



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Montgomery, Alabama students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960

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

Time period notes: Endpoint not clear

February

1960

to: Fall

1960

Country: United States

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

Location Description: *Alabama State College, County Courthouse lunch counter*

Goals:

Equal rights, eliminating segregation at lunch counters

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 162. Sit-in
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 062. Student strike
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 4th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Alabama State College Students
- black community

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Alabama State College students, Bernard Lee (identified as the student leader), Rev. Ralph Abernathy

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Sympathetic Media Outlets, NAACP, local churches, Rev. Martin Luther King & SCLC, white allies in Montgomery area, Tuskegee Institute students, whites opposed to segregation

Involvement of social elites:

NAACP, Rev. Martin Luther King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Professor R.D. Nesmith

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Media Outlets
- NAACP

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- Gov. John Patterson

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Rev. Ralph Abernathy
- Tuskegee Institute Students
- White activists

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 1 month*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Restaurant owners, white citizens opposed to segregation, city and state governments

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Refusal of service, closing lunch counter, obstruction of movement

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Physical assault (billie clubs, fire hoses, and physical attacks are documented), verbal threats, arrests, expulsion, blacklisting of expelled students (at other colleges)

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

This campaign was not successful at gaining integration of lunch counters

The Montgomery, Alabama sit-ins took place during the era of Jim Crow laws in the southern United States. The first of the Supreme Court rulings against these laws – which are symbolized by the phrase “Separate but Equal” – took place in 1954, in the form of *Brown v. Board of Education*; in this ruling, the Supreme Court ruled that separate education facilities based on race were inherently discriminatory, putting minorities at a disadvantage compared to their white counterparts. The Supreme Court ruled that schools should be desegregated with “all deliberate speed” – an ambiguous phrase that enabled pro-segregationists to

delay the integration process.

Although the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling declared segregated schools unconstitutional, this ruling did not apply to public (or private) facilities, nor did it apply to public transportation. Aiming to challenge these laws, Rosa Parks challenged the Montgomery transit authority by refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Her image and arrest were used symbolically and helped begin the Montgomery bus Boycott in 1955-1956; the boycott lasted over a year and involved almost all of Montgomery's black community (see "African Americans boycott buses for integration in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S., 1955-1956").

In the 1950's, the population of Montgomery was majority African-American/black Americans, and the city bordered Macon County (which is still currently overwhelmingly African-American). Although the city had a large black population, only around half of these black citizens were eligible to vote, and of these less than 10% were registered voters. It should also be noted that Montgomery was considered the "heartland" of the South and was also the site of notoriously violent reactions against the 'Freedom Riders' of SNCC in the early 1960's (see "Freedom Riders end racial segregation in Southern U.S. public transit, 1961").

Inspired by student sit-ins in Greensboro, NC in early February 1960 (see "Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960"), students at Alabama State College in Montgomery, AL, decided to attempt their own form of nonviolent resistance. The students staged their first sit-in on February 25; a group of 35 black students took seats in the lunchroom of the county courthouse. In response, the store-owners closed the lunch counter and a mob of pro-segregationists physically assaulted the students. Governor John Patterson ordered the university to expel any student participating in sit-ins. On February 29, around 800 people attended a rally – addressed by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr – to plan another demonstration on the next day.

On Tuesday, March 1, over 1000 people marched from the Alabama State College campus to the state capital and back. After this march, the president of the university expelled 9 students identified as leaders and suspended 20 other students, under pressure from the governor's office. As a result of this, students at the college voted to boycott classes and exams (although some news articles suggested that the exams were attended by most students).

The next week, on Sunday March 6, protesters began to gather at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, led by Rev. Ralph Abernathy – a well-known member of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and organizer of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This protest was cited as having a significant increase in the number of white citizens participating with the students. A crowd of white citizens – those in support of segregation – surrounded the church, physically assaulting some members of the march and forcing them to flee into the church. It was reported that the city fire company brought two fire trucks to the scene and used the high-powered fire hoses on retreating protesters; soon after this, the police dispersed the crowds and ended the protest.

The next day, over 1000 students at the university voted for a mass strike during the registration for spring quarter classes in response to the school and government. Later in the week 30 students and 1 teacher were arrested for disorderly conduct and disobeying an officer. The period after this (March 9) is marked by an apparent decrease in organization, as actions and sit-ins became more sporadic, and ultimately scarce in nature. Many of the expelled student leaders were blacklisted at other universities they applied to, and some were arrested for vagrancy (although it is reported that many of those arrested actually had jobs). After these arrests, Rev. King and other Christian leaders appealed to the federal government on the students' behalf; these appeals went unanswered, and ultimately the movement was pushed underground. Although the US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the expulsions were illegal, this campaign is noted for being an apparent failure.

Research Notes

Influences:

(1) This campaign was influenced by sit-in campaigns in 1960, such as in Greensboro (see “Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960”), and by the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-56 (see “African Americans boycott buses for integration in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S., 1955-1956”).

Sources:

Oppenheimer, Martin. The Sit-In Movement of 1960. Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995

Associated Press. (March 7, 1960). "Negroes Jailed for Protest." In Ludington Daily News. Retrieved September 11, 2011

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