

On organizing poor whites,

by Casey Hayden, Chicago
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A summer's work with white migrants in Chicago left me with numerous questions and some tentative conclusions about the extent to which the SNCC pattern of organizing and analyses can be used to organize this group of people. It's important to ask this, I think, since SNCC has been my experience in the movement and has certainly had a big influence on others.

ASSUMPTION OF WORK WITH SNCC

Patterns of work and ideology grew out of working in the Deep South in rural areas with Negroes. SNCC staff assumes:

--The power structure cannot and will not yield to even the most elemental political demands.

--The enemy is clearly perceptible: he is the white man, the man downtown, the boss-man almost always identified in terms of race and thus always felt and seen.

--Given the oppressor is clearly felt and even the simplest demands are radical ones, the task of the organizer is simply to get people together to voice their feelings and demands and to support whatever action people want to take.

--Deepening and broadening political awareness is not difficult as people learn from the actions in which they become involved and can begin to see and understand "the power structure" rapidly.

--The power structure's reaction is nearly always one of oppression: programs can be developed indefinitely simply in response to this clear oppression. Increased political awareness will happen more rapidly than concessions will come, so that people will reject tokenism.

--There are no allies to be trusted finally. Often organizing will involve overturning established leadership in the community so that masses can be mobilized. Allies in any national sense are political who will support the organizing SNCC does. There is enough support in the North to provide adequate funds and political pressure around given programs if the support can be mobilized. SNCC's task is to organize, not to build coalitions.

Some of these assumptions have proven wrong in specific situations, but they are the working basis of day to day activity in community organizing.

In applying these assumptions to work in Chicago the major problem, I think, is that of identifying an enemy and finding a basis for solidarity. For instance, instead of identifying an oppressor, people identify problems: "Teenagers drink. The neighborhood is dirty. Cops don't give protection."

Then people blame each other: "Anyone can make it who really tries. Hillbillies (or spicks or Indians or niggers) are to blame." What is a basis for identifying with each other, around which people can be organized: class, ethnic group, neighborhood, people with similar problems?

Because this seems to me to be the crucial question in community organizing and because no one seems to have any answers, I confined my work to one group I felt I could understand best: women, mostly on welfare, mostly southern. In this particular group I think there is real potential although we need to meet particular problems they have by searching for ways to pull them out of their homes and away from the kids, setting up centers of operation in their immediate neighborhoods which they seldom leave, building a group based initially on their immediate felt need for help. Nearly all of them have some other woman to whom they can turn for help when some guy beats them up, the kids are sick, the check is late. They can understand the need to enlarge that group, pool resources, stand together. And because they really are on the bottom in this community and know they are perceived that way, they are not so ready to blame others for the condition of people who are down. They are tied to the state through the welfare system, and thus their gripes are easily politicized.

GROUPS AND THEIR NEEDS

I don't have any real knowledge of any other group, but my general impression from scattered conversations with adult men and teenagers is that their needs, activities, and perceptions of causes for their condition differ enough from each other and from the women's that work with different groups will have to be somewhat specialized. A community union framework may be adequate, if the basis for the building of the union is clearly problems that adhere to different groups rather than problems of the neighborhood as a community area. I found, I think, that only as I organized around the problems of women and welfare people and really got involved in people's lives through those problems that I could begin to even think of talking with people on any other broader basis in any way that made sense to them.

N O MOVEMENT

Another problem in the general area of identity and organizing basis is that the people we have been working with don't have any reference point for organizing: no movement that can be pointed to, no group experience of working together on problems. Thus people initially consider JOIN a charity group--their only reference point for dealing with problems. My feeling is that starting with people where they are will allow us to build on their initial perception. That is, service actions can create strong ties: getting food for someone whose husband just left her, getting someone on welfare, will bring someone to a meeting perhaps and will certainly open her up to continued conversation and introduction to friends with similar problems. Given this, however, the problem of building an organization rather than a staff who service people remains. The need is to find reference points for helping people understand organizing themselves. The existing ties in the community can be used. Another is to talk in terms of backing each other up, a term used to refer to fist fights when one guy will step in if his buddy starts getting beaten. The Dorothy Perez arrests can be explained that way: people went to jail with her and went down and picketed with her and backing her up in this way got her demands. (This is a very different use of arrests than is often made of them in the South, where a community can sometimes be mobilized around unjust arrests. That can happen, I think, only when there is already a sense of identity with each other.)

