

# FREE AT LAST

The Important News About the Boycott

by Agnes Woods



Freedom School Students

The most beautiful thing about the observance days on October 19, 20, and 21 was the Freedom Schools. The most frustrating thing — to the children seeking knowledge at these schools — was being turned away because the doors of the neighborhood churches and service centers were slammed in their faces. Although many volunteers showed up to help direct the youngsters to the places where they were being welcomed, many late-comers arrived only to find the doors of service centers and churches locked. Not knowing where else to go, they wandered off aimlessly.

While unrest dominated at Castlemont, the young people inside of the Freedom Schools were discussing why some people feel the need to rebel against authority. Why black people in America are not content to be second-class citizens. The kids got a chance to express themselves; they were not told they could not discuss those things. They started thinking for themselves; students and teachers

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both started to ask questions.

I know because I was a teacher assistant in a Freedom School and visited other Freedom Schools in the area. Our school had as many as one hundred kids on 55th Ave.; Fruitvale United Church of Christ had over 200; CORE headquarters had about 35 and the ILWU Hall educated about 55. North Oakland had from 200-400 students.

The students were spellbound while such topics as Negro history, Civil War history and labor history and Black Power were kicked around. Students came from the continuation schools. Dropouts were eager to learn. They discussed "What bugs you most in schools?" and "How to

keep your head from getting whipped." The young people listened, answered and asked; their minds were stimulated.

They went away and came again for more answers. They want to continue with this kind of enlightenment; they want Freedom schools all year round, after school or on Saturdays. They want to learn more about themselves and their ancestors. They want a chance to be heard.

People seem to be afraid whenever more than three black kids come together. They have no places where they can meet and just be together. Most of all, the children who attended the Freedom schools feel a need to meet again.

# THE KIDS TALK OUT

## But will Anyone listen ?

### First Hand Report on Freedom Schools

This is what I saw. I arrived at the first Freedom School in the morning and found students there talking about school and history. They spoke of how a Negro picked up a rock and led a group of white people to rebel against a king in 1776. And in 1966 a Negro is trying to improve our run-down school system and the same color white people are talking about trying to run him out of the country.

Another student talked about teachers: "They should get rid of those teachers that sit back and tell their class, 'I got mine and I'll get my pay check whether you learn or not.'" Another girl said "My teacher told me the same thing."

The instructor asked if they wanted any other changes. They all said yes — one student said "better lunches," another "free lunches," somebody else "also that they stop expelling kids for holding hands at school."

At this the instructor said, "Let's do some play acting. Pretend that you three girls and this one boy are parents and also the school board. And you two boys are to be the principals of two different schools. And you have been expelled for holding hands with this girl. You start out — how do you feel about it?"

The boy said "I don't think it's fair that I be put out of school for a little thing like that. I see nothing wrong with holding hands with a girl at school."

The student playing the principal answered, "Well boy! You can't go around holding hands;



Mrs. Smith

do that after school and off the school grounds. I don't care what you do after you get off the school grounds. When you hold hands in the passageways, you hold up traffic and make other people late to their classes. This we will not (pause) tolerate. Do you hear me?" With a serious look and furrows over his eyes, he pointed a finger at the other boy. "Do you hear me? I mean it."

One of the girls playing a parent: "I don't see anything wrong with holding hands — I don't see how that is so bad." A "school board member" shook her shoulders: "I don't see anything wrong either, but from what they did in the past they would more likely side with the teacher." After a few seconds she said real loud, "That's right. Put him out of

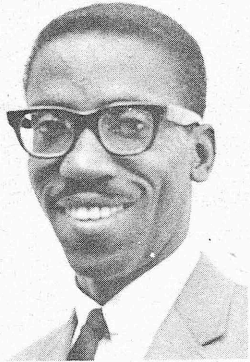
school until he learns better. This is not a school to come and learn how to make love and kissing and hugging and all that dirty stuff."

The boy answered, "But I was not trying anything like that. See, that is just how the white folks downtown take what you do and twist it around and make everything the black man does bad and dirty like he committed some big sin. All I did was hold this girl's hand. I never tried to kiss her; that's a lie."

The student playing principal said, "Shut up and don't say another word until I tell you to do so."

"Huh, I like that; she sit there lying on me and she knows it and him too, then when I open my mouth to defend myself she says

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# THE KIDS TALK OUT

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shut up."

The "principal" said: "I am not going to tell you again to shut up and stop using all those dirty words in front of your mother and these ladies. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You make you mother lose a day of work to come down here and then you

told, some were never told that great men like Ralph Bunche were black. If all the good the black man did and does came to light it would be a thousand times brighter than the sun.

