
LET

THERE

BE

UNDERSTANDING . . .

Of The Call

TO BOYCOTT



IN ALABAMA

(The material contained in this brochure represents the combined thinking of several groups in Alabama and was offered unsolicited to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for distribution.)

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UNDERSTANDING . . .

LET THERE BE UNDERSTANDING of the call to boycott the State of Alabama.

Friends and enemies alike of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Civil Rights Movement have been quick to criticize Dr. Martin Luther King's plan of economic withdrawal.

Even when it is based on the Ghandian concept of non-cooperation with evil, no one likes a boycott. It seems to say that the route to men's hearts is through their pocketbook, that on the guideposts to morality the dollar sign looms larger than the cross. But experience shows there are many roads to justice and all must be taken, however hard the way.

Some critics say the boycott is vindictive and that Negroes and fair-minded white Alabamians will suffer along with the racists. Others point to pending voter rights legislation as nullifying the need for further protest. And there is a general lament that a boycott will antagonize Alabama just as the state was coming to its racial senses.

LET THERE BE UNDERSTANDING of these charges and of the truths that confront them, the truths that make the boycott necessary and moral.

First, the intent is not to punish. Dr. King explained this clearly on April 2 in Baltimore at the SCLC executive board meeting when he said:

"This is not an attempt to destroy the economy of the state of Alabama, nor to penalize whatever elements that are attempting in good faith to bring economic justice to Negroes. Rather, it is an attempt to breathe life and health into that economy by making it necessary for the men of conscience and social responsibility to assert themselves and lead their state out of the clutches of racism, ignorance and injustice."

The boycott, planned in several stages which can be cancelled if goals are achieved, may bring hardship. The Alabama Negro is prepared for that. He is suffering now *with an unemployment rate 40 per cent higher than white joblessness*. His women have the *highest maternity death rate* in the state because of inadequate facilities and education, and *twice as many Negro babies as whites die* before their first year.

And above all, he is struck politically impotent by unfair voter

registration laws that result in nearly 70 per cent of eligible whites able to ballot compared with less than 20 per cent of eligible Negroes.

It is because of this that a 26-year-old Negro, great-grandson of a slave, named Jimmy Lee Jackson suffered death in Marion, Ala., at the hands of a state trooper whom authorities have yet to identify. His death was the catalyst that produced the March to Montgomery—to a state capitol where the flags of Alabama and the Confederacy greeted the 35,000 marking his martyrdom, but not the flag of the United States.

To make that march a reality, two white persons also suffered death, the Rev. James Reeb and Mrs. Viola Liuzzo. If white Alabamians of good will suffer economic hardship, they will be suffering in the tradition of martyrs.

LET THERE BE UNDERSTANDING of the second criticism, that a voting bill is moving through Congress making further protest action unnecessary. It is hoped that the final bill will secure the right to vote for every eligible Alabamian. But already Southern forces of reaction are seeking to hobble it in the name of states' rights—which has become synonymous with racial wrongs.

Faced with the undeniable need to reform voting laws that disenfranchise both poor white and black, what has been the reaction of Gov. George Wallace? On a nationwide television program several weeks ago, he said that he would leave it up to the federal courts—the despised federal courts—where numerous suits against the Alabama law have been laggardly pending.

Why?

Why doesn't the state of Alabama move immediately to right a wrong? Because it is more interested in perpetuating a politically profitable evil system than in eradicating it. And when the federal vote law is passed, the state officials will give ground grudgingly, fighting every inch of the way, obstructing universal suffrage that is both spirit and law of the land.

Why must justice be imposed on Alabama like a tax when any decent political body of men should welcome it as a blessing?

Because the great mass of white Alabamians are not demanding Justice despite the turmoil and tragedy of recent weeks.

LET THERE BE UNDERSTANDING of the criticism that the boycott will wither budding internal reform in Alabama. Where is this reform? State Attorney General Richmond Flowers, a political foe of Gov. Wallace, has been a lone voice crying out against race hate. But his accents in support of meaningful Negro advance have been blurred.

