

# Teaching SNCC:

## The Organization at the Heart of the Civil Rights Revolution

By ADAM SANCHEZ

“THAT’S THE PROBLEM with Black Lives Matter! We need a strong leader like Martin Luther King!” Tyriq shouted as I wrote King’s name on the board.

I started my unit on the Civil Rights Movement by asking my high school students to list every person or organization they knew was involved. They replied with several familiar names: Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Emmett Till. Occasionally a student knew an organization: the NAACP or the Black Panther Party.

“Has anyone ever heard of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee?” I asked while writing the acronym on the board.

“S-N-C-C?” students sounded out as my black Expo marker moved across the whiteboard.

“Have you ever heard of the sit-ins?” I prodded.

“Yeah, weren’t they in Alabama?” Matt answered.

“No, Mississippi! Four students sat down at a lunch counter, right?” Kadiatou proudly declared.

This is usually the extent of my students’ prior knowledge of SNCC, one of the organizations most responsible for pushing the Civil Rights Movement forward. Without the history of SNCC at their disposal, students think



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*A meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Atlanta, winter 1963–64. Executive Secretary James Forman leads singing in the SNCC office. From left: Mike Sayer, MacArthur Cotton, James Forman, Marion Barry, Lester MacKinney, Mike Thelwell, Lawrence Guyot, Judy Richardson, John Lewis, Jean Wheeler, and Julian Bond.*

of the Civil Rights Movement as one that was dominated by charismatic leaders and not one that involved thousands of young people like themselves. Learning the history of how young students risked their lives to build a multigenerational movement against racism and for political and economic power allows students to draw new conclusions about the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement and how to apply them to today.

## You Are Members of SNCC

Pedagogically based on *Rethinking Schools* editor Bill Bigelow's abolitionist role play, and drawing content from the voices of SNCC veterans and the scholarship of Howard Zinn, Clayborne Carson, and other historians, I created a series of role plays where students imagined themselves as SNCC members. In their roles, students debated key questions the organization faced while battling Jim Crow. My hope was that by role-playing the moments in SNCC's history where activists made important decisions, students would gain a deeper understanding of how the movement evolved, what difficulties it faced, and most importantly, an understanding that social movements involve ordinary people taking action, but also discussing and debating a way forward.

I taught the role play in my U.S. history class at Madison High School in Portland, Oregon, and more recently in a course about the Civil Rights Movement at Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City. Both schools serve a diverse mix of Black, Latinx, Asian, and white students — unusual examples of diversity for both public school districts. They also house a large population of students who come from low-income families.

To introduce the role play, I created a handout that situates students in the role of a SNCC member through providing background

on what led up to the formation of SNCC. Before reading the handout out loud as a class, I told students they would be writing from the role of a SNCC member and should highlight any information — particularly about historical events — they might want to include. The role begins with historical background:

*In Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Boynton v. Virginia, and several other court cases, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled Jim Crow segregation unconstitutional. But from movie theaters to swimming pools, parks to restaurants, buses to schools, almost every aspect of public life in the South remains segregated.*

*In 1955, 50,000 African Americans in Montgomery (Alabama's second-largest city) participated in a boycott to end segregation of the city buses. . . .*

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*Without the history of SNCC at their disposal, students think of the Civil Rights Movement as one that was dominated by charismatic leaders and not one that involved thousands of young people like themselves.*

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*But after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the movement struggled to move forward. Segregationists launched a massive campaign of terror that prevented further gains. . . . While the protests of the 1950s gave you a sense of pride and power, it increasingly became clear that larger, more*

*dramatic actions would be necessary to break the back of Jim Crow. You were prepared to act and you were not alone.*

The handout continues by discussing the initial sit-ins that spread quickly across the South and led to the formation of SNCC. After reading about the sit-ins and SNCC's founding conference in April of 1960, we quickly moved on to another crucial event that shaped SNCC's early history: the Freedom Rides.

## Freedom Rider Letter

To introduce the Freedom Rides, I edited together two clips from the PBS documentary

*Freedom Riders.* The first part introduces students to the concept of the Freedom Rides, a series of bus trips organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) through the South to protest segregation in interstate travel facilities. The clip also takes students through the burning of one Greyhound bus in Anniston, Alabama, and the attack on the Freedom Riders in a second bus by a white mob in Birmingham.

The second part reveals that after the violence in Birmingham, the first round of Freedom Riders decided to fly to New Orleans and head home. It then turns to the Nashville students in SNCC who decided they couldn't let the Freedom Rides end in failure. As SNCC leader Diane Nash explains in the video:

*If we allowed the Freedom Ride to stop at that point, just after so much violence had been inflicted, the message would have been sent that all you have to do to stop a nonviolent campaign is inflict massive violence. It was critical that the Freedom Ride not stop, and that it be continued immediately.*

After the clip, I tell students that to get in the role of a SNCC member, they will be writing letters to their parents as if they were planning to join the Freedom Rides. Together we read a short assignment that reiterates some of the basic facts about the Freedom Rides and gives them more information about what to write: "Describe for your parents the experiences that led you to risk your life in order to end segregation in the South. You can choose your gender, your race, your age, your social class, and the region where you grew up. Give yourself a name and a history. Be imaginative. In vivid detail, tell the story of the events that made you who you are now: a Freedom Rider." While in reality, many Freedom Riders chose not to tell their parents, this activity allows students to think through what makes someone willing to take great risks for a just cause.

Whether giving this assignment as homework or giving students in-class time to work on it, I often get back incredible letters. Marquandre wrote passionately about why he felt the need to join:

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I have made the decision to join the Freedom Riders. I know it's a big risk, but I feel I need to do this. I'm sure you've heard about the bus that was burned in Anniston and the attack on the Freedom Riders in Birmingham. We can't let this violence be the end. We need to show them that their violence can't stop our fight.*

*Now I know you'll be angry with me for dropping out of school to join the Freedom Rides. I really appreciate all you have done for me, and how hard you worked to get me to college. But seeing you work so hard for so little is why I'm doing this. I remember how you worked 10 or 12 hours a day just to pay the bills and put food on the table for me and my sisters.*

*I know you wanted a better future for me. But I've heard that nearly all of last year's graduates fell short of their dreams to be doctors, lawyers, journalists, and so on. They say "knowledge is power," but what's the point of an education when I'm still going to end up in a low-wage job because I'm Black? I want Lily and Diana to know that their brother fought for their future. I want my children to grow up in a country where segregation doesn't exist. . . . If not now, when? This is our time.*

After students finished working, I had them read their letters to each other in pairs or small groups. Sometimes I asked the class to form a circle and read each letter aloud one by one. I was never disappointed when I took the time to do this. It helps students gain a deeper connection to their roles and creates a rich aural portrait of a social movement.

## **Organizing Mississippi**

When students finished sharing their letters, we watched the movie *Freedom Song*. *Freedom Song* is an indispensable film that gives a gripping narrative based on SNCC's first voter registration project in McComb, Mississippi. I've found that the film helps give students a deep visual



understanding of SNCC's organizing efforts that grounds the role play that follows. While watching *Freedom Song*, I asked students to pay attention to what leadership looks like in SNCC and how SNCC makes decisions. I also point out that in the last scenes of the film, some of the students from the local community where SNCC was organizing join SNCC and move to organize other parts of the state, while others stay behind and maintain the voter registration classes that SNCC began. In other words, as the best organizers do, SNCC organized themselves out of a job — they built a local movement that not only could sustain itself once they left, but could also help spread the movement to other parts of the state.

Next I distributed a handout containing three key questions that SNCC debated during their fight for racial justice in Mississippi:

- Should SNCC focus its efforts on voter registration or direct action?
- Should SNCC bring a thousand mostly white volunteers to Mississippi? If so, should SNCC limit the role of white volunteers?
- Should SNCC workers carry guns? If not, should SNCC allow or seek out local people to defend its organizers with guns?

