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STUDENTS AND ECONOMIC ACTION

BY CARL WITTMAN

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It is important that campus political activists take stock of the new opportunities which are increasingly evident for campus programs which engage large numbers of students in constructive action, and still permit those participants and others on the campus to relate to the major issues of our society.

Four years ago, this was not possible. There were those activities which a small number of activists with enough initiative and foresight could do. There were also a number of mass activities, e.g. peace marches, resolution adopting, etc., in which many students could participate. There were grave limitations to that approach, however; most of the very active participants were motivated by ideas which they received elsewhere than the campus (and indeed, who except second generation radicals could be expected to be active, after 15 years of red-baiting), and as a result the base of any activities was limited except the most superficial of activities. Large numbers of students could be brought only to the point of protesting violations of civil liberties, and making "good-willish" manifestations of their desire for peace and security. And even though our southern counterparts were beginning the Negro revolution, the most we could do would be to perform the "cheerleading" role: fund raising, moral support, and perhaps congressional pressure. This does not deny, of course, that a few individuals carried on meaningful (both in terms of results and in terms of education) political activities: some went south, some probed into the depths of research in vital areas, some became leaders of organizations.

In the last exciting nine months, however, things have changed radically. Two major changes have come about in the nation. The first is that the Negro movement is no longer a southern movement, for it is beginning to realize that access to "civil rights" gets the Negro in the south no more than a Harlem. It is therefore possible for students on northern campuses to participate in the Negro movement without migrating south. Most of the east coast colleges and many of the midwestern and western colleges are located in urban or sub-urban areas near Negro ghettos, which are increasingly becoming the home of the Negro movement.

The reason for this transfer of the focus of attention of the movement from south to north is complex, but two concepts are of major significance for the northern student: 1) that the problems of the American Negro are not essentially racial, but are problems of poverty focused on a racial minority; 2) and that the problem of poverty is the result of an unhealthy economy. The northern movement, then, is really a movement of poor people, the Negro being the sole major element at this time, with assistance from intellectuals who see the need for economic change, and from humanitarians, who refuse to concede the necessity of poverty in twentieth century America.

These ideas would probably have become clear in a southern movement frustrated by its failure and by an already-tense situation in the northern ghettos. But the situation has been greatly exacerbated by a second major change in the nation: the economy is stagnating and automation is increasing unemployment. Related to the activities of the Negro movement is this secular decline in the economy. Again, the reasons for this change are beyond the scope of the problem. Although it is increasingly hopeless to look to the gradational American method of integrating a poverty-stricken minority into the mainstream, (i.e. equality of opportunity, education and high motivation,) it also raises the chances for the Negro minority to find allies in the society. For although the Negro still shouldered a good part of unemployment, cybernation and automation is color blind, and a 10-per cent minority can only absorb a limited amount of unemployment.

The possibility of allies in white America broadens the already expanded field of action for the student: labor unions seem to be responding to some degree to the threat of automation, and for some time a number of predominately white areas have already been struck by unemployment, most conspicuously the large Appalachian area.

Before beginning a discussion of how campus programming is to fit into this new situation, I think there are a number of reasons, other than geographical proximity, which make it easier for students to participate. Until now, race has been a major drawback for college participation in the movement -- most students are white, and have felt that they are in some way intruding, or at least tagging along, on what has been a Negro movement. But the shift of the movement away from an explicit racial basis enhances the possibilities for the white student. The possibility of working in areas of high white unemployment makes the white student not secondary or supportive, but the catalyst of the movement.

Secondly, the realization of the basic economic inadequacies of the American system increases the importance of the scholar-activist. In the movement for civil rights, the students have been important, and whites were able to lend their assistance in a number of ways. The fact that these whites were college students was of minimal importance: they could, perhaps, add administrative and tutorial talents to the Negro movement, and that aid is still needed.

However with the new character of the movement, there is a desperate need for analysis; the scholarship of poverty in America has been neglected, and only through a few occasional efforts (Harrington, Boggs) and the work of groups like SDS has any literature appeared on the subject. Both on the informational level (who, in a given community, are subject to automation? are steadily employed? are unskilled? are a potential political force? are concerned about various issues?), and on a theoretic level (can public works remove unemployment? is a 30 hour week the answer? what will be the net effect of

an economic movement on the political scene? how will such groups as trade unions, the Muslims, and southern Negro leadership, react to automation, and to any movement which challenges increasing unemployment?) there is a crying need for research, which students active in the movement can do. We cannot rely completely on the spontaneity of the movement to show itself what it is up against, and to respond in a constructive manner. Our description and analysis is needed.

