

CHAPTER 5

Hope Takes Its Last Stand

The Silent Vigil

The 250 students who had occupied University House arrived on Duke's main quadrangle on Sunday morning and made essentially the same four demands of Douglas Knight that they had been insisting on since Friday. One asked Knight to sign a newspaper advertisement committing the university to pursue racial justice. The second asked that the Duke president resign his membership in the segregated Hope Valley Country Club. Two demands pertained to Duke's nonacademic employees; one requested that Knight "press for a \$1.60 minimum wage for all Duke employees" and the second asked him to "appoint a committee . . . to make recommendations concerning collective bargaining and union recognition at Duke." Eventually, the demand for collective bargaining became the paramount issue for the vigil. While protesters accepted that the mechanics of any arrangement would have to be finalized later, they insisted that the university accept in principle the right of Duke's nonacademic employees to bargain collectively.

Collective bargaining was crucial for these employees. As matters stood in 1968, Duke management set wages for workers with no input from labor: the terms of employment were set forth in a personnel handbook prepared by the university. While Duke permitted its workers to join voluntary employee

groups, it refused to bargain with these organizations or to enter into any legally enforceable collective contract. As described by the faculty committee established during the Silent Vigil to investigate collective bargaining, “the provisions of the Personnel Handbook [are] subject from moment to moment to unilateral revision by the university,” and the university alone.¹ As the largest employer in Durham, this gave the university almost unfettered power to dictate wages and working conditions for its employees.

Under collective bargaining, this situation would be transformed. Labor-management issues at Duke would be resolved through negotiations between representatives of the nonacademic employees and university executives. Terms of employment would be set forth in a legally binding agreement between the workers and the university. While collective bargaining can take many forms, at its core, this right would require the university to cede at least some of its power to unilaterally establish the terms of employment for its nonacademic workers. Duke employees had been pursuing the goal of collective bargaining since 1965. They saw gaining this right—in some form—as essential to ending the paternalistic “plantation system” that had prevailed at Duke for so many decades. With the students at the Silent Vigil supporting this demand, Local 77 hoped to accelerate progress toward this key goal.

The Silent Vigil had multiple dimensions, but the university’s nonacademic employees were central to the entire effort. What limits, if any, would the university accept on its unfettered power to establish wages and working conditions for these workers? In the fraught climate following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., who had made the rights of the poor pivotal to racial equality, the university could either respond to the crisis by taking meaningful steps to advance the cause of economic justice or it could stick to the “plantation system.” Duke’s response would reveal how willing it was to move beyond attitudes that had shaped its Jim Crow past to become a leader in the quest for social and economic justice.

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A flyer signed on behalf of “the 200+” circulated through campus Sunday morning. “JOIN US on the West Quad in Front of [the] Chapel” for a rally at 2:00 p.m., it announced. “Those students and faculty sitting in at the President’s residence,” the flyer declared, “have decided . . . we will continue our vigil on the University campus. . . . The American crisis demands that all institutional leaders . . . demonstrate moral commitment to eliminate racial

dissensions and inequities.” Another flyer emphasized the connection between King’s work for economic justice and the goals of the Silent Vigil. “Dr. King died in Memphis as he was preparing a march on behalf of striking garbage men,” the flyer stated, that is, “workers whose union was ignored by their employers. We protest on behalf of Duke’s non-academic employees, whose wages are far below the poverty level and whose union the University refuses to bargain with.”²

The Sunday rally was attended by 1,100 students, faculty, and other members of the Duke community. Logistics for the event were improvised and organized on the fly. “Can anyone here play the guitar?” a student leader asked. “We are looking for someone who can play ‘Blowin’ in the Wind.’ This is your last chance to sing and we’ve got to make our presence felt with our voices so that the whole darn community and the whole darn world can hear us!”³

None of the Committee of Ten leading the vigil had ever directed a protest of this size. They were being carried along by events. It was “a period of radicalization for those of us who were radicalizing others,” David Henderson observed. As for participants, a survey found that fully 77 percent of those who joined the vigil were taking part in their first “demonstration,” including political rallies. As a result, participants in the Silent Vigil were not jaded about their prospects for success. “American society is much more cynical today,” Bunny Small commented many years later. “It’s much harder for people to believe in their own actions; they get discouraged before they even try.” But this was not the case for these Silent Vigil participants. “We had an optimism,” Small reflected, “in that we believed if we worked together we could change things.”⁴

Small told the rally what an “amazing,” “really fantastic” experience the sit-in at Knight’s house had been. “We didn’t know if we would be booted out, arrested, [or] suspended,” she explained, “but we felt we had to commit ourselves. . . . If white America, those of us who come from nice middle-class homes, could not make the ‘system’ work for us,” she asked, “what chance would our Black brothers have?” Small made clear that the purpose of the Silent Vigil was to compel concrete action by the university. “Everyone is for freedom, everybody is for justice,” she shouted, “but we’re gonna get something [done], we’re gonna get it here, and they ain’t gonna move us one inch until we get it!”⁵

Black students at Duke and members of the Black community in Durham were skeptical of white leadership, another speaker said. “Many Blacks have already decided that there is no hope for this society,” he explained. One reason for the Silent Vigil was to restore that hope. Black people were looking to see

if white students could cause an institution like Duke to make “the important, the dramatic, the meaningful changes,” he said. If Black people did not believe such changes were possible, the speaker warned, “they will be in the streets in guerilla warfare and they will try to bring the country down.”⁶

Watching events on the quad, William Griffith thought the demonstrators were pursuing worthy goals while behaving respectfully. “I’m just very impressed with the manner in which those who are participating are expressing themselves,” he told WDBS radio, “and I’m very moved by the expression myself.” Although many in the administration agreed with Griffith, the trustees were another matter. University and Endowment board member Marshall Pickens spoke for many when he wrote to two students: “My reaction to the so-called vigil is that it is a form of blackmail which should not be used in a civilized community.” With Knight sidelined, board chair Wright Tisdale decided that he would come to Durham to be closer to events.⁷

On Sunday night, five hundred people, the vast majority of them white Duke students, slept on the main quadrangle of the university. “We expect no trouble,” Kinney told the protesters, “and we are being protected by both the Durham and the campus cops.” Still, there was no way to know what nightfall might bring. There were rumors, according to Henderson, “of trouble from some of the more reactionary [students] including some of the football players.” Of greater concern were outsiders intent on disrupting the protest. “We are watching for firebombers,” W. C. A. Bear, chief of campus security, commented. “There have been lots of threats. We have been having men standing by . . . in case there is any outside interference.”⁸ Other than a few firecrackers going off, Sunday night passed uneventfully.

Meanwhile, once Tisdale arrived in Durham on Sunday, he started meeting with members of the administrative working team immediately. The board chair told the team that he did not favor the hands-off approach taken toward the protest thus far. “Let’s straighten this out,” Tisdale told them. “Let’s not have this going on at Duke University.” Tisdale had his own idea of how to proceed. “When Wright Tisdale flew in,” Charles Huestis recalled, “his first announcement was that he was going to close the university down. That really got us tied up in knots.”⁹

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“I still have a feeling of awe when I think about waking up that first morning on the quad,” Bertie Howard recalled years later. “I did not believe the number

of students who had joined the vigil during the night. It was incredible how the amount of space we used up had multiplied.”¹⁰

As the Silent Vigil grew in size, it also became more highly organized. Upon joining the vigil, participants were seated in rows of exactly fifty people. They were provided with printed “Ground Rules for Those Participating in the Vigil.” These rules were strict. They included “No talking. . . . No eating except at group snack and meal breaks. . . . No sunbathing” and “No singing except at specified periods under the direction of the song leader. . . . The monitors are in charge so please listen to them.”¹¹

As instructed, protesters sat in silence. “They have a break every 45 minutes,” Small told a reporter on Monday, “to stand and sing.” “We are a self-regulated bunch,” history professor Thomas Rainey commented. “Before joining us,” he explained, “all students agree to abide by the rules.” In case of rule violations, monitors were quick to respond, although some thought these efforts at maintaining order went too far. Hutch Traver, among the more militant students at Duke, remembered the monitors saying, “‘Please be quiet, Stay in your Vigil lines’ over and over again. ‘Raise your hand if you need to go to the bathroom.’ I thought it was very stupid,” he recalled.¹²

Other aspects of the vigil were also well organized. By Monday, monitors had been recruited, a sound system set up, and a press operation was running around-the-clock. Information tables were set up for those who had questions. A lost-and-found center, transportation pool, trash pickup, and banking service were all quickly established. The protest even had a poet laureate—activist John Beecher—who was elected early in the demonstration. Bertie Howard remembered “discussions about our bank account—we had raised \$6000 or so for the union strike fund in a few days, and suddenly there was talk about a tax ID number and investment strategies.” The vigil had “superb organization,” one researcher commented accurately, that was put in place with a speed that was “truly impressive.”¹³

The elaborate structure of the vigil emerged organically. “The organization [was not] planned out beforehand,” political science professor John Strange commented. “It was serendipitous,” he reflected years later. “As it evolved it was magic, it was beyond any of us.” “The vigil was a classic case of middle-class college kids using the skills they had to organize something,” Small recalled. Griffith shared the same sense. “If you look at pictures, it was so regimented. They had cleanup detail. . . . They had people to walk the gals to the restroom facilities at three o’clock in the morning.” Marveling at the organization, Griffith described the students running the protest as “potential technocrats, potential presidents of business concerns.”¹⁴

Cleanliness was a priority. Monday morning, the small cleaning crew left behind at University House was, according to Strange, “polishing it from top to bottom.” They were “sweeping down the [rugs], scrubbing the garbage cans, vacuuming all the floors.”¹⁵ Out on the quad, trash was collected and hauled away at regular intervals.

