Gwen Awsumb, Memphis City Council, 1968

SS003.mp3

David Yellin- Hello, Hello we are now talking from 4241 Park Ave. We hope you are listening tape recorder.

Carol Yellin- Getting a feedback from the negro community that seemed to, I mean perhaps their reaction, you could feel personally a change in the

Interviewee- I certainly could, I certainly could.

Carol Yellin- reaction of the…..

Gwen Awsumb- I certainly could.

David Yellin- So it might be your interpretation that you were held for this was that the so called hardening of the attitude against the union demands was not because of the demands themselves but it was because of the mechanism, the way they did it, asserting them and you knew what we didn't know that they had demanded only this for themselves the union check off the rest you can do whatever you want with your people here attitude. So I mean would this be a fair representation of say your own point of view.

Gwen Awsumb- Yes I have never been what you call an anti-union person. We have been doing them over the years you know they are here to stay. We have to live with them and that's it. And they do provide a sounding board and protection for many certain things in the private industry. But I view them in a entirely different way as far as municipal employees are concerned, entirely differently. And this opinion tampered with the way in which they went about it was definitely a hardening as far as I was concerned.

David Yellin- You can't really separate the two.

Gwen Awsumb- I think this was true of the mayor too.

Carol Yellin- Do you think then too if there had been a man besides (muffled) you might have had less hardening of the lines. I remember he absolutely infuriated me with his comments.

Gwen Awsumb- He infuriated everyone who even read about it in the newspaper the whole community was just, you know. And then saw these signs around town counfee? Go home and all that kind of thing.

Carol Yellin- The bumper stickers.

David Yellin- So as most things between groups of people it is very often not the principle itself, it's the mechanism around the principle that sometimes influences how that happens.

Gwen Awsumb- Well let me say that the mechanism around the principle strengthened my principle.

David Yellin- It gave you a reason for….yeah I see.

Gwen Awsumb- Right.

Carol Yellin- The cold-blooded statement that they care about the dues check off sounds like to harden a lot of people. This is why I was interested in the initial reaction. In this regard this would be if you could recall in your talks among yourselves as council members leaving out everyone else if you had private discussions.

Gwen Awsumb- We did.

Carol Yellin- You say that the racial overtones were not apparent, but did the fact that this brute that was attempting to be organized, were the dangers inherent in the fact that this was over-whelmingly a negro group of workers within the city government. Was there any discussion that this perhaps was a dangerous situation that had implications that should be dealt with

Gwen Awsumb- These came as warnings from our three negro councilman.

Carol Yellin- But was there any acknowledge or any feeling of this among white people that this might be something that was dangerous, that you might have hold of something dangerous.

Gwen Awsumb- Well at first this was sort of viewed with a jaundice eye in a way. We felt that three negros are a little on the alarming side. And then as time went on and they kept as the went into there own community and brought back the feeling of their community, it built up.

Carol Yellin- Was there a change that you could notice in the same way that as you charted, you felt you yourself if you were doing a fever chart that the negros councilman changed they were originally very that your feeling was as one which was not good on the dues check off.

Gwen Awsumb- Right.

Carol Yellin- Among the white councilman was there then some sort of change you could chart that some accepted this more quickly that we must now consider the fact that this is a predominantly negro, and where there others who still felt, know that we still must stand on the principle of union alone and still help that the best thing was to treat it continually as a union.

Gwen Awsumb- Well I would say that the most obvious change came in Mr., Blanchard. He was just as firm as anyone at the beginning. He changed along the way.

Carol Yellin- Would this change have come before Martin Luther King arrived in..

Gwen Awsumb- Oh this was before that. This was before that.

Carol Yellin- So this was all being discussed before and there was an awareness and a recognition…

Gwen Awsumb- Oh yeah.

Carol Yellin- And an attempt to, I won't say an attempt, but there was discussion of this definitely. Recognition of it before Martin Luther King.

