

**[Untitled History of SSOC  
Tom Gardner, 1970, 2002]**

**INTRODUCTION**

“I feel that SSOC translates my cultural feelings and sentiments about the South into political analysis and action.”

- James McBride Dabbs<sup>1</sup>

“We express complete solidarity with the Southern Student Organizing Committee as we both struggle to ‘liberate the South’ and bring justice and peace to the world.”

- Representative of Liberation Student Union of  
the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam<sup>2</sup>

As can be seen in the range exhibited in the quotations above, one from a Southern planter and former president of the Southern Regional Council (also a SSOC member) and the other from a South Vietnamese revolutionary, the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) was many things to many people. James Forman, former executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, describes SSOC in a book he wrote on civil rights martyr Sammy Younge, Jr. as “...a group of anti-racist white Southern college students.”<sup>3</sup> For historian Paul M. Gaston, “...the Southern Student Organizing Committee’s *New South Student* (SSOC’s monthly magazine) joins to the movement for racial equality a militant antimilitarism and a vaguely defined program for the restructuring of Southern society.”<sup>4</sup>

For organizations already existing when SSOC was formed in 1964, such as SNCC and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), SSOC filled an important void. Clark Kissinger, then national secretary of SDS, which had no program directed toward Southern campuses, observed, “SSOC couldn’t die now if it wanted to because of the tremendous vacuum in the South.”<sup>5</sup> A SNCC participant at a 1966 Atlanta SSOC conference defined his notion of SSOC’s role in the rising era of SNCC’s emphasis on Black Power: “Somebody’s got to organize or at least neutralize those young white cats that hang around the gas stations; I can’t do it because I’m black, but you can.”

With analytical hindsight and bit of journalistic flair, Harlan Joye, writing in *Trans-Action* magazine, concluded, “During its five-year existence, SSOC accomplished a seemingly impossible task – the establishment of a white radical movement in this bastion of reactionary politics.... Yet SSOC (organizationally) was a failure.”<sup>6</sup> Anne Braden, editor of the Southern Conference Educational Fund’s *Southern Patriot*, commented the year after SSOC’s demise, “Even though SSOC had some real problems when it started, it did make a real contribution to the movement in the South. If even fifty to a hundred young Southerners, through SSOC, decided to stay in the South and commit their lives to building a radical movement in the South, that’s a pretty good accomplishment for five years and something to be proud of.”<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to pass judgment on SSOC or on the above observations, but rather to examine the foundations of SSOC’s existence and the place of SSOC in the development of a new American left. The importance of an objective treatment of SSOC’s past rest on the assumption that a knowledge of our mistakes, failures, as well as partial successes in the past can help guide our approach to the future. In an attempt to learn from the past, we must search for as truthful and accurate an account as possible, attempting to explain what we find, rather than “discover” what we want to find.

To give full treatment to the history of SSOC and the Southern movement of the late 1960s would require several book-length works by many different people. Thus, in the development of this paper I have tried two initial and tentative contributions to the collection of this history. First, in the area of research, the manner of SSOC’s dissolution created special problems since many SSOC files (especially correspondence) were either destroyed or hopelessly strewn around the South. I have,

therefore, attempted to acquire from former SSOC cohorts various SSOC publications and files. This collection is still in process and the cataloging has barely begun. Hopefully, within a year, a fairly exhaustive and well-organized source bank on the Southern movement of the mid to late 1960s will exist under the auspices of the Virginia Research Institute and the University of Virginia Library's Social Movements Collection in Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, in this paper, I will try to present a brief historical outline of the nature and activities of the Southern Student Organizing Committee. Brevity is given too easily to simplicity, exaggeration, understatement, nonsubstantiation, superficiality, etc., all of which this paper is probably guilty to one degree or another. Being one's own primary source may also lead to confusion by the reader, nondocumentation, biased reporting of events prejudicially observed at the time, and numerous other problems. This paper should therefore be taken for what it is – one participant's observation of a small piece of important social history. Other participants and scholars must criticize it and add to it, in order to generate a more collective memorial to the part SSOC played in one of the great social revolutions of our time.

## THE BEGINNING

As the depressed and decadent fifties gave way to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Greensboro student-initiated sit-in movement, the school desegregation fights, the freedom rides, and the Kennedy campaign, a new spirit began to sweep the nation. The contradictions of poverty and racial injustice in a land of abundance and liberal rhetoric were recognized as problems that deserved immediate attention. Poverty and racism were serious blotches on America's otherwise proud record. It seemed to the reformers, young and not so young, that if those problems could be eradicated, America would once again be seen as the pure light of freedom and democracy around the world.

Despite its basic fallacies, this recognition of contradictions was one step beyond the public "harmony" of the late 40s and early 50s when racism and poverty were seen only as the creations of that deceitful communist imagination bent on destroying the American way of life.

The reasons for the new concern over social problems in the 1960s are many and complex and cannot receive full attention here. From various viewpoints, the 1960s have been termed a "second Reconstruction." It has been suggested that the "Kennedyite" liberal Democrats, anxious to undermine the tenured power of the "Dixiecrats", released financial resources for voter registration among Southern blacks, encouraged the national media to cover the civil rights movement in the South, and rode into office on the national wave of moral indignation, later passing token laws they had little intention of enforcing.

On the other hand, we cannot detract from the importance of the self-inspired movement of black people, especially the young southerners who fought, suffered, and forced their way into the national consciousness. Nor can we ignore the thousands of white people who found a way to translate their moral alienation from the racist status quo into some kind of positive action. As has been true of other periods of change in American history, it was the merger of structural (economic and political) forces that combined with a true grass-roots movement to produce change in the 1960s.

Due to the nature of the particular combination of forces in the early 1960s that were attempting to "reconstruct" the South in the national image and because of the insistent movement of black people rising against Southern oppression, the focus of the nation's anti-racist attention was on the South. It was also much easier to point the finger southward where the abuses were blatantly obvious than to examine one's own back yard where the abuses were obvious only for those who cared to or were forced to see them.

This nationwide morality play with the whole of white Dixie cast as the devil had an effect on young Southern whites – an effect which has received little scholarly attention but which played an important role in shaping the uniqueness of the Southern branch of the New Left. Even C. Vann Woodward recognized the dangers in his essay, "The Search for Southern Identity," published in 1958: "If Southernism is allowed to become identified with a last ditch defense of segregation, it will

increasingly lose its appeal among the younger generation. Many will be tempted to reject their entire regional identification, even the name ‘Southern’, in order to disassociate themselves from the one discredited aspect.”<sup>9</sup>

There were of course, and still are, young white Southerners who grew up fighting the “Civil War” and are continuing the battle today. There are even some campuses, very few now (1970) compared to the early 1960s, where students openly declare their pride in being white supremacists. But what about the significant number of sensitive, young, white Southerners, many of them on college campuses, who chose to depart from the racism of their society and to reject social practices dictated by that racism? There were two main options open to such concerned young Southerners: they could stay and fight for change, or they could leave the South, sometimes even the country.

It is impossible to estimate the number of young Southerners, black and white, who elected the escape route. The escape naturally took different forms. For white intellectuals of the middle and upper economic strata, college or employment in the North or West was common. For young blacks with no financial resources, the Army was the main way to get out. The drain of black middle-class intellectuals out of the South was also a significant damper on Southern progress.

The white, college-age Southerner who left the South, fled away from a repressive society, away from rejection by family and friends for his or her “Yankee” ideas, and toward what was only partially an illusion of a freer life in the North. Accepting the liberal assumptions of the Northern finger-pointers, the egalitarian Southerner felt shame for himself and his people, and he saw flight to the North and rejection of the whole South as the only way to escape a sense of constant guilt. There was little recognition until later that racism was a national phenomenon and that some were more responsible than others for its maintenance. It was easier for college students, with a natural class-elite bias, to put the historical responsibility for racism on the “ignorant rednecks” rather than on their genteel parents who may have sent their children to private (white) schools and refused to hire black people in their business, but never used the word “nigger,” nor donned a white sheet. With no sense of faith in the Southern people, there was no reason for the disenchanting youth to stay; so they left, by the hundreds.

