

The Congress of Racial Equality and Its Strategy

By MARVIN RICH

ABSTRACT: The idea for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was originated by James Farmer in a 1941 memorandum calling for personal nonviolent direct action to end discrimination, and by a group of University of Chicago students who staged the first successful United States sit-in in 1942. Early chapters of CORE were college-centered because of the demands on time involved in its training projects and in the sit-ins and picket-lines themselves. CORE's early demonstrations took place mainly in the North and were mostly aimed at increasing public accommodations for the Negro. In the 1950's CORE expanded rapidly, forming chapters throughout the South and widening its membership to include representatives of all social classes. It also widened its goals by working for improvement in Negro employment and housing conditions. By 1964, CORE had an income of \$900,000 and a professional staff of 137, as well as a solid nucleus of CORE chapters throughout the country. The dramatic sit-ins and Freedom Rides organized by CORE have had visible results in civil rights legislation and in increased public accommodation for Negroes. Its future efforts will be concentrated on training its burgeoning numbers of new members and on working for the improvement of Negro living conditions, voter registration, and employment. To accomplish its new goals, however, it will continue to employ its characteristic nonviolent direct action methods—Ed.

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A FEW of us try harder. A few try not at all. Yet the story of CORE is the story of an effort—sustained and sustaining—to put ourselves out of business.

ORIGIN AND EARLY HISTORY

James Farmer started it all, in 1941, when he went home again to his native South. He walked up the steps to the "crow's nest" reserved for Negroes in the local movie theatre. Perhaps for the first time, he fully realized that though he believed "Jim Crow" was wrong, he and most of his friends were actually supporting it by their daily actions. He wrote a memo posing this dilemma and called for the formation of a dedicated group of individuals who would combine mind and body in an effort to take personal nonviolent direct action to end discrimination.

This memo was widely circulated among student and religious groups, liberals, pacifists, and socialists in the spring of 1942. One such group was composed primarily of University of Chicago students. One Sunday afternoon following a session, the group wandered too far from the campus and was refused coffee at a restaurant. They tried to negotiate with management, but were unsuccessful, in spite of the fact that Illinois law forbade discrimination. They then began the first race relations sit-in in America. They were successful in changing policy. The first CORE chapter was formed out of Farmer's memo and this incident. Ever since, CORE chapters have been adapting the techniques of nonviolent direct action to different sections of the country and to different forms of discrimination.

The first CORE chapters were college-centered. They included as members students, teachers, ministers, and trade unionists. They were small and elitist. Only a very few individuals were willing

to make the sacrifices of time, energy, and reputation demanded of CORE members, for chapters usually met every other week, and committees met on the alternate weeks. There were negotiating sessions with management, training sessions for new members, and workshops before major actions. Then there was the radical nature of our action—picket lines and sit-ins—and the ever-present possibility of arrest. But if the chapters were small, they were also inclusive. It requires discipline and some training to sit-in and to respond to insults with good will. It does not require an advanced degree. CORE chapters have increasingly involved persons from every walk of life in their membership and in their leadership.

The first CORE chapters were located in the North and concentrated on public accommodations—yes, two decades ago throughout the North many restaurants, bowling alleys, skating rinks, and barber shops refused to serve Negroes. There were some experiments with interracial housing co-operatives and some successful efforts to open up job opportunities. But the main thrust was in public accommodations and in the North. It was in the late 1940's and early 1950's that CORE moved into the border states of Maryland, Missouri, and Oklahoma. It was only in the middle 1950's that the radical idea of direct action was able to secure a base in the South as a whole.

As time went on the emphasis in the North turned increasingly to jobs and to open-occupancy housing. The housing efforts included efforts to negotiate with realtors and to open tract housing in new suburbs to meet the needs of individual Negro families. This approach represented the largely middle-class base of these early CORE chapters. The effort to secure jobs, on the other hand was primarily centered on semiskilled occupations in consumer-oriented indus-

tries which were amenable to CORE-type pressure. Successes in this field inevitably drew in more Negroes with a working-class background and subtly changed the character of the middle-class and predominantly white Northern chapters. In the South, almost from the beginning there was a far higher percentage of black members, even though the first emphasis was upon public accommodations.

