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“Attracted by the light but repelled by the heat”: the final years of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) and the turn to the New Communist Movement in the South.

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“Attracted by the Light but Repelled by the Heat”: The Final Years of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) and the Turn to the New Communist Movement in the South

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the final years of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), including the organization's split in 1973. During the late sixties and early seventies, SCEF operated, with its headquarters in Louisville, as an interracial southern civil rights organization that focused on organizing whites in the struggle against racism, oppression, and exploitation. This thesis unpacks SCEF's relationship with Louisville's Black Panther Party and examines the ways in which interracial organizing grew to be more problematic during the turn of the decade with the rise of nationalism, Black Power, and a new attention to the intransigent racism that continued from the 1960s and into the 1970s. This thesis also explores the turn of sixties radicals to emerging "third world" Marxist-Leninist groups that aligned themselves with liberation movements in China, Cuba, and Vietnam.

Key Words

Southern Conference Educational Fund; Anne Braden; civil rights; Black Power; Black Panther Party; interracial organizing; communism

Lay Summary

This thesis focuses on the final years of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), a southern civil rights organization that aimed to organize whites in the struggle against racism. This thesis also unpacks the SCEF split of 1973 and the organization's conflict with the Louisville Black Panther Party during the same year. By unpacking SCEF's final years, this thesis will also explore the New Communist Movement and emerging Marxist-Leninist groups of the South during the 1970s.

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INTRODUCTION

In November of 1973, Anne Braden published a memo to the board, staff, and Advisory Committee of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) in which she attempted to explain her resignation of her position from an organization in which she had now invested over two decades of her time, wisdom, and passion. In the memo, she wrote:

> In my long years of work with SCEF, there has been only one other occasion when I seriously considered leaving the staff. This was last summer, when the SCEF Interim Committee had decided to pursue criminal prosecutions against three members of the Black Panther Party who had kidnapped Helen Greever and her husband, Earl Scott. I knew that such a prosecution violated the deepest principles for which SCEF stood.[1]

Braden's resignation came in the wake of a year's worth of conflict between SCEF and Louisville's Black Panther Party and of multiple internal tensions within SCEF, which resulted in the firings and resignations of longtime staff. Just two short years later, on the heels of a decade with unprecedented growth and success in its mission of getting whites and Black working together for, SCEF had completely ceased to exist, with its members moving on to other organizations—such as Atlanta's October League and the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC)—or instead opting to move away from the public eye completely.

The story of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) is one filled with instances of ostracism, endurance, and resistance. With roots in the New Deal-era southern conference movement of the 1930s, SCEF operated as an interracial southern civil rights organization that focused on organizing whites to work alongside Blacks in the struggle against racism, oppression, and exploitation. SCEF sought to build coalitions between poor and working-class whites and the emerging Black liberation movement, using education as a key tool to highlight discrimination and advancing an alternative media network to uplift the stories of

[1] Anne Braden, "My resignation from the staff," November 1973 in University of Louisville Anne Braden Institute.

those fighting against racial oppression. The *Southern Patriot,* SCEF's monthly newsletter, became the primary vehicle for these stories, disseminating information about segregation, disenfranchisement, and exploitation to otherwise isolated activists all throughout the South and across the nation. Regularly included in the *Southern Patriot* was news of other civil rights organizations. The birth of the sixties brought new, youth-led organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and, a few years later, its largely white counterpart, the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). Members of those two groups worked alongside SCEF to organize both Black and white communities against voter disenfranchisement, segregation, and poverty across the South during the 1960s.

In 1966, SCEF came under the directorship of Anne and Carl Braden, who had both already been active in the civil rights movement for over two decades and had been part of the SCEF staff since 1957. Marked as seditionists for their 1954 decision to purchase a home for a Black family in an all-white Louisville neighborhood, the Bradens constantly faced pressure from both local and federal political leaders who used anticommunism as a way to discredit white support for integration. Both Anne and Carl Braden stood out in opposition to the myth that all southern whites were in support of segregation, and their story inspired a new generation of southern white antiracists who had felt ostracized in their own communities and families for their beliefs.