Each question is accompanied with some historical context that helps students understand why this has become a debated question within SNCC, as well as short arguments for both sides. Here's an example from the handout:

**Situation:** *While SNCC has always been a Black-led, majority Black organization, there has always been a small number of white SNCC members. But Northern white students have been increasingly getting involved. At SNCC's 1963 conference, one-third of the participants were white. Some staff members are now proposing to bring 1,000 mostly white students from all around the United States to Mississippi in the summer of 1964 to help with voter registration efforts. This plan has sparked*

*discussion in SNCC on the role of whites in the movement.*

**Question:** *Should SNCC bring 1,000 mostly white volunteers to Mississippi? If so, should SNCC limit the role of white volunteers?*

**Arguments:** *Some Black SNCC members are concerned that instead of Black volunteers helping to build local leadership to organize their own communities, whites tend to take over leadership roles in the movement, preventing Southern Blacks from getting the support they need to lead. Many Northern whites enter SNCC with skills and an education that allow them to dominate discussions. If SNCC does decide to bring down white volunteers, these organizers insist that white activists should focus on organizing the Southern white community. After all, isn't it the racism in white communities that is the biggest barrier to Black progress? Other SNCC members argue that too many local activists have been murdered for trying to organize and vote and the majority of the nation will only care when their white sons and daughters are in harm's way. Bringing student volunteers from all around the country will mean increased attention on Mississippi's racist practices from the family and friends of the volunteers, as well as the media. This spotlight might force the federal government to protect civil rights workers and Blacks in Mississippi trying to register to vote. In addition, some local organizers argue that if we're trying to break down the barrier of segregation, we can't segregate ourselves. Moreover, Black people are a minority in the United States and can't change things alone.*

I gave students the handout the class period before the actual role play and asked them to jot down initial answers to each question for homework. This is especially helpful for students who don't feel as comfortable speaking in class discussion or who take longer to process their thoughts.

I explained to students that we would run our meetings in the same manner that SNCC



Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos

*Members of SNCC during a sit-in at a Toddle House in Atlanta in 1963.*

ran meetings. We would choose a chair to call on other students and try to reach informal consensus. I echoed what I was told by SNCC veteran Judy Richardson: “Each one of us is putting our lives on the line, so we want to try to make sure that we come to a decision that we all feel comfortable with.” Once we chose a facilitator (or one for each question), I concluded with another insight I learned from Richardson: “Now the last thing you need to know about how SNCC ran meetings is that if things got really heated, someone would start singing and then others would join in to remind everyone what they meant to each other and all they’d been through together. So, I’m going to teach you a song that they might have sung, and if our discussion at any point gets really contentious, we can sing to remind us that we are all in this together.” I sang for students “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” and encouraged them to sing with me the second and third round. This was a little out of my comfort zone as a teacher, and singing in a social studies class can be out of students’ comfort zones, but it became an essential and beautiful part of the role play. In addition to when the debate got

heated, we sang the song to refocus after a lockdown drill, and I even heard a few students singing it in the hallways after class.

### **Students Run Their Own Meeting**

To start the role play, students sat in a circle. I encouraged them to read the entire question out loud — including the situation and the arguments — before jumping into each debate. This way, students who weren’t present when I gave out the questions or who didn’t have a chance to read them for homework could still participate in the discussions. Students ran the debate, though occasionally I did jump in to the discussion to play devil’s advocate, ensure they were taking all sides seriously, or re-emphasize the historical context that had provoked the question they were debating. When I did jump in, I always did so as an equal — raising my hand and waiting to be called on by the student facilitator. In general, I’ve been blown away by the seriousness and passion students bring to these discussions. Here’s a sample from our class debate on the first question: Should SNCC focus its efforts on voter registration or direct action?

Dwell: *I think we should focus on voter registration because if we had some sort of political power we could take out the racist politicians.*

Jade: *I disagree. I think direct action is more useful. We've seen that the Brown v. Board decision didn't actually desegregate schools. It took direct action. Action moves things forward faster and we want change now.*

Giorgio: *I agree with Dwell, focusing on voter registration is going to create a permanent change that will come from the government, not just changes in a few small places.*

Rachel: *But at the end of the day, it was the protests that pushed the government to make new laws. And isn't it suspicious that the Kennedys are saying they will help us secure funds if we focus on voter registration? Whose side are they on? Do they just want these new voters to vote for them?*

Shona: *I see voter registration as direct action. As we saw in Freedom Song, SNCC members get beaten up whether they are doing sit-ins or voter registration. Both are forms of nonviolent disobedience. Why can't we focus on both?*

The time frame for the debates has varied depending on the pacing of class discussions and how much wiggle room I had built into the unit, but it has always taken at least one or two class periods. As we go, I have students jot down the decisions the class made, whether they agreed or disagreed with those decisions, and why.

When students finished debating the last question, I gave them a short reading adapted from several sources that explains how these debates played out in reality. Naturally, after debating the questions themselves, students were eager to know what really happened. Either for homework or as a debrief in class, I asked students to compare the decisions we made in class with SNCC's ultimate decisions on those topics, write about what decision they found most interesting or surprising, and think about how SNCC's experience in Mississippi changed the organization. While most students tended to agree with the decisions SNCC made, debating

these questions as a class allowed them to look at the decisions more critically and not see them as inevitable. Imari wrote: "While SNCC chose not to limit the role of white volunteers I disagree with this decision. In class we discussed how white college students would tend to dominate discussions and reinforce Southern Blacks' sense of inferiority. While I agree with SNCC that they shouldn't segregate Black and white SNCC members, I think they could have placed some limits on white volunteers."

Adeola's comments about how organizing in Mississippi transformed SNCC were particularly insightful: "I think SNCC members felt like they couldn't be safe without being armed. They would get violently attacked by whites for trying to get the most basic things like the right to vote. They probably began to see nonviolence as more of a tactic than a policy."

After debriefing the role play, we watched part of an *Eyes on the Prize* episode that covers Freedom Summer [season 1, episode 5, "Mississippi: Is This America?"], when more than 1,000 volunteers joined SNCC organizers to dramatically increase voter registration in Mississippi. We also learned how during the summer, activists formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to challenge the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention of 1964. The organizing involved in creating the MFDP was tremendous, full of valuable lessons, and worth spending time on in the classroom. I've often used Teaching for Change's phenomenal lesson "Sharecroppers Challenge U.S. Apartheid" to cover this complicated effort with students.

### **Case Studies in Organizing Alabama**

After learning about Freedom Summer, we return to the role play. Students are again seated in a circle and run their own meeting. This time, however, I split the class into three circles — groups large enough to still have a diverse group of vocal peers and small enough that they could get through questions a bit quicker. Armed with background about SNCC's work in Mississippi, I wanted to move student discussions away from SNCC's internal and more philosophical debates



and toward more concrete problem-solving that happens during an organizing campaign.

I chose two “case studies” that further draw out SNCC’s history and unique contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. The first case study looks at the famous 1965 voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, from the perspective of SNCC. Several of my students had seen the movie *Selma*, but even for them, looking at the campaign through the eyes of SNCC was a new experience. I started with a short reading that gave students background about SNCC’s long work in Selma and the new campaign launched by Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The reading explains the difference between the two organizations’ organizing methods: “SNCC projects emphasize the development of grassroots organizations headed by local people. SNCC organizers work, eat, and sleep in a community — for years, if necessary — and attempt to slowly develop a large local leadership that can carry on the struggle eventually without SNCC field staff. . . . The SCLC led local communities into nonviolent confrontations with

segregationists and the brutal cops and state police who backed up Jim Crow laws. They hoped to bring national media attention to local struggles and force the federal government to intervene to support civil rights activists.”

I explained to students why I’ve put them in multiple circles, have each circle pick their own facilitator, and hand out five “problem-solving” questions SNCC faced during the Selma campaign. In their circles, students debate and decide on answers to the five questions. Some of the questions ask students to decide whether they should support the efforts of the SCLC, while others are more open-ended and require students to come up with creative solutions. Here’s a short excerpt from one student discussion on whether SNCC should support the 50-mile nonviolent march

from Selma to Montgomery that will go through some of the most violent areas of Alabama:

Aris: No, no, no! First, it’s a 50-mile march! Then King’s going to take them through these violent racist places. And he’s nonviolent, so that means that if they want to snatch our people up, we’re gonna have to let them!