Those who stayed had again two basic choices. They could pursue their pre-conceived ambitions, doing what they could wherever they were within the system for moderate and gradual change. Or they could commit themselves, on a short-term basis, to any of the thousands of social change tasks that needed attention and, on a long-term basis, to a life of work for fundamental changes in their society. These choices or differences in approach are, of course, not definitive, mutually exclusive, nor the only options open. Everyone involved in social change constantly wavers between these and other approaches and, indeed, between staying and leaving, involvement and withdrawal. However imperfect this rough typology is, it is described here to identify those who made up SSOC. It was those Southern, mostly white, students in the latter “activist” category who were most important in the formation and continuation of SSOC, and it is those students who will primarily be discussed here.

The types of issues that concerned active Southern students in the late fifties and early sixties ranged from civil rights questions such as school desegregation and human relations work to civil liberties and capital punishment (always a race issue as well in the South) and to national concern over nuclear disarmament and the “Cold War.” Involvement, however, was slight and direct action on Southern campuses, black and white, was, for the most part, repressed.

The sit-in movement, initiated and organized by black and college and high-school students all over the South, gave birth to a new awakening on Southern campuses, black and white. Within a year after the first sit-in in Greensboro, NC on February 1, 1960, the number of participants in sit-ins and supportive demonstrations had “...grown to more than 50,000 in a hundred cities,” according to Howard

Zinn. "The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee was set up in April 1961, with help from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as a loose liaison of sit-in leaders from across the South."<sup>10</sup>

By 1963, there were many white college students in the South involved in the desegregation fights going on in most of the South's cities and college towns. There was greater involvement of white students in such areas as Greensboro (where my sister joined the lines in 1961 while a student at then Women's College of the University of North Carolina), Chapel Hill, Atlanta, Louisville, Jackson, Nashville, Gainesville, and New Orleans than in more secluded places. By 1963, however, SNCC, the organization which many student activists identified with the most, had shifted its focus from campus-based protests to community organizing and voter registration. Students and student groups began to learn more of each other through various channels of communication, including SCEF's *Southern Patriot*, SNCC travelers, Human Relations Councils, and the USNSA Southern Student Human Relations Project. Communication between local groups, however, was sparse and unorganized; students began to feel the need for a Southwide organization of their own.

The meeting which is given credit by some for initiating the idea of a Southwide organization for campus-based, civil rights activists took place in Nashville in February 1963. A group of Cornell students working on voter registration and Nashville students who had been picketing to desegregate the Campus Grill met at the Presbyterian Student Center at Vanderbilt. The meeting is described by Ron Parker, first treasurer of SSOC:

...the group saw two Southwide needs: (1) to put those groups that are active in civil rights in contact with each other, and (2) to discover latent or silent liberals on the campuses and help them organize a viable (local) group. It was proposed that a fund be started called the Southern Student Organizing Fund (SSOF), which would invite interested students to Nashville to discuss...establishing a Southwide organization.

Parker continues to describe the first SSOC Conference:

On the weekend of April 3-5, 1964, forty-five student leaders and representatives from approximately fifteen predominantly white southern campuses in ten states gathered in Nashville at the invitation of students from Vanderbilt University and Peabody and Scarritt Colleges. The goals of the conference were several: to assess the extent of involvement in civil rights by students at Southern campuses; to ascertain the amount of interest in action along other political, social, and economic lines; and to assess their student needs and set up a structure through which felt needs in these areas could be met.

Briefly, these goals were achieved. It was determined that there is a great deal of activity on these campuses, ranging from moderate to radical. Furthermore, it was confirmed that students are interested in not only civil rights but in other areas, e.g. peace, academic freedom, civil liberties, capital punishment, and unemployment. It was pointed out that the specific activities the local groups might engage in would be up to them. Finally, a structure was set up. The group called itself the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). A Continuations Committee, composed of one person from each campus was directed to formulate specific proposals and programs.<sup>11</sup>

Placing itself in an interesting position of historical continuity with the "I'll Take My Stand" agrarians of the 1930s and styling itself as modern-day populist, SSOC adopted a position statement entitled, "We'll Take Our Stand." More important, however, than the political positions taken by this group of dedicated neophytes was the very fact that they were joining hands to search for a way to

rebuild their South together. The significance of their coming together is difficult for a campus radical of the “student strike” 1970s to understand. The isolation felt by young white Southern activists in the early 1960s was a heavy burden, and it was the need to end this isolation that played a major role in causing these activists to ban together in SSOC. As one former SSOC member put it, “There were just a few of us on each campus, so when we all got together it was like a family reunion; SSOC was our family and often the only one we had.”

Thus, SSOC began its dedicated and non-doctrinaire “beloved community” with a real spirit of hope, infused with the enthusiasm of the civil rights movement, for building a humanitarian and democratic “New South” (whatever that meant). As movement sociologist Richard Flacks observed, “Any movement that sings, isn’t losing.” And SSOC sang – freedom songs, heritage-produced hymns and country songs, labor songs, and its informal theme song, “Big Jim Folsom,” with the refrain, “It’s the rich that gets the glory, and the poor what gets the blame, and it’s the same the whole world over, over, over, now, ain’t that a dirty, cryin shame.”

Nevertheless, SSOC’s auspicious beginnings were clouded with some political problems which the inexperienced SSOCers could only partially understand at the time. SSOC was immediately haunted with the old standbys employed by the Southern (and national) rulers to keep their power and weaken movements for change – anti-communism, racial division, and liberal cooptation. The exact manifestations of these problems deserve more discussion from the early participants. At this point in hindsight, however, we can probably benefit from a look at SSOC’s relations with SCEF, SNCC, and the liberal foundations.

The Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) was the survivor of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, founded in the 1930s, which was repressed out of existence in the 1940s. SCEF, based in Louisville and directed by two experienced journalists and organizers, Anne and Carl Braden, publishes a monthly newspaper of Southern movement news and analysis, the *Southern Patriot*, and is (was) involved in several interracial, working-class organizing projects. It was SCEF that had made a financial grant to SNCC in 1961 for a project to mobilize civil rights support on Southern white campuses. For several years, such white SNCC organizers as Bob Zellner, Sam Shirah, Ed Hamlett, Walter Tillow, and other SNCC community workers and travelers did some of the painstaking spade work on Southern white campuses that ultimately aided in the formation of SSOC.

SCEF, which for almost twenty years had been trying to build an anti-segregation movement among white Southerners, naturally took an interest in the development of SSOC, and it contributed \$100 to SSOC’s first Nashville conference. Anne Braden also wrote an article on SSOC’s Southwide Conference for the leftist *National Guardian*. Immediately, the collective eyebrow of the Southern liberal civil rights establishment was raised, and the SSOC people were warned from all corners not to destroy their young, innocent organization with the odious “red” taint of SCEF affiliation.

This warning had a powerful impact on the SSOC staff. Such “friendly advice” often came with the implication that “we probably won’t be able to get you that \$2,000 or \$5,000 grant if you’re identified with SCEF or the Bradens.” The SSOC folks did not know where to turn. They had not lived through McCarthyism as adults, but had instead been raised unconsciously on its teachings. They had little understanding of the ideological differences between some of their “friendly advisers” and the Bradens. They did not understand the political substance of the historical frictions between SCEF and the Southern Regional Council (SRC), a more moderate Southwide civil rights group which channeled tax-exempt foundation funds to SSOC in its early stages. They wanted to get SSOC rolling; they felt that they needed substantial financing, and they were sure they wouldn’t get it if they were identified with SCEF, so they made the natural, pragmatic, unlearned, and unprincipled decision to snub SCEF and the Bradens.