With many of SCEF's staff leaving the organization by the early 1970s in order to join emerging Marxist-Leninist groups in other parts of the South, the SCEF split serves as an example of a little-explored dimension of social movement history in the years immediately following the 1960s. Despite the legislative successes of the civil rights movement, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, intransigent racism remained all

across the United States, especially in the form of white backlash, in which many whites felt their privilege threatened by advances in civil rights. By the end of the sixties, the Vietnam War continued in full force despite the growth of a massive opposition to it. For many young activists, the war's endurance only highlighted the crushing effects that imperialism, capitalism, and racism had on movements for independence in what was considered to be the Third World. In search of a framework that centered both the anti-imperialist and antiracist uprisings of their era, many 1960s radicals who had begun the decade intentionally non-aligned with any existing leftist ideologies turned to the New Communist Movement, which called for a "third world" Marxist-Leninism that (contrary to much of the older Communist-Party-led communist movement that had looked more to the Soviet Union) aligned itself in solidarity with liberation movements in China, Cuba, and Vietnam, while also emphasizing the antiracist dynamics that had unified the early New Left.[2]

The New Communist Movement played a crucial role in the fracturing of major New Left organizations, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).[3] Yet the history of the turn to New Communism is one that has received very little historical exploration. The central existing secondary source is Max Elbaum's *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che.* While *Revolution in the Air* works to connect the struggles and insights of the New Communist Movement of the 1970s and 1980s to both to the 1960s and to more contemporary

[2] For the purposes of this thesis, I use capitalized "Communist" to refer to the Communist Party-USA (CP) and the New Communist Movement and lowercase "communist" to refer to other strands of communism, including those represented by Marxism-Leninism, as well as for those that identified as communists but not with a particular organization or ideology.

[3] An example of this shift to Third World Marxist-Leninism can be found in the Students for a Democratic Society, which was founded in 1962 with a non-ideological orientation. By the end of the sixties, spurred on by the continuing war in Vietnam, an increasing number of radicals aligned themselves with liberation movements in China, Cuba, and Vietnam. The ideological shift to emerging Marxist-Leninist tendencies eventually fractured SDS in 1969. *See* Kirkpatrick Sale, SDS: *The rise and development of the Students for a Democratic Society* (New York: Random House, 1973).

currents, it does not offer a comprehensive historical analysis of the movement, but instead yields a journalistic, semi-autobiographical account that focuses on insights from an author who was active within the movement itself. Elbaum's book provides a valuable overview of the New Communist Movement but does not analyze movement activity in the South, which came with its own regional dynamics and conflicts.

The entire history of SCEF has also yet to be fully unpacked. SCEF's beginnings and activity throughout the 1950s and early half of the 1960s are well-documented in Linda Reed's *Simple Decency, Common Sense* and in Irwin Klibaner's *Conscience of a Troubled South*; however, neither even begin to address the later years of the organization. Reed painstakingly documents four decades of activity of both the Southern Conference of Human Welfare (SCHW)—the parent organization of SCEF—and SCEF itself, but concludes her examination in 1963, a full decade before SCEF's split. In that span of time, the political landscape became completely transformed by events such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement, and the rise of Black nationalism. These events, among others, had a tremendous effect on the ideologies that aimed to transform and, eventually, take over SCEF.

