ALTHOUGH EFFORTS to combat racial bias have always been a part of California’s history, civil rights struggles in the state grew in scale and intensity during the 1960s. Supplementing the tactics of negotiation and litigation that had been used by affiliates of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and local fair-housing groups, new forms of militant activism, including civil disobedience, became increasingly common. Especially in Los Angeles and the Bay Area, nonviolent civil rights protests and demonstrations were inspired by the southern boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, and mass marches that followed the U.S. Supreme Court’s Brown vs. Board of Education decision (1954). By the mid-1960s, the African-American freedom struggle had become a source of inspiration for the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, and for anti-war and anti-draft campaigns. The emergence of the Oakland-based Black Panther Party and of black student unions on many campuses signaled a transition from struggles to remove barriers to struggles to redefine African-American destiny.

Although in the years before 1960 California did not have the kind of legalized racial barriers that existed in the South, de facto segregation and racial discrimination still limited the opportunities of African-American and other nonwhite groups. Well-established patterns of residential segregation contributed to the concentration of black students in predominantly black and often inferior public schools. In Berkeley, for example, pressure during the early 1960s from black residents, led by the Reverend Roy Nichols, prompted the city’s school district to initiate a desegregation plan that included busing of students. During the mid-1960s violent racial clashes involving students at several Bay Area public schools prompted not only renewed demands to end de facto segregation but also new campaigns to improve the quality and relevance of black students’ education. Meanwhile, efforts to end racial discrimination in housing resulted in uneven gains. Informal discrimination by real estate agents and white homeowners often made it difficult for African Americans to buy or rent homes outside predominantly black areas. During the late 1950s the mayor of San Francisco felt compelled to intervene when baseball star Willie Mays had trouble purchasing a home, and in 1962 a month-long sit-in at a realty office was required to enable a black physicist to buy a home in Monterey.

The issue of housing discrimination became especially heated in 1963, after the California legislature passed an open-housing bill introduced by Berkeley assemblyman J. Byron Rumford. Widespread opposition to the law culminated in a ballot initiative to overturn it. Despite a major “No on Proposition 14” campaign by civil rights supporters of all races, the anti-civil rights initiative passed in 1964. Civil rights and fair-housing groups continued to fight for open housing, and a 1966 California Supreme Court decision reinstated the Rumford legislation.

During 1963 and 1964 racial discrimination in employment also became a major focus of civil rights activism in California. At Stanford and at the Berkeley campus of the University of California, members of support groups that had provided funds and volunteers for the southern activities of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) became directly involved in the Mississippi voting-rights campaign. Friends of SNCC and Friends of CORE groups increasingly modeled themselves on SNCC and CORE and found ways to redirect their energies to deal with racial problems closer to home. Following a series of civil rights rallies in California that mobilized support for the Birmingham campaign led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and for the August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the Berkeley campus CORE chapter launched demonstrations late in 1963 at Mel’s Drive-in, protesting its policy of limiting black employees to menial positions. After these protests produced concessions, civil rights activists decided to target other employers. “Shop-ins” were staged at Lucky grocery stores (protesters left full shopping carts with cashiers after declaring they would not pay for the groceries until discriminatory practices ended). Sit-ins during February at San Francisco’s Sheraton Palace Hotel resulted in the arrests of more than 150 demonstrators. Similar demonstrations at car dealerships on San Francisco’s Van Ness Avenue “auto row” led to a hundred additional
arrests before civil rights groups agreed to a moratorium. The Oakland Tribune, known then for its conservative editorial policies, also became a target of protests. In the Bay Area, the Ad Hoc Committee to End Discrimination coordinated protests, while in Los Angeles, a group of activists broke away from CORE to create the Nonviolent Action Committee (N-VAC), which extended the campaign of picketing and civil disobedience to still more employers, including the Bank of America. When some Bay Area political leaders and University of California officials began to object to the use of the Berkeley campus as a staging area for off-campus civil disobedience, a confrontation over the rights of students ensued. In September 1964, members of SNCC and CORE support groups defied university regulations that banned student groups from using campus facilities to raise funds for off-campus political activities. On October 1, the day after eight students were threatened with disciplinary action, police arrested Jack Weinberg, a former student who was sitting at a CORE table in front of Sproul Hall. After Weinberg was placed in a police car near the spot of his arrest, a crowd gathered, preventing the car from leaving the campus. This event marked the start of the Free Speech Movement (FSM). Mobilized by Mario Savio and other veterans of both southern and northern civil rights activism, Berkeley students demonstrated against a host of in loco parentis restrictions on their activities. Mass rallies culminated in a sit-in at the Sproul Hall administration building. On December 3, police arrested more than 800 demonstrators, prompting Berkeley's faculty and administration to seek a compromise resolution of the crisis.

Although the FSM did not achieve all of its goals, its campaign against campus restrictions of political activity prompted major changes in the rules governing not only Berkeley students, but also those at many other colleges and universities. One of the first anti-war “teach-ins” was held on the Berkeley campus during the spring of 1965. Although the FSM had been begun as an effort to encourage off-campus civil rights protests, many students at Berkeley and elsewhere were subsequently likely to use their new freedoms to participate in campus protests and to express opposition to the war in Vietnam. Moreover, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the major goals of previous civil rights activities in the South had been achieved, and SNCC and CORE leaders soon proclaimed the new goal of “black power.”

The Los Angeles uprising of August 1965 (labeled “the Watts riot” in the press) marked the end of an era of interracial civil rights protests and the beginning of a period in which black activists would take their struggles in new directions. Subsequent outbreaks of racial violence in San Francisco and Oakland revealed the many racial problems that previous civil rights reforms had not addressed. During and after the black power era, civil rights protests were less evident in California, but groups such as the Mid-Peninsula Citizens for Fair Housing and local NAACP chapters would continue to combat racial discrimination in housing, employment, and public education.

By the last half of the 1960s, black protest activity in California had shifted from its former focus on civil rights reform to larger conceptions of civil and human rights. The rise of the Oakland-based Black Panther Party (BPP) reflected this new direction. The BPP’s founders, former Oakland City College (now Merritt College) students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, were inspired by Malcolm X and the black nationalist tradition as well as by the southern civil rights movement. When they formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in October 1966, the two men adopted their black panther symbol from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which SNCC workers had helped organize in Alabama. They focused their attention on racial issues that were relatively unaffected by national civil rights legislation and that were of special concern for urban blacks. The BPP’s Platform and Program demanded “full employment,” “decent housing,” “education that teaches us our true history and our role in present-day society,” “an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people,” and freedom for black prisoners “because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.”

By the end of the 1960s, efforts to consolidate and protect previous civil rights gains had merged with newer issues such as affirmative action. The achievement of formal citizenship rights by African Americans in California and other states were deemed insufficient to rectify the legacy of long-standing racial oppression. Controversy regarding how to compensate for historically rooted patterns of discrimination became part of a continuing debate about the boundaries of individual freedom, the role of government, and alternative concepts of social justice.