

SNCC Takes Stock

Mandate from History Elizabeth Sutherland

Washington, D.C.

Through a slashing downpour they came, in buses and trains and cars with license plates that ranged from Mississippi to Massachusetts, bringing life to the empty campus of Howard University. The occasion was the opening of the fourth leadership training conference of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Just three years ago, SNCC (universally pronounced "SNICK") had one office worker and one field secretary; now, more than 400 workers and staff watched as the major networks placed their cameras to televise the first of three days' talk about "Jobs and Food," three days of speeches by Norman Thomas, James Baldwin,

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Bayard Rustin of CORE, and SNCC's top men; of workshops with government agency and labor representatives; of the songs for which the civil-rights movement is famous; of cafeteria food, late parties — and personal reunions. One of the conference's problems, in fact, was that so many SNCC youths were so happy to run into former co-workers and jailmates that they found little time for the business at hand. I saw one staff member lifted a good three feet into the air by a joyous buddy; he never quite came down to earth again. The conference opened in the same week that *Life* magazine came out with an article by Theodore White about the civil-rights movement. White asserted that SNCC is an extremist organization which has attempted to convert

peaceful demonstrations into "putsches" against government offices in Southern cities and has contemplated the adoption of a sinister military plan that would start another civil war. "Lunatics and aliens" was his summing-up phrase for the organization, or at least for elements in it.

Established in 1960, to coordinate the many student protest groups, SNCC is known for its policy of encouraging local leadership, its practice of living closely with "the people" (as symbolized by the overalls many of its members wear) and especially for its imaginative, militant tactics. Of all the civil-rights organizations, SNCC has been the most candid advocate of basic economic and political change as necessary in America if "equal rights" is to have any mean-

ing for the Negro — and for all Americans. A mostly young, mostly Negro group, SNCC has concentrated its energy in the rural South — most recently on voter registration. It holds two conferences a year; no formal decisions are taken at them, but recommendations are collected for consideration by an executive committee a few weeks later.

The primary goal of the second 1963 conference was to examine the problems of unemployment and poverty in Southern rural areas, and specifically to acquaint field workers with existing government and trade-union programs which might be applied in their communities. During the three days a variety of themes emerged; few of the major issues facing the civil-rights movement were overlooked. All in all, the conference reflected the two-sided situation of that movement today: great strength and vitality, but no comprehensive strategy to overcome the equally great obstacles arising from the general state of our nation. SNCC leaders are sophisticated about those obstacles. Even a sixteen-year-old field worker may show a remarkable grasp of political realities, based on personal observation of power operating in his community. The movement is experienced and determined on the one hand, still groping on the other. And, as the conference also showed, no outside force has been able to provide the answers it needs.

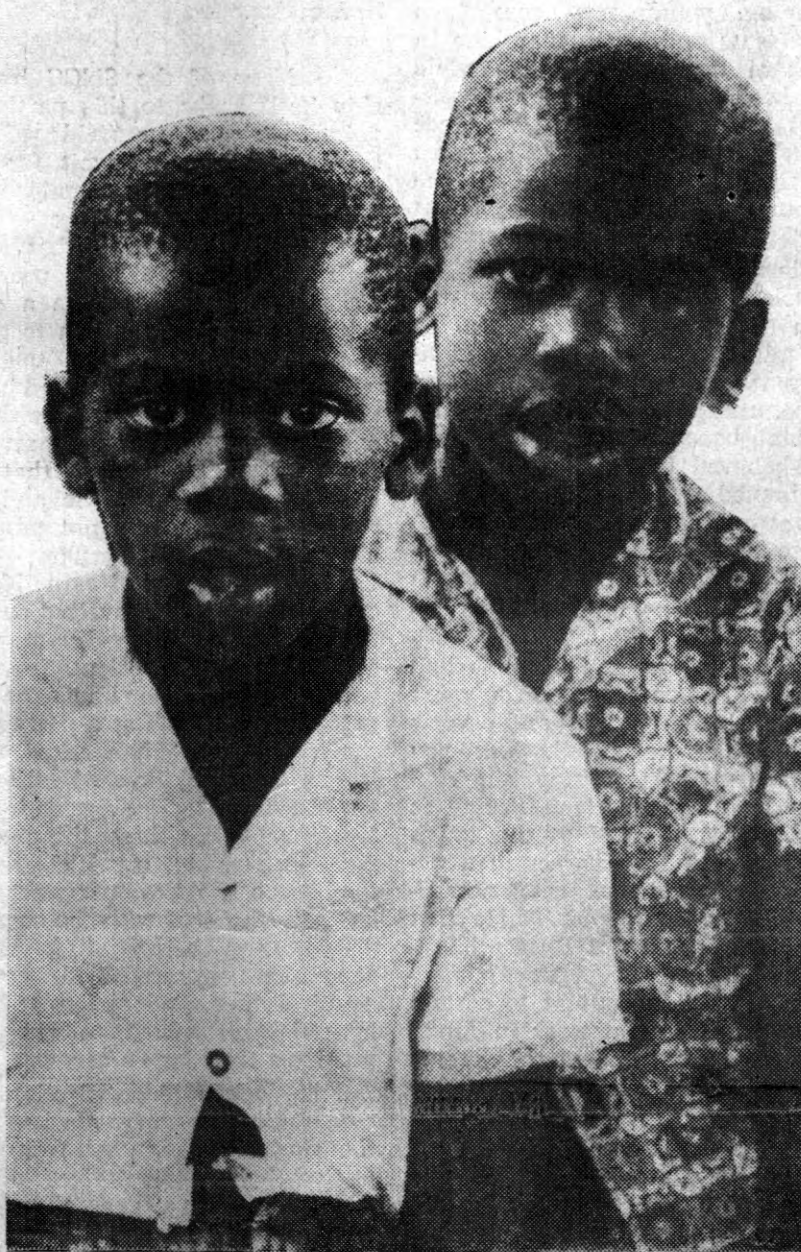
The first day of the conference vividly affirmed the strength of SNCC. The speeches given by its leaders in the Howard University chapel were striking for their lack of double talk, empty talk and just plain too much talk. Chairman John Lewis, standing in front of a stained glass window which bore the words "Gloria in excelsis deo," spoke of SNCC's broad humanistic goal: "We have a mandate from history, from our forefathers, to do everything possible to see the Southland and this nation come in line with the great democratic ideals."