Klibaner's exploration of SCEF inches closer to the split, with his account concluding in 1966. Klibaner's closing remarks about the SCEF of 1966 highlight the organization's ability to combine various ideologies within its theoretical approach, writing that SCEF was "eclectic in its theory, borrowing freely from others".[4] However, as the seventies unfolded, SCEF's lack of a distinct ideology would only feed the flames of the internal divisions and ideological sectarianism that led to the dissolution of the organization. Because Klibaner's book ends before

[4] Irwin Klibaner, *Conscience of a Troubled South* (Carlson Pub, 1989), 235.

the tumultuous later years of the 1960s and the difficult beginnings of the 1970s, it fails to capture the ways in which SCEF grappled with the struggles of interracial organizing during the rise of nationalism and Black Power. It also does not include a discussion of the intergenerational nature of SCEF, which was supported, at least in part, by the influence of Anne Braden, who (born in the twenties) acted as a mentor for many younger southern activists of the sixties.

In many ways, SCEF is difficult to separate from Anne and Carl Braden, who began their work with the group in the 1950s. The Bradens' relationship and time with SCEF is documented by Catherine Fosl in her biography *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South*. Although Fosl gives limited attention to SCEF's later years, she writes—consistent with Klibaner's view—that the organization's disintegration "devasted supporters around the nation who had seen it as a rare example of unity among social change forces".[5] With its connections stretching across generations and all throughout the South, SCEF makes appearances as an important secondary influence in the histories of several other organizations, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), and the Appalachian Volunteers (AV).[6]

While most of the historiographical work on SCEF has been exclusively focused on its formation and activity during the mass years of the civil rights movement, Kieran Taylor, in his dissertation, "Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement (1967-1981)", connects the SCEF split to the formation of the October League, a New Communist Movement organization headquartered in Atlanta during the 1970s.[7] He gives a

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[5] Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 321.
[6] For a more detailed account of the Appalachian Volunteers, *see* Thomas Kiffmeyer, "From Self-Help to Sedition: The Appalachian Volunteers in Eastern Kentucky, 1964-1970," *The Journal of Southern History* vol. 64, no. 1 (Feb. 1998), 65-94.
[7] Kieran Taylor, "Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement (1967-1981)," PhD diss., (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007).

brief overview of the events leading up to the 1973 split, including SCEF's mounting tensions with Louisville's Black Panther Party and the kidnapping of its executive director, Helen Greever. However, his inclusion of SCEF in his dissertation is used solely as a way to add context to the formations of the October League. While his work helps to situate SCEF as an organization directly affected by the turn to the New Communist Movement, his analysis does little to highlight the uniqueness and history of SCEF as an interracial southern civil rights organization.

Because scholarship involving SCEF's final years is so scarce, this thesis draws heavily on the primary sources created by the SCEF staff during the years surrounding the 1973 split. Among these documents are various reports, memos, and meeting notes from an Interim Committee SCEF established August of 1973 to investigate its with the Panthers in Louisville. The Interim Committee also left behind hours of recorded interviews with staff members that document the varying opinions of what led to the schism. Although these are valuable primary sources, they still fail to paint a complete picture of SCEF's activity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the documents themselves do not offer a satisfying conclusion as to what the final tipping point was in the schism. For the most part, the primary sources include the thoughts of some of SCEF's key leaders, such as those of Helen Greever, its executive director, and the members of the Interim Committee. They also include letters from Anne Braden, who by that time served as an "elder" of the organization and held much of its institutional memory. Braden wrote extensively to the Committee with her own thoughts and guidance regarding the split. SCEF's monthly newsletter, the *Southern Patriot*, documents much of SCEF's outward-facing

activity during this time, framing and contextualizing the internal conflicts that wracked the organization simultaneously.[8]

This thesis offers new insights into this turn to the left among southern radicals coming out of the sixties, who aimed to build support within the working-class for the antiwar movement, women's liberation, and especially the Black freedom movement and organizing used labor. It does so by telling the story of the Southern Conference Educational Fund's final years, picking up from where previous accounts have left off and continuing through to the beginnings of the divergent groups that emerged in SCEF's wake. Chapter One begins with a brief look at the political landscape of the United States in the late 1960s and situates Louisville's and SCEF's social movement activity within the larger framework of New Left politics and ideology. Chapter One also gives some contextual information on major events in Louisville's civil rights history, including the West End Uprising of 1968 and the Louisville Seven Trial of 1972. In Chapter Two, the thesis examines and unpacks the major events leading up to SCEF's split, including the aftermath of the Louisville Seven Trial and SCEF's relationship with Louisville's Black Panther Party. Chapter Two also recounts the robberies and kidnappings of the SCEF staff and analyzes their effects on the eventual dissolution of SCEF.

