African-Americans in Birmingham, Alabama, protest segregation, 1956-1958

Time period notes: While the campaign lasted almost two years, there were large periods of time with very little activity.

December 20, 1956 to: November 1958

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Birmingham, Alabama

Goals:
To end legal segregation in Birmingham, with a focus on city buses.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 063. Social disobedience
- 162. Sit-in
- 164. Ride-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 011. Records, radio, and television
Assemblies of protest or support
Protest meetings
Consumers' boycott
Boycott of government-supported institutions
Ride-in

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):
Deputations

Classifications
Classification: Change
Cluster: Human Rights
Group characterization:
- Birmingham African-Americans led by black Birmingham ministers. Two-thirds of the ACMHR-the main group in the movement-were early-middle-aged women with low incomes.

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR)
Partners:
The Jefferson County Betterment Association, Reverend Glenn Smiley, and Reverend J.L. Ware
External allies:
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.
Montgomery Improvement Association
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:
- Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Jefferson County Betterment Association
Montgomery Improvement Association
Reverend Glenn Smiley
Reverend J.L. Ware
Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

**Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**
While the National Association of Colored People was involved in every segment, they never exerted a huge force in the Birmingham fight against segregation.

**Segment Length:** 4 months

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**Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

**Opponents:**
Birmingham Police, the Birmingham bus company, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Birmingham City Council.

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
There were isolated incidents of blacks attacking other blacks who chose to ride the buses despite the boycott.

**Repressive Violence:**
On various occasions, black churches were bombed. Fred Shuttlesworth’s house was also bombed. A young African-American was beat and castrated by Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy members. A mob attacked Fred Shuttlesworth. Supporters of the ACMHR were repeatedly arrested.

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**Success Outcome**

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
1 point out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
2 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
A court ruling in 1959 upheld the right of the bus company to continue bus segregation, but violating the bus segregation were no longer a crime.

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In the mid 1950’s, segregation was widespread and legally enforced throughout the American south. Birmingham, Alabama was a hotspot of black activism in opposition to segregationist policies. Between December 26, 1956 and November 1958, Birmingham blacks, led by Fred Shuttlesworth and other black ministers, initiated a campaign against the legal segregation of Birmingham buses.

On December 20, 1956, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth delivered a statement on TV stating that unless Birmingham buses were desegregated in the next six days, blacks, specifically members of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), would desegregate the buses themselves. Five days later, Shuttlesworth’s house was bombed by white supremacists, but he and his family walked away with only minor injuries. The next day, Shuttlesworth urged members of the ACMHR, of which he was president, to follow him in a protest of bus segregation. Shuttlesworth and his supporters boarded city buses, but
they refused to sit in the back of the bus, as African-Americans were obligated to do. The protesters were polite and civil throughout, and after many hours of non-intervention, police arrested twenty-one protesters.

After this initial protest, there was a lull in activity from Shuttlesworth and his supporters. Shuttlesworth himself, however, remained busy. On February 14, 1957, he attended the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in New Orleans. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Reverend Ralph Abernathy were key founding members of the SCLC, and they would later be powerful allies for Shuttlesworth and the Birmingham civil rights movement.

On March 6, Shuttlesworth, along with his wife Ruby, attempted to desegregate the white-only waiting room of the Birmingham train station. Both the police and a gathered white mob left them alone, leading Shuttlesworth to praise the Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner Robert Lindbergh. Lindbergh’s moderate policies toward the civil rights movement came to an abrupt end when he lost the June 1957 election to Bull Connor, who would become known throughout the country for his brutal suppression of black protesters.

The campaign to desegregate Birmingham hit some major hiccups after the initial bus ride. One problem was the lack of active African-Americans. The ACMHR had just 600 members, and only three of those had previously been involved with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Perhaps the biggest problem was the lack of continuity between powerful African-Americans in Birmingham. At the time, Fred Shuttlesworth was still a relatively young minister, and was therefore supposed to defer to his more senior colleagues on important decisions, but Shuttlesworth was not one to take orders. He was fiercely independent, and very persistent in his pursuit of desegregation. He repeatedly challenged Martin Luther King, Jr., over his leadership of the civil rights movement, accusing him of not taking enough direct action to further the movement. In Birmingham, he repeatedly clashed with Reverend J.L. Ware, an experienced and prominent black minister. Unlike Ware, he was not afraid to ruffle feathers, and his speeches were impassioned and laced with cursing, and he came to be known as “the cussing preacher”. Ware advocated a more passive approach than Shuttlesworth, and Shuttlesworth’s insistence on direct action caused the two to quarrel over the best way to advance black rights.