A member of the SSOC staff, who had been appointed to the SCEF Board was asked by others in SSOC to withdraw from the Board of SCEF. Anne Braden was disinvited from a SSOC Executive Committee meeting on the grounds that it was closed, even though Hayes Mizell, USNSA Southern Project Director, was there. She was later invited to discuss the problem, as Parker puts it, "... that many doors were closing because of SSOC's innocent association with the Bradens." He continues, "She seemed to be more concerned with the broader aspects of civil liberties than to listening to the pragmatic difficulties SSOC was having because of their association."<sup>12</sup> In December 1964, at a Hattiesburg, Mississippi Executive Committee meeting, SSOC took a position opposing "totalitarian participation in SSOC activities." At the same time, Anne Braden was chastised for writing the SSOC article in the *National Guardian*, which made it seem to Parker and some others, "...that she was doing things to hurt rather than help SSOC."<sup>13</sup> Thus, SSOC jeopardized and set back its working relations with one of the few serious radical Southern movement groups and denied itself, for years, the benefit of learning from and working with SCEF personnel.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as mentioned before, provided much of the spiritual and some of the organizing impetus for the formation of SSOC. Concretely, SNCC gave SSOC \$300, a Volkswagen, printing services, and the staff of their "white student project." SNCC was also the leading mentor to SSOC in developing its approach to community-related projects and to its ideological direction during the first two years of its existence.

SSOC decided not to become a direct branch of SNCC for several reasons. For one, by the time SSOC was formed, SNCC had almost exclusively adopted community organizing as its strategy for change in the Southern black belt. Campus organizing had become a low priority for SNCC; thus, the SSOC folks felt that their campus organizing approach would be neglected if they were part of SNCC, that campus travelers would be, if you'll pardon the expression, "the last hired and the first fired." There was also a minority, but evident, opinion among many of the SSOC people that affiliation with the increasingly black, increasingly militant SNCC would damage their "effectiveness" with the more moderate students on predominantly white campuses. While this may have been objectively true, it was unfortunately, in part, a concession to the racial divisions, the removal of which was one of the announced goals of SSOC.

A primary reason, however, for SSOC's reluctance to affiliate with SNCC or any other existing groups was the fact that, according to Anne Braden, "by 1964, there was actually more direct action against segregation on predominantly white campuses of the South than on Negro campuses."<sup>14</sup> There was, in other words, a multi-issue movement gaining momentum on large and small, predominantly white campuses all over the South, and there was no suitable organization available which was primarily devoted to responding to and building that movement.

Thus, SSOC struck out on its "own." It acquired tax-exempt status, received \$2,000 from the Norman Fund, secured endorsement and aid from several powerful members of the Southern civil rights establishment and other good folks and went merrily on its fund-raising, campus-traveling way.

SSOC's foundation support had a definite impact on SSOC from the very start, but not in the way Mike Klonsky, leader of the 1969 "smash-SSOC" SDS squad fantasized it.<sup>15</sup> The charge was that SSOC's policies and programs were determined directly by the liberal foundations, which supported it. The charge certainly had some partial truth to it (very partial), but then only for SSOC's first one or two years. As already shown above, the decision to seek foundation money had some effect on SSOC's relations to other organizations. But the last time it was proposed that SSOC adopt a policy because it would bring in some foundation money was in August 1966 at an Executive Committee meeting at Buckeye Cove, North Carolina. The proposal was to do voter registration work and electoral politics

support because Field Foundation and other foundations would be more likely to give SSOC funds to support such activities. The proposal was immediately and overwhelmingly rejected, both on the grounds of political opposition to devoting resources to electoral politics and on opposition to doing anything just because it would please a foundation. Such a criterion was never again suggested in any subsequent SSOC meeting. The only thing that was changed politically in SSOC by foundation money was the style in which the foundation proposal was written. In fact, in 1967, one foundation director who wished to alter SSOC policies and associations “with certain groups not to be trusted,” was told quite bluntly that, “nowhere in the SSOC decision-making structure are foundation directors included.”<sup>16</sup>

The basic impact of foundation money was a structural one, which would have been the case with any large amount of money from an outside source. The SSOC office in Nashville received an average of \$10,000 to \$35,000 a year from foundation sources. Every attempt was made to decide democratically on the use of the money. But the necessity of centrally dispensing funds led inevitably to a top-heavy bureaucracy. Even after 1966, when SSOC became a membership organization with a more democratic decision-making process, the tendency still existed, in the “field”, to see the Nashville office as a small foundation.

Receiving large grants also made it less essential for SSOC to depend on its own constituency for survival. For SSOC to support itself financially would have been difficult, especially in the early years, but the attempt was delayed by depending on foundation money. Such an attempt would have made it necessary to reach a concrete decision on just who SSOC’s constituency was. Secondly, it would have been necessary to develop programs that arose more originally from that constituency and that met the needs of that constituency enough so that people making up SSOC would have seen it as important to support SSOC financially. Though the SSOC staff tried devotedly to make its programs relevant to the needs of its ever ill-defined constituency, it was, nevertheless, structurally, a top-down process. This was the most fundamental and lasting problem created for SSOC by its foundation support, and was, as we shall discuss later, an important factor in the demise of SSOC.

Essentially, SSOC saw itself as an integral part of the “movement.” If any organizations had a meaningful impact on the ideology and organizing approach of the early SSOC, they were primarily SNCC and SDS. But SSOC basically shaped its own political direction from the experiences, attitudes, and theoretical shortcomings of its primary constituency – Southern, white, activist college students and college-age activists.

SSOC’s organizing approach was multi-pronged and ever changing. From the beginning, SSOC rejected the notion that the issues of racism, poverty, peace, and academic freedom could be separated into compartments of activity wholly divorced from each other. On the other hand, SSOC had no precise or thorough analysis of just how all these social problems were related. It would be several years before SSOC and the rest of the “movement” would begin to fit their social practice into some sort of semi-Marxian analytical framework. For now, SSOC activists’ consciousness about the inter-relatedness of issues was intuitive and based mostly on their first-hand experiences on campus and in the community.

It did not take long, for instance, for a community organizer in “Southside” Virginia to learn that a prominent town leader (white) opposed voter registration because his political power depended on the disenfranchisement of black voters, or that he opposed anti-poverty programs because he profited from unskilled blacks having to depend on the slave wages paid at his lumber mill. And just a little more experience showed that that town father used his political power to maintain and increase his economic power and vice-versa. Nor did it take years of intensive theoretical study to figure out that the reason the administration of a particular North Carolina campus came down so hard on its students who supported a textile workers’ unionization drive was because the Board of Trustees was controlled by textile mill owners who contributed large sums of money to the college. In fact, it became progressively clearer in



SSOC's practice that the main obstacle to academic freedom was the fact the campuses were owned and controlled by those who perpetuate and profit from the status quo; logically enough, those "vested interests" were not particularly interested in seeing the status quo, i.e., themselves, challenged or even critically examined.

Thus, SSOC took it upon itself to poke wherever it could and was often encouraged by cries and acts of disapproval from the establishment to poke hardest where it would hurt the most. SSOC became an "umbrella organization" not just because it wished to be "all things to all people," but also because it saw the importance of mobilizing students and others around a variety of important issues and attempting to show the connections between them.

We might best examine the evolution and activities of this "umbrella" by breaking it down into four areas of concern: community-related organizing; student-campus activity; peace and anti-draft work; and women's liberation. Space limits us to a brief outline of the types of activities in each area, leaving plenty of room for future research, recollection, and writing.

