

4 Feb
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To the Southern Christian
Leadership Conference

4 February 1958
Atlanta, Ga.

On 30 January the SCLC executive committee gathered at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church to finalize plans for the Crusade for Citizenship, a campaign "to double the number of Negroes who vote in the South." At a press conference following the meeting, SCLC leaders announced that the Crusade would commence on 12 February with simultaneous mass rallies in twenty-one southern cities.¹ In the following memorandum, King clarifies the objectives of the Crusade.²

MEMORANDUM

FROM: M. L. King, Jr., President
TO: Speakers, Local Contacts, Participants in S.C.L.C.
RE: Crusade for Citizenship Mass Meeting, February 12, 1958

UNITY OF EMPHASIS

At our executive committee meeting on Thursday Jan. 30, 1958, many expressed the hope that all persons would leave the Mass Meetings with a clear picture of the aims and purposes of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, with a firm determination to register and vote, and with a sense of being part of a south-wide "crusade."

To help achieve this unity of aim and direction, we are urging you to make certain that the following points are clearly and simply made from the platform by some responsible person during the mass meeting:

1. The Crusade for Citizenship is a southwide movement. These meetings express this. The list should be read.³ It should be clear that this is the opening step in a long and hard, but necessary and glorious struggle.

1. SCLC also announced that King had invited the members of the Civil Rights Commission to attend the mass meetings to obtain "specific facts and pertinent information on present conditions and public climate regarding Negro voting in the South." King's 30 January invitation was declined by Civil Rights Commission chairman John A. Hannah, who confessed that the Commission's slow start was "due in no small part to a reticence" of the members "to proceed very vigorously until our nominations have been approved by the Senate" (SCLC, Press release, 30 January 1958; Hannah to King, 5 February 1958). Originally, SCLC had targeted 20 January as the kick-off date; on 19 December, the administrative committee revised the date to provide members more time to publicize the mass meetings (Cuthbert O. Simpkins, Minutes, SCLC administrative committee, 19 December 1957).

2. In an 8 February memorandum to SCLC representatives, King included drafts of resolutions to be adopted at the mass meetings. King also enclosed drafts of letters to be sent to congressional leaders and the attorney general urging the passage of stronger voting rights protections and stricter enforcement of existing laws.

3. With this memorandum King likely included a list of the scheduled mass meetings and their featured speakers (List of Crusade for Citizenship meetings, February 1958).

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2. The Crusade has two aims:
 - (a) to double the number of Negroes who vote in the South
 - (b) and thus, to help liberate all Southerners, Negro and white, to extend democracy in our great nation. When Negroes can vote, white people will have greater economic and political freedom. The South can have a real two party system—a necessity for real democracy.
3. The Crusade will place emphasis on preparing spiritually and tactically for registration prior to the 1958 and 1960 elections.
4. The Crusade is non-partisan. Its major purpose is to get men and women to realize that voting is a “moral” and “political” duty to God, to the nation, to themselves, and to their children; then to help them learn how to register and to want to vote. The Crusade will not engage in partisan politics. We urge people to vote: we do not want to influence them to vote for any particular party. We believe in the people. When they are aroused to vote, they will vote intelligently. No one need tell them where their political interest lies. This is morally the right approach.
5. The right to vote is related to all other rights. When Negroes have won and fully exercise their right to vote many changes can then occur:
 - (a) segregated buses will disappear
 - (b) wages will be increased
 - (c) police brutality will be a thing of the past
 - (d) men who believe in justice will be sent to congress
 - (e) “mob violence” will fade away
 - (f) Justice will be established in the courts.

These things will come about because the majors, city councilmen, police commissioners, the governors, congressmen and even the president will know that they must do the right things or be turned out of office when the people go to the ballot box.⁴

6. The Crusade has two other main purposes:
 - (a) to urge Negroes to vote where they have the right to do so. This is important since many fail to exercise the rights they possess.
 - (b) to set up at the local level the type of action and organization that can struggle, come what may, to obtain the right to vote where it does not exist.
7. The Crusade is not a talking campaign. It is an action campaign. It aims to include every man and woman of voting age—at the grass roots. We intend to set up voting clinics and workshops in local communities. There is a concrete job for you to do—giving out leaflets, or going with a friend to register, or visiting your neighbors, or helping people in your block learn how to fill out registration forms, etc., etc., etc..⁵

4. A draft of this memorandum, likely prepared by Bayard Rustin, began this list with “mayors” (King, Draft, To speakers, local contacts and members, 4 February 1958).

5. In a second 4 February memorandum to SCLC members, King reiterated the grassroots emphasis of the Crusade, asserting that the major objective is to “stimulate registration and voting at the local level” and to find “in each community active volunteers to do an inspirational and tactical job.”

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8. The Crusade is not in conflict with the NAACP's wonderful work or that of any established local groups. Dr. King and Roy Wilkins see eye to eye on the need for various efforts. The crusade will prepare materials for local groups to use under their own name. The crusade will welcome suggestions and advice.
 9. The Crusade will give meaning to the Civil Rights Bill. The Civil Rights Bill will help the crusade. However, no Legislation is any good unless, and until, people make use of it. If people exercise their rights under a law, even a weak law, they often achieve greater progress than was expected.
 10. The Crusade must succeed for God has promised his children that the loving and the meek (the non-violent) shall inherit the earth.