GROWTH AND EXPANSION

CORE had grown in the early 1940's. However, the groups were small. They had many student members who graduated and moved away. Further, many had been formed to combat a specific instance of discrimination and, once this was eliminated, they would often disappear. In the 1940's and early 1950's there was no paid staff, and CORE was entirely an organization of volunteers, but, by 1956, the organization began to develop a nucleus of solid chapters and a trained staff. In the late 1950's, CORE developed a series of summer training institutes for leaders of local groups. Those who participated in these institutes were to play important roles in the 1960 student sit-ins.

CORE staffers negotiated at the national level with the variety store chains involved in the 1960 sit-ins and provided workshops at the local level for the thousands of students. These efforts helped the organization to secure the allegiance of many in every section of the country and to secure firm roots in the upper South. The 1961 Freedom Rides, which were initiated, financed, and organized by CORE, brought CORE to the hard-core areas of the South. Today, CORE has a membership of over 80,000. It has approximately doubled in size and budget every year for the past five years. Thus, in the year ending May 31, 1959, CORE's income was

\$62,000. Five years later the income was \$900,000. There are now 124 chapters affiliated in every section of the country. In 1959 there was a staff of seven. Today there is a professional staff of 137.

SOME RESULTS OF CORE ACTIVITY

The sit-ins and the Freedom Rides were dramatic, and they were successful. Within a year of the first sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, more than 140 communities had desegregated at least some restaurant facilities. Most of these were of the chain variety and department stores and could thus be readily identified by the Negro shopper who wanted service without embarrassment. The Freedom Rides secured the Interstate Commerce Commission order which made possible effective enforcement of the Boynton decision. Further, CORE followed up with the Freedom Highways campaign, in the spring and summer of 1962, which opened the Howard Johnson and Holiday Inn chains, so that by 1962 it was possible for a Negro to travel from one end of the country to the other with dignity.

The successes of these campaigns brought into CORE thousands who wanted to share personally in bringing about the civil rights revolution. They have taken action individually which has brought about change. They negotiated with management, leafleted, picketed, and sat-in. And then, they have used the newly opened facilities. That first cup of coffee and that first hamburger have tasted better than any others for thousands. For these people, talk by columnists, politicians, and some civil rights leaders of returning the civil rights struggle to the courts and the legislative halls and out of "the streets" is a way of saying that they are not needed or wanted, that they are to

be relegated to the status of dues-payers. This status they will no longer accept.

Direct action plays an important role for the country as well. The Emancipation Proclamation, the First, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments have been the "law of the land" for some little time. Most Northern states have had civil rights laws for more than eighty years, and these laws have been strengthened since World War II. And, yet, these laws are as honored in the breach as in the observance. The non-violent activists know that their demonstrations which caused people to say: "Aren't they going too far, now?" also brought about the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They know that Act is as strong as it is only because of their pressure in the streets of Birmingham, Greensboro, and Jackson. When they went to talk to congressmen they could say: "It really happened in America; it happened to me." Zev Aelony told his congressman about facing a death penalty in Americus, Georgia, on a charge of insurrection. Jerome Smith could tell of being brutally beaten in McComb, Mississippi, while law enforcement officials looked on. And the congressmen responded by strengthening the bill. And the American people have responded—reluctantly, slowly, hesitatingly—but they have responded. When forced to make a choice between making a mockery of the American creed and making it a reality they have chosen the course of equality. Surely, there has been a backlash. It used to be called prejudice, but now there is a new term. But most of the American people and their representatives have chosen to go forward. We in CORE believe that when forced to make a choice, they will continue to make the choice for progress.

The willingness to sacrifice of CORE members has also played an important role. The first sit-in students who actually served their full jail terms in

the 1960 sit-ins were members of Tallahassee CORE. The first of the Freedom Riders to serve their full jail terms rather than appeal were members of New Orleans CORE. After the first bus of Freedom Riders was burned in Anniston, Alabama, a second bus proceeded to Birmingham only to be met by a mob. Here Jim Peck, editor of the *CORE-lator*, was brutally beaten. Walter Bergman of Detroit CORE is still partially paralyzed three-and-one-half years later as the result of the injuries suffered then. It was a CORE member, William Moore, who was ambushed and murdered at night on an Alabama highway in April of 1963. A few months later the vice-chairman of Cleveland CORE, the Reverend Bruce Klunder, was killed in a demonstration against the construction of a segregated school. And then CORE staff members James Chaney and Michael Schwerner and their student companion Andrew Goodman were abducted and murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi, on the night of June 23, 1964. The sacrifices and the determination to go on in spite of them have struck a responsive chord throughout the nation. The fact that three of the four CORE leaders who have given their lives are white has re-emphasized the essential interracial character of the organization.

