

[1960]

The Student Voice

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF WISCONSIN
816 State Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

Special Supplementary Issue prepared by
STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY
in conjunction with
STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE
197½ Auburn Avenue, Atlanta, Georgia

ELECTION DAY

Students march for civil rights



Hundreds of sign-carrying students marched in Chicago's election day civil rights demonstration. The nationwide demonstration was an attempt to remind both parties of the need for effective civil rights guarantees.

It often happens in our country that the most significant events go unreported by the mass media. In our newspapers full pages are devoted to the pomp and circumstances of the social set and the most trivial pronouncements of politicians, while the efforts of real people in pursuit of truly human goals receive little, if any, attention. So it was that astonishment and confusion seized those who could not read the signs when the sit-ins exploded into the national consciousness. And so it was also that an unseeing press, busy manufacturing excitement in the election numbers game, passed over a series of events that were possibly more meaningful finally than the slim resolution of the presidential contest.

We are referring to the Election Day marches staged by thousands of students throughout the country. Responding to the call issued by the Atlanta conference of student sit-in leaders, sponsored by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, students in a dozen cities from New York to San Francisco demonstrated before the polls and marched on the headquarters of the Democratic and Republican parties. Precisely how many people or how many cities were involved in the protests may not be known for some time. The collection of complete data is made difficult because the protests were not linked together by any formal coordinating structure. Instead, word of the Atlanta call-to-action was relayed by various national youth organizations deeply involved in the intensification of civil rights action, such as the National Student Association and Students for a Democratic Society.

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March in '60 so that all may vote in '64!

Though lacking formal structure, the protests vigorously sounded the common theme: "March in '60 so that all may vote in '64." They everywhere emphasized that as long as millions of Southern Negroes were denied the right to vote, those who have that right must not be content merely to cast a piece of paper, but must cast "a total vote"--they must commit themselves to the year-round battle against Jim Crow through mass direct action and to full support of the Southern struggle.

TRUE SIGNIFICANCE

The true significance of the demonstrations lay in this: the students made it clear that they were less concerned about who won the election than about what action would be taken to guarantee full racial equality. To them the issue of civil rights transcended the conventional party lines, and their demonstrations served notice on both parties that the student movement could not be bought off by empty promises or by the victory of nominally liberal candidates.

March on Polls

In most of the cities the students marched on the local campaign headquarters seeking out candidates and party workers. They registered their profound dissatisfaction with the civil rights performances of both parties and demanded that candidates elected on liberal platforms wage all-out war against the reactionary coalition that dominates Congress. Setting the pattern, hundreds of New York City students presented both parties with demands that the next president immediately issue executive orders: 1) sending aid to the embattled Negroes of Fayette, Tenn. by declaring that a distress area; 2) banning discrimination in federally supported housing; 3) discontinuing government contracts and subsidies to companies practicing employment discrimination; and 4) setting up federal registrars in areas where Negroes are denied the right to vote and including among the registrars Negro citizens.

The remainder of this special supplementary issue of The Student Voice is dedicated to a survey of the protests in various cities. It has been prepared by Northern students and concentrates on the demonstrations in non-Southern areas, in the hope of filling the gap left by the nation's mass media and, more importantly, of letting our fellow students in the South know of our firm support of the movement for racial equality.



AT SAN FRANCISCO CITY HALL

This report will also find its way into the hands of thousands of young civil rights activists in the North, many of whom were not aware of the national scope and significance of their endeavors.

We reported above that the demonstrations, though linked in spirit and purpose, and by largely informal correspondence, were not coordinated by any formal structure. Under such conditions, their success is especially heartening as an indication of the great potential for Northern student action that remains as yet untapped. The question of how this potential is to be maximally realized and effectively channeled should be a major concern of us all.



STUDENTS MARCH IN PITTSBURGH...

In 1958 over 10,000 students converged on Washington in the Youth March for Integrated Schools. In 1959 a second Youth March was held, this time producing 30,000 students. After each of these dramatic actions came a considerable let-down as the participants returned to their homes without a clear mandate for continued activity and without a sustained feeling of identification with the mass spirit of their fellow marchers.