Nakiyah: But King brings a lot of publicity with him. You think they are going to attack us while the cameras are on us?

Aris: It’s a 50-mile march. The cameras can’t be on us all the time.

Elian: But the troopers just shot a protester, we have to respond in some way and we’re stronger if we respond with King.

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*Playing out these debates in the classroom shows students that social movements aren’t only about protest — but also about tactics, strategy, and the ability to hold a debate and move forward together.*

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After students finish debating the questions, we read what really happened in a short excerpt I adapted from Clayborne Carson’s *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Students often leave this case study a little frustrated with King’s actions in Selma — a stark dif-

ference to how students feel after watching the movie *Selma*. Aris commented, “The first march he wasn’t there. The second march he’s there, but turns it around. What’s up with this guy?” In our debrief discussion, we return to the philosophical differences between SNCC and SCLC to try to answer this. I point out to students that at least in this instance, the SCLC’s strategy worked and the Voting Rights Act was introduced out of the crisis in Selma. But my student Francisco would not let the SCLC off the hook: “But they came in after SNCC had been working in Selma for two years. So who’s to say SNCC’s strategy didn’t work?” The point of this case study is not to answer these questions for students — but to get them to grapple with different organizing models for social change.

The next day we started on the second case study, which takes students through the SNCC organizing campaign in Lowndes County, Alabama. The format is identical to the previous day's, so students come ready to dive in. One question asks students how SNCC will respond to increasing white terror. Another question, set after the Voting Rights Act, asks students now that most official barriers to Blacks voting have come down, should people vote for the Democratic Party? Especially given that Alabama's Democrats have a slogan that touts "white supremacy?"

In addition to the voting rights campaign in Lowndes, the debrief reading for this case study takes students through the birth of the original Black Panther Party, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), and their impressive showing in the 1966 elections. In less than two years, Lowndes County went from a place that had not one registered Black voter to a model of independent Black organizing that others aimed to emulate across the country.

## Why Learn SNCC?

Probably the most important part of SNCC's legacy is not its nonviolent direct action tactics, but its base-building through community organizing. SNCC was influenced by the communities in which they organized, just as SNCC influenced them. The debates throughout SNCC's various organizing campaigns reflect this relationship with the communities in which they organized. Playing out these debates in the classroom shows students that social movements aren't only about protest — but also about tactics, strategy, and the ability to hold a debate and move forward together. Tracking SNCC's ideological transformation can also help highlight how social movements can quickly radicalize, as what seemed impossible only a few years before is made possible through protest and organization.

Too often, the experience of SNCC is ignored when we teach the history of the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, the movement is often taught with a focus on prominent

movement leaders. The "Rosa sat and Martin dreamed" narrative not only trivializes the role of these activists, it robs us of the deeper history of the Civil Rights Movement. It's not enough for students to simply learn about the sit-ins or Freedom Rides. SNCC's organizing campaigns need to be at the center of civil rights curriculum. In today's racist world, students need to grasp that social change does not simply occur by finding the right tactic to implement — or waiting around for a strong leader to emerge — but through slow, patient organizing that empowers oppressed communities. This crucial lesson of the Civil Rights Movement will help us plot a course for our movements today — and may help students imagine playing a role in those movements. As my student Nakiyah wrote me in her final course evaluation, "Learning about SNCC was so interesting because SNCC was so effective. Knowing that the racism they experienced still exists in a similar but different way today made me want to make a change and gather my generation to fight." ■

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## Member: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

YOU ARE MEMBERS of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an organization founded in 1960 dedicated to using non-violent tactics to challenge racial segregation in the South.

In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, *Boynton v. Virginia*, and several other court cases, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled Jim Crow segregation unconstitutional. But from movie theaters to swimming pools, parks to restaurants, buses to schools, almost every aspect of public life in the South remains segregated.

In 1955, 50,000 African Americans in Montgomery (Alabama's second-largest city), participated in a boycott to end segregation of the city buses. This mass upsurge against the racist system in the South was a huge inspiration to you. Watching the protest gave you both new role models, like Martin Luther King Jr., and a strong sense that change was possible.

But after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the movement struggled to move forward. Segregationists launched a massive campaign of terror that prevented further gains. When nine Black students tried to integrate Little Rock Central High School in September 1957, they were driven back by racist mobs. President Eisenhower was forced to send in the National Guard to escort students to school.

Meanwhile, the courts increasingly took the view that to demand a school district be integrated, those bringing the case needed to prove not just that segregation existed but that school districts were segregated intentionally. In practice, this meant that fewer and fewer schools were being integrated. So, in the first three years after the *Brown* decision, 712 school districts were desegregated, but by 1960 that number fell to

just 17.

While the protests of the 1950s gave you a sense of pride and power, it increasingly became clear that larger, more dramatic actions would be necessary to break the back of Jim Crow. You were prepared to act and you were not alone.

On February 1, 1960, four students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College sat down at a “whites only” Woolworth’s lunch counter. When the four were asked to leave, they refused and remained seated until the store closed. The next day they returned, this time with 23 students, and the day after that with 63.

These sit-ins made national news and spread like wildfire. Within two weeks, sit-ins had spread to 15 other cities in five different states. In a year, tens of thousands of students had taken part in sit-ins in more than 100 Southern cities.

By April, it became clear that students from across the South needed to come together to discuss how to strengthen and extend the new student movement. The founding conference of SNCC was organized by Ella Baker, the executive director in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). It took place in Raleigh, North Carolina, at Shaw College, a Historically Black College and Ms. Baker’s alma mater. One hundred and fifty student activists from all over the South, plus 19 delegates from Northern colleges attended the conference.

Though some in the movement wanted SNCC to have official ties with SCLC or be absorbed into existing civil rights organizations, Baker asserted that students “had the right to direct their own affairs and even make their own mistakes.” She encouraged us to make our own decisions and not subordinate ourselves

to existing civil rights organizations. Therefore, while SNCC of course collaborates with other civil rights organizations, we have autonomy and come to our own decisions as a group.

The sit-ins and the formation of SNCC were an important new development for the Civil

Rights Movement, but for you the pace of change seemed unbearably slow. There is a sharp debate among SNCC organizers on how to take the movement forward. How can we end segregation and win full equality for African Americans? That is the question we face today.

# Imagining Bravery: Freedom Rider Letters

IN 1960, THE U.S. SUPREME COURT banned segregation in interstate travel facilities — bus stations as well as buses — but in the South the state and federal government did not enforce the law. In May of 1961, a little over a year after SNCC was formed, two integrated buses left Washington, D.C., to challenge segregation in Southern bus terminals. When these Freedom Riders entered Anniston, Alabama, a racist mob armed with chains, sticks and iron rods began attacking one of the two buses, breaking windows and slashing tires before the police arrived. When the bus left Anniston, a mob followed it and tossed a firebomb onboard. The riders escaped the burning bus, but the local hospital refused to treat them.

The Freedom Riders continued their journey until Birmingham, where a white mob waited for them at the bus terminal. The Birmingham police, under the direction of Eugene “Bull” Connor, didn’t show up for 15 minutes after the Freedom Riders arrived. The white mob assaulted the Freedom Riders as they exited the bus, beating one rider so badly he suffered permanent brain damage. After the violence in Birmingham, the first round of Riders chose to fly to New Orleans and abandon their efforts.

Upon learning of the attacks, Diane Nash, a SNCC leader at Fisk College, a Historically Black College in Nashville, helped organize a group of students to continue the freedom ride campaign. The students were told that if they continued the rides, at least one of them would be killed, but they decided to go anyway. As Nash recalled in a speech later that year to the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, “these people faced the probability of their own deaths before they ever left Nashville. Several made out wills. A few more gave me sealed letters to be mailed if they were killed. Some told me frankly that they were afraid, but they knew this was something that they must do because freedom was worth it.”

