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Jesse Epps, AFSCME Field Representative, 1968

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Joan Beifuss- On?

Unknown Male Interviewer- Yeah.

Joan Beifuss- Ok, Mr. Epps first of all when did you come into Memphis this year, or do you work out of Memphis or what is the setup exactly?

Jesse Epps- I guess it is strange arrangements I live south of here in Clarksdale Mississippi however, I work out of our Washington office on the international staff of the American Federation of Stand County Municipal Employees as a general representative for the union involved. Which in sense gives me the responsibility not only for this area but for the whole united states throughout our international chain. However on February the 11th I received a called from Champ....actually Mr. Champa is the field staff director of our international union asking if I would go out to Little Rock for a special meeting that was developing and then late February 12th I received another call from him indicating we had a strike in Memphis and instead of going to Little Rock I should be going to Memphis and seeing what could be done and trying to resolve the Memphis strike.

Joan Beifuss- Well now do you operate out of, do you have an office in Washington?

Jesse Epps- Yes I would operate out of the Washington office.

Joan Beifuss- Ok now this office here is just going to be a permanent office?

Jesse Epps- Yes we are establishing for the southern region at this juncture our union is a fast growing union. We are developing so that as we see it as other unions are structured we will have a regional and district officers and undoubtedly there will be a district office where. We have added since that time several other staff people to our staff and one local a Mr. reverend Blackburn who was intimately involved in the strike who will bring with a wealth of experience in community development. So going back I know your interest is in the strike and I have seen it as it developed...

Joan Beifuss- Well I would also like to find out how you got with the union too if you want to go back a little further.

Unknown Male Interviewer- Are you from Clarksdale?

Jesse Epps- Originally I am in fact I was born and raised in a little town just south of Clarksdale in a little town called Dublin Mississippi. However I moved away to New York Syracuse New York inn1955 and lived in New York from 1955 to 1964. At which time of course I was involved in a number of things in Syracuse, in other words to make a long story short but I got involved in the union affairs and the union activities. I was attending night classes at the university of Syracuse trying to finish my education and was working at the General Electric company during the day, at which time my wife was still attending school. Of course, I am sure you are

aware what you are talking about when you struggling in an education situation of that time.

Joan Beifuss- What were you majoring in, what were your plans at that time?

Jesse Epps- Sociology. What developed out of that of course while I was in the shop I was elected a shop steward and then to a sectional steward and then assistant chief steward for that union and it was the international union of electrical workers. I became co-chairman of the civil rights committee for that union and then of course became active in community affairs assigned by my union for the greater Memphis labor council and of course broadened my interest and my activities in the community.

Joan Beifuss- Excuse me, greater Syracuse?

Jesse Epps- Labor council. It is AFLCIO.

Joan Beifuss- Ok now what union were you the electrical workers?

Jesse Epps- I was elected from a 15,000 local general electric IUE, international union of electrical workers. At that time of course in a predominant republican community we felt there were certain changes necessary and it was imperative of importance that we had a two party system with the contrast being that in Mississippi you have only a one party system and I dare not even disgrace the democratic party by calling it a democratic party system it is a Dixocrat party and of course then I got to New York and went from one side of the corn to another that we had another one-sided party situation. The republicans were there and had been there and still I, so I ran for public office with the support of all labor against a real entrenched local community persona and came within oh 400 votes of winning the election.

Joan Beifuss- What were you running for?

Jesse Epps- City Council. And of course at that point my interests somehow asked to what ought to be done and what could be done in the south was still on my mind and I was able to rally together sufficient local support in Syracuse. The president of the Muchins National Bank there, a man by the name of Thomas Higgins agreed to serve as chairman of a financial drive to establish for 18 counties in Delta Mississippi a community action program and this is before OEO came into existence because it was in 1959. SO it was before the election of the late president of John F. Kennedy. Of course having gotten this done I sort of chased around the country then James Cary was president of the IUE. He agreed to serve on the board then president of the burrow of New York, Dudley and who is now (Muffled) agreed to serve on the board of a newly formed organization.

Joan Beifuss- What was his name?

Jesse Epps- Dudley, Douglass. He is now a judge in New York a second judge in New York, a federal judge in New York appointed by the late president.

The late (muffled) Stevenson also agreed to serve on our board and the bishop Peabody's wife the bishop who was bishop of the diocese of the Episcopal diocese of New York, Central New York who was involved in some activities down in Florida.

Joan Beifuss- Is that (muffled) Peabody's mother?

Jesse Epps- Yes. She agreed with several of our boards so that we were able to develop a pretty rounded, I guess this is a bad term, that was pretty blue ribbon committee, that was interested in seeing that something was done along the lines of dealing with the poverty in the community as well as with the illiteracy in the community and using what we had termed it recreation as the catch all situation. I am skipping over a lot of persons that were involved in that activity.

Joan Beifuss- I am a little bit confused here, now this group of people were the governing board for what project?

Jesse Epps- For the southern educational and recreational association that was chartered as a non-profit organization for carrying on a community action program in 18 Delta counties in Mississippi. We went to the Ford foundation and interested them in funding the operation to the tune of almost \$20 million and of course we had developed it to a point when a president was elected and then of course I got involved because of union activities and his campaigning and so on and after his election we turned to go back and redevelop, or to continue to develop the project and had developed it to a point where Ford through its low Escalon had shown they were interested and shown the possibility of funding the project. I then took a leave of absence from the union to go down back to Mississippi to conduct that project.

Joan Beifuss- Now hold just a second, how old were you when you left Mississippi?

Jesse Epps- Let's see now I am 31 now this goes back I was about 19 when I left I believe. When I left New York going back of course I was about 24 or 25.

Joan Beifuss- Ok let me ask you this once you got out of Mississippi why did you care?

Jesse Epps- Well, you know I found myself saying that we ought to be doing something about the problems in Syracuse and the problems of our country. And yet, the urban problem today is but a transplant of the rural problem of America and until something is done about the rural problem in America our urban problem is going to always continue and you aren't going to be able to do anything about the urban problem because you are getting always the transplant of the rural problem and of course this is hwy so many other people of whom I have named were interested., In fact, too many of the people were involved because they felt that unless we do something about our difficulty and about the migration of rural America into urban America the problem of urban America will be completely

unmanageable because you are talking about the welfare being swelled year after year after year and people coming completely without direction and I found this was true during my campaign. It was really pronounced because we folks from Florida and Mississippi and Alabama predominantly from Florida and Alabama because generally people migrate in a straight line and they came right up the coast to Syracuse.

Joan Beifuss- How large of a negro population is Syracuse?

Jesse Epps- It has grown some now I guess in 55 you had a population of around 8,9, 10,000. By 1958, 59 when I ran for public office you had a population of about 15,000. I guess it is in the neighborhood of 20,000 now.

Joan Beifuss- How is that in percentage wise?

Jesse Epps- Well you are talking about 15,000 out of about 300,000, so it is just a speck almost in the total population. As the results of this the lawback illiteracy foundation is headquartered in Syracuse and his program of each one teach one is known throughout the world in fact.

Joan Beifuss- What is the name of that?

Jesse Epps- Layback.

Joan Beifuss- Spell it.

