

October 23, 1964

Memo

TO: SNCC National Staff

FROM: Mike Miller, Bay Area SNCC Rep.

RE: Questions raised for national staff meeting.

It is with some hesitation that I write from over 2,000 miles away regarding what you on the front lines must daily contend with. The questions raised for discussion at our staff retreat are overwhelming, and they are basic. I can't resist getting my 2 cents worth into the discussion. At best, these are notes. They follow the order of the Memo to all staff re: the Staff retreat, with omissions of topics where I have no cents worth to say anything.

WHAT DO WE ORGANIZE?

We ought to be organizing the unorganized blacks of the Deep South--that is the first priority. Only when these organizations are firmly enough rooted in their communities should we discuss relating to other organizations--integrated or white. There must be sufficient strength in the black communities so that those problems peculiar to the Negro community cannot be ignored by coalitions of white and black. Perhaps "organizing the unorganized" is a misnomer; as Nicholas von Hoffman put it, "So far as I know there are no disorganized communities. The two words cancel each other out. The word 'community' sums up a host of organized relationships. I don't want to get in involved in fine distinctions, or I will be ilke the sociologists who don't even agree on what society is. When I talk about organized relationships I mean nothing fancier than relations between people that are recognized by all, that are frequent, and that anybody who knows the community can reasonably anticipate as he moves about from person to person..." (Reorganization In the Casbah: Social Progress; April, 1962)

What we ought to be concerned with is mobilizing the existing organization in the community and giving it a new direction, a direction toward the freedom movement.

WHEN DO WE ORGANIZE?

We organize when we have the resources to do a definite job. I think we have to be willing to pass up those fights for which we can't mobilize enough resources to do significant battle. This is better than spreading ourselves so thin that we cover all the fronts but cover none of them well.

WHERE DO WE ORGANIZE?

This implies that we organize in those places where it makes tactical and strategic sense to organize--and, obviously, where there is a need for the kind of organization we build.

HOW DO WE ORGANIZE?

We organize by sending staff people into a community. The staff person has two main responsibilities: the development of local staff people to work with him and the development of a locally based organization that will become so strong that he can leave and it will remain.

WHY DO WE ORGANIZE?

We organize because we recognize that people are exploited when they are powerless, that being powerless is part of not knowing how to use organization for power, that power in this society is based upon two major things: money and people. The former characterizes most of our society today. The latter, power based on people is the heart of democratic theory. Power based on people means not only that people's interests can be protected. It also means that through their own organizations, people can build the kind of society in which they want to live.

Everything that follows in this memo is related to what, when, where, how, and why do we organize?

The executive committee, or some committee, must reflect the fact that SNCC is an organizing committee and not a membership organization. My feeling is that we need some form to which to relate the community organizations we build. COFO offers some of that. But a form like that on a Southwide basis also makes sense. The Cambridge movement, the Dallas County Voters League, the Pine Bluff movement, and other community based organizations--including by the way, branches of the NAACP, and anyone else, ought to be related to one another. Criteria need to be established as to what can't be an affiliate. These criteria ought to include the program of the community organization and questions on its implementation--making sure that the organization does, in fact, have democratic mechanisms within the organization and questions of leadership and so forth. Maybe this organization should be the Southern Council of Community Organizations. Such an organization should be serviced by SNCC. It might have a Southwide newspaper, hold regular conferences or conventions, and so forth.

What is our responsibility to Southern Negro college campuses and what is their relationship to policy questions and decisions in SNCC?

So long as Southern Negro college campuses remain an important source of recruitment and other support for SNCC, they ought to have some role in policy making in SNCC. Maybe it ought only be a policy advisory committee. But some structure is needed. Student Voice ought to report the activities of these groups as well as the activities of staff, and staff related organizations.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF SNCC TO OTHER CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS AND TO LOCAL GROUPS?

SNCC's relationship to other civil rights organizations and to local groups is not the same question. Other civil rights organizations are inevitably rivals. One of the beauties of SNCC is that it has put the movement above these organizational rivalries. As we all know, this hardly characterizes the role of some of our "friends!" I think we must deal with these organizations as one deals with rivals. One thing that I feel to be tremendously important: rivals are not enemies. It is too easy to say, ~~XXX~~ for example, "What NAACP is doing in X situation will play into the hands of the establishment, therefore NAACP is part of the establishment and even worse because it pretends to be part of the movement." We need to make our differences with NAACP, CORE, Urban League, SCLC or anyone else clear, but not in such a way as to preclude working relationships with them.

WHAT IS THE INSTITUTE?

