

## GROUPS MOVE INTO NEIGHBORHOODS—POLITICAL ACTION ULTIMATE GOAL

# Students organizing the poor in North's cities

By Joanne Grant

**W**HEN HUNDREDS of young people went to the South—mainly to Mississippi—last summer a few dozen left their classes to live and work among the poor in Northern cities.

Around the North local organizations—such as those spurred by these students—are being formed to fight for remedies to neighborhood problems and “for real control over living conditions,” as one student put it. Many of the groups are taking shape as Community Unions, such as that in Newark, N.J., and are looking toward formation of city-wide and state-wide grassroots organizations for eventual independent political action.

Among the projects is the Students for a Democratic Society's Economic Research and Action Project under which Northern students, both Negro and white, moved into impoverished areas of Louisville, Ky., Chester, Pa., Cleveland, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago, Trenton and Newark, N.J., to organize “toward independent political action.”

According to SDS national executive secretary C. Clark Kissinger, SDS members decided that the “only way to real social change is through organizing people.”

**IN DISCUSSIONS** through the winter and spring an organizing program evolved which included both community organizing and the “education” of radical students. Some aspects of the latter project “got shelved in the excitement of organizing,” Kissinger says.

The cities in which ERAP projects were started were chosen in most cases because of fortuitous combinations of circumstances. In some, projects were already under way and SDS was invited to participate with other groups such as the Northern Student Movement (a civil

work to know: What were the major industries? Where were people employed? How many were unemployed? What were housing conditions? Above all, they had to know what people felt their pressing problems were. They found the community survey a good method of getting to know the people and their conditions.

**IN NEWARK** the students learned that the neighborhood in which they would

Community Union meeting at the project's headquarters—a store front on a corner adjacent to the police station.

Following the pattern of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) workers of the Deep South, the students are digging in for a long stay in the community. They have rented an apartment a few blocks from the office and live at (or below) the level of their

manhood rotates each month. The members do not want to build their organization around leaders.

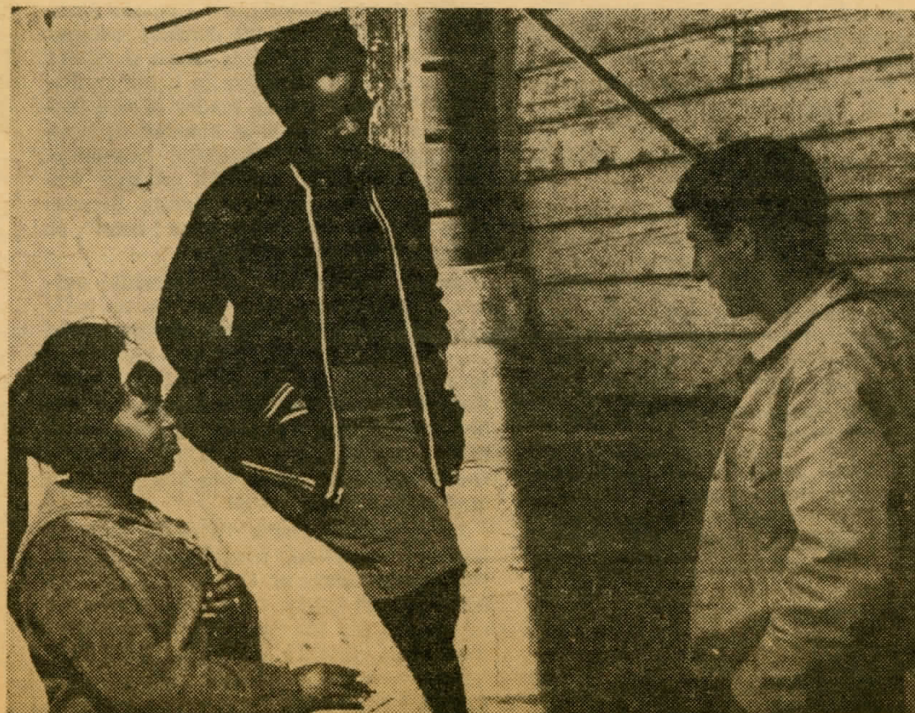
Another important aspect, the workers say, is that the project operates within a radical framework. The aim is to organize politically for a radical transformation of the whole society.

It is perhaps this which has caused the Newark group's conflict with what they call the “liberal coalition”—civil rights groups, some businessmen, the city government and the war-on-poverty group. Project workers describe the coalition's outlook thus: “The consensus on program is that society should adjust to the Negro only in terms of racial attitudes not in terms of national economic change; that the Negro should adjust to society through greater basic education and improvement of skills.”

Early in the summer project workers were attacked as “outsiders” and subversive fomenters of riots. One leaflet said: “Who are the OUTSIDERS in our neighborhood? Do-Gooders or No-Gooders. Don't trust strangers who don't belong in our neighborhood.” Similar attacks did not deter the project from organizing rent strikes (illegal in New Jersey) in 30 units, staging demonstrations, and appearing at City Council meetings with grievances.

