

# “Drive Awhile for Freedom”: Brooklyn CORE and the 1964 World’s Fair “Stall-In”

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*The entire civil-rights struggle needs a new interpretation, a broader interpretation. We need to look at this civil-rights thing from another angle – from the inside as well as from the outside.*

- Malcolm X, “The Ballot and the Bullet,” April 3, 1964

*“Brooklyn CORE was a very radical CORE. National CORE didn’t want us to do the World’s Fair in ’64 and they wanted to kick us out of National CORE and we took the blows. We don’t care what you do.”*

- Gilbert Banks<sup>1</sup>

By the spring of 1964, movements in New York City against racial discrimination had reached a fevered pitch. Minimal advancements from previous campaigns led activists to abandon non-violent direct action protests that had sought to fight racism from within the city’s liberal reform institutions. With its plan for a traffic stopping “stall-in” on the opening day of the 1964 World’s Fair, Brooklyn’s chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) initiated a new approach in its fight against racism: instead of working within the municipal system to negotiate change in power structures, it would force biased labor unions, the segregated education system, and an indifferent government administration to meet its demands immediately, or it would disrupt the entire city. Protests from the summer of 1963 illustrate the activists’ frustrations with token advancements.

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They also point to escalations in violence at demonstrations, a change that greatly affected mainstream support for Brooklyn CORE's future campaigns, like the 1964 stall-in.

Thousands of citizens protested against racist hiring practices in the building trades industries during the summer of 1963. The Joint Committee on Equal Opportunity – a coalition of representatives from New York chapters of CORE, the Urban League of Greater New York and various labor groups – along with Harlem's residents disrupted work on the Harlem Hospital annex in June of 1963. Demonstrators chanted, "If we don't work, nobody works," blocked trucks and scuffled with police. A "tense" atmosphere forced the city's government and union officials to halt work and negotiate with protest leaders.<sup>2</sup> Similar actions occurred at the Rutgers Housing construction site in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in July 1963 and activists also staged sit-ins at the Manhattan offices of Governor Rockefeller and Mayor Wagner. Protesters called for immediate changes in the construction unions' apprenticeship system, which denied non-whites access to jobs; they demanded more black and Puerto Rican workers at construction sites in non-white neighborhoods and "concrete action – not promises."<sup>3</sup>

In July and August of 1963, larger protests and more violence spread throughout the city. Bronx CORE demonstrated against racial discrimination in hiring practices at local White Castle Restaurants, which had four black workers

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Gilbert Banks

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, 13 June 1963, 14 June 1963.

<sup>3</sup> For information on the Rutgers Housing demonstrations see: *New York Times*, 12 July 1963, 23 July 1963 and *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 July 1963. For information on sit-ins at the mayor and governor's offices see: *New York Times*, 10 July 1963, 19 July 1963, *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 July 1963

out of 126 employees. While picketers at the White Castle on Boston Road chanted – “What do we want?” “Freedom!” “When do we want it?” “Now!” – white youths threw rocks and eggs. One youth reportedly said of the pickets, “They haven’t any right here. Let’m stay in Harlem. Better yet, Africa.” A police officer on the scene exclaimed that the Bronx was, “a bomb. And it may explode any minute.” On July 15, just such an explosion seemed possible as eight members of the National Renaissance party, a neo-Nazi organization, were charged with conspiracy to incite rioting at two Bronx White Castles after police uncovered their cache of arms.<sup>4</sup>

The highest incidents of violence and arrests of the summer occurred at Brooklyn’s Downstate Medical center construction site. Protestors, led by Brooklyn CORE and local black church leaders demanded that 25% of the site’s construction workers be black and Puerto Rican.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of several weeks there were hundreds of arrests, including fourteen of Brooklyn’s leading clergymen and seventeen children.<sup>6</sup> On July 31, mini riots flared at the site. Before the ministers lost control of crowd, Rev. William Jones, a leading member of Brooklyn’s black clergy, shouted for the demonstrators to disperse saying, “This proves there’s no difference between New York and Alabama, no difference between the United States and South Africa. This nation is going straight to hell.”<sup>7</sup> The ministers’ coalition, worried that they could not maintain

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<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, 7 July 1963, 10 July 1963, 11 July 1963, 12 July 1963, 16 July 1963; *New York Amsterdam News* 13 July 1963

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, 16 July 1963

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed description of the local organizing leading up to the Downstate protest see Clarence Taylor, “‘Whatever the Cost, We Will Set the Nation Straight’: The Ministers’ Committee and the Downstate Center Campaign,” *Long Island Historical Journal* 1:2, pp. 136-146. On arrest of children see *New York Times*, 20 July 1963

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, 1 August 1963

peace at the demonstrations and finance the bails of arrested participants, agreed to end the protest after meeting with Governor Rockefeller. The governor proposed to investigate the discrimination charges in the building trades industry and the ministers withdrew the demand that 25% of the labor force be black and Puerto Rican. But, Brooklyn CORE continued the demonstration and accused the ministers (who mostly belonged to the NAACP) of “selling out” for token advancements. With the ministers gone, however, support for the demonstration quickly diminished.<sup>8</sup> The NAACP criticized Brooklyn CORE as “too unsophisticated to know when to stop demonstrating and start negotiating.”<sup>9</sup> After the governor agreed to negotiate with the ministers, municipal and union officials made lists with the names of local blacks seeking employment at the site. Gilbert Banks, an experienced heavy equipment operator and diesel mechanic, participated in the demonstrations at Downstate Medical with Brooklyn CORE and was arrested for disorderly conduct.<sup>10</sup> Banks remembers:

We had qualified people in the community and they (city and union officials) got a construction team to review the 2000 names who applied for these jobs, there were 600 who were fully qualified who could do anything they wanted: electrician, plumbers, carpenters, steam fitters, all that stuff. And the deputy mayor got this committee together to find out if we were capable for doing this work and two years later, nobody was hired. So we had struggled in vain.<sup>11</sup>

Similar negotiations and empty promises deflated the city’s others demonstrations that summer. After a spate of protest activity characterized by outbreaks of violence and arrests, little changed. It seems like those efforts were indeed ineffective.

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<sup>8</sup> Clarence Taylor, “‘Whatever the Cost, We Will Set the Nation Straight,’ ” pp. 142-143

<sup>9</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York, 1973) p. 231

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, 11 July 1963

These previous campaigns created a strategic impasse for Brooklyn's activists. Protests that brought the city's power structures to the bargaining table did not create jobs, improve predominantly black and Puerto Rican schools or ameliorate quality-of-life conditions in New York City's ghettos. Thus, Brooklyn CORE called one of the post-war era's most radical organized demonstrations against racial discrimination the following year. While 1963's summer protests simmered, Brooklyn CORE was preparing to use the 1964-65 World's Fair (to be held in Flushing Meadows, Queens) to expose the city's racist treatment of its black and Puerto Rican citizens. In July 1963, black author Louis Lomax, insinuated that a "stall-in" might disrupt the forthcoming World's Fair during a lecture at Queens College. He told an audience of 1000, "Imagine the confusion which might result if 500 people get in their cars, drive towards the Fair grounds, and run out of gas."<sup>12</sup> The next day, an editorial denounced the proposed stall-in as "going too far." The *New York Journal American* believed that, "stalling hundreds of autos on crowded highways is not peaceful assembly. It is a clear threat to law and order which must be prevented . . . . What (these activists) are proposing would only harm their cause by alienating the innocent citizens who would suffer untold hardship."<sup>13</sup> The idea of a stall-in foreshadowed what would become a radical shift in tactics in New York City's black freedom movement.

Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of gradualist protest techniques to effect meaningful change, CORE stall-in organizers planned to disregard National

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<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Gilbert Banks, 1 April 2000 and 2 April 2000

<sup>12</sup> "Queens Traffic Jam Threatened in Racial Protest" *New York Journal American*, 11 July 1963 p. 1

<sup>13</sup> *New York Journal American*, 12 July 1963

CORE's rules for direct action protest.<sup>14</sup> They abandoned the prolonged investigations and negotiations that national CORE believed must precede non-violent direct action. Organizers of the stall-in wanted "that the Mayor and City Council take immediate action to right the wrongs that have been perpetrated upon Negro and Puerto Rican people for so long as a result of the apathy and callousness of the city of New York."<sup>15</sup> While the national civil rights movement, particularly in the South, concentrated on securing black voting rights and eradicating racism via participatory democracy, local activists in New York determined that throwing the city into chaos was the only way to transform a power structure that disadvantaged black and Puerto Rican citizens. As Brooklyn historian Craig Wilder wrote, "At the nexus of race and labor, at the nexus of race and housing, and at the nexus of race and education is power."<sup>16</sup> New forms of activism were needed to end the cycle of conciliatory tokenism that failed to change permanently racist imbalances.