Then, early this year, the students were fired again, this time by the spark of the sit-ins. They took to the streets, forming picket lines, organizing protest marches and demonstrations. For the first time in years, student governments became involved in off-campus campaigns and it became commonplace to remark something of a rebirth of social consciousness on the American campus.

PERMANENT ALLIES

It is our responsibility to see to it that this rebirth will not have turned out to be a fad, that out of it is constructed something real and permanent. Failing this, Northern students will have delivered a blow against the heroic work of the Southern students. For it is not enough that we appear and disappear like ghosts on the periphery of their struggle, which is, after all, our struggle. They must know that we are permanent allies, standing solidly through the shifting moods and changing headlines.

Reading the survey below, many patterns emerge and many ideas. But one conclusion is indisputable: the Election Day demonstrations barely scratched the surface of the tremendous support that exists for the civil rights movement among Northern students. The marches could have been many times larger, and have taken place in many more areas if there had been in existence central coordination in the North paralleling that provided by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the South. This is the problem to which student leaders will increasingly have to apply themselves. Hanging in the balance may well be not only our ability to support the civil rights movement, but the life-span of student protest in the sixties.

Students March for Civil Rights

NEW YORK: 500 placard-bearing students, supported by many student governments, gathered at Community Church to hear the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham, Ala. They marched, chanting enthusiastically, through Times Square to headquarters of Democratic and Republican parties, and delivered their demands for executive orders and change of Rule 22. Adult sponsors included: A. Philip Randolph, Norman Thomas, Rev. Thomas Kilgore, C. Wright Mills, Bayard Rustin and Erich Fromm.

BOSTON: Close to 300 students picketed Boston Commons demanding specific proposals to fight discrimination on the local and national levels.

PHILADELPHIA: Organized by the Student Civil Rights Coordinating Committee, over 300 students, representing 8 colleges picketed both campaign headquarters. Previously the Committee had held a conference, paralleling the Atlanta Conference, attended by 70 students.

PITTSBURGH: Hundreds of students, representing 5 colleges and 12 high schools, marched on the two headquarters. Led by the U. of Pitt NAACP they carried placards demanding "Total Democracy" and "Civil Rights Now!"

WASHINGTON, D.C.: 150 students formed a vigil in front of the White House from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 a.m. the next morning--in below-freezing weather--then marched to the Kennedy headquarters demanding "Free Elections in America--in the South, North and Washington, D.C."

CLEVELAND: Oberlin College students chartered bus to Cleveland to protest at central polling places; sponsored by student government and local NAACP. Over 150 people participated, distributing literature at central intersections in city. Then the Oberlin group returned to campus and continued distributions and meetings.

BLOOMINGTON: Winning headline local publicity, over 40 students marched in the rain from Indiana University to the City Courthouse; sponsored by the Student Ad Hoc Committee for Civil Rights. The local press noted that in contrast to last year's pro-sit-in demonstration, there was no heckling this time, though many of the same signs were carried.

CHICAGO: Hundreds of chanting, sign-carrying students confronted campaign workers of both parties. The march was led by Tim Jenkins, vice president of the NSA, and addressed by students just returned from Fayette County. Adult sponsors included: Negro American Labor Council, Amalgamated Meat Cutters. U. of Chicago student government and NAACP also gave endorsements

MINNEAPOLIS: 40 students from the U of Minnesota marched in front of City polls, then on to local campaign headquarters. Action was sponsored by Students for Integration and endorsed by the student government. They distributed thousands of leaflets in chill, windy weather.

SAN FRANCISCO: Hundreds of students from Bay Area colleges demonstrated in front of City Hall for 4 hours, then moved onto campaign headquarters. 250 students rallied at Oakland State College, the largest civil rights demonstration in that school's history.

--Edited by TOM KAHN

For additional copies write to:

STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE

or

STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

112 East 19th Street, New York 3, New York