

S  
SNCC NEWS SERVICE  
STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE  
360 Nelson Street SW  
Atlanta, Georgia 30313  
688-0331

#### PURPOSE OF THE ATLANTA PROJECT

[There is a war being fought in the back alleys of Atlanta. Landlords are locking tenants out of buildings and in one case they have demolished a building to discourage those who dare talk about better housing conditions. Tenants huddle around fires in front of buildings from which they've been evicted, break locks on their houses and hold rallies in the street to collect money for friends arrested by police at the scene of an eviction.]

Atlanta is about to explode. Tempers of Atlanta Negro citizens are pitched high as a war between tenants and landlords and marshals accelerates.

Atlanta landlords have the same relation to their tenants as industrial bosses had to their workers before unions, Taft-Hartly and child labor laws. There is the same potential for organizing in such slum areas as Vine City, as there was in the sweat shops of the 1930's. Taking advantage of this fact, SNCC has started a Vine City Project.]

The Vine City SNCC project represents an intensifying by SNCC of its involvement in the major urban centers in the South and especially in the city of Atlanta.

A SNCC statement says, "The compromising and politically expedient actions of the seven other Negro assemblymen in the Julian Bond affair suggests that unless SNCC steps up its political activity in Atlanta, the benefits of years of struggle may well fall to the politically ambitious and the ward political hack."

SNCC states further that "the controversy surrounding Julian Bond, his strong stand based on moral conviction, opens the possibility of developing an alternative political model to the conventional politician." The young politicians say, "Julian Bond suggests the symbol of humanitarian politics, a politics based on principle, a politics identified with and grounded in the hopes and needs of the very poor."

[It was around the denial of representative-elect Julian Bond his seat in the state legislature that the Atlanta movement started. The main headquarters is at 142 Vine Street, on the fringe of Julian Bond's 136th District. It may have failed thus far to gain the Vine Street people representation in the legislature, but it has given the people a voice--the voice of protest and rebellion.]

The purpose of the Atlanta program, then, is more than one of voter registration--the majority of Atlanta Negroes are already registered. It is a program of political organization and education.]

As SNCC worker Bill Ware says, "The project has already selected a number of assembly districts and municipal wards in which it will concentrate its efforts. Through house to house canvassing, block organization, small political education workshops and the establishment of a new community newspaper (and perhaps eventually, even a small community radio station, citizen band,) the Atlanta staff will attempt to raise the issues of segregated and slum housing, inadequate medical care, overcrowded and inadequate education, low wages, job discrimination, punitive welfare relief, and even the war in Vietnam."

Although the project supports action programs--picketing, sit-ins, rent strikes, and boycotts--by community people, the primary emphasis is political and the immediate objective will be to work for the emergence of a series of political candidates of Julian Bond caliber and integrity in the many important state and county elections this fall.

The project hopes to operate with a budget of \$33,520 a year.

Organizer Bill Ware said this fall the project will be concerned with 4 or 5 districts where the Negro vote is important. For example, Mrs. Doris Reed of the 137th District will run against Grace Hamilton if she is given the proper support. Ware says, "Mrs. Hamilton is a white woman although her skin is black. She often votes with the whites. She says she is having a good time working with a legislature that is robbing the Atlanta populace of decent intelligent representation. She ignored an invitation of the Vine City Council to a housing meeting."

An interesting adjunct of the Vine City project is the Bureau of African Affairs. Organized by John Clark, the Bureau hopes to stimulate exchange of knowledge and personnel between Africa and the Atlanta movement. John hopes to establish a research department to provide up-to-date films on African affairs.

#### WHERE THE VINE CITY PROJECT IS LOCATED AND WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

The Vine City Atlanta project is run from a two room shotgun house at 142 Vine Street. It is maned by Heligard Berland, Bill Ware, Donald Stone and Gwen Robinson. Forty-two volunteers from Spellman wind their way down the unpaved streets of Vine City during the week to help organize the ghetto of ramshackled, rambling overcrowded wooden houses.