**Imagine you are a Nashville student. Write a letter to your parents explaining why you have decided to participate in the freedom rides. Describe for your parents the experiences that led you to risk your life in order to end segregation in the South. You can choose your gender, your race, your age, your social class, and the region where you grew up. Give yourself a name and a history. Be imaginative. In vivid detail, tell the story of the events that made you who you are now: a Freedom Rider.**

**Requirements:**

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- \_\_\_ Name and Background (Where did you grow up? What injustices did you face/witness? What led you to join SNCC?)
  - \_\_\_ Cite Historical Evidence (Pull from the SNCC member role, the class readings, and freedom riders clip. For example, were you inspired by earlier struggles such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott? Are you influenced by the early ideas of Martin Luther King Jr.? Do you remember when Emmett Till was murdered? Did you witness the integration of Little Rock High?)
  - \_\_\_ Emotions about continuing the Freedom Rides (Remember SNCC members were risking their lives. Are you scared? Determined? Angry?)



# SNCC in Mississippi: Problem-Solving #1

1. **SITUATION:** Cleveland, Mississippi, NAACP President Amzie Moore came to meet with SNCC to encourage you to join his voter registration efforts in Mississippi. President John F. Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, also have contacted SNCC to encourage you to focus on voter registration, and ask you to abandon your direct action tactics (sit-ins, Freedom Rides). The negative attention that SNCC's direct action generated worldwide presented a dilemma for the Kennedys. If they enforced federal laws that SNCC wanted them to, they risked losing the white vote in the South; if they didn't enforce the law, damaging images and evidence of civil unrest were sure to be used by opponents inside the country and enemies outside. Because of this, the Kennedy administration has contacted SNCC, encouraging you to redirect the energy from the sit-ins and the freedom ride campaign toward the goal of registering Southern Blacks to vote. The Kennedy administration has assured SNCC that they would receive financial support for such projects.

**QUESTION:** Should SNCC focus its efforts on voter registration or direct action?

**ARGUMENTS:** Some SNCC members believe that the small amount of Black voters, especially in the Deep South, prevents Blacks from winning the political power necessary to achieve civil rights goals. These organizers argue that while direct action like the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides might be a good way to challenge segregated facilities, real political power — the power to change and enforce laws — comes through the ballot box.

Furthermore, poor, rural Blacks have no money to eat at lunch counters or other public facilities (like movie theaters or pools) and what they need most is political power. Through their votes, African Americans, who were the majority of the population in many counties throughout the South, could vote out racist politicians and vote in those willing to enforce the law. These activists argue we should join the NAACP efforts in Mississippi to register Blacks to vote. In addition, Northern liberals are more likely to fund less confrontational tactics and SNCC could greatly expand its operation with the funds that the Kennedys have promised to secure.

Other SNCC members are reluctant to abandon the direct action tactics that have placed SNCC at the forefront of the civil rights struggle. They argue that the Kennedy administration and the liberal establishment is trying to “buy off” SNCC by promising more funding if the group focuses on voter registration. These activists claim that the only reason the president is paying attention to SNCC is because direct action has focused the attention of the world on the racist South and is making the U.S. look bad in the eyes of the world. This is a major concern for the Kennedys because the U.S. is in competition with Russia for influence over newly independent African nations. Rather than switch SNCC's focus, the Freedom Rides and other forms of direct action should continue. These organizers argue that rather than abandon direct action, we should expand on previous tactics: “sleep-ins” in segregated motel lobbies, “swim-ins” in whites-only pools, “read-ins” at public libraries, and even “watch-ins” in movie theaters. These dramatic actions were gaining momentum and bringing the movement into the darkest corners of the Deep South, raising awareness, building courage, and inspiring new activists.

2. **SITUATION:** While SNCC has always been a Black-led, majority-Black organization, there has always been a small number of white SNCC members. But Northern white students have been increasingly getting involved. At SNCC's 1963 conference, one-third of the participants were white. Some staff members are now proposing to bring 1,000 mostly white students from all around the United States to Mississippi in the summer of 1964 to help with voter registration efforts. This plan has sparked discussion in SNCC on the role of whites in the movement.

**QUESTION:** Should SNCC bring 1,000 mostly white volunteers to Mississippi? If so, should SNCC limit the role of white volunteers?

**ARGUMENTS:** Some Black SNCC members are concerned that instead of Black volunteers helping to build local leadership to organize their own communities, whites tend to take over leadership roles in the movement, preventing Southern Blacks from getting the support they need to lead. Many Northern whites enter SNCC with skills and an education that allow them to dominate discussions. If SNCC does decide to bring down white volunteers, these organizers insist that white activists should focus on organizing the Southern white community. After all, isn't it the racism in white communities that is the biggest barrier to Black progress?

Other SNCC members argue that too many local activists have been murdered for trying to organize and vote and the majority of the nation will only care when their white sons and daughters are in harm's way. Bringing student volunteers from all around the country will mean increased attention on Mississippi's racist practices from the family and friends of the volunteers, as well as the media. This spotlight might force the federal government to protect civil rights workers and Blacks in Mississippi trying to register to vote. In addition, some local organizers argue that if we're trying to break down the barrier of segregation, we can't segregate ourselves. Moreover, Black people are a minority in the United States and can't change things alone.

- 3. SITUATION:** As SNCC's voter registration work has expanded to some of the most racist areas of the South, some SNCC members have begun to question whether the organization's commitment to nonviolence makes sense. In these areas, anti-Black terrorism by vigilante groups like the KKK is common and often protected by local police. Some SNCC staffers working in these areas have started to carry guns to protect themselves. In Greenwood, Mississippi, one SNCC office recently decided to obtain guns to protect itself. They had received information that several SNCC leaders were targeted for assassination and that whites in the area were arming themselves to terrorize those participating in their voter registration efforts. SNCC staff had even received information that a truckload of guns and ammunition was intercepted in Illinois before being delivered to white supremacists in Mississippi. The actions of the Greenwood office have brought up several questions about the role of nonviolence and armed self-defense in the movement.

**QUESTION:** Should SNCC workers carry guns? If not, should SNCC allow or seek out local people to defend its organizers with guns?

**ARGUMENTS:** Some SNCC members argue that carrying guns will just further endanger the lives of SNCC workers. They argue that because police commonly stop, question, and search Blacks, finding a gun would just give police an excuse to shoot SNCC workers. They also argue that if a local Black or a SNCC worker actually killed a white attacker, white citizens would retaliate even more violently — this time with the protection of the police. It would then put the local community in even greater danger of beatings and killings. Furthermore, they argue that carrying a gun will not necessarily save lives. They point to the case of people like Medgar Evers, the head of the Mississippi NAACP, who always traveled armed but was nevertheless gunned down in the driveway of his home. Many argue that the federal government is the only entity that could provide adequate protection for local Blacks and civil rights workers and that the practice of armed resistance would isolate SNCC from the majority of the movement and its Northern support.

Other SNCC members respond that the federal government has let white supremacists in the South kill Blacks and civil rights workers with impunity and because of this the local Black community has armed itself and is encouraging SNCC activists to do likewise. They point out that nonviolence might sound nice, but real change in the rural South has always required being willing to use violence, at least in self-defense. This goes all the way back to slavery and Reconstruction. In these areas, the alternative to armed self-defense was often death. These SNCC organizers point to examples of local Blacks who prevented attacks on their homes by being openly armed — and argue that armed Blacks, whether SNCC workers or locals, could similarly discourage attacks on SNCC offices. In the Deep South racist vigilantes are targeting the Black community and civil rights workers in particular. In this situation, these SNCC activists ask, how can we tell our members they can't carry a gun for protection? And even if they agree to the principle of nonviolence and don't carry a gun, what about the local Blacks they are organizing with? Are we going to tell them they can't carry the guns that they use to hunt for food and that are a routine part of life in the rural South?



# Organizing Mississippi — Part 1

CLEVELAND, MISSISSIPPI, NAACP President Amzie Moore, attended SNCC's October 1960 meeting and put voter registration on the table. The response was lukewarm. SNCC's priority remained direct action. "Jail Without Bail," and how to spread the sit-in movement dominated discussion.

