OAMU – A FIELD MANUAL ON ORGANIZING A MASS UPRISING II

Chapter Two: Recruitment

One person can start the work of creating a local activist organization.

A person who does this work by our method will be called, with respect for tradition, a *field secretary* -- because that is the title used by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

***Recruiting in a Nutshell*.**

Field secretaries can perhaps be best described as expert specialists in startups. Their main job as the instigators of an uprising is to go into a community (or campus), find the right people, and get them talking together in a meeting.

This is the nucleus of a local activist organization (LAO). SNCC's distinctive approach to meetings will be discussed in Chapter Three. The LAO eventually takes over. It recruits more and more people, decides on goals and objectives, determines strategies and tactics, and does everything

else required by a rebellion.

When the LAO is up to speed, the field secretary is no longer needed, so that person can start over in a different community or stay with the LAO as a leader or ordinary member. So, in theory, a field secretary is more concerned with how to develop the organization than with what it should do.

Perhaps we should use the word “convener” to describe what the SNCC-style field secretary does. He or she is a functionary who finds the right leaders in a community and convenes a meeting for them.

The local people, not the field secretary, decide who their leaders are. The local people, not the field secretary, decide what they should fight for and how they should fight.

Recruiting in Detail.

According to research by David Snow, face-to-face conversation is the most effective way of persuading people to participate in a movement.

Your standard approach as a field secretary using the SNCC model is to start out by talking to people in a get-acquainted way, in laundromats, in line at the grocery store, in pool rooms, at the student union building, wherever people congregate.

One of the most important parts of your job as a field secretary is canvassing, going door-to-door to talk with people. It is common today for people doing work called “canvassing” to spend only a minute or so talking to a resident. A SNCC field secretary, by contrast, might spend an entire half-day at one house if they thought it worthwhile.

Think of your recruiting job at any moment as recruiting just one person, a leader in the sense of being respected and looked up to by other people, a lover of liberty who is fed up and wants change. A libertarian with street credibility. A person who is open to, perhaps even enthusiastic about, militant methods for winning politically and willing to work.

You are seeking your “clone.”

Brenda Travis was a16-year-old in McComb, Mississippi, one of the most anti-black places in the world and epicenter of the Ku Klux Klan, when she “answered a call of duty to mankind to change the devastating ‘Jim Crow’ laws in Mississippi.” (Quoted from her book, Mississippi’s Exiled Daughter.)

It would be fair to say that a black working-class teenage girl in McComb, Mississippi in 1961 would

have been scraping the bottom of the American power structure -- but a SNCC field secretary was already coming, like a bloodhound, all the way from New York City looking for people just like her.

Bob Moses, the SNCC man, came to Cleveland, Mississippi to see Amzie Moore, who was head of the local NAACP chapter in that town. Moore was, in social network theory, a connector, a person who knows a lot of people.

Moore sent Moses to see another connector, C. C. Bryant, who was a barber in McComb. Bryant knew Brenda Travis and judged her to have the right stuff –leadership ability, militant attitude, availability–so he arranged a meeting with Travis and Bob Moses.

Moses found his clone. What had been accomplished?

SNCC established a beachhead in the high schools and teen community where Travis lived and where even more leaders could be found or developed.

In fact, Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes, two of Travis' fellow activists, would become the SNCC field secretaries sent to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to find the leaders who assembled the local activist organization in that town.

Watkins recently (2016) told his story in Brother Hollis, a well-written book that clearly reveals the method in action.

Another accomplishment of the Travis-Moses connection was that people in McComb acquired a pipeline into the heart of the civil rights struggle, which Moses represented, being a highly respected leader who worked every day at the center of the civil rights struggle where the rebels looked into the very faces of their oppressors.

Many people at the time were trying to be "involved" but found themselves licking envelopes at the NAACP office, just as many today are dragging themselves to the moss-covered Republican Party headquarters to assemble lawn signs.

It is events like the Travis-Moses meeting that ultimately achieves the level of grassroots involvement required for a successful revolutionary.

Freedom does not come out the barrel of a gun; it comes out of the conversations of activists and organizers!

After graduating college, Willie Peacock applied for a job but was turned down because, according to his interviewer, he led a student activist group that boycotted a theater to force it to end discriminatory practices. The employer did not need troublemakers.

