

Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1967

The ridiculous bill in the U.S. House of Representatives to penalize flag-burners passed by a whopping majority (385 to 16) last week—but in their haste, the patriotic legislators forgot to include the specific term “burning” in their prohibition. They did ban mutilating, defacing, defiling or trampling the flag.

Now they hope that the Senate will correct this significant omission. However, I believe that there is a good chance that the malapportioned upper chamber, which, with its 6-year terms is less susceptible to panic—the impetuous response to public pressure—will conveniently bury this obviously unconstitutional act.

Rep. John Conyers, Jr., of Detroit’s First District, stuck to his principles and was the only Michigan congressman to vote against it. Unfortunately, he overestimated the number of representatives who would have the guts to vote against it. He had predicted 25 “nay” votes.

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For a short while, Detroit’s cops almost became labor heroes and the esteemed City of Detroit looked like the big villainous “boss” in the recent ticket-writing slowdown and “blue flu” epidemic.

With all their faults, it’s hard to say that policemen are second-class citizens and that they should be denied a basic American constitutional right to use a strike or “neo-strike” in pursuit of their legitimate requests for higher pay and better working conditions.

The *Detroit Free Press* has revealed that the entire attitude of the city in negotiations with police has been a haughty one—full of belligerence and uncooperativeness in violation of the letter and spirit of Michigan laws governing labor relations in the field of public employees. The representatives of the city exhibited an infantile approach towards many of the non-economic demands of the police and engaged in a lot of double-talk about the crucial issue of a pay raise.

Once things got heated up, the city made a vicious attempt to obtain a court injunction against peaceful picketing of police stations by police and their families. Circuit Judge Blair Moody, Jr., rationally rejected this unconstitutional request—but it is very disturbing that the government of a city which is one of the labor capitals of the world would even dare to suggest such an abhorrent anti-labor and anti-democratic order.

It’s just another little item to add to my overall indictment of the Cavanagh administration. I certainly hope that some intelligent, articulate young politician doesn’t forget this flagrant disrespect for labor’s rights when he attempts to oust Cavanagh in 1969.

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The genesis of the police crisis was their ticket-writing slowdown. This is a cute weapon of police officers and it has not always been used for good causes. Some years back they used it to protest—it seems, unsuccessfully—the integration of patrol cars.

This time the slowdown had a much more legitimate purpose, that of seeking a higher salary and—honestly—no one who drives a car in Detroit could complain about it. Tickets are a drag to pay and can result in inflated insurance rates. The officials of the police department had to admit that the accident rate in town actually went down despite the slowdown in writing tickets.

A good side effect of the 80% reduction in writing tickets was that there were fewer police contacts with the Negro community, and this inadvertently reduced possible areas of tension during the hot days of late spring.

During the slowdown, police made some good humanitarian arguments for the use of reasonable discretion in the issuance of tickets. They insisted that, during the slowdown, they were just making a fuller use of their discretion.

Police Commissioner Girardin claimed that there is no “quota” for tickets—just a “norm”—as if there was a difference! Money from ticket fines goes into the city’s General Fund—for good causes like libraries—but it’s a hell of a way to raise money!

Police alleged, and probably with good basis, that officers who do not meet the ticket-writing “norm” get transferred to less desirable assignments. This matter certainly bears investigation—either by the Common Council or the state legislature.

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The score card on the “district plan” for electing city councilmen: only three Negro “leaders” have come out against it. They are Horace Sheffield and Nelson Jack Edwards, employees of the U.A.W. and Leonard Proctor, City Assessor appointed by Cavanagh.

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