A successful beginning has been made at Swarthmore in adjusting to the changes in the movement. In September, two of us were driving through Chester, Pennsylvania on the way home from an SDS convention, and after the summer in Cambridge we looked upon the situation somewhat differently than we had previously. If all the 20 and 30 year old Negroes move away from the Eastern Shore, and presumably from the whole south, where but here must they have gone? Aren't these really the same people we were working with this summer? Why then, shouldn't we shift our activities here, only 2 miles from Swarthmore?

We faced, I guess, the problem which faces most northern campus activists: how to get into the community. We had had a number of contacts with the Negro community. One was an employee at the college cafeteria who quit because of degrading working conditions, and subsequently became head of the Youth Chapter of the NAACP in Chester. For three years we had been attending its sporadic meetings, and mourning the middle-class and non-action orientation. A year ago we launched a 100 student tutorial in coordination with them, which is still going strong, but didn't lead to anything further.

But the summer's experience in Cambridge made us more confident in "invading" a community, and we immediately decided that in lieu of more provocative projects, we would begin a survey similar to the one which we did in Cambridge (which ultimately led to a 70 page report on the political, social, and economic conditions, in addition to a chronology of the movement there.) After getting the nominal support of the Chester NAACP, we initiated such a survey to canvass the southern end of the town, visiting every fourth house, asking questions about occupational status, income, housing, schooling, politics, religion, and attitudes toward the movement. The major value of this program was to gain a certain familiarity with the problems of Chester, and to make ourselves known in the community.

The real turning point came a month later, however, when a group of students visited the NAACP executive secretary, with whom we had worked in Cambridge. From that meeting followed the Franklin school boycott, the subsequent demonstrations, and the arrest of 200 Chester Negroes and 50 Swarthmore students, the formation of the executive committee of the local movement by 15 adults of Chester, and the drafting of the 37 demand platform (which included demands for fair and full employment,

new housing, new schools, adequate medical treatment, and fair police practices).

The most significant event, one which would not have been possible without the demonstrations, etc, is the formation of the neighborhood organizations. Over Thanksgiving three neighborhoods of approximately 400 families were pamphleted on our initiative, and groups of 10-20 in each neighborhood met to launch block organizations. Since then attendance has gone up to as high as 40 at the weekly meetings, and they are planning to combat housing conditions. They have begun to draw up lists of housing complaints, and are contacting the housing authorities and slumlords. More radical action is being considered including a city-wide rent strike. We assume that the Negro movement in Chester, although most concerned about employment, will be most active in those areas where local changes can bring about improvement, i.e. public services, housing, and schools.

The above activities, whether in Chester or in any northern ghetto, have certain short and medium range benefits which alone are enough to make such a project worthwhile as the major activity of a local SDS chapter. These benefits might be divided into two categories: the chapter and the community.

For the chapter, the benefits are obvious. The interdependence of issues about which we speak so much is amply demonstrated, and the large number of students who are attracted to the project for the first time are forced up to the realities of the problems facing America. The same students who came skeptically to the weekly seminars which discussed the Negro and the economy became less skeptical and more committed. The intellectual process of radicalization was speeded up for a large number of students. On an emotional level, too, the jail experience, the visiting of tenements, and long discussions at neighborhood meetings made students more concerned with social issues.

The SPAC seminars, which had been running since the beginning of the semester, stopped meeting regularly because of commitments in Chester and to academics, but the substitute was the accumulation of hours of serious discussion, which is now a matter of course at the dinner table, late at night, and at social gatherings, for an increasingly large number of student.

The Chester project, especially the organization of neighborhoods, has opened extraordinary opportunities for leadership training and has given enthusiastic newcomers room for expanding their potential. Two freshmen are now the chief organizers in two of the neighborhoods; they perform and organize whatever is necessary from the campus and to keep the neighborhood organizations active; they perform administrative duties until local people are able to take them over; they provide an intellectual perspective in the meetings themselves; help in mediation of disputes in nascent and competing leaders. Each of the neighborhoods has one student organizer, and this person

has begun to train other students and Chester adults to take over future neighborhoods. The effect on these students has been electric: they have learned in a few weeks administrative and leadership techniques for radical activity. And they have begun to face, alone but with the consultation and advice of the rest of the chapter, the realities of machine politics, slum conditions, democracy (or lack of same), and what will and won't work in facing these problems. The opportunities of expanding this experience is limited only to the number of neighborhoods.

