

CARTON 9:39 THE BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS

Oakland Fire Department

1955

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24 June 55

Mr. Wayne E. Thompson
City Manager
Oakland City Hall
14th & Washington Streets
Oakland, California

Dear Mr. Thompson:

Enclosed you will find certain information which our committee discussed with you in the conference we held relative to segregation and discrimination being practiced within the Oakland Fire Department. I had to compile this information from what I could remember that I promised to send you and hope that I was able to make it fairly complete.

Now we would like to point out that we are supplying this information because it was discussed in the conference and that you requested it, and we hope that it may be helpful. However, it is our position that the discrimination and segregation ought to be discontinued forthwith. The City Council of Oakland has gone on record against these practices; the Attorney General of the State of California has ruled that segregation in a Fire Department in the State of California is illegal; The Supreme Court of the United States has unequivocally ruled against segregation, pointing out the harm, particularly psychological, that segregation does and that decision was written by the recent Governor of California, the Honorable Earl Warren.

Therefore, it seems to us that the present policy of the Oakland Fire Department is illegal, undemocratic, unChristian and inhuman. We most sincerely request that you take the necessary steps to see that it is discontinued. We believe that the adoption of our recommendations will bring about the desired results.

Very sincerely yours,

C. L. DELLUMS
Spokesman for the Committee
Oakland Branch, W.A.A.C.P.

24 June 55

DISCRIMINATIONS PRACTICED AGAINST NEGRO FIREMEN ASSIGNED TO ENGINE CO. 19

There are two Negro Firemen assigned to this Company. When they were transferred to this Company they were told that the other Firemen had voted to exclude them from the House Fund, eating with the others and that in other words they were not being included in anything that the white members of the Company enjoyed. They were told that the television had been bought by the men themselves and that therefore the Negro Firemen were not to touch the television, not to use the House sundries and fund, certain chairs were pointed out to them and told that these chairs were private chairs and that they were not to sit on them.

Our information is that Lt. Leonard Jones, assigned to this Company at the time, held meetings, during working hours, getting the white members to work together in an attempt to force the Negro members to get out, even if they had to drive them out of the Department altogether.

These men were told that when they did "night watch" that they could not use the regular mattress provided for the Firemen during the night watch but that they would have to bring their mattress down from upstairs because the white Firemen did not want to sleep on a mattress they had used. When one of the Negro Firemen refused to do this he was suspended by Battalion Chief John Byrnes. Byrnes has really been the spokesman, or the supposed spokesman, for the Hosemen in the Company and he was the one who told the Negro Firemen that the white Firemen didn't want to associate with them or even want to speak to them.

There is a regular cupboard where the Firemen's dishes and glasses are kept. However, these two Negro Firemen are not allowed to keep their dishes and glasses in this cupboard or the cabinets, but were assigned to one small cabinet to keep their dishes in. It is a small bottom cabinet where the men have to bend way over to get to it. In order to get a drink of water, from where they have to get it, these men have to get down on their hands and knees since they are not allowed admittance to the refrigerator.

The usual custom is that if the officer and Engineer must be away from the Company without a replacement that the Senior Hoseman is assigned to be in charge. This has never happened to these two men at Engine Company #19 although most of the time they have been there, they have been the Senior Hosemen on duty. Lt. Jones, referred to above, asked for and received a transfer (as he put it) to a House where integration is not practiced. Later, Lt. Jones got into trouble and as a punishment he was assigned to one of the Companies where all the men with the exception of the officers, are Negroes.

With some variations, the two men assigned to Engine Company #24 have been treated pretty much the same. All four of these men are convinced that the Hosemen have reacted towards them as they have largely because of the attitude of their officers. Since the Chief of the Fire Department had made it known in no uncertain terms that he believed in segregation, it is almost a natural thing for his subordinate officers to attempt to carry out his policy. It would be just as natural then for the rank and file members to fall in line.

24 June 55

DISCRIMINATIONS PRACTICED AGAINST ENGINE COMPANY NO. 22 AND IT'S PERSONNEL

As a result of 22 being a segregated House and limited to Negroes, there was a stretch once of 15 years when no Negroes were employed as Firemen because there were no vacancies at 22.

