



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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African American residents of Chester, PA, demonstrate to end de facto segregation in public schools, 1963-1966

- U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

4 November

1963

to: 1 April

1966

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Chester, Pennsylvania

Goals:

The Committee for Freedom Now (CFFN) of Chester, PA, demanded that the Chester Board of Education end de facto segregation in the public schools and that conditions at schools with predominantly African American students be improved.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 013. Deputations
- 015. Group lobbying
- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 127. Withdrawal from governmental educational institutions
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 138. Sitdown
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 127. Withdrawal from governmental educational institutions
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations
- 015. Group lobbying
- 127. Withdrawal from governmental educational institutions

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- African Americans
- College students
- parents

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Stanley Branche; Committee for Freedom Now of Chester, PA (CFFN); Parents of children in Chester public schools; Dr. Felder Rouse, Jr; George Raymond, head of Chester NAACP

Partners:

The Swarthmore College Chapter of Students for a Democratic Society; Swarthmore Political Action Club of Swarthmore College; C.O.R.E.

External allies:

Phil Savage, Tri-State leader of the NAACP

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Swarthmore College students

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Phil Savage

Groups in 3rd Segment:**Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

Segment Length: 146 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Chester City government and Board of Education

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Police violence during arrests

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Following a Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruling, the Chester Board of Education voted to eliminate de facto segregation in the public schools.

In November 1963, African American parents in the small city of Chester, PA organized and demanded better conditions at their local elementary school, Franklin School. They picketed the school and blocked its doors, successfully shutting it down for

several days. The protesters also staged sit-ins in the City Hall, municipal building, and the Board of Education's offices. After several weeks of protest, the campaign grew to encompass desegregation efforts of 10 of Chester's public elementary and middle schools.

Chester, PA had a population of 63,000 in 1963, of which 27,000 were African Americans. According to a report by the Swarthmore College chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), "Except for two cities which are on the Federal Government's list of permanently depressed areas, [Chester, PA had] the worst unemployment, the lowest median income, and the most thoroughly exploited tax base of any city its size in Pennsylvania." Government figures indicate that during that time period, white unemployment was 15% and black unemployment was twice that number. The African American community lived in an urban ghetto, with low property taxes and disparate housing. The SDS report described Chester as "an industrial city, specializing in ship-building and oil refining; but industry is moving out. Ford left three year [sic] ago, leaving more than 1000 jobless." Segregation and discrimination were prevalent. Chester had a long history of Republican control and disenfranchisement of African Americans. African Americans had no voice in the city government.

Franklin Elementary School was in the middle of the Chester ghetto. The student body was 95% African American, but the school was not considered segregated because it served the surrounding integrated communities. The parents were concerned about the condition of the building and the quality of education. The building was built in 1910 for 500 students, but 1200 entered in September of 1963. The library consisted of one desk with a few piles of books, and two toilets served the entire building. The gym consisted of an unused coal bin. During recess students played on a cement playground that had a four foot drop to the sidewalk below along one edge. No railing protected this drop. There were over 39 students per class, as opposed to an average of 26 in the nearest white school.

After participating in protests in Cambridge, MD in the summer of 1962, Stanley E. Branche, an African American from Chester, PA and an officer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), returned home and looked for places to engage his activism. Branche, along with several Swarthmore College students, decided to focus their attention on the poor conditions at Franklin School in Chester. Branche, Swarthmore students, and local parents created The Committee for Freedom Now of Chester, PA (CFFN) soon thereafter.

During the year of 1962, parents of students at Franklin School made their demands for a better school known to the Chester City Board of Education. In October of 1963, CFFN identified the school as a problem of vital concern to the African American community in Chester. A picket line outside the school began on Monday, November 4, 1963. The picket line started with 20 protesters, but by Wednesday the number was up to 150.

The following Monday (November 11, 1963) community leaders held a mass meeting at the local church. Based on the fact that the Board of Education had not responded to the community's demands for a better school, attendees of the meeting decided to peacefully block the doors of Franklin School the following morning and prevent anyone from entering the building. In addition, community members filed a petition in a local court for the Franklin School to be closed due to its deplorable conditions.

