

MEMO

TO: The Southern Student Organizing Committee

FROM: Anne Braden

I am disturbed by some statements in your May newsletter---and also by a general line of thinking that seems prevalent in the movement now. Since you have no more issues of the newsletter this summer, I am jotting down a few notes this way now. In the fall, I would like to ask that you let me write an article for your newsletter setting forth a different view.

The line of thinking that disturbs me is that now that more Negroes in the movement are thinking in terms of "black consciousness" etc, white people in the movement should now turn to organizing whites separately. I am all for the idea of white people trying to organize white people into movements for social justice. What I object to is the concept that they must be organized separately from Negroes.

One article in your May newsletter states in regard to the Southern Mountain Project that the commitment of this project to "initial interracial organization is an Achilles Heel which foredooms the project to failure."

Now, the Southern Mountain Project may indeed fail. Any project may fail. There are many reasons other than its principle of interracial organizing as to why it might fail. Even if it failed because of this principle, or partly because of it, I don't think that necessarily proves that such a principle will fail somewhere else.

How can anybody say at this point that the concept of interracial organizing of the poor will fail in the South? How many times has it yet been tried (in the current period)? How much human energy has been put into trying it?

What bothers me if it is so is that people as young as you all are seem to be willing to write off something as impossible before it has really been tried. I do not think this is an attitude that one usually associates with youth.

Let me go back a minute and state what I think are some of my credentials for discussing this matter of black-white organizing. I speak as one who has thought for many years that the job of white people should be to reach other white people and help them find their way into social movements that are pointed to the future and not the past. I have never seen this concept of white people flooding into black communities and organizing them. I say never---that's a slight exaggeration, but anyway not for a long time. When I first got involved in the civil rights movement almost 20 years ago I certainly went through a stage, which I think most white people do, of working mainly in the Negro community. But soon after that I went through my baptism of fire on that one and came to the realization that Negroes did not need me or want me to either lead them or organize them.

I came to this realization through some things that happened to me, which I won't go into here because they are not pertinent now. But I made up my mind then, as many of you are making up your minds now I think, that if I really believed the things I said I did my job was to reach the white people of my community---and wherever else I could reach them---and convince them of the evils of racism and of the meaning of real democracy.

As the new movement developed in the South in the late 1950's and the early 1960's, there was a growing tendency for the relatively few white people who were active to work in the Negro communities. I just never could see this. When SNCC started as an almost entirely Negro student organization, I felt that my job as a white person was to convey to the white students of the South a feeling of what really going on and how they could relate to it. It was for this reason that SCEF started the "white student project" of SNCC, under which we made a grant to SNCC for the employment of someone to reach white students.

But at that stage, it was very hard to convince the white people who were active that this was their job. There was a great temptation to be where the action was, and the action was in the Negro communities.

Then, by the summer of 1964, white students (mostly from the North, but some Southerners) were coming into the South in great numbers, as you know. Mostly they were going to the black communities.

At that point, I greatly welcomed and agreed with the SSOC project which was going to attempt to reach the white people of Mississippi. I know some of the problems of that project and that it was not the greatest success in the world. But I thought your idea was right, and I truly think it might have been different if there had been more than just the feeble handful of you interested in it. People say the poor white people of Mississippi cannot be reached---but how do we know? Suppose all of the human energy that has been poured by white people into reaching Negro Mississippians had been put into reaching white Mississippians? What would have happened? We'll never know.

But at that time in 1964, the flood tide was running against this sort of idea---and frankly at times I began to wonder if I was wrong. Surely everybody could not be out of step but me (and a few others), I thought.

Now, the pendulum seems to be swinging the other way, and more and more white people are deciding they must reach the white Southerner, especially the poor one, who by and large has been neglected by the movement and by us all.

I am glad they are deciding this.

What I disagree with is the concept that they will organize these poor white Southerners completely apart from the Negro movement---and figure that somewhere down the road, maybe several years hence, maybe they'll get together in some sort of coalition.

I don't think it can work that way.

I think some people's conclusion that it can stem from their applying in their thinking about white communities some of the principles that are emerging from organization in the black communities. And I think this projection leads to a mistaken course.

To be specific: I can see the reasons (or think I can see them) why many Negroes are moving toward the idea of black organization. I know the reasons it is said that a "black consciousness" is needed. You all know this discussion; I won't go into it here; I think a great deal of it is valid. Therefore, I can see why Negroes want to build organizations of black people and build their consciousness as a people.

I just don't think the same arguments apply in organization of white people. For historic reasons, we may need "black consciousness." The last thing in the world we need is "white consciousness." As a matter of fact, of course, we already have "white consciousness," with all the evil and destruction that indicates. What we need to do is tear it down.

Again to be specific, if you are going to engage in a project (rural or urban) to organize poor white people, I can see how it might be desirable (and it may happen whether you think it is desirable or not) for Negroes to be organizing the black people in that community into an independent organization. But when you go to talk to and organize the white people I think you have to say to them in front, from the very word go, that if they are going to be effective and solve their problems they are going to have to team up with those black people over there and find terms that are acceptable to the black people to do it on. And I think you should go to these white people with teams of black and white organizers working together.

White people may not be able to work in organizing Negro communities and maybe should not---for all the reasons stated recently in various papers written on the subject (like the perpetuation of the idea among Negroes that only whites can do things, etc.). But I think black organizers are urgently needed to work in white communities.

