

## Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Aldon D. Morris

*Protest, Power, and Change: An Encyclopedia of Nonviolent Action from ACT-UP to Women's Suffrage.* Roger Powers, William Voegelé, Christopher Kreugler, and Ronald McCarthy, eds. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.

A pivotal organization of the American civil rights movement, formed in 1957 by African American ministers in the South and led by Martin Luther King, Jr. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was crucial to the development and major victories of the American civil rights movement. The SCLC led the protest campaigns directly associated with achieving the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. It was the organizational vehicle of Martin Luther King, Jr., who became the major charismatic leader of the civil rights movement. It was also the vehicle through which many civil rights leaders worked, including Ella Baker, Wyatt Tee Walker, James Bevel, Andrew Young, Hosea Williams, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, Jesse Jackson, and many others. A key element of its success was its mass base rooted in the black church...



The origins of the SCLC are to be found in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-1956, which set the stage for the emergence of a mass movement among southern blacks. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks of Montgomery refused to relinquish her bus seat to a white man. Parks was arrested because her refusal to give the white man her seat violated local segregation ordinances. Mrs. Parks was a member of the local NAACP, and she was active in a black women's group known as the Women's Political Council. Upon learning of Parks' arrest, these two organizations called for a one-day boycott of local buses. The organizers of the boycott were surprised at the degree of cooperation they received from the black community. The vast majority of black Montgomeries refused to ride the buses. As a result, plans were made to extend the boycott indefinitely until the bus company agreed to meet their demands.

The organizers of the boycott understood that a mass movement was needed to accomplish this goal. The black churches [members] were recruited through their ministers to support the boycott. The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), an umbrella organization composed of other local black organizations, was formed to guide and coordinate the boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr., who at the time was pastor of a local black church, was elected MIA president.

Nonviolent direct action was chosen as the method of the movement. While King was familiar with Gandhi's nonviolent movement in India, the masses of black people were not. At this time, King was not committed to nonviolence as a way of life. But there were activists associated with organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) who were steeped in knowledge of nonviolent resistance. Glenn Smiley and Bayard Rustin were two such individuals who came to Montgomery and conducted nonviolent workshops for the black masses and for the leadership of the movement. The philosophy of nonviolence was consistent with key tenets of the black religious tradition. This consistency made it less difficult to disseminate the philosophy and method of nonviolence to the black masses.



*King outside the SCLC headquarters*

The Montgomery Bus Boycott endured over a year. During this period, King proved to be an extraordinary, charismatic leader similar to Gandhi. King's influence stemmed from his connection to the black masses through the churches, his powerful personality, and his organizational position as president of the MIA. The MIA itself effectively combined charisma, organization structure, and a mass following. The movement was victorious because of the effectiveness of its year-long boycott and a Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation on buses to be unconstitutional.

The Montgomery campaign became a model for other southern black communities wishing to overthrow racial segregation. Even before the boycott achieved its goal, it inspired nonviolent movements in other cities such as Tallahassee, Florida, and Birmingham, Alabama. King and other southern leaders realized that these movements needed to be coordinated and new movements needed to be developed to overthrow the regime of racial oppression. Several northern activists including Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and Stanley Levison shared the beliefs of the southern leaders. The conclusion reached by the two groups was that a regional organization modeled after the Montgomery Improvement Association was needed to generate and coordinate mass nonviolent movements to overthrow racial segregation.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was formed by southern ministers in January 1957, with King as its president. Its goal was to produce mass nonviolent resistance on such a grand scale that it would topple racial segregation and usher in an era of racial integration. Charisma and nonviolent direct action by disciplined masses, combined with organizational structure, were to be the hallmark of the SCLC. Local SCLC affiliates composed of community organizations emerged in numerous southern communities, usually guided by church-based leadership.