There are other forms of sacrifice and commitment. CORE Task Force members live on a meager \$44.89 every two weeks, are occasionally cold or hungry, often harassed by local registrars, police, and night riders, and frequently discouraged. They must win the confidence of a people whose only protection is their seeming apathy. CORE Task Force members have picked cotton and worked in tobacco fields to win the confidence of local people and to earn a few dollars for a new shirt. They have given years of their lives while friends have taken the first steps on more

rewarding careers. Their day-to-day dedication and sacrifice have played a decisive role in the growth of CORE.

FUTURE GOALS AND PROBLEMS

But the new recruits who have been attracted to CORE because of its militancy, its dramatic successes, and the desire to share in the sacrificial struggle have also brought new problems. Their very number has made it difficult to train them in methods and in the philosophy of nonviolent direct action. When a staff doubles in size each year, very few can have had much training themselves. This past year CORE began a series of area training conferences. In the coming year these will be augmented by larger institutes as well as by regional workshops on specific problem areas.

During the past year CORE has emphasized in the North and in the South a program of community service to develop community roots, indigenous organizations with the ability to help themselves economically and politically. In the North there has been door-to-door canvassing in the sprawling urban ghettos to determine the complaints that most concern the people themselves. This has led to major programs to secure housing-code enforcement through rent strikes, demonstrations before the offices of building commissioners and mayors, and tours of the slum buildings with community leaders. It has also led to successful demonstrations to secure play streets and traffic lights. These kinds of demonstrations, if effectively followed up, can lead to permanent and significant community organization. In Mississippi, Louisiana, and northern Florida, CORE has developed a series of community centers that not only house the voter registration offices, but also have libraries, game rooms, sewing classes, and art activities.

The voter registration efforts of the past have begun to pay off with significant numbers of new registrants in most of the Southern states—excluding Mississippi and Louisiana. For example, during the past two years CORE staffers in South Carolina have co-ordinated registration drives that have put 31,000 Negroes on the books—this in spite of the fact that for most of the year the registration books are open only one day a month and in spite of prolonged slow-downs by some of the registrars. The voter registration effort which has been part of CORE's Southern activity since 1956 is now firmly rooted in the North as well. In part, this has been a natural outgrowth of the effort to service local communities more effectively. It has also been an outgrowth of the effort to defeat Goldwaterism. Soon, the national organization will establish a political action department to co-ordinate and develop local action programs.

The struggle for an increased share in the economy continues to receive major effort. CORE works under the assumption that there cannot be fair employment unless there is relatively full employment. However, we also know that even in a full-employment economy there need not be fair employment. Negroes could and probably would be the last hired and the first fired, confined to the menial and the dead-end jobs. So CORE continues to work to end discrimination by employers and unions. Our major concern has been among consumer-oriented industries where we can be most effective and to secure unskilled and semiskilled jobs where the largest reservoir of unemployed and underemployed manpower is available. There have been some notable examples of success. The First National Bank of Boston, after several weeks of picketing and previous months of negotiations, moved to hire Negroes. We believe that this will mean approxi-

mately 1,000 jobs. To do this the company re-evaluated its personnel policies and changed requirements for many jobs. For example, they decided that a messenger really didn't need a high school diploma. In New York, we were able to get the A&P to reverse a long-standing personnel policy and agree to hire hundreds of full-time Negro employees, whereas they had increasingly resorted to part-timers. These victories point to a concern and a direction. To use direct action effectively with primary manufacturers, such as

steel and aluminum, will be more difficult than with consumer-oriented companies, but not impossible.

CORE has changed to meet new situations and new demands. It will continue to do so. However, it will also continue to emphasize nonviolent direct action methods which involve people from every status level, to be interracial and interreligious, to be national in scope, youthful in membership and outlook. We believe that it will continue to be the cutting edge of the civil rights movement.