The Institute, or some internal education center, is tremendously important. I think it is the major way to offset attempts by other organizations to provide SNCC with an "ideology!" SNCC needs a place where people can discuss what is going on in the South, the nation and the world and how all this relates to the day to day work of a field secretary or a volunteer. And we need our own people or people we know and trust, running such an Institute.

WHAT IS STAFF DISCIPLINE?

The problem of discipline in the organization must be solved at the stage of recruitment. If we recruit good people, we won't have many of the discipline problems that now arise. "you all come and work with the movement because it will transform you" may be appropriate as an attitude toward volunteers in non-sensitive spots--it isn't appropriate in the development of staff.

WHAT SHOULD BE SNCC'S POSITION ON AFRICAN AFFAIRS?

That the question "what should be SNCC's position on African affairs?" is raised and the question, for example, "What is SNCC's position on the labor movement?" is not raised seems to me to ignore what we have to do here and now. There can be no question that the revolutions in Africa and the development of independent African nations is of tremendous importance in dealing with problems of identity and a sense of historic consciousness. It is also of tremendous importance that materials on the new African states be used in Freedom Schools and in adult education. This is a fundamental part of breaking through the remnants of a slave mentality that still exists in the South. But the importance of these things must not obscure the fact that the day-to-day world in which we live is such that UAW affairs are probably more relevant to MFDP, COFO, and SNCC than African affairs.

I have tried to spell out a program on the role of Friends of SNCC in the North that involves Friends of SNCC in local activities without sacrificing its main job of relating the North to the Southern movement. The interne program (described in another paper) is an attempt in this direction.

Perhaps the heart of the matter is black nationalism and the direction of the civil rights movement. Unfortunately, the term "black nationalism" obscures as much as it clarifies. To be for Negro leadership, black dignity, a sense of African history a recognition of the importance of black role models for ghetto youth--all these things seem so apparent that there should be little need to discuss them. Where the problems begin to get tough is when we think of a program and strategy designed to break through black-belt (or northern ghetto) poverty, to bring decent schools into the South, to break down discrimination in all levels of public activity, to bring about a society in which men and women of different races and cultures can live in a fully integrated way of life.

Here we come to the discussion of priorities: is the development of a Negro business men's association more important than the development of Negro co-ops, or more important than the development of avenues of alliance between black and white who are both bound by the same system? Is it more important to develop some relationship with the NAACP or with the Committee for Miners and the Hazard, Kentucky Miner's movement? Within SNCC, this must lead to a fundamental distinction on matters of race: we may well all agree that the projection of black leadership is of fundamental importance in breaking through the vast majority of black people in the Deep South. But if we are building in our own movement that beloved community, then race cannot be used to automatically disqualify the argument of a white field secretary when policy matters are being discussed amongst ourselves. On the other hand, if this is not what the staff and what SNCC stands for, then SNCC ought to make clear that it doesn't want whites working in the movement, but only helping it from the outside.

If all this seems rambling, let me try to tie it up with a rambling summary: We are an organizing staff who views ourselves as frontiersmen for the "beloved community." We are firmly and fundamentally committed to what most America only preaches. We are small "d" democrats, believing that men free themselves and become full citizens only by full and conscious participation in the decision making processes of their society. We also believe that it is only through the mobilization of people in "grass roots" organization that we can break through the deadlock that exists today in American politics--and we believe that this is true whether one attributes that deadlock to "the power elite," "the corporate state," "the military-industrial complex," "the ruling class," "the military-industrial coalition," or whatever. Because we have this view, we don't attempt to speak for the people. Our interest is in building the organizations through which the people can speak for themselves. As staff, we will attempt to analyze the alternatives facing a community organization. We will argue about and discuss the different alternatives. We may recommend a given alternative. But we will always finally say, "the decision is yours--and we will stick with you in it unless it violates the fundamental commitment of this organization." In our own discussions as a staff, in our Executive Committee or in the Coordinating Committee, we will make decisions as to where we organize next in relation to these goals. We will not be a part of the marketplace that now characterizes American politics. We are not satisfied that our Party is the Democratic Party as it is. We seek change not only in Mississippi but in the nation. Our priority at the present time may be Mississippi, but this does not mean that we are uninterested in northern relationships with people like ourselves working in the North, nor does it mean that we do not believe that at some point the grass roots organizations of Mississippi must be linked to those of the North.

Our internal form of organization must reflect what we want to do in the field. A coordinating committee based on organizations that do not daily feel this commitment cannot fully govern us, nor even can a central executive committee. The choice must be for staff autonomy in the development of the local project, but staff coordination through district, state, and regional organization when it comes to relating a local project to the broader scene. This will mean that the choice of staff and the training of staff are at the heart of the organizational problems being discussed today. If we have good people to begin with, many of these problems will disappear.