After his election the following month, President John F. Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, soon made it clear that they were hostile to direct action, and began pressing the student organizers of SNCC to abandon such protests and turn to voter registration. The two brothers thought that the white Southern response to such an effort would be less violent and thus less dramatic and embarrassing to the United States than demonstrations. SNCC was suspicious of their overtures. The Kennedy administration seemed indifferent to enforcing existing civil rights law and far too willing to compromise with Southern bigots. Many in SNCC thought that the Kennedys were trying to co-opt them and that organizing for voter registration was selling out. Others, however, saw voter registration as an important step toward the acquisition of real power for meaningful change.

Ella Baker stepped into this debate and helped the young SNCC organizers to reach a consensus decision that prevented a split within the group. SNCC would establish both a direct action wing and a voter registration wing. Baker knew that the distinction was largely meaningless. In the Deep South, voter registration *was* direct action. As SNCC field secretary Reggie Robinson later put it: "If you went into Mississippi and talked about voter registration they're going to hit you on the side of the head and that's as direct as you can get."

This debate began a process whereby SNCC, which began as a protest organization conducting and coordinating sit-ins and Freedom Rides,

slowly evolved into an organization of organizers — "field secretaries" — embedding themselves in rural communities across the Black Belt where they gave special emphasis to voter registration.

SNCC's first voter registration effort began in McComb, Mississippi, in the late summer of 1961. Supported by a small core of local adults, SNCC field secretary Bob Moses began conducting voter registration workshops. Few people of voting age were willing to make the attempt at registration, given reprisals ranging from murder and violent assault to retaliatory job loss. However, what Moses was doing had two unforeseen effects: local young people, excited simply by SNCC's presence in town, felt that "Freedom Riders" had come to their town and wanted to be part of the movement that they had only heard about. Some began working with Moses, canvassing the Black community for those willing to put their lives on the line to try to register to vote. Other young people began organizing their own student protest movement.

The other effect of the McComb project was to bring SNCC's work to the attention of Black leaders in the surrounding counties, where a network of older organizers already existed. Now, residents "out in the rural" came to McComb and asked SNCC to begin projects in their counties, which were even more dangerous than McComb. SNCC soon encountered violence at a level it never had before. A key supporter in Amite County, NAACP founding member Herbert Lee, was gunned down in broad daylight by E. H. Hurst, a white state legislator. SNCC workers were attacked and beaten at county courthouses.

One result of SNCC's work in Mississippi was the revitalization of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) — a coalition of major civil rights groups in Mississippi. In the fall of 1962, it took on the mission of coordinating voter registration activities in the entire state of Mississippi.

SNCC organizers were now successfully digging into an increasing number of communities. While the number of those attempting voter registration remained small, new leaders, many of them women — like Fannie Lou Hamer of Sunflower County, Mississippi, and Carolyn Daniels of Terrell County, Georgia — also emerged. So, too, did violence and other reprisals. More than any single thing, retaliation on every level kept Black people from trying to register to vote.

In 1964, Bob Moses proposed bringing hundreds of white students to Mississippi during the summer to aid with the voter registration campaign. He hoped that Mississippi officials could not crush such a massive force of civil rights workers and that national sentiment would not tolerate assaults against white students, especially those from elite colleges with well-connected families.

Seven white and about 35 Black field secretaries, discussed the proposal at a meeting in November. Several Black SNCC workers complained about the tendency of white civil rights workers to take over leadership roles and suggested that the role of white volunteers should be restricted. Black members also felt that the presence of white students reinforced traditional patterns of racial dependence. But other Black members joined Moses in defending the use of white volunteers. Fannie Lou Hamer insisted, “If we’re trying to break down this barrier of segregation, we can’t segregate ourselves.” Hamer’s comment and the violence the Black community faced as it continued to organize swayed many in COFO. They reached a decision to bring nearly 1,000 out-of-state volunteers without limiting the role of white people coming down to help.

What has become known as the 1964 Freedom Summer was violent and bloody. Eighty of the volunteers were attacked and beaten; 37 churches bombed or burned; another 30 Black homes and businesses bombed or burned; three COFO workers, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, were killed. Scores of the volunteers and organizers were arrested and beaten.

The violence SNCC experienced during Freedom Summer raised the question of armed

self-defense. At a national SNCC staff meeting during Freedom Summer, carrying weapons was discussed for the first time. The debate began after SNCC staff working out of the organization’s Greenwood office informed the participants in the meeting that they had kept guns in the office since January to “protect the people around the office and [to prevent] people from breaking in and bombing the office.” SNCC member Charles Cobb informed the meeting that Amzie Moore had received information from the “grapevine” that several COFO leaders were targeted for assassination. SNCC staff also received information about a truckload of arms and ammunition, which was intercepted in Illinois before being delivered to white supremacists in Mississippi. The Greenwood staff and other Delta organizers also reported that local Blacks in the Delta were arming themselves and advising SNCC organizers to do likewise. Willie Peacock pointed out that since the “FBI was unwilling to track down” the perpetrators of white supremacist violence, rural Blacks established a “self-defense structure.” As a result, attacks on the Black community were prevented because Whites were aware that they were armed. This sparked a lively and heated discussion on the question of armed self-defense versus nonviolence.

After the lengthy debate, a consensus was reached that SNCC would publicly maintain a commitment to nonviolence, but tacitly, it was accepted that many organizers might carry a gun in self-defense. Much of the SNCC staff were from Mississippi and Southern communities where armed self-defense had a longer tradition than nonviolence. Given the context of the Southern Black tradition, and the increasing violence meted out by the white community, it became increasingly difficult for nonviolence to compete with armed self-defense.

Adapted from “[The Story of SNCC](#)” by Charlie Cobb, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* by Clayborne Carson, and *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* by Akinyele Omowale Umoja.

## On to Alabama — Part 2

AT THE BEGINNING of 1965, few SNCC workers would have thought that Alabama would become the focus of their activities. Compared to projects in Mississippi and Georgia, SNCC activities in Alabama had garnered little attention. In 1963, SNCC field staff Colia and Bernard Lafayette came to Selma — located in Dallas County, Alabama — to start a voter registration project. Working with local organizers, they set up Citizenship School classes to teach people how to pass the literacy test required for voter registration and began canvassing door to door, encouraging African Americans to try to register to vote.

Only 2 percent of eligible Black residents were registered to vote in Dallas County, and even fewer in the surrounding areas. Dallas County was home to Sheriff Jim Clark, a violent racist, and one of Alabama's strongest white Citizens' Councils — made up of the community's white elite and dedicated to preserving white supremacy. The threat of violence was so strong that most African Americans were afraid to attend meetings. Most of the Lafayettes' first recruits were high school students. Too young to vote, they canvassed and taught classes to adults.

Even with the work of SNCC and local activists, it was almost impossible for African Americans to register to vote. The registrar's office was only open twice a month and potential applicants were routinely and arbitrarily rejected. Some were physically attacked and others fired from their jobs. White officials had fired teachers for trying to register and regularly arrested SNCC workers, sometimes beating them in jail. In one instance, a police officer knocked a 19-year-old girl unconscious and brutalized her with a cattle prod.

To highlight African Americans' desire to vote and encourage a sense of collective struggle, SNCC organized a Freedom Day on Monday,

Oct. 7, 1963, one of the monthly registration days. They invited Black celebrities, like James Baldwin and Dick Gregory, so Blacks in Selma would know they weren't alone.

Over the course of the day, 350 African Americans stood in line to register, but the registrar processed only 40 applications and white lawmen refused to allow people to leave the line and return. By mid-afternoon, SNCC was so concerned about those who had been standing all day in the bright sun, that two field secretaries loaded up their arms with water and sandwiches and approached the would-be voters.

Highway patrolmen immediately attacked and arrested the two men, while three FBI agents and two Justice Department attorneys refused to intervene. This federal inaction was typical, even though Southern white officials openly defied both the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and constitutional protections of free assembly and speech.