Although operating on little sleep, vigil leaders even found time to send a note to the Knights. “Please accept our sincere thanks,” Small, Strange, and Kinney wrote the Knights on Monday, “for your welcome and hospitality and our apologies for any inconvenience during our stay over this weekend.”¹⁶

The nonviolence, order, and good manners so evident at the vigil served multiple purposes. One was to garner support from those who viewed the student protest with concern. “We wanted to give the impression that we were . . . responsible,” the student narrator of a Silent Vigil audiotape commented. At every turn, “the idea of making a good impression held sway. . . . We were trying to not only affect people on campus but outside of it,” he explained, especially “the moneyed, respectable middle class of Durham. We felt that being neat and clean was very important in this respect.”¹⁷

A second purpose was more strategic. Demonstrators hoped to pressure the school to meet their demands while communicating to trustees and administrators that they remained loyal members of the Duke “family.” “I do give us credit for being smart enough to [be] not threatening,” Kinney recalled. “To try to be effective and [non]threatening is a very hard needle to thread.”¹⁸

This disciplined approach also helped recruit new vigil participants. “The order that we were able to maintain,” Henderson wrote in his journal, “undoubtedly contributed to . . . the support we got from faculty and other students.” Another student described the dynamic in a more personal way. “We were cautious,” Serena Simons commented. “There was a real feeling of moderation in our radicalism. It was a very culturally controlled event in that we were all ‘good’ kids.”¹⁹

Vigil participants also hoped that their tactics would send a message to Black students at Duke and in Durham. “Almost to the individual,” a researcher who interviewed participants after the event reported, “the members of the Vigil view their action as the last opportunity to [show] the Black Community that peaceful means can . . . bring about results.” Strange made that point at a Monday press conference. “The militant Black community was probably somewhat amused by the tactics which were being used” at the vigil, he commented. Both students and the broader community “have been amazed by the support which we have garnered both from faculty and

students by a very deescalated type of approach” and “are reassessing their attitudes about the ways in which you approach these problems.” However well intentioned, these comments by white protest leaders were not always well received. Brenda Armstrong recalled later that at least some of the Black students found them “condescending.”²⁰

Meanwhile, little contact between vigil negotiators and the administrative working team was occurring. Monday afternoon, the Committee of Ten was informed that Knight would be remaining in seclusion “for several days or longer.”²¹

At the same time, Local 77 was moving forward with a strike. At a 5:00 p.m. Monday meeting, Duke dining hall workers voted to strike, effective at 12:01 a.m. Tuesday morning. They approved two demands: the right to collective bargaining and an end to “poverty wages” through the establishment of a \$1.60 per hour minimum wage for all Duke workers. Significantly, the vigil participants asked *only* that the university establish a committee to “consider collective bargaining and union recognition for Duke’s non-academic employees.” Local 77 demanded specific action. “The University must recognize that Local 77 represents Duke workers,” a flyer for the strike meeting asserted, “and that Duke will negotiate a contract that will be voted on by the union membership and signed by both the union committee and the Duke administration.” While vigil protesters supported recognition for Local 77, Small explained, “our goal was to get the university to do anything that would be [a move] in [that] direction.”²²

For Local 77, recognition as the “exclusive bargaining agent” for Duke workers was essential. Agreement by the university only to the “principle” of collective bargaining could allow other unions to compete with Local 77 for the right to represent segments of Duke’s nonacademic employees. Should such a competition result in more than one union representing different groups of Duke workers, the negotiating leverage nonacademic employees were seeking could have been significantly reduced. Still, when told about the strike, vigil participants voted overwhelmingly to support the workers.

With King’s funeral to be held the next day, vigil leaders announced a class boycott starting at 8:00 a.m. on Tuesday. The school canceled third- and fourth-period classes, “as a part of the university’s participation in the memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King.”²³ The university wanted to acknowledge the sense of loss felt by many on campus while maintaining, to the extent possible, normal university operations.

Starting on Sunday, vigil participants had declared a boycott of the West Campus dining facilities. While the boycott continued, vigil organizers were

responsible for feeding the growing number of protesters. A distribution system staffed by faculty wives, nonacademic employees, and East Campus coeds was quickly established. Claiborne Tapp, manager of the Chicken Box, an iconic Black-owned restaurant in Hayti, proved instrumental in feeding the protesters. On Monday, the Chicken Box provided five hundred meals for vigil participants at its cost of fifty cents per plate. “If you need anything,” Tapp told protest organizers, “just call me. We’re with you all the way. We appreciate what you’re doing for us.” “Good meals . . . from the Chicken Box,” Howard recalled, opened up “a whole new world to white students who had not ventured into the world of African-American cuisine.”²⁴

Meanwhile, faculty support for the vigil continued to grow. Some joined students on the quad while others helped with food service. Faculty also showed support in other ways. At their regularly scheduled meeting on April 8, for example, the faculty of the divinity school voted unanimously to suspend any annual increment in faculty salary. They requested that “the resultant savings be transferred to the budget of the non-academic employees for the raising of their minimum wage.”²⁵

“It was obvious from the beginning” of Monday, Henderson reported, “that support for the Vigil was growing.” Not only were more students joining the protest, but the campus had become “polarized” between those who supported the demonstration and those who opposed it. “One of my students told me,” Samuel DuBois Cook recalled, “that his fellow students had to ‘justify’ to themselves their nonparticipation. How interesting and significant!” “An atmosphere of decency, morality, civility and social, racial, and economic justice permeated the campus,” creating a “great and proud moment in Duke history,” Cook remembered.²⁶

The hundreds of students who joined the vigil did so for a myriad of reasons. Some were moved by the assassination of King. For other students, the vigil was a direct way of responding to racial problems at Duke and in American society. “Eulogizing Martin Luther King did not seem enough,” one student recounted. “For me, the main issues were recognizing the rights of workers and recognizing that the University had a responsibility to the community.” Others joined for reasons that had nothing to do with politics or the “four demands.” Asked why she joined the vigil, Simons said that she was “wildly in love with this person who was real political. . . . I was dating him at the time.” Most participants joined the vigil for a combination of these reasons. “The Vigil attracted me,” a student recalled, “because it embodied many of the values I find important—democracy, [the] right to assemble, human

justice, and dignity, and equality. . . . I also remember I had a big paper due,” he continued, “and the Vigil gave me an extension because the class didn’t meet (All motives are mixed!).”²⁷

Whatever their reasons, by Monday, vigil participants had created a *separate* community on the main quadrangle of Duke University. This community operated outside the cultural and social norms of the school. Students sang together, slept together, and ate together. Once classes began to meet on the quad, they studied together. Security, banking, transportation, and medical care were all provided. Jeff Van Pelt described the “separateness” experienced by the vigil community. “One by one our numbers grew,” he wrote, “but only in one way: only as each person stepped onto the quad, stepped over the line that divided our ranks from the world as it had been before.”²⁸

The vigil community offered participants the social space to reflect on their values, politics, and goals in a new way. “You have levels of understanding, intellectual and emotional,” history professor John Cell explained, “and an experience like [the vigil] deepens, intensifies, focuses. It’s not that you hadn’t thought about these things, hadn’t known these things, or maybe hadn’t even understood these things,” he said. “But you understand them [now] in different ways and they become personal.” For many, the experience was transformative. “The Silent Vigil was a noble event and a sacred or divine experience,” Cook commented on the thirtieth anniversary of the protest, reflecting that it was “historical, institutional, symbolic, existential, and personal.” Cook remembered the protest as “one of those supreme and unforgettable mountain-top experiences in which the ‘Word was made flesh.’” It was “a magical moment,” Huck Gutman recalled, “when you think the world can be transformed and you can be a part of it.” “I was transported in a way unequalled for me either before or since,” another student explained. “I suppose it was as close as I ever came to a religious feeling.”²⁹

The dozens of letters written to Provost Cole by vigil participants on Monday expressed the passion and moral clarity that many at the vigil were feeling. “We do not want trouble,” one student warned, “but we are sick of apathy, sick of injustice. We want equality and we want peace NOW, at any cost to our personal futures.” Another student wrote poetically about the powerful sense of rebirth and renewal he was experiencing, calling it “a new Genesis. It is my sole hope,” this student wrote, “that Duke University can, in like manner, arise to the renaissance which it has undergone.”³⁰

