

M

ON POLITICAL ORGANIZING

By Jim Forman

(NOTE: The following paper was prepared by Forman for some recent SNCC workshops. Because we believe it has universal value, we are circulating it to the SCEF staff and hope it can be discussed at the April 5-6 staff meeting in Nashville.---Carl & Anne Braden)

DON'T SHUT ME OUT!

SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW TO MOVE A GROUP OF PEOPLE FROM ONE POINT TO ANOTHER,

OR

SOME BASIC STEPS TOWARD BECOMING A GOOD POLITICAL ORGANIZER!

This paper is divided into four sections.

- A. Toward a definition of power for us, the powerless.
- B. The Political Organizer is a leader.
- C. Three qualities of a good organizer.
- D. Seven steps a political organizer must take if he is to be effective.

Prepared for Snick's programmatic workshops held in Atlanta, Ga.,  
February 1 through 24, 1967.

This paper is also a response to some questions about leadership raised  
in the first issue of Rock Bottom.

James Forman  
Organizational Secretary

- A. Toward a definition of power for us, the powerless.

POWER

ORGANIZATION

EDUCATION

HARD WORK

Power = Organization + Education + Hard Work

PEOPLE SEEK POWER THROUGH INTENSE ORGANIZATION WHICH CAN BEST BE  
MAINTAINED BY CONTINUOUS INTERNAL EDUCATION AND THAT MEANS HARD WORK.

GOT IT!

(continued on next page)

2.

Power is obtained through organization and this is maintained through constant political education and that takes hard work.

Hard Work + Education + Organization = Power

POWER

ORGANIZATION

EDUCATION

HARD WORK

1. You work and work and work and work and if you're not willing to work, there's no need to read further, for in order to organize people you must be willing to outwork those you organize and you must not look for any thanks or praise. You have the strength from within that what you are doing is going to help in the long run of history and that is your reward!

2. YOU EDUCATE SOME PEOPLE IN THE BEGINNING AS TO WHAT YOUR OBJECTIVES ARE WHICH MUST BE IDENTICAL WITH THE OBJECTIVES OF THE ORGANIZATION.

YOU SAY:

"This is the program of Snick and we want you to understand why this program is important to us and why it should be important to you....If you agree with this program we expect you to educate others about it. We have a program of internal education for those whom we organize and we want you to use it so that all of us may grow strong. The more people we have who are united the stronger we will all be. And that is why we must have organization.

3. "WE MOVE AS A POLITICAL UNIT. We are organized into similar units in other places. What I am telling you all our organizers are saying to people just like us, poor black people who have so much power, but that power is unorganized. It resides in you and me, but we must band together for strength. That is why we are organizing into Freedom Organizations. We intend to use those organizations as a force, a resistance force against racism, political and economic exploitation. We will tackle the problem of jobs, of income, of automation, bad housing, lack of quality education, welfare and the distribution of wealth, the destruction of our cultural ties in Africa, Latin America and the Carribean. And we will also work with young people for we may well be a lost generation but we have organization on all levels. Every time one, two, or three of us are gathered we must organize ourselves and educate others and work hard."

4. THIS IS A PROGRAM FOR POWER, FOR BLACK POWER, POWER FOR US.

B. THE POLITICAL ORGANIZER IS A LEADER

Throughout Snick's history we have had various concepts of leadership expressed verbally and in action. We have also seen ourselves as self-effacing organizers who are not leaders in any sense of the word. We have on the other hand seen strong leadership exercised by self-effacing, so-called non-leaders. Some have said that we go into a community and work on whatever the people are interested in. Others have said this is

nonsense; we have ideas and we work to see these ideas implemented. There is an interaction between us and people. Notwithstanding our words, except for very few instances, we have always had plans -- direct action, voter registration, Freedom Schools, Community Centers, independent political action, some economic programs, and so forth.

The debate over organizing in a community also found itself in discussions about how we organize SNICK. We have passed through many stages -- The Beloved Society, The Community of Equals, The Leaderless Leaders, interweaving and concentric circles, Freedom High, "Advanced stage of Camuism", Beginning steps of Fanon -- and now, I hope, into the concept of political organizers, disciplined, capable and willing to exercise leadership without guilt.

Hence, this section starts from the premise that any organizer is a leader, but it makes the strong assertion that any organizer who is working on a political program is a political organizer, a political leader. Viewing himself in this category, he must understand some of the implications and the responsibilities this leadership imposes upon him, for a political organizer occupies a strategic position of leadership.

First, the political organizer realizes that his leadership arises from and is nurtured by the people. While he brings personal qualifications to the group, these personal qualifications find expression through the group with which he is associated and the people he organizes.

The organizer must provide leadership through example, work, educating and training others. He must be willing to do the nitty gritty and shitty work that people are often not willing to do. At the same time through his own efforts he develops an awareness in others that they too have a responsibility to do the so-called dirty work. Failing to do this his leadership will become negative and the people will soon let him know in one way or another: "Jack, You got to make it. Ain't nothing here for you to do. You goofed!"

