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Montgomery Improvement Association Press
Release, Bus Protesters Call Southern Negro
Leaders Conference on Transportation
and Nonviolent Integration

7 January 1957
Montgomery, Ala.

Reacting to southern racial violence, King, C. K. Steele, and Fred L. Shuttlesworth issue an "urgent plea" for a conference of southern black leaders to be held at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King's father was pastor.¹ The three activist ministers had been recent targets of intimidation, including a shotgun attack on King's home on 23 December 1956, the bombing of Shuttlesworth's parsonage two days later, and a cross burning in front of Steele's church and home on 3 January 1957.²

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Bus Protesters call Southern Negro Leaders Conference on transportation and non-violent integration. . . .
KING, STEELE AND SHUTTLESWORTH ISSUE URGENT PLEA . . .

In an effort to coordinate and spur the campaign for integrated transportation in the South, a conference has been called for January 10th and 11th in Atlanta, Georgia.

The emergency conference call was issued by Rev. M. King, Jr. of Montgomery, Rev. C. K. Steele of Tallahassee and Rev. F. L. Shuttlesworth of Birmingham. Negro leaders from troubled areas all over the South are expected to attend to share thinking, to discuss common problems, to devise a unified strategy and to plan mutual economic assistance.

A. Philip Randolph, a vice-president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and International President of The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters will deliver one of the opening addresses. Mr. Randolph of New York, Dean of Negro leaders, will attend the conference as a fraternal representative from the North.³

1. This meeting laid the foundation for the group that would become the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the organization King led until his death. Steele was pastor of Tallahassee's Bethel Baptist Church and president of the Inter-Civic Council, founded to direct that city's bus integration movement. Shuttlesworth, pastor of Birmingham's Bethel Baptist Church, founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and spearheaded the civil rights movement in Birmingham. Both Steele and Shuttlesworth had joined King at civil rights meetings during 1956.

2. See "New Fields Await Negroes, King Tells Mass Meeting," 24 December 1956, in *Papers* 3:494-495, and "Burn Cross on Minister's Lawn," *Chicago Defender*, 5 January 1957.

3. Randolph was unable to attend because of a previously scheduled meeting with the Railway Labor Executives' Association (Randolph to Stanley D. Levison, 4 January 1957).

Rev. King will open the conference by presenting eight working papers.⁴ These will include such subjects as:

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- (1) Dealing with violence directed toward the Negro communities.
- (2) The role of law in the struggle.
- (3) A unified strategy in the campaign for integrated buses.
- (4) Economic sharing.
- (5) Dedication to non-violence.
- (6) The relation of registration and voting to all efforts for justice.

In their call, the Negro leaders said:

“We are convinced that most white southerners are prepared to accept integration as the law of the land. On the other hand, a small but willful minority, dedicated to violence is resorting to threats, shootings, cross burning and bombings.

“In this manner, they seek to intimidate Negroes and to frustrate our highest laws. They believe we will retreat from the realization of democracy for all.

“This conference is called because we have no moral choice, before God, but to delve deeper into the struggle—and to do so with greater reliance on non-violence and with greater unity, coordination, sharing and Christian understanding.”

The leaders announced that the conference will convene at 2 P.M. at The Ebenezer Baptist Church, 407 Auburn Avenue, Atlanta, Georgia. The two-day working session will be closed to the public. However, following the consultations, a public statement to the nation will be issued.⁵ A press conference will be held at the end of the last session, Friday evening, January 11th.

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4. The conference was structured around seven working papers drafted by Bayard Rustin, a veteran pacifist and advisor to King during the Montgomery bus boycott (see Southern Negro Leaders Conference, Working Papers 1-7, 10 January-11 January 1957). Rustin collaborated on these documents with Ella Baker and Stanley Levison, two New York City-based activists who had helped form In Friendship to support the bus boycott and the southern desegregation movement; Rustin and Baker attended the Atlanta conference. For a more extensive discussion of the origins of this conference, see the Introduction, pp. 2-5 in this volume.

5. See “A Statement to the South and the Nation,” 10 January-11 January 1957, pp. 103-106 in this volume.

SOUTHERN NEGRO LEADERS CONFERENCE ON TRANSPORTATION AND NON-VIOLENT
INTEGRATION

Ebenezer Baptist Church
407 Auburn Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

January 10 - 11, 1957

WORKING PAPER # 4

THE RELATIONSHIP OF COMMUNITY ECONOMIC POWER GROUPS TO THE STRUGGLE

In the past we have given all too little attention to the economic power groups in the struggle for equality. However, the bus protests have clearly revealed certain economic facts.

1. The Negro's dollar is a factor in the economic organization of the community.
2. His refusal to ride had a catastrophic effect on the economics of the bus companies.
3. The unintended but non-the-less direct effect of the protest on down town merchants is real, indeed.

These very real economic facts have at certain stages caused bus companies, formerly unsympathetic to our cause, to see that they need the revenue of Negro riders. Add to this the legal "subterfuge" and the "century of litigation" tactics and it is clear to see that the bus companies are not prepared to lose money to save segregation. At this point two things occur:

1. The political leadership and the bus officials part company. The opposition is divided.
2. The bus companies may be prepared to make common cause with protest leaders.

If this analysis is correct, the following questions are worthy of discussion.

1. When can protest leaders approach bus officials to devise common strategy?
2. How can we foster that period in the struggle?
3. Should Southern Negro leaders arrange conference with the home offices of the companies working in more than one city of the south?
4. Can some approach be made to local businessmen in terms of the economic consequences in the present transportation confusion?

"Working Paper #4," presented at first meeting of the Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration (10-11 January 1957)