On the morning of Tuesday, November 12, 1963, 400 community members showed up at Franklin School and blocked the doors. They succeeded in closing the school down for the day. At 9:30 a.m., after it was clear that the school would not open that day, the protesters marched through the streets of Chester to the City Hall. 150 protesters entered the Mayor's chambers and demanded a better school for their children. The commissioners told the protesters that they knew nothing about their demands and said that neither the Mayor nor the City Council had any influence over the Board of Education.

The protesters then exited City Hall and marched en masse to the Board of Education. Upon arriving at the building, the marchers discovered that the doors had been barred. The protesters observed scared faces watching them from upper story windows. Stanley Branche was admitted to the building and spent an hour in negotiation. The Board of Education would not concede to any of CFFN's demands, nor would they make any promises to improve conditions at Franklin School. The crowd dispersed but community members vowed to return to Franklin School the following day and prevent anyone from entering.

The next morning, Wednesday, November 13, 1963, community members showed up at Franklin School and created a blockade of the building. Once enough people showed up and protesters believed that the school would be shut down for the second day in a row, arriving protesters were told to go to the Board of Education's building on the other side of the city. The protesters who arrived at the Board's offices created a blockade around that building as well. According to an SDS report, "the Board of Education did no work that day".

Once the two buildings were adequately shut down, marchers from both sites marched to the municipal building in the middle of Chester. When the marchers arrived at the building, they walked up the steps, singing and praying. They entered the building and sat down everywhere - on floors, counters, chairs, even preventing the elevator from operating. This effectively prevented anyone from entering or exiting the building. After a few hours, everyone who was working there was given the rest of the day off. Police watched the protesters and began to herd them towards waiting paddy wagons. The protesters locked arms and resisted arrest, but the police forced them apart and out the doors into the wagons. 158 were arrested.

That night, community members held another mass meeting at a local church. The following morning, Thursday, November 14, 1963, at 7:00 a.m., community members, along with students from Bryn Mawr and Swarthmore Colleges, laid down and blocked the doors of Franklin School to symbolize their belief that the school was not fit for human habitation. 83 protesters were arrested, of which 51 were adults, including Stanley Branche. He was released on \$200 bail. Police used 19 vehicles, including 2 buses, to transport the protesters to the local county jail at Broadmeadows. From inside and outside the vehicles, protesters sang loudly. Young protesters from within the police vehicles adapted the line "Not gonna' let nobody turn me 'round" to "Not gonna' let no white trash turn me 'round."

Protests outside of Franklin School continued through the morning and into the afternoon, when 50 state troopers showed up to assist the 77-member Chester police force, all of whom were at the scene.

That evening, Stanley Branche addressed a crowd of 1,000 Chester residents at the Temple Baptist Church in Chester and announced that the Board of Education had agreed to CFFN's demands, including the demolition of Franklin School. CFFN's vice-president, Dr. Felder Rouse, Jr., addressed the gathering and said that there had been a meeting with representatives of the Board of Education, the city, police and FBI, and CFFN. Rouse said that the school board assured CFFN that the school would be demolished as soon as possible. At the Thursday night mass meeting in Temple Baptist Church, Rouse said the CFFN would only agree to this offer by the Board of Education if the police also agreed to drop all charges against more than 300 demonstrators who had been arrested so far. Rouse also said that the school board agreed to immediately reduce class size at Franklin School to 25, bus excess students to desegregated schools, remove unsanitary toilet facilities and install new equipment, relocate classes being held in the boiler room and coal-bin, and repair the school's grounds.

The next morning, Friday, November 15, 1963, hundreds of Chester residents assembled at the doors of Franklin School for another demonstration. Police began arresting protesters at 8 a.m. and charged them with unlawful assembly and near riot. Stanley Branche was the first to be arrested that morning and was held on \$500 bail. On Friday night, 1,000 protesters marched from Temple Baptist Church to the Chester Police Station and demonstrated outside the station for half an hour.

Over the next months, Branche, Rouse and other activists organized an executive committee of CFFN to give the organization a more formalized structure. Branche became CFFN's executive director. The organization's goals expanded to include better public schools in all of Chester, more jobs, better housing and medical care and an end to discrimination. CFFN organized block groups in the African American community. These groups helped to empower community members. In response to the initial round of protests, the Chester School Board agreed to transfer 173 students from Franklin School to other elementary schools in the city.

On Saturday, February 8, 1964, Branche told a gathering of 150 Chester residents that he planned to organize a boycott of 6 of Chester's 17 public schools for the coming Tuesday, February 11 to protest de facto segregation of pupils and faculty in the school system. CFFN was also demanding better textbooks, certification of all teachers and reduced class size to 26 pupils.