Cole and others in the administration were receiving a very different message from alumni. Despite efforts by vigil participants to present themselves as

moderate, many alumni viewed the protesters as out of control. Letters from alumni called participants “hoodlums,” “mob-like,” “impressionable adolescents,” “complainers,” “malcontents,” and “beasts.” Almost all alumni urged the university to take a hard line against the protesters. “This is not the time to let the animals run the zoo,” an alumnus wrote, urging the administration to “take a firm stand against these misguided youths.” Letters “poured in like the snow,” Roger Marshall recalled. “At one point, I had 3,000 unanswered letters on my desk.”³¹

Alumni were not alone in opposing the vigil. Many students also did not approve of the protest. “The Vigil could have only occurred in the scholastic environment,” one student wrote critically, “a totally artificial arena where the participants can devote themselves to idealism with no concern for the mechanics of existence—food, shelter, birth, death.” Christopher Edgar, an economics major, opposed union recognition and a wage increase for nonacademic employees: “I felt that the administration had a duty to its students to provide the highest quality education at the lowest possible cost.”³²

As time passed, Wright Tisdale became increasingly concerned about events. By Monday evening, the board chair had been in Durham for twenty-four hours. Almost all that time had been spent in intense discussions with the administrative working team. Cole, Huestis, and Griffith, among others, were trying to explain to Tisdale “what the students were trying to say to us” and “that it was a peaceful demonstration and not out of control.” But with the protest growing in size by the hour, dining hall workers heading out on strike, a class boycott scheduled for the next day, and at least some faculty rallying to the cause, Tisdale was not persuaded. Noting that “feelings ran high at times,” Cole wrote that on Monday evening he was “*ordered* [by Tisdale] to dismiss summarily from the University a number of the leaders of the Vigil under threat of his resignation in case I failed to do so. I gave my strong reasons for refusal,” Cole explained, and “answered by promising my own resignation if the action by administrative fiat were taken.” The dismissals never occurred because, as Cole recounted, “cooler counsels eventually prevailed.” Still, Cole’s relationship with Tisdale became irrevocably strained. “The Chairman always considered me to be too sympathetic in my dealings with the students,” Cole wrote, “and I in turn felt that he was emotionally unpredictable and too far removed . . . from the ‘firing line’ . . . to make responsible judgments.”³³

Tisdale then proposed even more aggressive action. On Monday night, Huestis reported, “Tisdale said he’d heard enough and was going to close down

the university.” His intent, according to Huestis, was “simply to . . . demonstrate that Duke was . . . not going to put up with this kind of [nonsense]. We argued vehemently [with Tisdale] on that,” Huestis recalled. “I remember saying, . . . ‘Wright, will you explain to me why it is necessary that Duke University be the first university in the United States to close in the face of a student protest, especially when it’s a peaceful student protest?’” Huestis also played for time. “You don’t have the authority to close this university,” Huestis told Tisdale. “At a minimum, you’ve got to take it to the executive committee [of the board of trustees].” Tisdale then deferred action. The executive committee was summoned to Durham for an emergency meeting on Wednesday, April 10.³⁴

Griffith was relieved at the decision to call in the executive committee. He had his resignation “in his hip pocket,” he recounted, “if force was used against the demonstrators.” Huestis was exhausted. “I don’t know any time that I’ve felt as emotionally, and physically, and spiritually drained as I felt that night,” he remembered. Huestis told his wife, “‘We’ve been through this now for a day and a half and I just don’t know how I can do it all over again . . . from scratch with the executive committee.’”³⁵

Monday evening on campus was taken up with a rally that featured a previously scheduled appearance by antiwar activists Joan Baez and David Harris. When Baez and Harris tried to connect the issues in the vigil to those in the antiwar movement, some people raised objections. “We appreciate your speaking to us about the resistance,” one student told Baez and Harris to loud and prolonged applause, “but this is not our main focus.” “I want to remind you,” another student said, “that this vigil is not a draft resistance vigil. . . . Our main object here is for the employees of Duke.”³⁶ On Monday night, more than one thousand students and faculty slept on the main quadrangle of Duke University.

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Early Tuesday morning, Cook, Kinney, and Howard Wilkinson, chaplain of the university, boarded a flight to Atlanta to attend Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral. Cook and King had been friends for decades. Classmates growing up, the two entered Morehouse College in 1943 at age fifteen. Their friendship blossomed in college and they became allies in the civil rights movement.

As Cook and his Duke colleagues traveled to Atlanta, picket lines went up around campus dining facilities in the West Union, East Union, and Graduate Center. Labor organizer Peter Brandon estimated in the *Duke Chronicle* that

by Tuesday, the student boycott of the West Campus dining facilities was “90% effective.” On Tuesday afternoon, maids and janitors on West Campus voted to strike, effective as of Wednesday morning. The class boycott also began on Tuesday, and a vigil spokesperson estimated 80 percent of students stayed away from classes.³⁷

There was no contact between vigil leaders and Duke administrators on Tuesday morning. A memorial service for the civil rights leader was held in Duke Chapel at 10:30 a.m., timed to coincide with King’s funeral in Atlanta. Throughout Tuesday, “rumors were flying,” according to Henderson, “that Mr. Tisdale was running the university and that the students were going to be removed from the quad with fire hoses and police.” A WDBS reporter commented on the pending confrontation between the trustees and the students. “It becomes possible, in a very real sense,” he said, that “some of the students . . . may be putting themselves on the line not just bodily but in terms of their standing with the university.”³⁸

Meanwhile, some of the national press broadcast news of the vigil, and statements of support from national leaders started to arrive. “By your action in support of the employees of the university who seek recognition for their bargaining rights,” Senator Robert F. Kennedy told the protesters, “you set a standard that all should emulate.” Civil rights leader Benjamin E. Mays, who delivered a eulogy at King’s funeral, commented on the redemptive power of the protest. “As long as students like you are interested in racial justice and are determined to carry on [King’s] noble work,” he told participants, “he will not have died in vain.”³⁹

Howard Fuller’s appearance at the vigil on Tuesday was one of the most powerful events of the day. As the most visible Black leader in Durham, Fuller lent credibility to a civil rights protest composed almost entirely of white students and faculty. “We have an administration at this university that is out of touch with the needs of those Black people who toil every day to see to it that food is right, the grass is cut, and all of the other things that need to get done . . . are done,” Fuller told the crowd. “With your support,” he stated, Duke workers have “taken a stand” against “inferior wages and bad working conditions.” Fuller challenged the protesters to ask themselves, “Are you really serious?” To thunderous applause, he said, “If you’re really serious . . . that means that a lot of us are going to be out here for a long time.” “Any . . . people who don’t believe that everybody can be free,” Fuller told the group, “should be here today to see all of these people.” “I’m proud to be a Black man and I’m proud to be here today!” Oliver Harvey was amazed at

the power of Fuller's speech. "Howard Fuller . . . really moved things up," he remembered.⁴⁰

Duke's Black students were at best equivocal in their support for the vigil. The AAS did not officially endorse the protest, although members were free to participate as individuals if they chose to do so. "The Blacks were clearly not as active in [the vigil] as they were in their own things," Charles Becton explained. "It was mostly a white vigil." "I think the white students were very committed to the Vigil," Hopkins observed, "but I . . . was not committed to that type of protest. . . . I personally would not sit out on the quad for days." "It was absolutely unnecessary for us as Negro students to say we supported the Vigil," Black student leader Stef McLeod commented. "To ask a black student if he is for the goals of this demonstration," he said, "is like asking a Jew in the heights of Hitler's reign if he was for the termination of the torture, oppression and extermination of the Jews."⁴¹

Many Blacks saw "white guilt" as a primary motivating factor for the protest. The vigil, according to Armstrong, was seen "as a way for many whites to exonerate themselves from their guilt at being tied [to the King assassination] by the fact that they were white." Hopkins agreed. "Black students did not feel this guilt and thus many did not support the Vigil." Griffith had the same sense. Black students, he remembered, "were not very much involved [after King's death] that I could perceive." "Those few that I talked to said, 'This is whitey's thing—if he's got a guilt trip, well he can take his guilt trip.'"⁴²

To the extent Black students did participate in the vigil, they did so primarily to support Duke's Black maids, janitors, and dining hall workers. Janice Williams recalled that "to us these people represented our parents." Given these deep personal connections, the university's treatment of its nonacademic employees was "one of the most significant politicizing things" for the Black students, according to Hopkins. "I did not participate in the Vigil," Brenda Brown explained, "except to the extent we were helping the non-academic employees on the picket lines. . . . Any involvement on my part would be picketing, rather than sitting on the quad." "Black students wasn't too happy all the way through the vigil and the strike," Oliver Harvey recalled, "but they did participate with us."⁴³

Significantly, one of the reasons Black students were ambivalent about the vigil was the failure of the protesters to demand that Local 77 be recognized as exclusive bargaining agent for the nonacademic employees. The Black students, Oliver Harvey recalled, "told the white students . . . 'How far are you going? You don't mean what you are doing.'" For the Black students, collective

bargaining, without recognition of Local 77 as exclusive bargaining agent, was not enough. ““You people are talking about compromise, and grow as you go,” Harvey remembered the Black students telling vigil participants. And the Black students “were saying the same thing we were saying. ‘People want exclusive recognition. They want it now.’” One Black student was also concerned that white students did not fully appreciate the importance of the workers’ demand for a union. “I became . . . exasperated,” she said, “when I saw that the vigilers could not understand that the union, as a tool through which the workers can approach employers in a dignified and adult manner, was far more important than a raise in salary.”⁴⁴

