



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Atlanta students sit-in for U.S. civil rights, 1960-1961

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

March

1960

to: March

1961

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Atlanta, Georgia

Goals:

To desegregate the lunch counters and department stores of downtown Atlanta

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 016. Picketing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 038. Marches

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 167. Pray-in

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing

- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 6th segment:

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- African-American students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Lonnie King, Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR), a coalition of black students chaired by Lonnie King, Congress on Racial Equality (CORE)

Partners:

Members of United States National Student Association (USANSA)

External allies:

Negro Voters League, the African Methodist Episcopal Ministers Union, the Baptist Ministers Union, the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, and the NAACP; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Involvement of social elites:

Robert Kennedy (brother of presidential candidate John F. Kennedy)

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR)
- Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)
- National Student Ass'n (USANSA)
- students of math professor Dr. Lonnie Cross

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- African Methodist Episcopal Ministers Union
- Baptist Ministers Union
- Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance
- Martin Luther King Jr
- NAACP
- Negro Voters League
- Robert Kennedy

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Rush Memorial Congregational Church (Rev Joseph Boone pastor)

Groups in 4th Segment:

- SNCC

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Segregationist business owners and government officials

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Ku Klux Klan rally

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Arrests, bombings, acid thrown at protesters, burning crosses and threats of violence

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 goals were achieved, but campaign leadership was not happy about the negotiations through which desegregation of businesses was achieved.

The campaign did grow, but it took a long time, and petered out by the end of the campaign.

In the early 1960's, student-led sit-ins were a prominent scene in the United States Civil Rights Movement. The success of a sit-

in Greensboro, North Carolina (see "[Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960](#) [6]") began a wave of action in college campuses throughout the South. One of the many areas inspired by the Greensboro sit-ins was Atlanta, Georgia.

Atlanta had managed to make some progress toward a more integrated city in the years leading up to the sit-ins. In the 1950's an African American man named Rufus E. Clement was elected to the Board of Education, there were African American police officers, and there were two African American men elected to the Democratic Party Executive Committee of the city. There were also six African American colleges and universities in the city, so there was a lot of student power to draw on.

However, there were also many factors that contributed to the difficulty of starting an anti-segregation movement in Atlanta. Firstly, it was one of the older and larger cities in the South, and hence had a more complex social hierarchy than some cities. Additionally, the economy was in good shape, so many (blacks and whites) were content with the status quo. Among the blacks were groups of elites whose money stemmed from catering to the rich white population, or from working within the segregated black community. Thus, this sector of the black community had little interest in desegregating or causing trouble. The black community was also very spread out and did not revolve around a downtown shopping district (as in Nashville where the black population was easier to mobilize due to its centrality).

On 16 February 1960, about two weeks after the Greensboro, N.C. sit-in began, the Georgia State Legislature passed a law making it a misdemeanor to refuse to leave a place of business when ordered to by the management. The Georgia State Capitol is in Atlanta.

As that bill was being considered, Morehouse College student Lonnie King was already organizing the campaign the legislators feared. He built an inter-collegiate steering group by drawing three student leaders from each of the six historically black colleges/universities and engaged in dialogue with the six presidents, winning their agreement to give some degree of support.

While Lonnie King and his council were organizing the campuses a math professor, Dr. Lonnie Cross, led his students to engage in small lunch counter sit-ins 4-10 March.

The coalition, which included participation from the Congress of Racial Equality and students from the National Student Association, named itself the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR). Its first action was to write a manifesto: an "Appeal for Human Rights." With the financial help of the presidents, it was published on 9 March as a full-page newspaper advertisement in both of the mainstream white Atlanta newspapers and the newspaper that served the black community. It commanded wide attention. The Georgia state governor reportedly said it was too well-written to be by a student in Georgia and was probably written by a foreign Communist. U.S. Senator Jacob Javits from New York entered the Appeal in the Congressional Record, and the New York Times ran it as a full-page ad.

On March 15 the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR) launched its direct action campaign. 200 students participated in sit-ins in 10 different locations downtown, including the state capital building, the county court house, city hall, bus stations, and railway stations. Governor Ernest Vandiver ordered arrests, resulting in 77 students in jail. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) arranged legal assistance for the students.