The previous Monday, February 3, a similar public school boycott had been staged in New York City, keeping more than 364,000 students out of school. Other public school boycotts were planned for Chicago, Cambridge, MD, Wilmington, DE, Atlanta, and Cleveland.

On Monday evening, February 10, protesters marched through the streets of Chester, gathering support for the next day's boycott. State troopers were called in and five protesters were arrested for distributing leaflets. Each was held on \$300, bail even though the protesters had obtained the necessary city permits to distribute leaflets.

The boycott of the public schools began on Tuesday, February 11, 1964 and lasted for several days. On Wednesday evening, Branche, as well as Stan Daniels of the Philadelphia Revolutionary Action Movement and Dwight Campbell of the Cincinnati Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality addressed a crowd of approximately 600 protesters outside the

Temple Baptist Church. That night, Branche and Rouse hung an effigy of Rev. Donald G. Ming, pastor of the Murphy African Methodist Episcopal Church and head of Chester's Human Relations Commission. Ming had publicly urged Chester's Black Community not to support the CFFN boycott.

On Thursday, February 13, 1964, CFFN picketed 10 of Chester's 17 public schools and the boycott resulted in absenteeism at some predominantly African American schools being as high as 50%. The hardest hit schools were Franklin, Lincoln and Booker T. Washington elementary schools. At Franklin School, out of an enrollment of 977, 542 were absent. Only 4 teachers were absent out of 500 in the city. Absenteeism ranged from 10% at predominantly white schools to 55% at predominantly African American schools. In all, approximately seventy-five demonstrators picketed the 10 schools. Twenty-one white students from Swarthmore and Haverford Colleges participated in the demonstrations, switching forces among schools.

On Thursday evening, both Branche and Rouse were arrested and charged with "defamation of character" in connection with the hanging of Rev. Ming's effigy. Other charges against the two CFFN leaders were "criminal libel and conspiracy to commit an unlawful act." A grand jury was scheduled to begin in April. On Friday, February 14, 1964, members of CFFN, as well as CORE members from Philadelphia, marched in front of the jail where Branche was held on \$2,500 bail.

As of Monday, February 17, 1964, the Chester Board of Education had not responded to any of CFFN's latest demands. Meanwhile, the Philadelphia Tribune reported that Wallace Nelson of Philadelphia, who had been arrested in the Chester demonstration on Monday, February 10, was refusing to pay his \$50 fine and was on a hunger strike in jail. His wife, Juanita, was holding a hunger strike at her home in support. Nelson was being held at the Delaware County jail at Broadmeadows and was scheduled to be released on Friday, February 21.

On Saturday, March 14, 1964, over 60 delegates, representing civil rights organizations in at least eight states, gathered at the Masonic Temple in Chester and held an all day conference. Participants included Black Power leader Malcolm X and actor Dick Gregory. Similar conferences had been held in New York City and Chicago. At the conference in Chester, the delegates created a new more militant organization called ACT, which was dedicated to organizing larger and more effective boycotts and demonstrations. Lawrence Landry, head of the Chicago chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was elected chairman.

During the proceedings on Saturday, 200 CFFN members marched through the streets of downtown Chester and presented a list of demands to the mayor. The protesters demanded that a new desegregated school be built in Chester, that a comparative study be done of Chester's African American and white schools, and that no police dogs be used on demonstrators in Chester.

On the night of Friday, March 27, 1964, CFFN held a candlelight vigil through the streets of Chester. This vigil was to draw support for planned sit-downs in busy Chester intersections the following day. Police did not arrest anyone Friday night until the very end of the demonstration.

Shortly before noon on Saturday, March 28, 1964, CFFN members sat down and laid down at 7th and Edgmont, a busy intersection in downtown Chester, protesting school segregation. After fifteen minutes of relative calm, police charged the crowd

and brutally removed and arrested the protesters. At the encouragement of Branche, another group of demonstrators arrived at the intersection. Police were just as harsh to the second wave, cracking skulls with their bully sticks and dragging protesters across the pavement to waiting paddy wagons. Branche sent in a third and fourth wave of protesters to sit down in the intersection that afternoon. The police arrested these demonstrators without as much brutality. Four newspaper photographers were among those arrested. Police attacked and wounded reporters and damaged their equipment. Branche said that he had complained about police brutality to the U.S. Department of Justice, which already had opened an investigation.

