

# HOW MOVEMENTS (SOMETIMES) MOVE: BASE-MISSION, TRAVELING CADRE, AND SPATIAL EXTENSION OF THE NASHVILLE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Knowledge of how social movements move, diffuse, and expand collective action events is central to movement scholarship and activist practice. Our purpose is to extend sociological knowledge about how movements (sometimes) diffuse and amplify insurgent actions, that is, how movements move. We extend movement diffusion theory by drawing a conceptual analogue with military theory and practice applied to the case of the organized and highly disciplined nonviolent Nashville civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. We emphasize emplacement in a base-mission extension model whereby a movement base is built in a community establishing a social movement school for inculcating discipline and performative training in cadre who engage in insurgent operations extended from that base to outlying events and campaigns. Our data are drawn from secondary sources and semi-structured interviews conducted with participants of the Nashville civil rights movement. The analytic strategy employs a variant of the “extended case method,” where extension is constituted by movement agents following paths from base to outlying campaigns or events. Evidence shows that the Nashville movement established an exemplary local movement base that led to important changes in that city but also spawned traveling movement cadre who moved movement actions in an extensive series of pathways linking the*

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*Nashville base to events and campaigns across the southern theater of the civil rights movement. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications.*

**Keywords:** Base-mission; Nashville civil rights movement; nonviolent direct action; scale shift; spatial diffusion; traveling movement cadre

## INTRODUCTION

The question of how movements move and spread collective action events – the process of diffusion – is central to social movement scholarship and activist practice. Diffusion refers to the transmission of information about novel movement culture (e.g., framing, tactics, strategy, organization) from initiator to adopter (Soule & Roggeband, 2019), one of the ways in which movements auto-generate or matter for themselves (i.e., intra-movement diffusion, e.g., Isaac, 2008) and for other movements (i.e., inter-movement diffusion, e.g., Isaac & Christiansen, 2002). Additional sources of influence on the incidence and character of protest movements notwithstanding – e.g., grievances, moral outrage, resources, political and cultural opportunities – scholarship tell us that activists (and would-be activists) learn from and are inspired by other activists. Philosophy, beliefs, and concrete practice of social movements (including the configuration of demands, targets, and tactics) can travel through a variety of channels (Givan et al., 2010). The shape of diffusion processes varies from classical information transmission theory (Tarrow, 2005) to dialogical diffusion (Chabot, 2012; Isaac et al., 2012) to forms of artistic production and circulation of movement culture (Isaac, 2008).

Scholarship on the civil rights movement has provided significant insights about how Gandhian praxis diffused from India to the United States (Chabot, 2012; Isaac et al., 2012; Scalmer, 2011; Slate, 2012), ultimately establishing roots in “movement centers” of southern communities (Morris, 1984). We concentrate on the Nashville movement, one of those exemplary centers featuring its agentic extensions across the region as it energized and moved the wider movement. The key carriers (diffusion mechanisms) of courageous energy and nonviolent skill were traveling agents launched from their Nashville base, where they trained in a “local organic movement school” (Isaac, Jacobs, et al., 2020).

Our purpose here is to propose a novel addition to sociological theory about how movements expand and elevate insurgent actions, a vehicle through which movements sometimes move. We do this by analyzing the case of the nonviolent Nashville civil rights movement and drawing a conceptual analogue with military theory and practice, which we term the *base-mission spatial extension model*. Movement diffusion theory has a prominent place for direct-relational diffusion between participants (Givan et al., 2010; Tarrow, 2005) and some have pointed to traveling activists (below). But this scholarship typically does not specify how, why, and with what effect participants come into direct contact and why they may be carriers with differential efficacy. Filling these gaps is one of the goals of our theory of base-mission spatial extension.

Our conceptual model’s novelty is located in its three-dimensional focus on (a) regional diffusion of strategy, tactics, resourceful creative praxis, including

direct-action participation, that was (b) carried directly by traveling agents from (c) the Nashville base to outlying movement events and campaigns. The mechanism – base-mission traveling cadre – is our central contribution to social movement diffusion theory. What this process tells us about the place and role of the Nashville movement is our contribution to civil rights history.

## TRAVELING AGENTS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT LITERATURE

Most studies of movement diffusion focus on the content that is being diffused, various forms of oppositional culture (ideas, organizational forms, tactics) that travel across space from a source to an adaptor. Here our focus is on the movement participant or insurgent actor, who travels as a diffusion agent, in other words, the movement of movement agents (Isaac, 2008). We are not the first to study traveling agents in social movements. Other studies, centering on quite different movement contexts, are similar in their focus on what movement travelers do, which is to organize and carry information from place to place.

One of the first to identify the role of travelers in contentious collective action, Rudé (1964) shows how early agrarian riots in England and France spread along rivers and roads connecting rural communities. These travel conduits facilitated social interaction and the spread of grievances, information, and insurgent ideas. Travelers were more likely than others to receive information about impending riots.

Other studies show greater intentionality among traveling agents. Hedström and colleagues (2000) focus on the role of traveling “agitators,” those highly committed, often charismatic individuals, who moved across the Swedish countryside. Agitator’s mission was to carry new cultural ideas, to awaken, enlighten, and facilitate organization in accordance with social democratic principles, very much resembling the era’s religious revivalists. Traveling agitators played a key role in the successful establishment of the Swedish Social Democratic Party.

Heterodox reform ideology was also the content carried during the spread of the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Europe. In a context steeped in feudal agriculture, provincialism, and sparse travel routes, structural holes were a major problem for the distribution of the reform message. The agents who played a major role in bridging those structural holes were university students exposed to reform ideology in key universities such as Wittenberg and Basel, then spread the reform ideas when returning to their home communities (Kim & Pfaff, 2012). Religious agents also played a significant role in the early years of the long civil rights movement. A handful of Black religious intellectuals traveled to India and brought ideas of Gandhian praxis to critical communities like Howard University’s School of Religion through a process of dialogical diffusion (Chabot, 2012). Culturally modified Gandhian praxis was subsequently carried from Howard to Nashville (Isaac et al., 2012).

Oppositional consciousness and collective identity are also sometimes carried by traveling agents (e.g., Roscigno & Danaher, 2004) as well as movement tactics. The diffusion of militancy as a tactical innovation within the British Suffrage

Movement (1905–1914) was accomplished primarily by traveling organizers. Initially, militancy took the tactical form of intentional arrest and imprisonment in pursuit of gaining movement attention and goals. Activists would commit an offense (e.g., spit on a police officer) to be arrested. Once released as martyrs, these suffragette ex-prisoners would travel speaking to audiences about their experiences spreading the militant zeitgeist across the nation (Edwards, 2014).

Our model shares the agent carriers of movement culture aspect identified in these studies but differs in several key respects. First, it ties the traveling insurgent cadre and their high-quality movement capital to a specific locale, a training base, where capital was cultivated. Second, the cadre did not just spread movement ideas (although they did do that); they carried multifaceted mission content leadership in the form of public speaking, strategic design, training, organization, mobilization, and direct-action engagement in outlying events and campaigns. Following a mission path from source (base) to destination, the multiskilled performative agent is both subject and object of diffusion.

## **BASE-MISSION, TRAVELING CADRE, AND MOVEMENT SPATIAL EXTENSION**

*Base-mission as military analogue.* Gene Sharp (1973, p. 493), sometimes called the Clausewitz of nonviolent warfare, has argued that strategy and tactics are “just as important in nonviolent action as in military action.” For instance, in military theory and practice, it is not uncommon to bring the fight to the enemy via the establishment of a base or series of bases. From the base, troops are launched to move out in space to designated targets then sometimes return to the base after a mission is completed. While not fully appreciated, important parallels operated in some parts of the southern civil rights movement.

