



Global Nonviolent Action Database

Published on *Global Nonviolent Action Database* (<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>)

African Americans campaign for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, USA, 1965

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

January

1965

to: April

1965

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Selma, Alabama; some action also took place in neighboring counties and Montgomery, Alabama*

Goals:

The right for African American citizens to register and vote in Alabama

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 013. Deputations
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 063. Social disobedience
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 5th segment:

- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 6th segment:

- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- African American residents of Selma
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) activists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Rev. Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, Hosea Williams, and James Bevel; Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Partners:

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

External allies:

Northerners, Anti-segregationists throughout the country, Concerned White Citizens of Alabama

Involvement of social elites:

President Johnson and Administration; Ministers, rabbis, and priests from around the country.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Black citizens of Selma
- SCLC
- SNCC

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Concerned White Citizens of Alabama
- Northerners and antisegregationists throughout the USA
- President Johnson
- Religious leaders from around the country

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 3 weeks*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Government in Alabama

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Selma Security Director sought to fight the campaign nonviolently so that the campaign would not gain positive media coverage. Sheriff Clark used buses to obscure view of demonstrators. Alabama Governor ordered whites to stay at home and ignore the march from Selma to Montgomery.

Campaigner violence:

A woman hit the sheriff during one march.

Repressive Violence:

Police beat demonstrators at many of the marches, vigilante men attacked campaigners as well. Three supporters of the campaign were murdered

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign continued to grow up until the march to Selma, after which the Voting Rights Act was already in Congress

Even after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, most African Americans in the southern United States were still unable to vote because of registration requirements such as literacy tests and slow registration processes. In Selma, Alabama the registration office was open only two days a month and could only process 15 registrations for each of these days. This was not nearly enough to register the 15,000 black citizens of voting age in the county. For two years leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had been trying to break down these barriers, but received little outside support. In 1964 Judge Hare in Alabama passed a ban on mass meetings, making this organizational process even more difficult.

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) decided to bring their nonviolent struggle to Selma at the beginning of 1965 in order to enfranchise the black citizens in the South. They began with a mass meeting on January 2, in defiance of Judge Hare's ban. The new public safety director in Selma, Wilson Baker, was determined to fight King's gathering campaign nonviolently so that the media coverage that King would bring would not focus on the campaign in Selma. He hoped that a lack of media coverage would cause King and his team to move on from Selma. The sheriff James Clark, however, had hoped to continue fighting such movements with armed force and intimidation.

Rev. King and hundreds of people in Selma went forth with the first mass meeting despite the ban and were undisturbed by police. The church was packed. Following this first meeting, workers from the SCLC went door-to-door announcing neighborhood meetings to follow on January 7. These meetings served mainly as a place for black residents in Selma to share grievances and let their voices be heard by one another.

Leaders of the SCLC, which included Rev. King, Ralph Abernathy, Hosea Williams, and James Bevel, organized the first march from their church headquarters to the Selma courthouse to register to vote on January 18, one of the two days it was open that month. At mass meetings they had given training in nonviolent defense. Sheriff Clark ordered the marchers to wait in an alley behind the courthouse, out of view of the media, and they were not allowed to register. At the same time they decided to test the cooperation of white businesses with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by seeking service in the restaurants and hotels of Selma. Groups received service at almost every business they entered. A segregationist leader attacked Rev. King at his hotel and was immediately arrested by Baker.

The SCLC wanted a response from the authorities in Selma and they hadn't gotten one yet. So far Baker had kept Sheriff Clark and his men at bay during demonstrations. Clark, however, declared that he would arrest anybody who showed up at the courthouse the following day. After another mass meeting, 67 people marched to the courthouse with the intent to be arrested. The marchers followed Baker's continued orders to break into small groups and clear the sidewalk, but they were met with

hostility by Sheriff Clark, who arrested them, grabbing one woman by the collar and shoving her into a police car.

Having finally raised a response from the police force, organizers decided to step up the campaign and get more people arrested through nonviolent marches and disobedience. They wanted further media coverage to reveal the authority's violence against blacks in the south. The next day three groups of fifty campaigners marched to the courthouse and were arrested for unlawful assembly. Campaigners also began boycotts of white-owned businesses.

On January 22, a Friday, the African American teachers in Selma joined the struggle. Over one hundred teachers marched to the courthouse and announced their intention to register. They were urged to stop by the superintendent and were pushed back from the steps by the sheriff. Despite the stated threat of arrest, the teachers were allowed to pass and marched on to a church where they received joyous support from their students and other members of the campaign.

The courts passed down a new injunction against assembling before the courthouse, which was used against the marchers. The Monday after the teachers' march, campaigners again marched to the courthouse. After provocation a woman hit Sheriff Clark and was then arrested. State troopers, known for their brutality, had also joined local police in Selma.

The SCLC leaders planned further mass arrests, and Rev. King decided that he would be one of them so that he could write a letter from jail as he had in Birmingham two years earlier. On February 1, he and 250 others marched to the courthouse. They disobeyed Baker's orders to break into smaller groups and continued to march. Baker arrested them. The marchers knelt to pray and then went along.

That same day, students stayed out of school and were among 500 more in Selma to be arrested. A new injunction from the courts aimed at getting more people registered did not meet the demands of the campaigners. Marches and arrests continued over the next three days and spread to neighboring counties. By February 5, three thousand people had been arrested and jails in the area were filled.

After four days in jail, Rev. King posted bond and flew to Washington, D.C. to meet with President Johnson, the Vice President, and the Attorney General about a voting rights bill. He was unable to meet with them that day because of problems in Vietnam. After returning to Montgomery, Alabama for another mass meeting he was able to meet with them a few days later.

