Poverty and Welfare Rights

A New Poor People’s Campaign

In April 1969, the SCLC held a press conference in Birmingham to announce the beginning of what they called “a second chapter of the Poor People’s Campaign.”¹ This second chapter was to begin with a series of marches and demonstrations in Birmingham that would draw attention to what the SCLC felt were urgently needed changes in Alabama’s welfare policy.² SCLC president Ralph Abernathy also laid out a broader set of goals for a national campaign against poverty: decent jobs for everyone who could work, a removal of the “freeze” on the number of people on welfare rolls, supplemental income for the underpaid, land redistribution, economic development in poor communities, and “political power” for poor people.³ The new Birmingham campaign was intended to jumpstart this effort and help draw national attention to the issue. Ultimately, the organization planned to undertake campaigns in cities and states across the country.⁴

Thus, much as it had done six years earlier in 1963, the SCLC hoped to use Birmingham to build momentum for a larger national campaign. In fact, a police memo from the beginning of the 1969 campaign reported that Abernathy had told SCLC leaders that he also wanted to hold the organization’s annual convention in Birmingham because “it’s [sic] magic name would give SCLC a ‘much needed shot in the arm.’”⁵ Following the previous year’s experience at “Resurrection City” in Washington, DC, as well as a general search for direction following Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, the SCLC was also in need of an event to help define its role and maintain its prominence in the post-King years. Almost as soon as the SCLC announced its plan to launch a renewed Poor People’s Campaign in Birmingham, however, it turned much of its attention elsewhere. In March, hospital workers in Charleston, South Carolina, had gone out on strike, and they had since requested the assistance of both the
Hospital Workers' Union Local 1199 and the SCLC, partly in an attempt to make the strike a national cause célèbre. As a result, Charleston, not Birmingham, would become the Southern city where the SCLC would attempt to reinvigorate itself.

Despite the national SCLC’s wavering commitment, the local affiliate in Birmingham pressed ahead with protests aimed at addressing concerns rooted in poverty. Those efforts provide a clear indication that the movement impulse was alive and well in Birmingham’s black community. As this new campaign stretched into the summer of 1969, marches and mass meetings attracted hundreds of African Americans. Further, in the midst of the SCLC campaign, newer activist groups emerged to push a more forceful agenda. Exhibiting little faith in negotiations and behind-the-scenes politicking—at least in the absence of additional pressure tactics, these people and groups were unwilling to settle for access to institutions or seats on various municipal boards. Reflecting aspects of the black power impulse of the period, these new activists demonstrated through both their actions and their strident, uncompromising rhetoric that they were skeptical of calls for patience or compromise. Instead, they were prepared to return to the streets and to utilize disruptive direct action tactics to achieve their goals. In addition, they were not apt to be satisfied with another campaign that left local concerns unaddressed.

Prominent in the ranks of these new activists were welfare recipients and public housing residents, both of whom felt that Birmingham’s established black leadership was not affected by the same issues that they were. Many also expressed a sense that such leaders were overly protective of their status and unwilling to take a strong, public stand on issues until they had gotten a feel for the political winds. In addition to being poor or lower middle class, many of these activists were women. Not only did these women intend for this phase of the movement to address their concerns more explicitly, they also expected to assume leadership roles. Thus, the surge of organizing activity that grew amidst the SCLC’s 1969 campaign reflected not just a return to a more expansive agenda, but also a more expansive array of people and groups vying for leadership in the black community. These dynamics would ultimately contribute to the SCLC’s difficulty in sustaining—and controlling—the campaign, but they were also an indication of the vibrancy of black activism in the wake of 1963.

The SCLC’s campaign began in earnest on April 11, 1969, when national leaders Jesse Jackson and Hosea Williams led a march to the courthouse downtown. That evening, the first of a series of regular mass meetings was held at Thirgood Methodist Church. Following “freedom songs and demonstration chants,” activities that would initiate each such meeting, both Jackson and Williams addressed the gathering. The