Jesse Epps- That is L-A-C-....L-A-B-A-C-K. This is on, its headquarters is located on Horrison street, I believe it is about the 1200 block of Harrison street in Syracuse. The united church women of the church of god in Christ church was acutely interested about doing something in New York about the problem, Syracuse New York but also showed an interest in using whatever influence they could in aiding us to find funds for our project. Then unfortunately in fact the day of the assassination of the president, I guess none of us can forget where we were. It was at the home of the president of the women group in New York in Syracuse. Of course for the next few days and months that passed the river sort of took a completely different turn, We know what happened in the Congress and we know what position was taken by the Congress on poverty and so on. We had also incidentally, we had also talked to the Rockefeller foundation, I had talked to the governor himself, governor Rockefeller who had sent me over to talk to his brother who by and large is the guiding force for the foundation in New York and had also shown an interest in providing some funds for the project together with the field foundation, So we felt we were on pretty sure foot for a substantial grant and of course our philosophy was even in Mississippi where segregation and all the eels of the society was laden upon both the negro and the white community. That really both were caught within an inescapable situation. The whites in order to maintain the status quo found themselves hanging on to yesterday and the negros trying to get out of the ditch was not trying to get out off the ditch within its own community but was trying to find

their way out of the south and into urban America where they were really being....finding themselves in worse conditions in urban America than they were where they were coming from. The union, the IUD department of the AFLCIO then headed by Jack Conway gave us our initial grants of monies that I could then be relieved within my job and have funds within the operational budget of Sarah to come down to Mississippi and try to develop at the local community level a coalition of negro activists and white segregationists. That was one of the interesting eras of my life, I know you aren't interested in that. I will jump over that and come to what you are interested in here.

Joan Beifuss- I would be kind of interested in how you worked together with segregationists.

Jesse Epps- Dr. Aaron Henry lives in Clarksdale as you are probably aware and he served as president of the NAACP for the state of Mississippi and was the in fact the thorn in the side of the white power structure for the state of Mississippi. And strangely enough in Clarksdale, apparently attracts the activists from both sides. President of the white citizen council for the state of Mississippi lives in Clarksdale. The special government sovereignty, which is the legal white citizen's council which is funded by the state of Mississippi also lives in Clarksdale. The chairman of the John Birch Society for the state of Mississippi also lives in Clarksdale. Interesting, an interesting situation. Well before the foundation had laid down some almost impossible guidelines but yet which I felt were guidelines that might ought to be met if we were going to get a meaningful project going in Mississippi for a basic adult education program you see my whole idea was that while I had no notions that the Congress was ever going to do anything in the area of voter registration but knowing that in the Delta counties of Mississippi that the negro population was about 85% of that area that if the masses of my people were able to register, were able to read first then write, then we could demand registration. And if we could demand registration then we could take over the political range of the communities and thus we could bring about registration and bring about a resolution to many of the problems we had if we were able to do this. However of course we didn't say this in the beginning but ultimately the end of was when we went into the community. When we met with the, went into Clarksdale and we figured that we would use this as our base, this is in Colhoma County. There is a board of supervisors which is the governing body for the county government. The chairman of that board at that time and was until this past election and he didn't run, was a man by the name of Will Young. Will Young was a self style and self made millionaire using of course the same tools of exploitation that of course the white power structure had used before historically in Mississippi. But a man who was virtually uneducated but had muscled himself into power because of his money as chairman of the board. A very actionary. The lawyer for the board of course was a reflection of the board composition. I went to the chairman of the white citizen, first I went, instead going fresh to the negro activists in the community, I went to what we term today the uncle tom of today in negro leadership. A man by the name of Charles Stringer who runs a funeral home in Mississippi who had been the tool of the power structure from years past and still

was as father historically and so on. I said to him what we had in mind in terms of providing a basic adult education program geared around recreation for young folk and so on and wanted to know from him who were the powers that being the white community. Of course, he went down the list. I asked if he would arrange a meeting for me with those persons. When I met with the chairman of the white citizen's council Mr. McGavens who at that time and still is vice president of the Clarksdale Bank in town. Made it very clear to me that he had no interest in the negroes staying in Mississippi and in fact he said if it was left up to him he would advise the board of supervisors to provide them all one way tickets out of Cohoma County. Of course all I could do is to keep my composure when I talked to him but I cited to him, and of course Mr. Stringer had told them I was a labor man and so on. He said my interest my not necessarily in those people but it was to gain the confidence of the people and to organize the farm workers of Mississippi. Of course he was able to rally t he plantation owners and all of the board of supervisors are owned big plantations in the community.

Unknown Male Interviewer- When you went in to see him you in a way already had two strikes against you?

Jesse Epps- Indeed, indeed. However the thing that I kept pointing out to him, and I pointed out to him and to Stringer involved. You know you can't close your eyes to the problem that is here. I said to him, at that time it was about the summer of 65 about 65 at that time and then was having all the activities of the summer of 65 activities of students of all over the country in Mississippi because Dr. Aaron Henry lived there it became the center of activities because he was the most, the activist in the whole movement in Mississippi. So I said to him you aren't going to close your eyes you aren't going to give folks one way tickets, they aren't going to go because in New York and in Chicago and in all the towns where they going they found themselves completely without friend and without anywhere to go and many of them were migrating back and they were they were going back to Mississippi. I said that my thinking is that city is going to show some prudence if you could do something about your local situation if these people can become taxpayers rather than tax recipients. TO no avail, and he said he wasn't going to stand in the way if we felt this was going to be the thing that was going to e done but he was opposed to it and if Ford was going to put all the money in it was up to Ford and the board supervisors, if he had influence they weren't going to provide the money. Well by this time of course head start had been funded and we had been working, Jack Conway then became deputy director of OEO. Who was a real personal friend of mine from the united auto workers. He said to me Jesse get your application in because he knew we had already prepared for Ford and you could probably get some substantial money. So we got our application in and so we got back down there and to make a long story short we got funded over the objection of the governor after a phone call from the president to the governor to sign off on it.

Joan Beifuss- You got it OEO funded?

Jesse Epps- Yes, over the objection of the power structure, over the objection of the governor, I went to the board of supervisors. I made it very clear to them that this is what we wanted to do and we needed their help and needed their support. They said I wasn't going to get it they were preparing their own application and they were going to get their own money but they found out that OEO was going to give me the money anyhow. Then they decided they were going to appoint a special committee, an interracial committee of course as normal they picked all the toms and...

Unknown Male Interviewer- Toms huh.

Jesse Epps- And formed the committee and of course that was just, snow right in my hat was all I needed to point out that the guidelines wasn't being met and of course we got the money and now the project has been operating for several years I begin to find that again OEO programs unfortunately find themselves getting bogged down again in the bureaucratic system because here you have to keep some credence of community support and more and more it is becoming more establishment rather than a program of deliverance as I had seen it in the beginning.

Joan Beifuss- Is this what developed into that fight in Mississippi between...

Jesse Epps- CDJM and MAP. Well what happened there my closest friend became very much a target and lost much of his glamour of a civil rights activist and it is Dr. Henry for which I speak. Became involved at a point where (muffled) under the pressures from Stennance and Eastland saying that money had been misspent and had been spent wastefully by the CDGM operations. I had the privilege of testifying before the Senate Committee and a number of sub committees at the Congress level and I said to them and I said in subsequent speeches too those whomever I could get an audience with is that even though an item costs that you should have been able to buy for \$.50 but they paid \$.75 for if it was handled by the community itself, if I it was handled by the impoverished community then this in fact was getting at the cause of poverty. I don't want to get off into that argument but let me develop what I meant about that. Is that for the first time in the history of these persons lives they found that they could make a decision and by them making this decision you were then striking the first blow at the cause of poverty because up until this point we were treating the sickness and not the cause of sickness. You were providing money for welfare, you were giving clothes and shoes and so on. Now you were giving hope, you were giving aspiration to people, you were saying you count. You make a difference you can make a decision that could be honored. While the adult community in the negro community probably couldn't do a think about it in this juncture and probably would not themselves become professors and so on, But what you were really doing, you relaying the foundation for that little boy and girl in that household what are going to come up in that same cycle of poverty that his father and mother had been...so therefore, this was the quarter in between began getting at the real cause of poverty. Rather than the \$.50 that was sent on the program, well we will talk about this some other time this is my personal philosophy about the whole idea. Well I became the real controversy in Mississippi because as the power structure saying the negro power structure saying I wouldn't

stay in (muffled) I wouldn't steal as one of the local pressmen put it in the press that there was a restlessness about my spirit that I just refused to sit still and let what we had develop in an orderly fashion. Well of course an orderly fashion was talking about gradually instead of soon and of course I just can't see it and won't see it is just part of me. Well at any rate I had decided that I had found a young man who I thought who shared as near as I could find a person who shared my thinking and I used what little influence I still had to get him as deputy director of the project and in fact in order to try and put this thing together we ended up initially with me using the influence I had with Bo Washington in the Atlanta office and being responsible for the two director and deputy director of the project who still are director and deputy director of the project.

