

CHESTER  
PA.

JOBS

FREEDOM  
NOW

Community  
Organization  
In  
The  
Other  
America

SDS 12/63

Chester Report

Submitted by the Swarthmore College Chapter of SDS, in collaboration with the Committee for Freedom Now of Chester, Pennsylvania and the Swarthmore Political Action Club of Swarthmore College.

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November, 1963. 400 people block the doors to a school, refuse to let teachers or students enter. Parents of the school's children make up the demonstration line. 400 people march through the city's streets, singing. They march to the Mayor, to the Board of Education. No one listens to their plea for better schools. They sit in at city hall, blocking the building's main hall, stopping work for the day. Police arrest 258. These are the Negro citizens of Chester, Pennsylvania. They are fighting for better schools.

Chester, Pennsylvania poses some questions: What are the conditions of Chester? Can events there serve as an example for the rest of the North? How did the Chester movement come about? These three questions - the why, the importance, and the how of Chester - are vital to Students for a Democratic Society at this time of crisis in search for a new direction.

### I. What is Chester:

A northern city, population 63,000 - 27,000 Negro. Except for two cities which are on the Federal Government's list of permanently depressed areas, it has the worst unemployment, the lowest median income, and the most thoroughly exploited tax base of any city its size in Pennsylvania. Government figures set white unemployment at 15%, Negro at 30%. Chester faces the usual urban problem of the ghetto, determined by low rent areas and plagued by poor housing conditions. Discrimination in hiring keeps Negroes from some jobs and leaves them only low pay work in industry, but an overall lack of job opportunities towers over the segregation problem. Chester is an industrial city, specializing in ship-building and oil refining; but industry is moving out. Ford left three years ago, leaving more than 1000 jobless.

Chester has the oldest intact Republican machine in the country. It has survived the labor movement and the post war reforms. Bribes and physical intimidation distort election results, especially in the Negro wards. For all effective purposes, the Negro has no representation in the city government.

### II. How is Chester important to the North:

The problems of Chester are the problems of poverty. Discrimination dictates that poverty seeks out the Negro first. So long as the Negro population can absorb poverty, the white population does not have to bear the burden. If the community is 30% Negro and 30% indigent, not many whites are in the lowest strata. Only when indigency spreads, or when there is no Negro population large enough to take up the burden, does the white begin to feel the brunt of the poverty.

The distress of poverty appears in city after city throughout the north. Two major factors, the continued stagnation of the country and the increase in automation, are exacerbating poor conditions, and increasing the number of people affected. The Negro is hardest hit, "Last hired, first fired", applies in the broadest sense. The Negro has been first to protest: he is most affected, and he has a clearer focus at which to aim his resentment than the other poor: discrimination is easy to see, and relatively easy to fight. But Chester stands for any northern city, white, black, or integrated. The whites

too can organize around poverty. It is the thesis and the hope of this report that indigent America - the other America, white and black - can use the example and momentum of Negro protest to form a broader based movement.

What is Chester: an industrial city of the north, facing the rising specter of poverty.

How is it relevant: It can serve as an example and a first case study of the broader movement for social reform in America.

### III. How did Chester come about:

The rest of this report deals with the third major question - the how of Chester. It is a case study dealing with the history, techniques, and future of the movement in Chester, with the hope that Chester will be an example for the rest of the North.

#### How: the issue - Franklin School:

The conditions of Chester are northern conditions. The recent mobilization centers on these problems, and has taken a form unknown to the south. As an example, the initial issue in Chester concerned the poor conditions of the Franklin School, an elementary school in the middle of the ghetto. Although 95% of the school children are Negro, it serves all of the surrounding community, and is not considered segregated. The parents are far more concerned about the poor conditions of the building. Built in 1910, it was intended to house 500 students. In September of this year, 1200 were enrolled. One desk and several piles of books served as the library. Two toilets had to suffice for the entire building. An unused coal bin formed the gym. The playground, a cement terrace with metal pilings embedded in it, drops four feet to the sidewalk along one edge, with no protective railing. More than 39 pupils are squeezed into each classroom, as opposed to an average of 26 in the nearest white school.

#### How: the history:

Several attempts have been made in Chester within the last three years to organize the Negro community. All have put stress on discrimination - in housing or in medical service or in hiring. None have gained widespread or continuing support.

