

BLACK WOMEN AND THE CHARLESTON HOSPITAL WORKERS' STRIKE OF 1969

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation uses archival documents, newspapers, and previously collected oral histories to construct a history of post-World War II black working-class activism in Charleston, South Carolina. I examine the women involved in one of the lesser-known events of the civil rights and black power movements, the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike of 1969. These women, primarily working-class and black, were central to the success of the 113-day strike. As union leaders, strikers, soup-kitchen volunteers, and national fundraisers, black women ensured the viability of the strike. Without their participation in every facet of the strike, the push for better wages, working conditions, and a union would not have had a chance to succeed. While scholarship on the intersection of labor and civil rights focuses on Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign, specifically the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike, the Charleston Strike has lingered in the background. This study argues that black women were central to the success of the Charleston strike and that their leadership in the Charleston events was unique. The Charleston strike was a women's movement not only because over ninety percent of the participants were women, but also because women led the strike on the local and national stages.

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To Plummer Earl and Mildred Graves Debnam and Charlotte Justine Johnson Smallwood who instilled in me an unshakeable pride in black culture and the belief that I could be anything I set my mind to. Your influence is everlasting.

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TIMELINE

December 1967— Hospital Worker Meetings Begin

February 8, 1968—Orangeburg Massacre, South Carolina State College, Orangeburg, SC

March 17, 1969—Twelve Workers Dismissed from the Medical College of South Carolina

March 19, 1969— Hospital Workers Elect to Strike

March 20, 1969—Strike from the Medical College of South Carolina Begins

March 31, 1969—Abernathy Arrives, Leads Mass Meeting

Late April 1969—Coretta Scott King's First Visit to Charleston

May 9, 1969—Mother's Day March

June 27, 1969—Strike Ends at Medical College

July 18, 1969—Strike Ends at Charleston County Hospital

Introduction

The Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike of 1969 occurred at a moment of transition for the black freedom movement, the labor movement, and the wider American public that was still reeling from the cultural, social, and political tumult of the 1950s and 1960s. Less than a year after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, twelve workers were fired from the Medical College of South Carolina resulting in the initial call for the strike. The Charleston movement set into motion a renewed sense of hope in the civil rights and labor coalition during a waning moment for both movements. As civil rights transitioned into the Black Power movement and industrial labor unionism became less and less relevant, Charleston workers created their own version of black protest with aspects of nonviolent direct action, self-defense, and well-known labor movement tactics. This project contributes to a growing area of scholarship on black working-class women as well as the broader fields of African-American, labor and working-class, United States, Southern, and political histories.

My study of the strike diverges from current scholarship on civil rights, Black Power, labor, and women and gender in several ways. First, placing the working-class and middle-class women of the strike in conversation with each other allows people like Mary Moultrie, the local president of 1199B, and Coretta Scott King, a well-known civil rights figure not necessarily remembered for her activism, to be considered as important activists in both the labor and civil rights movements of the late Sixties. Second, taking into consideration the recent expansion of civil rights literature to focus on the importance of working-class activists like Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer as well as middle-class activists like Eslanda Robeson, a "political biography" of Coretta Scott King adds to the recent proliferation of work on women in the civil rights

movement.¹ Third, contemporaneous accounts of the Charleston movement posited that Charleston was “*one model* for beginning to develop a nation-wide mass movement of the poor. And only a sustained militant mass movement will push this nation towards making a firm national commitment to abolish poverty.”² While activists like Jack O’Dell, Andrew Young, and Rev. Ralph Abernathy considered Charleston a launching point for a new phase of the union between the black freedom and labor movements, recent histories of the fate of the national labor movement in the 1970s tell a different story.³ This dissertation discusses why Charleston fell short of meeting the expectations of labor and civil rights activists.

Finally, this project complicates discussions of the post-King black freedom movement by reframing the discussion from declension narratives that often dismiss Black Power and other manifestations of black protest as contrary to black progress. Both the nonviolent-direct action tactics of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as well as the more “aggressive” methods of Black Power protest influenced the Charleston movement. Ralph Abernathy, who assumed the leadership of the SCLC following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., championed nonviolent direction in the form of citywide marches that often led to mass arrests. In his recollection of Charleston’s atmosphere during the strike William Saunders commented “that we in Charleston was not going to have any riots; we’d have a war, because we were prepared to fight. And we were prepared to fight in a way that we could fight. We had guns.”⁴ At

¹ Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (New York: Beacon Press, 2013), xv.

² Jack O’Dell, *Climbin’ Jacob’s Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O’Dell*, ed. Nikhil Pal Singh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 189.

³ Recent studies by Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010) and Judith Stein *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), among others, have chronicled the decline of the labor movement in the 1970s. Their studies have offered important, often diverging, accounts of the fate of labor in the seventies.

⁴ William Saunders. Interview with Otha Jennifer Dixon. Recording. Charleston, SC., June 25, 2008. Interview number U-0382 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

times, the three main activist parties in the strike, local activists, union representatives, and SCLC workers, had competing interests. Apart from the desire for equal rights and union recognition, black working-class Charlestonians wanted real societal change. Using controversial methods was one way to access those changes. The Charleston strike was not only unique for its combination of labor and civil rights causes but also for the activists' use of Black Power tactics.

The Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike was the result of the confluence of labor and civil rights. But it was also influenced by the particularities of racism and segregation in Charleston and the hospital power structure and its relationship to the federal government. Occurring at a moment traditionally considered to be firmly within the Black Power Era, the Charleston strike was a combination of nonviolent direct action, self-defense, and labor organization. Falling into overlapping conversations about the nature of the black freedom struggle in the late 1960s as well as the labor movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the Charleston Strike provides many points of departure. Beyond its place within civil rights and labor narratives, the strike provides ample examples of black women's activism. Placing the Charleston campaign into the immediate context of black working-class women's activism in the 1960s and 1970s as well as black working women's activism throughout the twentieth century expands the discussion from a singular event in South Carolina to a trend in black women's activism during the period.

Chapter One, "'You had to be willing to give up all of it': Worker Unrest, Black Activism, and Genteel Segregation in Post-World War II Charleston," places the strike within the context of its city and time. Notable movement activists like Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark were from Charleston and the nearby John's Island. Black activism prior to the hospital strike was multifaceted. Black workers built a tradition of activism during the tobacco strike in the

1940s. Though Charleston was not central to national civil rights narratives, activists used traditional movement methods, namely sit-ins and boycotts, to push for change in the city and surrounding areas. Workers began meeting informally in December 1967 after five black nurses' aides and LPNs complained of discrimination on the job. Feelings of unrest percolated for around 15 months before a strike began. By 1969, persistent racial tensions and low wages finally resulted in a strike. This chapter focuses on the lead-up to the strike, the history of activism, however mild, in Charleston, and the after work grievance sessions that led to the 1969 strike.

Chapter Two "The Strike Takes Shape" and Chapter Three, "Crescendo and Conclusion: April to July 1969" chronicle the events of the 1969 strike. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Hospital Workers' Union 1199 were the main national organizations involved in the day-to-day strike efforts. But the SCLC and 1199 came to Charleston after more than a year of community organizing. The women and men involved in consciousness-raising efforts among hospital workers, including Mary Moultrie and William Saunders, were essential to the sustained life of the movement prior to the entrance of the SCLC and 1199. I use oral interviews, newspaper accounts, as well as autobiographical accounts to reconstruct the strike. These chapters provide a detailed account of the strike from the early stages of organizing in 1967 until its conclusion in July 1969.

Chapter Four, "A Women's Movement," centers the women involved in the Charleston struggle. The overwhelming majority of licensed practical nurses, nurses' aids, orderlies, and laundresses were women. When describing herself and fellow strikers Mary Moultrie, the president of Local 1199B remarked, "we were all black, virtually all women, and virtually all heads of household. We were what they call 'non-professional' workers... We were their non-

professional workers with professional responsibilities.”⁵ The women of the Charleston strike were striking for a union, fair wages, and fair treatment. These demands had an impact on their working lives as well as their family lives. While other treatments of the Charleston strike have focused on 1999, I argue that it was primarily a women’s movement and not wholly a union movement. Women like Mary Moultrie, Naomi White, Rosetta Simmons, Carrie Mitchell, and many others were essential to the strike not only as daily participants on the picket line but also as leaders of the local movement establishment.

Chapter Five, “‘I will be involved where the action is’”: Coretta Scott King’s Life of Activism,” focuses on Coretta Scott King’s activism in the Charleston Strike. Coretta Scott King’s role in the Charleston strike was multifaceted as she traveled around the country to fundraise, walked in marches with the strikers and their supporters, and seemingly constructed her own political presence in the wake of her husband’s assassination. Her image was also used to solicit funds in national newspapers like the *New York Times*. But King’s involvement with 1999 began well before the Charleston strike and would continue well after the strike ended. Seldom is King considered to be an activist in her own right. This chapter recounts King’s activism following her husband’s death. I also offer a “political biography” of her life.⁶

Chapter Six, “Governor Robert McNair and the Consequences of Early Civil Rights Gains,” focuses on the practical ramifications of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on the Charleston strike. At the time of the strike, the Medical College of South Carolina and Charleston County Hospitals were recipients of government funding through the Department of Health, Education

⁵ “Remarks of Mary Moultrie at South Carolina Voices of the Civil Rights Movement Conference: A Conference on the History of the Civil Rights Movement in South Carolina 1940-1970 on the occasion of the opening of an exhibit *We’ll Never Turn Back* A Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibit 130 photographs of the Civil Rights Movement October 30-November 28, 1982” November 5 – 6, 1982 at The Charleston Museum”, loose files, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.

⁶ Theoharis, xv.

and Welfare. The Charleston strike drew national attention to the hospitals, putting their HEW funding in jeopardy because they were accused of violating several Civil Rights Acts including the act of 1964. Governor Robert McNair was initially unwilling to compromise and calls for President Nixon to intervene fell on deaf ears. McNair's initial unwillingness to compromise and Nixon's avoidance of the strike are examples of the challenges of enforcing civil rights gains. This chapter addresses these issues as well as McNair's use of force via the South Carolina National Guard to intimidate the strikers in Charleston and other activists across the state.

I conclude the dissertation with a discussion of the consequences of the strike. At the end of the 113-day strike in June 1969, the hospital workers had gained a few victories. Their wages were increased from \$1.30 per hour to \$1.60 per hour and most of the strikers were rehired within ninety days of the strike's end. However, the matter of union recognition was less successful. South Carolina continued to be a "right to work" state and Governor McNair and Dr. McCord, the hospital president, only conceded to establishing a credit union to be associated with Local 1199B. Since workers were not required to pay union dues directly from their checks to the union, the union was unable to function. Local 1199B did not last. The lack of funding and enthusiasm hindered the state's minor union concessions.

But for the SCLC and 1199, the Charleston strike was thought to be a beginning of a formal alliance between civil rights and labor organizations. In Jack O'Dell's 1969 essay on the strike, he offered a hopeful outlook for the future of civil rights and labor organizing. According to O'Dell, "Charleston forged a unity between the community-organizing techniques developed during the civil rights era of the Freedom Movement and the working class organizational techniques of strike action developed by the labor movement."⁷ O'Dell's hope was shared by Andrew Young and Ralph Abernathy but the result was much different. According to Young, the

⁷ O'Dell, *Climbin' Jacob's Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O'Dell*, 189.

Charleston strike “was the first and last partnership of this type, and the last major campaign waged by SCLC...it turned out to be the end of the direct-action phase of the movement...and of the application of the direct-action techniques developed in the sixties.”⁸ For labor and civil rights the hopefulness of the late 1960s would be extinguished by the decline of the 1970s. The Charleston campaign was a last act for traditional civil rights activism. What about this particular moment in time, this strike, made these activists hopeful and what prevented the movement’s longevity? What local and national trends pushed economic equality out of the national picture? Beyond considering the “failure” of Local 1199B as the end of the Charleston movement, it is important to understand the broader political context that made it difficult to sustain this mass movement.

My study intervenes into a historiography that suffers from a paucity of studies on black working women and their involvement in the civil rights-Black Power movements. Long known as major contributors to the success and sustainment of the modern black freedom struggle, black working women are often left on the margins of major studies of pivotal civil rights-Black Power events and campaigns. Similarly, monographic studies on black working-class activism during the same period generally focus on the Memphis strike and more recently on welfare rights activism. As it stands, scholarship on black working-class women’s activism in the mid-twentieth century is limited. My study also advances scholarship on understudied locales of the civil rights-Black Power movements. While South Carolina was the site for various important civil rights campaigns, until recently scholars had not produced monographs dedicated to black

⁸ Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 501.

activism there.⁹ When scholars have undertaken serious local studies of the civil rights-Black Power movements, many of the studies have not considered the impact of movements beyond their success or failure. In this respect, this dissertation complicates understandings of civil rights gains through an analysis of the challenges in enforcing federal legislation and judicial rulings in a community that was reticent to change.

This dissertation contributes to the existing and burgeoning scholarship on the civil rights-Black Power movements, black labor and working-class history, and black women's tradition of activism. Because the Charleston Strike falls outside of the traditional civil rights periodization, 1954 to 1965, the strike must be considered within the context of civil rights and Black Power eras. Black women's roles in both movements have recently received more scholarly attention through autobiographies, biographies, and reinterpretations of the movement. Scholarship on the Black Power Movement has recently transitioned from general histories of the entire movement pioneered by scholars like William Van de Burg, Jeffrey Ogbar, and Peniel Joesph to monographs by Donna Murch, Hassan Jeffries, and others.¹⁰ These works have pushed Black Power Studies forward. My study adds to and complicates the existing scholarship on the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike, the contested periodization of the civil rights-Black Power movements, black women's activism during the civil rights-Black Power movements, and histories of black working-class resistance. By aligning with and challenging other trends and themes in the historiography, this dissertation adds nuance to familiar narratives of the civil rights-Black Power eras.

⁹ Steve Estes' recent book *Charleston in Black and White: Race and Power in the South After the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, 2015) is a study that addresses the post-civil rights era in Charleston and the south more generally.

¹⁰ In the last decade, literature on the Black Power Movement has grown exponentially from more general studies to monographs on activism in hotbeds like California as well as lesser known sites of black power activism in the South.

Scholarship on the 1969 Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike has generally focused on the involvement of Local 1199 and the turn towards radical black activism in the late 1960s. Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg's *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* offers a thorough history of Local 1199. Chronicling the development of the union, its growth during the 1960s and 1970s, and involvement in key events, Fink and Greenberg provide great context for the growing importance of this union during the 1960s and 1970s. The chapter on the Charleston strike is quite useful for its discussion of the union's involvement in Charleston. While Fink and Greenberg acknowledge black women's involvement, they are not the focal point. Likewise Stephen O'Neill's "From the Shadow of Slavery: The Civil Rights Years in Charleston" focuses more on the radical activism during the strike than on the importance of black women to the success of the strike. Both works offer useful insight into the development of the strike, some of its participants, and the strike's consequences.

Steve Estes's "Case Study: The Charleston Hospital Strike" offers important insights into the effectiveness of the strike but does not engage it as a women's movement. Eric Foner discusses the relationship between the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike and Charleston in a chapter in *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1981*. Millicent Brown's essay "Black Women on Strike In Charleston, South Carolina: We Shall Overcome, I Think" briefly documents the connections between the 1945-46 Tobacco Workers' Strike and the 1969 Hospital Workers' Strike. But Brown does not delve deeply into the complex role of black women leaders in the 1969 strike. A reassessment of the Charleston movement and especially of black middle-class and working-class women's participation could provide an alternate understanding of both the civil rights, black power, and labor movements.

FRAMING THE CIVIL RIGHTS-BLACK POWER MOVEMENTS

In the last ten years, scholars have debated the issues of continuity and change within narratives of the Black Freedom Movement. Central to debates within the field has been the acceptance and/or rejecting of a “long-movement” thesis. Scholars like Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, have written articles challenging historians and other scholars of the black freedom struggle to consider decades preceding and following the traditional decade from 1954-1965 as part of a longer civil rights movement. Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang suggest that the long-movement thesis has been used irresponsibly and should be reconsidered as a theoretical framework for discussing civil rights and Black Power. Similar to Hall, Peniel Joseph, one of the foremost scholars on the black power movement suggests that scholars should consider the possibility of a long Black Power movement. With articles published in leading journals including the *Journal of American History*, *Journal of African American History*, and *The Journal of Southern History*, Dowd Hall, Cha-Jua and Lang, and Joseph set forth challenges to traditional narratives of civil rights and black power resulting in a shift within the literature on both movements.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” sparked a debate about when the civil rights movement actually began, how long it lasted, and how it should be framed historically. According to Dowd Hall

[b]y confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement. It ensures the status of the classical phase as a triumphal moment in a larger American progress narrative, yet it undermines its *gravitas*. It prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time.¹¹

¹¹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 91, No. 4 (Mar., 2005), pp. 1234.

Dowd Hall argues against a traditional narrative not only because it reduces the movement to the decade between 1954 and 1965 but also because “the movement’s meaning has been distorted and reified by a New Right bent on reversing its gains.”¹² Dowd Hall’s central goal in advancing the long movement narrative is to strengthen the movement’s moral claim and its importance and uniqueness in the general American narrative. While this is an important project, lengthening the temporal and spatial context of the movement could also have the opposite effect.

Dowd Hall’s call for a long movement narrative is chiefly aimed as a corrective for contemporary misuses of the civil rights movement’s legacy. Because this article was a more fleshed out version of her 2005 Organization of American Historian’s presidential address, Dowd Hall aimed to use her platform as a call to action.¹³ In the last decade, her call to action and awareness has transformed both civil rights and black power narratives as scholars have responded by contextualizing the classic civil rights decade within the larger context of black leftist organizing from WWII to Vietnam.

In their 2007 *Journal of African American History* article “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang called for a more measured approach to altering the traditional temporal and spatial narratives of the civil rights and black power movements. Cha-Jua and Lang questioned “the adequacy of the Long Movement thesis because it collapses periodization schemas, erases conceptual differences between waves of the BLM and blurs regional distinctions in the African American experience.” Central to their argument is the idea that the limitless nature of the long movement thesis results in a “largely ahistorical and placeless chronicle with questionable

¹² Dowd Hall, 1235.

¹³ Dowd Hall, 1233.

interpretive insight.”¹⁴ While reconsidering the importance and influence of non-Southern spaces and events outside of the boundaries of the traditional periodization of the mid-twentieth century black movements is important, there should still be some structured approach to the period. A liberal notion of a long movement with no real boundaries results in “a totalizing approach that assumes an unchanging essence to African American struggle places the struggle outside the realm of time.”¹⁵

Instead of a no-holds-barred approach to the modern black freedom movement, Cha-Jua and Lang suggest retheorizing the movements. Rather than totally dismissing the long movement thesis, Cha-Jua and Lang suggest that “[w]e need an historical-theoretical framework of the BLM, one that is mindful of political, economic, spatial, ideological, discursive, and cultural factors, as well as subjective activity, in shaping paradigms of African American resistance in consistent, though contextually specific, ways across time and space.”¹⁶ While they don’t begin to define this new theory, Cha-Jua and Lang continue a conversation on the current revisionist spirit among scholars of the African American experience. Though flawed, the long movement thesis is an attempt to reimagine the civil rights and black power movements. But the need for some theoretical framework remains.

Similar to Dowd Hall’s argument about the long civil rights movement, in a 2009 article in the *Journal of Southern History* Peniel Joseph called for an expansion of the framework of literature on the black power movement. With “Rethinking the Black Power Era” Joseph argues against popular narratives of declension of black progress in the wake of the modern civil rights movement. Like Cha-Jua and Lang, Joseph places some of the blame for the historical

¹⁴ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *The Journal of African American History*, Volume 92, No. 2 (Spring 2007), pp. 265, 266.

¹⁵ Cha-Jua and Lang, 284.

¹⁶ Cha-Jua and Lang, 283.

misrepresentation of the black power movement on the “undertheorized” state of black power historiography.¹⁷ Instead of focusing on the decline of black urban spaces and a period of unrest, Joseph encourages scholars to search for the broad impact of black power on college and university campuses, black feminist organizations, and the emergence of black political machines.

Black Power studies is an alternative to mainstream assessments of the movement. According to Joseph, “Black Power studies is expanding the periodization, geography, and temporal and spatial boundaries of postwar American history...these works argue that Black Power-styled radicalism existed alongside, and intersected with, conventional civil rights activists.” Ultimately, “historians of postwar America [need] to take Black Power activism seriously as a touchstone for the era’s social, political, cultural, and economic transformations and upheavals.”¹⁸ Instead of viewing the study of the black power movement as a subfield, Joseph urges scholars to use the movement as a window into the various changes during the Vietnam Era.

The larger debate surrounding the periodization, location, and characteristics of the civil rights-Black Power movements has informed many recent works on the twentieth century black freedom movement. Some scholars have used the long movement framework as a way to further contextualize activists whose lives spanned the breadth of the twentieth century. Others have dismissed the theory as too broad and some have only acknowledged the debate without staking claim to it. Regardless, the long movement theory has helped expand the scope of what scholars consider the central characteristics of the civil rights and Black Power eras. It is less clear whether or not the civil rights movement ended with the affirmation of national citizenship found

¹⁷ Peniel Joseph, “Rethinking the Black Power Era.” *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. 75, No. 3, pp. 707.

¹⁸ Joseph, 714, 715.

in the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and the Civil Rights Act of 1965 or more localized changes in less-studied outposts of nonviolent direct action protest. Though the Charleston strike occurs during the Black Power movement, it is not distinctly a “Black Power” campaign as nonviolent direct action was essential to its success. It serves as an example of the coalescence of various forms of protest in the service of the common goal of securing equal rights and equal access. My study addresses the long movement approach inasmuch as the hospital strike cannot be categorized as either civil rights or Black Power. The long movement approach is a useful framework for considering both the chronology and methodology of the Charleston strike.

But expanding the scope of the studies of civil rights and black power does not only apply to new spatial and temporal contexts, but also to unexplored communities. Traditional movement narratives have long focused on male-driven, middle-class centered narratives that align with a politics of respectability. While scholars like Charles Payne, Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, and others have centered narratives on working-class people and “radical” women, mainstream narratives remain absent of local and national stories on black women. This dissertation extends the civil rights-Black Power narratives in several ways. Not only does the timing of Charleston campaign trouble long accepted narratives of the temporal and geographic lines of the civil rights movement, it also challenges the traditional periodization of the black power movement. This project also moves the discussion of the union between labor and civil rights from the Memphis campaign of 1968 to a consideration of other fruitful campaigns as leaders of labor and waning civil rights organizations searched for continued relevancy. Beyond this, the Charleston campaign was also the result of an organic, local movement outside of known areas of civil rights organization and struggle. Taken together,

these features of the project emphasize the importance of the Charleston campaign to the larger narrative of black working-class women's activism during the civil rights-black power eras.

BLACK WOMEN, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND BLACK POWER

My study builds upon a significant body of scholarship on black women's involvement in the civil right-Black Power movements. Early histories of those movements focused on male leadership and activism.¹⁹ With the 1990 publication of *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Rouse and Barbara Woods provided the first detailed analysis of women's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Kay Mills' 1993 *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* In 1997 Belinda Robnett's *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* defined black women's activism as bridge leaders within local and national civil rights organizations. In 2001 two important studies *Freedom's Daughters: Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 and 1970* by Lynne Olson and the collection *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights—Black Power Movement* edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin furthered the discussion of African American women. More recently Barbara Ransby, Kimberly Springer, Danielle McGuire, Earnest Bracey, Fran Buss, Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard have further complicated the story of black women participants in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.²⁰

¹⁹ Some texts on the Civil Rights Movement include: Taylor Branch. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989); Taylor Branch. *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); Taylor Branch. *At Canaan's Edge: American in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009); David Garrow. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1968* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); Howard Zinn *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1965).

²⁰ Work on African American Women's Civil Rights/Black Power involvement is far more extensive than the books discussed here. Recent publications on African American women activists include: Sarah Azanransky. *The Dream is Freedom: Pauli Murray and American Democratic Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Earnest

Barbara Ransby's much lauded *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* is an expert example of biography and civil rights movement history. Ransby weaves Baker's involvement in black activist groups for over a half-century as a leader and organizer into the greater narrative of black activism in the mid-twentieth century. Ella Baker's involvement in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was integral to many successes of the movement. Ransby's account of Ella Baker's life is testimony to the importance of black women in the Civil Rights movement.

With *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* Ransby models how biography should be written. As an important text on black women in the civil rights movement, Ransby's book chronicles the movement through the life and work of one of the most influential black woman in the Civil Rights movement. Ella Baker influenced many of the policies and actions of the NAACP, SCLC, and SNCC. Baker's issues with gender hierarchy and sexism counter Robnett's assertion that black women had no problems with sexism within the movement.²¹ According to Ransby, "a rhetoric of racial equality marked the public pronouncements of SCLC leaders, while old hierarchies based on gender inequities

Bracey. *Fannie Lou Hamer: The Life of A Civil Rights Icon* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011); Fran Leeper Buss, ed. *Moisture of the Earth: Mary Robinson, Civil Rights and Textile Union Activist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); (forthcoming) Katharine Charron. *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Dayo F. Gore, et al. *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*. (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Faith S. Holsaert, et al. *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts By Women in SNCC* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

²¹ Belinda Robnett's bridge leader theory applies to some black women's movement activism, her assessment of gender roles and sexism neglects actual occurrences of sexism within civil rights organizations. According to Robnett, "many of the women interviewed stated that they did not view gender relations as relevant to an account of their activities in the Civil Rights Movement." (4) Robnett also asserts that in terms of civil rights activism, "gender is and was a nonissue. The struggle for survival superseded and supersedes any preoccupation with gendered relations." (4) Robnett continually repeats this refrain. While African American freedom was most important to movement activists, dismissing gender issues seems extreme. For more see, Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

endured within their ranks. Baker refused to accept the situation in silence.”²² Ransby suggests the Ella Baker confronted gender discrimination in a variety of ways, most notably leaving the SCLC to form SNCC. Though an anomaly with the realm of black women in the civil rights movement in terms of influence and length of activism, Ransby holds Baker up as the pinnacle of black women’s civil rights activism.

Kimberly Springer’s *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1965-1980* details the rise and fall of black feminist organizations in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The Third World Women’s Alliance, National Black Feminist Organization, National Alliance of Black Feminists, the Combahee River Collective, and Black Women Organized for Action represented distinct strains of black feminism and black women’s activism. According to Springer, “black feminists’ voices and visions fell between the cracks of the civil rights and women’s rights movements, so they created formal organizations to speak on behalf of black women with an explicitly feminist consciousness.”²³ Black feminists found space for their activism in their own organizations. Springer asserts that black feminists were “the first activists in the United States to theorize and act upon the intersections of race, gender, and class.”²⁴ Black feminists were cognizant of black women’s multi-layered oppression. Race was not the only cause to rally around; issues of gender and class discrimination made speaking for black women’s issues difficult.

While Springer extends the civil rights-black power narrative to 1980, in *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* Danielle McGuire attempts to extend the civil

²⁵ Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 185.

²⁶ Kimberly Springer, *Living For the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

²⁷ Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 2.

rights-black power narrative to the 1940s while also revising the motivations for the entire movement. McGuire argues that “the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, often heralded as the opening scene of the civil rights movement, was in many ways the last act of a decades-long struggle to protect black women...from sexualized violence and rape.”²⁵ Reorienting the discussion of the Montgomery boycott and the dominant narrative of civil rights scholarship, McGuire seeks to insert battles against sexual violence into the story of the civil rights movement. McGuire attempts to reclaim Parks’ radicalism with nods to her involvement in the Scottsboro boys case, as well as to extend the timeline for civil rights activism to 1944, the year Recy Taylor became a victim of white assailants. Suggesting that the “testimonies [of black female victims of sexual violence] were a form of direct action,” McGuire emphasizes the importance of testimony and truth telling for black victims of sexual violence.²⁶ Challenging Darlene Clark Hine’s theory of dissemblance, McGuire suggests that black women spoke out about sexual violence and did not remain silent. Testimony in court was direct action.

In the collection *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, editors Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard offer alternative conceptions of black women’s activism during the Civil Rights and Black Power. Each chapter provides a nuanced approach to narratives of both movements by centralizing black women’s activism. Unlike much of the literature on the Black Power Movement, the scholars included in the collection move beyond merely mentioning the presence of black women in central organizations and events. Each chapter complicates the narrative of black women’s involvement in progressive or radical activism. With this collection, Gore, Theoharis, and Woodard contribute a much needed showcase of black women’s radical activism throughout the twentieth century.

³⁰ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), xvii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

The essays in *Want to Start a Revolution?* illuminate alternative visions of black women's involvement in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. By reinterpreting "radicalism," the editors and contributors complicate the male-dominated movement narratives of radicalism, militancy, and activism. Shifting women from the margins of mass movements to the center of organizations is an important beginning to expanding the historiography.

Jeanne Theoharis's *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* provides several important methods and frameworks for discussing both the working-class women of the Charleston strike as well as the life of Coretta Scott King. Theoharis could not access all of Rosa Parks's personal papers and effects which resulted in "a political biography" which "does not fully capture her community of friends, her faith and church life, her marriage, her daily activities." But Theoharis "excavate[d] and examine[d] the scope of her political life" in order to construct a history of Parks's activism.²⁷ According to Theoharis, the national narrative of Parks as silent civil rights heroine was as much influenced by her gender as her class status. Theoharis suggests that Parks "would be held up as a simple heroine, not as a thoughtful and seasoned political strategist in her own right, in part because she lacked the social status, education, and gender that some people believed necessary to be a strategist."²⁸ Similarly, Coretta Scott King is not remembered in the dominant narrative as more than Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dutifully supportive wife whose life following his assassination was solely focused on maintaining his legacy. She is not understood as a political activist or strategist. Theoharis's work is one guide to accessing and reclaiming the political lives of black women during the movement.

Scholars continue to complicate the traditional, male-dominated narrative of the civil rights-Black Power Movements. Beyond recent discussions of black women's roles in the

²⁷ Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, xv.

²⁸ Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 26.

movements, studies of local organizing and working-class involvement also counter the top-down national civil rights narrative.²⁹ Placing African American women at the center of the narrative as organizational leaders, bridge leaders, and regular participants reorients the narrative by including people not necessarily seen as active, autonomous participants. In the last twenty years, scholars have expanded and enriched the historical narrative with serious studies of black women as important and essential actors in the civil rights-black power era. While Martin Luther King continues to figure prominently in the national narrative, scholars continue to complicate the civil rights movement with works centering on women, the working-class, and local leaders.

BLACK WORKING-CLASS RESISTANCE

Beyond black women's involvement in the civil rights-Black Power movements, my study also contributes to scholarship on black working-class activism. Scholars like Robin Kelley, Jacqueline Jones, Tera Hunter, and many others are responsible for laying the theoretical and methodological foundations for discussions of black working-class life and resistance to oppression. Both Laurie Green and Michael Honey have offered important contributions to the study of the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike. Honey's *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (1993), *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (2007), and his edited collection of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches "*All Labor Has Dignity*" (2011) and Green's "'Where Would the Negro Women Apply for Work?': Gender, Race and Labor in Wartime Memphis" (2006) and *Battling*

²⁹ Some works on local civil rights organizing: Brian Behnken. *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); John Dittmer. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles Payne. *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Bruce Watson. *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season that Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York: Viking, 2010)

the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle (2007) are important works on the intersection of labor and civil rights struggles in the mid-twentieth century. As the most famous instance of labor and civil rights cooperation during the civil rights movement and its added notoriety as the sight of Rev. King's assassination, Memphis has become the lone example of King and the SCLC's Poor People's Campaign. But in some respects, Charleston was the next phase of the Poor People's Campaign.

Robin D.G. Kelley's article "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South" outlines a theoretical approach to discussing black working-class activism. Kelley makes important distinctions between "organized" and "unorganized" working-class resistance that challenge the idea that union membership was the only manifestation of workers' resistance. According to Kelley, "we must not assume that all action that flowed from organized resistance was merely an articulation of a preexisting oppositional consciousness. The relationship between black working-class infrapolitics and collective, open engagement with power is dialectical, not a teleological transformation from unconscious accommodation to conscious resistance."³⁰ While Kelley was specifically assessing working-class black life in the early twentieth century, it is important to acknowledge the formal and informal resistance of black workers. While the Charleston Strike culminated in the state recognizing a hospital workers' union, black workers in Charleston had been covertly meeting for more than a year before any organized public action. Kelley concludes his article by suggesting that "even for organized black workers [unions] were probably only a small part of an array of formal and informal strategies by which people struggled to improve or transform daily life" and "to assume that politics is something separate from all these events and decisions is to

³⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History*, 80, no. 1 (1993): 111. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2079698>.

balkanize people's lives and thus completely miss how struggles over power, autonomy, and pleasure take place in the daily lives of working people."³¹ The Charleston Strike is an example of the confluence of labor and civil rights but also of the myriad ways black workers resisted exploitation and affirmed their dignity.

In writing about the subversive activities of African American workers, Kelley posited that

by shifting our focus to what motivated disenfranchised black working people to struggle and what strategies they developed, we may discover that their participation in "mainstream" politics...grew out of the very circumstances, experiences, and memories that impelled many to steal from an employer, to join a mutual benefit association, or to spit in a bus driver's face...for southern blacks in the age of Jim Crow, politics was not separate from lived experience of the imagined world of what is possible."³²

The political motivations for action were not separate from the material or social concerns of working-class black people. Kelley's arguments about black resistance are essential regardless of whether or not workers engaged in covert or overt resistance to oppression. Black working-class men and women were always challenging the status quo at work or in other public space. Until Jacqueline Jones' 1985 book, black working-class women's labor had been on the margins of black women's history and labor history. Eventually, books like Tera Hunter's 1997 study of black washerwomen in Atlanta would set standards for how black working-class women's history should be approached. In this respect, the works of Jacqueline Jones and Tera Hunter are considered classics. The method and execution of each work are examples of great scholarship on black working-class women.

Tera Hunter's 1997 book *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* was a breakthrough and remains to be one of the most important works on black working-class resistance. Hunter furthered Robin D.G. Kelley's argument on the covert, "hidden transcripts," of black workers but also set forth another layer to working-class

³¹Kelley, 112.

³² Kelley, 78.

activism. At some point, activities on a small scale were no longer effective means of resistance.

Of the decision to organize and strike Hunter wrote,

Black women had reached the decision to undertake a direct, large-scale political action after years of trying other strategies to secure their rights, which proved insufficient. Quotidian subsistence tactics and covert resistance were vital to sustaining working-class women and their families, but they were not enough to procure fair working and living conditions in a city that increasingly proved to be hostile to their interests.³³

While Kelley championed the covert resistance of southern blacks during Jim Crow, Hunter's washerwomen went on strike visibly upsetting the social order. Hunter's analysis and uncovering of black women's work and resistance in Atlanta placed black working-class women's stories at the center. Hunter placed the Atlanta washerwomen's strike of 1881 in the context of other similar strikes namely, the 1866 Jackson, Mississippi and the 1877 Galveston, Texas strikes. Unlike the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the Atlanta washerwomen were domestic workers. According to Hunter, "domestic workers' protests were a part of a flourishing urban resistance campaign among African-American workers in the Reconstruction South...black workers signaled to postwar industrialists, who repeatedly denied dissension in the ranks of labor, that they would not assent passively to oppression."³⁴ Black worker resistance shocked white employers who were accustomed to black acquiescence to white rule. Following Emancipation, newly freed workers expected their free lives to be different from their enslaved lives and were willing to protest in order that the rights they were promised were actually given. An important addition, to many already a modern classic, *To 'Joy My Freedom* shifted the dialogue on women's roles in the early Jim Crow south. Hunter's book set a new standard for works on the time period. *To 'Joy My Freedom*, laid the groundwork for any book on laboring black women of the early Jim Crow period and black working class histories in general.

³³ Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 74-75.

³⁴Hunter, 76-77.

Jacqueline Jones' oft-cited 1985 classic *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* moved the working lives of black women to the center. Her central argument rested on the idea that the family is the central institution in black women's lives and that their work was in the service of the family. According to Jones, a study focusing "on black working women—not only what they did, but also what they desired for themselves and their children—reveals the intersection of African American, laboring-class, and female cultures."³⁵ Though their lives intersected, there was no working-class solidarity. According to Jones, "the tendency of members of the white laboring classes to claim "racial" superiority over black people with whom they in some cases shared a lowly material condition suggests that an analysis based exclusively on class factors will not yield a full understanding of black women's work."³⁶ The absence of a true, unified working-class begets the necessity of race and gender specific studies of the working-class. Beyond discussing working-class resistance during the Jim Crow period, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* chronicles black women's work from slavery to the recent past. An overview of the changing working lives of black women, including discussion of black women's migration to the North during the two world wars, Jones' book is essential to understanding the complexities of black working women's lives. Revised and updated in 2010, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* continues to be an important book on black working-class women. While *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* provides a foundation for any discussion of black working-class women, *To 'Joy My Freedom* is an excellent example of monographic writing on black working-class women's resistance. The works by Jones and Hunter continue to be cited by scholars doing work on black working-class women.

³⁵ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 3.

³⁶ Jones, 4.

The following study complicates and adds to existing narratives of civil rights, black power, women's rights, labor organizing, and workers' rights movements of the late sixties and early seventies. The Charleston strike was a product of the vestiges of nonviolent direct action left in the shell of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the more aggressive protest style of the labor movement, the burgeoning women's and welfare rights movements, and the overall feelings of discontent in the black community most often expressed as "Black Power." In Chapter Two, "'You had to be willing to give up all of it': Worker Unrest, Black Activism, and Genteel Segregation in Post-World War II Charleston," I discuss the workers' journey to action within the context of earlier civil rights and labor activism in and around Charleston in the two decades prior to the hospital strike. Worker activism in the late 1960s did not occur outside of the context of racial and working-class disparities that had been percolating in Charleston. The origins of the strike are found in earlier manifestations of worker discontent and struggles for the affirmation of equal rights.

Chapter One

“You had to be willing to give up all of it”: Worker Unrest, Black Activism, and Genteel Segregation in Post-World War II Charleston

The Charleston Hospital Workers’ Strike was, in a sense, part of a larger and longer movement. While it was the byproduct of a specific context, there were also concrete antecedents to the strike. After World War II, people from various sectors of the Charleston community took action against unfair labor and living conditions. From late 1945 to early 1946, workers struck from the American Tobacco Company Cigar Factory. During the 1950s and 1960s, Charleston was the site of a limited, but vibrant civil rights movement that encompassed many conventional methods including sit-ins, boycotts, and litigation. These two cases provide a window into post war activism in Charleston. In this chapter, I consider a variety of the immediate and proximate causes of and influences on the hospital workers’ strike. Workers began meeting informally in December 1967 after five black nurses’ aides and LPNs were fired. Inklings of unrest related to persistent racial tensions and low wages percolated for around 15 months before the workers struck from several hospitals across the city in the spring and summer of 1969. This chapter focuses on the lead-up to the strike, early civil rights and labor activism in Charleston, and the genesis of and context for the hospital workers’ discontent.

Activism was integral to black life in Charleston and South Carolina in general. Charleston had been a site of black resistance since at least Denmark Vesey’s failed slave revolt in 1822. As a major port during the Atlantic Slave Trade, black Charlestonians made up a significant portion of the local population. Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded by Vesey and a frequent meeting location during various movements, is a vestige of black Charleston’s activist legacy. In the post-Reconstruction period, black citizens engaged in a

variety of acts, large and small, of resistance against their marginal social and economic status. The black population in Charleston and across the state was central to the persistence of activism.

African Americans were a significant part of the Charleston population. In 1969, Charleston was a city of almost 67,000 people. Numbering at 30,225, African Americans accounted for 45 percent of the city's population. In Charleston County as a whole, African Americans were 31 percent of the almost 250,000 residents. Even though African Americans accounted for a sizeable minority, they were more likely to live under the poverty level than their white counterparts. 42 percent of black families in Charleston proper lived under the poverty level, which was five times the percentage of white families living in similar conditions. Within the black community, women earned a substantially lower median income at \$2415 per year as opposed to \$4163 for black men. Even with a relatively low unemployment rate at 2.2 percent, blacks still suffered financially in comparison to whites. But the majority of blacks over twenty-five did have a minimum of an elementary education with 47.8 percent holding high school diplomas.¹

After Mississippi, South Carolina was home to the largest group of African Americans in the United States. Prior to the 1968 general election, 18,560 African Americans were registered to vote in Charleston, which amounted to approximately 25 percent of those registered in the city and just more than 50 percent of the city's black population.² By the 1970 gubernatorial election, 50 percent of the state's black population was registered to vote. In that election and successive

¹ "1970 Census of Population Volume 1 Part 42: Characteristics of the Population-South Carolina," 1970 Census of Population, United States Census Bureau. Accessed October 31, 2015. <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

² "Supplemental Report of the Secretary of State O. Frank Thornton to the General Assembly of South Carolina," Biennial Election Reports of the State Election Commission, South Carolina State Election Commission. Accessed October 31, 2015. http://www.scvotes.org/files/ElectionReports/Election_Report_1968.pdf.

elections, around 50 percent of registered black voters turned out to vote.³ Since South Carolina had a significant black population, the decades of voter suppression prior to voter education efforts and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 silenced a significant portion of the state's population. In the twenty years between the end of World War II and the Voting Rights Act, activists in South Carolina sought tangible access to the franchise, fair working environments with compensation commensurate with work, and equal access to public education and accommodations.

Many of the signature events that preceded the 1969 strike established an activist lineage that influenced and informed, often indirectly, how the hospital workers would proceed. Almost immediately following the end of World War II, workers, primarily black women, at the American Tobacco Company Cigar Factory struck for better wages, work conditions, and union recognition. Approximately ten years later, black activists in Charleston developed a model for voter education that would impact the national civil rights movement. In the twenty years between the tobacco workers strike that ended in 1946 and the beginning of the hospital worker grievance sessions in late 1967, activists had laid the groundwork for the 1969 hospital workers' strike. The intervening years were filled with both labor and civil rights activism that likely influenced the future participants in the hospital strike. Some of the men and women involved in the tobacco strike and various civil rights campaigns were involved in the hospital workers' strike as organizers, participants, and mentors of the younger people who powered the picket lines. Post-World War II activism was essential to creating the environment for a multilayered movement for human rights that culminated in the hospital workers strike in 1969.

³ David J. Garrow, "Black Voting in South Carolina, 1970-1976," in *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 9, no. 1, (1978): 60, 75. Accessed October 31, 2015. <http://link.springer.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/article/10.1007/BF02689536>.

