

SELMA, ALABAMA

The following report is an analysis of the situation in Selma as seen by SNCC staff members Silas Norman and John Love. This report was prepared just prior to the attempted march from Selma to Montgomery, and provides an overall, long-range perspective from which the events of that march can be viewed.

We first started working in Selma in February of 1963. Our idea was then and still is that we should try to get Negroes registered to vote, with age and residence being the only qualifications for registering. This made sense in Dallas County, which is 57% Negro and where Negroes, if they could vote, could win some political power.

Negroes still can't register to vote in any significant numbers in Selma, but we have gotten somewhere. As a result of the recent demonstrations federal District Court Judge Thomas ordered that Negroes who wished to register must first sign an "appearance book," and that all those who had signed this book would have to be processed by July. (SNCC staff in Selma disagreed basically with that requirement that Negroes should be made to sign an appearance book in order to be processed, as this was just one more form of discrimination.) Sheriff Clark has made a mockery of this court order by calling off the numbers which the people were given when they signed the appearance book so fast that people can't possibly get from their place in line to the registrar's office in time to be registered. Sheriff Clark may keep doing this; we don't know. But in any case Judge Thomas's order says that all those who have signed the appearance book (over 3,000 people) must be processed by July.

There are some things about Selma that make it easier to work than some of the more rural areas. For one thing, Selma wants to attract industry from the North and elsewhere, and so it cares about its public image.

For another thing, white folks won't come to town and shop when demonstrations are going on; so we can hurt Selma economically that way.

Thirdly, a boycott can be effective. One began a few weeks ago that has already been effective, from what we hear from information sources in the white community. The local people started this boycott -- individually and spontaneously -- when they saw some of the merchants they buy from on the Sheriff's posse, and they got mad about that. The boycott is being organized by the Negro businessmen. The Negro community is setting up its own store, and is arranging motorcades to Montgomery to buy things they can't provide for themselves in Selma. We think that the boycott will lead to violence, eventually. It may spread across the state, and if it does we can really put the economic squeeze on the state of Alabama.

Fourthly, jail space is limited in Selma, and feeding prisoners is expensive.

A fifth thing that may help us, not only in Selma, but all over the state, is that President Johnson may be a little bit cool toward Gov. Wallace, who refused to support him in the last election.

Finally, there seems to be some confusion and uncertainty in the white community over how to deal with us, and a possible split between the supporters of the brutal Sheriff Clark and the more moderate Commissioner of Public Safety, Baker. The old administration (which was in office until Oct. of 1964, gave Clark a completely free reign, and made no visible efforts to restrain him. The present administration seems more anxious to control him -- though it is questionable whether this is possible -- because they feel that Clark's actions in dealing with civil rights workers are harmful to the image that this administration is trying to build up of Selma. So we have these things going for us in Selma.

One of the strongest forces operating against us in Selma is Sheriff Clark and his posse of about 300 men. (Clark claims the posse is only 200 men. He claims also that their main function is to deal with things like floods, and fires, and similar events.) Clark's brutality has been shown in many incidents, the most notable to date being the forced march in which people were driven out of Selma and into the county by possemen armed with cattleprods.

At this point it doesn't seem that the people of Selma have been turned around by Clark's brutality. The 300 people who were active in the first Freedom Day in October of 1963 are still with us, and are determined to get the right to vote no matter what it takes, no matter how many times it means going to jail or getting beat. Another 3,000 to 4,000 have become active since that first Freedom Day (over 2,500 were arrested in the recent demonstrations.)

From Selma and Dallas County we are moving out immediately into Perry, Wilcox and Lowndes counties. By the summer we expect to be in all 19 of the Black Belt counties in Alabama (counties with over 44.9 % Negro population.) We plan to move two workers into a county at a time -- to make contacts, to open up the areas, and eventually to hold groups meetings, freedom days, and so forth.

Besides the fact that these other counties are more rural than Dallas County, there is another important difference between them and Dallas County. These counties have no official posse (though Sheriff Clark sometimes moves his posse around that state); but there are state troopers. (It was state troopers who beat the movement to death in Gadsden, by using cattle prods on people, beating women in their breasts, and men in their testicles.) We hope, by scattering our workers out among 19 counties that we will also scatter the resources of the State, and thus make those resources less powerful in any one particular area.

We have a particular problem in Wilcox and Lowndes counties. Alabama voting laws require that a would-be voter have a qualified elector vouch for him. Since there is not a single registered Negro voter in either Wilcox County (79 % Negro) or Lowndes County (84% Negro), we, if we are going to comply with this requirement, must find a registered white elector who will vouch for a Negro. So far, city officials, tax collectors, the deputy sheriff and others have been asked to vouch for Negroes, and all have refused. SNCC's basic position, however, is that the very requirement the a would-be elector have a aregistered elector vouch for him is wrong, and should be done away with.

There is another county we plan to work that does not have many Negroes in it. This is Autauga County, where Lady Bird Johnson has her property. Most of the Negroes there are share-croppers, who live under the same kinds of conditions that Negroes everywhere in the South live under. When LBJ starts talking about his War on Pover ty, and when he claims that all people should have the right to vote, we can point to Autauga County and ask people to think about whether LBJ really means what he says.

We'd like to see an FDP get going in Alabama, and if the local people want that, then we'll support it. The whole question of where we're going as a political force is one of our differences with SCLC, however, and must be discussed in that context.

SCLC came to Selma as an organization in December of 1964. We are trying to work with them. When we expand into the various Black Belt counties, for example, SCLC will also expand. They are putting two persons in each county also. It has not yet been decided whether SNCC will work the same cities and towns in those counties. We have a number of differences with SCLC, hwever, that we have to deal with. One of these is that SNCC is demanding a voter reigstration test with no literacy requirement. SCLC is not pushing hard for that yet. Another difference we have with SCLC is that we support the idea of local people writing their own voting bill, submitting it to Congress, and lobbying for it; while SCLC opposes that idea. A third difference is that we support the idea of an FDP -- a third party in Alabama, while SCLC would rather see Negroes registered and then channeled into either the Democratic or Republican Parties. A fourth difference is that SCLC pushes the idea that local people need leaders like Martin Luther King and Rev. Abernathy, and others, while SNCC says that local people build their own leaders, out of their own communities -- that they build their own self-confidence by doing this. Whether or not we will be able to work out these and other differences with SCLC remains to be seen.

One final note on our future plans. On March 15 there will be a convention of students from Tuskegee, Miles and Stillman Colleges. We hope to use these students to mobilize the local people for a Peoples' Conference to be held sometime around the end of March to mid-April. At this Peoples' Conference future programs for the state will be decided.