Working paper for SNCC staff conference

From: Mike Miller, Bay Area Representative

Re: An internal education program in SNCC

*Note: this was written for a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee national staff meeting, probably held in 1964 or 1965.*

If there is anything that one might single out as being the most impressive characteristic of SNCC it might be that SNCC has thus far avoided that fatal confusion which identifies the movement with the organization. And, I suppose, it is precisely because of this that SNCC best embodies the movement. No one I know who has been South has failed to remark upon the openness of SNC and its close identification with the people with whom the organization works. Needless to say, there are many romanticized versions of this, especially in the North. Despite this, however, the open and grass roots character of SNCC remains a striking fact.

It was my experience in Mississippi and has been my observation since I have returned to California that some of the more “political” groups increasingly view SNCC as an arena for their own recruitment. From what I have seen and heard from others I think this applies to all the left sects—that is, all those organizations that remain embroiled in the issues of the ‘30s as they work in the ‘60s.

Let me try to be specific by referring to some of my own experiences in the student movement at the University of California. In its early days, SLATE, the campus political party at U.C., had a similar style to SNCC’s. Not that the issues were the same, but the mood was. Beneath the differences of style and opinion, we shared a sense of values and emotion that bound us to one another. Over the years this sense of community was eroded as youth branches of the adult left parties began increasingly to view SLATE as an arena in which to recruit new members. Again, I suppose this is natural. But from the point of view of our student movement and, I believe, from SNCC’s point of view, this process only imposes upon new movements the conflicts and history of old ones. To tell the truth, we never solved the problems in Berkeley. Looking back, I think the major mistake of those of us who were radicals but not of the sects was that we failed to rely on the development of our own community education program and resorted to administrative manipulations which made us in fact if not in intent of the same ilk as those we disparagingly referred to as sectarians.

But to return to the present. We all know of the past efforts by various and sundry people to “educate” SNCC. What they generally mean is that they know THE TRUTH and will pass it on to us. When SNCC is viewed in this way, I think it all presents us with problems of defining what we are. This is where I see the importance of an internal education program.

I think it is essential, if the movement quality in SNCC is to be retained, to avoid administrative solutions of the problems posed by rival groups or by attempts of other groups to recruit out of SNCC. This must mean the development of our own forums for internal discussion and education. The work-study program, the workshops that have been organized by Myles Horton, the character of the lasat SNCC conference, the discussion I have heard from Howard Zinn about a new school in the South and this staff conference are all part of this. They are all very necessary. I think it is important that activists in the movement have a place where they might retreat from the heat of battle and contemplate, discuss and write on the course of the war. If a context for providing answers or for clarifying questions is not provided within the movement, then, almost by default, it will be provided by those who enter the movement seeking to win adherence to their view of the truth and to their organization which embodies it.

Forman, in one of his papers, discusses socialism as one of the ideas that must be of interest to us. Obviously this is true. But what do we mean by the word “socialism”? It is like someone saying that Christianity is relevant to our movement. Don’t we have to ask him, “What do you mean by ‘Christianity’?” Is he talking about the Southern Baptists or the ministers who make up the NCC’s Commission on Religion and Race? Is he talking about Cardinal Spellman or Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker? My feeling is that ‘socialism’ is so broad a term as to be almost meaningless. Do we mean a Marxist view? a Marxist-Leninst view? a social democratic view? a democratic socialist view? a Trotskyist view? a Maoist view? a Toure view? an Nkrumah view? One thing I do not find to be relevant to us in America is the kind of socialism that is called “scientific socialism”. It implies two things that I don’t think are born out in history: (1) the inevitability of socialism as a result of inexorable forces at work in history; (2) the possibility of an elite party or vanguard that ushers us into the socialist era in which man’s exploitation by man is ended.

I think it more important to put our emphasis on small “d” democracy and to view corporations with centralized control, a military that is not responsible to popular control, and an executive that largely reflects these interests as contradictory to what we mean by popular government. If popular control of these institutions means socialism, then I am for it. It can also mean co-ops, worker-controlled factories, and many other forms that we might talk about.

This is not the place to make such arguments. What I want to argue is that we do need a place in which to make these arguments: a school, a journal, conferences, work-study programs, research programs, institutes, you name it.

I know there is an impatience on the front lines with “intellectuals”. It is a justified impatience, for where have the intellectuals been who are needed for the kind of analysis and interpretation of the movement that we need. But this shouldn’t make us disregard the need for thought as well as action. It is only when the two are tied together that lasting and significant change will really come about.