Another concern for Black students was whether a protest so firmly committed to “working within the system” could succeed. “While I did not question the ends,” McLeod observed, “I did question the means by which they were to be accomplished.” Henderson noted the same thing. “Most of the black students said all along that [the vigil’s] tactics would not work,” he wrote, “and refused to participate.”⁴⁵

It was ultimately a personal decision whether a Black student joined the vigil. Armstrong recounted,

I didn’t participate in the vigil. I think I appreciated the fact that a lot of the white students and faculty and other people really felt deeply moved by it. I just didn’t feel that they understood. I was just too angry to do that. . . . I can remember walking onto campus and there were all these people sitting around in the rain. And I couldn’t understand what they were doing. And I wasn’t sure what it meant to me. I thought it was just another world and I didn’t feel like I belonged.⁴⁶

The working team of university administrators spent Tuesday in meetings with Tisdale. They kept stressing the moderate nature of the protest and the caliber of the students involved. Cole described the “typical participant” in the vigil as “a highly motivated person of respectable middle-class background, with a creditable academic record . . . who was idealistic, concerned with the goals of equal rights and social justice for others.” The administrative team was also trying to persuade Tisdale that events were “moving in the right direction” and that force was not needed to resolve the protest.⁴⁷

During the late afternoon on Tuesday, Tisdale was joined in Durham by trustee Henry E. Rauch, chairman of the board of Burlington Industries in Greensboro, North Carolina, and a member of the powerful Executive Committee of the university board. Discussions among Tisdale, Rauch, and the

administrative team could not have been easy. Tisdale and Rauch, both staunchly anti-union, saw Duke facing a protest where the central demand was collective bargaining for Duke employees. By Tuesday, according to the *Duke Chronicle*, the vigil was “on the verge of virtually shutting down the entire university.” “One can imagine no greater pressure on an administration negotiator,” the paper commented, “than to realize that the students are in control of the University.”⁴⁸

Around 8:00 p.m. Tuesday evening, Griffith told vigil leaders that the university would issue a statement the next day. He told them that they could see the statement before it was released but cautioned that there was little likelihood that any changes would be made based on their input. Griffith also said he saw little possibility that the university would agree to collective bargaining.⁴⁹

Despite Griffith’s cautionary statements, vigil participants continued to believe that the demonstration could achieve its demands. “Participants sincerely felt,” Henderson wrote, “that the university had a great opportunity to take a significant step forward in race relations and in progressive labor practices in the South.” “In hindsight,” Henderson wrote in his journal for Tuesday, “it seems rather naive to think that we could appeal to the moral consciences of men, on the issue of collective bargaining, who had been fighting unions and organized labor all their lives.”⁵⁰

Hope prevailed, however, even in the face of discouraging feedback. Early in the protest, Small had characterized the vigil as an “act of faith.” The “spirit and faith” of vigil participants was “just overwhelming,” she said. Asked by a reporter why so many at Duke participated in a nonviolent protest while campuses around the world were seeing violent confrontations, Small explained that “sometimes hope takes its last stand.”⁵¹ It was this hope that drew more than 1,400 Duke students and faculty to sleep on the quad Tuesday night.

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Maids and janitors on West Campus went on strike on Wednesday morning. As vigil participants woke up, picket lines were forming around dormitories, the divinity school, and the engineering, physics, and biological sciences department buildings. Rain drenched the protesters.⁵²

The Executive Committee of the board of trustees started meeting early Wednesday morning. The meeting lasted most of the day. “It really took a long

time to hammer out some of these things,” Griffith explained. He described the discussion on the minimum wage demand. “Trustees were focused on how are we going to find that money,” he recounted, “where is it going to come from, was it the right thing to do, could we do it under the pressure of the vigil, is the university caving in? It was a very politicized situation,” he recalled.⁵³

In the afternoon, 160 Duke law students assembled on the quad to show support for the vigil. Much more significant, Howard Fuller, community organizer Benjamin S. Ruffin Jr., and 100 leaders of the Black community in Durham marched to campus. Looking back years later, Bertie Howard said that seeing the group from the United Organizations for Community Improvement and the Durham Black community arrive on campus and join the protest was one of the “things about the Vigil [that] will always remain with me.”⁵⁴

Around 3:00 p.m., Cook, just back from King’s funeral in Atlanta, spoke to the vigil crowd. “Just as it is hard to believe that Martin Luther King is dead,” he told the protesters, “it is equally difficult to believe that a movement for social justice and equality . . . is alive at Duke.” Cook echoed King’s last speech, in which the civil rights leader spoke of having seen the “Promised Land.” “My eyes, physically now,” he told the protesters, “have some vision of the glory of the coming of social justice to this University and country, because of you.”

Cook then spoke of King’s funeral:

As I saw, from afar, the casket containing his lifeless body, I was sustained by the knowledge of a thousand or more bodies, full of life, vision, and integrity, here carrying on his legacy in the spirit and in conformity with his ideals and methods. I was uplifted by the fact that you had made his mission your very own. And I am sure that Martin Luther King would be proud of you—mighty proud of you. Your vigil wiped my tears and helped to sustain me. *You provided, at a tragic moment, roses for my soul.*

Continued Cook, “A few minutes after the assassination of Dr. King the other night, a great soul, Dr. John Strange, came to our house.” Strange asked, “How much more can you take? Can you take any more? Haven’t you had enough?” According to Cook, “In a split second, my mind roamed over the tragic pilgrimage of my people since 1619. I wanted to give a religious answer—in the tradition of the faith of my fathers. I couldn’t. How could I say anything in the name of God when Martin Luther King, a good man and great soul, had been assassinated? I struggled over alternatives. But they did not satisfy me. I have been haunted by John’s probing question.”⁵⁵

“I think I have the answer now,” Cook told Strange and the other two thousand listeners:

I can go on affirming life; and I and other Negroes can go on hoping and believing in the promise of America; we can go on believing that we are going to be free someday because of people like you and all other members of this magnificent vigil. This provides hope and succor for my spirit. You are helping to create that kind of community, where, in the days ahead, after this long and tragic night of racial separation and misunderstanding, you and I, white and black together, can shout from the mountain top and the valleys of our innermost being and say what is inscribed on Martin Luther King’s grave: “We all are free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are FREE at last.”⁵⁶

The emotional climax of the Silent Vigil, Cook’s speech prompted loud cheers and was replayed often in everyone’s memories. By connecting the vigil to the life and work of King, Cook had embraced the tactics and goals of the protest while validating the efforts of the demonstrators to advance the cause of racial justice at Duke.

Shortly after Cook’s speech, vigil negotiators were summoned to the university development office, where they received a very different message. The Executive Committee had finished meeting and Tisdale was ready to share a copy of the university’s official response to the vigil. Although Tisdale was described as “cordial,” he would not consider changes or offer any interpretations of the written text. Tisdale told the students that he was prepared to deliver the statement to the vigil participants in person.⁵⁷

Reading Tisdale’s planned remarks, negotiators saw immediately that the university’s response to the four demands was unacceptable. They also noted, however, that the chairman’s statement contained no threats to clear the quad by force or to close the university. The administrative working team had succeeded in persuading Tisdale to respond to the Silent Vigil with restraint. At the executive committee meeting, “Bill [Griffith] and I hardly had to say a word,” Huestis recounted. “Wright explained what the students were trying to say to us, emphasizing that these were our best and brightest students. He did a beautiful job explaining it.” Griffith remembered that Tisdale “used the same arguments that we had used.” Among other points, Tisdale told the executive committee, according to Griffith, ““These are our kids, they are part of our family . . . You basically work with your family.” He was “just very eloquent,” Griffith recalled. Huestis, for one, was surprised. “Here was a man I’d been fighting for forty-eight hours.”⁵⁸

In his brief statement on the quad to vigil participants, Tisdale acknowledged the protesters' "deep concern with respect to the human issues which have now so intensely been brought into focus" and told them he "personally share[s] this concern with you." Tisdale recognized that "Duke University has its own responsibilities" in addressing the "great trouble" the nation is facing. Tisdale then responded to the demand for a \$1.60 per hour minimum wage for all Duke workers. While not willing to act immediately, Tisdale committed the university to achieving the \$1.60 minimum by July 1, 1969—two years before the legally mandated deadline. Further, Tisdale said, the university would make a "significant step" toward this goal by July 1, 1968. Tisdale said nothing about collective bargaining. He characterized the final two demands—that Knight sign the newspaper ad and that he resign from Hope Valley—as personal to the Duke president. A response to those demands would await Knight's return.⁵⁹