LABOR ORGANIZING AFTER WORLD WAR II

From October 1945 to March 1946, workers from the American Tobacco Company Cigar Factory struck. In conjunction with tobacco workers in Philadelphia and Trenton, New Jersey, the Charleston workers demanded “back pay and a pay increase of twenty-five cents per hour. In addition, they sought non-discrimination clauses in the Cigar Factory’s hiring and firing practices, paid medical benefits, and a closed union shop that would require union membership as a condition for employment.”⁴ Black women were the majority of the over one thousand workers who went on strike. According to historian Dwana Waugh, “the strike offered [black women] hope for securing higher pay and greater long-term job security with the establishment of a firm non-discrimination policy. For white women and the factory’s white and black male Local 15 strikers, combining forces across racial lines provided the prospect of better pay by presenting a united working-class front.” But the interracial nature of the strike was tenuous at best, as white male machinists were unwilling to concede “the benefits they received from race and gender discrimination” to work in unity with black men and women for long.⁵

That those on strike from the American Tobacco Company Cigar Factory were mostly black women foreshadowed the particularities of working-class struggle in Charleston that persisted in the city at least until the late 1960s. The black “women involved [in the strike] were the breadwinners of their families, and the lack of income [during the strike] was a burden.”⁶ Many of their white coworkers were uncivil and lacked sympathy for these women who were striking to better provide for themselves and their families. But the political network outside of the factory tapped into activist circles that bolstered the workers’ efforts. National activists like

⁴ Dwana Waugh. “Charleston’s Cigar Factory Strike, 1945-1946,” Lowcountry Digital History Initiative. Accessed October 28, 2015, http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/cigar_factory/world_war_11_and_labor_activis.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Virginia Durr of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and local activists who were members of the NAACP helped galvanize support for the strikers. The workers extended their fight by boycotting the company's tobacco products. Waugh credits this extra effort with forcing factory leadership to consent to negotiating a deal at the end of March 1946.⁷

Many of those involved in the tobacco strike became at least tertiary figures in the 1969 strike. Importantly, "Charleston's Cigar Factory strike revealed the potential for at least some collaboration across race and gender divisions in labor activism and civil rights struggles." People like Lillie Mae Doster, Isaiah Bennett, and Marjorie-Amos Frazier were politicized during the strike and would continue their efforts well into the 1950s and 1960s either directly or indirectly. Some activists including Doster and Bennett as well as Septima Clark attended seminars at Highlander Folk School in 1947. They, along with others, would reemerge as important organizational progenitors of black activism during the civil rights movement and beyond. In Waugh's estimation, "the organizational roots of [the tobacco] strike were an important precursor in Charleston to the city's civil rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s."⁸ The strike from the American Tobacco Company Cigar Factory was foundational for both the Charleston civil rights movement as well as the hospital workers' strike. The tactical and material connections between the factory and hospital workers as well as the similarities between those who populated the picket lines of both strikes suggests that there was a lineage of activism or at least of an activist spirit among working-class black women in Charleston. In the intervening years between the tobacco and hospital strikes, civil rights activism took hold in Charleston. Activists borrowed from tactics and methods that were spreading across the south and took to the streets and stores of Charleston to force change. The decade of activism from the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.; Lillie Marsh Doster. Interview with Interviewed by O. Jennifer Dixon, November 21, 2008. Southern Oral History Program, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

mid-1950s to the mid-1960s built upon the foundation of the tobacco workers' strike and bolstered the foundation of the hospital strike.

BLACK ACTIVISM IN AND AROUND CHARLESTON BEFORE THE STRIKE

In many narratives of the civil rights movement, Charleston is missing as a location of sustained, effective activism. But, in the decades before the 1969 strike, there was a consistent, grassroots movement that impacted both the local community and set a standard for voter education organizing across the south. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, there was a consistent and varied movement for civil rights in and near Charleston. The Charleston movement produced a replicable program for voter education and activists used proven strategies like sit-ins and boycotts to test the limits of segregation in the city's lunch counters and department stores. NAACP lawyers in South Carolina also employed familiar strategies to force the desegregation of public universities. There existed a tenuous relationship between the youth and established black leaders centering on methods and their desire to maintain their positions at the cost of true progress. Though Charleston never appeared in the national narrative of the movement, activists in Charleston and across South Carolina participated in nonviolent direct action campaigns that pressured politicians and political influences into at least conceding that integration was inevitable.

By the end of the 1960s, there had been waves of activism in and around Charleston as black activists blazed the trail for voter education classes and used tried and true methods to push for, at times incremental, change across the city. But by the time working-class people took up the cause of fair and equal employment practices, the movement had shifted from one to force desegregation of public facilities and more open access to the ballot to a working-class led movement for economic equality. During the hospital strike, proponents of nonviolent direct

action as well as the more truculent sect of Charleston activists coalesced into a movement that skirted the lines of two eras of activism. While they did not always agree on approach or even motive, their tactics balanced out into an effective movement. Regardless of strategy and motive, the existence of a sustained and diverse movement during the 1950s and 1960s set the stage for a struggle that was a tactical descendant of the earlier struggles as well as a movement that advanced the cause.

In the 1950s and 1960s, civil rights activists in Charleston and on the nearby Sea Islands worked in various spheres to push for fair and equal access to the ballot, the best schools, and to private and public accommodations. During the late 1950s on Johns Island, activists like Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark, and Bernice Robinson pioneered a voter education method that would be replicated across the south. Youth activists followed the example of their peers in North Carolina and sat-in at lunch counters in 1961 and NAACP attorneys litigated cases to force the desegregation of public education. Like many places across the south, Charleston was a site of a fertile and diverse movement.

Esau Jenkins was an integral player in early civil rights activism near Charleston. A native of Johns Island, he mentored a teenaged Mary Moultrie, remaining an important activist until his death. Jenkins was dedicated to bettering the lives of and preserving the culture of Johns Island. He worked as a farmer from his teens into his early twenties before being motivated to work to make black life better after witnessing several violent encounters between blacks and whites. He recalled that he was moved to act because “Negroes began to get malice in their heart for white folks. We [could not] afford to let things like that go on. We...[had to] make race relations better.” He continued that injustice on Johns Island “motivated [him] to organize in 1949 a progressive movement, that...could help the people to be better citizens, give them a

change to get a better education, and know how to reason and look out for themselves, and take more part in political action.”⁹ His early experiences on Johns Island and his involvement in activism was a part of the foundation for the hospital strike. Rev. G.C. Brown, a resident of Johns Island, reflected in 1966, “When I came here thirty years ago, there was no chance for any schooling beyond the fifth and sixth grade. Esau started the movement by going into Charleston, with his own children in a little truck, taking them to Burke High School...Esau started it. He’s the originator of it. They might not give him credit for getting that school built, but I know ‘cause I was here.”¹⁰ Jenkins’s involvement in expanding educational opportunities on Johns Island was integral to progress for underserved and undereducated African Americans in and around Charleston.

Jenkins’s standing as an important lowcountry activist was established with the opening of Haut Gap High School on Johns Island. But his activism extended beyond working for better educational access. He recalled,

in the year of 1948, I saw the condition of the people who had been working on the plantations for many years. And I knew that we were not able to do the things that would need to be done unless we could get people registered citizens. I operated a bus from Johns Island to Charleston carrying people to their jobs. So I decided to get a group in the bus in the mornings and teach them how to read the part of the Constitution that we have to read before we are able to become registered citizens.¹¹

Jenkins’s initial goal to help citizens on Johns Island get registered to vote expanded when

Highlander Folk School established a citizenship school on the island.

⁹ Esau Jenkins, *Ain’t you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs*. eds. Guy and Candie Carawan (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 145-146.

¹⁰ G.C. Brown, *Ain’t you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs*. eds. Guy and Candie Carawan (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 143.

¹¹ Esau Jenkins, *Ain’t you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs*. eds. Guy and Candie Carawan (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 149.

Of the citizenship schools, Myles Horton, the founder of Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, reflected that they “were inspired by Esau Jenkins who was trying to teach his Johns Island bus passengers to pass the South Carolina literacy test required for voting.” The Johns Island citizenship school was the “pioneer citizenship school, which met biweekly for three months” and “grew from fourteen to thirty-seven students...out of the first two schools, sixty people, two-thirds the total enrollment, passed the literacy test for voting.”¹² This success spread across South Carolina and the Georgia Sea Islands. Horton credited Jenkins along with Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, the instructor for the first citizenship school, and the people of Johns Island “for the role they played in the origin and development of a citizenship/literacy movement that became a vital part of the civil rights movement.”¹³ Highlander was the training ground for many integral activists involved in the movement. The citizenship school program was essential to establishing a black voter bloc in South Carolina and as a model was replicated across the south as civil rights activists and organizations sought to increase the ranks of registered black voters.

Jenkins’ connection to Highlander was tied to Septima Clark. Clark was born in Charleston in 1898 and worked as a teacher from the age of 18. At 21 she participated “in a successful campaign to force the city [of Charleston] to hire black teachers in its segregated public schools.” That experience “convinced the young Clark activism worked” and set her on the path to “advocating both on behalf of black children and to expand professional options for black women.” In 1950, Clark was fired from her position in the Charleston City Public Schools

¹² Myles Horton, *Ain’t you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs*, eds. Guy and Candie Carawan (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 198.

¹³ Myles Horton, *Ain’t you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs*, eds. Guy and Candie Carawan (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 199.

“for refusing to conceal her membership in the NAACP.” She was fully dedicated to the movement from that moment.¹⁴ Clark recalled that “[a]fter I came back from going to Highlander the first time, I decided that I should get Esau to go...Myles Horton had been into Charleston to try to get people to come up to Highlander. Now, through Esau he had a way to reach people.”¹⁵ A civil rights stalwart herself, Clark’s time at Highlander allowed Horton and Jenkins to expand their networks. The John’s Island citizenship school was integral to the sustainment of civil rights activism in and around Charleston. According to Clark,

The citizenship school classes formed the grassroot basis of new statewide political organizations in South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi. From one end of the South to the other, if you look at the black elected officials and the political leaders, you find people who had their first involvement in the training program of the citizenship school. It was 1962 before the major civil rights groups were ready to do something about voter registration. But we had developed the ideas of the citizenship schools between 1957 and 1961. So all the civil rights groups could use our kind of approach because by then we knew it worked.¹⁶

The partnership between Highlander and South Carolina activists like Jenkins, Clark, and Bernice Robinson eventually became a trademark program of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1961, the Highlander citizenship schools were “transferred” to the SCLC and the number of trained teachers increased from hundreds to thousands. Ultimately, the citizenship schools “set in motion a liberating force that gave dignity and collective power to thousands of black people throughout the South.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2009), 1-2.

¹⁵ Septima Clark, *Ain’t you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs* eds. Guy and Candie Carawan (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 201. Originally from *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* by Cynthia Stokes Brown, (Navarro, California: Wild Trees Press, 1986).

¹⁶ Septima Clark, *Ain’t you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs* eds. Guy and Candie Carawan (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 204.

¹⁷ Myles Horton, *Ain’t you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs* eds. Guy and Candie Carawan (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 199.

Virtually concurrently, members of a younger cohort of activists in Charleston caught the wave of student activism that was beginning to shift the modern movement. In April 1960, members of the Charleston NAACP Youth Council staged a protest at the Kress department store in downtown Charleston. James G. Blake, president of the youth council, had taken to organizing the youth separate from the larger Charleston NAACP chapter. This action was exclusively planned and carried out by young activists. The “adults in Charleston’s local chapter played no direct role in the protests.” The “twenty-four African-American students from Burke High School...was well dressed...[and] they carried Bibles as they marched silently in single file to the store’s lunch counter and took seats at twenty-four of the eatery’s fifty-two stools.” Blake and the other members of the youth council were compelled to act after the wave of sit-ins across the south after the Greensboro sit-in in February 1960.¹⁸ Blake “provided both the inspiration and the tactics for the sit-in at Kress.” After re-establishing the Charleston youth council in 1959, he “had developed a close friendship with the national NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins [and his] contacts outside of Charleston emboldened young Blake in his dealings not only with the white establishment but also with the old guard of the NAACP in the city.”¹⁹ The swell in youth activism in the early sixties would reemerge in the late 1960s as Charleston area high school students took to the picket lines of the hospital strike.

Their subversion of the Charleston activist hierarchy was integral to the sit-in movement. The traditional leadership hierarchy with influential ministers leading both churches and civil rights organizations was not integral to the implementation of the Greensboro model in

¹⁸Stephen O’Neill, “From the Shadow of Slavery: The Civil Rights Years in Charleston” Ph.D. Diss., University of Virginia, 1994, 198-199.

¹⁹ Ibid., 201-202.

Charleston. Interestingly, several of the high school students involved in the sit-ins were members of “the Criterion Club, an organization at Burke [High School] dedicated to cultivating refinement and social manners among its members and one that had a certain reputation for elitism on campus.”²⁰ According to historian Stephen O’Neill, “Blake’s emergence as a leader in the civil rights struggle represented the emergence of young people as the vanguard of the fight for black equality in Charleston. The youth in Charleston, like those elsewhere in the South, brought new, more confrontational tactics, such as direct action and mass protests, to bear against the white power structure.”²¹ Initially, dismissed by the “genteel” city leaders, nonviolent direct action “invited individuals to participate in their own liberation, and in that way compelled those participants to confront in their own hearts and minds the mythology and ideology that for so long supported Charleston’s peculiar insidious brand of white supremacy.”²²

While Jenkins, Clark, and Robinson blazed the trail for citizenship schools across the south and Blake and the local NAACP Youth Council members took action into segregated shopping facilities, the larger Charleston NAACP chapter was involved in boycotting major Charleston stores in the downtown shopping district near King Street. In early 1962, J. Arthur Brown, a native of Charleston who had been involved in civil rights activism in Columbia, returned to the city and collaborated with the president of the Charleston NAACP, B.J .Glover and state field secretary Rev. I. DeQuincey Newman to plan “a boycott of downtown merchants who discriminated against African Americans in employment.” As they “believed that white flight from the peninsula areas across the river now made downtown businesses more vulnerable to economic pressure.”²³

²⁰ Ibid., 200.

²¹ Ibid, 203.

²² Ibid, 204.

²³ Ibid., 218.

While in the planning stages of the boycott, members of the Charleston NAACP Labor and Industry Committee investigated the hiring practices of various businesses in the shopping district. As they expected, “the large department and variety stores that anchored each block on King south of Calhoun Street hired African Americans only for menial jobs and refused to consider blacks for positions as clerks, sales people, or office staff.” With this confirmation, the Charleston NAACP began their “No Buying Strike” in early March 1962. Participants picketed outside of large chain stores and smaller local businesses like Belk and Kress with signs that encouraged African Americans “ ‘Wear old Clothes With New Dignity.’ ” The boycott lasted for ten weeks without the full support of the black community. Newspaper accounts suggested “that during the middle of the week [when there were no pickets] the stores were busy with black shoppers.” Perhaps as a result of lukewarm support, the boycott only “achieved only small successes amidst generally disappointing results.” The only stores to alter their hiring practices abutted a predominantly black neighborhood surely not coincidentally as they “relied heavily on credit purchases from blacks.” The larger independent and chain department stores never seemed concerned about the impact of the strike on their bottom lines. Instead of filing for an injunction against the picketers, Edward Kronsberg, owner of Edward’s Department Store, decided to “ ‘wait it out.’ ” This early attempt at stifling the economic viability of downtown Charleston fell short. But like other civil rights activism during the period, this boycott helped to lay the foundation for more successful actions later.²⁴

The changing national climate surrounding race relations and desegregation had created a space for progress in places slow and resistant to change. Though Stephen O’Neill argues that much of the progress towards desegregation in South Carolina came as a result of outside turmoil, many of the changes in South Carolina were the result of years of labor and not mere reactions to

²⁴ Ibid., 218-220.

outside pressure. Soon after the confrontation at the University of Mississippi over the admittance of James Meredith, a federal judge in Greenville “ordered Clemson to admit [Harvey] Gantt.” Gantt’s enrollment at Clemson, in January 1963, was “the first desegregation in South Carolina on any level since Reconstruction.” As had been the operating policy of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and affiliated attorneys, local NAACP attorneys “had concentrated their attention on Harvey Gantt’s case until early in 1963.” Near the end of the summer of 1963, school desegregation activists won another victory. While the desegregation of Clemson opened the door to integration in South Carolina public schools, it was not until August that a federal district judge “ordered Charleston School District 20 to admit eleven African-American children to the city’s all-white schools.”²⁵

Though Gantt’s admission to Clemson had ostensibly cleared the way for the desegregation of all public schools in South Carolina, attorneys for the Charleston school board still virulently opposed desegregation arguing that “intellectual differences between white and black children would undermine the education mission of the [school] district.” But citing precedent and rulings of higher courts, the judge relented and ruled that “black children be admitted” and granted “class action-status [to the case which] opened up all District 20’s white schools to ‘any or all Negro students’ beginning in the 1964-65 school year.” But even with this ruling and the prospect of “‘total desegregation’” as dictated in the ruling, at the start of the 1963-1964 school year “every state except South Carolina and Mississippi had desegregated its public schools” as the ruling only covered Charleston’s District 20 and not the entire state. Though activists had steadily challenged segregation, the paternalistic city and state fathers prevented much progress. Those invested in maintaining a segregated Charleston and South

²⁵ Ibid., 220-222. The desegregation of the University of Mississippi is covered in great detail in Charles Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

Carolina, in general, were steadfast and unwilling “to concede...their racial traditions until forced to do so.”²⁶

From the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, various segments of black Charleston participated in nonviolent direct action and community education efforts that advanced the cause for desegregation in the city and across the state. With varying degrees of success, segments of the black activist community, often inspired by the upswing in activism across the country, sought to desegregate the city of Charleston on the way to desegregating public facilities across the state. But disagreement over method colored the movement in Charleston and surrounding areas. The younger sect of activists led by James Blake balked at the older generation’s willingness to compromise with city officials during the height of the sit-in movement in Charleston. In his assessment of the dynamic between the moneyed, “older, established blacks” and the youth, O’Neill argues that negotiations between NAACP leaders and Mayor Gaillard in which the leaders “agreed to suspend the demonstrations in return for the establishment of a biracial committee which would desegregate Charleston peacefully over a period of time” almost “unhinge[d]” the tenuous relationship between the old and new guards.²⁷ Blake was wary of any compromise between protestors and the government because he “ ‘did not have any sense that Mayor Gaillard or anyone else...would fulfill their promises.’ ” In Blake’s estimation, Mayor Gaillard and other officials only conceded to the protestors’ demands when activists “ ‘were able to force them.’ ”²⁸

The relationship between the old and new guard of activists in Charleston informed much of the decade preceding the strike as activists struggled to make permanent and far-reaching change across the state. By the conclusion of the summer of 1963, the city was still “partially

²⁶ Ibid., 238-241.

²⁷ Ibid., 231.

²⁸ Ibid., 232.

segregated. [Movie] theaters, nearly all its restaurants and hotels, and most significantly, its municipal facilities—parks, playgrounds, swimming pools—still discriminated against African-Americans.” But the prolonged movement from the sit-ins to the business boycott had “produced important psychological changes, especially for the students who made up the bulk of the marchers.” In O’Neill’s estimation, “African Americans had sent a clear message to whites...that they were not satisfied with their second-class status.”²⁹ Even without widespread change, black activists had made important inroads into the conscience of black and white Charleston. These activists made some progress in the dismantlement of the paternalistic Charleston social and political hierarchy.

Taken together, the birth of citizenship schools on Johns Island and the continuous nonviolent direct action campaigns of various segments of the Charleston NAACP were representative of a robust movement for equal rights and access in South Carolina. While the Charleston-Johns Island movement hardly penetrated the national consciousness, the legacy of the citizenship schools would remain essential to any understanding of the movement for voting rights and basic literacy. Even with the limited success of the sit-ins and boycotts, black activism had perforated the sensibilities of black and white Charlestonians. That some blacks were no longer willing to live under segregated conditions upset the normative social and political order in the city. Jenkins, Clark, and Robinson were not the only members of the activist old guard in Charleston. Some ranking officials of the local NAACP practiced a more conciliatory approach with city leadership than the youth. The origins of the strike can be found in all phases of this early movement. Esau Jenkins’ mentorship of a key leader, the third-party involvement of the interracial community committee, and the spirit of the youth activists who powered the early sit-

²⁹ Ibid., 237.

ins were essential to the foundation of the strike. Remnants of the youth's enthusiasm reemerged in the hospital strike as young people marched alongside the women workers and even held their own separate marches. Just as the legacy of activism directly influenced the strike, the city's political and social hierarchy would also play an important role in the strike. Many of the politicians and other influential figures remained in their positions as the 1960s ended.

Navigating the terrain of Charleston politics would be integral to any prospect of a successful strike campaign.

POLITICIANS AND POWER STRUCTURES

In the 1960s, Charleston was lead by politicians and influencers who were resistant to serious civil rights progress. While federal legislation and Supreme Court rulings had mandated the desegregation of public facilities and equal and free access to the ballot box among other things, the implementation of these new laws and statutes were left to state and local officials who often had no real incentive to apply the law. In Charleston, influential people like Mayor J. Palmer Gaillard, Police Chief William Kelly, Police Chief John Conroy (1968-1981), Governor Robert McNair, and Medical College President Dr. William McCord were among the contingent of leaders who were reticent or simply unwilling to do more than they were forced to with regards to enforcing or following federal civil rights laws and court mandates. These men played central roles in mediating the effectiveness of various forms of activism during the decade of struggle in the 1960s.

In the 1960s, most, if not all, of the elected officials in Charleston were white. In the face of civil rights activism, these officials wanted to maintain the status quo. J. Palmer Gaillard had been elected mayor in 1959 after a tight race against the incumbent. Gaillard's "racial politics [reflected] his upbringing [which was] steeped in the cordial inequality of Charleston's

plantation past...[and] his election as mayor in 1959 embodied old Charleston tradition.”

Through various political machinations, Gaillard had successfully diluted the black vote and by “the early 1960s politics did not hold a promise as a vehicle to carry Charleston’s African-Americans toward real equality.”³⁰ As a leader, he chose to maintain the status quo instead of becoming actively involved in the struggle between tradition and progress. Years after the tumult of the 1960s that culminated in the strike, Mary Moultrie concluded that these politicians and a majority of the white community were “afraid of what they thought was going to happen. [During the strike] we got no support at that time it was under the Gaillard administration. [J. Palmer] Gaillard was anti- everything black, you know. So we didn’t get any response from them one way or the other. Certainly, no support.”³¹ But according to Charleston activist William Saunders, black community leaders and the white political establishment were similarly disinclined to cooperate or negotiate with some black activists. With regard to the hospital strike, Saunders believed that some black activists

told the mayor...that [he] didn't have to worry about [the strike], because none of them, none of the black leaders in Charleston was involved with the hospital workers. And so the mayor, they sort of ignored what was happening around them until it got, really got out of hand. They had, at that point, they had even things like, only four blacks in the whole city of Charleston could go to talk to the mayor, so if you wanted to talk to the mayor or had any problem, you had to go through these blacks. And I told them in a meeting one night, you know, why couldn't everybody have access?³²

Saunders’s assessment of the relationship between white politicians and black leaders and the perceived or actual disconnect between segments of the black activist community is indicative of the many-layered struggle to make substantive racial progress in Charleston. Loyalty did not

³⁰ Ibid., 205-212.

³¹ Mary Moultrie. Interview with Jean-Claude Bouffard. July 28, 1982. Jean-Claude Bouffard Civil Rights Interviews. Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina, USA.

³² William Saunders. Interview with Kerry Taylor. March 5, 2009. Charleston, SC. March 5, 2009. Charleston, SC, The Citadel Oral History Program, The Citadel Archives & Museum. Charleston, SC, USA.

always fall along racial or even class lines and many power players wanted to maintain their status above all. During the height of activism in Charleston, Gaillard remained indifferent, attempting to stay above the fray, instead of becoming entrenched in the struggle between maintaining the status quo and succumbing to the tide of federally mandated racial progress.

Gov. McNair approved of Gaillard's tactics. In his assessment of the mayor's strategy during the hospital strike, McNair commented, "Palmer stayed firm, stayed out of it, but stayed supportive. We were saying that we didn't want them to get in and lose their credibility and bloody themselves up so they weren't of any use to the community thereafter. So we tried to keep people like that from having to take too much of the responsibility for it."³³ McNair endorsed Gaillard's actions during the strike. But even before McNair became governor, Gaillard was unwilling to wade too deep into the issues of desegregation in Charleston.

There were two police chiefs during the height of the movement in Charleston. William Kelly figured heavily in the early days of sit-ins and strikes. John Conroy became the chief of police just before the strike began and he was not interested in making himself a part of the narrative of the strike. According to Isaiah Bennett, Conroy was a "half decent fellow [who] kept a lid on a whole lot of things or else there would have been a riot."³⁴ Bill Saunders also gave Conroy a favorable review. According to Saunders, Conroy who "was brand new... was a professional guy, a Marine, and he told folks nobody would shoot a gun until he ordered it. He locked me up and all that good stuff, but he, he was fair."³⁵ Unlike some local police chiefs

³³ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. May 16, 1983. McNair Oral History Project, South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Columbia, SC, USA.

³⁴ Isaiah Bennett. Interview with Steve Estes. October 21, 1994. Charleston, SC. Folder 7, Box 1, Steve Estes Papers, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.

³⁵ William Saunders. Interview with Kerry Taylor. March 5, 2009. Charleston, SC, The Citadel Oral History Program, The Citadel Archives & Museum. Charleston, SC, USA.

during some of the more contentious sites of civil rights unrest, Conroy was either uninterested or unwilling to add fuel to the fire by using inflammatory policing methods. But for all of his fairness, Conroy was not the chief law enforcement officer during the strike. Once Gov. McNair involved the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, South Carolina's version of state police, and the National Guard, Conroy's tactics were overshadowed by their more aggressive response to the strike and related protests.

While these politicians and city officials were primary figures in the movement as respondents and at times combatants, some secondary figures also played perhaps outsized roles in how activism was received, interpreted, and responded to by the wider Charleston and South Carolinian public. Stephen O'Neill spends a good amount of time parsing the words and editorial choices of Thomas Waring, Jr., the editor of the *Charleston News and Courier*. O'Neill focuses on Waring as an instigator and shaper of public opinion which of course is true as he used his editorial page and editorial choices as a way to advance his arguments against desegregation.³⁶ During the strike the editorial page vacillates between vilifying the strikers and their allies and encouraging compromise so the city can return to some level of normalcy. Citing a need for "law and order," Waring used an editorial column a little more than a month into the strike to suggest that unlike in other states where civil rights activism earned measured success "the rule of law will not be eroded in South Carolina, that civil disobedience will not work in this state."³⁷ Referencing an oft-used Nixon refrain, Waring contextualized the state's unwillingness to compromise with the strikers as a testament to McNair and South Carolina's unwavering stance

³⁶ O'Neill, 215-217, 219-220.

³⁷ Thomas Waring, "In City and State Firmness and Fairness," *Charleston News and Courier*, 29 April 1969, 10-A, Folder 8, Box 406, Thomas R. Waring, Jr. papers, 1902-1977 (bulk 1940-1977). (1207.00) South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC, USA.

on maintaining the preeminence of the state above any one faction of the populace.

While influential, Waring's power was limited. Beyond using editorial space to rail against the prospects of integration during the early Charleston movement, by the time of the strike, Waring had put the full force of his newspaper behind the policies of Governor Robert McNair, who assumed the governorship in 1965 after the death of a South Carolina senator left the office vacant. Waring's paper likely reflected public opinion instead of shaping it. McNair's policies and his interpretation of South Carolina law was an important influence on the duration, tone, and tenor of the strike as well as other earlier desegregation efforts including the integration of public schools at all educational levels.³⁸

Government officials at the state and local levels were not interested in playing into tactics that had become familiar in places where the SCLC and other traditional civil rights organizations had had some success. Even in the face of the seemingly inevitable desegregation of all public facilities, lawmakers and political tastemakers were dedicated to maintaining the status quo. And to complicate matters even further, some black activists who had grown accustomed to having the ear of the mayor and governor seemed more interested in maintaining their positions and not necessarily in advancing the cause for civil rights. Taken together, the political and social structure of Charleston and South Carolina at large did not present as a likely space for a fruitful movement. But the persistence of various activist factions allowed for a sustained, but not necessarily cohesive, movement during the 1960s. By 1967, as school desegregation remained at the fore in South Carolina, workers in Charleston had resolved that working conditions at the Medical College of South Carolina and Charleston County Hospital were no longer bearable. Unsure of their next moves, the workers began a years-long journey

³⁸ For more on Robert McNair's personal and political life see Chapter 6.

towards action.

THE FOMENTATION OF A STRIKE

In September 1965, President Johnson signed Executive Order 11246, which mandated nondiscrimination in federally contracted facilities. The Executive Order stipulated that contractors “*not discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of race, creed, color, or national origin. The contractor will take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin.*”³⁹ If federal agencies or contractors violated this statute, they could be investigated and risk losing their federal funding. During “a routine review” of the Medical College in the summer of 1968, civil rights compliance officers uncovered “major concerns...with the area of contract compliance under the Executive Order.”⁴⁰ The Medical College was found to be lacking in programming and resources in the areas of Equal Education Opportunities, Equal Health Opportunities, and Equal Employment Opportunities.

In a letter addressed to Dr. William McCord, the president of the Medical College, on September 19, 1968, Hugh Brimm, Chief of the Contract Compliance Branch in the Office for Civil Rights, outlined the various issues with Medical College operations and recommendations for bringing the hospital into compliance. The litany of violations to Executive Order 11246 ran the gamut in terms of educational opportunities for black medical students and Brimm had concluded that the Medical College did not have the proper facilities and resources to

³⁹ Lyndon B. Johnson, EXECUTIVE ORDER No. 11246, September 28, 1965, 30 F.R. 12319. Accessed October 18, 2015. <http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/thelaw/eo-11246.html>.

⁴⁰ Paul M. Rilling to Robert L. Alexander, 12 June 1969. Folder 1, Box 33, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA.

accommodate black students in any way. The MCSC “had not established an affirmative action program designed to attract Negro students,” “there was no systematic or comprehensive recruitment program for predominantly Negro schools,” and “no Negro physicians in Charleston County” held faculty status at the hospital even though there were “several Negro physicians in Charleston.” HEW also found the Medical College in violation of equal opportunity standards with regard to patient care and employment.⁴¹

Patient care issues were some of the most blatantly discriminatory practices at the Medical College. Brimm noted that in terms of providing medical service to black Charlestonians, the MCSC did not have a “written nondiscriminatory policy statement” and “patients were shifted around to achieve a bi-racial mix in anticipation of the H.E.W. visit [and] when white patients complained about rooming with Negroes, the Negroes were moved.” Beyond differing treatment based on race, “service (non-paying) patients and private patients are separated and are alleged to be treated differently...senior medical students attend to private patients, while junior medical students attend service patients...the majority of private patients are white.” Patients’ family members also faced discriminatory treatment along class and racial lines. According to the letter from Brimm to McCord, interviewees “also alleged that husbands of Negro patients [were] not allowed in the labor rooms, while husbands of white patients [were].” There were also “‘dual’” restrooms for blacks and whites without signs indicating any separation. Even without “colored” and “white” signs, “old customs” were still in place.⁴² Though the hospital served both blacks and whites, black and white patients received vastly different service contingent upon their racial and economic status.

⁴¹ Hugh Brimm to William McCord. 19 September 1968. Folder 1, Box 33, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA.

⁴² Ibid.

The issues with the application of Executive Order 11246 on the employment side of the MCSC mirrored the issues found in the education and patient services sectors. The issues ranged from simple noncompliance with displaying Equal Employment Opportunity literature to a lack of in-house training for certain positions “that minorities [had] not had the opportunity to get.” Beyond this lack of information and opportunity, the Medical College was found to operate with “employment patterns [that] clearly suggest[ed] a stratification of employees with regard to race, i.e., administrative and professional positions [were] occupied by whites; non-whites [were] concentrated in service and non-skilled categories.” Investigators also took exception to job applications requiring applicants to submit photographs.⁴³ These issues were proximate to many of the grievances workers had begun to express the winter before this review. The disparities between job opportunities for whites and blacks as well as limited mobility for black applicants and employees were indicative of the litany of issues that officials at the Medical College had neglected to address in the wake of federal civil rights legislation and mandates of the mid-1960s.

Beyond outlining the numerous violations of Executive Order 11246, Brimm also detailed how McCord could bring the Medical College into compliance. These fixes ranged from creating and disseminating materials that communicated that the hospital was run on a nondiscriminatory basis to the intentional recruitment of black medical students. Brimm suggested “action be taken to recruit Negro students to pursue a medical education at the Medical College.” Some steps for increasing black enrollment included ensuring that black students knew both medical education and financial assistance were available at the Medical College, focusing on “pre-med advisors at Negro undergraduate colleges and possibly high schools to help motivate more Negroes and minority group members toward ... medical career[s].” As for the nursing school which had not ever admitted black students, Brimm

⁴³ Ibid.

suggested that students who had been admitted for practical nursing degrees be considered for “professional training as graduate nurses” and recruiters attempt to identify promising black high school students.⁴⁴

In order to address the litany of violations to Equal Health Opportunity and Equal Employment Opportunity, Brimm suggested a number of changes to protocol and procedure. Beyond signage indicating that the hospital was a nondiscriminatory environment for patients, HEW recommended that “the quality of service be equalized immediately between private and service patients” and “that waiting rooms be truly integrated.” In response to the employment issues, the hospital was instructed to “put in writing a firm equal employment opportunity policy statement to be disseminated to all department heads and supervisory personnel” and to appoint an equal opportunity officer who would monitor the hospital’s adherence to equal employment opportunity policies. Perhaps most notably, the hospital was directed to ensure “that persistent efforts be made to break the old patterns of stratified racial employment which have concentrated white employees in administrative and professional positions, while shunting non-whites into the unskilled and service categories.”⁴⁵ Coming into compliance with the requirements of Executive Order 11246 meant that hospital officials would have to undo systemic discriminatory practices. While some of the issues could be addressed with signage and updated hospital literature, most of the problems were overt and covert discrimination against black and working-class people. These were complicated and entrenched in the hospital’s DNA.

The atmosphere that compliance officers from HEW observed over a two-day period during the summer of 1968 was at the center of worker discontent at the Medical College of South Carolina. Even before the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare outlined the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

myriad issues with equal opportunity compliance at the MCSC, workers had already identified many of these problems as sources of their discontent and dissatisfaction with their jobs and work environment. In December 1967, five licensed practical nurses (LPNs) were fired from the Medical College after they refused to follow improper orders. According to Mary Moultrie, “a white registered nurse” would not give a proper report on the patients on the LPNs’ service. The LPNs “refused to take care of patients that they didn’t know anything about, so she told them, you know ‘You are fired.’ So they left.” Moultrie had only returned to Charleston a few months before these workers were fired, after she had worked for seven years as a waiver nurse in New York. In that short time, she had already been forced to take a decrease in pay and demotion in position. Since the Medical College did not recognize her waiver nurse license, she had “decided...to work as a nurse’s aid.”⁴⁶ These two examples illuminate at least two of the issues HEW investigators uncovered in their investigation of the hospital the summer after the initial firings. Once the workers began meeting, they discovered that their experiences were not isolated incidents.

Workers from the Medical College and Charleston County met to discuss their various work grievances. At these meetings, the workers “found out that everybody had a grievance.” Moultrie continued,

we found out that that was not just an isolated case, that was widespread, throughout the hospital. And there were all kinds of grievances that people had. You know, it was not just being fired by students, but it was a lot of discrimination, was a lot of heavy workload, was nurses, they’re referring to blacks as monkey grunts, and all sorts of things that they had to either tolerate it or you’re fired. But we didn’t have no means of grieving, you know, if you had a grievance, you know, that was your business. You had no place to take it. The hospitals were a fertile ground for organizing.

⁴⁶ Mary Moultrie. Interview with Jean Claude-Bouffard. 28 July 1982, AMN 500.009.005, Jean-Claude Bouffard Civil Rights Interviews, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.

Once the workers at the Medical College realized that their coworkers in different departments and in different positions faced similar barriers to advancement and a lack of basic respect from white coworkers and supervisors, “the rest was history.”⁴⁷

Since Moultrie was not a trained activist, she enlisted the help of known and seasoned Charleston activists like Esau Jenkins, Isaiah Bennett, and William Saunders to organize workers from various units of the hospital. Saunders, who had been involved in a variety of “radical” organizations and actions around Charleston, and Jenkins provided an organizing foundation for workers who had not yet been politicized or trained as activists. Saunders believed that organizing hospital workers into a union was secondary to gaining equality for poor people. In his estimation, more than a union, “it was a hospital workers' organization.” He continued,

We were trying to organize people for the purpose of trying to better themselves. We looked at putting together [a] supermarket, we had folks to register to vote, we had all kinds of high ambition with that union and folks kept talking about the hospital workers' organization, because we were saying to folks that, you know, the doctors got a union, an organization... Every group in this country that's any profession, got [a union]... the only people that don't have that right is poor people, at the bottom. Hospital workers don't have that right.⁴⁸

Aligning with 1199 and the SCLC would only add flesh to the skeleton workers had already established. Their organizing expertise capitalized on the enthusiasm of workers who were committed to gaining economic equality.

The weekly meetings were a proving ground for the “hospital workers’ organization.” Moultrie recalled, “once people started talking about [their grievances], then you feel the impact of it. So we decided that we wanted to change the whole system, and we decided that what we

⁴⁷ Mary Moultrie. Interview with Kerry Taylor. March 5, 2009. Charleston, SC, The Citadel Oral History Program, The Citadel Archives & Museum. Charleston, SC, USA.

⁴⁸ William Saunders. Interview with Kerry Taylor. March 5, 2009. Charleston, SC, The Citadel Oral History Program, The Citadel Archives & Museum. Charleston, SC, USA.

would do [was] start having these weekly meetings.” Eventually these meetings “grew into about 500 people.” Moultrie continued, “when we got to that point, well this was over a period of about a year, and we got to that point we felt that it was time to let administration know that we had all of these grievances and we wanted them to do something about it.”⁴⁹ The workers sought a meeting with Dr. McCord, the hospital president, to discuss their various grievances. But they “had no idea, how anti-Union, you know of the South, how they would react to...such a thing” and were unprepared for what they encountered when they attempted to meet with Dr. McCord in March 1969. After “trying for months to get McCord to meet,” they finally met on March 17th and that failed meeting launched a strike that lasted until the end of June 1969.⁵⁰

Between December 1967 and March 1969, workers from the Medical College and Charleston County met to discuss grievances and plans to push hospital leaders to improve working conditions and benefits. Those meetings had yielded a critical mass of workers who were ready to act collectively. But even after more than a year of weekly meetings and planning, by March 1969 they “were not prepared to strike.” Even with the SCLC and 1199 in place, the workers were not ready.⁵¹ When Mary Moultrie and eleven other workers were fired from the Medical College, the “hospital workers’ organization” transitioned from a space to share the indignities of work to a site of action. The various movements before this strike, namely the tobacco workers’ strike and the iterations of traditional civil rights campaigns, laid an important foundation for the transition from planning to direct action. Black women involved in the

⁴⁹ Mary Moultrie. Interview with Jean Claude-Bouffard. 28 July 1982, AMN 500.009.005, Jean-Claude Bouffard Civil Rights Interviews, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.

⁵⁰ “Pickets,” *The Columbia Record*, 21 March 1969, 2-A. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA.

⁵¹ William Saunders. Interview with Kerry Taylor. March 5, 2009. Charleston, SC, The Citadel Oral History Program, The Citadel Archives & Museum. Charleston, SC, USA.

tobacco strike turned up again as mentors and supporters of the women striking from Charleston area hospitals. Men involved in that strike and in the development of Charleston's civil rights movement served in similar capacities and offered ideological alternatives to nonviolent direct action. The impact of the generations of protest in Charleston and South Carolina more broadly was evident in the day-to-day action of the strike and the state's response. The next chapter will offer a detailed account of the beginnings of the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike of 1969.

Chapter Two

The Strike Takes Shape

The decision to strike in March 1969 transformed grievance meetings into nightly mass organizing meetings. Though they were thrust into direct action, workers across the city quickly responded in solidarity with workers from the Medical College of South Carolina. Other interested parties, namely Ralph Abernathy and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the national branch of Local 1199, settled in Charleston and amplified the workers' concerns with their battle-tested tactics. In the first month of the strike, the three main activist parties, local workers, the SCLC, and 1199 had to find ways to cooperate and coalesce into a movement. Conversely, local and state authorities responded to the protests with injunctions to curtail the growing movement. In this chapter, I discuss the first month of the strike, the involvement of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Local 1199 in the strike, and the increasingly contentious nature of the frontlines.

By March 1969, the hospital workers at both the Medical College and Charleston Community had reached their breaking points. Attempted negotiations with hospital administrators had yielded no real progress. On Monday March 17, 1969, 12 non-professional workers at the Medical College were dismissed. In a statement released on March 18, hospital officials stated: “[t]welve employees [sic] of the Medical College Hospital were dismissed yesterday (Monday) when they deserted their patients and their duties. These employees [sic] abandoned very sick people on the general surgery floor. This disregard for responsibility and patient care cannot be tolerated.”¹ Hospital officials and representatives of the dismissed workers gave conflicting reasons for the firings. While the Medical College asserted that workers had

¹ “12 Workers Dismissed At Hospital,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 19 March 1969, 1-B. Accessed February 12, 2014, Google News.

been derelict in their duty, “one of the discharged workers said she had been invited to a meeting along with several other persons—a meeting called by Dr. McCord. But Dr. McCord failed to appear at the meeting, so she returned to her job and worked until quitting time at 3:30. It was then she was fired, she said.”² In a telegram to William Page, Regional Director of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Isaiah Bennett, a local activist-organizer, wrote that the hospital workers had “been discriminated against as regarding their health, education and welfare . . . [and were] on strike after twelve of their fellow workers were fired under circumstances of injustice.”³

Both camps, the hospital officials and strikers and strike representatives, disputed each others’ explanation for the firings. This incident would remain a point of contention throughout the duration of the strike as the workers were adamant about the fired workers’ regaining their jobs. Whether or not McCord and hospital administrators had agreed to meet with union representatives, the circumstances of said meeting, and the results of the meeting were rehashed over and over as the hospital filed for injunctions instead of meeting with union representatives as the strike progressed.

At a meeting of approximately 200 at the DPOE Hall on East Bay Street on Wednesday March 19, workers affiliated with the Local 1199B voted to “walk off their jobs at 5:30 a.m.” on Thursday March 20th. Mary Moultrie, president of Local 1199B, recalled that the relationship between the Charleston workers and 1199 began after “Isaiah Bennett suggested that [they] get in touch with . . . a union that worked with hospitals, and that’s when 1199 came in. 1199 had a relationship with Reverend Abernathy and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Once

² Elaine S. Stanford “...Strike,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 21 March 1969, 2-A. Accessed August 25, 2013, Google News.

³ Isaiah Bennett. Telegram to William Page, April 2, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 1.

