

What is an Organizer? Mike Miller

Since there's been a great deal of discussion of what an organizer is, what he does, who he is -- both in SNCC and among people interested in SNCC's work, I thought I would try to write some brief thoughts on this topic. In particular, these notes are applicable to the kind of work done by the SNCC field secretaries.

An organizer likes people -- all kinds of people. He takes people the way they are.

An organizer doesn't like to do all the talking. He talk; he listens; he asks questions. He operates on the principle that people in the streets, in the neighborhoods, in the fields, in the factories, on the unemployed lines, on the welfare rolls know better than he does what they need.

An organizer begins his work with a conversation. First he talks with people one at a time. He's always trying to get people talking, so he can listen. Then the organizer wants to get the people with whom he has been talking one by one to talk with each other -- first in a small group where they won't shy away from saying what they said to him alone. Then in bigger and bigger groups.

The first kind of group the organizer brings together is informal that is it doesn't have a structure, like a constitution and elected officers and special jobs for the people in the group. He does this because he wants people to get comfortable with one another before they start dividing up work among themselves.

A radical organizer wants to get to the root of things, and he knows that getting to the root of things means getting to people. He knows that because he knows that at the root of the problems of America is the fact that a very few people make most of the important decisions for most of the people.

When an organizer has brought together people and the people are talking, he is interested in several things. First, he wants discussion from as many people as possible because he knows that the first step for people is to get them to talk about their problems. Second, he knows that if a group of people starts talking about their problems they will find that many of the problems are the same. His role then is to find a way to bring that group of people to see that if they work together, that if they fight together, they may be able to do something about their problems.

And that's just the beginning. From that point on the good organizer constantly raises questions, like: "How is this problem that you're working on related to that other problem we were talking about last week?" And "Who decided that Negroes couldn't vote?" And "Where did he get the money?" And so forth. The organizer asks questions -- he doesn't give answers. His reason for doing that is simple: if he gives the answers, people don't have to struggle to come to those answers themselves; and,

when people don't have to struggle for something, it doesn't mean too much to them. But when they grasp it themselves because they found it out, then it can never be taken from them.

Asking questions is part of working yourself out of a job. And a good organizer does that, too. At some point, people in the communities get the knack of asking questions. They ask themselves -- and then the organizer can move on. His job is done. He can go elsewhere and begin to work again.

There are some other things the organizer does. When people ask questions, they sometimes don't know where to get the information to answer those questions. The organizer is a resource of information. He can tell you where to find out about SDC elections or welfare payments or voting laws or food surpluses. Or if he doesn't know, he can ask. That's what SNCC research is for.

There are two fundamental things that I think can be said about SNCC organizers. And these two things have to do with the whole character of SNCC and the movement in the South.

First, SNCC organizers aren't confused by the phony value system of this society. That's one of the major gripes that you hear from the NAACP. "Why," asks the NAACP national leadership, "doesn't SNCC organize the Negro middle-class in Mississippi? That's where the leadership for the Mississippi movement must come from." SNCC organizers know that this isn't true. They know that the thin layer of Negro middle-class in Mississippi doesn't, by and large, become involved in basic issues facing the millions of domestics, day laborers, unemployed, etc. Negroes of the Black Belt. Like jobs, decent housing, good schools, adequate health, welfare and recreation services and so forth.

Second, SNCC organizers aren't afraid to raise those questions which, when discussed by social people, frequently lead to fundamental challenges to the whole system of segregation, degradation, and exploitation in the Deep South -- and in the country.

This approach leads to some of the problems we have in working in the North. For one thing, it means that SNCC isn't projected -- local people and local organizations are. For another thing, it means that we don't have exact timetables and beautiful programs on paper. If we did that, it would mean that we, not the local people, were really making the decisions. This is the meaning of the SNCC staff conference decision that says we won't have a summer project unless the local people want a summer project. Maybe this is the difference between SNCC and what I call "press release revolutionaries" -- those who announce big plans in the mass media but who don't have any people with them when it comes to implementing those plans.

Let me try to sum this up. The major problem in the country today is that a very few people make the decisions for most of us -- black and white. Basically, these are political decisions. Politics is the struggle for power. The power of people can only be brought to bear when those people are organized in democratic organizations which they control, and in which they make the decisions of program and policy. There are basically two sources of power: money and people. The power of people can only be brought to bear when those people are organized in democratic organizations which they control, and in which they make the decisions of program and policy. The organizer is the catalyst who makes this second source of power possible.

To organize people who have been exploited all their lives is a tough job. It demands of an organizer that he bring out of people what they have within them but have been told isn't there -- because they aren't "educated" or because they are Negroes or because they are poor. It requires that the organizer know who he is and that he not confuse what he wants with what the people with whom he is working want. Organizing in this way finally requires a self-discipline and a respect and love for other men that is not common in the Great Society.