

Turning Point For Freedom Fighters



DEMONSTRATOR FACES-KLANSMAN in downtown Atlanta. Over 500 protesters confronted the Klu Klux Klan during the 11 hour demonstration Saturday.

By Jake Rosen

(Ed. Note: Last month's civil rights demonstrations in Atlanta once more focussed attention on the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. In the article below, PL's southern editor reviews the background of SNCC and discusses possible future developments.)

Two or three years of daily living with Negro workers and sharecroppers in the South produces its own lessons for students. That is the key to the work of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Hundreds of Negro and white students from all over the country have, in the past four years, moved into southern Negro communities--big and small--as SNCC organizers ("field workers") to mobilize new forces in the civil rights movement. Some of these students have stayed for a few months, some for years. But all the students have learned as much, if not more, than they've taught.

SNCC field workers soon realize they are living and working with a people who exist mainly by domestic work, unskilled labor, and sharecropping; a people enslaved for 350 years, simmering with anger, afraid but ready to fight with any means that will work--non-violent or otherwise--for their freedom.

Growing out of the first lunch-counter sit-ins in 1960, SNCC now has some 100 field workers in Negro communities in nine southern states. Unlike some other "big name" civil rights organizations, SNCC maintains no plush, over-staffed central office in New York. Its headquarters is in Atlanta, Georgia, and 95 per cent of its work--also unlike most other civil rights groups--is done in the field.

This approach, plus a core of dedicated and militant young Negro leaders, constitute the basis of SNCC's strength and the hope for its future. It is also the reason that the federal government, as well as the dixiecrats, are so afraid of SNCC. (SNCC Executive Secretary James Foreman was the only major civil rights leader who did

NOT visit the White House in December to bow and scrape before President Johnson and praise the new "champion of Negro rights" from Texas).

In four years, SNCC has integrated scores of southern lunch counters and registered thousands of Negro voters (militant chapters of CORE, NAACP, and other groups have also played an important role in these efforts). Through its organization of mass Negro demonstrations in places like Albany, Cambridge, Gadsden, Greenville, and Birmingham, SNCC has brought the Negro freedom struggle before the eyes of the world. SNCC has not succeeded in every effort, but it has tried to learn from its failures (See Albany Report, in Oct. 1962 PL).

Despite its name, SNCC has generally respected the desire of the Negro masses for armed self-defense. While SNCC's policy remains one of non-violent action, SNCC workers have learned that the Negro people will defend at least their homes with guns, and no civil rights group will get anywhere in the South if it tries to discourage that. As Foreman recently put it, "I dare say that 85 per cent of all Negroes do not adhere to non-violence. They are allowing the non-violent movement to go ahead because it is working."

But today SNCC is coming to--or has already reached--a turning point. Precisely because it is so young and hopeful, precisely because it has not joined in the self-destructive red-baiting of the other "respectable" civil rights groups, SNCC has been made the number one target for destruction by the anti-Negro forces in this country--including the federal government.

Of course, the method of attack on SNCC may vary (it already has). Washington has generations of experience at destroying militant movements. There are, among others, the "buy-off-the-leaders" technique, the infiltrate-with-saboteurs technique, the open terror technique, the legal action technique, and above all the red-baiting technique. While the government forces have attempted various combinations of these methods against SNCC in the past without notable success, the Johnson regime now appears ready to open up a full-scale anti-SNCC drive.

This time the government will use the carrot-and-stick approach: "Here is a nice, comfortable, easy, out-of-trouble, respectable direction for you, SNCC (we'll even help finance it for you...)--but if you won't cooperate, if you persist in this subversive mass action, then you will feel the full wrath of the great white father."

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THE CARROT: The first attempt to divert SNCC's militancy goes back to the Kennedy Administration. The idea was a big financial subsidy for a voter registration program that would take up SNCC workers in tedious legal problems and get them away from mass action campaigns that were embarrassing to the Administration.