After Tisdale finished, the crowd began to sing "We Shall Overcome." Asked to join in by a student, Tisdale "gave a long, level, cold stare," according to Huestis, "and said, 'I'm not sure I can do that.'" However, as Tisdale started to walk away, Oliver Harvey recalled, a "white student grabbed him and had him rocking." Standing just feet from the board chair, Huestis became "suddenly aware" that Tisdale was "booming out the song in his baritone voice, and he knew the words! He got caught up in the emotion of the moment," Huestis thought. Criticized later for joining the protesters, Tisdale said that he had done so only because "there would've been a real disturbance" if he refused. "If you saw the picture" of me singing, Tisdale told an alumni group, "you'd know I wasn't happy about it."⁶⁰

In his journal, Henderson credited Griffith and Huestis for the "intense education" they gave Tisdale and for their role in persuading the trustees "not to use force to clear the quad, not to get rid of the leaders, to speak to the issues, to answer them positively, and for Mr. Tisdale to make his statement directly to the Vigil." Henderson believed that if force had been used, "there is no doubt that the University would have been destroyed, possibly with violence, undoubtedly by instant attrition by professors and students."⁶¹

If total catastrophe had been averted, however, the protesters were far from satisfied. The statement from the board of trustees was "totally unacceptable," the student narrator commented. "There is no mention made of collective bargaining. . . . The only people they talked to about this was faculty. They didn't talk to any students, they didn't talk to any workers."⁶²

It is not surprising that the university refused to address, let alone concede, the issue of collective bargaining. "Duke was nervous about unions

and collective bargaining,” board member Mary D. B. T. Semans commented later, “and there was much apprehension about them during the Vigil period.” Griffith also recognized the power of the anti-union sentiment on the board. “I think the trustees were very much opposed to collective bargaining,” he commented. “I think a lot of them were . . . textile people [who had] successfully fought the union situation.” These trustees were aware that any concession Duke made to its nonacademic employees could set a precedent in labor negotiations for other companies in the area. “I hope the union isn’t recognized,” Tisdale told a Detroit alumni group in May 1968. “I don’t think it is good for the individuals involved.”⁶³

Because it was still raining, more than one thousand vigil participants moved into Page Auditorium to discuss the next steps for the protest. “In Page Auditorium,” Henderson reported, “there was unanimous discontent with the statement from the Trustees.” The meeting of vigil participants lasted nearly six hours and was, by all accounts, chaotic. Kinney called it “democracy run amok.” According to the *Duke Chronicle*, Silent Vigil leader Jack Boger and other speakers were interrupted “as hundreds repeatedly jumped to their feet shaking their fists and four fingers, and shouting in solidarity ‘Four, Four.’” “The dissension Saturday night at Dr. Knight’s house was nothing compared with this,” Henderson wrote.⁶⁴

A meeting of the Academic Council attended by approximately four hundred faculty members concluded just as Tisdale was delivering his remarks to the vigil. At its meeting, the council unanimously adopted a resolution supporting the goals of the vigil, urging amnesty for all striking workers and asking all faculty and students to “return to their classrooms, libraries and laboratories.” Students and faculty could have the assurance, the resolution stated, “that those . . . issues that generated the [vigil] will receive the continued attention of the faculty, students, and administrative authorities of the University.” The council also established a committee, chaired by economics professor John Blackburn, to “determine the adequacy of the university’s relationship with its non-academic employees.” Early in the evening, the Executive Committee of the Academic Council arrived at Page Auditorium to tell students about these developments.⁶⁵

The discussion in Page Auditorium continued with no consensus. With the Silent Vigil having failed to obtain meaningful concessions from the university, many students pushed for more militant action. “[We] absolutely entertained” the idea of occupying the Allen Building, Henderson remembered. “It was widely discussed. . . . We assumed we couldn’t pull it off.” He continued,

“Given what we had built, it was impossible to move more than twenty-five or thirty people into Allen Building. There were large numbers of people who would have felt set up and sold out. They were there peacefully—that was the whole theme.”⁶⁶

Eventually the protesters adopted a series of proposals put forth by Strange. The vigil would be suspended for a ten-day moratorium. During this time, students would continue to honor the dining hall boycott and staff picket lines while raising monies for a strike fund. In addition, the *Duke Chronicle* reported, participants would “carry the argument of the Vigil to the classroom” to convince people to support the goals of the vigil and to “take advantage of the support [the vigil had] received, in Durham and nationwide.” Finally, a committee of students, workers, and faculty would be created (Vigil Strategy Committee). This group would meet regularly to plan strategy for the protest and to investigate the implementation of collective bargaining at Duke.⁶⁷

Although the vigil had failed to achieve a single one of its four demands, some students and faculty began to characterize the protest as a success. “We have realized our great end already,” religion professor John Sullivan told the gathering in Page Auditorium. “You have transformed the university.” An editorial in the *Duke Chronicle* echoed this theme. It described the Silent Vigil as more than a means for gaining the four demands and memorializing King. “More essentially,” the paper wrote, “it was a call for a change in spirit, a call for the University . . . to take a position of leadership in the community, a call for recommitment by whites to the principle of non-violence, and to working together to help Blacks. This, we feel, was to a large extent accomplished.” “We have seen things happen here,” the paper concluded, that would have “seemed inconceivable less than a week ago.”⁶⁸

The workers and their allies in the Black community had a very different view of events. They were not ready to suspend their protest or to declare the Silent Vigil even a partial success. “I was very impressed by the number of people they got to sit on the quad,” Howard Fuller commented. “They felt they had achieved a victory by sitting on the grass. To me, the victory has not been won until the union gets everything it has asked for.” The strike would continue, the *Duke Chronicle* reported, because “Local 77 felt that they were given no satisfactory answers on the \$1.60 minimum wage and collective bargaining.” “I don’t know what anybody else’s plans are, but we’re striking,” Brandon said. Harvey emphasized the importance of collective bargaining. “We appreciate what you have done very much,” he told the students. “You have helped us live a decent life.” For Harvey and the workers, however, the path forward

was clear. “We’re going on if you decide to go back. Sink or swim, live or die, we’re going on.”⁶⁹

On Wednesday night, vigil participants slept in Duke Chapel, Page Auditorium, and the West Campus Union. Well after midnight, Tisdale announced to Griffith that he wanted to visit Duke Chapel. Tisdale “had a strong feeling for the chapel,” Griffith explained. It “was very important to him, to his faith.” Griffith cautioned the board chair that if he appeared on campus, he might “need to speak to people.” Despite this warning, Tisdale went to the chapel, accompanied by Griffith and Ashmore. Student David Roberts who was in the chapel to “dry out” remembered seeing “an older man” who “looked up at the ceiling and bowed his head.” Although no one disturbed the board chair as he prayed, a student identified Tisdale on his way out. “They gathered around and they really put the pressure to him,” Griffith recounted, “just like a beehive.” Tisdale was, according to Henderson, “absolutely adamant that Duke would never have collective bargaining.” The *Duke Chronicle* reported that the board chair “reiterated the determination that he will not recognize a union because ‘a union can’t get nothing for these workers that we will not give them.’” Alarmed that Tisdale’s remarks were making an already volatile situation worse, Griffith and Ashmore pulled him out. “We were just anxious to get him out of there,” Griffith remembered, “and he was anxious to leave.”⁷⁰

Thursday morning began with another mass meeting of vigil participants in Page Auditorium. Many students were angry when they learned of Tisdale’s chapel remarks the prior evening. Nevertheless, the decisions made the prior evening to declare a ten-day moratorium on the vigil and continue the dining hall boycott retained majority support. In addition, the Vigil Strategy Committee would meet regularly to plan strategy and investigate the implementation of collective bargaining at Duke.⁷¹

Midmorning, vigil protesters reassembled on the main quadrangle. To mark the suspension of the Silent Vigil, the group marched to East Campus. A rally at 7:00 p.m. on the quad in front of Duke Chapel was planned.

Later Thursday, the university learned that Knight had been hospitalized. Although William Anlyan commented that further testing was needed to predict how long Knight would be on leave, he told the *Duke Chronicle* that initial indications were that Knight faced a recovery period that “may be a few weeks.”⁷²

Almost three thousand people attended the 7:00 p.m. rally on the main quad, the largest such gathering in the history of Duke University. Professor Charles Tanford told the protesters exuberantly, "You have wrought a revolution!" Not everyone was persuaded, however, that significant progress, let alone a revolution, had been achieved. "A large segment of the crowd," the *Duke Chronicle* reported, "decried the observation . . . that the Vigil had won important victories."⁷³

The ten-day vigil moratorium was taken up by "rallies, strategy meetings, and planning sessions." Dining hall workers remained on strike. The student boycott of the West Campus dining halls continued. According to Theodore Minah, Duke's dining hall director, the boycott was 75 percent effective on West Campus. Minah also said that as many as one hundred Duke students had crossed the picket lines to work in the dining halls.⁷⁴

On Monday, April 15, the full university board met in an all-day session. In response to a request from Griffith, vigil leaders prepared packets of information on the protest for board members. Included was a written statement strongly advocating for collective bargaining. Given the anti-union attitude of many of its members, however, there was little chance that the university board of trustees would agree to *any* form of collective bargaining. Rather than make its position on collective bargaining clear in mid-April, however, on the advice of Cole and other administrators, the board remained silent on the issue.⁷⁵ In doing so, the board delayed the strongly negative student and union reaction that would inevitably follow the announcement of its final position on the issue. Such a strategy worked to the university's advantage, the trustees likely thought, because it would be difficult for students to reignite substantial protest at the end of the semester.