The necessity of other information, e.g. housing codes, urban redevelopment plans and models, legal details, information on schools, has become most pressing. The SPAC Chester Political Research sub-committee had been organized last year, and since September it has been active, but when a neighborhood needed to know the legality of such and such an act, CPRC became active as never before. A number of other jobs have been created by necessity: someone to write press releases and phone them in; someone to organize and advertise mass meetings; someone to prepare a voter registration campaign. The responsibilities which the project is forcing students to accept has created an esprit-de-corps within the chapter, and have created an atmosphere in which more and more students are drawn into activities.

But what about the benefits of the Chester project for the community? In the short run, there is no question that the recent months have been good for the Negro community of Chester. They too are beginning to face the realities of their situation: who is with them? and who is their enemy? These lessons are learned slowly and painfully, but they are being learned for the first time in Chester. As never before, people on streetcorners and at meetings speak out against the Republican county machine, which they identify as the center of their problems. The defiance of police, the jail experience, and the neighborhood and mass meetings have made them confident of the possibility of change, confident that they have some control over the decisions which affect their lives.

The appalling necessity for middle-echelon leadership in the Negro movement was made apparent in Cambridge in September, 1963, when Gloria Richardson resigned as head of the movement; there was a complete lack of substitute leadership. Determined not to make this same mistake, we have been taking the greatest pains to develop grass roots leadership in the neighborhood organizations. Democracy does not come easily to people who have never worked with it and who do not believe in it; and when they accept it, they accept it in form only, and not in content. But slowly, people in the neighborhood organizations are rising, and displaying their potential. One neighborhood group decided to remove and "uncle tom" from a position of responsibility, a big move for a people who have lived so long with so many "uncle toms". In the same group, two men have spent hours of discussion with the student in the area about where the group can go, and they seem to have a grasp of its

directions and a belief in the people they are working with which surpasses that of the leader; of the Chester movement. In another slum area, one woman canvassed her block and has gone on to another one, recruiting volunteers for the housing survey, and talking up the movement. For whatever the direction the movement takes, the leadership and organization which has until now been missing and which inevitably is so necessary is beginning to develop.

Another change is the increasing realization of what the basic problems of their lives are, and what they can expect from life. It is a prerequisite for change that people believe things can be different, and that they have a right to a better deal. Until this fall, the Negro community in Chester did not believe these things. The demoralization from years of poverty and actual economic degeneration, the years of suppression, of broken strikes, sold-out leadership, "uncle tom" NAACP's, and an old time political machine, has begun to be broken. The victory at the Franklin school was the first time anything had ever been tried, no lesswon, outside the channels of the machine for as long as anyone could remember (or at least since the 30's when a city fire truck killed 10 people trying to break up a strike picket line. Another major attack on this demoralization has been the sustained presence of college students. We believed it would be difficult for the local Negroes to accept us college students, most of us white, educated, and middle-class. We expected the bitter racism which the Muslims thrive on. Actually the contrary is strikingly true: our acceptance has been remarkable, and more remarkable has been the absolute lack of any trace of racism in the whole movement in Chester. This is perhaps due to the presence of white students throughout, but it is also due to the non-race-oriented demands of the movement. It is clear to most people that poverty, not color, is the basic problem, and that to wage a race war would leave no one better off. It is the middle-class Negro who is concerned about job discrimination, housing exclusion, de facto segregated schools; it is the working class and unemployed Negro who is concerned about the lack of jobs, the bad housing, and the unfit schools. And if the movement is supported by some middle-class Negroes in Chester, its major support comes from the tenements, housing projects, and the students.

Good, one says, the project has a radicalizing and sobering effect on the students involved; it develops Negro leadership and creates a mental attitude which is conducive to change. But what Next? If our analysis that basic structural problems in the economy are the cause of poverty in Chester, and major national changes, probably socialism, are necessary to face these problems, how are we getting any closer to the solution? Won't all this just get hopes high, and collapse because of lack of success on the local level? Won't Chester go through this strife, leaving feelings more bitter than before, without having solved any problems?