Even though SNCC reluctantly agreed to the proposal, the diversion didn't work. The SNCC organizers began trying to express the feelings of the communities in which

they were living, through new programs. In a confused way, new demands--essentially class demands--were formulated, and these became part of the SNCC voter registration program.

A good example is the Mississippi operation. This is SNCC's largest project, with perhaps 60 organizers scattered throughout the state. They have been, for the most part, concentrated in voter registration work under the umbrella of the Council of Federated Organizations, (COFO) is theoretically made up of a number of groups including the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC, but it is headed by Bob Moses, SNCC head in Mississippi, and its staff is largely composed of SNCC field workers). COFO was almost entirely subsidized by the Southern Regional Council's Voter Education Project, which is the agency that administers the foundation money raised a few years ago by Bobby Kennedy directly to finance all the voter programs in the South.

Moses administers a vigorous and courageous voter registration program which, however, fails to get many Negroes registered; SNCC blames this on a lack of Federal government cooperation.

Responding to the need for more militant action,



SELMA Negroes line up to register to vote. (SNCC Photo)

SNCC--via COFO--decided to transform voter registration into a state-wide "Freedom Ballot" coinciding with the November general elections. Some 90,000 Negroes "voted" for Aaron Henry, head of the Mississippi NAACP, for Governor. Immediately afterwards, the VEP dropped the Mississippi project. VEP explained the precipitous act by claiming that it was running out of money and the return (in the form of registered voters) wasn't worth the investment.

In reality, the federally-supported VEP withdrew because the carrot wasn't working. SNCC had begun to transform the diversion into a powerful mass freedom campaign. The rebels were close to becoming revolutionaries. But the Administration tried again. If it was unable to prevent SNCC from learning the facts of life, it still hoped to force a chastity belt on the group.

A new dollar-coated carrot was dangled before the SNCC leaders. The new path to "respectability" was revealed at SNCC's Thanksgiving conference in Washington (a most convenient site). For this, the ruling class called upon its loyal AFL-CIO leaders.

The AFL-CIO paid two-thirds of the cost of the con-

ference (the Teamsters paid the rest), in return for which Industrial Union Department director Jack Conway and District 65 (Retail, Wholesale, & Dep't Store Union) secretary-treasurer Cleveland Robinson were the featured speakers. Robinson was merely boring; Conway shocked the audience with his re-writing of history and his praise-praise-praise and nothing but praise for Kennedy. He even compared SNCC to the Peace Corps.

In five workshops that immediately followed Conway's speech, presided over by AFL-CIO officials, conference participants gave the unions hell. One speaker told Ben Slayman, of the AFL-CIO Civil Rights Department, that the country needed a new union federation since the AFL-CIO was too far gone to be saved. Slayman just stared, then answered that if that was the speaker's attitude, the AFL-CIO didn't need him. It was the same in all the workshops. Despite the fact that a dance was scheduled, participants tried to get the union leaders to stay and argue, but the union men adjourned the discussions as soon as possible and left.

Behind the scenes, Conway set up a series of meetings to work out "cooperation" between the federation and SNCC. Among those "negotiating" for the federation were Conway, Louis Carliner of the U.A.W., Ben Siegal of the I.U.E., and one or two other pie-cards. They made clear that their main condition for "cooperation" was that SNCC pledge to have no dealings with "subversive elements."

The Federation offered to set up and finance a far-reaching system of conferences and seminars for SNCC organizers. To anyone familiar with the AFL-CIO's international operations, the plan is obviously the same as those used to try to subvert trade unions and anti-colonial groups in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Nothing was concluded at the first meetings, which didn't make the union men any too happy. SNCC people seemed to be uncertain, with some holding that if they give you anything--take; if they take from you--yell, while others maintained that you shouldn't swallow poison because you know the antidote.

The problem was made more complex by Kennedy's assassination. Because Johnson is a Southerner, many SNCC people are under the illusion that he will give more than Kennedy did on civil rights in order to win the 1964 elections. This reasoning made them anxious to be on good terms with the Administration, which means not exposing nor attacking it.