Two days later there was a closed mass meeting of 1,400 students, and sit-ins were temporarily cancelled due to pending negotiations with business leaders. These negotiations fell apart.

At a major meeting of the Georgia State NAACP, Lonnie King gave an address in which he announced a march on the state capitol building on 17 May. The governor responded by encircling the capitol with state troopers and dogs, and rumors circulated that violent racist whites were planning to attack the marchers as well.

As several thousand students massed on campus to begin their march – final exams having been postponed -- Lonnie King reports that Morehouse President Benjamin E. Mays called him in to say that the police chief informed Mays that the city police could not protect the students against the state police or enraged whites who might act on state property. Lonnie King addressed the crowd of students, stressing the importance of a nonviolent response to expected violence, and inviting those who could not

agree to remain on campus. All of the students present joined the march.

The students did not, however, reach the capitol building because they were diverted from their route by the city police.

On 29 May, the Ku Klux Klan held a 500-person rally, which spurred more members of the black community to sign the "Appeal for Human Rights," including the Negro Voters League, the African Methodist Episcopal Ministers Union, the Baptist Ministers Union, the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, and the NAACP. Frustrated that the black newspaper would not print the students' perspective on unfolding events, COAHR began publishing their own newsletters (edited by Julian Bond) and distributing 20,000 copies via the black churches.

"Close down your account with segregation; Open up your account with freedom," was the slogan of the boycott launched in June. The focus was on Rich's Department Store chain in the downtown shopping area. Teams of students went to the black churches to urge participation, supplementing the already significant consumer power of the students themselves (one-third of the black population of Atlanta). According to Lonnie King, downtown business lost \$10 million because of the boycott.

On 7 August, students in the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights started a kneel-in campaign, in which 25 students visited 6 white churches, only to be turned away from one. Two weeks later they did it again and were turned away from three. However, they did not follow up this action with any sort of immediate escalation.

The COAHR council decided on a fall mobilization for mass action with the return of the students to full strength. This coincided with the 14-16 October Atlanta conference of the newly-formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The COAHR organized a mass sit-in in two department stores and eight variety stores; four other stores were picketed. In a significant move, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., joined the students' civil disobedience action and was arrested on 19 October. There was national outrage at the arrest of Dr. King, and Robert Kennedy called the governor of Georgia demanding his release. King was released two days later.

According to Lonnie King the presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy (Robert Kennedy's brother) distributed millions of flyers in early November to black churches in Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and other swing states where the black vote could make the difference. Some observers believe that the Kennedys' intervention resulted in the election of John Kennedy as President.

The downtown store owners responded to the massive wave of sit-ins with a tactic of their own; they closed their stores' lunch counters when the protesters arrived, and when the activists left, the owners re-opened their lunch counters.

COAHR in turn created the role of "spotter:" at each store a student remained in the background, and as soon as the lunch counter re-opened, called headquarters which in turn dispatched a squad of students to return to the now-open lunch counter.

On 19 October, 51 people were arrested, including Dr. King. The following day 23 people were arrested, and 36 of those arrested both days refused to pay bail. A second round of negotiations occurred, but business leaders refused to integrate, so students resumed activity and managed to close down all downtown lunch counters by the end of November through boycotts.

Protests continued over the next three months, bringing down sales figures by 13%. Finally, white business owners met with the traditional leaders of the black community to discuss a plan for desegregation. The students themselves were left out of these discussions. On 7 March, 1961, the two groups of elder leaders agreed to desegregate the following fall. The students and many others in the black community were not happy with the delay, or with the alliance between black and white business owners, but accepted the agreement nonetheless.

In fall, 1961, the city of Atlanta, Georgia, ended the formal practice of segregation in public facilities.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Atlanta students were influenced by the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-ins (See “Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960”) (1).

Sources:

“Atlanta Sit-ins.” The New Georgia Encyclopedia. May 8 2008. University of Georgia Press. January 27 2010. <<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-3615>>.

Bayor, Ronald H. “Atlanta Georgia, 1960-1961: Sit-ins and Student Activism.” The Georgia Historical Quarterly. 75.3 (1991): 557.

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Telephone interview (by George Lakey) with Lonnie King, 22/05/12

Additional Notes:

Edited by Max Rennebohm (06/08/2011) and George Lakey (23/5/12)

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