

Black
power

THE SNCC TRENDS:
CHALLENGE TO WHITE AMERICA

An Editorial-Report by Anne Braden, Editor, THE SOUTHERN PATRIOT.

The most talked-about matter in the freedom movement in recent weeks has been developments in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Most of the Discussion has centered on SNCC's calls for "black power" - by which it is saying that Negroes, where they have the numbers to do so, should organize themselves into independent political groups that can win elections.

This phrase has frightened many white people. There have been new attacks on SNCC in the daily press of the country. There have been many distortions, half-truths, and rumors about SNCC's policies, some of which are simply not true and others of which are gross over-simplifications.

Thus, even among some people who have been ardent supporters of SNCC since its beginning in 1960 and who want to understand its position, there has been confusion and questioning about where the organization is going.

THE SOUTHERN PATRIOT, also long a supporter of SNCC, has delayed publication of this issue in an effort to interview as many people connected with SNCC as possible and thus bring its readers a report that can shed light where there has been mostly heat.

The first thing to note is that the so-called "new directions" of SNCC do not represent any sudden change of policy. Rather they are trends that have been developing over a period of years.

All that has happened recently is that certain surface events have suddenly brought these trends into public view and focus.

The surface events were that in May SNCC held a week-long staff meeting near Nashville, Tenn., tried to define its positions on basic questions, and elected new officers.

The election was widely interpreted as a "change in command." In part it was, and in part it was not.

John Lewis, who has served as SNCC chairman since 1963, was replaced by Stokely Carmichael, a young man reared in the slums of the West Indies and New York City, educated at Howard University, and now identified in the public mind with the new all-Negro political organizations he has sparked in the Black Belt of Alabama, with the symbol of the Black Panther.

Thus his election was interpreted as a new turn toward militancy by SNCC. But Carmichael has been a part of SNCC from its earliest days and was one of the key organizers in Mississippi, where he developed many of the ideas he is now putting into effect in Alabama.

(It should be recalled that SNCC has always been militant and has long been attacked or admired for it, depending on the attitude of the viewer. Three years ago it was John Lewis who was being attacked as "too militant" at the time of the March on Washington.)

Jim Forman, who has been executive secretary of SNCC since 1961, did not run for re-election but remains a key figure in the organization. He simply decided that instead of spending most of his time fund-raising in the North he wanted to concentrate on developing new leadership among young Southern Negroes.

He was replaced as executive secretary by Mrs. Ruby Doris Robinson, former Spelman College student in Atlanta, one of the earliest sit-in leaders and an original founder of SNCC who has been a leader in the organization ever since. Cleveland Sellers, who was named program secretary in 1965, was re-elected to that post; he too is a long-time SNCC worker and was a key organizer in Mississippi.

These three - Carmichael, Sellers, and Mrs. Robinson - make up the present governing "secretariat" of SNCC. They are important as individuals in that they obviously represent the long-developing trends in SNCC that are now being brought into public focus.

These trends are the product of SNCC experiences as it has worked in the deeply racist communities of the Deep South over the past five years, and anyone with the courage to face truth must see that they represent the developing thought of the majority of Negroes in those areas.

PATRIOT readers are probably familiar with most of these trends, as they have been reported at intervals in these pages since 1961. The current call for "black power" is only one of these trends, and it cannot really be understood except in the context of at least three others:

1. The first is the movement of SNCC toward an increasingly close identification with the poor and disinherited Negroes of the South and of the entire country.

This began when SNCC moved from campus to community organizing in 1961, and began to work with people who were very poor and very hungry.

Obviously, this didn't happen in 1966 at the Nashville staff meeting but it helps to explain why SNCC in 1966 is rejecting the concept of coalitions with so-called moderate forces in the South.

Some SNCC people deny that white moderates exist in the Deep South. This probably depends on how the term "moderate" is defined. But one essential fact that the people usually described as "moderate" - the white people and the Negroes who form coalitions with them - are generally people who never knew or have forgotten what it is to be poor.

SNCC simply does not believe that these people, even if they were strong enough to win elections in Alabama or elsewhere, are going to make the social and economic changes necessary to improve the life conditions of poor people. They think poor people have to do it themselves.

2. The second basic trends in SNCC is the movement away from dependence on the federal government - either for protection or action that can change poor people's lives.

The Disillusioned

That started back down the road too - when civil rights workers' calls for help brought much talk but little action, when FBI agents kept taking endless notes but people kept getting shot and beaten and killed, when new laws were passed but scantily enforced and nothing really changed in the South.

Obviously this disillusioning process did not happen in 1966 at the Nashville staff meeting either, but it helps to explain why, soon after the Nashville conference, SNCC issued its statement refusing to take part in the White House Conference on civil rights because it considered it a farce and a hoax that was not going to accomplish anything.

3. The third basic trend has been SNCC's slow but steady move toward independent political organization - independent, that is, of the old political parties.