Others, with perhaps more disappointed expectations under their belts, warned that Johnson is just as cynical on civil rights as Kennedy or Eisenhower; that SNCC would become meaningless if it didn't expose the federal government's covert support for segregation; that the Johnson Administration is continuing the federal prosecutions against SNCC workers in Albany, Georgia (see petition, page 6); and finally, that Negro people in the South want action, not political expediency.

The AFL-CIO bureaucrats have not yet followed up their November probe, but SNCC's respite is only temporary. The carrot still dangles, and if SNCC resists it,

SNCC PETITION ON ALBANY, GA. CASE

"You Have Adopted the Racist Practices..."

TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES:

On August 9, 1963, a Federal Grand Jury in Macon, Georgia, indicted Joni Rabinowitz, Slater King, Rev. Samuel B. Wells, Thomas C. Chatmon, Robert Thomas and Elza L. Jackson for perjury and Dr. William G. Anderson for obstruction of justice. Mr. King is President of the Albany Movement, a civil rights organization in Albany, Georgia, and Dr. Anderson is the Movement's former President. Rev. Wells, Mrs. Jackson, Mr. Chatmon and Mr. Thomas are officers and members of the Movement. Miss Rabinowitz, a student at Antioch College, was then a Field Representative of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. All of the defendants are Negro except Miss Rabinowitz.

The defendants moved to transfer the trial to the North. Miss Rabinowitz also moved to waive a jury. The United States Attorney opposed the motions and they were denied by the court. Five defendants have been convicted by local juries and Mrs. Jackson will be tried in February. Dr. Anderson, whose trial ended in a mistrial, will be tried again in April.

Many southern state courts have long systematically excluded Negroes from jury service, and the United States Supreme Court has set aside state court convictions on that ground. Until the indictments in these cases, however, it was not commonly known that the same illegal practices were followed in federal courts. Furthermore, the Supreme Court has stated that jury lists in the federal courts must represent a true cross-section of the population. The jury list from which both grand and trial juries were drawn in Macon was composed of less than 6% Negroes and not a single one of the 72 jurors who have sat on the trial juries in these cases was a Negro. Yet over 34% of the adult population of the area are Negroes!

Testimony in the cases established that the jury lists were chosen by court officers from among their acquaintances. In Macon the court officers are white and admitted that they did not have many Negro friends.

Your office should have consented to the dismissal of these indictments once the racial imbalance of the jury lists became known to you; at the very least, you should have consented to a transfer of the trial or to waiver of a jury. Your failure to take these steps forced the defendants to trial by all white juries drawn from an improper jury list in a hostile community. **Thus, instead of guaranteeing equal administration of justice in the federal courts, you have adopted the racist practices of the southern states.**

All of the convictions are being appealed. It is not too late to correct a gross injustice in these cases. We therefore petition you:

1. To confess error before the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit and to join in appellants' motions to reverse the convictions and dismiss the indictments.
2. To direct the United States Attorneys in the South to examine the jury lists in their jurisdictions and to apply to the District Courts for the immediate compilation of lists representing a true racial cross-section of the population.

Names

Addresses

Return Before May 1, 1964 to:

STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE,
NEW YORK OFFICE, 156 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY

the government is prepared with the stick.

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THE STICK: The Albany indictments were designed to give SNCC a taste of what's in store if they don't toe the Johnson line. But the most serious threat of a federal attack came in the form of an article in LIFE magazine, Nov. 29, 1963, by Kennedy's liberal friend, Theodore H. White.

White's piece is an attempt to keep the movement from assuming a revolutionary content. His argument is that in the South the Negro has a "relatively simple goal: to wring from hostile white men an end to legally imposed indignity." The heart of the Negro's problem, White says, lies in the Northern cities, and the essence of the problem is "clearing up the bitter tangle of misunderstanding between whites and Negroes..."