As in most SNCC projects, little kids find the office a haven. They run in and out all day grabbing bumper stickers, flyers and the "Nitty Gritty", the movement newspaper, and seeing who can get rid of them fastest.

Also typical of SNCC offices, there is a problem with the landlord. Brewer-head Realty Company sent the Vine City office an unusual notice February 28th, the day before the rent was due, which read: "A warrant will be issued if rent isn't paid in time."

The 28th was an average day in the Vine City office. Three young ladies sat in their coats with their backs against a wall decorated with precinct maps. They squirmed and giggled--uncomfortable to be speaking with other Negroes about matters they thought only white folks discussed. They must have thought themselves part of an amusing play as they spoke to Bill Ware about politics. Wasn't it absurd for them to consider themselves seriously? SNCC workers Bill Ware, Frank Hollaway, Robert Moore and Donald Stone thought not.

Stone, a man of philosophical temperment, who spouts complete quotes from great works of literature at propitious moments, asked the young women their names. They replied, shyly, in turn, Jesse May, Elaine, and Pearline.

Half to himself, Stone said, "Those girls are beautiful and don't even know it. Frank handed the girls ten copies of the "Nitty Gritty" newspaper. The girls opened it and Pearline pointed to a picture inside, "There's Martha's house." The picture was of pickets in front of the run down houses on Markham Street.

"We are trying to organize to get all the things other people have," Bill explained. "Because we are running people for office we need help to get people registered. We have to knock on doors and talk to people. We need people to drive voters to the poles. In order to get the word out about our organization we have a newspaper to hand out. We also need help in fund-raising activities. We can't get money from the North for what we want to do and we want to get it from our own people."

"We've been listening to the white man too long," Bill continued speaking while fingering his beard pacing in front of the girls. "We must listen to one another another. If we don't take ourselves seriously, nothing's going to change. Neither God nor President Johnson will change things."

"No one's going to free us unless we get on the move. Today people in the Markham Street area picketed the largest slum lord in the city."

"One thing I don't like is preaching--even when I'm the preacher. In church, class and on radio and TV everyone preaches to you. But no one has respect for enough to listen to you!" The girls were looking Bill in the eye for the first time. They were serious and Elaine's dark eyes were on fire with a deep hurt and yearning.

"We want to listen to you," Bill said. "We want people to work together and to talk to one another about problems. The newspaper should be looked upon as our newspaper."

Pearline was the most talkative. "Some of us girls could get together and give a party," she said. "The boys at the party could give money to the Atlanta project." Her hands moved gracefully, fingers fanning out when they wanted to emphasize a complicated and fingers snapping closed at the end of a sentence.

Bill kept talking. He spoke a lot about organizing technique--too much for a confident organizer. But then maybe that is part of the undefinable SNCC manner.

Bob Moore, a serious looking fellow, seemed to enjoy the conversation. Primarily concerned with research, Bob is studying poverty programs, education, housing, welfare and hospitals.

#### HISTORY OF PROJECT

Although the Atlanta project started as a response to the attack of Julian Bond by the state legislature and the Atlanta newspapers, it has grown to become a force with its own momentum. It is now moving on the relatively safe grounds of issues relevant to the Negro community. Within the Negro community SNCC will have some control of where and when to fight and what issues will be fought. The enemies of Julian Bond will find it hard to unleash their libelous attacks as he retreats from blows of his white critics to the Negro community, picking his own time to fight; retreating but fighting back. It will be in the crowded teaming alleys of Vine City that ideas and programs will painfully be created and grow to become black power. That's where Julian Bond will find his power to attack the Atlanta power structure.

The first community program of the Vine City movement was an attempt to help families early in February who were suffering from the cold. Hot suppers and housing was provided for people without adequately heated homes. Al Uimer, Vine City Council worker said, "We've seen 50 houses today with inadequate heating."



Out of 6,349 housing units in the 136th District, only 710 have steam heat and 208 have warm air furnaces, 678 have built-in room heaters, while most use smoky expensive and dangerous wood and coal heaters. Of those using wood stoves and fire places to keep warm, 1,627 have flues and 3,289 have no flues. 16 dwellings have no heating unit at all to guard against the rugged Atlanta winters.