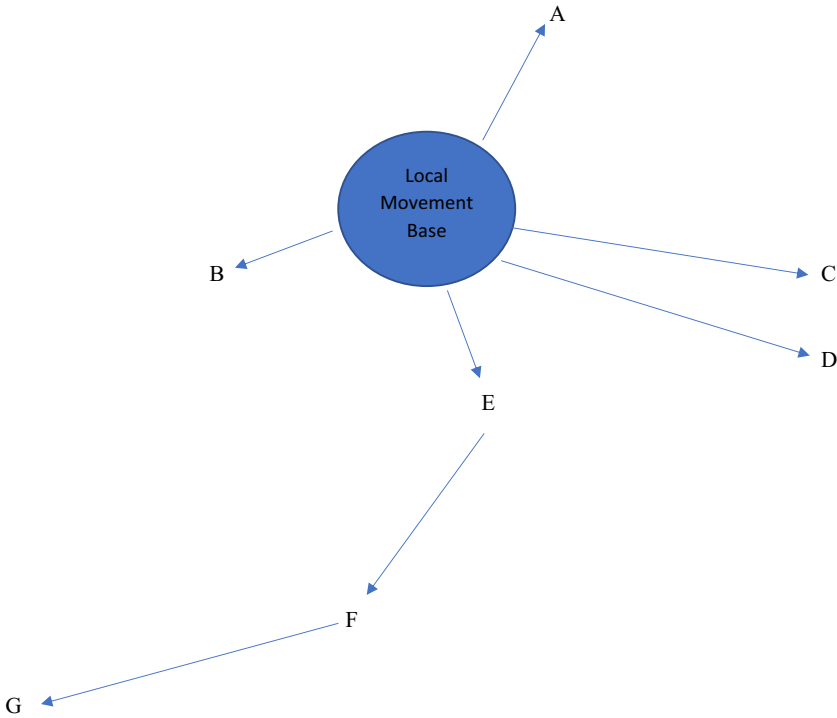
It may seem strange, even out of place, to use military language and concepts in conjunction with the nonviolent civil rights movement. For a variety of reasons, it is not; important streams of military culture flowed into the movement between World War II and the 1960s. For one, African American participation in a global war, ostensibly to protect democracy, provided a new confidence, skills, and transformation in political consciousness among many and made some standout civil rights movement leaders (e.g., Medgar Evers, Amzie Moore, and Robert Williams). As Dittmer (1995) points out, Black veterans played a key role in organizing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) affiliates in Mississippi following the war. Drawing analogies between the fight for democracy abroad and the Black fight for democracy at home, a new consciousness was created and symbolized in the Double-V. A second source was endogenous to some movement discourse. Major movement literature such as Krishnalal Shridharani’s (1939) *War Without Violence* used militaristic language; and James Farmer’s 1942 strategic memo to A.J. Muste, head of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), used militaristic language when he wrote that a mass nonviolent movement would require, among other things, a “nonviolent army” that was trained and disciplined (Farmer, 1985, pp. 355–356). Finally, some

scholars have noted the military-like character of the Nashville insurgent cadre, especially in training and discipline. Capturing John Seigenthaler's thoughts on the young Nashville agents, David Halberstam (1998, p. 323) wrote: "...these young people were like elite combat troops, well trained, battle ready, completely willing to accept the risks; they were mentally, physically, and psychologically prepared." Militant nonviolent direct action was central to James Lawson's praxis and training of the Nashville cadre (Isaac et al., 2012, 2016). His training, writing, and direct-action tactics left no doubt about the militancy in his approach.

The base-mission spatial extension model that we derive from the Nashville movement features a powerful form of high-quality nonviolent warrior, who physically moves to other campaign spaces directly diffusing militant nonviolent praxis, energizing, and helping the movement move. Properties of the Nashville base are crucial and consist of: (a) a strategically selected site for a movement base, (b) a movement infrastructure that articulates with both the local adult Black community *and* the college student population, (c) parallel to military basic training, a social movement school (workshop) integral to the infrastructure that recruits and trains participants in the art of nonviolent praxis (philosophy and performance), (d) activists who received training in nonviolent praxis through workshop training and/or local experience in the movement, some of whom (e) became core cadre teaching nonviolence themselves and leading movement expansion from the base out into movement events and campaigns across the southern theater. Through this methodical process, Nashville, the place, was transformed into an exemplary movement base, centered around its movement school that imparted powerful insurgent skill.

The base-mission concept proposed here is induced from the Nashville civil rights movement. It is not an identical fit with military models but rather a conceptual analogue. The Nashville campaign was a deeply nonviolent movement (e.g., Halberstam, 1998) but one that did share the trained discipline, spatial, and logistics imagery of military operations. Highly trained civil rights activists, what we call traveling movement cadre, moved from engagement with Jim Crow targets in Nashville to train, lead, and take part in a wide range of other civil rights campaigns during the 1960s. A heuristic representation of mission paths extending from a local movement base is depicted in Fig. 1.

*Theoretical foundations.* Understanding the importance of activist quality – movement capital – and how that helped the movement “move” builds upon and contributes to several theoretical perspectives. First, dialogical diffusion is central to how nonviolent praxis traveled from India to the United States (Chabot, 2012; Scalmer, 2011; Slate, 2012), from the northern United States into the South (Isaac et al., 2012), and from the Nashville movement base around the southern theater (our focus here). The dialogical diffusion perspective on nonviolent movement praxis recognizes that diffusion of oppositional culture is fraught, problematic, contested, not a smooth automatic transmission of information. Second, this is so because the difficult processes of learning and unlearning are integral to creating nonviolent oppositional culture (Isaac et al., 2016). Thus, we draw on cognitive theory, which understands movements as more than simply challenges to established



*Fig. 1.* Conceptual Representation of Relations Between a Local Social Movement Base and Several Outlying Mission Destinations (Sites A–G).

authorities or power structures. Instead, it centers specific forms of cognitive praxis highlighting symbolism, meaning, expression (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), and education into a new worldview, here Gandhian enlightenment.

Third, the cognitive transformation which agents undergo in training (Isaac et al., 2016) must be practiced, activated, and performed. We draw on the performative-theoretic perspective on how movements move which highlights emplacement and how opposition is enacted (Eyerman, 2006). Qualities of protest performance are crucial, including corporality, dress, demeanor, behavioral rules of engagement, tactical skill, creativity on the fly, and adaptation to forms of violent assault (Isaac, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, activists, like other human actors, follow paths that lead to and help create projects (Blee, 2012). Activists follow paths into movements (Isaac, Coley, et al., 2020), and they follow paths to movement-oriented projects or campaigns, our focus here. By following these pathways, traveling cadre knit together activist communities and brought movement capital to help support or create new projects. In this process, they contributed to strengthening the wider movement field. The Nashville movement in 1958–1960 was itself the creation of a new

movement project, a turning point in the larger trajectory of the civil rights movement, transforming the locality of Nashville, and the lives of movement participants. The wider movement was moved, in part, by the Nashville cadre who followed mission paths from the Nashville base to other movement projects – significant events and campaigns across the region.

Social movement scholarship focusing on the question of how movements “move” highlights processes by which the diffusion or spread of movement ideas, discursive frames, behaviors, strategies, tactics, or organizational forms takes place (Crossley, 2005; Eyerman, 2006; Isaac, 2008). Typically, analyses parse the content (the what) and mechanisms (the how) and sometimes the catalyst for and impact of diffusion (Givan et al., 2010; Soule & Roggeband, 2019). Content and mechanisms are especially important for understanding variation in diffusion impact.

*Content.* Like soldiers (e.g., O’Brien, 1990), trained, disciplined, and committed nonviolent movement agents carry things, what we call movement capital. In the words of Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) field agent, Glenn Smiley, his task (and that of other cadre and nonviolent soldiers) was “to carry the [movement] mail” (quoted in Morris, 1984, p. 160). We refer to our conceptual contribution as the base-mission spatial extension model of movement development. We seek to identify key traveling agents and open the “movement mail” they carried to various mission destinations.