Throughout the late 1950s the SCLC worked in local communities, preparing them to engage in nonviolent action to achieve racial desegregation and the franchise. In 1960, it helped the student lunch-counter sit-ins to become a major movement. These sit-ins generated numerous desegregation victories and led to the establishment of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which SCLC helped to create. The SCLC also assisted the 1961 Freedom Rides begun by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which played a key role in the desegregation of interstate travel.

By the early 1960s, the SCLC decided that major community-wide protest movements were needed to defeat southern white segregationists. These segregationists used heavy repression against the movement. They controlled local governments and the means of violence, and were supported by white supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizen Councils. To overcome such powerful repressive forces, the SCLC began planning massive nonviolent protest campaigns that would disrupt local communities and force the federal government to pass national legislation outlawing racial segregation.

In 1963, the SCLC organized such a campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. During that campaign, the SCLC utilized multiple nonviolent tactics including an economic boycott, sit-ins, mass marches, picketing, mass arrests to fill the local jails, defiance of a court injunction prohibiting demonstrations, and news media coverage to generate favorable public opinion. King and the SCLC were able to create total disruption in Birmingham within a month. Thousands of people filled the jails. The economic boycott paralyzed the

economic community, and daily mass marches disrupted traffic and dramatized to the nation and to the world the great injustices imposed on African Americans. Birmingham's white power structure responded by unleashing vicious violence on the demonstrators, including many children.



However, the movement had become too large and powerful to be defeated, and local economic elites yielded to the movement's demands. Within a short time additional communities throughout the nation developed Birmingham-style movements to oppose racial segregation, leading, in 1964, to the federal Civil Rights Act. The SCLC and the civil rights movement had achieved a major victory because this act removed the legal foundation of the entire regime of racial segregation. In light of this victory and the famous 1963 March on Washington, King received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

Following the Birmingham campaign, SCLC turned its attention to achieving the franchise [right to vote] for southern blacks. In the spring of 1965, SNCC had organized a major campaign in Selma, Alabama, aimed at gaining the vote for blacks. King and SCLC were called in to assist this campaign. SCLC decided to use this campaign to achieve the national legislation that would give blacks the right to vote. The SCLC and SNCC organized major demonstrations in Selma around the right to vote. They mounted huge public marches and other nonviolent tactics in Selma and surrounding towns. As in Birmingham, Selma's white power structure responded with violence against demonstrators, causing the death of a black protester. To counter the repression, movement leaders decided to organize a mass march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to dramatize the need for the vote.

Thousands of black and white demonstrators came to Selma to participate in the march. By the time the march ended, two white demonstrators from the North had been killed by white segregationists. Nevertheless, the demonstrations had been so large and dramatic and characterized by white violence that they moved the federal government to act. In August 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act, which finally guaranteed the franchise to southern blacks. SCLC and the movement had achieved another major victory leading to the defeat of the regime of racial segregation.

By the late 1960s, King and other civil rights leaders had begun to realize that economic inequality between the races was a major barrier to black equality. Large numbers of blacks, especially in northern cities, began to question the efficacy of nonviolence and racial integration. They began calling for Black Power and black self-determination. They also questioned the viability of a nonviolent strategy that did not allow for black self-defense against white violence. These trends were reinforced by the urban rebellions of the late 1960s. King and the SCLC were being severely tested by these new developments. Indeed, it was not clear whether SCLC could devise an effective national strategy to solve racial oppression, especially given the defeat King and the SCLC suffered when they attempted to build a victorious movement in Chicago in 1966. Moreover, by the late 1960s, SNCC and CORE had yielded to the developing trends by embracing the goal of Black Power and approving of the right of African Americans to engage in self-defense.

Amid these changes, King and the SCLC remained firmly committed to nonviolence and the goal of racial integration. However, King and the SCLC radicalized their approach. The organization concluded that capitalism itself was largely responsible for racism and poverty more generally. The SCLC, therefore, called for the utilization of mass nonviolent resistance to achieve a redistribution of income and wealth in America.

