

Interview with Nathan Spero

The UE and the Civil Rights Movement

(excerpted from The 1960s and 70s, Section 2)

J. Yeah. And that's a good distinction. I was looking at the literature in the Convention Proceedings in 1964 and it has a historical review of the UE and they had a lot of pictures--they showed "1964--the UE supported the March on Washington." And that was a really an important point for the Civil Rights Movement. And they had a UE sign that had a slogan: "No U.S. Dough to help Jim Crow Grow." And do you want to talk a bit about the UE participation in the Civil Rights Movement?

N. That march--I was made responsible by the Union to organize our contingents to the March. Now, A. Philip Randolph was the President of the Pullman Porters. He was the major figure in organizing it, and he was, tended to be hostile to so-called "red Unions". So we wondered how he would accept this. So, we sent a letter to A. Phillips Randolph telling him that the March was a great idea and enclosing a check for five hundred dollars. And we received a very cordial response from Randolph inviting us to participate in the March. Until we arranged throughout the country to have bus loads of people come down, and we did participate fully in that March. And as I say I was responsible for informing people, keeping in touch with them, calling them up and finding out what they were doing.

J. And did you get a good response throughout the Union?

N. Throughout the Union from all over the country, we had participation.

J. Like you say, the benefit of doing--having a part of your program all along. To be talking about race and discrimination--and the fruits of it show.

N. Absolutely.

J. I was interested to read that the UE also supported in 1965, with 64-65 the whole support for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And it must have been one of the few Unions that did that.

N. Yes. One of our lawyers, Bob Lewis, actually went down to Mississippi and helped them legally and, I'm trying to think whether at that time we had,--what's her name -- Fannie Lou Hamer--speaking at our convention and talk about the problems. So when we ran stories in the Union news--about the fight of blacks for representation. We did participate in all of these moments, and did it in a sincere, positive way. We contributed, we had people join in marches, we had leadership. It was part of our Union program.