**THE NEWARK** Community Union is now working on a plan to meet neighborhood objections to urban renewal.

The Newark experience is similar to that in Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. In Cleveland, 11 students worked through the summer to establish the Cleveland Community Project and several affiliated groups: Citizens United for Adequate Welfare, Union for Jobs or Income Now, and a tenants' group. Most of the members of the Cleveland Community Project are whites from



**TOM HAYDEN (RIGHT), SDS PROJECT CHIEF, HOLDS NEWARK CONFERENCE**  
With him are Melba Spottswood (left) and organizer Terry Jefferson

work—the Clinton Hill district of Newark—was predominantly Negro; they had thought it to be racially mixed. They found that the issue of major concern

neighbors. With a staff of five (three SDS members and two local women) they operate on a budget of \$400 a month, covering office expenses, rent



rights group) and the Hazard, Ky., Committee for Miners. Other cities, such as Louisville, Ky., were chosen because they were "almost out of a textbook" in the sense that conditions seemed to demand organizing around the issue of white unemployment.

The Chester project proved to SDS members that white students could work in poor Negro communities (Chester's population of 63,000 is 40% Negro) and, according to Kissinger, laid the groundwork for organizing in nearby Philadelphia and Trenton.

In planning concrete programs there were two debates in SDS. In the first, campus vs. community organizing, the community projects won out. In the second the debate was over whether to organize around a key issue such as unemployment or around immediate issues such as garbage removal and welfare problems.

**A VISIT** to one project, the Newark Community Union, and a study of written reports from six others, showed that in almost every case organizing had at least to begin around a problem which people saw as of immediate urgency. In Newark, an early activity was a fight for alternate parking so that streets could be cleaned.

All projects except that in the Boston area are located in poor neighborhoods—some Negro and some white. The Boston project is in suburban areas among middle-class defense workers. The issue is conversion to a peacetime economy.

The group began organizing among engineers and scientists who met to study reconversion and cooperated with "liberal" and "peace-oriented" individuals and organizations. The project publishes a monthly, Conversion Report, and now has begun to try to organize defense production workers.

In the other projects students began work early last summer, with plans for building viable political organizations to shake up the "power structure" of the cities chosen for work. In most places they found that their knowledge of the communities and the problems they would face was superficial and so they took research as their first task. They

was housing; they had thought it would be unemployment. They also learned that their fears that white students would not find ready acceptance among Negroes of the community were groundless.

The general problems in Clinton Hill were those SDS workers met in other cities: the fight against slumlords—rats, roaches, no heat, no hot water, high rents—the battle against welfare red tape, the need for playgrounds and day care. But the primary problem is the imminence of urban renewal, which residents view as a threat to their homes.

In addition to the general problems, common also to all the projects was the need, at least a minimum degree, to be a service center for individuals.

During a visit recently this reporter watched the staff deal with several time-consuming individual problems like that of Clyde Wright, who said he had been accused of shoplifting, beaten by department store guards, then arrested on charges of assault. Response to the man's need meant appointments with lawyers, doctors, the department store manager and appearances in court. But whatever the time such problems take, the organizer must devote attention to them.

The attempt to run a service center can create problems for the organizer, the students have learned. An effort to help 70-year-old Mrs. Pallastine Watkins fight an eviction led to the arrest of project director Tom Hayden on charges of assaulting Mrs. Watkins's former landlady.

**THE GROUP** IN Newark, through the establishment of block organizations, now is made up of about 50 "hard-core" activists and 300 persons who participate irregularly. The group says it reaches thousands through its weekly newsletter. The attention it receives from city officials illustrates its influence. As Hayden put it: "We have a 'hot line' to the deputy mayor's office. We call with all housing problems." And while this reporter was there there were calls from the district's city councilman and letters concerning housing problems from the mayor's office. The week before the city corporation counsel had addressed a

and food. One worker, Carl Wittman, a veteran of Cambridge, Md., and Chester, Pa., civil rights struggles, said that ERAP workers took as their living standard the lowest ADC (Aid to Dependent Children) allowance in the nation, 60c a day. "At one point during the summer," he said, "there was a competition among the projects to see who could eat cheapest. We got down to 42c a day." If they got more money would they increase their food allowance? "We would probably open another project," he said. (Project workers and visitors cook and eat in the office. "It's a waste of time to go home until late at night.")

**SDS WORKERS** have adopted another aspect of the SNCC pattern: decisions are made by the members of the neighborhood organization. Community Union members take democracy so seriously that in block organizations and the program committee, made up of representatives of each block group, the chair-

the South, in their neighborhood (the Near West Side) 40% of the housing is dilapidated or deteriorated.

For people in the communities and for the students the projects have been significant learning experiences. A major conclusion they have reached is that community organizing takes "enormous manpower and man-hours." Most believe it is impossible to accomplish much on a summer-vacation basis and, as in Newark, staff members have moved into the communities to stay.

Some of the projects failed because of conditions in the area chosen (the Trenton ghetto was removed by urban renewal) or internal problems (in Louisville there were too many staff changes and goals were not well defined). Most projects struggled and stayed alive. Some flourished. In Newark Hayden says 50 workers will be needed by next summer to "expand into a white working-class section of the city, from there to Jersey City, Paterson, Passaic, Elizabeth . . ."

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