Someone, possibly a girl who worked in the administration office, although nobody knows, recognized the importance of this information and told someone in the NAACP that a young leader was available. That person informed Amzie Moore, who as a member of the militant Black and Tan faction of the Republican Party would welcome another trouble-maker into his network.

Moore knew Peacock's father. Moore and Bob Moses drove to the Peacock house to discuss the movement and Peacock agreed to join. He became one of the most productive activists in Mississippi.

Tom Levin, a clinical psychologist and Marxist Communist in New York City, became one of SNCC's greatest finds. In Mississippi, there was a serious situation in which activists kept suffering beatings but very few doctors dared to treat them.

To seek solutions, Bob Moses met with two doctors who were willing to work with the rebels. One of them had met Levin at a protest and thought he might help. Levin, it turned out, had extensive contacts throughout New York City's medical community.

He was able to quickly assemble a large team that would go to Mississippi and either pay the medical bills of SNCC people and local activists or treat the people themselves. If you want more information, see The Good Doctors by John Dittmer.

Levin also established a pre-school program while he was in Mississippi while one of his contacts in New York City organized free one-week R&R vacations for activists. It's not what you know but who you know.

An excellent resource on the topics in this chapter is I've Got the Light of Freedom, by Charles Payne, a professor (emeritus) at the University of Chicago.

Chapters Four and Five will give a clear description of how SNCC people built a movement in Mississippi under what seem extremely hostile conditions.

One of Payne's theses is that SNCC built upon a tradition of black grassroots organizing that had not accomplished anything dramatic.

Chapters One through Four describe many of these earlier attempts including scout troops, help for black businesses, voter education programs, and so on.

The earlier activists were able to give SNCC their knowledge of the community, ideas about what should be done, and (critically important) their social networks.

To start a mass uprising today, field secretaries should try to meet and talk to activists in Tea Parties and 912 groups, militias, NRA, and political youth organizations.

Rabbit Math

Whenever you recruit someone, leader or not, into the movement, impress on that person the importance of talking to their friends, relatives, neighbors, and other contacts, to recruit even more people into the movement.

William Z. Foster used the term “chain method” to describe this process of milking social networks. In his pamphlet, “*Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry*,” Foster says that his ambitious strike plan, calling for up to a million strikers, could succeed only if thousands of workers could be organized to help in “individual recruitment.”

This process in which recruits beget more recruits leads to an exponential growth of the movement. We call it “rabbit math.”

The math shows that small differences in reproduction rates lead to large differences in the size of the population later on. Leaders have more “offspring” than the rank and file people who maintain your organization’s website and design your brochures, although the latter are also important.

SNCC people, knowing about rabbit math, would have conversations among themselves about people who might have leadership ability and how to approach them, about how to develop leadership ability in people who seemed to have potential, etc., to build leadership in the community.

More Advice from Experience.

SNCC field secretaries usually scoped out an entire community and tried to reach each and every individual in that community regardless of their level of interest in the movement.

As Bob Zellner, the first white SNCC field secretary, put it, SNCC would attempt to “mobilize entire communities from the wino on the street and the cab driver, right on up through all the preachers and the teachers and the funeral home directors. I mean, when we had a movement in a city or in a town it involved everybody from the bottom to the top.”[quoted in Cheryl Greenberg A Circle of Trust.]

Be aggressive but not too aggressive. If no one comes to the door, try again later. If someone slams a door in your face send in another face. Pester people. Do not ignore or dismiss people whose ideology seems opposed to yours.

In the first place, some of these people can be turned. It has been said that most communists were not communists; many fed-up people worked with the communists because they were the only group fighting for change.

In the second place, you might be able to use or at least learn from ideological adversaries. SNCC field secretaries tried to think up ways to use even their enemies.

Consider combining canvassing and petitioning. Asking someone to sign a petition might help break the ice, establish rapport, nudge the person slightly toward action, and reveal the person's political or social leanings.

At the end of your visit ask the person to do something -attend a mass meeting, for example. If they are not willing, consider asking for something smaller. In the beginning, it takes effort and patience to find recruits. When the organization starts scoring successes more people will present themselves to the organization, wanting to become involved.

