Poor People's Campaign demands federal intervention to end poverty, 1968

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

**Time period notes:** The first discussions took place in late May of 1967, however no action took place until 19 April, 1968.

April 1968 to: July 1968

**Country:** United States  
**Location City/State/Province:** Washington D.C  
**Location Description:** Washington Mall was the base of operations for the campaign

**Goals:**  
The goals were to force the federal government to intervene in the economy to end poverty and to end U.S. military intervention in Vietnam.

**Methods**

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions ➔ Done in conjunction with group lobbying  
- 015. Group lobbying ➔ Members lobbied various governing bodies

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 027. New signs and names ➔ People involved in the march wore signs stating 'I Am a Man'  
- 038. Marches ➔ Campaigners marched to Resurrection City  
- 068. Sanctuary ➔ Campaigners started to live in Resurrection City  
- 158. Self-exposure to the elements ➔ Everyone lived in Resurrection City, which was mainly outdoors

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 037. Singing ➔ As Kennedy passed through the city, the residents sang 'the battle hymn of the republic'  
- 045. Demonstrative funerals ➔ During Kennedy's funeral, his casket passed through Resurrection City  
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support  
- 158. Self-exposure to the elements ➔ Everyone lived in Resurrection City, which was mainly outdoors

**Methods in 4th segment:**
• 001. Public speeches › Solidarity Day speeches
• 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments › Campaigners did not pay for all of their meals
• 158. Self-exposure to the elements › Everyone lived in Resurrection City, which was mainly outdoors

Methods in 5th segment:

• 162. Sit-in › Goes along with Abernathy trespassing because he performed a sit-in
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 195. Seeking imprisonment › Abernathy trespassed at the capitol building

Methods in 6th segment:

Notes on Methods:
Segments are separated into 13 day clumps, with the first starting on 29 April and the last ending on 13 July.

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights
Group characterization:

• African Americans
• White Americans
• bill of rights
• economic equality
• poverty

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Southern Christian Leadership Conference, founded by Martin Luther King, Jr.; Ralph David Abernathy.
Partners:
Bayard Rustin, Coretta Scott King
External allies:
YMCA, A Quaker Action Group
Involvement of social elites:
Sen. Robert Kennedy

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Robert Kennedy

Groups in 2nd Segment:
• Coretta Scott King
• Robert Kennedy (exit)

Groups in 3rd Segment:

• Bayard Rustin (exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

• A Quaker Action Group

Groups in 5th Segment:

• A Quaker Action Group (exit)
• Coretta Scott King (exit)

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 13 days, with segment six being 10 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
House of Senate, Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
not known

Campaigner violence:
At the end of the campaign, a small group of people gathered at the original meeting location of the protestors and caused a riot with stone throwing and gas fires. This was not sanctioned by the movement

Repressive Violence:
Many arrests; allegations of police brutality.

Success Outcome

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

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The campaign did not achieve what it set out to do. The original leader was assassinated (for an unrelated reason) which set back the protestors. SCLC survived the end of the Poor People’s Campaign and went on to operate many other programs. Growth received a full score because the campaign grew much more than was expected as shown from the state of Resurrection City.

By spring 1967 some of the legal barriers to racial equality in the U.S. had been struck down. The federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination against racial, ethnic, national and religious minorities and women, in workplaces and in facilities that serve the general public. The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited discrimination in voting.
These laws were passed after enormous pressure was applied through mass nonviolent direct action campaigns by civil rights organizations and their allies. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had played an important role in the struggle. In the May 1967 SCLC retreat the organization focused on the economic problems that remained and how those could be addressed. The leaders agreed to create a campaign that would address all those in poverty, not only African Americans.

Another focus of the retreat’s attention was the Vietnam War, in which U.S. involvement had been escalating under the Presidencies of both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Dr. King had been controversially speaking out against the war, saying that the bombs that were dropped on Vietnam exploded also in U.S. cities. He believed that the inflation and poverty that hurt the U.S. was intimately related to the Vietnam War. SCLC agreed as an organization to join Dr. King in opposing the war.

By 27 November of that year SCLC leaders agreed to organize the Poor People’s Campaign for spring 1968 with the goals of pursuing equality for all Americans and protesting the war. They offered an “Economic Bill of Rights:"

1. People were to have a meaningful job with a livable wage.
2. People were to get a secure and efficient income.
3. People were to be able to access land for economic reasons.
4. Less well-off people were to have access to capital to promote business.
5. The middle class were to have a large role in government.