Gwen Awsumb- Right, this came definitely the most marked change came due to the public works hearing that we had at the council chamber. And recalling it distinctly the night before this hearing was to be held, which really was held on very quick notice, Mr. Fred Davis who is one of our Negro Councilman is the chairman of the public works committee. Due to his feeling about the growing resentment and disturbance in the negro community he felt a responsibility as negro councilman, particularly as chairman of this committee that perhaps it would be helpful if the committee held a hearing to hear from the workers themselves. We had never talked to any workers only heard the union side from the outside. Because Mr. Jones is the most inarticulate person and you know you can't……

Carol Yellin- And may I interrupt right there because this is one thing I did want to ask. Mr. Jones had been, had he been involved in the earlier attempts to form this union here. Had he been connected with this union in Memphis for a long period.

Gwen Awsumb- He was their representative.

Carol Yellin- Had he dealt earlier with the other city administration, was he known to them?

Gwen Awsumb- Yes, yes, yes.

Carol Yellin- And he is a native Memphis…

Gwen Awsumb- Former sanitation worker himself.

Carol Yellin- He is up from the ranks.

David Yellin- Was there any discussion or should there have been any realization or concern whether Mr. Jones was in what can be called the union position early. Do you think he was railroaded or dominated by outside influence?

Gwen Awsumb- No actually, all evidence points to the fact that Mr. Jones had been less than successful in getting members for this union. I think he had 31 or 32 paid members up at this point. They had, I understand through our negro councilman who have been in touch with the local situation that Mr. Jones had been sort of prodded from above as far as hi lack of producing what the union wanted, and so he decided one day to be dramatic. When he was dramatic and called for the strike then he didn't know what to do with it.

David Yellin- Was it this strike or a previous one.

Gwen Awsumb- This one, This one. And when he called it, he is not articulate, he is not well educated and did not know how to handle himself the negotiations. And when the union from above saw what had happened it is our understand that the union away from here at the higher level did not call the strike but when it was called knowing the inability of Mr. Jones to handle this sort of situation that's when they moved in, in order to see it through.

Carol Yellin- The feeling that it would be a loss of face elsewhere if they lost this fight in Memphis.

David Yellin- Now where you aware of this intrigue, situation in the earlier part or you found this later.

Gwen Awsumb- Oh I would say about halfway along.

David Yellin- So earlier I would say.

Carol Yellin- Your statement is brought out by some things that I have heard second hand apparently some of the union people came down and told a couple of the ministers the very same thing. Only you expressed it much better.

Joan Beifuss- In other words they had a runaway situation and events had over taken the national or the, out of Memphis union. Events overtook everybody in this case. It seems the more we hear that this is almost a case that no one expected this .

David Yellin- And the danger here is of course hindsight and saying….

Carol Yellin- And then the assumption that well what you are telling us is very…..

David Yellin- Well now to get back here you got a chronological order.

Gwen Awsumb- The night before we had the public hearing which I can't recall the date, but you can check it out it was on a Thursday. The night before was a Wednesday evening and by this time Mr. Workman had arrived on the scene because that was the night that Mr. Auburn was having the big dinner, the brotherhood dinner.

Joan Beifuss- That was the 20th of February.

Gwen Awsumb- Alright the 20th of February, and we were almost all I believe, councilmen were present at that dinner and we were on a subhead table in the front of this large, large hall. That very large hall at the rivermont. Mr. Davis and his wife by nameplate were to sit next to my husband and self. They were quite late and when they finally did come in, Mr. Davis was sitting next to me and his wife on the other side of him and then Downing Prior and his wife. And Downing leaned across Mrs. Davis down to me and said, uh we are going to have…Fred has called a public works hearing tomorrow and Billy Hyman who is a member of that committee is going to be out of town and I have asked Mr. Netters to sit in Billy Hyman's place. And he said as many of the council members who can be present it would be helpful

do you think you can come. I said yes that I would come. And that was as much notice as I had had of it. Mr. Davis had been late due to the fact that he was getting up and getting in touch with the people involved to come and so that we would have an ample sample of people there to get the story direct. And when we went the next morning all of the council members were not there and the meeting was called for I believe it was 10:30. There were about 5 or 6 council members present for the hearing. Some of them came and went. It was supposed to be a committee hearing but the council were invited and we were up at the council tables rather than sitting out on the thing.. Mr. Davis was presiding. I would say that there were at least 50 sanitation workers themselves present. Mr. Worth was present and Mr. Tony Powell and several of the Mr. Paisley and Mr. Lucie and so forth. Predominant at that time, the ministers were not in the forefront, the civil rights leaders were not in the forefront at that time.