### **COMMUNITY-RELATED ORGANIZING**

Most of SSOC's involvement in community organizing in its earliest stages was in the rural black communities. Several of SSOC's founders participated in the White Folks Project of SNCC during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, though there was a division of opinion over whether to organize poor white people around their own needs or middle-class Mississippians for civil rights support. The first Southwide support project SSOC organized on campuses was a Freedom Christmas drive to collect food, clothing and funds to aid the black Mississippi tenant farmers who had been evicted from their homes for attempting to register to vote. Many students gave up their Christmas vacations to help Mississippi tenants build temporary shelters and rebuild and paint burned-down churches. Student support projects and anti-racism work had been going on rather strongly in some areas: the Nashville students' picketing to desegregate off-campus eating facilities; statewide agitation by the Georgia Students for Human Rights; the sit-in movement in North Carolina; and the work of college human relations councils in various areas to desegregate the campuses and their surrounding shops and businesses. But in only one state, Virginia, did the students develop a coordinated, "long-term" community-organizing project.

The Virginia Students Civil Rights Committee (VSCRC) was formed during the 1964-65 school year by black and white students from 12 different Virginia colleges. Though independent, VSCRC was more-or-less informally affiliated with and supported by SSOC and SNCC. Some funds were also granted for voter registration work by the Southern Regional Council's Voter Education Project and from Taconic Foundation. VSCRC was a well-researched project and eventually fielded about 25 students in eight different blackbelt counties of "Southside" Virginia. The student-organizers worked on a whole gamut of civil-rights-type projects – voter registration, school and employment desegregation, political education, fighting for poor people's control of anti-poverty programs (a losing battle), getting kicked out of Klan rallies (an even more losing battle), etc. During the project's duration, black registration figures were doubled in some areas, and a great deal of local activity (on both sides) was stimulated. However, by the winter of 1966, all the students had left (though some non-student VSCRC organizers remained beyond that), and the same local people who had been working hard for civil rights before the students came continued to struggle.

Another SSOC-sponsored community organizing project in the black community was conducted in North Nashville from early 1966 to 1967. An attempt was made to expand the project into the

neighboring poor-white community, but it never really got off the ground. By September 1966, SSOC had decided to finance only one person in any community project, thereby setting its priorities in use of resources on campus organizing.

Although it was seriously discussed throughout the life of SSOC, there never was a sustained attempt by SSOC, per se, to launch a community-organizing project in any poor white community. In Durham, North Carolina, several ex-student radicals developed what was the most significant poor-white community project in the South at the time (outside Appalachia) – ACT. In the summer of 1968, SSOC recruited two students to work with ACT, one of whom continued to work in the community for some time. But, for the most part, SSOC's involvement with poor whites was on the labor front (with the Southern wage scale there is little difference between poor people and working people and the terms are often used interchangeably), or on issues of mutual concern such as prison reform, power structure and legal research (primarily in Durham), and draft counseling.

SSOC's first relations with organized labor came primarily as a result of supportive and organizing work by activists at Emory and Duke Universities on behalf of non-academic campus employees. With the creation and establishment of Local 77, the Duke employees formed one of the more successful, early campus-employee organizing attempts in the country.<sup>17</sup>

A SSOC conference on "Students and Labor" was called for April 1966 in Durham, North Carolina to discuss possibilities of cooperation between student activists and organized labor. There was a good deal of heated debate with the AFL-CIO representatives over the role played by the AFL-CIO and Southern unions in the civil rights movement, the position of the AFL-CIO on the Vietnam war, and undemocratic attitudes toward the rank-and-file. However, the last meeting of the conference, skillfully chaired by Myles Horton of the Highlander Center, produced some areas of agreement.

One concrete result of the Durham conference was SSOC's participation in a drive by the Industrial Union Department (IUD) of the AFL-CIO to organize the East Coast migrant workers. SSOC staff member Gene Guerrero, and six SSOC-recruited students worked directly to organize the workers, following the migrant stream from Florida to New Jersey and Michigan in an attempt to sign up union members. That was in the summer of 1966; by fall, most of the students returned to school, IUD began referring to the "organizing drive" as a "pilot project," and the whole campaign was junked (later to be partially picked up by the Packinghouse Workers). Only in Florida did the campus activists continue to agitate in support of the farm workers struggle against the powerful citrus growers.

The second labor project that SSOC participated in was the 1967 campaign by the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA), AFL-CIO, to organize the North Carolina textile industry. At one point, half of SSOC's entire staff was working on the drive, both in direct organizing work and (primarily) in organizing student support. Over 300 North Carolina college students, some of whom had grown up in mill-worker families, some of whom were born to mill owners, most of whom had no prior movement experience, participated in supportive picketing and leafleting both at the plants and on the campuses. Many barriers were broken down – between workers and students and between black and white workers. Enthusiasm was building through several short strikes for an all-out fight for union recognition. Then – the Union bosses in New York decided not to support a long strike for which the workers were pressing, organizers were withdrawn, and the bottom (the top really) fell out of the whole campaign. The student movement in North Carolina had benefited tremendously both in increased numbers and in wized perceptions about organized labor and the working class. But hopes for unionizing the textile workers in North Carolina and eventually the whole South were crushed – at least temporarily.

SSOC's imagination and enthusiasm in allying with working people, however, was almost immediately rejuvenated by a grass roots movement of women in Blue Ridge, Georgia, who, having no

support from their union, the ILGWU (AFL-CIO), decided to call an unauthorized (“wildcat”) strike against the Levi-Strauss Company. SSOC first mistakenly related to the strikers through a third party, the Southern Labor Action Movement (SLAM). SLAM was a well-conceived but short-lived grouping of activists who aimed initially to support wildcat strikes, which were on the increase in the South as in the rest of the nation, and to organize grassroots movements of workers to defeat the bosses and radicalize the unions. Though it was SLAM that first made SSOC acutely aware of the Blue Ridge strike, many problems were created by relaying SSOC’s financial and organizing support through SLAM. For instance, because of divisions within SLAM and misunderstandings between the two organizations, SSOC unknowingly severed its financial support at a crucial point in the strike. SSOC was eventually able, however, to establish a functional relationship directly with the strikers and to organize supportive actions such as a boycott of Levi slacks. The strikers never settled the strike, but instead built their own self-managed and partially successful sewing cooperative.<sup>18</sup>

The nature of student supportive work with labor usually resembled the following model. It stemmed mostly, in local situations, from student activists responding to a strike which they would learn about from the local news media. The students or local SSOC staff would then contact the strikers, help with the picket line, carry coffee, etc.; the strike was publicized on campuses for support; and in some cases the product of the struck company was boycotted. This was the typical response from SSOC people to strikes, mostly in 1968, by tobacco workers in North Carolina; Kayser-Roth textile workers in Dayton, Tennessee; Frosty-Morn meatcutters in Tennessee, Virginia and Florida; mine workers in West Virginia; and to the migrant workers strike by the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee in California.

In the latter case, the Farm Workers’ Grape Boycott, which SSOC helped to spread all over the South, not only accomplished some impressive gains, but also served as an excellent vehicle for discovering and working with progressive forces in the Southern labor movement. Throughout 1968 and early 1969, enthusiasm continued to build in SSOC for working to build a radical labor movement in the South. After SSOC’s dissolution in 1969, many former SSOC people went on to a more immersed involvement in one form or another of working-class organizing. At a meeting of radical labor activists, held in Louisville in July 1970, more than a third of those attending had previously worked on the SSOC staff.

Acting on other community concerns, students in North Carolina and Virginia worked with the North Carolina and Virginia Justice Committees to alleviate conditions in those states’ prisons. Prison reform was seen in both cases as a good issue with which to build bridges between students and poor whites, and potentially among black and white poor people, since many poor people of both races have either friends or members of their families in prison. In both North Carolina and Virginia, students and poor white folks (as well as black ex-prisoners in Virginia) demonstrated together in response to brutal conditions and demonstrations or “riots” against those conditions inside the prisons. The North Carolina coalition even included one King Kleagle of a faction of the North Carolina Klan.