While one of Dr. King’s key strategists, Bayard Rustin, encouraged the targeting of economic injustice through a broad, multi-racial coalition, he thought civil disobedience was not timely in light of the political situation in the upcoming election year. Dr. King overruled Rustin’s objections, believing that arousing the general public to the need for economic justice for the poor would be strategic, and made civil disobedience a central part of the strategy.

On 4 December Dr. King announced a start date for the campaign: 22 April 1968. The primary plan of action was to march to the Washington Mall that extends to the Capitol where the U.S. Congress meets, and camp there while demanding justice. Significant allies came forward including informal support from the Peace Corps, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) who all helped by spreading the word about the event. U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy stepped up.

In the months immediately leading up to the start of the Campaign Dr. King joined a campaign in Memphis, Tennessee, in which the sanitation workers union was demanding higher wages and greater safety on the job. On the night of 4 April Dr. King was assassinated on the balcony of the motel where he was staying in Memphis, plunging the U.S. into an emotional storm that included riots in a number of cities.

Dr. Ralph Abernathy, a Vice President of SCLC, succeeded Dr. King. In a retreat 17 April the SCLC leadership, in grief but also noting the victory of the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike, decided to move ahead with the Poor People’s Campaign.

On 29 April the Poor People’s Campaign “Committee of 100” began to lobby various federal agencies including but not limited to the Department of Justice, the Department of Labor, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The committee, composed largely of poor people, used the lobbying to get out the message of what the campaign was about and what they wanted.

In May caravans of poor people headed toward Washington, D.C. from multiple states: Virginia, Alabama, Georgia and others. Famously, one of the caravans was a mule train. After intense negotiations with the U.S. Senate the SCLC gained permission to set up a camp on the Washington Mall for those arriving. The camp was to hold no more than 3,000 people.

Campaign coordinator Bernard Lafayette led the founding of Resurrection City along with John Wiebenson. The encampment was the primary staging area for a series demonstrations at federal agencies and the U.S. Congress, including civil disobedience that led to jailings.
The U.S. Postal Service gave the encampment its own zip code: 20013. Living conditions were poor in the town and residents had mixed reactions. Some experienced it as a place of sanctuary and unity while others experienced racial tension.

The population grew to an estimated 7,000 people at its peak. Some believed that to be an unmanageable number given the organizational resources available. Philadelphia-based A Quaker Action Group (AQAG) was an ally of the Campaign and sent staff and volunteers to Washington to help maintain Resurrection City and to participate in the demonstrations and be arrested.

On 5 June, instrumental political supporter Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated, dealing yet another blow to the already floundering campaign. After making a speech regarding his possible presidential candidacy, Senator Kennedy was shot three times. During the funeral procession, Kennedy’s casket passed through Resurrection City on the way to be buried in the cemetery.

Internal conflict also weakened the campaign. On 7 June Ralph Abernathy removed Bayard Rustin from the campaign after Rustin made a speech on behalf of the campaign but advocating his own list of goals rather than the Campaign’s list, and omitting the demand by the campaign to end the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. Later that same day some Campaign members returned to the Statler-Hilton Hotel, where they were previously banned, and ate dinner but paid for only half of it; the mass media revealed this as a scandal. Further, a claim made by some Campaign members about police brutality turned out to be false, thus discrediting other claims of brutality that had been previously been made.

The final act of mass participation in the Campaign was 19 June 1968 when an estimated 50,000 people gathered for Solidarity Day. Coretta Scott King, Dr. King’s widow, was among the speakers along with labor leaders and politicians.

The next day a confrontation between some inhabitants of Resurrection City and police led to rock throwing and tear gas.

Police moved in 24 June, the day after the encampment’s permit expired, and cleared out the few remaining inhabitants. Dr. Abernathy and a few others were arrested after performing a sit-in in front of the Capitol. A crowd that gathered at the original campaign headquarters later that same day threw rocks and a gasoline bomb. After police intervened with tear gas and Abernathy reinforced his prior wishes of no violence, the incident was put to an end. Days later the headquarters shut down.

Other participants in the Campaign refused to leave the city and a total of 288 were incarcerated for twenty days, thus marking 13 July as the end of the campaign.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

This campaign was influenced by the civil rights movement’s previous use of mass pressure and civil disobedience. (1).

**Sources:**


Poor marchers have dropped Bayard Rustin. (1968, June 8). The Times News, pp. 9.


**Additional Notes:**
Amy Wright wrote an essay for her dissertation about the campaign as a whole and was not viewed completely. A google search of 'Wright Unfinished Business 2007' will reveal this 574 page document.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**
Ryan Zacharias 04/08/2013

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