New Orleans citizens boycott for U.S. civil rights, 1960-61

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

  Time period notes: however sit-ins, boycotts, pickets and arrests continue episodically for years after the primary campaign

April 1960 to: late 1961

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: New Orleans, Louisiana
Location Description: Stores and lunch counters on Dryades and Canal Street
Goals:
To end employment discrimination and segregation in Dryades Street stores and Greater New Orleans

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 063. Social disobedience
- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 063. Social disobedience
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 071. Consumers' boycott
Methods in 4th segment:

- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 5th segment:

- 071. Consumers' boycott

Methods in 6th segment:

- 071. Consumers' boycott

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)
- Consumers' League of Greater New Orleans (CLGNO)
- black clergy
- doctors
- students
- white student allies

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Rev. Avery Alexander, Rev. A.L. Davis (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), and Dr. Henry Mitchell (NAACP); Consumers' League (CLGNO)

Partners:
Lawyers Lolis Elie, Nils Douglas, Robert Collins, and Ernest "Dutch" Morial; former XULA student body President Rudy Lombard, Oretha Castle from SUNO, Jerome Smith formerly of Southern University in Baton Rouge, and Hugh Murray a white student from Tulane; CORE

External allies:
Raphael Cassimire, NAACP Youth Council, lawyer John P. Nelson

Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Consumers' League of Greater New Orleans (CLGNO)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- NAACP Youth Council

Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 3 months 10 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
New Orleans' white storeowners, Louisiana State Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Angry white citizens taunted, abused, and attacked demonstrators, beating them, scalding them with hot coffee, and throwing acid on them

Success Outcome

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

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The community energy of resistance initiated by the Consumer's League, and subsequently CORE, inspired and organized the black community of New Orleans so that the city could benefit from the synergy of the national Civil Rights Movement. While the Dryades and Canal street protests had notable short-term victories, it's difficult to assess the success in the longer term, since racial employee discrimination exists into the 21st century in New Orleans to some degree.

Both the Consumer's League and CORE seemed at times to be strained, but their efforts and purpose were furthered by others who maintained pressure on New Orleans storeowners, including students, lawyers and the NAACP Youth Council.

In 1960, almost 40% of New Orleans' population was African American. The city's main shopping avenue was Canal Street, where all stores were white-owned, predominantly Christian, had segregated facilities, and didn't serve blacks at lunch counters. The second busiest shopping avenue was Dryades Street, where the stores were also white-owned, but store patrons were almost
all black. Blacks could use the facilities, but were not employed in the stores aside from an occasional janitor. Many of the white storeowners were Jews, themselves prevented from owning stores on the more high-ranking Canal Street by the white Christian majority.

Late in 1959, Rev. Avery Alexander, Rev. A.L. Davis (SCLC), and Dr. Henry Mitchell (NAACP) organized the Consumers’ League of Greater New Orleans (CLGNO), an all black organization, to fight employment discrimination by the Dryades Street merchants. Their lawyers, Lolis Elie, Nils Douglas, Robert Collins, Ernest "Dutch" Morial, and others, provided free legal counsel. For several months, the League tried to negotiate with the Dryades storeowners, but made no progress.

In April 1960, the League launched a boycott of the Dryades stores that wouldn't employ blacks for anything but menial labor. The boycott was effective. The week before Easter was traditionally a good time for business, but on Good Friday the streets were empty. Shoppers were replaced by community members picketing the storefronts.

A few stores began to hire blacks, but most continued to refuse. The Consumers’ League claimed credit for thirty jobs for black people on Dryades Street. During the boycott, students from Xavier University of Louisiana (XULA), Dillard University, and Southern University of New Orleans (SUNO), New Orleans' three major black colleges, and white students from Tulane and the University of New Orleans joined the picket lines on Dryades Street.

Over the next months, the boycott continued and customers took their business elsewhere. Many stores closed or moved to white suburbs rather than hiring Blacks. Dryades Street, once a bustling commercial center had become a ghost town.