Robert Moses, the quietly impressive leader of last November's Freedom Vote Campaign in Mississippi (*The Nation*, Dec. 7), then took up Theodore White's article in *Life*. SNCC leaders have said privately that White's account of cer-

tain incidents was a hodgepodge of wild inaccuracy, distortion and second-hand material which had been incorrectly reported in the first place. But Moses did not give a detailed rebuttal to White's charges, perhaps because those with experience in the South have seen events twisted so often that they may well have stopped bothering to argue over specific facts. Instead, he discussed more profound differences of attitude. For example, White stated that Negroes could wreck the two-party system in 1964; Moses countered that this might not be a bad thing, since the system doesn't work at present. He also reaffirmed SNCC's policy of non-exclusion:

past political associations were not relevant in judging the merit of a person working for SNCC. It was quite clear that no fear of the Red label would stop SNCC from pursuing its goal: "We must change the political structure of the South as we now know it," said Moses.

At intervals, announcements were made about James Baldwin, who was scheduled to speak that morning and whose plane had been delayed. A press conference finally began; questions were asked and answered in an atmosphere of slightly tense formality. As this routine ended, Executive Secretary James Forman unexpectedly intro-



Singing at Danville, Va.

duced a short, round lady from Mississippi, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. She leaned toward the microphone and in a few words told how she had tried to vote but wasn't permitted and she was tired, just plain tired, of things being that way. "I don't want to be as good as white folks, I want to be better!" she cried. And then she began singing "Go Tell It on the Mountain." What happened after that was one of those moments of magic in the civil-rights struggle. All the young energy which had sat quietly through speeches and newsmen's questions suddenly let go — the kids in blue denims had something to do at last. The chapel rang with hundreds of voices and cadenced clapping; young men rose from their seats and began marching in a chain through the aisles while the bosomy woman from Mississippi sang on and on, her face drenched with sweat. The TV men sat silent, a little stunned, as the outburst climaxed with the chant of "Freedom, Freedom, Freedom!"

There was a lunch break, a speech by Norman Thomas, and then the singing began again. In the midst of it, James Baldwin finally walked out on the platform alone, unheralded, and sat down on a piano bench, looking like a nice, well-behaved boy. The TV fellows brightened at their star's arrival, but they would still have to wait because everybody was too busy singing "I'm On My Way." Baldwin watched quietly; after ten minutes or so he was introduced and spoke.

Of course Norman Thomas had been right when he said, "You won't win just by singing" — and equally right when he added, "but you won't win if you stop singing." Much of the tall, lean Socialist's speech was devoted to the tough issue of jobs for Negroes in a nation where unemployment is now almost 6 per cent, and double that for Negroes. Bayard Rustin bluntly said later, "The fight for freedom is running counter to certain important forces at work in American society . . . you can make room for the Negro on a bus but you can't make a job for him when there aren't any."

