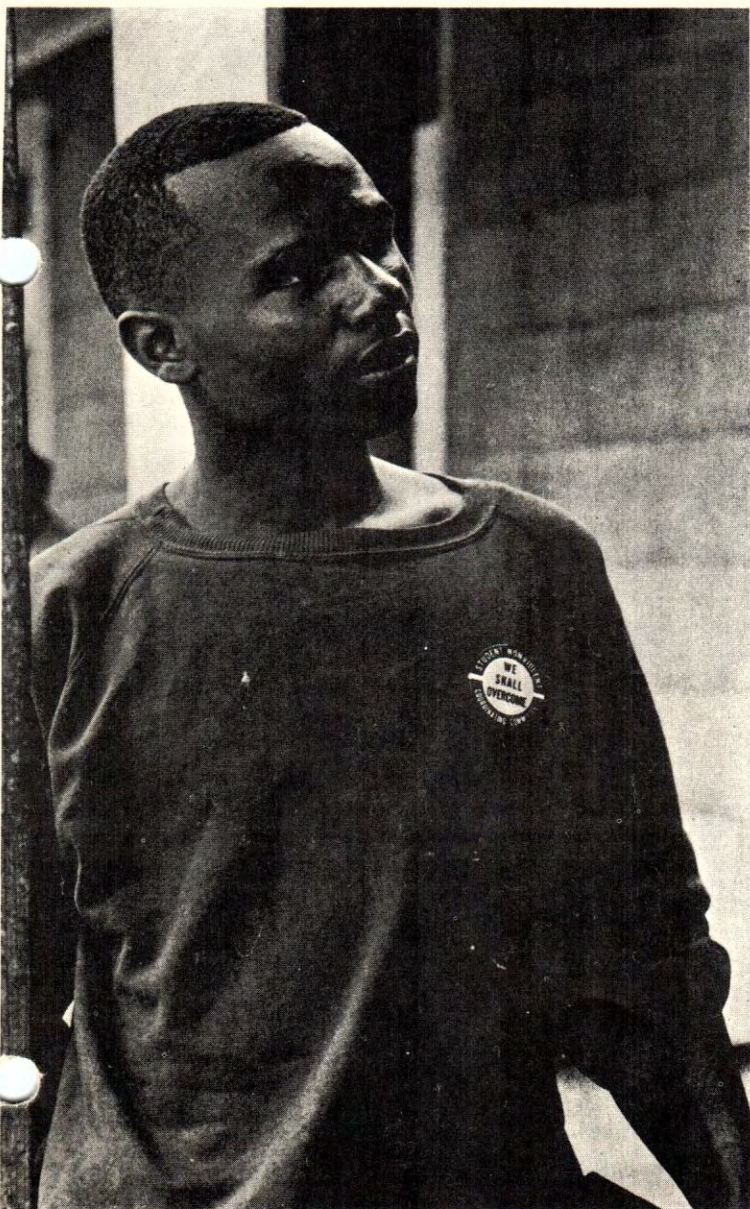


SNCC: Rebels With A Cause

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**Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
is a spearhead of Southern Freedom Movement**

BY LERONE BENNETT JR.



WHEN, in calmer times, men come to write the history of our raucous era; when they seek the cry that called a New Left, the rasp that twitched the nerves of Negro youths and the image that convulsed American campuses; when they try to set down in words once and for all the forces that pushed America to a desperate confrontation with herself, it seems likely that they will devote a considerable amount of attention to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee which has emerged within the last year as a major force of the Freedom movement, to the dismay of many persons of power—not all of them white.

A product of the sit-in movement which it, in part, led and a major force of the New Left which it inspired and, in part, leads, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—abbreviated SNCC and pro-



Canvassing for potential voters in Hattiesburg, Miss., Johnny Waters (l.) tries to persuade a skeptical prospect (above) that voting is key to power and freedom.

nounced SNICK—is the most radical, the most controversial and perhaps the most creative of all civil rights organizations. Strictly speaking, however, SNCC is neither an organization nor a civil rights movement. An organization in revolt against organization, a formless form, SNCC is a revolutionary action agency dedicated to the proposition that racism is only one symptom of a deeper sickness at the heart of our society. By establishing footholds deep in Black Belt hells and by carrying the revolution from door to door (see pictures this page) in a unique in-depth approach to community organization, SNCC has raised fundamental questions not only about Negro rights but also and perhaps more significantly about the meaning of leadership, education, and democracy in American life. Raising these questions in and through action, SNCC has created a radical, non-compromising climate which has exerted continuing pressure on civil rights organizations.

