

## GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES FAST DAY

An undertaking of which I am especially proud was the June 14, 1968 Government Employees Fast Day. I had intended to write what I remembered about it as part of my memoirs. But then looking through my files, I found a folder with material from the event, so, instead of trying to describe what happened from memory, I am able to quote from the documents themselves.

(After I wrote most of this, I found another folder with even more material. It contained copies of the news stories which were not part of the first folder, an analysis of hunger and malnutrition in America, position papers drafted by supporters of the Poor People's Campaign (worthy of a separate memoir), the manual for the June 19 Solidarity Day March, letters, news releases, a statement of collections and disbursements of the funds raised (also worthy of a separate memo)—everything. I suspect if I had this folder as well, I would have been overwhelmed and would not have been able to write what I wrote below. Maybe it is sometimes better to rely on memory alone, or else, write it with all of the material, and do one hell of an edit.)

Looking over the (first) file, I find it hard to believe that we were able to pull this off. The planning began on May 22, and the event took place a little more than three weeks later. I served as chairman, and my boss at the US Civil Rights Commission, Sam Simmons, was treasurer. The following are my (handwritten) opening remarks at the event, which was held at the reflecting pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial:

“Three weeks ago, four government employees went to lunch. They had watched a TV program about hunger in America the night before, and were deeply moved by it, as I am sure many of you were. For some weeks before, they had been following the developments of the Poor People's Campaign, and they were also moved by the terrible truth of hunger and malnutrition, poverty and prejudice, being described by the participants.

“What can we do about it? We don't pull much weight in our agencies. How can a bunch of GS 5s, and GS 11s show their concern in a meaningful way? From this noon-time meeting of Bill Payne, Marci Campbell, Natalie Proctor and Barry Strejcek came the idea for this Fast Day. There are many others like us: government employees who are concerned about the millions trapped in the ghettos and barrios; trying to eke out a living as sharecroppers or tenant farmers; wasting away in Appalachia; children with swollen bellies; black mothers old before their time; 30 million Americans in poverty; 10 million Americans living in chronic hunger.

“They are our brothers and sisters. We care and we know that there are other government workers who care. The way things get done, in and out of government, is to call a meeting. And that is what we did. And from that meeting came an idea, and a leaflet—in fact 50,000 leaflets--paid for by the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees. The word was spread to other like-minded government workers: A lunch-

fast on June 14. Contribute your lunch money to the Fast Day Committee for the Poor People's Campaign. Come together. Pay witness. Show your solidarity with the poor.

“There were those who said government workers only care about themselves. Others said government workers are afraid to speak out. They would jeopardize their positions if they identified themselves with the Poor People's Campaign. Didn't the Civil Service Commission say 'bulletin boards and other agency facilities should not be used in any way to promote the Poor People's March or any other similar event'?”

“Yet despite these Nervous Nellies, the Fast Day Committee in three weeks and with a handful of volunteers, raised thousands of dollars and called you to join us in this symbolic act of fasting, to identify with the hungry, And here we are! Dr. King reminded us that nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come. The time has now come for America to recognize that we can no longer permit hunger in our land. No one must be made to suffer the indignity of poverty...”

Not a great speech, but it got things going. I then introduced a speaker to describe the June 19, Solidarity March, then Congressman Don Edwards, then our treasurer, Sam Simmons, and finally, accepting the money that we had raised for the Poor People's Campaign, Jesse Jackson. Hardly anyone knew him then, but he spoke very movingly. We raised over \$10,000, and more than 2,000 people attended the rally. We had folk singer Archie Steward at the beginning of the program and labor's troubadour Joe Glazer, at the end. The rally received good coverage by the media.

Among my papers, is a memo I wrote to the Civil Rights Commission's Staff Director, and later, circulated more broadly, dated July 1, 1968, describing the undertaking: Following the May 22 lunch, 15 people met that evening to work out the details for a Fast Day. A second meeting was held May 24, to involve other agencies and to draft a leaflet, and a third meeting was held May 28, to elect officers, establish committees and approve the text of the leaflet. We met with the leadership of the Poor People's Campaign on June 2, held a news conference on June 3, and distributed the 50,000 leaflets to more than 75 volunteers that evening, who handed out the leaflets at their agencies over the next week and a half. We opened a post office box and a bank account in the name of the Government Employees Fast Day Committee, got a permit to solicit funds and canisters for the volunteers, and obtained permission to hold the rally. The logistics were daunting. I concluded the memo with the observation that this was the first solid movement by Government employees who, heretofore had remained anonymous, to come forward and identify with an important moral issue.

(The clips in the second folder were comprehensive and impressive. I had forgotten the great press coverage that we received. The Washington Post, Star, Daily News and Federal Times all picked up our June 3rd news release announcing the Fast Day and featured the stories prominently. Their headlines: “One Meal Fast Set to Aid Poor” (Post). “Skip Lunch and Give Money to Poor US Workers Urged (Star). Just as important, the articles gave the mailing address for contributions. There were stories June 13 and 14 prior to the rally, and June 14 in the Evening Star, and June 15 in the

Post, following the rally. The Washington Post story by Federal Diary writer Mike Causey, headlined “Lunch-Hour Fast. Memorial Rally Net Cash for Poor” noted: “Because most of the participants were on a tight schedule, the Government Employees Fast Day lasted less than 45 minutes. Songs, speeches and ever-circulating donation canisters kept the crowd busy and apparently happy. Chairman Jacob Schlitt, who thought up the Fast Day during a real lunch last week, pronounced it a success.” Somewhat snide and inaccurate, but Causey spelled my name correctly. I had my 15 minutes of fame.)

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