In other words, I am saying that I think you have to confront the white Southerner you are trying to reach with this whole question of racism and what it has done to him from the very beginning.

Some may say this is impossible---it will frighten him off and you'll never get to him. I am not saying it will be easy. We will fail many times. But I think we must begin trying in the beginning because I think if you wait it will get harder as time goes on and not easier.

In fact, if you begin to organize groups of white people without tackling this issue in a very concrete way, I think the problem is much greater than that you will just be wasting your time. I think you may be creating a Frankenstein. I think you may well find that you have organized groups and organizations that become a real danger---to the South and to all and to all you stand for.

Robb Burlage said something at a meeting in Atlanta a couple of years ago that has stuck with me: "He said: "White people don't organize as white people except for a bad purpose."

It is different from Negroes organizing as Negroes. They are an oppressed group, so when they organize as Negroes it can be for a good purpose---to throw off oppression. But white people are the oppressor group. This is true even if they are on the low rungs of the ladder. They can organize to throw off economic oppression, and that's good, but at the same time they are members of an oppressed group economically they are still very much a part of the whole oppressor white group too---and when they are organized as white people the groups they form may very well become expressions of that oppression (as well as maybe expressions of their own fight against economic oppression).

To put it bluntly, these groups you form could well---and not too far in the future---become active anti-Negro groups.

This could happen regardless of the fact that you don't want it to happen, which of course you don't. But you are not going to control what you organize. As I understand your philosophy, you don't want to control what you organize. And you couldn't control it even if you wanted to.

As I understand it, Saul Alinsky had this experience in Chicago. He organized Negroes on the Southside---and he organized the Back-Of-The-Yards movement, which was all white and poor and very oppressed. The Back-Of-The-Yards movement became very strong and effective in fighting its own oppression---but later it was the backbone of a movement to keep Negroes out of that part of Chicago.

Maybe this could not have been avoided. What I am saying is that we must try to avoid such mistakes by beginning in the very beginning to try to convince white people that their interest lies in teaming up with Negroes---even if the Negroes want and are forming their own organization. And if we hope to convince them, we must confront them with the issue as we start---because it will get harder as people get more organized, stronger in their own organization, more solidified, etc.

Let me give you an example. You mentioned somewhere (maybe the newsletter) that SSOC was considering "white community projects" in several cities, one of which was Louisville. Now Louisville is a city I know like the palm of my hand. I think a SSOC project working for joint Negro-white action would be a great thing for this city. But I can tell you right now that the last thing in the world we need in Louisville is a project that would come in and organize poor whites separate from Negroes. Let me be even more specific. If you were going to organize whites here, one natural place to begin would be a section of Louisville's West End know as Portland. It is almost all-white and poor. If you followed this "separate" idea you would go there with just white organizers, live, and organize the people around their grievances which are very real. You could do this---but if you did it that way I think it would be damaging to Louisville. As you helped these people gain added strength through organization, it is very likely that they would become

more and more the rivals and antagonists (for public funds, power, etc.) of a well-organized group of Negroes in another part of the West End---Southwick. As this happened, the people in Southwick would become more and more bitter toward the white people in Portland, and those in Portland more and more bitter against those in Southwick. It would be a vicious circle that would continue to get worse. Such antagonism already exists in embryonic stage; organizing Portland alone would intensify it. Any talk of getting them together later---somewhere down the road---is nonsense, in my opinion. It would become harder with each passing day.

On the other hand, some real good could be done if you or someone with your commitments came in here and began to organize the people in Portland with the specific and immediate goal of tying them in with the people of Southwick to work for common aims and on common problems (and the problems in the two areas are similar in many ways) right NOW. Not tomorrow but now.

It would not be easy. But I think there is a good chance it could be done.

I cannot believe that what is true in Louisville does not have counterparts in many other Southern cities. And believe me, Louisville is a Southern city. Don't let anyone tell you it is not.

It may be that the prophets of doom are right when they say it is impossible to bring the poor Southern white man into unity with the poor Southern Negro. I know it failed in the past when it was tried. I happen to think there are circumstances today that may make it different, circumstances I won't go into here but which I touched on a bit in my article in Monthly Review last summer. But I may be completely wrong. Maybe it is not possible.

But I say let's don't give up before we have tried. Let's try for a while pouring as much energy into that effort as whites have poured into Negro communities in recent years---and see what happens.

As for our Southern Mountain Project in East Tennessee, as I said earlier, it may fail. But this is just one effort. I think there are possibilities there---but it is too soon to say for sure. But one thing I do feel: I do not think the handful of people working on the project should have to feel that the whole burden of proving whether white-black organizing can be done in the South rides on their shoulders. If the project fails, it may fail for many reasons. They should not be burdened with feeling they must be the testing lab for an entire movement that includes many, many people.

I want to see some of the rest of you tackle this problem. Let's have many projects and many efforts. If we do that for a while, we'll have a better basis for any opinions on it. And if we fail, we will know that it was not because we did not try. I think we who are white have this historic responsibility at this time---and I think the responsibility rests on the shoulders of each of us.

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Note: The above memo was written in early June, 1966. Since then, certain specific circumstances mentioned in the memo may have changed. However, the basic position of the memo is one that I still adhere to, as of February, 1967.