In the fall of this year, Stanley Branche, a Negro resident of Chester, and several students from nearby Swarthmore college returned from a summer in Cambridge, Md. The movement in Cambridge had flared violently over the summer, and then dissipated because of too strong an opposition from the national guard, and more important, because of a growing realization that the movement had no where to turn. No one had the money to pay the bill in restaurants that might have been integrated. Cambridge did not have the industry to give jobs and money. Enthusiasm for civil rights demands had begun to dwindle, and a broader, but still vague view of the essential problems was beginning to take shape.

Mr. Branche and friends, with the aid of Swarthmore students, set out to find an issue that would have importance and appeal for the Negro community.

Segregation was too limited and too obscured to have meaning for many. The poor conditions at the Franklin School were problems much more immediate. This group formed a loose organization, The Committee For Freedom Now of Chester, Pa. (CFFN).

A brief chronology of recent events in Chester:

1962 Parents' complaints about the poor conditions in Chester's schools had been brought to the attention of the Board of Education.

1963 - Oct.

CFFN decided on the Franklin School as a problem of vital interest and concern to the Negro community.

Nov. 4

Parents, CFFN, and students set up a picket line around the school in protest. They sent a letter to the Board of Education protesting the poor conditions, demanding immediate improvements, and asking that plans be drawn up immediately for a new school. The letter asked for a reply within a week.

Nov. 5-8

Picketing continued; the picket line grew. From 20 at the beginning of the week, the line swelled to 150 by Wednesday.

Nov. 10

Monday evening: A mass meeting of the community was held at a local church. The Board of Education having sent no reply, CFFN decided to block the doors to the school the following morning and forbidding anyone to enter.

Nov. 11

Tuesday morning: The blockade closed the school. Four hundred people participated. When the closing was made official at 9:30 A.M., the demonstrators marched through the streets to the center of town. Arriving at City Hall, 150 entered the Mayor's chambers and presented their complaints to the commissioners. They were told that the letter never arrived, and that the Mayor and the Council had no control over the Board of Education.

Rebuked the demonstrators marched again through the town to the office of the Board of Education. The doors had been barred, but from the upper windows scared faces watched the crowd below. Mr. Branche was at length admitted to an hour long conference, but the Board refused to make any commitments or any promises. The crowd dispersed, planning to block the doors again the following day.

Nov. 12

Wednesday morning: The blockade was set up once again. As soon as enough people arrived at the school to insure the blocking of the doors, the rest were ferried across town to the Board of Education offices. There too the doors were blocked. The Board of Education did no work that day. From the Board's offices at the northern part of town, and from the school, in the western part, the demonstrators marched toward the municipal building. On the steps of the building they sang and prayed, and then entered, sitting on counters, chairs, and floor, preventing the elevator from operating, stopping anyone from entering or leaving the building. For several hours, the policemen watched as demonstrators continued to pray, sing, and talk. The building's entire staff was given the rest of the day off. Those who

were not afraid to walk through the crowd of demonstrators went home. Eventually parade wagons were backed up to a side door. The demonstrators had locked arms. The police pulled them apart and dragged them down the stairs to the waiting vans. Three hours later 158 had been arrested. Another mass meeting was held at the church that night.

Nov. 13

At the school more members of the community blocked the school doors. Police arrested 82. The first day, prisoners were released on \$200 bail each.

At a mass meeting that evening, Stanley Branche announced that the Board of Education had given in to many of CFFN's demands. The Board promised to reduce the size of classes, provide better toilet facilities, and said it "looked forward" to the construction of a new school.

Nov. - later

An executive committee organized during the days in prison began to give CFFN a formal structure. The committee formulated a broad list of long-range goals (see the Chester leaflet). The committee asked for more jobs, better housing, better schools, better medical care, and an end to discrimination.

Thanksgiving -

CFFN organized block groups in the Negro community, concentrated in the area immediately around the Franklin School. An awareness of the true nature of Chester's problems was seen as the goal of these organizations, an awareness to be achieved through active participation in the struggle for better conditions. The focal point so far has been housing conditions. The neighborhood groups have surveyed to determine the extent of bad conditions, petitioned landlords, and threatened to call a rent strike some time in the spring or early summer. Each neighborhood has appointed one representative to be on the executive committee of CFFN. It is expected that the network will expand from the present four groups into a city wide organization.

How: the program, definitional:

The next aspect of the How of Chester deals with the program - what basic premises lie behind the decisions, and what kind of considerations have gone into determining a course of action.

Decisions must be made about three major categories: goals, strategy, and tactics. Goals are the long range hopes of the movement. Strategy makes up the general lines of action. Once strategy is successfully completed, the goals will have been achieved. Tactics constitute the specific projects undertaken in pursuing the line of strategy. In brief, tactics are implemented to effect strategy, which is conceived to bring about basic goals.

