

LESSON 7: CIVIL RIGHTS

Student Handout 2: Problem— Birmingham, 1963

PROBLEM 2: WHAT SHOULD AFRICAN AMERICANS DO ABOUT THE DISAPPOINTING DEMONSTRATIONS?

It is April 1963, three months later, and you are still Martin Luther King, Jr. You decided to go ahead with the sit-ins and protests, but they have not gone well. Storeowners responded to the sit-ins by closing their lunch counters. A judge ordered 133 African Americans (including all the leaders of the SCLC) not to engage in or encourage parades, demonstrations, boycotts, trespassing, picketing, or “kneel-ins” in churches. The Birmingham police have prevented such demonstrations from taking place and feel little pressure to change their tough stand. The national press hasn’t paid much attention to the events and developments in Birmingham. After eight days of protest, only 150 protesters have been jailed, and the boycott of city businesses hasn’t pressured whites to give in to your demands. African American business leaders in Birmingham have tried to work behind the scenes to improve the day-to-day lives of African Americans in a peaceful way. They resent that you and the SCLC have come into their city and made it more difficult for them to negotiate with white business leaders.

The Alabama legislature recently passed a bill to increase the maximum bail amount for protesters from \$300 to \$2500, which will force protesters to stay in jail much longer than a few days. The SCLC simply doesn’t have enough money to bail everyone out of jail within a few days of being arrested.

Come up with at least four options for actions you could take at this point, and explain which of them (it could be any or all of them) you will take.

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Student Handout 3: Options— Birmingham, 1963

Here are some options for you to consider. Which will you choose?

1. Arm African Americans with guns to defend themselves. So far, peaceful protest has not helped African Americans achieve equal rights. They must earn the respect of whites by fighting.
2. Have African American preachers (except for you) march and get arrested. People will react strongly against such arrests and be more likely to support you and the SCLC.
3. You (Martin Luther King) will march and get arrested, which will gain publicity and support for the civil rights movement.
4. Write letters and telegrams to President Kennedy urging get him more involved in the situation in Birmingham.
5. Suspend the demonstrations and negotiate a compromise with white business leaders and the city government for whatever rights you can get. If you and your leaders don't like the city's final offer, you can start marching again.
6. Have children, ranging from ages six to 18, march in the demonstrations. If the police arrest them, it will gain publicity and support for the civil rights movement.
7. Write letters to the editors of newspapers about the evils of segregation and the reasons behind the Birmingham demonstrations.
8. Bring in movie stars and other celebrities from outside Birmingham to join the demonstrations. Most of these will probably be African Americans, but white celebrities could join the fight too.
9. Make appeals (through phone calls, letters, and speeches) around the country to raise money to bail protesters out of jail.
10. Continue the demonstrations but negotiate with white business leaders and the city government to see if you can come to a peaceful settlement.