In short, the SCLC had begun to organize an interracial movement to implement a form of socialism in the United States. To this end the SCLC was to lead a Poor People's March on Washington in the fall of 1968 to eradicate wide-scale poverty and achieve social justice. All of this was to be accomplished nonviolently. By 1968, it was not clear whether King and the SCLC could prevent violence from occurring during its demonstrations. In the spring of 1968, King and the SCLC were summoned to Memphis, Tennessee, to help lead a movement by black sanitation workers. One march King led erupted in violence that led his critics to maintain that King should not be allowed to lead protests in the nation's capital because they too would generate violence. King responded with plans to lead a peaceful march in Memphis to demonstrate that nonviolent resistance was still viable. He never had the chance. King was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

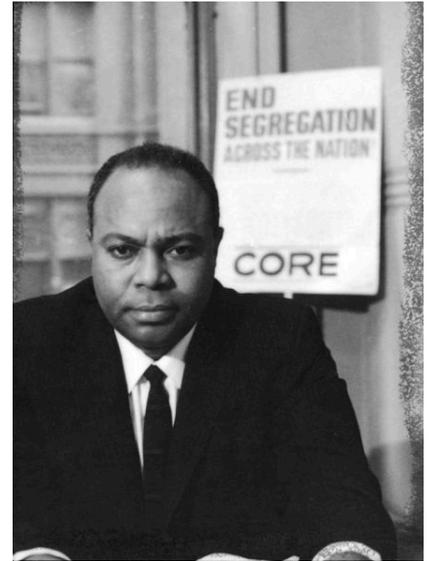
King's death was a major loss to the SCLC, for it removed the charismatic center of the organization. But even if King had lived, there is great uncertainty as to whether the SCLC could have eradicated poverty and racial inequality in the United States through the use of nonviolent protest. SCLC under the leadership of Ralph Abernathy conducted the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C., in 1968. The protests were disorganized, and SCLC experienced internecine conflict during the campaign. These protests did not achieve their goal.

SCLC remains active and is likely to be so well into the twenty-first century. However, it is not clear whether the organization will be able to utilize nonviolent direct action in a creative fashion to challenge poverty and racism, which remain deeply entrenched in American society. What is clear is that the SCLC was a major player in the dismantling of legally sanctioned racial segregation in America during the twentieth century. Bayard Rustin was right when he concluded, "Thus when judging the SCLC, one must place above all else its most magnificent accomplishment: the creation of a disciplined mass movement of Southern blacks. . . . There has been nothing in the annals of American social struggle to equal this phenomenon, and there probably never will be again."

## Congress of Racial Equality

Duke University and The SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) Legacy Project  
and History.com

The Congress of Racial Equality began when James Farmer, who would become its first national director, proposed the creation of an organization that would use “Gandhi-like techniques of nonviolent resistance – including civil disobedience, non-cooperation, and the whole bit – in the battle against segregation.” Farmer was born on January 12, 1920, in Marshall, Texas. His mother was a teacher and his father a minister who was also the first African-American citizen to earn a doctorate in the state.



*James Farmer*

Surrounded by literature and learning, the young Farmer was an excellent student, skipping grades and becoming a freshman at Wiley College in 1934 at the age of 14. While there he continued to excel as part of the debate team, and his eloquence and storytelling abilities would later be heard nationally as an adult. Farmer earned his divinity degree from Howard University in 1941, and while there he learned about the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Farmer studied much of Gandhi's philosophies and would apply the leader's ideas of nonviolent civil resistance to U.S. racial desegregation.

CORE was founded on the University of Chicago campus in 1942 as an outgrowth of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). For the next two decades, CORE introduced a small group of civil rights activists to the idea of achieving change through nonviolence, but during these years, its chapters were all in the North and its membership predominantly white and middle class. In 1955 CORE went into the South and provided nonviolence training to demonstrators during the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. Soon thereafter, CORE hired a small staff to work in the South including Bayard Rustin.