Daily demonstrations continued following the March 28 arrests. On Saturday, April 4, 1964, CFFN and the Chester chapter of the NAACP, headed by George Raymond, announced that they had agreed to postpone a scheduled noontime demonstration until they had met with the Chester School Board, a meeting scheduled to take place on Monday, April 6. At the request of CFFN and the NAACP, the School Board agreed to exclude the Chester Human Relations Commission from Monday's meeting, which led to the resignation of Rev. Ming.

As of April 4, 200 demonstrators had been arrested since March 27, and 60 remained at the Delaware County prison in Broadmeadows. Early in the week of April 6, U.S. Congressman Robert N.C. Nix (D-Phila) asked the U.S. Department of Justice to launch a probe into a hearing conducted by magistrate Phil Puzanchera of demonstrators who had participated in the March 28 sit-down. Representative Nix claimed that the magistrate had intimidated the prisoners and bail bondsmen in the case.

On Wednesday, April 8, Branche and Phil Savage, tri-state leader of the NAACP, appeared jointly at a rally in Chester to call for an economic boycott against white merchants in Chester to pressure them to persuade the School Board to listen to the demands of the African Americans. By this point, Chester clergymen had joined CFFN's campaign and had called a meeting for Monday, April 13 at the Calvary Baptist Church in Chester.

The initial meeting between CFFN, the NAACP and the School Board did not occur until April 20. The meeting was held at the suggestion of Pennsylvania Attorney General Walter Alessandroni and was called by the state Human Relations Commission. The School Board walked out of the meeting after the two other groups refused to halt demonstrations unless the School Board dropped the suit it had outstanding on demonstrators. Phil Savage, Branche, and George Raymond led the rights groups. After the meeting, a Board spokesman said that the Board would return to the table the next day. On Monday, Branche called a 24-hour moratorium on the demonstrations but he said on Tuesday that demonstrations would resume if no resolution were reached by the end of the day.

In the same time period, Howard Talbert was fired from his job at Sears and Roebuck, allegedly because he was participating in the demonstrations. On Monday morning April 20, 50 protesters entered Sears, demanding that Talbert be rehired. Protesters scheduled a meeting with the store manager for Tuesday, April 21 at 4 p.m. but said that if Talbert were not rehired, Sears would be boycotted.

On Tuesday, April 21, the State Human Relations Commission announced that it was unable to resolve the differences between the School Board and civil rights groups. As a result the CFFN lifted the three-day moratorium on demonstrations that night.

On Wednesday, April 22, Chester School District Superintendent, Charles D. Long, announced that the Chester School Board had approved a measure to close Chester's 18 public schools immediately and indefinitely in order to prevent physical harm and violence. The decision affected 11,000 students and 500 teachers. Long said the schools would not reopen until there was a "return to normalcy." Over 183 demonstrators were arrested at protests that evening.

On April 24, the Chester School Board asked the Delaware County Court for an injunction that would ban demonstrations, intending to reopen schools on Monday, April 27. The School Board also asked the Court to determine whether de facto segregation existed in the Chester public schools. Also on April 24, 74 of the more than 200 protesters who were arrested that week, were held on \$1,000 bail each and were fined \$350 and assessed costs of \$18 each.

At the same time, it was reported that the FBI had opened an investigation of the arrest of two Philadelphia Bulletin reporters and the alleged beating of one of them by Chester police. One reporter, Timothy Tyler, had suffered a broken nose and bruised

ribs after having been beaten by several Chester police officers.

On the night of Friday, April 24, protesters marched into Chester, and shortly after midnight, they linked arms and blocked a busy downtown intersection. State police were called in to assist the Chester police force and 100 protesters were arrested, including the Rev. Clayton K. Hewitt, the rector of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Atonement in Morton, PA.

On April 25, The New York Times reported that James Farmer, national director of CORE, had classified Chester as the "Birmingham of the North" and that Delaware County Court Judge William Teal said the city was "approaching martial law." It was also reported that the Chester businessmen's association had asked Gov. William W. Scranton to intervene in this situation. The association cited loss of income as a result of the turmoil and the boycott. The Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Pennsylvania, Dr. Robert L. Dewitt, and the Dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Dr. Jeffrey Fordham, drove to Harrisburg at midnight during this time period and met with Gov. Scranton, urging him to intervene in the situation in Chester.

