

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

OFFICE FOR EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

OFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. B. F. Ashe

DATE: June 7, 1943

FROM: Marvin Cox *MC*

SUBJECT:

The acuteness of the Mobile racial situation impels me to ask that the public relations representatives of the Government agencies concerned with the Alabama Dry Docks, meet with me in Mobile tonight to map out a public information program to meet this situation.

If you can have your regional information representative on hand, it will be most helpful.



616 First National Annex
Mobile, Alabama
June 7, 1943



REPORT ON THE SITUATION AT ALABAMA DRY DOCK AND SHIPBUILDING COMPANY

In order that the Regional Office may be in a position to understand and appreciate the situation at the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company, I am presenting this complete report, in which I am including a considerable amount of the background which led up to the disturbance on Tuesday, May 25. What actually happened must be viewed against the background in which there are several factors of significance. In the first place, the racial situation in Mobile has been tense for some months. The efforts of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice to enforce absolute non-discrimination between white and black races have intensified the resistance of many white workers to such a policy. The sweeping orders which were issued to the shipyards of this Area have further intensified this feeling on the part of not only white workers, but a great many persons in Mobile and other parts of the South who feel that such a policy is not applicable to the social structure existing in this Area.

In the second place, the Management of the company is distinctly what must be designated as backward, insofar as its labor policies are concerned. Apparently, company officials feel that a simple announcement that a certain policy is to be followed is an adequate explanation to its employees. The company has no adequate labor management or personnel department, and such personnel work as is done is under the supervision of an industrial relations manager whose background consists largely in coaching in small, sectarian colleges. Being without any real authority to determine and administer labor policies of the company, he has often been forced into the position of making promises which he could not later fulfill. This has resulted in public criticism by workers, and the application of the designation "an expert in the 'old run-around'".

As examples of the failure of this company to properly acquaint its employees with labor policies, may I revert back to the famous ferry dispute of late last year, in which arrangements were made to change from the free ferry to a pay ferry without any notices being posted or any explanations being given. Just before the change-

over was made, one sign was posted, saying, "This is no longer an entrance, but an exit", and no specific directions were given as to where the new entrance was to be. Of course, any intelligent person could have looked around and found the new entrance. A group of workers, however, who were disgruntled at the idea of the establishment of the pay ferry, could not be expected to exert themselves to find the new entrance.

At the hearings which were held by the Maritime Commission here in Mobile, the company was severely criticized for its failure to properly inform the employees in regard to the new arrangement. Both the Maritime Commission and the company failed to convey to the workers at the shipyard the reasons why the free ferry had to be abandoned, and apparently were quite content to let the City of Mobile shoulder the blame for establishing the pay ferry. The City of Mobile, however, merely accepted the contract from the Maritime Commission to operate the ferry as a matter of assistance to the war effort. The City of Mobile was quite willing and did relinquish the ferry contract when it was given the opportunity to do so. Nevertheless, the City was allowed to take all of the blame for the inadequate ferry service which was provided when the pay ferry was first inaugurated. It is the considered judgment of this office that an intelligent campaign of education would have avoided the ferry walk-out.

Later, the company has had some difficulty with its women employees in regard to the matter of dress. Under the guise of a safety regulation, the company did publish in the weekly magazine an announcement that, effective at a certain date, all women would be required to wear a certain prescribed uniform as being safe dress. The same safety regulations were not applied to male employees of the company. The result of this arbitrary announcement of policy was a great deal of dissatisfaction and the refusal of a number of women to wear the prescribed uniform.

In the present instance, the decision to place welders on certain ships on the third shift was conveyed to union representatives on Thursday, May 20. The policy was inaugurated on the night of Monday, May 24. Obviously, no adequate opportunity for the union representatives to explain this policy to their members was given.

The instances just mentioned are three major occasions when the failure of the company to properly inform its employees regarding its policies have resulted in serious difficulties. In addition, I may say that the yard is constantly filled with rumors about this, that, and the other thing, with no clear-cut statements ever coming out from responsible company officials.

