

The Mining Journal

Upper Michigan's Largest Daily

A PANAX PUBLICATION

Founded July 11, 1846

JAMES H. LUKE
General Manager

KENNETH S. LOWE
Editor

In Pursuit Of Equality

This week's sit-in by an estimated 85 black students at Northern Michigan University started out peacefully enough. The students occupied student personnel offices in Kaye Hall in protest over a disciplinary ruling against one of their number, but they caused only minor disruption in the office operations. Nineteen hours later, however, the demonstration had turned into something radically different.

A university vice president had been held captive in his office for 35 minutes and reportedly threatened with bodily harm and the student personnel offices had been ransacked and equipment wrecked. The demonstration ended shortly before 4 a.m. when the protesters learned that the disciplinary ruling against the black student by the all-university student judiciary had been reversed by the higher level faculty-student judiciary committee.

By then, however, the damage had already been done. The protesters had abused their right to dissent by substituting force for the democratic judiciary process. They had forcibly subjected a person to a harrowing experience, maliciously destroyed public property and upset university operations.

Clearly this was an episode of lawlessness that need never have occurred. The machinery for handling the black student's grievance existed and had been set in motion when the demonstration took place.

"The present situation, involving the rule infraction by one of our students, has been taken up in fullest accordance with the established procedures and has been acted upon promptly," Dr. John X. Jamrich, university president, explained in a statement after the protest got under way. "The student judiciary has rendered its decision of 'guilty.' This decision is being disputed by the student as not just and it is being disputed on the grounds that the student judiciary was not representatively constituted and that certain procedural errors existed during the hearing.

"The student is now in a position to appeal the decision to the faculty-student judiciary, the next level of judicial processes on the campus (which he did, winning a reversal of the 'guilty' verdict). Also, the question of procedure has already been placed before the Human Rights Commission which at this moment is considering this matter and will bring forth a recommendation."

To what extent the faculty-student judiciary was influenced by the demonstration is a moot question, but it must be hoped that this was not a consideration.

The basic question involved in this demonstration is equality of treatment for all students. But this has to cut both ways. It can't be interpreted to mean special privileges for a black minority — or any other minority.

It is the same question that lay at the root of the demonstration that caused cancellation of an NMU basketball game a year ago almost to the day. On that occasion, about 150 black students staged a sit-in on the NMU fieldhouse court and prevented the rest of the students and the public from witnessing the game with a team that had been flown here from Texas to compete in a televised contest.

The protest last December affected hundreds of others who were not protesting. In effect, it denied freedom to others. It brought to mind the "tyranny of the minority" that Robben W. Fleming, who was to become president of the University of Michigan, had condemned in a speech only a few days before last year's sit-in at NMU.

In a recent editorial, John S. Knight, publisher of the Knight Newspapers, asked, "In order to save Vietnam, must we destroy America?" Looking back at this week's demonstration on the NMU campus, one is tempted to paraphrase him: "In order to assure equality, must we destroy democracy?"