The guest speakers at this conference offered several proposals for the unemployment problem. Norman Thomas, noting the effects

of automation and affirming that fair employment requires full employment, suggested that the government establish a fund to support the unemployed and also provide work for them (but outside the armament industry). Stanley Aronowitz of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers urged that a massive public-works program be demanded. Bayard Rustin, whose general position was that the civil-rights movement should broaden its base, suggested that white youths go, not to the Deep South, but to Kentucky, West Virginia or wherever large numbers of unemployed whites live, and persuade them to join Negroes in exerting pressure for action. Thus could begin a true social revolution in America.

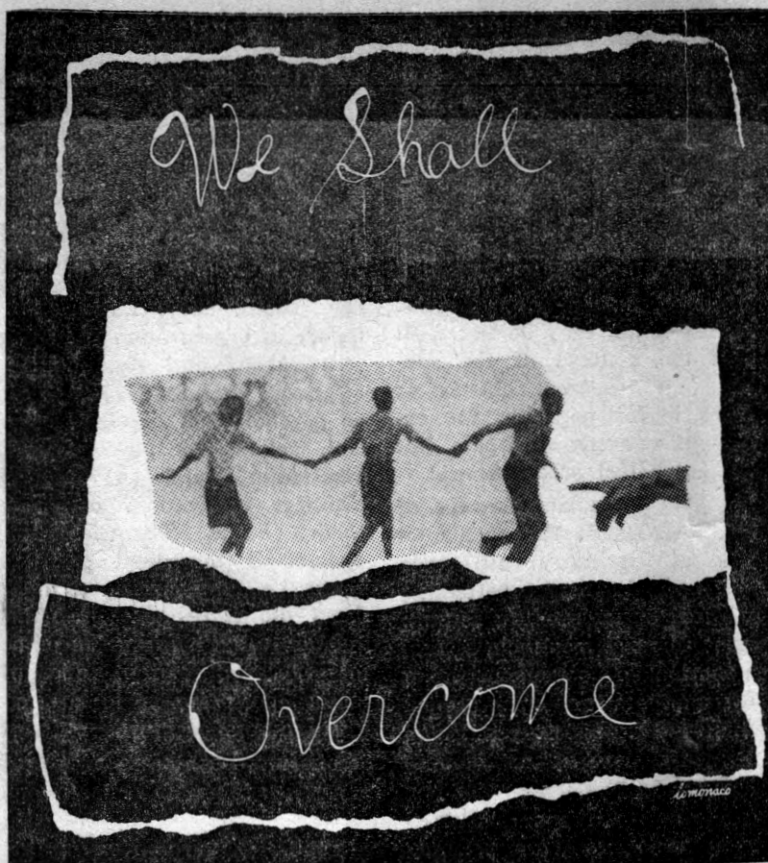
None of the SNCC leadership itself spoke to this particular point. Some of its field workers seemed reluctant to wait for full employment as a prerequisite for fair employment. They are so concerned with injustice that even "fair unemployment," to use one girl's phrase, can become a goal. And when it is a triumph to get a single Negro registered to vote without anybody's being killed in the process, one can see how the threat of automation might appear remote. Many SNCC people feel that the Southern Negro's specific and immediate problems are not properly appreciated by Northerners — including sometimes Negro Northerners. Even when traveling outside the South, a SNCC worker may not quite shake off his orientation. One young Negro from Louisiana appeared with a flute at a party after the conference. When asked about it, he gestured toward different pockets in his clothing and said, "I always carry three things with me — my flute, my Bible and a toothbrush." It wasn't necessary to ask why: he lived with the constant possibility of being jailed. At the same time, many field workers simply lack the education or background with which to see their problems in a larger context.

This lack of identification and communication showed itself in the workshops. Several were conducted by representatives of the AFL-CIO, and a general address was given by Jack Conway, Executive Director of that organiza-

tion's Industrial Union Department (IUD). In their statements, most of these men followed a general line that not all labor is conservative, that labor and the civil-rights movement should cooperate (the SNCC conference was partially financed by union money). But many SNCC workers remained skeptical, even antagonistic. A workshop would occasionally become tense as a SNCC youth strove for less vague talk and more real help. It sometimes seemed as though the unions wanted the movement to do their organizing for them, and at one point a U.A.W. representative said rather plaintively, "The labor movement isn't very strong, you know." In another workshop, somebody asked if combining organized labor and the civil-rights movement wouldn't be like a marriage between an old man and a young girl. Again and again, pointed questions were met by "That's too complex to go into now" or "Our time is nearly up." Bayard Rustin was one of the few people who expressed a strong positive position toward labor: he called for an end to "all this foolishness of damning the trade-union movement."