Leadership implies the willingness to give direction and to struggle for its implementation. It implies a responsibility for planning, not only planning meetings but other courses of action that must be taken. But it especially implies planning for meetings of all sizes. People are busy and leadership must be exercised in order to make matters more efficient.

The leadership of the organizer must inspire confidence and this results from a willingness to work hard, to educate and train others, and to realize his actions will affect the larger group with which he is associated. Therefore, he understands that he has to uphold the standards of the group, both the group with which he is organizing and the one with which he is associated. (Snick in our case.) When one member of a larger unit goofs in this place it is very hard for another to go in and salvage the situation. Time moves on but we have a responsibility not to retard or slow down the clock.

The organizer must recognize that it is very hard for people to say I don't know. They are protective of their egos as we all are. But as a leader, the organizer is very sensitive to the needs of those with whom he works. He tries to find a style of work that is helpful while at the same time preserving dignity. As he does this he and the



people will develop more and more strength and will openly talk about their problems and search for answers.

The organizer is going to find that his position of leadership will make him the center of problem solving, if he allows this to happen. That is, many people will want him to solve the external and internal problems of the group. Also, depending upon the size and the organization of the group, he will find that many of the younger and more invisible members of the group will expect him to run interference with someone who is in an administrative position, to cut through the red tape. He, the younger and less visible member, has not found the strength or the method by which he can cut through some of the administrative details or get around the "bureaucratic hang-up."

The political organizer must find ways to shift the focus away from him as the problem solver. Organizational forms or structures must be found to minimize conflicts that are bound to occur. Also, people who assume administrative positions must recognize a difference in roles and a conflict of interest between what they must do and what the "non-administrator" wants to do. The "non-administrator" has to also understand the problems and the point of view of the administrator. These matters cannot be solved without constant discussion. Failing to discuss them and arriving at a point of view healthy for the entire unit -- the fight is on, time is lost, energy is wasted, feelings are hurt, animosity and hatred begin to grow that affect the unit in many strange ways. Sometimes the so-called non-administrator turns to self-destructive acts and incidents that force people to become aware of his existence. The administrator reacts negatively and the circle goes around and around. A solution must be found!

There are other ways this problem can be stated: In the development of any political unit every person who joins it should be assigned and should assume some administrative responsibility. Every political organizer is an administrator in some sense of the word. There really is then only a difference in the hierarchy of administrators. However, there is a difference in the authority and the responsibility of some people within the unit. Sometimes there develops within different people who are working on a higher level of authority than others a certain vested interest in the roles they are performing. Many times they may not be aware of these interests themselves. Nor am I assuming that these vested interests are all negative. Yet these interests often clash with the vested interest of someone who is on a lower level of authority. What he has to do in order to get his job done is not the same that the person in a higher position of authority must do. The reverse situation does occur.

Let us raise this question another way, from the Snick point of view. A person has been with the organization a long period of time and has accepted all assignments, many of them very hazardous. He is still willing to take these assignments. Yet, he works in an obscure place, away from the capitol of SNICK or even around it. However, it seems that in many little different ways there are negative reactions to him until there is again a hazardous assignment. He has to struggle to get some resources and yet others do not have to make the same struggle because they are a part of the so-called in-group, he feels.

The political organizer must be aware of this problem as he builds units. He tries to make all those with whom he works realize they must struggle against inconsideration sometimes caused by overwork and not enough time to think of the problem from the other man's point of view. At the same time the goals and work of the unit must be agreed to by all or otherwise the problem will increase. Common goals, acceptance of lines of

5.

authority, discipline, hard work, forms of appeal and constant discussion are some methods by which the problem of conflicting interest can be solved.

There is a rule of administration that says one can delegate authority but he cannot delegate responsibility. This simply means that if I am in charge of X Project I can give assignments and authority to this or that person but if the chips go down and I am called on the carpet it is administratively unsound and a weak-kneed position to put the blame on someone who is working under me. The political organizer is aware of this rule and accepts the responsibility for the failures of this or that project not working if it is under his jurisdiction or supervision. He discusses with those who were assigned to carry out certain functions and failed to do this and he may even take action. However, he should not shift the burden of the responsibility to someone else. "After all he was in charge.

Since he is a leader, the organizer must strengthen the unit and the transition in his own leadership. This best done through the process of internal education. Any organizer carries with him certain skills, information, contacts, training and association with a larger group than the one with whom he works. Yet he must try to transfer some of these to as many people as possible. Without this attitude the struggle enlarges itself at a much slower pace than necessary. Naturally in the process of working and developing an internal education program the organizer is going to learn much from the people with whom he is working. Their ideas and their behavior are going to modify many of his ideas and behavior.

When and how the transition in leadership will take place is a very knotty question and the best solution is collective discussion about the problem. It is highly debatable if the political organizer alone is best able to make this decision. In fact, he should not even try. He may well look at the situation from too personal a perspective and thereby cause damage to the unit.

