

Vanguards in the Fields: The Student Nonviolent  
Coordinating Committee and the National Farm  
Workers Association, 1965-1966

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Black Power, and the United Farm Workers, 1965-1973”

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From its founding in April of 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) represented a dramatic shift in civil rights activism. Like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), SNCC's founding members included both blacks and whites. And like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), who facilitated their founding, SNCC was committed to the ideals of love and nonviolence. However, the members of SNCC were a different breed from their counterparts in the NAACP, CORE, and SCLC. SNCC's members, who were primarily college students, used new and radical tactics to achieve their goal of racial equality. Moreover, their belief in multi-racial equality, not just the equality of blacks and whites, set them apart from other civil rights organizations. Indeed, SNCC's commitment to multi-racial equality and cooperation solidified their status as the most radical civil rights organization of the era.

SNCC's commitment to multi-racial equality was most explicitly demonstrated in its relationship with the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), a union of mostly Mexican-American farm workers founded in 1962 by Cesar Chavez. Chavez had been a farm worker who had become a successful organizer with the Community Service Organization (CSO), a mutual aid society that encouraged political participation and integration of Mexican-Americans. Chavez eventually became the director of the CSO, but resigned to work on behalf of farm workers. Although the NFWA was substantially different than the CSO, Chavez's experience with the CSO provided the NFWA with early connections to SNCC.

Despite the fact that SNCC was headquartered in Atlanta and dispatched activists to Mississippi, Alabama, and other areas of the South, its members were acquainted with

other progressive activists across the country. Two activists who were well known by SNCC were veteran Chicago organizer Saul Alinsky and the West Coast operative for his Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), Fred Ross, Sr. Under the umbrella of the IAF, Ross founded the CSO in 1947 and recruited Cesar Chavez. For the NFWA, one of Alinsky and Ross's most important connections in SNCC was Mike Miller, head of the San Francisco SNCC office. Alinsky and Ross began working with Miller through his work with SLATE, a political organization that he helped found as an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley. Miller was appointed the SNCC representative in the Bay Area in 1962 and, after working for a year in Mississippi, returned to San Francisco to establish a SNCC office there.<sup>1</sup>

As a SNCC staff member, Miller pioneered the organization's activism on behalf of agricultural workers. In 1964 he wrote a working paper comparing California's Central Valley to the Deep South and presented it at a national SNCC staff meeting. At the same time, SNCC became interested in conducting voter registration among migrant farm workers on the East Coast. Even though migrant farm workers in that region were primarily African-American, Miller persuaded SNCC to explore the idea of voter registration among California's Mexican-American farm workers. In order to pursue this idea, Miller sought contact with the fledgling NFWA, which he had learned of from Fred Ross soon after its founding.<sup>2</sup>

Miller met with Cesar Chavez and NFWA organizer Dolores Huerta in late January 1965, which established the first formal connection between SNCC and the NFWA. This connection proved to be advantageous within a few months of the initial meeting when in July 1965, the NFWA and the California Migrant Ministry organized a

rent strike against the Tulare County Housing Authority. The issue at hand was the doubling of the rent at the Woodville and Linnell labor camps, despite no increase in pay and no improvement of the Depression-era tin huts, which had been condemned by the county health department. Finding themselves ill prepared for a rent strike, the NFWA called on the San Francisco SNCC office, which quickly sent organizers.<sup>3</sup>

The SNCC newspaper, *The Movement*, which was published out of the San Francisco SNCC office, was diligent in reporting on the Tulare County rent strike. Although San Francisco SNCC published the newspaper, it was disseminated to SNCC and Friends of SNCC offices nationwide, as well as to many other progressive organizations. It was through *The Movement* that many in SNCC learned of racial and social problems outside of the South. Issues of *The Movement* included articles on farm workers and reprinted articles from *El Malcriado*, the newspaper of the NFWA.<sup>4</sup>

The attention paid to the NFWA by *The Movement* was also the product of the staff's interest and background in areas related to agricultural work. One of *The Movement's* most prolific photographers and writers was George Ballis, a former factory worker and editor of the *Valley Labor Citizen*, a weekly AFL-CIO newspaper. Another early member *The Movement's* staff was Hardy Frye, who had established the Sacramento Friends of SNCC and worked closely with Father Keith Kenney, parish priest of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Sacramento, who ministered to farm workers in the area and was a strong supporter of the NFWA.<sup>5</sup>

Thus by September 1965, the NFWA was already working with SNCC in various capacities. Moreover, those SNCC activists, in addition to being experienced organizers, had previous connections to farm workers, had experience in multi-racial coalitions, and

were sympathetic to the struggles of Mexican-Americans. These qualities proved to be essential to the NFWA as it embarked on the most pivotal moment of its history.

