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September-October/1963

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Trade Union Leadership Council: experiment in community action

Interviews with Robert Battle III and Horace Sheffield

The Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC) of Detroit is a community organization of over 9,000 members which has played and is playing an important role in the political life of the city and is considered by many observers a model of the future of the civil rights movement in the urban areas. Initially motivated by the struggle against discrimination in the field of employment, it soon broadened out into political and social action of a more general character and became an important center of activity in the Detroit Negro community, winning the respect and support of progressive forces in the white community. In addition to publishing a monthly newspaper, *The Vanguard*, the TULC invites distinguished speakers to address the membership, supports a youth group, conducts voter registration campaigns, and maintains numerous community education and welfare projects. All of this activity centers around the A. Philip Randolph Freedom House, a renovated hardware store which now houses the offices of the organization, provides a forum for speakers and discussion groups, rings often with the gaiety of social functions, and, in addition, possesses a bar whose proceeds help defray the expenses of TULC. To find out the story of the origins and activities of TULC, we interviewed two of its officers: the President, Robert ("Buddy") Battle III, and the Administrative Vice-President, Horace L. Sheffield.

Q. What is the history of the TULC? Where did it come from and where did its founders come from? What was their thinking and motivation for getting it started? (Asked of Battle)

A. The real motivation for the TULC getting started was the fact that a group of union leaders sat down and looked over the situation of discrimination within the unions on certain jobs, and in certain international unions which actually did not admit Negroes to their unions. After twenty years of existence we didn't think that we could wait any longer. Having been union leaders for many years, we thought we had the know-how to change the situation; after all, the union is supposed to be against discrimination against any workers.

This situation existed in all the unions; although the UAW-CIO is thought of as being better than the AF of L unions, there is still room for improvement. Take one of the things that stuck in our craw the most: the international union (UAW) still didn't have a Negro on the twenty-five man executive board after some fifteen or twenty years. This is one of the things we wanted to argue to — having a Negro on the policy-making board.

Q. About when did the TULC develop?

A. The TULC idea developed in 1955. By the time we got the different leaders from the unions together and got a basic idea of exactly how and what we wanted to do, it was 1957. In 1957 the TULC was formed, and it was formed by quite a few of the local trade union leadership — some staff members and some elected officials of the local unions. After we got started we figured that we'd get into action strictly as a union organization, where a person must be a member of a union to belong, because the problems that we were going to deal with and talk to were all union problems. But after about a year and a half, we found that we could not separate the problems of the unions from the community, because basically the union people are the community when they are at home. So we lifted the bar then and made it a community organization where the total community would be involved. We figured that the problem of job discrimination and discrimination within the unions were problems that should be dealt with within the community as well as within labor. We dropped the bar that you had to be a member of the union and said that all you had to believe in was the struggle, the fight of all mankind.

After about six or seven of us started off thinking that we had to have an organization, we rented this place as a headquarters for the 1960 Kennedy election. We looked at the place and said for once we've got a home we can build. So to get the home, ten of us drew all our **savings** from the bank and put it in here to renovate the whole place. Then we started getting loans from the members — we had about twenty people who loaned money from their private savings — first to get the place renovated, then started. We started out with four blank walls — it used to be a hardware store — and all the work has been done by the members. The architect was a member, the plumber was a member, the carpenter was a member — everything was volunteer work. We came around every night, shooting the breeze, grabbing a mouthful of nails and a hammer, and wham, wham, wham, back and forth.

We asked both men what they considered to be the major obstacles to Negro progress and the similarity of the answers reveals a consensus within TULC on the vital importance of employment.

Q. What are the major issues, national or local, that are facing the people of Detroit? (Asked of Battle)

A. The major issue facing the city of Detroit is unemployment. Although you read in the papers that we have come out of being a distressed area, that doesn't speak to the number of kids running the street without jobs and out of school. Not all of them are drop-outs, either — you have many kids who have graduated from high school and still have no job waiting for them. As a result you have mass unemployment; you have the delinquency question, because kids between 18 and 25 have a lot of time on their hands and nothing to do. Certainly idleness will bring on problems for the youth.

