Baton Rouge students sit-in for U.S. civil rights (Southern University 16), 1960

March 28, 1960

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Location Description: Mainly on Southern University’s campus and by the state capital

Goals:
The first goal was to desegregate the lunch counters in Baton Rouge, but the goal then shifted to reverse the expulsion of 16 Southern University students.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 062. Student strike

Methods in 5th segment:
• 062. Student strike

Methods in 6th segment:

• 062. Student strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 048. Protest meetings

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Democracy
Human Rights

Group characterization:

• Students and members of civil rights action groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Reverend T. J. Jemison

Major Johns

Marvin Robinson, Southern University president

Partners:
CORE (Congress of Racial Equality)

External allies:
Not known

Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• CORE

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: Approximately 2 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
White segregationists in Baton Rouge
Felton Clark, President of Southern University

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
None known

Repressive Violence:
Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Throughout most of the U.S. civil rights campaigns of the 1950s, Baton Rouge, Louisiana remained quiet. The city of “broad avenues and tree-lined streets” (Sinclair 1998) remained fully segregated despite movements towards desegregation in neighboring states. However, at the beginning of 1960, when university students staged sit-ins at lunch counters across the south, students at Baton Rouge’s Southern University took notice. Southern University, a black university on the edge of the city, became home to the main civil rights campaign in Baton Rouge. Inspired by the February 1st lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro (see “Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960”), a group of students who wished to protest segregation formed on Southern’s campus. Students were led by Reverend T.J. Jemison, a leading figure in previous civil rights campaigns in Baton Rouge. There were also two younger leaders of the campaign: Major Johns, a member of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Marvin Robinson, student president at Southern.

Ignoring warnings of expulsion from Southern University’s President, Felton Clark, the student group began planning for a sit-in in late March. They asked for support from CORE, who reminded students of the vital importance for nonviolence in their campaign. On March 28, 1960, seven students sat in at the Kress lunch counter in downtown Baton Rouge. They were immediately arrested for “disturbing the peace” and were sent to jail with a bail of $1,500 each. Reverend Jemison succeeded in raising these huge bail amounts from students on campus, and the seven arrested returned to Southern University late in evening to cheers and gatherings. The following day, March 29, seven more students were arrested for sitting in at Sitman’s lunch counter, and two were arrested for sitting in at the Greyhound bus station. The arrests sparked intense anger and excitement in the students on campus. This became a turning point in the campaign, and the following day, masses of students walked out of class and marched to the state capitol. They held a one-hour prayer meeting there, and Major Johns gave a rallying speech.

While students were gathered at the state capitol, Southern’s President and faculty members were deliberating. That evening,
President Clark announced that the sixteen students that had participated in the sit-ins, were to be “suspended indefinitely”. In the students’ minds they had been expelled, and urged the campus to continue to boycott classes. Classes remained empty on March 31, and Marvin Robinson and Major Johns gave speeches every two hours to the masses of students. Many students attempted to go home, but many others remained stranded because they lacked the bus fare to return home.

The next day, however, the campaign began to disintegrate. After speaking with President Clark for hours, eight of the expelled students announced to the student body that they had accepted their expulsion and wanted to end the protest. Students were shocked and upset, and did not know how to react. The next morning, April 2, Marvin Robinson and Major Johns reversed the previous evening’s decision and recalled the students to boycott classes. They claimed that President Clark had violated his agreement with them by expelling another student. The scene at the university was chaotic, and confused students were unsure of whether they should still try to leave campus and go home, or whether they should be staying. Students asked the Citizens’ Committee, an organization of black residents of Baton Rouge, for support in paying for their bus fare home. After speaking to President Clark, the committee decided not to support the boycott, and students remained stranded.

Over the next few days, students began drifting back to campus. Of the sixteen expelled students, fifteen asked for re-admittance and twelve were accepted back to Southern. The failure of the sit-ins was partially blamed on Reverend Jemison, who failed to gather up money for the students to return home. It was also blamed on the citizens’ committee’s lack of support for students and for the civil rights campaign. Much of the blame, though, was brought on the student organizers, who did not tell the black community of their plans for a sit-in or seek their support before the campaign had begun. Finally, the lack of continuity in the goals and orders from the student leaders caused confusion among the student body, weakening the campaign.

In 1960, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the convictions of the sixteen students arrested for sitting in, and student protesters revived the campaign. It took until 1963, though, for Baton Rouge’s downtown lunch counters to be desegregated. Although the sit-ins of 1960 failed, they are credited with spurring the eventual desegregation and inspiring Baton Rouge’s black community to action.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

The Southern University students were influenced by students of North Carolina A & T, who staged a sit-in at a lunch counter in Greensboro on February 1st, 1960 (see “Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960”)(1).

**Sources:**


**Additional Notes:**
Most sources blame the failure of this campaign on its lack of leadership and organization. Although the initial goal was to desegregate lunch counters, the focus shifted to a school boycott after the arrests of the initial group of students who staged a sit-in.

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