

A Brief History of the Southern Conference Movement

Lineages of Organizing Listening Program Birmingham, AL

Short version:

The Southern Conference Movement is one of the longest sustained interracial organizing lineages for economic, social, and racial justice in the South. Begun in Birmingham in 1938 with the founding of the **Southern Conference for Human Welfare**; through the 1950's, 60's, and 70's with the grassroots organizing of the **Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF)**; then from the 1970's into the 2000's with the regional networking of the **Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC)**, the Southern Conference Movement endured, weathering at times extreme attack, always holding firm to the principle that only in working together against racism could working class people succeed in establishing real democracy with civil liberties and a viable quality of life for all. Drawing on this heritage, the **Lineages of Organizing Listening Program** is committed to a deliberately multiracial, multi-issue, multi-generational approach to organizing for economic, social, and racial justice in Birmingham and the South.

Long version:

The Southern Conference Movement is one of many lineages of struggle against racial oppression and authoritarianism that make up the progressive history of Birmingham and the South. It began in 1938 with the founding of the **Southern Conference for Human Welfare** at the Municipal Auditorium in Birmingham. Twenty-six years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, an interracial gathering of fifteen hundred people came together to discuss farm tenancy; labor organizing; the poll tax and voting rights; fair wages for women; youth opportunity; racial inequality in wages, education, housing, and health; jim crow laws and racial violence — the array of problems plaguing the society and economy of the South in the Great Depression.

The opening session on Sunday evening, November 20, was euphoric as Black and white Southerners assembled, sitting wherever they chose — business owners, factory workers, radical organizers, liberals, farmers, sharecroppers, economists, academics, educators, students, clergy, civic leaders, and government and elected officials. There was excitement in the city in response to the vibrant gathering taking place downtown.

On the second day, however, Eugene “Bull” Connor, then serving the first of his many terms as Commissioner of Public Safety, arrived with a contingent of police and announced that attenders would be required to abide by Birmingham’s segregation ordinance or face arrest. He then oversaw the separation of the attenders, whites to one side and Blacks to the other. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, there to participate and address the conference, refused the order, had a folding chair placed in the middle of the aisle, and sat in it.

The organization resolved to never again meet in a city or facility which would require racial segregation of the meeting.

The Southern Conference for Human Welfare worked as an interracial organization at both the leadership and membership levels. In 1942 it began publishing a monthly newspaper, *The Southern Patriot*, which developed into a vehicle for getting issue information and word of local Southern struggles out to a national readership.

Because **SCHW** sought to fundamentally change Southern society and bring about racial equality in all aspects of life, it was constantly subjected to red-baiting and anti-Communist attacks. The pressure of these attacks, and internal disagreement over the pivotal 1948 presidential election, led to the decision to fold the organization in 1948. However, in 1942 the organization had created the **Southern Conference Educational Fund** to receive financial contributions and engage in education around issues, and **SCEF** now stepped forward to continue the work.

Having learned that no progress would be made as long as racism and segregation prevented coalition-building and white Southerners failed to make common cause with Blacks, executive director Jim Dombrowski led SCEF to commit itself to a one-point agenda: the ending of legal segregation in the South.

Extreme anti-Communist persecution and repression throughout the Cold War 1950's strained the resources and cohesion of the organization to its limit, but it survived.

Anne and Carl Braden began work as field secretaries for SCEF in 1957, visiting localities where movements were forming, and locating and encouraging Southern whites whose consciences were leading them toward support of the movement. With the emergence of the civil rights movement of the late 1950's, SCEF's newspaper, *The Southern Patriot*, edited by Anne Braden, covered local movements generally ignored by the press. Among those for whom this proved a lifeline were Birmingham's Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. SCEF drew the connection between the poverty and lack of rights experienced by working class whites, and the plight of their Black fellow citizens.

SCEF offered organizational assistance for the civil rights movement, and championed and supported the development of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Throughout the 1960's, SCEF continued to encourage white participation in the movement for racial equality, and to illustrate by its existence and its principled work, the possibility of racial unity and the hope of interracial democracy.

The 1970's brought severe backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement, leading to frustration and sectarianism on the left and in SCEF. Likely meddling by FBI Cointelpro agents lent another blow, and in 1974, those representing the Southern Conference Movement heritage departed the organization.

In 1975, a new vehicle for struggle was formed, the **Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC)**. The leadership included Anne Braden, Rev. Benjamin Chavis, Jim Dombrowski, Modjeska Simkins, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Carl Farris, Jack O'Dell, Gloria Firmin, Alex Hurder, Scott Douglas, Rev. C. T. Vivian, Rita Anthony, Ron Chisom, Rev. Fred Taylor, Harvey Henley, and others. It was consciously organized as a biracial entity, and later reached out to Latino, Asian American, and Native American groups to become multiracial. SOC's educational efforts lifted the connection between unmet basic human needs and the nation's bloated military budget. SOC emphasized the defense of Black elected officials under attack by the FBI, and labor-community connection and support. SOC helped identify the issue of environmental racism and worked to link organizers in communities where polluting industries had created harm. SOC placed opposition to racism, and bringing whites into the struggle to work against racism on their own behalf, at the center of its priorities. SOC developed into a regional network of organizers and local organizations, and continued until 2002.

Over the intervening years, countless organizations and efforts throughout the South have been inspired and led by people deeply influenced and trained by the Southern Conference Movement, among them, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Greater Birmingham Ministries, White Birminghamians for Black Lives, and Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ).

The spirit of the Southern Conference Movement is at work again in the concept of the **Lineages of Organizing Listening Program**, which seeks to not only lift the histories of individuals and movements who labored for justice against all odds in the past, but also to embody the breadth and inclusion that are prerequisite for a winning coalition against racism and for economic and social justice today.

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