

THESE ARE THE QUESTIONS

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee exists primarily because racial segregation is rampant in the United States and the people within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee feel that these problems of racial discrimination and segregation should be eliminated.

There exists within SNCC at this present time some 210 staff people, some 200 other people working as volunteers, many people across the United States working in the Friends of SNCC groups. Undoubtedly these many people associated with SNCC have become involved in the movement for a variety of reasons. And, therefore, lacking this general consensus on what we are about, it seems only appropriate that each individual speak from his own conviction as to why he feels we should organize. Therefore I shall not attempt to project my ideas as universal within SNCC; I speak only for myself.

Whenever we are asked what is the difference between SNCC and other civil rights organizations we are essentially being asked, "why do we organize, who, where, when, how and what?"

Why Do We Organize? Obviously we are organizing because we feel that racial segregation is wrong. We are organizing because we ourselves have within us so many drives to end racial segregation that we feel that the best expression of these drives is to get other people to act in accordance with what we believe.

I believe we also organize because people who suffer from discrimination and segregation are denied a sense of dignity. In June, as you will recall, we had a long discussion on why we are organizing, and there was much discussion around the question of dignity. We were trying to find some umbrella, some over-all objective, around which we could close, or gather around, or form some type of consensus. It was then we projected the concept that a person working in Mississippi, a person earning \$2-\$3 a day, was being denied a sense of dignity, was being exploited economically and that this exploitation made it very difficult for him to hold his head high, to say to his family, "I am a man", in whatever full sense of the term we usually use it. Also a man without a job has a very difficult time holding his head high.

He is a man being deprived of his dignity.

A student, going into a lunch counter, knowing that he can buy coffee pots in the five and ten cents store, but unable to buy coffee at that lunch counter, is being denied a sense of dignity.

It is almost four years now since the student movement started. Many of us forget that the students who sat in, who were the historical forerunners to whatever we are doing now and will do in the future, were basically concerned about the caste system. The caste system in the United States denied them a sense of dignity. It was an affront to their existence, to their education and, one may say, to their sense of being an American. But, stripped of all this, it was undignified to say to a college-trained student, "come into the five and ten cent store, buy a coffee pot, but don't buy a cup of coffee". And also, the caste system had to be destroyed. In destroying bits and pieces of segregation, including the sitting at a lunch counter, forcing the owner to recognize that lunch counter discrimination was wrong, the students were helping to break down the larger area of the caste system. For the caste system re-enforces basic attitudes and these attitudes obviously will not be changed unless people chip away bit by bit, step by step.

Let us take this concept of dignity and look at what we have organized. Let us begin with the Albany Movement in 1961. Charles Sherrod, Cordell Reagon went into Southwest Georgia and they were attempting to organize a movement in Albany. First of all they were interested in voter-registration in the surrounding counties. But they believed at that moment there was too much fear in Terrell and Lee, in Dawson, in Baker County, too much fear for the people to attempt to go down to register to vote, and that this fear had to be overcome. One of the ways that it could be overcome was by showing in Albany, Georgia, the largest metropolis in that area, that people were not afraid. In order to displace the fear of Albany, people had to be organized into some form of movement. There were many civil rights groups in Albany, Georgia in 1961. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was another. It

came with the voter-registration project; its organizers assisted in the formation of the Albany Movement, trying to constantly project the local people as the people who should lead in that area. We were organizing basically to break down the fear in Albany and the surrounding counties, and once the fear disappeared and once the people felt that they could move on their own, then going to the voter-registration booth in Albany and the surrounding counties would not be that difficult. Time has proven this theory correct. Just last month the King-for-Congress campaign was a justification of that rationale.

In Mississippi we were concerned about voter-registration in the underprivileged areas, in the bayous, in the small cities. We started in McComb, gathered a few forces, went into the Delta, said COFO could be a viable entity. We are now organizing around political objectives, trying to force the nation to see what is wrong in the state of Mississippi.

I contend we are also trying to bring hope, we are trying to give a sense of dignity to the people, wherever we work, be it Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama or Georgia. Underlying all of our actions, we believe if the people themselves can feel a new spirit, a new sense of dignity, that they would easily gather together in some organizational form and begin to take certain steps of their own in order to help alleviate the suffering and the depraved human conditions in which we and they find ourselves. I am simply advancing dignity as a concept around which we can operate, around which we can give some definition to our work and some meaning to the lives of the people with whom we are working and around which we can also relate to them what it is that we are doing.

We have said we want to change the system, the system of segregation, the system of discrimination. We have said that it is not the people, it is not the segregationists, it is not the discriminator who is to blame, but rather it is the system. Now we did not carry the analysis of the system perhaps to other conclusions. We did not say, except in a few instances, that the system of segregation is wrapped up in the American system of political and economic exploitation, and this is a fact. But, when

we spoke of changing the system of segregation we did not completely speak of an overhaul in the economic and political institutions of this country.

Who Do We Organize? We are going to organize people.

