



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## African Americans campaign for equal accommodations, Birmingham, Alabama, USA, 1963

- U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

April 3,

1963

to: May 10,

1963

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** *Birmingham, Alabama*

### Goals:

1. "Desegregation of lunch counters and all public facilities in all downtown stores"
2. "Immediate establishment of fair hiring practices in those stores including employment of qualified Negroes for white collar jobs"
3. "Dropping of all charges against those who have been arrested during sit-ins"
4. "Establishment of fair hiring practices in all city departments."
5. "Reopening of city parks and playgrounds, all of which are now closed to avoid desegregation"
6. "Establishment of a biracial group to work out a timetable for desegregation of all Birmingham public schools"

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship

- 038. Marches
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 071. Consumers' boycott

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 071. Consumers' boycott

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 175. Overloading of facilities

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 010. Newspapers and journals

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

**Group characterization:**

- College students
- Members of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) and members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- elementary and high school students

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph David Abernathy headed the campaign in Birmingham.

**Partners:**

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

**External allies:**

United Auto Workers and other unions

**Involvement of social elites:**

Al Hibbler, a blind black singer from New Jersey

Harry Belafonte

Attorney General Robert Kennedy

President John F. Kennedy

Singer Joan Baez

Comedian Dick Gregory

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights
- Black Miles College students
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

- Black Birmingham elementary and high school students

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 6 days*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### **Opponents:**

Birmingham's segregated businessmen and City Council; Eugene "Bull" Connor, Public Safety Commissioner; Governor of Alabama George C. Wallace

### **Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not known

### **Campaigner violence:**

Supportive onlookers hurled rocks and bricks at patrolmen one day

### **Repressive Violence:**

Police brutality - clubbing, beatings, police dogs, and pressured fire hoses.

## Success Outcome

### **Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

5 points out of 6 points

### **Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

### **Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

### **Notes on outcomes:**

The campaigners achieved: "Desegregation of lunch counters, rest rooms, fitting rooms and drinking fountains in large downtown department and variety stores within the next 90 days," "Promotion and hiring of Negroes on a nondiscriminatory basis in stores and industries, hiring Negro clerks and salesmen within 60 days by the stores and appointment of a private fair employment committee," "Release of jailed Negro demonstrators on bond or on their personal recognizance," and "Establishment of a biracial committee within two weeks." This reached most of the goals of the campaign, although there were some compromises.

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On April 3, 1963, several black integrationists belonging to the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) entered the Briling Cafeteria in Birmingham and sat at the white's only lunch counter to request service. When they were refused service, these members staged a sit-in. The ACMHR had struggled to desegregate the lunch counter and bring about equal employment opportunities in all sectors for black citizens in Birmingham for seven long years. In the spring of 1963 they joined forces with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), headed by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in order to finally internalize the resolution from the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

This sit-in would be one of many sit-ins organized by the ACMHR- SCLC targeting several segregated businesses of Birmingham. These sit-ins, coupled with a concerted boycott of all segregated commercial institutions, aimed to bring pressure to the white power structure of Alabama—the white business sector and the city council, whose leadership had been contested. After losing the election for mayor, Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's openly racist Public Safety Commissioner, refused to accept Albert Boutwell's win.

The ACMHR-SCLC's original plan for sit-ins and boycotts did not provoke the expected confrontation between the white power structure and the black integrationists; consequently, Reverends Fred Shuttlesworth, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph David Abernathy decided to take more action by organizing marches towards city hall. On April 7, the local police stopped a march and angry black onlookers began to jeer at the police and throw rocks. The police responded by unleashing the dogs upon the crowds. Photos of this event circulated the media and afterwards, Project C was born (C for confrontation).

On April 10, Commissioner Conner and the Chief of Police obtained a temporary injunction that “prohibited movement members from engaging in, sponsoring, promoting or encouraging mass street parades, marches, picketing, sit-ins, and other actions likely to cause a breach of the peace.” This court order specifically targeted the ACHMR and SCLC and named particular members.