ORGANIZING TACTICS

Given that people have no sense of identity or oppression clearly focused and that they don't have experience with organized effort of any kind, there is a real need to find patterns in the community through which people already relate to each other and to build on those. For instance, one woman's husband works at a charity store. There are lots of these little second hand stores around which give things away and sell enough on the side to make an income for several people. This woman is interested in having JOIN start such a store, as they are widely used by really down and out people in the neighborhood. This notion grows from her viewing us as trying to help people on a very elementary level, but the store could well be used to introduce us to people, provide some income for the project, involve community people in working with it. We should seriously consider whether we can utilize this way people try to solve immediate problems for what we want to do. Another instance is that people continually ask for membership cards. The idea that people who do work are members certainly fits our values, but it doesn't answer people's needs. People in this area don't belong to anything and nothing belongs to them, but one way they can understand being a part of something is a card or something that says 're "in." If this helps them see the organization as theirs rather than ours, then it should be seriously considered. Another instance: the leadership question. The SNCC position on leadership grew from pragmatic considerations about how to build a movement. One of the things that had to be done was to free people from uncle tom leaders. Another was to create a sense among people that they could do and act, to battle inferiority feelings. Pragmatically, poor Southern whites need one of themselves who can be seen as heading up the organization, as a leader. That is, there are plenty of white leaders, but none who

express their class and ethnic group in any positive way. It may be that instead of titular heads and spokesmen, potential leaders in the community can become organizers. At any rate, the "we have no leaders" position does not seem to me helpful in organizing Southern whites. I am less sure what to do about that.

II. The second major problem in applying Southern assumptions to Northern situations is the reaction of the power structure. I don't really doubt that the intent is to stifle radical politics anymore than in the South, but we are handled differently:

ACCOMODATION - There are numerous organizations providing "help": the War on Poverty, officials who will grant audiences, precinct captains, etc. This differs from the South largely in that in areas where SNCC has had the most experience there are literally no institutions to provide relief to Negroes. That means that numerous institutions in the North must be learned about and coped with. While the system is attempting to accomodate poor people more in the North than in the South, I don't think the power structure can yield any more readily to radical demands. As in the South, radical demands are those which ask power for a dispossessed group - real power over their lives. It seems to me that the welfare bureaucracy is too screwed up and anti-democratic to meet demands for fair treatment to recipients; the hospitals are overcrowded, the police too corrupt. The issue is not what demands are radical, but how we organize people to make demands.

SUPPRESSION - High fines, false arrests can suppress activity rather than providing a mobilizing issue as they do in the South. Besides the fact that the community doubts us more, there is the fact that we have no source of funds and moral support "up North." Besides oppressive fines and false arrests, organizers in Chicago are already having to deal with red-baiting in the community. I don't know what the implications of all this is, but probably the most positive attitude to take is simply that we must organize faster than they can get us.

III. ALLIES AND COALITIONS. The question of allies and coalition building is more complicated in the North largely, I think, because the liberals who give us money in the South are right here in Chicago, judging and periodically threatened by our work. Aside from this, however, the SNCC position on coalitions is probably fairly relevant for us. This is not because there are no liberal groups around, but because we probably have as much real power against the Daly machine and the prevailing politics as any of them.

IV. ORGANIZER'S ROLE. I feel fairly certain that the organizer working with poor whites must be much more active and probably more persuasive than the organizer in rural Southern Negro areas. This is the result of problems of identity outlined earlier. Another difference in the poor white neighborhood is that students there are not viewed, as in the Negro community, as an elite educated group which should be expected to provide leadership and are thus accepted. Traditionally, mountain people are suspicious of outsiders, although this breaks down somewhat when they enter the urban environment. But that factor, combined with the fact that it's very hard for the people to understand what we're doing there causes me to question whether students can organize on a large scale in poor white areas on the pattern of Southern movement work. Middle class college students have a hard enough time understanding and relating to Southern poor without the added complication of youth. However, even if students are to be used, it is crucial to find and train community people to come on staff. That is the highest priority in the initial stages of organizing.

V. NON-VIOLENCE Violence is a part of life for these people, and the organizer has to be able to receive it and deal with it. Nonviolence as a tactic is even further from these people than from the Negro. Moreover, I think poor whites can be organized, but it will require much more openness in organizational forms and in building leadership than I had expected. Sure ain't easy.