

Text of speech delivered at the staff retreat of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee at Waveland, Mississippi, November 6, 1964, by James Forman, Executive Secretary.

There are many strong points about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. One of those strong points is our ability to look inwardly at ourselves, at our organization, and to criticize it honestly and openly without fear of anyone misconstruing, misunderstanding what we are doing. We have been relatively free, as someone has said, of power struggles within SNCC. Let us continue to be free of these struggles and of personality clashes. We have examined ourselves many, many times in the past. In 1961, when we decided to put on a staff of some 16 people there was an intensive examination of our structure. It was found inadequate and a new structure emerged, where the Executive Committee was basically the staff. And it was in this new structure that I was granted the opportunity to serve as the Executive Secretary. On Easter weekend of 1962 we ended an extensive examination of that structure and we found it wanting in many respects. It was not workable because, in fact, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee still had a student base and there were students who had been intimately involved in the formation and early development of SNCC who felt that they had a right to be a part of SNCC. It was also felt by the small staff, not more than 20 at that moment, that it should be responsible to some other body than to itself. Consequently we all agreed as an operating procedure that the staff would have voice but no vote on any Executive Committee, on any Coordinating Committee. Time has changed this particular situation. We come to this meeting, November, 1964, 3 years since the staff was first formed, and find that, in effect, there is no student base to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, that the organization is composed primarily of a group of organizers, of people who operate within the Friends of SNCC, and of many other people associated indirectly with SNCC throughout the country. But that the nucleus, the people who do the most work, is the staff. And there has been within SNCC during the past 3 years a constant examination of the role of the staff in the overall decision-making. Now the

word decision-making can confuse us. No one is questioning the fact that everybody within SNCC is a decision-maker, every project director makes decisions about his projects. There is no super-structure which sits in Atlanta or sits in Jackson and constantly says this project must do this and must do that. There have been suggestions and there have been rigorous attempts to make these suggestions the binding rule, the binding force, but no one has ever questioned the right of the staff to make decisions in the field, except for certain decisions dealing with fund-raising. In this respect we have been different from other organizations that have attempted to control decisions made by staff people in the field from a central point. On the other hand, that freedom to make decisions has created many problems and many strains within the organization.

In December of 1963 it became quite apparent at a staff meeting that the decision-making body of the organization had to be changed. A compromise was found in the amendment to the Constitution to allow the staff itself to elect 6 members to the Executive Committee. At the spring conference of 1964 this was done, but the student base was even weaker than it had been in 1963 and legitimate questions were raised later in a staff meeting in June of 1964 about that structure. At the staff meeting recently held, one month ago, there were attempts to deal with that problem. Many other problems came out and it was felt that another staff meeting, a staff retreat should be held to deal with the problems that were very basic to the organization. We are here today, we will be here this weekend, and we should remain here until this question is resolved. I call for internal cohesion. We can withstand the external pressures if we are together. I call for unity. I call for a consensus around the proposition that the staff and those here present consider themselves as the Coordinating Committee and elect at some point in this meeting an Executive Committee, the number to be determined. Also I suggest that the Coordinating Committee, we here assembled, elect a Call Committee to handle the arrangements for future meetings of the Coordinating Committee and to determine whom it wants to invite to sit in session with this body.