A third factor of importance is that a very large percentage of the employees of this company are former farmers and small-town residents from country areas of Alabama and Mississippi. These people are thoroughly infiltrated with racial prejudice, and a great many of them are not overly intelligent. They represent a group which is easily excited to violent action, and when once excited, are extremely hard to control.

In connection with this factor, it must be noted that the company guard force, consisting of some 165 men, is poorly organized and almost wholly untrained. Salaries paid guards are below those paid in other shipyards of the Area, and the result has been that men have been placed on guard positions largely because they had no skills which qualified them for craft work in the yard. In appearance, many of them are slovenly, and they certainly appear at a great disadvantage as compared to some of the guard forces employed in other establishments in this Area. Also, it should be noted that a great many of them are old, and really not physically qualified to perform the duties which, in emergencies, a well-trained plant guard should be prepared to perform. In addition, I must add that they represent, in some part at least, the same type of people, and come from the same country areas as many of the other employees of the yard.

Some months ago, representatives of the union took up with the management the idea of setting aside one or more ways to be manned by negro workers. At the time of the visit of Dr. Ashe, Mr. Estell, and Mr. Coffin, this matter was broached by Mr. Griser, the Vice President of the yard. As I recall the conversation, Dr. Ashe told Mr. Griser he thought he had a good idea there, and the War Manpower Commission would be glad to cooperate with the yard in developing it. Mr. Griser conducted our party through the yard, and took occasion to point out the ways which could be utilized in connection with the Plan. The impression was, as I am sure Dr. Ashe will recall, that the management was considering the proposition and was favorably inclined toward it. Even Mr. Daly, the Industrial Relations Manager, with whom I spent most of the time on the trip, explained at some length how the plan could be worked out for utilizing the negro workers on these ways.

Shortly after this visit, representatives of the union called at this office and suggested that the War Manpower Commission arrange to discuss with the management and the union the proposal, and to develop the necessary plan for training which would be required. A conference was held, in which Mr. Yingling of the Vocational Education group; Mr. Teat, representing the yard; Mr. Bouche, representing the union; and Mr. John Broxson, representing this office participated. A proposal in regard to training was developed. On May 3 I submitted this proposal to Mr. John Griser, Vice President and General Manager of the yard, in a letter which stated clearly that while the War Manpower Commission was not urging that the proposal be adopted, it was in a position to cooperate with the yard, should the management decide to set aside these ways for negro workers.

On May 20, after waiting for a reply from the yard and receiving none, and also after having been queried several times by the union, I again wrote to Mr. Griser and asked him whether or not the company had come to a decision. On May 24, the morning of the day on which the new policy was to be inaugurated, I received a one-sentence letter over Mr. B. C. Knerr's signature, stating that the company took pleasure in informing me that, effective on the third shift of the 24th, negro welders were being placed on ways one, two, three, and four. On Wednesday morning, May 26, the day after the disturbance in the yard,

Mr. Griser called me and wanted to know what we could do to help them in bringing the disturbance to an end. He stated that they had inaugurated the new policy as a result of the suggestions we had made. I told Mr. Griser at that time that I had in no way interpreted Mr. Knerr's letter as a reply to my letters of May 3 or May 20.

As a result of this conversation, I immediately wrote the yard and informed them that this office did not regard the proposal which was established on May 24 as being in any way connected with the proposition which we had taken up with them, as indicated by my letter of May 3. It is the position of this office that the letter of May 3 still remains unanswered by the yard. In any event, I hope that this office would not have been so stupid as to inaugurate without any preparation and planning a policy such as that outlined in our letter or such as that put into effect on the 24th by the yard.

Twelve colored welders went to work on the third shift on the night of the 24th. These men worked the complete shift without molestation, checked out, and went home the next morning. Approximately one hour and a half after the regular first shift came on duty on the morning of the 25th, agitation to "run the negroes out of the yard" began. Inflammatory speeches were made at various points in the yard by white workers without interference by company guards. After the riot was allowed to develop without interference, it was obviously almost impossible to quell it. Practically all of the negro employees of the yard, consisting largely of laborers and helpers, were driven off the yard by rioting workmen, and those who were driven off were escorted to safety by members of the naval detachment which is stationed on the northern part of the Island. A little later, members of the Home Guard, and still later, a detachment of troops from Brookley Field took complete control of the situation and all violence ceased. Negro employees of the yard were told that it would be well for them to remain away from work until the matter had cooled down and something had been settled.

