SNCC & Grassroots Organizing Discussion Series

SNCC & Black Power Toolkit

A SNCC Digital Gateway Companion

Lowndes County, Alabama, November 1966 election. Photograph by Jim Peppler.
ABOUT THE SNCC & GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING DISCUSSION SERIES

Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the SNCC & Grassroots Organizing discussion series and related materials aim to expand knowledge of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “Snick”), the only national civil rights organization led by young people. Organized in 1960 and mentored by the legendary Black organizer, Ella Baker, SNCC worked with community leaders to organize around voter registration and build local grassroots organizations in the Deep South. At its core, SNCC helped community members feel empowered to make choices and act on the issues that most impacted their lives and their communities.

Learn more about SNCC on SNCCDigital.org > Inside SNCC > The Story of SNCC

THE PURPOSE OF THESE LEARNING TOOLKITS

The Learning Toolkits provide concrete ways for people of all ages to engage with and learn about SNCC’s work. The Learning Toolkits will help people and groups explore primary source materials and utilize the SNCC Digital Gateway (snccdigital.org), which tells the story of SNCC and grassroots organizing from an inside-out perspective. Community members will be able to connect contemporary issues in their own lives and communities to central themes in SNCC’s history.

WHO ARE THE LEARNING TOOLKITS FOR?

The Learning Toolkits are made for a broad audience: interested individuals, civic organizations, community or activist groups, educators, students, young people, librarians and museum staff, and most of all, you.

You can work through the material on your own. But we’ve also designed the Learning Toolkits to be used by people and groups that are in a position to share what they’ve learned with others. Grab your friends, comrades, colleagues, and neighbors and dig into the history.

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

Defining and Demonstrating Black Power (p. 2 - 6)

- Learning Directly from SNCC Organizers: Emergence of Black Power
- Engage with the Sources: Stokely’s Speech Class

Lowndes County and Black Power (p. 6 - 10)

- Learn Directly from SNCC Organizers: The Black Panther and Lowndes County
- Engage with the Sources: “Us Colored People”
- Engage with the Sources: “What We Want”
- Explore the SNCC Digital Gateway: Primary Sources

Economic Organizing, Institution Building, and Internationalism (p. 10 - 14)

- Engage with the Sources: Economic and Cooperative Organizing
- Learn Directly from SNCC Organizers: Internationalism and Building Institutions
- Explore the SNCC Digital Gateway: SNCC and Black Power

Making Connections, Learning More (p. 14 - 15)

Activist Insights Across Generations
Next Steps
If You Want to Keep Learning

You can find more on SNCCDigital.org

SNCC & Grassroots Organizing | SNCC & Black Power Toolkit | 1
Black Power is often associated with SNCC’s Stokely Carmichael, who publicized the phrase in June 1966 during the Meredith March Against Fear, and it is often misunderstood as angry, anti-white rhetoric. These stereotypes miss Black Power’s true meaning and deep roots in SNCC’s work and thinking. In summer 1960, Amzie Moore, an NAACP leader and World War II veteran, met with Bob Moses, who quickly became a key leader of SNCC’s work in Mississippi. Moore encouraged Moses to initiate a voter registration project in Mississippi’s majority Black Delta, emphasizing that, where African Americans were the majority, they could claim political power and transform their lives, while also reshaping the national electoral map. By the mid-1960s, influenced by their work with rural Black southerners like Moore, as well as by the larger national and international context, SNCC understood Black Power in terms of political and economic power, Black Consciousness, and institution building.

Although SNCC was initially known for direct action challenges to segregation, by summer 1961, the young people started moving into community-based organizing around voter registration. Many SNCC staffers were thinking about the structural issues that couldn’t be easily tackled by nonviolent direct action, such as housing and job segregation, unequal schools, and police brutality. To impact these, Black people would need to organize for broad political power. That was SNCC’s focus from summer 1961 through early 1964, as SNCC field secretaries worked closely with Black southerners. Although SNCC was successful at building strong local movements, white supremacists blocked African Americans from registering to vote through the use of violence and economic terrorism. In order to break the white supremacist stranglehold on voting, SNCC used increasingly creative political

Stokely Carmichael canvassing in Lowndes County, Alabama, in 1965, encouraging Black citizens to register to vote. Photograph by Douglas R. Gilbert.
organizing, including the 1964 Freedom Summer project, which involved voter registration as well as Freedom Schools and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), a statewide alternative to the regular Democratic Party that excluded African Americans. Most important, SNCC began moving toward parallel institutions to transform or create alternatives to existing institutions, like schools and political parties, that were not serving the needs of African Americans. The MFDP lobbied state delegations at the national convention of the Democratic Party to seat their 68-member delegation, rather than the state’s all-white delegation. Instead, the national party played politics and offered two seats at-large (not representing Mississippi), making it clear to SNCC that they could not rely on white liberals. They needed to build their own power base.