Also, radical law students at Duke University formed in the summer of 1968 the Durham Research Institute, comprised of law and graduate students, to conduct power structure, consumer, and other community research for ACT, a poor-white community organizing project in Durham. The law students in Durham, organized in a local group called the Student Legal Action Movement, also provided some draft counseling and legal research assistance for ACT. The Duke law students were instrumental in the formation of yet another, longer-lasting SLAM, the Southern Legal Action Movement, which matured into an organization with members at most major law schools in the South.

### CAMPUS ACTIVITY

While community organizing was of prime concern to many SSOC members, especially those on staff, the major activities of most of the local SSOC chapters were directed toward their own campuses. It should be noted once again that almost all of SSOC's campus work took place at predominantly white colleges, especially after 1966.

SNCC, as noted before, had moved thoroughly into the community by 1964. To the extent that SNCC did any campus organizing, it was intended mainly to involve students in community work. From 1964 to 1966, SSOC travelers assisted SNCC travelers somewhat in reaching black campuses and SSOC did a fairly decent job of publicizing protests and repression on black campuses through the *New South Student* and worklist mailings. For instance, in 1966, South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SCLD) agents and S.C. Highway Patrolmen opened fire on black students milling around their campus at S.C. State College in Orangeburg, S.C., killing three students and wounding many others. In both cases, and in others, SSOC took the lead (along with SCEF and SNCC) in organizing Southwide protests and in publicizing the repression.

By 1966, however, a new working relationship between SNCC and SSOC was established according to a new consciousness of the need for black people to organize themselves and for whites to organize other whites. This division of labor, and the whole concept of what was later to be called "Black Power" were thoroughly discussed at a Southwide SSOC and SNCC conference with 300-400 participants held in April 1966 at Old Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta. In workshop sessions with Stokely Carmichael, Willie Ricks, and other SNCC organizers, it was generally agreed that SSOC's job was to organize whites against racism and against the oppression felt by white people themselves, particularly poor and working-class whites. This had clearly been the implicit understanding on the part of many SSOC people, and now with a clearer consensus and understanding between the two organizations, SSOC began at that conference to establish a membership organization and to discuss how to go about its now clearer task.

From 1966 on, SSOC conferences became progressively more white, and SNCC conferences eventually became all black. Relations between SSOC and SNCC amounted primarily to relations between co-workers from the older, more innocent "freedom high" days of the civil rights movement, and to the working relationships between individual SSOC campus travelers and SNCC campus organizers. Attempts were constantly made, for instance, by SSOC travelers to put black student groups at predominantly white campuses in touch with SNCC and SNCC in touch with them. In 1966, SNCC, feeling the financial pinch from its "Black Power" stance and responding to the enthusiasm of many black college students for such a stand, developed a stronger campus program under the direction of George Ware, former Tuskegee activist. For a good description of SNCC-campus relations, see James Forman's *Sammy Younge, Jr.*<sup>19</sup>

The activities of SSOC-type groups in the earliest years, 1963 to 1965, centered almost exclusively on the issues of civil rights and academic freedom. In the areas of civil rights, most of the students' energies were devoted to integrating their campuses, desegregating such campus functions as housing, athletics and social life, and picketing, sitting in or boycotting to desegregate off-campus public accommodations frequented by the campus community. It was this latter activity that most often led to public reaction and violence. Direct action against public accommodations had already developed a strong tradition by 1963 and emotions easily flared. The pattern of disciplined non-violent response developed by the student sit-in movement in Nashville under Jim Lawson's tutelage had been adopted throughout the South. Take, for example, the case of Paul Gaston, a young history professor at the University of Virginia who, while picketing in 1963 to desegregate a Charlottesville eatery called "Buddy's." When he walked to a pay phone to call the police about violent harassment of the picket line, a local tough wheeled him around and socked him in the jaw. While painful at the time, this incident

became an important part of Gaston's history lectures, and his example would open the door to many of his students who were inspired to take up the on-going challenge. For those of us in his class who were Southerners, the fact that this example was set by such a genteel Southern gentleman with a smooth South Alabama accent operated in a sense to "give us permission" to also question our society's racist rules, both formal and informal.

Not all campus activism was immersed in direct action, however. Students at the University of Virginia, for instance, responding to the self-serving claim by the U.Va. admissions office that black enrollment was so low because it lacked applicants from black schools, spent their weekends combing the black high schools of Virginia recruiting applicants. Most of the civil rights on campus, as in the community, consisted of basic, non-dramatic, day-in-day-out legwork. Students and faculty would gather evidence, present their case, try to mobilize popular support, run the gamut of administrative committees, -- often with the bureaucratic run-around response of "well, you will have to see so-and-so about that" -- while constantly trying to keep up popular support and always struggling to make the administration think the issue had more popular support than it actually did. In most cases, student governments remained supremely irrelevant to the process of change, except to respond to movement initiated elsewhere in the student body and very often to assist the administration in bogging down the issue in endless committee deliberations.

The academic freedom or civil liberties issues were at the same time the easiest for which to gain popular support from students and faculty and the most difficult battles to wage in terms of personal sacrifice. The former was true because vast segments of the campus communities took seriously the rhetoric of academic freedom and "unfettered inquiry" which the college presidents always used in their convocation and commencement addresses. Of course, the same rhetoric was used in the 1950s, but everyone understood, especially in the South, that to protest the status quo was to risk one's job or student status. But by the mid-1960s, there had been too much movement, too many examples of courageous witness, both in black communities and campuses around the country, to be held back. Southern students saw the examples of Berkeley's Free Speech Movement, protests at Wisconsin and other centers of student activism and could find no reason why their right to speak and agitate for change should be any more restricted.

Civil liberties also presented some of the most costly battles, because the decision to repress a certain group or certain ideas was one made by the top levels of administration, often at the Board of Trustees or governor's level. Once the gauntlet was thrown down, there was essentially no way to fight for the right to speak or leaflet but to go ahead and do it. That very often meant disciplinary action, expulsion or termination of a teaching contract for the person or people who ventured across the unconstitutional line drawn by the administration. While northern teachers or students who traveled South to join for a time in the Southern freedom struggle were often seen as heroes in their home institutions, there were few rewards for the Southern teacher who was fired and blacklisted or the Southern student who was expelled from school, disowned by parents, not considered a good "test case" by the ACLU, and then possibly drafted. It was a risky business and always a borderline walk between the possibilities of victory and the possibility of clubs, cattle prods, letters of expulsion and multiple other possible results of struggling for the right to exchange views on a Southern college campus in the early and mid-1960s.

Throughout the 1960s, the Southern student movement was oriented around a sharpening of the struggle against the racism of the South's elite educational institutions and related struggles and the civil liberties fights just to create the space to organize around racism and other issues. As students became more aware of the oppressive elements of their own environment, the struggle was often expanded to include opposition to "in loco parentis" regulations, which often included compulsory chapel attendance

at religious schools; attempts to make the curriculum and educational process more meaningful and educational; and other efforts at increased self-governance for students. These issues, however, were much more open to cooptation and concession, and in most cases student government associations took over the role of negotiating settlements on these non-essential points with administrations. The powers-that-be in the state or on the boards were less concerned about altering dormitory hours, having a few more seminars on a pass-fail basis, and turning over some disciplinary problems to student lackeys, especially if such concessions would help buy the students off and avoid the necessity of dealing with more basic issues such as admitting blacks or women, or allowing controversial speakers on campus (later conceded in some cases), or keeping certain military research contracts secret and ROTC intact.

By 1968 and 1969, student activism in the South took a much more militant tack as it strove to disrupt and eliminate the war machine on major campuses and as it responded to the forceful demands made by black students upon the universities to end all of their racist policies and connections. Duke University again moved ahead of other Southern universities. In the spring of 1968, a broad-based student strike was organized in support of the striking campus employees. And in February 1969, when over a hundred black students took over the administration building, hundreds of white students gathered outside in support and, along with many spectators, were gassed and beaten by Durham and state police.

