

POLITICAL ACTION ON THE
COMMUNITY LEVEL: Part 1

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This paper is to serve for discussion purposes and as an initial guide for chapter use. Your chapter may already be experienced in political action, but this is to serve those chapters who would like some concrete ideas before going into their community. Of course, there are variables but most locales will find the following applies to them. This paper should be used in conjunction with other material which the National Office has regarding community organization.

Why political action? An organized community is the most effective pressure group that can be created at the local level; it can form a lobby for legislation, can break a corrupt political machine, can improve community conditions through political pressure and through self-help programs, and can set up cooperative community projects.

What is political action? The definition of political that would fit our context would be "of or pertaining to the organization or action of individuals, parties, or interests that seek to control the appointment or action of those who manage the affairs of a state." Therefore, when a CORE chapter pickets to seek redress and change, it is taking political action. When we ask that laws be changed or existing laws be enforced, we are taking political action.

As your community organization program develops, there are some things which always must be kept in mind. CORE is working to develop leadership within the community. This means that whenever you go to the Traffic Commissioner to negotiate for a stoplight on an intersection, you should be accompanied by mothers who will stress the need for their children's safety and tell the commissioner about the accidents which have occurred due to the lack of a traffic light. When you go to the mayor or housing commissioner to negotiate demands for better housing, you should be accompanied by the leaders of tenants councils which you have helped to organize. You should not attempt to negotiate on such a level until you have organized the tenants councils. Always try to let the members of the community do the talking. You will benefit by an acting out of the situation before the appointment with members of CORE acting as the civil authorities and the members of the community acting as the negotiators. Then discuss weaknesses in the negotiation before going to your meeting. You will have to speak at some points in the discussion to point up or underline pertinent issues. Never underestimate the power of this method of negotiation. When officials see CORE with community leadership behind the organization, they are more likely to be impressed than with CORE negotiating alone.

When choosing your first targets, pick areas of prime vulnerability. Choose those areas that indicate obvious discriminatory practice. When you go to the Sanitation Commissioner to protest that areas of your community do not have garbage collected from one to two weeks at a time, have the figures that show the white community gets garbage collection more often. The street lighting may be better in the white neighborhoods, etc. If you receive no satisfaction in negotiations and finally have to go into direct action, the issue will be a clear one when you present it to the press. Also, if the community is involved in your demonstration, the issue will be pointed up even more. It is often better to stage your demonstration directly in the

community, where you have a chance for greater numbers, more unity and authenticity, rather than inside your city hall. This, of course, depends on your local conditions.

We also must never make the mistake of using the community to back up demands which are largely our own. We are there to back up the community. There will be national projects where we will present the case to the community for their support and CORE will provide the direction for other projects, but we need the community just as much as the community needs us. In fact, we have more to lose without it--a ghetto area has nothing to lose, so they will be skeptical and large portions of it will be unmoving at your first attempts. Only by thorough and repeated follow-up will you begin to gain their confidence. Don't expect the name of CORE to make vast inroads...you'll have a head start and they'll open doors for you that they wouldn't for others, but it won't be easy.

When working with the community, sooner or later appeals and demands must be addressed directly to legislators and the chapter then becomes involved in the legislative process. The widening of the scope of CORE's voter registration programs has necessarily brought involvement in political education. Voter registration must be directed towards an end. CORE's end has been the full involvement of the Negro community in the structure which governs; only through this involvement can our goals be achieved.

The "how to's" of any chapter's program will vary with the locale of the chapter: urban, suburban, rural, North, South, etc. A few basics to follow as you begin your program are:

A. Study of local election laws: Members of the chapter should be educated in these laws; workshops could be conducted and inquiries made as to how members of CORE might serve as poll-watchers at registration and elections. Those long lines, which usually occur in the minority communities, are almost always due to stalling on the part of those working the election boards to support an incumbent machine or inefficiency and lack of knowledge concerning procedures or both. The Board of Elections is chosen through patronage of the machine in power, so a hostile beauracracy is faced when attempting a breakthrough. A little patience has to be exercised when dealing with situations which result when beauracracy proves most frustrating, but if you know your facts, you can usually spot errors and abuses. When your group is confident of what it's doing, alert the press. Report all abuses and inaccuracies to the Board of Elections, the police officers at your polling place (get badge number) and report the results of your investigation and complaints to the press (and to the Department of Justice where appropriate). Always have copies of the local election and registration procedures with you and check for slip-ups before making your complaint. (Simplified copies of these procedures are given to members of most local boards before they serve and they should be available at your Municipal Board of Elections.) If you can, get assistance from reputable attorneys.