In the aftermath of the MFDP Challenge, many in SNCC were burned out and disillusioned. Singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte took a group of 11 SNCC staffers to Guinea to experience the politics and culture of the newly independent African country. Mrs. Hamer, a former sharecropper and SNCC’s oldest staffer, was profoundly affected. For the first time, she saw Black people running a country and addressing the needs of its people. In fact, “Seeing black people in widespread positions of power was a ‘revelation,’” for the entire delegation. They shared this experience with the others in SNCC, helping “to create . . . a positive historical identity and self-image.” (Wood, “SNCC Women, the 1964 Guinea Trip,” 224) Visiting Guinea was an extraordinary experience, but Africa and its liberation movements had had an important influence on SNCC staffers for years, through the media, academic study, personal connections, and travel. Growing up, the young people who joined SNCC watched Ghana and other African countries fight for and gain their independence. In their first statement of purpose in 1960, SNCC’s founders declared their identification “with the African struggle.” Three years later, during the March on Washington, John Lewis connected the organization’s demand for “One Man [Person], One Vote” with African anti-colonial movements. A few months later, SNCC welcomed the Kenyan leader Oginga Odinga to Atlanta with freedom songs and camaraderie.

LEARN DIRECTLY FROM SNCC ORGANIZERS:
EMERGENCE OF BLACK POWER

SNCCDigital.org > Our Voices > Emergence of Black Power

Explore the Emergence of Black Power in the Our Voices section to hear first-hand accounts of how Black Power developed over time and what SNCC veterans consider especially important about it.

What ideas and events shaped SNCC’s move to Black Power?
What do SNCC veterans emphasize about its development and importance?
Are there Black Power ideas or programs that you can imagine using today?
SNCC staffers increasingly challenged and rejected many assumptions that were based on European values. The defeat at Atlantic City forced the group to think about the limitations of working in coalitions with white folks before building a strong Black Power base. They were also looking more to Africa with its models of liberation, self-determination, and Black leadership. Perhaps most important was the ongoing immersion in the rich cultural traditions of rural Black southerners that stood as a daily alternative to the lie of white supremacy.

SNCC was also willing to challenge or disregard common conventions that existed in both Black and white communities. Many Black women stopped straightening their hair and began proudly wearing a natural afro style. The staff emphasized Black history and culture in the 1964 Freedom Schools. One summer volunteer noted that she was learning Black history in order to teach it in Mississippi, because it was not offered at her prestigious college. To make that history more available, SNCC published its own Black history book, *Negroes in American History: A Freedom Primer*, in 1965.

Like others in SNCC, Stokely Carmichael encouraged young Black students to appreciate their culture. In a 1965 lesson he asked them to compare what many would call standard English with the language they were likely to hear at home, sometimes called Black English. The inspired students raised and answered questions about how language—and other things—are given value, often by those from the dominant culture. Maria Varela used the insights of local African Americans to create adult education materials, what Worth Long called “freedom handbooks.” Meanwhile, many SNCC staffers were listening to new voices: Malcolm X’s fiery speeches and cutting analysis, as well as Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, stimulated discussions about the foundations of white supremacy. The drive for change was also reinforced by popular music like Curtis Mayfield’s “People Get Ready,” while Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” reflected SNCC staffers’ feelings of pride and anger.
How do the students initially respond?

How does Carmichael help them consider and rethink assumptions about language and what is “proper”?

What does this class suggest about SNCC’s approach to freedom teaching compared with traditional academic teaching?

The most important class was “Stokely’s speech class.” He put eight sentences on the blackboard, with a line between, like this:

- I enjoy drinking cocktails
- The people want freedom
- The police cause troubles
- I want to redline to vote

Stokely: What do you think about these sentences? Such as — “The peoples want freedom”
Selma: It doesn’t sound right.
Stokely: What do you mean?
Selma: “Poplees” isn’t right.
Stokely: Does it mean anything?
Milton: Peoples mean everybody. Peoples means everybody in the world.
Alma: Both sentences are right as long as you understand them.
Henry: They’re both okay, but in a speech class you have to use correct English.

(Stokely writes “correct English” in corner of blackboard.)