On Wednesday, May 26, even with troops in control, there were one or two instances of minor violence in isolated parts of the yard. About the middle of the morning of the 26th a large proportion of the welders, burners, and heaters in the yard staged an unauthorized walk-out. This walk-out practically paralyzed the ship construction in the yard. The repair division of the yard continued to operate with a fair amount of effectiveness. The situation which developed Wednesday was continued almost unchanged through Thursday.

On Thursday afternoon the union wired the management requesting a conference of all parties concerned in the dispute. Such a conference was arranged under the auspices of Captain Graham of the Maritime Commission and Commander Wright of the United States Navy.

The conference convened in the Admiral Semmes Hotel at 9:00 Thursday evening. The union had requested in its telegram that the press be present. Captain Graham refused for a time to admit the representatives. Finally, after fifty-five minutes of argument, Captain Graham compromised by allowing the press to sit in, with the understanding that they would print only what was released.

It quickly developed that all members of the conference felt that the situation was serious, and that a well-organized attempt had been made to incite the white workers to violence. It was the general consensus of opinion among those present that this well-organized work was very probably due to Axis agents. With this opinion, I have been later informed, the FBI does not concur. At the conference, representatives of the yard stated that they had no intimation of trouble, and had taken no precautions to meet trouble. How such a statement could have been made by people in responsible posts who must have known the tense situation in Mobile, is beyond my comprehension.

The net result of the conference Thursday night was the appointment of two committees, one to deal with various law enforcement agencies, looking toward a thorough investigation of activities of possible Axis agents in the yard, and the development of better civil authority protection. The revamping of the plant guard force was also a responsibility of this sub-committee. The other committee was composed of representatives of the yard, the union, the Maritime Commission, and the War Manpower Commission.

The sub-committee charged with the responsibility of finding a solution of the difficulty met continuously all day Friday at the offices of the company on Pinto Island. On Friday afternoon, the committee was augmented by the addition of two members of the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice. Late Friday afternoon, all members of the Committee agreed on a plan which had been submitted by officials of the company. This plan, a copy of which is attached to this report, is in the judgment of this office, substantially that proposed by us on May 3. There is one significant difference. It is proposed, upon approval of the Plan by the Maritime Commission, to immediately call a mass meeting of all employees of the yard, and to explain the Plan completely and in detail to them. This means a somewhat more rapid introduction of the Plan than, under normal conditions, would be desirable. However, it is my judgment that, due to the disturbance which has been created, the procedure to be followed is the only practical thing that can be done.

Immediately after the Plan had been developed, the Committee issued a signed statement to the press, calling on all loyal American workers to return to the yard and await the announcement of the Plan before taking any further action.

Immediately after the unauthorized walk-out of white workers on the morning of the 26th, this office instructed the Employment Service not to make any referrals or clearances of workers out of the Alabama Drydock yard. We informed officials of the company that we would not release any workers until the dispute had been settled, or until the seven-day limitation ran out. Acting entirely without instructions from this office, some officials of the company apparently instructed their foremen to refuse to give termination slips to workers who desired to quit. This action on the part of the company constitutes a violation of the Stabilization Agreement and was entirely without authorization of this office. As soon as I was informed of the action being taken, I

wired the company that it must not refuse to give a Certificate of Separation, and that this office and the Employment Service would assume the responsibility of refusing the release of workers who appeared and requested referral to other industry.