Tough, abrasive, and avowedly revolutionary (in a nonviolent way), SNCC has played a large and unheralded role in a quasi-revolution it wants to make "a real revolution." SNCC was primarily responsible for raising the whole issue of "One Man, One Vote" in Black Belt areas of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. It also helped to create scaffolds of revolt in Selma, Albany (Ga.) and other focal points of the struggle. Beyond all that, SNCC has infused new life into the Freedom move-

ment by creating new forms (the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, statewide Negro student organizations, sharecroppers unions, Freedom schools). No other civil rights group has been so endlessly inventive in local organization; nor has any other group grown so fast. From a nucleus of sixteen ex-students in 1961, SNCC has grown into a direct-action giant with a budget of almost \$1 million and the largest field staff of any civil rights organization. From SNCC headquarters on the edge of downtown Atlanta, the organization's Secretariat (Chairman John Lewis, Program Secretary Cleveland Sellers, Executive Secretary James Forman) directs a staff of 200 organizers, most of them Negroes, most of them Southern-born, almost all of them former college and high school students who have adopted rebellion as a profes-



Thinking the idea through, weighing the dangers, prospect scratches his head. Waters redoubles his efforts, points to the need for self-assertion on part of Negroes.

sion. Agitators for equality, SNCC practices equality. All members of the staff are members of the policy-making Coordinating Committee which elects the executive staff and executive committee.

Though structured, SNCC is more a secular religious order than an organization. On entering the group, one resigns, in a manner of speaking, from society; and almost everything SNCC people do or say is designed to reinforce or reflect a willed distance from a society almost all SNCC people consider rotten to its very core. SNCC staffers want to transform American society. They are critical of the acts and values of the middle class—Negro and white. Detached from a society which they reject, living on subsistence wages of \$20 a week, scorning the ties of family and conventionality which stay the arm of the adjusted, SNCC workers are full-time rebels with a flaming cause.

Who are these rebels?

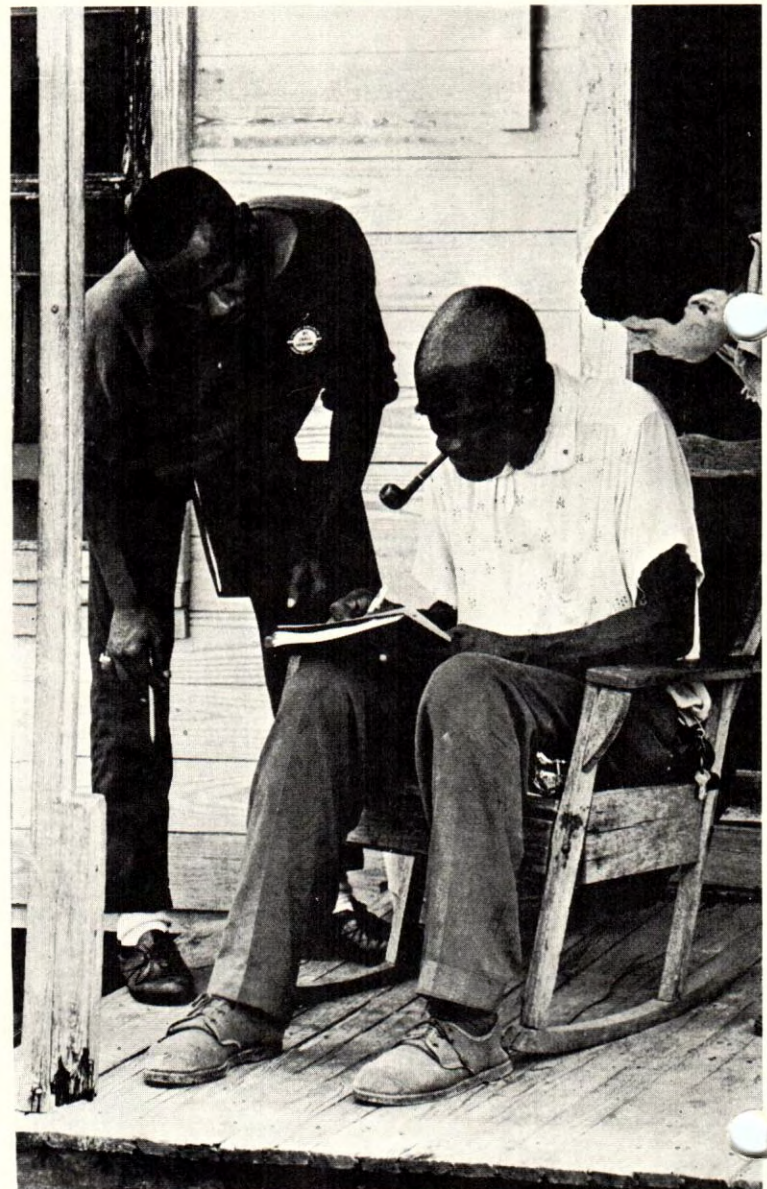
What do they want?

