

Statement by John Lewis, Chairman
Staff meeting February 1965

With a deep sense of humility I speak to you today in an attempt to share with you some of my feelings and thoughts on SNCC and the black Civil Rights struggle. I have no words of wisdom, nor have I been dreaming great dreams. From the outset I am aware of the fact that we are at a crucial juncture in the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The situation demands clarity, firmness, and certainty, as well as an unmatched capacity for planning and foresight.

On my arrival in Atlanta after having been out of the country for two months, I was thoroughly informed about the questions and issues that were raised at both the staff meeting and the staff retreat. I have read the positions papers, the minutes, and have talked with many members of the staff with great interest concerning the nature of your deliberations in Atlanta and in Bay St. Louis. I only regret that I was unable to take part in the many sessions of serious discussion and thinking. Fortunately or unfortunately I was in Africa on what I like to call a mission of learning, or an attempt to cement the relation between the liberation movement of Africa and the Civil Rights Struggle in this country. I am convinced more than ever before that the social, economic, and political destiny of the black people of America is inseparable from that of our black brothers of Africa.

It matters not whether it is in Angola, Mozambique, Southwest Africa, or Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Harlem, U.S.A. The

Struggle is one of the same.. Call it what you may--racial segregation, social, economic, and political exploitation, or what the Freedom Fighters in South Africa are demanding an end to....imperialism and colonialism. It is a struggle against a vicious and evil system that is controlled and kept in order for and by a few white men throughout the world.

We are struggling against the same powers. We must question the United States intervention in the Congo. We in SNCC must in good conscience ask of the United States government whether it stands with struggling freedom fighters of South Africa, or with the U.S. supported oppressive government.

The cry in the dependent countries of Africa is still One Man One Vote. It is a cry for Freedom, Liberation, and Independence. It is a cry of People to have some control over their political destiny. The cry of SNCC is essentially the same, for it is a cry to liberate the oppressed and politically denied black people of this country. I think we all recognize the fact that if any radical social, economic, and political changes are to take place in our society, the masses must be organized to bring them about. We must continue to inject something new and creative into the very vein of our society. We must continue to raise certain questions and certain problems that we can neither answer nor solve, but must dramatize them in such a way that they would force the government to address itself to the demands and basic needs of all the people. I have noticed the constant use by the staff of the words "It seems

to me." These words are extremely significant. For our job in Mississippi, Alabama and the deep south is to get people to say "It seems to me," to get people to express their ideas, their opinions. One of the basis for the Freedom School is that the students say "It seems to me."

Those of us in SNCC are only playing roles on the American scene, for we are here today and gone tomorrow. SNCC is one of many forces at work in our society for certain basic changes. There is something unique about SNCC which sets us apart from other organizations and groups---at least we tend to think that way. In a real sense I would like to consider SNCC as a spark to begin the flame for basic social, economic, and political changes. SNCC is the shot in the arm of a sick society. We are the birth pains in the body politic. We have made summer projects respectable; we have made Freedom Registration acceptable. We have even made the idea of One Man One Vote "respectable;" just look around at some of the other civil rights groups.

Our job is to help educate, help prepare people for political action. Our job is to organize the unorganized into a vital force for radical, social, economic, and political change. Our job is to create what I like to call pockets of power and influence, where the people can say "this is what I want and need." Our primary concern must be the liberation of black people. At the same time knowing that there are many white people in this

country who are victims of the evils of the economic and political system. Black people feel these evils more for we are not only economically exploited and politically denied but we are also dehumanized by the vicious system of segregation and racial discrimination. So our work must continue to be in the black communities, in the rural areas, the farms and hamlets of the slums and ghettos of the cities.

To many of us are too busy telling white people that we are now ready to be integrated into their society. When we make appeals for active, moral, and financial support they have been geared toward the white community and for the most part not at all toward the black community. This is true of all the major civil rights organizations including SNCC. We must dig deep into the black centers of power throughout this nation not just for financial reasons but as a base of political support. I am convinced that this country is a racist country. The majority of the population is white and most whites still hold to a master-slave mentality.

