

GRASS ROOTS ORGANIZING WORK (GROW)

-- a program to begin organization and  
education in the white community in  
the deep south

Agreement is now widespread within the civil rights movement on the necessity of organizing in the white community, especially in the southern white community. As is obvious to those who have followed the progress of the movement, this decision was reached by whites with a great deal of agonized soul-searching -- for it is true, as black organizers point out, that for too long have whites sought the comparative safety of the black community, establishing, as it were, an emotional haven of "brotherhood" and "love."

We think black organizers are correct when they say that interracial coalitions in the south at present are mostly talk, since obviously a coalition cannot exist until and unless there are two groups who agree to work together, not just a few individuals who come and work in a particular community.

None of this is to say that we feel the past five years have been in any way wasted or mis-spent. We think it was natural for whites to come to the black community and accept its leadership, just as the national student community was and is today so influenced and affected by SNCC.

But now if we are going to create the possible conditions of change in the south we must create in the white community an organized force of working and poor whites, sympathetic students and professionals who will unite with their counterparts in the black community. There is nothing in southern history which leads us to believe that this is impossible. Terribly difficult, yes -- but who can say it will be impossible since no concentrated, long-range effort has ever been made?

The importance of a project like this was underscored by SNCC chair-

man Stokely Carmichael in the New York Review of Books late last year:

There is a vital job to be done among poor whites. We hope to see, eventually, a coalition between poor blacks and poor whites. That is the only coalition which seems acceptable to us, and we see such a coalition as the major internal instrument of change in American society...It is purely academic today to talk about bringing poor blacks and whites together, but the job of creating a poor-white power bloc must be attempted. The main responsibility for it falls upon whites.

Therefore we accept the challenge presented by SNCC. We intend to try to do this, and make the following proposal.

### Purpose

We want to begin the serious long-range effort to organize the white people in the south into a force equal in strength and similar in commitment to the movement now flourishing in the black community, so that interracial coalitions, based on common interests, can be formed.

For a long time SNCC tried to change the white man in the south by appealing to his conscience through the use of nonviolence and "Christian love." This did not work because the man did not have a conscience or, at least, he had something which he valued more than his conscience -- his whiteness. So the poor white in the south has always been tricked into accepting "whiteness" rather than demanding for himself the basic rights of a human being to decent food, housing, medical care, education, and a real voice in the decisions affecting him.

The white poor and working class, then, has been used by the power structure to keep the black man in his place. For this privilege he has accepted poverty, because: "We may be poor and hungry, our teeth are falling out and the house is falling in, but at least we are better than the niggers -- we're white!"

If the poor whites in the south can be brought to realize that the power structure indoctrinates them with this idea in order to keep them from seeing their common cause with black men, basic changes can take place in the south.

What is needed is a project which will appeal not to the poor white's conscience, but to his self-interest. We propose, then, this project of Grass Roots Organizing Work (GROW).

### Implementation

In order to organize the white half of this coalition, two kinds of organizing must take place simultaneously. One is the necessary education at all stages to show whites how much more effective their own movement would be in combination with blacks. In other words, no matter what kind of local organizing is done, constant education against racism must be conducted.

The second part of this is that the organizer must be able to make some tangible improvements in the condition of poor whites. For example, it may be that white organizing will initially take the form of protests to get a new road; or more and better surplus food commodities; or student strikes in state-supported institutions; the organizers have to be able to show that by unifying the particular segment of the white community some changes in their lives are possible. The next step will naturally be to show that if the black and white communities unite, more substantial changes can follow.

The project, then, will be concerned with developing techniques effective in organizing whites to see their common interests with blacks and to change some of the conditions under which they live. Throughout this, constant effort will be made to develop strong local leadership and personalities capable of withstanding the attacks by the power structure -- which

will certainly come as soon as organizing begins to bears fruit.

This is the general framework in which we intend to try and work. However, we do not expect to be able to do actual community organizing until a certain period of time elapses -- six or more months, perhaps -- in which we will try to get the feel of the various local situations in the south in order to determine where the organizing possibilities are and what kind of people (students, farmers, factory workers, unemployed) are available for working in local communities. It will mean renewing old contacts and making new ones among ministers, teachers, relatives, farmers, miners, old friends, unemployed people, city dwellers, country and hill folks, etc.

The time schedule for this period must be flexible so that we will be able, when a promising situation arises, to follow each possibility for organizing as far as we can take it. In other words, we don't think that on a project like this we can just choose a town or county blind and decide to organize there. Promising circumstances must be found and followed as far as they go. One of these may become the project, the one which may serve as a model for future projects or serve as a base from which to organize other areas.

#### The Educational Facility

Two characteristics of the southern white, particularly the southern rural white, have been his great isolation and provincialism. This condition has helped perpetuate the closed society, and has been especially crippling for those whites who, under normal circumstances, would be willing to aid the movement or unite with blacks in common cause.

Therefore, one of the pressing needs is to establish methods of keeping contact open among whites themselves, and to make sure that ways are instituted to keep discussions going, and ideas and views circulating.

At some point, too, it will become necessary to provide a place where whites can experience interracial contact, since it is our experience that talking about racism is not enough -- the individual must also meet the object of his fear and hatred in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Therefore, we propose to set aside part of our home to be used as an educational center or facility, established in Mobile, Alabama. Mobile has the advantage of being in Bob's home state, is central to the deep southern states, and cosmopolitan enough to provide a certain degree of safety and sophistication. (We also have relatives there.)

