

THE MEANING OF THE SIT-INS

The following statement was prepared not as a definitive statement of CORE's position, but rather to stimulate thought and discussion about the sit-ins and their effect on CORE and on other national organizations.

GENERAL REMARKS:

All were agreed that the Sit-In movement which began February 1st in Greensboro, North Carolina, was something that no national organization had anticipated or planned for. All were agreed, also, that this is the most significant mass attack on segregation to occur within the last several years. It indicates: (1) A strong dissatisfaction with the pace of school desegregation; (2) A growing conviction that something active must be done to show that we do not accept the segregated patterns of the South; (3) That many persons in the South, white as well as Negro, are ready to move far faster than had been supposed.

The movements spread across the South, and involved large numbers of persons. Some people estimate that as many as 100,000 people were involved in one way or another. There is no question but that the movement began more or less spontaneously and spread very rapidly across North Carolina. As for the spread into other areas, particularly into some of the areas in the deep South, spontaneity is not so clear. Students in one institution know some of the students in another institution, and there was a desire to emulate the example of those leading the attack against segregation. Also, the staffs of the various organizations did quite a bit of traveling through the area, and this undoubtedly contributed to the spread of the movement.

The framework of the entire movement was a commitment to the use of non-violence. Adherence to this principle was remarkable: in very few instances were there any violation by the desegregationists of the code of nonviolence. It is also noteworthy, I believe, that violence by segregationists was relatively light. This tends to prove a contention which has been held to be largely theoretical: that where those who are making the attack on segregation remain nonviolent, it becomes very difficult for those on the other side to use violence frequently or consistently or with great force.

For the national organizations, this movement poses a number of problems, both in terms of how we can best aid the movement, and in terms of giving it greater direction and depth without interfering with the spontaneity that has been involved.

At our meeting, we were primarily concerned with nonviolent, direct action. We were also agreed that nonviolent, direct action is not the only method which is feasible, and that traditional methods, such as legal action, education, etc., must not be neglected while we proceed with nonviolent, direct action. The problem then arises of how these various emphases mesh together. There has been an unfortunate tendency in the press to emphasize nonviolent, direct action in terms of an attack on methods previously used. It was generally agreed that nonviolent

direct action is important in the struggle, and that it does not necessarily conflict with other methods. It was also agreed that nonviolent, direct action, by itself, would not be sufficient.

The following discussion will be under three main headings: (1) What is nonviolent direct action; (2) Relation to legal action; (3) Spreading the movement.

WHAT IS NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION?

Nonviolence, by itself, is not a sufficient description of what has been going on: all of the various methods which are used in this struggle are nonviolent. But the term "direct" is an important element here. Direct action is action which involves an opponent who is in a position to make the change that the action is directed toward. Thus, a picket line outside the Mayor's office to put pressure on the Mayor to exert his influence with the City Council or some other department of city government to put through legislation bringing about a change in the legal set-up in order to benefit the cause of integration, is not properly "direct" action. On the other hand, a picket line outside a supermarket in order to get Negroes employed there, can conceivably directly bring about the results it seeks, and is, therefore, "direct" action.

The concept of nonviolent, direct action in this country is largely derived from the techniques developed by Gandhi in India. It is a step-by-step procedure based upon "soul force" and upon the belief that those we are working to change do have a conscience and can be reached through such means. (NOTE: Step-by-step is not meant to be hard and fast. In the variety store lunch counters, for example, the initial steps were not used. Since the sit-ins started locally and the policy of segregation or non-segregation is determined by the national offices of the chains, local "negotiation" would have possibly been good for maintaining relationships with the local manager; but it would not have been true negotiation inasmuch as the power to change the pattern really did not rest with the local manager.) The usual steps in a nonviolent, direct action are, therefore: first, investigation to determine the actual situation as exactly as possible; second, discussion or negotiation with the person responsible for the policy; third, if the negotiation does not produce the desired change, then appealing to the general public, either through leaflets or press releases or in some other way; fourth, the development of cause-consciousness either in a fairly small group, or in a larger community: this may be done through rallies, publicity, meetings at churches, etc.; fifth, training and "self-purification" of those who are working with us for the change. This may include anything from discussion of the techniques we are going to use to such religious practices as fasting or prayer, depending in part upon the kind of group we are working with; sixth, if negotiation at this stage still does not produce the desired change, then an ultimatum is issued. The ultimatum indicates to the other side that, if a change is not forthcoming, we shall feel free to proceed to direct action; seventh, the direct action stage itself. This may be, in a restaurant, a sit-in. In employment in a supermarket, it is apt to be a picket-line and general boycott of the supermarket involved.

