



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Blacks in Huntsville, Alabama, sit in and win racial desegregation at lunch counters, 1962

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

3 January

1962

to: 11 July

1962

Country: United States

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

Goals:

Integrate lunch counters and public spaces in Huntsville, Alabama and form bi-racial committee.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications

- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 012. Skywriting and earthwriting › Releasing balloons into the air with messages about equality
- 016. Picketing
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 162. Sit-in

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- African American Students and Elite African Americans

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

John Henry (Hank) Thomas

Community Service Committee

Dr. John Cashin

Dr. Sonnie Hereford III

Rev. Ezekiel Bell

Partners:

CORE Members

Alabama Agricultural and Technical College

Oakwood College

External allies:

White members of unions

Involvement of social elites:

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

James Lawson

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Alabama Agricultural and Technical College Students
- Community Service Committee
- Core on Racial Equality
- Hank Thomas

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Oakwood College Students

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

CORE members never officially left, but the Community Service Committee took more control over time up to when an Alabama law banned CORE in the state. Also, white union members did not officially join the campaign, but there are reports of some whites indirectly joining because they refused to cross the picket lines.

Segment Length: 1 month

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Mayor Robert Searcy

Lunch Counter store owners

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known.

Campaigner violence:

Not known.

Repressive Violence:

Spraying demonstrators with mustard gas, arrests

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Community Service Committee gained full integration and a bi-racial committee in a matter of months.

Huntsville, Alabama, grew quickly during the United States' Space Race with the Soviet Union. From 1950 to 1960, the population tripled from 16,000 to 72,000, with 30% black citizens. With Redstone Arsenal and the National Aeronautics (NASA) bringing scientists and middle class citizens to Huntsville, the city administration tried to present the city with a progressive image. However, instead of improving conditions for black citizens, the administration claimed that a racial inequality did not exist.

On 3 January 1962, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) field secretary and former Freedom Rider Hank Thomas came to Huntsville. He quickly gathered a group of students from Alabama Agriculture and Mechanical College, a historically black college founded in 1875. He also recruited Council High School students to join in launching a sit-in campaign to desegregate lunch counters around Huntsville.

On 5 January 1962, police arrested two demonstrators for trespassing on public property, Frances Sims and Dwight Thomas. In a few days, police arrested 14 more students.

In response, members of the black community in Huntsville sent a delegation to speak with Mayor Searcy about working with store owners to integrate lunch counters. After Searcy refused, members of the community formed the Community Service Committee (CSC).

The early role of the CSC was to raise funds to bail out students (often costing thousands of dollars) so they could keep numbers up for participating in the sit-ins. The leadership of the CSC, the Steering Committee, included seven elite blacks such as Reverend Ezekiel Bell, dentist John Cashin, and medical doctor Sonnie Hereford III.

Dr. Cashin developed what he called the "subcommittee on psychological warfare," which worked to get the sit-ins publicized when the local news ignored them. Cashin also acted as a false informer to Mayor Searcy about the CSC, giving away only what the CSC wanted the public to know.

The CSC united with CORE, and took over as the leadership group after a mustard gas attack hospitalized Hank Thomas during a sit-in.

For the next month, the Community Service Committee held weekly meetings, organized prayer marches and picket lines at stores that discriminated against blacks, spoke with Mayor Searcy about creating a bi-racial committee, and made sure students stayed nonviolent at the lunch counters and on the streets.

By March, the total lack of news coverage and progress harmed the campaign's momentum. To keep morale high the CSC brought in leaders from other sit-in campaigns such as Reverend James Lawson from the famous 1960 Nashville, Tennessee sit-in. On 19 March 1962, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the First Baptist Missionary Church and the all-black Adventist Oakwood College. On hearing Dr. King, Oakwood College students, who had been unaware of the sit-ins due to the censoring of news and media at the school, began to join the Alabama A&M students in sit-ins.

Despite inspiring more students and members of the community to join the campaign, King's speech did not gather much outside attention.

Dr. Cashin decided to draw attention by staging a sit-in with his wife, Joan Cashin, their 4-month old daughter, Dr. Hereson's

pregnant wife, and Frances Sims. On 11 April 1962, police arrested Dr. Cashin and Joan Cashin, Dr. Hereson and Martha Hereson, a minister, and two students.

The men posted the \$100 bail and left. Police offered to let two women go while keeping Frances Sims in jail, but Cashin and Hereson refused bail unless all three could leave. They spent 48 hours in jail and received coverage from newspapers and magazines out of town.

With national attention finally on the campaign, the CSC began planning an Easter Boycott. Instead of buying new suits and dresses, blacks would buy a new pair of jeans from out of town. Since Alabama law banned boycotts, demonstrators broadcasted the boycott by forming picket lines near stores and handing cards to black patrons.

The boycott had 90% compliance, and even white citizens bought less because those in labor unions refused to cross picket lines to shop. By Easter Sunday, 21 April 1962, downtown stores lost over one million dollars of profit.

For the next two months, the sit-ins and picketing continued. On 19 May 1962, just after a visit from Governor George Wallace, students and the CSC met in front of the courthouse to release balloons with slogans and messages on equality.

A few weeks later, Mayor Searcy formed a biracial committee to negotiate with store managers. On 9 July 1962, the city council began a three-day trial period of desegregation. All eight lunch counters and other public areas opened up to all races. On 11 May 1962, Huntsville became the first racially integrated city in Alabama.

Research Notes

Sources:

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Hereford, Sonnie. *Beside the Troubled Waters : A Black Doctor Remembers Life, Medicine, and Civil Rights in an Alabama Town*. 2nd edition. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011. 86-110. eBook.

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