Chapter Three explores the moment in 1973 when SCEF fractured. It does so primarily by using the documents left behind by SCEF's "Special Committee" that was set up specifically to investigate what led up to the kidnapping and its effects on SCEF's work in Louisville's Black community. Chapter Three also examines the subsequent responses from key members of SCEF's administration, such as Anne Braden and Walter Collins, who became its first Black director after the investigation. A final section discusses the outcomes, implications, and

[8] All primary sources I refer to in this paragraph are held by the University of Louisville Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research, William P. Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Kentucky.

significance of the SCEF split by briefly examining the role of SCEF members in the beginnings of Atlanta's October League and the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC). While the successes of these new organizations were limited, their existence and work stand out in opposition to the commonly held belief, at least in popular memory, that activism withered away in the face of Nixon's "law and order" administration.[9] They also highlight the ever-growing importance of international solidarity in the struggle against imperialism, capitalism, and racism—currents that would gain steam worldwide in the 1980s, manifested most dramatically in the fall of South African apartheid in the late eighties, in part due to the work of such international solidarity movements.

[9] Some historians, such as those whose essays are included in *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan*, argue that movement work continued under the repressive forces of the administrations of both Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, whereas scholars such as Max Elbaum, Catherine Fosl, and Mike Honey argue that there was a decline in membership numbers and a discontinuity in the level of both government repression and larger social backlash it faced, which grew tremendously in the seventies. The other voices that have weighed in are those who have been active in movement work who suggest that movement work was greatly diminished under this level of repression.

CHAPTER ONE

"SCEF is a Southwide, interracial organization with roots in Southern history that go back to 1938. Over the last few years we have been bringing increasing numbers of white people into the freedom struggle in the South. Our main job is to help poor and working white people to see that their problems are the result of an economic system that puts profits ahead of people—and to realize that they will have to join their strength with that of the black movement to change their situation."

- Southern Conference Educational Fund[10]

In the wake of the sweeping social and political changes of the late 1960s, Louisville was one of many cities still grappling with the effects of the civil rights movement, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the rise of Black nationalism. Violent confrontations with the police and legal repression of movement activists and community leaders marked the shift toward Nixon-era "law and order" policies that dominated the 1970s. During this time, the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), which had been organizing southerners for racial and economic change since the 1940s, cooperated with other local organizations to combat growing political repression. These coalitions are best exemplified through SCEF's work during the trials of the Black Six in 1970 and the Louisville Seven in 1972, in which white local leaders and police targeted Black community leaders through the use of fabricated conspiracy charges. SCEF's activity during this period was an extension of the work the organization had been taking on since its inception as the educational wing of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in 1942.

The Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) was a Depression-era organization that formed in 1938 with a mission to alleviate the widespread poverty and disenfranchisement in the South.[11] The founders of SCHW believed that segregation was the

[10] SCEF, "SCEF Speakers" Pamphlet.
[11] Linda Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), *xxi.*

main obstacle standing in the way of political and economic progress in the region. Drawing from the political ideology of the New Deal, and the climate of social unrest that propelled it, SCHW leaders hoped to form coalitions between poor and working-class Black and white southerners, as well as with other movement organizations, in order to form a more progressive and inclusive South.[12] During the 1940s, SCHW operated solely as a political action organization while SCEF, its educational wing established in 1942, took on the role of reaching out to the white community in order to inform them of race relations in the South.[13] Toward the end of the 1940s, SCHW came under tremendous scrutiny and pressure from opponents for its members' alleged ties to the Communist Party-USA (CP). The post-World War II red scare created an environment of anticommunist hysteria that equated any support for integration as communist. This same hysteria was turned on SCHW, and the intense pressure from the House Un-American Activities Committee caused the organization to fold in 1948.[14]

