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Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

8 1/2 Raymond Street Northwest

Atlanta, Georgia, 30314

SIX MONTH REPORT

27 December, 1963

John Robert Lewis

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*Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
6 Raymond Street, North West
Atlanta, Georgia, 30314*

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TO : Coordinating Committee
FROM : John R. Lewis, Chairman
SUBJ : Six Month Report

This is not to be a formal report, rather an informal collection of statements based on my observations, so please forgive the many personal references.

Since June of this year, it has been my pleasure to visit all of the SNCC projects in the protest areas, with the exception of Gadsden, Alabama. For the first time, I was able to see the Atlanta office as somewhat of a nerve center of SNCC. I had the opportunity to meet practically all of the field secretaries and field workers.

During the early part of the summer I found myself in Danville, Virginia. I was very much moved and impressed by the spirit and raw courage of the people of Danville, under a very dynamic SNCC-type leadership. The people of Danville were willing to put their bodies between the High Street Baptist Church and Police Chief McCain. In Danville, I had the opportunity to speak at rallies, to conduct workshops and to participate in a demonstration.

During the last part of June, after the hot days of Danville, the Executive Secretary and I, along with heads of several other civil rights and labor organizations, were asked to meet with the late President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson to discuss the President's Civil Rights Bill he had just presented to Congress.

During the early part of July, we were very much involved in the "Big Six" (later the "Big Ten") conferences which were dealing with the March on Washington (the Council For Civil Rights Leadership, and the United Civil Rights Leadership Conference). A good deal of our time went into the preparation of, and policy making decisions for the March on Washington.

Later in July, I had the opportunity to visit Greenwood, Mississippi. Under the distinctive direction of Bob Moses, perhaps Greenwood is a symbol, in one form or another, of what we would like to accomplish in our other projects. In Greenwood, I was able to see more than just the hard daily work of canvassing around the communities, voter registration clinics, mass meetings, etc. I saw, in Greenwood, a positive education program, not just for SNCC staff and young people, but for the whole community as well. The new library was off to a good start. Hundreds upon hundreds of books had been received and catalogued, and were made available to youngsters and adults alike, who used the library as an informal community center.

Later during July, I dropped over to Pine Bluff, Arkansas, to check on Bill Hansen, Ben Gringer, and Bob Whitfield. I spoke at mass meetings, worked to assist in the canvassing of the Negro community urging voter registration, and collection of poll taxes, etc.

From there I went to Somerville, Tennessee to see Walt Tilley. SNCCers and non-SNCCers were conducting a massive voter registration drive which appeared to be largely successful.

During the middle of July, I happened by chance into Selma--the heart of the Black Belt in Alabama--to take a peek at the Lafayettes. I was speaking at a mass rally when I received an urgent call, similar to those I have received on many other occasions: I was needed in Cambridge.

I spent some time in Cambridge, meeting with our Executive Committee member, Gloria Richardson, Field Secretary Reginald Robinson, local officials of Cambridge, and on other occasions, state officials of Maryland. From Cambridge, I proceeded, with Gloria Richardson, Reggie Robinson, and other civil rights people, to Washington to meet with Attorney General Robert Kennedy. It was at this meeting that we signed the now famous "Cambridge Non-Demonstration Agreement."

I think there's a great lesson to be learned from the events surrounding the Cambridge protest. Cambridge dramatized to the nation, and to the world perhaps, that there cannot be any such thing as "peace and tranquility" in any given community where protests have taken place until the demands of the Negroes are met. Furthermore, I think that Cambridge is one of the best examples of what a few people could have done by being steadfast in the face of opposition from both sides. By yielding to the demands of factions within the Negro community, we were forced into signing this agreement. We did so because we felt it necessary to present to Attorney General Kennedy and others with whom we were negotiating, a reasonable facsimile of unity. And here, I think it cannot be overstressed that there are times when "flexibility" is not the word. All of us are aware of the difference between resoluteness and mere pigheadedness.

During the first week of August I was in Mississippi at the time of the primaries for that state. I was in Greenwood, and later in Clarksdale, where an injunction curtailing my activities was served me, as well as a member of the National Council of Churches. The next two or three weeks were quite hectic with my being constantly in transit between Atlanta, Washington, and New York City, in preparation for the March on Washington.

Everyone on the Executive Committee is well aware of the facts surrounding the censoring of my speech, so I will content myself with making a few observations about the effect of that censorship. First of all, it must be noted that not only did pressure to change the speech come from officials like Burke Marshall, et al, but from Negro leaders within the March on Washington as well, notably, Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King. Again, "unity" was stressed. Now, there are two schools of thought about the changing of the wording of the speech. One is that either way (i.e. changing or not changing the wording), was bound to bring SNCC to the attention of the people and the press. The other is that I should have refused to accommodate Messrs. Wilkins, King, and the Archbishop. The fact remains that in the name of "unity" I did change the speech, at the same time trying to maintain the original tenor of the speech without sacrifice. This was done in consultation with the aid of our Executive Secretary James Forman, and our Executive member and March on Washington representative, Courtland Cox.

Since that time, I find that people are asking questions about SNCC. What is SNCC's program? What is SNCC doing? Who is SNCC? And usually, when they do find out, they want in some way or another to become identified with SNCC. For this we can thank our good brethern, Archbishop Boyle, Messrs. Wilkins, King, Young and Randolph. So much for that!