Smiley’s “movement mail” is a shorthand for our concept of “movement capital.” Members of the Nashville movement, especially the core cadre, were deeply embedded and trained in: (a) practical strategic and tactical skills (cf., Van Dyke & Dixon, 2013); (b) understanding alternative forms of oppositional culture such as armed self-defense, institutional politics (e.g., NAACP’s use of the courts), or pacifism; and (c) strong interpersonal bonds and deep trust or movement social capital (Isaac et al., 2016).

Militancy is not a constant but varies in struggle, and the base-mission extension process illustrated below finds variation in the content carried across space. For example, some missions called for the specification of nonviolent philosophy as foundation of organizational mission statement (e.g., the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC]); some missions required leadership and nonviolent training (e.g., Birmingham campaign); there were mission projects that provided the opportunity for public speaking about nonviolent movement goals and possible futures (e.g., March on Washington); while many other missions required campaign support in the form of nonviolent, often dangerous, direct-action design and engagement (e.g., Freedom Rides). Sit-ins, freedom rides, and other directly confrontational actions, especially when multiplied in large numbers, become a qualitatively different level of action than had been employed before (e.g., bus boycotts). The Nashville cadre, trained in the Lawson workshops, excelled in such operations, and they carried that skill to other movement projects. The general content thread was a sophisticated insurgent nonviolent praxis tailored to the mission at hand.

*Mechanism.* Social movement diffusion scholarship has conceptualized several general types of diffusion mechanisms: (a) indirect or nonrelational channels (e.g., news media), (b) mediated interpersonal relations (e.g., through brokerage

of third parties), and (c) direct relational contacts (Tarrow, 2005). One of the major contributions of the base-mission extension model is the core mechanism of movement extension: deep knowledge of nonviolent praxis and direct-action support extended to outlying campaigns. The mechanism we highlight for this extension is the “traveling movement cadre” as agents of tactical creativity, leadership, mentorship, inspiration, and nonviolent direct-action support, a specific form of direct delivery diffusion. Cadre trained in social movement schools (here, Lawson’s nonviolent workshops) and actual nonviolent experience in Nashville followed paths linking performative projects across the South, thus deepening and expanding the quality of movement habitus and oppositional performance. *The key distinction here relative to other social movement theories, including other diffusion theories, is the mechanism (extending movement capital from the base) through which the movement moves.* Physical resources, opportunity structures, or movement framing notwithstanding, we emphasize the insurgents themselves and their qualities for carrying in-person the oppositional knowledge and actions to a spatially distant location, then sometimes returning to the Nashville base where many were students at the time.

*Catalyst.* Several interdependent forces served as drivers for the extended operations moving out from the Nashville base. The sheer daring and determination of the Nashville cadre was crucial, characteristics shaped, cultivated, and sharpened through the nonviolent workshop training and experience acquired in Nashville. That movement culture was part of the design of James Lawson’s movement mentorship through organized nonviolent workshops and his goal of creating a “nonviolent army” to launch a “nonviolent revolution” (Lawson, 1960, 1961), in other words, a deep, highly organized and committed radical nonviolent praxis. Finally, faltering actions or calls for assistance from activists in other locales triggered the extended mission operations, drawing the Nashville cadre from the base to outlying struggles.

*Impact.* Social movements are often organized along multiple spatial scales (Sewell, 2001). For example, the US civil rights movement during the 1950s to early 1960s was organized largely at the local community level within the southern region (Morris, 1984). But it had an earlier spatial trajectory that moved along transnational and northern regional scales as well (Isaac et al., 2012). Our model illuminates a significant element for enhancing the flow from local-to-regional scale. When movement agents are launched from their base to operate in other campaigns, they extend their reach and force by assaulting opponents’ power at multiple points, supporting movement actions in other spatial locales, thus increasing the spatial extension of movement power at critical moments, and potentially altering the spatial balance of power in the struggle. The contributions of the traveling cadre to outlying campaigns varied. The evidence we provide below indicates that the impact delivered through base-mission extension served to save and extend some operations (e.g., the Freedom Rides). It contributed to an intensive and extensive upward shift in movement scale (Givan et al., 2010) from local to regional as forces from one site became a coordinated part of the struggle in other locations, stitching together and strengthening the overall regional movement. In the process, movement dynamism was fueled in important



ways contributing to a form of movement scale shift in spatial, coordinative, and intensive proportions.

## DATA AND METHOD

Our data are drawn from secondary sources, which include published work by the authors as well as high-quality historiographic work on civil rights movement campaigns. We also employ primary data in some places consisting of semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors with Nashville movement participants (see [Isaac et al., 2016](#)).

As analytic strategy, we follow an “extended case method” ([Burawoy, 1998](#)) buttressed by insights from historians and historical sociologists. In this approach, one develops a case ethnography or case event narrative (as we do here) to highlight contradictions, gaps, or silences in existing theory for purposes of, at least partially, contributing to or extending extant theory. Because the goal is an extension or the reconstitution of theory rather than verification/falsification type hypothesis testing, the analyst selects unusual or exemplary events, cases, processes, or situations. The movement processes and events analyzed here fit well this “exemplary” characterization.

Other scholars have conceptualized activist participation patterns in a variety of ways, including the cross-temporal variability in pattern-specific trajectories such as persistence over time, transfer from one movement organization to another, abeyance from activism then a return to it, and complete disengagement or leaving activism altogether ([Corrigall-Brown, 2012](#)), or as the frequency or duration of activism within a specific historical phase of a movement ([Isaac et al., 2016](#)). Our approach here is different because it emplaces agency by linking the specific agent (by name) to the path followed from the base location (Nashville) to a specific event or movement campaign spatially removed from the base (e.g., John Lewis → March on Washington, 1963; Lucretia Collins → Freedom Ride, 1961).

These events do not constitute a random sample. Rather, the specific sites of struggle, campaigns, or projects ([Blee, 2012](#)) represent (to our knowledge) the full complement or universe of major events extending from the Nashville base (via agents of its movement) in the years 1958–1968. [Table 1](#) lists these events and campaigns and Nashville cadre’s mission content as part of the extended case. After describing the key contours of the Nashville movement base, we extend the case by providing brief contextual vignettes of each campaign, the Nashville movement agent paths linking them, and the major role they played in the outlying campaign.

## THE NASHVILLE BASE CASE

James Lawson left Oberlin College Divinity School in 1958 at the behest of Dr. King and, with the counsel of Glenn Smiley (FOR), moved to Nashville as the FOR Southern Regional Secretary ([Lawson, 2007](#); Lawson papers 1). From early 1958 to

**Table 1.** Events and Campaigns During the Movement Heyday With Nashville Movement Extended Mission Participation.

Event	Year	<i>N</i>	Main Mission Content Extended
<i>Movement Heyday, 1960–1965</i>			
SNCC Founding Conference*	1960	16	Nonviolent philosophy for SNCC Mission statement
SNCC National Chairs*	1960–1961	1	National organization leadership
	1963–1966	1	National organization leadership
Incidental sit-ins	1960	2	Direct-action engagement
Northern college campuses	1960	7	Invitational speaking engagements
Rock Hill, SC campaign	1961	4	Direct-action engagement
Freedom Rides*	1961	43	Direct-action engagement
Monroe, NC campaign*	1961	2	Direct-action engagement
Deep South voter registration projects	1961–1963	6	Direct-action engagement
Albany, GA campaign	1961–1962	6	Direct-action engagement
Lebanon, TN. theater campaign	1962	150	Direct-action engagement
Birmingham, AL campaign*	1963	4	Nonviolent training & strategic design
March on Washington*	1963	4	Organizers & public speakers Scores Attendees in support
Danville, VA campaign	1963	1	Public speaking & nonviolent training
Freedom Summer campaign	1964	3	Leadership support & training
Selma, AL campaign*	1965	5	Direct-action engagement
<i>Post-Heyday, 1966–1968</i>			
Chicago Freedom Movement*	1965–1967	4	Leadership for movement organization
Memphis sanitation workers' strike*	1968	2	Leadership in support mobilization
Charleston hospital workers' strike*	1969	1	Leadership in support mobilization

*Note:* Missions marked with \* are discussed in the analysis section; others are given a brief summary in the Appendix.

spring 1960, Lawson (a) worked with Reverend Kelly Miller Smith of the First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, as the new Action Director of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC, the first local branch of Dr King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC]), headed by Smith, and began to run workshops on nonviolence in Nashville, (b) enrolled as a graduate student in Vanderbilt University's Divinity School, and (c) continued to work for FOR traveling the South doing workshops and preparing local grassroots activist communities – “seeding” the southern region to “make many Montgomerys” and advance a nonviolent movement (Isaac et al., 2012). The spatial reach of Lawson's traveling workshop engagements is illustrated by the list of destinations reported in Table 2, an itinerant approach to movement that would be passed on to his mentees.