How do they intend to get it?

The SNCC rebels, to take the first question first, are intense, nervous people who know the insides of many jails, people who have seen the bottomless cruelty of man, people who have seen their best friends beaten to pulp and killed, people who have been tested, who have looked on death and despair a long, lonely time. Most are veterans of

the sit-ins and freedom rides which stirred them greatly. The sit-ins, Charlie Cobb says, marked "the first time I had ever seen any black people doing anything that was not controlled by white people." Cobb, like most of his colleagues, is also in flight from a middle-class America he considers hopelessly corrupt. Cleve Sellers spoke for almost all of SNCC staffers when he explained why he abandoned Howard University and a potential career as a mechanical engineer. "I couldn't make it in that society. I couldn't breathe."

What sustains these rebels is a *mystique* of total commitment. SNCC workers take vows of total poverty and total devotion. They identify themselves totally with the people—i.e., the poor, the despised, the downtrodden, the humiliated. Sharecroppers with eyes, victims with voices, they thrust themselves into the ditches of desperation so they can speak more clearly for the inhabitants thereof. SNCC workers dress poor, think poor and act poor. Most of them wear the rough overalls and large working shoes of Negro farmers and laborers. "Basically," James Forman has said, "we're dealing with poor people, and these are the people we identify with. It even affects our salary scale. One reason it's so low is just lack of money, but another reason is that we think you can't come out from a nice hotel every day to work with these people and then go back at night. Besides, in Mississippi, as a practical matter, you have to look like a rural Negro in order to get to talk to a rural Negro. And then we have to move a lot, and there's no use



Converted by the persistence and the dramatic example of the SNCC youth, prospect yields and signs canvassing sheet. SNCC concentrates in Black Belt areas of South, stresses grass-roots organization and development of indigenous leadership.

REBELS WITH CAUSE *Continued*

wearing a coat and tie if you're likely to end up sleeping on the floor. Another thing that's operating here, too, consciously or unconsciously, is: Why should we have to comb our hair and put on a coat and tie to get what are basically our rights? The student (sit-in) movement was positive, and without it we couldn't have had this, but it was also defensive—to show people we were clean. This is a different game. Also, there's a certain mystique about the dress, a certain morale factor. Maybe we've overdone it; it's almost a uniform now.

Another element in the SNCC mystique is a deep, almost religious, faith in the ability of people to govern themselves. "The people," Prathia Hall says, "are also our teachers. People who have struggled to support themselves and large families, people who have survived in Georgia and Alabama and Mississippi, have learned some things we need to know. There is a fantastic poetry in the lives of the people who have survived with strength and nobility. I am convinced of how desperately America needs the blood transfusion that comes from the Delta of Mississippi."

In the SNCC view, it is evil for a leader to manipulate people and tell them what to do. What is required, they believe, is "a waiting for

SNCC's philosophy of leadership is grounded on its deep faith in people. SNCC believes that leadership is specific to the situation and that one does not have to be articulate, college-educated, or clean in order to exercise it. "We believe," John Lewis says, "that the leader is one who should emerge from particular situations and problems. SNCC people say the press creates leaders in America. These leaders have to have certain characteristics. They have to be articulate, college educated. Then you are a leader, as long as you keep in line. But SNCC people are saying that even the people in Mississippi must emerge as leaders. They must be able to speak for themselves."

This is not, it should be noted, an intellectual pose. Bob Moses, who became famous as leader of the Mississippi Project, left the state and changed his name (to Parris) because too many people knew his name. "My position there," he said, "was too strong, too central, so that people who did not need to, began to lean on me, to use me as a crutch."