Ideally, you should have face-to-face conversations with them, which takes time. But in interesting times there might be more people wanting to be involved than the organization can handle, so the organization should look for ways to capture as many as possible.

This is one of the reservations SNCC had about Martin Luther King's approach to activism, which was to work a city for a few weeks or months, create a giant spectacle with hordes of reporters, and leave town with his cast of thousands returning to ordinary life before anyone from SNCC could button-hole them.

Many SNCC people preferred the slow-and-steady approach with rabbit math.

Finding Resources

You can "recruit" resources as well as people. Chapter Five of I've Got the Light of Freedom is about the uprising in Greenwood, Mississippi, an area where the locals were at first extremely hostile to the movement. SNCC nevertheless succeeded in acquiring office space, cars, free room and board for its activists, even free medical care. It is important to ask.

Organization

When you have recruited a few good leaders, say ten or twenty, and some rank-and-file people, it is time to convene a meeting. This begins what we call the *Green Dragon Phase*, named after the

tavern in pre-revolutionary Boston, where many revolutionary events, including the Boston Tea Party, were planned. Paul Revere, Dr. Warren, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams all frequented the Green Dragon.

You invite everybody to the meeting. Some people come and they talk and think, then they meet again to talk and think, and they meet again, and eventually they decide to do something. The revolt gathers steam.

In the interim, you as a field secretary would think about moving on to your next job. But before you can actually say goodbye there would be a few things to do.

As a SNCC-style field secretary you would be a champion for participatory democracy, as described in the next chapter. According to SNCC's philosophy, the new local activist organization should remain like an informal discussion group, a radical democracy with no command hierarchy and no division of the people.

Everyone free and equal. No leadership vs. rank-and-file. No departments or bureaus. All decision-making and problem-solving, and all the other functions of the organization are to be done by the ordinary people who were recruited –the Brenda Travises and the Willie Peacocks and the Hollis Watkinses.

William Z. Foster wrote in his "Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry: "A central aim must be to draw the largest possible masses into direct participation in all the vital activities of the union; membership recruitment, formulation of demands, union elections, petitions, pledge votes, strike votes, strike organization, etc. This gives them a feeling that the union is actually their movement."

As long as you remain field secretary you struggle for these ideals. There is also post-recruitment work that must be done in the early Green Dragon phase.

Many of the recruits turn out to be less than 100% recruited. They do not think of themselves as activists or members of a movement. They are, in their minds, only there to help clean up after meetings. They're only there to learn. They're only there to show support.

To push recruits closer to 100% you must cause events to happen frequently. According to the Southern Regional Council, SNCC in the deep South had mass meetings at least weekly. They also provided weekly voter or citizenship education programs. There were always office chores to be done. Funds had to be raised. There was always just cause to make signs and go out on a march.

A related post-recruitment task is fitting people into jobs. SNCC's position was that no one can possibly know what another person is capable of doing. So each participant has to look around, consider what is going on in the movement, and decide for themselves how they can fit into the

movement.

Some people will do whatever you ask. Some can’t decide what they should do for the organization and will take helpful direction from you.

Don’t forget rabbit math! SNCC found that many teenagers would accept the job of canvassing and would greatly benefit from that kind of work. The people of the civil rights movement, like the Viet Cong and many other insurgent groups, consisted mostly of teenagers. They can do canvassing.

It turns out that many young blacks at the time were exceptionally ignorant about the basic facts of their predicament. Many families did not discuss race-related topics with their children. The inferior status of blacks was simply how things were. Dogs bark. Rain makes you wet.

Some young canvassers, talking with adults, were surprised to learn that people were afraid to try to register to vote. Some, hearing a prediction from a SNCC field secretary that they might soon have a black sheriff, expressed astonished disbelief, even though the county had a very high black population. They began to connect the dots.

Leadership How do leaders help recruits become more useful to the organization? There are at least two theories. Information Dependence When people lack information they often go by what a trusted leader tells them. This is not a sign of weakness, but an intelligent strategy for obtaining information when it is needed.

It is also an intelligent strategy for people to sometimes find out the information for themselves, although this might take time.

Social Pressure

Most recruits value their membership in the organization and don’t want to disappoint or alienate other members by acting against the group’s wishes. So they conform.

This only works if the group’s norms are communicated to recruits, and this kind of communicating is the job of leaders. Based on the method described in this manual, several norms should be communicated.