*Bayard Rustin*

Rustin was born in Pennsylvania in 1912. He moved to New York in the 1930s and was involved in pacifist groups and early civil rights protests. He strongly objected to the draft during World War II and supported the Communist Party throughout the 30s and 40s because of their stance on race relations. In 1953 he was arrested on a morals charge for publicly engaging in homosexual activity and was sent to jail for 60 days; however, he continued to live as an openly gay man for the rest of his life. By the 1950s, Rustin was an expert organizer of human rights protests. In 1958, he played an important role in coordinating a march in Aldermaston, England, in which 10,000 attendees demonstrated against nuclear weapons. Rustin met the young civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1950s and began working with King as an organizer and strategist in 1955. He taught King about Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance and advised him on the tactics of civil disobedience. He assisted King with the boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama in 1956. Most famously, Rustin was a key figure in the organization of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, at which King delivered his legendary "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963.

For CORE, the outbreak of sit-ins in 1960, following those in Greensboro, North Carolina, moved the organization further southward and saw the emergence of young people into the ranks of its leadership. Projects began in various southern states, most notably Louisiana. In 1961, CORE began the Freedom Rides through the South to test federally-ordered desegregation of buses and bus stations. The Freedom Rides offered many young activists, including those in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), their first experience in organized activism in the South, as well as helped CORE expand its southern presence, especially in Mississippi. Although the riders were attacked so brutally in Alabama that they were unable to continue, more than a thousand participants, black and white, carried on Freedom Rides during the summer.

Starting in late 1961, voter registration became the new civil rights priority, and CORE focused on Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina. At this time many civil rights workers were beginning to feel that black political power, not integration, offered the best hope for achieving racial equality. Although CORE did not abandon its commitment to racial understanding—it was, for instance, a cosponsor of the March on Washington in August 1963—it placed increasing emphasis on black autonomy. Pessimism about integration was reinforced by the wave of beatings and murders that met the voter registration projects and by CORE's expanded work in the North, which shed new light on the depth and intransigence of racial discrimination in the United States. In early 1966, Farmer, a pacifist and longtime advocate of racial integration, was replaced as national director by Floyd McKissick, who had become committed to black separatism. Thereafter, as a primarily black organization, CORE continued to press for political and economic justice for blacks while also lending its voice to the rising antiwar movement.

CORE is still in existence today and continues their work fighting for civil rights, “To many we have served as a buffer between them and a life of welfare, joblessness and dependency. To others we have been the last hope in a never-ending struggle against tragedy, depression and hopelessness. We are the light at the end of a long dark tunnel.”

## Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

Young activists and organizers with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC (pronounced “SNICK”), represented a radical, new unanticipated force whose work continues to have great relevance today. For the first time, young people decisively entered the ranks of civil rights movement leadership. They committed themselves to full-time organizing from the bottom-up, and with this approach empowered older efforts at change and facilitated the emergence of powerful new grassroots voices. Before SNCC, with only a few exceptions, notably the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) during the 1930s and 40s, civil rights leadership always meant adults. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) founded in 1942, grew during the 1960s because of a significant influx of young leadership into its ranks; but in that decade, there were more SNCC field secretaries working full time in southern communities than any civil rights organization before or since. Speaking on February 16, 1960 at the White Rock Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged the emerging importance of young people: “What is new in your fight is the fact that it was initiated, fed, and sustained by students.”

On February 1, 1960, Black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina launched sit-ins challenging segregation in restaurants and other public accommodations. Similar “direct action” lit by this spark in Greensboro spread like wildfire across the south. SNCC was founded just two and a half months later – on Easter weekend – at an April meeting of sit-in leaders on the campus of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Ella Baker was the gathering’s organizer. She had immediately recognized the potential of this new student activism and persuaded Martin Luther King Jr. to provide \$800 to bring them together at her alma mater. The sit-in movement was “bigger than a hamburger,” she told the students addressing them at the Shaw conference. And in an article published a month later, she wrote of the young activists, “[They] are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination – not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life.”