SNCC's position on leadership is a direct criticism of the entire civil rights movement. "We are in revolt," John Lewis says, "not only against segregation but also against the type of leadership, the so-called old guard leadership, where you have had a select few to speak for the Negro people and to make deals. No one person can be picked, no one



Absorbing violence, SNCC leader John Lewis falls to ground after attack by state troopers who stopped first attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery. SNCC made first large-scale penetrations of Albany, Georgia, and Selma. Organization also played large role in focusing attention on conditions in Black Belt enclaves in the South.

the motion of the people, a working with them to the point where they can develop a program." Bob Parris, the philosopher-poet of the people concept, has said: "What we have begun to learn and are trying to explore about people is how they can come together in groups, small groups or large groups, and talk to each other and make decisions about basic things, about their lives. . . . Our problem with people who might want to do this . . . is that they would first think that in order to go to people and get them together, they would have to have something for them to talk about. So they would have to have a program to carry to them or they would have to have something to organize them around. But it doesn't turn out to be true, from our experience. You could in the North, in the ghettos, get together 10 or 20 people and out of their getting together and giving them a chance to talk about their main problem would come programs that they themselves decided on, that they thought about. If that happened and began to happen around the country, that would be the key to spreading some of the things that have happened in the South to the rest of the country."

organization can be picked to speak for the Negro people. People must be allowed to speak and decide for themselves. Even the civil rights movement must become democratic.

Leaders with contempt for leadership, organizers who despise imposed organization, heroes with contempt for heroism, SNCC staffers find it necessary to spend a great deal of time disputing the view that they are the James Bonds of the civil rights movement. Bob Parris has said that the SNCC staffers are "very afraid of the people in the South and that they have had to fight and struggle against [it]." He added: "But suppose, then, that they had no choice, that is they can, through many different ways, see that their backs, so to speak, were against the wall and they had to move within that fear. And then suppose that what they are trying to do is explore how to move within the boundaries of fear and that what they've got to learn about fear is that it paralyzes you so that you don't move—you don't do what you think you should, be it to ask a question or take a person to register. And suppose also about the Mississippi people that they're not heroes and that

we're not heroes, that we're trying very hard to be people and that is very hard. If anything what we're trying to do, or have to do, is to see how you can move even though you are afraid."

Making few compromises with themselves, SNCC staffers refuse to accept compromises from others. This has led to no end of hard feeling within the civil rights movement where SNCC has repeatedly denounced the "realistic" policies of allies.

SNCC refuses to play the game. It has consistently condemned gestures and conciliations. It was cool toward the March on Washington and largely hostile to the Selma-to-Montgomery march, both of which it considered gestures largely without context and content.

The intransigence of SNCC staffers stems not only from the pains they have suffered but also from their peculiar vantage point. Having made themselves into sharecroppers and laborers, viewing life from that vantage point, SNCC staffers believe, with Jean-Paul Sartre, that truth is the perspective of the truly disinherited. "When a man has risked his life to vote," Prathia Hall says, "you can't offer him anything less than what he needs and be relevant."

In the rhetoric of Negro leadership, it is permissible to ask for the whole cake with the understanding that the white man will give only

SNCC's objective is a fundamental change in the social, economic, and political structures of America. How does it propose to achieve this objective? By creating "pockets of power" outside established institutions, by organizing and stimulating local or indigenous movements, by going to the people and sharing their agony and their danger and their hope. "Our job," Lewis says, "is to help educate, help prepare people for political action. Our job is to organize the unorganized into a vital force for radical, social, economic, and political change. Our job is to create what I like to call pockets of power and influence, where the people can say, 'This is what I want and need.'"

In pursuit of its objectives, SNCC sends workers (field secretaries) into backwoods areas to live with the people and to show them a new way of living and a new way of resisting. Field secretaries live wherever they can find a bed. They share the food, the dangers, and the privations of the people. Talking to the people in poolrooms, in kitchens, in cotton fields, in bars, they win their confidence and begin the slow and painful process of developing "indigenous" leadership. Day after day, they knock on doors and urge Negroes in Black Belt counties to assert themselves, to organize, register, and vote. Many doors, in the beginning, are slammed in their faces. But the SNCC field secretaries keep



Spreading love, SNCC workers conduct Freedom School in yard of Mississippi home. SNCC, which grew out of sit-in movement, attracted national attention with organization, in 1964, of Mississippi Summer Project and Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. More political than most civil rights groups, SNCC organizes communities "in depth."

a slice, if that. But when SNCC asks for the whole cake, SNCC wants the whole cake and is prepared to create nonviolent havoc to get it.

