**Freedom Now – the SNCC Story, by Charles McDew, with Mike Miller. the liberal democrat, December 1962.**

***Charles McDew is chairman of Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.***

On February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, the first student sit-in took place. By March 31, over 50 student demonstrations had occurred in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. Others were soon to follow in the rest of the South. I became involved in the first sit-in in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Out of these protest sit-ins grew the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, SNCC. We were brought together for the first time in April 1960 at a conference sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference – the group led by Martin Luther King. At that conference, we decided to form an autonomous student organization, SNCC.

In its first year, SNCC concentrated on getting the news of what was happening in the South to the various student groups and other protest organizations. We were little more than a communication network trying to keep one another informed of our activities. Now, only two years later, we are an organization with 22 full-time staff workers operating a full program for civil rights in the Deep South. Our story is part of the story of the growth of a mass civil-rights movement in the South.

In 1961, we began to increase our activity. We saw a need to bring more sit-ins and other direct action into the South. We found areas untouched by the major civil-rights organizations. We decided to go into these areas, live with the citizens there, teach them the principles of social action, leadership training and non-violent techniques. We also began what was to become a major addition to our program: voter registration.

It was only after long and serious discussion within SNCC that we decided to embark on a program of voter registration. With our commitment to working in those rural areas where the vast majority of Southern Negroes are, we felt we could do the job, and do it effectively. We thought of what President Kennedy had said: We must be prepared to ask not what the country can do for us, but what we can do for the country. We had our answer. Rather than heed the calls of the Peace Corps, we felt that there was a job we could do here in this country.

In beginning a voter-registration project, we understood its potential for cracking the power of the Dixiecrat political machine. We saw our work in the South as having national implications for more than civil rights. It is not the potiticians in California, Illinois, Iowa and New York who hold the most political power in this country. Rather, it is the gentlemen from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina; the Eastlands, the Longs, the Talmadges, and the Russells. These men shape our national policies, voting against – or blocking in crucial committees – not only measures for civil rights, but foreign-aid bills, social welfare and civil liberties legislation, and other liberal measures. We felt, of course, that there was something we could do about this situation.

By late 1961, our voter-registration projects were underway. A good example of the problems faced is found in Mississippi. We went into McComb last year, and set up voter-registration schools in the Masonic Lodge and in a number of homes in the surrounding area. McComb is a small city of about 15,000 people, in southwestern Mississippi, some 90 miles south of Jackson. In McComb, we had trouble. The white power structure began to react to our work – and it reacted violently. Mr. John Hardy, one of our field secretaries, a 21-year-old lad from Nashville, Tennessee, was beaten by the Registrar of Voters. He accompanied two potential registrants to the Office of the Registrar. The Registrar said to Hardy, “Ain’t you that nigger that’s been stirring up trouble here? Well, get the hell out.” As John turned to leave, the Registrar struck him in the head twice with a pistol, opening up a large gash, and left him lying there. The people with John moved to help him down the street to the Sheriff’s office. The Sheriff, however, met them and arrested Hardy, charging him with breach of the peace and incitement to riot. The US Justice Department took action in this particular case (it hasn’t in many others) and sought an injunction to stop the prosecution of John Hardy, claiming it to be an act of intimidation to stop Negroes from registering to vote.

This is just one incident. There are many others. They go unheralded. In Midcounty, Mississippi, Mr. Herbert Lee, a Negro farmer, father of 12, who had been working closely with SNCC in its voter-registration project, was shot and killed by his state representative, Mr. E.H. Hurst. The state ruled the shooting an act of self-defense, and Mr. Hurst was acquitted. No Negro was willing to testify against him for fear that he would meet the same fate as Mr. Lee. In this case, the Federal Government was of little help.

In Ruleville, Mississippi, this past September, two young Negro girls, Marylene Burks, 20, and Vivian Hillet, 18, were shot and wounded. Miss Burks critically. Also in Ruleville, economic reprisals were launched against Negroes active in voter registration. Ruleville is in Sunflower County, home of Senator James O. Eastland, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. The county has a Negro voting age population of 13,524 (out of 22,309 total) and has 161 Negroes registered to vote.

This is the environment that a SNCC field worker enters when he begins a voter-registration project. Yet this is where we have chosen to be. We live where we work because we don’t think you can get people registered in the South by sending down orders from New York or Atlanta. Those of us who work for SNCC believe that expression of moral and spiritual solidarity with Southern Negroes is not enough. We feel that the way to help is to be there, on the line – or, if that can’t be done, to help actively from the North. Our staff workers live with the people, and like the majority of Southern Negroes, the SNCC staff member lives at close to subsistence. Salary is $40 per week, $60 for married people. All too often, even this money isn’t available. The $40 goes to pay for food and gas, housing, and an occasional haircut.

Setting up a voter-registration school takes a lot of preliminary work. When a staff worker arrives in a new town, he is often viewed with suspicion by local Negroes. Many of them are so intimidated by the white power structure that they want nothing to do with the civil-rights movement. It is in these areas, where hundreds of thousands of Negroes live, that we feel most deeply the sense of frustration in comparing the rhetoric of “progress” in civil rights with the reality of the situation. When we go into an area, we begin by making ourselves known to the people of the town, meeting them in social settings where it is least dangerous for them to be seen talking to us, finding key Negro community figures who can take leadership in setting up the voting schools and locating a place for them to meet. When these things have been done, we work on setting up the school and recruiting people to come to it. Beside the threat of physical violence, we must deal with fears of economic sanctions, poll taxes, literacy tests administered by racist registrars, and other forms of harassment.