A few newspapers, in recent years, have spoken out against injustice. But there has been no groundswell following in the wake of their words. Here is a portion of a story from the Auburn (*Ala.*) *Plainsmans*

"The retiring president of the Alabama Education Association was told to sit down and shut up because she was about to say something which might offend the Alabama politician

"Mrs. Annie Mae Turner had released a copy

of her speech to a Birmingham newspaper hours before she was to give it. Word got out.

"Mrs. Turner had actually dared to say that the Negro has a moral right to vote. She had even gone so far as to suggest that others who feel the same way write Gov. George Wallace and tell him.

"She said that state business and industrial leaders and ministers should speak out against the 'prevailing posture in Alabama' which has been 'to deny the Negro an opportunity to gain the full rights of a citizen.'"

The newspaper said that fellow-educators pressured her to keep silent and she did not give the speech.

"She reportedly cried," said The Plainsman.

Jimmy Lee Jackson and Rev. James Reeb were already dead when Mrs. Turner wept because words of truth could not be spoken.

Teachers, businessmen, politicians hold their tongue. What of the white clergy in Alabama? Will the boycott be "antagonizing" it as ministers make dynamic Christ's teachings of brother hood?

There has been faint thunder from the pulpits. Rev. Joseph Ellwanger of St. Paul Luthern Church in Birmingham led a group of about 60 white Alabamians on a protest march in Selma the Saturday before state troopers and possemen fell on Negro marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Highway 80.

This was a brave band. To assemble it, white men of good will scoured the entire state and could find only 60 white persons willing to take a stand for morality.

What happened?

Deacons and council of the First Lutheran Church of Birmingham condemned Rev. Ellwanger. They "disavowed and disclaimed" any fellowship with him.

"Civil disobedience," they said, "Is contrary to teaching of Scripture which demands obedience to the government."

When righteous thunder was needed from the pulpits of Alabama to shake men of good will into action there came instead this carping criticism spoken in the name of Scripture. And other men of God there are continuing to demean their ministry by adding their silence to the general silence of shame that covers the state like an oppressive and evil cloud.

But, say the boycott critics, what of the reaction to the recent bombing in Birmingham of a Negro home? Rewards totalling fifty thousand dollars have been offered and Gov. Wallace personally visited the shattered house to denounce the bombers as "dastardly fiends."

LET THERE BE UNDERSTANDING, clear and unmuddled, of what this means and what it does not mean. Violence always marks a failure in human relations and automatically is deplored by right-thinking men. But that praise should accrue to the governor of a state for condemning it gives some indication of the moral climate in that state. Gov. Wallace is personally responsible for much of this moral climate where violence, if disavowed by the state, is carried out in the name of the same segregationist principles endorsed by the state.

At his inauguration, Gov. Wallace declared:

"Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

He articulated a creed that is today burning in the breasts of fanatics and law-abiding Alabama segregationists alike. The fanatics who bombed the Negro home also left explosives on the doorstep of Birmingham's mayor and a white city councilwoman. White officials—and these include President Johnson—are impelled to speak out when terrorists touch the white man. The death of Jimmy Lee Jackson was all but eclipsed by the tragedies of Rev. Reeb and Mrs. Liuzzo.

Gov. Wallace rightly saw fit to denounce the Birmingham bomb plot. But he has *never retracted his inaugural paen to segregation* which stands as an encouragement to the violence-prone and as an insult thrown in the face of every Negro citizen of Alabama. He has never moved a finger toward a legislative switch that would throw open the vote to Negroes. He has never rung down the flags of defiance that fly over his Capitol. And white Alabamians have never demanded new colors on that lanyard of bigotry.

The Governor finally did accept a petition containing Negro grievances from the hands of civil rights leaders. And this was hailed as a sign of a new dawn in Alabama, a proof that the long night of protest should end, the boycott be forgotten. But those who seize on this as a reason to criticize the boycott neglect this question:

Did Gov. Wallace have to read a petition to learn what is wrong in the state of Alabama? Did his fellow white citizens, who have given him a booming popular mandate, require further evidence than the three martyrs to know that something is terribly wrong in their state and that they must act quickly, willingly—yes, gladly—to set it right?