The Chester movement has two goals: To better the conditions of the city on an immediate and local level, and, whenever the first is not possible, to lay the groundwork for a national organization to effect broader change.

Strategy in Chester has been along four major lines. 1) To get the people in general to realize the true nature of the problems they face. 2) To create the will and the ability among the population at large to carry through well organized projects. 3) To find and train leaders who can direct tactical endeavors and who can meet to formulate strategy. These first three are organizational strategic objectives, the fourth finally gets down to business. 4) To

initiate direct action endeavors to bring about the long term goals. This last objective, however, cannot be begun until the first three strategic aims have been at least partially gained. Most direct action to date has been of a tactical nature aimed at effecting the organizational strategical aims. The blockade of the schools and a proposed rent strike are to date the only direct action projects with any strategic value, but these were conceived mainly for organizational ends.

Three major tactics have been employed to date in Chester: the blockade of the school, the organization of neighborhood groups, and the formation of an executive committee. All three have been aimed to effect the first three steps in the strategy - awareness, organization ability, leadership training.

In addition, a myriad of minor tactical techniques have been developed. Door to door campaigning has proved absolutely essential in the organization of neighborhood projects. Even after the groups have been set up it is often necessary to make personal visits to assure adequate attendance at meetings. Mass meetings must precede any large scale action, and thorough leafletting is a prerequisite to every mass meeting.

How: the program, chronologically:

In a chronological context, the tactical steps necessary to effect the first three strategic points can be arranged thus: research, direct action, neighborhood organization, more direct action.

**Research:** The first steps that students in Chester made this fall involved a door to door survey of living conditions, asking about housing, jobs, salaries, church affiliations, family structure, complaints against the way of life. The survey gave the students a rough idea of the problems, and enabled them to obtain a knowledge of the geography and political structure of the town, as well as some insight into the employment situation.

At this stage, as well as at most other times in the course of the movement, detailed research was necessary into the political and economic history of the town, and also into immediate conditions.

**Direct Action:** The next step was a meeting with local leaders to determine the first projects. This occurred in September, at which point, it was decided to concentrate attention on the Franklin School. At this point direct action serves to focus attention, draw the community together, and provide it with a point of common experience - hopefully a success - around which to rally future support. As a result of the Franklin episode, the residents spoke of going to jail with pride, the children sang freedom songs in the streets when they played, and, for the first time, the Negro in Chester has some small grain of hope.

**Neighborhood organization:** Hope is essential to create a deep-rooted movement. Block organizations, which have been the succeeding tactical step, are intended to instill hope and to achieve preliminary strategic objectives,

Conditions at the Franklin school have been bad for years. But now, as a result of the blockade and the block organizations, the community speaks of hope for change, which is two-fold: on the one hand, is a realization that the community has a right to better schools, more jobs, more say in government; on the other hand is the first feeling of hope that they have the power to achieve better conditions.

Block organization and the endeavors they undertake give many members of the community a chance to take an active part in the fight. Through participation they learn that action does not mean retribution - as it has always in the past - loss of jobs, loss of homes, increased police arbitrariness. They learn that working together they are strong.

More direct action: Through active participation the community begins to understand the true nature of the problems. CFFN has integrated the staff of every downtown store that hires more than two or three. For their pains, they have gained fifty to a hundred jobs - no gain at all compared to the pressing need. The community is coming to realize that fight along the lines of discrimination will never cure the problems.

These activities of the neighborhood groups form the fourth tactical step - activity to tighten the organization, spread it to other parts of town, and increase awareness. Eventually, it is hoped that the first three strategic steps have been sufficiently achieved so that direct action can concentrate toward making concrete changes in Chester - or at least toward finding out if such changes are possible on a local level!

This discussion of the tactical procedure for community organization in Chester is by no means complete. It is drawn from the experience of one northern community. Most of the tactics were developed on the spot in a trial and error fashion. Much experience is necessary to increase the store of tactics and the understanding of the problems. Tactical knowledge of "how" will only come as other communities are organized throughout the North.

How: the program, analytic: This report has dealt with the program in Chester - its goals, strategy, and tactics in a definition and chronological manner. The third step in discussion is "how" to deal with strategy analytically. The definition of the goals, strategy, and tactics is clear, and so is there meaning in terms of the Chester situation. So too is their sequence. The reasoning that must be continued before future decisions can be made remains to be discussed.

The essence of the first three strategic aims - awareness, organizational ability among the community, and leadership development - is the elimination of fear - or the creation of hope. Hope rests on four things: having a direction to go in, having leadership to show the way, believing that the end can be reached, and having interest enough to reach it.

