

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

You are a member of the newly organized Philadelphia chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Like many young Black people in this country, you were inspired by the 1960 sit-in movement. You believe it's time to use more confrontational tactics to win equality — in both the South and the North.

While much of the focus has been on the South, Black people in Northern cities like Philadelphia face a housing, employment, and educational crisis that needs to be addressed. After World War II, Black people began moving to Philadelphia as part of what became known as the “Great Migration.” Meanwhile, white families were moving out of the city taking advantage of a racist partnership between the federal government, wealthy housing developers, and corporations.

Levittown, Pennsylvania — a Northeast suburb of Philadelphia — is an example of this. In the 1940s and 50s, developer William Levitt began building “Levittowns” in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The Federal Housing Authority agreed to finance these suburban housing developments on one condition: The homes could only be sold to “members of the Caucasian race.” When the Myers, a Black family, managed to purchase a home in 1957, a mob of several hundred white men, women, and children threw stones at the house for three straight nights. White people painted the letters “K.K.K.” on the side of the house and the Myers received ongoing threatening phone calls. Police had to be placed as a round-the-clock guard on the Myers house.

While white families fled Philadelphia for suburbs like Levittown, many industries also left Philadelphia with them. U.S. Steel, Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (3M), and many other corporations opened new factories in the Northeast Philadelphia suburbs during the 1950s. Because of racist housing policies, Black families could not move to the suburbs to take advantage of these jobs and so Black workers were forced to compete for limited job opportunities in the city.

In Philadelphia this meant that Black people came into conflict with the racially discriminatory practices of the local labor unions. The construction trades — the electricians, steamfitters, plumbers, roofers, ironworkers, and sheet metal workers — all had racially discriminatory membership practices that kept Black people from gaining jobs in the construction industry. The city claimed to be against this and passed a ban on discrimination in city contracts, but they continued to allow all-white construction companies to build city buildings.

In 1963, you and other CORE members had had enough. You decided to begin a sit-in at the Mayor's office demanding the city government address the discriminatory practices at the new city building under construction across from city hall. Within one day, the Mayor agreed to conduct an investigation of the hiring practices on the work site and CORE suspended its protest.

But when the Mayor announced that “nothing can be done to remove discrimination on current city contracts,” you returned to his office and sat-in again until the mayor agreed to halt construction. The mayor gave in and pressured the unions to hire one Black electrician at the work site. Although, only one Black person was hired, it showed that protest could break the discriminatory practices of the unions. You

joined with the local NAACP to start similar protests at other construction sites that won more jobs for Black workers throughout the city. Soon after the Philadelphia construction demonstrations, President Kennedy issued Executive Order 1114, which required employers on federal construction projects to take “affirmative action” to desegregate their workforces.

You also joined with the local NAACP and the group of 400 Black ministers to protest segregated and substandard Black schools in Philadelphia. Schools were segregated in Philadelphia because Black people were not only kept out of suburban neighborhoods, but you were also kept out of certain city neighborhoods through racist restrictions similar to those in the suburbs. Ten percent or more of the teachers at majority-Black schools were substitutes — twice the rate at majority white schools. The teachers who weren’t substitutes were often the least experienced teachers in the city. Through a combination of direct action and lawsuits against the Philadelphia School Board, you and others in the community have been protesting these conditions for the last several years, but little has changed.

Now you’re headed to Washington, D.C., to meet with activists from around the country. You want better schools, better housing, and most of all, better job opportunities. For decades the government has had racist policies that benefit white people — it’s time for them to pass some anti-racist policies that stops the harm they’ve caused.