The acid test of effective leadership by the political organizer is his willingness to submit his role for examination, evaluation and criticism. He must be willing to do this with the people with whom he is working and within the unit he represents. It is his responsibility to lead this discussion and to always insist that his role is up for constant evaluation. Naturally he must be willing to evaluate his own efforts, to admit mistakes, to correct them and move on, for there is work to be done.

It is of course easy to criticize this action or that one. It is not so easy to suggest alternatives, but it is the responsibility of those who take pot shots at the leadership of the organizer to suggest different methods of proceeding -- for the intent of constant constructive evaluation is to build something better, for there is still work to be done.

Finally, the organizer must himself realize he is human. He will make mistakes, There is only so much that he can do in a given period of time and there is only so much that others can do. Perfection-seeking is a dangerous trait and leads to more destruction than perfection. We do what we can in the limited time we have. We make decisions based on information at the moment, information we may well find not valid five years from now, but we must move ahead, there is indeed much work to be done. The harvest is great but the reapers are few.

6.

C. Three characteristics of a good organizer. These three characteristics or qualities or traits apply to anyone who considers himself an organizer in any field or any arena, whether it is social work, political organizing administration, or fund raising.

1. He is creative. He is a self starter. He moves with a plan, with long and short range goals learned from collective discussion with his unit. If any cat tells you that he has nothing to do, that he is waiting direction while he sits in a pile of dirt or sees a dirty floor, and does not get a broom right away, then that cat is not an organizer. He is saying in fact: "I am lazy and I'm not really a good hustler of work."

2. He is a pusher. He has a goal in mind. He must get from A to Z in X amount of time. It is impossible to get there on time unless he pushes himself and pushes others who are working with him. Very important that he pushes himself first of all, for he has no right to expect others will follow a phoney lead. If he pushes himself and works hard, then others will willingly follow. We know when the pusher is shucking and jiving. Slavery is almost dead within the United States.

3. He pays attention to details and he follows through. Lack of follow up is the graveyard of most ideas and plans. This death often flows from taking on too many jobs, inadequate planning or record keeping, and sometimes downright laziness.

D. SEVEN STEPS A POLITICAL ORGANIZER MUST TAKE IF HE IS TO BE EFFECTIVE. Combined with the three general characteristics of a good organizer in any field, these seven steps therefore constitute ten basic steps in becoming a good political organizer.

1. He thinks he knows and, yet he may not know. The other guy may be right. for the organizer must learn from the people with whom he works. They can teach him something and he must learn it. There is no place for a dogmatic position nor a belief that I, the organizer, am absolutely right. I must have the last word. This attitude may well lead to the final work, but there will be few people around willing to listen.

2. The good organizer seeks to understand the customs, the language, the history, the strong points and the weak point of the people with whom he works. Failing to do this, he weakens his own effectiveness. One of the tragedies of some middle class people working in the South is that it takes them a long time to get accustomed to the ways of the people and by the time they do they are ready to return home, sometimes full of romantic notions about the purity of the local folks and their beauty in the midst of poverty, disease, degradation and death.

3. He assigns work to people, to men and to women and to young people. He takes the attitude: "I must move on and organize others and if you really want to do this you must take steps yourself. I can help get you started, but if you ain't willing to work for your own liberation -- then I must go! Have skills. Must travel. No time for clinging vines. Fertile Fields I must find."

4. The organizer must also concern himself with his own survival and the survival of the unit with which he is working. He should first look for the necessary resources for survival in the area where he is working. There is a rule that no army is stronger than its supply routes. The first effort



7.

of the enemy is to attempt to destroy the supply lines. Dig Vietnam. If the resources are coming from the area in which one is working it becomes much more difficult to cut them off, unless the work itself is destroyed.

5. He seizes every opportunity to develop a sense of struggle in the people with whom he works. He must be alert and look around for weak points in the system and motivate small and large struggles. He knows people grow and learn and develop from commitment and involvement. A spirit of defiance and fight does not arrive just from study. Action is key to change and mass mobilization will knock down all sorts of doors.

6. He must have a sense of timing. Pushing too fast when people are not ready for certain ideas will lead to negative reactions and the organizer will lose time. Yet, there are some issues which cannot wait, no matter what the plan might be. People must react since we do not live in a controlled vacuum or a sealed box. An awareness that positive action is better than none and will have positive consequences of which we might not know -- this is fundamental to developing the social awareness and a sense of struggle in ourselves and the people with whom we work.

7. He must constantly improve his own intellectual development. He must take time to study, to read, to write, to rest. He must constantly evaluate his actions and the actions of others and discuss them collectively with his friends and fellow workers. We live in a rapidly changing world and the good organizer has to be kept abreast of world events.

If the organizer keeps reading, studying, and writing about his experiences, the entire unit will grow and the organizer himself will acquire skill that make him very mobile, able to move into many different kinds of situations -- an absolute must in our time.

#