

[1963]

SNCC

A Suggested Program of Support for the Student NonViolent
Coordinating Committee

Some thirty young people, most of whom are between 19 and 23 years of age make up the Field Secretary staff of SNCC. The Executive Director is James Forman. The National Board of SNCC includes Harry Belafonte, and Ella Baker, Southeastern Director for YWCA. Forman gave up a job teaching in the Chicago schools and his wife, Mildred, a job in one of the large utilities to go to Atlanta and head up the operation of SNCC. Between them they now are paid \$60 per week when they can get it.

The field secretaries come from all over the country. Most are Negroes, although currently three are white, and several are young women. All of them have been repeatedly jailed on a wide variety of charges, and many have been beaten in and out of jail, and shot at by passing motorists. Two have been hit.

They all left college or divinity schools either voluntarily or by expulsion for developing action movements in their schools. All, that is, but a few who joined directly from high schools. Without exception their devoted commitment to the cause is unquestionable, and a source of inspiration to those who know them. The director of the current Mississippi project, Robert Moses, for instance, took his Master's degree at Harvard and was a candidate for his Ph.D. there when he enlisted. Another lad of 19, Cordell Regon, finished high school in Nashville, Tennessee and became one of the outstanding leaders in the Albany movement.

The program of SNCC is two-fold. First is directing Voter Education projects. Currently these are under way in southwest Georgia; Gadsden, Alabama, throughout the Delta region of Mississippi, and in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The highly respected Southern Regional Council is also involved, and since it has access to tax-exempt funds, a number of SNCC field secretaries are given a little support from these funds, directly or indirectly. The work involves canvassing Negro communities, holding meetings to give inspiration and courage, and training in the requirements

of exercising the franchise, and then supplying transportation and moral support in registering and voting.

The second part of the SNCC program is community organization, with or without specific registration campaigns, depending on the circumstances. In this activity one or two Field Secretaries will go to a county--usually a county with a high percentage of Negro population, and consequently a high degree of oppression,--and begin to circulate, talking in pool halls, taverns, churches, sewing circles, club and lodge meetings, in fact wherever they find groups of Negroes together. Their greatest obstacles are fear and the apathy of those who have given up the fight, or who have never really believed that they were in fact born equal. Invariably, however, individuals and then groups become involved and then convinced that they must organize and begin to challenge, themselves, the status quo in their own communities.

We have all heard some of the results of this work. McComb, Jackson, Little Rock, Montgomery, Tallahassee, Baton Rouge, Albany, Terrell--the church-burning-county in Georgia, Cairo, Ill., are some of the better known symbols of the movement these young people are sparking throughout the South. There are dozens of others, not reported in the press, where the work is proceeding. SNCC acts as the catalyst that serves to unite communities which have been kept hopelessly divided for so many generations by the slavery-minded plantation owners, businessmen, and police forces.

Immediate and constant threat of jail, beatings, and death itself faces each of these young people, whether they are involved in voter education only, or in community organization. The activity has within it perhaps a real possibility for ultimately bringing full democracy to the South. At present it is a security

conscious operation, with meetings held often under cover of darkness and in unannounced locations. Always the tension is high, and the courage great. Just a few of the charges and arrest records accumulated so far are listed in the following tabulation.

Charges: Contempt of court for sitting in the white section of a courtroom, Vagrancy, Conspiracy, Criminal Anarchy, Suspicion of passing bad checks, Disturbing the peace, Parading without a license, Passing handbills without a license.

Arrests: Sam Block - five arrests; beatings, attempted lynching from which he escaped with another by jumping out of his second story window.

Charles McLaurin - five arrests. Has \$1500 price on his head by local whites.

Robert Moses - beaten by son of police officer, arrested at Registrar's office.

Charles Cobb - threatened by constable, brother of confessed murderer of Emmet Till.

Hollis Watkins - 70 days in jail.

Cordell Regon - 200 days in jail.

William Hansen (white) - 19 arrests.

Robert Zellner (white) - 7 arrests.

So the record runs. Probably the most significant single fact about the SNCC movement is that this small group of organizers is actually the single agency in the South whose members are so convinced that they will take these risks consistently and over long periods of time.

To the extent possible, these young people live by the hospitality they encounter wherever they work. They have been getting about ten dollars per week in good weeks from headquarters, plus reimbursement for car repairs, medical bills, or other unavoidable expenses.

We believe that it is imperative to establish a continuing program of support for this work. A dollar given to SNCC will pay dividends ten-fold, since it will act as the seed for growing and spreading the message of democracy among those who need it the most.

A number of excerpts from field reports, letters, and statements are appended to this report. To get the true flavor of their activities and needs, please read them.

Our goal should be to organize a "guarantee of subsistence" campaign to make secure a livable minimum of food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and a supply of organizing materials. These minimums are pitifully small, but when multiplied by thirty people, they become substantial in total. On the question of materials alone, their own publication, "The Student Voice", has been published very irregularly, and the Mississippi Free Press, a paper of great value in the Mississippi campaigns, needs a much wider circulation.