Joan Beifuss- Who is director.

Jesse Epps- This is Mr. Gus Russler who is the director and Benny Goodin who is the Deputy Director this is (muffled) opportunities operating out of Clarksdale. What really happened ,my vision of the whole 18 county thing, white power structure (muffled) through the whole idea and saw that massing this number of negroes together their kingdom was gone. They rallied together and said we aren't going to have this kind of coalition it is going to have to be county by county and so on. So I said fine and I finally withdrew and went back to staff with the IUE. Because the IUE is a basic industrial union and we organize in industrial settings and in industrial towns throughout the country. Which in a sense would have taken me out of Mississippi and into areas where we are needed but really away from the problem. And of course when I looked around and I found that within the AFLCIO a union for the poor of America and this is what I talk about union. It is the union for the poor of America because the poor public employee both black and white have been both left outside. The politician in the south has used the white man given him jobs and told him he was the poor white and told him he was the real man and you are better than a nigger therefore we are going to give you this job and we want to make sure you keep us in power politically and as long as we are elected you have a job and we can keep the nigger down and give him nothing in terms of wages. So that I said this is the place for me. So of course when I was back in Washington I went over and talked to the president of my now international Mr. Worth and said to him you know instead of back to the IUE, in fact I was on the IUE staff a the time, I said I think what I am going to do I am not, I cannot fulfill what I would like to see done for the masses of my people both black and the poor of America, the poor white in the union where I am and yet the south is literally unorganized in our area. I pointed out to him Memphis and Jackson and New Orleans and so on. And he agreed and said well we would be glad to take us aboard our union and of course I started working for the state, county, municipal employees. Then I got involved in a number of southern drives over in Little Rock for example we were involved in organizing the university of little rock and then I went down to Pascagoula Mississippi and we had strike in Pascagoula and this is my pride and joy. I guess everybody has something they like to point to, that is an achievement.

Joan Beifuss- I don't even know where Pascagoula is.

Jesse Epps- Pascagoula is on the gulf coast of Mississippi down right on the gulf. It, within 20 miles of Mobile Alabama. Should I say more? But strangely enough in Pascagoula I found an unusual situation. You either find in cities of the south an all white public employee or an all black public employees. Particularly in the sanitation department of the public works department. But I found in Pascagoula almost a 50/50 employment which was unusual and strange. Nothing unusual in terms of who had the better jobs. But then I found that the men there, the poor white and the poor negro had discovered themselves and found out what was going on, how they had been exploited and they themselves had since organized themselves and gone out on strike for higher wages.

Unknown Male Interviewer- Just locally?

Jesse Epps- Yeah it wasn't connected with anybody.

Joan Beifuss- When was this?

Jesse Epps- This was in early, or in late last year, 1968, 67. So I went down to Pascagoula to meet with the men to see if they were interested in becoming affiliated with our union. Of course the president of the AFLCIO in the state of Mississippi which is an unusual, strange and courageous man. His name is Claude Ramsay. He had said to unions in Mississippi, did not say it from his office with guards around him but said it, and it was some of the most rapid segregationist areas said it in Natchez, said it in Vicksburg, said it in the Delta of Mississippi in Greenwood and said it in Charleston. If you remember Charleston it is the place of (Muffled) trial and so on. And said to the white power structure and to the negro people in that community the system that we have is completely outdated and we have got to change. He is a southern, born of Mississippi. White Mississippian, however he went down and talked to the men and of course our union we had a man who was a member of the Long family, Willy Long out of Baton rouge. He was very close to Pascagoula and our union called him and asked him if he would come over and see what could be done in Pascagoula. Then of course I talked to Gerry and he agreed that now was the time even though we had forced integration of all our local unions across the south to become integrated and so on, no more separate two local unions but one. I said to him, now is the time we are going to establish once and for all if the men don't want to come in under this banter than we can't represent them and he agreed. Of course with some fear and trembling I went to Pascagoula and in Pascagoula was my most marauding experience. We were able the men involved both negro and white was able to elect among themselves the officers of the local union as fairly about 50% from each group. We held integrated meetings from the very beginning. We had one of the best run, even though it is small about 100 men, one of the best local unions racially and race relation wise anywhere we have in our country in Pascagoula. We ended up with a signed agreement and this was the thing we stuck in Lobe's crawl here in Memphis. We ended up with a signed agreement with Pascagoula with a wage increase that the city said they couldn't give that they

gave, with fringe benefits that they thought they couldn't give but they found monies for. So that I find myself being very happy with our Pascagoula situation and I went off with my chest stuck out and I always talk about Pascagoula, if I am in Arkansas I say if it can be done in Pascagoula it ought to be done anywhere. And of course when I was summoned to Memphis..

Joan Beifuss- Now you were over in Little Rock right before the strike broke out?

Jesse Epps- Well really I was in, I had just completed my activities in Little Rock and I was in a town just below Mt. Bio it was an all negro town, well it was an all negro town it isn't anymore. Cleveland, Cleveland Mississippi. We were organizing poverty workers in Mississippi. We had some 2,000 employees organized at that point and we were negotiating several contracts. When I got the call I couldn't get in on that day and I told Champa who was the field staff director that I could probably get into Memphis the following night.

Joan Beifuss- Ok was Champa here at that time?

Jesse Epps- No when he called me, when he first called me he had just gotten the call that there was a strike in Memphis and he said he was leaving for Memphis and said he would call me back. So he called me back later that night and said he was in Memphis and sure enough it was a strike and we need to get out in probably a couple days and get this thing behind us. He told me sort of put everything you have on the coals there and come up and maybe in 2 or 3 days we can have this garbage strike behind us and you can go back to what you were doing.

Joan Beifuss- Ok now just hold just a minute how familiar were you with Memphis, had you worked here in Memphis?

Jesse Epps- Well in terms of only, not, I had worked in Memphis oh I guess in the early, in the late 50's. I guess around 60, no it was earlier than that. It must have been around 58, 59 thereabout. I came through and believe it or not I stopped by and talked to the men, I was passing through and I talked to the men out at the airport who work for the park commission because it was not in my union jurisdiction and they showed interest. So I came back and signed all those men up and went over and visited the park area and signed up a number of men that were there. And of course because it was not my jurisdiction I couldn't stay here and develop it so on and so forth. By and large I had no real familiarities with Memphis in terms of its powers structure and so forth. I knew none of the negro power structure people nor any of the white power structure. So when I came to Memphis on the strike, usually a garbage strike lasts 3 or 4 days, no more than a week, because usually they are in the summer you just can't you see. Because this happened you know what time of the year it was and when I came here I said to the men out at the hall in my first meeting that I was here was out at Firestone Hall on Firestone Blvd. Of course when I spoke to the men and I told them I ain't no New Yorker and I ain't no Yankee, but I am a lowly Mississippian, coming even from

where many of you have come from, migrated from. I was able to relate to them that I understood the problem have been born and bred in the south.

Joan Beifuss- Now when you came in here when you were briefed on the situation here what were you told, were you told how the strike started?

Jesse Epps- Our office was pretty upset that we had no knowledge that the strike was developing, in fact when we knew anything it was a risk and that Mr. Jones, a courageous little man had done what probably had to be done at that time. You know once you stop and look back and examine all of the situations in Memphis while it was not the time strike wise, not the time strategically wise, but it was the time humanly wise that it had to be done.

