

## **Racial Discrimination and Volunteer Fire Departments**

by Stavros Kilimitzoglou

A particularly bitter issue was the existence of all-white volunteer fire departments in many communities. In February, 1967, Newsday described how a single individual could "blackball" a prospective African American candidate, insuring the continued racial segregation of the departments.<sup>53</sup> In an April, 1967 article, Newsday reported that "the Hempstead Human Rights Commission charged that the volunteer fire department has not negotiated in good faith in meetings aimed at desegregating the all-white department. The Mayor Walter Ryan and village board members have said they favor getting Negroes on the fire department but do not have the power to compel it."<sup>54</sup>

The volunteer fire departments were also notorious for promoting racist ideas to justify their segregated membership policies. An editorial in the Hempstead Beacon protested against the attitude in many Long Island volunteer fire departments that African Americans were "dull, backward and not having the capacity to fulfill the requirements and the responsibilities of such a heavy job as is a policeman or a fireman."<sup>55</sup> Newsday quoted opponents of racial integration who argued that the departments could only admit "people with wits."<sup>56</sup>

### **Documents: Racial Discrimination and Volunteer Fire Departments**

#### Helpful Vocabulary

blackball- to exclude someone from membership because of a single negative vote.

#### **Plan Fire Department Integration Try, *Newsday, January 27, 1964***

Wyandanch--A Negro real estate agent who had previously charged the Wyandanch Fire Department with negligence and prejudice announced last night a drive to integrate the all-white department. The agent, James M. Ellison, who is also president of the Wyandanch Republican Club, announced the drive after meeting for an hour . . . with 10 other Negro residents of the predominantly Negro area. Ellison said that he was not interested in joining the department, but that the 10 men were and that two of them previously had been told there were not vacancies.

#### **LI Fire Officials Deny Department Bias, *Newsday, January 30, 1964***

Long Island fire department officials denied yesterday that they are refusing to admit Negro members. But civil rights leaders contend that discrimination exists and said they would work to have it ended. In a survey of 15 fire department officials throughout Long Island, all said their departments did not discriminate though none of the departments had a Negro member. Each of the chiefs said no Negro had ever applied to his department.

#### **Fireman Quits; Racial Dispute Called Cause, *Newsday, April 6, 1966***

Westbury--A veteran fireman resigned from the Westbury department yesterday, claiming he was forced out because he advocated the admission of Negroes. The fireman, Theodore P. Conlin, 37, of Westbury, said he had been given the silent treatment by his fellow firemen for about a year. Westbury Fire chief Frank DiGaetano said, however, that there was no discrimination in the all-white fire department and that no Negroes had ever applied for membership. Conlin has been a member of the 150-member Westbury Fire Department since Oct. 28, 1952. He has been active in civil rights movements on Long Island, has served as a treasurer of the Long Island Coordinating Committee for Civil Rights and has worked in other civil rights organizations. On June 13, 1965, he participated in a demonstration against the all-white Wyandanch Fire Department in Suffolk County. He said he began receiving the silent treatment from then on in his own fire department.

**Firemen's Unit Is Picketed By Rights Group, *Newsday, May 19, 1966***

East Norwich--A meeting of the Nassau Firemen's Association was picketed by about 15 civil rights demonstrators last night. Pickets began forming outside the East Norwich firehouse shortly after 8 p.m., greeting delegates to the Firemen's Association annual meeting with signs that said "Extinguish Racial Bigotry" and "Stamp Out Fires and Bias." They were led by Alvin Dorfman, chairman of the Long Island Coordinating Committee for Civil Rights. He said the demonstration was to call attention to discrimination against Negro volunteers by volunteer fire departments. "This is a problem statewide," said Ben Watford of Smithtown as he marched in the picket line. "I'm seeking to make the point that if I weren't black I could get into a fire department."

**LI CORE Chief Ousted From Village Meeting, *Newsday, January 18, 1967***

Hempstead--Police ousted the chairman of Long Island CORE from a turbulent village board meeting last night after he and other civil rights leaders exchanged charges and threats with the mayor over integration in the Hempstead Volunteer Fire Department. Mel Jackson, the chairman of the Long Island chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality, was escorted from the room by a policeman after he and Mayor Walter B. Ryan engaged in a shouting match and Jackson refused to sit down when ordered to by the mayor. Gerald Taylor, the state president of the NAACP Youth Division, then threatened to bring 400 people into the village to "tie up Hempstead in boycotts and demonstrations." Ryan challenged him to do so, and warned that any disorder would be put down with "guns, if we have to."

**Fault Firemen On Bias Talks, *Newsday, January 24, 1967***

Hempstead--The Hempstead Human Rights Commission charged yesterday that the volunteer fire department has not negotiated in good faith in meetings aimed at desegregating the all-white department. The commission said in a statement that the Fire Council, in meetings first with the commission and then with a special committee, "has shown disregard for the concerns and recommendations of the village leadership or what, in the opinion of many, is in the best interests of the village." Mayor Walter B. Ryan and village board members have said they favor getting Negroes' on the fire department, but do not have the power to compel it.

**Fire Departments And Discrimination - Beacon Editorial**

*Hempstead Beacon, February 8, 1967*

The Long Island volunteer fire departments and in the process the individuals who are members, are taking a wallop in the press and over the airways with the charge of discrimination. In view of the long and outstanding record of service performed by the volunteers in the service of the communities they serve, it is surprising that so few have come to their defense. The writer has been a volunteer fireman and company officer and knows something of how the vamps function. The critics may have some grounds for criticism of membership application practices but they have failed to produce any evidence of a positive incident where a person was denied membership on the grounds of race, creed, or origin. The truth is that many men from minority groups have won the right to wear the blue uniform of a volunteer. The County commission in its report only discussed Negroes and failed to mention any other minority groups.

We feel the protesters do the community a disservice when they attack the volunteer fire department organization because they are not sincere candidates for membership. We also feel that the volunteer fire departments need some self appraisal, should take their collective heads out of a basket, and look to what is in their immediate future. Threats of economic reprisals against community business people to blackjack (threaten) the community are not the solution. The long record of dedication and service by our volunteers, in some cases for more than a century, deserves better treatment.

**Hempstead Vamps May End Blackball**, *Newsday*, February 16, 1967

Hempstead--The Hempstead Volunteer Fire department, which has been the target of a heated integration campaign, is considering proposed changes in its membership selection procedures which include abandoning the much criticized blackball system.

A four-point set of recommendations, now under consideration by the membership of the 10 individual companies of the fire department, was agreed upon in recent negotiations between a committee representing the fire department and a special citizens committee named by the village administration to discuss the problem of integration of the all-white fire department. There is no specific mention in the proposed changes of inducting a Negro into the department. Civil Rights leaders, who have been conducting demonstrations urging integration of the department, said last night they felt the proposed changes in membership procedures meant little unless a specific commitment was made to take in Negro firemen.

The blackball system, which allows one or a few members of a company to reject an applicant for membership, was among fire department membership practices criticized recently in a Nassau Human Rights Commission report as secretive and subjective.

**Questions:**

- 1- Why did civil rights activists protest against the membership practices of volunteer fire departments?
- 2- How did fire department officials explain why they had no African American members?
- 3- Was there evidence of racial discrimination by volunteer fire departments? Explain your answer.
- 4- How did the "blackball" system work?
- 5- Write a "Letter to the Editor" responding to the Hempstead Beacon editorial of Feb. 8, 1967.