The company was also informed that we would refuse to refer any workers who admitted or were proven to have been engaged in the riot. As a result of this latter statement, a number of workers have appeared at the Employment Service, bearing Certificates of Separation on which the company had endorsed the statement, either "inciting to riot", "took part in rioting", or similar phrases. Those workers who have admitted the truth of the statement have been refused referrals to war-connected industries. On the other hand, in several cases, workers have appeared at the Employment Service and stated that they were falsely accused of being involved in the riot. I have told the company that to charge a worker with being involved in a riot is a serious charge, and that extreme care should be used to be certain that the statement is true before it is placed on the Separation Certificate. We shall be very careful to investigate these cases before we finally refuse to refer a worker to any other war-connected industry. In view of the fact that the yard's records are often inadequate and inaccurate, as evidenced by its two years' series of difficulties with Selective Service, I have requested the company to put in writing all statements bearing on the clearance of workers from the company.

After the adjournment of the conference on the evening of May 28, both Captain Graham, the Maritime representative, and Lieutenant Commander Wright, Industrial Relations Officer of the Navy, departed from the City. On Monday morning, May 31, a very considerable number of the workers in the yard, both colored and white, returned to work. In spite of the good turn-out from the standpoint of total numbers, it was significant that a large number of welders did not return to work.

On Tuesday morning, after everything remained quiet, this office removed the temporary emergency provision, which had been established and began operations under the Stabilization Plan. From this time on, very few workers appeared asking for releases.

In the meantime, the public interest in the situation resulted in numerous calls to this office from the press. I understand that the Regional Office in Atlanta was similarly besieged with requests for information about the Plan. This office tried repeatedly by telegram and telephone to get in contact with Captain Graham of the Maritime Commission. In spite of these efforts, I was not able to get in touch with him until late Thursday evening, June 3. He, at that time, informed me that the Conference Committee would meet again in the shipyard on Friday morning at 10:00 o'clock. In the meantime, the Regional Office had released through OWI a statement in regard to the Plan, which was regarded by the Maritime representative as having been a betrayal of the secrecy which had surrounded the Conference Committee. It appears to me, however, that the Maritime representative has unduly insisted upon this item of secrecy. The Regional Office dispatch gave only the

fundamental principles of the Plan, which anyone with any intelligence could have figured out in advance anyway. It is the considered judgment of this office that this news release did not do nearly so much damage as some of the military men connected with the conference insist. If the representative of the Maritime Commission had remained here in Mobile, and if approval of the Plan had been secured promptly, as in fact, I am inclined to think it was, the promised mass meeting could have been held not later than Wednesday, June 2, and then all would have been clear.

The Planning Committee met again on Friday morning on call of Captain Graham. At the opening of the meeting, Captain Graham took some fifteen minutes to explain that all deliberations of the Committee must be kept highly secret. Without making any references by name, he certainly made it clear that certain members of the conference had betrayed its confidential nature. This I strongly resented, but remained silent in the interest of harmony. After almost a whole day of discussion, which accomplished only the formulation of an insipid press release which was published in the papers of the 5th, the Committee adjourned to meet on call of its self-appointed chairman, Captain Graham.

In the discussions during the day, it developed that it was the opinion of law-enforcement officers, and probably of the members of the conference, that a mass meeting would not be unwise. A good deal of discussion turned on the point of how the Plan could be conveyed to the workers through conference committees from the various departments of the plant. Commander Wright of the Navy suggested that the company employ an expert in public relations to do the job. I understand that a call was placed to Industrial Relations Counselors during the day. Company officials also stated that they were employing representatives of a firm of industrial engineers to help them with some of their internal plant problems.

Just after the conference adjourned, the news released from Washington and Atlanta hit the papers. I got first information from the Press Register, and later, through a call from the Deputy Regional Director. I immediately called the yard and informed Lieutenant Commander Wright of the Navy what had happened. I stated to him that the news releases carried almost all of the details of the Plan. I suggested that in view of this fact, the Conference Committee should be called together, and the complete Plan released. Commander Wright stated that he would discuss this matter with Captain Graham and yard officials, and contact me later.