They were telling the students they should be proud they were black and hold their heads high

him to this big department store. Guess what they did, put a broom in his hand. Who wants to be a janitor, anyway? While the white kids he went to school with were working upstairs as salesmen or clerks. These jerks kept him there until he went into the service."

the school board just started, do you?"

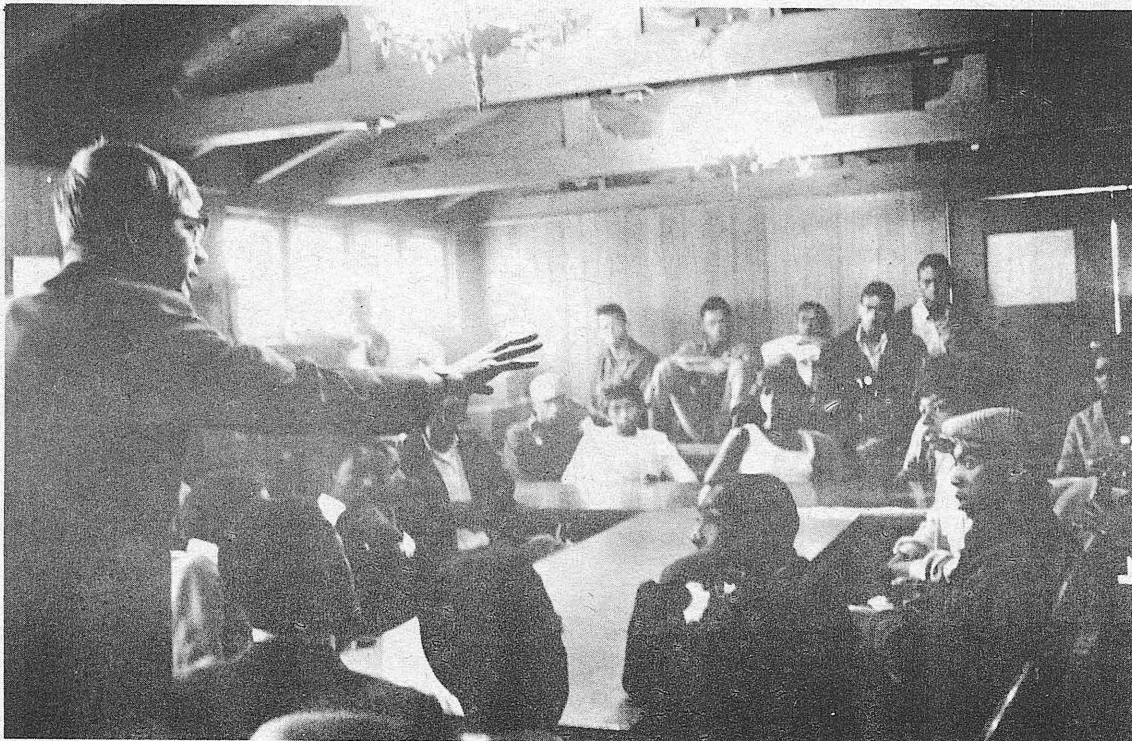
The instructor said, "Now let's move to the labor movement."

A boy: "At the beginning, tell us how the poor white people started strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations for fair pay from the rich employers. How they

pile, so when they come to us, they can truly say they have no more jobs."

Instructor: "What are you going to do about it?"

"Just like the poor white did in the beginning of the labor movement. Strike, boycott and demonstrate until we get equal



Rev. Copolungo speaks to Freedom School Students

act like a wild man." Turning to the "mother"—"You get him out of here and teach some respect so he can live with decent people and behave himself. After two weeks maybe he can come back to school."

"Two weeks! Two weeks for holding hands the first time?"

Again the instructor cut in: "Do they really expel you for two weeks when you hold hands?"

"Man, what you talking about? Those blue-eyed devils do that and sometimes more."

Another: "That's right, baby. I seen them do worse than that for less."

One girl said "Honey child, if you knew what they do and say at our school you wouldn't let you children go."

Another: "You know what my teacher told me just because I walked into class one minute late because I couldn't get my books out of that broken down locker? That if I couldn't get to her class with my books on time, to walk around with my damn books in my arms all the time!"

"And something else. That garbage that they make us pay 40 to 60 cents for ain't fit to eat."

"I got sick the first time I ate at school and had to say home for two days afterwards."

I got a call to serve as a monitor in a Freedom School in another area. This school was in a night club. Someone had called and said there were students in front of the school, but when I arrived, I didn't see any students out front. Going in I saw children sitting on folding chairs all over the dance area. Three or four students stood in the center talking.

