



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Tallahassee, Florida, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960

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

February

1960

to: December

1960

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Tallahassee, Florida

Goals:

Desegregation of public places, such as restaurants and buses, in Tallahassee

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 071. Consumers' boycott

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

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 162. Sit-in

Notes on Methods:

Sit-ins were used intermittently until December 1960, but it is not known in what specific segments this method was used except for segment 1

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Black pastors
- College students
- Regional high school students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Patricia & Priscilla Stephens, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Chapter at Florida A&M University

Partners:

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

External allies:

White Florida State University (FSU) students

Involvement of social elites:

Rev. Daniel B. Speed

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- CORE
- Florida A&M Students
- Florida State University students
- NAACP
- Rev. Daniel B. Speed

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Local Citizen Council, Governor of Florida and Mayor of Tallahassee, police, legal forces

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

None known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Barring and threatening of violence with armed men; Arrests, charges with disturbances; Harassment with no police involvement to stop; Tear gas

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

goal was never achieved during the campaign. The overall goal of desegregation of public places in the United States was achieved later on.

the CORE chapter at FAMU was not recognized as an on-campus group, but National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was because it refrained from open activity of protest. By early 1961, sit-ins were almost at a standstill, and the FAMU CORE chapter dwindled. There was lack of support for more direct action than boycotting. CORE survived and thrived nationally.

the number of participants grew to be over 1000 at its peak, but it soon dwindled down to only CORE members.

Prior to the Tallahassee student sit-ins of 1960, the Tallahassee Bus Boycott took place in 1956, patterned after the Montgomery Bus Boycott that started with the refusal of Rosa Parks to surrender her bus seat to a white person. Tallahassee was sometimes called the “little Mississippi” where segregation was prominent.

During the summer of 1959, Patricia and Priscilla Stephens, two Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (Florida A&M, a Black school at the time) students, entered a Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) workshop at Miami University. They brought a CORE chapter back to Florida A&M.

They tried out various little CORE projects such as picketing around Tallahassee—both successfully and unsuccessfully. A series of other “tests” were also followed, including sit-ins. There was no major publicity, and not much is known about these early actions.

On February 1, 1960, four African American students performed a sit-in against segregation at a Woolworth lunch counter in North Carolina, also known as the Greensboro Sit-ins of 1960 (see “Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960”). In response, eight Florida A&M and high school students sat-in at the local Woolworth counter for 2.5 hours on February 13, 1960. No one was arrested.

A week later on Saturday, February 20, a group of 11 students returned to the lunch counter in Tallahassee. This time counteractive tactics were ready. The police squad, led by the Mayor of Tallahassee, asked them to leave. When the group refused, they were arrested. A local minister, Rev. Daniel B. Speed bailed the students out.

The group was charged with “disturbing the peace by riotous conduct” and “unlawful assembly.” Five other charges were dropped by the time of the trial. All were found guilty. They could either pay a 300-dollar fine or serve 60 service days. All but 3 chose service—an incident of “jail-versus-bail.”

Florida A&M students conducted a sit-in again on March 5, and then again on the 12th. White students from Florida State University (FSU) joined both sit-ins. Some 240 students of both races were arrested. Later in the day of the 12th, some 1,000 Florida A&M students in groups of 75 headed downtown with posters. The marchers asked for the release of the students. The Local Citizen Council barred the students’ approach to a store with a group of variously armed white men. The students turned back, but six more students were arrested.

In different parts of Tallahassee, several students gathered in response to the massive arrests. The mayor announced a 3-minute warning for the group to disperse. Before the allotted time was up, the police used tear gas. Several female students were hospitalized with burns. The governor ordered students confined to the campus. CORE did not officially organize or conduct these marches. 11 were convicted—6 blacks, 5 whites. They spent Easter in jail. No arrests were made on the armed white counter-forces.

During these actions when the students gathered to participate in or to support the sit-in, the mayor would order pickets and sitters to leave. The white harassers that were against the sit-in were not molested by the police. The picketers and sitters were arrested if they did not leave the scene

By this time the state officials urged the students to stop in order to prevent the Florida’s Interracial Committee from weakening. Further campaigning would throw the state’s Democratic gubernatorial primary to a segregationist candidate Farris Bryant. He won regardless. A series of visits to city officials and merchants followed this détente, backed up by a general boycott of the downtown chain stores. The boycott continued well into 1961.

The Florida Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, an interracial committee, endorsed the campaign. However, it failed to secure any results. Many reluctant and scared supporters of the sit-ins viewed this committee as an excuse to drop out of actively supporting the sit-ins, but were rather content with only participating in the general boycott.

CORE decided to continue its sit-ins until December of 1960. They were alone, and were not generally supported. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), instead, continued to boycott most downtown chain stores and published every so often “Traitor Lists” of blacks who had been “buying segregation.”

CORE was not recognized by Florida A&M as an on-campus group for its active protests. NAACP was recognized, however, for it refrained from open activity. At FSU, at least one white student was expelled for his participation in the sit-ins. By early 1961, the sit-ins were almost at a standstill, and the Florida A&M CORE chapter dwindled, mostly due to its lack of support from outside for more direct action other than boycotting.

There were many possible reasons for the lack of success and growth in the Tallahassee sit-in movement, such as: a very small and powerless black middle class, mostly only of ministers; sporadic and weakened student power in reorganizing; lack of a black newspaper and black attorney in the area; overall unstable black community class structure; lack of any independent black group that could effectively support the students financially or legally.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign was influenced by the 1960 sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina (see “Greensboro, NC, students sit-in for U.S. Civil Rights, 1960”)(1).

Sources:

CORE. "History of CORE." CORE – Congress of Racial Equality. September 10, 2010 < <http://www.core-online.org/>>.

Oppenheimer, Martin. The Sit-in Movement of 1960. Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Pub., 1989.

Additional Notes:

This sit-in campaign was one of many cases that took place around the nation in the 1960s.

Many elements point to the lack of success in the sit-in campaigns. The very small black middle class, mostly only of ministers, had little power. The student power became sporadic and weak as they had difficulty in reorganizing. There was no black newspaper, and no black attorney in the area. The overall unstable class structure of the black community with no independent group of blacks that could effectively support the students financially or legally all contributed to the movement in Tallahassee not growing effectively.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (08/08/2011)

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

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