SCEF continued to operate even after the collapse of its parent organization, and the group continued to face similar anticommunist scrutiny for the entirety of the years it was active. The organization was vulnerable in this regard because it never excluded members or supporters of the CP, and in fact it took a principled stance against doing so. In the 1950s, SCEF was led by James Dombrowski and Aubrey Williams, two white southerners willing to defy both segregation and anticommunism, and it continued its work but now with the singular goal of building support among southern whites for integration.[15] Louisville activists Anne and Carl Braden began their relationship with SCEF when Carl reached out to Dombrowski to learn more

[12] Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 149.
[13] Klibaner, 17.
[14] Reed, *xxiii.*
[15] Fosl, 182.

about the group's work.[16] The Bradens, white Louisvillians who were hired as field secretaries for SCEF in 1957, brought with them a new wave of anticommunist pressure against the organization. That was because in 1954, the Bradens—who had never hesitated to champion CP-led causes—faced sedition charges in their hometown for the decision to buy a home for a Black family, Andrew and Charlotte Wade and their baby daughter, in an all-white Louisville neighborhood. In the highly publicized controversy that followed, he Bradens' defense became an integral part of SCEF's program and was used as a vehicle to highlight the silencing effect of anticommunism on antiracist organizing in the South.[17]

By the time the Bradens took on the directorship role of SCEF in 1966, they had become mentors for a new generation of young activists who took the civil rights movement to new heights after 1960, and SCEF had become a gathering spot for those interested in a wide array of issues, such as civil rights, Black nationalism, and the antiwar movement.[18] Later in the decade, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in 1960 with a strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience to break segregation, turned to Black Power ideologies that called for Blacks and whites to organize in their own communities. In response, many young white activists turned to SCEF and the Bradens for an example of how to organize in the white community. SCEF's projects during this period spanned the entire southern region, with Anne Braden focusing her attention on local campaigns against racism and her work editing the *Southern Patriot* and Carl overseeing SCEF's regional programs.[19] One of these programs

[16] Ibid.
[17] Klibaner, 140.
[18] Fosl, 306.
[19] Ibid.

included a new outreach program in Appalachia, which became a site for coalition building among groups like SNCC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and SSOC.[20]

By the late 1960s, Louisville was bursting with the fervor of youth activists who had been inspired by the civil rights and anti-war movements. Among this fervor was growing support for Black Power ideology, which was not new to Black culture, but became much more widespread after 1965. Many young white radicals readily embraced Black Power but did not really know how to work effectively in coalition building across the color line. That dynamic tension was replicated in many communities, including Louisville.[21] There, as in many places, the idea of Black Power meant something different to each individual and to each organization and was represented by both local activists, grassroots groups, and through local chapters of various Black-led national organizations, such as the Black Panther Party. Local activists, regardless of their organizational affiliations, shared the common goal of bettering their own communities through the acquisition of political, social, and economic agency; however, some were more politically focused while others were more cultural.[22]

Many of Louisville's Black Power organizations grew out of national groups located in other cities. The Louisville Junta of Militant Organizations (JOMO), for example, held ties to the national group in Florida but established its own presence in Louisville through programs that promoted Black unity. Drawing from Marxist-Leninist theory, JOMO ideology was based on the idea that western whites made up the bourgeoisie and that the proletariat class was composed of the globe's nonwhite population. JOMO members did not see Louisville as having a true

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[20] Appalachia was designated by President Lyndon Johnson as a target area in the War on Poverty in 1964, and the region became a site of interest for many activists, including SDS, Highlander, and trade unionists. SCEF's Southern Mountain Project was created to tackle the economic exploitation of the region. *See* Fosl 304.