Carol Yellin- Was Reverend Jackson there at that time?

Gwen Awsumb- Not at that time.

Carol Yellin- He wasn't present in the city hall?

Gwen Awsumb- Not at that time when we began. The thing was that the first person who somehow got up to inject the civil rights thing into it was kaninia Cranshaw was the first person to speak at that hearing and I remember leaning over to Mr. Davis as I saw her get up when he called the meeting to order and ask for whoever wished to speak. He sort of laid down the ground rules and then he said now who would like to speak. Mrs. Crenshaw got up and started down to the podium and I said, well what has she got to do with the whole situation. She spoke in behalf of the fact that this was a situation in which they were denied all these things because they were black.

Carol Yellin- Now as far as you can recall in all the discussions between the union and the councilmen that you were aware of and in your discussions among yourselves this was the first public mention of this?

Gwen Awsumb- Yes.

Carol Yellin- Had you discussed it privately, would you say some of your warnings…

Gwen Awsumb- We had discussed it and thrown it aside and said that is irrelevant, didn't have anything to do with the situation.

Carol Yellin- This would have come before say the change that you felt like you could chart, oh you are saying that this is in fact the spot…

Gwen Awsumb- This is the spot, This is the spot.

David Yellin- This is what the original question…

Joan Beifuss- Who is Kaninia Crenshaw?

Gwen Awsumb- Kaninia Crenshaw is a negro woman who for some at least 15 years and maybe longer worked for the Memphis Housing Authority. As a paid employee and due to some difficulty with Mr. Simmons was fired by Mr. Simmons. Held a real chip on her shoulder about the whole situation and has injected herself purely, obviously from everything that she says when she gets up this has…

David Yellin- Was her right to speak ever questioned?

Gwen Awsumb- It was only questioned under my breath by me to Mr. Davis.

David Yellin- And did she try to qualify why she was there.

Gwen Awsumb- Oh yes she always qualifies the fact that she has been through this herself and this was the way city treats employees.

David Yellin- If you think the fact that she did it again, I mean we are coming on a personal level, the fact that she did it as you say with the chip on her shoulder help to alleviate or help to ameliorate or did it help to enflame or even though..

Gwen Awsumb- Her remarks were inflammatory. Not as inflammatory, they were mild compared to later, but they did aggravate the situation. Mr. Davis repeatedly asked some of the workers to speak and when he did several of them raised their hands that they would like to speak, and he was trying to get people in order you know. Mr. Jones who was present got up and went over while another person was at the podium speaking, went over to the people that had raised their hands and took them out into the lobby for a few minutes and then they came back and the sanitation workers that he had taken out with him sat back down in the chamber and when this person at the podium finished speaking Mr. Davis said now I would like to hear from you that raised your hand and no one raised their hand. And he said well you just raised your hand a minute ago. Do you not want to speak? And that no one would speak.

Carol Yellin- Then at that meeting there was not a single striker who (talking over)

Gwen Awsumb- Who got up, no, no, right, but it was obvious to us sitting up there at the desk that they had been taken out and been told not to get up and say anything.

David Yellin- What was your interpretation of this?

Gwen Awsumb- My interpretation was that the union did not wish for them to express themselves, that they would take care of it and we felt that the union was afraid for them to express themselves.

Carol Yellin- Did you feel that Mrs. Crenshaw, did she have any connection to the union? Was there any indication apparent as she sat there that she was an approved union speaker as opposed to the sanitation workers where you got a very apparent impression they were not approved union speakers?

