
The Black Panthers in Court: The Lonnie McLucas Trial

On May 1, 1970, a massive demonstration was held on the New Haven Green. University students, townspeople and visitors from across the Eastern Seaboard gathered to protest the treatment of Black Panthers in America. Just on the northern edge of the Green sat the Superior Court building where Bobby Seale and seven other Panthers were to be tried for the murder of Alex Rackley. In order to sift out the various issues raised by the prosecutions and the demonstration, and to explore how members of the Yale community ought to relate to these trials on its doorstep, several students organized teach-ins during the week prior to the demonstration. Among those faculty members and students who agreed to participate on such short notice were Professors Thomas I. Emerson and Charles A. Reich of the Yale Law School and J. Otis Cochran, a third-year law student and president of the Black American Law Students Association. They have been kind enough to allow Law and Social Action to share with our readers the thoughts on the meaning and impact of political trials which they shared with the Yale community at that time.

Inspired by the teach-ins and, in particular, by Mr. Emerson's remarks, Law and Social Action decided to interview people who played leading roles in the drama that unfolded around the Lonnie McLucas trial. We spoke with Lonnie McLucas, several jurors, defense attorneys, some of the organizers of the demonstrations that took place on May Day and throughout the summer, and several reporters who covered the trial. (State's Attorney Arnold Markle declined to participate because of his current involvement in the Seale-Huggins trial.) To shed some light on the nature of the trial and of the experience for those who were involved, we are pleased to present excerpts from these interviews.