

Congress of Racial Equality

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1965

In April 1960, 1200 people crowded into New Zion Baptist Church for a mass meeting called by the newly founded Consumers' League of New Orleans.

In a revival of the 1930s depression-era “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns to protest black unemployment. The Consumers' League of New Orleans outlined a plan to boycott stores on the Dryades street corridor that refused to hire blacks above the menial labor level. By May 7, all but one store had moved to hire black sales clerks. A group of students, led by Rudy Lombard and Oretha Castle, would organize as the New Orleans chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). As a proactive tactic before sit-ins were necessary, the New Orleans NAACP opened talks with Canal Street businesses to desegregate their lunch counters in August. The newly minted CORE chapter were ready to take matters into their own very capable hands. On September 9, 1960, seven CORE members held a sit-in at the Woolworth’s on Canal Street.



1960s Consumers' League Boycott of Dryades Street.
Source: The Louisiana Weekly.



A sit-in at Woolworth's by members of CORE in September 1960. Seated from left are Jerome Smith; Ruth Despenza; Joyce Taylor; Hugh Murray, Jr.; Archie Allen; and William Harrell.
Source: The Times-Picayune/NOLA.com.

They were arrested, charged with criminal mischief, and released after black churches and the ACLU paid bail. The next day, the NAACP Youth Council picketed Woolworth's in solidarity. On Monday, September 12, Mayor Chep Morrison banned all picketing and sit-ins with police, arresting six members of the Consumers' League as they picketed a shopping center that Friday. On Saturday, September 17, Rudy Lombard, Sydney Goldfinch, Oretha Castle, and Cecil Carter sat down at the lunch counter at McCrory's and refused to leave. They were charged with criminal mischief and released on bail, but Goldfinch, the white member of the group, was also charged with ‘criminal anarchy’ which carried a maximum sentence of ten years in prison. The day after the McCrory's arrests, 300 people rallied outside the jail in support of the four students, and the day after that, 3000 people gathered in support at the ILA union hall on Claiborne Avenue. Attorneys Lolis Elie, Robert Collins, Nils Douglas, and John Nelson argued their case, Lombard v. Louisiana, up to the Supreme Court, where in 1963 an 8-1 decision found the ban on picketing and protest unconstitutional. With the ban on protest still on the books, CORE and the NAACP Youth Council, along with their elders in the Consumers' League continued to expand their efforts. With Oretha Castle as chairwoman, the interracial group of college students leafleted, picketed, sat-in at supermarkets, theaters, stores, and public facilities on a

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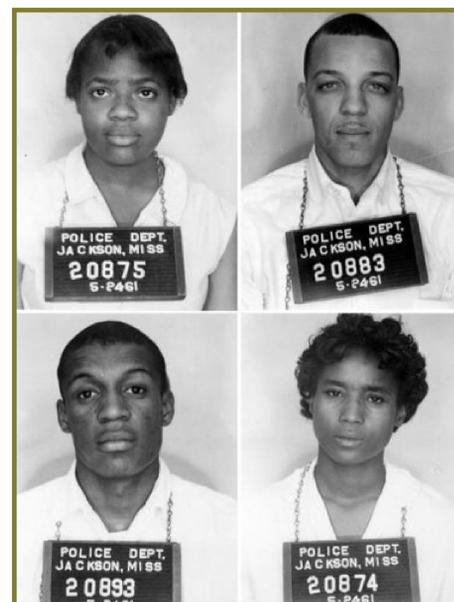
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In his book *Race and Democracy*, Adam Fairclough writes, “of all the civil rights organizations, CORE was the one most committed to nonviolence as a form of social action: sit-ins, boycotts, picket lines, and marches were standard weapons in its arsenal.” The ‘weapons’ were deployed with stunning persistence over the next several years to great effect.

In 1961, CORE director James Farmer gathered fifteen volunteers in Washington D.C. to train them for the next stage of direct action, the Freedom Rides, fourteen years after the organization's post-war Journey of Reconciliation had failed to desegregate interstate travel. With New Orleans serving as the end point for the rides, the local CORE chapter provided food, shelter, and critical training support for the Riders who made their way across the South, as well as serving as Riders themselves. As police harassment of incoming Freedom Riders escalated, the NOPD arrested three Riders out of a private house and beat them badly before charging them with vagrancy, battery, and attempted escape. When CORE members staged sit-ins at the mayor's office and a police station to protest the brutality, fifteen additional members went to jail. Through their campaigns, CORE had shaken off one of the most powerful constraints of white supremacy on black action, the fear of physical and reputational harm from police violence or being sent to jail.



Freedom Riders, who were all part of the New Orleans's CORE group arrested in Jackson, MS for their efforts to desegregate bus terminals. From clockwise top left: Julia Aaron, Dave Dennis, Jean Thompson and Jerome Smith. Source: Mississippi Department of Archives and History.