Since the problem is verbal, according to White, and not related to the structure of American capitalism, the chief obstacle is the Negro's vocabulary, which imposes a false view of American reality. Particularly harmful is the word "militant" ("Militancy" thus makes the public confrontation between the races chiefly a dialogue of black demand on white guilt"--militancy "has a crippling effect on strategy"); the phrase "Freedom Now!" ("By wiping out reasonable public discussion of steps and procedures, the phrase 'Freedom Now!' blinds rather than clarifies. It could conceivably deliver leadership of the Negro community to demagogues who, if they insist that 'now' is 1964, will force the major parties to polarize on this demand to the peril of both Negro and white."); and the phrase "power structure" ("To Negroes 'power structure' means not only government but the men who control the banks, industry and insurance companies; the men who control the newspapers, magazines and television; it means the schools and their administrators; it means the churches and their hierarchies; it means the labor unions and their leaders.")

This "bad" language is dangerous, to whites, because it "has brought into the crusading Negro movement a fringe of extremist followers...moved by many...inspirations, both domestic and alien." These extremists are the "direct actionists." The good among them--the domestically inspired--are mainly in CORE. The bad are either disreputable groups or Communists, who "again are trying to mount an important penetration into American politics."

White then alleges that attempts by Communists to infiltrate CORE and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were made and frustrated. "A more serious penetration by unidentified elements is believed to have been made in S.N.C.C.," writes White. He goes on to give "evidence" of the penetration--an attempted "putsch" in Jackson, Mississippi, and a "battle plan" to cut Montgomery, Alabama off from the world.

White concludes, "It cannot be over-stressed that such lunatics and aliens are, at the moment, no more than irritants in a vast and inspiring thrust of Negroes toward dignity. But the confusion in the dialogue over civil rights magnifies what these irritants can do."

The word is out, White--a singularly appropriate

name--has warned the little black boys not to get too uppity. If they do, his article clearly implies, the federal government will come out openly on the side of Eastland.

(As we went to press, the Atlanta Constitution, the southern paper most closely linked to the Administration, attacked SNCC's "Communist supporters" in a front-page article. A few days later the Atlanta City Council, also generally considered to be politically close to the Johnson way of thinking, passed a resolution inviting the House Un-American Activities Committee to investigate civil rights groups in Atlanta.)

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AN ALTERNATIVE: To refuse the carrot and still survive the stick calls for the utmost unity by SNCC.

SNCC is not now prepared for an attack on it by the federal government. This unpreparedness is a necessary result of illusions about the White House. That this unpreparedness is real, and not merely theoretical, is shown by the group's inability so far to stimulate a wide campaign against the federal indictment and sentencing of the Albany (Georgia) defendants.

Some say that any federal attack on SNCC will fail because it has good leaders who know what they are doing, and the staff is loyal. But the point is that a full-scale federal attack, which could be demoralizing to the staff and to local persons, would have to appear in the form of a red-baiting campaign.

How will the SNCC leaders respond? To go along with government demands, which might look like expedient politics, is death. No progressive social movement was ever built anywhere on the basis of anti-communism; rather, anti-communism has always been the barrier reef which sinks the vessel of progress. So how, without preparation, will SNCC oppose the attack successfully? No one can dance at two weddings at the same time.

The necessary preparation has two aspects. On the one hand, SNCC workers must be clearer than they are now about the nature of the government and the nature of the struggle in which they are involved. In short, a way has to be found for a greater exchange of ideas within the staff. All illusions that the federal government "wants to help" must be abandoned.

Second, SNCC workers must have a more direct relationship to large numbers of working class Negroes. This can only be accomplished by SNCC workers organizing and helping to lead membership bodies that struggle for the demands of particular sections of the Negro working class--particularly for housing and jobs. SNCC must create an impregnable base for itself.

Wyatt Tee Walker, executive head of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, accurately characterized the main body of the integration movement today when, in passing, he told a television reporter, "All I'm saying is that it's embarrassing not to be able to go in (to a restaurant) when we've got the money." SNCC can and must represent those millions of black workers who DON'T have the money. Whoever leads this group will change America.