There are a number of ways one can confront this problem. First of all, there are certain things a city can do to improve conditions. A housing code, new public housing, an improved school program, perhaps even ARA funds and manpower retraining, are all within the administrative, and perhaps financial scope of the city of Chester. And these changes would materially benefit the Negroes and poor whites of Chester. If conditions are not so bad that they cannot be solved or partially solved on the local level, then let them be so solved. And if the problems are too large, then at least the students and Negroes will know that they will have to look elsewhere for a solution, something which they do not yet think about. It may be suggested that these piecemeal successes are not good for the movement: they may sap the energy, buy off the leadership and solve no real problems. I think this is a threat only when the crumbs are handed down unrequested or requested only by "bi-racial" committees and the like. When they are demanded by a militant movement, and gained through force, they have the opposite effect: to increase demands and increase the pace of the movement. And it has been our role much of the time to force the leadership to do this.

More important than the gains which can be gotten are those which cannot. The realization that the main problem of Chester is the lack of jobs, and that this is a national, not a Chester problem, is a major achievement in itself. This realization is a pre-requisite for a national movement to begin to solve these problems. Chester Negroes will be a good step ahead of the rest of the U.S. population if they can realize this much, and see that their enemies are not white people, not political machines, but the economic system and its implications. If socialism is necessary, Negroes must first see that the traditional solutions of American problems are inadequate. Only then will it be possible for them to consider such an alternative.

I do not believe, however, that this kind of change in belief, this kind of positive evaluation from failure, is a natural spontaneous chain of events. I think it is necessary for leadership to point out conclusions: the community is not used to dealing in abstract terms, and is more willing to say "It was Wilbur's fault that we didn't win that employment demand", than to say "maybe full employment isn't possible on the local level". The role of students in pointing out these abstract conclusions is most important: the perspective we have in combining direct action with seminars to produce long-run answers is one of the contributions we can make.

The most natural result of failure on either the direct action level or on the political level is to look around for allies. These allies are in Chester: poor whites, perhaps 10-20% of the total population (Negroes are 40%). It is in this group that there is already great hostility

toward Negroes, and if the movement were to press fair employment demands very far, there would be actual fighting in the streets between black and white workers over the few jobs there are, hardly a thing to look forward to. The realization that this group will have to be won over must be made by both students and Negroes, students so that they will begin to go into the white lower class neighborhoods to organize there, Negroes so that they can begin to adjust to a class, rather than race, approach to their problems. This is the major failure of the movement so far, and the major failure of the project: the neglect of whites in Chester. There is a natural antipathy toward whites among those of us who have spent time in the Negro movement, and a disinclination to work with this group. They are most open in their racist feelings, most likely to beat one up in a demonstration. And it takes a good deal of courage and initiative to launch into this area which none of us has experience or confidence in.

A major problem faces us in Chester, and will face all areas which begin similar movements in the north: if one puts all one's hopes in a national solution and therefore a national movement, how will Chester hook up with this national movement, and what form will such a movement take? This has been in the backs of our minds, and for this precise reason we have made efforts to circulate out list of total demands throughout the north, in hopes that other movements would adopt them, providing some uniformity of program. This, however, is not enough. Chester will soon reach the end of the number of projects which can achieve some success on the local level, and if leadership is good enough, Chester will soon face squarely the fact that national unemployment is the key issue, that working on other issues is dilatory. When Chester comes to that point, as indeed Cambridge did, ~~must it stagnate, die or wait for the rest of the north~~ to catch up so that it can proceed along with the rest?

This, of course, is somewhat far from the subject of campus programming. I think there are sufficient reasons for campus to engage in such programming: one must make the jump of faith and believe that some national solution is possible, and that, any job of radicalizing students, and making a local movement more sophisticated and realistic is a positive contribution toward that solution.

It is, however, the responsibility of the more farseeing of us to project the movement on a national scale. Whether it is through SDS, a SNCC-SDS-NSM union, or some other vehicle, this must be done and it must be done soon, or much of the work which is being done in communities like Chester will be lost. It is this tie between the local movement and the national movement, paralleling the local chapter and the national organization of SDS, which provides the rationale for a national organization at all: not only to cross-pollinate local groups, and permit our experiences to be of some assistance elsewhere, but to take the lead in the formation of and execution of plans for a national movement and national solution which local movements, partially the product of campus programming can relate to.