Hopefully we can rent a house in a "changing" or interracial neighborhood which has enough space for our family needs, and meeting rooms, library, guest rooms, space for showing movies and hearing tapes, etc.

Another aspect of the center is that we hope it serves as a focal point in Mobile for discussion groups of local people. Through this method we can begin the political education that will produce some indigenous organizers in the white community.

It should be understood, however, that because of the necessity to travel and explore various situations, the educational center will take shape gradually.

#### The Co-operative

A chicken farmer whom we know has offered to help raise the money to buy land for a chicken farm and would volunteer time to help people set up a co-op. This kind of enterprise traditionally is one which gives real economic and therefore political independence. Once it gets going the co-op would be a center where people from surrounding areas could gather for discussion and it could become the inspiration for the founding of similar co-ops by people from the area.

### Present Staff

There are four of us now working full-time on this project: Bob Zellner, a SNCC field secretary since 1961; Dorothy Zellner, writer and fund-raiser for SNCC since 1962; Marguerite Nolan, a recent graduate of Newton College for the Sacred Heart (Mass.) and fund-raiser in Boston for the past three years; and Robert Golbach, a Yale Ph.d. candidate in Political Science and former fund-raising chairman of the American Independent Movement. The present division of labor is that Bob and Dottie (and daughter Margaret, 18 months) will go south and establish themselves in Mobile by April or May, 1967, while Maggie will be in Boston helping to provide funds and resources, and Bob G. acts as treasurer-bookkeeper.

### Relationships with SNCC and SCEF

The Zellners are currently on SNCC staff, and Maggie Nolan has worked as a SNCC volunteer in Boston. SNCC has indicated it may be able to help raise some financial aid for our project, depending on its own financial condition, and the use of its resources, such as bookkeeping help, printing where possible, and so on. The Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) will make regular contributions to the project, and will make available its press and public relations machinery, should that be needed in the near future.

We look forward to a firm relationship with both organizations and hope that ultimately our project will be a joint SNCC-SCEF effort.



Perspective: a personal statement -- Bob Zellner

Returning to work in Alabama has become a deeply-felt personal commitment for me because I was born and reared there. As the son of a Methodist minister who was assigned different churches every few years, I have lived in the principal cities and towns of southern Alabama. My maternal grandfather was also a Methodist preacher, a circuit-rider who covered most of the towns and villages in the southern part of the state.

Though my parents are liberal on the race issue (but much of the family are ardent segregationists), I was never involved in the movement or with the black community until my senior year at Huntingdon College (Montgomery) in 1961, when I and four friends had the temerity to interview the black leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott for a paper due in sociology class. When the five of us faced expulsion for this act, I was confronted with the kind of system I had lived in all my life and saw crosses burned in front of the dormitory, was called into the Attorney General's office, and so on. My parents stood by me and because of my activity in the civil rights movement have, over the years, lost more than ten churches to racist pressures.

I came on the SNCC staff in September, 1961, as the only white in a group of 16 field secretaries, and though my work was supposed to be mainly in the white community, I got involved in the direct action protest by the black community of McComb, Mississippi two months later. This was my first arrest and was naturally given considerable press attention in the southern papers because at the time I was the only young native-born white southerner in the movement.

One particular arrest does show the climate of Alabama and what needs to be done. In January, 1963 I was walking on the campus of my alma mater intending to renew acquaintances and make new contacts when the agents of Gov. George Wallace arrested me for supposedly trying to organize demonstrations at his inauguration. Later this charge was turned into a felony which could have brought me 10 years at hard labor had I been convicted. At my trial in Montgomery 17 Methodist ministers from various parts of the state came to testify to my good moral character, even though I was by now a notorious "outside agitator." This incident illustrates both the fear of the state machine regarding social change, and also the tremendous potential for working in the white community.

Since 1961 I have worked in almost every southern state, in both the black and white communities (mostly white college campuses); have studied two years at Brandeis University toward a master's degree in sociology; and have recently completed serving as campaign manager for Robert Cook, an independent congressional candidate, in New Haven, Conn.

It is just because I am a product of Alabama's social and educational system that I feel I must return there to work in the community which I know only too well; in addition, it may be that my personal associations over the years will provide an entree to the white community which others may have difficulty establishing.

Our commitment is long-range and the plans we have so carefully laid in this proposal may not materialize in exactly the same form as presented here. But the important thing is to start.



## BUDGET (first year)

Grass Roots Organizing Work

Project director	@\$80/wk	\$4,160
Secretary	@\$40/wk	2,080
Automobile --		
travel, upkeep, expenses		2,400
Other travel --		
plane, bus, train, taxi		1,500
Phone	@\$80/month	960
Postage	@\$60/month	720
Office supplies		600
		<u>\$12,400</u>

GRCW Educational Center

Director	@\$60/wk	3,120
Rent, util	@\$100/mon	1,200
Mimeo		150
Newsletter		
(paper, postage, supplies)		900
Phonograph system		300
Tape recorder		200
Camera		350
Book shelves, furniture		200
Tapes, batteries (1 yr. supply)		150
Film and other supplies (" " ")		250
Movie projector		250
Movie screen		30
Assorted games		50
10 chess sets @ \$2.50		25
Film strip projector		150
Travel for resource personnel and students		<u>1,000</u>
		\$8,335 *

Note: Since this includes an outlay for permanent supplies,  
we estimate the second year budget at \$5,620.