Gwen Awsumb- No I definitely got the impression because I believe it had been a day or two prior to that they had talked to the Memphis Housing Authority employees and had been.

David Yellin- Who were they now?

Gwen Awsumb- The union had been in contact with the Memphis Housing Authority employees and it was my opinion that Mrs. Crenshaw was on the side of the union in order to tear up the Memphis Housing Authority because they had treated her in what she considered a not as it should had been. She had been fired not with justification, therefore, if there was any way that he could get back at them. Now this came out…

Carol Yellin- Now does some of this go back to an interparty fight among the democrats.

Gwen Awsumb- I don't know about that. I don't keep up with their interparty battles.

Carol Yellin- For instance the fact that she was against Willis, Representative Willis, there had been some interparty struggle there.

Gwen Awsumb- I knew that did exist.

David Yellin- This is something that just again to have kind of an interpretation in that it may have some validity and consideration. Were you Mrs. Austin kind of aware of the inarticulateness of the strikers themselves? And I am about to ask an unfair question but not for unfair reasons, I mean it sounds unfair. That these people could not really ever express themselves and particularly in public with any validity even as you see it now to have made some arrangements to talk to them if they needed to be talked to in private or under more favorable circumstances.

Gwen Awsumb- Well of course this is what this meeting was actually set up to do.

David Yellin- And this was set up by Fred Davis probably in consultation with the union or without consultation.

Gwen Awsumb- No it was set up actually directly with some of the workers themselves and the union came in on it.

David Yellin- I see. So the workers themselves in a sense felt they were contradicting what I have said here. That they would be willing to tow and indeed if they were properly moved than they are the ones that would have to pay then they would talk even in being articulate they would be probably more articulate than other people.

Gwen Awsumb- But the fact that Mr. Davis had his own group turn on him so violently at that meeting was a pretty much of an eye opener I think to him and something that we had talked about earlier as far as negros who do get elected, who

do assume rightfully positions of leadership have difficulty in that the people spill at the lower level psychologically resent their leadership.

David Yellin- They associate them with the establishment.

Gwen Awsumb- That's right. And at that meeting Mr. Davis made the mistake of saying I have been on both sides of the street,

David Yellin- Yes and putting them on the other side from them.

Gwen Awsumb- And they just jumped up in the audience and said we don't like two face people. You're either for us or you are against us, and you are against us we can see that. And they began to holler from the audience all sorts of things against Mr. Davis. He was unprepared for it and had to leave the chair.

David Yellin- Was this Jones taking the people out.

Gwen Awsumb- This was after the hordes arrived from the union hall. Where they were meeting at noon, 11:30, and Davis kept asking for people to come before us. Finally, Thomas Powell got up and said if you want people we will have people here in ten minutes, And then these people arrived and there were too many for the council chamber and we had had only one experience with that and had no problem what so ever. At a council meeting just previous to that where Mr. Prior said we cannot seat more than the number of seats here and no standing in the aisles. They quietly left. And there was no problem. But they would not at this particular time and this was the meeting at which the Reverend Ezekiel Bell and Jackson and Starks, I believe his name is, and several others, Kyles, Lawson, etc. were present when they came in from the union meeting to….

David Yellin- This is the same meeting. So now the ministers are in it now.

Gwen Awsumb- Yeah now they are in it, and because of the…

Carol Yellin- Now may I interrupt to ask one question. Some of these ministers also are members of NAACP and other groups.

Gwen Awsumb- Mr. Davis is on the board of NAACP.

David Yellin- Let's finish this please.

Gwen Awsumb- The point at which it got completely out of hand was when the room was too crowded, there was no audio out into the lobby which we did arrange at a later time, but at that point there wasn't. I figured we weren't prepared for this.

David Yellin- But there were people out there.

Gwen Awsumb- They wouldn't leave because they couldn't hear when they got out there. SO they were asked to take the chairs up where the legal council and the comptroller and so forth sit. Behind the railing under ordinary circumstances and there were no people there because it was just a hearing. So they did come up and

sit down there, and then in order to, first they demanded to go to the auditorium so that everybody could be heard.