Father Thomas Merton raises this question in his book, Seeds of Destruction: Is it possible for Negroes and whites in this country to engage in a certain political experiment such as the world has never yet witnessed and in which the first condition would be that whites consented to let Negroes run their own revolution, giving them the necessary support, and being alarmed at some of the sacrifices and difficulties that this would involve?

We have reached a crucial moment in American history and the history of the world. For the word revolution is becoming common. In 1960 with the Sit-in movement, the Freedom Ride in '61, and the other events through the spring of '63, the word "revolution" was at first accepted with tolerance, and as a pleasantly vivid figure of speech. With the Negro masses demanding jobs, Southern Negroes demanding the vote, with the Democratic Convention Challenge and now the Congressional Challenge by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the word Revolution is becoming a bad word, with more and more disapproval, because it comes too near the truth. Why? What is a social or political revolution?

What does it mean to say that a people struggling for civil rights amounts to a revolution? Much as it may anger some die-hard whites, the fact that a Negro sits down next to a white woman at a lunch counter and orders a Coke and a hamburger is still short of revolution. When the Negroes in Lowndes County, Alabama, where there are 12,000 Negroes and 3,000 whites, and not a single Negro is registered, get the vote and actually manage to cast their vote on Election Day without getting shot; this is still not revolution, though there may be something radically new about it. The real question still is, who will they vote for: Governor Wallace, Bull Connor, or Jim Clark?

Southern politicians are much more aware of the revolutionary nature of the situation than are the good liberals in the North, who believe that somehow Negroes (North and South) will gradually and

quietly "fit in" to white society, exactly as it is, with its power structure, its affluent economy, its political machine, and the values of its middle class suburban folkways.

White America as a whole seems to think that when Negroes of the South begin to use the vote, they will be content with the same candidates who were up the last year and the year before. As a matter of fact, Southern politicians realize very well that when the Negroes turn out in full force to vote- and thereby establish themselves as a factor to be reckoned with in Southern politics, the political machines of the past are going to collapse in a cloud of death. There are enough black people in the South to make any free election death for the status quo.

I think past history will testify to the fact that white liberals and the so-called affluent Negro leader will not support all our demands. They will be forced to support some of them in order to maintain an image of themselves as liberal. But we must also recognize that their material comforts and congenial relations with the establishment are much more important to them than their concern for an oppressed people. And they will sell us down the river for the hundredth time in order to protect themselves. We all saw this in Atlantic City. For this reason, as well as to support their own self-esteem, white liberals are very anxious to get closer to what they call the "seat of power", or to have a position of leadership and control in the Black Revolution, in order to apply the brakes when they feel it is necessary. Why was the United Civil Rights Leadership Council organized during the summer of 1963? Because

a segment of White America felt that the revolution was getting out of hand, and by raising money and procuring some big money, they could control the movement. There have been other situations where an attempt has been made to remove the revolutionary sting from the movement. // The civil rights revolution is a manifestation of a deep disorder that is eating away the inner substance of our society. Thoreau said "If a man does not keep pace with his companion, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away." As William Melvin Kelly makes it clear in his first novel, "A Different Drummer," the Negro hears a drummer with a totally different beat, one which the white man is not yet capable of understanding. It is a must for the black people to make themselves visible in order for white America to pay attention. Even white staff members must recognize the fact that we are caught up with a sense of destiny with the vast majority of colored people all over the world who are becoming conscious of their power and the role they must play in the world.

If the movement and SNCC are going to be effective in attempting to liberate the black masses, the civil rights movement must be black-controlled, dominated, and led. The oppressed people, the common people, the little people, are the people who rise up.

In closing I make an appeal to all of us; not just for SNCC's sake, but for the sake of the total struggle and the people who are depending on us. I appeal to the silent staff, the intellectuals, Southerners and Northerners, black and white, to move forward in building a better, stronger, and more effective organization

with a sense of purpose and direction.

Finally, lest I be accused of chauvinism, we are what we are.

We are not the Students for a Democratic Society. We are not the

Salvation Army. We are not American Friends Service Committee.

We are an organization, yet a movement of people with different

backgrounds, ideas, hopes, aspirations, working for a just and

open society. We are the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee.

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