For some 30 years this Company had white officers but it was used as a "penal House" for white officers with bad conduct.

Twenty-two now has Negro officers but on their days off they are not relieved by other officers as officers are relieved in other Houses. The same is true for the Engineer. This condition even exists when a regular officer or Engineer is off on vacation.

A check of Page 58, "Book of Rules and Regulations, Oakland Fire Department", under subjects "Relief Chiefs and Relief Operators"; "Relief Officers"; and "Relief Engineers", seems to indicate that Engine Companies 22, 28 and 33 are not a part of the regular Oakland Fire Department.

Engine 22 has been used quite a bit as a training center for white Firemen. According to these white Firemen, they were told by Mr. Farrell when they were sent to 22, to take their own silver and dishes and to expect a rough time. Our information also is to the effect that they were told not to "trade" with any of the Negroes and to report back weekly concerning their treatment. Right here it is to be noted that when the Negro Firemen were sent to Companies 19 & 24 they were not given this same instruction nor warning. One group said they were told that they were going out there to "learn something". Also, according to these white Firemen, they were told that they're only being sent to 22 for the breaking in and would be moved as soon as a vacancy appeared in another House. Results have most certainly indicated that this is true.

The men assigned to No. 22 are not allowed "trading" privileges as the men are in other Houses.

Although Negroes have been in the Oakland Fire Department for some 35 years, not a single one has ever been assigned to or allowed to transfer to a Truck Company. These men have been denied the right to transfer. As an example, we cite the case of Fireman Ernest Allen. This man had a home in East Oakland around 86th Avenue. He had three small children, a little girl of 4 or 5 years of age stricken with Polio. In early June 1952 Allen requested a transfer to a Company near his home, preferably 20 or 29 Engine Company, which would reduce the time required in traveling to and from work, which would allow him more time to help his wife care for the children. This man's request was ignored and after waiting nearly three years, he finally gave up in disgust and resigned from the Department.

Battalion Chief Harris told several of these men personally that Negroes would not be transferred. According to our information, one man finally succeeded in seeing Chief Burke himself about the transfer and he asked Chief Burke if his refusal to allow Negroes to transfer was democratic and the man reported that Chief Burke told him that he, Burke, didn't care anything about democracy and that he, and he alone, was running the Oakland Fire Department. Right after that, an order came from Chief Harris directed only to 22 Engine that no members were to appear at the office again regarding transfers.

On February 5, 1953 the Oakland City Council unanimously adopted a resolution banning segregation in all Departments of the City Government. As a result of the adoption of this resolution by the Council, four of the Firemen were transferred from Engine Co. 22.

Two of them were sent to Engine Company 19 and the other two were sent to Engine Company 24. Obviously this was only a token gesture to comply with the City Council's mandate, since no other transfers have been made.

When this Company began to be used as a breaking-in Company for white Hosemen, beds that had been used by Negro Firemen were removed and other beds brought in for the use of the white Firemen. Obviously this had to be done by a Chief's order. Those "ear-marked" beds are still in 22 since there are still two white Firemen on each shift serving their probationary period at this Company.

Now that this Company is staffed with Negro officers and Engineers, under the present system it doesn't seem to be possible for any other Negro Firemen to get a promotion until one of the present officers or Engineers leave the Department.

It is the custom for the men to be allowed "trading" privileges with other men within their District. Obviously as long as one Company in a District is known to be a Jim-Crow Company that their trading privileges will be limited among themselves in their own Company. Under date of February 26, 1953, a special order on "trading" came out over the signature of Mr. Farrell, but we understand that it was only sent to the Districts where Negro Firemen were employed.

ENGINE COMPANIES NO. 28 and No. 33

To these two Companies are assigned six Negro Hosemen each. All of the officers are white. No regular appointed officer has remained at 28 Engine any longer than was necessary. The same condition obtained for quite a while at 33 Engine.

It is the custom for engineers to sleep in the dormitory where the Hosemen sleep. However, the Engineer at 33 does not sleep in the dormitory but sleeps in the room with the officers.

No relief officer is assigned to 28 and 33 Engine Companies.