By this point, the list of CFFN demands had grown to include the hiring of African Americans for supervisory positions in the school system and the employment of more African American secretaries. Chester's one public high school was scheduled to reopen on Monday, April 27 and the other schools were to reopen the following day. The high school had 40% African American enrollment.

On Sunday, April 26, Gov. Scranton traveled to Philadelphia to meet with State Attorney General Alessandrone and both sides of the Chester school controversy. Branche remained in Chester and refused to travel to Philadelphia to meet with the Governor saying that the Governor should have come to Chester. That night, Branche announced demonstrations would resume the following day.

To counter the efforts of the CFFN and the NAACP, white residents of Chester formed the Chester Parents Association to preserve the neighborhood schools. On Sunday, April 26, 1964, 2,000 members of this organization gathered for a counter rally.

On Tuesday, April 28, Delaware County Court Judge John V. Diggins granted the injunction that the School Board requested, prohibiting civil rights advocates from demonstrating on or near public school property. Chester elementary schools reopened that day.

Around this time, a court granted an injunction that prevented the leaders of the campaign, including Branche and Savage, from interfering with the school system. Also, around this time and under orders from Governor Scranton, the Pennsylvania State Human Relations Commission announced that it would hold hearings on the de facto segregation in Chester schools. These hearings were scheduled to open on May 3. In preparation for the hearings, Branche and Savage announced on Wednesday, April 29, that there would be a seven-day moratorium on all demonstrations.

The state Human Relations Commission hearings opened as scheduled on Monday, May 4 at the Pennsylvania Military College in Chester. Initially, leaders of the desegregation campaign, including Branche and Savage, refused to testify before the Commission. They cited procedural oversights in the preparation of the Commission, which they felt would discredit and illegitimate any ruling it made. Upon entering the audience, Branche, Savage, and George T. Raymond, who was another leader in the campaign, were all subpoenaed to testify.

The 10-member Commission, which had three African Americans on it, opened by receiving reports from investigators it had sent into Chester. As reported in The New York Times on May 5, 1964, these reports concluded that there was "maintenance of all-one color schools, assignment of Negro teachers to all-Negro schools, inferior educational standards in nonwhite schools, failure to appoint Negroes to supervisory and administrative positions and gerrymandering of boundary lines defining school zones in order to perpetuate all-Negro schools" in Chester.

On Wednesday, May 6, 1964, School Board president Frances Donahoo testified before the Commission and dumbfounded the audience, press and even members of the Commission when she said that the Board had never discussed the issue of segregation in Chester's public schools because it did not want to hurt the feelings of the African Americans on the Board. Nathan Agran,

counsel for the Commission, responded by asking her, "Is this possible, with all that has been happening in the past months?"

On Thursday, May 7, CFFN took depositions from over a hundred people who were brutalized by local and state police during demonstrations. Branche said that these depositions would be contained in a forthcoming federal suit to be filed by Cecil B. Moore, president of the Philadelphia Chapter of the NAACP. At this point, state police were conducting their own internal investigation into possible police brutality during the demonstrations.

On May 22, 1964, Branche organized a demonstration in front of the State Capitol in Harrisburg to raise awareness about de facto segregation in Chester and police brutality. After one and a half days of protests and following a thirty-minute phone call with State Attorney General Alessandrone, Branche cancelled the demonstration, awaiting results from an investigation due to be released on Monday, May 25.

On Thursday, June 4, a Delaware County Grand Jury indicted 10 people for participating in the anti-segregation protests in Chester. The following day, the same Grand Jury indicted an additional 254 people. In response to these indictments, Branche announced that protests in Chester, which had been halted since May 5, would resume that night.

On July 25, 1964, The Philadelphia Tribune, an African American newspaper, published an editorial in which the paper urged the State Human Relations Commission to release its recommendations before the start of the coming school year.

The city of Chester had an ordinance requiring organizations to register with the city clerk before they distributed leaflets. On July 29, 1964, University of Pennsylvania Law School Professor Anthony Amsterdam filed a suit in a U.S. District court on behalf of CFFN, challenging this ordinance. He petitioned for an immediate injunction, restraining Chester police from arresting CFFN members for distributing leaflets.

