

The Not-Buying Power Of Philadelphia's Negroes

HANNAH LEES

PHILADELPHIA
WHEN FOUR HUNDRED ministers in one city advise their congregations not to buy something, a lot of whatever that something may be goes unbought and the company that makes it is quickly aware of the fact. For a month and a half, starting March 19, the congregations of four hundred Negro churches in Philadelphia have not bought Sunoco gas or oil for their cars and trucks or Sun fuel oil to heat their homes. Last January for exactly one week they were not buying Gulf gas or oil. Last October for two weeks they were not drinking Pepsi-Cola. And last summer for two months they were not eating any cakes or pies made by the Tasty Baking Company.

These periods of mass inaction have been the result of a joint decision reached last May by the pastors of those four hundred churches. They call it their Selective Patronage Program and their purpose is simple and forthright: to persuade—they reject words like “force” or “demand”—one company after another in Philadelphia to employ more Negroes in prestige jobs.

Their method is equally simple and forthright. A delegation of ministers, sometimes five, usually four, calls on whatever company the group has decided to investigate and politely inquires how many Negroes it employs and in what jobs. The companies have given this information willingly so far, and they might as well; the ministers usually already know, unofficially. The first meeting is always exploratory, but a second meeting is then requested a week or two later. At this meeting the ministers, though still quiet, still polite, are specific about what they want. At first it wasn't very much. Lately, as with the present Sun boycott, it has become a good deal. Whether they are now asking too much only time will tell.

With the Tasty Baking Company,

the second firm they visited and the first one where they encountered opposition, the ministers asked the company to hire two Negro driver-salesmen, two Negro clerical workers, and three or four Negro girls in the icing department, where the workers had traditionally been all white. They were not interested in the fact that the Tasty Baking Company already had hundreds of Negro employees. What they are interested in is placing Negro workers in posi-



tions of dignity and responsibility. Their aim is to change the public image of Negro workers. The Tasty Baking Company did not have any Negroes driving trucks or working in its office.

'Until Further Notice'

When Mr. Pass, the personnel manager of the company, and Mr. Kaiser, the president, pointed out that they had no need, just then, for more driver-salesmen or clerical workers, the ministers said politely but firmly that they still hoped these people could be hired within two weeks.

If not, the four hundred ministers they represented would have to advise their congregations on the Sunday following not to buy any Tasty cakes or pies until they were hired.

Mr. Kaiser understandably felt pushed and resistant. The Negro driver-salesmen and clerks and icers were not hired within the two weeks, and the ministers did tell their congregations not to buy any Tasty cakes or pies until further notice. Printed advertisements to this effect mysteriously appeared in bars, beauty parlors, and barbershops. Nobody knows how many thousand dollars' worth of sales the Tasty Baking Company lost during those summer months, but there are 700,000 Negroes in Philadelphia and a large proportion have some connection with those four hundred churches. When the boycott was officially called off two months later from four hundred pulpits, the Tasty Baking Company had in its employ two Negro driver-salesmen, two Negro clerical workers, and some half-dozen Negro icers.

The Pepsi-Cola Company, which was called on last September, was also resistant to the ministers' requests. On October 2, a boycott was called from four hundred pulpits. Two days later the spokesman of the delegation received a telegram saying that Pepsi-Cola had hired the requested personnel. But the boycott lasted two weeks, because it is a policy of the ministers not to call a boycott off until the new employees are actually at work.

Gulf Oil, which was approached last winter at the height of the heating season, showed no interest in meeting with the ministers. When three weeks had gone by without an appointment being arranged, a boycott of Gulf products was called the next Sunday. The day after that the switchboards at Gulf were jammed with calls canceling oil contracts. Gulf then moved so quickly to meet the ministers' demands that the boycott lasted only a week. But here a new factor entered: the union. One of the ministers' stipulations, that the new Negro employees must not be the first to be laid off, conflicts with seniority provisions in Gulf's union contract. Union officials met with the ministers and explained that they were sympathetic with their

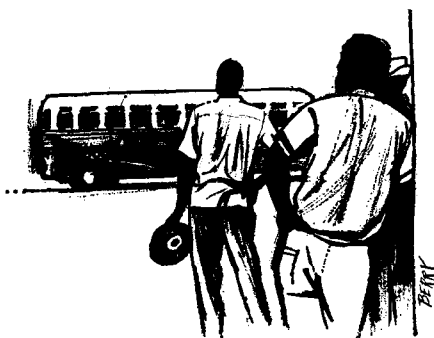
aims, but not when they collided with union bargaining. Three Negro truck drivers had been hired and after thirty days joined the union. All has been serene, but seasonal layoffs have begun by now. If drivers with seniority are laid off first, the union is not likely to take it lying down. The ministers may decide to finesse that one.

