

"WHAT'S HAPPENING IN SNCC?"

A Special Bulletin from the New York Office  
June 3, 1966

Note: The following paper is based on discussions at the recent SNCC staff meeting, and between Chairman Stokely Carmichael and the New York SNCC staff. It is not for publication but for the information of supporters in the New York area. The newly elected Central Committee will prepare a fuller, formal statement when it meets in mid-June.

Vastly distorted reports and outright lies have appeared in the press about what took place at SNCC's annual spring conference near Nashville, Tennessee, on May 8-13. The press has published stories based upon second-hand reports and wild guesswork, and containing statements quoted out of context. The greatest distortion has resulted from the Press's misuse of such terms as "black power," "anti-integration," "black nationalism" and "separatism" in accusations against SNCC. We wish to provide SNCC's friends with accurate information and interpretation.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES: THE FACTS

Each year, SNCC holds elections for officers and for members of governing committees. At the recent spring conference, John Lewis was defeated in the election for Chairman -- an office he has held since 1963 -- by Stokely Carmichael, a Trinidad-born, New York-bred, Howard University graduate who was most recently head of our Alabama program. At that same meeting, John was elected to SNCC's new Central Committee. He is also now in charge of our new international education program, which will include considerable travel abroad by SNCC staffers as guests of youth groups in Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia. We believe this program will do much to broaden the horizons of our workers, to educate other nations about SNCC, and to strengthen the movement against oppression around the world. John also continues to take speaking engagements in the North. He declared his support of the new officers of SNCC in a recent statement which read in part: "Some members of the press have suggested that there is a schism or conflict in SNCC. Nothing can be further from the truth. The new officers of SNCC have my

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Lewis

James Forman was succeeded as Executive Secretary by Mrs. Ruby Doris Robinson, who has been with SNCC since 1961 and most recently filled an administrative position in the national office. Jim had announced his intention to resign over a month before the meeting. At the meeting he repeatedly declined to run for that office which he has held for nearly six years, for several reasons -- among



them, that he wished to see the young new leadership which exists in SNCC exercise itself in an official capacity. He too was elected to SNCC's new Central Committee and is presently director of the national office in Atlanta.

Cleveland Sellers, a native of South Carolina who came to SNCC in the summer of 1964, was re-elected Program Secretary. In this post, which he has held for a year, he will be supervising our field work and helping to develop new programs.

#### GENERAL POSITION AND POLICY

The changes described above did not constitute a pattern of "take-over" by "anti-white extremists." What came out of the spring conference was essentially an awareness of the need to develop new programs within the Negro community and to project them differently within that community -- programs geared to achieving basic change.

Over the years, SNCC has become primarily concerned with making changes in the daily life of black people -- not merely in changing laws, not in cultivating "acceptance" of the Negro, not in tokenism. Almost from its beginning, SNCC realized that power was the key to this and that Negro-controlled political groups should be formed. But disenfranchisement, maintained by racist terror, made this impossible in the South at that time. The right to vote had to be won, and SNCC workers devoted themselves to this from 1961 to 1965. They created pressure for the vote with mock elections in Mississippi, which demonstrated that Negroes weren't apathetic as claimed and which also served to start Negroes thinking politically. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was created in an attempt to break into politics within the framework of the Democratic Party; it too provided pressure for the vote and political education.

That struggle was eased, though not won, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act. SNCC could then address itself to the question of "who can we vote for -- how can we make the vote meaningful?"

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The 1966 elections in Alabama offered the first chance for the Negro to exercise real, as opposed to, mock power. In Lowndes County (80% Negro), SNCC workers found that Negroes felt they could accomplish nothing within the framework of the Democratic Party. For them, that was the party of George Wallace and such other symbols of white oppression as Bull Connor and Al Lingo. In Lowndes County itself, the Chairman of the Democratic Committee was a man against whom the federal government had brought suit on the charge of evicting Negroes from his property for registering to vote. We therefore worked for almost a year to help build an independent political organization with the goal of taking power on the county level.