SES is facing a directional crisis, so is Chester. Should Chester attempt to solve its problems internally? Is such a solution possible? Chester is becoming more and more certain that there is no local solution, but until SDS or someone else provides a national network with which it can hook up, it must continue to wage a local battle. Even on the possibly fruitless local level, which way should it turn? Can inroads be made best on housing, schools, medicine, or jobs? An explanation of why housing and schools are being chosen appears below. These decisions, however, have been made empirically, and much research is necessary to find which areas form the best focal points, which are most likely to yield successes, which are most important to breaking the vicious circle of poverty?



Although Chester can make some further progress before these questions are answered, the question of local versus national solutions - and how and when national solutions are to be obtained, has direct bearing on CFFN leadership development, and therefore CFFN tactics. If the solution will be local, then CFFN should cultivate grass roots understanding, and prepare for a long, slow campaign. If, on the other hand, the solution will be national, perhaps CFFN should concentrate on developing leaders who can lead the population in a relatively short time into dramatic action. Different tactics would be required for each course. If Chester has a rent strike, in the near future, it might be necessary to bring it off without every participant fully understanding the issues involved. With good leadership, it might be possible. CFFN would set another example for the north. On the other hand, since such a battle does not necessarily do the most to arouse awareness, and might result in the local Chester movement getting quashed, such a tactic might be devastating for CFFN if it lacked outside support or interest.

Thus there are many questions which only an organization like SDS can answer before Chester can know which way it is to go, and before it is fully sure of how to give the community hope.

Hope comes with able leadership, and in this area too there are specific problems. Three hundred years of suppression have scared the Negro away from the active role. Leadership implies responsibility, and always in the past, leadership has received the blame and the retribution. The Negro must be shown that he need not lose his job or his home for taking a stand. Potential leadership in Chester have shied away from phoning or writing governmental authorities for fear of retribution. Few will sign their names to petitions for the same reasons. The lack of leadership opportunity and training, and the lack of time away from home-keeping and work represent other barriers to developing a sound leadership. Block organizations and the executive committee, however, are beginning to solve the problem.

Creating a widespread belief that something can be done is an obvious necessity for continued interest. But such a belief rests at least in part upon past successes. The Negro community of Chester speaks of the Franklin School episode as a battle won. The vicotry serves as a rallying point for future organization. Issues that give easy victories, however, are not likely to be those involving basic, deep-seated problems.

In talking of possible issues for the Chester movement, there are four distinctive types of endeavors, positive dinky, positive community negative community, and negative national. Dinky, as opposed to community or national, distinguishes those projects which do not deal with major problems, and are conceived only to give the participants organizational practice, and are not conceived to benefit the community. Positive implies that the problem tackled is not a basic one, and therefore apt to yield success. Negative type projects attack fundamental weaknesses in the system, and because of the strength necessary to produce change are apt to run the participants into a figurative stone wall. In so doing, they may learn of the deep nature of the problems that face them, but morale will not be helped.

It is clear that creating the belief of the possibility of success depends in part on positive projects. Positive community projects, however, cannot be undertaken without organizational skill, which must be created with endeavors of the positive dinky variety. On the other hand, neither positive variety does much to show the community the true nature of the issues. Obviously, a

balance must be struck between "positive" and "negative" projects. Where the fulcrum lies is not clear, and will vary from community to community.

The final prerequisite of hope is continued interest. Interest is affected partly by the presence of successes (see above), and partly by the relevance of the issues to the needs of the population. Several possible focal points in Chester are discussed below as examples:

Medicine: Poor medical treatment is evident only to a certain small percentage of the population at any given time. Hospitals are often removed from the neighborhood of the indigent community, and do not provide an adequate physical focus for mass activity. The connection between poor medical care and the broader economic problems is not easy to make clear.

Jobs: Although the need for jobs is the fundamental need of the indigent community, it does not readily form a focal point for direct or educational action. Except for one industry locale (see discussion under Future) any factory work; not affect many people in a small area. Again, the factory is not apt to be a strategically located focal point.

Aside from tactical problems, however, an attack on employment at this time in most Negro communities could be a serious strategic mistake. The Civil Rights movement has forced the Negro to think of job difficulties in terms of segregation and discrimination. He is accustomed to blaming the color of his skin. It could be difficult, although not impossible, to see that other employment demands must be for full rather than fair hiring. In Chester, even after the non-racial Franklin Scholl controversy, CFFN made demands for fair hiring in retail stores and in industry. None so far have been made for full employment.

