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NAACP  
DIVISION OF RESEARCH  
AND INFORMATION

# **THE SINGLE ISSUE**

## **in the Robert Williams Case**

There is one, and *only* one, issue in the Robert Williams case.

That single issue is: Shall the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People endorse the advocacy by a local NAACP officer of stopping "lynchings with lynchings" or meeting "violence with violence"?

The Association gave its answer on June 8, 1959, when the Board of Directors affirmed the suspension of Mr. Williams from his position as president of the Monroe, N. C., branch of the NAACP. The Board unanimously rejected Mr. Williams' proposal as inconsistent with the Association's 50-year fight against mob violence.

This is the only issue.

There is no issue of self-defense.

There is no issue of free speech.

On the morning of May 6 when Mr. Williams confirmed to Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins the accuracy of the language attributed to him in a United Press International dispatch of May 5, he made no mention of self-defense. He simply called for mob

action to redress injustice. He did not retract this demand in his long distance telephone conversation with Mr. Wilkins.

The issue, then, is mob action versus the orderly legal, legislative and educational procedures the NAACP has successfully pursued for half a century.

There can be no issue of self-defense for this has been a cardinal principle of the NAACP since its organization 50 years ago.

The Association's first annual report, covering the years 1909-1910, records two instances in which the newly-organized NAACP came to the aid of Negroes, both of whom, in defense of their lives and their homes, shot white men—one in South Carolina and the other in Arkansas.

Of many cases in which the NAACP came to the aid of Negroes charged with self-defense homicide, the most celebrated was that of Dr. Ossian H. Sweet of Detroit in 1925. A mob gathered in front of the home which Dr. Sweet had purchased in a white neighborhood and into which he had moved his family. In the milling around, the turmoil, the shouts and the threats, a member of the mob was shot and killed. Dr. Sweet, his brother and others were arrested and charged with murder. The NAACP retained the most famous lawyer of the period—Clarence Darrow—to represent the defendants. At the conclusion of a long trial they were acquitted.

It was the NAACP also which successfully sustained the four-year fight to secure freedom for 79 Negroes convicted, in Phillips County, Ark., of killing a white planter who was a member of a mob which raided a meeting of Negro farmers called for the purpose of organizing a union to protect their rights. The riot in which Negroes acted in self-defense occurred in 1919. It was not until four years and many court hearings later (including a final ruling by the United States Supreme Court) that the last of the defendants was freed as the result of NAACP efforts costing thousands of dollars.

Assistance to Negroes involved in self-defense slayings has been one of the major responsibilities of the NAACP. The Association's role in these cases has been and remains consistent. The NAACP has defended individual Negroes and groups of Negroes who have been compelled to kill in defense of their homes and lives.

At its June 8 meeting affirming the suspension of Mr. Williams, the NAACP Board of Directors reiterated this position:

The NAACP has never condoned mob violence but it firmly supports the right of Negroes individually and collectively to defend their person, their homes and their property from attack. This principle has always been the policy of the NAACP. For example, the Arkansas riot case in 1919, the Sweet case in 1925, the Columbia, Tenn., riot case in 1946, and the Ingram case in Georgia in 1947.

Just as there is no issue of self-defense in the Robert F. Williams case, there is also no issue of "free speech."

The constitutional guarantee of free speech is not unlimited. A man is not privileged to cry "Fire!" in a crowded theatre. Nor is he at liberty to advocate criminal acts. Likewise, he is restrained from fomenting violence. In many a case, the courts have imposed such restrictions on free speech.

Mr. Williams and his supporters have sought to becloud the issue—to make it appear what it is not. His suspension was not based on later self-defense appeals. Such appeals are neither contrary to NAACP policy or inimical to the best interests of the Association. No charges have been brought against Mr. Williams on the basis of his second-thought remarks.

The charges are based upon his call for aggressive, premeditated violence. Lynching is never defensive. It is always prearranged, incited and aggressive.

Mr. Williams has also claimed that he was speaking for himself when he called upon Negroes to act as prosecutor, jury, judge and executioner. But the dispatch identified him as president of the Monroe, N. C., branch of the NAACP.

It is practically impossible for an officer of the NAACP to make a public statement, as a private citizen, on such an issue.

No action was taken against Mr. Williams for the advocacy of self-defense.

His suspension as president of the Monroe, N. C., NAACP branch was the result solely of his call on May 5 for mob action.

Following a hearing before the Association's Committee on

Branches, June 3, the Board unanimously endorsed the Committee's recommendation approving Mr. Wilkins' suspension of Mr. Williams and extended the period of suspension for six months ending November 6, 1959.

The Board found that Mr. Williams' statement of May 5 "endangers the effectiveness of the NAACP, especially in the South. It can be used by segregationists to spread the false impression that the NAACP supports lynching and mob violence."

Moreover, the Board concluded, "the NAACP cannot support any sentiment calling for the use of violence to correct injustice, and public expression of such sentiments by its officers cannot be condoned."

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