SNCC spokesmen now are saying this has always been the organization's goal - to help previously powerless people organize their own political vehicles.

"The only difference now is that it has become possible to do it," one SNCC leader said. "Until recently the struggle had to focus on the simple right to vote and organize. Now we are to the point where we can think about what to do with the vote."

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was actually a move toward independent politics. It was people organizing for themselves - even though at that point they hoped to work within the framework of the national Democratic Party.

Most of them concluded they couldn't do it. The rejection of MFDP at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964 and the failure of the congressional challenge in 1965 had a profound influence on SNCC workers. Many decided then and there that there was no way for Negroes to build political strength within the American two-party system.

The next logical step was to try building their own parties where they had the numbers and conditions to do it - and that is what has developed with the independent parties in Alabama Black Belt counties.

It is significant that these parties, which held their own nominating conventions on primary day in Alabama, will have their candidates on the ballot in November, whereas almost all Negro candidates who ran for nominations in Democratic primaries have now been eliminated from the races.

The idea of independent political parties is sure to spread - both through the Black Belt areas of the South and the ghettos of the North.

This does not mean that SNCC is rejecting the idea of coalitions for all time to come. It is rather obvious that in a country where Negroes represent only 11 per cent of the population and even in the South do not have a majority in any state and only in a limited number of counties there must someday be coalitions with someone.

The question SNCC is asking at this point is coalition where, when, and with whom. It is saying that in order for a meaningful coalition to take place, at least two conditions must exist: (1) the people who have been powerless must create a power of their own, else there will be no coalition but only a situation in which they will be absorbed and controlled by those who have all the power; and (2) there must be groups with kindred interests with whom to make a coalition.

Since SNCC orientation is to a politics of power for poor people, this makes meaningful coalition with white people impossible at this moment, since organized groups of poor white people resisting oppression simply do not exist.

This brings us to the matter of SNCC's position on black-white relations.

The phrase that is being used widely in Negro organizations today is "black consciousness," and that is one of the things SNCC is saying must be built.

With this phrase, SNCC is saying to Negroes that they need to eliminate from their thinking and feeling the patterns that have been put there by a society that is essentially built on the concept of the superiority of the white man.

It is saying that Negroes need to reject the unconscious idea that what is white is better. And because they do live in a society that holds to that idea, they will begin to think and feel differently only when they realize their own history, their own worth as a people, their own ties with darkskinned people elsewhere in the world.

As one SNCC leader put it: "It's really just a new way of saying an old thing - don't be ashamed of yourself. It is a matter of human dignity."

With this phrase of "black consciousness" SNCC is also saying some crucially important things to white people within the movement.

False Rumor

It is not true, as has been falsely rumored, that SNCC is asking all of its white staff members to leave. Rather it is saying to them that they simply cannot, because of objective conditions, attempt any longer to organize in Negro communities.

SNCC is saying that this is impossible because if Negroes are ever to achieve the "black consciousness" that is necessary to human dignity they must organize themselves - that as long as white people are there doing the work the idea is perpetuated that only white people can do things.

They are saying further that the very presence of white organizers in black communities has an intimidating effect on Negroes who have known white people only in the role of oppressors. This happens, SNCC says, even if the white organizers have the best of attitudes, even if they don't actually do anything to make it happen.

It happens because we live in a racist society that has conditioned the thinking of black people as well as white, and the white person who cares about the freedom movement must accept the truth about the consequences of that racist society of which he is a part.

Thus SNCC is saying, in effect, to its white organizers: "Sure you served an important function in the Negro communities of the South. You helped break the ground and establish the right to organize. But now this is done, and if you really mean what you said about why you came here in the first place - that you wanted to help people win the power to control their own lives - you must now step aside and let them do it in the manner that they decide to do it."

Beyond this, and maybe more important, SNCC is saying something else to white people in the movement. It is saying that instead of giving their time and their energy - and maybe their lives - in the Negro communities it is now time (and long overdue) that they turned to the essential task of working in the white community.

Delayed Task

It is there, SNCC point out, that the basic problem in race relations in America exists because the basic problem is white racism. It is time that white people who care address themselves to the task of confronting this racism on its home ground, combatting it, and organizing white America for a new kind of world.

Especially, SNCC says, white people must get to the task of organizing the poor white people of the South who are also oppressed but have been by-passed by the civil rights movement and thus left prey to their fears, to white racist groups and their propaganda. Unless someone with a belief in the freedom movement organizes these people there is no hope of those meaningful coalitions for the Negro movement that have been talked about.

THE SOUTHERN PATRIOT agrees with this concept and SCEF, which publishes it, has long taken the position that the job of white people who believe in freedom is to confront white America. SCEF has been laying the basis for efforts to organize poor white Southerners in alliance with Negroes with its Southern Mountain Project in Appalachia.

SNCC workers will soon be attempting similar work. Many Negroes in SNCC are frankly doubtful that the poor white people of the South can be organized for such coalition, but they have not reached the point of rejecting the hope of trying. How long they maintain that hope may depend on how much effort whites are willing to put into such work.