Corrupt political machines always benefit by low registration and a low percentage of voting. Higher percentages mean the community is becoming informed and wants change and action.

B. Study the precincts in the minority community. See which precincts the state senators and representatives come from. Find out which precincts the U. S. Senators and Representatives come from. (Each precinct will be dependent on the other for support and endorsement, etc.) Do those holding office represent the community's needs? How does the system of patronage work in the community? Who controls the patronage? In the courts? In the housing boards, etc.? What is the racial make-up of the precincts? Which areas are the most depressed?

C. Study the local political clubs. Often you will find two clubs of one party in the same precinct---one white and one Negro. Or you will find that Negroes are discouraged from joining the club---annual membership is prohibitive, etc. Does the club have a constitution? Is it a good one? Does the community ever use the club? The local political club is supposed to serve the community in which it's situated.

In the process of finding out some of the things listed above, you will find that many ideas will occur to you. Some of them will be unprintable and some you could go to jail for, but remain non-violent. You may be discouraged and remain steadfast in your belief that "all politicians are alike." But they aren't. Every now and then, you'll find a man of principle trying to keep his head above water. It's very difficult for him to do so without support, which brings up our next point...

D. Study legislation in municipal and state bodies that fall in line with your chapter's program and then discuss the relevant legislation with knowledgeable members of your community---perhaps in a forum. The discussion will raise new ideas and from all of the above, you will find those members of the community who will evidence capabilities of potential leadership. Find the authors of the legislation that fall in line with your chapter's program---after investigating their past records, you can determine if this is the type of representative that you can contact in the future for assistance. You will also probably want to contact him to support other legislation which will benefit the needs of the community. In the process, you can learn further details of the political situation in your locale from a reliable source.

Some chapters have already become involved in local elections; some have supported candidates for office. But if your chapter ventures into this area, some basics must be kept in mind. The most important is that the candidate you support must stay clear of ties with the leadership of corrupt political machines...the problem of political patronage has too many pitfalls. Many "reform" movements have come full circle back to the old corrupt practices in such rapid order, that a few local political clubs in the major cities have found it necessary that all those in leadership positions take pledges of accepting no patronage positions whatsoever while serving in office, due to the conflict which arises.

Chapters should not run candidates until their programs have been underway for some time and are smoothly functioning--this does not mean that you can't support a candidate if a top-notch one comes along. But there should be full discussion within the chapter before doing so.

The problem of patronage is an area of politics filled with quicksand; the novice can go under because he is not aware of what he's getting into. Patronage is defined as "the right or control of nomination to political office;" also "the offices, contracts, honors, etc. which an official may bestow by favor."

One type of patronage is commonly called "no-show" jobs. This is the type of job whereby a politician will put someone on his payroll, but the person doesn't have to report for work. A corrupt machine will use this method to buy loyalty.

Another type of patronage is that which is that which is legitimate appointment to a public office. The problem which arises in this area is that when a good leaders, who is principled, is appointed to public office conflicts will arise if he continues to serve on his post in the local club or local organization. Perhaps the organization doesn't support a city program or will want alterations to be made on the city program, and the leader of the group is in conflict---if he represents his group's position, he is subject to pressure from the city administration. It might be necessary for him to resign his post in the local group when taking the city job so that he can represent an independent viewpoint and the group can function more independently.

Under the system of "no-show" jobs, the public is bilked of money. Our answer should be found in our programming, which demands public work projects to take up the slack in employment. This can even be carried on in the community, such as rehabilitation of housing. We are there to serve community needs, and the community is not served by getting jobs for one or two individuals while others could be served by the building of more and better schools, public housing, playgrounds and recreation centers. We should press for these positive measures along with an effective and responsive police department, a meaningful health program including nutrition and family planning.

If your chapter has no strong community organization program going on very steady legs, messing in the local political set-up will produce major setbacks, trouble and sometimes, disaster. Just approach with caution, examine thoroughly before you act, and your chapter can become a vital force in the community.

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