*Ella Baker*

Her network across the South was extensive; in the 1940s, she had been the NAACP Director of Branches. After the 1955-1956 Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott, she had been instrumental in organizing Martin Luther King Jr’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and was its executive director when the sit-ins erupted. “Strong people don’t need strong leaders,” she stressed to SNCC. She provided office space for the new organization in a corner of SCLC’s Atlanta headquarters. Jane Stenbridge, a white Baptist preacher’s daughter who had grown up in Georgia, left her graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary and became SNCC’s first staff person.

Within the year, a few other students left their college campuses to commit to full-time movement work. Although SNCC was still primarily engaged in protests aimed at desegregating lunch counters and restaurants, Ella Baker maintained a conversation about grassroots organizing, especially with Robert “Bob” Moses, a Harlem, New York native who in the summer of 1960 had come to Atlanta as an SCLC volunteer. She and Jane Stenbridge sent Moses on a journey through the Deep South to recruit students to participate in a SNCC conference being planned

for October 1960, in Atlanta. Ella Baker provided Moses and Stenbridge with a list of her contacts, and Jane Stenbridge wrote letters of introduction to them.

One of the southern leaders she sent Moses to was Amzie Moore, president of the Cleveland, Mississippi NAACP branch and vice president of Mississippi’s state NAACP. Moore, a tough World War II veteran, had worked with Medgar Evers and other Black activists to form the Regional Conference of Negro Leadership (RCNL). In 1951, the RCNL held a conference that drew over 10,000 Black residents to a conference in all-Black Mound Bayou, Mississippi that focused on voter registration and police brutality. Though he admired the sit-ins, Moore did not want them in Cleveland. He wanted a voter registration campaign and introduced Moses to that idea. “Amzie,” remembers Moses, “was the only one I met on that trip giving the student sit-in movement careful attention,

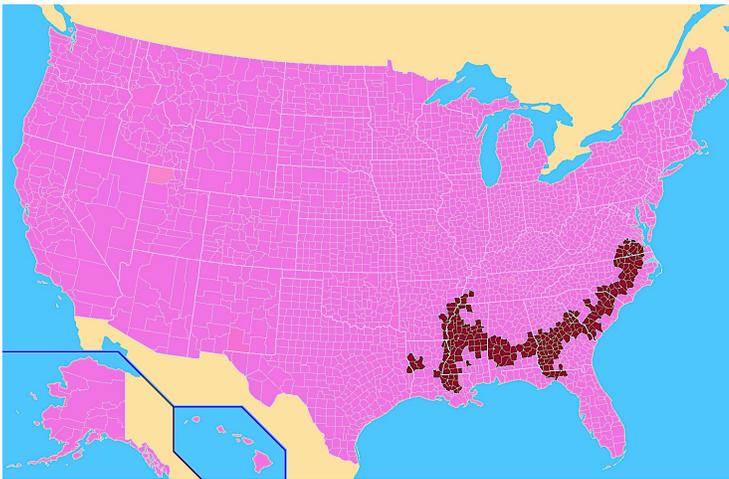
aware of all that student energy and trying to figure out how to use it.” Moses promised Moore that he would return to Mississippi the following year and work with him.

Amzie Moore attended SNCC’s October 1960 meeting and put voter registration on the table. The response was lukewarm. SNCC’s priority remained direct action. “Jail Without Bail,” and how to spread the sit-in movement dominated discussion. “Only mass action is strong enough to force all of America to assume responsibility and . . . nonviolent direct action alone is strong enough to enable all of America to understand the responsibilities she must assume,” the invitation to the October conference had stated.

After his election the following month, President John Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, soon made it clear that they were hostile to direct action, and began pressing the student activists of SNCC and CORE to abandon such protests and turn to voter registration. The two brothers thought that the white southern response to such an effort would be less violent and thus less dramatic and embarrassing to the United States than demonstrations. SNCC was suspicious of their overtures. The Kennedy administration seemed indifferent to enforcing existing civil rights law and far too willing to compromise with southern bigots. Many in SNCC thought that the Kennedys were trying to co-opt them and that organizing for voter registration was selling out. They wondered what such an effort meant for the radical, systemic change in the country that they were increasingly coming to believe was necessary. Others, however, saw voter registration as an important step toward the acquisition of real power for meaningful change.