(Whether the correct method of organizing white people is in groups separate from Negroes is still a subject of debate within the movement. The PATRIOT does not agree that it is correct, and this will be the subject of later articles.)

In addition to all these trends, there are two other developments in SNCC that must be noted.

One is simply a matter of organizational structure. SNCC is trying to tighten it up.

From the beginning SNCC has been loosely organized. This has been in a way its genius, since it gave free rein to individual creativity, but it has also been its weakness.

Creativity sometimes became over-weighted by wasted effort when many people came into SNCC seeking the "new world" and were more interested in finding their own freedom there than in doing what might be needed at the moment to build that new world. This became known as the "freedom-high" movement in SNCC.

Now they are rejecting the "freedom-high" idea and are saying that if people are serious about making a social revolution there are certain organizational disciplines that are necessities of the struggle. How well this will work out remains to be seen.

The other development - and it is a basic one - is that most people in SNCC have rejected the idea of nonviolence as a philosophy and in most situations are becoming more critical of it even as a tactic.

Like the other trends, this one has been developing over the last five years, but has just now been brought into public focus.

It is important to add quickly, however, that this in no way means that SNCC has turned to advocating violence.

As a matter of fact, those who jump to this conclusion should stop to realize that SNCC's emphasis on serious political organization is the direct opposite of advocacy of violence. Effective independent political organization may be the last, best, and only hope of avoiding widespread violence as a means of attacking the racial situation in America.

But most people who work with SNCC in the Deep South - and for that matter with other civil rights groups - simply reject the idea of turning the other cheek. They believe in people's right to defend themselves against the continuing and unrelenting violence of white racists.

The idea of nonviolence as an aggressive weapon of social change - the concept of nonviolent revolution - has, at least for the time being, disappeared as a significant factor in the South.

When and Why?

Just when and why this happened will be the subject of a future article in the PATRIOT. Suffice it to say here that those who believed in this concept missed the historic moment in which it might have been effectively projected, and such a moment is not likely to come again in the near future.

With the decline of this concept, certain other concepts and phraseology have fallen into disrepute within the movement. As Ed Hamlett points out in an article elsewhere in this issue, nobody talks about "the beloved community" anymore. Words like "love", "morality" and "conscience" are rarely heard in the Southern movement today, and if they are heard they are laughed at.

Stokely Carmichael has been widely quoted as saying recently that "integration is irrelevant." His entire quote, which was not used in the press but which sheds considerable light on what he meant, was:

"Integration is irrelevant when initiated by black people in the present society. It does nothing to solve their basic problems."

Most people in SNCC agree with him. What white people must realize is that integration has been presented as a matter of Negroes being "integrated" (or absorbed) into white society. On the face of it this says plainly that what is white is better. This is a raw insult to Negroes; many have long sensed this and now they are saying it.

Asked recently how he defined integration, Jim Forman said: "It means moving Negroes into the mainstream of American life and its accepted value system. I reject this.

This is not what everyone in the movement has meant by integration. To some it has meant the literal meaning of the word integrate: "to make whole" - that is, to make whole the human race.

It meant integration of peoples not into the existing society but into a new society that the movement would build where different groups of people could enrich each other's lives, where all men could be free, and where it was possible for men to live as brothers.

The PATRIOT is among those who believed in this concept of integration - and it still does.

But as a publication which promotes this belief, THE PATRIOT feels it has both the right and the obligation to point out certain realities to others who hold to this belief.

The basic reality is that this concept of integration is yet only a dream in the minds of some people. It does not square with the world as it now is. And until the world is different the dream cannot be realized.

The fact that many people in the movement now laugh at words like "love" and "conscience" does not mean they would not like to see a world where these words could have meaning. It is simply that talk of love is hollow mockery when so little of it is evident and hate runs rampant not only on the South but in the entire country.

White people who believe in integration must see that it can never exist until there is equality in strength between different groups of people - that the human race can never be "made whole" until those who have been oppressed can create for themselves their own strength. The concept of white supremacy which we must realize has been the cornerstone of our society makes this impossible today.

That is why white people who really believe in a united human race should not be frightened when SNCC and other groups talk about "black power." Our society has lived by white power. Unless black people create their own power there can never be a meeting ground.

This is a time of great flux in the Southern movement. Many white people who have worked in Negro communities in the South are being hurt because they now feel rejected. There are individual instances in which they feel overt hostility which for some reason they did not realize was there before.

Of course it was there, and if it is now coming to the surface it is a much healthier situation than when it was repressed. The individuals who are feeling hurt and rejected must try to see that what SNCC is doing may be the only way that the conditions can be created whereby a meaningful unity of black and white can come into being.

SNCC is not rejecting white people. Rather, by forcing them out of the black communities where so much work needs to be done, it may be providing this generation with the last chance white people may ever have to overcome the racism and white supremacy by which western man has come close to destroying this planet.

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