[1199] came in they invited them. They had me write a letter asking them to come and help us.”⁴

According to reports in *The Charleston News and Courier*, “the walkout was a protest over the firing of 12 employes [sic] and the refusal of Medical College Hospital authorities to recognize the union. The workers are taking the position that the firing of the 12 constitutes a lockout of all the union members.”⁵ Though non-professional workers from the Medical College and Charleston County hospitals had been meeting to air grievances and build a union for many months, the firing of the twelve workers was the catalyst for direct action. But given the Medical College’s explanation for the twelve’s dismissal, the tensions between the union-affiliated workers and hospital officials escalated.

The suggestion that the workers were derelict in their duties to their patients diverted the attention away from the administrators’ unwillingness to negotiate work conditions. Early newspaper reports on the strike focused on the hospital’s legal maneuverings more than the workers’ complaints about work conditions and the right to unionize. The workers felt as if striking was the only way to communicate their seriousness with regards to forming a union and protesting the firing of their twelve colleagues. The myriad issues surrounding work conditions, compensation, discrimination, and lack of union recognition coupled with workers’ general dissatisfaction with hospital administrators came to a head on Thursday March 20th. Staff reporters for *The Charleston News and Courier* covered the entirety of the strike. In a front page article on Friday March 21, 1969, worker demands and their previous difficulties with hospital administrators were reported as reasons for the strike of at least 100 workers on the first day of

⁴ Mary Moultrie. Interview with Otha Jennifer Dixon. June 23, 2008, Charleston, South Carolina. Interview number U-0390 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4—7) at the Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill, 6.

⁵ “Medical College Workers Vote To Walk Off Jobs,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 20 March 1969, 1-B. Accessed February 13, 2014, Google News.

the campaign. Reports that approximately “400 non-professional workers at the teaching hospital stayed away from their jobs” demonstrated the immediate impact of strike action on the hospital.⁶

As early as the first day of the strike, hospital officials had remarked on the strike’s impact on hospital operations. Within a day of hundreds of non-professional workers walking off of their posts or neglecting to report to work at all, hospital administrators reported that “ [a]dmissions are being curtailed somewhat.” At the beginning of the strike eighty percent of the Medical College’s beds were occupied. The loss of a substantial amount of support staff crippled day-to-day operations. In response to the strike, Medical College officials sought an injunction against the picketers accusing them of conspiring to “impair the proper functioning of the teaching hospital...[picketers used] threats, cursing, obscenities, acts of intimidation and acts of violence...with the result that the proper functioning of the hospital is curtailed and the safety of its patients is endangered.”⁷

In response to the Medical College’s move for an injunction against “acts of violence,” Elliott Godoff, director of the National Organizing Committee of Hospital and Nursing Home Employees/1199, commented that the workers “are prepared to go to jail...these workers are prepared to fight for their jobs and their rights.” On the first day of the strike, three strikers were arrested for “disorderly conduct and creating a disturbance on the street.” Two men, John H. Green and 17 year-old Larry Simmons, and one woman, Naomi White, were arrested after a “scuffle” with police officers.⁸ Relatively short jail stints would become a major part of the strike campaign as policemen and National Guardsmen, on orders from Governor Robert McNair,

⁶ Elaine S. Stanford, “Workers Picket Medical College: Injunction Granted to Halt Strike,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 21 March 1969, 1-A. Accessed August 2013, Google News.

⁷ Stanford, “...Strike.”

⁸ Ibid.

sought to quell any substantial strike activity. Participants like Naomi White, an employee at Charleston County Hospital, were willing to go to jail, in part because they did not necessarily ascribe to nonviolent protest. Conversely, the assertion, through seeking an injunction, that strikers were physical threats to the hospital set the stage for further confrontations between police and strikers.

Godoff's comments also drew parallels to the recent SCLC campaign in Memphis not only as a strike of predominantly black workers but also as a movement with the potential to capture the nation's attention. Of the potential for the strike, Godoff remarked "'This will probably become a national issue—not different from the garbage workers strike in Memphis'" While the SCLC had yet to enter the fray in Charleston, Godoff also suggested that " [Rev. Ralph] Abernathy might make an appearance in Charleston."⁹ The Memphis strike was a high point of the union between labor and civil rights organizations and organizers in Charleston hoped that the Charleston campaign would be similarly successful. In the early days of the strike, organizational and financial resources were limited to the local and national members of 1199 as well as other concerned citizens of Charleston. But by the second day of the strike, the arrests and general discord between the strikers and the hospital set the stage for a larger movement.

On Thursday March 20th police continued to arrest strikers who violated the stipulations of the temporary injunction. By Friday twenty people had been arrested at the picket lines. Mayor J. Palmer Gaillard, William McCord, and police chief William Kelly collaborated on the injunction that stipulated that "not more than 10 persons 20 yards apart are allowed to picket 'in a peaceful manner' on side-walks surrounding the college and its teaching hospital. Persons picketing are not to impede entrance into or exit from the buildings." Any violation of these

⁹ Ibid.

provisions resulted in arrests. Newspaper reports of the action on March 20th describe “a wild melee resulting in the arrest of 14 persons” and one police officer was injured. Those arrested were charged with a variety of crimes including resisting arrest, disorderly conduct, and assaulting a police officer. One of those arrested was a juvenile.¹⁰ To stave off “violence” and to “back up” Charleston police, highway patrolmen and State Law Enforcement Division agents were prepared to intervene.¹¹ The encounter between police and the “hundreds” of picketers allegedly involved rock throwing and an attempt to “gouge” the Charleston Police Sergeant Frank Riccio’s eye out.¹² A white male bystander/sympathizer alleged that police officers were overly aggressive and “pulled out a billyclub” when he suggested that they were arresting the wrong person for rock-throwing. This high school teacher had walked in the picket line “out of sympathy [sic] for their cause.”¹³

Not only were strikers and police officers at odds, strikers also challenged black workers who continued to work as well as people who attempted to break their picket line. One black woman “left [the hospital] in a taxi with a brown paper bag over her head so as not to be recognized. Another worker walking a picket line took a swipe at a white girl in a uniform as the girl walked through the picket line, but a policeman prevented her from hitting the girl.” Strikers aggressively patrolled the picket line from black “scab” workers and white workers who attempted to cut the line.¹⁴ From the beginning of the strike, ideological lines separated the

¹⁰ Elaine S. Stanford and William Walker, Jr., “...Injunction,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 22 March 1969, 2-A. Accessed August 2013, Google News.

¹¹ Elaine S. Stanford and William Walker Jr., “Medical College Injunction Violated,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 21 March 1969, 1-A. Accessed August 2013, Google News.

¹² Stanford and Walker, “...Injunction,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 22 March 1969, 2-A. Accessed August 2013, Google News.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Stanford and Walker, “...Injunction,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 22 March 1969, 2-A. Accessed August 2013, Google News.

striking workers from hospital administrators and the striking workers from their colleagues who chose to continue working.

For many workers deciding to strike was not simple. Walking off of their jobs for an unknown amount of time, sacrificing income, mental and physical well-being, and family was not feasible for many non-professional workers. Early on in the campaign, hospital administrators and union representatives disagreed on the actual impact of the strike on hospital operations. While a hospital spokesman commented that 272 of 1,509 non-professional workers were absent on Thursday March 20th and 224 were absent on Friday the 21st, “[a] union spokesman said some 400 stayed away from work on Thursday to take part in the walkout.” Of the 272 the hospital accounted for only “100 were in picket lines and the rest stayed away because of different reasons, including intimidation, sickness, etc.” In order to supplement the worker shortage, “the Medical College brought 14 new workers to the hospital in two panel trucks” shuttling in their own strike breakers.¹⁵

As the strike continued over the weekend, strikers continued to violate the injunction that limited picketing to 10 people at a time. By Monday March 24th, more than 100 workers had been arrested with union organizers reportedly planning to expand the strike to Charleston County, Roper, and St. Francis Xavier hospitals.¹⁶ By limiting the picketing to ten people at a time spaced twenty yards apart, city officials in conjunction with hospital administrators and the police force essentially made arresting picketers a key part of their anti-strike policy. Along with city and hospital officials’ refusal to meet with union leadership, their policy of mass arrests characterized picketers as aggressive rule-breakers who disturbed the peace.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Charleston Hospitals Face Strike Threat,” *The Columbia Record*, 25 March 1969, 1-B. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

A union spokesman said “a majority of the 280 nonprofessional workers at the county hospital have been organized.” While the Medical College and Charleston County were public facilities, Roper and St. Francis Xavier hospitals were private. At this point in the strike, organizers saw the Medical College as a starting point for a citywide strike for better wages and work conditions. The fluid nature of the movement allowed for both an element of surprise at other Charleston hospitals and for a change in tactics if the direct action campaign faltered.¹⁷

While the picketers were trying to maintain their presence outside of the Medical College in the face of mass arrests, Robert Bateman, a representative of Local 1422-A of the International Longshoremen’s Association, spoke out in solidarity with the picketers. Bateman commented that “the hospital workers and [longshoremen] are in the same boat.” Longshoreman staged a walkout in early March 1969 for union recognition and better contracts. Both locals struggled to enter negotiations with state officials as “State Attorney General Daniel R. McLeod ruled that while the state could not forbid employees [sic] joining unions, the state and its agencies could not negotiate with the labor organizations.” Though McLeod stated that the hospitals had no means to negotiate, he also commented that “[t]here’s no law actually specifying this. At the same time there is no authority delegated, and in the absence of this authority the agencies of the state have no power to bargain with unions.”¹⁸ Due to a technicality, the Medical College was able to avoid official state-mandated discussion of union acknowledgement. Even though the law did not explicitly forbid it, since it was not required, hospital and state officials used every measure to avoid meeting with union representatives.

¹⁷ “More Pickets Jailed At Port City Hospital: Spread of Strike Possible,” *The Columbia Record*, 24 March 1969, 1-C. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

¹⁸ Stewart R. King, “...Hospital,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 24 March 1969, 2-A. Accessed March 4, 2014, Google News.

Elaine Stanford reported on a telling 1199B press conference held on Wednesday March 26th. Mary Moultrie, Local 1199B president, and Henry Nicholas commented on the trajectory of the strike. Merely a week into the strike, Moultrie appealed to the public for food and monetary assistance commenting that “[w]e have no more money, so we must go to jail...[b]ut we will continue to struggle.” As a result of mass arrests, Moultrie added that “[c]hildren will replace adults on the picket lines.”¹⁹ Until this point in the strike, the pickets had been manned by adults. But children were forced into action due to the circumstances of the strike, the need for more visibility, and stronger ranks.

Though the Medical College was the center of the workers’ ire, by March 26th, union officials had been in contact with at least three other hospitals, public and private, seeking union recognition. Workers at Charleston County, Roper, St. Francis Xavier, and McClennan-Banks Memorial hospitals were affiliated with Local 1199B, which expanded the scope of the strike from the immediate catalyst of the twelve fired workers at the Medical College. While the State Attorney General cautioned public affiliated hospitals, officials at the publicly supported McClennan-Banks met with five 1199 representatives on March 20th.²⁰

The substance of the March 20th meeting was immediately disputed. Union representatives announced that McClennan-Banks officials agreed to recognize the union.

According to Dr. William McFall, the McClennan-Banks administrator, the hospital board

put through a motion that since we are sort of a quasi public organization, in that we do get an appropriation from the county, we would wait...we made no commitment with the union. We were courteous enough to meet with the union and a representative group of employees [sic], but no commitment was made whatsoever. I do not know what official of the union would make a statement like that (that McClennan-Banks Hospital had agreed to recognize the union.)²¹

¹⁹ Elaine S. Stanford, “Union Says Rev. Abernathy to Speak Here,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 27 March 1969, 1-A. Accessed March 10, 2014, Google News.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Since McClennan-Banks depended on paying patients to operate, McFall was resistant to paying above the federal minimum.

While the Charleston campaign expanded to several local hospitals, its national reach was taking hold. Of the national nature of the hospital workers' movement, Henry Nicholas commented "[y]es, we are involved in a nationwide campaign, but the campaign in Charleston started long before that nationwide campaign." Stanford reports that the national union had "not sent any funds to the Charleston local." In the early stages of the movement, before national union and SCLC involvement brought attention and money, the state conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People "voted to extend the striking workers 'such aid and assistance as would be required.'"²²

As the strike spread to more hospitals, strikers continued to encounter aggressive policing on the picket lines. At the same news conference where Moultrie and Nicholas discussed the expansion of the strike, Moultrie also detailed the injuries of picketer Thelma Buncum. According to reports, Moultrie "repeated an earlier charge that a woman was beaten while being arrested at the picket lines at the Medical College Hospital...the woman is now at McClennan-Banks Memorial Hospital." In his account of Ms. Buncum's injuries, Chief Conroy blamed Buncum's actions during her arrest for her injury. According to Conroy, Buncum "was arrested Saturday [March 22] after refusing to move from a driveway to allow two taxis to enter the Medical College Hospital lot. After being placed in the patrol wagon...[she] tried to prevent a second person from being placed in the wagon also and while doing so, hit her head on the door frame."²³ Disputes over police action continued for the duration of the strike.

²² Elaine S. Stanford, "...Union," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 27 March 1969, 2-A. Accessed March 10, 2014, Google News.

²³ Betty Walker, "Chief Denies Charge of Police Brutality: Union Claims Beating," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 27 March 1969, 1-B. Accessed March 18, 2014, Google News.

Conroy also claimed that his police department “was neutral” in the ongoing labor dispute. But in many ways, the Charleston police force and eventually the South Carolina National Guard became surrogates by representing the interests of the hospital and state and local governments instead of keeping the peace. Conroy also suggested that union representatives attempted “to inject false charges of police brutality in a situation that has been substantially free of violence.” In spite of his claims of a violence free atmosphere, workers who crossed the picket lines filed several claims “alleging harassment, intimidation and assault from persons supporting the walkout.”²⁴ Strikers did attempt to forcefully restrict workers who were not striking in solidarity with them from work.

While strikers may not have been able to prevent workers from reporting to the Medical College and other hospitals, the hospitals did suffer from the loss of hundreds of workers due to the strike. Approximately 80 workers walked out at Charleston County Hospital. Hospital administrator Dr. V.W.H. Campbell “announced that ‘several essential services ha[d] already been curtailed.’” He was also seeking permanent replacement workers.²⁵ He also lamented that “the hospital ‘ha[d] no alternative but to limit the emergency room to absolute emergencies’ while the strike [was] on.” The staffing issues at Charleston County also impacted other patient units. Staff was required to work more shifts. Campbell complained that overtime would eventually ‘exhaust the supply of employees [sic].’”²⁶

While the hospital administrators, police officers, and strikers faced the various consequences of the strike, local and national religious leaders began crafting plans to intervene in the increasingly contentious strike. The Committee of Concerned Clergy, a group of at least

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ William Walker, Jr., “Picketing Goes On At 2 Hospitals,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 30 March 1969, 1-A. Accessed March 18, 2014, Google News.

²⁶ William Walker, Jr., “...Pickets,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 30 March 1969, 14-A. Accessed March 18, 2014, Google News.

thirty Charleston clergymen, produced an appeal to hospital administrators and striking workers. In their “Peace With Justice Proposal,” the ministers “called on both management and labor at the Medical College Hospital to make sacrifices in order to serve ‘the ultimate common good.’” They also “suggested that union and non-union workers hold ‘an impartially supervised election’ to select a committee to deal with management to ‘settle all grievances’” and “urged workers to return to their jobs.”²⁷ The clergymen suggested that Medical College officials rehire the twelve fired workers “as a ‘bold gesture of peace.’” They directed these pleas to Governor McNair, Elliott Godoff, of the National Organizing Committee of Hospital and Nursing Home Workers, and Earl Ellis, the state appointed investigator of the strike.²⁸

Just as local Charleston clergy appealed for peace, Rev. Ralph Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference made his first trip to support the Charleston workers. On March 31, 1969, Abernathy led a mass meeting of approximately 1,500 people including workers and their supporters at the Fourth Baptist Church in Charleston.²⁹ Along with Rev. Andrew Young, the SCLC’s executive vice president, and at least five other staffers, Abernathy compared the burgeoning Charleston campaign to the SCLC’s Poor People’s Campaign that was “going on in Alabama with meat workers” and “in Macon, Ga., with garbage workers.” Abernathy also charged that Representative L. Mendel Rivers, chair of the House Armed Services Committee and representative of South Carolina’s 1st congressional district which included Charleston, “was willing to spend 60 per cent [sic] of the national budget ‘for destruction of life on foreign battlefields...but [was] unwilling to spend millions to stand people on their feet in

²⁷ Walker, Jr., “Picketing Goes On At 2 Hospitals,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 30 March 1969, 1-A. Accessed March 18, 2014, Google News.

²⁸ Walker, Jr., “...Pickets,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 30 March 1969, 14-A. Accessed March 18, 2014, Google News.

²⁹ Stewart R. King, “Abernathy Pledges Support to Strikers,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 1 April 1969, 1-A. Accessed March 20, 2014, Google News.

Charleston.”³⁰ By associating the Charleston campaign with the SCLC’s broader program for the poor as well as anti-Vietnam sentiment, Abernathy placed the Charleston movement within the ideology of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s late activist sentiments.

Abernathy’s argument for better work conditions and higher wages relied on correlating increased war spending with poor living and work conditions around the United States.

Abernathy was not the only spokesperson at the March 31st rally that commented on the inaction of the US Congress on poverty. Rev. Andrew Young of the SCLC also commented on Rep. Rivers labeling him a “ ‘military-minded’ [congressman] who spent enough on the Vietnam war to rebuild every school and hospital in the nation.” While Democratic Rep. Mendel Rivers’ stance on the Vietnam War drew ire from Abernathy and Young, Abernathy considered Democratic Senator Ernest Hollings’ concessions about poverty in South Carolina promising. Since Senator Hollings “ ‘finally had his eyes opened’ to hunger conditions in South Carolina” Abernathy hoped he would encourage his peers to investigate poverty in their states. Abernathy also suggested that Hollings’s ignorance on hunger in South Carolina “show[ed] the little knowledge a white politician ha[d] about the poor and colored people in this country.”³¹ The disparities between war spending and government aid to the poor and hungry would be debated in various arenas during this period. The Charleston strike and other workers’ rights campaigns became opportunities for anti-Vietnam activists to express outrage about how Congress chose to approach antipoverty legislation.

Abernathy’s trip, which lasted less than twelve hours, was an important milestone for the Charleston campaign. While they had successfully limited hospital capacity, union members had yet to make a national statement. Abernathy’s presence and support affirmed the importance of

³⁰ Stewart R. King, “...Strike,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 1 April 1969, 7-A. Accessed March 20, 2014, Google News.

³¹ Ibid.

the Charleston campaign to the workers and perhaps put city and state officials on notice that the local union had not only national union support but also the force and resources of the SCLC. In an editorial in *The Charleston News and Courier* on April 3rd, the editors recognized Abernathy's national influence. According to the editors " Mr. Abernathy himself has become a sort of historical sight. As leader of the Poor People's March in Washington about this time last year, he had more exposure on television screens and elsewhere in the information media than anything or anybody of historical nature in Charleston. His features and his words have become familiar to untold millions of persons."³² Clearly by this point in 1969, Ralph Abernathy had become a national voice for civil rights and the poor. The formal association of the SCLC with the Charleston workers added weight to the cause. The union of civil rights and labor had proved effective in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike of 1968 and activists in Charleston hoped for a similar resolution.

Though Abernathy was the marquee speaker at the March 31st mass meeting, Mary Moultrie and state NAACP president Arthur W. Holman also addressed the attendees. The coalition between union and labor and local and national activists would be an important facet of the Charleston campaign. Like many civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, the local movement in Charleston laid the foundation for the national leaders and organizations that flocked to fertile ground. Moultrie and other local activists remained visible throughout the campaign, though Abernathy did garner more national spotlight likely due to his position within the SCLC and the national acclaim of the Poor People's Campaign.

While Abernathy's visit energized the ranks of workers and their sympathizers, the state continued to hold firm to its assertion that state-affiliated agencies could not bargain with unions

³² "Rev. Abernathy's Visit," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 3 April 1969, 12-A. Accessed March 31, 2014, Google News.

or union representatives. A day after the visit, Gov. McNair reaffirmed the state's position that while workers were not prohibited from joining unions, "the hospital...and other state institutions [could not] bargain with" unions. He also commented that since the General Assembly determined salary increases the strike would not necessarily result in higher wages.³³ Though the state refused to bargain, smaller hospitals were willing to make some concessions as their operations were severely limited by the absence of so many workers.

By early April, workers on strike appealed to local, state, and federal officials for food relief. Without working for almost two weeks, many of the strikers, who were fighting for better wages, were unable to buy food and other basic necessities. On Tuesday April 1st, as many as one hundred striking workers lined up outside of the Charleston County Public Welfare Department's Food Stamp Distribution Center on King Street.³⁴ For many of the striking workers, participating in the work boycott was a sacrifice. Already stressed by making only \$1.30 per hour, losing their minimal wage for an uncertain amount of time placed many families in compromising financial situations.

In the week following Abernathy's visit, activists were involved in meetings and demonstrations in Charleston and around the state. On Wednesday April 2nd the newly formed Committee of Concerned Clergy of "approximately 50 members" presented their "Peace with Justice Proposal" which called "for an impartially supervised election of workers in the nonprofessional category. This election would determine the names of workers chosen to meet with management to settle grievances. Those voting and those elected need not belong to a union. The election committee should be empowered to deal with management and also be recognized

³³ Jack Roach, "McNair Says State Can't Bargain," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 April 1969, 1-A. Accessed March 31, 2014, Google News.

³⁴ Elaine S. Stanford, "Strikers Seek Food Stamps, Appeal Ruling By Simons," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 April 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.

as spokesmen for the workers.” The “non professional workers [should] return to work when the mentioned democratic procedure is obtained.” The clergy sought a middle ground between state and hospital officials and the workers. Their immediate goal was a swift and peaceful end to the two week old strike before violence could derail the possibility of mediation.³⁵

The clergy also encouraged Medical College administrators “to reinstate all workers who ha[d] been discharged and to drop all charges against the workers which ha[d] arisen during the dispute.” While Medical College officials had no immediate comment, Elliott Godoff, a national representative for Local 1199B, commented “ ‘while these proposals certainly do not meet the full expectations and the program adopted by the workers, we nevertheless believe that if the Medical College Hospital would show the slightest desire to negotiate with us, these proposals could form a bridge for bringing a peaceful solution to this labor dispute.’ ”³⁶ In the face of strained hospital resources, Medical College officials and state officials maintained their anti-bargaining stance. The Committee of Concerned Clergy was one of the first collectives of community advocates. Religious advocates and other community members became a key third-party in the struggle between the striking workers and the state and hospital officials.

On Friday April 4, strikers memorialized Martin Luther King, Jr. on the first anniversary of his death with a march through Charleston. Approximately 450 marchers marched from “the union headquarters to the Charleston Municipal Auditorium.”³⁷ Aside from Abernathy’s visit, this march was one of the first mass demonstrations of the nascent strike and set the stage for ramped up protest and action in Charleston and throughout South Carolina at large. During the march, workers marched by five hospitals, including the Medical College and Charleston County

³⁵ Ibid.; Elaine S. Stanford, “...Strikers,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 April 1969, 2-A. NewsBank.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Striking Hospital Workers Parade Through Charleston,” *The Columbia Record*, 5 April 1969, 8-A. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

as well as St. Francis Xavier, Roper, and McClellan-Banks, where they were attempting to gain union recognition.

The strike spanned a 3 ½ mile route through Charleston with Mary Moultrie and Isaiah Bennett leading the group of approximately 450 strikers and allies. Marchers held signs ranging from “Give us bread, not jail,” and “Dr. King marched for us. Now we march for him” to “Dr. McCord, bigotry is poor medicine” and “There will not be any Orangeburg in Charleston.”³⁸ The marchers’ reference to the 1968 Orangeburg Massacre at South Carolina State College connected the Charleston strike to other civil rights activism in South Carolina. It may have also alluded to the marchers’ willingness to defend themselves in the face of state sponsored violence. Since the march was a memorial for Dr. King, local minister Rev. Mack E. Sharpe prayed that the crowd would use a nonviolent strategy. Curiously enough a Columbia based student-group called the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) styled themselves as protection for the marchers just in case “something happen[ed].” A majority white organization, the SSOC “was born out of the civil rights movement and was in Charleston to support the strikers’ ‘right to unionize.’” A derivative of the Students for a Democratic Society, the SSOC added another element to the collective of third party allies and opponents.³⁹ The MLK Jr. memorial march was one of the largest mass acts early on in the strike.

Of the strike, State Attorney General Daniel R. McCleod commented that “the state could not forbid employees [sic] from joining unions, the state and its agencies could not negotiate with labor organizations.” Regardless of government stonewalling a “union spokesman” suggested that “‘hospital workers throughout the state [would be] organized, but there [was] no active

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Elaine S. Stanford and William Walker, Jr. “...March,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2-A. NewsBank. For more on the Southern Student Organizing Committee, see Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

organizing” by 1199 happening outside of Charleston.⁴⁰ Though the union had no immediate plans to formally organize workers in Columbia, Greenville, or other cities in South Carolina, the possibility of an expansion must have left government officials on edge.

Meanwhile other interested parties continued their appeals to state and hospital officials and workers for a expedited resolution. On April 4th, Gov. McNair met with some of the members of the newly formed Committee of Concerned Citizens regarding the strike. A who’s who of Charleston society, the Committee was

a federation of leaders from various local organizations [including] Delbert L. Woods of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as its chairman...Mrs. Septima Clark and Mrs. Berniece Robinson of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Bernard Fielding, president of the Young Democrats; Matthew Mouzon of the Greek Letter Society; Esau Jenkins of the Citizens Committee; George Kline of the Political Action Committee; Frank Smith of the Business and Professional Men of Charleston [and] Mrs. Angie Frasier of the Southeastern Business College.⁴¹

Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins were known civil rights activists in Charleston. Involved in early civil and educational rights campaigns, Clark and Jenkins were apart of the old-guard of black Charleston activists.

The Committee outlined three objectives for its immediate involvement in the hospital strike. The Committee’s goals included supporting the Committee of Concerned Clergy’s “[P]roposal for Peace With Justice,” meeting with Gov. McNair, and to rejecting “the accusations of Dr. William M. McCord, president of the Medical College of South Carolina ‘made against 12 workers at the college and to suggest that the original and pervading cause of any neglect of patients has been and continues to be the unfair and unreasonable actions of Dr. McCord himself.’”⁴² That there were several concerned community groups speaks to the immediate social and communal impact of the strike. Outside advocates in the interest of the

⁴⁰ “500 Expected To March To Hospitals Today,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 4 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

⁴¹ “Group To Meet With Governor Today,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 4 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

⁴² Ibid.

strikers or peace in general appealed to the Governor beyond the bounds of organizations like the local union. These appeals further pressured the Governor, state, and local officials to make some decision on bargaining and union recognition.

In the lead up to a show cause hearing, 116 individuals were charged with violating the injunction on protest outside of the Medical College Hospital. Local 1199B was tasked with proving “why it should not be ruled in contempt of court for failure to comply with an amended temporary injunction which set up rules for picketing at the Medical College Hospital.” As national, state, and local representatives of 1199, Isaiah Bennett, Elliott Godoff, Henry Nicholas, and Mary Moultrie were served with legal papers at the Charleston airport while greeting Rev. Abernathy while many others were served at their homes. The ongoing fight over the legality of a sizeable picketing population outside of the Medical College Hospital underscored the issues between the union and hospital administrators.⁴³

While some local clergymen had already spoken out in the hopes of facilitating a swift end to the strike action, workers also appealed to the clergy and their parishioners for monetary and moral support. They used Easter Sunday as an opportunity to petition large crowds with a simple message: “ ‘we need you.’ ” “Nurses’ aides, janitors and kitchen employes [sic]” distributed leaflets with messages ranging from “ ‘We believe in what we are doing, and we pray for your support’ ” and “ ‘We are still looking for a resurrection, but our resurrection has justice and dignity attached to it’ ” as well as more direct pleas asking that “ ‘religious-minded people will not try to take our jobs.’ ”⁴⁴ By appealing to congregations for monetary and moral support and cautioning churchgoers against taking jobs as replacement workers, strikers widened their

⁴³ Elaine S. Stanford, “Show Cause Hearing Rescheduled Next Thursday,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 4 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

⁴⁴ Stewart R. King, “Striking Workers To Seek Statewide Support Today,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 7 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

base of support. This was especially necessary since the strike was still in its early days and workers were already applying for food stamps. Any assistance from clergy and their congregants would only benefit the cause.

The seemingly endless flow of activity following the Abernathy visit not only influenced daily events in Charleston, but it also extended across the state. On April 7th, workers traveled to Columbia to appeal to the governor as well as other labor unions for support. According to Isaiah Bennett, “the main purpose of the trip [was] to meet with representatives of union locals and other organizations in other parts of South Carolina and ‘get statewide support’” for the Charleston strike.⁴⁵ Workers also met at a local church in Columbia “where they hoped to gain support for their efforts to organize a union.” Beyond appealing to Columbia unions and congregations, some of the delegation from Charleston “visited three other hospitals in the Columbia area in an effort to gain support from the non-professional workers in these hospitals for the Charleston effort.”⁴⁶ Coupled with the Easter Sunday appeals to approximately 80 Charleston congregations, the Columbia trip allowed the workers to further expand their network across geographic and possibly class lines.

While in Columbia, “approximately 40 of the workers picketed the State House” and requested a meeting with Gov. McNair. Though McNair was in New York, the “group then staged a ‘sit in’ on red leather couches in the lobby outside the governor’s office” until the State House closed. Then they moved their protest to the “State House steps” saying they would remain there “until the governor return[ed] from New York.”⁴⁷ While the governor relented and agreed to a meeting with a few members of the Charleston delegation after their “29-hour vigil”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jack Roach, “McNair Agrees to Meet With Striking Workers,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 8 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

at the South Carolina State House, upon leaving the meeting Mary Moultrie called it ““a waste of time.”” Besides Ms. Moultrie, the workers’ delegation included “Jack Bradford, spokesmen for the group, three other workers, and F. Henderson and George Payton, two Charleston Lawyers.” At the union’s post-meeting press conference, Moultrie added “[w]e got nothing from him. I don’t know whether he rejected our requests or not. We got no concessions from him. It was the same story we’ve been getting. I don’t know where this will end but we won’t give up. We’ll keep on trying.” F. Henderson Moore, one of local union attorneys commented that “he knew of no law in the state which prohibit[ed] the hospital from recognizing the union. ‘The whole thing revolves around a question of money. Even the state attorney general has cited no law which forbids the hospital to negotiate. It’s a matter of state policy, not law.’” Both Moultrie and Moore were vocal about the Governor’s unwillingness to negotiate or budge on some of 1999’s demands.⁴⁸

Within a week of Abernathy’s visit at the end of March, the strike had expanded in reach and impact as workers and their allies as well as unaffiliated third party groups had engaged with state and local officials as well as influential community members. The strike was also beginning to take a significant toll on the Medical College’s operations. Housewives, high school students, patients’ family members, and other community members volunteered by “answer[ing] telephones, work[ing] as ward secretaries and nurses’ aides...serv[ing] food and work[ing] in the kitchen.” Some registered nurses worked overtime to compensate for the hundreds of striking workers. As a result of the hampered operations, Dr. McCord began hiring “permanent replacements for employes [sic] on strike and refusing to work.” State and hospital officials were

⁴⁸ Jack Roach, “Meeting With McNair Termed ‘Waste Of Time,’” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 9 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

so resistant to bargaining that they risked consistent daily operations and hired new staffers, some likely inexperienced, to replace those on strike.⁴⁹

Both Medical College and Charleston County officials maintained the stance that they could not bargain on wages because state and county legislatures were in charge of state and county wages. According to William McCord, the Medical College President, average wages for non-professional workers were above the \$1.30 union officials claimed. In an exhaustive list, McCord detailed the various pay levels for non-professional workers

Licensed practical nurses on strike were earning more than \$2 an hour. Striking nurses aide technicians [made] more than \$1.60 an hour and the majority of nurses aides earn \$1.44 an hour or better. He listed the following hourly earnings of workers on strike: housekeeping, \$1.44; central supply clerks, technicians and maids, 41.69; X-ray orderlies and aides, \$1.49; physical therapy orderlies and aides \$1.51; out-patient clinic practical nurses, orderlies, aides and clerks, \$1.54; laboratory messengers, \$1.48; dietary aides, \$1.37; nursing service licensed practical nurses, \$2.01; nurses aides, \$1.45; and nurses aide technicians, \$1.62.

The two sides were on opposite sides with contradictory evidence for their claims. Not only were hospital officials claiming that they were legally unable to bargain, but they were also arguing that the striking workers had no foundation for their claims since they were earning more than \$1.30 per hour. Even after three weeks, there was still a stalemate between the hospitals and the union.⁵⁰

Though Local 1199B had made significant progress in gaining more support from churchgoers and union members in Charleston and Columbia, Mary Moultrie and other leaders of the local were disappointed by the lack of progress with hospital, state, and local officials. To that end they appealed to Abernathy for another visit to Charleston. According to Moultrie, “the governor [was] leading an alliance in South Carolina which [was] ‘determined to preserve poverty and to deny the poor people in our state every right to respect and human dignity.’” Even

⁴⁹ “Volunteers Keep Hospital Running,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 9 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

⁵⁰ William Walker, Jr., “Abernathy Expected To Arrive Here,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 10 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

the Concerned Citizens Committee was left unsatisfied with “the failure of Gov. McNair and workers to open up lines of communication.”⁵¹

The two sides were also disputing whether or not the hospital strike was a civil and human rights matter. Hospital officials denied that “the strike [was] a civil rights matter. They maintain[ed] it [was] a labor dispute between the hospitals and the union. A spokesman for the Medical College said...there [were] no whites on strike at the facility, but there are whites still working at the same jobs held by Negroes. He said the hospital applies the same rules for pay and promotion to all workers ‘regardless of race.’”⁵²

INJUNCTION JUNCTION

On April 10th, officials at Charleston County were granted a “temporary restraining order limiting picketers to 10 and prohibiting non-picketing union members from gathering within 500 yards” of the building. The 10 picketers were required to “be spaced 20 yards apart” and were “enjoined from ‘intimidation, threats and harassment’ of hospital employes [sic], and state, county and city law enforcement officers [were] directed to apprehend persons violating provisions of the order.” Reportedly, strikers had been physically assaulting workers who attempted to enter Charleston County facilities. In one incident, “two Negro pickets tried to prevent a Negro worker from crossing Courtney Street...[Then] a woman picket threw a handful of pepper at two patrolmen, hitting one officer in the eyes.” The altercations continued when “[b]ands of strikers gathered on street corners and bus stops near the hospital and harassed

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² “Violence Is Reported In Charleston Strike,” *The Columbia Record*, 10 April 1969, 1-B. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

several workers reporting for duty...[w]indows of two automobiles parked near the hospital were shattered.”⁵³

Several picketers were arrested for a variety of offenses ranging from resisting arrest to assaulting police officers. At Charleston County, two women, Mary Delestine and Margaret Richardson, both residents of St. John’s Island, were arrested for assaulting police officers and held on bond. While two other women were arrested at the Medical College Hospital. Rosa Lee Turner a 24 year old woman from Charleston “was charged with cursing and abusing an officer” and Barbara Drayton was held under bond for “malicious mischief” and violating the Medical College injunction. Picketers were deemed harassers for their interactions with police officers and workers who entered the hospitals. According to a ““summons for relief”” “activities of the union members [were] illegal and ‘unless immediately enjoined [would] seriously curtail or prevent the functioning of [Charleston County Hospital] and [would] also endanger the lives and welfare of numerous of its patients.’”⁵⁴

The court order also alleged that “the conduct of the pickets violate[d] Sections 46.6 and 46.8 of the state law known as the ‘right to work’ law. The law says it is illegal for a person or a group of persons to attempt to force a person to join or support a labor organization. It also is illegal for persons to picket in such a way as to interfere which access routes to place of employment.” These injunctions against union members and their sympathizers reflected the state’s argument against recognizing and bargaining with the union. The idea that picketing could violate the right to work law precipitated the strict injunction limits.

⁵³ William L. Walker, Jr., “Court Orders Limit To Hospital Pickets,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 11 April 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.; William L. Walker, Jr., “...Hospitals,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 11 April 1969, 2-A. NewsBank.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

While the temporary injunction against large groups outside of the Medical College was being contested in court, 31 pickets were arrested for violating the injunction on April 11th. Those arrested included: Alvin Alston, Eva Alston, David Bright, Rosalee Brown, Starlin Bryant, Pearlina R. Canty, Arthur Capers, Evelyn Capers, Jack W. Coaxum, Marilyn Dingle, Mary Ford, Dension Gibbs, Annabell Green, Myrtle Harrell, Ben Johnson, Inez Lewis, Shirley M. Middleton, Mary Moultrie, Delores Nelson, Robert Padgett, Bessie Polite, Nathaniel Richardson, Alberta Rouse, Rosie Marie Smalls, Hermina B. Traeye, Joroda Vandderhorst, Paul Washington, Clancan Washington, Naomi White, Arthur Williamson, and James White. While the majority of those arrested were first time offenders, a dozen were charged with a second violation with a \$1500 bond. One person was arrested for a third offense.⁵⁵

Jack Bradford, the vice president of Local 1199B “said the workers who were arrested ‘[were] determined to stay in jail without bail until their rights [were] established and steps to end poverty [were] taken...[t]he workers who were arrested today (Friday) were arrested for exercising their constitutional right to picket and to protest against poverty and injustice in Charleston’s hospitals...Neither hunger nor injunctions nor arrests will stop us from fighting for our rights.” This mass arrest was the beginning of a trend of frequent arrests. In this instance the arrests were “‘very peaceful’ and many sang songs as they were led to police vans.” Mass arrests were a popular Civil Rights Movement tactic. In the Charleston case, activists vacillated between peaceful protests and more aggressive tactics. Confrontations between striking workers and police and workers attempting to enter hospital facilities varied as the strike persisted and tensions in the city heightened.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ “...Hospital,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 12 April 1969, 2-A. NewsBank.

⁵⁶ “31 Workers Arrested For Disobeying Injunction,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 12 April 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.

To counter the hospitals' legal maneuvering the strikers filed a \$10 million lawsuit against the Medical College Hospital and Charleston County Hospital. Henderson Moore, one of Local 1199B's attorneys said that the workers were seeking "a declaration from the court 'that hiring practices, seniority lists and wage structures of the service and maintenance employees [sic] at the two hospitals are part and parcel of an invidious practice of discrimination and in violation of the civil rights act of 1871 and 1964.'" A union spokesman alleged that "white employees [sic] [had] received favorable treatment over Negroes doing the same kind of work." By formally reframing the strike as a civil rights issue instead of just a labor dispute, the workers and their representatives moved the strike into a wider context.⁵⁷

In an effort to expand the reach of the strike, the Charleston chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) invited Roy Wilkins to Charleston. Representatives for the local chapter "called the strike situation 'acute' and said [Wilkins'] presence was needed 'to support efforts to correct unfair wage and discriminatory practices now being demonstrated against striking Negroes hospital workers; by hospital and state officials.'" As a national civil rights figure and executive secretary of the NAACP, Roy Wilkins was an ideal addition to the ranks of public support for the workers. Even the local chapter's appeal to Wilkins displayed the broad base for support the workers had in Charleston. The Charleston NAACP support added an additional sphere of influence to the strike, which was already supported by other unions, clergy, and churchgoers.

Days after the Charleston NAACP invited Wilkins to visit Charleston, Ralph Abernathy made his second visit to Charleston. In correspondence with Ralph Abernathy leading up to the visit, Bradford, the vice president of Local 1199B, appealed reported the 31 arrests and

⁵⁷ "\$10 Million Suit Due Against 2 Hospitals," *The Columbia Record*, 12 April 1969, 7-B. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

suggested that “[h]undreds of other strikers face hunger and evictions because they dare speak out against poverty and discrimination.”” Abernathy’s second visit to Charleston came two weeks after his initial trip to support the strike. In those two weeks, activity had increased exponentially as dozens of workers were arrested for violating injunctions at the Medical College and Charleston County, the workers filed suit against the two hospitals, and community members spoke out for a swift resolution to the situation. This seemed unlikely as both sides ratcheted up the rhetoric and entered into litigation. With outside support from civil rights stalwarts and suggestions that hospital practices violated the recently passed Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Charleston movement was transitioning from a local struggle to one with national implications.⁵⁸

Rev. Abernathy returned to Charleston on April 21st. That night at a mass meeting at Morris Brown African Methodist Episcopal Church, crowds spilled out into the street as strikers prepared for another mass march through Charleston. At the mass meeting, Abernathy confirmed the SCLC’s support for the workers. The SCLC was ““totally committed to the struggle of the hospital workers...and prepared to engage in massive, creative non-violent action.”” Abernathy continued, “ ‘We are here in Charleston until the hospital workers’ union is recognized. We will not at this [time] disclose the details of our course of action but I will say it will be extensive and comprehensive. We will deliver plague after plague upon the power structure of this city and state.’” He also appealed for student support for the strike mentioning that “ ‘[t]here are some things you can’t learn in school’” and that jail might offer some lessons for young students.”⁵⁹

At this stage of the strike, Abernathy’s role in Charleston was more as a motivator and energizer than a tactician. As representatives of the mass of union members, Moultrie and

⁵⁸ “Abernathy Due in Charleston Monday To Aid Strikers,” *The Columbia Record*, 15 April 1969, 1-B. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

⁵⁹ Stewart R. King, “Abernathy Sets Mass March Against Struck Hospitals,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 22 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

Bradford invited Abernathy to Charleston to put pressure on state and local officials and to reinvigorate the mass of sympathizers and strikers in Charleston. Moultrie, released from jail the morning of this mass meeting after her arrest on April 11th, offered a new 1199B slogan, “ ‘an injury to one is an injury to all.’ ” She also mentioned that “other state employes [sic] would be asked to join the fight ‘for human rights and dignity.’ ” Having already expanded their network to include community members and some clergy, bringing other state employees into the fold would be a sensible extension especially if the workers wanted to make an even bigger impact on state and local operations.⁶⁰

Between 600 and 1000 people marched in the April 22nd march. Members of Local 1199B, “mostly women wearing white uniforms and white and blue caps” and their supporters walked in a peaceful march in support of unionization.⁶¹ Led by Abernathy, Mary Moultrie, and Rev. William Joyce, secretary of the Committee of Concerned Clergy, “the virtually all-Negro group, bolstered heavily with a bevy of small children, began singing: ‘Ain’t nobody turning ‘round—keep on walking down to freedom land.’ ”⁶² Though Abernathy was called in to help lead the march, Ms. Moultrie and the women workers remained central to the movement. Along with their children, these black women made up the mass of marchers and protestors as the strike progressed. Framed as a matter of civil and human rights, these women were marching for equal wages in order to provide for their families. The Charleston campaign was similar to other movements at the time, namely the welfare rights movement. As women and men across the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Sam McCuen, “Abernathy Leads March,” *The State*, 23 April 1969, 1-B. Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

⁶² William Walker, Jr., “Mr. Abernathy Leads 800 On Medical Center March,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 23 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

United States were pushing the federal government for better housing and food for low-income families, the Charleston workers were fighting a similar fight on the local level.⁶³

Framing the strike as a matter of social justice, William Joyce “prayed that Negroes who ‘have been caught up in centuries of serfdom and slavery might be free. Peace is our goal. Not an empty vapid peace, but a peace with justice on our side. The truth, when it is known, will make us all free.’” But justice in this case was a contentious battle. While workers struck to gain better wages and end on-the-job discrimination, they were also depending on the idea that once the strike ended their jobs would still be open. But hospital administrators at the Medical College and Charleston County had already begun replacing those on strike. During the march, union “members singled out employes [sic] for bitter verbal abuse.” One woman threatened a group of workers with bodily harm while other “marchers screamed in derision at Negro and white hospital employes [sic] in the laundry room.” While clergymen preached peace, some of the workers struggled with the idea of nonviolence or avoiding agitation. Peace was an ideal that was sometimes in opposition to the material concerns of low-wage workers.⁶⁴

The stalemate between the union and state and local officials was the central issue of the march. In comparing Charleston to the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike, Abernathy said “ ‘[i]n Memphis, we were seeking to help the poor to see to it that the union was recognized as a bargaining force. When we got there, negotiations were in force. But this negotiating phase has been omitted. In order to keep a nonviolent campaign movement, you’ve got to be able to

⁶³ For more on the Welfare Rights Movement see, Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004) and Premilla Nadasen, *Rethinking the Welfare Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

talk.’’⁶⁵ The governor’s unwillingness to negotiate even with the third party committees severely limited the progress toward a strike resolution.