Selma: I was taught to use the sentences on the right side.
Stokely: Does anybody know use the sentences on the left?
Class: Yes.
Stokely: Are they wrong?
Selma: In terms of English they are wrong.
Stokely: Who decides what is correct English and what is incorrect English?
Stokely: You all say some people speak like on the left side of the board. Could they go anywhere and speak that way? Could they go to Harvard?
Class: Yes — No. Riegroent.
Stokely: Does Mr. Turnbow speak like on the left side?
Class: Yes.
Stokely: Could Mr. Turnbow go to Harvard and speak like that? I want to redline to vote.

Class: Yes.
Stokely: Would he be embarrassed?
Class: Yes...so?
Selma: He wouldn’t be, put I would. It doesn’t sound right.
Stokely: Suppose someone from Harvard came to Holmes County and said, “I want to register to vote.” Would they be embarrassed?
Selma: No.
Stokely: Is it embarrassing at Harvard but not in Holmes County? The way you speak?
Milton: It’s inharied. It’s depending on where you come from. The people at Harvard would understand.
Stokely: The people at Harvard should help teach us correct English.
Alma: Why should we change if we understand what we mean?
Shirley: It is embarrassing.
Stokely: Which way do most people talk?
Class: Like on the left.

(He asks each student. All say “left.” One says that southerners speak...)

Jane Stembridge, Notes on Stokely’s Speech Class, Feb.-Mar. 1965, Social Action Vertical File, WHS
When the Voting Rights Act passed in August 1965, it made Black voter registration more feasible and opened the door for creative political organizing, especially in Lowndes County, Alabama. There, the Black population was 81 percent Black but none had been allowed to vote. Across the country, most people assumed that new Black voters would join the Democratic Party, but in the South, the Democrats were the face of white supremacy. In fact, the Alabama Democratic Party’s logo was a white rooster surrounded by the words, “White Supremacy for the Right.” When SNCC raised the possibility of organizing an all-Black, independent political party at the county level as a starting place for building Black political power, local people embraced the idea. SNCC’s Courtland Cox explained, “The Negroes of Lowndes County want a political grouping that is controlled by them. They want a political grouping that is responsive to the[ir] needs.” (Cox, “What Would It Profit a Man?”)

SNCC began working with local residents to form the Lowndes County Freedom Party (LCFP). According to SNCC field secretary Gloria House, “we were helping to equip the people with the information and skills essential to running the county themselves not just as new voters but also as political leaders. We found that a review of African American and African history, giving a strong sense of historical identity, was of immeasurable significance in this process.” (House in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 528) SNCC staffers, including Courtland Cox and Jennifer Lawson, developed political education workshops and materials, including comic books. These materials taught local people who had been excluded from political participation about the roles and expectations of various government officials, encouraging them to see themselves in these positions. In early May 1966, the LCFP successfully nominated candidates and organized enough voters to be placed on the November ballot.

**ENGAGE WITH THE SOURCES: “US COLORED PEOPLE”**

BY JENNIFER LAWSON AND COURTLAND COX

To read “Us-Colored People” and other materials (such as “Sheriff” and “Board of Education”) that Jennifer Lawson and Courtland Cox developed using a comic book format, go to Inside SNCC > Culture & Education > Political & Economic Education.

**THINK ABOUT THESE QUESTIONS:**

What ideas did SNCC emphasize about voting and organizing for political power?

What do you think is significant about their use of the comic book format?

Can you imagine using a similar format to address an important issue today?
Just days later, Stokely Carmichael was elected chair of SNCC, reflecting the shifting mood and changing priorities in the group. This evolution had been accelerated by two major national events that took place just days apart in August 1965—the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the Watts Rebellion. SNCC was openly rejecting philosophical nonviolence and de-emphasizing integration. At the same time, they prioritized self-determination, Black consciousness, and the importance of defining their own history and culture. The organization was beginning to expand its work beyond the South and focus even more on the structural issues that led them into voting rights in the first place.

One of Carmichael’s first acts as chair was to join the Meredith March Against Fear, where SNCC encouraged voter registration and applied the lessons of Lowndes. During an evening speech in Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael gained national attention and galvanized Black people across the country when he named the new mood in SNCC and roared out a demand for Black Power (at the direction of SNCC’s Willie Ricks). He struck a nerve as the supportive crowd thundered back their approval, repeatedly shouting Black Power! Black Power! SNCC’s Courtland Cox explained, “The phrase Black Power was liberating, and the whole concept that we are going to define what is beautiful was liberating.” (SDG, Emergence of Black Power)
While many people saw Black Power as little more than an angry slogan, for SNCC the catalyst was the success of the Lowndes County Freedom Party. But SNCC’s approach was about more than simply electing Black people to office. They rejected traditional American politics and instead emphasized voting for issues, not people. For example, the LCFP developed its platform before nominating candidates, and the candidates who stepped forward reflected the community’s goals. Alice Moore, who ran for tax assessor, announced that she would “tax the rich to feed the poor.” (Alice Moore, SDG)