Among “movement centers” across the South (Morris, 1984), Nashville was perhaps the most remarkable. James Lawson, Kelly Miller Smith, Andrew White

**Table 2.** James Lawson's FOR Nonviolent Traveling Workshop Circuit, 1958–1959.

Location	Date
Memphis, TN (LeMoyne College)	March 1958**
Jackson, MS (Tougaloo College)	March 1958
Knoxville, TN (Knoxville College)	April 1958**
Berea, KY (Berea College)	April 1958
Bluefield, WV (Bluefield State College)	April 1958**
Dover, DE	April 1958
Nyack, NY	May 1958
St. Louis, MO	May 1958**
Springfield, MO	May (?) 1958
Little Rock, AR	Summer 1958
Birmingham, AL	Summer 1958**
Birmingham, AL <sup>†</sup>	October 27, 1958**
Crossville, TN	Summer 1958
Bridgewater, VA (Bridgewater College)	July 1958
Charlottesville, VA	July 1958
Norfolk, VA	Summer 1958**
Winston-Salem, NC	Summer 1958**
Raleigh-Durham, NC	Summer 1958**
Columbia, SC	Summer 1958**
Lake Charles, LA	Fall 1958
Nashville, TN (Fisk University)	February 1959
Crossville, TN	February 1959
Oklahoma City, OK	March 1959**
Berea, KY (Berea College)	April 1959
Hattiesburg, MS	October 1959
Atlanta, GA (Spelman College)	No date**
Mobile, AL	1959
Barbourville, KY (Union College)	November 1959
Chattanooga, TN (University of Tennessee)	December 1959**
Athens, OH	December 1959
Cincinnati, OH	December (?) 1959
Nashville, TN (adult workshops)*	Periodic: 1958–59**
Nashville, TN (student workshops)*	Periodic: Summer 1959–Spring 1960**
Shreveport, LA <sup>†</sup>	October 11–13, 1960**

*Source:* Re-stylized from [Siracusa \(2021, p. 159\)](#) with additional data on Nashville workshops. Siracusa's data come from: The Lawson Papers, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

*Note:* <sup>†</sup>Indicates events taken from: Stanford University, the Martin Luther King, Jr, Research and Education Institute, King Papers, Historical Material from James M. Lawson. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu> \*Indicates events acquired from author interviews with James M. Lawson, Jr. \*\*Indicates that a sit-in movement took place in the city prior to the founding of the SNCC ([Andrews & Biggs, 2006](#)).

(Dickerson, 2008), and others established an exemplary movement base that integrally articulated three key components: (a) the Student Central Committee composed of student leaders from local higher educational institutions (Fisk University, Tennessee A & I University, American Baptist Theological Seminary, Meharry Medical School, and to a lesser extent Vanderbilt University and Peabody College) as conduits to the mass college student body in the city; (b) NCLC and First Baptist (a “movement church”), both headed by Kelly Miller Smith and deeply rooted in the Black community; and (c) Lawson’s nonviolent workshops which served as an underground social movement school, recruiting, training, organizing, planning, building solidarity, and eventually mobilizing direct actions that drove the Nashville movement. Lawson was integral to all three elements – he was key to imparting a sophisticated and intense nonviolence pedagogy and the lynchpin that integrated the movement infrastructure (Isaac et al., 2012).

The first workshops engaged mostly community adults. By summer 1959, Lawson and Smith turned their recruiting efforts to college students. While students performed the most dramatic and daring actions, the Nashville movement was always intergenerational, not exclusively a student movement (Cornfield et al., 2021; Lawson, 2007). At an ideal age with extensive movement and nonviolent knowledge, Lawson bridged not only the local age divide but linked a long line of intergenerational developments in the civil rights movement (Cornfield et al., 2021). One of the leading movement intellectuals, Lawson’s version of nonviolent praxis – not to be confused with pacifism – was shaped by early social-gospel Methodism infused and animated by insurgent Gandhianism (Dickerson, 2014). His intellectual and moral leadership imparted a strength of purpose and shaped the quality of nonviolent warriors in a way that was unparalleled in other local movements.

Lawson insisted on nonviolence, never inflicting injury on others, absorbing it, when necessary, but aggressive, militant in its drive for social change (Lawson papers 2). This core premise, drawing from both a serious study of Jesus and Gandhi, was taught to young activists through a methodical four-step Gandhian-inspired process (Lawson, 2022, p. 42): (1) *Focus* – focusing on the issue or problem via investigation, research, and education; developing potential solutions, demands, goals, vision, recruitment, and training of leaders; (2) *Negotiation* – engaging with the opposition; presenting demands, planning for direct action, and developing strategy and tactics; (3) *Direct action campaign* – launching a creative, flexible direct action campaign; moving from the simple to the more complex actions while continuously working to build inspiration and public support; and (4) *Follow-up* – regrouping with movement forces and engaging with the opposition in healing and reconciliation, conducting a strategic assessment (are promises for change being kept?) and educating movement and community on progress and failures, and planning for the next campaign.

During November–December of 1959, Lawson and his cadre began launching “test” sit-ins to accomplish two objectives. One was to gather intelligence, to gauge the degree and kind of reaction that would likely come from different store managers in response to Jim Crow norm violation. The tests were also useful in assessing student reactions to “real-world” experience (in contrast to workshop role-playing sociodramas) moving from lunch counters back to workshop meetings to share results (Isaac et al., 2012; Lawson, 2007).

When the “Greensboro Four” launched their lunch counter sit-in on February 1, 1960, the Nashville group was well-prepared, ready to go. Twelve days later, the Nashville insurgents staged their first nontest sit-in. A series of sit-in actions extended into May when success came in agreements from six downtown stores to desegregate their counters. Additional stores followed suit later that summer.

A diverse tactical repertoire was deployed by the movement in that first year, including sit-ins, jail-ins, an economic boycott of downtown merchants, mass marches, and stand-ins to desegregate movie theaters. These actions have been documented elsewhere (Halberstam, 1998; Hogan, 2007; Houston, 2012; Isaac et al., 2012). By the end of summer 1962, many downtown businesses and public accommodations had been desegregated, accomplishments by the local movement two years prior to the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Nashville movement was gaining attention as an exemplar of what could be done by a well-organized, disciplined nonviolent movement, a point recognized early on by Dr King. While addressing a large audience at Fisk University in the wake of the sit-ins, King proclaimed that the Nashville movement was “the best organized and most disciplined in the Southland” (quoted in Lewis, 1998, p. 111), a personal inspiration for him and shining model for the larger civil rights movement.

Experience and training received by the young Nashville insurgents, especially from the Lawson workshops, became part of personal makeup of these agents, animating and guiding them forward as they carried the movement mail into one campaign after another across the southern theater. The core cadre reproduced and extended what they learned from Lawson by running their own nonviolent workshops and training sessions in the extended campaigns. As they extended their insurgent praxis, many returned to the Nashville base, especially if they were still finishing their education. But as time went by, cadre members frequently established residence in areas near current movement operations.

