Statement Adopted at Spring Session of SCLC in Tallahassee, Florida

15 May 1959
Atlanta, Ga.

On 14–15 May, eighty-five SCLC members convened at Tallahassee’s First Baptist Church for the organization’s first meeting of 1959. In the wake of SCLC executive director John Tilly’s departure, Ella Baker reported on the organization’s activities of the past seven months and its future plans. On the first day of the conference, King addressed a mass meeting at Bethel Baptist Church. SCLC approved this statement deploiring recent acts of racist terror and urging Eisenhower to travel to Mississippi to “assume personal command of the investigation” into the lynching of Mack Charles Parker. They request that the attorney general “saturate danger areas” in the South with federal agents, and they threaten to appeal to the United Nations if the administration fails to act.

“The Southern Christian Leadership Conference has the unwelcomed and grim satisfaction of noting that for several years we have repeatedly called to the attention of the President, the Attorney General and the nation that violence in the South can not merely be deplored or ignored. We have emphasized that without effective action led by the President, himself, the situation would worsen. Today, the outrageous record speaks for itself.

“The barbaric lynching of young Mack Charles Parker, in Poplarville, Miss., while he was in the custody of law officials, has shocked the civilized world. In Tallahassee, Florida, a Negro girl has been abducted at gun-point and viciously raped by four white men. In Bessemer, Alabama, a respected leader and colleague of

1. The meeting was delayed to accommodate the 13 May Africa Freedom Dinner in Atlanta.
2. In her report to the executive board, Baker called for the distribution of “thousands of pieces of literature in the North, urging Negro voters not to let their Southern brothers and sisters down by failing to vote,” and stressed the need of promoting “the participation of women and youth in the Southern civil rights struggle” (Baker, “Report of the director to the executive board,” 15 May 1959). The board also voted for officers and executive board members. Following the Tallahassee meeting, Baker sent King and the SCLC board members the results of the election, noting that the selection of National Beauty Culturist League president Katie Wickham as SCLC’s first female officer was “in keeping with the expressed need to involve more women in the movement” (Baker to King, 28 May 1959).
3. On 25 April, Parker was abducted and killed while he awaited trial for allegedly raping a white woman. King sent an immediate wire to the governor of Mississippi (see King to James P. Coleman, 25 April 1959, pp. 190–191 in this volume). Though scores of FBI agents investigated the case, no one was indicted for the murder.
4. In his address at Bethel Baptist Church, King reportedly remarked that he did not believe in capital punishment but was hoping for a “punishment suited to the crime.” He also praised students from Florida A&M for drawing attention to the case: “If the court fails now Florida will be condemned in the eyes of the nation” (“Eyes of the World Waiting to See if Justice Will Be Done in Tallahassee—King,” Atlanta Daily World, 16 May 1959). For more on this case, see King to Clifford C. Taylor, 5 May 1959, p. 196 in this volume.
Asbury Howard was beaten by some forty white men in the presence of police officers; and while the attackers have not been arrested, Asbury Howard was jailed and sentenced without proper recourse to appeal; and his son has been condemned to the chain gang for the manly act of defending his father. Their only “crime” was that of the simple exercise of freedom of speech in an effort to encourage Negroes to register and vote.5

“In Birmingham and Tuscaloosa, Alabama, four men, two of them ministers, have been brutally beaten by white men with chains and other heavy instruments.6

In many areas of the South there has been a general breakdown of law and order which we attribute to the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the status of respectability given to the White Citizens Councils by some law officers, elected public officials, and “solid citizens” of the South. The unholy attitude of certain Governors, state officials and United States Congressmen from the South in calling for open defiance of law and constituted authority, have done much to inflame and incite those who committed these atrocities.

“It is ironical that these Un-American outrages occur as the representatives of our nation confer in Geneva to argue for the extension of democratic principles in the conduct of international affairs.7 Sitting as a silent, but weighty judge, at the Geneva roundtable is the ghost of the mutilated, bullet ridden, water soaked body of young Parker. His death alone explodes the arguments of the gradualists that Federal legislative and executive action should be delayed until the white South is ready to accept change. As we have repeatedly warned, delay encourages defiance of law, rather than compliance with it.

“We can not ignore the fact that opponents of racial justice have moved from vocal defiance of constitutional edict to an avowed reliance upon terror. This low level of lawlessness is expressed in brutal acts, deliberately designed not only to crush or destroy the immediate victim, but to intimidate and silence the millions of oppressed Negroes of the South.

“But, we will not be terrorized or silenced. We will demand and act until the latent decency, and intelligent self-interest of the American people forces an end to this disgraceful breakdown of law and order. We urge Negroes and other concerned Americans to speak forthrightly to their Government for action, now.