Joan Beifuss- If you laid that, why T.O. Jones took those men out at that point is there any one thing that kicked it off.

Jesse Epps- I think the major thing that really brought down the rafters was the needless to say Memphis is the capital of the agrarian society and because it is all of the, all of the schisms and isms and all of the formalities of the agrarian society is carried over here in Memphis, There are many white people in this community that have a good relationship with negros. But it is not the relationship on a man to man basis but a servant to master basis. I like John he is a good boy. Many of them it has turned their pockets inside out for negro families right here in this town and this is the kind of society we were in a negro community....many negros while they had accepted it was completely fed up beyond that. Of course the thing that brought the strike was two fold. One the men had felt that the time had passed for them working for nothing, The city had promised them and promised them and promised them. Then when the city refused even to come down and talk wit them about their inability to do anything about money for them and then compounded with the fact that several days prior to that a rain had come up and the negros, everybody had come to the barn and the negros had gone home and the white had stayed around and gone back to work and they were getting paid and the negros hadn't. When they talked with the director he said well we are going to take care of it and then finally when the paycheck was put out it wasn't taken care of. Finally when they confronted him with it and they said this is it and all the things are going to be done. Well those two factors together became the straw that broke the camel's back. They said to themselves, we don't have anything, no hiring, no needing to stand around because we ain't going to get nothing under the situation that we have, In a sense I am glad that we wasn't involved, because then professionally we would have advised against it we would have tried to get around it another way. By them taking the whole thing into their own hand and sort of saying...and this is the way the union ought to function and this is the way we feel our union functions through out this country. Our international do not impose its will upon the local membership. We only advise them and they take whatever action they please and to this we pride ourselves. But at any rate when I came in here it was the day after Lobe had spoken to the men, I wasn't here the day he spoke to the men over at the South Hall and the men booed him. That was the first time in the history of Lobe's life that he was no longer the

master of the...there was an insurrection among the slaves. He couldn't have again, because he was elected on a racist ticket in Memphis. And he was the last standing barrier for the racist community. He couldn't have predominant black men telling him what he had to do and he just drew the line and he drew it because he felt these men had not the power to resist the powers that he had and he was right., He was completely correct.

Joan Beifuss- Did you see the mayor when you first came in?

Jesse Epps- Well, when I came in P.J. Champa and Bill Lucie are another member of our staff and brother Jones who had a meeting, or a meeting was then arranged with Lobe to see him the next day. Champ said to me I think you should go with us., I said to him no, what I think I need to do is stay with the men in the hall and probably do some interpreting in the community. What the strike is all about because no one at that time, because the press...the kindest word I can use for them is not only hostile towards unions but hostile towards what is right and I am being kind when I say that. Very kind, I should find stronger adjectives to describe what I think about them but I was standing and they had helped to perpetuate the kind of thing that Lobe stood for. Well at that juncture I had seen that the strike, the sides were becoming galvanized. Rather than Lobe saying we are going to do anything he was taking a very unaltered position, the men's fired and if they come back to work or else they don't. So then I said to Champ we have got to, and then of course Champ was getting some real bad press.

Joan Beifuss- To say the least.

Jesse Epps- They were showing, and then they were showing quite accurately what he was saying and what he was doing but they weren't showing anything Lobe was saying or doing. That provoked his outburst you see and of course it presented to the reasonable man in the community that one of these Washingtonians coming down here don't know nothing about our community causing all these problems we just got to run him off. So I said to him what we have got to do at this juncture I feel is to do some real interpreting in the negro community and particularly in the negro community because I feared what would happen is Lobe would announce the following day because of high unemployment in the city we are going to hire new men and people because they want jobs would take the jobs of the men and then we would be completely out in the cold. So we did something that was unprecedented up until that juncture that we were using almost, all of us learned some lessons in Memphis., The negro minister historically and even in Memphis up until that juncture was a tool of the power structure. If mayor Ingram had been elected the mayor of Memphis we would have never been able to be successful in my efforts here, this is my personal feelings in Memphis. Because mayor Ingram had enough political ingenuity to either have influenced, bought or by hook or crook divided the negro leadership and would have had some negros with him, we would not have gotten the united negro front that we got in Memphis. Lobe had closed the door and run off all of the negros and even those uncle toms like the pastor of a Methodist church here in town, Alcorn, I don't have many friends because I tell folk what I

think that is just my make up. He couldn't even get an audience with Lobe and to me he is the chieftain of uncle tom's in Memphis.

Joan Beifuss- Let me ask you some thing is, I have not met T.O. Jones. Is T.O. Jones sophisticated enough in power politics if that is thee term to oppose Lobe and not Ingram?

Jesse Epps- No, in fact, Lobe was a professional politician. I don't even consider myself and I of course have had far more experience and been far more involved in politics as brother Jones has for the last 5 years I and then going back to my campaign in New York and then going back and coming and involving myself in political activities throughout the country. Right now I serve on the national advisory committee of the national party, first on the national board of the young democrat clubs of America and then served as a special 9 man committee for the party on involving young people in the national party. I served as co-chairmen of the young democratic clubs of Mississippi and so on. But Lobe, he himself was not probably as wise and as studios as his plans were but he is professional as I was concerned in this area. Unfortunately brother Jones is not that articulate, he comes from the rank of the men. He was a garbage worker himself.

Joan Beifuss- Yes I know.

Jesse Epps- And while he was a garbage worker he had many qualities of leadership but not a so polished and not so articulate that he could have rattled the community for his support.

Unknown Male Interviewer- Go ahead.

Jesse Epps- In fact it took probably the combination of all of us to have been able to interpret to this community what this thing was all about. Could you stop it just a minute. (Tape Break) The strangest thing happened in Memphis and you know I am writing a book too.

Joan Beifuss- Are you?

Jesse Epps- I just haven't had any time. I am writing with a friend of mine who is I guess who is a very articulate writer, I am not.

Joan Beifuss- Who are you writing with?

Jesse Epps- It is boy from the university of Mississippi believe it or not and myself have been working on the materials and getting together. Here in Memphis and of course probably my book is going to take a completely different turn for the rest of the books are being written because I am going to write as I saw and see the changing negro community and how the negro community as a unit while it is a minority in almost every community and a minority in this country if the, if the little minute power that they have is directed in the right channels can bring about a majority opinion. To change the whole structure of the society and that is what

happened in Memphis. The negro leadership was completely divided among many lines. They each had their own political dynasty, they each their own church activities or their club or what you have. And in many instances, there were, in fact in a lot of instances in fact in a number of the real power people in this community had not spoken to one another for several names I can remember off the top of my head, for over a year when we came to Memphis. And this had gone back to the root problem of politics that had been fanned by the whirlwind of this good old man mayor Ingram we were talking about who had been most successful in dividing the negro community and then of course by dividing the negro community then he could go over to the white community and with the division of the negro community could insure himself almost political success. But he found a demagogue worse than he who was able to throw him from his throne, and that was the best thing that happened to Memphis. Lobe, mayor Lobe was the best thing that could have ever happened to Memphis despite the tragedy, despite all of the difficulty involved but Lobe was the best thing that could happen to Memphis. When we called for a meeting of the negro leadership and of course I said to against some advise of some folk that had been involved in community activities in the past, that we had and my thesis was that we had always, that we had somehow not gotten to the leaders of the, the natural leaders of any community. A minister is a natural leader whether he is (muffled) or not because as long as he is a pastor there is a group of people that believe in him. And this is a fact that too many people over look. And generally the leadership of all communities attend some kind of a church. (Tape Break)

Joan Beifuss- Then in other wards you wanted the black ministers involved in the situation.