At a “youth rally” at Morris Brown AME Church, Rev. Andrew Young, of the SCLC, joined Abernathy to speak to the community and the workers. In another effort to support the community, Abernathy claimed that he would “do everything in [his] power to get Mrs. Martin Luther King to” Charleston.⁶⁶ With Coretta Scott King, the strike was likely positioned to gain more press as she had ascended to the level of a national figure following her husband’s assassination. Abernathy left Charleston the day after the march with the promise of returning on Friday April 25th.

The weekend of April 25th was a turning point. As activists were reinvigorated by Coretta Scott King’s visit and several marches, the governor responded with force. The next chapter details the increasing militarization of the picket lines and the subsequent resolution of the strike.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Chapter Three

Crescendo and Conclusion: April to July 1969

By the end of the first month of the strike, workers and their supporters had coalesced into a movement that featured consistent daytime protest at the Medical College and Charleston County and nightly mass meetings along with occasional marches through the city. At the end of April, action reached a near breaking point. Hostilities increased between the two sides because the state refused to negotiate and the workers continued to pressure the state at the frontlines. Gov. McNair responded to the increasingly contentious frontlines with force. His use of the National Guard escalated the atmosphere of the strike and strained the already poor relations with the workers. In spite of this, workers continued to protest in fervor. In this chapter, I discuss the crescendo of tensions and the eventual conclusion of the strikes from the Medical College and Charleston County.

MCNAIR SENDS THE NATIONAL GUARD TO CHARLESTON

On April 25th, Abernathy, his wife Juanita, national Local 1199 president Leon Davis, and Mary Moultrie led a march of approximately 2,500 to 7,000 people through the streets of Charleston to the Medical College Hospital. Walking, singing movement songs, and clapping, “[m]ost of the marchers were teen-agers, and most sported the blue-and-white paper hats of Local 1199B...Several young men and women wore colorful African-style-robos, and at least four babies went the distance in [strollers].” Outside of Charleston County “demonstrators knelt down on the pavement while a Negro minister offered a prayer for workers who ‘suffer[ed] the plight of malnutrition and poverty.’” The march began mildly and peacefully with the only initial difference being the large numbers of those involved, especially the youth.¹

¹ The wide range in participants stems from disagreement between police estimates of 2500 people and union estimates of 7000; William Walker, Jr. and Stewart R. King, “Guardsmen Ordered Into Tense Charleston:

When they returned later in the day to picket the Medical College Hospital, Abernathy and 50 workers and their supporters were arrested for violating the injunction that limited pickets to 10 people standing 20 yards apart. 51 others were arrested for the same infraction later on that night. While the arrests were peaceful, “[s]cores of National Guardsmen, armed with rifles and fitted bayonets were rushed to the Medical College Hospital after a group of marchers earlier broke ranks and dashed to the main entrance of the hospital. After fumbling at the locked doors, they promptly sat down on the steps.” A seemingly mild action resulted in armed troops lining the streets of the city. In response “a woman marcher, eyeing their bayoneted rifles, declared: ‘That’s all they know all their life is to fight with the weapons.’”²

The increasingly contentious nature of the strike left “a small army” of “500 troops on duty in the city [Friday] night, while another unit was on its way from Beaufort and several others were placed on stand by.” Some young protestors “taunted the guardsmen” while police officers also stepped up their patrols. Though the strike organizers had planned a Friday night mass march, “[p]olice, supported by guardsmen, thwarted any attempts of a mass movement by blocking off streets.” The National Guard troops sent to intervene were part of the 1st Battalion 118th Infantry with companies from Charleston, North Charleston, Mount Pleasant, Summerville, St. George, and Walterboro. According to Colonel William Oliver, an officer in the South Carolina National Guard, “the primary mission [of the National Guard’s presence in Charleston was to] support [the] civil authority.” In other words, the National Guard was sent to Charleston to protect state interests as marchers primarily comprised of women, youth, and young children

Abernathy, 101 Followers Arrested,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 26 April 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.; William Walker, Jr. and Stewart R. King, “...Guardsmen,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 26 April 1969, 9-A. NewsBank.

² Ibid.

needed to be patrolled by volunteer soldiers with bayoneted rifles.³ Charleston had not been under quasi-military control for 50 years. But the National Guard's intervention went along with Gov. McNair's aversion to any social "unrest." Like his decision to send highway patrolmen into Orangeburg in 1968, Gov. McNair sent in the National Guard to protect the state from its citizens.

With National Guardsmen in the background, Medical College officials suggested that they would consider rehiring the 12 fired workers if union activity ceased. On the face of it, this was an extreme position considering that as Medical College officials claimed they were ready to negotiate, but the state had escalated tensions with the introduction of the National Guard. Even so, Medical College administrators released a statement suggesting that "should the union withdraw from its activities, we stand ready to re-employ striking workers to fill existing vacancies, except for those dismissed or convicted of law violation[.] There are currently about 100 such positions available." This statement was not really a concession, since it hinged upon the end of union activities. Without compromise from either side, the tense situation in Charleston remained.⁴

During this phase of the strike, religious leaders continued to appeal to both sides in an effort to encourage a resolution. In this instance, The Most Reverend Ernest L. Unterkoefler, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston, released a statement calling for dialogue between hospital administrators and the workers as well as "a day of prayer for peace and harmony." His statement was generally supportive of the workers' right "to organize into voluntary associations and organizations for purposes congenial to their aspirations as human beings." He continued "to place the full blame for the strike on the workers is not fair. Because of constant refusals to communicate with the representatives of the non professional workers in

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Medical College Prepared To Study Re-Employment," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 26 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

their organization choice, this grave situation has come upon the community of Charleston.”

Though he chastised hospital administrators for their reticence to negotiate, he also asked “the strikers to act justly and fairly when the opportunity for dialogue” was presented.⁵ According to William McCord of the Medical College, “the board of trustees offered ‘two encouraging and hopeful proposals’ to a group of business leaders and elected public officials who were in touch with the union. But the proposals were ‘bluntly refused’ by the union.” By meeting with intermediaries instead of actual union representatives, the hospital maintained their claim that state representatives could not negotiate with unions. Interestingly enough, McCord ended his statement reinforcing this stance by saying that “‘the Medical College has never refused to meet and talk with a responsible group of citizens at any time unless they represented the union.’” At this point both sides were unwilling and allegedly unable to negotiate.⁶

On Saturday April 26th, the day after the mass arrests outside of the Medical College, “thirty Negroes, more than half of them juveniles” were arrested after an “abortive attempt to march in support of hospital strikers.” In this instance, the youth were arrested for marching without a permit. Nineteen of those arrested were juveniles and led in their efforts by an adult named Carl E. Farris, Charleston project director for the SCLC, and Burke High School Student Jerome Smalls. According to reports, “the demonstration...was a calculated attempt by strike organizers to create public sympathy for the drive.” In their report on the strike Charleston News and Courier reporters William Walker, Jr. and J. Gregory Prior linked the youths’ protest to Rev. Andrew Young’s suggestion “that the public would compare the young people to the armed

⁵ “Bishop Urges Dialogue Between Strikers, Hospital,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 26 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

⁶ “Overtures To Settle Strike Fail,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 26 April 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

National Guardsmen.” Young said people would wonder ““why do they need that kind of power for these beautiful people?””⁷

Putting youth at the forefront was not a new strategy for the SCLC. Children (and women) had been used as pawn-like figures in the Selma movement and others with the news media and a sympathetic public outraged by displays of police and community members’ brutality. Mass arrests during the traditional civil rights movement in marches and protests led by the SCLC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and local organizations used youth and women to elicit sympathy and hopefully action. In the Charleston case, the juxtaposition of children and youth marching and protesting versus National Guardsmen with bayoneted rifles was sure to evoke strong feelings once these events reached national news.

The arrest of 19 juveniles during this “abortive strike” was not a singular act. After the arrests on April 26th, “a student group...called for a strike by students beginnings [sic] Monday [April 28th] to indicate support for strikers by remaining out of school.” All the while union attorneys still worked to invalidate the injunctions that limited the amount of strikers outside of the hospitals. At this point, strikers and their supporters remained willing to violate the injunction in order to maintain pressure on hospital administrators and to gain public supports. In response, the mayor of Charleston, J. Palmer Gaillard “vowed that order [would] prevail in Charleston...‘law and order will be maintained...and...there are ample lawful forces within the city to do so. I would also like to caution those intent on violating the laws that it will not be tolerated.’” With the use of youth on the front lines and National Guardsmen, neither side seemed likely to acquiesce to negotiations.⁸

⁷ William Walker, Jr. and J. Gregory Prior, “Arrest of 30 By Police Ends 4-Hour Protest Here,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 27 April 1969, 1-A. NewsBank; William Walker, Jr., and J. Gregory Prior, “...March,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 27 April 1969, 2-A. NewsBank.

⁸ Ibid.

47 people were arrested in another mass march on Sunday April 27th. Since Rev. Abernathy had been jailed in the Friday march, Andrew Young, Rev. Ralph Jackson of Memphis, and local ministers including Rev. William Joyce, led a march on the Medical College grounds. “Approximately 900 National Guardsmen” and other forces were posted around the hospital. 17 juveniles were arrested while “thirteen women and 16 men were...driven off to jail. A woman with a baby in her arms was turned away from the second bus when Chief Conroy ordered ‘no infants.’” While this incident was milder than others of that weekend, Coretta Scott King and Juanita Abernathy entered into the action of the strike. Mrs. King was reportedly headed to Charleston to show her support while Mrs. Abernathy mentioned that “she had hoped to be arrested in one of the Friday demonstrations” while speaking at a Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Columbia on Sunday. Both women would become important spokespeople for the women of the strike.⁹

As called for on Saturday April 26th, school children along with some adults staged another “abortive march” in downtown Charleston on Monday April 28th. Unlike the earlier marches, these adults and juveniles attempted to march on the city and not just the medical complex. The march marked the fourth straight day of protests in support of unionization efforts. Of the 128 people arrested, 99 of them were children who skipped school to protest. Due to the protest “three times the normal number of Negro children were absent from classes Monday [April 28th].” Since Abernathy’s return to Charleston on April 25th, 362 people had been arrested. 170 of them were juveniles under sixteen. Instead of mixing the juveniles in the adult population, the Charleston City Police detained the youth at a football stadium. 9 were sent to the local juvenile detention center and the rest were released to their parents. There had never been “so

⁹ Stewart R. King, “47 Arrested In Hospital March,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 28 March 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.; Stewart R. King, “...Hospital,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 28 April 1969, 2-A. NewsBank.

many juveniles arrested at one time” in Charleston. Along with student protests, the workers were also planning to boycott stores in downtown Charleston¹⁰

The weekend of April 25th was a turning point in the Charleston strike. As tensions escalated between workers and their supporters and the various police and military forces in proxy for the state government and hospitals, national attention turned to the struggle. Beyond this, the inclusion of children, youth, and even infants in pickets and marches further painted a stark portrait of the separation between the workers and the hospitals. On the eve of Coretta Scott King’s arrival, mass arrests and the National Guard furthered the unrest in the city.¹¹

Partly in response to events during King’s visit, Governor McNair made a more forceful statement against the hospital strike and the parallel events at Voorhees College, a historically black college in Denmark, South Carolina. In an effort to “ ‘cool down’ ” the city, McNair “declared a state of emergency in Charleston” and set a 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew, curbing normal nightlife for residents and tourists.¹² McNair’s statement included the idea that “ ‘there exists in and around the city of Charleston wide-spread acts of violence and threats of violence, common disregard for the law and disorders of a general nature which constitute a danger to the persons and property of the citizens of the community, and threaten the peace and tranquility of the state.’ ”¹³ The curfew was indefinite and left Charleston similar to an “[e]vacuated [c]ity.”¹⁴

Along with the hundreds of National Guardsmen, the nightly curfew put Charleston on the verge of martial law. Reminiscent of his actions during the Orangeburg Massacre of 1968, McNair suggested that “he may not wait for an invitation from [Voorhees] before sending in

¹⁰ Stewart R. King, “Police Arrest 128 In Abortive March,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 29 April 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.; Stewart R. King, “...March,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 29 April 1969, 2-A. NewsBank.

¹¹ For more on Coretta Scott King’s involvement in Charleston see Chapter 5.

¹² Stewart R. King and Jack Roach, “Imposed To ‘Cool Down’ Tense Charleston: Guardsmen, Police Busy Checking Violence, Arson,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 May 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.

¹³ “McNair Issues Executive Order,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 May 1969, 1-B. NewsBank.

¹⁴ Stewart R. King, “Curfew Gives Charleston Look Of Evacuated City,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 May 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.

guardsmen and SLED agents.” In the face of conflict in Charleston and at Vorhees, McNair promised not to “ ‘surrender’ ” “to the SCLC or Charleston’s unionized hospital workers; not to anyone, student or otherwise, who seizes a public or private building in South Carolina.” Some suggested that by refusing to negotiate with the strikers and the students, “McNair virtually laid down a demand for unconditional surrender. He said every possible avenue for compromise already ha[d] been explored and proved in the end to be a blind alley.”¹⁵ Though the Governor did not explicitly mention race as a factor in his decision to send in the National Guard and institute a curfew, newspaper reports suggested that “the curfew was ordered...after the tense racial atmosphere surrounding the strike appeared to be [at] the boiling point.”¹⁶

The curfew had detrimental effects on a variety of Charleston institutions. The negotiation stalemate increased pressure on downtown Charleston businesses that were already suffering from a decrease in business due to the strike. High school student participation in several marches and their pledge to boycott school also impacted attendance at the black high schools like Burke. Hospital administrators were even considering closing the hospital. This would have been the most drastic response to the “labor turmoil” as “the closing of the hospital would mean the closing of the state’s medical college.”¹⁷ McNair and McCord were willing to consider even the most drastic measures instead of negotiating the workers.

CONCERNED CLERGY?

At the end of April and the beginning of May, various members of the clergy and laymen engaged in a debate on clergy participation in the strike. In several advertisements in *The*

¹⁵ Hugh E. Gibson, “McNair Squares Off Against SCLC, Insurrectionists,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 May 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.; Hugh E. Gibson, “...McNair,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 May 1969, 2-A. NewsBank.

¹⁶ Barbara S. Williams, “...Strike,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 4 May 1969, 2-A. NewsBank.

¹⁷ Barbara S. Williams and Hortense Roach, “Possibility Raised of Closing Hospital,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 7 May 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.

Charleston News and Courier, clergy and laymen unaffiliated with either side of the strike and Abernathy debated the merits of nonviolent direct action and religious participation in labor struggles. This exchange typifies the misunderstandings surrounding the labor action in Charleston. With his letter, Abernathy clearly mirrored his involvement in Charleston on MLK's participation in Birmingham. More importantly, both came at a time when tensions were steadily rising.

In their "Open Letter To Members of the Clergy Concerned Committee" 59 men, some ministers, expressed their disappointment with the clergy's involvement in nonviolent direct action. The assigned parties were "totally opposed to" the Clergy Concerned Committee's (CCC) involvement "in the dispute between employees and employers at the Medical College and the County Hospital on [their] contention that it [was their] religious duty." Those in disagreement with the CCC argued that the clergy was not operating in any religious capacity by involving themselves in the strike. In fact, their opponents also used their "open letter" to vilify the clergy for encouraging an anti-Christian uprising in the United States. By dividing the people, creating the appearance of popular support, neutralizing the opposition, precipitating mob violence, and creating a semblance of revolution, the clergy was unwittingly fostering a potentially large-scale rebellion.¹⁸

Their opponents also alleged that the Charleston campaign was a part of a larger global, sometimes Communist, initiative. In their letter, the 59 men appealing for an end to clergy participation in the strike suggested that "[t]he strikes, marches, and demonstrations at the Medical College [had]...passed out of control of the non-professional workers hands and [had] become an operation that [could] only benefit the enemies of this country...As it was in Cuba, as

¹⁸ "An Open Letter To Members of the Clergy Concerned Committee," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 26 April 1969, 3-A. NewsBank.

it was in Algeria, and so it [would be] in the United States.” They continued, “[w]e hereby put you on notice that you are contributing to a long established plan to create discord, and destruction in our community, to use the Negro people as cannon fodder in a bloody and violent revolution; a plan which is designed to dismember and destroy freedom in the United States and convert this country into a Communist dictatorship.”¹⁹ The men assigned to this open letter articulated a familiar sentiment among Americans in the Cold War Era.

Communist connections to the civil rights and black power movements, real or imagined, made some Americans especially hostile to the movements. Fear of a communist uprising in the United States was furthered by Fidel Castro’s successful campaign in nearby Cuba. But apart from the looming presence of Cuba near the US mainland and the much larger and more menacing Soviet Union, those opposed to the clergy’s involvement in the Charleston strike echoed another common fear for some white Southerners in the face of an ever-changing racial and political landscape. After disparaging the clergy’s involvement in the strike, the 59 closed their letter urging “[the clergy] to return to [their] churches and teach the word of God so that all of our people will live together in peace and harmony.” Seemingly innocuous the phrase “our people” can connote a sense of ownership of the predominantly black group of striking workers. An appeal for peace at a time of discord disregarded the strikers’ many valid issues with hospital and state leaders. Suggesting that the workers and the clergy were involved in a communist campaign also neglects the extremely local characteristics of the strike.

Almost a week after the “Open Letter To Members Of The Clergy Concerned Committee,” Rev. Abernathy responded with an advertisement in *The Charleston News and Courier* and pamphlets that were distributed around the city of Charleston. Abernathy sought both to defend the CCC and articulate the SCLC’s Charleston platform. At the beginning of his

¹⁹ Ibid.

response, Abernathy countered the claim that the members of the CCC were operating outside of their religious or moral authority in participating in the strike. As “men of goodwill” they were “trying to administer preventative measures to a potentially explosive situation...they [were] carrying out their commission as Rabbis, Priests, and Pastors.” As such, he outlined six points of contention with the contents of the letter to the CCC.²⁰

In many of his arguments, Abernathy channels Martin Luther King, Jr.’s writing style as well as many of his theological arguments for nonviolent direct action. In his first point, Abernathy challenged the signers of the letter to the CCC to reinterpret The Ten Commandments as a document about love. Abernathy argued

love is life’s most lasting and enduring force. It expresses itself in action...love causes many of us to go to jail, march in the streets and deny ourselves the comforts of American life in order to make democracy and its promises a reality for all Americans, black and white, rich and poor...love is a just and powerful feeling for God and man in action. This is the true meaning of the Ten Commandments. So, if we love as commanded by God through Moses, then we love Local 1199B and will act until it is recognized as a bargaining unit for the non-professional workers.²¹

Abernathy’s argument for love in action echoed King’s theological framework for his participation in the civil rights struggle. In terms of justice for the non-professional workers, Abernathy saw love as basis for his and other concerned clergy’s participation in the Charleston campaign.

To counter the claim that civil rights demonstrations including those in Charleston caused destruction and calamity Abernathy recounted several instances of just protest in the United States, including those that led to the American Revolution. Abernathy challenged the notion that protest was not productive for blacks and other oppressed people in the United States. Abernathy stated

²⁰ Ralph David Abernathy, “A Letter From Charleston County Jail,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2 May 1969, 3-A. NewsBank.

²¹ Ibid.

I guess you say this kind of protest is all right for affluent white America, but not for black, brown, yellow, red and even white poor Americans. Let me remind you that peaceful, orderly and non-violent protest against what one feels to be unjust is an American right, guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. It was through these demonstrations that you speak of that black Americans won the most basic American right, the right to vote here in South Carolina and throughout the South. It was not until these demonstrations which you claim led to chaos that black people regardless of education or economic standing won the right to eat at certain lunch counters; live in downtown hotels and motels.²²

In disputing claims of black violence in Charleston, he continued

I would be the first to admit that murder, destruction, violence and arson came as we demonstrated for our rights. I can do this with authority, for I was a victim. But where did this violence, murder, destruction and arson come from? IT CAME FROM THE WHITE COMMUNITY. It came from your people and not from black people. Today, we must try to understand that a State which refuses to serve and recognize its poor people is itself doing violence to the poor and keeping them down in poverty.²³

Abernathy not only countered claims of protestors inciting and creating violence, but also called out the state's use of the National Guard and other elements of force to combat the strike. While the National Guard, police, and other elements were meant to deter the strike action,

[a]n idea of total freedom has come to the black community; an idea to organize the poor is on the horizon; a non-violent revolution is taking place, and no force can stop it. *No, not even the state troopers and the National Guard with fixed bayonets, guns, clubs, tear gas and tanks; no force can stop this idea, not even the armed forces of the Federal government. The wealth of this rich land must be more equally distributed and there will be no more tyranny. You may crush it here with force, but it will spring up somewhere else.*²⁴

Abernathy was adamant that regardless of the state's response, the movement for economic justice would eventually take hold in the United States.

While Abernathy's entire letter was a scathing rebuke of the opposition to the Clergy Concerned Committee, he ended it by claiming space for poor workers to unionize just as other hospital workers did. According to Abernathy,

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., emphasis added.

The purpose of this Committee is not to divide the people; its purpose [is] to try and bring us together by getting Local 1199B recognized as a union so that it may bargain for the rights of non-professional hospital workers. Doctors are organized and their Medical Association is recognized. Nurses are organized and their groups stand up for their rights. The hospital administrators are organized, and that is why the target is so clear. Why do you have a Chamber of Commerce here in Charleston? Why? Because you are organized. There are unions all over South Carolina, but not for poor hospital workers. Please tell me why? Is it simply because they are poor or is it because all poor, black and white, brown and yellow and even red, are getting together and this represents a force too powerful for you to deal with? Are you afraid that, “You are going to reap what you have sown”?

He continued, “We cannot control everybody, any more than you can, but I will say that unless strike is settled, you will have much more violence. If the S.C.L.C. (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) was not here and the Concerned Clergy was not on the job, there would be violence which would destroy life and property and bring shame upon this proud and old historic city.”²⁵ The reality of violence, state-sponsored, community-generated, and otherwise, was a constant issue throughout the strike. Robberies, fires, confrontations between police and protestors, and the looming presence of the National Guard created an atmosphere conducive to great mistrust between the parties involved in the strike and concerned citizens throughout the city and state.

Ultimately, Abernathy’s letter in defense of the CCC and the Charleston strike as a whole came at an integral moment in the prolonged confrontation over union rights and wages. In a clearly articulated argument, reminiscent of King’s writing during the Birmingham campaign, Abernathy refuted the initial letter to the CCC as well as bolstered the workers’ claims to unionization and fair wages. The SCLC’s overall thrust for “an end to poverty” was the impetus for Abernathy, Young, and other SCLC members’ participation in the Charleston campaign. As a strike for fair wages and better working conditions, Charleston was the perfect continuation of the SCLC’s larger Poor People’s Campaign, which had its beginnings in the Memphis Sanitation

²⁵ Ibid.

Workers' Strike. While Local 1199 was still a burgeoning national force, the SCLC had a decade long reputation for staying the course in places like Montgomery, Alabama and Albany, Georgia. The resistance in Charleston was not intimidating for Abernathy or other members of the SCLC.

Though Abernathy thoroughly countered the arguments in the letter to the CCC, his response did not end the debate surrounding clergy participation in the strike and the merits of the strike in general. On May 7th, a letter entitled "Letter To Ralph David Abernathy (a man of religion??) In Jail, Or Wherever He May Be" was published as an advertisement in *The Charleston News and Courier*. Rev. Leon J. Hubacz, the pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church in Charleston and "a truly concerned clergyman," responded to Abernathy's letter. Similar to the initial letter to the Clergy Concerned Committee, Hubacz argued that Abernathy and the SCLC were merely instigating conflict in Charleston and that there "was no potentially explosive situation until [Abernathy and the SCLC] were called into the act." Hubacz alleged that instead of attempting to resolve the conflict, clergymen were encouraging an increase in tension. According to Hubacz, clergy could be heard exclaiming inflammatory remarks like "'Boy, things are going to get hot!'" In his estimation, such exclamations were contradicting the CCC's goodwill mission.²⁶

Overall Rev. Hubacz's letter was an incoherent and partially misguided attempt to vilify the Clergy Concerned Committee. According to Hubacz, the mass truancy at Charleston high schools was not beneficial to the children of Charleston and prevented them from being productive citizens. While the SCLC's use of children and youth in mass marches had been questioned in their other campaigns, Hubacz made several misguided and ultimately racist arguments for school attendance. Calling into question the sincerity of the slogan "I Am

²⁶ Leon J. Hubacz, "Letter to Ralph David Abernathy (a man of religion??) In Jail Or Wherever He May Be," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 7 May 1969.,3-A. NewsBank.

Somebody,” Hubacz suggested that the CCC, Abernathy, and the SCLC were disregarding the youth’s education to make political statements, thus contradicting their claims to “somebodiness.” Until this point, Hubacz’s argument maintained a degree of credibility when related to questioning the use of youth in the campaign. However, Hubacz quickly descended into a rehashing of assumptions of black acquiescence to white supremacy.

In his attempt to champion black involvement in Charleston’s history and claims to being a great city, Hubacz exclaimed

You have heard of the famous Gardens. Do you think any real connoisseur can walk through one of these gardens without appreciating the know-how and tender care of the Black man that makes it all possible? Have you ever seen the look of pride on the Black man’s face as he watches the tourists admire these gardens? Have you ever walked up to any of them and shook their hand and congratulated them on their achievement? You probably consider them slaves that need the help of ‘concerned clergy.’ They **are** SOMEBODY! They EXCEL! And so it is with many other historical sites, and many other things that Charleston is proud of. What of the colored Mammy? Could all your speeches and marches ever replace the glow of pride on her face as she watches, day after day, as her little charge grows into a man of importance in the world? I’m sorry—you consider her life a life of slavery—you do not agree with her that she is excelling. Maybe that is why she does not walk with you. You claim you want to make her ‘somebody’, and she knows she **is** SOMEBODY.

Hubacz’s defense of black personhood restricted blacks to nameless, subservient roles. While these workers may have been proud of their work, Hubacz related their worthiness to white approval of their work. Whites like Hubacz were convinced that black Charlestonians were satisfied with their role in the city but the strike “exploded, once and for all, the myth of black satisfaction that had been so powerful in governing the actions of white Charlestonians.”²⁷ While it was fair to challenge Abernathy on the SCLC’s tactic of mass school truancy, Hubacz did not offer any substantive alternative or any real concern for the situation of poor blacks, hospital workers or not.

²⁷ Stephen O’Neill, “In the Shadow of Slavery,” 253.

This exchange in *The Charleston News and Courier* exemplified the conflict surrounding the strike. People across Charleston and across the political and religious spectra did not agree on the necessity or tactics of the strike. For some like Rev. Hubacz and the more than 50 other ministers and laypeople associated with the initial letter to the CCC, not only were SCLC workers intruding in a local issue, they were also exacerbating a seemingly nonexistent problem. These men also alleged that the SCLC was operating outside of the purview of the clergy. Rev. Abernathy's response was typical of SCLC tactics and theology. The idea that his and the organization's involvement was based in the overall theology of love in action and not in a desire to stir up trouble in Charleston aligned this strike with the SCLC's greater mission. By absorbing the Charleston campaign into the Poor People's Campaign, Abernathy and the SCLC expanded the reach of the movement into areas that had not yet been the site of large-scale civil rights struggle.

MOTHER'S DAY MARCH

On Sunday May 9th, Mother's Day, approximately 5,000 people, workers, allies, and concerned citizens from across the United States, gathered in Charleston to march in support of the hospital worker's strike. Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers, Representatives John Conyers and Charles Diggs, Jr. of Michigan, and Representatives Allard Lowenstein, Edward Koch, and William Ryan of New York, were among those who marched in support of the campaign for higher wages and better work conditions. Ralph Abernathy briefly joined the strike along with local leaders including Mary Moultrie. The Mother's Day March was one of the largest protests during the hospital strike and brought together influential national leaders with those who had been working for change in Charleston for some time. The Mother's Day March came during a moment of tension as National Guardsmen remained stationed

throughout the city and hospital administrators and the workers were still resisting any true negotiations.

Throughout the strike, the editors of *The Charleston News and Courier* consistently challenged the necessity and morality of the workers' strike. In several editorials, Thomas Waring, Jr., the editor, and others also suggested that the workers were not acting on their own accord or in the best interest of poor Charlestonians. In the editorial "In City and State Firmness and Fairness," the editorial board posited that "[i]nsofar as the Negro community is concerned, the disruptionist effort is aimed at displacing the regular community leadership and introducing spurious leaders imported from outside—persons who have less interest in community development than in national publicity and power."²⁸

In the days before the Mother's Day March, the editors also suggested that the strikers were on the wrong side of the wage dispute because "[l]ocal citizens know that thousands of poor people in Charleston depend on Medical College clinics, as they also depend on the emergency room and other facilities of the county hospital. If the Medical College is closed by the union and SCLC, comfortably situated citizens won't be the chief sufferers. They will be able to obtain medical care elsewhere in the city or state. The people who will suffer the most are the poor people of this county—the people who visit the diabetes, obstetrical and eye disease clinics, for example."²⁹ While these editorials were not necessarily representative of the entire Charleston community, they did put activists on the defensive.

²⁸ "In City and State Firmness and Fairness," *The Charleston News and Courier* 29 April 1969, 10-A. Waring, Thomas R. Thomas R. Waring, Jr. papers, 1902-1977 (bulk 1940-1977). (1207.00) South Carolina Historical Society. Box 406, Folder 8.

²⁹ "SCLC and The Union Victimizing the Poor," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 11 May 1969, 10-A. Waring, Thomas R. Thomas R. Waring, Jr. papers, 1902-1977 (bulk 1940-1977). (1207.00) South Carolina Historical Society. Box 406, Folder 8.

Prior to the march, several thousand supporters met at County Hall for a rally featuring Reuther, Moultrie, and Abernathy as speakers. Reuther delivered a fiery speech affirming his and the UAW's support of the Charleston campaign. After presenting Mary Moultrie with a \$10,000 " 'first down payment' " check from the UAW, Reuther said he was " 'proud to have the privilege of joining in this struggle for economic justice and union recognition.' " He continued " '[w]e are going to have the governor of this state jacked up into the twentieth century. Wherever there's a struggle for justice, I want to join that struggle. \$1.30 an hour won't buy half the things you need...[officials should] try to live on a \$1.30 an hour until they change their minds.' " Likely in an attempt to divert the more aggressive among the ranks of protesters, Reuther commented that " "We need to be militant. We need to fight with all the power we can mobilize within ourselves. [but] [w]e need to find new forms of militant, nonviolent struggle.' " He also appealed to what was a central theme in black activism since at least World War II, that " "[t]his is 1969, and this is America, and we can't preach freedom and democracy around the world and deny it to these workers in Charleston, South Carolina.' " ³⁰ Reuther wanted to hold the governor and other state and local officials accountable for the lives of the working poor in Charleston and elsewhere. His and the UAW's support was notable. While the Charleston workers had the backing of local longshoremen, the UAW added national prestige to their cause outside of the support of the civil rights establishment.

In his address, Abernathy echoed Reuther's message suggesting that " "[p]oor hospital workers here...have risen up against exploitation and oppression by the ruthless political, military and economic machine of South Carolina.' " He also noted that "hospital administrators

³⁰ W.K. Pillow Jr. and Stewart R. King, "...March," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 12 May 1969, 7-A. NewsBank; For more on black political discourse and sensibilities in the late Sixties see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013) and Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1992), among others.

and workers were at a standstill because ‘the representatives of the power structure and the hospital administration refused to sit down and discuss reconciliation with balck [sic] ... and beautiful Mary Moultrie...Poor people are declaring and demanding their right to organize—the right to organize for human dignity and self respect.’”³¹ The standstill only encouraged more protests and possibly facilitated more confrontations between the workers and National Guardsmen.

Mary Moultrie addressed the local media’s less than sympathetic portrayal of the strike. She predicted that “[i]n tomorrow’s papers we’re going to read all about outside agitators who come here to mess up Charleston.” She countered claims of outside intrusion “ ‘I’ll tell you something. We’ve got more in common with you hospital workers from New York...packinghouse workers from Chicago...steelworkers from Pittsburgh—we’ve got more in common with all you so-called outsiders than we’ll ever have with those fat cats in Columbia and those hospital trustees in Charleston...The only people who do not want it settled are the real outsiders—the people in the state capital, the rich textile owners and their friends.’”³² By addressing the *News and Courier* and other news outlets who opposed the workers’ methods, Moultrie broadened the scope of the Charleston struggle by aligning the local fight for better wages with national labor movements. While government and hospital officials and journalists used the national characteristics of the strike to discredit the merits of the enterprise, Moultrie and her counterparts viewed the Charleston struggle as a part of the larger fight for wages and respect across the United States. The coalition of local, national, and international activists added a measure of credibility and exposure that local officials rejected.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

The Mother's Day March was a climactic moment. With the combination of several thousand participants, a who's who of activists, and long-term commitments from large organizations, the workers made significant inroads into the national consciousness. Even so, Governor McNair "remained adamant...on his position concerning the Charleston hospital strikers, saying that marches, demonstrations, and strong language will have no effect on the state's position 'when it comes to union recognition and collective bargaining with state employees.'" Of the visiting "congressmen from various northern states," McNair "said the congressmen should 'sweep under their own steps' before coming to observe civil disorders somewhere else. He had pointed out that most of the congressmen were from states where civil disorders of greater magnitude than Charleston's were taking place." McNair neglected to mention that the congressmen from New York and Michigan were also from states with significant labor movement histories. Unlike South Carolina, Michigan and New York were sites of consistent labor struggle. The Charleston struggle was unique because South Carolina was not a union-sympathetic state. That the strike could last in a state hostile to any concentrated union activity proved that the south was not impenetrable to labor uprisings.³³

STRIKE ENDS AT THE MEDICAL COLLEGE

Tensions began to cool by the end of May, which resulted in the end of the 32-day curfew that had restricted nighttime activity around the city. Initially instituted "in the wake of window breakings, fire bombings, rock throwing and other disorders," the curfew covered night hours decreasing from an 8-hour period to 5 hours per night.³⁴ While state and local officials were willing to relax the curfew, they remained unwilling to capitulate to the union's demand for the rehiring of the 12 fired workers. As workers maintained a united front, Gov. McNair, local

³³ "McNair Stands Firm on Hospital Strike," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 12 May 1969, 8-A. NewsBank.

³⁴ "32-Day Curfew Is Over," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 3 June 1969, 1-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

officials, and hospital officials vacillated between rehiring and refusing to rehire the twelve workers. This issue was the linchpin in the strike negotiations.

During the month of June, Governor McNair, Dr. McCord, and other officials gave mixed messages on the issue of rehiring. In a *News and Courier* article published on June 6th, W.K. Pillow reported that McNair and hospital officials agreed to rehire the 12 workers after the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare recommended “that the 12 workers be reinstated and be paid from their date of discharge.” But by June 12th, McNair and McCord withdrew the offer, after interventions by Senators Hollings and Thurmond and Rep. Mendel Rivers. (For more on this episode see Chapter 6) To counter the state’s vacillation, longshoremen based at the Charleston port and operating under the auspices of the International Longshoremen’s Association of the AFL-CIO threatened to strike in support of the hospital workers. If the longshoremen decided to strike, that would have paralyzed the Charleston economy.³⁵

As the strike inched closer to the 100-day mark, tensions were heightened again as Rev. Abernathy was jailed for violating a ban on night marches. This arrest for leading a prayer vigil of 400 people sparked an upsurge in violent reactions to police pressure. Chief Conroy insisted that Abernathy end the June 20th prayer vigil as it met the criteria for a night march, though the participants were not marching. Instead of encouraging participants to disperse from their gathering on Mary Street, Abernathy prayed “ ‘We thought the chief was the most sane official in the city and he has turned his back on us and won’t let us go to our praying ground.’ ” Then Conroy ordered two officers to arrest Abernathy and “several younger memebbers [sic] of the group became involved in a shoving match with police and National Guard units.” As Abernathy

³⁵ W.K. Pillow, “Authorization to Rehire Fired Workers Reported; McNair Attends Meeting,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 6 June 1969, 1-B. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina; Victor Riesel, “New Union Frontier-Hospital Strike,” *The Shreveport Journal*, 24 June 1969, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina; William Walker, Jr., “Labor Chiefs Shocked BY Port Threat,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 26 June 1969, 1-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

and his SCLC colleague Hosea Williams were being transported to a paddy wagon “bricks, bottles, boards and other debris rained down on Mary Street.” After approaching the crowd with nightsticks, Charleston Police and National Guardsmen “began to retreat under a hail of missiles.”³⁶

At a mass meeting preceding the vigil, subsequent arrests, and alleged violence, Hosea Williams delivered a fiery address to strikers and their supporters at Memorial Baptist Church. During the speech he challenged the ban against night marches, asserting that ““We’re going to tell Chief Conroy we’re going to march in Charleston, or we’re going to die...Hosea Williams has never been able to accept non-violence as a meaningful philosophy, but I have accepted it as a way to stay alive...White folks are crazy. White America is insane. We have played around with Charleston long enough. We’re going to march in Charleston tonight or we’re going to die.”” Williams’s disregard for the rule of law as well as his open rejection of nonviolent direct action or the theory of nonviolent protest was representative of a shift in SCLC methods and ideologies in the face of unwavering state and local officials.

In a statement Bernard Lee, Rev. Abernathy’s assistant, detailed said that the SCLC was

‘seriously considering’ resorting to ‘drastic tactics’ such as tying up Charleston’s transportation routes and its telephone communications system...He said such tactics have never before been used by SCLC. ‘Usually our pressure and persistence on an issue brought forth a settlement. Now we have no alternative...we will have a night march regardless of the military action that confronts us...non-violence will be lifted to a new level.’

The Charleston campaign was an organizational and eventually a tactical departure for the SCLC.

Venturing deep into a labor dispute in a state slow to adopt federally mandated civil rights

legislation challenged the SCLC’s long-tested methods to break the will of state and local

³⁶ William Walker, Jr., “Violence Follows Abernathy’s Arrest,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 21 June 1969, 1-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.; William Walker, Jr., “...Violence,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 21 June 1969, 2-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston South Carolina.

officials. At this late stage of the movement, the SCLC was willing to compromise on its strict adherence to nonviolent methods. Relentless pressure and unorthodox methods, at least for the SCLC, seemed to be the last option to ending the strike with some concessions made to the workers.³⁷

Soon after Hosea Williams and Bernard Lee, among others, suggested that the SCLC would endorse new tactics, the curfew was reinstated in Charleston. McNair “ordered a 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew on the racially charged city.” Small fires around the city were attributed to the strikers as well as “brick and bottle throwing” incidents. In response, “[s]everal hundred National Guardsmen and State patrolmen were dispatched to Charleston...to support local law enforcement personnel.” Abernathy continued to protest his arrest for inciting a riot by threatening to begin a hunger strike. During Abernathy’s preliminary hearing on the charge of inciting a riot, approximately 50 supporters gathered at the intersection of King and Wentworth streets. Of the 50 marchers, 26 people were arrested including 22 adults and 4 juveniles. Nine of the adults were women ages 18 to 29. According to David Prosten, a spokesman for 1199B, during the arrest “ ‘[s]everal people were hurt pretty badly including a couple of teen-age girls’ ...[patrolmen] ‘started working over the women [and] some of the women were beaten with sticks.’ ” While police disputed this narrative, National Guard reinforcements and Abernathy’s arrest further alienated the strike supporters from the police and other government representatives.³⁸

Strikers and their supporters were reticent to take responsibility for the fires and other violent outbursts that coincided with the strike. But *The Charleston News and Courier* editorial board alleged that “[f]irebombs, assault and destruction of property are the bitter fruits of ‘non-

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

violent' protest in Charleston. This city's reputation for racial harmony is in danger from hoodlums. Respectable citizens, both black and white, are afraid and ashamed." The board also continued to suggest that "[o]rganizers of strike have come to Charleston. They have the right, we are told, to move freely and to ply their trade. Others also have rights. They are the citizens of Charleston, both black and white..." These statements were made while the board clearly disregarded the influence of local citizens in the organization and implementation of strike tactics. The editorial board also characterized Rev. Abernathy as "an invader charged with the serious offense of inciting to riot."³⁹

After much vacillation on the part of local and state officials, Local 1199B and state officials came to an agreement to settle the strike at the Medical College of South Carolina on Friday June 27th. In a press conference, Dr. William McCord announced that "[t]he strike [was] settled' and that " '[a]ll those working on March 17 will return to their jobs on Tuesday. A grievance procedure has been set up and they can have a credit union.' " At the press conference Esau Jenkins, a local Charleston activist and member of the SCLC, and Rev. Henry Grant of the Community Relations Committee, joined William Saunders as he spoke for the committee and as the representative for the strikers.⁴⁰

While the final settlement depended on the hospital's willingness to rehire the 12-fired workers, the terms of the strike settlement included more than that concession. The terms of the settlement included:

1. Returning workers were to be placed " 'in a job of the same classification' " as the jobs they had vacated for the strike at pay levels dictated by the State Classification and Compensation Plan.
2. A six-step grievance procedure, with Dr. McCord as the final step, included

³⁹ "A Call for Order," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 25 June 1969, 10-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

⁴⁰ William Walker, Jr., "Medical College Strike Ends After 100 Days; McCord Breaks News," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 28 June 1969, 1-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

- a. The employee should submit a formal oral or written grievance to his or her immediate supervisor. If the dispute was not settled at that level, the department head would then become involved.
- b. If the department head was unable to settle the grievance, “the Institutional Grievance Panel, the director of personnel, the vice president and treasure, and ultimately the president” would hear the case.
3. The minimum wage for state employees was raised to \$1.60 per hour.
4. An employee credit union would be authorized by the Medical College “ ‘if sufficient interest is indicated by employes [sic].’ ”

Saunders deemed the settlement “ ‘a victory for [the] 25,000 workers, black and white, across the state.’ ”⁴¹

The terms of the Medical College settlement did not guarantee that the workers would be able to maintain Local 1199B. Since South Carolina was a “right to work” state, Local 1199B’s reach was limited. The settlement only included provisions for the union and credit union without any guarantees that it would gain enough traction to remain relevant on a long-term basis. But even this unstable agreement fulfilled the desires of most of the strikers and their supporters. In the weeks and months following the strike, workers returned to the hospital with the hopes that they would no longer endure harassment from coworkers and that they would be earning a better wage.

