

51  
September 25, 1969

The Honorable Ivan Allen, Jr., Mayor  
City of Atlanta  
City Hall  
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Dear Mayor Allen:

This letter is in response to the letter of August 15, 1969 addressed to you by Chief P. O. Williams of the Atlanta Fire Department.

You will recall that at the meeting which prompted that letter, many of the Atlanta firemen expressed to you their grievances over discriminatory practices in the Atlanta Fire Department. We are certain that you are unaware of the extent of the racial discrimination practiced in the Atlanta Fire Department. The purpose of this letter is, first, to summarize certain major grievances in the light of Chief Williams' letter, and secondly, to request that you attend the meeting of the Board of Fire Masters on Monday, September 29th, when these matters will be considered.

This letter will emphasize three specific courses of action in which the black firemen of Atlanta are interested. Although this list is not exhaustive, it is believed that action in these three areas will demonstrate good faith on the part of the City and on the part of the senior officials in the Fire Department, and will also make it possible to work effectively toward resolution of the other grievances of the black firemen.

First, on promotional practices. In his letter of August 15, 1969, Chief Williams stated that the promotional system of the Atlanta Fire Department is set by law. This is true. The Code of Ordinances of the City of Atlanta requires that all hiring and promotional practices by City Departments shall be on a non-discriminatory basis. It is not true, however, that this law is always followed in practice. As Thomas Jefferson observed: "The execution of the laws is more important than the making of them."

In his letter, Chief Williams states that promotional examinations for Fire Lieutenants are held every two years. In the past, such examinations have been held at varying intervals of time, from six months to as much as two years. The most recent such examination was last March. As Chief Williams states, there are no black firemen high enough on the promotional list which resulted from that examination to anticipate any promotions of black firemen to Lieutenants within the foreseeable future.

For the reasons summarized below, it is the position of the black firemen that the examination given in March, 1969, was unfairly administered, and that there were both overt and covert methods of favoring white firemen who took this exam.



For example, at the time prior to the test in March, many white firemen were seen studying copies of an examination folder, and discussing among themselves questions that would be on the exam. Whether these were actual copies of the exam to be given, copies of examination booklets from which the questions would be taken, or copies of previous examinations, it is not known because none of them were made available to any black firemen. The only textbooks available to the black firemen for study were the one set of regulations and fire fighting procedures available at each station, to which the black firemen had only limited access.

Moreover, the written examination is not the only grade upon which promotion is based. In addition to the written examination score, firemen are graded at the training tower and the score given them there can only help their grade, not detract from it. Scores given at the training tower are entirely subjective and the only graders are white officers. The white firemen who are favored by the officers receive higher scores.

Even if a black fireman were to score in the top twenty of all the Atlanta firemen on the written and training tower tests, there is an oral interview to determine the order in which the top twenty will be promoted. It would be an easy matter, under this system, to place the black firemen at the bottom of the list, and before that point was reached in promotions, to call for another Lieutenant's examination, which would "reshuffle the deck." No other reason for breaking down the promotion list into groups of twenty suggests itself.

It must also be remembered that white firemen receive encouragement and special instruction from the white officers who want to see them succeed. There is no such encouragement to black firemen even to take the examination, much less is there any special instruction or advice on taking the examination given to black firemen. The numerous instances of discrimination in the Department make it clear to the black firemen that the leadership of the Department is committed to a policy of making certain the black firemen are not to be judged on an equal basis with white firemen.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis it is difficult for us not to believe two things. First, the examination for promotions given in March, 1969, for fire lieutenant was not fairly administered as between black firemen and white firemen. Black firemen were expressly discriminated against in that copies of the examination were not made available to them, and in that they were graded down at the training tower. Black firemen were more subtly discriminated against in that they did not receive the encouragement to take the examination and the assurances that the examination would be fairly administered. Given these disadvantages, which were apparent to all black firemen, the motivation of the black firemen who took the examination was understandably low.

Again, we wish to point out that promotions have been made within the Fire Department in the last few years on an emergency basis, promoting persons who did not have the required length of time in grade. The



present situation is a crisis of confidence by black firemen in the administration of the Fire Department, and is an emergency which would justify the immediate appointment of several black firemen to officer status. In addition, for the benefit of all the black firemen who desire to see fair, non-discriminatory administration of the promotion process, no promotions to Lieutenant should be made on the basis of the March, 1969 examination, and promotions already made on the basis of that examination should be rescinded. A new examination should be held, administered under the supervision of an outside agency to guarantee its fair, non-discriminatory administration. All black firemen should be given the same access to study materials as white firemen. Only after such a departmentwide examination is given, should any further promotions be made in the Fire Department.

Second, we believe the rules of the Department are, as a matter of policy, being unfairly administered to discourage blacks from remaining in the Fire Department. There are numerous examples, known to every black fireman, of unfair administration of the rules of the Department. For example, black firemen will be reported and disciplined for being a few minutes late reporting for duty. White firemen who are late for a longer period of time are not reported and disciplined. In order to put an end to this petty abuse of rank, there must be created in the Fire Department a grievance procedure whereby such specific discriminatory practices can be called to the attention of higher officials, and dealt with in some specific fashion. There is no such grievance procedure which has the confidence of the black firemen at present. In his letter of August 15, 1969, Chief Williams said there are, in fact, three methods by which to air grievances. There are (1) completing a special request, (2) going through company officers and battalion chiefs, and (3) using the suggestion form available in all stations. The problem is, that after using these methods, nothing is done. There must be a nonpartisan committee, preferably with both outside and black officer participation, which would publicly hear all complaints, and which will follow a consistent pattern of punishing and suspending those officers who practice petty discrimination. Without such a grievance procedure, the black firemen feel that there is no hope of ending the petty discrimination which presently pervades the Department.

In addition to the unfair administration of the present rules, we feel that discrimination is being built into the proposed new rules promulgated at the last meeting of the Board of Fire Masters. In his letter of August 15, 1969, Chief Williams stated that "we are in the process of rewriting the rules and regulations of the Atlanta Fire Department to eliminate any inequities in the old book, to eliminate any possibility of discrimination or the possibility of any officer over-reacting with authority."

Section 21, Paragraph 1 of the proposed new rules, relating to re-employment, provides that any employee who resigns or is dismissed from this Department may have his name placed on the re-employed list for re-employment within three (3) years from the termination of his services and that any member who is so re-employed may be credited with all former



2

service in the class in which he is re-employed. The present period for which this privilege of credit for former service is allowed is six (6) months. The effect of the adoption of any such rule would be to place all of the white firemen who left as a result of the strike less than three years ago, and in whose place many black firemen were employed, ahead of the black firemen in seniority. To the minds of the black firemen, such an unjust result, achieved with a mere "flick of the pen," is an important and significant manifestation of the bad faith of the present administration of the Fire Department with respect to black employees. You, as Mayor of this City, are urged to use your influence to prevent any such change in the regulations of the Fire Department which would place all black firemen at the bottom of the list in terms of seniority.

Within the confines of the above problems, there are many specific grievances and complaints of Atlanta black firemen. The purpose of the black firemen of Atlanta is to serve their City well and to protect its citizens from the dangers of fire and other hazards for which the Fire Department was organized. However, the black firemen of Atlanta are not able to serve their City effectively in the present atmosphere of discrimination and unjust treatment that pervades the Atlanta Fire Department.

Your earnest attention to the above matters is urged.

Yours very truly,



William Hamer, for  
BROTHERS COMBINED SOCIAL CLUB

cc: Members of Board of Fire Masters  
Chief P. O. Williams