Jesse Epps- Yeah well we sent out I again there is a psychological air of importance that you have to give people who are in leadership or recognize people who are in leadership and if you recognize their importance then people are generally, he is the center of the stage he is willing to do something, so instead of just arranging a telephone pole or something of this nature they sent out urgency and the matter was urgent of course, a certain amount of importance and the matter was important that was attached top the telegram. So I sat down and I composed a list of all the negro ministers in town and sent all of them a telegram and asked them for a meeting on that Saturday.

Unknown Male Interviewer- Do you recall when this was?

Joan Beifuss- The day of the macing?

Jesse Epps- Yeah that is right and I tell you I should have taken some time and jotted down some dates and I haven't.

Joan Beifuss- That's alright we have them.

Unknown Male Interviewer- About the 24th of February.

Jesse Epps- There about, it was after the day of the most humiliating situation that we had ever had.

Joan Beifuss- Were you caught in that macing?

Jesse Epps- I sure was. Now what happened there and I think again this was the second best thing that could have happened to Memphis. First was Lobe and second was the macing. Were people such as Dr. H. Ralph Jackson who in this town, a man probably in terms of prestige, in terms of jobs and so on.

(Tape Break)

Jesse Epps- Killing me.

Unknown Male Interviewer- You were talking about reverend Jackson being influential, and the effect of the macing.

Jesse Epps- Oh, yeah. Up until this point men like Dr. Jackson and Dr. Jackson himself, had been silenced for example when there had been a strike over at the universal life insurance company. Where predominant negroes had gone out because it was a negro insurance agency. Not a single negro leader lifted a finger to help and there were at least among us and we are fortunate to have him among our staff now, a young man out of UAW who tried to do some thing about it but was unsuccessful because there was no support from anybody. But then of course Dr. Jackson again was not so interested because people are not generally interested in things that they are not directly involved in, however the mayor and the council and in a special session of the council we had gone down to present our case, the men's case. For fear that the president of the council would say that we are outsiders thus and so, the president of our union at that time Mr. Worth who had come in and met with Mr. Lobe the day before, the night before Sunday night in fact in an all night session because I attended that meeting.

Unknown Male Interviewer- The 18th of February.

Jesse Epps- That is right. And of course with some pleasant exchange..

Joan Beifuss- That was the meeting sponsored by the ministers?

Jesse Epps- Yes right by Dr. Wax and that group and however we decided in order not to get caught in the trap of saying that it is an outsider coming in here to speak for the council that I should be our spokesmen for our union and of course it almost took me 15 minutes to get the flow from the chairman, co chairman. The chairman on the sub-committee on public works was surprisingly enough was a negro./

Unknown Male Interviewer- This is Fred Davis.

Jesse Epps- Yes and of course Mr. Davis is sufficiently tied to the power structure enough that he is no longer a in my judgment a true representative of the people but a representative of the power structure and he resisted the fact that and he pointed

out you know that we were an outsider and we needed to say where I was from. They were completely shocked when they found out I was from Mississippi. And understood the problems because they were saying those of us here understand the south we understand our problems and we don't need these other folk coming in and telling us about these problems well then after I got in the flow and we argued about the case back and forth and then he accused me of trying to bridge the men and weren't giving the men a chance to speak because we had only 2 or 3 folk there but they had deliberately gone out and drummed up 5 men whom they had for public relations purpose were going to call on them to speak and say that the men should go back to work and so on. The men has told us this since. And they kept saying well we got some men saying that they want to hear from them and not from you. Because knowing the trick they had I had the floor and I just wouldn't give the floor up.

Joan Beifuss- Who went out and got the 5 men?

Jesse Epps- I don't know if Mr. Davis had done it himself or who had done it but part of the power structure and I surmised it was Davis himself because he kept pointing to there is a man back there in the, I believe he had a leather coat. He works for the public works department how come he can't come down here and say what the men want to do. Well I knew, I have been in enough of these kinds of situations knowing there is a trick up his sleeve so Champ was in the audience, all our staff was there. So Champ went back to the hall where the men were meeting and we brought all 1300 of them down and of course that was when we had dinner in the...because the committee agreed that they were going to recommend to the city council that the union be recognized and so on but they couldn't guarantee that the council was going to vote this way and so on and this was going to be done the next day at 2:00.

Unknown Male Interviewer- On this, did you feel this was an effort on the part of the subcommittee or this committee to more or less appease you temporarily?

Jesse Epps- I think they found themselves in a trick, they thought they had been tricked, they had not been tricked they had tricked themselves and they found themselves in a real big because all those men weren't going to leave there and it was going to be a sit in and they were going to have to arrest everybody there because nobody was going to leave city hall until justice was done. So in order to get us all out, they said the committee voted unanimously...no one just abstained and gloat. That they were going to recommend to the council that this be done. We said fine and this is what you are going to do and then we agreed that we would meet over at south hall instead of the chamber in order that all the men get in. But as the power structure of almost any community in the south they had their meeting before the meeting. They marched into the south hall, they sat down the chairman called the meeting into order. The secretary read the resolution, he called for a vote, per roll call. He called for a motion of adjournment and got up and left. And that was, that was the next best thing that was the most humiliating....I have never in all my life been so angry, I almost, but at that juncture of course the men decided we are going to march to Mason temple and you know the rest of the story and Dr. Jackson

who had come down there was completely humiliated because he had planned to come down and appeal to reasoning. Reason with the council and a number of other leaders James Lawson and many other folk had come down and hopefully they was going to try to convince the council that this was a time that the new form of government become grown up. Become men and assume the responsibility that it had but the mayor was the mayor and unfortunately the whole council were puppets for the mayor with the exception of 1 or 2.

Joan Beifuss- Had you ever been gassed before that day?

Jesse Epps- You know believe it or not I have been in a lot of fights and when I say fights in terms of being arrested a number of times in civil rights demonstrations and I have been beaten by sheriff's and arrested in some other situations where union activities in all, but this was the first time in my history I had even been gassed. I got it in Memphis.

Unknown Male Interviewer- What did you think during this march, what really brought on this? (Tape Break)

Jesse Epps- So, well the men were angry because unfortunately those of us who were in leadership had shown our anger, and it was never in all my life had I been so humiliated in terms of, never had I seen a council say hear ye, hear ye, the council is hear to hear all things pregnant before it and yet that was worse than any parts of Mississippi I had seen in my whole life,. Even in Mississippi they gave you a chance to talk but they are going to do what they want to do anyhow. The men was mad and they said they weren't going to walk on the sidewalk and this police chief insisted we walk on the sidewalk. We said there wasn't going to be no walking on the sidewalk. They went out in the street and then of course the chief then got permission that we could walk on one side of the street.

Joan Beifuss- Was that Lutz?

Jesse Epps- Yeah. And then..

Joan Beifuss- Were you in that group that was talking directly to Lutz?

Jesse Epps- Yeah that is right, Of course the president of our union said to him of course our men have been treated very badly and he had, the first time in all the history of my life there is a man who is a man of toughness. But here was the...he saw the real tragedy that could possibly take place. That was the first time in my life of knowing him, I had really seen him really plead for tolerance on the part of a city and tolerance for barrens and he as sincere because he saw what could happen a massacre could almost erupt and he said to him, he pleaded with the city that here we are not asking to violate any law but we are asking that the men, they want to go in peace, they are peace loving folk and let them go. Finally they agreed to let us march on that side of the street but then the announcement was we would walk on the west side of the line. But then the sheriff the police, drove the car that was going to keep us intact also on the west side of the line and kept butting the folks.

Unknown Male Interviewer- Were you back in this area?

Jesse Epps- I was just in front of the car and there were 3 or 4 cars in front and there was a car right behind us and it kept nudging in on the folk and of course this is what really brought on the real problem.

Unknown Male Interviewer- Did you see it, there was some mention later that it ran over a woman's foot?