[21] Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 350.

[22] Tracy K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 181.

coalition of Black militants who were working to build a new nation that was "separate from this brutal racist nation."[23] In October of 1970, JOMO began the process of building this unity through the establishment of the Institute of Black Unity, which operated out of the SCEF office. JOMO's time working within the SCEF office did not last long, however, as their relationship with SCEF broke down over the course of the year because of disagreements about shared office equipment. Such conflicts emerged over resources, and they reflected larger racial power imbalances that were not new. This same kind of disagreement would later plague SCEF's working relationship with Louisville's Black Panther Party and signal the beginning of a longer and more consequential conflict between the two organizations. A young Black married couple named Ben and Judi Simmons were part of JOMO, SCEF, and the local Panther chapter. They became key figures in these conflicts.

The growing acceptance of Black Power ideology within Louisville's Black community inspired fear in many of Louisville's established white leaders, who were part of the national panic surrounding "rioting," violence, and radical forms of assertion. White fear among government officials resulted in acts of suppression against local activists through charges of conspiracy and sedition, such as in the trials of the Black Six and the Louisville Seven.[24] The Black Six trial was the response of Louisville's white political officials to a week-long uprising in the West End of Louisville in May of 1968, one month after Rev. Martin Luther King's assassination in Memphis. On May 27, 1968, the Black Unity League of Kentucky (BULK) held a rally to call attention to the problematic reinstatement of white police officer Michael Clifford, who had been suspended for instances of police brutality. After the speeches had ended and the crowd started to peacefully disperse, several police cars arrived on the scene. After someone

[23] K'Meyer, 208.
[24] K'Meyer, 181.

threw a bottle at one of the cars, the police responded with armed violence against the crowd, which sparked a week-long uprising in the West End.[25]

A few months after the West End uprising, a handful of key figures in BULK—along with more established civil rights leaders—were arrested and charged with conspiracy to blow up an oil refinery during the week of the uprising. These far-fetched charges shocked and upset Louisville's Black community, especially since some of those arrested did not even know one another, and the resulting controversial case lasted almost two years. Their trial was moved to Munfordville, Kentucky, and then back to Louisville, before it ever concluded.[26] On July 7, 1970, Judge S. Rush Nicholson—who would later serve as judge in the Louisville Seven trial—handed out a "not guilty" verdict, citing a lack of evidence.[27] Despite the verdict, the trial sent a strong message to Louisville's Black community: the white establishment of the city would not tolerate Black protest. Throughout the Black Six trial, SCEF worked successfully alongside other local organizations, such as the West End Community Council (WECC), in order to drum up support for the defendants, as well as to fight back against the government suppression of Black militants in Louisville.

The 1972 trial of the Louisville Seven was seen by movement leaders as yet another attempt to silence Louisville's Black protest, in this case the newly founded chapter of the Black Panther Party. The Panthers arrived late in Louisville after local efforts to establish a chapter in the city failed in 1969 when no one could afford to attend a mandatory training in California.[28] Despite the group's late start—the national Black Panther Party had been founded six years

[25] Southern Conference Educational Fund, *Lessons of Louisville*, in University of Louisville Anne Braden Institute.
[26] "Louisville Trial of 6 Blacks is on", *New York Times*, June 28, 1970.
[27] K'Meyer, 197.
[28] K'Meyer, 210

earlier, in 1966—Louisville's Panthers still managed to establish a small but active presence in the city. During the early 1970s, they focused on social programs, such as food distribution and transportation to medical offices and to the local prison, where some were able to visit incarcerated family members. They established a local version of the Black Panthers' famous free breakfast program.[29] The Panthers also worked with other groups in order to eliminate drugs from their communities. However, only months after their start in Louisville, the Panthers became the target of police harassment and suppression during the Louisville Seven prosecution that was reflective of a national climate of government repression.