Qualitative evidence illustrates ways in which the Nashville movement schooling personally changed cadre members; quantitative evidence shows that the training they received from the Lawson workshops significantly increased the frequency and duration of engagements in movement campaigns beyond Nashville (Isaac et al., 2016). In what follows, we open the black box of this extended case to illuminate the agent paths taken from Nashville to far-reaching campaigns, project paths the core cadre took to move, to energize, the larger movement.

## **EXTENDING MOVEMENT MISSION BEYOND THE NASHVILLE BASE**

Three different types of activists – supporters, soldiers, and especially core cadre (Isaac, Coley, et al., 2020) – carried the Nashville movement mail into a series of key events and campaigns across the southern theater and beyond between 1960 and 1968. Paths followed by insurgents were key to activating the movement widely and provided significant oppositional culture and experience to various

destinations around the South, as they performed missions in a variety of ways. We present ten extended missions here and summarize eight others in the Appendix.

*SNCC Founding Conference, 1960.* The first major mission extended beyond Nashville was the instrumental role the cadre played in the formation of the SNCC. SNCC was the organizational outgrowth of the sit-in wave born at a conference called by Ella Baker, acting executive director of SCLC, held at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, in April 1960. The idea was to build a permanent movement organization that would harness and grow the youthful energetic militancy that emerged in the sit-ins. The conference drew between 100 and 200 Black student activists representing 56 colleges and high schools from 11 states plus the District of Columbia. Most schools sent one or two representatives. The Nashville contingent consisted of 16 including James Lawson, John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Marion Barry, Bernard Lafayette, and others.<sup>2</sup>

Following Ella Baker's sage advice, the students formed SNCC as an autonomous organization, related to but distinct from the church elders and SCLC leadership. The size and the experienced quality of the Nashville cadre gave it an outsized role and impact in shaping the session and direction of the early SNCC. The fiery Lawson, the young peoples' Martin Luther King, as some called him, received "a standing ovation" when he addressed the conference (Payne, 2007, p. 96). The Nashville group was distinguished by confidence, trust, solidarity, disciplined commitment to "militant nonviolence," and participatory democracy, all integral marks of the Lawson workshops, a well-organized movement with local success before most others. The SNCC founding statement, drafted largely by Lawson, "affirmed the philosophy or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and manner of action." These were key elements of Nashville movement culture infusing the early SNCC.

SNCC held another strategic conference in October, this time in Atlanta. The central theme was the importance of stimulating local mass actions. Diane Nash and James Lawson spoke at the meeting and conducted a nonviolent workshop. Lawson continued with his mission of multiplying mass actions, a generalization of "making many Montgomerys." He proclaimed to the audience that the student protests were the beginning of a "nonviolent revolution" to dismantle "segregation, slavery, serfdom, paternalism" along with "industrialization which preserves cheap labor and racial discrimination" (Lawson, 1961).

*SNCC national leadership.* With Marion Barry as the first (1960–1961) and John Lewis as the third national chair (1963–1966), the Nashville movement brought a particular brand of movement capital and leadership to the SNCC that shaped its course for the first half decade. Situated between Barry and Lewis, Charles McDew (1961–1963) was quick to adopt the Nashville ways. From founding to 1966, the daring youth organization bore the deep imprint of the Nashville cadre. During this period, SNCC inspired the formation of and helped teach their brand of oppositional culture and nonviolent praxis to two northern student movement organizations – Students for Democratic Society (SDS) and Northern Student Movement (NSM) – and inspired the largely white Southern

Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) launched in Nashville in 1964 (Hogan, 2007; Morris, 1984). SNCC members played key roles in virtually every major campaign across the South and took bigger risks than those in other civil rights movement organizations. This was, in no small part, due to the Nashville imprint. Without the Nashville cadre, it is likely that SNCC would not have had the insurgent precepts and praxis it brought to the wider southern civil rights movement, playing a dynamic role as daring shock troops across the southern theater, truly the beginnings of the “nonviolent army” central to Lawson’s plans (Isaac, 2019). Nashville traveling cadre extended their approach to struggle by stamping the organizational design and philosophical content of early SNCC and diffused their praxis to other New Left movement organizations. This mission was a major contribution to extending the Nashville movement and energizing the larger southern civil rights movement.

*Freedom Rides, 1961.* As a collective action tactic, the Freedom Rides were designed to test compliance with the Supreme Court ban on segregated interstate mass transit terminals (bus and train) handed down in the *Boynton versus Virginia* decision the previous year. Despite the ruling on terminals, Black passengers were still required to sit in the back of the bus. The tactic was to test compliance with desegregation in terminals and to violate segregationist seating codes. The expectation was that white supremacists would create a reactionary crisis and the federal government would then be compelled to enforce the law.

The initial ride was organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), modeled after the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation ride. With 18 Riders, including John Lewis from the Nashville cadre, the plan was to depart from Washington, DC, with New Orleans the ultimate destination. Violence was first encountered in Rock Hill, S.C. bus terminal, where John Lewis and Albert Bigelow were beaten by white thugs. Things intensified in Alabama; one bus was firebombed in Anniston, and the other was attacked by a white mob on arrival in Birmingham. With conditions looking more dangerous than expected, CORE reluctantly abandoned the Ride. The Nashville group immediately sized up the gravity of the situation, one that could not be left to end under the weight of violent assault.

Within a week of the aborted Ride, 21 students from the Nashville movement “prepared to pick up the baton” (Isaac, 2019). Despite urgings and pleas from all quarters – parents, college administrators, some civil rights leaders, and the Kennedy administration – the young insurgents were determined to continue the initial mission. Diane Nash played the role of operations commander and logistics coordinator assisted by Angeline Butler (Butler, 2010). In Nash’s words: “If they stop us with violence, the movement is dead” (quoted in Arsenault, 2006, p. 184).

The first wave of 10 rescue Riders was selected by James Bevel from a group of eager volunteers, indicated along with race and institutional affiliation in Table 3. When this bus arrived in Birmingham, they were detained by police chief “Bull” Connor, put in jail, and eventually transported back to the Tennessee state line. Diane Nash immediately dispatched a driver from the Nashville movement – Leo Lillard – who sped to the rescue of the group at the state line, while simultaneously dispatching a second wave of Riders to Birmingham via rail.

**Table 3.** The Rescue Freedom Ride: Nashville → Birmingham → Montgomery, May 17–21.

Freedom Rider	Race	Institutional Affiliation
William Barbee	B	TA&I
Paul Brooks	B	ABTS
Catherine Burks	B	TA&I
Carl Bush	B	TA&I
Charles Butler	B	TA&I
Joseph Carter	B	ABTS
Allen Cason, Jr	B	TA&I
Lucretia Collins	B	TA&I
Rudolph Graham	B	TA&I
William Harbor	B	TA&I
Susan Hermann	W	FU (exchange student from Whittier College)
Patricia Jenkins	B	TA&I
Bernard Lafayette, Jr	B	ABTS
Frederick Leonard	B	TA&I
John Lewis	B	ABTS
Salynn McCollum	W	PC
William Mitchell, Jr	B	TA&I
Etta Simpson	B	TA&I
Susan Wilbur	W	PC
Clarence Wright	B	TA&I
Jim Zwerg	W	FU (Exchange student from Beloit College)

*Source:* Re-stylized from [Arsenault \(2006, Appendix\)](#); all institutions of higher education are located in Nashville; school abbreviations: ABTS = American Baptist Theological Seminary; FU = Fisk University; PC = Peabody College (now part of Vanderbilt University); TA&I = Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial State University, renamed Tennessee State University in 1968.

On May 20th, the Freedom Riders traveled from Birmingham to Montgomery with police escort, a result of Attorney General Robert Kennedy's pressure on the Alabama governor. The climate changed as they approached the state capitol; state trooper vehicles abandoned the convoy, and police were absent at the bus station. Instead, a white welcoming committee proceeded to beat the Riders, a host of whom were seriously injured including John Lewis, William Barbee, and Jim Zwerg, all members of the Lawson-trained group. Attorney General Kennedy's special assistant, John Seigenthaler (a Nashville native and movement supporter; [Isaac, Coley, et al., 2020](#)) was also seriously injured. Under an all-night siege, the Riders held up in a church. The next morning, the Attorney General ordered the use of federal troops and forced the Governor to declare martial law, dispersing the white mob.