Ella Baker stepped into this debate and helped the young SNCC organizers to reach a consensus decision that prevented a split within the group. SNCC would establish both a direct action wing and a voter registration wing. She knew that the distinction was largely meaningless. In the Deep South, voter registration was direct action. As SNCC field secretary Reggie Robinson later put it: “If you went into Mississippi and talked about voter registration they’re going to hit you on the side of the head and that’s as direct as you can get.”

This debate begins the process whereby SNCC, which began as a protest organization conducting and coordinating sit-ins and Freedom Rides, slowly evolved into an organization of organizers – “field secretaries” – embedding themselves in rural communities across the Black Belt where they gave special emphasis to voter registration.



The influence of the Black vote particularly applied to the Black Belt (← See map), where Black people made up 60-80% of the population. As Amzie Moore told Bob Moses in their early meetings, if Black people in the Black Belt were allowed to vote, they could elect officials at every level who could represent their concerns.

The convergence of young SNCC organizers with politically-experienced adults like Ella Baker, and especially with veterans like Amzie Moore and other strong local leaders the age of their parents and grandparents, was crucial to the foundation on

which SNCC stood and began developing its work. These adults gave access to networks they had built and been part of for years: not just NAACP branches, but also social organizations like the Prince Hall Masons, Elks, and church groups. They taught SNCC organizers how to move and stay alive in the dangerous environs of the rural Black Belt South.

Much of the work was simply demonstrating that violence could not drive them away. Indeed, SNCC’s young organizers brought something rare into the local communities they entered. “[They] hadn’t been conditioned by people who blew their mind about . . . you can’t do this, you can’t do that,” recalled Amzie Moore who was 49-years-old when he first encountered Bob Moses and SNCC. “They didn’t think they were under slavery . . .

You'd go to the courthouse with 'em – an 18-year or 20-year-old youngster, got on a pair of tight-legged blue jeans and a blue shirt – that was something boy, and he's walking out there in front, and putting him in jail wasn't nothing . . . This was an outstanding example of determined leadership in young people. I had never seen it before."

SNCC's first voter registration effort began in McComb, Mississippi in the late summer of 1961. Amzie Moore who lived in the Mississippi cotton plantation country known as the Delta was not quite ready for Bob Moses when he returned to the state, so he sent him to McComb NAACP leader Curtis Conway "C.C." Bryant. McComb is located in Southwest Mississippi then the most Klan-ridden region in the state. Nonetheless, supported by Bryant and a small core of local adults, Moses began conducting voter registration workshops. Few people of voting age were willing to make the attempt at registration, given reprisals ranging from murder and violent assault to retaliatory job loss. However, what he was doing had two unforeseen effects: local young people, excited first by just the fact of Moses's presence in town and soon by other incoming SNCC workers, felt that "Freedom Riders" had come to their town and wanted to be part of the Movement that they had only heard about. Some began working with Moses, canvassing the Black community for those willing to put their lives on the line to try to register to vote. Other young people began organizing their own student protest movement.

The other effect of the McComb project was to bring SNCC's work to the attention of Black leaders in the surrounding counties. Soon, residents "out in the rural" came to McComb and asked SNCC to begin projects in their counties, which were, if anything, even more dangerous than McComb. In Amite County, Moses began holding a "voter registration school" at a church on the farm of Eldridge Willie "E.W." Steptoe, who in 1952 had organized an NAACP branch in the county. SNCC soon encountered violence at a level it never had before. A key supporter in Amite County, NAACP leader Herbert Lee, was gunned down and killed in broad daylight by E.H. Hurst, a white state legislator. SNCC workers were attacked and beaten at county courthouses. As Moses would put it years later, SNCC, "had, to put it mildly, got our feet wet."