They talked about how the history books were filled with the great things the white man had done, but left out all the great things Negroes had done for this country, even his picture—unless in some shack or as slave labor.

And that some white kids in small towns had never seen a Negro. That if the truth was

because it is just as much our world as it is the white man's.

To me these beautiful black children were just the victims of a modern time when their so-called leaders of city, state, etc., thought more of perfecting cars, airplanes and rockets than they do of upgrading public schools. Not to mention the present war—money that could be spent to improve the children's condition all around.

At the approach of noon, I left the club and went to a Freedom School in the part of town where I live. This one was in a church building. The kids were divided into three large discussion groups. In all groups here there were white children and instructors with Negro instructors also.

At no time did I see or hear of one incident of fighting or even pushing in any Freedom school.

The students at these schools were looking for something—some are disappointed and are still looking. Now it is up to the grownups to follow through and take care of business.

It is not enough just to pay our taxes; we must get up and see that they are spent to the best advantage. This attitude of let George do it must be done away with. It is our duty as citizens to see that procedures and plans are carried out. Standing shoulder to shoulder we can all be George and take care of business no matter what the job may be.

I was not a member of Ad Hoc but I intend to become one. My reason for going to the Freedom Schools was to see that the children were not led into trouble. After what I saw and heard, I know they were not.

The topic one group was discussing was employment tests. Instructor asked "What kind of job are you going to get; what would you like to do?"

The whole group was quiet and still. He asked one student, "Don't you want a job?"

"Sure, but not the kind they are going to give me. Look man, my brother passed his test at the Employment office and they sent

The instructor replied, "But you are different, right, and you are not just going to take anything they give you."

"No, I am not." Instructor: "You are going to go back to the employment office and demand to be sent out for the job that you applied for, right?"

The whole group answered, "Right."

"And if the window clerk doesn't agree you are going to demand to see her supervisor, right?"

"Right!" "And if he doesn't give you any satisfaction you are going to again demand a hearing by those

over him, right?" "Right!"

"And if they don't give, you are going to write to the mayor, your congressman, even the president, right?"

At this, some boys asked, "What good would that do? They don't care, they have it made."

The instructor answered, "But you are going to write anyway, right?"

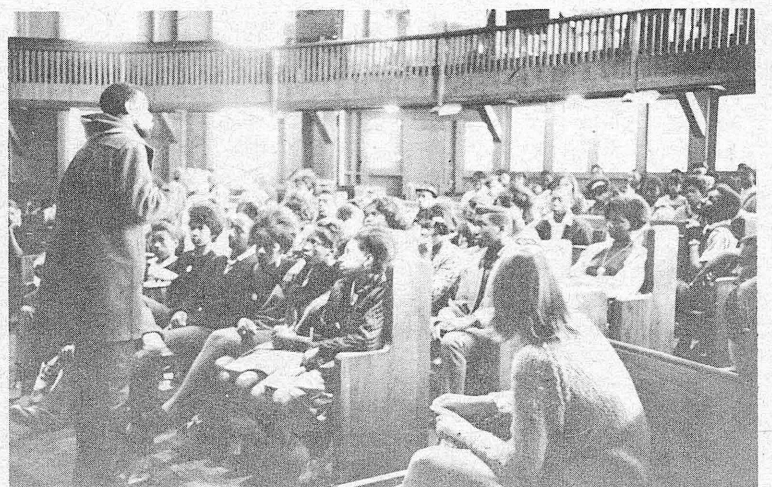
"Write!" "That's what I call action, that is taking care of business. Now what happens after you get the job?"

"New clothes," said one girl. "Food, man," said a boy. "A new car," said another. "A new house." "Freedom."

In another class, the instructor was saying, "Was that right or wrong?"

A boy standing next to the window answered, "Wrong. The white man had no business taking the Indian's land. He should have stayed on his boat until the Indians asked him to come live in their country. Just like the school board, they never ask us what we think or want. Every year they come up with something different and we have to take it and like it, without having anything to say about it."

Instructor: "Let's stick to history for now. You don't think



Elijah Turner teaching school

broke windows, closed shops, had sit-ins and caused some cities to come to a standstill. How the police, and the army came out and shot them down."

A girl: "And how the law put the leaders in jail. Some were even convicted of starting a riot when all they wanted was fair pay for their hard and long work."

A boy: "And how after a lot of money was spent the rich white finally took over the poor white unions. And saw to it that they keep the black men out, so they could have some cheap labor."

