

A PROPOSAL
for
EXPANDED WORK AMONG SOUTHERN WHITE STUDENTS
and
AN APPALACHIAN PROJECT.

By SAM Shirah

THE BACKGROUND: In the fall of 1961, the Southern Conference Educational Fund initiated a project under which it made an annual grant to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for the purpose of work among white Southern students. The objective was to carry the message of the integration movement to these students and to attempt to stimulate them to action. For two years, Bob Zellner worked under this grant. In the fall of 1963, when Bob went back to graduate school, I took over the job. During his years on the project, Bob visited many Southern campuses and, while certainly no mass movement emerged among white students, he inspired many people---some by the spoken word, some by his example of courage. During the fall of 1963, I continued in this same pattern, visiting 20 campuses in six Southern states. I met with students in all these places, talked to them about the work of SNCC and their own problems, and sometimes joined in demonstrations with them. Late in the fall, however, it became apparent to me that there were many new factors in the world around us that lead us to a new situation and call for a new approach.

THE NEW SITUATION: In the first place, there are this year many more white students active on social issues than was true two years ago, or even one year ago. It is not apparent to everyone, because these things are not always reported in the press, but an upsurge is taking place among Southern white students on many campuses. No longer is it one or two white students active; often there are hundreds. For example, Nashville, Atlanta, Tallahassee and Gainesville, Fla., Chapel Hill, N.C., are spots where large movements of white students have developed. More and more individuals are seeking meaningful action elsewhere. This upsurge has been inspired by the Negro freedom movement, but at this point there is actually more motion on predominantly white campuses than on Negro ones.

Meantime, paradoxically, a crisis has been developing in the civil rights movement. More people are active in this movement than ever before, but despite this there have been no real breakthroughs. There are more segregated schools this year than last, more segregated housing---and more Negroes unemployed. It is evident that the Negroes in America, and the handful of whites who are now uncompromisingly committed to the freedom movement, do not have the strength, political or numerical, to bring real change in our society. Furthermore, the civil rights movement is now moving rightly more in the direction of a demand for decent living standards and jobs;

to win these demands the movement must ask for some fundamental changes in our society, and to do this successfully it must have more strength than it has today. It must have allies.

And thirdly, a crisis has been developing among the white people of the South and of the nation too, because of the rising rate of unemployment. This is caused by automation which is displacing thousands of workers each month. It is not going to get better; it is going to get worse. Obviously, these people too need some fundamental changes and the strength to win them.

All of this adds up to a tremendous challenge to my generation.

THE CHALLENGE: This challenge was verbalized by Bayard Rustin when he addressed the SNCC conference in Washington in November, 1963. He urged the white young people who want to help the civil rights movement to stop putting on blue jeans and going to Mississippi. He urged them instead to go into the white communities and organize the people there to form an alliance with the civil rights movement. Especially, he urged them to organize the white unemployed, to inspire them with the spirit and tactics of the civil rights movement--to the end that these two groups of disinherited people, the Negroes and the downtrodden whites, may work together to achieve a society that will be of benefit to all.

THE POTENTIAL: It seems to me that the time has come when it is possible to meet this challenge. I think we must offer hope to the benighted white people of the South. In many cases, their lot is as bad as that of the Negro or worse. They too are hungry, they too are jobless, they too are denied the vote in some places, they too are hemmed into slums as Negroes are into ghettos. And yet no movement in recent years has spoken to the needs of these people or offered them constructive channels of organization.

For too long, we have attempted to bring white people into the freedom movement. I think we must reverse this process and take the movement into the white communities. We must help white people see that the Negro has gained strength by casting off fear and that the white man is still the slave to fear but he can cast it off too. This is needed not only by the unemployed white, the poor and economically downtrodden white; the white Southern student, the white professor, the white professional man, the white minister---all these are enslaved in the South, denied their free speech and their opportunity for the good life.

I realize that the dream of uniting the Negro and white Southerner is not new. It was tried before the Civil War, it was tried during Reconstruction, and again during the Populist Movement and finally during the early days of the CIO organizing drive in the 1930's. Each time the effort failed, because when the chips were down, the white Southerner fled back to the false glory of his white skin rather than unite with his Negro brother.

Some of us dare to hope that it can be different in the 1960's because of three factors that have not existed before: (1) Today, because of automation the needs of the white man are desperate and will become more so; this may be stronger than his traditional prejudices. (2) Today, when the white man looks at the Negro he sees as he has not in the past a strong and effective movement, a movement which can be a source of strength to him and from which he can learn. And (3) today there is a growing of white students, many of them inspired initially by the civil rights movement, who want to pour their life and energy and talents into constructive social movements.

On the negative side, the danger we face today is also unprecedented. With not enough jobs to go around and the danger of whites and Negroes fighting each other for the few that do exist, unless a joint movement can be achieved, the white Southern unemployed and underemployed could become a mass base for fascism.

THE PROPOSAL: Therefore, after consultation with many people, both adult and student, in the civil rights movement, I propose that the white student project of SNCC be expanded to the greatest degree possible. I recommend that we put more workers in the field---visiting campuses and stimulating white students, and that as we bring them into activity we steer them where possible into community work in white communities, along the lines indicated above: to organize the unemployed and the downtrodden, to develop programs against poverty, slums, poor schools, etc.

A PILOT PROJECT: As a pilot project, to show how this will work and to be of service in a crucial area, I propose and have already started to develop an organizational program among the unemployed and under-employed miners in the Appalachian regions of Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee. This project will include community service programs, educational programs, political action in support of economic programs adequate to meet the needs of the area. We who are students have established good relations already with leadership among the people of this area, and the potential is great. We plan to develop an office and center in a central location (probably Appalachia, Va.). This center will serve as a location of community service programs, an organizational center for the unemployed, a training center for students coming into our program. It will be developed under the leadership of a local committee, and the student workers will go in to work under the direction and leadership of local people.

THE COST: We estimate we can operate this office for a five-month trial period on a budget of \$1000. For field work in colleges we need about \$5000 a year for each team of two persons. For field work in communities, one worker may be able to subsist for a year on about \$1000.

OUR REQUEST TO SCEF: In view of the expanded nature of our program,

we request the following of SCEF:

1. That SCEF join with other organizations in the sponsorship and financial support of our Appalachian office and center. We are making a similar request to SNCC, SCLC, Students for a Democratic Society, and Committee for Miners. If three of these four agree, the cost to each group will be \$250 for the five-month period, at which time the program can be evaluated for further support.

2. That SCEF pay to SNCC before September 1, 1963, the entire amount of its \$5000 grant which was approved for the year that ends at that date. We realize that SCEF has been under great financial strain this year because of the attacks on it and that it is remarkable that it has been able to make any payments on this grant. We are informed that thus far these payments have amounted to \$300 a month, which for the year would make a total of \$3600. We would not feel justified in asking for the additional \$1400, ~~xxxxx~~ except that we think our expanded program merits it---and we hope that what we are going will ~~help~~ SCEF to raise more money so that the additional amounts can be given.

3. That if possible SCEF raise whatever amounts it can over the projected \$5000 grant---using the challenge we present here as a means of reaching new money.

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