

Civil rights struggle returns to Selma

by Marianna Wertz

Twenty-five years after the "Bloody Sunday" March across Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, a new civil rights protest in Selma is gaining national prominence, even as the date for the planned reenactment of "Bloody Sunday" draws near. This small southern city of 27,000 residents is embroiled in a bitter struggle between black and white citizens for control over the city and its school board, whose outcome will apparently only be decided through direct confrontation.

"Bloody Sunday" refers to the first March to Montgomery by civil rights activists on March 7, 1965, when hundreds of black and white marchers were met on Edmund Pettus Bridge by mounted police and Alabama state troopers, who clubbed, gassed, and beat them. Dr. Martin Luther King catalyzed the national outrage at this action into a successful march on Montgomery later that year, and into the successful passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

In December 1989, black parents and students in Selma were shocked by the news of the firing of Selma's first black school superintendent, Dr. Norward Roussell, by the white majority on the school board. The five black school board members had been excluded from the school board's meeting where the six white members voted to fire Dr. Roussell. The reason given for Roussell's firing was that he "lacks the necessary leadership skills." Black spokesmen claim that the real reason was that Dr. Roussell was firing teachers who refused to change the biased tracking system which is used in the Selma High School.

According to Alice Boynton, President of the Best Education Support Team (BEST), the parent organization which is leading the demonstrations, students were tracked into ability-level classes according to where they live. "They'd look at the student's address, and put him in track one, two, or three accordingly," she said. As a result, most black and poor students were tracked into the non-college curriculum, and most white and wealthier students were tracked into the pre-college courses. Dr. Roussell had been working with BEST to eliminate this "leveling" system, she said, and that was the real reason for his firing.

Demonstrations and a sit-in at Selma High School in the second week of February forced the school board, which is nominated by the city council, to restore Dr. Roussell's job, but just for the remainder of the 1989-90 school year. On Feb. 14, the sit-in ended, out of concern that Dr. Roussell

would again be fired. Some 200 civilian reserve troops and FBI agents have now moved into Selma High School to maintain order. Demonstrators have moved to City Hall, where they remain to this date, demanding that Dr. Roussell be given a full contract.

While Selma city attorneys are demanding a restraining order against further demonstrations, no judge has yet been willing to grant it. Asked what would happen should a restraining order be granted, J.L. Chestnut, attorney for the demonstrators said, "Dr. Lowery, one of the co-convenors [of the upcoming reenactment], was here Saturday marching and demonstrating and meeting with the Mayor, and telling him that injunctions are made to be broken."

'This is our South Africa'

Amelia Boynton Robinson, veteran of the 1965 march and a leader in the Schiller Institute today, was in Selma in mid-February and gave this picture of the situation. She called the ongoing mass meetings and demonstrations "our South Africa," referring to the outpouring of support for the freed African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela, which occurred in the same week as the Selma demonstrations peaked.

"The world is watching," she told demonstrators. "Don't let up, for God's sake don't let up," she exhorted them, because "we've awakened the whole world."

Mrs. Robinson, who was beaten, gassed, and left for dead on Edmund Pettus Bridge 25 years ago, will play a major role in the March 3 reenactment. Following that, she plans a speaking tour in Eastern and Western Europe sponsored by the Schiller Institute, to bring the message of Selma and the battle for civil rights in America to the fight for freedom there.

The demonstrations are expected to continue up to the planned reenactment and beyond, until their demands are won. The commemorative march and reenactment is expected to draw thousands of participants, who could potentially be drawn into the ongoing struggle. Already on Feb. 11, hundreds of students from surrounding colleges joined a support march in Selma, estimated at 1,500 strong.

The Schiller Institute has sent a message of support to the demonstrators, which stated, in part:

"On this birthday of President Abraham Lincoln, whose Emancipation Proclamation decreed that all Americans shall be free and shall participate fully in the political life of this nation, we send our greetings and support to your demonstration.

"Civil rights and economic justice go hand in hand. Without economic justice, and the right to a quality education, there are no civil rights. The education of our children to their fullest potential is the most sacred right and obligation of a democratic republic. Any nation that allows race to determine who does and who does not get a quality education, is a nation that is dooming itself to destruction."