SNCC’s Black Power was also deeply rooted in the self-reliance and the rich cultural traditions of the rural Black communities they lived and worked in. The organization believed in community-centered economics, politics, education, and culture. Carmichael explained, “our vision is not merely of a society in which all black men have enough to buy the good things of life. When we urge that black money go into black pockets, we mean the communal pocket. We want to see money go back into the community and used to benefit it.” (Carmichael, “What We Want”)

“Lowndes County Candidates Lose, but Black Panther is Strong,” The Movement, December 1966, Civil Rights Movement Archive.

ENGAGE WITH THE SOURCES: “WHAT WE WANT”
BY STOKELY CARMICHAEL, NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, SEP. 1966

When Stokely Carmichael called for Black Power, many politicians and reporters attacked SNCC, claiming that Black Power was anti-white, violent, and reverse racism. Read excerpts of “What We Want,” that Carmichael wrote to explain his thinking and that of many of his colleagues in SNCC.

THINK ABOUT THESE QUESTIONS:

How does Carmichael define “Black Power”?

What does he say about the kind of economics and politics SNCC was calling for when they used the phrase “Black Power”?

What role does he say that whites should play?
SNCC had always been interested in economic issues. Even the seemingly simple step of encouraging someone to register to vote could mean that they might lose their job or their home. Mrs. Hamer was fired and evicted the night she first tried to register. That threat was weaponized against an entire community in 1963 when white officials in Leflore County (Greenwood, Mississippi) ended government food distribution as an attempt to stop SNCC’s voter registration work. Many families desperately needed that food for their survival. Agricultural jobs were declining rapidly. As Bob Moses observed, SNCC was in a battle to register African Americans before they were driven off the land and out of the South. SNCC responded first by raising and distributing food and clothes, and then by connecting economics and voting rights. People who had been reluctant to try to register could easily see the link between “political participation and food on their table.” (SDG, Leflore County cuts off surplus commodities) John Lewis pointed to these economic issues in speaking for SNCC at the 1963 March on Washington: “hundreds of thousands of our brothers [and sisters are] . . . receiving starvation wages . . . or no wages, at all.” (John Lewis, Original March on Washington speech)
SNCC escalated its work on cooperative economics in the summer of 1965. In Mississippi, SNCC organized sharecroppers into the Freedom Labor Union and led the way on a number of cooperatives, including an Okra Co-Op in Batesville and the more ambitious Poor People’s Corporation. These efforts were designed to create jobs and develop skills. In 1969, Mrs. Hamer established the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County, Mississippi, while Charles and Shirley Sherrod helped found New Communities, Inc. in Southwest Georgia. Both projects used the skill of Black farmers to feed people, while providing the independence that came with landowning. Not all these efforts were successful, but they provide insight into the priorities of southern Black people and blueprints for what might be possible. Although New Communities lost its land in the 1970s, the vision and persistence of its leaders, including the Sherrods, prevailed in the long run. After a major court victory, in June 2011 New Communities used a $12.1 million settlement to purchase a 1600 acre plantation where the organization continues to provide leadership and resources for the Southwest Georgia community.

EXPLORE THE SNCC DIGITAL GATEWAY: SNCC’S ECONOMIC & COOPERATIVE ORGANIZING
SNCCDigital.org > Timeline > 1965-1969
Browse the timeline from 1965-1969 and read about these projects and events. What were SNCC staffers and veterans trying to accomplish? What challenges did they face? What can we learn from these efforts that might be useful today?

JUNE 1965
Mississippi Freedom Labor Union founded

JULY 1965
Poor People’s Corporation organized

SEPT. 1966
ASCS (Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service) elections

1969
New Communities formed in Southwest Georgia

1969
Fannie Lou Hamer founds Freedom Farm Cooperative
SNCC was pivotal in popularizing the phrase Black Power and unleashing its powerful energy, but much of what was central to Black Power happened beyond SNCC as Black Power grew exponentially. African Americans intensified their economic and political organizing, accompanied by tremendous cultural energy and creativity. Black students took over Black and white institutions, demanding Black professors and the creation of Black Studies programs. At the time, even HBCUs like Howard University prioritized European music, history, and culture until students rose up and insisted that their schools offer classes on African and African-American history and culture. SNCC staffers founded Drum and Spear Bookstore, which served as a movement space and supported the burgeoning Black Studies programs.