Bond Bread, Freihofer Bread, Coca-Cola, and Seven-Up all seem to have found the ministers' requests reasonable when they were called on. So, apparently, have Esso, Cities Service, Atlantic, and Mobil. None of these companies has had to cope with a boycott. Atlantic, which already had some Negroes in clerical and executive jobs before the ministers came to call, says it now has twenty-five Negroes in white-collar jobs, including a chemist, a psychologist, and a former football hero in sales promotion. They say that they are well pleased with the quality of work these employees do and with the general office morale. The ministers mention Atlantic frequently as an example of how smoothly their project goes when everyone co-operates.

THE ORIGIN and operation of the Selective Patronage Program are somewhat shrouded in mystery. It acknowledges no leaders, and no one will say who called the first meeting. "Some of us just got together," they say, "and decided we could not in good moral conscience remain silent while our congregations patronized companies that were discriminating against Negroes." The names of the ministers who have called on the various companies are on public record, but there is a different delegation for each company and a different spokesman. The Reverend Alfred G. Dunston, pastor of the Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church, has been the spokesman with Sun Oil. The Reverend Leon Sullivan of the Zion Baptist Church was the spokesman with the Tasty Baking Company. The Reverend Joshua E. Licorish, of Zion Methodist Church, was the spokesman with Gulf and with the union.

The Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, which investigated the Tasty boycott at the request of the Chamber of Commerce—and

found no illegal discrimination but no evidence of positive integration either—mentions Dr. Noah Moore, a bishop in the Methodist Church, the Reverend Lorenzo Shepard, pastor



of the Mount Olivet Baptist Tabernacle, and the Reverend Leon Sullivan as prominent in the campaign. But no one will say who makes up the priority committee, which meets—always at a different place—to decide on the next target and what they will ask for. They have, they say, no officers, no by-laws, no minutes, no dues, and no treasury.

"But it is the best-organized unorganized program you ever saw in action," one of them said to me. "We can call a boycott of a quarter of a million people within twenty-four hours and call it off within twenty-four hours." A quarter of a million is probably not too high. Lined up solidly behind the ministers are fraternal organizations, social clubs, insurance agents, bartenders, beauticians, the N.A.A.C.P., and the Negro newspapers. Even local dealers whose sales have been hurt by the various boycotts seem to go along with the program.

Unorganized 'Advice'

Highhanded and arbitrary as the Selective Patronage Program may seem, it is hard to find anything illegal or even really unethical in it. The ministers are simply exercising their democratic right to "advise" their friends what to buy and what not to buy. They are, of course, using their buying power to pressure these companies to hire employees they may not need at the moment, but their position is that if they waited for any of these companies to need that many Negro employees they would wait a long time. "We have waited too long already," one of them said.

A consistent complaint of both liberals and conservatives has been that Negroes did not do enough for themselves, did not exercise enough leadership in solving their own problems. These Negro ministers are exercising leadership and, so far, with impunity. The Tasty Baking Company consulted both the Chamber of Commerce and their own lawyers to see if any counteraction were possible. The conclusion seemed to be that it would be pretty hard to take a group of unorganized ministers to court, and even if they could it would not help Tasty's position much.

The ministers point out that some three thousand Negro boys and girls graduate from Philadelphia high schools every year and usually end by taking the jobs that nobody else wants because they are the last to be chosen. Many of them, the ministers admit, are not as highly qualified as they should be, but even the qualified ones have to fight the preconceived idea that they are not qualified. This, essentially, is the battle the ministers are trying to fight for them.

There are some new elements to the Sun Oil boycott now in progress. The ministers are feeling their strength and pushing harder than ever before. They may be pushing too hard, but perhaps they have to, to find out how far and how fast they can move. They phoned Sun at the end of January and requested a meeting. Sun arranged a meeting for February 3 in a very relaxed mood. A year ago Sun had asked the Reverend Leon Sullivan and Dr. Jerome Holland, president of Hampton Institute, to advise it in setting up a program of increased Negro employment in white-collar jobs. At that time it had hired two Negro clerks. It had records of hundreds of Negro employees at its Marcus Hook refinery, some in responsible supervisory jobs. It had just decided to include three Negro colleges in its yearly talent search. Sun felt it was in the clear.

