

The Children's Crusade

Written by Maya Beecham

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On any given weekday morning in 1963 average schoolchildren stood upright in classrooms, hand over heart, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. It was a customary act. Ironically, the lives of average Black children and their families during that time were at odds with the pledge's line, "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Their humanity was threatened on a daily basis by the rule of Jim Crow laws and practices. In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) struggled with the need to revive the campaign to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama. In order to build momentum they made a controversial decision to recruit students to serve as protesters for the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement.

A new pledge was taken. On May 2, 1963 nearly a thousand elementary, middle and high school students in Birmingham, Alabama changed the tide of the civil rights movement and sent ripple effects across the world by participating in The Children's Crusade. They skipped school and marched from Sixth Street Baptist Church to downtown Birmingham utilizing the tactics of nonviolent direct action, taught to them by the SCLC and the Alabama Christian Movement for Civil Rights. As they approached police lines they were arrested and hauled off in school buses and paddy wagons. The children were undaunted. On May 3, 1963 hundreds more children showed up to march. Bull Connor, commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, Alabama at the time ordered firemen to attack the children with fire hoses and the police force to assault them with batons and dogs.

Strong arm tactics by the police were to no avail. Violent images of children being attacked were televised and printed in newspapers nationwide. The U.S. Department of Justice intervened and the campaign to desegregate Birmingham ended on May 10, 1963, with an agreement between

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SCLC and local officials to halt demonstrations and boycotts in lieu of releasing protesters from jail and desegregating downtown stores. Within a matter of weeks Birmingham Board of Education suspended and expelled students from school. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and SCLC fought the issue in the local federal district court, where the ruling was upheld. On May 22, 1963, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the decision.

On Friday, August 24, in honor of the 49th year anniversary of the Children's Crusade, Group Solidarity is hosting a special screening of the Southern Poverty Law Center's documentary on the 1963 Children's March, as a kick-off to the Minneapolis Urban League 2012 Family Day. The event will take place at the Glover Sudduth Center for Economic Development & Urban Affairs, 2100 Plymouth Ave N, Minneapolis, MN 55411. The free event includes a social hour with food beginning at 6:00p.m., and the film screening at 7:00p.m. The evening will conclude with a panel discussion facilitated by Professor and Community Elder Mahmoud El Kati, and featuring panelists Dr. Rose Brewer and Dr. John Wright from the University of Minnesota. The event was sponsored by African American Leadership Forum, Headwaters Foundation for Justice, and Minneapolis Urban League.