One of the most brutal incidents of violence in Birmingham between 1956 and 1958 occurred on September 2, 1957. A group calling themselves the Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy, a radical, paramilitary offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan, grabbed a young, black man named Judge Aaron off the street and beat him while they drove him back to their headquarters. After more beatings, he was eventually castrated and dumped on a highway. He survived and after some police investigation the perpetrators were arrested. The Klansmen overestimated the loyalty of white juries, pleaded not guilty, and were consequently given twenty-year sentences. The white community at Birmingham was able to dismiss this event as the action of a few radicals, and this horrific event did little to change policies toward blacks.

Seven days later, anti-black violence broke out again. Fred Shuttlesworth attempted to enroll his daughter Ricky in the all-white Phillips high school. As soon as he stepped out of the car, whites attacked him. The mob beat Reverend J.S. Phifer and stabbed his daughter Ruby in the hip. After a few minutes, several police cars arrived on the scene and tried to disperse the crowd and Shuttlesworth escaped. The next day, Shuttlesworth gave a speech forgiving his attackers and vowed to continue the campaign.

After the Phillips High School incident, Shuttlesworth stayed away from direct action for more than half a year and instead focused on reform through legal channels. He met with Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor asking that Birmingham hire black police officers, but Connor refused. Four weeks after Shuttlesworth’s meeting with Bull Connor, Shuttlesworth’s church narrowly escaped a bombing. Indirect collusion between Connor, a few of his officers, and white supremacist J.B. Stoner (he participated in many of the other Birmingham bombings) caused the bombing. A janitor moved the bomb into the street before it could go off.

Back in court, a lawsuit to end bus segregation failed, and Shuttlesworth decided direct action was once again needed. On October 20, 1958 twenty blacks boarded the front of buses in Birmingham. Thirteen were arrested. Though Shuttlesworth had not participated, he was arrested for his role in organizing the protest. On October 27, three ministers from the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), which had organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott two years earlier (see “African Americans boycott buses for integration in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S., 1955-1956”)
joined ACMHR members in Fred Shuttlesworth’s house to discuss the possibility of instituting a bus boycott. Several police officers entered the meeting without a warrant and arrested the three Montgomery ministers on suspicion of vagrancy. That same evening, thousands of African-Americans attended an ACMHR meeting, including ministers brought by Reverend J.L. Ware, who had traditionally been Shuttleworth’s rival. In a reaction to the officer’s arrest and increasing police harassment, ACMHR members called a bus boycott, starting just after Halloween.

The events of October 27 were very important in the Birmingham civil rights movement. Firstly, the arrests of the three Birmingham ministers gained attention nation-wide, producing a condemnation of Bull Connor’s actions by Martin Luther King, Jr. Secondly, despite the unifying nature of the boycott, it was initiated with very little organization. The white minister Glenn Smiley was summoned to Birmingham to help lead the boycott, but he was uncomfortable with the spontaneity of the boycott and Shuttleworth’s direct personality.

Bull Connor vowed to jail anyone that assisted the boycott and he made true on his promise. Police jailed Reverend Charles Billups for accidentally touching an officer’s lapel outside of an ACMHR meeting. Officers also arrested Reverend Charles Woods for urging his congregation to walk rather than take the buses. Ministers got together to discuss strategy and gave press conferences in defense of the ACMHR and condemned Connor’s actions.

After just a little more than a week, the protest began to fall apart. A lack of initial planning was a main cause, but the size of the Birmingham metropolitan area also severely hampered efforts. The small size of Montgomery allowed for an effective car pool system to be set up, but Birmingham’s size, along with Bull Connor’s repressive measures toward an ACMHR carpool made maintaining the bus boycott much more difficult. Blacks in Birmingham were also just much less enthusiastic about the boycott than blacks in Montgomery, and many African-Americans continued to ride the buses during the boycott. Disunity and mistrust between leaders was another cause of the boycott’s failure. After just a week, Glenn Smiley left Birmingham, believing the boycott was doomed to failure, and that the tremendous successes that happen in Montgomery two years prior weren't transportable. After a few weeks, activists abandoned the bus boycott.

Despite the relative failure of the 1958 Birmingham bus boycott, a year later, Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR achieved a partial victory when a judge ruled that while the bus company still had the right to tell blacks to move to the back of the bus, blacks who refused were not doing anything illegal. While this was not the complete and total victory Shuttlesworth and his supporters had hoped for, it was a step forward in the advancement of black civil rights in Birmingham.

Research Notes

Influences:

Sources:


