

Citizenship and Liberation

An Analysis of Mid-20th Century Community Schools for 21st Century Organizers

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Abstract

In the spirit of Mariame Kaba's Archival Activations zine series, "Citizenship and Liberation: An Analysis of Mid-20th Century Community Schools for 21st Century Organizers" analyzes two of the leading adult education programs of the mid twentieth century, the Citizenship School and the Liberation School. The Citizenship School aimed to address the material needs of African American adults in the American South. They improved students' core handwriting, literacy, and math abilities as well as helped build fundamental skills required to register to vote amidst the racist restrictions of Jim Crow on Black enfranchisement. On the other hand, the Liberation School's mission was to teach the lessons of African American history extracted from dominant narratives through a curriculum rooted in the Marxist-Leninist theory of historical materialism. The hope was that the Liberation School would prepare a vanguard of Black organizers to usher in the qualitative and quantitative shifts necessary to radically reorganize society to improve material conditions for all working class people in a way the civil rights era of struggle could not and did not.

Understanding the different ways in which the Citizenship School and Liberation School responded to the material reality of Jim Crow leads to a crucial research question: what can today's organizers learn from the experiences of two of the leading adult education programs of the mid twentieth century? To explore this crucial question, this academizine explores the archival collections of James E. Campbell, Septima P. Clark, and Bernice Robinson as well as delving into the larger archives and the closed-stack library housed at the College of Charleston's Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture. This close exploration leads to the identification of key lessons to be gleaned from both models of adult education, specifically as they can be applied to the work of contemporary organizers aiming to create broad societal change in American society. These lessons are positioned within the liberatory cannon of Marxism-Leninism to provide added context and help highlight additional ways for organizers to think about their work in the present political climate with particular emphasis on the importance of incorporating the mass line into organizing work and thinking beyond the limitations of the ballot.

The flexibility of the zine format allows for archives related to the Citizenship School and Liberation School curriculums as well as student and instructor experiences to be reinterpreted to fill gaps in modern popular education and improve understandings of movement work. The

format also creates space for primary sources in the archives to become more engaging, accessible, and tell their own stories beyond the bibliography.

Print Instructions

Print as a booklet on 8.5 x 11 paper. Set print settings to print on both sides and print on the short edge.

Image Credits

1. Co-Op Store with Alice Wine behind the counter photograph, Undated, Esau Jenkins papers, Box 1, Folder 24, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.
2. Liberation School graduation pamphlet, James E. Campbell papers, Box 4, Folder 25, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.
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13. Bernice Robinson teaching at a Highlander Voter Education Workshop photograph, Undated, Bernice Robinson papers, Box 3, Folder 19, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.
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22. Images of Malcolm X speaking at the Hotel Theresa, James E. Campbell papers, Box 4, Folder 25, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.

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24. Photo of James Campbell courtesy of Dana Campbell.
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39. Image of James Campbell courtesy of Dana Campbell.
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43. Collage of previously cited images.
44. "No Weapon Can Defeat a People Decided to Be Free" poster, James E. Campbell Posters, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA.
45. Freedom Bag Food Drive at the Avery Research Center, October 18th, 2025, courtesy of the Lowcountry Action Committee.

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