Also, by the 1968-69 school year, high school students all over the South had begun to organize against the war, the draft, racism and oppressive school policies. In February 1969, SSOC's high school organizer, Grant Cooper, reported radical high school activity in Oak Ridge, Tenn.; New Orleans; Richmond, Va.; Lakeland, Fla.; Nashville, Tenn.; Swan Quarter and Durham, N.C.; Charlottesville, Va.; and Atlanta, Ga. Activist high school students usually created their own alternative, often underground media. The need for such media in the growing youth movement and protest culture led to the creation of newspaper collectives that outlived SSOC. Among them: The Great Speckled Bird, in Atlanta; the Kudzu in Jackson, Miss.; Protean Radish in Chapel Hill, N.C.; and the Virginia Weekly in Charlottesville, Va.

### **PEACE AND ANTI-DRAFT WORK**

By 1967, many SSOC chapters and affiliates on campuses were spending possibly a majority of their organizing energy on the war in Vietnam and the draft. SSOC had, from its beginning, included many people who were concerned about the "Cold War," nuclear disarmament, the constant threats to Cuba, and the ever-escalating conflict in Vietnam. Local campus groups in 1964 and 1965 spent many hours debating the question of Vietnam, reading available material, and deciding whether time devoted to public protest of the war would detract from the domestic problems that most activists were primarily concerned with. Many local campus groups, already unpopular for their strong civil rights stands, ventured further into public reproval by sponsoring public discussions on the war in Vietnam. In the early stages, many students seemed willing to listen as long as "objectivity" was maintained and "both sides" were presented. University of Virginia students were fortunate in discovering that the chairman of their sociology department, Richard J. Coughlin, had once been Vice-Consul to Saigon and had since become critical of American involvement there; he assented to being the first member of the U.Va. faculty to openly question U.S. policy in Vietnam. By the 1965-66 school year, however, Vietnam had become a "protest" issue, and while students the previous year had at least been tolerant, now the Virginia "gentlemen" pelted with snowballs a small group of students, faculty, and spouses demonstrating in front of the library their public concern over the war.

Some have argued that it was the draft scare that really got students moving against the war. Since most people are more likely to be more concerned about something they are directly involved in (or might die in), there is probably much merit to that argument. Anti-war activity on campuses certainly

increased every time General Hershey, Selective Service System (SSS) director, threatened student deferments. SSOC's first official participation in a national anti-war activity was to conduct the Southern end of the SDS Vietnam Draft Test launched in response to Hershey's national testing of students in the fall of 1965. There had only been slight participation on SDS's Vietnam protest march on Washington in April 1965. David Nolan, at U.Va. activist who dropped out to work full time first with VSCRC and then SSOC, argues that the Virginia Students Civil Rights Committee didn't begin to act against the war until it saw several staff members threatened by the draft. VSCRC community organizers also saw even the miniscule financial commitment of the federal government to anti-poverty programs being drained by military spending.

Another important motivation for activism against the war was just the simple shock at learning that the government had been lying in the most fundamental way. Young people had been taught by parents and all the way through the educational system that America always wore the white hat, that it was the world protector of democracy and self-determination, and was the peace-lover of all peace-lovers. College students, however, besides being draft age, are one sector of the population that has access to a great deal of varied information and perspectives, the time to examine different viewpoints and facts, and the ability to discuss complex issues with peers in a relatively open setting. After some investigation, it seemed to many that if anything America was, internationally, the opposite of all it had claimed to be.

For those who were uncertain, the Dominican Republic invasion of 30,000 US troops and sailors against a popular, democratic revolt in 1965 offered evidence that Vietnam was more than just a "mistake." The illusions were shattered; the ideal didn't exist; the polite journalese "credibility gap" was an absurd understatement of what it was intended to euphemize. Students took it upon themselves to bridge the gap between the ideal that they had been taught was the reality and what they discovered to be the actual reality.

By 1967, there had been some type of peace vigil or demonstration in over 40 Southern cities. Often these were the result of an alliance between church-based peace supporters in the community and students and faculty at a nearby campus. Much of the vigil organizing was done by the Peace Education Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee, Southeast region (based in High Point, NC), William Jeffries, a dedicated peace worker with whom SSOC had an excellent working relationship.

The thrust of SSOC's work against the draft consisted of draft counseling and aiding in the establishment of draft counseling centers (often with the aid of AFSC), primarily on campuses and occasionally in the community. Several SSOC members went through a pacifist period, during which some of them were non-cooperators with the draft.<sup>20</sup> A significant number of SSOC staff members either refused induction, turned in or burned their draft cards, acquired conscientious objector status, or fled the country for Canada. Very few went in the army to organize (though at least one, John Lewis of Kentucky SSOC staff, did so), and SSOC, though surrounded by military bases, developed no programmatic approach toward organizing GIs (though there was some contact with the coffeehouse movement springing up near bases such as Ft. Bragg, NC and Ft. Jackson, SC, where SSOC member Dr. Howard Levy was imprisoned for refusing to train Green Berets). Statements by two SSOC staff members (David Nolan and Tom Gardner), along with another Southerner, Muhammed Ali, on their personal experiences with draft resistance are included in a collection edited by Alice Lynd, entitled *We Won't Go*.<sup>21</sup>

Local SSOC groups sought to educate their campuses and communities on the fallacies of U.S. policy in Vietnam and other aspects of U.S. foreign policy through literature distribution, teach-ins and open forums, community canvassing, and public demonstrations. Though SSOC did participate in several national anti-war coalitions and protest events, its major objective was to "spread the word" and initiate continuing education and organizing projects on the local level.

SSOC did develop, on a regional basis, two programmatic attempts to aid local anti-war organizing efforts: the Peace Tours and participation in Vietnam Summer. The major SSOC program on foreign policy and the draft, initiated and organized by SSOC and co-sponsored with SCEF (relations with SCEF having improved) was the Peace Tour. In the Peace Tours, several SSOC staff members and the SCEF member participating (Nancy Hodes), sharpened up their knowledge in particular areas of foreign policy and the draft and billed themselves as speakers. Traveling in groups of three or four, the Peace Tour would stay at each campus an average of two days. The speaker-organizers would give public presentations, hold smaller workshops, show films, set up literature tables and meet with local activists to discuss strategy and follow-up projects. The Peace Tour got its start in Florida in the spring of 1967 with travelers Nancy Hodes, David Nolan, and Tom Gardner. After a statewide tour of campuses, it culminated in a peace walk from Ft. Lauderdale to Miami that local activists had planned. After the tour's initial success in Florida, SSOC decided to use the Peace Tour as its major approach to campus traveling on the war. In the 1967-68 school year, Peace Tours (with alternating participants) traveled through Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina.

The response of students and others to the Peace Tour varied. At Appalachian State Teachers College in Boone, NC, several hundred students amassed to bodily evict the "outside agitators." The administration had to intervene to guarantee safe passage off the campus. One member of the Tour returned to campus that night and was able to discuss the war with several students, while taking time out periodically to persuade others that lynching him for his opinions would violate the American values that the GIs believed they were fighting for. The Appalachian State students, who had essentially rioted against the First Amendment, drew praise on the floor of the North Carolina legislature for actively resisting the infiltration of "communist ideology onto our campuses." Two days later, however, at conservative Belmont-Abbey College, near Charlotte, NC, mostly "pro-war" students anxious for some meaningful dialogue, voted overwhelmingly at a mass meeting to violate the administration's prior ruling that the Tour could have only one hour on campus. At a small South Carolina college, one Peace Tour member sat staring down the barrel of a loaded .45 caliber automatic while its holder gave an emotional description of how "those damn gooks" had killed his brother and "I just might as well kill you." In Florida, all the Tour participants and a local organizer were arrested for trying to speak at Miami-Dade Junior College, and a week after the Tour left Miami, the house they were staying in was hit with a bomb (their location having been identified against their request by a young radio talk-show host who attacked their patriotism on his program – his name was Larry King). But generally, the tours were successful in stimulating debate where there had been little discussion before and in putting thousands of people with the anti-war and radical movement who might otherwise have had no contact with it. An unintended but significant consequence of the Peace Tour as well, in many locations, was to challenge and overturn bans against controversial speakers, thereby opening up the possibility for more debate and activism, as well as giving more substance to what was, after all, the ostensible purpose of those institutions – education.

