

Detroit Cops Respond to Poor: Crunch!

Chris Singer

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The King described the Poor People's Campaign as being the last, great nonviolent movement. If tactical non-violence met with failure in this movement, he felt, then nonviolence as a means to ends" was done for.

The Detroit Police Department seemingly tried their best, for reasons known only to them, to make nonviolence appear a rather poor tactic on Monday, May 13, when more than 6,000 persons marched to Detroit's Cobo Hall in support of the Poor People's Campaign The King inspired.

In what Milwaukee's marching priest, Father James Groppi, described as "a stupid confrontation over nothing," police injured 26 demonstrators. The injured ranged from small children to elderly women. And the attack could see the suspension of some officers, and will certainly bring a Southern Christian Leadership Conference drive in Detroit.

The day began peacefully enough. The midwest contingent of the Campaign, led by Rev. A.D. King, the brother of Dr. King, and Groppi, rolled into town about noon. The 1100 members or contingent assembled at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral.

From there they began the long march to Cobo Hall. They were supposed to stay on Woodward all the way, but instead turned down Forrest to John R. More and more marchers joined along the way and by the time they returned to Woodward downtown the march looked like a great, black sea with wave upon wave of marchers rolling down Woodward.

They assembled in a park by the river to hear speeches and music. The members — of the midwest contingent went inside Cobo Hall to eat dinner and rest.

There had been police stationed three officers on each corner along the entire line of march. Motorcycle police accompanied the marchers. The Tactical Mobile Units had 'strolled the downtown area all afternoon. Some of the T.M.U. cars displayed their riot gear inside the rear windows of their cars, as if expecting trouble at any moment.

Their expectations were fulfilled and trouble did finally come.

At about 8:45 p.m., the trouble came over the relatively minor problem of an illegally parked car. A white Oldsmobile sedan, bearing Illinois plates, and clearly identified as a march organizer's car was parked outside Cobo Hall.

Inside the car was Abraham Rice, coordinator of the midwest contingent. He was using the radio equipment in the car to marshal the activities by communicating with marshals in the various groups of demonstrators; the young marshals being equipped with walkie-talkies.

The car had been parked there since the marchers arrived at Cobo Hall about 6:30. Four other cars, including one from the Detroit News, were parked illegally there along with Rice's Oldsmobile.

Suddenly a police sergeant walked up and demanded that the car be moved immediately. When Rice tried to talk about it, the sergeant ordered a Detroit Police tow truck to tow the car away. But, Rice called in help in the form of the Commandos, the members' of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council who are Groppi's bodyguards.

The Commandos, together with bystanders, sat on the car and prevented its removal. SCLC organizers tried desperately to reason with police. Hundreds of Detroit High school students, and other young people, had joined the march their mood was decidedly militant, in fact, revolutionary.

But, police responded by ordering a charge by the mounted police. They rode their horses into a segment of the crowd made up of younger school age youths. When a group of older women tried to protect the children, they too were attacked with clubs.

Not content with merely swinging their clubs, the mounted police used their horses against the marchers too. One woman was clubbed to the pavement and then kicked by a horse when she tried to get up.

SCLC marshals tried to get the marchers into Cobo Hall and away from the police. But, inside the building were more police who met the marchers with swinging fists, shoves, and more clubs. The people were trapped between the two squads of officers.

Groppi was knocked to the pavement just outside the doors, and when a Commando went to his aid he was set upon by police. The two officers so severely injured the Commando that he had to return to Milwaukee and could not continue in the campaign.

After the charge, and the mounted police had taken up a position in front of the nearby Veteran's Memorial Building, T.M.U. officers began getting out of their cars and donning their riot gear. The crowd, already enraged, saw this as an even greater threat.

SCLC organizers were hard pressed to cool tempers, but they did it and kept the crowd from retaliating.

But the next day, in the chambers of the Common Council, they lost their own tempers in a series of fiery speeches denouncing the police and Detroit.

The midwest contingent, with the 200 Detroiters who were joining them, were held back in Detroit so an official protest could be filed.

Speaker after speaker denounced the action to Mayor Jerome P. Cavanaugh. Josea Williams, of the SCLC, said Detroit Police were "sicker than the Mississippi state troopers." Groppi labeled the police involved as "Nazi stormtroopers camouflaged in blue uniforms." Frank Ditto, of the East Side Voice of Independent Detroit, demanded the immediate suspension of three officers. Ken Cockrel, of the Northend Community Council, said that even if Cavanaugh wanted to set things right, "he can't do it."

Cavanaugh said that appropriate action would be taken with an investigation and suspensions, if they were in order.

Josea Williams said that when the SCLC was through in Washington, they would return to Detroit to "deal with the Detroit police force."

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