailed a cab, and he stopped and we got in.

Joan Beifuss: Dan, what kind of white labor was marching in that march?
Dan Powell: Oh, I’d say that the officers of the central body, and Taylor Blair with the Electrical Workers. There weren’t many white labor leaders.

Joan Beifuss: How about, can you make any kind of estimate about how much strike sympathy there was among rank and file? White rank and file? Is there is any way to judge that?

Dan Powell: No.

Joan Beifuss: Short of taking a (muffled).

Dan Powell: My guess if you’d have taken a vote among the white rank and file, and this is purely a guess, it wouldn’t have been 50% for the strike.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Was there any…

Dan Powell: Now you know one union refused to support the strike in the meeting, this was the newspaper guild.

Carol Lynn Yellin: I was, way back I had made note of that, and I was going to ask you about your old union. How did you feel? I just have to ask you, how did you feel about that?

Dan Powell: Well, I was disgusted and ashamed of them, and I later found out, I believe from Larry Williams what happened. The business office, which is a much more conservative group than the reporters, and the editorial end, all came to the meeting that night, and voted down the resolution to support for the strike.

Joan Beifuss: I just remember Ed Ray telling us that all of his reporters were supporting the strike I mean. He said it with a certain disdain.

Dan Powell: Joe Sweat, who is now editor of the Catholic state paper, was working on the Commercial at the time, and he was strong for the strikers.

Carolyn Yellin: I was going to ask, during the strike, was there any sort of real material support for the strikers, on the part of other unions? I just don’t remember any.

Dan Powell: There was, but most of this came from the international unions.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, was there any attempt, say just grocery money, or contributions to a strike fund of any sort, on an individual basis among the rank?

Dan Powell: There was some of that, but um…

Carol Lynn Yellin: The hat wasn’t passed at other labor meetings.
Dan Powell: No, the real appeal had not gone out. Now after the first march things stepped up. Then, after King was killed of course, then it really snowballed.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Had there been any increase in union support after the day that the mace was first used after the car-rocking incident on Main Street? The first hint -- the first real, I mean the first overt violence.

Joan Beifuss: When Champa was maced.

Dan Powell: Now, I was out of town the day that that happened, and I came back into Memphis two days later, but I was reading about it in the paper. I was in Alabama. I think that there was some after that, but of course the longer a strike goes, then part of the issue becomes you are bound to have some pick-up. But, the real source of money in a strike like that is from international unions, not from local unions.

Joan Beifuss: Dan, what’s the mechanics of if a local union needs help from outside unions, is it the labor council that goes to the national, or do individual unions, do people contact individual unions, or is there…?

Dan Powell: Well, generally the method, the route is that first the local union that is on strike contacts its own international, and gets help initially from its own international union. If the strike is big enough, the cause great enough, then that international union will then contact the AFL-CIO, and other international unions asking for support at the local and state level. The city council and the state council will then send out letters, not necessarily then, but at whatever time they are brought into it they will send out letters to other local unions asking for contributions to the strike, or if there are to be demonstrations, asking for people to demonstrate. Generally it is a matter of contributions, and local unions will contribute from their treasuries, but their treasuries in many, many cases are very limited. The bulk of your money for this strike here was not raised locally. It came in from the outside, from the national AFL-CIO, from the Automobile Workers, and from other international unions.

Joan Beifuss: But, are you saying that this kind of an appeal really wasn’t made until after that mini-riot, that there wasn’t any kind of massive support coming in?

Dan Powell: No. The appeal was in the process of being made at that time, but I don’t think that the national AFL-CIO had made a contribution until after that. Now, I think at the time that the riot occurred, the first day, that they were meeting the board. You may be right because we made a call to their headquarters from the Peabody Hotel. Bill Lucy called.

Joan Beifuss: They were meeting -- there was a national meeting going on wasn’t there?

Dan Powell: Yeah, I think they were meeting with the AFL-CIO that day. I think there was a council meeting, and I think Jerry Wurf was there. I remember Bill Lucy talked to the Secretary Treasurer of the union.
Joan Beifuss: Of the AFSCME?

Dan Powell: No -- yeah, the state and county municipal workers that day. I am not sure that Jerry was in town, though. I know Champa was here.

Joan Beifuss: I just can’t imagine that nobody asked Wurf, how do you feel now, Mr. Wurf, or something, if he was on the scene, you know? I just don’t know how the press could have missed him. But, anyway they were in the process of that (muffled).

Dan Powell: Of course, he may have left town right after the march, see. He could have done that. Now, you’d have to go back to your papers the day before, and see if his name was to appear in the march.

Joan Beifuss: It’s not there at all. Okay, well let me jump…

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, I wanted to ask one thing, unless yours is -- I don’t want to interrupt you, but I did want to ask you, were you surprised at Loeb’s very adamant stance, and with that, what would you comment on your own feeling about Loeb’s attitudes toward organized labor? Had you thought of him as anti-labor?

Dan Powell: Well, I had always thought of Loeb pretty much as a nut.

Carol Lynn Yellin: In a word.

Dan Powell: Yeah. His anti-labor bias was known, though he had the support of some of the AF of L building tradesmen because of his racial position. A few of the more racist of the building tradesmen.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Was there a history of labor problems in the Loeb Family Enterprises? Had there been any organizing…

Dan Powell: No, I don’t recall now. I think there was some effort being made to organize the laundry, though I am not sure now.

Carol Lynn Yellin: But it was still not -- there was no union in the Loeb laundries?

Dan Powell: No.

Carol Lynn Yellin: It was mostly black workers?

Dan Powell: I don’t think there was any union in any of the laundries at that time.

Carol Lynn Yellin: And were most of the employees in the Loeb Enterprises, were they mostly black employees? I mean did he have a bad labor record, as well as a bad -- organized or not?
Dan Powell: I would say of all the employees of the laundry that a majority of them were black, this would apply to any laundry in town. But, as I recall, none of the laundries here at that time were organized.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Well, I’m even going back to the point where his father had -- what was his father, or his whole family, his brother, all of them had the name Loeb, and had this relationships with their workers had anything to do with a bad image for Loeb in the black community?

Dan Powell: I don’t think so. I am not sure about that, but it is -- I have been told by a couple of prominent labor leaders here in town, they were in a meeting with Loeb early in the strike and Loeb admitted that he could settle the strike then, but he was not going to do that. He was going to use this strike to get additional tax -- more money for the city. I don’t know whether you heard this or not.

Carol Lynn Yellin: I haven’t, no.

Dan Powell: I don’t want to identify the person, but he was, two of them were prominent labor leaders in the town who know Henry and who met with him early in the strike. Now of course he did use the strike, and the settlement of the strike to get the garbage fee.

Carol Lynn Yellin: Did he have the garbage fee in mind specifically, or did you see that coming as it did…?

END OF RECORDING