During the summer of 1967, SSOC participated in Vietnam Summer, a national attempt to extend the anti-war movement into the broader community. The Vietnam Summer activity helped to bring together adults in the community, students, church people, and some people in the black community around one concern central to all of them – getting the U.S. out of Vietnam. Many new groupings flourished, and a good deal of community canvassing, newspaper advertising, petition gathering, draft counseling, and other work was done. But few groups sustained themselves past September, and only in a few cases did a lasting coalition against the war grow out Vietnam Summer South.

SSOC's own perspective on U.S. foreign policy and anti-war organizing radicalized as a result of three factors: an increased awareness of the economic, political, and military role played by the U.S. in the world; frustration over the failure of the peace movement to reverse the aggression in Vietnam or the



official support for third-world dictatorships who served important American “interests”; and increased contact and communication with third-world revolutionary movements themselves. For instance, two SSOC staff members visited Cuba and communicated, upon returning, a more personal understanding of what a socialist revolution was all about. Another staff member traveled with 40 American civil rights and anti-war activists in September 1967 to Bratislava, Czechoslovakia where they met for over a week with 12 delegates from the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and 12 representatives from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.<sup>22</sup>

By 1969, there was a growing, though incomplete, sense of solidarity with third-world revolutionary movements and an increased understanding of the nature of U.S. imperialism.

### WOMEN’S LIBERATION

The fact that SSOC women were in the lead in organizing a women’s liberation movement in the South came not from SSOC’s advanced level of countering male chauvinism, but more from its level of male chauvinism. It was discovered in 1968 by the women in SSOC (the only ones who cared to check), that men outnumbered women approximately three-to-one in SSOC and Southern new left generally.

One can, of course, offer many explanations for such a phenomenon, especially if one were more interested in rationalizing than understanding the existence of male chauvinism in SSOC and the rest of the “radical” movement. One could point to the percentage of men and women on Southern campuses (though it’s better than two to one).

It could be pointed out that the “Southern woman” is even more socialized than her northern counterpart to accept a submissive role and dutifully avoid entering any areas of concern reserved to men, which naturally includes social revolution (though notable exceptions are abundant). But not only would these points beg the question, they merely provide more evidence of the oppression of women, and that women are more burdened than men in struggling out of that oppression both individually and collectively. If SSOC had been speaking clearly and loudly to the problems of women, women who felt and understood their oppression would have been attracted to it. That was not the case. There was not a single male on the SSOC staff level who did not express some reluctance about devoting SSOC resources to women’s liberation organizing. The fact that SSOC began to address itself to the question at all (which was only shortly before its dissolution), was due to the initiative of the women in SSOC and elsewhere, and it was done in spite of, not with the men in SSOC.

The first strong women’s group in the South was in Gainesville, Florida where two of its participants, Judith Brown and Beverly Jones, produced a pamphlet reprinted by SSOC, entitled Toward a Female Liberation Movement.<sup>23</sup> While an excellent consciousness-raiser, the pamphlet stressed the psychological and interpersonal aspects of female oppression and offered as a strategy a totally separate female revolution. Capitalism and racism were seen as mere obstacles to be removed (how and by whom were not defined) along the way to ultimate female liberation. Men, personally, were as much or more the enemy than capitalism. The Gainesville women’s movement later split – the second group stressing the importance of direct action and strategic alliances with movements involving men, such as the black and international liberation struggles.

Several of the women in SSOC, with experience in community and working class organizing, had helped to lead the way in the increasing radicalization of many in SSOC toward a more Marxian, working-class perspective on change. They were uncomfortable with the middle-class, academic nature

of much of the women's liberation movement, and, in spite of their experience with chauvinist men in the movement, they could not accept as realistic the call for a totally feminist revolution. Yet, they recognized the dialectical value of "consciousness-raising" groups and the need for women to be organized as women within the overall revolutionary movement. Lyn Wells, Program Secretary of SSOC, after discussions with women in SSOC, did her own research and came up with a pamphlet in December 1968 entitled American Women: Their Use and Abuse.<sup>24</sup>

After a sophisticated discussion of the history of women and women's movements in America, Wells, in her pamphlet, scientifically analyzed the role of revolutionary women. She explains that, "Although the problem has personalized symptoms, it is an institutionalized menace, and must be approached as that." She insists that, "We must begin to build a movement that holds our self-interest as primary, but the goal that our activity is directed toward as radicals must be for all humanity." She cites an analogy from Courtland Cox of SNCC: "Blackness is necessary but not sufficient." She continues, "The political-economic changes (necessary to) ...changing exploitative and dehumanizing power relationships...can only be achieved if all segments of the population fight, because our only real resource for fighting is people." She further argues that the liberation of women within the revolution will be guaranteed only "...if women are organized before, during, and after the battle." She explained the application of her theory in practical terms:

"On a local level, this would mean that every radical woman would belong to a woman's group. Much of her organizing time would be spent working with other women, both on issues of Female Liberation and general problems. But she would also belong to groups that are working for total change (such as SSOC, SDS, poor white community groups, etc.). It is important that she not only be represented but be an integral part of revolutionary and radical organizations."

By the spring of 1969, there were at least five strong women's groups in the South (Gainesville, Atlanta, New Orleans, Nashville, and Durham). A conference was called for Atlanta to discuss the growth of the women's liberation movement in the South, and the response was overwhelming. Women have continued to organize themselves all over the South so that by 1970 there was at least one women's liberation group in every major city and college town in the South.

### **THE UMBRELLA FOLDS**

The Southern Student Organizing Committee was disbanded by about 100 people who attended an open conference to discuss the fate of SSOC and the "Southern movement" in June 1969 at Mt. Beulah, Mississippi. It could have survived the vote if a few more SSOC people had attended, but, as it was, SDS people, North and South, who had resolved that SSOC should be destroyed, carried the day.<sup>25</sup>

Those were complex and fractious times. Any organization which was as top-heavy in its bureaucratic structure as SSOC was by 1969 and as unsure of its political direction in that year of a thousand factional splits was bound to pass under the guillotine of the righteous, self-styled "revolutionaries," and had little chance of survival. The specific political questions involved at that conference are not as important for discussion here as are more general observations and lessons that can be drawn from SSOC's growth and demise.

First of all, while SSOC grew numerically and in practice, it failed to develop any coherent theory of radical social change. The beginnings of such a development certainly existed in 1969, and had SSOC hung together on a restructured basis, the process might have been accelerated. As it was, however, SSOC felt the full impact of its failure to deal critically with important theoretical and practical questions

of overall strategy. Mao tse-tung describes a malady which seemed familiar to many in an attempt to understand SSOC's inability to conduct productive internal political struggle. He describes "one kind of liberalism" in *Combat Liberalism*:<sup>26</sup>

"To let things slide for the sake of peace and friendship when a person clearly has gone wrong, and refrain from principled argument because he is an old acquaintance...a schoolmate, a close friend... an old colleague...or to touch the matter lightly instead of going into it thoroughly, so as to keep on good terms. The result is that both the organization and the individual are harmed."

SSOC's tendency toward "liberalism" in this regard throughout its existence has its roots in the cultural and historical setting in which SSOC's role was performed. The economic, cultural, political and social suppression of revolutionary movements and ideas do not need explanation here. The Southern environment has not been conducive to training people to think in very analytical terms about social revolution. Objectively, it was also the case that political and often actual survival was a much more pressing questioning the middle 1960s for the New Left activist of the South than was true for his or her counterpart in the North. The same luxury did not exist in the South as it did in the North for consideration of the important, long-term theoretical questions of revolution making. In addition, compromises were more likely to be made at the beginning stages of a movement in a more repressive atmosphere – and they were. The national New Left, of course, suffered from most of the same faults that SSOC did (with the addition of "yankee paternalism"), but the differences in degree and kind flowed from the historical differences in both the regions and their movements.