What distinguishes SNCC from other civil rights organizations is its tough, power-oriented, wholistic approach. The moral issue, it believes, cannot be realistically separated from the political and economic issues. Nor, it believes, can Selma be divorced from Saigon or Santo Domingo. More and more, in recent months, SNCC has taken the lead in denouncing American foreign policy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

At the same time, there has been a shift in SNCC's position on nonviolence. SNCC still champions nonviolence as an offensive tactic, but few SNCC staffers believe that getting themselves clobbered on the head will change either George Wallace's policies or his morals. "Since the founding of SNCC," Lewis says, "there has been a great deal of debate on nonviolence. The discussion now is perhaps at its highest peak. The majority of staff people accept nonviolence as a tactic and technique. That's all we require of people."

coming back, and a man here or a woman there throws caution to the wind and invites them in. Slowly, painfully, dangerously, SNCC workers sow the seeds of assertion and humanity, giving men, women, and little children the courage to defy sheriffs, nightriders, and the organized power of the state.

Deep in the America nobody wants to see, SNCC staffers have learned a great deal about themselves and about others. The organization's whole program, in fact, is a reflection of experiences paid for by blood and pain since the sit-in movement. Organized in October, 1960, at a conference of sit-in students on the campus of Atlanta University, SNCC concentrated in the beginning on lunch counter desegregation. "But we soon discovered," Prathia Hall says, "that that was not where it was at. Then we went into the Black Belt with voter registration. The people there couldn't eat at lunch counters because they were only making twenty-three cents an hour. That was where it was at." Starting with a Bob Parris-inspired project in Mississippi in 1961, SNCC shifted its emphasis from hamburgers to political power, using voter

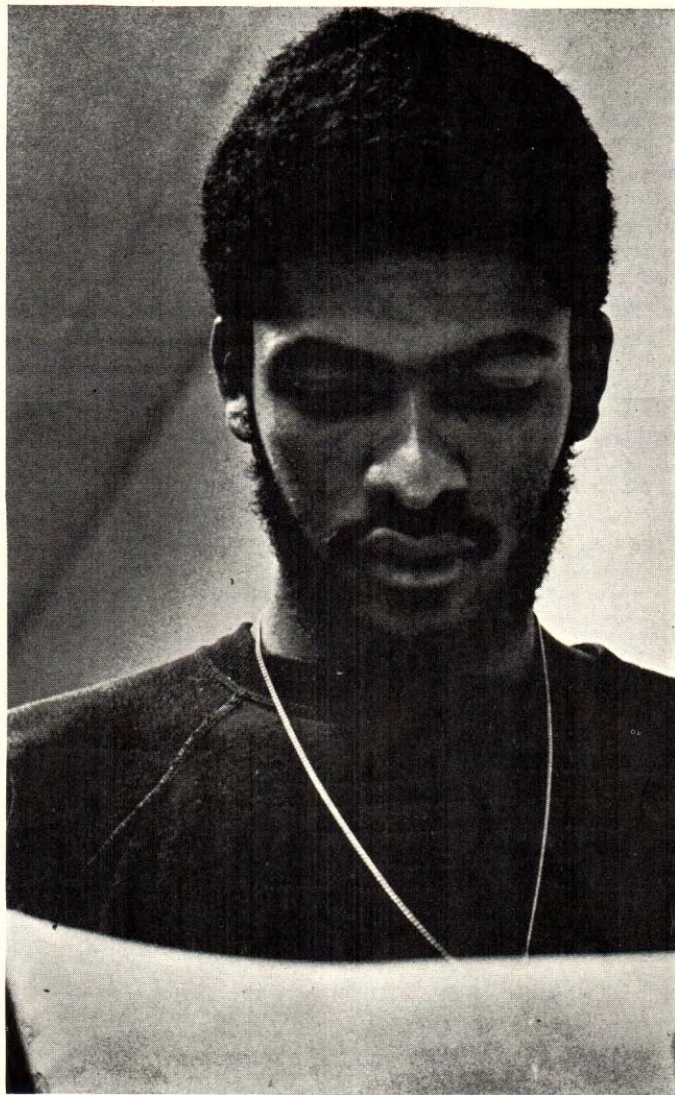


James Forman, 36, executive secretary, is oldest member of three-man Secretariat (executive secretary, chairman, program secretary) of the organization. Forman is a former Chicago teacher who resigned his position to enter Freedom Movement.