Meanwhile, Charles Sherrod, who was the first of the student sit-in leaders to leave school to work as a SNCC organizer (Moses already had a Masters degree when he went South), began a second project in Southwest Georgia in the fall of 1961. He based the project in the regional capital of Albany. Against the backdrop of mass protest initiated by students at Albany State College (now University), Sherrod and a core of SNCC field secretaries began organizing for voting rights in the surrounding rural counties. These Georgia counties were no less violent than the Mississippi counties where Moses and SNCC had begun working a few months earlier. Blacks formed a majority of the population in Southwest Georgia, but few were registered voters. And, as in Mississippi, whites greeted SNCC's work with violence and reprisal. However, as was also true in Mississippi, there were strong adults who seemed to have been looking for them. The small farm of Annie "Mama Dolly" Raines in Lee County, for example, became a base of operations for SNCC's organizers, and often she would sit up at night with her shotgun keeping a protective eye out for nightriders. These were unexpected people, not on the radar of the civil rights establishment or the nation in general.

What also emerged from this organizing process in both Southwest Georgia and Southwest Mississippi was a core of young people who would fan out into rural communities as SNCC field secretaries. For the most part, they were local young people.

One result of SNCC's work in Mississippi was revitalization of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). It had been organized in 1961 to assist released Freedom Riders, but on the initiative of NAACP state president Aaron Henry, in the fall of 1962, it took on the mission of coordinating voter registration activities in Mississippi. Henry became president; Bob Moses COFO program director; and David Dennis of CORE, which had begun organizing in central Mississippi, assistant program director. SNCC and CORE field secretaries became COFO staff.

In both Southwest Georgia and Mississippi, SNCC organizers were now successfully digging into an increasing number of communities. While the number of those attempting voter registration remained small, new leaders, many of them women – like Fannie Lou Hamer of Sunflower County, Mississippi and Carolyn Daniels of Terrell

County, Georgia – also emerged. So, too, did violence and other reprisals. Still, the federal government provided little help. In April 1963, for example, in Greenwood, Mississippi, where COFO was making its largest effort, the government withdrew its request for an injunction ordering county authorities to stop interfering with Black voter registration attempts.

More than any single thing, reprisals on every level kept Black people from trying to register to vote. To go to county courthouses and attempt to register was to enter the heartland of hostile white power. Whites argued that the low numbers proved that Blacks were not interested in voting. To refute this, COFO workers launched a “freedom registration” in Mississippi’s Black communities. Some 80,000 Black people registered. A “Freedom Vote” followed that fall, offering as candidates, Aaron Henry as Governor and Tougaloo College Chaplain Edwin King, a white native of Natchez, Mississippi, as Lt. Governor.

In April 1964, COFO workers organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and decided to challenge the legitimacy of the all-white “regular” state party. Key to getting the party and the challenge off the ground was the presence during the summer of 1964 of nearly a thousand out-of-state mostly student volunteers. What has become known as the 1964 Freedom Summer was violent and bloody. Eighty of the volunteers were attacked and beaten; 37 churches bombed or burned; another 30 Black homes and businesses bombed or burned; three COFO workers, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney of CORE and Andrew Goodman, a summer volunteer working with them, were killed. During the search for their bodies, the unidentified bodies of five Black men were pulled from Mississippi rivers. Scores of the volunteers and COFO organizers were arrested and beaten. The state blamed the Movement, claiming the voter registration activities had caused the violent white reactions.

In August, an MFDP delegation went to the Democratic Party national convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to challenge the legitimacy and seating of the all-white Mississippi delegation there. Although there was sympathy for the plight of Black Mississippians, they were not seated. President Lyndon Johnson did not want to challenge the Dixiecrat wing of the party, and threatened those in the party who did. Dixiecrat power triumphed.