SETTLEMENT AT CHARLESTON COUNTY

Though workers and hospital officials at the Medical College had come to an agreement in late June, workers and county officials were unable to come to a concurrent agreement to end the strike. As a result, Abernathy, 1199, and those striking from Charleston County Hospital doubled down their efforts to come to a resolution. The negotiations at Charleston County came down to the rehiring of all of the workers who had left their jobs to strike. Initially, “the county [was] willing to take back half the strikers and look for jobs for the others but the workers’

⁴¹ Ibid., William Walker, Jr., “...Strike Ends,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 28 June 1969, 2-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

representatives want[ed] the hospital to re-hire all those on strike.” As in the case of the Medical College, rehiring was the major sticking point in strike settlement discussions.⁴²

After a meeting with Andrew Young and Stoney Cooke of the SCLC and other Charleston county representatives, J. Mitchell Graham, the Charleston County Council chairman, reiterated the county’s claim that they did not have enough vacant jobs to rehire all of the strikers. According to Graham, the county was prepared to “ ‘replace the vacant positions that...exist with those persons on strike and to attempt to find vacancies that may exist and place [the remaining strikers] on a preferential list.’ ” Since the hospital had “ ‘permanently replaced’ 60 strikers,” it could only rehire “35 persons” at the time of these negotiations. Graham and hospital officials were privileging workers who had remained “‘loyal’” to the hospital and remained on the job during the strike over workers who had participated in the strike.⁴³ The issue of rehiring was the main stumbling block as the union and SCLC representatives were unwilling to compromise on guaranteed rehiring. Not only was the hospital unwilling to replace any of their recent hires with workers who had longer work histories at the hospital, but it was also resistant to rehiring workers who might “have incurred criminal records during the three-month dispute.”⁴⁴ Rehiring was the only barrier to a complete resolution of the strike.

From June 30th to July 18th, negotiations between Charleston County and union representatives vacillated between possible settlement and complete communication breakdowns. In a July 1st meeting, strikers rejected the hospital’s offer to rehire workers in other hospital locations instead of assigning them to the jobs they left in order to strike. County officials refused arguing that “loyal” workers, who stayed on the job during the strike, deserved to keep

⁴² William Walker, Jr., “Rehiring Sole Bar At County Hospital,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 29 June 1969, 1-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ William Walker, Jr., “...Hospital,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 29 June 1969, 2-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

their positions. Meanwhile strike participants at the Medical College had already begun returning to their positions by July 1st. The prolonged strike at Charleston County was surprising to some observers because “[t]he County Hospital strike had been considered a sympathy walk-out during the 100-day crisis. Most felt its settlement would be a matter-of-course if the Medical College dispute could be resolved.”⁴⁵ That observers were surprised that the strike at Charleston County persisted for weeks after the Medical College strike was resolved illustrates the disconnect between some Charleston citizens and officials and the striking workers. It is clear that even at the end of the Medical College strike common citizens did not understand that the County strike was not merely in sympathy but the result of similar work conditions and experiences as the workers at the Medical College.

Almost a month after the strike at the Medical College Hospital ended and 113 days after official strike action began, workers and county officials agreed to a settlement at Charleston County Hospital on July 18, 1969. Unlike earlier negotiations, by July 17th grievance procedures were the central holdup to a settlement. The county council and worker representatives eventually agreed to a tiered grievance structure. Similar to the Medical College agreement, the grievance procedure would begin with a worker’s supervisor and, if necessary, end with a presentation in front of the county council. The department head, county manager and personnel director were the intermediate tiers of the procedure. 42 of the striking workers were set to return to their positions on July 22ⁿ. 27 others were to be rehired within three months. The settlement

⁴⁵ Stewart R. King, “Negotiations Deadlocked In County Hospital Dispute,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 1 July 1969, 1-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina; Stewart R. King, “...Strike,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 1 July 1969, 2-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

also included a commitment to the \$1.60 per hour minimum wage and worker access to the County Credit Union.⁴⁶

While the County Council represented the hospital and County interests in strike negotiations, the workers' coalition included the Charleston County chapter of Local 1199B, the SCLC, and various concerned citizen committees. Rosetta Simmons, Hermina Traye, Stalin J. Bryant, Willene Myers and Alma Harden were members of the 1199B County Hospital Committee. Rosetta Simmons, the strikers' committee chairwoman, seemed satisfied with the agreement saying "[w]e will return to work in a new relationship of mutual respect and dignity. We are devoted to the hospital and each other in our commitment." Carl Ferris, Charleston representative for the SCLC, commented " [a] critical and significant victory has been consummated today in Charleston. It is a victory in all the poor, black and white, red and yellow. Equally important is the fact that it is a victory for Charleston because another step toward democracy has been taken. Now it is time for us (SCLC) to march on to other cities and win in them. It is possible the case has been won for the South." Though Ferris spoke of the SCLC moving on to other cities, they would not be totally absent from Charleston until the end of their annual convention which would be held in Charleston later that summer.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

The hospital strike ended with some semblance of a victory for the workers. Workers altered hospital, city, county, local, and state operations in their quest for some form of income equality and human rights. With increased hourly wages and some guarantee that they would not

⁴⁶ Betty Walker, "Hospital Strike Settled," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 19 July 1969, 1-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina; Betty Walker, "...Hospital," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 19 July 1969, 2-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

⁴⁷ Betty Walker, "...Hospital," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 19 July 1969, 2-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.; "Settlement Of Strike (An Editorial)," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 20 July 1969, 1-A. Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

face on-the-job discrimination, workers were ready to get back to work and to provide for their families. The long-term consequences of the strike were yet to be seen. While they initially gained union recognition, various stipulations in the agreements with the Medical College and Charleston County limited the reach and scope of Local 1199B. Concessions for access to hospital credit unions and the acceptance of the union as a party in grievance negotiations were outweighed by the reality of South Carolina being a right-to-work state. Any progress toward better working conditions was limited because workers were not required to join the union and union dues were not automatically transferred to the union from the workers' wages. The intermediate step of the worker having to pay union dues after they were paid lessened the likelihood of the union surviving off of dues.

Regardless of this reality, the strike proved that civil rights and labor could have a future in organizing around economic equality. For many involved, the Charleston campaign was seen as the beginning of the civil rights and labor coalition. For the SCLC and Local 1199, the Charleston strike was thought to be a beginning of a formal alliance between civil rights and labor organizations. In Jack O'Dell's 1969 essay on the strike, he offered a hopeful outlook for the future of civil rights and labor organizing. According to O'Dell

Just as Montgomery, more than a decade ago, forged a model for a mass movement assault upon the public practice of racial segregation, the Charleston hospital workers have given us *one model* for beginning to develop a nation-wide mass movement of the poor. And only a sustained militant mass movement will push this nation towards making a firm national commitment to abolish poverty....Charleston forged a unity between the community-organizing techniques developed during the civil rights era of the Freedom Movement and the working class organizational techniques of strike action developed by the labor movement.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Jack O'Dell, "Charleston's Legacy to the Poor People's Campaign," in *Climbin' Jacob's Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O'Dell*, ed. Nikhil Pal Singh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 189.

O'Dell was not alone in his enthusiasm. Ralph Abernathy also hoped that the coalition represented a new era of the civil rights movement. Local 1199 was also invested in the lasting impact of the campaign. 1199 produced a documentary on the strike called *I Am Somebody* that was used to recruit hospital workers around the United States.⁴⁹

The strike was a momentary success for labor and civil rights. The idea that these two activist traditions could merge into a productive coalition held the promise of a sustainable future for liberal human rights activists. But the realities of labor organizing in a right to work state limited the long-term impact of the summer's long strike. Regardless of its sustainability, the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike had a lasting impact on the city of Charleston, the women and men who acted as the primary organizers and picketers, and the legacy of the campaign for economic rights. Ultimately, the people involved in the day-to-day struggle carried the consequences of the strike into the hospitals when they returned to work and in their personal lives as marks of the fight for equality.

In Chapter Four "A Women's Movement," I explore the lives of four women who were involved in the strike at various levels. These women came to the strike from differing perspectives and used various methods during strike. This glimpse into their lives offer a more layered narrative of what it meant to be a black woman activist in the late 1960s.

⁴⁹ *I Am Somebody*. Directed by Madeline Anderson. 20 min. First Run/Icarus Films, 1970. DVD.

Chapter Four

A Women's Movement

They were out so long, and all, I was thinking about [was] their children. It was Easter coming and they were out on strike. So my daughter and I got together and we had an Easter egg hunt for those strikers' children. And I remember I did not-- I wasn't able to really go out with them, march with them but I had done a lot of other [things] for them. But anyway, that strike, it was really something. And we had a young lady that was president of that union.

- Marjorie Amos-Frazier, June 17, 2008¹

When describing herself and fellow strikers Mary Moultrie, the president of Local 1199B remarked, "we were all black, virtually all women, and virtually all heads of household. We were what they call 'non-professional' workers... We were their non-professional workers with professional responsibilities."² The women of the Charleston strike were striking for a union, fair wages, and fair treatment. These demands had an impact on their working lives as well as their family lives. While other treatments of the Charleston strike have focused on 1199, I will argue that it was primarily a women's movement and not wholly a union movement. Women like Mary Moultrie, Naomi White, Rosetta Simmons, Carrie Mitchell, and many others were essential to the strike not only as daily participants on the picket line but also as leaders of the local movement establishment. This chapter illustrates that the women involved in the strike came to

¹ Marjorie Amos-Frazier. Interview with Otha Jennifer Dixon. Recording. Charleston, SC., June 17, 2008, pg. 9. Interview number U-0384 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA.

² "Remarks of Mary Moultrie at South Carolina Voices of the Civil Rights Movement Conference: A Conference on the History of the Civil Rights Movement in South Carolina 1940-1970 on the occasion of the opening of an exhibit *We'll Never Turn Back* A Smithsonian Institution Travelling Exhibit 130 photographs of the Civil Rights Movement October 30-November 28, 1982" November 5 – 6, 1982 at The Charleston Museum", loose files, pg. 41. Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.

action from a variety of perspectives and chose to use different methods in order to force change in Charleston.

By the late 1960s, domestic work was no longer the primary option for working-class black women. For some black women in Charleston and other places around the country, hospital work became an increasingly attractive career for women of all professional levels.³ However, the work environment was no less fraught with racial tension and discrimination than the domestic space. In late 1967, black hospital workers, most of them women, at the Medical College of South Carolina began meeting to discuss grievances and to organize some unified action. Working-class black women led these hospital workers to action.

The women of the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike were marginal in their community. While some historians have addressed the strike's importance within the labor movement, black women as central figures, both as leaders and as foot soldiers, is less understood.⁴ Coretta Scott King's visible involvement with the strike as well as local black women leaders provides an opportunity to address black women's activism cross class lines. This paper will provide some biographical information about key participants in the strike including the local union president Mary Moultrie, outspoken picketer Rosetta Simmons, and Coretta Scott King as well as offer some commentary on the motivations for their protest.

³ For more on black women's exodus from domestic work see: Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Karen Brodtkin Sacks, *Caring by the Hour: Women, Work, and Organizing at Duke Medical Center*. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988) and Darlene Clark Hine *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), among others.

⁴ Scholarship on the 1969 Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike has generally focused on the involvement of Local 1199 and the turn towards radical black activism in the late 1960s. Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg's *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* offers a thorough history of Local 1199. Chronicling the development of the union, its growth during the 1960s and 1970s, and involvement in key events, Fink and Greenberg give great context for the growing importance of this union during the 1960s and 1970s. The strike is also discussed in Philip Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1981*, Stephen O'Neill's dissertation "From the Shadow of Slavery: The Civil Rights Years in Charleston," and Millicent Brown's chapter "Black Women on Strike In Charleston, South Carolina: We Shall Overcome, I Think," in *Studies in African American Leadership: Individuals, Movements, and Committees*.

While Rosetta Simmons, a nurse at Charleston County Hospital, spent most of her childhood and adult life in Charleston, Mary Moultrie, the eventual president of Local 1199B, moved north from Charleston to New York City in search of better work opportunities. Of her decision to move to New York Ms. Moultrie recalled “when I got out of high school, it was almost impossible for a person without a college education to land a job. My family, you know, could not afford an education and at that time in the ‘60s, in the 1960s...I needed the work to help my parents with the other kids and I decided that I was going to go to New York.” She continued, “I went to New York and I landed a job there as a nurse’s aid at Goldwater Memorial Hospital...At that hospital, they had a course, you know, it was like on-the-job training, they call it a “waiver course” where you could become a LPN. You work and you go to school, but you get paid. So I worked in New York...seven years...from 1960 to 1967. I think it was March of 1967, I came back to Charleston, after awhile you get homesick, you want to come back.”⁵

Upon her return to Charleston, Mary Moultrie was unable to get a job as a licensed practical nurse. Moultrie had to decide whether or not to go back to school in South Carolina or take a pay and position cut as a nurse’s assistant. While she was homesick, Moultrie also moved back to Charleston with the plan to continue supporting her family. She “had to work” even if it meant working at a lower skilled position.⁶ Low wages were accompanied by demeaning work conditions. Moultrie and those similarly employed made \$1.30 per hour, were restricted to segregated lounges and locker rooms, and were often mistreated by white coworkers. Of their decision to organize, if only informally in the beginning, Moultrie remarked “conditions were

⁵ Mary Moultrie. Interview with Jean-Claude Bouffard. Recording. Unknown Location, July 28, 1982, pg. 3. AMN 500.009.005, Jean-Claude Bouffard Civil Rights Interviews, Avery Research Center at the College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

just too much, you know. Once people started talking about it, then you feel the impact of it. So we decided that we wanted to change the whole system, and we decided that what we would do start having these weekly meetings.”⁷ These meetings were the beginnings of the Charleston movement.

Carrie Mitchell was a frequent attendee at these weekly meetings. Born in 1938 outside of Charleston in Beaufort County, South Carolina, Mitchell was a low wage worker at the Medical College of South Carolina. As a divorced mother of five, Mitchell struggled financially during the strike. Of the strike’s toll on her family, Mitchell reflected, “[i]t was hard. It was very hard...the union helped us pay rent.” She continued “[the strike] was [a] sacrifice that was awful, and it was a lot of time away from my children because I was all they had...it was a trying time for almost all of us.”⁸ Mitchell was one of many single mothers actively involved in picketing and working in the union headquarters.

Local, state, and federal officials were vigilant during the strike. South Carolina Governor Robert McNair, who was keen on law and order as exhibited by the tragic Orangeburg Massacre of 1968, sent National Guardsmen, with bayonets on the ends of their rifles, to monitor the situation. The Charleston police chief arrested picketers en masse. SCLC president Ralph Abernathy was jailed for more than a week during the strike. Carrie Mitchell also went to jail. Of her brief time in jail Mitchell reflected that it “was just scary for me.”⁹ Law enforcement used jail as a consequence for activists who broke court injunctions and broke other city ordinances.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Carrie Mitchell. Interview with Jennifer Otha Dixon. June 25, 2008, pg. 8. Interview number U-0389 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

Moultrie, Simmons, Mitchell, and Naomi White each offer a window into the motivations for action in Charleston in 1969. At face value, it is easy to assume that Moultrie, Simmons, and Mitchell were solely motivated to strike in order to make more money. But a closer look offers a variety of reasons. For Moultrie and Simmons, women who had received some level of “professional” medical training, not only were they discriminated against based on their race, they were also barred from working to their highest professional ability. These women came to the strike from different perspectives and with different end goals. However disparate their desires were, Moultrie, Simmons, Mitchell, White and dozens of others represent an important constituency.

Black women activists sacrificed again and again during the movement to affirm black citizenship and humanity. While the strike’s end initially led to union recognition, a slight increase in wages, and an end to workplace discrimination, Local 1199B eventually became ineffective due to lack of funds and manpower. Though the union’s influence waned, strike participants gained more than temporary relief. Reflecting on the strike forty years later, Rosetta Simmons concluded,

Money will come later, but just those things, being treated as human beings and being treated with dignity and with respect. And I think, when I think about all of what we went through, we got some respect, in a sense....The big thing, as far as I was concerned, is that we were being treated as a human being, and before that, we weren't. You know, you were told to do so you did it, not in a comfortable way, but as if you're just another thing, in other words . . . [I wanted to be] treated as a human being with dignity and with respect.¹⁰

Women involved in the Charleston campaign approached the strike with a variety of motivations ranging from material concerns like wage increases to a desire for more respect. Mary Moultrie, Rosetta Simmons, Carrie Mitchell, Coretta Scott King, and dozens of other

¹⁰ Rosetta Simmons. Interview with Kerry Taylor, Mary Moultrie, and William Saunders. March 5, 2009, pg. 31. The Citadel Oral History Program, Charleston, SC, USA.

women were essential to the sustainment and success of the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike. Their sacrifices for dignity and respect as well as better work conditions are similar to hundreds or thousands of other black women who picketed and marched in earlier civil rights campaigns. The Charleston strike and the women who powered it offer a new window into black women's history during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as well as their roles in late-twentieth century labor struggles.

MARY MOULTRIE

Mary Moultrie was born in the early 1940s in Charleston but left in the early 1960s for New York in search of better job opportunities to help support her family. Her father was “a naval shipyard worker. [Her] mom was a housewife [who] did do some work in white folks' homes...other than that she just stayed home and took care of her children.” Moultrie “had worked in New York as an LPN, a waiver nurse.” When she moved back to Charleston at the latter part of 1967, the Medical College “did not recognize [her] certificate that [she] got there as a waiver nurse. They didn't know about it.” So Ms. Moultrie worked as a nurse's aid which was effectively a demotion in position and pay from her career in New York. According to Moultrie, “Charleston paid less. When I first went in I was making less than a dollar thirty an hour. When we went out on strike in 1969 I was making one thirty an hour.”¹¹ Though she had advanced training, Ms. Moultrie was not allowed to work as an LPN so she made even less money than she was qualified to make.

Unlike other women involved in the strike, Ms. Moultrie was exposed to activism in her teen years through her relationship with Esau Jenkins. Along with Septima Clark, Jenkins was a

¹¹ Mary Moultrie. Interview with Otha Jennifer Dixon. June 23, 2008, pg. 1. Charleston, South Carolina. Interview number U-0390 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

part of the civil rights vanguard in Charleston. As a teenager Moultrie recalled, “I got a job in a restaurant that [Esau Jenkins] had in Charleston. I got to be friends with his children. Mr. Esau used to take me around with him doing his political things. I would help make speeches and help with voter registration and other things that he was involved in.” This early politicization informed Moultrie’s involvement in the early organizing period for the strike and the strike itself.¹²

Moultrie’s time in New York was also a formative period. Since she lived in New York during Charleston’s Civil Rights Movement, she was not involved in any of that activism. She recalled that “[w]hen I came back here and went to Medical College I knew that things were different from the hospitals that I had worked at in New York. In New York everybody, black, white, Puerto Rican, everybody got along well. When I came here I could see the separatism. Blacks didn’t sit in the same lounge. They had a lounge, we had a locker room.” Juxtaposed with her experiences within a multicultural and integrated work environment in New York, the environment at the Medical College reinforced the separation of blacks and whites in a time when federal legislation mandated at least a superficial acceptance of integration. Moultrie began organizing because people “were suffering and there was very little said about it.” By late 1967, soon after she had returned to Charleston, conditions at the Medical College had come to a head and workers began formally organizing.¹³

In her account of the beginning of the organizing period, Moultrie recalled that

It happened in December of sixty-seven. Five, well they were nurses’ aides and LPNs, went to work during the Christmas holiday, I guess no one really wants to work. When they went on duty that day the nursing charge, which was a white RN, because at that

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

time all of your registered nurses were white. You may find a couple that have come from other places but they were predominately white. The nurse refused to give the workers report on the conditions of the patient. She offered them an ultimatum, “you take care of the patients or your go home.” They insisted that they weren’t doing anything without getting a report. You don’t know what to do. She was in a really bad mood. Being in charge she told them, “either you go to work and take care of the patients or you go home.” They went home. Then they were fired.¹⁴

This incident sparked weekly organizing meetings. Along with Moultrie, William Saunders, and Reginald Barrett, “who had some connection with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare,” began talking with workers “about grievances and found out that this was not an isolated case that it was widespread throughout the hospital. It wasn’t just one RN being nasty, there were all kinds of conditions. That’s when we found out about the salary.”¹⁵ Barrett “was on the civil rights committee from Washington, to look at [civil rights violations at] the Medical [College.]”¹⁶

Moultrie continued,

I had just come in. I was making a dollar and thirty an hour but there were people who had been there ten or twelve years making a dollar and thirty an hour. The heavy workloads, people being fired --. If a white RN wanted to fire you, she could do it. No grievance procedures or anything like that. Nursing students come on the unit for what they called fieldwork and you would have to teach them what to do but if they didn’t like you and wanted you fired then you were fired. It was just a really bad situation. They didn’t have any respect for us whatsoever. They would call some people out of their names. Call them monkey grunts, things like that. It was just bad.

Ms. Moultrie’s recollections of the direct catalyst for the strike and early organizing offer an important perspective on the origins of the strike. The systemic underpayment of black workers and discriminatory situations like segregated break rooms and white nurses and nursing students

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ William Saunders. Interview with Kerry Taylor, Mary Moultrie, and Rosetta Simmons. March 5, 2009, pg. 3, Local 1199-Charleston, 1111 King St., Charleston, SC The Citadel Oral History Program. The Citadel Archives & Museum.

that sometimes had unilateral firing power were examples of the hostile working environment at the Medical College.¹⁷

In response to these unfair working conditions, Moultrie approached known Charleston activists to find out what, if any, recourse the workers. She recalled,

I spoke with Mr. Saunders and we started these weekly meetings. They were able --. The people who worked with HEW were able to get the five people back to work. We knew at that point that we needed to do something. Mr. Saunders, he was the leader, he would tell us that the doctors had an association. He didn't like that way that unions were or anything like that. He never told us that we needed to be a part of a union, he just said that doctors have an association, nurses have an association, and you all need something. That's why we started coming together like that. Started off with about five or six of us and each week we would say that when you come in next week bring somebody that you can trust. We wanted to keep it out of the ears of the supervisors and it just kept growing and growing. Until it got to the point where --. We were meeting at Reginald Barrack's real estate office. It got so large, we couldn't meet there anymore so that's when they called in Isaiah Bennett. He was a part of the Tobacco Workers union and they had a union hall on East Bay Street and we started meeting there. It just kept growing. We started asking to meet with the president of the hospital to let them know that we had concerns. Sixty-seven is gone. We were way into sixty-eight. Cause we started to get the five back. That was in sixty-seven. They got back in sixty-eight because this was like Christmas time, a week or so into the next year.¹⁸

In most of her accounts of the strike, William Saunders and other local Charleston men like Isaiah Bennett and Esau Jenkins figure heavily in the planning and execution of the strike. Since these men had organizing experience and community connections, they formed the skeleton for the strike providing guidance and know-how to the novice activists. For Ms. Moultrie, several of these men served as mentors both from her youth and as an adult. But these men were also outsiders as none of them worked in any of the Charleston area hospitals. Bennett, a veteran labor activist who had been apart of the 1947 tobacco workers' strike in Charleston, and

¹⁷ Mary Moultrie. Interview with Otha Jennifer Dixon. June 23, 2008, pg. 5. Charleston, South Carolina. Interview number U-0390 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

Saunders, who had ties to the Charleston activist community, were critical to the early development and success of the strike.

As those early meetings grew in numbers of attendees and frequency, the workers began to consider an action plan. After they “sent [a] letter to Dr. McCord, he kept refusing [to acknowledge the issues] He sent out this flyer throughout this hospital saying that the union only wants your money.” According to Moultrie, McCord’s assertion that the union was solely after the workers’ money “was an insult because if you are making a dollar thirty and hour you don’t have any money. We had nothing really to lose so people really got upset about that. We got even more members. So we kept on asking them to meet with us and then he did.” After 1199 and the SCLC settled in Charleston, the workers’ weekly meetings continued as usual. 1199 chartered the Charleston workers’ organization as 1199B and Ms. Moultrie was elected president with Jack Bradford and Rosetta Simmons as the vice presidents. Ernestine Grimes and Sadie Brown were the secretaries.¹⁹

Moultrie maintains that not much changed for the workers after 1199 and the SCLC settled in Charleston. In her estimation, they simply provided the workers with the tools to conduct an effective movement. According to Moultrie the large organizational presence of 1199 “was just an encouragement. We knew we had somebody to back us. They didn’t come in to run the union, they kind of came in to lead us in the right direction. We still had our own meetings.” The organizational structure that Moultrie, Simmons, Saunders, and others built sustained the workers for the duration of the strike. Just as they were when 1199 settled in Charleston, Moultrie recalled, “people were excited [when the SCLC came.] There was definitely no turning back then. We got support from all over. To have people like Rev. Abernathy, especially Mrs.

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

King to come here was motivating.”²⁰

Moultrie felt that the outside help was necessary because “they knew about fundraising. They had PR people that could pull the press together so that we could get the coverage that we got.” She continued “we certainly would never have made it without 1199. I don’t think we could have made it without SCLC either because they had expertise in mobilizing, getting marches, and working with children and stuff like that. We needed everybody that was here.” Despite the apparent cooperation between the outside organizations and the workers, Moultrie was not privy to all of the backdoor dealings during the strike.²¹

Moultrie’s position as president of Local 1199B was multifaceted. She spoke at nightly mass meetings, with the press as the workers’ representative, and she traveled across the country to fundraise for 1199. Of her role in the strike she reflected, “I stayed with the people. Periodically, I would travel around trying to get support, finances and stuff like that. I flew a lot of different places. A lot of things, like the meetings they had behind closed doors, those doors were closed [to me.] I wouldn’t know anything about them ‘til later.” By staying with the people, Moultrie was close to the day-to-day activity of the workers and not necessarily caught up in the politicking of the strike. Ms. Moultrie applied a distinction between “power” and leadership. She understood herself as a leader of “the people” and not necessarily as an arbiter of power or politics.²²

As a hospital worker, Moultrie related to the struggle that many of the women on the picket line faced. Like many of these women, she was a single mother. Moultrie recalled that

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Ibid., 12.

²² Ibid., 10.

“the majority of the women who were out there were single moms, heads of household. Some of them had as many as ten or twelve children.” She continued, “I had one daughter...She was there [on the picket lines.] She was two. When I first went out there she hadn’t turned two yet but I used to bring her to the union hall and stuff with me so I wouldn’t lose contact with her. Some of them had their children everyday. Even though we were marching some were pushing kids in the strollers, some were walking. My vice- president even led a march with children.”²³

As the president of Local 1199B, Ms. Moultrie was a main target of her coworkers’ and supervisors’ ire upon her return to work after the strike. Even as late as 2008, Moultrie found it difficult to recount her reentry into the Medical College Hospital. She recalled:

It was hard and I hadn’t really gotten to the point that I could actually talk about it. There’s been a lot of workplace mobbing... I went through a lot. It’s not easy. I can’t talk about that at this point. But I have overcome. I stuck it out as long as I could. There was a lot of picking on you and stuff like that. It was bad. When I left [there] I went to the city. I worked in recreations for a while. There was some of that there too. People coming and find out who you are and they don’t really get to know you.

Her return to the hospital was detrimental to Moultrie’s physical and mental health. Moultrie was a notorious figure in Charleston because of her prominent involvement in the strike. Her coworkers made her job more difficult. The fact that she could not even escape the backlash even after she left the hospital speaks to her impact.²⁴

Moultrie’s unsympathetic coworkers were not alone in their treatment of Ms. Moultrie after she returned to work. Workers who had been out on strike also distanced themselves from Moultrie. She recalled that

a lot of people went back to work and didn’t want to hear anything about the union. That

²³ Ibid., 12.

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

was a problem I had too. That togetherness wasn't there anymore. It made me crazy because of the unity that we once had. Some of the workers would see me walking in the hall and would notice it was me and go someplace else. They would go in a patient's room or something. They didn't want to be seen talking with me.

That those who once stood on the front lines with her were no longer willing to be seen with her reflected the overwhelming was especially troubling for Moultrie. While she had led the strike to alleviate hostile working conditions, Moultrie returned to a hospital that was much the same, if not worse, as when she left. The difficulties with former strikers and her other coworkers and supervisors encapsulated the struggle of maintaining the activist spirit in Charleston after the strike ended. Opponents and those she had once called allies vilified Moultrie. These issues were apparent in and outside of the Medical College Hospital.²⁵

Outside of the hospital, Moultrie also struggled to keep Local 1199B active. With dwindling ranks of workers willing to openly associate themselves with Moultrie and, in conjunction, the union, Local 1199B did not last long after the strike ended. Moultrie explained the difficulties with maintaining the local: "we tried to maintain the union for a while but we didn't have the dues check off. It was hard to pay the bills. And then we weren't getting any money to support the union. So we paid rent and stuff out of our pockets for a while and then after that we just had to give it up." Soon after the strike ended and people were back to work with their minimal pay increases and hopes for better working conditions, Local 1199B was not operational. While the workers had sustained a movement since late 1967, once some concessions were made there was not the same sense of urgency to continue to put pressure on the hospitals to keep up their end of the bargain.²⁶

Not only was Moultrie disappointed in the dissolution of the union, but she also felt that

²⁵ Ibid., 16.

²⁶ Ibid., 16.

the settlement that ended the strike was unsatisfactory. According to Moultrie,

No. It wasn't enough change. They came up with a grievance procedure. It worked for a little while. They would allow an employee to take somebody in with them to represent them. They allowed me to do that a few times. Then after that, oh no you can't bring Mary Moultrie, you have to get somebody else. That lasted for a little while but after that things just reverted back to how they were, almost.

In her estimation, the grievance procedure, which was a contentious piece of the strike negotiations, was inconsistently applied. Since she was the union president, many workers wanted her to represent them at the grievance meetings. According to Moultrie, once the hospital barred her participation, the grievance talks deteriorated and eventually working conditions returned to the pre-strike status quo. Along with the defunct local, ineffective grievance procedures also contributed to Moultrie's belief that the gains of the strike had quickly fallen away.²⁷

Even with all of the difficulties, Moultrie continued her activism even as late as 2008. While there had been some gains for workers across Charleston, Moultrie explained her persistent activism commenting, "I have a passion. I know that working conditions can be better." She continued

I've got a problem now with black supervisors. When I was there were very few, if any, black supervisors. But now there are lots of black supervisors. They're doing the same things to their employees that the whites did. The whites are still on top because that's their supervisors and everything just trickles down, get in their head, and they do that to the workers. Then there so much fear. The people are so afraid to come out. I am talking about young blacks.

Hospital workers in Charleston were still facing some of the same issues as Moultrie and her comrades faced in the late 1960s. But black supervisors were now, in part, responsible for hostile working conditions for non-professional workers. Moultrie commented that some of the black

²⁷ Ibid., 18.

workers “have positions. Some of them are still dietary workers. They’re not called nurse’s aides or assistants anymore. I think they are called some kind of technician.” She lamented “they are still going through but they are afraid to stand up. *The difference then and now is that back then everybody stood up.* Right now, they want to call me on the phone and tell me what’s going on but when I say come to a meeting they won’t come.” That hospital workers were facing similar circumstances in 2008 as Moultrie and hundreds of others faced in the late 1960s speaks to the institutionalized nature of worker suppression and mistreatment and that the presence of black supervisors would not necessarily result in better working conditions for non-professional workers.

Mary Moultrie was integral to the early planning phase of the strike and throughout the duration of the strike action as she served as president of 1199B, spoke at nightly mass meetings, and traveled across the United States fundraising for 1199. Her involvement with worker activism lasted well beyond the length of the strike. She bore the consequences for her outspoken involvement in the strike for years after it was over and its impact lessened. Moultrie’s involvement on the grassroots level of the strike as a worker allowed her to be an effective leader. She understood the issues at the hospitals on a tactile level. Like the other women involved in the strike, the outcome of the strike impacted her daily life so she was especially motivated to work for actual change.

ROSETTA SIMMONS

Rosetta Simmons was born in the Mt. Pleasant section of Charleston. Like many of the women involved in the strike, Simmons had not been involved in any political activism during the Civil Rights Movement. The strike was her first experience in labor or civil rights organizing.

But as a lifelong Charleston resident, Simmons was well acquainted the complicated nature of integrated housing and segregated services like schools and hospitals. As a leader of the Charleston County branch of Local 1199B, Simmons' experiences during the strike offer some insight into the parallel experiences of workers at the Medical College and Charleston County.

After graduating from the segregated Burke View School in Charleston, South Carolina, Rosetta Simmons did what most working-class black women did in the 1950s; she went to work as a domestic in a white home. Unhappy with domestic work, Simmons found a job as a housekeeper at the Catholic St. Francis Hospital. It was there that "the sisters saw potential" in her and recommended that she apply for LPN school. She "did not want to be cleaning nobody's floor other than [her] own. This is why [she] went to nursing school." She attended Roper's School of Practical Nursing in Charleston and after passing the South Carolina licensing exam, she began working "in the black area" of Roper Hospital until 1959. She worked at the Medical College from 1959 to 1965 and began working at Charleston County Hospital in 1966 where she worked before joining the 1969 strike. Simmons' journey from working in a white home to hospital work is representative of working class black women's transition from in-home work to other service industry jobs from the 1950s to the 1970s.²⁸

Simmons became involved in organizing for the strike through her friend Isaiah Bennett, a Charleston activist who had been involved in labor activity for several decades before the strike. Since the Medical College was the largest hospital in Charleston, workers there were more aware of their coworkers complaints about working conditions and unfair treatment. But Rosetta Simmons was fairly isolated at Charleston County. The organizing meetings exposed Simmons

²⁸ Rosetta Simmons. Interview with Otha Jennifer Dixon. Recording. Charleston, SC., June 25, 2008, pg. 3. Interview number U-0392 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA.

to the pervasiveness of these situations in different hospitals across the city. Simmons recalled

that I attended [the] meetings that they were having and in so doing I was taking this information back to some of my coworkers. Since I was an LPN, I didn't know what was going on in the housekeeping department and the dietary department or other departments. In so doing, I found out that these people were having the same kind of complaints as some of the persons at Medical. So, I in-turn, started organizing Charleston [County] Hospital.

Ms. Simmons described the weekly organizing meetings as opportunities to address “complaints from the different areas because it was two hospitals involved. There were community people who were also involved. They all came together and saw that the need was that something needs to be done, because people weren't treated fairly and weren't treated as human beings, without respect.” Ms. Simmons became the lead activist at Charleston County and was the second-vice president of Local 1199B.²⁹

Throughout the strike, some involved made it their mission to expose scabs who continued to report to the hospitals to work and those who were hired to replace those workers who were out on strike. Ms. Simmons along with Naomi White and others were involved in tracking scabs down. Ms. Simmons reflected, “[w]e had [scabs] at [County], I know we did. It was brought to my attention that we did so we went out to prove that fact. And we did, we got together to meet at a certain point, I was the driver, and to catch the persons who were going to work. Didn't let them know that we saw them.” When these scabs went to work nightly “they were exposed.” She continued “[i]t was getting out of hand. We didn't mean to hurt anybody. The purpose was to let them know that you aren't really who you say you are. It almost got out of hand but we squashed it.”³⁰ The strike was contentious from beginning to end. Ms. Simmons' participation in exposing scabs did not prevent her from being a part of the formal negotiations with Charleston County

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 7.

representatives. That Ms. Simmons could thrive in both facets of the strike suggests that there was some understanding between adherents to nonviolent direct action, those involved in the negotiations at the Medical College and Charleston County, and activists who used more aggressive tactics to advance their cause. There were no strict lines between these groups.

Like most of the women involved in the strike, Rosetta Simmons came to the movement with familial responsibilities. At the beginning of the strike, Ms. Simmons was pregnant. About two weeks into the strike on April 2nd, she prematurely delivered a daughter who “died four days later.” Simmons recalled, “I was devastated because I lost my child. I stayed out for a while but I said it’s God’s will and I can’t question the work of the Lord. I said my job is to get back out there, and I did. I just wanted to be a part of what we started. I said God’s willing, I was able to get back out there.” Fueled by her dedication to the cause, Ms. Simmons eventually returned to the front lines of the strike, a testament to her mental, emotional, and physical fortitude.³¹

Walking off of their jobs for more than 100 days resulted in financial burdens for many of the women involved in the strike. Ms. Simmons managed to stay afloat because she had been saving money for her child during her pregnancy. Of her financial situation during the strike, Simmons reflected, “I wasn’t really out on my own. My older sister and I lived together so, we shared...shared in the plight that we were in. But I was always able to do my share because I had set aside “X” amount of dollars ...That’s how [I] managed.” She continued, “[t]he sacrifice was great. I can see why, to get a job, some persons should’ve gone back to the hospital but I can see that plight. We were out for a long time.”³²

As a leader of the Charleston County contingent, Ms. Simmons faced some difficulties

³¹ Ibid., 7.

³² Ibid., 8.

after the strike ended. Unlike the workers at the Medical College who went back to work on June 18th and those who went back to Charleston County on July 18th, Ms. Simmons “didn’t go back to work until November 10, 1969.” According to Simmons, there were “a hundred” workers out on strike from Charleston County “but they started fading away because of the longevity [of the strike] and we ended up with sixty-nine persons. They only rehired forty-two, so that left twenty-seven. I was among the twenty-seven.” She continued, “they realized that I was the agitator[or]... They said I was not going to ever be rehired back at Charleston [County] Hospital. But in the meantime, while we were out, we organized, we registered rather, 800 plus persons registered to vote during that time.”³³

According to Simmons, “[t]hose twenty-seven were never really rehired but they went and found jobs elsewhere.” She continued, “I didn’t, like I said because I had prepared myself financially, because I was an LPN I was making more than a dollar and something an hour, naturally. But I didn’t flaunt that either. I was with the cause” and there “were some instances, as far as LPN’s were concerned versus the black and white, we still had some issues too. But in the meantime they said there weren’t going to rehire me.” Simmons was shut out of work because of she was an “agitator” She recalled,

My manager, who’s white, where I was working, she had an eye out for me on the job. They hired an LPN after they wouldn’t rehire me. So that called to let them know they were hiring an LPN and they said they didn’t have an opening for me. He told me there wasn’t. I gave him the person’s name, the date, the place where she was rehired because my manager gave me the information. That was a Friday, they made room for me that Monday. November 10, I’ll never forget the date, 1969.

Simmons “knew going back was not going to be easy.” When she finally went back to work she planned to avoid confrontation. Simmons said “I am not going to let this... mouth get me in

³³ Ibid., 8.

trouble, and I didn't. I went back to work." She continued "I was working seven to three on one day, three to eleven two days later, and eleven to seven in that same week. Three shifts in one week, which is against the hospital policy, trying to wear me down. I didn't work it. I worked two shifts and called in the third one. I worked that way for about a month and a half. One day I said, 'you know what, work that third shift.' I did and they stopped."³⁴

Simmons' experiences upon her return to Charleston County were similar to those of other women, like Mary Moultrie, who were in leadership positions during the strike. As an officer within Local 1199B, a member of the negotiating committee for workers of Charleston County, and a part of the quasi-vigilante group who patrolled scabs, Simmons was a target for poor treatment upon her return to the hospital. Even her prolonged unemployment was a direct result of her visible involvement in the strike. Despite the hostile work environment, Rosetta Simmons managed to work at Charleston County Hospital until 1996.

NAOMI WHITE

Naomi White was born in 1925 in Charleston, South Carolina. By the time of the hospital strike, White had lived through Charleston's iteration of the Civil Rights Movement. As a member of the local NAACP chapter, White felt that the her chapter "wasn't all up to par" and that unlike the North Charleston chapter, the Charleston chapter was not "doing nothing but talk." The sit-in movement took hold in Charleston but White was "married and was too busy having offspring." But by the late 1960s, White became involved in the early organization of workers at hospitals around Charleston.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., 9.

³⁵ Naomi White. Interview with Otha Jennifer Dixon, June 25, 2008, pg. 2. Charleston, South Carolina. Interview number U-0393 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

Unlike Moultrie and Simmons, Mrs. White did not frequently attend the workers' organizing meetings that led to the strike. She "only attended...two of those meetings because [she] worked the graveyard shift and...had to be to work.". Despite her absence, White remained actively involved in the workers' plans because "the ones who kept up, they kept [her] abreast of what was going on." Since the walkout following the workers' failed meeting with Gov. McNair occurred on White's day off she "just didn't go back" to the hospital. The organizing meetings were essential in the planning before the strike began and throughout the duration of the movement.³⁶

Like many women involved in the strike, White's role as a mother overlapped with the time she spent on the picket lines. When asked about her children's participation in the strike, White recalled that "the older ones" joined in the strike. Her son who was a student at Wilberforce University in Ohio "came home and he participated" and her oldest daughter "participated in some of the marches and stuff." White continued "[b]ut the small, the two youngest ones, I didn't--. No. Several times they were out, but at the time my mother wouldn't let them come out, especially when it start getting rough." Though Mrs. White was a working mother, she did not have the same level of financial instability as some of the other women involved in the strike. While other women relied on financial assistance from the union and federal government, in some cases, White's husband worked in their barbershop and they rented out the third floor of their home. Though Mrs. White was not in as pressing a financial situation as her comrades, her enthusiasm for the strike and for fair wages and work conditions was just as high. She may have been able to take a more aggressive stance because she had more

³⁶ Ibid., 5.

security at home.³⁷

With the presence of armed National Guardsmen, police officers, and other intimidating forces, the front lines of the strike were contested spaces as workers tried to maintain their right to picket and march while law enforcement was charged with compelling the protestors to adhere to very restrictive mandates and injunctions. The contentiousness of the strike spread beyond the conflict between law enforcement and the strikers, but also between the workers who chose to strike for better wages and work conditions and the workers who continued to report to their hospital posts or those who were hired to replace the strikers. Many accounts of the strike include discussions of the sometimes violent confrontations between those on strike and those who continued to work at the hospitals. According to Naomi White, the workers on the line “worked together. Only what we called scabs, the ones that was sneaking in...[w]ho couldn’t come out” did not work with the strikers. The scabs “used to attend some of the meetings and go back [to the hospitals] and tell everything.” White also alleged that the scabs and replacement workers aggressively broke the picket lines.³⁸

There was a concerted effort among a group of the more aggressive strikers to prevent replacement workers from reporting to work. Naomi White recalled this team, comprised of one man and the rest women, who traveled around Charleston pursuing “scabs” on their way to work. White recounted, “[w]e’d ride around and we’d get out at certain places where we know they was coming, you know. Some of them, they would change their route and we find out where they change, where they’re going to come, and we’d be right there to greet them.” These strikers were serious about maintaining the integrity of the strike and viewed those who continued to work in

³⁷ Ibid., 6.