REBELS WITH CAUSE *Continued*

registration as a tool to reorganize communities and re-structure them around new axes. In out-of-the-way places, without trumpets, the original sixteen clawed toeholds and hung on. They went from one filthy jail to another, from one shack to another—and as they moved, singing, their numbers grew. By 1962, there were some 150 dedicated field secretaries.

The longer SNCC struggled, the more it learned, and the more attention it attracted. But it suffered from inadequate public relations (a term SNCC staffers loathe, preferring the omnibus "communications") and the tendency of white reporters to lump the organization with King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. SNCC acquired high visibility for the first time in the summer of 1964 with the organization of the Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) which challenged the bona fides of the lily-white Democratic Party in a melee that almost stopped the Democratic convention. The Atlantic City confrontation was, in some respects, a turning point for SNCC which has always distrusted people who wear ties and eat three large meals a day. ("If you're comfortable," SNCC staffers say, "you're out of it.") When national civil rights leaders suggested that FDP accept a compromise of two-at-large seats, SNCC exploded. Its anger has not yet died down. "All these people," John Lewis said, "said they were supporting us, but at the eleventh hour they said they could go no further. It was an eye-opener, a sign of the men standing up and the boys sitting down." Prathia Hall adds: "(Atlantic City) indicated to some of us that you cannot get too close to the power structure and expect to change it. So that's why some of us are guarding against being absorbed by the



Cleveland Sellers, 20, program secretary, coordinates field programs in South. Sellers quit Howard University and joined SNCC, has been told that he is the "youngest executive in America." SNCC staff members work for subsistence wages.

Establishment. We want to be outside the Establishment. We speak from that vantage point."

Operating outside the Establishment, on the uncharted frontiers of power, SNCC has moved to the forefront of the Freedom movement. Mississippi, which is criss-crossed today with a beehive of indigenous political and economic movements, is a tangible testimonial to the group's community organization concept. SNCC workers are now fanning out over Arkansas, Alabama, and Georgia, in a series of Black Belt projects modeled loosely on the successful Mississippi Project. The organization is also making experimental probes in urban centers. Bob Parris is developing an urban project in Alabama. Even more important perhaps is SNCC's first foray into the North with the organization of a community center in Chicago.

Program Secretary Cleveland Sellers says SNCC will continue to stress political and economic issues and the development of local leadership. SNCC will also press, he says, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's challenge to the lily-white Mississippi Democratic Party.

SNCC's vision for the future transcends voter registration. What the organization is trying to do is to create new communities and new men. "What we are trying to do," Sellers says, "is to make people important and necessary again." Sellers adds: "The idea of SNCC will always be with us. SNCC is a moving force in this country, a force that has only people and the interests of people at heart. We're raising basic questions about our society. We're trying to get people to see that when you talk about civil rights you have to go deeper than hamburgers, deeper maybe than even the vote. You have to go really deep into the



John Lewis, 25, chairman, is Baptist preacher and veteran of sit-ins and Freedom Rides. An action agency, SNCC has no members. Coordinating Committee (roughly Board of Directors) is composed of entire staff of some 200 Negroes and whites.

whole thing about relationships. That's what makes SNCC unique. I don't think any other organization wants to deal with these basic things. I think we have to go even further, however, to be most unique. We're trying to find ways now so we can deal with man as man, *because he is who he is*, and not in terms of money or his father's background."

Although SNCC has fashioned a formidable instrument, it is far from perfect. As Howard Zinn pointed out in the excellent book, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, SNCC is not "scrupulously well-organized; letters may go unanswered, phone calls go unreturned, meetings start late or never or without agendas. It is so quick to act that it often does not stop and plan actions carefully to get the most value from them. It does not take enough time to work out long-range strategy. It is not groomed in the niceties of public relations. . . . It exasperates its friends almost as often as it harrasses its enemies." It should be noted, however, that a great deal of this disorganization is organized. SNCC staffers tend to see structure and organization as hypocrisy and they are determined to defy the iron law of organization which says that the more an organization wins the more conservative and bureaucratized it becomes.

Will success spoil SNCC?

