



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960

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

February 1,
1960
to: July 25,
1960

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Greensboro, North Carolina

Location Description: Lunch counters

Goals:

Desegregation of lunch counters in Greensboro, NC

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 071. Consumers' boycott

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 013. Deputations

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Predominantly African-American Students in Greensboro

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The four initial students, Ezell Blair in particular.

Partners:

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

External allies:

NCA&T Administration, NAACP, Greensboro Record, Greensboro Daily News

Involvement of social elites:

Mayor formed a commission to study race relations, and the NCA&T administration tacitly supported its students

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bennett College students
- NCA&T students
- Woman's College students

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- CORE
- Mayor's committee on community relations
- News media

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 1 month

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

White Pro-segregationists, Store owners and managers, Ku Klux Klan

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Counter sit-in (162): White students occupied lunch counter seats, only yielding them for white patrons.

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Mostly intimidation tactics - there was very little, if any, actual 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:

All goals were achieved, the organizing group survived, and the campaign grew from 4 students to hundreds with national attention

In Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960, Jim Crow laws were in widespread effect. Though the African-American Civil Rights Movement had led to some successful desegregation (notably within the school system thanks to *Brown v. Board* and *Swann v. Charlotte*), “separate but equal” was still the norm with respect to the vast majority of businesses in Greensboro, and the rest of the South.

On February 1, 1960, at 4:30 pm, Ezell Blair (now known as Jibreel Khazan), Franklin McCain, David Richmond, and Joseph McNeill – students at historically black Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina (NCA&T) – walked into the Woolworth’s store in Greensboro. They browsed the drugstore section of the store, and purchased a few toiletries each. The

students then proceeded to sit at the lunch counter – a section of the store clearly marked “For Whites Only” – and waited to be served. Though they sat there without incident, and were not harassed, they also were not served. The manager of the store attempted to persuade them to leave, but could not. When Woolworth’s closed an hour later, the four students left quietly.

The next day, the four students returned, but this time they were accompanied by sixteen other NCA&T students, who sat at the lunch counter for most of midday. They were not served, though white customers sat and were served around them. That night, the four initial demonstrators mailed a letter to the President of Woolworth’s, asking politely but firmly that he end his company’s policy of discrimination. The demonstrators were almost immediately endorsed by the NAACP.

The sit-ins continued, with participants numbering more than 300 in less than a week. The Greensboro Record reported on February 2 that the students were “seeking luncheon counter service, and will increase their numbers daily until they get it.” Blair said in an interview that “Negro adults have been complacent and fearful... It is time for someone to wake up and change the situation... and we decided to start here.” The NCA&T football team began to turn out to demonstrate, partially in the hopes of warning off any hostile action by white dissenters, and the Congress of Racial Equality dispatched a field representative to help organize the demonstrations. The major newspapers in Greensboro, the Record and the Daily News, appeared to be solidly on the side of the black students – their editorials argued for the cause with vigor.

On February 6, a fake bomb threat was called into the Woolworth’s store. Shortly after, the store was closed in the interests of public safety, and all demonstrators were ushered out of the store. Both blacks and whites at Woolworth’s that day appeared to be relieved – the tensions inside the store were incredibly high, and it was stunning that there were no significant incidents. The lunch counters would remain closed for three weeks, though the rest of the store re-opened on February 8. When the counter re-opened, there was no sign indicating that service was to be segregated.

A temporary truce seemed to exist between the storeowners and the demonstrators. When the counters reopened, there was no disruption of service – the students had turned to negotiating with the storeowners and the government, now that they had proven that they could mobilize if they needed to do so. On February 27, the Mayor of Greensboro formed the Mayor’s Committee on Community Relations to study and attempt to fix the race relations issues that existed in Greensboro. Meanwhile, sit-in demonstrations continued across the south.

On April 1, the Committee reported that their efforts had failed – the storeowners had been wholly unwilling to compromise and integrate even a small portion of their lunch counters. Later that day, black students returned to the streets, picketing in front of stores and returning to their seats at the lunch counters.

The next day, the lunch counters were shut down again. For several weeks, a few picketers stood in front of each store that refused to integrate its lunch counters, maintaining a constant presence in the minds of Greensboro citizens. Segregationists held counter-pickets, which usually included signs meant to intimidate the black demonstrators. There were claims that the white counter-pickers were paid by the Ku Klux Klan but naturally there was no solid evidence that this was the case. Regardless, there was no violence, and no one was arrested.

On April 21, black students went into Kress’s, another store that had closed its lunch counter, and sat at the counter anyway. 45 students were arrested for trespassing. Though this news was covered by the press, it did little to affect the movement, and the students did not court arrest again.

By mid-May, several other cities had integrated their lunch counters, including Nashville and nearby Winston-Salem. However, Greensboro’s storeowners remained strongly opposed to integration, arguing that those that supported the black students did not patronize the stores, and most of their clientele favored continued segregation.

Finally, on July 25, without any fanfare, three black students sat down at the Woolworth’s lunch counter and were served. The newspapers covered the event briefly, but it was a quiet story – a column the next day, and no pictures to speak of. Despite the seemingly casual nature of the event, it was carefully organized and negotiated by the black student leadership, the Greensboro Mayor’s office and the storeowners.

The sit-in campaign was eventually successful not because they had succeeded in making a moral appeal to the storeowners, but because it was economically impossible for the storeowners to fight the sit-ins. Though Greensboro would not fully integrate until several years later, the NCA&T students' success with the sit-in campaign would inspire continued participation in the civil rights movement among individual students.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by previous sit-ins (Oklahoma City, Durham, Chicago, and St Louis) (See "St. Louis CORE campaign for lunch counter desegregation, 1948-52") (1).

Influenced dozens of other sit-in campaigns throughout the South, most notably in Nashville, TN (see "Nashville students sit-in for U.S. civil rights, 1960")(2)

Sources:

Chafe, William. *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Davis, Townsend. *Weary Feet, Rested Souls: A Guided History of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998. 309-312

Wolff, Miles. *Lunch at the 5 & 10: The Greensboro Sit-Ins: A Contemporary History*. New York, NY: Stein and Day, 1970.

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