On the other hand, SSOC had probably collectivized more experience in white, working-class and community organizing than most other groups in the national New Left at that time. It was this relatively abundant practice which could have combined with some theoretical development to produce a significant contribution to the ideological development of the New Left. But that possibility was aborted, for a time at least, by the unnecessarily thorough destruction of the entire SSOC network.

Secondly, the collective memory and analytical discussion existed for only a small group of people (50 at most) and mostly at the staff level. Throughout its last year of existence, the SSOC staff attempted to disburse this political development down to the membership. The radical history conference in the spring of 1969, the *Phoenix* (SSOC newspaper), the *New South Student*, literature distribution, and campus visits – but it was largely in vain.

By 1969, SSOC, in response to its growth and the success of statewide organizing in North Carolina, had restructured itself into "autonomous" state or multi-state regions (including Appalachia as a state after they had waited 100 years). The different SSOC "regions" developed their own politics, often widely divergent from each other. The Nashville office and centralized SSOC activities became irrelevant to the membership except as a potential source of funds, which were democratically dispersed when available. New members were not isolated locally; they were developing their politics in relation to national as well as state and local events. The need for a specifically Southern student organization was brought into serious question.

SSOC had outgrown itself structurally, had collectivized its political development too slowly, and had failed in disbursing that development among its members. SSOC deserved either an exhausted death or a brilliant rejuvenation. It died. But SSOC was more than an organization – it was people, and most of us are still alive and kicking.

- <sup>1</sup> James McBride Dabbs verbally to author, June 1967, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.
- <sup>2</sup> Member of the Liberation Student Union of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam to author, September 1967, Bratislava, Czechoslovakia
- <sup>3</sup> Forman, James, *Sammy Younge, Jr.* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 218.
- <sup>4</sup> Gaston, Paul M., *The New South Creed* (New York, NY: Knopf Press, 1970), p. 5.
- <sup>5</sup> Parker, Ron K., "The Southern Student Organizing Committee" (Nashville, TN: Jan. 5, 1965), unpublished paper, p. 30.
- <sup>6</sup> Joye, Harlan, "Dixie's New Left," *Trans-Action Magazine*, Sept. 1970, p. 30.
- <sup>7</sup> Anne Braden to author, Louisville, KY, July 1970.
- <sup>8</sup> Such a collection was assembled over the ensuing two years and archived with the U.Va. library. Unfortunately, at that time, U.Va. did not fully grasp the importance of these documents and they were not well preserved. In the late 1990s, that changed, due in large part to the doctoral research on SSOC by Gregg Michel and Paul Gaston's continuing interest, and several personal collections of SSOC-related documents, donated by the author and others, are now well-preserved and indexed at U.Va.'s Alderman Library.
- <sup>9</sup> Woodward, C. Vann, "The Search for Southern Identity," *The Burden of Southern History* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1960), p. 12
- <sup>10</sup> Zinn, Howard, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).
- <sup>11</sup> Parker, Ron, *Op Cit.*
- <sup>12</sup> Parker, *Op Cit.*
- <sup>13</sup> Parker, *Op Cit.*
- <sup>14</sup> Braden, Anne, "The Southern Freedom Movement in Perspective," (New York, *Monthly Review*, July-August, 1965), p. 66.
- <sup>15</sup> Klonsky, Mike, "SSOC=CIA", *New Left Notes*, v.4, no.19, May 1969.
- <sup>16</sup> Statement by author (then SSOC chairman) to foundation director on fundraising trip to New York, September 1967.
- <sup>17</sup> Brandon, Peter and Parks, Nancy, "Brief History of Local 77," Southern Student Organizing Committee, Nashville, 1965.
- <sup>18</sup> Mull, Brenda, "Our Strike Against Levi-Strauss," SSOC, 1968.
- <sup>19</sup> Forman, James, *op cit.*
- <sup>20</sup> David Nolan, Tom Gardner, and Bob Dewart traveled north to the founding conference of the non-cooperator movement, participating in the drafting of the first "We Won't Go" statement in a meeting hosted by A.J. Muste.
- <sup>21</sup> Lynd, Alice, *We Won't Go* (Boston: Beacon, 1968)
- <sup>22</sup> Gardner, T.N. and Smith, Bruce, *New South Student*, Nov. 1967.
- <sup>23</sup> Brown, Judith and Jones, Beverly, *Toward a Female Liberation Movement*, SSOC, Nashville, 1968.
- <sup>24</sup> Wells, Lyn, "American Women: Their Use and Abuse," SSOC, Nashville, 1968.
- <sup>25</sup> For a variety of perspectives on SSOC's dissolution, see:  
     "Movement South," v.8, n.7, *Great Speckled Bird*, May 1969.  
     "Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win," v. 4, no. 13, *New Left Notes*, May 13, 1969.  
     Joye, Harlan, "Dixie's New Left," *Trans-Action*, *op cit.*
- <sup>26</sup> Tse-Tung, Mao, "Combat Liberalism" in *Five Articles by Mao tse-Tung* (Peking, 1967)

## Tom Gardner

### Biographical Sketch

Tom Gardner is professor of communication at Westfield State University, Westfield, MA.

For the prior six years, he was managing director of the Northampton-based Media Education Foundation, a non-profit organization, which he helped develop into the nation's leading producer and distributor of educational videos on media and culture.

Earlier he served as public affairs officer and editor of *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* for Harvard Divinity School, senior editor at the Harvard Institute for International Development, and director of communications and public education for the Union of Concerned Scientists. He has taught communication courses for five years and is completing his

dissertation toward a Ph.D. in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

A native Southerner, Tom became a leading activist in the Southern civil rights and national peace movements of the sixties and seventies. He was chairman of the Southern Student Organizing Committee, Southern field director of Vietnam Summer, a community organizer with the Virginia Students Civil Rights Committee, a field representative of the USNSA Southern Project, and served on the board of the Southern Conference Education Fund. In the 1970s, he organized a successful, global, human-rights campaign to win freedom for a politically framed Alabama death-row inmate, Johnny "Imani" Harris. He also was an organizer in South Carolina with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America.

Tom later became an award-winning senior political reporter, columnist, and city editor at the *Montgomery Advertiser*, and subsequently served as public relations director for the Alabama State Employees Association. He holds a B.A. in sociology from the University of Virginia, an M.A. in Journalism and Mass Communication from the University of Georgia, and a Master in Public Administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Tom's scholarly research focuses on the role of the media in shaping the political environment which has led to the incarceration of two million Americans and on the area of communication law. He is the author of "The Media Rhetoric of Law and Order: How ABC Framed the Mumia Abu-Jamal Case" (Edwin Mellen Press, 2005). He has published articles in numerous national publications, has spoken at more than 100 campuses, and is an award-winning photographer. He serves as vice president on the Board of Directors of the Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School in Holyoke, MA. He is listed in *Who's Who in America 1999* and *Who's Who in the Media 2000*. He has a daughter, Sarah and son, Koby. He lives in Amherst, MA with his wife, Karen Levine and about a dozen chickens.

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**Tom Gardner is Available to Lecture on the Following Topics:**

"The Media, Mumia, and the Fight Against the Prison Industrial Complex," – a multi-media presentation  
"Violence and the Media: Asking the Right Questions" – a multi-media presentation  
"Men Overcoming a Violent Culture – Defining our Humanity" – a multi-media presentation  
"Breaking Out: Campus Activism and Social Movements in the long '60s"  
"The Media, the First Amendment and America's Wars"

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