³⁸ Ibid., 7.

the hospitals as a hindrance to an effective movement. Mrs. White was a staunch opponent of those who continued to work and had numerous encounters with “scabs.” Of her group’s pursuit White recalled, “[w]e ripped them scabs up if we caught them. That’s what we did...that was our mission.”³⁹

In one encounter with a scab, White confronted a woman who, according to White, was heckling the protestors. Their confrontation resulted in White’s first jail experience. Of the fight, White recalled

Well to me it was because you shouldn’t break a picket line. And some of them, they did. And it was bad enough to try to get through a picket line, but then some of them they try to come through and then they still had derogatory remarks, you know. That’s what made you angry. That and not doing one thing but then you got, you know. That’s when I got locked up because I told this lady that worked in housekeeping that I know she was still making more than ninety cent an hour or something, and here she hired somebody to bring her in. I told her I didn’t object to her going in but she wasn’t going to break my line. And this guy, he says, “Oh, yes, she is because that’s what I’m being paid for.” I said, “Well, that’s your business. You can get her in any way you can, but you ain’t going through here.” He said, “Oh, yes, she is.” She had a bunch of chains and stuff around her neck and I grabbed them, and that’s when the free-for-all started...I got arrested.⁴⁰

White’s account illuminates a number of the frontline issues of the strike. In an effort to preserve the integrity of the strike, White and her fellow strikers sometimes used force to deter replacement workers from entering the Medical College and Charleston County. In response, women, like the one White confronted, used their limited funds to hire men to mediate their entrance into their jobs. These intra-worker confrontations often resulted in arrests and limited jail time. Since arrests were used to quell worker resistance to the police, injunctions, and to those they felt were undermining their efforts, workers were often bound for some kind of police interaction on a daily basis. As a result of frequent arrests, workers and their supporters cycled in

³⁹ Ibid., 10-11

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

and out of the various local Charleston jails.

Mrs. White was arrested two times and spent a limited amount of time in police custody. Of her first arrest, White commented that Isaiah Bennett, “Attorney Payton and [Fred] Moore” “didn’t let me stay in because they didn’t want no one person in jail because you didn’t know what would happen.” She also recalled that she had a run in with jail workers over “the food.”

There’s one that they brought, you know the trays had compartments, and there was lima beans and green peas and pork and beans, three kinds of beans, and I said, “I ain’t a peas or bean eater, so I’m not eating that mess.” I threw that on the matron or whatever they called them at that time, but there wasn’t nothing they could do because they had all of us in like they call a bullpen. So there wasn’t nothing that one could do to an individual with a group there. That’s why they didn’t want you to go in there, for safety, by yourself...because I would fight them.

White’s zeal motivated her to confront “scabs” and prison workers alike. Other strikers comported themselves in similar ways in encounters with “scabs,” police, and other opposition. While women activists were in the majority, men did participate at all levels of the strike. White recalled that the “twenty or twenty-five” men who worked in the hospitals alongside the non-professional women supported the strike effort.⁴¹

As the SCLC and 1199 became more involved in the day-to-day operations of the strike, protests expanded from picketing at the hospitals and at government buildings in Columbia and Charleston to the wider Charleston community. Boycotts of King Street businesses, a major shopping thoroughfare, furthered the economic impact of the strike. According to White,

... we asked people not to shop on King Street. There weren’t that many malls like we have now, but there were outlets across, you know. And some of them, they insist they going to shop, so when they come up, we relieved them of their shopping...so then they stopped and they were going west of the Ashley, so we sent a group over there, let them know you can’t get away. We are everywhere... A lot of businesses on King Street, they

⁴¹ Ibid., 8-9.

had to close because of that, because people were afraid to go after we started helping them with their products.⁴²

White's description of the more aggressive segment of protestors highlights the differences between both the local and national organizations and individuals who solely ascribed to nonviolent direct action and those who used whatever means they deemed necessary to further the strike.

The distinction between the nonviolent direct action methods championed by the SCLC and some local activists' use of more aggressive tactics was not simply the difference between nonviolent direct action and self-defense. Activists like Naomi White were interested in any methods that maintained the integrity of the strike effort and advanced the cause. Whether or not those methods aligned with the nonviolent strain of the civil rights movement or with the popular turn towards more aggressive, sometimes violent, means was irrelevant. White and those who participated in harassing scabs who tried to report to work and shoppers on King Street understood their efforts as essential to the strike and not necessarily as a political statement against nonviolent direct action or for self-defense. The distinctions between nonviolence and self-defense were immaterial to the on-the-ground activists in Charleston. The theoretical merit of nonviolent direct action and self-defense was not central to many of the strikers as they were more concerned with the material consequences of low wages, adverse working conditions, and their inability to appeal for better treatment through a proper grievance procedure.

After many concessions and their ultimate acceptance of de facto union recognition, women like Naomi White returned to the hospitals they had left months earlier. Like Moultrie and Simmons, White recalled that upon their return, their supervisors and coworkers treated

⁴² Ibid., 12.

them differently. According to White

They were afraid of us, because they didn't put us on the floors we came off. They said the scabs didn't feel too comfortable. But I said it was foolish for them to do that because they said we could request to go back on your original unit within a month, so what was the difference a month. And like I told the supervisor, I said, 'I don't think that's too smart or fair either,' I said, 'Because if somebody up on the ninth floor I want to cut their behind I'm going on the elevator and do what I got to do and come back'...so I said that didn't work too well.⁴³

Beyond being assigned to new units, White suggested that new workers hired during the strike were not qualified for their positions. There were

a lot of inexperienced people, and they wanted us to go back, but since they did what they did to distribute us like they did, we stayed wherever they put us and let them see wherever they put us we were capable, because they had--. When we came up they had--. Anybody off the street could come in then and get a job...I know a couple of informants we let stay in so we would get feedback, they said they had people off the street to take people's pressure and temperature. They got the thermometer in the mouth upside down...So they were glad in a way for us to get back in there. And a lot of people, when they found out there was a strike, a lot of people came and got their parents or patients out and left the hospital.⁴⁴

Even though the hospitals remained functional for the duration of the strike, they were forced to replace skilled, non-professional workers with people who had little to no hospital experience. The non-professional workers who worked at various levels in patient care were essential to the effectiveness of the hospitals.

Upon their return to the Medical College and Charleston County, the women experienced varying degrees of harassment and mistreatment sometimes relative to their standing within the union and strike hierarchies. In a lengthy account of her return to the hospital, Naomi White recalled that some of the racial hostilities between black and white workers at the hospital remained. Never one to hold her tongue, White commented that "I could talk for myself and

⁴³ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

defend the other people's affairs because several times they tell me, 'Ms. White, you should mind your business. This doesn't concern you.' I said, 'It does concern me. You see the color of her skin and the color of mine? That's where the concern come in, and you don't be talking to her like that.'" White took to defending some of her coworkers "[b]ecause some of these people, they get their feelings hurt. You see them go in the bathroom, come out, eyes, you know they've been crying from what they said, and they wouldn't talk back. I was lucky I lasted there as long as I did."⁴⁵

White consistently stood up for herself. After one encounter after the strike, White threatened to leave her job after her white coworker told her to "shut up" and "don't talk back to her." White said that "if it wasn't for a couple of the nurses coming out the nursery I was going to autoclave her ass, because I had done opened the door and said, 'Who do you think you're talking to...I want you to know I'm a grown woman.' I think I was forty-seven years old." Her supervisor intervened and told White's coworker, " 'You can't go around talking to these grown women like they're children or something...I think you better leave because I'm not getting rid of her.'" White eventually heard that her former coworker was "re-hired at one of the other hospitals at Roper."⁴⁶

For Naomi White, the gains of the strike were incremental. She recalled that after the strike they "had a little more respect." But it was hard to keep the local union active. Simmons echoed Moultrie's sentiments about the union's decline. It was hard to "[k]eep going, yeah, because it seemed like everybody got back to work and start, you know, they just got too comfortable, relaxed. And some of them didn't want to pay dues. The dues would be what kept

⁴⁵ Ibid., 17-18.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

us floating for rent and different expenses. It just dwindled like that.” White worked at the Medical College hospital until 1985. After 27 years, she took an early retirement. While her supervisors wanted her to keep working into her mid-sixties, she declined “because there was no guarantee that [she] would live that long.” She reflected “ ‘[j]ust as long as you’re in this world you ain’t never going to get what’s due to you.’ So I’m satisfied with a little.”⁴⁷

CARRIE MITCHELL

Carrie Mitchell was born on October 21, 1938 in Beaufort County, South Carolina and with her mother moved to Charleston around the age of 6. Her mother worked as a domestic. Of her childhood, Mitchell recalled that “[f]or my mother and her children [life] was hard and [we] struggled. She had a hard time, and me, being the oldest, I kind of, when I got of age, kind of raised her children, took care of her children. So life was hard for us. It was hard.” As a child and as a young adult worker, Mitchell was firmly a part of the working-class. Prior to the strike, Mitchell had not been involved in any civil rights related activism. As a novice activist, Mitchell’s involvement in the strike was similar to dozens of other women who came to the strike without prior politicization or activism. By acting on their own interests and not as trained activists, women like Mitchell represented an integral segment of the Charleston movement. Mitchell was an early participant in the weekly organizing and grievance meetings at the East Bay Union Hall, churches, and other community buildings. As an employee of the Medical

⁴⁷ Ibid., 14-15.

College Hospital, Mitchell experienced a variety of unfair work conditions and as a result was a part of the early worker organizing efforts.⁴⁸

According to Mitchell, the strike action began accidentally. On March 19, 1969 workers believed that they had a meeting with Gov. McNair regarding their grievances but were met by other hospital workers who were not interested in union organizing. After the failed meeting, “[w]e trashed his office, you know, and all like that, so people came off their job. Some people was working; some people was not working. So when they walked off their job and then they came in the office, of course, he's not going to let you come back to work tomorrow, so the strike actually began that day.” Regardless of their intent, the workers had jumpstarted the strike. The workers used early meetings after they struck to firm up plans and demands. According to Mitchell “we just discussed the plans, and the things that they were going to ask for, and the different things they was going to ask. Of course, they were asking for the union. And then there were the people there from New York 1199 and then a man named Issac and of course Bill Saunders. A couple of the preachers were there, and that's what they were planning, asking for pay raises, the union, better working conditions, and things like that.”⁴⁹

During the strike, Mitchell marched on the picket line and worked at the local union office. As a picketer, Mitchell had a first hand view of the daily struggle to maintain people on the front lines, as hospital officials and workers actively worked to prevent workers from joining the strike. In one instance, Moultrie described a supervisor named “Miss Theresa” going to her subordinates’ houses and urged them to report to work. Not only did strike participants see this

⁴⁸ Carrie Mitchell. Interview with Jennifer Dixon. June 25, 2008, pg. 8. Charleston, South Carolina. Interview number U-0389 from the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4.

as a method that limited their actions, but they also actively protested “scabs” and people who continued to report to work regardless of the strike. According to Mitchell, “[w]e were upset. We were upset. They were working, and some of those people that was working, they stayed in the hospital. Or they provide them with a place to stay. Yeah, they stayed there. Some of them stayed for days and kind of like that, and just stayed there.”⁵⁰

Strikers and their supporters faced the possibility of jail, injury, harassment, and other negative consequences. Most often people were arrested for violating the limiting injunctions against picketing and night marches. Mitchell recalled that

[a] lot of people got arrested. A lot of people—I forgot that child's first name, but her last name is Malcolm. There's some people got beat up real bad. Yeah, she got beat up real bad. By the police, but she was in the hospital I think over two weeks, a while... That girl got beat up real bad by some guys. I want to say that she got hurt the worst, but maybe I'm wrong. And then there's some people that have been jail, I know, for over two weeks.⁵¹

This account of police brutality was one of many instances of aggressive policing during the strike. The various police forces represented in Charleston including local and state forces and the National Guard were empowered to use force during arrests and in their daily patrols. Given the strict parameters of the injunctions at the Medical College Hospital and Charleston County Hospital, strikers came to expect arrests and time in jail.⁵²

Carrie Mitchell avoided jail for the majority of the strike, but as the strike waned Mitchell was rounded up.

[W]e went to jail in the last part. We didn't march for a long time, and this particular afternoon we went out there, we got there, the chief of police there. I thought, “My God, I thought this was over.” ... They turned the heat on. But we stayed there for hours. We

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵² Ibid., 6-7.

didn't stay...Jail was just scary for me, but then we were all in one place, all in one thing, and it was hot. And the weather was hot already, and they turned the heat on us. We were there for maybe three hours or whatever and that was the end of the jail thing for us. I think it was at the end of the strike. We didn't do it for a while, but those people that was there on strike, they weren't scary people. They did what they had to do. But it was an awful time. It was awful.

Though she did not spend weeks or even an entire day in jail, her jail experience was a common theme of the Charleston movement. Police used jail as a way to quell protests. For Mitchell and other participants, the strike was “an awful time” not only because they faced the prospect of jail during the strike but also because of other hardships during the strike and the various consequences of labor protests.⁵³

Mitchell's other remembrances of the strike focused on the unpleasant reality of the hospital strike. As a mother of five, Mitchell sacrificed time with her children to participate in the strike. On one occasion her involvement in the strike made her maternal duties difficult. Mitchell recalled,

My daughter, we was marching one day. Of course, I spent most of my time—I stayed and worked in the office because like I said, I just came out the hospital. But one day we were picketing, and my daughter had a freak accident. She cut her leg. There was some glass on the porch, and I can't take her there because they be striking, you know, whatever. So there were so many policeman that I had to maneuver so I had to take her to the--. I think I took her Roper. But it was a frightening experience that when an emergency come, you got to get to the nearest medical center.

Throughout the strike editorials in the *Charleston News and Courier* chastised the strikers for limiting poor and sick people's access to health care. By walking off of their jobs, newspaper editors and other citizens alleged that the workers were putting the public's health at risk.

Mitchell's personal emergency encapsulated the dilemma of striking at an in demand facility. Her inability to access quick emergency care highlighted the difficulties of making a stand at

⁵³ Ibid., 6.

hospitals. The heavily policed picket lines, combined with short-staffed hospitals, created an additional unintended barrier to treatment.⁵⁴

For Mitchell, the strike had a variety of unintended consequences. With an already dire economic situation, striking for several months obviously impacted Mitchell's income and her ability to provide for her children and other family members. Her family bought food and she often relied on the union to pay some bills. Some years later, she lamented the collateral effects of the strike on her life and her family's sacrifice during the strike.

Where I was striking, so that was an experience that was—. *I don't know that it was worth it. I mean, I don't know. I mean, not in the sense that we didn't organize and got together, but I mean for what we accomplished afterwards.* But it was such an experience...It was sacrifice that was awful, and it was awful lot of time away from my children because I was all they had and of course my mother. Now my mother and my brothers and those, they were really, really, really good to me. My family was close-knit, so I couldn't do it without them, but it was a trying time for almost all of us.

Mitchell was not alone in wondering whether or not the strike was in fact "worth it." The stress, possibility of jail time, physical harm, and an indefinite period of joblessness were perhaps the most obvious consequences of strike participation. Not only did workers who returned to the hospital face hostile coworkers and managers, but they also dealt with the reality of the union collapse.⁵⁵ That the union did not last long after workers returned to the hospitals was the crux of Mitchell's and other union women's discontent. For Mitchell, the ultimate failure to sustain the movement and the local union after they settled the strike with the two main hospitals exponentially decreased her enthusiasm about the nominal gains they did make.

Mary Moultrie, Rosetta Simmons, Naomi White, and Carrie Mitchell are representative of the women who were involved in the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike. These women

⁵⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 7-8. Author's emphasis.

came to the strike with a variety of personal circumstances and responsibilities that influenced and emboldened their activism. At some level, more aggressive actions like tracking down scabs and physical altercations with their opposition reflected the desperation of their situations. Since they were already suffering, the risks involved in striking were worth the possible outcome of the strike. However willing they were to be involved, their lives were greatly complicated by their involvement in the strike. While they all approached the strike from different contexts, they were devoted to seeing it through until the workers reached a desirable agreement with the hospitals. Their accounts of the strike along with their personal histories offer some insight into the women involved in the day-to-day struggle for better wages and working conditions in Charleston area hospitals. All of the women involved in the strike brought their personal lives to the strike, for them the fight for fair wages and better working conditions was personal. As mothers and women responsible for maintaining households, decent wages were essential.

Though all of the women faced some hardships throughout the strike, after the strike ended, Mary Moultrie endured the brunt of the discontent. As the known leader, she encountered consistent mistreatment upon her return to the Medical College. Unlike many of her former comrades, whose relative anonymity shielded them from mistreatment, Moultrie could not escape her association with Local 1199B. Moultrie and Rosetta Simmons' remained involved with 1199 into the 2000s. Ultimately, the women involved in the strike represented a cross-section of working class black Charleston women. Some came to the strike with little to no activist experience. Other women were single mothers of multiple children. Regardless of their differences, these women were the central force of the strike.

Black women activists sacrificed again and again to remain on the frontlines of the hospital strike and hundreds of other local campaigns during the civil rights-Black Power

movements. Their lives and struggles to maintain some semblance of self in difficult atmospheres should be included, if not centralized, in civil rights-Black Power studies. Black women activists were the vanguard. Women like Jo Ann Gibson Robinson of the Women's Political Council in Montgomery set the stage for and followed through with critical involvement in the bus boycott. According to Robinson, "the WPC was formed for the purpose of inspiring Negroes to live above mediocrity, to elevate their thinking, to fight juvenile and adult delinquency, to register and vote, and in general to improve their status as a group. We were 'woman power,' organized to cope with any injustice, no matter what, against the darker sect."⁵⁶ The WPC's black centered politics and mission made them the voice for blacks who faced discrimination on the bus system and in other parts of Montgomery society. These women were integral to the success of the Montgomery boycott. Black women were involved in every phase of activism in local and national events and should be understood as activists as well as individuals who made tough sacrifices in order to advance the cause. The next chapter discusses one such woman.

Coretta Scott King's involvement in civil and human rights activism spanned the better part of the twentieth century. But her journey to activism before and after her husband's death is less understood. In the next chapter, I offer an assessment of King's life of activism.

⁵⁶ Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 23.

Chapter Five

“ ‘I will be involved where the action is’ ”: Coretta Scott King’s Life of Activism

Coretta Scott King was born on April 27, 1927 just outside of Marion, Alabama to Obadiah and Bernice McMurry Scott. She spent her childhood cultivating her love of music in a community that celebrated her intellectual and cultural abilities. She and her sister Edythe attended high school at the “‘semi-private’ Black” Lincoln High School in Marion. The “integrated teaching staff” offered King an alternate perspective on life, which was only widened when she chose to study at Antioch College.¹ There, King earned a bachelor’s degree in music and education in 1951 and soon after, moved to Boston to continue her musical education at the New England Conservatory of Music and met her future husband Martin Luther King, Jr. She graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music with degrees in voice and violin. Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott married in Marion in 1953 and moved to Montgomery just before Dr. King was thrust into the national spotlight as the leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Once they married, she made the decision to prioritize her husband and future family over her budding career as a soloist.

Though her activism during her husband’s life and the height of the conventional civil rights movement was limited, she was able to carve out her own lane through concerts and speaking engagements. She was thrust into a more prominent position after her husband’s death as both an emissary for his ideology and methods and over time as a leader in her own right. King spent the duration of her adult life preserving and advancing her husband’s legacy. But beyond this, Mrs. King developed a social justice stance separate from her husband’s that included antiwar and antiapartheid activism and advocacy of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender

¹ Margena A. Christian, “Coretta Scott King First Lady of the Civil Rights Movement 1927-2006,” *Jet*, 20 February 2006, 19-20.

rights. The ways in which she used her voice and assumed a leadership role at the end of the civil rights movement that continued until she died were complicated and varied. She remained in demand as a speaker until her illness prevented it. Mrs. King died at an alternative medical facility in Mexico on January 30, 2006 of complications from ovarian cancer and cerebral vascular disease.

Mrs. King's life of activism spanned more than four decades and changed over that period. But for the majority of that time, she was at the vanguard of fighting for human rights in the United States and globally. Her involvement in the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike was one of the many instances where she used her influence and platform to expose the broader public to social issues that were underpublicized and impacted those on the margins of society. She continued to work with labor organizations after that strike, as issues of poverty remained central to her mission. Her activism on the behalf of marginalized groups in many countries and against the misuse of military force exemplified a version of black women's leadership that is often absent from narratives of the civil rights movement as well as of black women's activism in general. This chapter will discuss Mrs. King's long-term activism and contextualize it within other narratives of black women's leadership in the mid-twentieth century.

“I didn’t learn my commitment from Martin. We just converged at a certain time.”²

King's activism began long before she met her husband in Boston. She had been raised in a community that emphasized being civic minded. But her time in college had expanded her understanding of and experience with direct racism and discrimination. In *Desert Rose*, Edythe Scott Bagley's biography of her sister's life, Bagley recalled, “[s]ince our days at Lincoln School,

² Peter Applebome, "Coretta Scott King, a Civil Rights Icon, Dies at 78 1," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), February 1, 2006., Accessed November 6, 2015.
<http://ezproxy.msu.edu.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/93273475?accountid=12598>.

we had been socially aware and concerned about the issues around us. At Antioch College that awareness had deepened and matured.”³ Of her time at Antioch, King recalled that it was difficult to be one of the few African Americans at the majority white college. Her sister Edythe had been the first black student at Antioch and was an important influence on King’s decision to study there. At Antioch King “could sense that in the back of [her classmates’] minds as the feeling of race superiority bred in them through generations and by all the myths about black people they had acquired.” She found that it was difficult for white people to understand “that not everyone want[ed] to be a pioneer” and that “[t]here were black students who *were* qualified and who could afford Antioch but who would not *want* to come because they might be isolated or subjected to special treatment” at an institution “which had only token integration.”⁴ King’s encounter with a racist school board during her second year of student teaching was an important catalyst that led her to take a more active role in activism. She “was even more motivated than before” and became involved in the Antioch “chapter of the NAACP and a Race Relations Committee and a Civil Liberties Committee.” She was “determined to get ahead, not just for myself, but to do something for my people and for all people.”⁵

King’s turn toward activism at Antioch came well before she ever encountered her husband. In many ways, their activism developed in unison as they both learned new perspectives and methods as they delved deeper into activism in Montgomery and beyond. The Montgomery Bus Boycott altered both of their paths as Martin Luther King was thrust into the national spotlight. During the boycott and subsequent civil rights campaigns, King’s concerns vacillated between her family’s wellbeing and the overall success of the movement. As her

³ Edythe Scott Bagely and Joe Hilley. *Desert Rose: The Life and Legacy of Coretta Scott King* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2012), 241.

⁴ Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

husband's travel increased, King maintained the household in Montgomery and then in Atlanta venturing to the frontlines of marches when needed. Though her schedule was limited due to her household responsibilities, King used her talents to benefit her husband's activist efforts and maintained her own appearance schedule. Most notably, her series of Freedom Concerts began in November 1964 and provided some financial support for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which depended on Martin Luther King's speaking fees and other donations to function. The concerts "combine[d] readings, music, and poetry and present[ed] the history of the Movement."⁶

Mrs. King traveled across the country to Los Angeles, San Diego, Denver and even to Canada performing at these concerts until 1966 and "returned to [this] format as a fundraiser for the development of the King Center."⁷ According to her sister, the Freedom Concerts were an outlet for Mrs. King's artistic side, which she had not been able to fully explore after graduate school. She "sought to use her soprano voice and her love of music to tell the story of the Civil Rights Movement to people who might not otherwise attend a civil rights rally." Not only were the concerts useful for spreading the message of the movement to places and people possibly unfamiliar with its goals, they were an artistic outlet where "she could combine her creativity and love of the performing arts with the compelling message of the African American struggle for social and economic justice."⁸ In this way, she was advancing the cause and using arts as activism.

The concerts came at a crucial moment for the SCLC and the movement as some overlapped with the tumultuous Selma campaign. More than three thousand patrons attended her performance at the Third Baptist Church in San Francisco, which came soon after the infamous

⁶ Octavia Vivian, *Coretta* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 18.

⁷ Laura T. McCarty, *Coretta Scott King: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 42.

⁸ Bagely and Hilley. *Desert Rose*, 197.

Bloody Sunday events on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. This concert and others on the tour gave people “an opportunity to hear a firsthand account of events in Selma and of other work in the Civil Rights Movement. Attending her concerts became an act of support for the cause of racial equality and justice.”⁹ Importantly, these concerts “raised more than \$50,000” for the SCLC and “helped make the protest in Selma possible.”¹⁰ As both an artistic and activist outlet, King’s Freedom Concerts were essential for her identity as a civil rights activist. She used her unique abilities to bring awareness to and support the movement.

Though the civil rights movement figured heavily in Coretta Scott King’s life, she was also interested in the consequences and meanings of the war in Vietnam. At a time where civil rights leaders and organizations benefited from working relationships with politicians like President Lyndon Johnson, vocal antiwar sentiments could be harmful to maintaining the limited cooperation between activists and politicians. MLK delivered his most notable antiwar speech “Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam” at the Riverside Church in 1967. According to Bagley, her sister Coretta “was ahead of Martin on the issue and kept up a consistent presence in the Peace Movement . . . Coretta had searched for an area of involvement that was her own—a place where she could make a unique contribution separate from being the wife of Martin Luther King Jr. The Peace Movement became that place.”¹¹ King “had . . . recognized the inherent incongruity between supporting nonviolent change in the United States and supporting the US government’s use of military force to impose change on foreign countries.”¹²

⁹ Ibid., 198.

¹⁰ Glenn T. Eskew, “Coretta Scott King (1927-2006): Legacy to Civil Rights,” in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times—Volume 2*, eds. Ann Short Chirhart and Kathleen Ann Clark (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 351.; Bagely and Hilley, *Desert Rose*, 200.

¹¹ Bagely and Hilley, 201-202.

¹² Ibid., 282.

“You know, there are a lot of people who’d like to regulate me to being a symbol.”¹³

Mrs. King’s public life and mission changed dramatically after her husband was assassinated on April 4, 1968. While her Freedom Concerts and limited involvement in marches and other civil rights organizing had conditioned her to being on the move for the movement, her public presence increased as she took up much of her husband’s schedule after his death and thus was thrust further into the limelight. In the immediate aftermath, Mrs. King appeared in Memphis to express solidarity for the sanitation workers and to encourage them to continue the work. King was best able to encapsulate her husband’s mission as “[s]he not only had been a homemaker and mother, she had attended meetings, participated in discussions, march, written, spoken, and sung for freedom, both alongside her husband and on her own . . . [and] was as well versed as anyone in the ideals that inspired Martin to a life of selfless service.”¹⁴ She was determined to continue her husband’s work saying “we are going to continue his work to make all people truly free and to make every person feel that he is a human being.” She continued, “we are concerned about not only the Negro poor, but the poor all over American and all over the world. Every man deserves a right to a job or an income so that he can pursue liberty, life, and happiness.”¹⁵ According to Laura McCarty, a Coretta King biographer, the content of the Memphis address encapsulated Mrs. King’s “primary focuses for...the remainder of her life,” which were “resistance to racism, calls for economic justice, and opposition to war and violence”

¹³ Henry Leifermann, “ ‘Profession: Concert Singer, Freedom Movement Lecturer, ’” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, November 26, 1972. Accessed November 6, 2015.
<http://ezproxy.msu.edu.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/docview/119546639?accountid=12598>.

¹⁴ Bagely and Hilley, 241.

¹⁵ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 345-346.

or “the ‘triple evils of racism, poverty and violence.’”¹⁶ Mrs. King would work for those three causes in a multitude of ways “that evolved over time.”¹⁷

King’s participation in the Charleston strike was an extension of her mission to address economic disparities. A little more than a month into the 1969 strike, Coretta Scott King made her initial visit to Charleston in support of the striking workers. Along with Juanita Abernathy, King went to Charleston “to lead further protest marches against hospital management refusals to recognize the collective bargaining demands of the workers.” According to a report in *The Chicago Defender*, King went to Charleston to “replace Abernathy as head of the campaign” and “act in her capacity as honorary chairman of the National Organizing Committee of Hospital and Nursing Home Employees.”¹⁸ At a rally on Tuesday April 29th at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, “more than 3,000” people attended a mass meeting where King “pledge[d] her support to local striking workers.” She announced her plans to lead a march on April 30th. As was now custom, the National Guard, state, and local police patrolled the streets outside of the mass meeting.¹⁹

Accompanied by Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. and Rev. A.D. King, who had met with Gov. McNair that morning in Columbia, Mrs. King rallied the marchers and their sympathizers. In a moving speech King remarked, “If my husband was alive he would be with you right now, joining in your struggle.”²⁰ Coretta Scott King’s presence in Charleston affirmed the strike, extended its national reach, and created a lane for King’s own brand of activism. Workers in Charleston had already tied their movement to MLK, Jr. through their commemorative march on

¹⁶ McCarty, 54.

¹⁷ Peter Applebome. “Coretta Scott King, a Civil Rights Icon, Dies at 78.”

¹⁸ “Mrs. King To Lead S.C. Hospital Fight,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 29 April 1969, pg. 7. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁹ Stewart R. King, “Coretta King Pledges Support of Hospital Strike,” *The Charleston News and Courier*, 30 April 1969, 1-A. NewsBank.

²⁰ Ibid.

April 4th and association with the SCLC. Mrs. King's presence further associated them with his legacy. But for Mrs. King, the Charleston struggle and her long-term association with 1199 opened new doors for her own activist legacy.

In the initial period following her husband's death, Mrs. King took on work that aligned with themes and issues similar to those he had been working on. After Dr. King died, she had become "a symbol of the nation's grief, but [was also] a woman devoted to carrying on her husband's work."²¹ In a November 1972 profile in the *New York Times Magazine*, Henry Leifermann described Mrs. King as a woman who "moved regally through the civil rights movement, lending support to the black hospital workers' union here, gracing a fund-raising banquet's head table there, sought after by magazine editors offering columns, by television and film producers with lucrative projects. She turned down the commercial offers, and she became known in the movement as 'The Queen.'" But by 1972, she was no longer ingratiating herself well with SCLC staffers and other people who had expectations for how she should comport herself in her new role.²² In the *Times* profile, she commented that her "role ha[d] been so misunderstood by so many people." She continued, "there are a lot of people who'd like to regulate me to being a symbol. And it means that you are supposed to grace occasions, and that you really don't have very much to say, that you really aren't doing much, really, but being the widow of a great man. I embraced the cause just as my husband did, and I would have done so anyway, had I not met Martin.'" Here Mrs. King directly rejected the notion that she was merely her husband's widow and a woman without her own political and social worldview. The idea that she was a symbol was an effective and sympathetic image that the SCLC and other interested parties capitalized on. But her rejection of being used as a symbol and insistence that she had her

²¹ Ibid.

²² Henry P. Leifermann. " 'Profession: Concert Singer, Freedom Movement Lecturer.' "

own motivation to work for civil and human rights was a public departure from solely taking up her husband's cause.

But Mrs. King's participation in several workers' causes immediately after the end of the Memphis strike, signaled that at least for a short period, she was interested in both symbolically advancing her husband's work and marking her own trail. According to historian Michael Honey, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been publicly affiliated with the labor movement since 1955 as "the Montgomery Bus Boycott introduced the world to King and King to the world of civil rights unionism. There he found his strongest allies in black and left-led unions in and outside of the AFL-CIO."²³ Eventually Dr. King became aligned with Local 1199 which "was the kind of labor movement King so desperately needed to build the labor-civil rights coalition" as one local leader described 1199 as "more than just another union; this is part of the freedom struggle."²⁴ Dr. King's relationship with unions and the labor movement in general culminated in his participation the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike. But he had been actively giving speeches and meeting with labor leaders for the duration of his participation in the civil rights movement.

It was through her husband's "close association" with 1199 that Mrs. King became associated with the labor movement. Her involvement in the Charleston strike was one of the many ways she helped advance the relationship between labor and civil rights and pushed for workers' rights in general as "she became a regular at 1199 rallies, picketlines [sic] and cultural events... At 1199 conventions and Black History month celebrations she repeatedly called for justice for working mothers."²⁵ Coretta Scott King's role in the Charleston strike was

²³ Michael K. Honey, "Introduction" to *All Labor Has Dignity*, Martin Luther King, Jr. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), xxvi.

²⁴ Ibid, xxviii.

²⁵ Dennis Rivera and George Gresham. "Obituary 5 -- no Title." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Feb 02, 2006. Accessed November 6, 2015.

<http://ezproxy.msu.edu.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/932648>

multifaceted as she traveled around the country to fundraise, walked in marches with the strikers and their supporters, and seemingly constructed her own political presence in the wake of her husband's assassination. Her image was also used to solicit funds in national newspapers like the *New York Times*. In Charleston, Mrs. King was able to negotiate a balance between preserving and advancing her husband's legacy and creating her own.

King's participation in the Charleston strike came almost a year after her husband's assassination. But King's alliance with 1199 dated to July 1968 when she assumed the honorary chairmanship of the national organizing committee. In earlier SCLC campaigns, Coretta Scott King was a peripheral figure, accompanying her husband at marches and taking care of the family home. After his death, Coretta King assumed a more prominent role in the organization, with the Charleston strike placing her at center stage. King's involvement in the Charleston strike and her advocacy for black workers disrupts the prevailing narrative of her involvement in the civil rights movement. King was more than her husband's helpmate and in the wake of his death took on a more public role. Like the activism of Eleanor Roosevelt after President Roosevelt died, Coretta Scott King developed her own social justice platform.²⁶

In their assessment of the Charleston strike, historians Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg describe Coretta King's role as one that highlighted "the moral claim of the unionizing effort."²⁷ In an advertisement published in the *New York Times* in May 1969, King appealed to the American masses (or the *New York Times*' readership) on behalf of the strikers. In her appeal, King remarked, "the strikers and the black people of Charleston are poor. They are determined to

0?accountid=12598.

²⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt's post-World War II activism is well documented. See Allida M. Black. *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

²⁷ Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 144.

assert their humanity, no matter how large the risks...[if] the black people of Charleston are defeated, the tragic polarization in our nation will intensify.” She continued “[b]ut if the hospital workers win, Charleston can become the moment in our history when the unity of black and white, of the civil rights movement with organized labor, may be regained.” Evoking her husband’s death with the headline “If my husband were alive today...he would be in Charleston, South Carolina!”²⁸ King’s moral appeal and her articulation of the importance of the relationship between civil rights organizations and labor unions placed Charleston in a national context. Her involvement in the Charleston campaign was “her most enduring association with 1199.” There she “marched, led prayer vigils, spoke in churches and buoyed the spirits of Charleston strikers in an inspiring display of leadership that fused soul power and union power.”²⁹

Octavia Vivian described Mrs. King’s May visit to a “tense” Charleston as indicative of her rising stature among civil rights activists. According to Vivian, “Coretta spent about forty-five minutes with Abernathy and then went to the Emmanuel [sic] African Methodist Episcopal Church, where she addressed seven thousand persons. Only a third of the people could get into the church. The rest listened outside over the loudspeaker system.” At Mother Emanuel Mrs. King gave a speech where “she expressed disappointment at not having gone to jail, explaining [that] her husband had thought their children too young to understand.” In Vivian’s estimation, Mrs. King was bound to “have a following” because people were drawn to her. Vivian concluded her account of Mrs. King’s Charleston visit with this description of Mrs. King leading “the two-mile march to the Charleston hospital and back to Emmanuel Church, blacks lined the street.

²⁸ Coretta S. King, “If My Husband Were Alive Today...He Would Be in Charleston, South Carolina!,” *The New York Times*, 1 May 1969, pg. 40. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

²⁹ Dennis Rivera and George Gresham. "Obituary 5 -- no Title." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, 1 February 2006.

<http://ezproxy.msu.edu.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/93264980?accountid=12598>.

Some of them joined the march...The National Guards and state troopers pressed close but were reluctant to arrest her. They watched Coretta kneel on the hot pavement to pray.”³⁰

Coretta Scott King’s ability to draw attention to the Charleston struggle along with the SCLC’s organizational infrastructure was essential to the success of the strike. The Charleston strike allowed King to carve out her place within the civil rights struggle. In a speech from April 1969, King offered a striking comment on her limited involvement in the movement during her husband’s life. According to King, “I wanted to go [to jail but during] those years our children were very young. [We decided that] one of us should stay home with the children.” She continued “I really am ashamed to admit it but I have never had the privilege of going to jail.”³¹ Coming just a year after her husband’s death, King’s admission was quite remarkable. “Jail, No Bail” was a hallmark of more contentious civil rights campaigns and King’s regret that she had never gone to jail for the cause suggests that she wanted to be more actively involved in the daily struggle for human rights. King seemed to approach the Charleston campaign and perhaps her subsequent activism as opportunities to give herself to the movement.

Coretta King’s relationship with the SCLC was complicated. In the days following her husband’s death, King had assumed that she would take over his role as president of the organization. According to Henry Leifermann, the relationship between Mrs. King and the SCLC began to sever soon after Dr. King died. In his 1972 profile, he mentioned that Mrs. King “flatly rejected...an annual salary of \$12,000 from S.C.L.C.” because she thought that ““they certainly would have expected a certain amount of work from me for this.”” Leifermann suggested that “she ke[pt] a distance from the...staff, including the Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, who succeeded

³⁰ Vivian, *Coretta*, 110.

³¹ Uncatalogued News Reel, April 25-30, 1969, Moving Image Research Collections, University of South Carolina Newsfilm Library, Columbia, SC, USA.

Dr. King as president [because she] had wanted that job, and for a few hours after the funeral, she thought she was going to get it.” After Abernathy assumed that role, “she turned her energies and talents to creating the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Social Change, a living memorial to her husband.”³² Mrs. King continued to have a difficult relationship with the SCLC as she carved out her own role in the movement and preserve and advance her husband’s legacy.

Some SCLC leaders viewed the establishment of the King Center as competition for the scarce resources that funded civil rights organizations. In a 1989 *Washington Post* profile, Juan Williams interviewed several of the key movement players about their opinion of Mrs. King’s leadership of the King Center in the twenty years since its founding. Many of the issues between King and SCLC leaders like Hosea Williams and Joseph Lowery, among others, center around mission and money. Hosea Williams asserted that the King Center was an unnecessary endeavor as “ ‘Martin Luther King never started but one organization; he never worked with but one organization—the SCLC. There was no need for the separate organization set up by Mrs. King.’ ” He even went as far as to say that “ ‘when she talks about keeping the dream alive, carrying on the torch of his work and legacy, she is talking absolute nonsense.’ ” Abernathy cautioned against making the King Center nothing more than “a tourist center.” According to Williams, King “came under attack from many of her husband’s disciples for raising money to pay for mortar and bricks instead of social activism.”³³ Maintaining and growing the King Center remained an issue for King for the rest of her life.

Beyond establishing the King Center, the enactment of a national holiday in honor of her husband was a priority. King had to navigate the tumultuous political and social climate of the

³² Henry P. Leifermann. “ ‘Profession: Concert Singer, Freedom Movement Lecturer.’ ”

³³ Juan Williams, “Coretta’s Way,” *The Washington Post* (1974-Current file), 4 June 1989; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post pg. L19, 36

1980s to gain any traction for the holiday. During a particularly difficult moment, King lamented “I had great hopes this could be a national day of unity. What’s so devastating is the political climate, the lack of moral leadership, the lack of enforcement of civil rights. It’s fashionable to be prejudiced now.”³⁴ While she eventually succeeded in getting a national holiday to commemorate her husband’s life and legacy, her activism and zeal was not limited to maintaining his legacy.

King remained involved in championing human and civil rights, oftentimes extending her voice on behalf of underrepresented and oppressed communities in the United States and abroad. Perhaps surprisingly, in the 1990s, Mrs. King voiced her support for members of the LGBT community. Responding to critics, she remarked ““I still hear people say that I should not be talking about the rights of lesbian and gay people, and I should stick to the issue of racial injustice. But I hasten to remind them that Martin Luther King Jr. said, ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’”” In 2004, she “denounced a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage.”³⁵

“ ‘Mrs. Coretta King,’ . . . not . . . ‘widow of the slain civil-rights leader.’ ”³⁶

While Coretta Scott King’s involvement in the Charleston strike resonated with people who were still mourning her husband’s recent assassination, her activism should be understood within a framework of black women’s leadership. Though Belinda Robnett offers a useful framework with her bridge leader concept, this characterization does not apply to Coretta Scott

³⁴ Art Harris. "Carrying on the Dream." *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, 19 January 1986. <http://ezproxy.msu.edu.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/138920546?accountid=12598>.

³⁵ Christian. “Coretta Scott King First Lady of the Civil Rights Movement 1927-2006,” 54, 56.

³⁶ Bernita Bennette, quoted by Henry Leifermann in ““Profession: Concert Singer, Freedom Movement Lecturer,”” SM42.