In November of 1964, the State Human Relations Commission released its findings and concluded that the Chester School District "had committed and continues to commit unlawful discrimination practices in violation of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act." The Commission ordered Chester to submit a plan for the desegregation of six of the city's predominantly African American schools by Jan. 31, 1965. Chester appealed this ruling to Commonwealth Court, which delayed the city's response to it.

The Philadelphia Tribune reported on January 23, 1965, that CFFN petitioned the U.S. Commissioner on Civil Rights to have all federal aid to Chester schools stopped due to the school system's de facto segregation. Branche said he wanted the U.S. "Attorney General [to] file a civil suit compelling desegregation of the system." The petition also mentioned that CFFN was preparing formal complaints by Chester Public School students and parents alleging school segregation.

On Friday, January 26, 1965, four members of CFFN, including Branche, began a sit-in at Governor Scranton's office in Harrisburg. The group demanded that the Governor halt state funding of Chester schools because of continued segregation. The group also demanded that the Governor take action on police brutality against demonstrators in Chester. The four said that they would continue to sit-in until the governor took action on the conditions in Chester and said they were prepared to go to jail. The group, which included William Ellis, Jr. (coordinator for CFFN), Barry Wally, and Margo Doss, met with two assistants to the Governor on Friday afternoon.

During the week of November 15, 1965, federal officials announced a full-scale investigation into de facto segregation in Chester's public schools. Branche's earlier petition was the impetus for this investigation. This investigation had the ability to suspend all federal funding for Chester schools if it found discriminatory practices.

On Tuesday, February 15, 1966, in a controversial ruling, a Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court nullified the authority of the Human Relations Commission to rule in the area of de facto segregation in public schools. Branche said the ruling had "wiped out everything our organization has been working for during the past four years." Branche announced that, in response to the ruling, there would be a rally at Murphy's Church in Chester on Friday evening, February 18. He also announced that CFFN had joined with CORE in petitioning the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare to cut off federal aid to Chester public

schools because of violation of Title III of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

On February 22, 1966, the Philadelphia Tribune reported that, following a routine meeting of the Chester School Board, during which no measures were introduced to end segregation, CFFN, the NAACP and CORE announced that demonstrations would begin on February 28 if the School Board did not take any action. At this point, CFFN's demands had expanded to include that an African American be superintendent of Chester's School District or that two new assistant superintendent positions be created and one of them be filled by an African American. Branche announced that he would lead a boycott of Chester Public Schools starting Friday, April 1, 1966. He said that he had been requesting to meet with the School Board to come to a compromise but the School Board had made no offers to do so. Branche also said that the boycott would target local businesses in Chester as well if they did not endorse school desegregation.

On Wednesday, March 30, 1966, Barry Wally, CFFN chief lieutenant was distributing leaflets at Chester High School urging students to participate in the boycott. He was arrested around 3 p.m. and charged with being in interference with the operation of the school system. On Friday, April 1, 1966, most of Chester's African American students ignored Branche's call for a boycott and attended schools. The African American community did not boycott local merchants. Branche asked an African American high school student why he was not participating in the boycott. He responded, "Man, we need an education."

In the spring of 1967, Branche ran for mayor in the Democratic primary. He lost. By July of that year, the President of the Chester School Board was an African American, but no substantial changes in the school system had been implemented.

On September 26, 1967, after many appeals, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled in a 4-2 decision that the State Human Relations Commission had the authority to compel the Chester School Board to desegregate its schools. The Court ordered the Commission to set a new date by when the school district had to submit a desegregation plan.

On the night of October 2, 1967, the Chester School Board voted to "eliminate or substantially reduce" the racial imbalance of Chester's six predominantly African American public schools in the next school year. Charges against over 399 of those who had protested school segregation in 1963 and 1964 were maintained until 1971, but no one was brought to trial. On Wednesday, February 13, 1971, Delaware County Common Pleas Court Judge Francis J. Catonia threw out all charges against the protesters.

Research Notes

Influences:

The activists in Chester and the Swarthmore College Chapter of SDS were influenced by civil rights struggles in Cambridge, MD during the summer of 1962 (see "Cambridge, Maryland, activists campaign for desegregation, USA, 1962-1963")(1).

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Additional Notes:

Much information about this campaign can be found in November - December, 1963 issues of the Swarthmore College student newspaper, The Phoenix. Archives of this paper are at the Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA, U.S.A.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Carl E. Sigmond, 29/08/2011

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