Although the board might have avoided inflaming protesters on collective bargaining, the statement it released Tuesday was hardly conciliatory. Stepping back from Knight's commitment to form a committee of students, faculty, administrators, trustees, and workers to address employment-related issues, the board established a Special Trustee-Administrative Committee (Special Committee) to "look into . . . the adequacy of the relationship between the university and its non-academic employees." In a powerful statement of the real intent of the trustees, neither students nor any nonacademic employees were included on the committee. In what the board may have regarded as a concession, the statement "invited" striking workers to return to their jobs "with full standing." Finally, the statement announced that the July 1 raise for nonacademic employees promised by Tisdale would be spelled out "as soon

as information is available [on] University resources [for] this purpose.” The statement ended by cautioning that the resolutions to the open issues “will not advance further for some time.”⁷⁶

The composition of the Special Committee was also problematic. While the committee was not precluded from considering collective bargaining, Tisdale populated it with trustees whom he knew would oppose any such arrangement. Henry Rauch, CEO of Burlington Industries, would be the chair. Charles B. Wade Jr., vice president of R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, P. Huber Hanes Jr., president of Hanes Corporation, and Walter M. Upchurch, senior vice president of the Shell Company’s foundation, would serve as members. Rauch, Wade, and Hanes, professor Peter Klopfer wrote, “are associated with companies whose reputations in the area of labor are notorious, to say the least.” Their personal opposition to the principles of collective bargaining and fair grievance procedures was, according to Klopfer, “unremitting.” As for Upchurch, he had been personnel director at Duke “at a time when the exploitation of Duke’s nonacademic employees was at its height.”⁷⁷ Although there would be other members of the Special Committee, it was unthinkable that senior executives of Burlington, R. J. Reynolds, and Hanes and a former director of personnel at Duke would allow a collective bargaining recommendation to come out of the group.

Both the students and the union reacted to the April 15 board’s action with anger and disbelief. At a Tuesday night rally of 2,500 students and faculty on the main quad, Boger called the statement “disappointing and inadequate.” He explained, “They have not so much as mentioned in their statement collective bargaining.” Edward L. McNeill, president of Local 77, was even more direct. Rejecting the statement “even before he had heard it,” McNeill said the trustees could have done something better with their time. Still, the previously announced ten-day moratorium on student protest would continue.⁷⁸

More than two thousand people attended a vigil rally on Wednesday night featuring folk singer Pete Seeger. Harvey assured the crowd of his unshakable determination to continue the fight. “I want to let you know,” he told the protesters, “we’re not going to give up.” Harvey told rallygoers that the striking workers needed \$2,000 to \$3,000 per week to remain on strike. He asked them to continue their efforts to raise money and to boycott the dining halls.⁷⁹

Despite his strong statement at the rally, with the strike by dining hall and housekeeping workers nearing the end of its second week, Harvey was aware that time was running out to resolve the labor action. “The University had almost won,” Harvey remembered, “because our employees had gotten . . . worried

about getting back on the job. They were fixin' to leave me." Harvey was "very, very worried" because he knew "we would lose at Duke if we walked back in there," he recalled. "But by the help of God," he recounted, "on the thirteenth day . . . my wife called me and said that the Trustee board wanted to meet with me." Harvey had been seeking such a face-to-face meeting with the trustees for years. He considered the chance to speak directly to Duke's governing body a significant accomplishment.⁸⁰

Harvey appeared at a Special Committee meeting held on campus on April 20. The nonacademic employees "didn't get anywhere" at this meeting, Harvey remembered, "because my main point was what we had struck for was exclusive recognition. But they talked all around that." Instead, the Special Committee proposed that "another type of organization" be set up. "They pleaded to us to go back, to call off the strike, and no person would be penalized," Harvey said. Faced with this response, the workers decided to go back to their jobs. "So we come to the conclusion to end the strike," Harvey explained, "by promises from the Trustee board that we would work with an organization that we'd agree on together that would [have] the same meaning to us as a union, and that everybody would be brought up to a \$1.60 minimum."⁸¹

Student representatives also met with the Special Committee, stressing the importance of collective bargaining. The *Duke Chronicle* reported "that the students were pleased at the receptiveness of some of the committee members to their proposals." Rauch told the students, according to the student newspaper, that the committee "wanted to provide personal dignity and integrity in the decision-making process of the University." Despite the facade of amiable give-and-take, however, students had almost no negotiating leverage in the meeting. "We did not have the strength or the organizational ability to be determining what would go on in the negotiating sessions," Henderson explained. "We were negotiating from a position of threat, not strength." "I think we got a little seduced," Gutman said decades later. "We were sitting down with the trustees and we had the vigil on our shoulders. . . . I think the firmness we showed when we planned the vigil, the firmness we had out on the quad, I don't think it was [there] quite as much . . . in that room."⁸²

During their meeting, the members of the Special Committee also reviewed a university study comparing the wages of Duke's nonacademic employees with compensation levels at state universities in North Carolina. The findings were stark. The study found that the minimum wage paid to employees at state universities was \$1.45 per hour, more than 20 percent higher than the \$1.15 per hour minimum wage at Duke. In addition, wages paid to employees

at state universities with more than five years of experience were “substantially higher” than those paid to comparable employees at Duke. Finally, the study considered how the university’s payroll system was administered. Confirming a claim that Duke workers had been making for years, the study found that the administration of the wage structure at Duke was “extremely poor.” Actual wages paid to nonacademic employees at Duke, the study found, were “in most instances at substantial variance with the approved rate ranges for each job classification.” This meant that many employees at Duke were not even being paid the amount applicable to their job classification.⁸³

The wage study was central to the Special Committee’s recommendation that “prompt action . . . be taken to bring Duke wages more nearly in line with those currently paid by the State Universities.” Armed with a study showing wages at Duke “grossly out of line” with other schools, Huestis explained, “we were able to lay in front of [the trustees] the figures. They didn’t hesitate.” “We didn’t feel like our conscience could be cleared before we took care of” the wage disparity, Special Committee member Wade recalled. “We were grateful to the students. We were just sorry the students had to go to the length they did.” Huestis emphasized that this was not “a decision to break up the Vigil.” Rather, Huestis noted, “it was a statement by the trustees that this was something they felt was the right thing to do.”⁸⁴ The fact that Duke administrators had not previously provided this compelling and readily available market data on wages to the board speaks powerfully to how little concern they had for the economic circumstances of the university’s nonacademic employees.

On Saturday, April 20, at 9:00 p.m., following what Cole called a “long and soul-searching deliberation,” the Special Committee released a statement. The committee acknowledged that “inadequacies in the relationship of the University and its non-academic employees do exist” and expressed its intent “to work as rapidly as possible to remedy them.” The minimum wage for Duke employees would be raised from \$1.15 per hour to \$1.45 per hour on May 6, 1968, bringing it to the level at state universities. On June 3, 1968, “additional appropriate adjustments” would be made for employees earning more than \$1.34 per hour. Finally, the statement reaffirmed the university’s commitment to reach a \$1.60 minimum wage by July 1, 1969. Huestis advised the Special Committee that the annual cost of these wage adjustments was approximately \$2 million.⁸⁵

Although the Special Committee once again made no reference to collective bargaining, students, faculty, and workers still reacted positively. “There was an atmosphere of general elation in the strategy session following the

release of the statement,” Henderson reported, and “everyone seemed to feel that we had won a significant victory.” The workers were similarly encouraged, commenting that “they never would have believed that things would have worked out to this point . . . so well.” The “statement changed everything,” the student narrator observed. In its response to the Special Committee, the Vigil Strategy Committee said it looked forward to “the establishment of structures that will allow effective employee participation in decisions affecting their relationship with the University.” At least some students continued to believe that these “structures” could include some form of collective bargaining.⁸⁶

The striking workers met on Sunday afternoon and voted to return to work for a “trial period” of three weeks. The Local 77 president declared that this suspension of the strike was to “allow time for the students, faculty, and trustees to consider and act upon the issues and conditions which have arisen from the strike.”⁸⁷ In addition, returning to work was a financial necessity for the striking workers. Most could no longer sustain the loss of income from being out of work.