On September 16, 1965, Mexican Independence Day, the NFWA voted to join the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in their strike of grape growers in the Delano area. As soon as the NFWA joined the strike, growers, police, and townspeople became increasingly hostile and violent towards the farm workers. Chavez had studied Gandhi and was determined that the strike be nonviolent. Therefore, he told his staff that they needed to quickly get some teachers of nonviolence to Delano. Chavez personally called the two organizations that he knew would be able to help the striking farm workers: SNCC and CORE. Within a week, each had sent skilled organizers.<sup>6</sup>

Although Chavez called on both SNCC and CORE and both organizations readily provided assistance, it was SNCC that proved to be the more important connection. While SNCC's involvement with the NFWA grew to include additional staff members and volunteers throughout California, the involvement of CORE diminished. CORE's primary role was to teach classes in nonviolent resistance, though they also joined picket lines. However, the CORE volunteers soon moved on to other projects. This was partly due to differences in organizational structure; while the national SNCC office in Atlanta approved the agendas of all SNCC offices, CORE was organized into chapters that worked totally independently. However, the difference in the involvement of SNCC and CORE can also be attributed to the fact that several SNCC staff members not only had longstanding relationships with the NFWA, but also had previous experience in coalition-building and previous connections to agricultural labor. These factors provided personal reasons for SNCC's involvement with the NFWA that complemented its commitment to

fighting for all of the oppressed. Therefore, the alliance between SNCC and the NFWA came to fruition because of the combination of the backgrounds of SNCC's staff and volunteers, their experiences with coalition-building, their personal connections to the NFWA, and SNCC's doctrine of love and nonviolence that facilitated the formation of multi-racial coalitions.<sup>7</sup>

When Chavez called on SNCC for help, these individuals not only went to Delano immediately, but they reached out to others within their activist community to lend additional assistance to the NFWA. SNCC's first contribution to the strike was in the person of Marshall Ganz, a SNCC staff member who was originally from Bakersfield and who the San Francisco SNCC office sent to work with the NFWA less than a week after the strike began.<sup>8</sup>

The civil rights activists who came to the aid of the NFWA were welcomed with open arms. The relationship between the SNCC organizers and the farm workers was facilitated by the fact that the NFWA had positioned itself as a movement, rather than as a labor union. As such, the farm workers felt a kinship with civil rights activists and took inspiration from the milestones of the Civil Rights Movement. The members of SNCC also related to the NFWA as if it were a movement rather than a union. Unlike SCLC, who had worked closely with the AFL-CIO, SNCC had a minimal relationship to organized labor and therefore, "The core of the connection [between SNCC and the NFWA] was the similarity in treatment of blacks in the South and Latinos in the West and Southwest."<sup>9</sup>

This feeling of kinship and common purpose prompted SNCC to rally to the side of the NFWA. One of SNCC's first projects was to supply the NFWA with two-way

radios, which were vital to the effectiveness of the strike. The area of the fields being struck was one thousand square miles, making it difficult for the NFWA to monitor the use of scab labor. With two-way radios, scouts would be able to quickly inform the NFWA office of which fields were being worked so that pickets could be sent. Moreover, as SNCC was well aware, two-way radios could be life-saving apparatus in the face of violence by growers and police. Therefore, SNCC obtained a business band license for the NFWA and sent several two-way radios to Delano.<sup>10</sup>

Three months later, the SNCC staff voted to give full support to the NFWA and to allow Marshall Ganz to be the SNCC representative on the NFWA staff. In addition to allowing Ganz to work full-time with the NFWA, while still paying him as a SNCC staff member, SNCC also provided the farm workers with additional manpower. In December of 1965 a small delegation from SNCC including Stokely Carmichael visited the NFWA office in Delano. As a result of this meeting, SNCC sent Dickie Flowers, a staff member from Greenwood, Mississippi, to work with Ganz. Flowers also organized farm workers in Bakersfield, where there were more African-American farm workers than in other areas of California's central valley.<sup>11</sup>

