

Mass Student Movement in the United States Began Six Decades Ago

1960 marked the initiation of the sit-in movement demanding an end to legalized segregation

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On February 1, 1960, four African American students from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical University sat down at a racially segregated lunch counter in the F.W. Woolworth Department store in downtown Greensboro to demand service.

This act of civil disobedience was organized by **Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, William Smith, Clarence Henderson** and **Ezell Blair, Jr.** (later Jibreel Khazan). They, of course, were refused accommodation by the wait staff which called the police.

Surprisingly these students were not arrested and eventually reached an agreement with the Mayor of Greensboro to abolish the racially segregated policies at several lunch counters in the city. Remarkably this form of protest spread throughout the South and several areas of the North.

By the end of February, thousands of students and their supporters had sat-in at various establishments throughout the country. Many were arrested and brutalized by the police.

Nearly two weeks after the Greensboro protest, African American students in Nashville, Tennessee, a center for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), set out to overturn segregation in the city. The youth were given a political orientation by Vanderbilt University graduate student and clergyman **Rev. James Lawson** who trained them in nonviolent resistance techniques beginning in the fall of 1959 as they gathered under the banners of the Nashville Student Movement (NSM) and the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC).

Lawson was later expelled from Vanderbilt, a prestigious white university, due to his activism and influence among the African American students at other institutions. Yet the movement in Nashville would produce some of the most militant and consistent fighters for Civil Rights in the U.S. such as **Diane Nash, John Lewis and John Hardy.**

The struggle to desegregate Nashville lasted for several months. Students from Fisk University, Tennessee State Agricultural and Industrial College, Meharry Medical College and the American Baptist Theological Seminary played a leading role in what became the first organized movement aimed at ending all Jim Crow regulations in a major municipality in the South during the 1960s.

White mobs in response to the student demonstrations gathered inside lunch counters and on the downtown streets of Nashville to taunt and physically assault protesters. Activists

such as **John Lewis** and **Diane Nash** spent time in jail for their actions.



Nashville mass demonstration in April 1960 led by Diane Nash and John Lewis

The courageous efforts by the students in Nashville had a monumental impact on youth around the country. Eventually the city administration relented on a number of the demands put forward by the youth illustrating that direct action could win results in the campaign to abolish segregation.

Diane Nash at the time was a student at Fisk University. She travelled to Nashville from Chicago where she had grown up. Along with Bernard Lafayette, James Bevel, John Lewis and others, they constituted the core organizers of the student movement in the city.

Nash was quoted in the Atlanta Journal Constitution in regard to her burgeoning activism saying that:

“I started feeling very confined and really resented it. Every time I obeyed a segregation rule, I felt like I was somehow agreeing I was too inferior to go through the front door or to use the facility that the ordinary public would use.”
(See [this](#))

Lafayette, who was a 20-year-old student at the American Baptist Theological Seminary, noted the central role of Nash in the early phase of the movement in Nashville. In the same above-mentioned article Lafayette told the newspaper:

“She was always very calm, clear and articulate. She didn’t try to dominate anything. But she really impressed us with her leadership abilities. One of the things that she was very good at was managing conflict within the group.”

As the struggle expanded to mobilize thousands of students, Nash became the media spokesperson for the movement. She confronted Nashville Mayor Ben West amid a march of 4,000 people which descended on City Hall in the aftermath of the bombing of the home of African American Attorney Z. Alexander Looby on April 19, asking him directly did he think maintaining legalized segregation was morally correct. West said he was a staunch believer in segregation.

Looby, who escaped the bombing uninjured, along with other lawyers, worked tirelessly to win the release of some 150 students who were arrested between February 13 and May 10 when a settlement was reached with the West administration. Although the May 1960 agreement did outlaw segregation in six establishments in Nashville, demonstrations continued against other segregated businesses until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of July 1964.

The Formation of SNCC

While the student movement led by African Americans grew rapidly, a conference was called by Ms. Ella Baker, the-then executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Raleigh, North Carolina in April of the same year. Baker encouraged the students to form their own independent organization which resulted in the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

SNCC played a pivotal role in the mass movement for Civil Rights from that period throughout the 1960s. The following year in 1961, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) began the “Freedom Rides” throughout the South to eliminate racial segregation in interstate travel.

There were malicious attacks on Freedom Riders in Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama where many were severely beaten by white mobs while police and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents looked on doing nothing. A Greyhound bus was bombed on Mother’s Day in Anniston, Alabama by the Ku Klux Klan. The inhabitant barely escaped leaving many injured with no fatalities.

CORE was forced to abandon leadership of the Freedom Rides which was soon taken up by SNCC. Several of their activists were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi at the end of a journey during the protests and sentenced to weeks and even months in the notoriously brutal Parchman State Penitentiary.

Many of those arrested and sentenced including John Lewis and Stokely Carmichael would later serve as chairpersons of SNCC. Their role in the broader Civil Rights and later Black Power movements during the 1960s and 1970s changed the course of African American history.

Linking the Student Movement to the Plight of Black Farmers and the African Liberation Struggle

The student movement led by SNCC and other organizations would have been historically significant on its own since it challenged the racist notions of African American apathy, complacency and cowardice. Yet its impact was much broader since SNCC and other youth groupings worked closely with sharecroppers, tenant farmers and independent Black landowners in the South.

In Fayette and Hayward Counties in Southwest Tennessee, hundreds of families were evicted from farms where they worked for white landowners when they sought to register to vote in order to participate in the 1960 presidential elections. Local organizers in Tennessee requested assistance from around the U.S. and received food, water, makeshift housing supplies and healthcare workers to prevent the evicted tenant farmers from starving. This activity represented the first "Tent City" of the Civil Rights Movement in the winter of 1960.

SNCC sent organizers to Fayette County to provide assistance. The Tent City encampments coincided with protest efforts in nearby Jackson, Tennessee where students from Lane College, a HBCU, waged a campaign to desegregate buses and other public facilities.

The student movement was inspired by the African independence movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1960 alone, numerous African colonies gained their liberation while others continued to wage protracted struggles for freedom under majority rule. It was also on March 21, 1960 that the Sharpeville massacre occurred in South Africa leaving 69 Africans dead at the hands of the security forces for merely protesting nonviolently against the racist pass laws.

As the movements in the U.S., Africa and internationally escalated, other tactics and strategies would emerge. By the mid-1960s, as a result of the direct experience of organizers in the Civil Rights Movement, many of whom were influenced by the African Liberation struggles, the Vietnamese Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, etc., some activists concluded that the fight for freedom could not be won solely through nonviolent direct action and passive resistance.

The examples set by developments in Vietnam, Cuba, Angola, Mozambique, Algeria, Guinea-Bissau and other geo-political regions of the world, led many within SNCC to work towards the building of independent political parties such as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in 1964-65 and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), which was the original Black Panther Party in Alabama during 1965-1966.

After 1963, urban rebellions would erupt in cities throughout the U.S. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968 would radicalize even more youth.

These developments involving the student movement and its links with the plight of urban dwellers, farmers and the world liberation struggles should be reexamined by the emerging youth activists at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. Racism, national oppression and economic exploitation remain intact in the U.S. necessitating the imperatives of organizing and mobilizing the masses of people for genuine equality and liberation.

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Featured image: Greensboro sit-in during February 1960 ignited the student movement during the 1960s.

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