At this point, Huestis and Griffith, among others, urged the students to refrain from further protest. In their view, any escalation would jeopardize support for the vigil’s demands among faculty, administrators, and trustees. Vigil leaders accepted this advice. Further protest activities would be low-key and the dining hall boycott was suspended. Given the arc of events, however, the student narrator—among others—was starting to doubt the trustees’ good faith. “My only concern,” he said at the time, was that “I’m not so sure that the trustees are playing fair with us. They could very well just be leading us down the garden path. . . . We’ll just have to keep our fingers crossed and hope that they deal with us in good faith,” he concluded.⁸⁸

A nighttime rally attended by four hundred students and some faculty was held on Sunday, April 21. It was, according to Henderson, “a victory celebration.” “Participants felt that the University was finally moving in the right direction,” he wrote. “Our methods had worked; we had proven that people with concern could effect rapid, progressive change.”⁸⁹

Rauch also thought that things were heading in the right direction. He wrote to the board of trustees on April 22, reassuring them that “only about 400 students, faculty members and employees” participated in the rally the previous night. This was only a fraction of the more than two thousand who had attended the final vigil rally and Seeger concert only ten days earlier. “While our statement did not go as far as [faculty and student groups] would have liked,” Rauch told the trustees, “they accepted it as evidence of good faith

and exerted their full influence on the faculty, students and employees on Sunday to accept it as evidence of definite progress.”⁹⁰

With all the celebration, however, the central issue of collective bargaining remained unresolved. The *Duke Chronicle* reported that McNeill told the Sunday night rally crowd that workers would return to their jobs for three weeks, “while the faculty, trustees, and committees had time to make constructive movement toward collective bargaining at Duke.” “We’ll be right back” on strike, Harvey told the rally, “if constructive progress towards collective bargaining is not made within three weeks.” Vigil leaders agreed. “This thing might not be over,” vigil leader Bob Creamer told the rally. “The trustees have made a few statements but certainly have not instituted collective bargaining. We’ve got to let the trustees know we’re still here.” “We cannot return to normalcy,” Strange told the rally crowd. “The effort to build the beloved community is long and difficult [and] we have only begun.”⁹¹ In the days leading up to the end of the spring semester, students and workers would learn just how “long and difficult” the effort would be.

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By May 5, two weeks had passed since the first encouraging statement from the Special Committee. No word had yet been received from the committee on the issue of collective bargaining. With the end of the three-week moratorium approaching, vigil leaders were becoming increasingly aware that their key demand might not be achieved. “Things are very much up in the air,” Creamer commented.⁹²

Several days later, on May 9, the Vigil Strategy Committee issued a statement expressing its growing concern “about the progress of the special committee . . . toward creating a collective bargaining system for Duke’s non-academic employees.” It called the absence of any communication from the Special Committee “disappointing” and declared its support for a complete boycott of the university dining halls on May 10.⁹³

On Saturday, May 11, one day before the three-week moratorium was set to expire, the Special Committee finally released a brief statement. The committee proposed establishing a “council of non-academic employees” at the university. It also indicated that it was looking into forming a “Duke University Employee Relations Advisory Committee” composed of administrators, faculty members, and nonacademic employees. Neither proposal addressed collective bargaining in any form. The statement also said that the Special

Committee would be reconvening on Wednesday, May 15, and hoped to meet at that time with faculty representatives, students, and workers.⁹⁴

In a final attempt to apply pressure to the Special Committee when it met on May 15, the Vigil Strategy Committee decided to reconvene the vigil at 2:00 p.m. on May 14. “It is with despair and disappointment that we return to the quadrangle,” a Vigil Strategy Committee statement explained. “We believed that the Trustees were acting in good faith. . . . It is now obvious that there was no good faith and no understanding. . . . We must be on the quad to demonstrate that we expect collective bargaining and will not accept less.”⁹⁵

The workers were also deeply disappointed by the Special Committee’s statement. Oliver Harvey told the *Duke Chronicle* that while employees would report to work on Monday, May 13, representatives of the different departments would meet on May 14 “to determine if and when the non-academic employees union members would begin striking again.” Harvey’s message to the Vigil Strategy Committee was somewhat different. He told the committee that a strike during the waning days of the spring semester was unlikely because students would be leaving for summer vacation and many nonacademic employees would be furloughed during that time. Anticipating his upcoming meeting with the Special Committee, Harvey told the *Duke Chronicle* that collective bargaining is the “main issue” and that the workers “are not planning to commit ourselves to anything else.”⁹⁶

On May 14, students and faculty marched from East Campus to West Campus to reconvene the vigil. In contrast to early April when nearly 1,500 protesters slept on the quad, now just over two hundred joined the march. Because of a downpour, participants in the May vigil moved inside the chapel around 6:00 p.m. and remained there overnight. Student protesters and their faculty supporters were “disillusioned with the Board of Trustees,” Creamer commented. “We are here out of sadness and determination.” Leaders announced that the vigil would remain on the quad until after the Special Committee meeting the next day.⁹⁷

In Duke Chapel, many vigil participants were busy working on end-of-semester projects. To understand why the turnout was so small, the *Duke Chronicle* conducted a “random sampling” of participants in the Silent Vigil who did not join the vigil when it reconvened. Some were uncomfortable that the protest now focused exclusively on collective bargaining. Most Silent Vigil participants who did not participate in May, however, cited pragmatic reasons. One “typical ex-Vigiler,” the student newspaper reported, commented,

“I have too much damn work to do, finals and papers are . . . approaching, and being out there tonight just doesn’t stack up.”⁹⁸

When they met with the Special Committee on May 15, the students’ fears were confirmed. The Special Committee would not be recommending collective bargaining in any form. The scene was confrontational. Collective bargaining “has gotta happen,” Small declared. “The time has come. Duke’s not a plantation.” At this point, according to Small, “Henry Rauch started shaking—literally shaking. He said, ‘There will never be collective bargaining at Duke University.’” Instead, the Special Committee identified seven areas that would be the focus of efforts to enhance employer-employee relations at Duke.⁹⁹

The Special Committee delivered this same message to the workers. Harvey was direct in his response. According to the *Duke Chronicle*, he asked the committee whether the trustees were totally against collective bargaining. While trustee Brantley Watson responded, “We have not said we are against collective bargaining,” Rauch interjected, “I am!”¹⁰⁰

Rauch also made his position clear when he transmitted the Special Committee’s recommendations to the full board. He expressed the group’s desire to improve relations between the university and its nonacademic employees and described the nonacademic employee “council” that the Special Committee recommended be established by the university. Rauch made clear to the board, however, that the creation of the employee council did not mean any change in who controlled the labor-management relationship at Duke. Employee participation, he assured the board, “is [not] intended in [any] way to transfer decision making responsibility to employees.”¹⁰¹

As the Special Committee was meeting on May 15, a group of about eight members of the small Duke chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) decided that they no longer had any choice but to escalate the protest. The group entered the Allen Building, then staged a brief sit-in in the lobby on the second floor. Hutch Traver, the group’s leader, saw the tactics of the vigil as too moderate. “Like the Afro-Americans have realized in past weeks,” he said, “most of us realize the ways of the liberals don’t work now.” Once the SDS members entered the Allen Building, Traver tried to persuade those in the larger vigil group on the quad to join the sit-in. He was unable to do so. After about thirty minutes, the SDS members left the Allen Building. Traver later called the attempt at escalation a “disaster.” “For some reason it just died,” he recounted. “We got upstairs, sat down. . . . There weren’t even enough of us to block traffic in the lobby.”¹⁰²

The Special Committee did not make its specific recommendations public. Instead, the committee issued only a brief general statement saying that it intended to work on spelling out the details of the program that had been outlined. “We don’t expect you to be happy with this,” Huestis said to the students when he handed the statement to them.¹⁰³

Huestis was right. The *Duke Chronicle* reported that vigil leaders responded to the statement with “resigned disgust” and that a “sense of frustration seemed to grip many participants.” The Vigil Strategy Committee said it was “extremely disappointed” that “little progress [had been made] on collective bargaining.” The students were getting “increasingly disillusioned” about the prospects for working with the Special Committee, the *Duke Chronicle* editorial board wrote. Noting the committee’s “intransigence” on the issue of collective bargaining, the paper correctly stated that students saw “no hope of dialogue with a group which delayed its discussion as long as possible so as to make demonstrations academically difficult.”¹⁰⁴

The nonacademic employees were also very disappointed. As they understood it, the proposed employee council could not enter into a binding agreement with the university and would not be independent. Accordingly, the employee council could do little, if anything, to improve the employees’ negotiating leverage with the university. “The trustees don’t want to negotiate with a union,” a flyer for a meeting of nonacademic employees stated, “but instead want to sit and talk to workers from a council. What’s the difference?” the flyer asked. “Power!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”¹⁰⁵

The vigil soon disbanded. “It looks pretty hopeless,” Gutman told vigil participants. Small told the *Duke Chronicle* that “many students are considering transferring.” “By the end of the vigil,” Henderson said later, “we hadn’t won anything.”¹⁰⁶

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Given that the Silent Vigil failed to achieve its objectives, it is striking that Duke trustees, administrators, faculty, and students now broadly consider the protest as having been highly successful. For many, memories of the vigil have taken on a reverential glow. Cook called it a “transcendent moment and indelible memory.” Trustee Mary D. B. T. Semans recalled “golden moments” during the protest, calling the vigil “a special chapter in the life of Duke.” “It was,” she commented, “a collaboration of students and faculty acting for the betterment of the total university.” Students exhibited a “new maturity” and

“elements of unselfishness,” Semans recounted, “and the administration plus trustees listened and acted.” Professor Alan C. Kerckhoff recalled the event as a “beautiful example of people trying to effect change through nontraditional means.” The vigil had been “inspirational,” he said. “We did this one right,” Kinney recalled. “It showed me the value of a small cadre of people making committed decisions.”¹⁰⁷