It is difficult to appreciate fully what is involved for a Negro, living in the heart of a racist culture, when he finally decides he will register to vote. He must risk everything that he has for a right constitutionally guaranteed him 100 years ago. Most Negro applicants are denied – even those with Harvard PhD’s. Here people do not refrain from voting because of a football game, a tea, or the weather, but because they don’t want their homes bombed, their sons castrated, their daughters whipped, themselves killed. Fear has been deeply ingrained in the Southern Negro; fear, in fact, is institutionalized in the South. Many Negroes will say that politics is white folks’ business. This attitude is the result of years of intimidation, violence, propagandizing and brainwashing for the purpose of creating subservience in the Negro. It is written and woven into the fine fabric of Southern culture.

We are not satisfied simply with registering Negro voters; we are not seeking to register Southern Negroes so that they may choose between two racist candidates. In Mississippi, for the first time in the 20th Century, two Negro candidates filed for office. In Georgia, the first Negro since Reconstruction days will sit in the state legislature. Though out the South, candidates are emerging from within the Negro community, and our staff members are seeking out people who will take the risk to announce themselves as candidates for public office. These are not SNCC candidates, but SNCC workers are doing everything they can to see that candidates do emerge, that they are good candidates, and that a campaign organization is built to make them a political force in their district. We intend to have Negro candidates running for everything from US Senate to dog catcher – and we will do it in the next few years.

In our work in the South, we have come to have little faith in the Kennedy Administration. It is claimed by some that more was done for civil rights by President Kennedy in the first eight months of his Administration than had been done by President Eisenhower in his eight years. This is true; but it is true because Kennedy did more than Eisenhower had done merely by making two statements mentioning civil rights. Only once in the Eisenhower Administration did the President discuss civil rights, and then only in a vague and nebulous manner. But Eisenhower is not what the Kennedy record must be compared to. It must be examined in the light of the problem as it exists today in the South. And here we have direct experience with what the Administration is doing.

Almost everyone of our staff members has spent time in jail. Yet in these situations, which we face time and again, the Department of Justice has been of no help. Not only is being in jail an obstacle to our work, taking away valuable time and causing us great expense, but Southern jails are no bed of roses. For someone like Bob Zellner, one of our white staff members, jail is a certain beating. Southern jailers take delight in throwing Zellner into the white “tank” along with the remark, “Here’s a nigger lover.” The white prisoners take care of the rest, while the guards walk away or watch. Robert Kennedy will make fine statements about what the Justice Department can and intends to do. But the proof of the Kennedy Administration is in its action – in the enforcement of the existing laws of the United States. Robert Kennedy has said a number of times that we have enough laws, that it’s a question of enforcement. However, from our experience, we don’t believe that the Justice Department is moving fast or decisively enough in the area of civil rights in the South. The Department has initiated suits and has made statements, but no Federal marshals appear to guarantee the right of citizens to register and vote.

SNCC’s work in voter registration has not meant an end of direct action as part of our program. We see the two as complementary programs, sometimes intimately involved with each other. Albany, Georgia is an example. We started working in Albany in June 1961. We sent a number of field organizers down there – Charles Jones, Charles Sherrod, Cordell Reagen – to begin voting programs. These staff workers began working with direct-action projects, not only because these are effective means of protest, but because they involve the people of the community in the civil-rights movement, and make them think in terms of using their political strength as voters to win their rights.

Direct-action projects are also dramatic in character, and are pointed to by our staff members working in outlying areas as a symbol of what must be done everywhere by the Negro to win his rights. The Albany Movement has had this effect; it was followed by local protest movements all over Terrell and Lee counties, Georgia. In direct action, the individual is confronted with the decision: do I continue to acquiesce to an immoral and unconstitutional situation, or do I confront it with my person?

We do not ask of every civil-rights supporter that he come to the South and do what we are doing. But we do ask that supporters of the civil-rights movement become friends of SNCC, that they spread the word of its activities, that they donate money and urge their friends to do so. The problem of money is the biggest one that we face. This is where people in the North can help us. We can get the people, the workers for our staff, the willingness to sacrifice. Many young people have agreed to do this. The shame, the pity, and the very painful thing to us is that we don’t always have the money which would enable us to accept those who are willing and competent to do our work. We are selective, of course, in who we take, not because we are elitist, but because we recognize that not everybody can work everywhere. In some areas of the South, a white wouldn’t last 15 minutes. However, we have chosen people who are dedicated to action, able to deal quickly with a rapidly moving situation, tough, stable, and extremely willing to sacrifice. Our success depends upon others in this nation who see and accept their social and moral responsibility. This is why we call for help.

We don’t know what lies ahead. We hope a better society, a better America, a better world. Behind the dark curtain that separates today’s America from tomorrow’s, no human eye can see. We know that the hand of fate weaves back and forth, tossing the shuttle to and fro, fashioning tomorrow’s world. It poses a grand challenge to us who are part of this world. I would hope that we would choose, all of us, to accept the challenge, to meet it with fortitude, determination and a willingness to overcome, for “we shall overcome.”

*The author of this article, Charles McDew, is now on a national speaking tour for SNCC. He is charged with “criminal anarchy” in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and is now out on bail. He will be in the S.F. Bay Area from December 1 – 11, and in the Los Angeles Area from December 13 – 22 to raise funds for SNCC. If you would like to help arrange his tour in either of these areas, or to sponsor a meeting for him in your home, write our Associate Editor, Mike Miller, 1915 Milvia, Berkeley 9, California. TH 8-4312.*