



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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U.S. civil rights activists occupy Wisconsin State Capitol to demand human rights act, 1961

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

1 June

1961

to: 13 August

1961

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Madison, Wisconsin*

Goals:

To persuade the Wisconsin state legislature to pass a human rights bill ensuring fair housing and employment

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 015. Group lobbying
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 015. Group lobbying
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 015. Group lobbying
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 162. Sit-in

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- African Americans
- Ministers
- Politicians
- Whites
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Lloyd Barbee and Isaac Coggs

Partners:

Governor Gaylord Nelson, Wisconsin NAACP

External allies:

Roy Wilkins, Executive Director of National NAACP

Involvement of social elites:

Governor Gaylord Nelson and his sister, Janet Nelson Lee, Assemblyman Isaac Coggs

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- African American Churches
- Assemblyman Coggs
- Governor Nelson
- Wisconsin NAACP

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Students
- middle class whites
- professors
- women

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 10 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Representatives in the Wisconsin State Legislature, Wisconsin Real Estate Brokers Board

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

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:

Though the campaigners did not achieve their goals for the sit-in, they succeeded in building awareness and momentum for later campaigns.

On 1 June 1961, Isaac Coggs, the only African American Member of the Wisconsin legislature, introduced a Humans Rights bill with two civil rights provisions: a fair housing law and a plan to reorganize the Fair Employment Practices Commission. Though Governor Gaylord Nelson supported the bill, it was met with resistance in committee, facing amendments to kill or cripple it. Opponents of the bill argued that real estate brokers and home sellers should have the right to decide to whom they should sell homes.

The state National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) called for a protest in response to the opposition of the Human Rights bill on the steps of the State Capitol building on Friday June 13. Two hundred mostly African American supporters came to the rally led by Reverend Oliver Gibson of Beloit. Reverend Gibson had served as pastor in Little Rock, Arkansas and had been an active leader of the anti-segregation fight there. He instructed demonstrators to behave in a “quiet and dignified manner.”

Speakers included: Reverend Gibson, Assemblyman Coggs, Rebecca Barton- Executive Director of the Governor’s Commission on Human Rights, and Governor Nelson. Protestors held signs reading “All Men Are Created Equal- So Give Them Rights” and

“In Alabama They Walked. In Mississippi They Sat. In Wisconsin We Stand for Human Rights”

Despite the successful rally, the bill continued to face strong resistance in the legislature. On Monday July 31, a group of sixteen self proclaimed "Liberty Lobbyists" marched into the Capitol wearing badges reading “We’re here for Wisconsin human rights legislation.” Twelve of the liberty lobbyists were white, four were black, and they included a professor, a mechanic, two ministers, housewives, students, and Lloyd Barbee, the head of the Wisconsin National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The sixteen lobbyists sat in folding chairs in front of each of the rotunda's sixteen pillars vowing to continue their occupation until the legislature acted on the bill with the support of Governor Nelson, the Commission on Human Rights, and Assemblyman Coggs. The next day more supporters who had been afraid of arrest joined the occupation including sixty members of the Madison NAACP, about a dozen University of Wisconsin students, several ministers, Governor Nelson’s sister Janet Nelson Lee, and Anne Miller, the daughter of two former slaves.

Leaders instructed protestors to “refrain from loud talking and moving around. Speak quietly if at all. Sit or stand straight at all times. Use chairs or camp stools, if available. Otherwise sit on the floor or stand.” They hoped their action would be a “peaceful, dignified demonstration emphasizing human worth and solidarity of the purpose of those who engage in demonstrations, and the righteousness of their cause.”

On August 4, the demonstrators received word that the bill would advance through the Assembly Public Welfare Committee. Hearing news of the victory, 243 more people joined the occupation including members of the NAACP from Beloit and Milwaukee. Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the national organization NAACP, endorsed the demonstration.

On August 11, the bill was defeated. On Sunday August 13, the sixteen Liberty Lobbyists marched out of the Capitol wearing black armbands. 700 people had participated in the protest. Though Wisconsin still has not passed civil rights legislation and the problem of unequal housing remains, the occupation of the Capitol paved the way for later successful civil rights campaigns in Wisconsin.

Research Notes

Influences:

Sit-ins and marches in the southern civil rights movement (1,2).

Sources:

Jones, Patrick Damien. “ ‘The Selma of the North:’ Race relations an civil rights insurgency in Milwaukee 1958-1970.” The University of Wisconsin, Madison [Doctoral Thesis]. 2002. Accessed: February 16, 2013.

<http://search.proquest.com/dissertations/docview/305507259/13C4BCB7542749EAFAC/1?accountid=14194>

“Nelson Sister Joins Sit-In.” The Milwaukee Journal, Page 1. August 2, 1961. Accessed: February 16, 2013.

<http://www.jsonline.com/historicarchive/search/?searchBy=date&searchText=&dat=19610801&fromDate=08%2F01%2F1961&ni>

“NAACP ‘Sit-In’ Starts In Capitol Rotunda.” The Milwaukee Sentinel. August 1, 1961. Accessed February 16, 2013.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1368&dat=19610801&id=0xAwAAAIAIAJ&sjid=ZhEEAAAIAIAJ&pg=7162,207171>

“Sit-Ins Quit, Claim Efforts Not Wasted.” The Milwaukee Sentinel. August 14, 1961. Accessed February 16, 2013.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=ICoxAAAIAIAJ&sjid=WBEEAAAIAIAJ&pg=4603,1881619&dq=lloyd+barbee+madsis&hl=en>

Additional Notes:

Here is a link to an article with a photograph of the Liberty Lobbyists.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1368&dat=19610801&id=0xAwAAAIAIAJ&sjid=ZhEEAAAIAIAJ&pg=7162,207171>

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

Jonathan White, 17/02/2013

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[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/wave-campaigns/us-civil-rights-movement-1950s-1960s>

[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>

[3] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/included-participation-more-one-social-class>