Brooklyn CORE and their supporters planned for the "Stall-in" to signify this new direction. The stall-in organizers attempted to circumvent municipal reform mechanisms and effect change on their own terms. A press release to the officials of New York City and the general Public from the Bronx and Brooklyn chapters of CORE summarized local frustration and ushered in a more antagonistic approach to fighting racist power structures. "More severe direct action methods" were needed to bring attention to the city's inferior, segregated

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<sup>14</sup> Craig Turnbull, "Please Make No Demonstrations Tomorrow': The Brooklyn Congress of Racial Equality and Symbolic Protest at the 1964-1965 World's Fair," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* (New Zealand) 1998, 17 (1) pp. 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold Goldwag papers, "Statement of Demands" n.d. (copy in author's possession)

<sup>16</sup> Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York, 2000) p. 239.

schools and inadequate housing in black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods. The press released continued to demand that:

The officials of this city must also realize that they can no longer let citizens be subjugated to beatings by ‘criminals’ who hide behind a badge – not if there is to be any peace in this city. There will be no peace or rest until every child is afforded an opportunity to obtain high-quality education, and until significant changes are made in all areas mentioned. The World’s Fair cannot be permitted to operate without protests from those who are angered by conditions which have been permitted to exist for so long – conditions which deny millions of Americans rights guaranteed them by the Constitution of the United States. We want all our freedom!!! We want it here!!! We want it Now!!!<sup>17</sup>

This philosophy also attracted younger, more militant neighborhood activists to the movement.<sup>18</sup> This shift in tactics would also appear in later localized community struggles that disavowed “integration” as the mantra for equality, most notably in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school battles of 1968, and the creation of an African Nationalist community cultural center in Bedford-Stuyvesant called “The East” in 1969.<sup>19</sup>

The premise of the stall-in was simple: cars would jam all major highways leading to the World’s Fair on its opening day, April 22,1964. Leaflets encouraged people to “drive awhile for freedom” and “take only enough gas to get your car on EXHIBIT.” While the World’s Fair showcased the country’s technological and social progress, the stall-in would exhibit the power of the

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<sup>17</sup> Arnold Goldwag papers “Press Release from Bronx CORE, 1301 Boston Rd. & Brooklyn CORE, 319 Nostrand Avenue, to the Officials of New York City and the General Public,” 4 April 1964. (copy in author’s possession).

<sup>18</sup> Author’s interview with Sunny Carson (in author’s possession) Martha Biondi provides an in-depth study of the creation of liberal institutions to combat racial employment discrimination on the municipal and state level in New York in “The Struggle for Black Equality in New York City, 1945-1955.” PhD dissertation, Columbia University (1997) pp. 35-99.

<sup>19</sup> Very little has been written about “The East.” The most detailed study to date is Kalonji Lasana Niamke’s “The Legacy of ‘The East’ : An Analysis of a Case Experience in Independent Institution and Nation(alist) Building, 1969-1986,” Cornell University, MA Thesis Africana Studies (1999). Snippets of information can be found in Jim Sleeper’s *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (New York, 1990) pp. 210-213. For information on the grassroots movement behind the Ocean Hill-Brownsville protests see: Clarence Taylor,

grassroots to draw attention to the government's negligence regarding urban poverty and racism. The protest's demands were listed on flyers that organizers handed out on street corners throughout New York City: "We want jobs now, integrated quality education, (and an) end (to) slum housing." <sup>20</sup>

Brooklyn CORE's stall-in generated an enormous response on both the local and national level, much of it shaped by the dominant discourse of the national movement. As Congress debated civil rights legislation, and national organizations such as CORE and SNCC prepared for intensifying the voter registration movement in the Deep South with a campaign called "Freedom Summer," Brooklyn CORE's stall-in appeared as a radical anomaly that threatened to hurt the movement for black freedom.