On May 24th, the Riders departed Montgomery on two buses (Greyhound and Trailways) bound for Jackson, Mississippi. The Trailways bus carried 12 passengers, 7 from the Nashville movement; the Greyhound carried 15, 7 from



the Nashville movement (see [Arsenault, 2006](#), Appendix). On arrival in Jackson, the Freedom Riders were pushed into police wagons, transported to local jail, then transferred for a lengthy stay in Parchman Prison, where they staged another battle behind bars ([Arsenault, 2006](#); [Isaac et al., 2012](#)).

During 1961, the year of the Freedom Rides, a total of 436 individual Riders launched 63 riding events. Forty-three Nashville movement members did at least one Ride; counting those doing multiple Rides yields 66 Rides by Nashville members. Freedom Rides were launched from a variety of cities, but none matched the number of intercity Rides launched from Nashville. Between May 17 and August 5, 13 Freedom Rides departed from the Nashville base (see [Arsenault, 2006](#), Appendix).

Nashville cadre rescued the aborted Freedom Ride in Alabama; picking-up the baton, they forced federal and state authorities to protect constitutional rights. The Freedom Rides put the “movement on wheels” ([Arsenault, 2006](#), p. 508) and the rolling insurgents from Nashville played an outsized role at this juncture in sustaining the nonviolent movement. As Bob Moses, SNCC architect of the Freedom Summer campaign, would later comment, referencing the fire-bombed bus in Anniston: “Only the Nashville student movement had the fire to match that of the burning bus” (quoted in [Arsenault, 2006](#), p. 179).

*Monroe campaign, 1961.* Following an attempt at desegregating a swimming pool in Monroe, NC, Robert Williams, and other local NAACP members, decided to enlarge the scope of their local movement. The list of demands presented to municipal leaders included the elimination of discrimination in hiring, welfare agency policies, public accommodations, schools, and medical care. The swimming pool protests drew vicious white supremacist violence, while widening the scope of movement demands provoked more of the same.

With the support of Ella Baker, SNCC and SCLC sent 17 activists with recent Freedom Ride experience to support Williams and the Monroe movement. Paul Brooks and Catherine Burks from the Nashville movement volunteered for the mission ([Burks-Brooks, 2009](#)). The sense was that Williams was relatively isolated from the wider Black community and in real danger; he had drawn firearms to protect himself and his family in recent confrontations. Monroe’s Black community was facing heavy violence, including shootings of protesters and the Freedom Riders’ mission was to assist in teaching and applying nonviolent methods to diffuse white hostility. Williams, an ex-Marine and advocate of armed self-defense, maintained that nonviolence alone could not achieve the sizable results necessary for real progress and would often embolden more white supremacist attacks ([Tyson, 1999](#)).

Beyond Monroe, the hope was that the campaign could be used as a launching pad to extend SNCC groups into rural hamlets across the South. Although not an advocate of nonviolence himself, Williams worked with the SNCC contingent who he had requested in *The Crusader* with the following words: “If you are a Freedom Fighter or a Freedom Rider, Ride, Fly or Walk to Monroe, the Angola of America, and help us in this noble undertaking for human dignity” ([Tyson, 1999](#), p. 266). Paul Brooks and Catherine Burks, members of the Nashville core cadre, answered the call successfully de-escalating violence.

*Birmingham campaign, 1963.* In the aftermath of the Albany campaign failure, it was clear to Dr King and other movement leaders that a big “victory” was sorely needed (Lewis, 1998, p. 195). It would have to be a nonviolent campaign that generated massive disorder in crisis proportions (a point made by Dr King in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”), not one that could be quietly managed as Police Chief Pritchett did in Albany, and it would require serious planning and organizing. The selection of the site was an important part of mission planning. It was well-known that Birmingham’s police chief – “Bull” Connor – was a vicious racist without the self-control of Pritchett (Lewis, 1998; Morris, 1984).

“Project C” (for confrontation) was launched during the first week of April. SCLC organizers called for movement expertise, including several key agents from Nashville. Prior to the initiation, James Lawson and C.T. Vivian made periodic trips to the city to conduct nonviolent training workshops for “the foot soldiers for Project C” (Branch, 1988, p. 703), while the Bevel-Nash team organized and trained school-aged participants (Lewis, 1998, p. 195).

The plan called for a multipronged approach modeled after the early Nashville campaign but on a more massive scale (Branch, 1988; Lewis, 1998). Tactics would include economic boycott of the downtown business district along with a mix of sit-ins, kneel-ins, jail-ins, and mass marches. The central idea was an intensity crescendo of disruption and disorder that would produce a city-wide crisis eventuating into capitulation to protester demands. The primary target was the business district; the hope was that costs of economic disruption would lead businessmen to put pressure on political elites for a favorable solution.

During the early weeks of the campaign, Bull Connor showed more restraint than anticipated, relying mostly on arrests to contain movement actions. With the movement appearing to stall, SCLC and Dr King sought the counsel of James Bevel, who launched the “Children’s Crusade” with the help of Diane Nash Bevel and Bernard Lafayette (Lafayette & Johnson, 2013) deploying thousands of grade school and college students as disruption agents unleashed on the business district in a nonviolent manner while courting mass arrest to fill the jails. The multiple waves of children (modeled after the multi-wave sit-ins used in Nashville), staggered for training purposes, created economic disruption with the appalling media spectacle of white violence on Black youth. By May 10th, business leaders agreed to movement demands. Within a month, President Kennedy gave his famous TV address, announcing to the nation that he would send a powerful civil rights bill to Congress. Without the nonviolent preparation and planning of the Nashville cadre, including Bevel’s creative and daring tactical design, the Birmingham campaign might have ended very differently.

*March on Washington, 1963.* Resurrecting his March on Washington movement from the 1940s, A. Philip Randolph proposed a new mass rally in the nation’s capital to pressure the administration for “jobs and freedom,” organized by labor and civil rights leaders, especially Bayard Rustin. From the South and in the wake of the Birmingham campaign, James Lawson also proposed to SCLC that a massive march on Washington should be the next move (MOW; Lawson, 2022, 2022a, 2022b).

Hundreds of Nashvillians traveled to DC (Lovett, 2005), including a large delegation from the Nashville movement, some of whom were very visibly

involved. For instance, C.T. Vivian served as the Tennessee chairperson for the March (Lovett, 2005), and John Lewis and Diane Nash Bevel were featured on the program. Newly elected to SNCC leadership, Lewis had a place on the official program as SNCC's National Chairman. The draft of Lewis' speech was a major behind-the-scenes event. Older civil rights leaders, including King, Randolph, Rustin, Foreman, Abernathy, and others, found some of Lewis' language too inflammatory and prevailed on him to tone it down. Lewis finally agreed to do so, but the powerful nonviolent militancy of the Nashville movement and SNCC relative to mainstream liberalism still shined through. Diane Nash Bevel was also on the program as part of the "Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom."

In violent reaction to the Birmingham campaign in previous months, President Kennedy's June TV address announcing a major civil rights bill, and now the March on the nation's capital with major press coverage, white supremacists bombed the 16th Baptist Church on a Sunday morning killing four little girls. In her "Move on Alabama" plan (Lewis, 1998, pp. 235-236), Diane Nash urged activists across the South to immediately mobilize a massive campaign against the Alabama state capital and the Governor. The idea was to form a "nonviolent army" in her words that would lay siege to the Alabama capitol and force the Kennedy administration to intervene for justice (Jones, 2013, p. 211). When she made this call, Nash drew on her Nashville social movement school training, experience, and mentorship from James Lawson (Isaac, 2019).