Jesse Epps- I did not witness this, but it was reported and so on. I do know it almost knocked down several folk as it stayed on that side of the line. Now whether it ran over a person foot or not I cannot truthfully say that this is a fact but at any rate it kept pushing and bumping or whatever happened when I discovered.

Joan Beifuss- Did you go back to the car?

Jesse Epps- Yes I went back there at the time and, or at least I started back there.

Joan Beifuss- Was that when they were rocking the car?

Jesse Epps- Well yes. So we started back myself, and Dr, Jackson and Lawson, and a number of us were walking at the head of the line because we felt the police was trying to harass the folk on the front end of the line. At that juncture they came out indiscriminately without provocation on anybody's part with the mace and their night sticks and while it was the most...at that moment it was in terms of the behavior of the police it was a real tragedy for the police department of Memphis To become inhuman and act without provocation and yet in terms of our success in Memphis I must quote the ministers that I learned to live with for that day on for about 6 or 7 weeks. That the law works in mysterious ways and wonders to perform. Because it was from that juncture that they realized that as Dr. Jackson put it so amply. That had that been white ministers or leaders in the white community the police would never have done this. Ahead of Dr. Jackson not only a local minister but his director of the minimum salary department for the whole African Methodist church of the whole united states. Had been hailed by the mayor as one of the most responsible citizen in the community, had taken pictures with him and come down and cut the ribbon tot his building and so on. And yet without discrimination praise him he sprayed him too.

Unknown Male Interviewer- Did you hear any order ever given to use the mace or did somebody just bring out their can and start spraying.

Jesse Epps- Well I didn't hear any orders but I don't know whether it was a spontaneous thing or whether it was planned before they got there but it was so spontaneous that I think it was already premeditated and pre-planned. In fact, the director of the civil rights department for the federal government was walking with us at the ahead of the line and he said to, he saw one poor little old man some 70

years old who was being beaten and he said you know it is no need of this and he had his badge in his hand showing him who he was and they maced him and clobbered him welding his federal badge.

Unknown Male Interviewer- This is Jacque Wilmoore?

Jesse Epps- Right.

Joan Beifuss- Mr. Epps strategically speaking could the union have handled the strike without turning it into a racial issue, or was it a racial issue from the beginning and did you want the support of the black community on racializing or did you prefer to handle it as a labor dispute.

Jesse Epps- Well unfortunately the problems of the poor, not that we inject racial overtones, but the problem of the poor is that they have been exploited because of racial situations and you have to deal with the problem. If you are going to solve the problem you start where the problem is. And the problem particularly in the south and in the north and in the east too but particularly in the south. The problem of the poor both black and white has been, they have been sort of kept in that corner along the racial lines. Now however a racial, the racial difficulty which was a major factor involved also can be and should be handled as a labor situation and of course this is the kind of thing we struggled to make sure that the labor identity was kept there that our interests was not necessarily while we of course make it very clear the goals and the objectives and the aim of union and so on is to achieve total equality for all men in respective of his race and in fact I always say in the south and in the north when people talk about you know AFLCIO ain't doing nothing and they aren't doing all the things they ought to be doing and this was right. but yet, when there was no civil rights organization in this country the AFLCIO was the only civil rights organization in this country and yet it to me is still carrying on that fight,. You see to me civil rights and unfortunately when we talk about civil rights today it becomes in the minds of the people and the press has done a marvelous job, the good old press. When you say civil rights it is automatically thought of as racial rights rather than civil rights. See civil rights is far broader than racial rights. But if I go out and say a civil rights man is in town. It is nothing about all of the human rights that civil right denotes but it has got to be somebody talking about race. Of course we wanted the civil rights aspects brought in because you see, it is inhuman in fact for men who work for a living particularly 8 hours a day and at the end of the day they are still entitled to welfare to payments,. They still don't have enough food for their families they still don't have enough clothes or proper shelter and yet they have given their blood sweat and tears for the livelihood of their families. To me this is a civil rights they have been denied an American right,. It is not necessarily a racial situation. If it was a racial because it was made racial. Race was used as a means of achieving their ends and t he ends were of course the exploitation of both poor white and poor negros.

Joan Beifuss- Well after COME was formed and you were working with COME were your hands tied to some extent? In having to go through the COME organization.

Jesse Epps- No in fact we take some pride, some real pride that COME has come into existence as a result of ingenuity and by god's blessings as the ministers would say that it was being able to brought into existence because we realized that unless we had a confederation of organizations that Lobe would get the message sooner or later and he did that he had to have some negroes support or else he was going to lose the fight. In fact on one particular day right in this very building Lobe came down to meet with the negro ministers. He said to them you know, you know I have known you fellows you know, my office is open come down and see me you don't have to be...and there was a minister that stood up and said maybe we need to go down there and see the man maybe the man is right and if you didn't have a confederation of all the other men involved so that everybody became a watchmen for everybody else, that we would have won the battle because Lobe would have been able to pick off one by one the leadership. It is fortunate that meeting that man got up because then Dr. Jackson, reverend Lawson, Dr. Donelson, and a number of others stood up and when they were finished with him no others would dare get out of line from that day forward.

Joan Beifuss- Lobe came down here to meet the ministers?

Jesse Epps- Yes sirree.

Joan Beifuss- Do you have any idea the date on that?

Jesse Epps- I can probably get that date for you, I don't remember right off the top of my head.

Joan Beifuss- Is that early in the first couple weeks?

Jesse Epps- No it was after the macing and so on and after the, I guess about a week or so of he strike, when he was finding that the negro community was holding completely solid and apparently his advisors got to him and said you know you are going to have to beat the whole negro community you aren't going to beat just those 1300 garbage men. Because by now all the negro ministers had preached from their pulpits which side they ought to be on, and they too couldn't go back they had burned their bridges too. And the battle lines was drawn. A number wanted to go back, a number wanted to find their way back over the creek but the tide we made too swiftly for them to get back across and as result, Lobe took another hard nosed position and criticized the ministers which was good because then they knew he was only placating them in the beginning. So they said to them sleeves and to their congregation, this is no longer affecting the 1300 men fighting. But this total negro community fighting if we lose we all lost and we all might as well pack our bags and leave Memphis and then the lines were really drawn and we knew we had them entrenched because we began to reach out and involved at that juncture as much help as we could from without. Because the men couldn't survive.

Joan Beifuss- I was going to say how much was it costing you a week did you know?

Jesse Epps- In the beginning it was costing us approximately, the first couple days after we started getting welfare it was costing us if I remember correctly the first day costs us \$3,000, the second day \$4,000 and thereafter it was running about 5, 6, and \$7,000. This is just welfare.

Joan Beifuss- Yeah who was in charge of the program of trying to get the rent held off and bills...

Jesse Epps- Well we had a committee. Basically we sort of then divided knowing we had a long struggle ahead...(Tape Break) Yes but he is not on the line. Well to make a long story short and I wish I could go on in detail because this is important to me because if we are using this as a reference to what we hope to try to achieve in other communities.

Joan Beifuss- Well hold on let me ask you a couple of questions that will probably shorten it. When did contact with the mayor break off completely, at a certain point there was no more contact at all was there.

Jesse Epps- Well what had happened was the mayor had agreed to continue to meet with the ministers and the ministers had arranged a meeting and so we had gone at each time and you would go and you would talk over the same thing and this was the last meeting as I remember was over on the catholic church on 3rd and Adams I believe it is.

Joan Beifuss- Then after those negotiations.

Jesse Epps- Well what broke them, that off was that we decided that the men weren't going to do anything and if anything was to be done the council was going to have to pick up the ball and do it and of course we began to work with councilmen's and with the chairman of the council and so on.

Joan Beifuss- were you arranging private meetings with...

Jesse Epps- Yeah first we met with some real close friends of Lobe. I have supposedly some good friends in the democratic party who some of the folk here are high in the democratic party so we went through some of those channels.