That same month Chavez asked Mike Miller to coordinate a national boycott of Schenley Industries, a liquor company that owned one of the largest of the ranches being struck in Delano. The decision to boycott Schenley came about after SNCC volunteers discovered that Schenley distributed well-known whiskeys such as Cutty Sark, as well as wine made with Delano grapes. It was quickly surmised that Schenley products would be effective boycott targets because the brands were easily identifiable, as opposed to those

of grapes. Two months before the Schenley boycott was declared, SNCC began weekly picket lines in front of Schenley's San Francisco offices.<sup>12</sup>

The New York SNCC office was also instrumental in the Schenley boycott. San Francisco SNCC and the NFWA sought their help because Schenley's national headquarters were in New York and the SNCC office there could effectively put constant pressure on the company. In early December, New York SNCC organized a letter writing campaign and began conducting visits to liquor stores where delegations asked managers to remove Schenley products from their shelves and to put a poster in favor of the strike in their windows. If managers did not comply, picket lines were set up outside the stores to inform consumers about the boycott. Using these methods, twenty liquor stores in Brooklyn complied with the boycott by the third week of December. SNCC was even more successful in Harlem, where all forty-nine stores visited agreed to cooperate with the boycott.<sup>13</sup>

The skills of SNCC's members became most useful when the NFWA chose to utilize a favorite tactic of the Civil Rights Movement: the march. In February 1966 during an NFWA brainstorming session over how to increase the visibility of the Schenley boycott, someone suggested a march to Schenley headquarters in New York, likening it to the Selma-to-Montgomery march the previous spring. Realizing that New York was too far, someone else suggested they march to the Schenley offices in San Francisco. Questioning whether Schenley would respond, Chavez suggested that the march be to Sacramento to put pressure on Governor Edmund "Pat" Brown to intervene. Chavez then decided that since Lent was approaching, it shouldn't be a march at all, but a pilgrimage in the tradition of a Mexican *peregrinacion* that would arrive at the Capitol on

Easter Sunday. Even though Chavez conceptualized it as a pilgrimage, it still resembled a march enough to make the most of the SNCC organizers' experience. At Chavez's request, Marshall Ganz was put in charge of coordinating the march and Terry Cannon, editor of *The Movement*, was made press secretary. With Miller in charge of the boycott itself, SNCC activists were the nerve center of the Delano-to-Sacramento march.<sup>14</sup>

The march began on March 17, 1966, the day after the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Farm Labor held hearings in Delano. It started out with sixty-eight farm workers and some NFWA staff members, including Chavez and Dickie Flowers of SNCC. Though the farm workers were the heart and soul of the march, the collective organizing experience of the SNCC volunteers was essential to the success of the march. Along with the work of Ganz, Miller, and Cannon, SNCC and Friends of SNCC groups lent assistance to the march. The Marin Friends of SNCC raised two hundred dollars for the NFWA, which was used to purchase shoes and sleeping bags for the marchers. Other chapters collected food and clothing for the marchers. Members of various California Friends of SNCC groups marched themselves. Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, head of the New York SNCC office and one of two Mexican-Americans on the SNCC staff, traveled to California to participate in the march and gave a speech in Spanish proclaiming SNCC's support for the farm workers and calling for African-Americans and Mexican-Americans to join together in the fight against injustice. SNCC's Hardy Frye also connected the NFWA to the Civil Rights Movement when, in his speech on the Capitol steps at the conclusion of the march, he compared Governor Brown's refusal to meet with the marchers to Governor George Wallace's refusal to meet with those who marched from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, the other major civil rights organizations were not listening when Martinez and Frye gave their speeches. While SNCC was intimately involved in the Schenley boycott and Delano to Sacramento march, none of the other major civil rights organizations participated in any way. The Portland branch of the NAACP attempted to issue a resolution in support of the NFWA, but was prevented from doing so by the NAACP national headquarters. Because the resolution included a pledge to urge NAACP members to boycott Schenley, the branch president requested approval from NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins. Wilkins did not respond until three weeks later, three days after Schenley signed an agreement to recognize the NFWA. In his belated response, Wilkins recommended that the Portland NAACP send a letter to Schenley “commending Schenley for having recognized the union.”<sup>16</sup>