*Selma campaign, 1965.* Several Nashville cadre had voter registration experience prior to the Selma campaign, including Marion Barry, James Bevel, John Harding, John Lewis, Bernard and Colia Lafayette, and Diane Nash Bevel. In early January 1965, Dr King and SCLC came to Selma to join forces with SNCC in the fight for voting rights. From that point to the first attempted mass march to Montgomery on March 7th, a series of contentious events took place in and around Selma. Teachers marched to the courthouse with intent to register but were blocked and threatened with arrest by Sheriff Clark. About a week later, Dr King and more than 200 protesters were arrested in a voting rights march in the city. In other well-documented confrontations on the courthouse steps, Nashville cadre James Bevel and C.T. Vivian were violently assaulted by Sheriff Clark (Branch, 1988; Garrow, 1979; Halberstam, 1998).

The proximate triggering event for the Selma-to-Montgomery march occurred in the neighboring town of Marion where voter registration was also facing fierce resistance. After SCLC activist James Orange was arrested, word spread that local Klan members were planning to abduct and lynch him. To deflect attention from Orange, local movement members quickly organized a march. C.T. Vivian was one of the leaders in that march, during which young Jimmie Lee Jackson was murdered by a state trooper. Black community outrage surrounding Jackson's murder provided energy for renewed mass protests. Speaking at a memorial rally, James Bevel called for the mass Selma-to-Montgomery march (Lafayette & Johnson, 2013). Bevel's design did not spring de novo but rather was a variation on the "Move on Alabama" siege that Diane Nash Bevel had called for in 1963 after the murders of the four little girls in the Birmingham 16th Street Baptist Church.

Some SNCC workers were initially against the mass march with Dr King at the helm. But others, including John Lewis, planned to participate in the march no matter the conditions. In fact, it was Lewis (Nashville) and Hosea Williams (SCLC) who led the marchers in the first attempt. On “Bloody Sunday” (March 7th), they were violently attacked by Sheriff Clark’s heavily armed and mounted troops on the outside edge of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. One more march led by Dr King also failed to leave the city. On March 21st, the third march successfully departed for Montgomery (Garrow, 1979).

The march on Montgomery was not the forceful siege that Diane Nash Bevel had designed and unsuccessfully pitched to Dr King in 1963, but it is widely credited with providing “the spark for a crucial confrontation between Alabama blacks and obstinate state officials,” which in turn contributed to a favorable climate of support outside the South and the subsequent passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Carson, 1981).

#### *Post-Heyday, 1966–1968*

*Chicago freedom movement, 1965–1967.* From late 1965 to mid-1967, Dr King’s SCLC allied forces with Al Raby and the Coordinated Council of Community Organizations to launch the Chicago Freedom Movement (Findley et al., 2018). Advance groundwork was done by Nashville’s Bernard Lafayette and James Bevel. Lafayette moved to Chicago in 1964 at the behest of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to bring his knowledge and experience with nonviolent direct action to help produce social change in the city’s Black ghettos.

In April 1965, only weeks removed from the Selma campaign, Bevel traveled to Chicago for more speaking engagements, fundraising, and nonviolent workshops. As a key strategist of the Selma campaign, Bevel was now a movement hero. Speaking to a Northwestern University audience, he declared that the southern movement was coming North, and Chicago was its first target. Within several months, Dr King and Andrew Young, encouraged by Bevel, announced that SCLC had selected Chicago as its first northern campaign site. The goal was to attack urban racial injustice, especially housing discrimination, by organizing tenant unions (Cornfield et al., 2018). Along with Lafayette and Bevel, other Nashville movement cadre included Diane Nash (now divorced from Bevel) and C.T. Vivian, who played significant roles in Chicago as organizers, mentors, speakers, and direct-action agents (Vivian, 2008).

The overall impact of this small Nashville cadre on the Chicago movement was substantial. The shift from the fight against denials of basic political and civil rights to social-economic inequalities and human rights generally in the North was more difficult than had been anticipated in the heady days of Voting Rights Act victory. But as Bernard Lafayette told AFSC staff in December 1966, the Chicago movement demonstrated that “large numbers of people in a northern city can be mobilized for nonviolent direct action in the face of mass violence” (quoted in Ralph, 1993, p. 233). The realization of that mission bore the deep imprint of the Nashville cadre, now extending north.

*Memphis sanitation workers' strike, 1968.* Following two worker deaths in the back of a garbage compactor truck in February 1968, 1,300 African American men from the Memphis Department of Public Works went on strike shutting down garbage service across the city. Led by coworker and union organizer, T.O. Jones, the men struck over long-term racist neglect, union recognition, better safety standards, and wage increase, all supported by Jerry Wurf, president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (Honey, 2007).

Strong resistance from Mayor Loeb led to a series of marches and demonstrations designed to pressure city authorities and unify the Black community behind the strikers. After one march where nonviolent demonstrators were attacked by police, James Lawson led a group of local ministers in the formation of the Community on the Move for Equality. The purpose of the group, following the Nashville model, was to lead with nonviolence in actions that would fill Memphis jails to bring attention to the strikers' cause. While Dr King was traveling and organizing support for the Poor Peoples' Campaign, Lawson kept him informed and urged him to visit Memphis to help boost striker and community morale. Other civil rights leaders also visited in support, including Roy Wilkins (NAACP), Bayard Rustin (CORE), Ralph Abernathy (SCLC), and Nashville's James Bevel (SCLC).

Lawson and King led a march in February that was halted because of violence from a contingent of young Black men and police. Dr King returned to Memphis on April 3rd with the goal of leading a nonviolent march. That evening, he delivered "The Mountain Top" speech, perhaps the most powerful of all his oratories. In it, he acknowledged the important role played by Lawson in the Memphis struggle and for many years prior (King, 1968). The next evening, he was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel. In the wake of the murder with urban rebellions burning across US cities, Lawson worked to maintain calm. On April 8th, Coretta Scott King along with SCLC and union leaders led a silent march for the workers' demands which brought union recognition and better wages by April 16th.

The Memphis sanitation workers' strike was an iconic merger of civil rights and labor rights movement currents in the context of a highly exploited public sector workplace (Isaac & Christiansen, 2002), what historian Jeff Cowie (2010, p. 58) calls "the perfect dialectical synthesis of the age." The event was truly a microcosm of the fabric of Dr King's concurrent Poor Peoples' Campaign, a signal of what that campaign stood for and what ultimately motivated Dr King to accept Lawson's request for assistance.

James Lawson continued the fight for civil rights unionism in the Charleston Black hospital workers' strike the following year. In the decades since the late 1960s, the architect of the Nashville movement has remained continually engaged in the lifelong "revolutionary nonviolent" struggle for labor rights, civil rights, and human rights (Lawson, 2022), as have many of his Nashville cadre mentees. For Lawson and the Nashville cadre, the big mission went far beyond dismantling Jim Crow conditions in Nashville; it was to create the forces for and to extend a nonviolent revolution for social justice.