It is important to stress that these steps go in order, with the more extreme steps always following the earlier and less extreme ones. At the same time, it is important to realize that the less extreme steps can be repeated while the other steps are going forward. Thus, it is not necessary to cancel direct action in order to continue negotiations. Negotiations should always be open at any time and during any stage once the initial investigation has been completed.

Gandhi also attached several corollaries to this general scheme of action. He actually defined his method as "insistence on truth." In certain sections of the United States, where those actively working are a small minority, we cannot afford the same full frankness used in India, but we cannot violate the principle of truth either. In general, we follow "the truth, and nothing but the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth."

There is a tendency in this country to exaggerate for publicity purposes, and most organizations tend to emphasize their successes, and forget their failures. The use of nonviolence probably dictates that we must be willing to admit our mistakes and that we should not overplay on any score. While it is obviously impracticable to give the other side a complete scheme of what we plan to do and when, it would also seem to be a violation of the principle of nonviolence to give them a deliberately false impression of our plans in order to get the jump on them action-wise. It would not seem to me to be a violation of principle for a group to so organize itself for action that only a few persons within it knew exactly what was to be done and when. This may be necessary in order to prevent the closing of a facility where an action project is planned.

Another important corollary, and one that is very difficult for us to achieve in America, is the principle of non-attachment. Non-attachment has been demonstrated in practice during the lunch counter sit-ins. It has been very evident that, in the face of threats of expulsion, many students have been quite willing to go ahead. This is certainly a form of non-attachment - a willingness to sacrifice one's own position for the sake of a cause. It is also obvious that most of the participants in the various actions have been willing to make sacrifices without receiving any limelight in return. However, there are a number who have been anxious to become leaders, and others have enjoyed publicity. This involves a problem in terms of non-attachment. We do need leaders, and we do need publicity, but we must be careful that in the process we do not develop leaders who are primarily interested in being leaders, or primarily interested in publicity. At the Easter conference in Raleigh, there was some indication that this was true of a few persons there, and it was also evident that there was some disposition toward organizational in-fighting. All organizations are, of course, interested in their own growth. Those of us who work for organizations feel that organization is necessary to further the cause. At the same time, it is essential that we not be so attached to organizations as such that we overlook the movement as a whole. It is my feeling that our organizations will grow best and the movement will go forward fastest if we do not attempt to fight with each other. The movement must attract widely varied people with widely varied backgrounds, religious, racial, etc. Therefore, each organization with its special emphasis and attraction, is necessary to the movement. If we can keep this uppermost in our minds, we should achieve some degree of non-attachment within our various organizations.

Some of the above discussion goes into rather fine points about non-violence. I think, therefore, that it is necessary to stress that work can very well be started with persons whose only real conception of nonviolence is, "I shall not hit back or talk back when I am hit or taunted." This conviction, once it is successfully tested in action, can lead to the other points. But this minimal acceptance of the principle of nonviolence should be accentuated and insisted upon: persons who accept anything less than this should never be taken on direct-action projects. We all know that, if violence occurs, and our side plays any part in it, we shall be blamed for it. The remarkable thing about the movement so far has been that our side has very rarely been guilty of any infraction of nonviolence.

RELATION OF NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION TO LEGAL ACTION

The Supreme Court desegregation decision is the basis for the present movement in the South. This decision put our national government on record as opposed to segregation and discrimination. Also, it meant that desegregation should move with "all deliberate speed." In terms of the schools in most sections of the South, we have seen a snail's pace, and not "all deliberate speed." This is the reason that persons who believe in brotherhood in the South - Negro and white - are now ready to proceed in a more direct fashion and not to wait upon decisions which go court by court, year by year, and achieve, in most cases, merely token integration. The present popularity of direct action, therefore, is traceable to the Supreme Court decision.