By late 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were looking for a local community where they could launch a campaign to force the country to confront the Southern white power structure's widespread discrimination against prospective Black voters.

At the same time, local Dallas County leader Amelia Boynton, wanted to escalate the struggle in Selma and invited SCLC in. In January 1965, Dr. King announced that he intended to lead a large voter registration campaign in Selma.

While SNCC organizers knew that King's effort would bring national publicity to their voting rights efforts, many were also skeptical. It had become clear that SCLC and SNCC had very different organizing strategies. SNCC projects emphasize the development of grassroots organization headed by local people. SNCC organizers work, eat, sleep in a community — for years,



if necessary — and attempt to slowly develop a large local leadership that can carry on the struggle, eventually without SNCC field staff.

SCLC's approach was very different. Instead of remaining in a community to help local activists develop independent organizations, SCLC led local communities into nonviolent confrontations with segregationists and the brutal cops and state police who backed up Jim Crow laws. They hoped to bring national media attention to local struggles and force the federal government to intervene to support civil rights activists. According to SNCC member Cleveland Sellers:

*The differences between the two approaches reflected different analyses made by members of the two organizations. SNCC's members were convinced that Black people would only be free when they took their destiny into their*

*own hands and forced a change in the status quo.*

*SCLC's members, on the other hand, believed that Blacks would be free when the federal government took steps to ensure that their rights were not violated. . . .*

While SNCC fears that King's presence might undermine their efforts to develop local Black leadership, they nevertheless have offered the use of their equipment and facilities to SCLC. SNCC might disagree with SCLC's methods of organizing, but they still have immense respect for the work of King and his organization.

Adapted from "Ten Things You Should Know About Selma Before You See the Film," by Emilye Crosby and *The River of No Return* by Cleveland Sellers.

## SNCC in Selma, Alabama: Problem Solving #2

1. King and SCLC have launched a series of daily demonstrations outside the Dallas County Court-house. It has become difficult for SNCC organizers to continue their work. Most local people want to attend or discuss the demonstrations. Much of SNCC's staff is worried that the demonstrations make people feel good, but won't accomplish much. **Should SNCC join the demonstrations? Should they denounce the demonstrations?**
2. In Marion, a town outside of Selma, a night march ended with dozens injured and 26-year-old Black protester Jimmie Lee Jackson shot by a state trooper. SCLC announced plans for a march, with local residents, from Selma to the Alabama capitol in Montgomery. SNCC is worried that this 50-mile march will go through some of the most violent areas of Alabama without organizing long term in these communities, and that King's adherence to nonviolence will prevent marchers from defending themselves. **Should SNCC support the march? If not, how should SNCC respond?**
3. On Sunday, March 7, 2,000 marchers began their trek from Selma to Montgomery. King was busy delivering a sermon in Atlanta but still plans to join the march later, leaving the leadership of the march in the hands of other SCLC and SNCC leaders. At the Pettus Bridge in Selma, marchers were attacked by police. SNCC chairman John Lewis' skull was fractured in the attack, but marchers regrouped at a church in Selma. **Should SNCC encourage the marchers to try again? If not, how should SNCC respond?**
4. SCLC plans a second march and has asked a federal judge to issue an injunction to prevent state police from intervening in their right to peacefully protest. The federal judge demanded that SCLC postpone the march as a condition for giving them a hearing in court. But 450 religious leaders from around the country have already joined 2,000 African Americans for the scheduled second march led by King over the Pettus Bridge. Possibly to satisfy the federal judge, and without informing SNCC, King led the group in prayer in front of a police barricade outside of Selma, and then told marchers to turn around and go back. Many SNCC workers, local residents, and out-of-town supporters are angered by this action. **How should SNCC respond?**
5. Shortly after the second march, local whites attacked three white ministers who had joined the demonstrations killing Unitarian minister James Reeb. In contrast to little media attention the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson received, Reeb's death attracted major national notice and a few days later President Johnson demanded Alabama Governor George Wallace mobilize the National Guard to protect demonstrators. **Should SNCC participate in this third attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery?**

## The Story of Selma — Outcome 2

DESPITE DIFFERENCES in strategy, many SNCC staff members became involved in the demonstrations led by King, especially after violent clashes between police and local residents. After the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, SNCC representatives met with SCLC leaders to discuss their differences. SNCC initially opposed the march from Selma to Montgomery, worried that it would expose marchers to even more violence, but they continued to provide assistance because of their commitment to local residents. Even though SNCC refused to endorse the march, the organization allowed SNCC staff to participate as individuals. SNCC had always believed that violence should never be seen as having stopped the movement.

After the first attempt to march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge ended in a brutal assault that left SNCC's chairman John Lewis with a fractured skull, SNCC threw the weight of their organization behind the effort. Four carloads of Mississippi staff suddenly left a meeting to drive to Selma. "We were angry," SNCC member Cleveland Sellers recalled. "And we wanted to show Governor [George] Wallace, the Alabama State Highway Patrol, Sheriff Clark, Selma's whites, the federal government and poor Southern Blacks in other Selmas that we didn't intend to take any more shit. We would ram the march down the throat of anyone who tried to stop us." Concern for those who had been attacked and an understanding of the value of protest activity as a training ground for those who would sustain the struggle prompted SNCC workers' reaction.

Once in Selma, SNCC workers openly criticized SCLC tactics. SNCC militants condemned the federal judge's request to postpone the march as a condition of hearing SCLC's demand for an injunction against state officials. King initially agreed to march despite federal warnings but decided against a confrontation with other

government officials. King did not inform SNCC workers of his intentions, however, when on March 10 he joined a group of more than 1,000 protesters confronting a police barricade outside Selma. The SCLC leader led the group in prayer and then told the marchers to turn around and go back. King's action angered many SNCC workers and local residents.

Shortly after the march was stopped, local whites attacked three white ministers who had joined the demonstrations. One of the ministers, the Reverend James Reeb, died a few days later. Thousands of demonstrators demanded federal intervention during sympathy protests in many Northern cities. President Johnson used the Selma crisis as an opportunity for a nationally televised address in which he proposed the Voting Rights Act, which would outlaw literacy tests and other practices used to keep Blacks from registering to vote and send federal monitors into several Southern counties to ensure these rules were enforced.

When the march from Selma to Montgomery finally occurred, 25,000 people marched peacefully to the state capitol, where a mass rally was held on March 25. Yet shortly after the rally, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, a 39-year-old mother of five, who drove herself from Detroit to Alabama to attend the march, was shot by Klansmen. An undercover FBI informant was riding in the Klan car. This murder was the first indication that even with the pending Voting Rights Act, the struggle was far from over. On the march, SNCC made contact with local organizers, particularly in nearby Lowndes and Wilcox counties. They now prepared to move into one of the most dangerous counties in Alabama: "Bloody Lowndes."

*Adapted from In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s by Clayborne Carson.*



## Bloody Lowndes County — Part 3

LESS THAN 48 HOURS after the Selma-to-Montgomery march ended, five SNCC organizers, carrying little more than the names of Lowndes County residents they met during the march, slipped quietly into the county determined to set up a meeting and begin a voter registration project.

SNCC was interested in Lowndes County for several reasons. The county was close to Selma, a major city that had just experienced a mass movement. The county shared many of the same social and economic characteristics of the places SNCC had already organized in the Mississippi Delta.

And, equally important, local residents had already organized the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights. These similarities gave SNCC workers an advantage in terms of being able to build on an already-existing group of voting rights organizers, who knew what to expect from the white community regarding resistance.

At the beginning of 1965, even though the population was 80 percent Black, not a single Black citizen was registered to vote. As SNCC member Cleveland Sellers explained:

*Lowndes County stood out for other reasons, too. Whites controlled everything. . . . Some 60 percent of the county's Blacks were farmers, most of them sharecroppers. Half of the Black women were employed in white homes as domestics, and the median income for Blacks was \$935 a year. The median income for whites was almost five times higher. Eighty-six white families owned 90 percent of all land in the county and their relatives controlled all elected and appointed offices.*

In addition, neither SCLC nor any other civil rights organization had a permanent presence there, meaning that SNCC could avoid the strategic disagreements that they faced in Selma. Moreover, Lowndes County was an extremely violent place, which made future competition from civil rights groups unlikely. The county's sinister reputation also meant that if SNCC succeeded, then it would be considerably less difficult to organize Black communities in neighboring counties. In other words, the extreme nature of local oppression made organizing in Lowndes County the key to reforming Alabama's Black Belt.