With reservations, the leaders of the ACHMR-SCLC decided to disregard the injunction, dismissing it as an illegal and unconstitutional restriction. On April 11 several picketers violated the injunction and were arrested but not charged for the violation.

Commissioner Connor also informed the Esdale Bonding Company, which had been used to bail out the movement members, that it could no longer secure the release of incarcerated demonstrators, “for the city considered his assets insufficient to warrant the bonds.” This presented ACHMR-SCLC with a new tactical crisis; it could no longer guarantee that protesters would be bailed out.

Regardless of the difficulty, on April 12, Good Friday, the integrationists, headed by King, Shuttlesworth and Abernathy, marched along 6th avenue with 50 activists towards City Hall. Hundreds of spectators were watching and some even joined. The group of demonstrators traveled two blocks before confronting Bull Connor; they circumvented his blockade and knelt and prayed in front of the Federal Building. The police detained 54 and arrested 46, including King and Abernathy.

While in jail, King and Abernathy were kept in solitary confinement. Outside the prison walls, white preachers declined to support the movement, stating that a more peaceful and less confrontational method must be implemented to negotiate racial tensions. To this, King responded with the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” which was released to the press on April 18.

Coretta Scott King, King’s wife, called President John F. Kennedy directly to make sure that her husband was being treated well in prison; Kennedy’s immediate response to Corretta’s plea signaled the administration’s concern for Birmingham. King was released on April 20. On April 22, King and Abernathy were tried in court where they were accused of knowingly violating the court’s previous injunction.

At this time, the size of the campaign remained relatively small; the count of those willing to participate in arrestable actions usually remained under 30 volunteers. Due to modest numbers and dwindling national and media attention, the ACHMR-SCLC decided to pursue a more dramatic action; it began to appeal to school-aged children. Students from both elementary schools and high schools received leaflets urging them to join the fight for freedom. Civil rights activists like Malcolm X, as well as President Kennedy, later criticized the decision to recruit children.

On May 2, the children’s crusade, alternatively known as “Operation D Day,” began. Hundreds of children remained home from school and, instead, gathered at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. When the march began, police had no choice but to arrest hundreds of children, which would wreak havoc on the prison facilities. On May 3, the children, sympathizers, and other ACHMR-SCLC members once again assembled on the streets, marching and singing gospel freedom songs. Not wanting to arrest hundreds more because of the lack of room in the prison, Bull Connor ordered the children to be hit with the full force of water from fire hoses. The images of police brutality towards a nonviolent procession of children captivated not only the United States, but also viewers from around the world. Fearing further deterioration of the United State’s image abroad, President Kennedy urged for a solution. The marches and the hoses continued (although on Sunday May 5 the firemen refused Bull Connor’s orders to spray the demonstrators), until a biracial committee made up of white businessmen and Negro leadership began negotiations. At this time, unions like the United Auto Workers donated the funds to bail most of the arrested protesters out of prison.

On May 9, negotiators reached an accord that many persons viewed as being treasonous. On May 10, Reverends King, Shuttlesworth, and Abernathy released the details of the truce that sprung from the negotiations that would bring the campaign to an end. The final agreement provided the white power structure with 60-90 days to bring about the desegregation of public facilities and put in place equal employment opportunities for African Americans.

Although the Birmingham campaign made several compromises, the overall success of the campaign made Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. a public figure and helped him attract thousands nationwide towards the cause of desegregation and racial equality.

## Research Notes

### Sources:

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Morris, Aldon D. "Birmingham Confrontation Reconsidered: An Analysis of the Dynamics and Tactics of Mobilization." *American Sociological Review*, 58(5), Oct 1993. pp 621-636.

### Additional Notes:

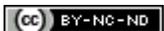
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### Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Aurora Muñoz, 10/10/2009

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