TULC doesn't go along with the idea of being satisfied with some 4 to 6 per cent unemployment throughout the country. We feel that some basic crash program put on by either the city or the federal government, trying to take the unemployment off the hands of the people, is

needed. There are some types of jobs where this unemployment situation could be handled without a fellow just laying on welfare, becoming lazy and ashamed of taking money for doing nothing; and it would also speak to the problem of the youngsters getting out of school. If they had something to do — after all, they have been going to school for some twelve or thirteen years, and then they come out and become unemployed. Now, we figure that if you had some kind of program where they could come out of school and look forward to working, it would eliminate quite a number of problems.

Q. What do you think are the obstacles facing the Negro in the future? (Asked of Sheffield)

A. Well, I think that the basic difficulty that we have is that there's a scarcity of jobs. I think that the basic problem confronting Negroes, and all America, is the question: How do we get full employment in this country? Obviously the Negro drive in terms of job fulfillment has to abate at some point unless we can do something about increasing the amount of jobs. Of course, a problem that bears very heavily on Negroes, though it also affects whites generally, is automation. It bears more heavily on Negroes because there are two unskilled or semi-skilled Negro workers to every white, and this is precisely the area where automation has its greatest impact. So there's going to be a disproportionate number of Negroes displaced — all of us are competing for scarce jobs. That's why I think that the most important thing we can do in this country — and this is why I think that the Negro can be such an important ally, and the white worker should understand this — is to press the fight for full employment.

TULC activities can be broken down roughly into two categories: direct action against discrimination and political action. Here Robert Battle comments on TULC's civil rights projects.

A. We have engaged in several projects like the aiding of the fight in the South. We helped Martin Luther King and Rev. Abernathy, and other movements in the South which needed financial help, although they had physical help of their own. We put on a number of projects to raise funds for the South or wherever the other trouble areas were.

Now, within the TULC itself, we have worked on the problem of meeting with the AFL-CIO executive board. Phil Randolph, who is the dean of Negro labor, was in a constant fight with George Meany about the expulsion of international unions that had color bars in their constitutions. You can well remember the terrible fight between Phil Randolph and George Meany in 1960 and 1961, where Meany asked "who in the hell made you boss of all Negro labor?" Some twenty different international unions to which Negroes belonged took it upon themselves to make a trip to Miami Beach in 1961 to answer this question for George Meany. As a result of a four hour meeting with George Meany, the international unions that had color bars in their constitutions were told to take the color bars out.

But although they took the color bar out, that didn't end discrimination — some of them, although they didn't have the color bar, still practice discrimination. Since 1961 the situation has improved by about

35 to 40 per cent. That is, although all unions have removed the color bar, in practice, only about 35 to 40 per cent have actually removed discrimination. One of the main purposes of TULC has been to remove the color bar from unions, so that each person, be he Negro or white, has the right to work and make a living."

A. One of the other things that TULC has been engaged in is political action. We feel that what you win across the bargaining table can be taken away from you at the ballot box. We feel that to handle a person's job in the shop all day, and to forget about it when he gets home, doesn't work. So we have ventured to weld together the total community, those of the working class of people, and tried to bring forth to them why each one of them should be registered and should vote in each election, and who they should vote for on the basis of the basic problems that are confronting the working class of people.

We've also worked on the minimum wage law, which we think is a basic thing not only in the city of Detroit but throughout the country, to try to raise it into a decent wage so that everyone who's working can buy back some of the products that he makes. The fellows making \$1.25 an hour can't buy back the things they'd need \$2.50 an hour for; so consequently you have a situation of unemployment. Another thing was the right to work laws. The TULC was very instrumental throughout the mid-western states in getting around and lobbying and campaigning among the working class of people, explaining to them exactly what was meant by "the right to work." It wasn't at all like it was painted up to be — it wasn't the right to work without having to belong to a union, but the right to work without representation and without being able to protect yourself. The right to work law was strictly in favor of big business — where you can pit worker against worker.

We were in contact with members of the City Council whom we had supported time and time again through the Negro community and through labor, but each time we had a problem or a bill of any kind or any decision to be made by the Council which would benefit the total community, Negro or white, or labor, we found that there were certain Council members taking orders from people other than the ones that put them in office. As a result, we figured why should we beat our brains out and spend our money electing these people when we can't call on them when we have basic issues and expect a fair decision from them? We went down the line looking at the candidates who had taken a fair position over the last two or three years and had worked with labor and with the total community on the basic things that were right. We came up with only three Councilmen. We then figured that we would displace five and add one. So we had to tie together the total community — the Jewish community, the Irish community, the Polish community, and the Negro community. We came up with five candidates who we figured would be in sympathy with the thinking of the people of the community.