BY ITS NATURE, a boycott is not a perfect nor a pretty device. It seeks to use crude monetary means to enable men of reason to speak out in the name of expediency and say the things they are afraid to say in the name of moral truth.

Alabama can look at its sister state of Mississippi and see the proof of this. A few months ago, the Mississippi Economic Council—corresponding to a state chamber of commerce—issued an outspoken declaration in favor of equal justice and opportunity for its black citizens. Nothing like this has ever been seen or whispered of in the state of Alabama. How had this come about, then, in a state whose racial intransigence was a legend, a legend sometimes written in blood?

A loose boycott has been conducted against Mississippi for more than a year, supported by SCLC, SNCC, CORE and the NAACP. Its effect upon the state's economy hurt Negroes and whites alike. There was white resentment on the part of "Moderates" who said it was "vindictive." Men of good will were said to be compromised by it and the cause of racial equality set back.

But the Mississippi boycott was a revelation. The results were immediate and significant. Here is what was accomplished by the grafting of Mississippi's racial sins to the branch of its economic life:

● In McComb, church-bombing capital of the United States, three plants that had contemplated moving in decided to stay out. Soon

after, a white citizens committee was formed which ended violence and opened a possible avenue to racial agreement.

- A nation-wide firm with headquarters in Jackson, Miss., was forced to use an out-of-state office address when recruiting technicians because an advertisement with the Jackson address failed to draw a single reply. More than 50 answers were received out-of-state.

- In 1964, the amount spent on new plants in Mississippi dropped almost 30 per cent in comparison with 1963.

Faced with the stark facts of economic life, men of reason found their voice. How much better if rightness alone had moved them! But at least—and at last—they were moved. Mississippi has a long, long way to go. But it has started to move. *Alabama has not budged an inch.*

LET THERE BE UNDERSTANDING. This is the reason for the boycott. Alabama, despite some fuzzy reportage, is not moving an inch, and something must get the state going. Columnists like William S. White, writing in *The Washington Post*, can critically observe:

“There is in this, as in every poignant controversy, a human limit of tolerance. Let it be transgressed long enough and harshly enough and not rational solution but irremediable chaos is the only result. . . the middle way is the only way if justice and national order are to be preserved; for justice never lies with the men of passion and violent tongue.”

And Richard Starnes of *Scripps-Howard* says:

“Here is one witness who is bored up to the eyeballs with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”

The civil rights struggle demands dedication and endurance, and many—seeking facile solutions—are quickly bored. There is a human limit of tolerance and the Negro has reached it because the injustice is directed against him, not against the white man of Alabama.

Irremediable chaos *could* be the result if justice is denied men who have done nothing wrong in Alabama save be born black.

The middle way is the moral way and there can be no compromise with evil to chart it. One wonders what Mr. White wants the Negro to give in on? End his opposition to a state government publicly committed to denying him and fostering segregation? Trust to the mercies of a white power structure that has given ground only to militancy? Wait, docile and hat-in-hand, for the federal government to give him a vote owed him by the state? Rejoice because bombers are condemned by men who defame those who speak for the spiritually explosive value of equal rights?

LET THERE BE NO MISUNDERSTANDING. The boycott of Alabama is not a creation of extremists bent on social disarray. If the people of this state lay fallow, unresponsive, barren of reaction what hope is there for even the federal seeds of suffrage to flower in full citizenship? The ground must be prepared, the reasonable white people of Alabama must prepare it amidst themselves and the boycott is a plow in their hands. Ground that was unyielding to truth and reason may yield to the blade of necessity.

SCLC is a Christian group so let us vary the metaphor. The boycott is a David of truth and love sent out against a Goliath of oppression. It is a Christian attempt to strike the shackles of political perfidy from white and black alike. Its aim is to encourage men of good will to lift up their voices against wilful men.

And the boycott will be ended as soon as justice meaningfully begins. It is a cause worthy of the support of all Americans who do not seek to punish nor to prolong America's racial agony. Its aim is as real as a seat in a schoolroom or a job on an assembly line for someone who is black. Its means comes from the same non-violent springs that have brought our country to a new realization of national morality. It is the logical creation of all Americans who believe in their minds and hearts:

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Martin Luther King, Jr., Pres.