



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Jacksonville students sit-in for integrated lunch counters, 1960

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

Time period notes: *Students had staged occasional sit-ins in the spring of 1960, but stopped after facing limited success. That summer, they reorganized and started a survey to get more people involved.*

Because the sit-ins in August represented a significantly different structure of the organization, and came after a new planning phase, I have marked the first sit-in after the reorganization as the beginning of the campaign.

The end-date is quite arbitrary. The sit-ins stopped after August 27th, although one newspaper article suggests that they may have continued again the next fall. On the 28th or 29th, activists started a boycott, but it is not known when the boycott ended. As a result, I have marked November 5 as the end date, because it seems that the campaign ended at some point that fall.

August 13,
1960

to: November 5,
1960

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Jacksonville, Florida

Location Description: Downtown area of a city in Northern Florida

Goals:

The goal was to integrate the lunch-counters at downtown department stores.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

Notes on Methods:

A boycott began on the 28th or 29th, but it is unclear when it ended. There were sit-ins during the fall, and possibly other forms of demonstrations as well, but it is unclear when specifically.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- local black students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

NAACP Youth Council, Youth Council President Rodney Hurst, Youth Council Vice-President Alton Yates, teacher and Youth Council Coordinator Rutledge Pearson

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

White student at a nearby college Richard Parker, attorneys, ministers

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- NAACP Youth Council survey
- Richard Parker
- attorneys
- ministers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: 2 weeks

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Mayor Haydon Burns, store owners, local citizens

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

No known campaigner violence from those actually affiliated with the NAACP Youth Council. However, neighborhood gangs intervened on August 27, physically retaliating against the attacks by white racists, and later threatening to defend the African American community using force. This violence was not sanctioned by the leadership of the organization.

Repressive Violence:

Local citizens and members of the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens Councils from nearby towns used baseball bats, ax handles, and other similar weapons to repress the protestors.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign was successful insofar as the lunch counters were eventually integrated, as were many public facilities, and African Americans were allowed to work in jobs previously unavailable to them. However, some suggest that part of the success was due to white fear of violence, not the nonviolent tactics used by the NAACP survey.

Jacksonville, Florida, in 1960 was a city with a population of about 372,600, located in the northeast corner of the state. Of that population, nearly 100,000, or 27%, were African Americans—one of the highest urban concentrations of African Americans in the South. However, despite this high population, a legal mandate segregated the lunch-counters of various downtown department stores. Mayor Haydon Burns endorsed the segregation, telling storeowners not to integrate, despite the fact that they were not all adverse to integration. Burns also denied requests for a bi-racial council to deal with race issues in the town, objecting that such an organization might lead to desegregation.

In response to the segregation, and also possibly to the refusal to negotiate, student activists began a campaign to sit-in at the segregated lunch counters. Students had staged the first sit-in on March 13, 1960, and a few other sit-ins over the course of the spring, but they had not gone well and the students stopped the effort quickly, as the mayor and the store managements fronted crippling opposition. However, they renewed the efforts over the summer, organizing a more enduring coalition that July. Considering the new structural organization and membership at this time, the sit-ins that came shortly thereafter mark the beginning of a new campaign that year, as separate from those that spring.

In the middle of July, the NAACP Youth Council, under the leadership of Youth Council President Rodney Hurst and Vice-

President Alton Yates, started a survey of students from the local high school and Edward Waters College, marking the initial organization of the campaign. Although the sit-ins that spring had failed, they determined to continue their efforts and prepare for an action in mid-August. The local NAACP had a strong leader in Rutledge Pearson, a social studies teacher who taught his students to criticize the hypocrisy of segregation and an adviser and coordinator of the Youth Council. Pearson understood the power of an economic protest and started training sessions for students who wanted to stage sit-ins, which included know-your-rights training from attorneys and lectures by ministers on Christian principled nonviolence. However, although the organization emphasized the importance of nonviolent principles, they did not put significant effort into preparing for extreme violent confrontation.

On Saturday, August 13, eighty-two [one source claims only thirty—uncertain] members of the Youth Council survey, led by Hurst, entered a downtown store and made small purchases at various counters around the store. They then approached the eighty-four-seat lunch counter reserved for white patrons, and attempted to order lunch. Part of their strategy in this action was to highlight the store's hypocrisy of allowing black patrons to place orders at every counter except the lunch one, forcing them to go to a fifteen seat lunch counter in the back instead. The store manager, a sympathetic northerner, soon closed the lunch counter, preventing any business from occurring during the lunchtime rush. Demonstrators hoped to repeat the action until the store was forced to negotiate due to heavy loss of business. In the first several days of enacting this strategy, there were few hostile incidents, although one news article suggests that even this early in the campaign white patrons of the stores jabbed demonstrators in the back with a sharpened cane and made verbal racial attacks.