Meanwhile, in Selma the registration office had made an appearance book available so people who hadn't been able to register could sign and be called in the next day the office was open. Clark had ceased his arrests and took up a nonviolent response to the nonviolent demonstrators. When young African American students began to demonstrate before the courthouse he parked buses to obscure the view of reporters and did not address the youths. On February 10 he had taken enough of their demonstrations, however, and he and his men forced the youths to run to the city limits, chasing the running students in cars and beating them as they ran.

These actions gave the campaign new life, and the mass meetings and marches continued. On February 15 the African American demonstrators formed the longest line yet in front of the courthouse and the same occurred in neighboring counties. Black and white citizens held meetings together to discuss the problem at hand. The white authorities in Selma granted the demonstrators the right to march, and the students, who had not been attending school in order to protest, agreed to return to classes.

To further escalate the campaign SCLC leaders decided to hold night marches, knowing this would further provoke the police forces and whites. The first was held on February 18 in the neighboring town of Marion. As the marchers left the church to begin marching, state troopers attacked both demonstrators and members of the media. Troopers shot one young man, Jimmy Jackson. After this, the leadership in Selma cancelled night marches because of death threats against Rev. King.

On February 28, campaigners held the first memorial for Jackson's death. In Selma and several neighboring counties demonstrators continued marches to courthouses to be registered. The SCLC announced their plan to walk from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital, on March 7 and began organizing the march. The governor and mayor asked for nonviolent responses to the march among law enforcement. Sheriff Clark and the head of the state troopers had other plans.

On March 6 a group of white citizens marched to the courthouse in Selma as a show of solidarity with the African American campaigners.

Rev. King did not show up to the march on March 7, knowing that it would not be the first attempt at the walk between Selma and Montgomery. The governor had declared the march unlawful, but the campaigners continued. They went forth in two waves. The first wave met state troopers at a bridge. The state troopers gassed and beat the protesters, forcing them to turn back.

Rev. King and the SCLC began organizing the second attempt to go to Montgomery. They called in support from northerners and set the date of the next march for two days later. Supporters flocked into Selma from around the country. Although a federal order was made against the march, on March 9, this time led by King himself, campaigners began the procession again. Again they were met by state troopers. This time, when asked to turn around, the demonstrators stopped and prayed and then headed back to Selma. That same day demonstrations were held in cities throughout the country.

That night James Reeb, a white Unitarian-Universalist minister from Boston that was in Selma for the march, was lethally beaten. The next two days the campaigners in Selma tried to march to the courthouse in response, but were stopped by Baker. They held their meetings and vigils where he stopped them and waited there overnight. Baker announced Reeb's death the second day. The murder angered and motivated people throughout the nation. The Attorney General began work on a voting rights bill, as Rev. King had asked for, that week. President Johnson urged the Alabama governor to allow the campaigners to march to Montgomery.

Even more supporters joined the campaigners in Selma and a memorial was held for Reeb in front of the courthouse on March 15. At the same time President Johnson addressed a joint meeting of Congress to present the Voting Rights Act.

In the following days student demonstrators in Montgomery, led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were also attacked. After a long wait, the march to Montgomery was finally permitted by federal order. Alabama's governor was ordered to protect the demonstrators. The SCLC leadership began organizing the full five-day march. 300 people were allowed to go the whole way, but organizers were needed for every aspect of operation and thousands would walk with them each day.

Eight thousand people left Selma for Montgomery on March 21. The governor had ordered all whites to stay home and to ignore the march. Demonstrators marched five days through rain, singing and chanting. They arrived at the state capital safely on March 25 and Rev. King addressed the crowd, which had grown greatly since the first day. They then presented their demands for voting rights to the governor and left the city. Members of the Ku Klux Klan murdered one supporter of the campaign as she drove back to Selma.

After the march to Montgomery the Alabama campaign began to slow down. The SCLC leaders left having organized the citizens of Selma and further efforts to petition the governor died down. The new leadership in Selma did little and even stole money from the campaign. However, the bill proposed by President Johnson continued moving through congress.

On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. By the end of the year 250,000 new black voters had registered in the South. The SCLC and the campaigners in Selma had successfully defeated the laws that impeded their right to vote in the South.

Research Notes

Influences:

Gandhi's Satyagraha (1)

Sources:

Byrne, Dara N. The Unfinished Agenda of the Selma-Montgomery Voting Rights March. Hoboken, NJ: J, Wiley,& Sons, 2005

Chestnut, J.L. Jr. and Julia Cass. *Black in Selma: The Uncommon Life of J.L. Chestnut, Jr.* New York: Farrar Straus, and Giroux, 1990

Fager, Charles E. *Selma 1965: The March That Changed the South.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1985

Fleming, Cynthia G. *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South.* Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004

Foreman, James and Sammy Younge, Jr.: *The First Black College Student to Die in the Black Liberation Movement.* New York: Grove Press, 1968

Green, Robert P, and Harold E. Cheatham. *The American Civil Rights Movement: A Documentary History.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009

Lewis, John and Michael D'Orson. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998

Riches, William T. M. *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance.* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

Thornton, J M. *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002

Additional Notes:

Edited by Julio Alicea (05/05/2011)

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

Max Rennebohm, 28/9/2009

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

Copyright Swarthmore College.



Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/) .

Original website design and artwork created by [Daniel Hunter](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu> .

Registered users can [login](#) to the website.

Source URL (retrieved on 02/20/2020 - 03:46): <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/african-americans-campaign-voting-rights-selma-alabama-usa-1965>

Links:

[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/wave-campaigns/us-civil-rights-movement-1950s-1960s>

[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>

[3] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/example-paradox-repression>