David Yellin- Who did who said it?

Gwen Awsumb- The union people asked if they could move the meeting, the hearing to the auditorium.

Carol Yellin- They made this request to Donald Prior as you recall or from the throne.

Gwen Awsumb- Fred Davis.

Carol Yellin- Oh to Fred Davis who was still running the meeting.

Gwen Awsumb- Right. And Downing Prior was there in and out, he was not there the entire time. By the time they asked for this it seemed we didn't know what was going on at the auditorium at that point and without any previous plan we felt that this…well we just hesitated by the time that it was offered they didn't want it. In the meantime the press who were there suggested that the press room which was above and has these doors that open out—it's not a very practical press room architect just didn't do a very good job on that. Anyway, it was suggested that about 50 people could be up in this balcony with the doors open and could hear and this was suggested as a means as enabling more people to hear. And it was at that point that the Reverend Ezekiel Bell came from behind, came form the back of the room. He had not been down in the front and this was my first confrontation with him. And he came roaring down the aisle with his arms waving above his head screaming that you are not going to put us back in the balcony we have been out of the balcony now you had us there for 300 years and we are not going back in the balcony. Which was the most unreasonable…

Carol Yellin- Did you know who this was?

Gwen Awsumb- No I did not know who he was,

Carol Yellin- Did he have on a clerical collar.

Gwen Awsumb- He did. But I did not know what his name was. At that time. This was a boat from the blue really because it was not in anyway from our viewpoint even thought of and this reaction was quite a shock. Then there were some police who came because it did get…they did threaten to stay the whole time until removed bodily. By this time…

Carol Yellin- Did you know who might have told who just by natural course of events would have called the police.

Gwen Awsumb- Mr. Prior went out and made them aware of what the situation was. Mr. Chandler was there and the reason that the police were called was because they

threatened to tear down the big emblem in the back and burn the council chamber down.

David Yellin- Now these were shouts.

Gwen Awsumb- Yes.

David Yellin- Now let's get back to Reverend Bell.

Gwen Awsumb- Well Reverend Bell took over and sort of whooped them into a frenzy but of course by this time the room was completely full and the people were lining the sides.

David Yellin- Did he direct his remarks to people or to you, or everybody.

Gwen Awsumb- He was directing it to the people up at the front of the council thing, an then he would turn around and say isn't that right. They would reacted…

Carol Yellin- It created a revival meeting atmosphere.

Gwen Awsumb- It was because of the crowding of the aisles and could not get it clear the Mr. Prior went out and asked for help to get the aisles clear. There was a recess called for the meeting by Mr. Davis who when it got completely out of hand because he did not know just what if we should just go on and move over, that's when we decided and came back and said we will take it to the auditorium and they said no. At that point when the policeman…

Carol Yellin- You had had stepped outside and had a private consultation among yourselves as council.

Gwen Awsumb- Yes we have a little room.

Carol Yellin- Council people who were present at this meeting.

Gwen Awsumb- Yes.

Gwen Awsumb- And you had met and agreed first that you should move to another room.

Gwen Awsumb- Yes to move to another room and to allow them to in orderly process to make statements.

David Yellin- There was no indication that you should call this to a halt. I mean you wanted to hear these people.

Gwen Awsumb- Not at that time there was not indication of it.

Carol Yellin- Then later after you had moved to the…

Gwen Awsumb- We did not move to the auditorium, we never moved to the auditorium. They wouldn't go.

David Yellin- Did you suggest?

Gwen Awsumb- Yes.

David Yellin- But then they wouldn't leave there.

Gwen Awsumb- Then they wouldn't leave they said they had come to stay and they…

David Yellin- How do you think that came about did you see somebody started it?

Carol Yellin- They said it involved marching across the street in a TV large auditorium.

David Yellin- I think we are coming to a break in the tape here and you were talking about your recess so we can have a recess of our own.