5. Howard, vice president of the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers, was attacked inside Bessemer City Hall, where he had just been found guilty of “breach of the peace” for attempting to display a poster urging people to vote. He was sentenced to six months on the chain gang and his son, Asbury Howard, Jr., received five years probation. Writing on behalf of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), Fred Shuttlesworth and King sent telegrams to Alabama governor John Patterson and U.S. Attorney General William P. Rogers, demanding an investigation of the Howard case (Emory O. Jackson, Press release, 4 February 1959; see also “Negro Labor Leader Hurt During Attack,” Montgomery Advertiser, 25 January 1959, and “Alabama Negro Leader Beaten, Jailed in 1st Amendment Case,” Civil Liberties, March 1959).

6. King refers to the 9 April kidnapping, robbery, and beating of minister Charles Billups, a member of the ACMHR, and two coworkers by a group of white men in Birmingham. One week later, minister O’Hara M. Prewitt was similarly abducted and beaten in Tuscaloosa.

7. During the 11 May through 5 August meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in Geneva, the United States pressed for the continued occupation of Berlin until Germany could be democratically reunited.
VIOLENCE IS NOT THE ANSWER

“In this tense and frustrating period, some Negroes have been driven to advocate violence to meet the violence perpetrated upon them. While we thoroughly understand their outrage and despair, we must reaffirm our fundamental conviction that violence is neither a practical nor a moral force for the establishment of justice. We pray that those advocating violence to meet violence, will come to embrace our unshaken belief that continued and firm resistance, based upon the spirit of nonviolence, is the only constructive course.

“Because the Federal Government has both the moral obligation to protect all citizens and the power to right many wrongs, this conference of Southern leaders calls upon it to take these steps:

1. The immediate enactment by Congress of legislation, such as the Douglas civil rights bill to strengthen the authority of federal agencies to act with vigor in enforcing law. Congress should also enact a definite anti-lynch law that would cover all mob imposed deaths, and thus end a barbaric practice which is worse than murder.

2. As a means of changing the climate of opinion, the president should go to Poplarville, Mississippi and assume personal command of the investigation of the Parker case. He would thus vitalize the efforts to apprehend the lynchers and demonstrate his human concern as he has done in travelling to disaster areas caused by floods and other catastrophies. The mob-inflicted death of Mack Charles Parker and the outrages it represents are catastrophic to millions of Negroes whose physical safety is threatened throughout the South.

3. The office of the Attorney General of the United States should treat the resurgence of mob violence in the South as a national calamity, and should use existing legal powers, afforded by present laws, to saturate danger areas such as Mississippi and Alabama with sufficient Federal marshals and special agents to apprehend those who have broken the law and to anticipate future crimes. There are federal violations justifying such steps, and historically our government, when it had to tame the frontier West, utilized federal marshals when local law and order broke down and citizens lived in daily terror.

8. King’s statement was probably provoked by recent remarks made by Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP leader Robert F. Williams. For more on Williams, see King, Address at the Fiftieth Annual NAACP Convention, 17 July 1959, pp. 245-250 in this volume.

9. Senate Bill 810, co-sponsored by Illinois senator Paul Douglas, would have hastened the enforcement of the Supreme Court’s school desegregation decision and allowed the U.S. attorney general to initiate lawsuits to protect civil rights. It was not approved by the Judiciary Committee.

10. At a 5 May press conference, Eisenhower rejected a reporter’s suggestion that the Parker case underscored the need for new civil rights legislation: “I don’t know how you can make law stronger except to... make certain that its violation will bring about punishment.” Eisenhower expressed his confidence that the FBI and Mississippi authorities “will find some way of punishing the guilty, if they can find them” (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1959 [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960], p. 364).
"In the name of justice and decency, we appeal for action NOW. As reasonable people, we can wait a reasonable period of time, but if these atrocities continue and nothing is done to stop them, we have no choice but to present our plight to the President in person, through a southwide delegation of Negro leaders. And it well might be necessary and expedient to appeal to the conscience of the world through the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nation."11

Signed: Rev. Martin L. King, Jr.
President

THD. MLKP-MBU: Box 4.

11. The commission was formed in 1947 to draft a Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

To Thomas Jovin

19 May 1959
[Montgomery, Ala.]

California Institute of Technology student Thomas Jovin hosted King’s 25–27 February 1958 visit to the campus.1 In a 7 May 1959 letter Jovin, who had been elected student body president, asked King’s advice on recruiting black students to Caltech.

Mr. Tom Jovin
Dear Tom:

On returning to the office after a rather lengthy speaking tour, I was very happy to find your letter on my desk. I still remember with pleasant thoughts the moments that I spent on the campus of Caltech.

It is very heartening to know that you are greatly concerned about the fact that there are no colored undergraduate students at Caltech. This is certainly a manifestation of your genuine goodwill and your basic humanitarian concern.

Certainly, I can understand some of the reasons that Negro students are not presently in the student body of Caltech. The two reasons that you listed in your

1. Jovin to King, 23 January 1958. Thomas M. Jovin (1939– ), born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, received a B.S. (1960) from the California Institute of Technology. In 1964, he received an M.D. from Johns Hopkins University and later became the chairman of the department of molecular biology at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen, Germany.