What explains this positive view of a protest for racial justice that, in April 1968, nearly shut down the university and ended with leaders feeling “resigned disgust”? One answer is that the vigil had, in some instances, a transformative impact on both Duke University and those who participated in it. Before the vigil, one student wrote in the *Duke Chronicle*, the university was a “peaceful, quiet bastion of Christian morality . . . , a pleasant, sheltered place inhabited by bright, but unconcerned people; where ‘nice kids’ came for four years of beer, basketball games and studying.” After the vigil, that changed. “I use the metaphor of the tree,” Cell reflected in describing the impact of the vigil on Duke. “When the tree is shaking, [you don’t know] what’s going to come down. And it did shake the tree.” Cell saw a “new intensity” at Duke following the Vigil and he was very excited by it. “I told the students the morning of [April] 11 in Page,” he recalled, “that it was the first time I had been really proud of the university.” “I think the vigil made a difference in the institution,” he said later. “It marked the beginning of the changeover from a board comprised of mostly conservative, North Carolina businessmen [to a more progressive board]. The image Duke had of itself,” Cell commented, “and the kind of people who were in positions of power changed.” Small, among others, dismissed the view that the vigil itself caused any fundamental change in the university. “That’s a bunch of crap,” she said. “As long as people like Henry Rauch are in charge of an institution, it’s going to stay exactly the same.”¹⁰⁸

Students had also been affected. For one thing, the vigil challenged the Cold War mindset that many students had brought with them to college. “It is hard for people today to envision,” Van Pelt later commented, “a time when virtually every American believed without question that we . . . always had been good guys, which is why we were a wealthy nation that never lost a war; that our leaders and law enforcement officials were on a mission from God.” The vigil challenged these assumptions. “For five days we made common cause with one another and the workers,” student David Roberts recalled. “Many of us found ourselves in growing realization that the world might not be so predictable, that our lives might not progress from comfort to comfort, that we would not have the luxury of ignoring or merely observing the anguish

and misfortune of Black Americans.” Campus activists had found a new momentum. “Many white people,” according to McLeod, “have been forced to think for the first time.” “‘Activist’ will no longer be regarded as an epithet” at Duke, the student newspaper commented.¹⁰⁹

For a number of students, the vigil had a profound personal impact. One alumnus writing on behalf a group of Duke graduates living together in California years after the vigil found that “the days of protests seem naive now.”

Yet the Vigil was a true and important beginning. We learned on the sodden and trampled grass of the quad that people can live and work together, and that ordinary people possess within themselves the power to change the world. Yes, I remember panty-raids, blue jeans, drugs, making love (Duke Gardens!). I even remember Freddy Lind’s great play to beat UNC in overtime. But most of all, I remember the Vigil. The spirit of it lives on here.

Another participant wrote that “those four or five days when I participated in the Vigil, and my two days of sitting on the quad is very important in my life. Participating in an . . . active show of support for something I very much believed in,” she said, “gave me a foundation for later active participation in my academic and work communities. None so dramatic or meaningful as the Vigil, but all stemming from my experience then.” “I was never the same” after the vigil, student Clay Steinman commented. “I was now someone who saw my life as being interconnected with the lives of others. I can’t tell you what a change that was.”¹¹⁰

The vigil also had a positive impact on Duke’s nonacademic employees. Responding to one of the vigil’s demands, the university agreed to a significant increase in the minimum wage for Duke workers, bringing it up to the level paid at state universities. In September, Huestis announced that the university would meet the \$1.60 per hour minimum wage by October 7, 1968. The cost to the university for these increases was not insignificant. Soon after the vigil, more customary job descriptions and job classifications were developed for Duke’s nonacademic employees and, under Huestis’s leadership, the payroll system was administered in a more professional manner. As plans for an employee council were worked out with Duke’s nonacademic employees, communication between workers and the university improved along with working conditions for the employees. “Some of this [improvement in worker conditions] would have happened anyway,” Cell commented.¹¹¹ Still, the vigil caused the changes to occur sooner than anyone would otherwise have expected.

Although the positive changes that ensued were one reason why the Silent Vigil is regarded with such favor, another is the self-discipline and order many saw in the protest. Semans had not approved of the occupation of Knight's house. "It was a violation of his rights," she explained, "showing bad manners." Yet her view of the Silent Vigil was much more positive. For her, it was "purposeful and amazingly impressive, non-violent and constructive." Huestis saw the vigil in a similar light. "I think [the vigil on the quad] was a very responsible approach on the part of students," he commented, "who wanted to be heard, who were genuinely concerned and who did it in a style and in a tone that I think reflected credit on the Duke student body." Sociology professor Alan Kerckhoff joined the chorus of praise. "These were all well-mannered, middle-class young ladies and gentlemen who were brought up properly and did things properly. More importantly," he commented, those organizing knew that the "only way to accomplish anything was to do it in a proper manner. . . . It isn't bloodletting, it isn't climbing walls, it isn't destroying property."¹¹²

Some who admired the self-restraint and orderly nature of the vigil even viewed those attributes of the protest as the reason for its "effectiveness." Huestis observed, for example, that the peaceful, controlled vigil "was really a far more effective demonstration than a violent demonstration." Kerckhoff agreed, explaining, "We are dealing with people for whom any overt attack would be defined as not only unacceptable from a legalistic point of view, but would completely erode the bargaining position of the people involved." "We appealed to the better aspects of the white southern church-going population," Kinney explained. "In order to build popular support for [the vigil], . . . we had to do things that were not the same as they did" at Columbia University, where the student protests turned violent. "It was just a totally different environment."¹¹³

The white students and faculty who participated in the Silent Vigil did so, in part, to demonstrate to Black students and workers at Duke and in Durham that nonviolent protest could still work. They wanted to show that by working within the system, a white institution such as Duke could be forced to make dramatic, meaningful changes to advance the cause of racial justice. Knight appears to have concluded that the Silent Vigil accomplished this goal. He described the protest in his memoir as "highly effective."¹¹⁴ Yet how effective was it actually? Answering this question requires more than simply determining whether the vigil resulted in positive developments for the university and its students, which it certainly did. One still must ask whether the vigil was

successful in accomplishing the specific objectives it set out to achieve. Did the remarkably self-regulated, highly organized protest that occurred at Duke in April 1968 achieve the four demands it presented? If not, did it otherwise summon the university to respond to the racial crisis in America by taking a dramatic step to advance racial justice? Did Duke students show that a protest that operates squarely inside the “system” can force meaningful change?

The disposition of the four demands begins to provide an answer. The first demand, that Knight sign the *Durham Morning Herald* ad, was not accepted. Knight refused to lend his name to the ad. Regarding the second demand, that Knight resign from Hope Valley Country Club, the Duke president appeared to be more receptive. He agreed that at some point in the future he would resign from the club, although he would not commit to a specific time frame. It would be another ten months before he took this step, and only due to escalating pressure from Duke’s Black students. The third demand—to increase the minimum wage for Duke employees to \$1.60 per hour—received a more positive response. The university in fact did agree to a significant increase in the minimum wage for Duke workers, a step taken at no small cost. Still, while many observers viewed this wage adjustment as a response to the vigil, other factors were also certainly at work. At the same time as the Silent Vigil, Duke service workers staged a highly effective strike that lasted for almost two weeks. It is at least possible that this strike was a contributing factor in the university’s decision to raise the minimum wage. The compensation study presented to the Special Committee at the same time also certainly played a critical role. How much and how quickly the board would have raised wages in the absence of the worker strike or compensation report cannot be known.

The fourth issue—collective bargaining—is the most problematic and most central. Because it involved a change in the power dynamic between Duke and its workers, acceptance of collective bargaining represented the most dramatic step the university was asked to make in order to distance itself from its traditional “plantation system.” As events demonstrated, the demand for collective bargaining was a nonstarter for the Duke board. Not only did the board refuse to grant this right in any form, but it delayed disclosing its inflexible position until the end of the spring semester. Ultimately, Duke would cede no authority or leverage to the workers in negotiating wages and working conditions at the university.

Every observer is entitled to their own opinion as to whether Duke University rose to the moral challenge posed by the King assassination and the Silent Vigil. Samuel DuBois Cook, King’s longtime friend and the man whose

speech to the vigil captured the spirit of the protest, answered the question in the negative. While not “for a moment [questioning] the good will, motives, honor, or decency of the administration,” Cook assessed the university’s overall response to the vigil critically. “Honestly, painfully, unfortunately, and regretfully,” he wrote thirty years after the event, “the response of the administration was . . . weak, myopic, institutionally unimaginative, ethically insensitive, humanistically blind, extremely disappointing, and quite unworthy not only of Duke, but also its own great potential.” Cook could not “escape or hide the feeling that the administration was terribly on the wrong side of a great moral issue and missed, so sadly, a great and unique opportunity.” “Thankfully,” Cook added, “Duke’s remarkable sense of community stayed intact.”¹¹⁵

With the vigil over, Black campus activism would regain center stage. Attention would turn to the Black students’ demands that the university finally take steps to address their cultural, social, and academic needs. How would these students approach protest and how would the university react? Would Duke’s “remarkable sense of community” survive the encounter? Events occurring at Duke in the fall semester of 1968 would begin to provide these answers.