*Adapted from Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt by Hasan Kwame Jeffries and The River of No Return by Cleveland Sellers.*

# SNCC in Lowndes County, Alabama:

## Problem Solving #3

1. Within a week, SNCC was in dialogue with local leadership in the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights (LCCMHR). Local organizers are skeptical of SNCC because SCLC representatives had met with them during the Selma campaign but did not follow through on their promise to send organizers. SNCC wants to prove itself by helping to build a large presence at the next LCCMHR meeting, but the meeting is only a week away, the county is huge, and there are only a handful of SNCC organizers. In Mississippi, SNCC had success asking students to give fliers to their parents. **How should SNCC get out the word about the meeting?**
2. The first mass meeting hosted by LCCMHR and SNCC was a huge success. Five hundred people showed up and listened to rousing speeches by local leaders and SNCC organizers. The next day 75 people showed up outside the county jail hoping to register to vote. Still, most people are too fearful to try to register. **How can SNCC continue to grow the number of people willing to register?**
3. Students, inspired by the voter registration campaigns but wanting to take their own actions since they couldn't vote, decided to launch a boycott of the Lowndes County Training School (LCTS). The boycott was launched after a petition demanding more resources in the school was ignored by the superintendent. But Alabama uses student attendance to determine school funding levels so the boycott would reduce the amount of money going to LCTS even more. **Should SNCC support the boycott?**
4. The increasing number of registered Black voters has intensified white resistance and terrorism. Recently a white deputy sheriff killed Jonathan Daniels, a white civil rights worker, and wounded others, but he was found not guilty by an all-white jury. A movement supporter who donated her home to SNCC as a "freedom library" had her house shot into at night while her children lay asleep. Federal officials have refused to intervene and local movement supporters are beginning to carry guns for protection. **How should SNCC respond?**
5. The result of a SNCC lawsuit and the passage of the Voting Rights Act has meant that many of the barriers preventing African Americans from registering to vote in Lowndes County are now gone. But now Black voters face the question of who to vote for. While the national Democratic Party is more sympathetic to civil rights than the Republicans, local Democrats are the very people who have prevented civil rights. The Alabama Democrats are led by the segregationist Governor George Wallace, the party's symbol is a white rooster and its official slogan is "white supremacy for the right." **Should SNCC and local organizers encourage Black voters to try to take over the Democratic Party, or should they encourage them to form their own independent political party?**

## The Birth of the Black Panther — Outcome 3

WITHIN A WEEK OF MEETING with local leaders, SNCC was trying to notify as many African Americans in Lowndes County about the next Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights (LCCMHR) meeting. Drawing on lessons they learned in Mississippi, they decided to enlist the help of local students by putting leaflets in their hands to take home to parents. At first, the organizers attempted to reach the students by waving down school buses and announcing the meeting to students, but very few drivers stopped.

A team of organizers then went to Lowndes County Training School to pass out leaflets. Not long after they arrived, five police cars bearing 15 deputies arrived on the scene and encircled them. One officer yelled, “You shouldn’t be here and you could be arrested.” SNCC project leader Stokely Carmichael responded, “If you’re going to arrest me, do it. If not, don’t waste my time. I got work to do.” Taken off guard by Carmichael’s boldness and not sure what to do, the deputies left. Students who watched the confrontation in disbelief — never before seeing someone stand up to the police — now swarmed the organizers begging for the fliers. The first meeting with SNCC was a huge success, with 500 people attending.

The specific aim of the mass meeting was to recruit volunteers to go down to the county jail the next day to register to vote. Seventy-five people showed up. Afterward, SNCC and a few local leaders began door-to-door canvassing to try to broaden the movement and break through the fear most Black people had about registering. In addition, SNCC asked local organizers to tap into their social networks — church groups and various clubs — to recruit new potential voters.

Meanwhile, students who were not old enough to vote began to organize at their school.

Lowndes County Technical School, the largest Black high school in the county, lacked many of the resources of the all-white Hayneville High. When the superintendent ignored a petition from Black LCTS students demanding more library books, more laboratory equipment, a breakfast program, and listing several other grievances, students decided to launch a boycott. SNCC and LCCMHR organizers worked to support the students even though many adults worried that the school would receive even less funding because of the boycott. SNCC created a Freedom School to teach students who were participating. When the boycott failed, students and movement leaders backed an effort to integrate Hayneville High.

When the integration effort stalled, two dozen youth decided to picket a handful of stores in the town of Fort Deposit to protest discriminatory hiring practices, unequal and rude treatment, and overcharging. The leaders of the LCCMHR admired young people’s enthusiasm, but opposed direct action. They thought that, at best, demonstrators would be beaten or arrested and, at worst, killed. In true SNCC fashion, once the young people insisted on carrying out the protest, the organization promised to support them.

Sure enough, police arrested the students along with SNCC organizers. When the demonstrators were released on August 20 — two weeks after the Voting Rights Act was signed into law — a white part-time deputy sheriff fired shots into the group, killing one of the civil rights workers and injuring others. The deputy sheriff was later acquitted by an all-white jury.

In the aftermath, white resistance intensified. Patty McDonald, who had allowed SNCC to set up a freedom library in the two-room structure by her home, was visited at night by white terrorists. Bullets tore through her house shattering

windows, but miraculously no one was killed. In response to the increase in white terrorism, local activists drew on a long tradition of armed self-defense. “You can’t come here talking that nonviolence shit,” said one resident. “You’ll get yourself killed, and other people too.” Based on lived experience, movement leaders believed it was safer to let white people know that they possessed guns and were not afraid to use them. “I have simply stopped telling people that they should remain nonviolent,” said Stokely Carmichael. “This would be tantamount to suicide in the Black Belt counties where whites are shooting at Negroes and it would cost me the respect of the people.”

Armed self-defense helped frustrate whites’ attempts to defeat the movement through violence. By the end of October 1965 some 2,000 African Americans, or 40 percent of the Black electorate, had become eligible voters.

SNCC organizers, frustrated with the experience of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, entered Lowndes County hoping to establish a grassroots, independent political party. And once they had helped to build a new Black electorate, they approached local leaders with the idea. Local leaders were enthusiastic about the idea because Alabama’s Democratic Party was so openly racist.

The new political organization was called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) and John Hulett, founder of the LCCMHR, was chosen as its chairman. The official seal of the white Alabama Democratic Party was a white rooster with the slogan: “White Supremacy for

the Right.” The LCFO selected a snarling black panther as their ballot symbol. “The black panther is an animal that when it is pressured it moves back until it is cornered,” explained Hulett, “then it comes out fighting for life or death. We felt we had been pushed back long enough and that it was time for Negroes to come out and take over.” As young John Jackson added, “And we knew a panther can beat a rooster any day.”

The LCFO ran candidates for sheriff, tax assessor, coroner, and school board, and educated Blacks through comics and classes about how these positions directly affected their lives. Like the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the campaign built a base amongst poor and working-class Blacks. As Alice Moore, the 42-year-old LCFO nominee for tax assessor, summed up her campaign in a mass meeting, “My platform is tax the rich to feed the poor.”

Despite a massive get-out-the-vote effort, including organizing a countywide carpool system on election day, the LCFO couldn’t defeat a united white community that continued to intimidate Blacks at the voting booths. Nevertheless, the party received 80 percent of the Black vote and 42 percent of the total vote, a remarkable achievement given that only two years earlier not a single African American in the county was registered to vote. As Carmichael observed, “November 8, 1966, made one thing clear: Someday Black people will control the government of Lowndes County.”