In any direct action in the South, the segregationists are apt to have control of the governmental machinery, and therefore arrest becomes likely. This means that civil-rights lawyers, trained in the legal method, are immediately involved in a situation which is based on somewhat different principles from those which they have used in the past. The result has often been confusion, which has left the movement somewhere between the usual legal method and the nonviolent direct action procedure. Both techniques should be used, but I believe that they should be consciously used, and never confused.

A prime example of the confusion of the two techniques is the Atlanta "sit-in". A large number of students went to eating places in federally owned buildings throughout Atlanta at the same time. In most cases they were arrested. A valid legal point can be raised as to the participation of government in the segregation of races. Subsequently, the students did not return to these eating places, and are awaiting the outcome of the legal cases. This, it seems to me, transfers the action to the legal phase. The question arises: could not the legal cases have been equally well setup by using a single person in each instance? At the same time, there is every indication that many students were interested in using direct nonviolent action. It seems to me that this could easily be worked out. Legal action may well be the most feasible means of checking discrimination in cafeterias in government buildings. But sit-ins could have been continuously carried on in such variety-chains as Woolworth's at the same time. The two methods are supplementary, not contradictory.

Nonviolence implies a high value of self-accepted suffering. This may mean that participants prefer to sit in jail rather than pay bail. This, of course, is a strange concept to a lawyer who is concerned about getting his client out of jail as soon as possible. When groups of people are willing to sit in jail, however, their very presence there does put pressure on the community to consider searchingly how much they really want to impose segregation - to consider how thoroughly persons must reject segregation in order to willingly accept jail in preference to failing to make an attack on the system. The same would apply to refusal to pay fines and preference for jail: (jail rather than bail; jail rather than fines).

As this movement grows, it is conceivable that refusal to pay bail and fines may be essential to its success. In India, we know, the willingness to go to jail sometimes immobilized the government. When persons of conviction fill the jails, what is the government to do? When it cannot incarcerate everyone, and those it releases immediately proceed to sit-in at the same counters again, what is it to do then? This does not at all preclude selecting particular persons setting up particular tests, and carrying them forward through the courts.

In preparing for direct-action projects, particularly in the more difficult states in the South, those who are about to take action should know the various chances that they are taking. At no time should a person get involved in an action project, and then, after arrest, be told that it is preferable for him to stay in jail. The decision to stay in jail or to go out on bail should be left up to the individual. Sometimes, groups can be divided before a project, so that a whole group will accept bail in one case, while another whole group will refuse bail in another case. Also, organizations as such should not push the value of jail without giving the individual an out. Certainly, going to jail for some is relatively easy and for others very difficult indeed.

In conclusion, it seems to me that organizations should not take a position that jail is always preferable, or that bail is always preferable, or that the decision should be up to the lawyer and not to the individuals involved. This movement is based on people, not primarily on law or abstract principles of non-violence. If all organizations and lawyers in connection with the movement can put people first, the resulting fluidity of approach can be most instructive to all of us. For people will provide fluidity: they are as varied as can be and will certainly accept various approaches to problems such as these.

SPREADING THE MOVEMENT

It is generally agreed that this movement, which has been centered in college student groups, should be spread both upward and downward. The attempt this summer has been largely downwards towards involving students of high school age. This is most important. It seems to me that it is also important to involve as many adults as possible. They should be involved at the action stage; that is, participating in sit-ins or in picket lines. The unifying factor is not a question of age or class or experience; it is a question of the dedication and willingness to participate in direct action. Adults may have more stake in the community, and therefore many of them may not be willing to participate. But others certainly will participate. Let's give them the opportunity.

Organizations can set up conferences and study groups. These groups should consider the use of the same method in other areas, such as employment projects. They can study the theory of nonviolence, and attempt to increase the depth of understanding within the movement.

The emotional excitement which has been generated by the movement can also be an aid in other forms of action which are not direct action. This is particularly true of Negro voter registration in the South and in the North. Those who have been afraid to attempt to register or have been apathetic, are now more vulnerable to an appeal to register. How can they hesitate to take this small risk when so many have been willing to go to jail?