

BLACK PICKETS UPSET MERCHANTS

CINCINNATI -- Santa Claus, usually rotund and rosy cheeked, has taken on added color (black) and grimmer, leaner look in the war between Retail Merchants Association and the SCLC over the refusal of the merchants to hire a black Santa. In fact the situation has become so tense that four executives representing downtown's leading merchandisers have asked Mayor Eugene P. Ruehlmann to appoint an impartial and representative committee of citizens to review the situation.

This was the second step taken by the downtown merchandisers to offset the heavy pressure being applied by the utilization of SCLC methods. The first step was the delivery, by hand, of copies of a letter sent to Rev. Otis Moss Jr., to leaders in the black community and to the black news media.

The letter, from Fred Lazarus III, chairman of the board at Shillito's, said in part, "I deeply regret that a controversy has developed as it has over the issue of a black Santa Claus between the black community of Cincinnati and Shillito's."

The letter also said "It is now clear that a significant number of people do not consider a black Santa Claus to be incongruous," although Mr. Lazarus had previously stated he believed this to be so.

A further statement in the letter which read, "Frankly, however, in coming to us with your request as late as you did, we had no opportunity to evaluate these facts this year. Since we planned and constructed our Santa Claus area long before you talked to us, it is impossible to rebuild it at this late date." "We will plan our area in which Santa Claus greets children in our store, for the year 1970, in a way that will satisfy the community as a whole, and we plan to include a black Santa Claus in 1970." The letter was not explicit as to whether or not the Santa would be segregated.

A spokesman for the SCLC said the wording of the letter and a closer look at the overall policies of downtown merchants made further negotiations in categories necessary.

Intensified picketing and pressure over Saturday was perhaps the reason for the call for help to the mayor's office.

Agreeing to accept the recommendations of the committee in advance, the four executives, Fred Lazarus III, board chairman of Shillito's; Edward Condon, president of Pogue's; William Schroeder, President of Mabley and Carew, and William Stubenwall, president of McAlpin's asked Rev. Moss to cease the picketing of Shillito's until the committee, if appointed, had time to study the facts.

The telegram to the mayor read:

"As you know, representatives of a national organization (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, of which Rev. Mr. Moss is Cincinnati chapter chairman) with members in Cincinnati have asked the Cincinnati Retail Merchants Assn. to include a black Santa Claus in each store having a white Santa. One store is being picketed because it has not acceded to this request.

"The issue thus raised in the Christmas season is a highly emotional one, as indicated by many diverse responses we and the media have received from customers and other citizens of all races and creeds." "Of course, the stores exist to serve the public and are open to all. We have no desire to inflict our views on any one, or to engage in public controversy."

"Because of the seriousness of the issue raised we urgently request that you promptly name an impartial and representative committee of local citizens to review this matter and make recommendations to us for a fair and equitable solution of the matter. We are asking the organization which has raised the issue to join with us in this request and to cease picketing while your committee finds facts and presents its recommendations.

"We pledge to accept recommendations of your committee on this issue, and ask the organization which has raised the issue to do likewise."

The executive sent a copy of the telegram to Rev. Moss, and in addition sent another telegram to him, which read:

"In response to your request for further consideration of the black Santa issue raised by your organization, we have today asked the mayor of Cincinnati to appoint a committee of representative citizens to review the issue impartially, find the facts and make appropriate recommendations which we agree in advance to accept. We ask you to join with us in this request and to cease all picketing so that the people of Cincinnati can enjoy their Christmas free of this controversy." Rev. Moss said in an interview with the

CALL & POST that a proposed meeting with the Retail Merchants Assn. scheduled for Tuesday Dec. 16, had been cancelled by the Association and until the Association negotiated further with the SCLC on all phases of the hiring practices of the downtown merchants the pressure would not be lifted.