Students protest segregation in Columbia, South Carolina, 1960-1961

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

  Time period notes: The boycott in March 1961 that was the campaign’s final action seems to have gradually petered out, leaving no set ending date.

February 1960 to April 1961

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Columbia, South Carolina
Location Description: Allen University and Benedict College
Goals: Desegregation of Columbia schools and businesses

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 063. Social disobedience
- 162. Sit-in » Lunch Counter

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 063. Social disobedience
- 162. Sit-in » Lunch Counter

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in
Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches around the state capital building
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse

Notes on Methods:
There was a large amount of activity around the beginning and the end of the campaign, however there was a serious lull between the two, due to a lack of strong organization.

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- University students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Students at Allen University and Benedict College, especially those involved in the South Carolina Student Movement Association or the Campus Committee for Human Rights. Leading students included Lennie Glover, David Carter, Major Swinton, and many others.

Partners:
NAACP

External allies:
Not known

Involvement of social elites:
Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- NAACP
- South Carolina Student Movement Association

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Student Committee for Human Rights

Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length: 2.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Local businesses, members of the white community, politicians in favor of continued segregation.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known

Campaigner violence:
Students attacked a white restaurant in retribution for attacks on Allen University, before students became fully organized into coherent groups.

Repressive Violence:
White youth violently attacked both Allen University and Benedict College's campuses, and there were multiple reports of stabbings of black student leaders.

Success Outcome

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

Survival:
0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The campaign did not succeed in desegregating South Carolina's schools, but it was able to bring a large amount of attention to the issue of segregation. The number of activists also grew substantially, to the point where the group's decision to boycott segregated local businesses had serious financial effects.

By the beginning of the 1960s the Civil Rights Movement had taken hold of the United States, where black Americans had been treated unjustly since they first arrived in the nation. During the Civil Rights Movement, black communities all throughout the US South rose up in protest against the segregationist policies that kept them in systematically separate and insufficient living arrangements, a world away from the “separate but equal” treatment promised them by the 14 amendment and its interpretation in the Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson.

As a southern state, South Carolina played a major role in the Civil Rights Movement. Alongside many important struggles that also took place in South Carolina, there was an attempt to desegregate Columbia, its capital city, in 1960-1961. Despite the courageous work of student civil rights protestors, segregation proved too strongly rooted in the politics of the state to be shaken by a local campaign.

The campaign to desegregate Columbia began February 14-15, 1960, when students at Allen University and Benedict College (two black schools in Columbia) independently held rallies to protest school and community segregation. These two protests merged into a larger action, which drew several hundred students. Encouraged by the success of this first action, the two schools
continued to collaborate on organizing protests, and on March 2 approximately fifty Allen and Benedict students participated in lunch counter sit-ins at two department stores. Approximately ten minutes into the protest, both businesses were temporarily closed, giving the movement a palpable early victory. The very next day, five hundred students gathered together to protest. Two hundred of them marched to the main business center of the city where all the businesses had closed in preparation for their arrival.

Intimidated by this string of successes, white youth drove past Allen University the next night (March 4), and proceeded to burn a cross and throw bricks at one of the school buildings. This prompted retaliation from black students, who violently attacked a white drive-in restaurant and broke car windows. This appears to have been the only violence by black students over the course of the campaign.

In reaction to that violence, the Mayor of Columbia announced he would arrest anyone caught protesting, and student leaders at Allen and Benedict temporarily called off protests, apparently intimidated either by the mayor’s threats or by the student violence. On March 5, however, students from Claflin and South Carolina State colleges formed the South Carolina Student Movement Association. This gave new strength to efforts in Columbia. The South Carolina Student Movement Association’s stated goal was to collaborate with all South Carolina black schools in order to bring about integration. This group, which included Allen and Benedict students, would take a leadership role in much of the student organizing over the next few months. On the same day that the South Carolina Student Movement Association was formed, however, the Columbia desegregation campaign had its first arrest; the police took Mr. Arnold M. Smith into custody for “loitering,” in accordance with the mayor’s threat.

On March 15, members of the South Carolina Student Movement Association held a protest in Columbia, designed to take place at the same time as one happening on the same day in Orangeburg, South Carolina (see, “Orangeburg, South Carolina, college students protest segregation, 1960”). Police arrested 11 students over the course of two days.

Students continued with small-scale protests through the spring and summer, yet student organizers had difficulty solidifying an organizational structure through the South Carolina Student Movement Association, as there was no cohesive group that spanned all involved campuses (most notably Allen and Benedict). Both schools had NAACP chapters, yet they had trouble collaborating with one another. Benedict administration also refused to allow members of its student body under the age of 18 to participate in protests, allegedly out of concern for students’ safety and in reaction to a Benedict student having recently been stabbed at a civil rights protest.

On October 15, seven months after the establishment of the South Carolina Student Movement Association, students at Allen and Benedict formed the Student Committee for Human Rights in order to facilitate cross-campus and citywide organizing. Allen students did the majority of the organizing for a period of a few months, although progress was slow. Morale was dampened by the discovery in early 1961 that the chairman of the Student Committee for Human Rights had been stealing money from the organization and deliberately slowing its progress in order to collect bribes from local business owners who were reluctant to see the city desegregated. Despite institutional challenges, however, campaigners continued to protest. At a storefront sit-in in February of 1961, police arrested twelve students. Thirteen more, who had gathered outside the jail in order to welcome back their fellow organizers, were also taken into custody. Students became more active in organizing over the next few months.

At a regional NAACP conference in Greenville, student leaders planned a large-scale action to take place in at the Columbia State House on March 2. At the protest, a student leader explained that the goal of the action was to bring public attention to the problem of segregation. Over 200 student protesters attended and nonviolently sang hymns as they marched in the streets. Another student leader is cited as having encouraged the crowd with a religious speech.

Students circled the building once before they were ordered to leave, but once they refused to disperse police arrested 187 of them (one source claims 193) on the charge of “disturbing the peace.” Testimony from the police chief overseeing the protest implies students’ singing and stomping may have caused fear of violence among the onlookers, although there were no reports of
actual violence.

After being found guilty by a state trial court, their case was eventually brought to the United States Supreme Court, which dropped all charges against the 187 protesters in its Edwards v. South Carolina ruling. The ruling brought significant national attention, and was covered by many major newspapers of the day.

Three days after the protest, whites attacked two black student leaders. One, a Benedict student named Lennie Glover, was seriously injured. The attackers were never caught. Mr. Glover became an icon for the campaign, and other student organizers began to use his name as in rallying energy for a very economically powerful Easter boycott of segregated businesses, a boycott they called the “Easter Lennie Glover No Buying Campaign.”

The duration of the boycott is unclear, yet despite the strong economic effect it had on local businesses, the area remained segregated. Although the campaign failed in its initial goal of bringing about school integration (as stated by the South Carolina Student Movement Association), and was unable to desegregate local businesses, the publicity of the protests and the trial hastened the south’s eventual desegregation.

Research Notes

Influences:

Other civil rights protests and student actions against segregation (1), Protests in Orangeburg South Carolina (see "Orangeburg, South Carolina, college students protest segregation, 1960"). (1)

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy: Elowyn Corby, 30/01/2011