

1100 West Ainslie
Chicago, Illinois
August 7, 1965

Dear Friend:

I want to share with you some developments that are significant and exciting to those of us who are supporters of today's freedom movement.

For over a year, Students for a Democratic Society has been working in Northern slum communities against racial and economic discrimination. Like SNCC in the South, SDS is building a movement that starts at the bottom--with the people most in need of change, the people most affected by job scarcities, squalor and political voicelessness.

The SDS push to extend the Southern freedom movement Northward has been impressive. In a year's time, it has amassed a full time organizing staff of over 200, working with community poor in 12 cities from Boston to Oakland, California. And these organizers have set in motion thousands of poor people against unfair welfare officials, slumlords who won't fix-up, government poverty boards which exclude poor people, and urban renewal planners who work against the interests of slum residents.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the SDS program is its organization of poor whites. To my knowledge, it is only effort anywhere in the country to turn poor white indifference or opposition to the Negro cause into active support.

SDS is reaching white people on the basis of day to day problems of slum living--police brutality, loan shark practices, night welfare raids, bureaucracies inequipped to accommodate human beings in need. The young organizers are showing people that through grass roots organization they can gain control over some of the maligning forces affecting their lives. Most importantly, they are showing that against these forces, poor whitepeople have allies in the Negro civil rights movement.

I want particularly to bring to your attention an organization called JOIN--the largest and fastest growing movement of poor whites in the country. Based in Uptown Chicago, most of the JOIN members are from Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia. A smaller number are from Puerto Rico. Others are Indians, small town immigrants to the city or native Chicagoans.

While a small movement in comparison to many Negro organizations, JOIN people have discovered muscle power in their numbers and are using it against the status quo. I would say that, thus far, their program has been more "against" than "for": to stop welfare "run arrounds"; to end rats and roaches in apartments; to stand up against a war on poverty that excludes neighborhood poor people from decision-making. Nevertheless, behind these first efforts to resist the accepted practices of those people in power lies the basis for a new way of using that power. JOIN people are looking for alternatives. They want thorough change. And they are eager for "outside" allies.

At the end of this month, JOIN will have an opportunity to learn about other urban and rural movements and to tie in to them. On August 27 and 28, a national gathering of poor people from Mississippi, Alabama, Boston, New Jersey, Cleveland, Chicago, California--wherever SNCC and SDS are active in generating grass roots protests--will convene to examine new alternatives, strategies and allies in the freedom movement. The convention will be held in Newark, New Jersey, in a Negro slum. Here the leadership of local movements--North and South--can meet each other for the first time. And here there exists the first possibility of national political action from poor people since the 1930's.

I need not stress for you the significance of this Newark convention. It provides a chance for the dozens upon dozens of local protest groups to begin to link together in a new national perspective. What must be stressed, however, is the value of poor white people participating.

Mississippi Negroes have found few white allies who are with them on a day to day basis. They have experienced hatred and little else from the white man who has only his skin color to separate him from the poor Negro's condition. The Southern freedom movement has not known allies among even a handful of America's poor white millions.

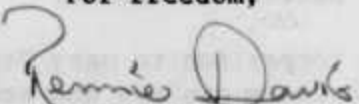
At Newark, this will be different; poor Negroes will sit with poor whites--many of them from the deep South--and they will both consider themselves part of the same movement. For example, from JOIN, the convention will meet white Mississippians and Kentuckians who think poor people must organize for decent jobs, housing, schools, and playgrounds as well as "Jim Crow must go." JOIN people will ask the convention for national action against the top-down war on poverty. They will plea that people overcome racial bigotry in order to forge a national movement against police brutality, slumlords, urban renewal, and other enemies of poor people. I think you will agree that a national convention of this kind could have a major influence on the direction and perspective of the civil rights movement.

JOIN needs your backing to meet transportation and convention costs in Newark. We can fill a bus with people who want to go--about 40. The chartered bus--round trip--will cost \$1050. Another \$500 is needed to pay convention fees. It would be tragic if insufficient funds prevented JOIN from sending its most active supporters.

You can help and I know you will want to. Checks can be made payable to the Chicago Project--JOIN--and returned in the enclosed envelope.

Your contribution will be gratefully appreciated and it will be put toward the support of a significant event.

For freedom,


Rennie Davis,
SDS-JOIN Organizer