The march being over, I returned to Atlanta, after which I spent about a day and a half in Southwest Georgia--in Albany and Americus. I came back to Atlanta to attend a meeting of the Coordinating Committee which lasted about three days. The cowardly and insane murder of the children in Birmingham brought me to that unfortunate city. After the funeral in Birmingham, the Macedonian Call went up, and I was off to Selma, once again. I had the opportunity to be in contact with the local people by conducting workshops, canvassing neighborhoods, addressing mass rallies, etc. I also said "hello" to Jim Clark, and I got a close look at Al Lingo. After these momentuous events, I was granted a two-week vacation at the expense of Dallas County. I rested at the Dallas County Manor, and shuttled back and forth between Camps Selma and Camedia. All in all, what with trials, etc., I spent about three weeks as a guest of the State of Alabama.

The slogan of my Washington speech: *One Man - One Vote*, was never put into visible operation until signs were carried in Selma shouting this demand. In a real sense, this slogan served to awaken the Negro community to the issue of voting and the part in civil responsibility they have a duty to play. To the Southern white power structure, it demonstrated that they would have to use every means available to suppress this movement. The extreme, brutal attempts to quash registration in Selma served notice on Negroes everywhere in the South--as well as all citizens in the rest of the nation--that the white Southern power structure will continue to use brute force, and flagrantly violate constitutional laws (as well as laws of human decency) in order to deprive Negroes of their rights. One thing we can learn from Selma is that we can effectively have a positive program of Direct Action centered around Voter Registration.

The first week of November I had the opportunity to spend a few days in Mississippi working in the field (which I like) on the Freedom Vote Campaign. At the conclusion of the campaign, I went on an extended speaking engagement in cities throughout the country, which included Detroit and Ann Arbor, Mich.; Chicago, Ill.; Columbia, S.C.; Cincinnati, and Granville, Ohio; Meadville, Penna.; Burlington, Vt.; New York City and Newburgh, N.Y.; Washington, D.C.; and on the West Coast: Los Angeles, San Francisco, etc., following the paths made by some of our field secretaries and our Freedom Singers.

This part of my report is the most difficult to write, but since I feel a responsibility to the Committee, I would be derelict in my duty if I omitted it. I would like, first of all, to preface these remarks with this statement of principle. While I am not too concerned with our "image" in the sense that would affect our national policy: as an organization SNCC does what SNCC must do and in SNCC's own way, and that's that! I make no apologies for SNCC's image in that respect. What concerns me, however, is our relations with the public at individual levels. And this is where I must re-

count some rather unfortunate incidents which came to my attention during my travels.

It appears that some of our personnel have been abusing hospitality while on the road. It further appears that these same people have the mistaken idea that because they are FREEDOM FIGHTERS, they are to be accorded the red carpet treatment. Some, I am told, even go so far as to demand VIP treatment wherever they go. This attitude has done nothing to win SNCC friends and influence people. It has done quite the opposite, and I don't think it necessary to labor the point. There are two incidents to which I will refer in order to justify the charge I just made. The first is that two SNCCers spent some time in the home of someone who befriended them. They repaid that hospitality by leaving their host with a \$100.00 telephone bill. The other incident is that a young lady decided, for reasons best known to herself, to purchase a \$45.00 pair of shoes in the presence of a wealthy woman who is a FRIEND OF SNCC. It is beside the point the amount of money this young lady paid for her shoes, but it is NOT irrelevant that SNCC is not noted for being an affluent organization that is not obliged to depend upon the good will of contributors.

Recommendations:

1. There should be more effective screening of individuals who are to go on the road to campaign for funds for SNCC. They should not only be conversant with SNCC activities and policies, but with SNCC's underlying philosophy of nonviolence. I am well aware that some of us accept nonviolence as a technique, while others among us accept nonviolence as a philosophy of life. It is not an absolute necessity that the latter is a prerequisite for going on the road; however, it is desirable that the difference is known and adequately explained to those whom we would enlist in our struggle. It should also be reflected in our behavior.
2. Members of the Coordinating Committee and the Executive Committee should have a more intimate knowledge and a closer interest in the day to day operation and activity of the whole organization, as well as their own immediate area. Closer contact with the main office is needed.
3. SNCC should explore the necessity to move into metropolitan areas as well as opening up rural areas. The existing situation of farm automation is moving many of the younger population into the larger Southern cities, or else to the North. What is usually left behind in the rural areas are the very old, and/or the very young, for the most part.
4. While *esprit de corps* is both necessary and desirable to maintain cohesion within the organization, it must not degenerate into mere chauvinism. In spite of differences with other civil rights organizations, we must be willing to work and cooperate with them, at the same time grappling with the Herculean task of resolving external organization differences.

5. There should be some active efforts on the part of the Coordinating Committee to restore life to local protest areas. (We don't have a single strong or active protest area except for Cambridge. At the end of this meeting the Coordinating Committee should issue a *call* to all local protest areas to *finish the job*!
6. There is a definite need for more centralization of authority in the organization, and this should be investigated at this meeting. On some occasions, our field secretaries have gone into a community to conduct a *voter registration project*, only to switch to a program of *direct action*, without consultation with the Executive Secretary or anyone else in the Atlanta office. (The Executive Secretary, Director of Communications, Bookkeeper, and the Chairman could be in *Snow Storm, Maine*, when such actions occur without prior consultation.) At the same time, when people are arrested or some other dramatic event occurs, the field staff or project director expect immediate legal assistance, money for bail aid from the communications section, or, in other words: full attention from the Atlanta office. We must be mindful of the fact that SNCC is no longer a spontaneous movement, but an *Organized Revolution*.

"One Man - One Vote!"

JRL:srl


John R. Lewis

Season's Greetings!