Julian Bond sent a telegram to Mayor Ivan Allen which read:

"Word has reached me of the suffering which many of the people in my district are facing because of the current cold wave. I believe this condition is the result of the city's failure in its responsibility to ensure that every resident of Atlanta has adequate and comfortable housing. There is no justification for houses without heat. I regret that I am presently snowbound in Washington, D. C.

However, I call upon you to mobilize all the resources of the city to provide adequate heat and blankets, emergency food and medical care to those people who are undergoing serious hardship because of the cold. Furthermore, I urge you to initiate immediate prosecution of those landlords whose houses do not meet the standards of the city's housing code."

Mayor Ivan Allen replied to the plea of Bond and other concerned citizens by saying he had communicated with the Department of Public Welfare of Fulton County, the American Red Cross, the Atlanta Housing Authority, the Building Inspector's Office of the City of Atlanta Inc., and that all of these organizations were operating on emergency basis to meet the crisis.

Bond said in a telegram sent January 31, "One of my aids has communicated with both the Red Cross and the Public Welfare Department only to learn that these organs are totally unequipped to respond to the needs of the people..."

Shortly after the exchange between Bond and Allen a man froze to death in his apartment.

The landlords reaction to the drive was quick. On the 31st Hector Black of the Vine City Council was arrested while attempting to bring blankets to people living in the Markham Hotel, a property of Joseph Shaeffer. At his trial, a month later, Mr. Black was lucky to be acquitted.

On February 4th, Julian Bond called a press conference in the front of the Markham Hotel. He said, "I stand here today in front of a hotel that has not been condemned by the city for violations of the city code. Within it are many conditions representative of poor housing in Atlanta and throughout the United States.

"Markham Street is symbolic of many streets in the black ghetto of this Nation where there exist slum houses from which greedy landlords make huge profit."

Bond called for a Freedom Village to be built in the 136th Assembly District before anyone is relocated. He said slum lords should be forced to comply with the housing code within the next six months. He asked that the local government declare Vine City a disaster area and that local, state, and federal governments take necessary steps to alleviate the housing problem in Vine City.

When rent strikes spontaneously started in Vine City, Attorney Howard Moore came to the defense of the strikers. His first cases have been fought in Judge Osgood Williams' civil court around the issue of the right of the poor to have a day in court.

The problem was that when tenants appealed landlords' eviction notices, the case might not be heard until after the eviction. The Georgia Code states "The tenant may arrest the proceedings and prevent the removal of himself and his goods from the land by declaring on oath that his lease of term of rent has not expired, and that he is not holding possession of the premises over and beyond his term or that the rent claimed is not due or that he does not hold the premises.... provided, such tenant shall at the same time tender a bond with good security, payable to the landlord, for the payment of such sum, with costs, as may be recovered against him on the trial of his case." (61-303) The bond, unfortunately has been set in such cases at the equivalence of a years rent. The case was eventually lost and several tenants are now living outside their houses, huddled around a fire.

On the morning of the 9th of February, three SNCC workers were arrested as they tried to prevent the eviction of a Negro family at 444 Markham street.

Julius (Miendy) Samstein, Ruffin Harris, and Bill Ware were charged with "interfering with due process of law" and taken to the Fulton County jail. Their bail was set at \$1,000. An eviction crew had torn the lock off the back door of Mr. Teague's house although Mr. Teague had received no notice of eviction. The eviction was temporarily stopped. A woman who lives next door to the Teagues said she heard the marshals say they were going to tear the house down. The following week the house was demolished. Mr. Teague was at work February 14th, when the demolition crew started. He hurried home from work to keep his furniture from being destroyed. He received no notice that the house would be demolished.

Julian Bond immediately wired Mayor Allen. "Mr. John Teague was illegally evicted from 444 Markham Street today. This action must be stopped..." James Forman, SNCC executive secretary said, "We may have to go and live with the Mayor."