To sum up, the Nashville cadre: (a) played an outsized role in the founding and early national leadership of SNCC, the youthful, most daring, and dynamic organization in the movement; (b) rescued the initial Freedom Ride and did more to keep the Ride tactic running than any other local movement; (c) delivered training, leadership, and strategic design for a host of other local movements; and (d) repeatedly put their lives on the line as direct-action warriors in multiple campaigns. The aggregation of this insurgent nonviolent action delivered in person was critical to connecting local campaigns, sustaining, energizing, and elevating the level of struggle on a much larger scale across the South and beyond.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

At a large assembly on the Fisk University campus in 1960, Dr King proclaimed that the Nashville movement was “the best organized and most disciplined [movement] in the Southland,” a source of personal inspiration and a shining exemplar for the larger movement (quoted in [Lewis, 1998](#), p. 111). At that point, King could not have known just how influential the Nashville movement and its cadre would be for other movement campaigns across the nation. We believe, as did Dr King, that it was the mix of special features of Nashville, especially the movement infrastructure and, within it, the underground local organic movement school with Lawson’s tutelage that made such a difference ([Isaac, Coley, et al., 2020](#)). Because of their training and experience, the cadre that followed these paths to projects across the south possessed greater degrees of movement capital than many other activists at the time, becoming movement intellectuals and leaders. It was through workshop training and nonviolent direct-action experience ([Isaac et al., 2012, 2016](#)) that commitment and nonviolent fighting skill was learned, applied initially in Nashville, then carried as movement capital (content) in person (mechanism) to many other campaigns across the South, expanding the spatial reach of the Nashville cadre and the regional movement in the process.<sup>3</sup>

The base-mission extension model that developed in 1960s Nashville draws movement scholarship attention to both the significance of organization and disciplined practice in the making of high-quality mobile warriors and spatial movement to a range of campaigns. In many ways, the story of the Nashville nonviolent civil rights movement is the story of highly committed and skilled participants and creative leaders who became key shock troops with extraordinary spatial reach in the fight against southern Jim Crow and for social justice more broadly. This story underscores the role of agentic quality of insurgent practice in the struggle for racial justice. It was more than tactical innovation that drove the pace of insurgency (e.g., [McAdam, 1983](#)) during the movement heyday (1960–1965). Mobile movement agents filled gaps or “structural holes” ([Burt, 1995](#)) in movement space by carrying insurgent skill to struggles in other locales. The traveling Nashville agents carried movement capital, multifaceted oppositional culture that took the form of ideas about nonviolence, training, targets,

tactics, organization, and participatory direct action as boots on the ground, fully willing to put their bodies in harm's way.

What about applicability of the model to operations in other civil rights movement centers? Our purpose here is primarily theoretical development of the base-mission model, not a general exploration of other empirical examples. We do know that other civil rights movement centers developed highly committed and skilled cadre who also traveled to outlying campaigns. Other movement centers such as Atlanta, Birmingham, Greensboro, Montgomery, and Tallahassee would be fruitful sites for comparative analysis to determine the extent to which the base-mission model applies more widely. We do believe that the Nashville cadre was exemplary, but the degree of that difference can only be determined through comparative case studies.

What about applicability of the model to operations in other nonviolent movements? Our research leads us to believe that the key ingredient for powerful base-mission extension operations of the type we find extending from the Nashville movement is the presence of a high-quality social movement school. These are deliberately designed movement spaces “for the purposes of educating, mentoring, training, and coordinating individuals as effective, committed movement agents” (Isaac, Coley, et al., 2020, p. 160). Movement schools operate with at least an implicit base-mission model in mind. Labor colleges during the first half of the 20th century offer such an example, and the AFL-CIO Union Summer program more recently (Van Dyke et al., 2007). FEMEN, the radical international feminist movement, provides yet another example. Originating in Ukraine, FEMEN moved its headquarters and training center to Paris with other subcenters located across France. The movement draws from activists internationally, and after training, these activists return to their homeland to operate autonomously (FEMEN, 2014).

The making of the Nashville movement base-mission model is instructive for other movements. The well-developed infrastructure, centered around a movement training school headed by a leading nonviolent intellectual and tactician, with links to local institutions of higher education and African American community, has practical implications. Doing the work focused on the local community is job one, but sending high-quality experienced agents out to support other local movements was significant in moving the movement more generally, a form of upward scale shift (Givan et al., 2010) and a key element in movement spatial dynamics. Each movement for social justice must chart its own course; but the Nashville model can provide portable elements with wide applicability. In an era with so much indirect digitally mediated movement diffusion, the example of direct diffusion through highly trained traveling nonviolent warriors might still play a key role in movements for social justice.

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## NOTES

1. For example, see the list of protest “Dos” and “Don’ts” drafted by John Lewis (1998, p. 98) based on his training in the Lawson workshops.
2. SCLC 1 (1960) indicates 10 Nashville participants, but there is evidence that the number was higher; Halberstam (1998, p. 215) and Hogan (2007, p. 35) both claim 16. The difference in these accounts likely hinge on the distinction between “delegate” in the SCLC roster versus attendee, the larger number.
3. Nashville’s central regional location and institutional and political culture also played a role (Isaac et al., 2012).

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## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

### *Abbreviations:*

J AHL = Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

SCLC = Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

J AHL 1, James M. Lawson, Jr. papers, Box 38 (FOR), Folder 1: Nonviolent Workshops, 1958.

J AHL 2, James M. Lawson, Jr. papers, Box 38 (FOR), Folder 1: Nonviolent Workshops: “Non-violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change,” presentation by James Lawson at the Fisk Race Relations Institute, 1958.

MOW = March on Washington Program for “Jobs and Freedom” (1963).

SCLC 1, Delegates to Youth Leadership Conference, Shaw University, Raleigh, NC, April 21, 1960.

## APPENDIX. ADDITIONAL MOVEMENT CAMPAIGN SUPPORT MISSIONS BY NASHVILLE MOVEMENT CADRE NOT PRESENTED IN TEXT

- *Incidental extension of sit-ins, 1960.* Occasionally, activists would be in the position to activate movement skills while traveling to destinations not originally planned for such action. For example, James Murph led a sit-in in Boynton Beach, Florida, while visiting family; in summer 1960, Bernard Lafayette, visiting family in Tampa, Florida, accepted a CORE invitation to a workshop in Miami where he and other attendees engaged in a lunch counter sit-in and used the jail-no bail tactic devised in the Nashville sit-ins ([Lafayette, 2008](#); [Murph, 2010](#)).
- *Northern campus speaking engagements, 1960.* Because of their notoriety from the Nashville sit-ins, movement cadre, John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Marion Barry, Angeline Butler, Paul LaPrad, Curtis Murphy, Kenneth Frazier, among others were invited to speak to student at several northern educational institutions. Destination campuses included University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin, among others ([Hogan, 2007](#); [Lewis, 1998](#)).
- *Rock Hill, SC campaign, 1961.* Nine SNCC student representatives answered a call for support from Rock Hill protesters under siege from white supremacists. Diane Nash and Charles Jones (both from the Nashville movement) were among those who answered the initial call. They were subsequently joined in support by Nashville comrades, John Lewis and William Harbour ([Arsenault, 2006](#); [Carson, 1981](#)).
- *Albany campaign, 1961–1962.* Began with voter registration work but expanded to target other sites of segregation in the city. Major roles were played in the campaign by Nashville traveling cadre: Cordell Reagon, Charles Jones, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Salynn McCollum, and Reverend Will Campbell ([Campbell, 2008](#); [Hawkins, 1997](#); [Hogan, 2007](#)).
- *Deep South voter registration campaigns, 1961–1963.* Between 1961 and the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, a host of Nashville movement cadre worked on voter registration in deep South states including: John Hardy (Mississippi), Marion Barry (Mississippi), James Bevel and Diane Nash Bevel

(Mississippi), Cordell Reagon (Georgia), John Lewis (Mississippi), Guy Carawan (Mississippi), Bernard Lafayette (Mississippi and Alabama) and Colia Lafayette (Alabama) (Branch, 1988; Lafayette & Johnson, 2013; Nash, 2010; Patton, 2008; Payne, 2007).

- *Lebanon, TN. theater campaigns, 1962.* Students from the Nashville movement (approximately 150) traveled to Lebanon to demonstrate at segregated movie theaters (Lovett, 2005).
- *Danville, VA. campaign, 1963.* John Lewis traveled to Danville to do support work, speaking at rallies and conducting nonviolent workshops (Lewis, 1998).
- *Freedom Summer campaign, 1964.* SNCC was deeply split over the strategy to use mostly northern white college students in the campaign. John Lewis (National Chair) and Marion Barry (Executive Committee) gave Bob Moses' proposal the support it needed to move forward. James Lawson was involved in nonviolent training for the white students during the "boot camp" for the white recruits held at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, prior to the "invasion" of Mississippi (Carson, 1981; Lewis, 1998; McAdam, 1988).