A letter from Mary R. Mac Arthur, a white resident of Glen Ridge, NJ and a self-defined "active participant in the Civil Rights movement," warned of the repercussions the stall-in would have on the national struggle for black freedom:

I feel very strongly that the recent actions of the Brooklyn chapter of CORE may set the civil rights movement back from 2 to 4 years . . . there are certainly hundreds of thousands of people who believe as I do . . . and among them may be MANY workers in this struggle whose support you may lose if you continue along this path.<sup>21</sup>

John Keating from Yonkers, New York, echoed these sentiments. He wrote Isaiah Brunson, the chairman of Brooklyn CORE:

"I am a white man. I was all for the Civil Rights bill to help the colored people. I don't like the violence that's being used now such as the Stall-In. If I had to vote now, I would vote against it. It shows by the actions of your people

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*Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York, 1997) pp. 176-207

<sup>20</sup> Congress of Racial Equality, *The Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, 1941-1967* (microform). Stanford NC: Microfilming Corporation of American (1980). Series 1, File 1, Reel 12, Frames: 907 and 908. Here after, cited as *The Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality*, series, file, reel, frame number.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold Goldwag papers "Letter to Arnold Goldwag, 14 April 1964." (copy in author's possession)

they are not ready for us to accept them as equal. P.S. I shall write to Washington hoping to stall the Civil Rights Bill now.<sup>22</sup>

Black citizens also encouraged Brooklyn CORE to rethink their plans for the “Stall-In.” Mrs. Myra Zuckerman, whose daughter died en route to a hospital because of traffic tie-ups, wrote:

After hearing your threats to stall cars on roads . . . I can only feel shock and fear. I am a Negro myself, and I know and understand what you’re fighting for . . . These demonstrations you purposed can only cause other Americans to call and think us unpatriotic and unfit for the rights of citizens . . . Many times the end justifies the means but in this case the means will only bring the Negro further from his goal.<sup>23</sup>

Other letters reflected more violent and racist opposition to the stall-in. An unsigned letter to the Brooklyn CORE office told Arnold Goldwag, the chapter’s community relations director “It is Communist kikes such as you that cause the hatred by so many for law abiding Jewish people. Watch out!”<sup>24</sup> Margaret V. Martyn, the chair of the White teachers of American Inc., wrote: “Why you miserable black sonofabitch! How dare you threaten the Worlds Fair and the Christian White Power structure of this City? You nigger bastards belong in Africa not here among genteel white Christian folk! We hope the police break your black ape heads on Wednesday! So drop dead!”<sup>25</sup>

Moderate national civil rights leaders and politicians, who viewed the stall-in as a threat to the movement, shaped much of this condemnation. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP dismissed the stall-in and marginalized its organizers as,

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<sup>22</sup> Arnold Goldwag papers, “Postcard to Isiah Brunson, 20 April 1964.” (copy in author’s possession)

<sup>23</sup> Arnold Goldwag papers, “Letter to Brooklyn CORE office, 13 April 1964.” (copy in author’s possession)

<sup>24</sup> Arnold Goldwag papers, “Letter to Arnold Goldwag, 15 April 1964.” (copy in author’s possession)

<sup>25</sup> Arnold Goldwag papers, “Letter to Brooklyn CORE office from Margaret V. Martyn, written on Board of Education of the City of New York letterhead, 17 April 1964.” (copy in author’s possession)

“strictly Brooklynese,”<sup>26</sup> and James Farmer, national director of CORE, suspended the Brooklyn chapter for its plans to go through with the stall-in. Farmer commented that the stall-in would “merely create confusion and thus damage the fight for freedom.” The city traffic commissioner said that the stall-in would “paralyze the whole city. It would take a week to untangle the mess;” and the police commissioner commented that the stall-in, “ignored the civil rights of others to work and play without interference.”<sup>27</sup> Senators Hubert H. Humphries (Minnesota) and Thomas Kuchel (California), the floor managers for the civil rights legislation in Congress expressed concern over the white resentment and violence the stall-in would generate. “Violence,” they said, “is the very antithesis of law and order. Illegal disturbances, demonstrations which lead to violence or to injury, strike grievous blows at the cause of decent civil rights legislation.” They felt that the fight for black equality would be furthered if rights advocates conducted, “their peaceful crusade with the same good manners, forbearance and devotion so abundantly displayed in last August 28<sup>th</sup>’s civil rights march on Washington.”<sup>28</sup> These critics failed to see that the message behind the stall-in was more in-touch with the sufferings of a majority of the country’s urban poor and that it signaled a change in how this population would fight for social equality.