Wilkins’s lack of sympathy for the NFWA was a result of his close relationship with Schenley Industries. During the strike, Schenley actively attempted to curry favor with the black community by donating large amounts of money to black-owned banks and businesses. Schenley was also quick to point out that its vice-president, Charles T. Williams, the brother-in-law of Jackie Robinson, was African-American. Civil rights leaders and organizations were only supportive of the grape strike if they successfully resisted Schenley’s efforts to influence them. When the Schenley boycott ended, Wilkins was still firmly in the company’s grasp, so much so that the company drafted a press release congratulating itself which was released by Wilkins. At no point did Wilkins congratulate Chavez and the NFWA.<sup>17</sup>

Schenley Industries also used its connections in the black community in an attempt to prevent SCLC from supporting the NFWA. Two days before the NFWA began

its march from Delano to Sacramento, Martin Luther King, Jr., received a telegram from his friend Jackie Robinson asking him to meet with his brother-in-law regarding the boycott. It is unknown whether King ever met with Williams. What is known, however, is that King did not issue a statement in support of the march and did not urge SCLC members to boycott Schenley products, despite King and SCLC's pro-labor stance and productive relationships with many labor unions.<sup>18</sup>

The failure of SCLC to become involved in the Schenley boycott can also be attributed to the fact that the organization's presence was limited to the Deep South, which had an almost negligible Latino population. According to both the 1960 and 1970 census, "persons of Spanish heritage" made up only 0.6% of the population in Georgia, where SCLC was based. In Alabama, where SCLC also organized, the Latino population was 0.4% of the total in both 1960 and 1970. Therefore, SCLC didn't consider the oppression of Mexican-Americans because they were not confronted with it.<sup>19</sup>

Although SNCC's national office was located in Atlanta, their offices outside of the South exposed the organization to the racial inequality suffered by racial minority groups other than African-Americans. Furthermore, many of the staff members working in the South were originally from the West and the North and had lived in areas with significant Latino populations. CORE and the NAACP not only had chapters across the country, but also were not based in the South and thus had an intimate knowledge of the discrimination faced by Latinos. SCLC, in contrast, only saw racism as the problem of blacks and whites because it operated solely in a black and white world. Although SCLC later turned its attention to the issues of Mexican-Americans, it did not participate in the

Schenley boycott in part because it did not yet occur to them to organize on behalf of anyone besides African-Americans.

SNCC, on the other hand, recognized early on the similarities between the oppression faced by Mexican-Americans and African-Americans. SNCC's intimate involvement in the NFWA's first strike and boycott proves that, more than any other organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was the vanguard of civil rights activity. Their bravado and innovative tactics and programs alarmed both whites and older civil rights leaders. Whether in the areas of direct action or voter registration, SNCC was the leader that others in the Movement had to follow or risk being left embarrassingly behind. This was certainly the case with SNCC's belief in multi-racial equality and cooperation, which resulted in its relationship with the NFWA, the first coalition formed between organizations of the Civil Rights and Chicano Movements. Furthermore, by reaching out to the NFWA, SNCC not only helped the farm workers achieve victory against Schenley Industries in June 1966, but also took the lead in introducing the other major civil rights organizations to the struggles of Mexican-Americans and to the concept of multi-racial activism. Therefore, the relationship between SNCC and the NFWA established SNCC as the most radical civil rights organization of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Padilla, interview by author, Berkeley, CA. 18 May 2004; For more information on Alinsky, see Finks, P. David. *The Radical Vision of Saul Alinsky*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984; Mike Miller, interview by author, San Francisco, CA. 19 February 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Miller, interview by author, San Francisco, CA. 19 February 2004; Mike Miller, interview by author, by telephone. 20 December 2003; Letter from Coleman Blease to Dolores Huerta, 20 January 1965, National Farm Workers Association Collection, Box 1, Folder 3, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