*Adapted from *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* by Hasan Kwame Jeffries.*



# rethinking schools

This lesson was previously published in [Rethinking Schools magazine](https://rethinkingschools.org).

*Rethinking Schools* is an award-winning quarterly magazine, featuring articles portraying some of this country's finest social justice teaching. *Rethinking Schools* is a must-read for everyone involved in education — first-year teachers, veteran teachers, parents, community activists, and teacher educators.

*Rethinking Schools* magazine, books, and other resources promote equity and racial justice in the classroom.



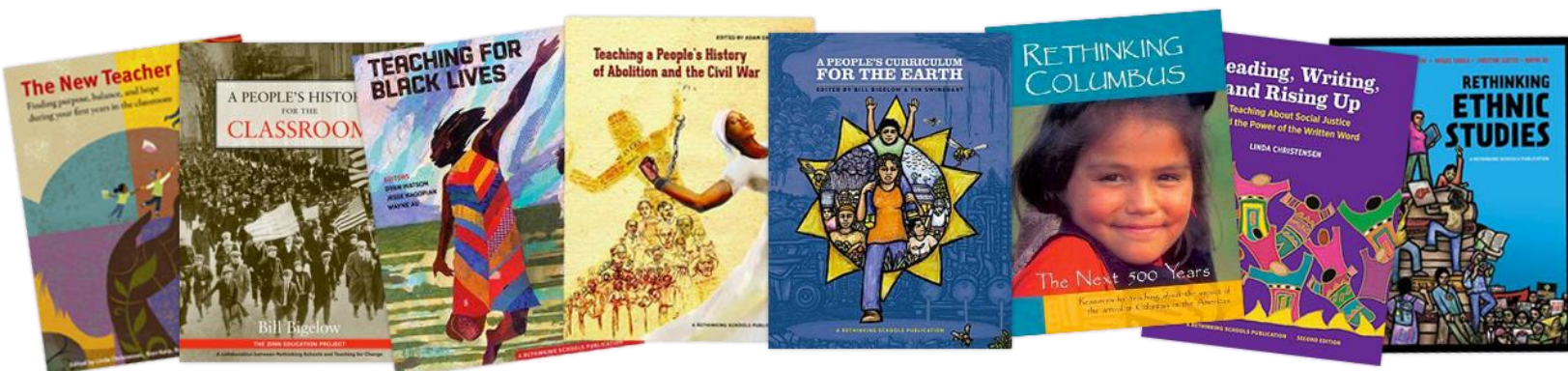
To order back issues or to subscribe, visit [rethinkingschools.org](https://rethinkingschools.org).

Zinn Education Project registrants get 15% off a [Rethinking Schools](https://rethinkingschools.org) subscription by using the code **RSMAGZEP** at checkout.

**As a teacher and researcher, I rely on *Rethinking Schools* for information, insight, and inspiration. — Sonia Nieto, Professor Emerita, University of Massachusetts Amherst**

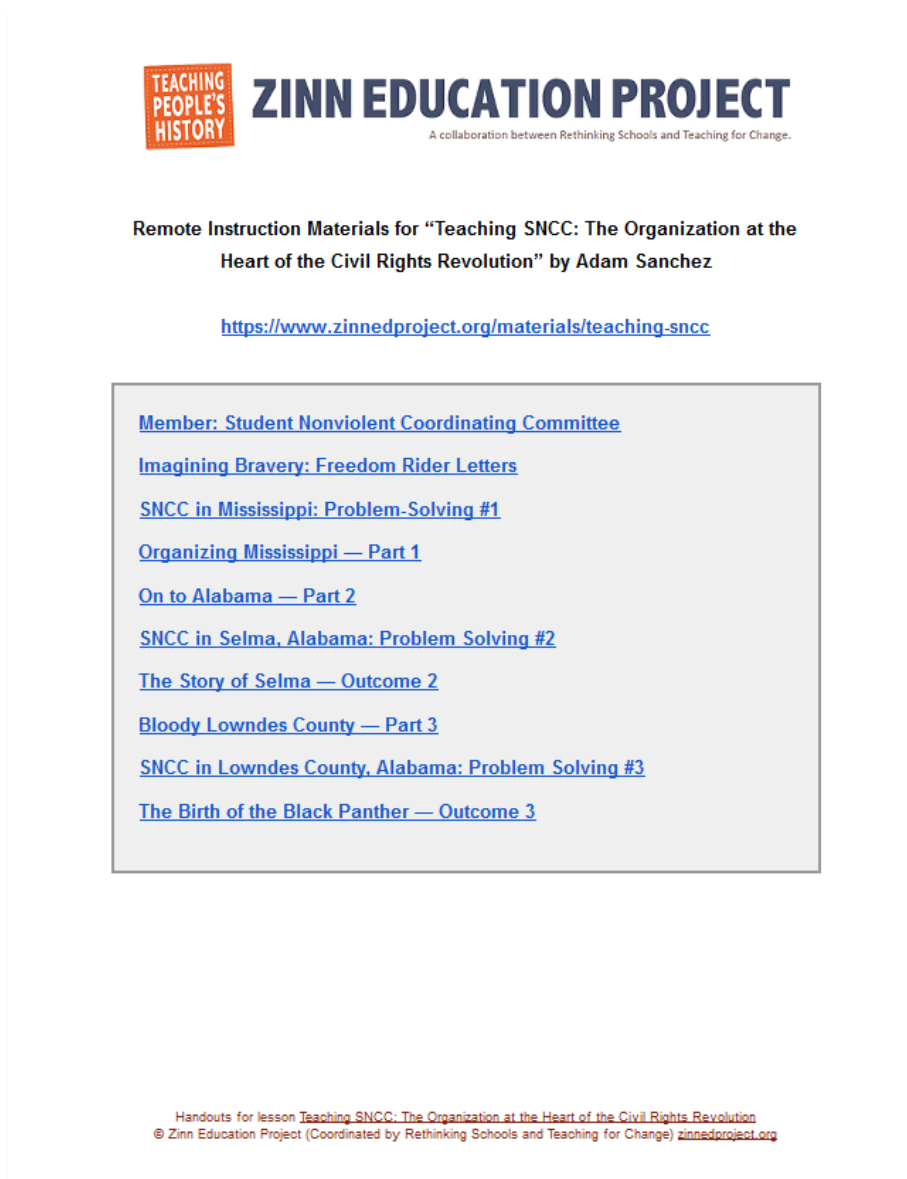
## More from Rethinking Schools

Rethinking Schools also publishes books with articles and lessons about teaching climate justice, ethnic studies, teaching for Black lives, immigration, gender and sexuality, people's history, and more. Visit [RethinkingSchools.org](https://RethinkingSchools.org) to browse and order online.





**Teach this lesson remotely with online handouts, including readings and question sheets.**



The screenshot shows the Zinn Education Project website. At the top left is the logo "TEACHING PEOPLE'S HISTORY" in an orange box. To its right is the text "ZINN EDUCATION PROJECT" in large blue letters, with a smaller line below it: "A collaboration between Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change." Below this is the title "Remote Instruction Materials for 'Teaching SNCC: The Organization at the Heart of the Civil Rights Revolution' by Adam Sanchez". Underneath is a URL: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/teaching-sncc>. A grey box contains a list of links: [Member: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#), [Imagining Bravery: Freedom Rider Letters](#), [SNCC in Mississippi: Problem-Solving #1](#), [Organizing Mississippi — Part 1](#), [On to Alabama — Part 2](#), [SNCC in Selma, Alabama: Problem Solving #2](#), [The Story of Selma — Outcome 2](#), [Bloody Lowndes County — Part 3](#), [SNCC in Lowndes County, Alabama: Problem Solving #3](#), and [The Birth of the Black Panther — Outcome 3](#). At the bottom of the screenshot, small text reads: "Handouts for lesson [Teaching SNCC: The Organization at the Heart of the Civil Rights Revolution](#)  
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[Click here](#) to make a copy of the Google Doc, pictured above, with links to the online materials. Then, share the specific materials you want to use with your students for synchronous or asynchronous learning.