Joan Beifuss- Can you mention any of those?

Jesse Epps- And met with the local man here, what is the boy's name. Boy who runs Fisher Body Shop here, Fisher body company.

Joan Beifuss- John Fisher?

Jesse Epps- He himself he was one of the men we talked to and the man who was the closes to the mayor is the cotton buyer.

Joan Beifuss- Ned Cooke?

Jesse Epps- Cooke, who was a very (muffled) democrat and so, and who was a personal friend of the mayor who we talked in great length and he went to the mayor and tried to persuade him and I think he did. But the mayor just wouldn't listen to anybody. He too had gotten himself in a corner and he was the champion now of the racist community and he couldn't retreat on the pedestal he had put himself on.

Joan Beifuss- Was there any kind of outside pressure on the mayor from say Washington before his first march of Dr. King's?

Jesse Epps- We had talked to, well we talked to the governor...

Joan Beifuss- You talked to him?

Jesse Epps- I had called the governor's administrative assistant and then I talked to my close ties with the partiers through Bailey in Washington and asked him had the vice president to call the governor and asked him to use whatever influence he could and saying to Lobe let's do what's right.

Joan Beifuss- Ok and this is before Dr, King led that first march?

Jesse Epps- Yes that is right. And these kind of things were being done just Lobe wouldn't listen to anybody in fact when the governor came here Lobe almost insulted the governor in requiesce. Excuse at the Peabody some months prior so that the governor and Lobe weren't on too good of terms. Lobe of course at that juncture had his mind on being governor. He didn't want to, he wanted to project a different kind of image than cooperating with the governor that he was going to project. In the final analysis what brought the strike, what made the strike successful was the unity of the black community and then of course after the first march of Dr. King during that well we found that we were in a really long struggle and Gerry had made an arrangements to go in front of AFLCIO executive board and say to the AFLCIO brothers this is a fight not just for our union but it is a labor fight and we all have a stake in this thing. Of course he got down here and we got caught up in the thing and he was unable to go back but he sent his administrative assistant who spoke to the AFLCIO. Well I have a real close personal friend over at the UAW Walter Ruther. I have known Walter Ruther over the years. So I called her who was an administrative assistant to Walter and said to him we have some real big problems here Walters and we need some money, Of course when she asked me how much I said of course whatever you can give us but we need...at that time we were running, you see our union doesn't have a strike fund as most unions have because law said it was unlawful to strike and so on but we had not developed because we were young primarily and is young.

Joan Beifuss- Is that why you didn't have a strike fund because theoretically public employees can't strike?

Jesse Epps- Well I think the real reason why is because our union is not developed financially to such a position that we can really be in the wall chest as such,. The, and

I said to her but we are spending, at that point we were spending about \$50,000 a week. If you can give us a hand for a week \$50,000 I didn't have an idea that he was going to do it., In fact when she said yup, just said see what I can do and she called me back and she said don't say anything but I think I can get the \$50,000. I told Gerry and he said no they aren't giving no \$50,000.

Joan Beifuss- Was there in fact around the end of March before Dr. King's first march was the union really in bad shape money wise?

Jesse Epps- Now in a sense we had not even tapped our own local unions throughout the country. We had not because we thought that a strike last this was going to last but one or two weeks no more than three weeks and it just kept on. And the more it kept going in fact at one juncture we had even one day we had discovered that we had spent \$15,000 in one day of operation. And then we realized where we were and where we were going. We were talking about a half a million dollars at the least if we went another 3 to 4 weeks and this was just for benefits to the men and not talking about all the other supportive expense that was being incurred you see. So we, of course that was when Gerry made the decision he was going to go to, he sent a letter out to all our local unions throughout the chain and he said he went over to the AFLCIO and of course the labor movement then saw and this was before Dr. King's death, the significance of Memphis, that either Memphis was the dam or the gate and to lose it was not losing it for state and county it was losing it for the whole AFLCIO in the south and it was going to be difficult for everybody to win any kind of elections here after because Lobe would have set the pattern for what should be done. So it really became a, and then Lobe of course kept saying this is not New York and this is Memphis and we ain't going to allow New York into Memphis and but then he automatically brought the thing into the public eye and of the press was most effective in covering up what they want and printing what they want to print and so we found we had to find a way to escalate to let the folk know what was going on in Memphis. Because I went over to Atlanta and met with Dr. King and his staff.

Joan Beifuss- Was that before he came in the first time?

Jesse Epps- Yeah I talked with him before he came in the first time. Jim Lawson primarily made the first contact with him but after we was trying to think of names of people who we ought to bring in and then having worked with Dr. King before I called him and...

Joan Beifuss- Where had you worked with him before?

Jesse Epps- In Mississippi on a number of project in Mississippi and he had come down in Grenada and so on. (Tape Break) So Dr. King said well Jesse I can't get bogged down in Memphis because I have got my march on Washington and I am afraid it will get bogged in Memphis and we just don't have the time and we don't have any staff either that you know so I said to him well you know if no more lend some inspiration to the men, to the folk involved you ought to come. And of course

when he came to that first meeting there was 15,000 folk there and it was electrifying to him and he saw as he put it in his own words there was a rejuvenation of the movement. He felt that he had to be involved but this whole staff and this is what makes my heart soft heavier than anybody else in all of the tragedy. His whole staff said including himself said this is all they could do is to come in and give us a (muffled) and that was it. Of course we pointed that this was not, he just couldn't do that and that they had to do more than that. Of course, right on the stage right there we sort of, with all of the crowd there and all sort of pushed him into saying he would come back and lead one march for us. Of course when he came back to lead that march we know what happened. And then the staff folk said to him Dr. King you can't go back to Memphis we are going to get bogged down with a little private fight with a man in Memphis and let some of our staff folk go back in and we can handle it just to make it a successful march because we got to go on to Washington. Well I went over to, it was a Saturday and I went over to Atlanta and I spent the whole day. You know it bothers me even now because that particular day in log I had never seen him so with as much gloom. He was a man of real courage.

Unknown Male Interviewer- He was real shaken by the march here.

Jesse Epps- He was indeed and he had gotten all kinds of bad press on it so and what made me feel so bad about it was that I had like the devil's advocate I had collected all the newspapers I could that said King had run, we know he didn't and you know King had done this and abandoned the thing. I went back and said to him you can't, you as much stuck in Memphis as we are now and you can't leave Memphis now anymore than we can. That if you do in a sense you are doing what the press said you are running. While you didn't literally run I know your aides literally carried him off and they did, he didn't try to leave that street but it was the best thing that ever happened for him because he would have been killed that day. And so his staff told him no, let Andy and Raff come back and lead the march and let him go on to other activities. And I stayed there all day with him and we talked about this one item from 9:00 that morning until; about 3:00 that afternoon.

Joan Beifuss- In his office or his home?

Jesse Epps- In his office, and he left several times and left me with the staff. I had one of our staff boys from Atlanta a boy by the name of Howard, James Howard.

Joan Beifuss- Did anyone else go with you?

Jesse Epps- No, Jim Lawson was supposed to have gone with me but he couldn't go because some things had developed at his church with a funeral that day and he had to stay for the funeral. So that, I followed back on the trails today or I say to myself if I hadn't gone maybe he wouldn't have come back to Memphis and he might be still alive of course I said this to Mrs. King and the rest of the folk afterwards but I guess somehow we all sort of chart our own destiny and Dr. King would not have come back if he didn't want to come back, he came because he wanted to come back and but somehow for evil or for good I feel we did have a something to do with

influencing him to come back to Memphis. That afternoon when the staff finally said, and they finally gave me an answer alright for this one time. They talked about how labor has always renigged on its promises and hasn't kept its word and so on. In many instances where the civil rights movement is concerned. The thing that was most impressive at that conclusion of the staff meeting, that was a literal prayer meeting in that office, I shall never forget that for as long as I live. And everybody sort of emerged from the meeting in a very jubilant, and I came away saying mission accomplished he is coming back and everybody was looking expectedly at a successful march and we were thinking this is going to break the camel's back and we will have this thing behind us.,

Joan Beifuss- Was Dr. King jubilant at the end of...