By the end of the 1960s, even as it received increasing popular attention, the Black Power movement had significantly declined in membership, in large part due to efforts made by the US government to infiltrate and silence Black movement leaders. In 1969 alone, 749 Panthers across the United States were arrested and 27 were killed.[30] National BPP leaders were prime targets of state repression, which was made clear by the arrests of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1968.[31] Government pressure and infiltration only exacerbated existing tensions within the Panthers, and the national group fractured into two opposing factions headed by Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton. The combination of years of repression and internal conflict further reduced already dwindling membership numbers. But the impact of the Panthers went far beyond that of the national leadership and many small Panther organizations, such as the one in Louisville, remained active across the nation throughout the 1970s. These smaller Black Power

[29] K'Meyer, 211.
[30] Elbaum, 66.
[31] Newton's arrest was followed by the Free Huey campaigned, which was broadly supported in the left, as well as by prominent liberals and celebrities. Newton was later freed on bond and his conviction was overturned in 1970. Seale's charges of conspiracy to instigate a riot during the Democratic National Convention of 1968 were eventually dropped, as his case was declared a mistrial in 1969. *See* Elbaum, 66.

groups faced similar types of repression, including the use of the courts as an attempt to silence Black activists as in the Louisville Seven trial of 1972.

On the eve of the Kentucky Derby in May 1972, seven activists—all of them Black and including five members of the Panthers and two associates of the group—were arrested on the grounds that they had crashed a Derby Eve party and forced the guests to undress and hand over their cash and jewelry.[32] Bonds for the Seven were set high, and only four were able to make bail. The three who remained in jail were transferred to a maximum-security prison. At the start of the trial, five of the seven were released because no witness could identify them as being present at the Derby Eve party. Of the other two defendants, Ben Simmons, formerly of JOMO and now chairperson of the local Panther Party, was eventually acquitted but William "Darryl" Blakemore, who had been identified by a witness, was convicted.[33]

Bill Allison, a young white lawyer who worked for SCEF during the late 1960s and into the 1970s, defended the Panthers during the Louisville Seven trial in September of 1972. Allison described the Louisville Seven case as "hard fought," to the point where the prosecuting attorney solemnly slid a photo of Allison's wife and daughter—taken of the two of them demonstrating outside the courthouse on the day of trial—onto his desk as a way to intimidate him before he stood up to give his closing argument.[34] This form of intimidation, along with the packed courtroom and on-going demonstrations outside the courthouse—both in support of and against the Panthers—point to Louisville's white community's unease with the growing Black Power activity within the city, as well as at the support found within movement organizations, such as SCEF, and other local community leaders.

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[32] K'Meyer, 211.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Conversation between author and Bill Allison via Zoom, February 6, 2021.

The Panthers saw their charges as a form of targeted harassment by the police, part of the backlash they received for their actions against drugs in their community. Laird's Tourist Home, site of the Derby Eve Party, was well-known for its connections with Louisville's drug world, so the implication that the Panthers—who had been public about their anti-drug stance—would be frequenting the area left a false impression about their stance on drugs. When reflecting back on the trial, Allison remarks that Blakemore—who had once had connections with Louisville's drug world but eventually joined the Panthers in order to fight against the harm he had seen perpetrated on his community—became a scapegoat in the Louisville Seven trial.

During the trial, SCEF worked to distribute flyers, pamphlets, and other forms of information to Louisville's white community in order to put pressure on the judge to dismiss the charges against the Panthers. During this period, Anne and Carl Braden also began forming what became in 1973 the Kentucky Alliance against Racist and Political Repression, a branch of the national organization that coalesced from the Free Angela Davis movement of earlier in the decade.[35] Like the Bradens and like Davis herself, many of those activists had some background in the CP, or with CP-led causes and leaders. The Bradens also campaigned in Louisville and other parts of the South against the repression of Black activists.[36]

