

► ain't gonna let segregation turn us 'round: thoughts on building an interracial and anti-racist student movement

In the summer following his junior year of college, together with nearly one thousand other Northern college students, Andy Goodman traveled to Mississippi to participate in Freedom Summer 1964. Organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Freedom Summer was a call to Northern white college students to join black Mississippians in the drive to register black voters in the South. SNCC staff members last reported seeing Andy, along with his friends Mickey Schwerner and James Cheney, alive on June 21st, 1964. The three activists were found dead weeks later. Lawrence Rainey, then Neshoba County sheriff, was one of seven men later convicted, not of murder, but of "conspiracy to deprive the dead men of their civil rights" (pg. 115, *In Struggle*, by Clayborne Carson). Andy Goodman made a heroic decision and cast his fate with the Black Freedom Struggle in the Jim Crow South. He became one of many martyrs; a symbol for people working towards racial justice in the United States.

If you believe what you read in the press, both mainstream and left, the recent rise in political activism has been composed solely of white people who oppose globalization. While the coverage of political activism tends to ignore the rich and inspiring work that goes on in communities of color, it is true that white students are on the march- and largely overlooking questions of domestic racism in favor of internationally flavored anti corporate activism. People of color (as well as the mainstream media) have noticed with some distaste the overwhelming whiteness of the protests in Seattle and D.C. (See for example Elizabeth Betita Martinez's article "Where Was the Color in Seattle?" in the Spring issue of *The Activist*.) The activist causes and organizations receiving the most attention, funding and support on campuses are predominantly white anti corporate and anti sweatshop groups, while organizing in communities of color has been routinely ignored.

While it is tempting to simply obsess over the whiteness of campus anti-corporate activism, we believe that such obsession makes us miss the most important point. Both on a practical level, in terms of building good relationships with campus-based organizations of color, and on a political level, in terms of making an anti-corporate vision meaningful, white students have to take up the fight against racism in a serious way. This means, if you are a white activist, incorporating anti

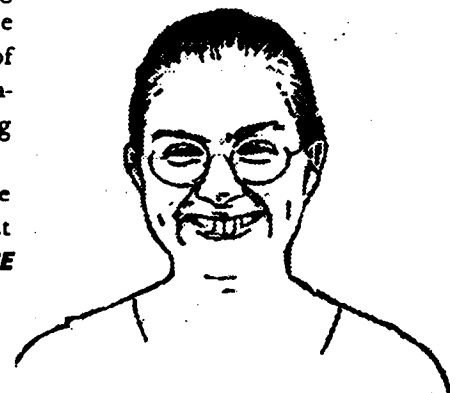
racism into your own work, and doing work against racism that you do not yourself lead.

The leadership of many predominantly white student organizations have begun to discuss how the white portion of an expanding student movement can adopt an explicitly anti-racist agenda. Some of these organizations, such as the Direct Action Network and United Students Against Sweatshops, are beginning to discuss how to confront racism with their activist work.

The coalitions mobilizing protests at both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions have focused their attentions on issues facing Black and Latino communities, and have begun to reach out to activists within those communities. Despite their good intentions, however, these efforts have not gone far enough. To succeed, we must transform more than our slogans and symbols; committing for the long haul to fighting against, for example, the proliferation of the prison industry, or fighting for equitable funding of public education. While this is the beginning of new direction and dialogue, we still have a long way to go.

We do not claim to have forged a magic bullet, but

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE



we would like to raise some questions which may point our organizations in the right direction. In considering the role of white students in opposing racism, we should remember the story of Andy Goodman and his sacrifice. Let us ask ourselves what the equivalent of Freedom Summer is today. Where are the spaces for white students to act in solidarity with the struggles of people of color; to assist in building an anti racist movement led by people of color? Where are our Mississippis, and who is going down to help?

White students cannot answer this question alone. Only through accepting the leadership of those who experience racism in their daily lives, can white students identify their role in building an anti racist movement.

As a white woman, I (Amanda) have been very much a part of the anti sweatshop movement at the University of Wisconsin. The growing anti sweatshop movement is fundamentally good, and it has been a powerful force on our campus. Many students who have never participated in social justice work before have gotten involved, breathing new life into campus activism. While it is right to organize in solidarity with exploited workers of color in the Third World and at home, as the anti sweatshop movement grows, we have a responsibility to make sure that we take on local racial justice issues as well as international ones. On campuses like UW Madison, white students have too often ignored this responsibility. Because such an overwhelming majority of most college campuses are made up of white students, it is very difficult for students of color to make gains without white support. This is especially true around such issues as increasing recruitment and retention of students of color or the creation of a long sought after Chicano Studies Department.

This is not to say that anti sweatshop organizing in Madison should end; but simply that we must take another step forward, connecting the work we are doing to oppose discrimination around the globe with that which is happening in our own communities for students and faculty of color. For example, in prior years at the UW, white students, as part of an interracial coalition assisted in a successful campaign led by people of color to strengthen the University's ten year affirmative action plan.

Let's work so that our anti sweatshop organizations are

explicitly anti-racist, and build a committed and long standing relationship with the communities affected by oppressive labor standards; namely immigrants and women. This work will bring issues of racism to bear on what has been seen, incorrectly, as a "white" organizing issue.