Jesse Epps- Yes. He was very much, he got up and he said that he was glad that the staff had finally, there was some in the beginning and I guess rightly so the staff was very bewildered and very confused and wasn't sure what he ought to do and of course I was there as the old prod trying to keep them on course to come back to Memphis and one of my colleagues from Mississippi a boy by the name of Jose Williams was very very straight forward with me at that meeting. Then we emerged from it and I will never forget the day I picked him up, it was his last trip to Memphis he said, well we have come back to Memphis he said to straighten out the mayor and go on to Washington. He said., either the movement lives or dies in Memphis and he said that there might be some violence he said but whatever the outcome of Memphis it is going to be a success for the men. And of course you don't think about any of these things until you reflect on...

Joan Beifuss- You picked him up at the airport when he came in that Wednesday morning?

Jesse Epps- Yes.

Joan Beifuss- Did you take him over to Centenary?

Jesse Epps- Right. And well then for in a sense I became the liaison between King and our folk. I guess I hadn't left him I would guess 20 minutes at the hotel before he was shot.

Unknown Male Interviewer- Where were you when you heard about it.

Jesse Epps- Well I had left the Lorraine came back by here and picked up some materials and when I was getting out of my car to go in to the Peabody the boy at the desk door said I heard on the news that Dr. King has been shot. I said there is no way I just left him, and he said but just a minute ago. Of course then I turned on my heels and then drove back down and because by that time the ambulance was leaving and the police hadn't roped off the place yet and then I saw Jose and he said to me, he said Jesse he said I think he was already dead because when I saw him laying there, and then he described the wound and so on. And then of course the Saturday before went back before me if only we hadn't vested him to come to Memphis. But then I

say to myself that unfortunately for the progress of any nation and for the progress of any people it is unfortunate indeed but this is the history is not kind in this regard. E who build the bridges and pave the streets are not normally the people who walk on them and Dr. King sort of summed it up himself. In fact I always say, I say to my wife that he said his own eulogy the night before. There is a strangeness about death I guess and none of us can really say it because we haven't experienced it, nobody come back to tell us. But I sensed that Dr. King somehow felt that his end was near because of the....I have heard him speak many many times and yet in all of the history in my life I had never heard him talk about death it self. On that night particular and I had heard him and I don't know he may have done this some other places but I had, and all the friends I have been able to talk to bear it out that never before had he really spoken about the incident in New York when the woman stopped him you know. His introduction by Ralph was unusual, you know he took almost 20 minutes to introduce when back over his whole life and the beginning of SCLC the movement and the whole thing. And the thing that was, that was the most grabbing to me was after you look back on the whole thing, the night, because it was a very bad storm that night and almost at every high point of his speech there might have been applause and should have been and in many instances there were but in some instances where there should have been where there weren't where the audience would have normally responded and I want to make it very clear that I am not a religious fanatic either, should have responded with some applaud for what he was talking about, almost without question there were real loud or real severe flash of lightning and a real loud clap of thunder that sort of hushed the crowd and yet as I said to my wife afterward, the whole thing was just too frightening and too providential when you look back on that whole situation. But then you have to say as you did about the late president where do you go from here. The work that Dr. King had begun is still left undone. It becomes a greater responsibility on those of us that are left that were so close to him. It is too fashion our lives in trying to achieve the goals that he projected. And I feel because the goals are right and they are noble and they are grand and they are American that those of us that are in the labor movement in particular because Dr. King gave his life for the working man. And he lived as, he died as he lived. He lived with the poor of the nation and he made not his home with the rich and the high society people of our nation for which he could have. He took nothing to himself. It was a man that was completely unselfish. He could have been one of the richest men in America if he wanted to be but yet he took all the means he ever earned even the Nobel peace prize money and gave it to the cause. And yet a man who had done all of these things was greater in his death than he was in his life. The negro community in general throughout this country did not realize the contribution he was making until he was dead, until he was here no more. They didn't realize the importance of his mission and they didn't realize the closeness he had won in their hearts until he was gone and it was a spontaneous reaction all over this country, first the shock and then the real closeness that somehow he had won in people's hearts that they didn't even know he was there. So that somehow (muffled) and avoid that those are left behind have got to try to find a way to help try to feel. And to that end I found our union as a vehicle, as an economic vehicle to bringing about economic and racial justice and equality for all people in

this country and that is why I am with the labor movement. That is how I see this thing, I know I have wandered afoot and haven't answered the questions as related to the thing here but I have gotten to much of my personal feeling about this whole question but I guess one cannot really project a situation unless he is personally involved and not in a manner in which you feel is right and just. I was recently offered...(Tape Break) You know as I have said to Mr. Worth and to the rest of our headquarter people, that our union has a double mission now, that it had all the time but now wit more urgency than we had at the beginning. An urgency that says that we are not the conventional industrial union and we knew that in the beginning, we are not the waterfront union and we knew that in the beginning. But our union is completely different because it is a union of the people and of the less fortunate, the trodden down people the people who had been left outside. And it was the same people whom for which Dr. King had given his life, the same people who he was fighting for the forgotten American.. The by passed citizen of the community and that somehow or another we have got to find a way of translating into community relations and understanding. The mission that we are about. I have said this to Raff and I have said it to his staff people at, the goads of our union and the goads of which Dr. King and the civil rights movement in terms of "racial right movement" this country has had, which in sense has become civil right in the sense of justice being done, without (muffled) one in the same. The only different in our approach to this whole question is, and I think it is the approach that has to be taken. That after the doors are opened and after the bridges built between the communities, the bridges cannot be traveled on and the roads cannot be used and the dorsa cannot be gone through unless the man has some economics to take advantage. This is where it become so imperative important that will all the fiber of our being that we accelerate and that we give this to America the hope, the last hope that America has. If America fails today with the poor in this nation as much as I love this country and as much as I believe in democracy unless we with some urgency and with some dispatch unless we move with some haste, and addressing ourselves to the difficulties that this country is about that we are going to find ourselves not only losing our prestige aboard as we have already have. But we are going to be rampid and toned from within in such a way that any man from without will be bale to overcome us without the forwardness that our country should have and the forthrightness that we should have in being bale to rebuff them. However even though I see all this gloom I see a real bright light in America. We always in the history of this country been more than equal to the task. There have been other real blighted situation where this country has appeared to be going in the other direction where we have turned a stone and done some thing about our situations, Race wise and all these things the problems of the cities it is one problem. It is just one single problem. It is not a combination of al the problems, the combination of the problems that we cite. Is the sickness and not the cause,. The one problem in America today as I see it, is the forgotten poor of this land and the forgotten poor are saying we have got to have our share and unfortunately, unfortunately indeed we wait until the walls are torn down before we try to build up and remodel and revamp the house and because the masses of the people have seen this it is unfortunately psychologically and other wise being used as a tactic and those

persons who otherwise could have been leaders in the past who say this is the orderly process by which we ought to bring back the changes in society, voices are being shouted down by those who say the change is not coming until there is a direct confrontation, until there is disruption, until there disruption to a point that there is chaos and then progress is going to be had and unfortunately, unfortunate indeed that this is a fact in American way of life. This is the thing that we have got to change and I hope and I pray that those people who are advocating this time to stand at the head of government of the nation is going to be brave enough to do something about all these things. I know that our union is dedicated to this proposition. Thank you very much, I know I have taken too much of your time and I will just ran over my schedule completely.

Joan Beifuss- Oh I know we would have been more polite except we waited so long to get to you at all.

Jesse Epps- I am sorry Joan.