

Bob Moses, veteran of Southern civil rights movement, is dead at 86

Helen Halyard, Fred Mazelis
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Bob Moses, the civil rights activist best known for his determined struggle in the early 1960s to win the right to vote for African Americans in the Jim Crow South, died at his home in Florida on July 25 at the age of 86. His life and contributions exemplify both the achievements as well as the limitations of the 1960s mass movement for democratic rights, and against racial segregation.

Though Moses' name was not as well-known as those of Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders of that period, he was held in the highest regard within the Southern movement, and especially among the many Mississippians whose lives he touched and changed. He is best known as one of the organizers of Freedom Summer, also known as the Mississippi Summer Project, the 1964 campaign that drew more than 1,000 student volunteers from around the country to the state. They assisted Mississippi activists in working to register as many black voters as possible. At that time, only 6.7 percent of eligible African Americans had been able to overcome the Jim Crow roadblocks aimed at denying them the right to vote.

Also in 1964, Moses was one of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which sought recognition as the Mississippi delegation at that year's Democratic convention. The convention nominated the sitting president, Lyndon Johnson, who had succeeded the assassinated John F. Kennedy only nine months earlier.

Moses was born and raised in Harlem. Exposed to reading and study as a child, he attended Stuyvesant High School and later went on to Hamilton College and to Harvard for graduate study in philosophy. He was teaching in a New York City high school in 1960 when he decided to move to Mississippi to devote himself full-time to the fight for civil rights. This was to become a truly mass movement, largely working class in composition, in the first half of the 1960s.

Soon joining the staff of the newly-formed Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Moses became known for his personal courage and calm in the face of white supremacist violence, and for his organizational skills and dedication to working on a local level, living and working

among the poorest and most oppressed sections of the population.

As the *New York Times* reports, "White segregationists, including local law enforcement officials, responded to his efforts with violence. At one point during a voter-registration drive, a sheriff's cousin bashed Mr. Moses' head with a knife handle. Bleeding, he kept going, staggering up the steps of a courthouse to register a couple of black farmers. Only then did he seek medical attention. There was no black doctor in the county, Mr. Moses later wrote, so he had to be driven to another town, where nine stitches were sewn into his head."

This was by no means the only example of such violence, and Moses was arrested and jailed many times. By 1964, he had become co-director of the Council of Federated Organizations, an alliance of Mississippi civil rights groups. In this capacity, he was one of the principal organizers of Freedom Summer, which drew national and international attention, especially after the brutal murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in late June. These killings were among the most prominent, but there were many more.

Moses was instrumental in rallying the volunteers after this vicious attack that had been organized by the Ku Klux Klansmen within the local police. Although he made clear that any volunteers would not be blamed if they wished to leave, very few did so. The campaign succeeded in mobilizing broad support, one of the main reasons for the passage of the Voting Rights Act, enacted by Congress the next year, after decades in which the ruling establishment of both capitalist parties had accepted Jim Crow restrictions without complaint.

At that year's Democratic Party convention, held in Atlantic City, New Jersey only two months after the murders of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney, and only weeks after their bodies had been discovered, the newly-organized and racially-integrated Freedom Democrats demanded to be seated as the official state delegation. Lyndon Johnson and his vice-presidential candidate, Hubert Humphrey,

maneuvered to prevent this. Walter Mondale, future vice president and then Minnesota state Attorney General, announced a “compromise,” which gave the Freedom Democrats only two “at-large” seats, without voice or vote, out of a total delegation of 48.

Martin Luther King Jr., then working closely with the Johnson administration, pressured the Mississippians to accept the deal. The delegation, led by Fannie Lou Hamer, Bob Moses and Ella Baker, rejected this insulting offer, however. By this time, MFDP leader Fannie Lou Hamer had been able to address the convention’s credentials committee, in testimony that was televised. Despite the MFDP’s false perspective of transforming the Democrats, the proceedings had succeeded in exposing the rotten character of this big-business party.

“I stomped out of the room, slamming the door in Hubert Humphrey’s face,” Mr. Moses later recalled, in the book *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*. He called this a “watershed in the movement.”

Moses moved back to the North, where he became active in the growing movement against the war in Vietnam. Rather than drawing any deeper conclusions from the experiences of the civil rights struggle, however, he withdrew from activity at the war’s peak. “I will have nothing to do with the political system any longer,” he is reported to have said in 1965.

Moses apparently saw the arrogant behavior of the political establishment primarily in racial rather than class terms. According to one account, he concluded that he would no longer work with whites. When he received a draft notice in 1966, even though he was by then five years beyond the age limit for draftees, he strongly suspected government retaliation for his political activity. He soon left the country, living in Tanzania from 1969 through 1976, returning to the US after newly-inaugurated president Jimmy Carter announced an amnesty for Vietnam War draft resisters. While in Africa he worked as a teacher, and also with the Tanzanian Ministry of Education.

Andrew Young, John Lewis and other 1960s civil rights figures entered elective office as capitalist politicians after the collapse of the movement. Moses did not take this path, but he had no progressive political alternative to offer. When he returned to the US, he completed his doctoral studies at Harvard and then began teaching math at a Cambridge, Massachusetts high school. He received a MacArthur Fellowship in 1982, and soon after began The Algebra Project, whose aim was to make students from poorer families fluent in mathematics, and specifically in algebra. As Moses wrote in *Radical Equations*, “The political process has been opened—there are no formal barriers to

voting, for example—but economic access, taking advantage of new technologies and economic opportunity, demands as much effort as political struggle required in the 1960’s.”

Moses was correct in recognizing that the gains of the civil rights movement had revealed the economic challenges. These are not issues of access, however, but rather ones of exploitation and inequality that are the inevitable product of the capitalist system.

Moreover, as the crisis deepens, the democratic rights that have been won through past struggle are facing dire threats. Spearheaded by the fascistic Republican Party, state legislatures around the country are mounting the biggest attacks on voting rights since the days of Jim Crow. And the Democratic administration of Joe Biden, the president who issued a hypocritical tribute to Bob Moses after his death, made clear just last week that it will do absolutely nothing in the face of the brazen efforts to roll back the rights that millions fought for only two generations ago.

The expansion of educational opportunities is a laudable goal, but it could never be a substitute for confronting the fundamental class questions posed by the crisis of capitalism. In 2021, as The Algebra Project nears the 40th anniversary of its inception, that is clearer than ever. The vast majority of young people, including many, if not most of those trained in mathematics, are unable to use their skills and earn a decent living. The issue is not equipping the poor for the hypercompetitive job market, but ensuring for everyone both high-quality education and well-paying jobs.

The life of Bob Moses raises the fundamental class contradictions of the civil rights movement. While the mass movement in the South was overwhelmingly working class in composition, it remained under the leadership of the middle class, forces which limited the struggle to what the capitalist status quo could afford. What is urgently needed is a class perspective, turning to, organizing and uniting the working class of all races, religions and ethnicities, breaking with both parties of the capitalist system, and fighting for socialism.



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