In the workshops with government representatives, also, the exchange of ideas was strained. Listening to how Southern Negroes might be helped under the Manpower Development and Training Agency's program, for example, SNCC workers were less impressed by possible advantages than concerned about barriers which inimical local whites could raise. One speaker showed a kind of awareness of this problem when he told how some Negroes had complained to the federal government because they weren't receiving the Farm Security payments to which they were entitled. The Attorney General sent the FBI down to investigate and the people who had complained were later arrested. "But at least it got the federal government involved," he concluded. That is hardly the kind or degree of involvement for which SNCC strives.

The general failure to achieve a dialogue was not entirely the fault of the labor and government representatives. The workshops were poorly attended and they should have been better organized. But Robert Moses' workshop on the re-



alities of voter registration was mobbed. The reason for such opposite responses became clear during one workshop when young Paul deBrul of the IUD said that instead of backing the Mississippi "mock election" for Aaron Henry in which 80,000 Negroes unofficially voted, SNCC would have done better to canvass for the Republican candidate, Rubel Phillips, and against the racist Democrat, Paul Johnson, who won. But those from Mississippi know that Phillips supports Jim Crow too. His election campaign was centered on proving that he was just as good a segregationist as Johnson. DeBrul probably meant to argue for working within the power structure to achieve relative, "realistic," victories. SNCC, while accepting this tactic in principle, knew that it was not only morally unacceptable in that particular situation, but also impractical — Negroes simply wouldn't have rallied for Phillips.

This type of conflict becomes all the more interesting when one notes that a majority of the guest speakers at this conference were of Socialist affiliation — although it was certainly hard to tell that from anything they said. They failed to

impress the SNCC workers, partly because of problems in communication, but also because SNCC is less discouraged, not so intimidated by the opposition, impatient with old, mechanical tactics which they know will prove inadequate — in short, more truly radical.

What of SNCC's attitude toward the federal government? Here the leadership position seemed clear. Kennedy's assassination was respectfully noted with a moment of silence at the opening of the conference, and some chilling reports were given by SNCC people who had seen white Southerners gleeful at the news from Dallas. But James Baldwin probably expressed the general feeling when he said, "Let us not be so pious as now to say that President Kennedy was a great civil-rights fighter." SNCC's James Forman appeared optimistic about the long-range effects of Johnson's accession: "Kennedy could get by on words, Johnson has to deliver." There would not be a moratorium on direct action, Forman added; Johnson himself hadn't called a moratorium on pressing for the civil-rights bill. The way to help get the bill through, John Lewis felt, was

by the continued pressure of direct action. Even Bayard Rustin, who urged in general a more "clever" approach, did not suggest any letup of direct action; in fact, he urged intensification.

The Negro revolt is fighting against time, as unemployment rises and the need for results mounts. "The civil-rights movement is now in extreme crisis," said Rustin, for there has not been one area of real breakthrough despite all the sweat and sacrifice. He failed to mention the psychological gains of the movement, but clearly some crucial questions are demanding hard-thought answers. And these questions are, ultimately, the same that confront any citizen who believes in the necessity of deep-seated change to meet the needs of all the dispossessed in our society. Yet there is a great difference between the tired liberal or isolated leftist—who has long recognized that necessity—and the SNCC people. They may not yet have found a sure-fire strategy with nation-wide scope, but they are working, experimenting, learning, thinking—with imagination, and in every field. Beyond this, they have an asset for which there is no intellectual measure: the glow of historical momentum.

LETTERS

(Continued from inside front cover)

ples of fuzzythink, then, turn up on both sides. And where are the clear-headed engineers? If one manages to penetrate all the smoke about taxpayers trusting their money to the likes of Urey and Gold (neither of whom, to my knowledge, has anything to do with the space program), it seems that the engineers are the ones who are running almost every act in the government's three-ring technological circus. If Schenck seriously believes that Nobel laureates are engaged in the design and building of rockets, he has been reading comic books. . . .

The problem is not that agencies like NASA are refusing to run major projects like basement experiments, but that they are receiving such a disproportionate share of the so-called Research and Development budget that they have attracted large numbers of scientists into the lower ranks of totally unscientific engineering projects, even within many universities. And one of their chief problems there is the personal animosity of many engineers toward basic research—an animosity shared by Schenck. . . .

John J. Coffey