On May 3, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization held a meeting of almost 1,000 Negroes to nominate candidates for the election next November. They chose, and SNCC supported this position, not to participate in the Democratic primary held that same day because there is an Alabama law which could have been used to invalidate the independent convention on the grounds that people cannot vote the primaries of two parties. It was considered more important to protect the independent party by making it legally invulnerable than to participate in the primary of a party which Lowndes County Negroes had, in any case, rejected as a voice for their needs. A full slate of candidates was nominated in Lowndes; candidates from freedom organizations in four other Alabama counties were also named. Their ballot symbol, needed for illiterates, is the "black panther" which was chosen to represent the strength and dignity of the new Negro and his demand for political power (the panther, it might be noted, is an extant animal in Alabama, Louisiana and other Southern states).

The validity of this program was affirmed by the outcome of the Democratic primary on May 3, in which the white moderate vote did not materialize and the Wallace administration was overwhelmingly re-elected. Across the state, only four Negroes were nominated to county office in the May 31 run-off. But the election of one of those four, Lucius Amerson (now Democratic candidate for sheriff in Macon County — 84% Negro) provided further confirmation of SNCC's position. Amerson won, despite the strong opposition of local Negro leaders who feared that his election would distress whites and upset the "go-slow" policy which had prevailed until then. Many Negroes now recognize the need to unite behind black candidates, and many are now talking about the need for independent organizing. This will be one of SNCC's main programs both North and South, in rural and urban areas.

We are already extending this program in three counties of our Southwest Georgia project. The independent pattern will be varied according to local conditions. Julian Bond, for example, ran and will run again this fall in the

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We are already extending this program in three counties of our Southwest Georgia project. The independent pattern will be varied according to local conditions. Julian Bond, for example, ran and will run again this fall in the Democratic primary but on an independent platform and opposed by the Democratic machine. Let no one think that this program has developed or will grow without great struggle. Many Negroes were evicted this year in Alabama for their political activity; white racists are intensifying the use of starvation and forced emigration as weapons to supplement terror tactics. Any Negro who runs for office risks his life and his family's well-being. As for Julian Bond, his struggle to take office is well-known.



The goal of this program is indeed "black power." What does this mean? It means, for example, that in Lowndes County if a Negro is elected tax assessor, he will be able to collect and channel funds for the building of better roads and schools — things which determine the quality of daily life. If elected sheriff, he can end police brutality. It means, ultimately, the freeing of colonies — which is what the ghettos of this country, North and South, really are. If, for example, the Negroes of Watts had organized their political power, Los Angeles Police Chief Parker might not remain in office today, a year after demands for his removal.

SNCC will therefore be working for freedom through the acquisition of economic and political power on the local level. We will encourage Negroes to use their majority where it exists, as other Americans use theirs — to exercise control of local government. Such power bases can then work to change statewide or nationwide patterns of oppression through negotiation — from strength, rather than weakness. Negroes cannot form alliances with the white community until they have that strength, and until there are white groups with which Negroes can coalesce.

As we work toward organizing Negro power, we intend also to build a poor white base in the South with which poor Negroes may eventually combine their strength. Jack Minnis, a member of SNCC's Central Committee, and others will go to Kentucky and Tennessee on June 10 with a view to organizing independent political action by poor whites — a "white panther party" of not merely moderate but militant whites. This is the only form of coalition we can accept and this is how we see basic change taking place in the society.

We have also found that the power of Negroes as a group force cannot be developed as long as Negroes are fearful and believe, consciously or unconsciously, that they are inferior. We must change the attitude expressed by a Wilcos County Negro who voted for the white sheriff on May 3, saying "We aren't ready to have a colored sheriff. The white folks wouldn't have liked that a bit." We must seek to overcome the Negro's sense of shame about such things as "Negroid" physical

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The heart of our program, in sort, is our belief that the key to basic change is power and it must be the power of group strength — as every oppressed people in history has learned.