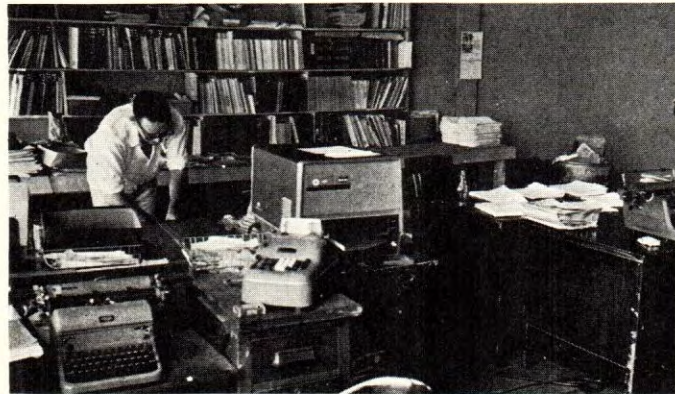
This question is discussed often nowadays by SNCC staffers who are grappling with two major problems—one internal, the other external—stemming largely from the organization's success. The internal problem revolves around the relations between Negro staff members and the large number of whites who gravitated to the organization after the successful Mississippi strike. Some whites with special skills have drifted into leadership positions to the dismay of a large number of

Here's how you can help

- Get together with others where you live or work. Talk about your common problems. Find ways that you can work together to help people gain a voice in the decisions that affect them.
- Money. SNCC needs it. "Subsistence" salaries often go unpaid. People have to eat. Send contributions to: SNCC, 360 Nelson St. S.W., Atlanta, Ga., 30313.



Philosopher-poet of organization, Bob Parris, developed Mississippi project. Parris' ideas on leadership and "participatory democracy" (the concept of direct participation by the people) have influenced the entire non-Communist left in U. S.



In new Atlanta office, Jack Menses, research director, organizes files. Organization has research staff of seven who provide field staff with detailed pictures of power structure of local communities. SNCC also has large printing office.



Betty Garman coordinates fund-raising, interpretative and action efforts of Friends of SNCC in North and Canada.



Ruby Doris Robinson is personnel chief of organization. She is also administrator of the Sojourner [Truth] Motor Fleet.



No. 1 exhibit, Fannie Lou Hamer, is one of several powerful local leaders developed in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia.



Communications Dir. Julian Bond dramatized SNCC program in recent race for Georgia House of Representatives.



Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) is product of Mississippi Project. FDP, one of most creative efforts of Freedom movement, is challenging legitimacy of white party.

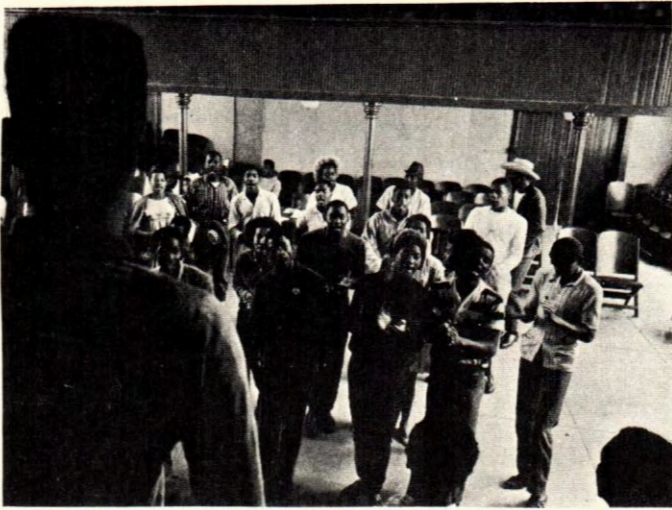
REBELS WITH CAUSE *Continued*

Negro staff members who say the organization must be "black-led, black-controlled, and black-dominated." At the last general staff meeting, John Lewis and other leaders took the position that "whites must consent to let Negroes run their own revolution without being alarmed at the sacrifices and difficulties involved." SNCC leaders say "the majority" of the white staff understand why "black domination is a must," but the issue is far from settled and it is potentially explosive.

Beyond all that, SNCC is threatened by dangers without. Powerful forces—not all of them white—are alarmed by the growth of the organization and SNCC staffers believe they are organizing to crush it by isolating SNCC from the direct-action coalition (SNCC, SCLC, CORE) and by waving the "red" flag. SNCC is not now, nor has it ever been, an un-American organization. But its refusal to impose a loyalty oath on staff members has given critics a weapon which they have been using with increasing effectiveness. To disarm critics, friends have urged the organization to issue a routine "public relations statement" denouncing Communism and Communists. SNCC, so far, has refused, citing the SNCC answer that ends all arguments—"It would be dishonest."



Battle-oriented, SNCC has fleet of radio cars. Organization has continuing educational program for staff members who learn how to operate radios, business machines.