There may be some uncertainty about whether or not those people gathered in this room - the staff, the remnants of the Executive Committee, some Friends of SNCC - do have the right to change and alter the over-all decision-making body within the organization. We have the right and we must do that this weekend, for the organization for the past 3 to 4 weeks has been in limbo, because of the unresolved nature of this question. Someone has written that we are a boat which is afloat and that the boat has to be changed in order to stay afloat, and that it must stay afloat in order to be changed. There are some who say they don't understand that metaphor. Well, let me further confuse the picture by saying that we are on a river of no return. We do have an organization. We are committed to programs and to people in the bayous and in the Deltas, in the back woods, in the Black Belt, in Northern cities and Southern hamlets. And so, therefore, the longer we take to deal with this question, the longer we fail to give the kind of service to the people that we could. It becomes imperative that we solve this question. It also becomes imperative that we ask ourselves why do we exist? Spend some time on that, but not too much, because we only have 4 days, and then we must examine what is the structure that can help 'do whatever we exist for? Put another way, what are our goals? And what is the structure that we want to implement those goals? And what will be our program for the summer of 1965 and even up until 1968? Will we have a four-year plan? Will we have a summer project for the summer of 1965? And if we can accomplish these three things at the staff retreat, we will have done a momentous amount of work. We cannot answer all of the questions that were circulated on that staff memorandum. Some of the answers are in writing, and I sincerely urge every member to read the position papers that people have written, for they provide some answers to some of those questions.

Before I close, I should simply like to dovetail what I think are some other things that we have to deal with this weekend, or soon thereafter. We must rigorously examine the civil rights bill to determine what is there in that bill that we can use as tools and techniques to further the militant struggle we have started.

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We took the 1960 and 1957 civil rights acts with the provision basically of the federal government coming in and filing suit, and under the 1960 civil rights act supposedly providing protection for civil rights workers. We knew that the law was a sham in many respects, but we used the law in order to further the struggle and mobilize people. There is much within the civil rights bill that has just been passed that we can employ to further break down the barriers of segregation. We must examine the anti-poverty bill and find out if, in fact, there is anything in there which we can employ.

We must begin to study more diligently the political and economic forces operating in this country, to continue to criticize those forces and to continue to construct new alternatives for the people and for ourselves. We must continue, not necessarily to work for the redemptive society, but to work toward a new spirit of brotherhood, a spirit that transcends both black and white, a spirit that superceeds, a spirit that goes above and a spirit that sees all of us simply as men and women, struggling for a sense of dignity. But, above all, we must take the sense of injustice that burns deeply inside all of us, we must take the few tools and the few resources that we have and begin to organize that which we know is unorganized. And we must not be concerned too much with the theory of what we are doing, but rather begin to do some of the things we know that have to be done, a theory itself, for it is out of practice that a theory will evolve. We have enough practice for the past 3 years to develop a sort of theory about what we have been doing and it is our hope that in 3 years from now we can come back and further re-examine ourselves.

And now my brothers and sisters I should like to take this opportunity to say a few humble and honest words. I have tried to serve you in the capacity of Executive Secretary for the last 3 years. I have tried diligently and at all times to consider the best interests of SNCC, to do that which would make the organization alive and that which would make it survive, not for its organizational value itself, but rather for what it has done in the sphere of race relations, what it must do, what history demands of us. There have been mistakes made by all of us, we recognize that. Whether I con-

tinue to serve in the capacity of Executive Secretary is a decision which you should make, a decision that you must make, but it is with a profound regret that I must tell you, regardless of your decision, I absolutely, positively must take off at least 3 months for my state of health. I'm in bad shape. My dues are overpaid. In those 3 months I intend to be available for consultation, for various meetings, for occasional speaking engagements, but I must rigidly guard the use of my time. Also during those 3 or 4 months I will be working on a book, the title of which will be: A Band of Brothers; A Circle of Trust. I shall attempt to write a personal history of SNCC, because there are many things about this organization which only I can write, just as there are many things about the Indianola project which only Charles McLaurin can write, or just as there are many things about McComb which only Jessie Harris can write, or Bill Hansen about Arkansas or Cordell Reagon about Southwest Georgia. All of us have our little histories within us and I would wish that all of us could set them down on paper. But your deliberations this weekend should not take into account, necessarily, what I will be doing 6 months from now, or 1 year from now, or 2 years from now, nor should it take into account what anyone else in the organization will be doing. But rather you should take into account what it is that's best for all of us, for there are people who are waiting on us right now to return to our respective projects to begin work and to continue the work we started. People do see us as a band of brothers. We must decide if the circle will be unbroken. If we remain a band of brothers, a circle of trust, We Shall Overcome!