King's involvement in the movement before and after her husband's death.³⁷ An alternate conception of black women's leadership is necessary in understanding how King contributed to the movement. King's presence was not merely an appeal to national sympathies but also an important moment in black women's involvement in the civil rights movement. A reappraisal of her involvement within the Civil Rights Movement and her later activism is essential to any understanding of her involvement in the Charleston campaign as well as conceptions of black women's leadership during and after the civil rights movement. Recent biographies of twentieth century black female activists provide frameworks for more nuanced discussions of the characteristics of black women's leadership during the civil rights-Black Power movements and beyond. In *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* and *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson*, Jeanne Theoharis and Barbara Ransby center black women who are either consistently misunderstood or barely known. In both instances, Theoharis and Ransby offer context for their subjects' lives and complicate prevailing narratives of well-known people and events. While both works are important to larger narratives of black activism throughout the twentieth century, they also illuminate the particular difficulties that black women faced when attempting to assert themselves in political and activist circles. Much of Parks' and Robeson's lives had been overshadowed by the men in their activist or personal circles. Similarly, Coretta King's legacy as an activist in her own right is often neglected or minimized, intentionally or not, in the shadow of her husband's tremendous impact. But any complete understanding of both Martin Luther King, Jr.'s impact while living and the eventual institutionalization of his life and

³⁷For two decades, black women's movement leadership has been almost exclusively defined by Belinda Robnett's trailblazing "bridge leader" concept. The idea that black women served as intermediaries, often as leaders without titles, was embraced by scholars in various fields as a useful framework for measuring and assessing black women's contributions to the civil rights-Black Power movements. But in many cases, black women were more than bridges between male leaders and the laypeople who manned boycotts and pickets. King was not a bridge leader. For more on the bridge leader concept see: Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Civil Rights Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

work is incomplete without serious consideration of Coretta Scott King as an activist and leader on her own merit. Black women activists have often been relegated to second tier status in narratives of black progress. Coretta King's legacy reaches beyond the bounds of her relationship with and to her husband and she should be considered as influential as his other contemporaries and collaborators.

While many of Dr. King's colleagues in the SCLC and other civil rights organizations doubted Coretta King's stewardship of his legacy, some female leaders in the movement countered these claims. According to Dorothy Irene Height, former president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, " 'much of our male leadership that honored Dr. King, worshipped Dr. King, find it hard to recognize the strength in a woman like Coretta King. It is easier for them to think of her as the widow of a martyr than giving leadership in her own right.' " ³⁸ The idea that King was more palatable or acceptable to men in the movement when she solely occupied the "widow" role speaks to the many, well-documented issues of sexism that permeated many male-dominated organizations during and after the end of the civil rights-Black Power era. After her husband's death, King subverted the organizational hierarchy by establishing the King Center as an organization independent of the SCLC or other longstanding groups. Dorothy Cotton, an SCLC collaborator with Dr. King, argued that " '[i]f Mrs. King had not moved ahead on her dream to develop that center, it would not be there. The SCLC has its own ways; there's no hiding the fact that it is an extremely chauvinistic organization. If she had moved into the SCLC, her dream would have been subsumed.' " ³⁹ It was difficult, even incomprehensible, for some of King's detractors to consider her as a leader, in the movement or otherwise.

³⁸ Williams, "Coretta's Way," 37.

³⁹ Williams, "Coretta's Way."

Height and Cotton's comments serve as a partial foundation for understanding Coretta King the leader. In the context of women involved in the organizing aspects of the black freedom movement, male leaders like Hosea Williams, Ralph Abernathy, and others in the SCLC were either unwilling or unable to consider women of King's ilk, widows of fallen leaders, as anything more than a wife or helpmeet. Coretta King had chosen to lift the mantle of her husband's activist career as a standard for civil and human rights activism after the movement ended. But she was more than "a living symbol from a bloody era."⁴⁰ Like Eslanda Robeson, King was most often known as "the wife of" someone instead of as an activist and leader in her own right. In this respect, she had to do more work in order to gain a semblance of respect from other activists and, at least during the foundational years of the center, her work was greeted with great skepticism. By establishing her own organization, the Martin Luther King Center for Social Justice, King had leapfrogged the normal role of women in the black freedom struggle. Women like Coretta King, Eslanda Robeson, Ella Baker, and Rosa Parks seem to belong to an entirely different category of activist as their work transformed and founded many key moments of the movement. These women were cultivators.

While Ella Baker's journey as a civil rights activist and key proponent of the idea of participatory democracy has been well documented, Coretta King's role as an integral thinker and actor during and after the height of the modern civil rights movement and after is less understood. King's various maneuverings at essential moments during the movement, especially her concert tour, served as a catalyst for more effective SCLC programming. In this manner, King's work helped foster SCLC operations across the south. In his 1986 *Washington Post* profile of King, Art Harris characterized King as "the first lady of the civil rights movement

⁴⁰Harris, "Carrying on the Dream," K4.

[who i]n the early years, when Martin Luther King Jr. was leading marchers into a maelstrom of hate . . . was at home, organizing behind the scenes, tending four small children, fielding death threats from rednecks who meant them.”⁴¹ Similarly, in his biographical article of King, Glenn Eskew suggests that she ““understood the nation needed her martyred husband because his image suggested the movement’s success in bringing about racial equality.”⁴² Consequently, she spent her lifetime working to preserve an image of Dr. King that aligned with the American belief that civil rights gains had fully rectified the fraught legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. King’s work at the King Center and her consistent involvement in amplifying various movements of “minority” communities was indicative of her role as a cultivator.

In recent historiography on women in the civil rights and Black Power movements, scholars like Barbara Ransby, Jeanne Theoharis, and Sherie Randolph have expanded the definitions of leadership and complicated the oft-misunderstood roles of women in both the civil rights and Black Power movements and adjacent movements like women’s liberation. Ransby’s treatments of Ella Baker, a central organizer for the NAACP, SCLC, and SNCC, and Eslanda Robeson, someone usually categorized as Paul Robeson’s wife, illuminate the necessity for serious study of black women’s integral leadership contributions to the black freedom struggle. Likewise Theoharis’ study of Rosa Parks’ life of activism, with limited archival resources, also points to the need for more monographic studies of black women who cultivated the movement. Within this context, Coretta Scott King’s involvement in the civil rights movement from the locus of one of its birthplaces, Montgomery, to her lifelong work in preserving her husband’s legacy along with her own activist priorities is indicative of her importance to the history of the movement and the need for serious analysis.

⁴¹ Harris, “Carrying on the Dream,” K4.

⁴² Eskew, 355.

As a woman who was both integral to the movement as an active participant in various facets as well as in the preservation of its legacy in the American and global consciousness, Coretta Scott King used her influence to cultivate a space for continued civil and human rights activism. Often lumped into the category of “wife of” or “widow of,” King used this position to propel her own goals and to support causes like the Charleston hospital strike. That her interest in justice and the affirmation of oppressed people’s civil and human rights expanded the purview of her activism from black issues to antiwar and LGBTQ causes speaks to her evolution as a thinker and activist. Coretta Scott King lived a dynamic life in the face of challenges from the civil rights old guard and various factions from outside of the movement, notably politicians resistant to creating a national holiday for her husband. Ultimately, her life’s work as an activist and institution builder cemented both her and her husband’s place in the national consciousness and mythology.

In chapter six, “Robert McNair and the Consequences of Early Civil Rights Gains,” I chronicle a portion of Governor Robert McNair’s administration in South Carolina. McNair assumed the governorship at a time of great transition locally and nationally as civil rights legislation was beginning to mandate sweeping institutional change. As the leader of a state known to be slow on civil rights, McNair used controversial methods when forced to confront the disparities between federal mandates and local application of new laws. In a broader sense, I detail the challenges of actually applying the landmark civil rights legislation on the local level.

Chapter Six

Governor Robert McNair and the Consequences of Early Civil Rights Gains

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist act at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in June 2015, Representative James Clyburn recounted Robert McNair's "second term" decision to temporarily remove the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House grounds. In his autobiography *Blessed Experiences: Genuinely Southern, Proudly Black*, Rep. Clyburn described both how the flag began flying on State House grounds and McNair's action. In 1962, "the all-white General Assembly [hoisted] a Confederate flag atop the State House to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the state's participation in the Civil War...Governor [John] West told me that it was understood that the resolution authorizing the flying of the flag was to be for that legislative session; but, somehow at the end of that two-year period, the flag fluttered there beneath the American and state flags. Over time I guess people came to accept it as one of those things 'that's always been there.'" In his second term, "McNair decided to see what kind of reaction he would get if the Confederate flag was not raised one day. By midday the furor was so great that he quickly put it back in place, telling callers that it had been 'sent out to be cleaned.' It was about then that people began to realize that the flag's presence atop the State House dome was not so casual or incidental to a lot of people. And it was about then that many black South Carolinians began to wonder why a flag they felt symbolized slavery and oppression was flying atop their State House."¹

McNair's short-lived attempt to test the boundaries of the social mores of segregation in South Carolina was unusual in the context of his responses to civil rights protest and unrest during his gubernatorial administration. This chapter focuses on the practical ramifications of the

¹ James Clyburn, *Blessed Experiences: Genuinely Southern, Proudly Black* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 147-148.

Civil Rights Act of 1964 on the Charleston strike and other civil rights-Black Power activism in South Carolina. At the time of the strike, the Medical College of South Carolina benefitted from government funding through the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The Charleston strike drew national attention to the hospitals, putting their HEW funding in jeopardy because they were accused of violating President Johnson's 1965 Equal Employment Opportunity Executive Order. Governor Robert McNair was initially unwilling to compromise and calls for President Nixon to intervene fell on deaf ears. McNair's initial unwillingness to compromise and Nixon's avoidance of the strike are examples of the challenges of enforcing civil rights gains. This chapter addresses these issues as well as McNair's use of force via the South Carolina National Guard to intimidate the strikers. This chapter also contributes to literature on local governmental responses to civil rights activism. While national civil rights narratives include the federal legislative concessions to activism, many scholarly treatments of the movement and its aftermath neglect discussion of local implementation of federal legislation and judicial decisions. By detailing a local example of the application of civil rights legislation and judicial rulings, this chapter contributes to civil rights legal and political history. In many respects, the strike and other earlier activism in Charleston and across the state forced the governor and his administration to take on civil rights.

As governor of South Carolina, McNair supervised the state's response to federal legal and judicial mandates and civil rights organizing and protests for desegregation of schools and other public facilities. In three cities, Orangeburg, Charleston, and Denmark, McNair employed militarized law enforcement and National Guardsmen to quell uprisings, perceived or real. His approach to maintaining order in the face of social unrest and change differed from his colleagues in other southern states that were also resistant to sweeping societal and legal change.

Though he did use much racist rhetoric, his actions belied some allegiance to maintaining the status quo in the name of law and order. His response to unrest across the state offers an example of the challenges of desegregation at a local level. McNair biographer Philip Grose describes South Carolina as a state that “was not among those that rushed to comply [with *Brown v. Board of Education*], nor was it part of the collective resistance that characterized its Deep South neighbors. The state had chosen its own course of defiance,” which was essentially delay.” McNair was tasked with navigating a government and society that had become accustomed to “the ambiguities and equivocations of moderation” in the face of growing discord over the enforcement of federal civil rights mandates.²

Robert McNair was born on December 14, 1923 in Williamsburg County, South Carolina to Daniel and Claudia McNair, “prominent landowners in Berkeley County, a place where . . . the state’s latter-day rural poverty was most profound.” He fought in the Pacific theatre of World War II under General Douglas MacArthur. Upon his return to the United States, he completed his degree in political science at the University of South Carolina. After an early campaign for a seat in the South Carolina legislature ended in defeat, McNair was elected in June 1950 to represent Allendale County in the South Carolina General Assembly. Along with serving in this capacity, McNair maintained a legal practice near his home. By 1955, he had an “appetite for bigger things” and began “to believe that a House member from a small, lower-Savannah river county could have statewide ambitions.” During his time in the General Assembly, McNair served as the “chairman of the Labor, Commerce, and Industry Committee” which gave [him] statewide exposure for the first time” and “challenged his ability to moderate a dispute between two groups important to his electoral base—the corporate community and organized labor.” In

² Philip G. Grose. *South Carolina at the Brink: Robert McNair and the Politics of Civil Rights*. (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press 2006), 13 and 21.

this capacity, McNair secured the support of important corporate players as he was “an increasingly prominent figure” in maintaining both “right-to-work laws and racial peace.” In 1962 with the support from some of these corporations, McNair finally ran for statewide office and was elected Lieutenant Governor.³

ROBERT MCNAIR’S APPROACH TO CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISM

In 1965, Robert McNair was the Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina, a part-time politician in charge of State Senate proceedings but with little political power, when one of South Carolina’s United States Senators Olin Johnston died. The Senate seat vacancy resulted in the elevation of several top South Carolina officials. Governor Donald Russell assumed the vacant Senate seat and Robert McNair became governor. McNair’s rise to the governorship came after years as a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives where he had served as the chair of the Judiciary and Labor, Commerce, and Industry committees through which he built relationships with law enforcement and other officials who would greatly influence his term and a half as governor. McNair was thrust into the governorship during a time of heightened social and political unrest as South Carolina was in the process of desegregating schools, the campus student movement spread to colleges across the state, and national backlash to civil rights gains resulted in a splintered Democratic Party and the rise of Richard Nixon. McNair’s six years, from 1965 until 1971, as governor of South Carolina were dominated by an ideological struggle over the future of the state as student activists sought better accommodations on and off campus, white citizens’ councils organized in opposition to the enforcement of federal civil rights legislation, and the societal unrest that resulted from these conflicts. His responses to the confrontations over civil rights conflicts in Orangeburg in 1968 and Charleston and Denmark in

³ Ibid., 23, 43-44, 49-52, 56-65, 78- 81, 82-92.

1969 reflected his understanding of his role as governor and the broader implications of executive action after sweeping federal legislative mandates.

In 1968, student unrest at South Carolina State College came to a head in a dispute over black students' access to the only bowling alley in Orangeburg. Pete Strom, the chief of law enforcement of the State Law Enforcement Division [SLED], lead the response. Strom had been reappointed to this position early in McNair's term because McNair wanted it to "be clear to everybody that Pete Strom was the governor's chief." McNair continued, "I thought that would let people know what I thought of him, the confidence I had in him. I wanted to emphasize, too, for everybody that he was going to be chief."⁴ McNair relied on Strom to manage crises and facilitate cooperation between local, state, and federal officers. In several instances, McNair was blindsided by the "eruption" of unrest across the state. The escalation in Orangeburg was not on McNair's radar until tensions were almost too high to quell.

In McNair's estimation, South Carolina was, as compared to other southern states and the rise in civil unrest in northern and western cities, a bastion of civil rights progress in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But he, his administration, and the state legislature resisted federal intervention or regulation and thus were not welcoming to sweeping change with regards to school integration and other federal mandates. According to McNair, the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] "was a very responsible organization with good strong leadership that always took the position of non-violence. Reverend I. DeQuincey Newman was an outspoken advocate of peaceful resolution of whatever the problem was. That sort of set the tone." He continued, "the big problem was the splinter

⁴ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. July 7, 1982, pg. 13. McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Columbia, SC, USA.

groups, the new groups that were emerging, were trying to wrestle control from the established black leadership.” The “new groups” were full of “the young black student, college students. They were sort of the center of the movement at that time for change... They wanted access, and we had all the old laws on the books that separated the races, wouldn't allow that. They were divided then over whether to take it to the courts and resolve it or take it to the streets and resolve it.”⁵ The conflict at South Carolina State had been brewing for more than a year as students were dissatisfied with the administration of Dr. Benner Turner.

From February 5 through February 8, 1968, students at South Carolina State College and some from neighboring Claflin College, both historically and predominantly black colleges, were involved in protests on and near their campuses which began as an attempt to force the desegregation of a bowling alley near the colleges. On February 8, a group of National Guardsmen, State Highway Patrolmen, and officers from the State Law Enforcement Division armed with bayonetted rifles, tanks, and tear gas, among other weapons, opened fire on a group of unarmed students and bystanders who had been barricaded into the campus by law enforcement. Twenty-seven people were injured and three, Samuel Hammond, Henry Smith, and high school student Delano Middleton, were killed. In the wake of these killings, Gov. McNair and other state leaders quickly created a narrative demonizing Cleveland Sellers, formerly of SNCC and a native of South Carolina, as the instigator of the students’ protests and peddler of Black Power ideology. Of Sellers’ involvement, McNair commented “all I knew was Cleveland was around and he was trying to start trouble and, and we knew his history...I thought he was

⁵ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham, August 2, 1983, pg. 2. McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC, USA.

instrumental in precipitating the, the growing militancy of the unrest.”⁶ McNair “was determined to maintain law and order” and his use of military force in this instance foreshadowed his reaction to several civil rights events in South Carolina during his administration, including the hospital strike.⁷

Though the proximate cause of the tragedy in Orangeburg was a dispute over the integration of a bowling alley that escalated into a confrontation between unarmed people and militarized law enforcement, tensions at South Carolina State had been boiling because of an old-guard president, Dr. Benner Turner, who did not communicate well with students or faculty and a substandard curriculum. McNair reflected on the issues with black college students:

I think we reached the point where sometimes we'd sit around and say, ‘You know, if I were a young black college student today, I probably would be so frustrated . . . until I may be out there doing the same thing they're doing.’ You really understand to some degree the frustrations of a lot of the young, black, intelligent, potential leaders who just couldn't see things happening... [activism] was something new and exciting, and they wanted to participate in it, but at the same time they were feeling the frustration. It was beginning to be a realization in their mind that, ‘I'm really not getting a quality education. When I get out of here, where do I go, and what do I do?’

Of the substandard curriculum at South Carolina State, McNair admitted, “We were teaching them how to be sharecroppers and not farmers. It had a bad image.” His administration had begun to change the curriculum in the months before the bowling alley confrontation. But the students were seeking more change than better courses and faculty.⁸

The bowling alley became a contested space after students attempted to integrate it. The

⁶ Robert McNair, *Scarred Justice: The Orangeburg Massacre 1968* directed by Bestor Cram and Judy Richardson; produced by Bestor Cram and Judy Richardson (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2009), 14:45.

⁷ Judy Richardson, *Scarred Justice: The Orangeburg Massacre 1968* directed by Bestor Cram and Judy Richardson; produced by Bestor Cram and Judy Richardson (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2009), 15:25.

⁸ Ibid.

SCSC bowling team needed a practice space and other students and community members wanted access. While local authorities had been aware of the tense situation, state officials, including Gov. McNair, were not aware of the confrontation until it had nearly reached its peak. He recalled that he did not understand why the students were protesting. He reflected, “I’m not sure I got it that they were trying to go there to bowl as much as they’d had a big demonstration and kicked out the glass doors, and they had rioted going back to the campus because they’d had quite a head-knocking session in front of the bowling alley, several hundred students and others in the black community with law enforcement officers.” He continued, “Nobody had called up and said we got a problem with the bowling alley. We knew we had problems in Orangeburg, but I don’t think we knew at that moment that they were anywhere near an eruption. We had problems everywhere all over the state and were getting reports.”⁹

By the time McNair had been made aware of the circumstances, things were already unwieldy as “the people were boarding up in the stores, armed and everything else.” In response to the uncertain situation McNair and his administration “determined that Orangeburg was a place where it was an armed arsenal and that the students and kids and all on the campus and the community, the black community, was so upset over the fracas at the bowling alley that we had to get it under control and keep the town and the school apart.” He recalled that they went “from having no real good information to a bowling alley eruption to a massive, serious problem that really looked horrible to us, to immediately putting in an emergency and a curfew and getting the guard in there to keep the town and the school separate and apart and to keep those kids from marching down Main Street in Orangeburg.” McNair thought that an increased police, SLED, and National Guard presence would put a barrier between the black community including the

⁹ Ibid.

students and other Orangeburg citizens who had prepared themselves for a violent confrontation by “boarding up in the stores, [getting] armed and everything else.” But the increased police presence did not deter the students from marching and protesting near the bowling alley.¹⁰

As tensions increased, McNair relied on Pete Strom to keep him abreast of any remarkable changes in the situation. Because SLED sometimes operated as a plainclothes division, they were “spread thin” across the state to monitor civil rights situations without the assistance of local police. Strom reported all of the pertinent information directly to McNair. Though McNair and Strom kept in constant contact, McNair rarely anticipated situations getting out of control. McNair described his role: “I always got something when it needed a Caesarean, and not often did we get serious things because these things erupted. I mean, they just happened. Most of them happened when you didn't anticipate them.” McNair recalled that Strom tried to encourage the students to challenge the public accommodations of the Civil Rights Act saying, ““why don't you get two or three of your buddies and come on in and get arrested and get it in the court and get the federal court involved and get this thing resolved?”” Conversely, McNair “really couldn't understand why there wasn't some way to set aside Tuesday night, like you do for the church leagues, or on Wednesday night for State College to come bowl and let them have a bowling team and let them have bowling contests.” But much to McNair’s chagrin, the federal government was slow to file suit against the bowling alley.¹¹

In the midst of the political negotiations, students at South Carolina State remained on edge and SLED and National Guard forces were still on guard. Of the night Hammond, Middleton, and Smith were killed McNair recalled:

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Well, I think Pete Strom was on the phone giving me a report, and said, "I've got to go, all hell's busted loose. I'll call you right back." I didn't know what had happened. He was right there on the scene, and it seemed like hours. It wasn't long, but it seemed like hours before he called me back to tell me what had happened, that one patrolman, as I understood it, was seriously hurt, wounded. They thought he had been shot, and that's the report I got, and that several of the students and people were wounded, and they were all at the hospital. Some of them they thought were dead, and they were trying to get a count, and he gave me a report as far as he could... Well, I don't know what time it was, but I remember it was late, later on in the evening before I got the word what really happened. Then the next morning was when we tried to figure what to do now by summoning all the leaders in, getting all the black leaders in and everybody else. What do we do now? How do we pick this thing up and really keep it from just spreading all over South Carolina?¹²

As governor, McNair was more concerned with the implications of the “eruption” for the rest of the state than the immediate issues in Orangeburg. In the early stages of the investigation, state authorities were unclear about Cleveland Sellers’ influence in the student unrest. Sellers was a young activist affiliated with Stokely Carmichael and other Black Power activists who helped students at South Carolina State organize. He was shot in the confrontation at the college and arrested. The state and federal investigations that followed the tragedy generally implicated Cleveland Sellers for inciting a riot.¹³ McNair’s response to the conflict at South Carolina State College foreshadowed his approach to the Charleston strike and other student unrest across the state.

McNair’s response to the 1969 Charleston Hospital Workers’ Strike lined up with his approach to Orangeburg in 1968. Adamant about the state’s stance on collective bargaining, McNair held firm through the duration of the hospital strike to his interpretation of state statutes.

¹² Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham, August 23, 1983, pg. 20. McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

¹³ Gregory E. Carr, "Sellers, Cleveland (b. 1944)." in *Race and Racism in the United States: An Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*. Edited by Charles A. Gallagher and Cameron D. Lippard. Vol. 3. (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014), 1119-1121. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Accessed April 14, 2016.
http://ezproxy.msu.edu.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/login?url=http://go.galegroup.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3160000591&sid=summon&v=2.1&u=msu_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=a6eb2c9a97950828de7e0defc1f6d9ed.

Similar to the Orangeburg case, McNair ordered SLED and the National Guard into Charleston to stave off unrest. The National Guard manned tanks with tear gas and bayoneted rifles while protestors, mostly women and children, marched around Charleston and on the hospital grounds. His unwillingness to compromise won him support across the country as some citizens who thought the country was succumbing to civil unrest and pressure appreciated his firm stand. Conversely, those sympathetic to the strike cause and wary of police and National Guard interventions challenged his authority and methods. McNair's response to the Charleston strike affirmed his willingness to use force to curb citizens' protests and illustrated how he stood out from his southern gubernatorial contemporaries who were not as capable of navigating public opposition to desegregation.

Before workers struck, McNair had been concerned about operations at the Medical College. McNair described the Medical College as "a Charleston medical school run by the Charleston Medical Society for their benefit, and they were on the verge of losing accreditation." He found it difficult to have any initial impact on the school because the president of the Medical College "didn't welcome suggestions and certainly didn't want any advice from anybody" McNair recalled that his administration "revamped the board [of the Medical College] and made it a statewide board. Not more than half, I think, could be professional, and the other half had to be non- professional, so we got some businessmen on the board. We got into almost building a whole new medical center down there by getting the support of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare."¹⁴

But the situation at the Medical College extended beyond poor educational standards,

¹⁴ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham, July 23, 1982, pg. 12. McNair Oral History Project of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

low-wage, non-professional worker discontent had reached a head before Gov. McNair was even aware that there was any unrest in Charleston. Like other southern politicians, McNair blamed “outsiders” for the politicization of black South Carolinians. But McNair did not restrict his classification of outsider status activists who settled in South Carolina from other states or perhaps countries. He remarked “a lot of times [an outsider] was somebody like that who’d gone outside and who had become a part of one of the movements around the country and had come back home. Other times it would be others who were parts of movements.”¹⁵ So in his estimation, an activist like Mary Moultrie, who had spent years living and working in New York, could be classified as an outsider even though she was born and raised in Charleston. The outsider activist narrative was popular among politicians who rejected the idea that black unrest was organic. Though McNair was relatively more understanding of some of the racial issues and unrest than his other gubernatorial colleagues, he still trafficked in the concept that black South Carolinians had to be nudged into action by outside activists.

In a broader sense, white southerners often blamed outside activists for the radicalization or politicization of black southerners. During the modern civil rights-Black Power movements, politicians and normal citizens spun their own narratives of black contentment with racial mores and laws that limited black movement, education, earning power, and jeopardized their safety. It was hard for some white southerners to acknowledge that black people had never been fine with segregated facilities or that blacks resented separate public accommodations. Beyond legal segregation, common social practices that emphasized blacks’ second-class status, having to move off of sidewalks or out of the way of white people in public space, being called “boy” or “girl” instead of “Mr.” or “Ms.,” and other microaggressions, were stifling for many blacks.

¹⁵ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. May 9, 1983, pg.3. McNair Oral History Project, South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Columbia, SC, USA.

Once a critical mass of African Americans began protesting in unison for equality, white southerners' only retort was that "their" blacks could not be at the crux of the movement. For McNair and others, it was convenient to use the outsider activist narrative to advance the idea that the status quo was acceptable to blacks and whites and to shift the blame for unrest to "northern activists" or "Black Power activists." But local activists led most, if not all, of the civil rights and Black Power organizing and protesting in South Carolina during McNair's administration. The outsider activist narrative was a convenient way for some white southerners to remain in denial about the rising tide of homegrown activism and discontent.

McNair's belief in the outsider activist narrative and his ignorance of worker discontent as his administration attempted to repair the image and standards of the Medical College resulted in a reactive instead of proactive response after the dispute over the dismissal of the twelve workers in March 1969. He recalled:

Being in Charleston, we didn't hear that much and didn't know that much about what was going on inside [the hospital]. We knew they had problems. I would get some things from people about conditions down there, but we were caught short, totally unprepared for a strike at the Medical University hospital. With that, we felt that we had to very quickly enunciate the policy of the state. That had to come quickly and firmly, so that again came from meetings with legislative leaders, government leaders, and others in the state, no question about it having strong support from the business community because we were a right-to-work state anyway.¹⁶

According to McNair, the labor and civil rights issues at the Medical College were "an exception...an isolated incident down there [in Charleston] that sort of erupted on us. We say it blindsided us. He continued "I think it blindsided us because we just were more concerned about building the medical university and developing that hospital so that it would have an image as a medical university hospital. All of us had been concerned about the college and the fact that it

¹⁶ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. September 1, 1982, pg. 10. McNair Oral History Project, South Carolina Department of Archives. Columbia, SC, USA.

was about to lose accreditation, and we poured money into it. We had the hospital there, and it never really had a good image.”¹⁷ While McNair was focused on repairing the inner-workings of the medical school, the hospital itself was in disarray. McNair remained unaware of the full extent of the hospital’s issues for the duration of the strike.

McNair only understood the issues between non-professional workers and their coworkers and supervisors at the Medical College as “a festering sore” that “erupted” after the strike had ended. There were “attitudinal” issues at all ranks of the hospital including “the leadership from the top nurses to the blacks who were nurses’ aides and the support facilities, even among the faculty.”¹⁸ Even though he acknowledged that the Medical College was a toxic work environment at all levels, years after the strike, McNair remained unwilling to concede that the workers had come to a consciousness about activism separate from the national chapter of 1199. McNair was convinced that outside agitators, including the national branch of 1199 and even Stokely Carmichael, who had visited William Saunders, were involved in stirring up the hospital workers.¹⁹ McNair assumed that if the workers had been more informed about labor issues in South Carolina, they would have known that they were “going to get caught up in a state policy against recognition and collective bargaining.”²⁰ That McNair believed that detailed knowledge of the state’s strict labor policy would have deterred the workers exemplifies how disconnected McNair was from the Charleston situation.

McNair’s response to the strike was based on the idea that South Carolina law prevented public entities from bargaining with unions. For McNair, the two central issues of the strike were

¹⁷ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. May 9, 1983, 17-18.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. May 16, 1983, pg. 8. McNair Oral History Project, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC, USA.

²⁰ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. May 9, 1983, 18.

“jobs and better work relationships and the other was recognition and bargaining.”²¹ Thus McNair was focused on negotiating for better jobs and working relationships and not interested in recognizing the union or allowing collective bargaining. While the workers saw union recognition as essential to guaranteeing better working conditions and relationships, McNair was unwilling, he would claim unable, to discuss recognizing the union. According to McNair,

[The state was] caught in the middle of trying to improve the work relationships and improve the working conditions and get that in better shape without getting ourselves in trouble over on the legal side where it came to negotiating or recognition and bargaining. So we tried quickly to define the areas and make it clear by an enunciation of a state policy that the state was neither going to recognize a union nor engage in collective bargaining. Now we didn't say and didn't intend to say that people couldn't join if they wanted to and belong if they wanted to, but that in the public sector we weren't going to recognize a union, and we weren't going to engage in collective bargaining. So from those two points, you were out there, and there wasn't anything we could do about it. That caused the prolonged effort. I think that's where 1199B almost felt that they had to succeed in that or lose something nationally, and our attitude was that there just wasn't anything that was negotiable.²²

With the support of the state General Assembly, McNair maintained this stance for the duration of the strike. Since the workers were focused on gaining union recognition, they continued the strike with the hopes of forcing the state to capitulate to their terms on recognition.

But McNair was steadfast in his opposition to union recognition. The strike was “a test of will power” because “people from everywhere [were] coming in, getting into it, participating in it. Walter Reuther coming down and leading marching demonstrations, just about everybody you could think of that was a national labor leader.” McNair credited outside support for the prolonged strike claiming that “had it not been for that, the thing could have been ended much earlier. The end result was about what it could have been within a matter of weeks.” He remained convinced that the workers were not self-motivated and self-activated activists. For

²¹ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. May 16, 1983, pg. 4.

²² Ibid., 4.

many governors in the south, it was easier to associate any “rebellion” with northern or other outsider influence than come to terms with the fact that “their” citizens were dissatisfied with the status quo. Despite his misinformed assessment of the strike’s beginnings, he continued with the precedent he had set in Orangeburg by sending SLED officers and the National Guard into Charleston.²³

In response to the workers’ continued picketing, McNair sought to protect historic parts of Charleston from the strike. Because “Charleston [was] a wooden city,” McNair was especially concerned about preserving the city for historical purposes as well as financial and tourism related purposes. In McNair’s estimation, Charleston “was a place you couldn’t afford to have [a strike], and thus we had to take precautions to keep people out of [the historic] areas. We really pretty much sealed off the old city by using the National Guard and all and prevented any of the demonstrations from taking place down in there and tried to keep [the protestors] out in the areas where they could march and could congregate without the risk of either violence or a fire.” He continued, “both of them were of equal concern to us because one fire in the wrong place and you’d have a terrible time there. Fortunately we were able to avoid it. I think one thing that most of the national leaders who came in shared with us is they didn’t want violence, they didn’t want to get caught up in violence, and we didn’t either.”²⁴

Though neither party wanted or anticipated “violence” McNair authorized SLED officers and the National Guard to patrol Charleston. Like Orangeburg, “Pete Strom really became the guy in charge of all the security, including the National Guard. Everybody sort of worked under his supervision. They had their own internal team set up where they were constantly meeting and

²³ Ibid., 5.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

always together and always in touch so that nobody went off on their own, nobody got out of hand or precipitated a problem.” For the majority of the strike, state officials “worked closely with the local enforcement people.” But local officials were not always privy to decisions. In McNair’s estimation, local law enforcement was “so close to [the strike], and we knew they had to stay back and live and work together afterwards. So occasionally we’d take them out of it totally and just let them go on with their normal day-to-day activities in Charleston.” He continued, “they had Chief Conroy, who was one of the outstanding police chiefs in the country, and he worked very closely with Pete Strom and the National Guard as far as security and maintaining protection for the areas in Charleston and the people down there.” The heavy security presence was not only to maintain the integrity of hospital operations, but also to protect the protestors from outsiders that could have triggered “a problem.” Though McNair claimed that the National Guard was used as “a matter of protecting”, the militarized nature of the picket line only instigated hostility between demonstrators and the police who they saw as extensions of the hospital and government power structure.²⁵

Armed National Guardsmen and SLED officers patrolled picket lines outside of the hospitals and often lined the streets during organized marches around Charleston. The contentious relationship between the strikers and hospital officials was only made worse by the militarized atmosphere of the frontlines. Pete Strom delivered frequent reports on the situation to the governor. In his April 28th report, Strom noted that protestors were “becoming more angry—making remarks to white people in route to church” and that “[t]hey are attempting to organize the garbage collectors.” Strom also reported that “Reverend Abernathy apparently [did] not want to get out of jail” since he was “drawing larger crowds” while in jail. As a result of the high

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

arrest rates due to the strike, Strom needed McNair to intervene “to determine the availability of the Migrant Workers Camp, County Fair Grounds, and the County Hall.” A month into the strike, Strom was overseeing “700 National Guardsmen, 100 Highway Patrolmen, [and] 45 SLED Agents.” Throughout the strike, Strom maintained constant communication with the governor with regard to the strength of his force and the day-to-day and sometimes hour-to-hour happenings in the strike.²⁶

Not two hours after his initial report on April 28th, Strom delivered a second report to McNair detailing truancy in schools across Charleston. According to Strom, “[a]t 10:30 [on April 28th] the absentees from the schools in Charleston totaled 4300. This [was] 1800 from the county schools and 2500 from the city schools which is 3200 above normal absentees. Some of the bus drivers turned in the keys to their buses.” Relatedly, “[t]here [were] very few adults at Morris Street Church” a strike staging area, “but a good many youth.”²⁷ Local activists and SCLC organizers had been organizing youth around Charleston and were often blamed for youth truancy during the strike. Youth participation was central to some of the major marches. Students also reinforced the hospital picket lines.

Strom followed up with another report at 1:45 pm commenting on the dire healthcare situation at the Medical College, general strike updates, and the tense situation at Voorhees College. Medical College operations had been severely hampered by the absence of a significant portion of the staff. As a result, Strom reported that “Dr. McCord [would] have to close the Hospital Clinic within 24 hours due to the fact that the non-professional workers apparently

²⁶ “REPORT FROM CHIEF STROM, MONDAY, APRIL 28, 1969, 9:45 A.M.,” Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

²⁷ “Report from Chief Strom at 11:25 A.M. – April 28, 1969,” Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

[were] honoring the request of the Union officials and [were] not reporting to work...This [would] be done only in a life and death situation and that [was] what it [was] approaching at [that] time.” The workers were not planning to cease action anytime soon as Strom reported “75 arrests” as “strikers in Charleston moved from the Police Station to City Hall...[and] “600-700 people” were in “the vicinity of the churches...SCLC ha[d] stated that they are fully and totally committed to the operation in Charleston and [were] prepared to stay until the Hospital recognize[d] the Union.” By the end of April 1969, the strike was in full swing as workers were committed to staying off of their jobs and national leaders in other union and civil rights campaigns had begun directing their attention to Charleston.²⁸

But the strike was only one of the major civil rights issues on McNair’s plate. At the same time as the McCord considered shutting down the Medical College Clinic, students at Voorhees College in Denmark had “taken over the Administration Building” on campus. Strom’s 1:45 pm report to McNair included information detailing the takeover. According to “Sheriff Strickland of Bamberg County...A small group—approximately 25 of the militant crowd—had taken over the Administration Building and Library and the switchboard.”²⁹ These students were subsequently arrested “after conferences with two professors, as National Guardsmen, Highway patrolmen and State Law Enforcement Agents entered the grounds [who were sent to the campus by McNair] at the request of President John F. Potts and the Rev. J. Kenneth Morris of Columbia, chairman of the college’s board of trustees.”³⁰ This newly hostile situation in Denmark perpetuated the growing discord between the state and its citizens. The circumstances

²⁸ “REPORT FROM CHIEF STROM,” April 28, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “McNair to Explain Voorhees Position,” *The State*, 1 May 1969, 1-A. Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina, USA.

surrounding the unrest and McNair's decision to intervene with militarized police and guardsmen were up for debate. In an editorial entitled "Vigilante of the Week 'McNair Claims Top Honors,'" an editor of the Columbia based *Southern Afro-Chronicle*, questioned "which [was] the lesser of the two evils. McNair as Governor or [Strom] Thurmond as Senator." The writer also suggested that "McNair's intervention in Denmark [was] condemned by black people of the state and the nation, his action was unwarranted, unwanted, unneeded and undesired." According to this report, "Denmark was calm there were no incidents, talks were underway...but the governor had to have his way . . . he had to put his foot down, and it seems like he went stomping (bare foot) in a hornets [sic] nest." The author astutely suggested that McNair was operating as other "men of his position [were] notoriously given to self-defense in the name of the genral [sic] welfare [and that his actions] inhibited legitimate dialogue at the school, resulting in greater hostility, anxiwety and uncertainty."³¹ While the Voorhees takeover aligned with college campus movements across the country, more unrest in South Carolina only encouraged McNair and Strom to expand surveillance across the state.

In response to the situations in Charleston and Denmark, state political leaders doubled down on their stance against negotiating. During an April 29th meeting legislative leaders the South Carolina House Speaker "suggested...that there be a resolution introduced, with both houses concurring, reaffirming the State's position concerning negotiation and collective bargaining for state employees." Those involved in the meeting also discussed "getting legislation concerning individuals who take over public buildings."³² In another meeting that

³¹ Goodhope Blackman. "Vigilante of the Week 'McNair Claims Top Honors,'" *The Southern Afro-Chronicle* 2 May 1969, 1. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 12.

³² "MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD," April 29, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

afternoon between McNair and Charleston County legislators, several members of the county legislature expressed their dissatisfaction with the state's response to the strike. One legislator "expressed his opinion that it was repugnant...that the people of Charleston would be living in a 'police state.'" McNair "assured the Delegation that the people of Charleston [w]ould be protected in their homes and person with all the authority of the State [and] that the State's position on this subject would not be weakened on account of Charleston." McNair also informed them that the South Carolina "Attorney General was...in Charleston ready to talk with anyone and the National Guard would not be pulled out until peace and tranquility [was] restored." At the end of this meeting the county legislative delegation was "in accord with the Governor's views."³³

Late April and early May 1969 was an eventful period in the Charleston strike. While McNair, state, and local politicians crafted a response that hinged on the state's inability or unwillingness to negotiate, union officials and local worker representatives refined their demands and continued to put steady pressure on the hospitals and government through daily picketing, mass meetings, and marches. McNair was tasked with navigating the interconnected but sometimes disconnected power structures in Charleston and at the state level. The Charleston mayor, J. Palmer Gaillard, the Charleston County Council, and the state legislature had competing interests. But they all wanted a swift resolution to the action that was stifling the city.

In an April 29th conversation, Mayor Gaillard and Gov. McNair discussed the difficulties in mediating the situation with the workers and regular Charleston citizens. Gaillard was primarily concerned with the status of the National Guard in the city and the general safety and security of Charleston. He complained that "250 guards went home with no warning" and that

³³ Ibid.

“[g]uards [had] been dismissed twice without notice.”³⁴ McNair assured Gaillard that safety was his priority and that the National Guard would remain in Charleston as long as troops were needed.

While McNair managed to juggle the interests of city, county, and state officials, the Military, Public, and Municipal Affairs Committee of the South Carolina House introduced a resolution on April 29th that affirmed McNair’s insistence that the state and state entities cannot bargain with its employees. The concurrent resolution between the House of Representative and the Senate read, “BE IT RESOLVED by the House of Representatives, the Senate concurring: THAT there being no constitutional or statutory authority permitting the State, its subdivisions, agencies or institutions to bargain collectively with their employees, the public policy in this regard as announced by His Excellency, the Governor of South Carolina, be, and the same is hereby, affirmed.”³⁵ By doubling down on their refusal to bargain with employees, state legislators almost guaranteed an extended strike. In late April and early May, the workers remained unwilling to compromise on their central demand of collective bargaining.

People from across the United States responded to McNair and William McCord’s refusal to bargain and show of force with SLED officers and National Guardsmen by sending hundreds of telegrams in support of and opposition to the state’s response. The telegrams ranged from glowing approvals of McNair’s unwillingness to concede to the workers demands and praise for his use of the National Guard to civil rights and labor activists sharing their disapproval of these

³⁴ NOTES FROM TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WITH MAYOR GAILLARD,” April 29, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

³⁵ State of South Carolina House of Representatives, “A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION,” April 29, 1969, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

same actions. Over the course of the strike McNair received correspondence from across the country and occasionally from international locales. The fact that McNair's office was inundated with correspondence through the duration of the strike indicates the magnitude of interest in the strike from the media and concerned citizens. The situation in Charleston had reached the nightly news, daily newspapers, and had travelled through the activist, both left- and right-wing, circles. McNair's movements and decisions were not only the subject of much debate in South Carolina, but also of interest to people across the country.³⁶

A little more than a decade after the strike, McNair recalled that "outside" interest from the likes of Walter Reuther and "Catholic nuns and one or two of the bishops...caused it to be a long, prolonged, strike. Had it not been for that, the thing could have been ended much earlier. The end result was about what it could have been within a matter of weeks."³⁷ While Reuther had limited contact with the governor, others including the Bishop of Charleston appealed to McNair with frequent and persistent correspondence. In a letter to McNair, the Most Reverend Ernest L. Unterkoefler, who was "named a bishop by Pope John XXIII in 1962," served as the Bishop of Charleston from 1964 until 1990, and was involved in a variety of civil rights activism, lamented that there was

[a] serious situation of non-communication between labor and the administrative officers of the Medical College of South Carolina has been brought to my attention as one of the religious leaders of the Charleston community. I wish I could share with you the serious implications of this whole situation. At this moment realists will dialogue and even be willing to negotiate. The labor issue covers up a raw interracial problem of the gravest magnitude. I hope that you understand the urgency in this breakdown in human relations and will take appropriate means to take a responsible position before the good people of

³⁶ Concerned and interested parties sent Gov. McNair hundreds of telegrams and letters over the course of the strike. I reference a limited but hopefully representative portion of this correspondence in this chapter. The full set of correspondence is located at the Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina Box 32, Folders 5-21.

³⁷ Robert McNair. Interview with Cole Blease Graham. May 16, 1983, 5.

South Carolina, who love peaceful racial brotherhood and harmonious human relations.³⁸ Bishop Unterkoefler sent this letter on February 17th, weeks before the strike officially began. By this point, it was clear that the absence of fruitful communication between the workers and the hospital would lead to tumult that impacted the greater Charleston community. Unterkoefler's assertion that "the labor issue cover[ed] up a raw interracial problem of the gravest magnitude" and that South Carolinians wanted "peaceful racial brotherhood and harmonious human relations" was both an accurate assessment of the basis of the tensions in Charleston as well as a hopeful characterization of race relations in the city. Unterkoefler had written to encourage the governor to intervene before the tensions reached a breaking point. The clergy played a central role in brokering talks between the government and the workers.