LEARN DIRECTLY FROM SNCC ORGANIZERS:
INTERNATIONALISM & BUILDING INSTITUTIONS
SNCCDigital.org > Our Voices > Internationalism

SNCC staffers were deeply engaged with international issues, whether that meant African and Cuban liberation movements or challenges to the Vietnam War. They also continued to build Black Power, even after leaving the organization. One important effort was the Washington, D.C.-based Drum and Spear Bookstore, which later expanded to include publishing in the United States and Tanzania. The bookstore was a movement center, selling books by and about Black people, while hosting African-American artists and authors. SNCC veterans, including some of those involved in Drum and Spear, were also central in pushing for the Sixth Pan-African Congress (known as 6PAC) to bring together Africans from across the continent and throughout the diaspora. When the gathering opened in Tanzania in 1974, it was the first ever held on the African continent and SNCC veteran Courtland Cox served as the Secretary-General.

How did African Liberation Movements and other international events influence SNCC?

How did Drum and Spear Bookstore and 6PAC continue SNCC’s work and reflect Black Power?

The Book of African Names and “The Call, Sixth Pan-African Congress”
SNCCDigital.org > Timeline > 1968-Present > Drum and Spear Books Founded
The new mood was expressed in traditional African dress and bold music. Songs like James Brown’s “Say It Loud: I’m Black and I’m Proud” reflected and inspired Black Power. Heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali also symbolized the new movement in his joyful self-affirmation. Though Ali paid a steep price for changing his name and resisting the draft, he never backed down. By standing up, he helped represent and encourage the self-definition at the heart of Black Power.

For too many people, negative stereotypes about Black Power interfere with a complex and nuanced understanding of the full range of tactics and thinking that made up the Black Freedom Movement and the ways it energized other movements by marginalized communities. Black Power established that the African-American community would define itself: its values, history, and culture, and maximize collective action on behalf of the Black community.

EXPLORE THE SNCC DIGITAL GATEWAY: SNCC & BLACK POWER
SNCCDigital.org > Timeline > 1965-1969

Browse the timeline from 1965-1969 “Freedom Parties to Black Power” and read about these significant moments. How do you think these events might have influenced or reflected SNCC’s thinking about Black Power? How might you apply SNCC’s strategies or thinking today?

SEPT. 1964  SNCC Delegation Travels to Africa
FEB 1966  SNCC’s Atlanta Project Grows Out of Julian Bond’s Campaign
APRIL 1966  Lowndes County Freedom Organization Founded
MAY 1966  Stokely Carmichael Elected as SNCC’s Chair
JUNE 1966  Meredith March
AUG. 1966  Anti-Draft Protests by SNCC’s Atlanta Project
1968  Drum and Spear Bookstore founded
1969  Jim Forman Delivers Black Manifesto at Riverside Church

Learn more about the Atlanta Project and read their Statement on Black Power at Inside SNCC > Policy Statements > Atlanta Project Statement
Activist insights across generations

In a recent conversation SNCC’s Courtland Cox and two younger activists, Nsé Ufot and Charles Taylor, discussed the importance of a new southern political strategy that centers the thinking and priorities of Black southern communities.

What have you learned? What will you do with what you have learned? How can you share this toolkit and SNCC’s lessons?

**Next Steps**

What have you learned? What will you do with what you have learned? How can you share this toolkit and SNCC’s lessons?

**Share and Inspire**

Working individually or with others, share what you have learned by using media posts or actual posters. What are some of the key points that stood out to you? Share links to important events, people, ideas, and whatever caught your attention.

SNCC organizers breaking the intensity of a winter 1963 staff meeting in the Atlanta National office by singing as a way to strengthen their bonds. They were wearing coats, since SNCC couldn’t afford to heat the office. Photograph by Danny Lyon.
LEARN MORE

SNCC was an extraordinary organization with a rich and extensive history. We hope this toolkit helped introduce you to the ways Black Power was central to SNCC’s organizing. There is much more to learn, and the SNCC Digital Gateway is a great place to continue exploring. You can also find archival materials, bibliographies, lesson plans, and essays at the SNCC Legacy Project Website (SNCCLegacyProject.org) and the Civil Rights Movement Archive (CRMvet.org). Find out more about the SNCC and Grassroots Organizing: Building a More Perfect Union discussion series, including information about and livestream recordings of our in-person events. This toolkit is one of six—please use, share, and look for the others.

Learn more about the series

PHOTOGRAPHS USED

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