"Tell us how many are today still lily white. And how many have taken black men that come to less than 1% of total membership."

"Yeah, let's talk about how these unions have been taking the black man's application and putting them on the bottom of the

opportunities in jobs, pay, housing and schools."

Instructor: "What are you going to do when they call out the police and army?"

One boy said, "Die. I lost two of my brothers overseas, one in Korea and one in Vietnam. I might as well die here, trying to get equal jobs, housing and I guess schools too." I thought what a waste of life. What is the world coming to when children that have not yet begun to live feel that they have to die, see no future for themselves, only frustration and no destination.

Another boy: "My parents' parents and their parents before them have been begging and talking for all of these things for more than 100 — more than 100 years. And today they still don't have it."



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# WE DEMAND TO BE HEARD

ADDRESS TO THE OAKLAND  
BOARD OF EDUCATION

Agnes Woods

I am a parent whose children attended the Ad Hoc Committee on Quality Education's Freedom Schools, October 19, 20, and 21. I feel there is something radically wrong in the Oakland Police Department and the Oakland schools when things like last week's disruption took place.

As a parent, I feel I have the right to an alternative to a school system I feel is inadequate. An alternative like the Ad Hoc Freedom Schools. No one has mentioned the Freedom Schools or the conditions that already existed in the schools that caused the Ad Hoc Committee to be concerned in the first place. A teacher from Castlemont has already testified to this. People in the Flatlands are tired. They are tired of being passed over. They are tired of crowding more and more portables in flatland schools while hill area schools have empty classrooms. Only when the prospect of more money and opportunity and benefits for hill area schools became possible through ESEA money - did Oakland attempt to do anything about this long stagnant problem. This was one of the Ad Hoc Committee demands.

They were already fed up when little Brenda Griffin was locked in a clothes closet at Lafayette School according to the Chronicle, February 25, 1966 edition. She was locked in the closet and forgotten like an animal by a teacher who went home and was not discovered until 5 o'clock.

I think the Freedom Schools were a good example of what education can be like for our children. Students in the Freedom Schools were given an opportunity to express their feelings, and freedom to think for themselves. A chance to question the things that have been thrown at them. They expressed a desire to learn about their heritage. Contrary to popular belief, as taught in Oakland Public Schools, Africans have a culture so old it is buried deeper than the culture of the Europeans and has taken longer to dig up. Our children said they wanted to hear about their heritage and culture. There

were no riots in the Freedom Schools. The young adults were wonderful. They carried on their classes intelligently, they questioned what other students and teachers in the Ad Hoc Freedom school were saying and for the first time, some were able to make a choice for themselves. They abhorred the conditions in the schools that have long provoked dissatisfaction in the Oakland schools. They abhorred the violence. The Ad Hoc Committee for Quality Education did not provoke the trouble at Havenscourt last fall or the trouble at Frick or Fremont last semester - or the trouble at Fremont two weeks ago - nor the trouble provoked

by the police in the streets. The riots in the streets this past August and September were unreported in local newspapers

Ad Hoc cannot take responsibility for the conditions that existed before the observance day. The Ad Hoc Committee was protesting these very conditions.

We parents ask the Oakland Board of Education to listen to what the Ad Hoc Committee is demanding. We feel the board was negligent in ignoring the fact that the students were going to be kept out of Oakland Public Schools on October 19, 20, and 21. We in the Flatlands are saying we demand to be heard!

## An Open Letter to the School Board

Dear Sir:

My children will be returning to their classes in the Oakland school system only until such time as I am able to arrange for their education elsewhere in compliance with state laws.

I feel that I cannot condone the policy of the school board and their apathy in dealing with the segregation, crowded classrooms, and poor atmosphere for the students. Emphasis seems to be on discipline rather than on dealing with the poor educational system. It is impossible for children to become educated, that is to be able to think and to feel as if they are individuals and respected as such, in such a constricting system.

When I enrolled my two children in September, I was told that if a teacher gave one minute of class time to help each student she would not have time to lecture.

I am appalled that the teachers in making their demands to the school board, have made no mention of their classes of over 40 students, nor of the other ways in which they are hampered from fulfilling their duties.

The school board and the apathetic citizens are depriving the children of a good basic education. I express sympathy with those individual teachers and administrators who are caught in this system, are aware of the needs and powerless to act.

The answer to the problems facing the Oakland public school system is not more police protection, but a complete re-evaluation of the institute of public schooling. If steps are not taken immediately to correct the gross inadequacies and inequalities the institution of public schooling will further deteriorate.

Most sincerely,

(Mrs.) Mary P. Humphrey

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