The ministers didn't agree. They weren't interested in the number of Negroes working in the refinery. Negroes had always held jobs like that. "You hired two Negro clerks a year ago, but none since," they said. "Two in an office force of fifteen

hundred isn't much, is it? And you have no Negroes driving trucks. And even though you plan to include Negroes in your talent search, you haven't actually hired any."

Sun said business had fallen off. They had had to move more slowly than they planned, but were now going ahead as fast as they could.

At the second meeting, two weeks later, the ministers quietly dropped what must have seemed to Sun a bombshell. They wanted Sun to hire twenty-four Negro employees: nineteen additional office workers, three permanent truck drivers, and a motor-products salesman. When? Within the next month.

Sun said that wasn't possible, not within a month. There would not be anywhere near nineteen new job openings in the office in that time. And how could it hire three new truck drivers when they were just about to lay off thirty-five as the heating season ended?

IT MAY BE a coincidence that what the ministers have asked for at Sun is just about equivalent to the number of white-collar Negroes now employed by Atlantic. Philadelphia is the home office of both Sun and Atlantic. Each of them has about fifteen hundred people working in its home office. The ministers say that twenty-five Negroes in an office force of that size is not much to ask; that they can be found and will have to be if Sun wants any Negro customers around Philadelphia. The Urban League could supply them, say the ministers; they themselves could supply them if asked.

Sun has not, so far, asked the ministers to recruit for them, but it has been in touch with the Urban League. By March 16, the last meeting before the boycott deadline of Sunday, March 19, Sun had interviewed nineteen Negro applicants for clerical work, and had hired one of them. The others, they said, did not have the necessary qualifications. Sun had also hired one Negro salesman and upgraded one man from mechanic to truck driver. The ministers had accepted Sun's stand that it could not take on new truck drivers while about to lay off old ones and said they would settle for upgrading to truck driver three of their men

who were already employed by Sun.

The boycott was called on March 19 and is still in progress. As of late April, Sun had hired about half the workers requested by the ministers. There were seven more Negro girls in the home office, there were two Negro salesmen, and three drivers had been upgraded from work in the garage and the refinery. Sun says that from now on it will hire people as needed, interviewing both white and Negro applicants without discrimination. When asked about the loss in business, spokesmen for the firm shrug and say it is hard to estimate. They seem unruffled and without resentment, but say flatly that they cannot do more. And there is no reason why they should if they can get along without Negro customers. The ministers estimate, however, that Sun is losing some \$7,000 a week. And the number of Negro customers Sun may have to get along without seems to be increasing.

Those four hundred unorganized ministers now plan to spread their boycott progressively, first across the state and then, they say, across the country if necessary. On Sunday, April 9, they began the first part of what they call the second phase of their program. All the Negro Masonic lodges across the state announced a boycott of Sun products. Their members number 25,000 and they claim to be able to



influence several times that many. Perhaps they can. If Sun has still not hired the requested twenty-four Negro workers in another couple of weeks, the ministers say the boycott will spread to all the churches across Pennsylvania, and after that to all the men's and women's clubs.

And after that they will go beyond Pennsylvania.

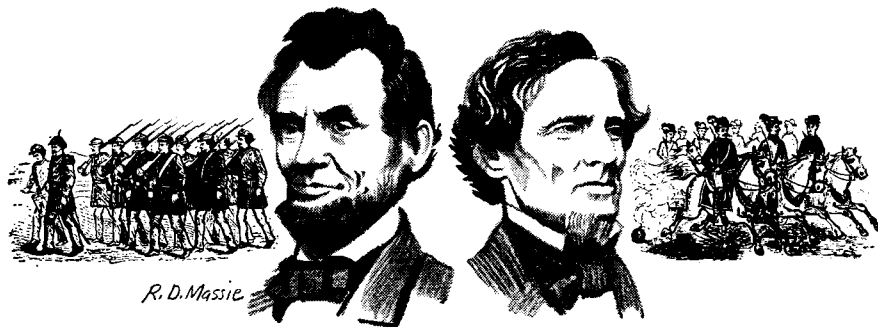
Wouldn't it have been more logical, I asked, to start with all the churches in Pennsylvania?

"A boycott of the Masons is easier to control," I was told, "and easier to call off in a hurry if Sun fills its quota. We could easily call on a boycott of all the churches, but it might take a while to call it off. We don't want to hurt Sun. We aren't mad at anybody. We just want to see our boys and girls in decent jobs."

