

# From Civil Rights to Black Power: The Significance of the 1965-66 Alabama Freedom Movement

Application of independent politics transformed the African American struggle

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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*With the release of the "Selma" film tremendous interests has been generated among youth activists in the struggle for Voting Rights as it reached its apex in March 1965.*

This campaign for the ballot in Dallas County, Alabama, where Selma is located, did not begin when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) intervened during early Jan. 1965. In fact, as mentioned in the film, organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had been working in Selma for at least two years prior to SCLC.

In a first person account by Prathia Hall, a SNCC field secretary, she says that

"In early winter 1963, SNCC field secretary Bernard Lafayette was beaten and jailed in Selma, where he and his wife, Colia, had been working alone. Immediately afterward James Forman, executive secretary of SNCC, came to Southwest Georgia and said, 'Come on, Prathia, we need you in Selma.'" (Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts of Women in SNCC, p. 470, 2010)

Hall went on to point out that

"The members of the Dallas County Voters' League had been working there for ages; they were part of that longtime movement struggle. They had done some voting rights work, and small numbers of schoolteachers and other middle-class black people had been registered. League members also had filed some related lawsuits."

When SNCC workers arrived in the early 1960s, they began by working with high school students living in the projects. Hall stresses that

"The 1965 Selma Movement could never have happened if SNCC hadn't been there opening up Selma in 1962 and 1963. The later, nationally known movement was the product of more than two years of very careful, very slow work."

## **The Intervention of Malcolm X**

After the coming to Selma of Dr. King and SCLC in early 1965, on Feb. 3, Malcolm X, the

founder of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), visited Alabama where he spoke at Tuskegee Institute, a historically African American university eighty miles away from Selma. Malcolm had broken with the Nation of Islam nearly a year earlier pledging to work in an alliance with the Civil Rights Movement, particularly the youth.

Fay Bellamy Powell, a former member of the U.S. Air Force, was recruited into SNCC during late 1964 and wound up in Dallas County, Alabama running the organization's office and conducting press work. She found out along with Silas Norman, also of SNCC, the details of Malcolm X's itinerary at Tuskegee.

When they arrived on Feb. 3 at the campus auditorium the place was packed with standing room only. The SNCC workers were able to get into the hall and eventually spoke with Malcolm after his lecture which consisted of an extended question and answer period.

Powell and Norman invited the OAAU leader to come to Selma the following day to address a group of youth working in the movement. Malcolm immediately agreed to come and they arrived at Brown's Chapel A.M.E. Church on the morning of Feb. 4 where they were swarmed by both U.S. and European press reporters.

Powell wrote of the experience that

"Each morning Brown's Chapel would fill with elementary, junior high and high school students. They were the core of the Selma Movement and took part in all the demonstrations. Usually these morning sessions were lively and noisy. On the day Malcolm spoke, although the church was packed with young people, there was no noise, no shuffling of feet, no coughing, no squirming. Only Malcolm's voice could be heard." (Hands on the Freedom Plow, p. 474)

Later when Powell and Norman drove Malcolm to the Montgomery airport he told them that the OAAU was planning to send organizers into the South and wanted to know if SNCC would work with them. Powell said "Silas and I answered Malcolm's question with an enthusiastic 'Yes!' and asked that he return in the not too distant future. Three weeks later, Malcolm was assassinated. That was a dream deferred."

### **The Formation of the Black Panther Party in Alabama (1965-66)**

In the aftermath of the Selma to Montgomery march, Stokely Carmichael, later known as Kwame Ture, a SNCC field secretary, became the Lowndes County project director. Working with local students and community activists, they formed the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), an independent political party with the Black Panther as its symbol.

Gloria House, then a graduate student at the University of California, went to work in Alabama as a SNCC field secretary in the summer of 1965. The racist murder of white Episcopal seminarian Jonathan Daniels in Hayneville, located in Lowndes County, on Aug. 20, prompted House to return as a full-time Civil Rights worker for SNCC that fall.

She later wrote that "In Lowndes we organized the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which initiated the formation of an independent black political party. Influenced by the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), we chose to create a separate political party instead of seeking admission into the Democratic Party. Jack Minnis, a researcher in SNCC's Atlanta office, discovered a provision in the Alabama Administrative

Code that allowed independent parties to enter county elections if certain stipulations were met.” (Hands on the Freedom Plow”, p. 509)

House continued later to note that “SNCC workers spread the idea of independent black political parties from Lowndes County to other Alabama counties where black people constituted sizable majorities. Later I moved into Selma to help other SNCC organizers establish the freedom party of Dallas County. The fruits of our labor in the Alabama independent parties were not immediately reaped in the 1966 elections, but rather in 1970, when black people in a handful of counties won positions in local government. These officials subsequently organized a statewide coalition of independent parties, determined to win representation for black voters on a state level.” (p. 510)

### **The Rise of Black Power**

It was within this context that Stokely Carmichael contested and won the chairmanship of SNCC in May 1966. The following month James Merideth, who had desegregated the University of Mississippi in 1962, set out alone in a “March Against Fear” from Memphis into Mississippi on June 5.

The following day he was shot and wounded by a white racist in Mississippi. In response the SCLC, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and SNCC, pledged to continue the march to Jackson, the state capitol.

During the course of the march through the Delta region of the state, Willie Ricks, now known as Mukasa Dada, mobilized sharecroppers and youth through the slogan Black Power. Carmichael picked up the slogan in a speech on June 16 after being released from a six hour jail stint for defying the police over erecting tents for the marchers at a local high school in Greenwood.

He said in part that evening that “We have begged the president. We’ve begged the federal government—that’s all we’ve been doing, begging and begging. It’s time we stand up and take over. Every courthouse in Mississippi ought to be burned down tomorrow to get rid of the dirt and the mess. From now on, when they ask you what you want, you know what to tell ‘em. What do you want? The crowd shouted back ‘Black Power’. Willie Ricks jumped to the stage and lead the chorus of chants saying: ‘We Want Black Power!’”

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