I was compelled to leave Mobile and go to Pensacola to conduct an appeals hearing. On this trip I was accompanied by Mr. John Bouche and Mr. Charles Hansen, the representatives of the union. While in Pensacola, we received several long-distance calls from Mobile which were made in an effort to secure the release of the Plan. The union officials and myself both agreed that the Plan should be released. We informed Mr. George Toulmin, Assistant Director, to communicate this information to such other members of the Committee as might be found. In order that the newspaper would be able to print the Plan in the early morning edition,

and at the specific request of the paper, I directed Mr. Toulmin to place the Plan in a sealed envelope with the notation thereon, "Not to be used unless officially released by the Committee". When company officials declined to give their consent, and when all efforts to reach Captain Graham, who had again left town promptly, failed, the newspaper returned the Plan to this office in the envelope in which it was sent.

On my return to Mobile, I received a call from Lieutenant Commander Wright early Saturday morning, and was severely criticized for having given the Plan to the papers, although it was in confidence and although it was not revealed. Commander Wright, while not a member of the Committee, sat in on several of the sessions and apparently was included within the inner circle of secrecy. He stated that the Navy would take a strong interest in the violation of confidences of the Committee and that he intended to make an official report upon the action taken by this office. As matters now stand, the essence of the Plan has been repeatedly revealed to the public, and the only thing secret is the actual Plan itself. The psychological effect, however, of the failure of the Conference Committee to release the Plan is that a number of people think perhaps there is a joker in it somewhere, and hence, we are afraid to publish it. It is my considered opinion that it would have been an excellent piece of psychology to have released the Plan in the papers of this Sunday in order that everyone could see that the news release covered the Plan in full, and that there were no hidden jokers involved.

It is the position of this office that the so-called Planning Committee has now really completed its function, and should be immediately dissolved after the Plan is released to the Press. The installation of the Plan should be left to the officials of the company and the representatives of the collective bargaining agency involved. The representatives of the Maritime Commission and the Navy might well stand by to offer assistance and advice, as should the representative of the War Manpower Commission. The War Manpower Commission is perhaps more deeply involved than either of the others, inasmuch as a great deal of training work will have to be done before a sufficient supply of negro craftsmen can be developed.

In conclusion I would like to draw attention to a number of significant factors which are deeply involved in this whole problem.

1. The idea of using certain ways for negro workers was first presented by the union.
2. It was first presented to the War Manpower Commission by Mr. John Griser of the shipyard.
3. Officials of the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company have not to this moment replied to the suggestions made in the letter of May 3 from this office.
4. The plan to suddenly introduce negro welders was discussed by the yard with the Maritime Commission and apparently noone else. Responsibility for the precipitant action should therefore rest squarely on the company and on Captain Graham of the Maritime Commission.

5. Throughout the negotiations, for the purpose of settling the difficulty, the representative of the Maritime Commission and the representative of the Navy have played closely with officials of the yard and have failed to include the representatives of the union and of the War Manpower Commission in the discussions until Captain Graham was ready to call a meeting of the Planning Committee.

6. The attitude of the Maritime Commission representative and of the Navy representative, in their insistence upon secrecy, has been, in the judgment of this office, unwise. Captain Graham, upon one occasion, clearly stated that he did not think the public had any business to know about these things until we were ready to release them. It was repeatedly stated in the conference that the newspapers wanted news in order to sell newspapers, and that they shouldn't be given anything until we were ready to give it to them. Apparently both of the gentlemen involved failed to realize that the public has a very real stake in an industrial disturbance of the character of that which took place at the Alabama Dry Docks. It is not merely an industrial dispute; it is a racial question which might easily involve the whole community.

7. Finally, this office has observed throughout the dispute that the leaders of the union have demonstrated a cooperative attitude and have striven honestly and earnestly to assist governmental agencies in bringing the situation to a settled and peaceful conclusion.

This report covers the situation up through Sunday, June 6,

1943.

Burton R. Morley
Area Director
War Manpower Commission

July 8, 1943

Monseignor Francis J. Haas, Chairman of the reorganized Fair Employment Practices Committee yesterday gave out the resolution of the committee:

The committee accepts the accomplished fact of the settlement made at Mobile to end a crises in war production, except that the committee cannot give its approval to the complete segregation of Negroes' four ways and does not consider that as a precedent.