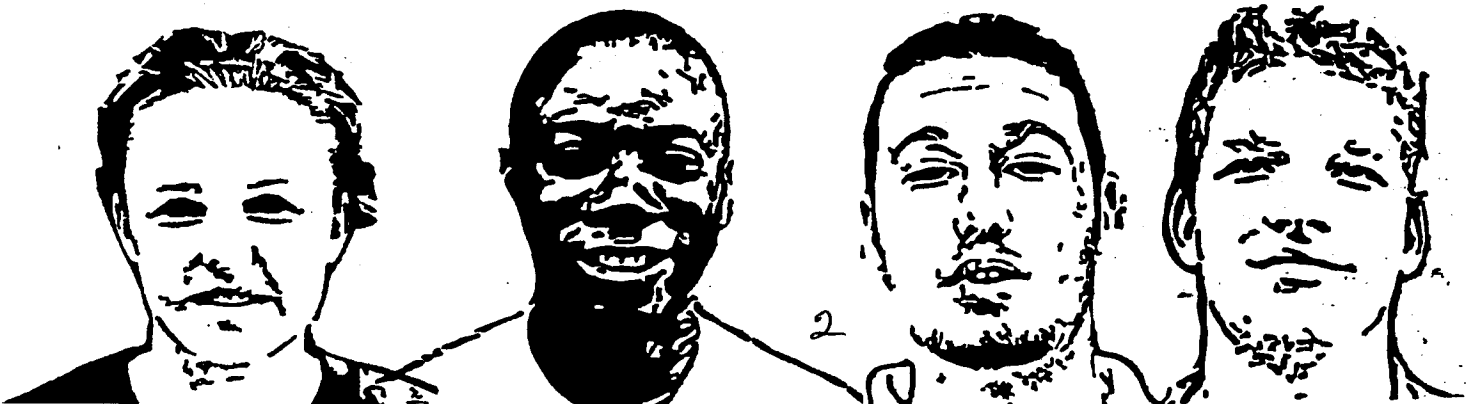
the color line divides america, as well as the student movement

Because racism is such a powerful force in our economic and social systems, it is ridiculous to think the student movement could somehow be immune or disconnected from the legacy and consequences of racism. Social justice movements in this country have at many other points in history been divided along racial lines. This has happened both because of white racism, and because of the legitimate desire on the part of activists of color to build independent organizations.

It's a mistake to feel like every student activist organization should look like a Bennetton ad. We should not approach this whole question with the goal of simply "diversifying" our organizations. This article is not a guide to "shopping for minorities." It is a call to action for white students to put real work behind the fight against racism.

White students should respect the expressed need and desire for separation by student of color activist groups. Of course, none of the "predominantly white" student movement organizations out there are exclusively white, and there are some practical things that white activists can do to make their organizations a better place to work for people of color. All white people enjoy the fruits of racism, both historical and contemporary, psychologically and spiritually as well as politically and economically. White people need to break down the structures and change the institutions which give them privilege. If we are truly committed to building an inter-racial movement, then white people must constantly assess their privileged position in society.

We think that the most important thing white students can do to build an interracial and anti-racist movement in this country is to stand in solidarity with people of color who are organizing against racism. Concretely, this will require white students to take direction and leadership from people of color, but it also means that white students have a special duty



to exercise leadership amongst white people, fighting racism in our own communities. This is no simple task; there are no rules or formulas for being a good white ally, and standing in solidarity with people of color has meant many wildly different things throughout history. It is likely that in twenty years, we will look back and laugh at the positions we are taking in this very article. Let us seek guidance in the history of anti-racist organizing in this country; becoming students of the interracial and anti-racist movements that have come before us.

practical suggestions

Here are some steps that white students can take to begin the process of building an anti racist movement:

- Include racial justice issues in your organizational discussions and analysis.
- Commit to doing serious work against racism as part of your organizing and to forming meaningful, principled alliances with people of color organizations in your communities.
- Make sure that your agenda isn't set before considering the goals and demands of activists of color. Too often, white activists think of the issues that they are working on as "universal" and approach activists of color asking them to join their "big tent". Why aren't white activists holding themselves accountable in the same way and viewing racism as a universal concern?
- Take steps to create a more tolerant culture within your own organization. Sometimes, white culture is "invisible", meaning that methods of work, choice of music, food, ways of communicating, etc., are thought of as "progressive" ways of doing things, instead of "white progressive" ways of doing things. One way should not be held up as "authentically progressive", especially when that cultural form is typically or historically white.
- Consider the needs of people of different backgrounds than your own. Can people with jobs attend your meetings? What about people with children? What email list or social scene do you have to be a part of, to hear about meetings?
- Work to build long term, authentic and trusting rela-

tionships with organizations led by people of color in your community. As we stated above, white activists are prone to "shopping" for minorities. Too often, when it comes time to host a conference or chose speakers for a rally, white activist organizations are out looking for brown faces, when they haven't supported the daily work of anti-racist organizations all year long.

•Speak up when people of color in your community are being attacked! Don't wait for the Black Student Union on your campus to write all the letters to the editor of your student newspaper. It is time for white people to police their own communities around these issues — after all, whose responsibility is it to fight racism in the white community?

•Listen harder, and better. Too often, white activists try to be the savior instead of the ally. One of the legacies of the early Civil Rights Movement's organizing style, which came from people like Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and Bob Moses of SNCC, was the deeply rooted belief that there is no one who knows more about the experience of oppression than those who are oppressed themselves. Simply put, go to meetings of people of color organizations, find out what they are up to, and help out. Period.

Working in an interracial coalition can be a difficult and humbling experience, but also a sweet one. The most important things we should take with us on this winding road are a willingness to be vulnerable, to make mistakes and be self critical, and to listen to each other. We have a lot to learn, and we need all the brains and hands we can gather. Within the movement, as in the civil rights movement of the 60s, we need a "division of labor," in which the special responsibilities of various groups are recognized. Andy Goodman was one of the many who acknowledged his own responsibility and sought to accept leadership from African American activists. To broaden and deepen today's movement, we need to learn from that spirit of listening, uniting and acting with courage.

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