No Caucasian Hosemen have been assigned permanent duty with either of these two Companies.

The Engineers (white) sleep in the room with the officers, although the custom is for Engineers to sleep in the dormitory with the Hosemen throughout the Department.

THIS IS ONLY A PARTIAL LIST OF CITIES WITH INTEGRATED FIRE DEPTS.

• SAN DIEGO

FRESNO

BERKELEY

SACRAMENTO

RIVERSIDE

PASADENA

• ST. PAUL

MINNEAPOLIS

• COLUMBIA, OHIO

• PHILADELPHIA

BOSTON

PLYMOUTH, MASS.

NEWARK, N. J.

ROCKAWAY, N. J.

BUFFALO

NEW YORK CITY

• LOUISVILLE

• ATLANTA CITY

• Cities that have become integrated within recent years.

24 June 55

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engine Company 22 be broken up as a Negro Company and that white Firemen be assigned to it.
2. White Hosemen be assigned to Engine Companies 28 & 33.
3. Negro Firemen be assigned to Truck Companies.
4. That a policy be adopted limiting the number of Negroes to any Company to four.
5. Negro Firemen be transferred to other Companies in pairs and that they serve on a shift together.

6. There should be some in each Battalion.

22-28-33 should be served by relief Officers, Engineers + Hosemen.

There are 13 men assigned to 22. If Officers, Engineers + Hosemen relieves at this hour they would be only 8 men assigned.

3 January 56

Mr. Wayne E. Thompson
Oakland City Manager
Oakland City Hall
12th & Washington Streets
Oakland, California

Dear Mr. Thompson:

On behalf of the Oakland Branch, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and for myself personally, I wish to hereby express our appreciation for the job your Administration has done in removing the segregation and most of the discrimination that existed in the Oakland Fire Department. Knowing the condition which you inherited, it could not have been properly handled without forceful and direct action. You have demonstrated that the City is headed by a strong man. We are deeply appreciative for the progress that has been made to date. Being such a vital part, and as a matter of fact the test itself of American Democracy, makes us extremely conscious of the respect given the human personality. It is most reassuring to know a Public Official who believes in human decency, equality, Christianity and Democracy strong enough that he is not only willing to see it work, but will help make it work. It is good to find Americans who seem to know that America must practice what it preaches.

We congratulate you upon your selection of Mr. James J. Sweeney as Chief of the Fire Department. We believe that Chief Sweeney was an excellent selection and we would also like to extend our sincere thanks and congratulations to him, through you, for the excellent work he has done in helping to formulate, and in carrying out the program of decency and human equality in the Fire Department. Much progress has been made and we believe that Chief Sweeney will remove the remaining existent discriminations. We have continued to observe the Department and have made our own and independent investigation and analysis of the program and feel that you would want to know how the picture looks to us at this time.

Mr. Wayne E. Thompson

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3 January 56

We are therefore enclosing our analysis of the situation as it exists today. We believe our analysis is fairly accurate because our information has been compiled from many sources, including a rather surprisingly large number of white Firemen.

Again expressing our appreciation.

Very sincerely yours,
OAKLAND BRANCH, W. A. A. C. P.

G. L. DELLUMS, Chairman
Firemen's Committee

CLD:pw

Encls: As mentioned above

COPY

Oakland Branch N.A.A.C.P. Analysis of Conditions Existing in the Various Houses where Negro Personnel is Employed as it Appears to us at this Time.

Engine Company #26 and Truck Company #8: - White personnel seem to want to be "regular" fellows but appear to be dominated by one or two persons, particularly the Lieutenant who doesn't seem to want them to have anything to do with the Negro Personnel. Investigation indicates that the Engineer has been condemned because of his friendly attitude toward the Negro personnel and has been branded a "nigger lover" by the bigots in the House. It might be well to point out right here that in many of the houses there is quite a difference in the men on the shifts. In some cases the men on the "A" shift seem to be regular fellows while the same Company the men on the "B" shift may be rather cold or vice versa. We are unable to properly pin-point the shift in question here but it's our belief it's the shift on which the Lieutenant serves. Our investigators have observed some of the white Firemen hold friendly discussions with some of the Negro Firemen in the Lieutenant's absence but when they see him coming they "clam up". We believe that the men on one shift, particularly in the Truck Company, jointly participate in all "funds". However, we think that one shift, at least in Engine Company #26, doesn't allow the Negro Firemen to participate in the food fund. We think it's the "A" shift.

