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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Poor People’s Campaign (1967) | [Next entry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_popper_hermine_rich_isaacs_1915_1968) | |
| Martin Luther King announced the Poor People’s Campaign at a staff retreat for the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) in November 1967. Seeking a ‘‘middle ground between riots on the one hand and timid supplications for justice on the other,’’ King planned for an initial group of 2,000 poor people to descend on Washington, D.C., southern states and northern cities to meet with government ofﬁcials to demand jobs, unemployment insurance, a fair minimum wage, and education for poor adults and children designed to improve their self-image and self-esteem (King, 29 November 1967).   Suggested to King by Marion Wright, director of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_association_for_the_advancement_of_colored_people_naacp1/) Legal Defense and Education Fund in Jackson, Mississippi, the Poor People’s Campaign was seen by King as the next chapter in the struggle for genuine equality. Desegregation and the right to vote were essential, but King believed that African Americans and other minorities would never enter full citizenship until they had economic security. Through nonviolent direct action, King and SCLC hoped to focus the nation’s attention on economic inequality and poverty. ‘‘This is a highly signiﬁcant event,’’ King told delegates at an early planning meeting, describing the campaign as ‘‘the beginning of a new co-operation, understanding, and a determination by poor people of all colors and backgrounds to assert and win their right to a decent life and respect for their culture and dignity’’ (SCLC, 15 March 1968). Many leaders of American Indian, Puerto Rican, Mexican American, and poor white communities pledged themselves to the Poor People’s Campaign.   Some in SCLC thought King’s campaign too ambitious, and the demands too amorphous. Although King praised the simplicity of the campaign’s goals, saying, ‘‘it’s as pure as a man needing an income to support his family,’’ he knew that the campaign was inherently different from others SCLC had attempted (King, 29 November 1967). ‘‘We have an ultimate goal of freedom, independence, self-determination, whatever we want to call it, but we aren’t going to get all of that now, and we aren’t going to get all of that next year,’’ he commented at a staff meeting on 17 January 1968. ‘‘Let’s ﬁnd something that is so possible, so achievable, so pure, so simple that even the backlash can’t do much to deny it. And yet something so non-token and so basic to life that even the black nationalists can’t disagree with it that much’’ (King, 17 January 1968).   After [King’s assassination](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kings_assassination_4_april_1968/) in April 1968, SCLC decided to go on with the campaign under the leadership of [Ralph Abernathy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_abernathy_ralph_david_1926_1990/), SCLC’s new president. On Mother’s Day, 12 May 1968, thousands of women, led by [Coretta Scott King](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_coretta_scott_1927_2006/), formed the ﬁrst wave of demonstrators. The following day, Resurrection City, a temporary settlement of tents and shacks, was built on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Braving rain, mud, and summer heat, protesters stayed for over a month. Demonstrators made daily pilgrimages to various federal agencies to protest and demand economic justice. Mid-way through the campaign, [Robert Kennedy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kennedy_robert_francis_19251968/), whose wife had attended the Mother’s Day opening of Resurrection City, was assassinated. Out of respect for the campaign, his funeral procession passed through Resurrection City. The Department of the Interior forced Resurrection City to close on 24 June 1968, after the permit to use park land expired.   Although the campaign succeeded in small ways, such as qualifying 200 counties for free surplus food distribution, and securing promises from several federal agencies to hire poor people to help run programs for the poor, Abernathy felt these concessions were insufﬁcient.  **SOURCES**   Ben A. Franklin, ‘‘5,000 Open Poor People’s Campaign in Washington,’’ *New York Times*,13 May 1968.   Ben A. Franklin, ‘‘Poor People’s Drive Makes Gains, but Fails to Reach Goals,’’ *New York Times*, 30 June 1968.  King, Address at workshop on civil disobedience at SCLC staff retreat, 29 November 1967, MLKJP-GAMK.  King, Address delivered at SCLC staff meeting, 17 January 1968, MLKEC.   Joseph A. Loftus, ‘‘City of the Poor Shuts Peacefully,’’ *New York Times*, 25 June 1968.   McKnight, *Last Crusade*, 1998.  SCLC, Press release, ‘‘Black and White Together,’’ 15 March 1968, BPD-AB. |