

STRATEGY PAPER for participants at the August 1, 2009 San Francisco Freedom School.
by Mike Miller (Guest Speaker)

On August 1, 2009, at the session of the San Francisco Freedom School, you will be a participant in this debate. Based on what is in this paper, please think about which point of view you would support: “direct action” or “voter registration.”

PURPOSES:

- End racism in the southern states of the United States of America.
- Achieve freedom and dignity for African-Americans; end the climate of fear.

GOAL: Eliminate legal/legally enforced segregation and discrimination in the Deep South.

STRATEGY: a strategy answers the question, “What is our overall plan for getting from where we are (the world as it is) to the world as we’d like it to be (our goal/s and purpose/s, and specific objectives we adopt to move us toward our goal/s and purpose/s)?”

There emerged in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee a strategic discussion and disagreement over whether the organization’s focus should be on “direct action” (sit-ins, freedom rides) aimed at segregated public facilities and institutions or on voter registration in “black belt” counties which had majority black population, but few or no black people registered to vote.

At the time of the debate (1961/62) here are some things that were known or thought by the people involved in the discussion:

- Direct action provoked violent responses from southern racists.
- Direct action created international news, especially on television.
- The U.S. government was very concerned about how the US looked in the Cold War world when it said it was for democracy yet there was systematic discrimination and violence against African Americans being broadcast by international news media.
- The Freedom Rides of 1961 generated enough public pressure on the Kennedy administration to force it to enforce the court rulings and regulations against segregation in inter-state travel.
- Direct action appealed to young African-American students, both in college and high school.
- The US Supreme Court was regularly ruling against discrimination, but its rulings were not being obeyed in the South, and the Federal Government was doing little to enforce them.
- Voter registration was supported by local Black leaders with whom SNCC organizers were discussing SNCC’s program in the South.
- “Local people” (Black adults living in southern communities) did not participate in direct action because of the fear of violence against them, firing, eviction and other sanctions.
- The Justice Department promised to support SNCC if it engaged in a voter registration campaign.
- Southern racist Democrats in Congress (both the House of Representatives and Senate) were a powerful bloc opposing desegregation, voting rights and most progressive legislation.

Discussions on subjects like these were held at week-long SNCC staff meetings—gatherings of the full-time “field secretaries,” the Atlanta-based support staff, representatives from campuses on the Coordinating Committee, northern support staff (who raised money, recruited volunteers, built political pressure on the US government and educated northern communities about the conditions in the South).