McNair did not respond to Unterkoefler's letter until March 11th. In his response, McNair characterized the situation between the workers and the Medical College as "a delicate situation." He reiterated his stance that the state could not recognize a union adding "on a confidential basis" that "the union representatives moved into the Charleston area and organized the employees at the Hospital and then requested a meeting to negotiate." McNair's assertion that the union organized the workers persisted throughout the strike action despite much evidence that the workers had been organized and organizing long before 1999 settled in Charleston. For McNair, the disagreement with would soon become a full blown strike was "a touchy problem...that we have not wanted to discuss publically...[but] the leaders of the unhappy employees group have been given all of the facts on a personal basis." Even as more dramatic action loomed, McNair

³⁸ "Bill 3101," South Carolina General Assembly, 110th Session 1993-1994, http://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess110_1993-1994/bills/3101.htm, Accessed December 8, 2015 "History," Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston, <http://www.sccatholic.org/history> Accessed December 8, 2015.; Letter to Governor McNair from the Most Reverend Ernest L. Unterkoefler. February 17, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

remained unwilling to budge. His stance would remain relatively constant until the conclusion of the affair.³⁹

In his letter to Unterkoefer, McNair also offered a detailed explanation of the state's classification and compensation system, a major point of contention for the workers. In response to the workers' claims that the wage system privileged white workers over blacks even when black workers had seniority, McNair wrote that the state was working on "establishing a personnel classification and compensation system that will cover all employees in State Government including the wage and hour personnel in the State institutions and the Medical College Hospital. This will make uniform [sic] the classification and compensation throughout the State and should clear up the situation in Charleston." He continued, "[i]f people are still unhappy then, there would be nothing we could because they would have to comply with the uniform system affecting [sic] State Agencies and State Institutions." Ultimately, "the State can never put itself in the position of negotiating because it could lead to a situation that could get out of control."⁴⁰ McNair's stance on negotiation would dominate the state's narrative. But Unterkoefer's attempted intervention indicated that outside parties were invested in the outcome of the disagreement if only to preserve order in Charleston.

Unterkoefer extended the conversation with his March 14th letter to McNair. The Bishop reiterated his hope "that all means [would] be taken in order to keep a balance of good relationship among the workers, supervisors and administration. The internal problems of hospitals and institutions, including church institutions, today have a way of disturbing the local community." Unterkoefer, other clergy, business owners, and other interested parties, hoped to

³⁹ Robert McNair. Letter to Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefer, March 11, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

avoid a prolonged labor struggle. He was primarily interested in “the welfare” of a “growing” South Carolina. The prospects of a long-term labor dispute were unsavory for a community that thrived off of tourism and an active port. The exchange between Unterkoefer and McNair encapsulated the dynamics between some community leaders and the state government. It was in their best interest to contain the workers’ outrage from impacting the larger community. But the workers were not interested in preserving the status quo in any way.

Bishop Unterkoefer was not the only concerned clergy member in Charleston. On March 22nd, Rev. William Joyce of St. Patrick’s Church in Charleston along with Rev. Z. L. Grady, Rev. John Enwright, Rev. Thomas Duffy, Rev. Mack Sharp, and Rev. R.R. Woods in expressing their deep concern with the status of discussions between the workers and hospital administration. They wrote that they were “deeply concerned about the apparent unwillingness of hospital administration officials to deal with the elected representatives of the workers.” They were also “concerned about the substandard salaries which ha[d] always been a heritage of the hospital...[and] about what this confrontation [could] do to [the] city.” They implored McNair to do everything he could to open “a path to peace with justice...[that would] cause genuine negotiations to begin.” Bishop Charles Golden and Dudley Ward of the Christian Social concern United Methodist Church of Washington, D.C. wrote to urge McNair to agree to collective bargaining as it was “the peaceful and orderly way to achieve justice and to avoid an escalation [sic] of the conflict [and cautioned that] delay generates social forces similar [sic] to those operative in Memphis and leading to the tragedy there.”⁴¹ Clergy across the political spectrum

⁴¹ William Joyce. Telegram to Governor Robert McNair, March 22, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.; Bishop Charles Golden and A. Dudley Ward. Telegram to Robert McNair, June 23, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 3.

urged the governor to intervene to ensure a swift end to the conflict.

While clergymen like Unterkoefer, Joyce, Grady, Enwright, Duffy, Sharp and Woods, wrote McNair to warn him of the brewing discord, other concerned community members and outside observers offered support for his firm stand against bargaining and use of the National Guard and others encouraged him to take a different approach altogether. On March 17th, the day twelve workers were dismissed from the Medical College Hospital, Isaiah Bennett, Charleston activist and state coordinator of Local 1199B, sent the governor a telegram urging him to intervene “in this matter as early as possible...as we feel that these workers should be reinstated immediately.”⁴² A few days later, John H. WRIGHTEN, of Charleston, warned the governor that if he did not “do something about the Medical College immediately, another Orangeburg Massacre [was] on the way in South Carolina.” WRIGHTEN claimed to “have seen some of the same people who triggered the Orangeburg Massacre in Charleston. If this occurs, the blood will be on your hands...”⁴³ While WRIGHTEN’s fears may not have been corroborated by fact, his letter encapsulated the paranoia of some people in Charleston.

The strike loomed large both locally and nationally as interested parties and people outside of the state telegraphed McNair to express their approval of or disappointment in his response. On March 31st, Grey Temple Bishop of Charleston wrote to McNair about the “ugly situation...at the Medical College in Charleston.” Concerned about the strike becoming “a national affair,” Bishop cautioned that too many “influential persons” were taking control of the strike “out of the hands of local people.” Like John WRIGHTEN, Grey Bishop feared “another

⁴² Isaiah Bennett. Telegram to Robert McNair, March 17, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

⁴³ John H. WRIGHTEN. Telegram to Robert McNair, March 22, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

Orangeburg crisis which would be tragic.” Bishop echoed the clergy’s sentiment that “someone on the state level with authority...sit down across the table with representatives from the strikers to see what can be done to deal with what they believe are grievances.”⁴⁴ Macon P. Miller, the Executive Vice President of the South Carolina State Chamber of Commerce, supported the state’s “vigorous action...in combating outside sources causing illegal unrest and agitation at the Medical College in Charleston.” Writing from New York, Buck Nickel was convinced that “the full force of South Carolina’s law enforcement must be thrown behind the hospital authorities” and that “law and order must be preserved.” McNair received dozens of telegrams that supported his choice to bolster the local Charleston police with SLED officers and eventually National Guardsmen. Concerns over “outsider” interference and influence ran through many of the messages of support for the state’s tactics.⁴⁵

In a telegram on April 17th, George Johnson, Jr. wrote “to commend [McNair] on [his] handling of the strikers at the Medical College of Charleston. By upholding the law [he] set an example for the 99% of the people of our State who believe in law and order.”⁴⁶ Robert Russell, president of the Ruscon Construction Company, wrote Governor McNair to commend Dr. McCord, “in his struggle with the forces with the forces seeking to overturn the free enterprise system in the Charleston area.”⁴⁷ Many of McNair’s supporters took a position similar to Robert Vance’s assertion that “Charleston Medical College [was] fighting a battle for the whole state.”

⁴⁴ Grey Temple Bishop. Telegram to Robert McNair, March 31, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

⁴⁵ Macon P. Miller. Telegram to Robert McNair, March 28, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2. Buck Mickel. Telegram to Robert McNair, March 28, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

⁴⁶ George Dean Johnson, Jr. Letter to Governor Robert McNair, April 17, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

⁴⁷ Robert B. Russell. Telegram to Robert McNair, April 1, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

One writer from Raleigh, North Carolina urged McNair not to “capitulate [to the] labor threat and political expediency.” Ruth Grovenstein of Maxton, North Carolina wrote “to applaud [McNaor’s] stand on the rights of ALL citizens . . . not just a few of the loudest!” She was glad “to know . . . men with backbones [were] holding offices of importance!” In one of the more extreme notes of support, the Concerned Citizens of North Charleston commended the governor for “being a real governor of the Old Palmetto State” and his “stand to protect the greatest white civilization of all time.”⁴⁸ Some viewed McNair’s methods, his refusal to bargain and use of heavily armed National Guardsmen and state police, as the most appropriate response to the strike.

While local citizens and interested parties across the country wrote to encourage McNair’s stand against bargaining and his show of force, many people also wrote seeking to encourage negotiation and an end to the more restrictive measures that were being used to quell the strike. On May 1st, Mrs. W.M. Lacy telegrammed McNair as “a white housewife” who was disappointed in what she perceived as his absence from and irresponsiveness to the strike and the workers’ concerns. According to Lacy, McNair’s response to the strike was a direct result of what she understood as his absence from the frontlines of the strike. She argued that

The show of militia is both assuring and heartrending. Your job was to reassure to make plain, to stand by. Each day the situation continues. Allows a greater maximum of danger. Obviously the curfew is the easiest way out for you, a man of little courage or concern. The qualities were what we needed. Frankly I am amazed at the restrain[t] of our negro people who have no encouragement from any source...All things put together, your

⁴⁸ Ruth Grovenstein, Letter to Robert McNair, June 12, 1969 Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 3.; Robert M. Vance, Telegram to Robert McNair, March 28, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.; Edward E. Hollowell and Dragstall. Telegram to Robert McNair, March 31, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.; Concerned Citizens of Charleston, Telegram to Robert McNair, May 2, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 3.

political [stature] is decreasing fast. We speak here generally of McNair as a man who lets the other fellow do the job for him. We don't need more industry we need clean air we don't need your military right arm, we needed a presence and a concern. Your absence in this crisis was an appalling failure."⁴⁹

For Lacy, McNair seemed too far removed from the day-to-day action and atmosphere of Charleston to adequately respond. His inclination to use his "military right arm" was, at the very least, a miscalculation. Lacy was not alone in her criticism of McNair's capabilities and methods. In a succinct telegram, Guy R. Smythe wrote, "as a voter I wish you would stop this curfew and start negotiations."⁵⁰

Activists from across the United States joined concerned citizens from South Carolina in their effort to encourage the governor to take an alternative approach to the strike and the workers' concerns. On April 28th, Mrs. J. R. Carr of Montgomery, Alabama telegraphed the governor. Mrs. Johnnie Rebecca Carr was a "founding member of the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955" and became the fifth president of the organization in 1967. She was "the conscience of the Montgomery community" and a longtime friend of Rosa Parks.⁵¹ On behalf of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), Mrs. Carr wrote, "it is regrettable that the officials of your state are jailing our leaders and other persons because they are protesting unjust treatment on their jobs. We urge you to use the power of your office to bring about justice and equality for all." Harold Carter, of the SCLC branch in Baltimore, Maryland, telegraphed

⁴⁹ Mrs. W.M. Lacy. Telegram to Robert McNair. May 1, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 5.

⁵⁰ Guy R. Smythe, Telegram to Robert McNair, May 1, 1969, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 3.

⁵¹ "Johnnie Carr and the Montgomery Improvement Association," The Jack Rabin Collection on Alabama Civil Rights, Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA, <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/digital/rabin/carr.html>, Accessed December 8, 2015.; "Carr was Community's Conscience." *Montgomery Advertiser*, Feb 24, 2008. <http://ezproxy.msu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/412898452?accountid=12598>. Accessed December 8, 2015.

McNair on April 29th “Sir, we want you to know that we support the demands of striking hospital workers and join their crusade please use your office to bring justice to this cause.” Rev. Jefferson P. Rogers, president of the Washington, D.C. chapter of the SCLC, also appealed to McNair. According to Rogers, “the entire constituency of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the vast majority of the American public protest the jailing of Doctor Ralph Abernathy on behalf of the just cause of exploited workers.” He asked McNair “to lend assistance to the workers thereby upholding the American creed instead of making more difficult the achieving of an economic dignity on behalf of Black American citizens.” Howard E. Spragg, executive vice president of the United Board for Homeland Ministries, also condemned the jailing of Abernathy arguing that the “bail aggregating in excess of 200,000 dollars . . . clearly demonstrate[d] discriminatory practices [sic] and a disregard [of] essenti[al] human and constitutional rights.” Thomas Kilgore, pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Los Angeles, California and someone who “had been active in civil rights protests since before Martin [Luther King, Jr.] entered the ministry . . . [and] had been instrumental in planning the Pilgrimage for Freedom in 1957 and the March on Washington in 1963,” implored McNair to “correct” the wage issue for the workers because it was a “national disgrace.” Black activists and their allies from across the country were paying close attention to the strike. The national network of black ministers and laypeople was an important complement to the local interest in the situation.⁵²

⁵² Mrs. J. R. Carr, Jr. Telegram to Robert McNair. April 28, 1969, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2; Harold A. Carter. Telegram to Robert McNair. April 28, 1969, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2; Howard E. Spragg. Telegram to Robert McNair. June 21, 1969, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 3.; Jefferson P. Rogers, Telegram to Robert McNair. April 28, 1969, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2; Edythe Scott Bagley. *Desert Rose: The Life and Legacy of Coretta Scott King* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2012), 197.; Thomas Kilgore, Jr. Telegram to Robert McNair. April 28, 1969, Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political

While individual citizens sent their opinions via Western Union telegrams, union representatives, civil rights activists, and business leaders also made sure to communicate with Gov. McNair. The pressure from all sides of the struggle, people sympathetic with the workers, people supportive of the Governor's methods, and local citizens tired of living in a city under siege of the National Guard and "outside" activists, elicited little action from McNair. Most of the telegrams from concerned citizens on either side of the issue were met with form letter responses that thanked the writers, no matter the content of their telegrams and letters, for "taking the time to express [their] thoughts." Conversely, McNair and his administrative staff did take the time to respond personally to various business leaders' letters and telegrams. Concerned citizens sent Gov. McNair hundreds of telegrams in support and opposition to his policy during the strike. The senders ranged from Charleston business leaders, union representatives, and ordinary citizens to SCLC representatives from local chapters across the country and other interested parties.

While McNair sought to limit the reach and impact of the strike, the combination of national organizational involvement, a captive audience across the country, and the extended length of the strike thwarted McNair's desire for a simple and swift end to the conflict. The strike lasted well into the summer, which was an unfortunate circumstance for McNair as it overlapped with another important civil rights campaign in the state. Student unrest at Vorhees College in Denmark, South Carolina elicited a response similar to the unrest in Orangeburg and Charleston. Citizens wary of the increasing presence of "militants" in their state wrote to McNair to urge action. Marshall T. Pack of Greer, South Carolina "The militants have come in force to Vorhees [sic] College in Denmark...South Carolina has been peaceful. I emlore [sic] you to take the necessary steps even if you have to battle the administration of that college to bring peace to that

campus use whatever force you deem necessary.”⁵³ McNair obliged and once again sent Pete Strom to the frontlines of the campus takeover.

The situation at Vorhees served as the third event in a string of actions and confrontations that moved South Carolina from the civil rights periphery into the larger national conversation. Though the state had a long history of civil rights campaigns and actions, especially those led and influenced by Esau and Septima Clark, the state had not been the focus of much consistent national attention. Unsurprisingly, many local citizens and members of the state government blamed “outsiders” for the sudden uptick in civil rights activity. Though “outsiders” were actively involved in some of the organizing and action in the state, college students and hospital workers were the principal actors in all three events. Students were the primary leaders and participants in the actions in Orangeburg and Denmark and the hospital strike also featured a significant mass of high school students among those who actively marched alongside the workers. That all of the tensions on campus at South Carolina State, Vorhees, and at the Medical College and other hospitals in Charleston came to a head in the span of a little more than a year is also evidence that there had been rumblings of discord permeating the state at the same time.

While McNair dealt with the seemingly sudden upswing in black activism across the state, South Carolina’s representatives in Washington sought to interfere or influence the Nixon administration’s investigation of the Medical College of Charleston. Senator Strom Thurmond, Representative Mendel Rivers, and Representative Ernest Hollings were influential and seasoned politicians who knew how to use their influence to gain favors for the state and district, respectively, that they represented. Though President Nixon was reticent to get involved in the

⁵³ Marshall T. Pack, Telegram to Robert McNair, April 29, 1969. Robert E. McNair Collection, South Carolina Political Collection, Ernest Hollings Special Collections, University of South Carolina, Box 32, Folder 2.

labor struggle, his administration could not avoid Thurmond, Rivers, and Hollings's inquiries into the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's civil rights investigation into the Medical College. The matter of executive enforcement of civil rights laws was central to McNair's handling of local unrest and to Nixon's and his administration's approach to federal civil rights investigations and the enforcement of various federal civil rights laws.

THURMOND, RIVERS, HOLLINGS, AND HEW

Between May and July 1969, strike action vacillated between moments of calm and unrest as Charleston police continued mass arrests and the workers did not back down from pressure to end the strike without assurances of better wages and work conditions. Their concerns about work conditions were further bolstered by findings of the 1968 Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) investigation of the Medical College. As the strike approached the 100-day mark, findings from the 1968 Health, Education, and Welfare review of the Medical College Hospital revealed that the hospital was in violation of equal employment opportunity laws. According to newspaper reports, Medical College officials had been aware of their noncompliance in more than 30 instances since September 19, 1968. Dr. McCord, the hospital president, was notified that "a HEW team had made nine findings in the area of equal education opportunities, 13 relating to equal employment opportunities and 15 pertaining to equal health opportunities." HEW investigators from the Office of Civil Rights "visited the medical college" in July and August 1968 "to review its compliance with the equal opportunity clause of its contract with the departement [sic]."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Rudolph Pyatt, Jr. "HEW Report Cites Bias By Hospital," *The Charleston News and Courier*, 2-A, 18 June 1969, Addlestone Library, The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

According to a June 15th newspaper report, “HEW’s contract compliance branch chief wrote a letter to Dr. McCord June 5 recommending that the dismissed 12 employes be rehired with retroactive pay” ...paving the way for a threatened strike of nurses and doctors...in addition to the recommendation that the 12 employes [sic] be rehired, the letter also stated that a HEW investigation ‘has established one basic fact, which is, that the Medical College of South Carolina together with its hospital facilities is in non-compliance with the requirements of Executive (presidential) Order 11246.’ ... ‘in order to continue as a government contractor it will be necessary that the Medical College develop [an] affirmative action program in equal employment opportunity as set forth in the rules and regulations of the executive order.’”⁵⁵

The findings of this investigation were revealed in correspondence between Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina and Dr. Hugh Brimm, of HEW. Along with Hollings, Senator Strom Thurmond and Representative L. Mendel Rivers had also pressed HEW for more information on the Medical College’s status. Hollings, Thurmond, and Rivers used their considerable Washington influence to intervene in a consequential decision on federal funds for the Medical College. After a group “of House and Senate [members] pleaded with President Nixon to intervene” in the strike negotiations, “Thurmond and Rivers, silent until then, took exception to ‘meddling’ by their colleagues.” As a response to the perceived “meddling,” Secretary Robert Finch of HEW “found himself having to placate members of Congress who take a dim view of federal guidelines...the net effect of attention given Finch by Thurmond and Rivers [had] a damaging effect on negotiations in Charleston.” An unnamed official suggested that the hospital was willing to comply with the HEW discipline because it “allowed the Medical College to put the onus on the federal government.” Thurmond, Hollings, and Rivers used their

⁵⁵ Ibid.

sizeable Washington influences to dissuade Secretary Finch from enforcing any punitive measures against the Medical College.⁵⁶

Though an aggregation of congressional members sought the President's involvement in the Charleston affair, Nixon never relented. In a *New York Post Magazine* article from June 23, 1969, the author argued that the strike was "not a minor local skirmish. It has become a key test of the Nixon regime in its dealing with exploited minority groups. What happens next could have momentous effects on this summer's climate throughout the nation." The author also questioned whether Rivers and Thurmond were "bigger than Finch in the counsels of the Nixon Administration" and asserted that "it [was] clear that Sen. Strom Thurmond and his House cohort, Mendel Rivers, threw their weight on the anti-union side and encouraged McCord to revert to his earlier primitivism." Appeals for Nixon's involvement came throughout the strike but increased as the strike grew more contentious. After the arrests of Rev. Abernathy and Rev. Hosea Williams on charges of incitement to riot, observers believed that the charges could "only be construed as a last ditch effort to break the spirit of the strikers." Regardless of the increasing "national dimensions" of the strike, Nixon was unmoved.⁵⁷

In the days following the tentative agreement between workers and the Medical College, activists in New York organized a solidarity demonstration. Members of the W.E.B. DuBois Clubs of New York, the Black Panther Party, Communist Party, Harlem Unemployment Center, and Freedom and Peace Party, among others, called for a demonstration in front of J.P. Stevens Company. Demonstration organizers argued that J.P. Stevens Company along with other "big-business interests" and "racist politicians like Strom Thurmond and Mendel Rivers [were] in cahoots with the Nixon Administration." The organizers also asserted that these parties united to

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Critical Hours in South Carolina," *New York Post Magazine*, 44, 23 June 1969. Thomas R. Waring, Jr. papers, 1902-1977 (bulk 1940-1977). (1207.00), Box 406, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

wage “a vicious, brutal campaign against the basic rights of these Hospital workers” but “the unity of the Black community, who braved the bayonets of hundreds of National Guard troops, the beatings by state troopers and over 850 arrests, along with the support of many unions, forced big-business and its government to settle with half of the workers. BUT THEY CONTINUE TO LOCK OUT HALF THE WORKERS AT COUNTY HOSPITAL!” This level of national solidarity with the workers in Charleston across race and political lines was essential. These activists and others like them across the country helped to keep the strike in the news outside of Charleston.⁵⁸

McNair and Nixon could have done more to quell the concerns of the strikers. While McNair made countless public statements and communicated with the hundreds of people who wrote him via his aides, he and President Nixon delegated much of the responsibility for the strike to those who worked for the state of South Carolina and the federal government. Even in his face-to-face meetings with the strikers, McNair proved ineffective. Strikers left the April 8, 1969 meeting. In both cases, the executive branch did not willingly enforce new civil rights legislation. Instead, McNair depended on officials at the Medical College of South Carolina and Charleston County and state and city law enforcement officials. On the federal level, the Nixon Administration’s efforts were thwarted by part of South Carolina’s congressional delegation. Nixon himself avoided any direct contact with the strike even after appeals from Rev. Abernathy and other allies.

Nixon visited Columbia in early May and made no mention of the strike which was almost at its two month mark. He and his wife, Pat, were in Columbia to celebrate the 90th

⁵⁸ Flyer “Working People and Friends of Labor Show Your Solidarity With the Charleston Strikers,” Thomas R. Waring, Jr. papers, 1902-1977 (bulk 1940-1977). (1207.00), Box 406, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

birthday of former South Carolina governor James F. Byrnes. Nixon's visit with Gov. and Mrs. Byrnes was anticipated to only last for thirty minutes and "neither the President nor Byrnes [were] available for lengthy or serious interviews." Prior to his arrival, political observers assumed that he would "face a demonstration sometime during his visit to Columbia [as] striking Negro hospital workers in Charleston have threatened to bring a small group to Columbia to demonstrate for their cause."⁵⁹ Before the president landed, the Lexington County Sheriff arrested seven "youths" for "trespassing and assault on a police officer." The "officers took away banners and placards carried by the group one of them bearing the name Local 1199-B."⁶⁰ Though state and local police were on the lookout for protestors, especially those connected to the hospital workers' strike, Nixon's visit to Columbia was fairly uneventful. He managed to avoid any real confrontations with strikers and their allies.

Shortly after his visit to Columbia, President Nixon instructed Attorney General John Mitchell "to send Justice Department officials to Charleston." Nixon initially refused to capitulate to calls from a group of 20 congressmen "to send a representative to Charleston so that those 'who feel they have no stake in our society will know that the President stands with them.'" He "questioned... 'whether the presence of a presidential representative... would aid in a fair resolution of the controversy.'"⁶¹ Nixon was forced into making this small concession due to pressure from members of Congress and the visibility of Mrs. King and Rev. Abernathy as national figures involved in the strike. Congressional intervention influence Nixon's response.

⁵⁹ Patricia McNeely. "Nixon Due In City At 10:30 Saturday," *The Columbia Record*, 1-B, 2 May 1969, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

⁶⁰ "Seven Arrested Prior to Nixon's Airport Arrival," *The Columbia Record*, 1-B, 3 May 1969, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

⁶¹ "Nixon to Get Report on Charleston Strike," *The Columbia Record*, 7-B, 10 May 1969, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

This episode is emblematic of Nixon's involvement in the Charleston strike. Though the Medical College had been under investigation for discrimination violations prior to the strike, actual strike action did not force Nixon's hand. He remained content to allow his administration via various departments including Health, Education, and Welfare and Justice to investigate the strike and preceding events. Abernathy remarked that after meeting with the Urban Affairs Council at the White House on Tuesday May 13th, Nixon "“said nothing when ‘I asked him to use the power and influence of his great office’ to end the seven-week old work stop-page.””⁶² Nixon was not motivated to intervene in the strike beyond the HEW investigation and the now routine practice of Department of Justice monitoring of civil rights activity via the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Executive action was essential to the successful passage of the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s. But the enforcement of new federal laws in the wake of the legislative progress of the mid-1960s was often left to politicians who lacked real political motivation to enforce the new laws. The Columbia episode encapsulated Nixon's approach to the Charleston Strike. Unlike his predecessor, Nixon was less inclined to directly intervene with volatile civil rights situations. His unwillingness to act juxtaposed with the influential South Carolina Congressional delegation exemplified his approach to this incident and similar events that followed this strike. While Nixon avoided prolonged engagement with the strike, McNair and his administration were at the center of the debate. McNair's various decisions regarding negotiations and ramped up police and military presence were hallmarks of his approach to civil rights conflict at this stage of his governorship. McNair and Nixon attempted to avoid falling into

⁶² “ ‘He Didn't Say Anything,’ Abernathy Says of Nixon,” *The Columbia Record*, 1-B, 14 May 1969, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

the fray of the strike but Rev. Abernathy and other activists used every occasion to vilify both for their inaction.

Though the executive branch at state and federal levels contributed to earlier civil rights progress, a slow executive branch often hindered the application of widespread societal change. Governor McNair's problematic use of force to quell black working-class activism and President Nixon's active avoidance of measurable involvement in the Charleston strike exemplify the struggle to affirm hallmark civil rights gains. Landmark legislation in the hands of unmotivated executives could often result in extremely slow enforcement. But in the Charleston case, consistent and persistent pressure forced McNair and Nixon to pay more than lip service to civil rights. Even so, neither politician was willing to make radical concessions to their interpretations of the law. McNair's approach to the strike and labor organizing in general depended on his interpretation of state law. His belief that the law prevented the state from collective bargaining was the lynchpin of the entire affair. And in this way, McNair hid behind the law. In the wake of seemingly transformative federal legislation, McNair and Nixon relented that state law and states' rights mediated the enforcement of federal law and federal intervention.

McNair's response to and actions during the Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike is one example of the importance of state involvement in advancing the progressive legal and judicial mandates of the 1950s and 1960s. Compared to some of his contemporaries like George Wallace of Alabama and Orval Faubus of Arkansas, McNair was a moderate Democrat who sought to maintain a sense of order in the midst of the societal upheaval of the civil rights-Black Power movements. But "order" for McNair was tied up in using force to quell unrest and these methods had a range of results, most unfortunately the killing of three unarmed black men at South Carolina State in 1968. In Grose's *South Carolina at the Brink*, McNair offered some public

comment about the tragedy Orangeburg. “That something as devastating as the shooting deaths of three young men on a college campus could happen in South Carolina, particularly on my watch, was unthinkable . . . It was a moment in time which should have never occurred, a moment we had fought so very hard to avoid.”⁶³ McNair’s handling of the events in Orangeburg, Charleston, and Denmark privileged excessive force as a means to limit the impact of protest. Unlike Orangeburg and Denmark, protest in Charleston was not confined to one space. While strikers were focused on change at the hospital, they ventured out into the streets to expand the scope of their movement to include store boycotts and mass marches. As governor, McNair chose a course of action that served to only agitate an already discontented population.

Ultimately, McNair’s decision-making during critical moments of the Charleston strike, especially the show of force, escalated situations that may have been navigable with negotiation. But his commitment to maintaining order with militarized law enforcement came at the cost of a protracted struggle between hospital leaders and strikers. For some, McNair’s “successful settlement of the Charleston strike provided . . . some recovery from the Orangeburg shooting and the tarnishing of his reputation as a racial progressive. In his own mind, the Charleston strike served to toughen his image as a no-nonsense leader in times of stress.”⁶⁴ While McNair’s rhetoric did not approach the vitriol of some of his gubernatorial counterparts, his use of force, especially in the case of Orangeburg, did not belie his “progressive” politics. Instead, some constituents responded to this policy as if it were an affirmation of the status quo. His leadership during the strike was indicative of the difficulties of governing during a period of great social change. Moreover, the disconnect between federal, state, and local responses to unrest was emblematic of the broader issue of federal legislation outpacing segments of the general

⁶³ Grose. *South Carolina at the Brink*, 239-240.

⁶⁴ Grose. *South Carolina At the Brink*, 261.

population. As governor of a state that was inclined to wait out social progress, McNair would have been better served by being proactive instead of taking the slow approach to change.

Conclusion

After Charleston: New Horizons for Labor and Civil Rights?

After workers returned to the Medical College of South Carolina and Charleston County Hospital, Local 1199B began a swift decline as the union was unable to maintain operations due to inconsistent funds. The national branch of 1199 had moved on to cultivate strikes in northern industrial cities like Pittsburgh and Baltimore. In Pittsburgh in the fall of 1969, “mostly black workers . . . formed a local of union 1199 Hospital and Nursing Home Employees, RWDSU, AFL-CIO, and as a result local hospitals [were] threatened with a strike if they [were] not recognized and their demands for a \$100 minimum wage [was] not met.” The formation of the local in Pittsburgh followed a contentious 1199 campaign in Baltimore focused on organizing workers at Johns Hopkins Hospital. 1199’s influence had only grown “[s]ince the explosive days in Charleston when the union was being organized” and had “become much dreaded to hospital administrators in the country” with more than 40,000 members in “New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, and Charleston.” With successful membership and strike campaigns in Pittsburgh and Baltimore, as a southern city Charleston remained an outlier among 1199 cities. While black workers remained a large segment of the union’s base, the cooperation between 1199 and civil rights organizations like SCLC had for all intents and purposes ended in Charleston.¹

Importantly, Coretta Scott King remained committed to the cause of workers’ rights visiting Baltimore and telegramming her support to union members in Pittsburgh.² But the idea that economic equality would become the central cause of the civil rights movement in general

¹ Diane Perry, “Hospital Shutdown Threat Looms In City,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 November 1969, pg. 1, col. 4. ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Diane Perry, “... Workers,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 November 1969, pg. 4, col. 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

² Ibid.

was less and less apparent. In Pittsburgh, worker discontent was a citywide issue as workers from “Local 434, Nursing Home and Hospital Employees; Local 95 Operating engineers; United Public Employees Union; Local 29, Service Employees International Union, and 1199 [were] all demanding exclusive bargaining rights, and recognition from hospital administrations.” At Mercy Hospital. “a joint committee . . . of members of 1199P, and the Professional Nurses Association . . . decided to demand recognition from administrators there.”³ While the issue of which union would gain recognition was apparent, worker cooperation was unquestioned. The workers in northern industrial centers operated outside of the purview of organizations like SCLC.

The SCLC’s involvement in Charleston had become central to its post-King pivot towards economic justice. Near the end of Rev. King’s life, the concerns and interests of poor people had become a focal point. This thrust continued after his death as Coretta King aligned with 1199 and the SCLC organized its short-lived Resurrection City protest in Washington, D.C. Of their successful union of labor and civil rights activism in Charleston, Ralph Abernathy believed “[i]t was time for people working for minimum wage or less to band together and seek fair compensation for a day’s work. I saw the immediate future as one in which we would intervene [on] behalf of poor people in the struggle for economic justice . . . [w]e were now confronting problems that were older and more deeply rooted than even racial injustice.” The SCLC held its convention in Charleston in 1969 in part to celebrate its “rebirth” after a time of uncertainty following King’s death.⁴ The SCLC newspaper, *Soul Force*, categorized the

³ “All City Hospitals Faced With Strike,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 December 1969, pg. 1. col. 4. ProQuest Historical Newspapers; “...Tensions,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 December 1969, pg. 5, col. 4. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁴ Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1989), 576-577.

Charleston strike as “a lasting tribute to [Abernathy’s] leadership.”⁵ The optimism surrounding the strike and the possible next steps for the labor and civil rights coalition was infectious. In Jack O’Dell’s essay, “Charleston’s Legacy to the Poor People’s Campaign” originally published in *Freedomways* in the summer of 1969, O’Dell thought that the union between labor and civil rights in Charleston was “an effective combination of applied techniques which will undoubtedly be sharpened by [more] experience.” But he cautioned that the victory would “have to be guarded and boldly extended to other parts of the South in order to prevent the achievements from being eroded and undermined by the opposition.”⁶ The SCLC was unable to maintain or build upon the momentum of Charleston to expand the struggle for economic justice across the south.

Within the context of the larger labor movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, the Charleston strike is representative of a shift in the constituency of the American labor movement that continues to have an impact on labor activism today. For some labor scholars, industrial unionism and the union movement in general was in decline by the 1970s. Recently, scholars have begun studying the decline of industrial unionism in the early 1970s. Jefferson Cowie and Judith Stein offer divergent narratives on the changes in union membership and influence. Their works provide context for the rise of non-industrial unions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since these works still center the white-male industrial worker as the quintessential American worker, their focus on the labor movement’s decline does not necessarily extend to conversations about non-white male workers. Regardless, the new focus on labor during late sixties expands the framework for discussing the rise of service unionism during this period.

⁵ “Charleston: Victory for all Poor People,” *Soul Force*, 13 August 1969, pg. 7. Radicalism Collection, Special Collections, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA.

⁶ Jack O’Dell, “Charleston’s Legacy to the Poor People’s Campaign,” in *Climbin’ Jacob’s Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O’Dell*, ed. Nikhil Pal Singh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 189 and 191.

With *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, Jefferson Cowie argues that the reshaping of the Democratic Party dramatically hastened the decline of industrial unionism. According to Cowie,

the social upheavals associated with the sixties actually took root in most communities in the seventies, which was not simply a different decade but a distinctly less generous economic climate. From a policy perspective, the Democratic Party faced a dilemma that it could not solve: finding ways to maintain support within the white blue-collar base that came of age during the New Deal and World War II era, while at the same time servicing the pressing demands for racial and gender equality arising in the sixties.⁷

Similar to declension narratives that blame the black power movement and self-defense tactics for the decline of nonviolent direct action, Cowie's narrative places the "blame" for the shifting demographics of the Democratic Party and the decline of unions with the new demands for the inclusion of women and minorities in national politics. While industrial unions do become less and less relevant during the period, the labor movement does not die with the emergence of Rust Belt states. But Cowie's focus on political realignment in the wake of various equal rights movements masks the rise of service industry unionism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies*, Judith Stein argues that with civil rights and gender equality seemingly at the national forefront, politicians abandoned the relationship between capital and labor enabling the growth of the finance sector. Stein suggests that arguments that hinge on the flight of white workers from the Democratic Party as evidence for the decline of industrial unionism and the rise of conservatism are too simplistic. For Stein, it was not the Democratic Party's focus on civil rights that resulted in a shift towards conservatism but its focus on balancing the budget instead of growing the economy. Stein argues that by 1973, economic turmoil had cemented the shift from the "Age of

⁷ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. (New York: The New Press, 2010), 6.

Compression” and economic stability to the “Age of Inequality” and widespread economic disparities.⁸

With diverging arguments, Cowie and Stein illuminate the turmoil of the mainstream labor movement during the 1970s. The decline of white-male dominated unions in the face of the expansion of the financial sector was not the only change in the labor movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s. But instead of signaling a decline in the larger American union movement, the 1970s birthed a rise of service sector unions like Local 1199. As white male industrial workers suffered from the decline of the industries that had propelled their careers, service worker unions grew, as did the roles of women, African Americans, and nonindustrial workers in the union movement. David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey’s edited volume *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry*, explores a portion of the radical black unionism in the face of persistent housing, job, and union discrimination. Local movements for equal access to construction jobs were associated with the post-WWII government-subsidized housing boom.⁹

Juxtaposed with the Cowie and Stein narratives, Goldberg, Griffey, and the other authors of *Black Power at Work* pushed scholars of late twentieth century labor to consider the centrality of blacks, women, and other “minorities” to the persistence of labor struggle after civil rights. Though focused on construction protests, *Black Power at Work* does offer a useful springboard for further study of black labor struggles during the traditional civil rights movement and after. Though African Americans have come under more consideration within labor and working class historiography, the stories of black women have, until quite recently, remained absent from the

⁸ Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), ix-xiii.

⁹ David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey, eds., *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

narrative. Discussions of male workers and industrial unionism have overshadowed the experiences of black women workers. Even more, a focus on black professional women workers has further outcast working class women from the discussion of black women's labor. Recently, literature focusing on many aspects of black women's work has altered the landscape. Discussions of black women migrant laborers, union auxiliary members, and factory workers during World War II have joined the stories of black women entrepreneurs, professionals, and domestics creating a more accurate picture of black women workers. Inherent in many of these discussions are the class dynamics within the African American community. Sometimes seen as a monolithic group with the same interests, many neglect the different class interests of middle and working class African Americans.¹⁰

The Charleston Hospital Workers' Strike of 1969 remains a force in the local memory of the late 1960s. It is remembered as "one of Charleston's defining moments of that era" and "should be considered a pioneer for workers' rights statewide." In spite of the contentious nature of the strike, eventually "a sort of healing would take place, as a marker honoring the 1969 Hospital Workers' Strike went up on the [Medical College's] campus."¹¹ Some in the Charleston community remember the strike as "the last major event of the civil rights movement."¹² The strike was a pivotal moment for race relations in a city and state that remains haunted by its long history of racism and segregation.

¹⁰ For more on black working-class women see: Megan Taylor Shockley, *"We, Too, Are Americans": African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-1954*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Melinda Chauteauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Rhonda Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005); LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Number Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

¹¹ Schuyler Kropf, "Mary Moultrie, leader of 1969 Charleston hospital strike, dies at 73," *The Post and Courier*, 28 April 2015. <http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20150428/PC16/150429360/1177/mary-moultrie-leader-of-charleston-hospital-strike-has-passed>.

¹² Brian Hicks, "Remembering an unlikely civil rights pioneer," *The Post and Courier*, 29 April 2015. <http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20150429/PC16/150429339/1177>.

“Black Women and the Charleston Hospital Workers’ Strike of 1969” intervenes in the void in the historiography of labor and the civil rights-Black Power movements. As a study of black women workers in a particularly southern context rife with entrenched racial and class politics, this dissertation offers a detailed account of black women’s agency in accessing greater economic freedom. I argue that black women were central as leaders and supporters to the development of the momentary collaboration between national labor and civil rights organizations. The women involved in the strike drew from a variety of activist traditions. This study provides insight into the history of activism in and around Charleston in the decades leading up to the 1969 strike. Charleston and Johns Island were important locations for labor and civil rights activism in the immediate post-World War II period. The exploration of that earlier period offers historical and tactical context for the 1969 strike and background on some key participants.

This study details an understudied and misunderstood period of black activism in the south. In many narratives on the transition between the civil rights-Black Power movements, black activism suddenly moves from the south to the north after the landmark civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s and the assassination of MLK as if legislation meant problems in the south were resolved. By covering an understudied event in an even more misunderstood location, I contextualize a history of activism that is influenced by local history and national activist trends. The Charleston strike was a descendant of earlier labor activism in Charleston, namely the Tobacco Workers’ Strike in the mid-1940s. Activists in Charleston used a combination of nonviolent direct action, self-defense, and labor organizing tactics in their strike effort. The presence of one notable civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, along with Local 1199 provided some structure for the workers who had been meeting for more

than a year before the strike. I use newspaper, autobiographical, correspondence, and previously collected oral interviews to reconstruct the strike.

My dissertation illuminates the lives of black women activists of the civil rights-Black Power eras. Women like Mary Moultrie, Rosetta Simmons, Carrie Mitchell, Naomi White and the hundreds of women who participated in the strike on a daily basis came to their activism from different backgrounds and for different reasons. In focusing on their biographies and experiences during the strike, I explored another understudied area of historiography on the civil rights-Black Power eras. It has long been known that black women were essential to the success of most, if not all, major and minor civil rights campaign during the height of the modern movement from 1954-1965. Beginning in Montgomery, black women were the organizers and the foot soldiers of movements that brought about significant societal and legal change across the country. But most studies of the era had neglected to explore these women's lives. Instead many scholars have focused on male "leaders." In that respect, my focus on Mary Moultrie, Rosetta Simmons, Carrie Mitchell, Naomi White, Coretta Scott King, and other women also adds to a growing literature on well and less known black women cultivators of the civil rights-Black Power eras. My focus on black women of various black women complicates conceptions of leadership and activism during the period.

Not only does this dissertation add to literature on the civil rights-Black Power eras and the labor movement, but it also starts a conversation on the enforcement of landmark civil rights gains on the local and state level. While the civil rights era is usually understood to end with the passage of the Voting and Civil Rights Acts, perhaps extended until the *Loving v. Virginia* decision in 1969, the era does not end with these laws and judicial decisions. The matter of enforcing federal laws was left to the states and they all dealt with it differently. In South

Carolina, Governor Robert McNair used force to quell the protests of black activists across the state. In Orangeburg, Charleston, and Denmark, black activists picketed, boycotted, and struck to force the hand of a lethargic state. Governors and local politicians across the country used a variety of methods to delay or deny school integration and the desegregation of public places. While McNair's use of force may have been unique, he was not the only governor who attempted to subdue black activism in the period following the passage of sweeping civil rights legislation.

“Black Women and the Charleston Hospital Workers’ Strike of 1969” complicates a period usually considered as solidly of the Black Power movement while also offering a window into the lives of black women who are usually left out of substantive narratives on black activism during the mid-twentieth century. Fuller and more complicated narratives of black women's lives are necessary. This study adds voice to a population, working-class black female civil rights activists, that is usually silenced. It also complicates narratives of women like Coretta Scott King who are usually portrayed as one-dimensional. This study also encapsulates a moment of great optimism about the future of a labor and civil rights coalition. The prospect of a real, prolonged movement for economic equality was exciting for activists from both camps as industrial unionism was in decline and the SCLC was searching for a new path after King's assassination. But the SCLC was unable to remain a viable and relevant organization and service workers in places like Baltimore and Pittsburgh had already created interracial coalitions. Economic equality remains elusive for black Americans.

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