Much more important, however, are the possible misinterpretation of any Negro employment demands by the white community. Whites feel that any demands from the Negro are for fair employment, and, given the limited supply of jobs, feel that these demands are a threat to the white. Even if the Negro community demonstrates for full employment, they may not easily heed the call to "come and read our picket signs - we're on your side".

The Negro is fast realizing that his problems are more than racial. More slowly he is seeing that he cannot solve them alone. Any action which might alienate his potential allies - whites who are now or who may soon be in his same, indigent position, must be avoided at all costs.

Even though direct action on jobs seems difficult at present, jobs form the core of discussions within CFFN, and awareness of the problem is growing.

Schools: Franklin School shows clearly that education can form a good focal point for community action. Many are affected and organization is simplified by the central location of schools and the sure communication line of children to parents.

Housing: Housing has formed the most valuable focus for action in Chester. The ghetto and the poor economic conditions produce large areas of high density poor conditions. Although concentration along this line is perhaps a longer route to facing the basic problem of the city, housing protests give large numbers a chance to participate. Especially in government assisted housing, the tenants have to face the city's problems. In Chester, housing

projects' tenants will soon have to ask themselves if the city can afford to give them the same housing at lower, more reasonable rates. Then too, housing is a "positive" type demand, assuring some success and tending to sustain interest.

To achieve the first strategic points, hope is the fundamental prerequisite. Definite direction, adequate leadership, belief in success, and sustained interest are essential to maintaining hope.

It is hoped that this section of the report has conveyed some idea of the how of Chester - the history, the techniques and their how, why, and when. Having considered the conditions of Chester, its importance as an example for the rest of the north, and the manner in which it has come about, the final section of the report turns to consider the future of Chester and the future of the northern movement.

#### IV. The Future:

Chester, as the first example of the northern movement, has taken some of the form, but little of the content of the southern struggle. It is fitting some of the old tactics to new, broader goals. Chester's future involves solidifying the long range goals, and developing new tactics to fit its new objectives. Although it may use the momentum of the civil rights struggle to provide example and incentive, it will have to reverse some of the trends of the southern campaign. In the north, the Negro must not learn to think and act as black, but as poor, his problems as those of an indigent minority, not a racial one.

Chester must wait for other cities; or Chester may have fought in vain. Empirical evidence in Chester, and research on the U.S. economy is the large point to broad based, structural weaknesses which cannot be solved locally.

Certain problems confront the organization of white communities. They do not have the momentum of the Civil Rights movement to spur them on. They are, perhaps, partially alienated from protest movements in general, due to the events in the south during the past few years. In addition, poverty is not ghettoized in white America to the degree it occurs in the Negro community. Instead of existing in close packed slums, white poverty is apt to be more thinly spread over a larger area (with the possible exception of the few largest cities).

On the other hand, none of these barriers are insurmountable, and economic trends in the U.S. appear to be creating the need for organization. Continued stagnation of unemployment and the growth of automation are increasing poverty, and more and more poverty is overflowing into white America. The closing of large, industrial plants (often due to changes in defense contracts - Long Island, Schenectady, San Diego in recent months) is creating pockets of unemployment, as is the elimination of the need for certain goods (the coal problem of the Appalachian region, Hazard, etc.). It is often said that prejudice is most severe between the lowest class whites and Negroes, ignoring the fact that such antagonism is frequently between employed whites and job-threatening Negroes. When whites find themselves fighting the same employment battle as Negroes which will happen if the economy continues to falter, and if he finds that he and the Negro have a common hope to look up to, it is not impossible that he will be less inclined to look down upon his black co-sufferer.

Chester must wait for other cities. Conditions and experience suggests that these other cities can be organized. Many of the experiences in Chester can be examples to other places. White communities are facing many of the same problems under many similar conditions. Possible organizing techniques for other northern cities: 1) the same local problem technique used with the Franklin School in Chester are applicable to white or Negro locales. 2) spreading housing or job protest from Negro sections into neighboring white communities - as in the New York rent strike at present. 3) organizing through militant labor unions - the Teamsters and the mine workers locals in Kentucky are current examples. 4) concentrating organization on areas of lightning unemployment produced by the closing of large scale industry, such as is occurring in Long Island over the New Year's holiday.

To steal a phrase: What is to be done?

- 1) Set up organizations in other indigent communities, white or colored, using Chester as an example where applicable.
- 2) Set up a national organization to coordinate the northern movement and deploy available manpower most expediently.
- 3) Develop concrete goals, consistent strategy, and effective tactics for the rising northern movement.