- Members should participate in the group’s actions.
- Members should try to recruit more members to produce rabbit math.
- Members should help the group solve problems and make decisions, and
- Members should contribute their ideas at leadership meetings.

Recruiting Youth

“It was only after we started working with the kids that we got the large groups of people to go down and attempt to register.”[Charles McDew, national Chairman of SNCC from 1960 to 1963]

“As in nearly all SNCC projects, efforts are made to meet and organize young people, a particularly important job in Georgia where the voting age is 18. They are then recruited to help canvass and help with other aspects of the project.”[Southern Regional Council, “Survey: Current Field Work, Spring 1963,” report on southwest Georgia]

“As with many SNCC projects, one of the most successful aspects of the project has been work with young people. Building on an already existing gang structure, the staff has developed a democratically controlled group of high school age students who have aided with registration and held their own weekly citizenship training meetings. With the help of these students and a group of interested adults, the entire town of Selma has almost been canvassed for the first time.”[Southern Regional Council, “Survey: Current Field Work, Spring 1963,” report on central Alabama]

The year 2011 saw youth-led mass uprisings in the Arab world and in Europe. Estimates range in the tens of millions of teenagers and adults in their 20s involved in these rebellions.

The year 1968 was another big year for youth rebellions. In fact, young people have been prominent in rebellions going back at least to the American revolution. Why? The quick answer is they have the means, motive, and opportunity.

Means

Students spend a large proportion of their time in schools or campuses that are densely populated with other students, so their environment is one in which they can talk among themselves about problems and what the students themselves can do.

Think of schools and campuses as Green Dragons. After graduation, people become more and more isolated, surrounded at workplaces with older people who will rise up when pigs fly. Then friends move away, people die, and there’s no one to conspire with.

Motive

Compared to adults, young people have longer futures. Young people wade in legacy problems like segregation, needless wars, and government debt, which government caused and apparently will not solve.

The young are more difficult to prosecute and easier to forgive. What do they have to lose?

Opportunity

The concept of biographical availability, defined by sociologist Doug McAdam as the “absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation, such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities” provides perhaps the best explanation for why young people join movements.

Stated simply, the theory is that people are free to become politically active if they have the time.

The theory of biographical availability correctly predicts which demographic groups tend to populate uprisings: young people, unemployed people, rich people, retired people, and others like ministers and lawyers who have flexible schedules.

Young people might be better than adults at soliciting resources from adults and obtaining their participation in the struggle. It is hard for adults to turn down their reasonable requests.

They have access to coaches, scout leaders, and other leaders who might otherwise be overlooked. The Mississippi Student Union, a group that grew out of SNCC’s Freedom Summer project, started a project to involve high school and middle school students as militants in the civil rights struggle.

The project showed signs of success but the Mississippi state government quickly stomped down on the project by enacting heavy penalties for some aspects of organizing minors, demonstrating that government is capable of acting quickly and decisively when its self-interest is challenged.

Have you heard of the Children’s Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963?

Birmingham was Martin Luther King’s biggest mega-show to date, one that would have hordes of participants and would throw every known tactic at the city.

The Children’s Crusade project was conceived by King’s chief strategist, James Bevel, who along with his wife and fellow activist, Diane Nash, were SNCC insiders(co-founders, in fact.) The idea was to organize all the area’s students, from college-level down to the first grade.

Bevel had 150 students who were willing to act as field secretaries who could go into the schools and recruit influential students, such as athletes and prom queens, to act as organizers.

King approved the project despite moral and ethical concerns expressed by his leadership staff. It looks like the method can organize kids in large numbers very quickly. At the appointed time thousands of students burst out of the schools and performed the actions they were trained for.

Three thousand were arrested, which was the intended result (to congest the jail system.) Both theory and experience suggest that young people in schools are ideally situated for purposes of recruitment into mass movements. Whether or not to recruit them is a topic that would be discussed by rebels in meetings.

After the Green Dragon phase, the rebels confront society with disruptive actions that polarize people and infuriate them. A full-blown rebellion breaks out and meetings become intellectually and emotionally draining. Moral and ethical issues are everywhere.

It becomes time when the game is played with the hardest balls. Much of the society's future is decided in meetings. We turn now to that topic.

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