What types of people? We are going to organize old people and young people, people without jobs, people with jobs. We have been concerned with organizing two groups of people: the students and the adults in the community. We should organize the young people in grammar schools. We should organize high-school students. We should organize those groups of students or ex-students who have dropped out of high-school, who have not gone to college. We should organize the college students. These are four categories of young people that we should attempt to organize.

On the level of the adults, we should organize the women. We must be aware that both within and without SNCC subtle and blatant forms of discrimination against women exist. We should consciously endeavor to correct this situation. We should organize the old people, people 50, 60, 70 years old. These are the people who have never had very much, who understand what we are talking about. We should organize the unemployed, young and old. SNCC as an entity has not been concerned with organizing unemployed people. We simply have not done that. We could organize the maids in the towns where we work and we could organize the men who are working in certain factories. Or we can work conjointly with some unions to help organize these people.

Where Do We Organize? Every city in the United States has people that can be organized. Every major city, every small village, North, South, East, West. Therefore we have to say: we only have so much time in our lives; we have limited resources, we have limited people, limited money, limited time, limited paper on which to write and to propagandize, and therefore we have got to consciously define an area for ourselves where we can organize.

Where have we organized in the past? On the college campuses and in the communities. During 1960 and the early part of 1961 the student movements on the campuses organized people, young people, who then motivated and forced into motion a lot of the

community forces, primarily in the big cities. In 1961 it became quite apparent that the student movement had to go beyond the large communities because many of these problems were in the process of being solved. But the cities of 50,000 or less were unorganized and there was very little motion in these places. A degree of complacency was setting in in the United States. We went into Albany, Georgia. We went into McComb and some of the cities of the Delta. One of the greatest features of Albany was that we demonstrated to the country that there were significant numbers of people in the Black Belt, in the hard-core areas of the South, in the smaller cities, that also wanted to be free.

The Black Belt area in the United States is basically unorganized. It's in the rural areas. We can predict that not many of the civil rights organizations, if any, are going to be willing to go and work in these areas where we have been working: Southwest Alabama, where we have not succeeded to any appreciable degree, Southwest Georgia, Black Belts in Mississippi and Arkansas. The Black Belt is an area that we can properly stake out as a territorial entity for ourselves.

There is a danger, however, in this form of organization and we must be aware of this. The population statistics show that there is a move from the rural areas to the cities. Therefore in the major cities, in a lot of the ghettos, in a lot of the pockets of black people there will be found many people who have come from these rural areas. The decision that we then have to make for ourselves is whether or not it is best to go into these rural areas or better to come into the cities. Given the resources that we have, given the way in which we have been working in these rural areas, I say that we should continue to work in the Black Belt. We must begin to find some way to transplant what we are doing to certain areas of the major cities in the South also.

There are other reasons why we should concentrate on the Black Belt at this particular moment. The significance of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was not so much in what it immediately accomplished in Atlantic City, but rather in what it accomplished for the future. In the Call to the Convention in 1968

there is a stipulation that the National Democratic Party shall set up a committee to review State Parties and that no State Democratic machine can come to the Convention and be represented if it is denying people the right to participate in that machinery. We know, as Claude Sitton has aptly pointed out, that the greatest problem, the greatest inequities in the electoral process, the greatest difficulty in people participating in the political machinery are going to occur in the Black Belt across the South. From now until 1968 we should establish a four-year plan. A plan for four years of activity in the Black Belt areas of the South so that we can go into every county, at least in the Black Belt area, and begin to document some of the inequalities in the electoral process, or rather in the political machinery, and be able to present this kind of a unified claim to the Democratic Convention in 1968. To do that we cannot wait until the year 1968 because it means getting our roots into those fertile areas now so that by 1967 the people have confidence in us and are willing to work with us on this program.

That's organizing in the communities in the Black Belt. It does not seem that we have to give up the other area of organization in the major cities. Most of the college campuses do exist in and around certain cities. We can set up two types of organizers, those on the college campuses or youth organizers in cities, and those in the communities. The college campus organizers can attempt to get people in the major cities to translate some of our programs into those areas. Let's make it concrete. Why can't the Nashville student movement be revitalized and people begin to set up Freedom Schools in some of the ghettos of Nashville? Why can't we here in Atlanta, for instance, even those of us who work in the Atlanta office, set up a Freedom School in Buttermilk Bottom and begin to teach one or two hours a week in the Freedom School?

We know that we cannot organize everything. We cannot work in every city. Therefore I would say let us forget the Northern cities. There are many people up there who can work on it. We just can't do everything. SNCC cannot save the world.

When Do We Organize? We organize now. Where Do We Organize? We organize in the Black Belt areas of this country

and in the poor sections of the cities. How Do We Organize? We organize people in Freedom Schools, in Community Centers, in voter-registration programs, in federal research programs. We organize people into maids' unions, we organize them in student groups, college groups, unemployed, drop-out groups, high-school groups, grammar school groups. We organize the old people. And Why Do We Organize? We organize in order to give people a new sense of dignity, to give them the machinery, the tools with which to fight their particular battles.