On August 18, managers advertised a policy not allowing more than two demonstrators into the store at a time, but demonstrations nevertheless continued without incident the following day, a Friday. However, that night, Youth Council organizers heard that the Ku Klux Klan was planning to interfere with the protests the following day. Demonstrators nevertheless returned to the counters on Saturday, but a hostile onlooker pushed and beat one demonstrator. Again, the stores closed, and the demonstrators began a picket outside the store. On Wednesday, a white racist threatened a demonstrator with a knife, but when another demonstrator reported the incident to the police, they ignored the incident. On Thursday and Friday, a white student named Richard Parker from Florida State University joined the pickets, attracting a crowd of angry whites. Both times, Youth Council members protected Parker from violence by escorting him from the area. On Friday the 26th, a white woman and a picketing black woman got into a small fight outside one of the stores downtown, and several white female bystanders were knocked to the ground. Over these three days, police arrested approximately ten demonstrators, although they released most if not all after a few hours. Their refusal to stop white instigators of violence made clear to the demonstrators that they would have no legal support, and would have to defend themselves on their own. However, by that Friday, the white community, already uncomfortable after nearly two weeks of demonstrations, had decided to take action; in fifteen minutes that afternoon, over fifty of them purchased ax handles at a nearby department store.

White violence reached a climax on the following day, Saturday August 27th, later termed "ax-handle Saturday." Early that morning, a local hardware store started distributing ax-handles and baseball bats from a truck to white agitators, some of whom affixed confederate flags to the ends of their weapons. The agitators, some of whom brought their own weapons, were mostly local residents and members of the KKK and White Citizens Council from nearby towns in Florida and Southern Georgia. They congregated in the nearby Hemming Park, awaiting the arrival of the protesters later in the day, and demanded that downtown merchants continue segregation at the risk of a white boycott.

When a group of Youth Council activists left a local church to go downtown, a group of white men wielding ax-handles stopped them in their path, causing the group to scatter. Vice President Alton Yates, with approximately eight other activists, arrived at Woolworth's, where men beat them as they tried to sit at the counter.

That same day, approximately 30 demonstrators arrived at Grant's store around 11:00 or 12:00, made small purchases, and sat at the counter, but left soon afterwards to go to other stores, as Grant's store closed the counters almost immediately after their arrival. As they left, a gang of over three hundred armed white males ran towards them, and started attacking all African Americans they saw on the street, including some innocent bystanders, with ax handles and baseball bats. Some demonstrators were able to flee the attack, taking refuge in nearby churches and elsewhere. Around 1:00 pm, a local black gang, unaffiliated

with the campaigners, arrived and started fighting back against the armed assailants. Other gangs quickly joined them, and started throwing bricks at cars driving by with white occupants. At the same time, Klansmen were attacking a group of 3,000 peaceful protesters in nearby Hemming Park. The passivity of the police and their failure to get involved at this point meant that those demonstrators committed to nonviolence had little choice but to stay in the street, which Yates explained guaranteed a physical assault, or to flee, as Yates and many others did. Although they had known from the outset that they would have little recourse if physically attacked, according to Yates, they had expected that the police would interfere more in the event of violence.

The violence continued throughout the day with a crowd of about 3,000 people. Someone shot a black man in the head that night and two others suffered less severe bullet wounds. Someone stabbed a white teenager, who was admitted to a hospital nearby, and four black men threw potash in the face of a white taxi-driver; it is unclear if they were affiliated with the campaign. According to police estimations, approximately fifty people were injured in total, and a local hospital treated about twenty. Police arrested sixty-two people, forty-eight of whom were African Americans. Among the fourteen others was the white student ally, Richard Parker.

The NAACP held a scheduled rally the next day, but cancelled their plans for sit-ins and pickets on Monday. On Sunday night, rumors started circulating that the Klan was planning raids for Monday night. As a result, various local gangs started planning to retaliate, and to protect the African American community using force. From the outset, the organizers had been devoted to nonviolence, and refused to respond to the violent force with their own show of violence. In response to the planned gang retaliation, community figures, Youth Council members, and gang members began communicating about their response, and eventually all but one of the gangs backed down from its violent platform.

Much of the violence had died down by Tuesday, but the African American community was still in disagreement about tactics. On that day, parts of the community started a boycott, effective up to 50%, while those still devoted to violence began throwing firebombs into stores under white ownership, attacking a total of four stores. However, it is crucial to note that the more traditional leaders did not condone this violence. Instead, the Youth Council called for a retreat, with the goal of starting a boycott instead. This sentiment ultimately prevailed, and the violence drew to a close later that day.

The violence that Saturday marked the end of the three weeks of peaceful sit-ins. However, the general boycott of segregated stores starting in the next two days was more effective, leading to discussions between members of the Chamber of Commerce and the NAACP, as well as community meetings between black and white local citizens. African American citizens began demonstrations again later in the fall. It is not clear how long the boycott lasted, when the demonstrations resumed, or when the negotiations started. The discussants in these meetings agreed to desegregate some lunch counters and give two jobs in the local library to African Americans, the first two jobs given to African Americans in public libraries. Many public facilities became fully integrated, and downtown lunch-counter segregation ended completely the next spring, although restaurants remained segregated for a while longer. The local newspaper continued to offer only scant coverage of African American affairs, and black police could not draw their weapons in the presence of white citizens, nor could they arrest them. What progress there was may have been due to a fear of repeated violence rather than the nonviolent protesting, although the protests, as well as voter pressure, were surely instrumental as well. Furthermore, the activists' structures were quite enduring. Pearson later became president of the Florida NAACP, with the hope of having similar success statewide, and his leadership in the Jacksonville NAACP transformed it tremendously, increasing membership from a few hundred to over 2000, with a more comprehensive membership base.

Research Notes

Influences:

Inspired by the Greensboro, Nashville, and other sit-ins (see "Greensboro students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960" and

"Nashville Students Sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960") (1)

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Additional Notes:

This is one of many sit-in campaigns in 1960 and following years.

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

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