Engine Company #29: - The men are getting along splendidly together. The Negro Personnel participate in all funds with the exception of the food fund and it seems to be just about broken up. Our investigation indicates that the original Firemen want the new personnel to participate in everything but are afraid of being criticized if they are allowed to participate in the food fund. However, it doesn't seem to be a problem and everybody seems to be reasonably satisfied on both sides and the Company seems to be rapidly becoming just one Company of Oakland Firemen.

As an indication of a certain amount of fear of criticism, we learned that a Negro Fireman was assigned "detail" to Engine Company #27 and upon arrival was given his duties as any Fireman would expect them to be given and then told what time "we eat". Later he was told that he could not eat with the others because it just wasn't being done.

Engine Company #22: - The new assignees to this Company were received as gentlemen and brother Firemen and made welcome to participate in everything that goes on in the House and all "funds". The new assignees appreciate their reception and we understand that they do participate in everything. These men were treated so nice that they were embarrassed because new blankets were sent with them and we understand that some of them never used the new blankets. Incidentally, we might point out here that we understand that where white Firemen were sent to relieve Negro Firemen that the white Firemen were supplied with new blankets, and that when Negro Firemen were sent to replace white Firemen that in some cases the Negro Firemen were told to take their blankets with them. Now for one apparent discrimination practiced against 22... we understand that the usual method for calling for a detailed man is to just call for one and that each house rotates their men on detail. However, when the Battalion Chief calls 22 for a detailed man he names the man he wants and it is always one of the whites. Therefore, the men at 22 do not rotate on detail since no Negro has been allowed to do detail out of that House yet.

Engine Companies 28 and 33: - The original hoemen at these two houses, being colored, obviously were in control of all of the "funds". When the replacements came in they were told about all of the different funds just as they were at 22 and made welcome to participate in everything in these Houses; nothing mandatory but welcome to participate if they wanted to. Everything is getting along fine.

Fire Company #24: - Replacement personnel accepted and treated similar to replacement personnel at 22, 28 and 33. Everybody participates in everything and therefore everybody getting along fine.

Engine Company #13: - Replacement personnel not allowed to participate in the coffee fund or the food fund. Our investigation indicates to us that this is another House where the men seem to want to be regular but are dominated by one or two persons. The chief trouble maker here seems to be relief Engineer Woolcock. When he isn't around everything seems peaceful but when he is there tension seems to be in the air. The original personnel try to avoid a replacement personnel. We might point out here that we find that in the few Houses where things are not running smoothly that the original personnel (white) seem to be very nice fellows when alone. They seem to accept the replacement personnel (colored) perfectly alright when alone but when the original personnel is together they act as if they are afraid that if they are friendly somebody might "tell".

Engine Company #29: - Our investigation seems to indicate that the morale in this Company was low long before there were any transfers and replacements. Discovering this unusual condition existing, we secured the services of additional investigators in every attempt to be certain of an impartial report. Here the original personnel seem to want to be "regular" but seem to fear the Captain. They are regular fellows in his absence but seem almost afraid when he shows up. The men are much friendlier on the Lieutenant's shift.

Engine Company #2: - Replacement personnel have been accepted with the same spirit as shown in 24. Everybody getting along fine.

Engine Company #17: - Again here is a Company where the replacement personnel (colored) was accepted as Firemen and nothing more. Men are allowed to participate in everything. Everybody getting along fine.

Engine Company #19: - The Negro Firemen were told that they could not participate in the coffee and food fund. They participate in everything else and otherwise everything seems to be O.K.

Several of the white Firemen called our attention to something they felt would have been a good suggestion. That is that the first transfers should have been made to Company #1. They felt that if the colored Firemen had been brought to #1 that because of it's location and whatnot that everything else would have fallen right in line. Just thought you would like to know about such a suggestion. Since there are still 4 fellows up at 33, it might not be a bad idea to bring a couple of them to #1.