

What Were The Failures of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM)?

Mike Miller, Field Secretary, SNCC, 1962-1966.

By "civil rights movement" I mean the 1955-1966 period, and from the national Big Four to independent local community organizations exemplified by FIGHT in Rochester, NY.

Failures must be placed in the context of tremendous successes ending the south's "slavery by another name", and breaking many barriers of prejudice and discrimination in the north.

First was insufficient recognition of, and strategy based on, the close and interdependent relationship of class and race. To break the racist system that is able to play one against another both must be addressed. The country's vast majority of Black people were working class, under- or unemployed.

The CRM played a "zero-sum" game: its gains were perceived as losses by poor and working class Whites. Complicating matters, there were no real White partners: the 1963 March On Washington's program included full employment; the March was endorsed by major labor unions; SNCC initiated a "poor whites" organizing project in the south. These were never elaborated.

Second, and related: seduction by "community-" and "economic-development," and "community control" that coopted Movement organizations in program administration rather than building "mass-based" people power. The guideline, "Power Precedes Program" was lost; "community-based" programs substituted for people-based power.

Third, "The Movement" substituted rhetoric and tactical excesses for real power. It proclaimed "Black Power" but only sporadically built it. Most exceptions succumbed to the seduction of foundation and government funding and became "community-based nonprofits".

(See Mike Miller's writing on this and related subjects at [Organize Training Center](#).)

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