

Breaking Down Legalized Segregation: 1963 Mass Struggles Advanced the Cause of Civil Rights

From Birmingham to Detroit and Washington, D.C., the people set the world stage

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In 1963, despite the tremendous campaigns aimed at breaking down legalized segregation and national oppression for eight years, the demand for federal civil rights legislation remained stalled due to southern segregationist influence, northern indifference and political avoidance by the John F. Kennedy administration. Nonetheless, by the spring of this momentous year, things would begin to rapidly shift in favor of the African American people and their movement allies.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court declared that “separate but equal” public schools systems were unconstitutional. However, by 1963, compliance with this ruling was hardly felt among the majority of the African American population most of whom remained in the South.

Between 1955 and 1962, African Americans were in motion determined to end apartheid in the U.S. A Civil Rights Bill passed in 1957 which empowered the Justice Department to take action against county governments which refused to allow universal suffrage led in part to the outbreak of the movement in Fayette County, Tennessee in 1959-1960.

The Fayette County Civic and Welfare League was organized by local activists in 1959 under the direction of Viola and John McFerren. In 1960 they set out to register African Americans to vote in the upcoming presidential elections.

However, the white landowners in this southwest Tennessee County put hundreds of African American tenant farmers off their land for daring to register. The movement established a “Tent City”, the first of its kind during this period which drew national support.

1960 witnessed the beginning of the student sit-in movement where thousands protested Jim Crow segregation resulting in hundreds of arrests. In April of that year the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed becoming the most militant organization within the civil rights movement.

After the Freedom Rides of 1961, where scores were arrested and beaten, the abolition of segregation in interstate travel was overturned in practice. Nevertheless, key centers of intransigence such as Birmingham, Alabama were fiercely resistant to desegregation.

Birmingham Sparks Nationwide Resistance

It was the eruption of the movement in Birmingham in the spring of 1963 that captured the

attention of the nation and the world. Both SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) founded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been organizing in the city, one of the most industrialized in the South.

Several thousand people, mainly children were arrested by the police and jailed. Dr. King, Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth were all arrested and beaten by the racist police.

The struggle would come to a head on May 5, when thousands of mostly youth marched through the African American community to the downtown area. Police chief Bull Connor ordered fire hoses turned on the people.

In response to the repression on May 5, the first significant urban rebellion of the 1960s occurred. James Forman, executive secretary of SNCC, described the events that day saying that “The police had cordoned off the intersections leading to downtown and started shooting water on people. Bricks and rocks started flying back at the police and the firemen. “(The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 1972, p. 315)

Forman went on to point out that “For over forty-five minutes, there was a chase in and out of alleys and streets. Other Black people joined in the fight against the police. The ‘riots’ that day in Birmingham received wide public attention—they were a prelude to Harlem ‘64, Watts ‘65, Newark and Detroit ‘67.”

Large demonstrations took place throughout the South that spring and summer. In Danville, Virginia, African Americans marched against racism and police brutality meeting violent repression on June 10.

President Kennedy delivered a speech on civil rights on the evening of June 11 saying at its conclusion that he would introduce federal civil rights legislation. Just a few hours later in Jackson, Mississippi, Medgar Evers, state field secretary of the NAACP, was gunned down in his driveway by white racist Byron De la Beckwith who avoided conviction for this crime for over three decades.

In response to the assassination of Medgar Evers and other issues, the Detroit Council for Human Rights, headed by Rev. C.L. Franklin, organized the largest march to that date for civil rights on June 23. Hundreds of thousands marched down Woodward Avenue led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with the support of the-then UAW President Walter Reuther.

King would deliver his first “I Have a Dream” speech at Cobo Hall in the aftermath of the Detroit march. It was the success of this demonstration which fueled the plans for the “March on Washington” that was held on August 28.

Repression Continues

Despite this outpouring of mass sentiment in favor of civil rights, the racists would strike back on September 15 when the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, a center of the movement, was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan. Four African American girls, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair were killed.

It would take until 1977 for the first of the Klansmen associated with the crime to be convicted. Two other Klansmen, Thomas E. Blanton and Bobby Frank Cherry, were later convicted in 2001 and 2002 respectively for the bombing and murders.

Two months after the church bombing, on November 22, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. The murder was reflective of the atmosphere of violence and intolerance in the U.S. at the time.

On December 1, Malcolm X during the question and answer period after a speech at the Manhattan Center in New York City described the assassination of Kennedy as a case of the “chickens coming home to roost,” meaning that the violence inflicted upon African Americans and other oppressed people throughout the world was now impacting the leaders of the U.S.

His comments, which received wide press coverage, led to his suspension and subsequent departure from the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X would form the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) the following year and tour the Middle East and Africa.

These developments in 1963 would result in more militant actions in the following years of the decade. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were not enough to stave off the urban rebellions which occurred in hundreds of cities throughout the country.

Some five decades later the struggles of 1963 provide lessons on the role of mass mobilization and the need for militant direction against oppression and state repression.



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