The mayor had been an obstinate person — you go down to try to see him on any problem pertaining to the Negro community, the white community, or pertaining to labor, you found that he was one of these guys who never had the time and was never around. He'd give you these stock answers, or else he'd appoint people and then refer you to them. You could never get any basic answer from him whatso-

ever. So we felt that this wasn't the kind of mayor that we needed. We needed a full-time mayor who would speak to all the problems of the community.

Horace Sheffield commented on the reasons for the success of TULC in the political field and also on some of the problems created by the presence of race as a factor in elections.

Q. How do you account for the fact that TULC has been so successful here in Detroit?

A. Well, I think one of the reasons that TULC has been so successful is the fact that the trade union movement has itself been successful in political action, and you've had a tremendous amount of Negro involvement, as a result, in political action . . . Negro trade unions and TULC feel that the coalition between the labor movement, the Negro community, the Democratic party, liberal white forces, and other ethnic groups has really made for some progressive changes in this state. We support the coalition, but I think our greatest contribution has been in espousing the most progressive view — I mean trying to rid the coalition of the notion that you take the line of least resistance — in other words, that the prime standard for endorsing a candidate is 'can he win' rather than 'can he provide the most leadership for the community: what does he stand for?' Detroit is unique in that it has so many Negroes who have been involved in this kind of thing — who are precinct delegates, who are functionaries at all levels of parties, who are in a full-blown labor political apparatus such as the UAW's COPE (Committee on Political Education).

As for problems, in the last councilmanic election we had a Negro running for re-election. There were efforts on the part of groups in the community to say 'just vote for one,' but we gave leadership and we came up with a formula we called '5 plus 1' in which we argued, and happily were successful, that we had to get a majority of liberal councilmen, 5 out of 9 constituting a majority, and that for the community to vote for just one individual because he was Negro was wrong. Surprisingly, we got a large number of adherents to this view. We also had a fight last year in the Congressional district where I live, the 15th district, where John D. Dingell is the congressman and a Negro ran against him. Of course the district is probably about 48% Negro, but we at TULC had to meet that problem. We argued that if you say that a white man can't represent Negroes then you must also say that Negroes can't represent white people. We don't buy that theory. Now this is one of the largest conflicts we've had with forces in the Negro community but our position did prevail. Clearly Dingell had been a good congressman and is a good congressman. He'd championed every liberal view and in our judgement, and fortunately we were able to convince most of the leaders of the Negro community, he deserved re-election . . . As a principle, I think that Negroes shouldn't say that a Negro ought to hold office *because* he's a Negro or that only a Negro can represent Negroes.

Q. You haven't mentioned discrimination specifically in formulating the problems of employment and housing. Does TULC have a

position that solving the problem for the whole community will solve the discrimination problem? (Asked of Battle)

A. I feel that once you have solved the job problem, I figure that the discrimination problem will then disappear by at least 65 per cent. If you are unemployed and I am unemployed — if a white fellow is unemployed and a Negro is unemployed — one of the problems they share is the scarcity of jobs. If you're unemployed, you're just as mad as I, a Negro, am about being unemployed. So if in the civil rights field we holler for jobs for Negroes, if our whole fight is in the discrimination field, on the basis of being Negroes, the first thing it does is to make a bitter feeling between Negro and white. So that's the reason we talk about unemployment in the total community. We feel that unemployment is just as hard on whites as it is on Negroes, although a large number of Negroes are unemployed because of discrimination in hiring practices.

We are fighting to break down any barriers, any discrimination that bars Negroes from jobs. Once these barriers are broken down, Negroes will then have the right to any job. They have to be qualified for the job. We don't feel that it's right to keep Negroes out of certain classifications of work for the last 200 or 300 years because they're Negroes, nor do we feel it's right to walk in saying 'we've been shut out of these classifications — now you're going to lay off five whites and put on five Negroes.' We think that as long as employment is open to everyone, so that a Negro has just as much chance to qualify for a job as a white, this is the main thing we're fighting for.

TULC has recently been attempting to organize sister groups in other major metropolitan areas with marked success. Its unique approach to the over-all problems of American society make it a valuable experiment and an important model for the future development of the civil rights movement and for the wider struggle against poverty, injustice, and intolerance.

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