Brooklyn CORE did not waver in its radical plans. They received support from other CORE chapters in Manhattan and the Bronx and some local labor organizations. John J. Delury, president of the Sanitation Men’s local 831, said that all 10,000 of his men would stay home on April 22 if they were asked to tow

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<sup>26</sup> *New York Times*, 11 April 1964

<sup>27</sup> *New York Post*, 10 April 1964

<sup>28</sup> *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 April 1964

cars. “We’re not going to scab on anyone fighting for freedom or civil rights,” he said.<sup>29</sup> Brooklyn CORE stayed focused on their constituents and the objective. Arnold Goldwag – a Jewish Brooklynite who joined Brooklyn CORE shortly after the chapter’s rejuvenation in 1960, and was the last white member to leave after the group’s leadership abandoned interracial organizing in 1965<sup>30</sup> – unequivocally reminded critics that Brooklyn CORE had an, “ultimate responsibility to the people of this community who look to us for leadership and for solutions to the long-standing problem of discrimination and exploitation.” Oliver Leeds, a former chairman of the chapter emphasized the role Brooklyn’s black citizens would play in the stall-in: “Its not so much that CORE is planning (the stall-in) but that the man in the street is going to do it. From what I’ve heard in Bedford-Stuyvesant, neither CORE nor anyone else is going to be able to stop him. That’s the beauty of this whole operation.”<sup>31</sup> Isiah Brunson, the chairman of Brooklyn CORE, summarized the need for the radical nature of the stall-in. His response to some letters sent to the office stated:

As you are obviously aware, we have up until this very day used every means at our disposal to awaken the City Fathers of New York to the crying needs of their city. We have picketed, boycotted, sat-in lied-in, etc. All of our efforts have been in vain.

The time has come. The Power structure of this city, state, and country must be made to realize that we will accept palliation no longer. Empty promises, investigative committees, and such have done nothing to alleviate the problems that exist.

We have therefore, been forced into the position of using the only path left open to us. Our demands are simple. They can be instituted immediately, and do not necessitate the passage of any new laws. Rather all we are actually asking is that all existing laws are enforced.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *New York Times*, 15 April 1964

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Arnold Goldwag

<sup>31</sup> *New York Post*, 10 April 1964

<sup>32</sup> Arnold Goldwag papers, “Letter from Isiah Brunson, chairman of Brooklyn CORE, to Mr. and Mrs. Thurow, 19 April 1964.” (copy in author’s possession)

April 22, 1964 was an unseasonably cold, rainy day. Many who attended the Opening Day of the World's Fair opted to take public transportation, thus, there were few cars on the roads. The 1,000 patrolmen working that day probably did not see much traffic.<sup>33</sup> Some demonstrators tried to block a subway in Queens and were violently removed by police, but the stall-in generated little actual disruption.<sup>34</sup>

The historical significance of the stall-in lies in the grassroots organizers' refusal to work within a system they felt gave them nothing for their efforts. As activists engaged the city's liberal reform mechanism on its own terms, real change for poor citizens of color remained an illusion. Thus, Brooklyn CORE decided that it had to go outside liberalism's tactical rules of engagement. As civil rights legislation passed on the national level in June of 1964, little actually changed in the streets of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem. One Harlem resident remarked that the Civil Rights Bill was, "still a piece of paper. Let's wait until the letter of the law is carried out." Another commented that he saw "no particular reason why the urban Negro, especially in New York City, should rejoice over the passage of the bill. The result will not have that much effect on his problems. The rejoicing will take place in the South, where the shackles of discrimination will begin to come loose. The urban Negro is concerned with housing and building better business opportunities."<sup>35</sup> Brooklyn CORE's threat to create havoc throughout the city on the opening day of the World's Fair spoke directly to these issues and signaled a new direction in the local and national struggle for black

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<sup>33</sup> Craig Turnbull, " 'Please Make No Demonstrations Tomorrow' " p. 31

<sup>34</sup> *New York Journal American*, 22 April 1974

<sup>35</sup> *New York Times*, 20 June 1964

freedom. If the laws and liberal institutions could not improve the lives of struggling citizens, community activists would employ more antagonistic and radical measures to exert power over their lives.