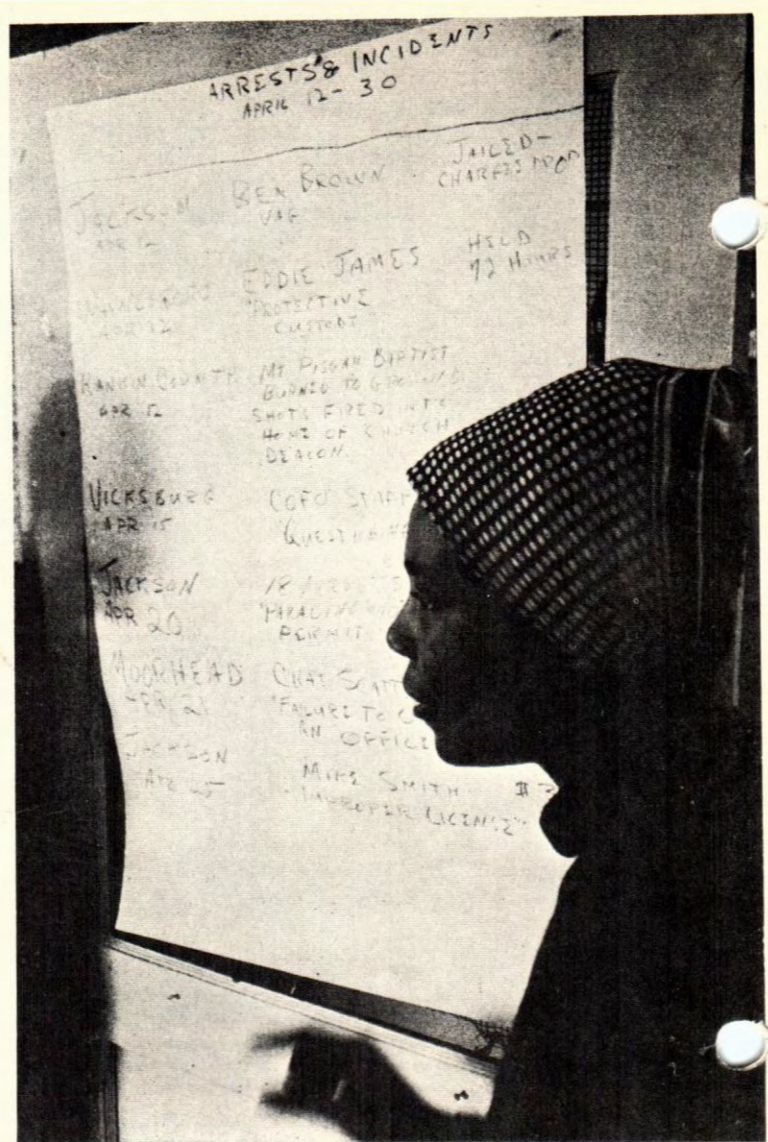


At Mount Beulah School, in Edwards, Mississippi, SNCC staffers participate in training session for Mississippi youth who signed up for projected "Freedom Corps."

"We have a positive program of nonviolent direct action," Executive Secretary James Forman says. We stand on our affirmative program. We don't ask people what they are. We don't have a security check or a loyalty oath."

The external pressure is likely to increase in the coming months. Can SNCC keep its soul and its effectiveness? Bob Parris says "the coming months will be crucial. We've been hated for a long time in the South, but we could always go to the North and be heroes. Now we may find ourselves isolated and destroyed in the North. We have to prepare ourselves for that. Somebody may have to be ploughed under. But, after all, that's what a revolution means."

And revolution, a nonviolent revolution, is what SNCC means. SNCC, John Lewis says, intends to go the distance. "We're going to be consistent with what we consider right. We're going to be honest. We are *what we are*. We are not the Students for a Democratic Society. We are not the Salvation Army. We are not the American Friends Service Committee. We are an organization, yet a movement of people with different backgrounds, ideas, hopes, aspirations, working for a just and open society. We are the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee."



In Jackson, Mississippi, office of SNCC-supported Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), Lorne Cress discusses organization's battlefield-like operations near poster (of arrests, incidents) which dramatizes dangerous life she has chosen to live.



Stopping traffic in Chicago's Loop, SNCC's Chicago director Fanny Rushing (r.) and SNCC supporters sprawl in street.



SNCC slogan, "One Man, One Vote," dominates placard carried by Selma demonstrator. Chairman John Lewis says SNCC is "a spark to begin the flame for basic social, economic, and political changes."