SNCC was understandably embittered by the rejection of the MFDP in Atlantic City. But it was not paralyzed. As was traditional in the organization, new ideas bubbled from the bottom and were pursued. The MFDP set aside its disappointment and campaigned for Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party in the November election. After the November elections, they also mounted a challenge to Mississippi’s congressional delegation. That too, they lost. Others in SNCC began discussing the need for an independent Black political party that would aggressively pursue the interests of Black people. To attempt this in Mississippi would mean fighting the MFDP, which was still led by local community leaders, and SNCC was not willing to do this. “You can’t say that people have a right to make the decisions affecting their lives and then turn around and fight them because they made a decision you disagree with. The MFDP belongs to the Mississippians, not SNCC,” reflected one SNCC organizer.

So, in March 1965, another SNCC group used the Selma-to-Montgomery March to locate interested Black residents and begin organizing in Lowndes County, Alabama. SNCC workers had been organizing in nearby Selma since February 1963 but had not expanded into Lowndes County, a county that was 80 percent Black, but with no Black registered voters. A handful had successfully completed the application about two weeks prior to SNCC’s arrival, but they were still waiting to hear if they had been registered.

This group, led by Stokely Carmichael, was determined to organize an independent Black political party. They found a willing partner in John Hulett, who, with a small group of other Black Lowndes County residents, had already organized the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights. Together with SNCC, they now organized the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), with Mr. Hulett as its chair. The party’s symbol was a pouncing black panther. Within a year after passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, a majority of the voters in Lowndes County were Black. John Hulett, who had been part of the group attempting to register to vote two weeks before SNCC arrived, was elected the county sheriff in 1970.

First, by putting their lives continuously at risk through committed grassroots organizing, this relatively small group of young people broke the back of a racist and restrictive exclusionary order that was tolerated at the highest levels of government.

Second, the right to vote was gained not because Lyndon Johnson and the U.S. Congress woke up one morning and decided it was the right thing to do, but because Black people, denied the right to vote, struggled to gain it ... and they won.



Indeed, the MFDP and that party's 1964 challenge not only led to a two-party system in Mississippi and the South, but also forced changes in political practices through the 1972 "McGovern Rules," that have permanently expanded the participation of women and minorities within the Democratic Party. As a result, Dixiecrats fled to the Republican Party. This realignment, plus the dramatic increase in the number of Black registered voters, is what made possible the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency. Even more importantly, though less visible, is the increase of local Black elected officials at every level. Mississippi, for example, has more Black elected officials than any state in the nation. The importance of this increase is evident in the recent statement of U.S. District Judge Carlton W. Reeves, who in 2010 became only the second Black federal judge appointed in Mississippi. In sentencing three young white men who killed a Black man in Jackson, Mississippi, by running over him with their truck, then yelling "white power" as they drove off, Judge Reeves read a long statement from the bench. He noted the murder was part of the group's reign of terror within Jackson's Black community over a period of months. In his widely-publicized remarks, he noted this "irony":

Each defendant was escorted into court by agents of an African-American United States Marshal, having been prosecuted by a team of lawyers which includes an African-American ... from an office headed by an African-American U.S. attorney – all under the direction of an African-American attorney general, for sentencing before a judge who is African-American, whose final act will be to turn over the care and custody of these individuals to the BOP [Federal Bureau of Prisons] — an agency headed by an African-American.

Also, all-white juries are now largely a thing of the past.

Third, nationwide, student struggle was inspired by the Southern Movement, and these movements expanded and accelerated in the decade of the 1960s. Organizations such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Northern Student Movement (NSM) are examples of this.

Fourth, other movements gained strength from the pool of ideas found in SNCC; Chicano farm workers, who were facing sheriffs and going to jail in the late 1950s, invited SNCC workers to help with their efforts in the late 1960s. Discussion of sexism and women's rights within SNCC – as well as SNCC's real life examples of empowered, respected women who led local movements and held key positions in the organization — encouraged and reinforced a burgeoning feminist movement.

Lastly, the work of SNCC in particular taught an abiding lesson: that while protest is often necessary, it is not sufficient. The long, hard job of organizing at the grassroots is what empowers communities.