The Consumers’ League boycott, apart from stopping business as usual on Dryades Street, helped cohere the black community in New Orleans. Lolis Elie claims the League was "in many ways a spiritual movement." The boycott inspired other protests which led to the formation of the Citizens’ Committee, a federation of black organizations that worked on desegregating downtown stores, businesses and employment between 1961 and 1964. Also born out of the boycott was the Coordinating Council of Greater New Orleans (CCGNO), a federation of black organizations that organized voter registration drives between 1961 and 1965.

While the League's pickets were temporarily stopped by an injunction, college students formed a Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) chapter led by former XULA student body president Rudy Lombard, Oretha Castle from SUNO, Jerome Smith (one of the students who withdrew from Southern University in Baton Rouge), and Hugh Murray, a white student from Tulane. Lawyers Collins, Douglas, and Elie agreed to represent the students in future actions after the ACLU refused.

On September 9, seven members of the new CORE chapter staged a sit-in at the Woolworth store on Canal Street. The integrated group of blacks and whites were arrested and charged with 'criminal mischief.' In contrast to the Dryades Street actions, the protest on Canal Street was seen as much more of a threat to the existing order because it threatened not the Jewish storeowners but the wealthy Christian elite of Uptown New Orleans.

On September 12, city mayor Chep Morrison issued a statement in response to the Canal Street sit-in claiming “the effect of such demonstrations [was] not in the public interest of [the] community” and "economic welfare of this city require that such demonstrations cease and henceforth...be prohibited by the police department.” The mayor banned further sit-ins.

Four days later, September 16, CORE field secretary Jim McCain, Reverend Avery Alexander, and other members of CLGNO were arrested for picketing stores on Claiborne Avenue. The following day, Rudy Lombard, Oretha Castle, Dillard student Cecil Carter, and Tulane student Sydney Goldfinch were arrested for sitting-in at the McCrory’s department store lunch counter. Goldfinch, who was a Jew, was charged with 'criminal anarchy' with a $2,500 bond and potential ten years in prison.

As police control increased, not only were sit-ins and picketers arrested, but also those handing out leaflets were arrested for 'leafleting without a license.' Halted by lack of bail money, CORE sit-ins continued sporadically as funds became available. Raphael Cassimire led the NAACP Youth Council, picketing storefronts to protest segregation and the arrests. Angry white crowds taunted, abused, and attacked the CORE and NAACP demonstrators, beating them, scalding them with hot coffee, and
throwing acid on them.

Lawyers Collins, Douglas, and Elie asked John P. Nelson for assistance in representing those arrested on September 17. During the days following the arrests, almost 3,000 people attended a support rally for those in jail at the ILA (longshoremen’s union) hall, and SCLC leader A.L. Davis opened his church to CORE activists for meetings and training sessions in nonviolent action.

The most acute stint of action was over though some protesting continued for the next year. By late 1961, the economic elites of New Orleans were feeling the impact of the boycott. Members of Chamber of Commerce and other local economic leaders formed a coalition to negotiate settlement to the protests at Canal Street stores and lunch counters. Storeowners were becoming nervous about continuing demonstrations and picketing by CORE and the Consumers’ League after news of struggling storeowners in Birmingham reached New Orleans.

Business leaders and leaders of the black community formed an informal conference to negotiate the desegregation of the town. Lolis Elie and Revius Ortique represented the black federation, known as the Citizens’ Committee, and continued negotiation that lasted for more than two years, eventuating in steps toward desegregation of the city. CORE agreed to remain passive during the negotiations as stores removed signs from toilets and drinking fountains and slowly increased black employment.

The New Orleans sit-ins, boycotts, and arrests continued for years, culminating in a large Freedom March in September of 1963. Very slowly, more public facilities were desegregated. Even though New Orleans integrated slowly after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Dryades and Canal Street boycotts and pickets helped black solidarity in the city and involved students in the civil rights struggle.

Research Notes

Sources:


Additional Notes:
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