Mr. Teague said, "Somebody must take the blame for violating the privacy of my house, especially when I have paid rent on time. Right now, all my household goods are in the streets for the second time this week. Who is to take the blame? The City, the landlord, the realtor or the police department...?"

Lt. John Rhimer ordered SNCC people not to interfere with removal of the furniture.

A crowd quickly formed and Bill Ware addressed a crowd of 50 people. "There must be unity among black people," He said. "The only way we can stop evictions is for the people to come together." Local Markham Street leader, Willie Williams also spoke to the group telling of court action to be taken by Attorney Moore and of future organizing efforts. The angry crowd grumbled in agreement. Williams said, "If the people didn't act now they never would." Williams quit work with Shaffer for whom he did repair jobs when Shaeffer had Black arrested in the Markham Street Hotel.

James Forman spoke to the crowd and declared a war on slums in Atlanta. He charged Atlanta public housing discriminates and noted that in the phone book there are separate listings for Negro rental agents and white agents.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ventured into the Vine City slum area and said he "found living conditions there the worst he had even seen." The president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference accompanied by his wife, Coretta, took a walking tour of Markham Street, not too far from his modest home in Vine City and said, "This is appalling. I had no idea people were living in Atlanta in such conditions. This is a shame on the community." (From Jet, February)

Saturday--

Saturday, March 5, as the sun rose from the red Georgia soil east of the city, the wheels of Justice were turning, grinding, and slipping. At 8:30, Mr. Willie Williams, and SNCC worker Dwight Williams were arrested outside Mr. Williams home where officers were carelessly throwing his furniture in the street. Dwight was trying to take pictures and Williams had merely asked that his furniture be treated with respect. He was being evicted after losing his rent strike case in court. He had asked to be tried before he was evicted. His actual case won't be heard for weeks. Meanwhile he's in the street and may have to live in a tent.

## AN INDICATOR OF THE PROBLEM

The crucial issue in Vine City is housing. Vine City covers two census tracts in the northern third of the 136th district. Most of the weather worn structures in the dark muddy lands of Vine City were built before 1939.

Everytime SNCC executive committee member Cleve Sellers passes through the area he cynically says, "They keep this section of the big city so Negroes won't forget where they came from and where they can be sent back to."

Most of the houses are raised on cinder blocks to prevent flooding of the first floor. Little gardens in front yards crowded with religious figurines offer the only relief to the drab scene.

There are 800 Negroes and no whites living in owner occupied dwellings. 2,709 blacks and 3 whites live in rented occupied dwellings and are potential victims for unprincipled owners. Because the median family income in the area is \$2,754, heads of families desperately search for low income housing. Too often there must be a choice between eating and paying the rent.

An Atlanta project report reads, "There are pockets of dilapidated rodent infested, unheated dwellings scattered throughout the predominate Negro areas of the city. Here live people who are sapped upon by parasitic slumlords, lying peddlers, cheating insurance men and election day only politicians.

"A prime example of this is a slum area in the Southwest part of the city... Here one slumlord runs a plantation-like system where he is employer, landlord, grocer, judge, and jury over the people who live in his house.

"He is seen in the area from five in the morning until well past midnight cruising around in his big green Cadillac terrorizing his serfs... He cashes their (tenants) welfare checks, controls their credit, makes them work off debts, demands where and what they should buy..." Its a story from Dickens that's unbelievable in today's world of cellophane wrapped happiness.

Few in Atlanta expect to receive a stove or ice box with their apartment. If you pay enough, you may receive heat. 1,844 households have sound plumbing. The 1960 census also reports that 50 of the households with sound plumbing lack hot water and 138 of the Vine City households lack other plumbing articles. 927 households have deteriorating plumbing and 439 contain dilapidated plumbing. While 2,306 units have one or more bathrooms, 1,668 have shared baths or none.

SNCC leaders say, "No longer will the captives of these Center City Plantations tolerate the oppression and squalor of the dismal quarters in which they have been entombed. They are past the point of questioning their so-called leaders. They are attempting to break the chains of the exploitative cycle."