Danger Ahead

Do the ministers have this much power? They probably don't know themselves yet. They must feel there is a certain poetic justice in big business feeling pushed by its traditionally most subservient employees. They may feel there is a special poetic justice that Sun Oil, owned by the Pews who for years controlled the Negro vote in Philadelphia by dropping money where it would do the most good, should now be having to negotiate with the new Negroes. But this proposed state-wide and possibly nation-wide boycott which originated with four hundred unorganized ministers is loaded with dangerous possibilities. George Schermer, executive director of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, has been glad to see these Negro ministers exercising leadership. As long as they can function in this amorphous state, he is all for them, he says, but if they can make good on this spreading boycott, it may be hard not to develop an overt organization with leaders and factions and ultimate corruption. At the very least, any real organization could sooner or later run into some sort of conspiracy suit. These are the dangers ahead of the crusading ministers.

"Power corrupts, you know the old saying," I reminded one of the ministers. "Aren't you afraid that all this mushrooming power may land you in trouble?" He smiled gently. "No, honey," he said, "because we haven't any heroes to feed on that power, we haven't any leaders or bosses. And we aren't going to have any. As long as we can make out without them, we'll do fine." As long as they can, he is probably right.



And the War Came

ALFRED KAZIN

THIS YEAR we begin to play Civil War. On February 12, in Montgomery, Alabama, the bells "opened a week of pageantry commemorating the beginning of the Confederate nation and the Civil War that followed." In the State House of Representatives Chamber, where the Confederate convention met, legislators re-enacted the secession debates that took Alabama out of the Union. "To make the celebration as realistic as possible," it was announced that "men would walk the streets wearing Confederate beards, top hats, and string ties. Their women-folk have forsaken formfitting dresses for the ankle-length hoop skirts of Civil War days." In Atlanta *Gone With the Wind* has been "screened again to kick off Georgia's centennial observation of the War Between the States."

A more somber note was struck in Charleston, South Carolina, where it was firmly announced that a Negro member of the New Jersey Civil War Centennial Commission, which had planned to attend the ceremonies marking the firing on Fort Sumter, would not be allowed to stay at the hotel with other members of her state group. Major General Ulysses S. Grant III, chairman of the National Centennial Commission, seemed puzzled by the disturbance over one Negro lady. When Allan Nevins, in his official capac-

ity as adviser to the national commission, also protested, the general said to a reporter, "Who's Allan Nevins?"

In Virginia, opening *his* state's commemoration of the great event, Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., drew a parallel between the present conflict over what he called states' rights and the "unhappy difficulties" of the nation on the eve of the Civil War. He lamented, "It has unfortunately been the course of our history that men have raised false issues which could influence the minds and stir the emotions instead of exercising constructive leadership in the effort to mold common opinion in support of that which is best for the nation and the world." And in a special series of articles called "The Needless War" for the New York *Herald Tribune*, Bruce Catton (the last survivor on either side) pointed out that the war need not have happened at all, and would not have happened if responsible leaders North and South had been less emotional. By 1861, says Mr. Catton, it could be seen "that the very cause of the dispute was itself dying and would, if men approached it reasonably, presently reduce itself to manageable size . . . The American Civil War . . . settled nothing that reasonable men of good will could not have settled if they had been willing to make the effort."

But the war did take place. As Lincoln said in his second inaugural, looking back to that anxious day in 1861 when, taking the oath for the first time, he had pleaded with the South to stave off the war: "All dreaded it, all sought to avert it. . . . Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish, and the war came." The war came, and to read about it now—in the superb history of *The Ordeal of the Union* by Nevins, in the chronicles of the anti-slavery movement, in the great debates in Congress, in the novels and poems of the time, in the memoirs of Grant, in the wartime diaries of Whitman, in the letters and articles of foreign observers on the battlefields, in the inflamed and exacerbated writings of abolitionists, slaveowners, ex-slaves, politicians, soldiers—is to realize at once the frigid emptiness of all this current play acting, with its characteristic suggestion that the war would have been averted if only people had been sensible.

The inescapable fact is that if you look at the passionate writing that helped to bring the war about, that in turn came out of the war, and that among Southerners, at least, has never ceased to come out of the war, you can see why even the endless debates between American historians as to the causes of the war seem dry and inconclusive by contrast with the torment of principle, the convulsion of experience.

A CIVIL WAR is terrible—so terrible that perhaps only an irrepressible conflict of interests and principles can explain it. It is as terrible as the murder of brother by brother described in the Old Testament, of mother by son in Greek tragedy. The very foundations of the human family are ripped asunder, and that is why such wars are never forgotten and perhaps never quite end. They show us a side of human nature that we can never forgive. When you read in *The Personal Memoirs of General Ulysses S. Grant* of Confederate raiders killing stragglers and then of being caught and lined up in the town square to be shot, the fact that