It should be remembered that what attracted Negro students to SNCC in the first place was that nowhere else in the society could they participate in something which had social significance and was not dominated by whites. The phrase "something of our own" represents a feeling which brings with it commitment, energy and creativity. Organizing the strength of Negroes as a group force does not, however, constitute "reverse racism" or Black Nationalism as the press would define it: in a purely negative sense of "hate whitey." SNCC's interest has always been in concrete programs and we advocate black consciousness — as defined above — for positive programmatic reasons. Furthermore, our emphasis on the need for power co-exists with the basic, humanist spirit for which SNCC has long been known. //

#### PERSPECTIVES FOR 1966

We believe our spring conference was the best staff meeting of SNCC in some time. Among most SNCC people, morale is higher now than in many months. Recently, some 30 Southern Negro students asked to work for SNCC. We have been concerned by our diminished appeal to those students in the past two years, and this is a most encouraging development. We shall be working hard to revive our student base, and Jim Forman expects to be traveling considerably to Southern college campuses for this purpose.

The spring conference also produced a renewed sense of vitality in the areas of decision-making, discipline and fund-raising. Our former Executive Committee, which had difficulty in meeting regularly because it was composed of 21 widely scattered members, has been replaced by a newly elected Central Committee with 10 members. Chairman Stokely Carmichael will be devoting most of his time this year to traveling around our Southern projects, strengthening the staff. SNCC should thus be functioning in a more coordinated, effective way.

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Mrs. Ruby Doris Robinson will be responsible for fund-raising in the North, as was Jim Forman. She will also be responsible for a new program of fund-raising. We aim to make our Southern projects self-sustaining, with the community providing daily maintenance and living expenses while the national SNCC office provides subsistence salaries, cars, radios, basic office expenses such as rent, and the services of its communications and printing departments. We believe that communities value our projects enough to want to support them financially -- as has



already happened in Lowndes County.

Thus we seek to expand our fund-raising base. We do not reject white support, nor are whites being "purged" from SNCC. Approximately one-fifth of our full-time staff is composed of whites, working both in the North and South. We will be urging white people to work in the poor white community when that program is established because we consider it a politically important program.

We believe that our past supporters, who have stayed by us in other periods of criticism, will continue to do so, because they recognize the present attacks as simply a new phase of reaction to SNCC's consistent radicalism and because they know that SNCC's primary concern is serving the needs of oppressed Negro communities. We believe they value the unique, forward-looking character of SNCC. We took a position against the Vietnam war when no other civil rights organization dared to do so; today, opinion polls indicate that less than half the American people support that war. Recently we declined to attend the White House Conference on Civil Rights for several reasons, among them that (1) the Administration had yet to prove it was serious about racial equality; (2) the Administration was using civil rights to strengthen U.S. prestige which is at a low ebb because of the Vietnam war, our intervention in the Dominican Republic, etc.; (3) we could not in good conscience meet with the chief policy maker of the Vietnam war to which we are opposed. Following our refusal, others joined in rejecting or criticizing the conference: first, comedian Dick Gregory, then Rev. Benjamin Payton (who heads the Commission on Race and Religion of the National Council of Churches) speaking for a group of New Yorkers active in the struggle, and finally CORE. The correctness of our criticism appears to have been confirmed by the statement of Arthur Goldberg, U.S. Representative to the United Nations, that "the cause of civil rights helps our foreign policy." It is also interesting to note that the NEW YORK TIMES reported the conference as being "an Administration show all the way."

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Those supporters truly concerned with human rights -- a phrase we prefer to the more limited "civil rights" -- will, we believe, recognize the need for a youthful organization which seeks constantly to make genuine social change and is willing to endure danger, poverty and unpopularity for the sake of that goal.