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- <sup>3</sup> “Viva! Tulare County Rent Strike, March,” *The Movement*, August 1965; Gilbert Padilla, interview by author, Berkeley, CA. 18 May 2004; Marshall Ganz, interview by author, by telephone, 4 May 2004.
- <sup>4</sup> “Viva! Tulare County Rent Strike, March,” *The Movement*, August 1965, 1; “Tennessee Freedom Labor Union: Poorest County Organizes,” *The Movement*, August 1965, 1; Terry Cannon, interview by author, by telephone. 11 December 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> George Ballis, interview by author, Oakland, CA. 19 November 2003; Hardy Frye, interview by author, Berkeley, CA. 18 November 2003.
- <sup>6</sup> Brooks, Wendy. December 2003. “The Story of Wendy Goepel Brooks, Cesar Chavez and La Huelga.” Farmworker Movement Documentation Project. Available at: [www.farmworkermovement.org/essays/essays/007Brooks\\_Wendy.pdf](http://www.farmworkermovement.org/essays/essays/007Brooks_Wendy.pdf).
- <sup>7</sup> Wendy Goepel-Brooks, interview by author, by telephone. 13 September 2004; Mike Miller, interview by author, San Francisco, CA. 19 February 2004.
- <sup>8</sup> Marshall Ganz, interview by author, by telephone. 4 May 2004; Terence Cannon to Cesar Chavez, 22 September 1965, National Farm Workers Association Collection, Box 13, Folder 22, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- <sup>9</sup> “Editorial: Igual Que Los Negritos,” *El Malcriado*, July 1965, 2, translated and reprinted as “The Voice of the Farm Workers Same as the Negroes,” *The Movement*, August 1965, 1; “Editorial: Enough People With One Idea,” *El Malcriado*, September 1965, 2; Terry Cannon, interview by author, by telephone. 11 December 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> “SNCC Radios Go to CORE, Delano Strike,” *The Movement*, October 1965; Joe Schulman to Richard Haley, 5 November 1965, National Farm Workers Association Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University; Joe Schulman to Cesar Chavez, United Farm Workers Organizing Committee Collection, Box 2, Folder 2, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- <sup>11</sup> Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Tentative Agenda, Third Staff Meeting for 1965, 24-28 November 1965, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982. Reel 3; Mike Miller, interview by author, San Francisco, CA. 19 February 2004; Marshall Ganz, interview by author, by telephone. 4 May 2004; Marshall Ganz, interview by author, by telephone, 25 November 2003.
- <sup>12</sup> Marshall Ganz, *Five Smooth Stones: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University Microfilms, 2000), 323-324; “Schenley (Roma Wine) Offices in SF Picketed,” *The Movement*, November 1965; “Farm Labor Pickets in S.F.,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 October 1965.
- <sup>13</sup> Minutes, Report on Delano Farm Workers Strike given by Wendy Goepel, New York SNCC office, 6 December 1965, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982. Reel 21; George Wiley and Elizabeth Sutherland, “Boycott Schenley!,” 24 December 1965, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982. Reel 21.
- <sup>14</sup> Marshall Ganz, *Five Smooth Stones: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University Microfilms, 2000), 333-334; Terence Cannon to Members of the Press and Media, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982. Reel 21. Terence Cannon, Press Release, “Striking Farm Workers Begin 300 Mile March,” 16 March 1966, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982. Reel 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Terry Cannon, interview by author, by telephone. 11 December 2003; Cesar Chavez to Marin Friends of SNCC, 16 April 1966, National Farm Workers Association Collection, Box 14, Folder 6, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University; Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, Notes on the Delano to Sacramento March, 17 March - 10 April 1966, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982. Reel 21; Mike Miller to Karen Whitman, 13 April 1966, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1982. Reel 33.
- <sup>16</sup> Lorna Marple, Report of the Political Action Chairman to Portland Branch NAACP, 20 March 1966, Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, West Coast Region, Box 19, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Letter from Harry C. Ward to Roy Wilkins, 22 March 1966, Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, West Coast

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Robert O. Powell to Roy Wilkins, 21 April 1966, The Papers of the NAACP, Part 28A: Special Subject Files, 1966-1970. Reel 17; Roy Wilkins, Statement, The Papers of the NAACP, Part 28A: Special Subject Files, 1966-1970. Reel 17.

<sup>18</sup> Jackie Robinson to Martin Luther King, Jr., 15 March 1966, Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, Ga. Box 20, Folder 24.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. *U.S. Census of Population: 1960. Subject Reports. Nativity and Parentage*. Final Report PC(2)-1A. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965; Cambell Gibson and Kay Jung. "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States." U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division. Working Paper No. 56, 2002. Available on [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).