Although the bond between SCEF and the Panthers remained strong during the trial, the relationship deteriorated soon after, which played a crucial role in the eventual dissolution of SCEF in 1973. The tensions in Louisville between SCEF and the Panthers are examples of conflicts that were happening across the entire nation amid increased disillusionment with the "establishment" and the repression of activists. Across the nation, many antiwar and antiracist activists grew with the establishment's resistance to change, as well as with the increased

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[35] "About Us", The National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, https://naarpr.org/about/.
[36] K'Meyer, 213.

government repression of Black activists through arrests and infiltration of movement organizations.[37] As SCEF entered a new decade, its members were forced to grapple with a changing political climate marked by large-scale government infiltration and repression, which significantly reduced the membership of movement organizations. The new decade also demanded that activists respond to growing nationalist sentiment in the Black freedom movement, which provided new difficulties for the predominately white-led SCEF. Although the conflict between SCEF and the Panthers cannot be attributed to one simple factor, these dynamics acted as barriers to effective Black-white coalition building during the early 1970s.

[37] Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* (New York: Verso, 2018), 36-27.

CHAPTER TWO

"In the civil rights era, if there was anything that people underestimated, it was probably the extent to which, once things changed to a certain point, there would be tremendous resistance to them changing any further. What that would leave us with is a revolution that was only half finished…So what happens when you stop halfway?

- Blaine Hudson[38]

Framed by an external conflict with Louisville's Black Panther Party and internal struggles that later divided the organization, 1973 proved to be a watershed year in SCEF's history. While 1973 was not the first time SCEF had ever engaged in a dispute with another organization—members of SCEF continued to deal with the consequences of the JOMO conflict months later—it marked the first time that SCEF involved the police in movement affairs. Prior to the Panther conflict, SCEF members had relied on the counsel of Black leaders, including those on SCEF's board and within the community, while navigating disagreements with other organizations. This strategy was not always successful, as seen by the JOMO conflict, which had not yet been completely resolved by the early months of 1973. The decision to use the state in a movement conflict was also significant in that white leaders of SCEF, including Executive Director Helen Greever, made such a weighty decision without first consulting SCEF's Black leadership.

SCEF, which was founded and primarily staffed by whites throughout its history, placed a significant emphasis on consciously working alongside Black leadership, whether that be through its board or through coalitions around specific projects. However, following the exodus of whites from SNCC and Stokely Carmichael's call to "organize your own," increasing number

[38] Catherine Fosl and Tracy K'Meyer, *Freedom on the Border: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 224.

of whites were drawn into SCEF. By the 1970s, SCEF was primarily composed of whites, aside from a handful of Black leaders and board members. SCEF's presence in the West End, then, was seen by some in the Black community as an instance of white organizations attempting to co-opt the movement from Black leaders, and that "competent Blacks have become helpless appendages and captives rather than full-pledged partners in alliances."[39]

At the start of the Louisville Seven trial in the fall of 1972, SCEF and the Panthers had established an unwritten set of guidelines that outlined how the SCEF office space was meant to be shared. Among these policies was an agreement that the Panthers could occupy one room of the SCEF office and could have access to any of the office equipment that they wished to use, including SCEF's printing press and typewriter.[40] When reflecting back on this relationship a year later, Helen Greever, SCEF's Executive Director, noted that the relationship as it was initially established was already problematic, as there was "very little basis for a truly reciprocal relationship" due to the fact that SCEF consistently offered their resources to the Panthers while, at the same time, constantly attempting to prevent the Panthers from overstepping the bounds of their agreement.

A turning point in SCEF's relationship with the Panthers came in the form of Ben Simmons' resignation as Chairman of the Kentucky Political Prisoners Committee (KPPC) in January of 1973. The KPPC, which was developed mainly by SCEF administrators Helen Greever and Mike Welch, aimed to fight against individual cases of political prisoners, such as Blakemore of the Louisville Seven. The Prisoner-of-War Committee, which was developed by the Panthers, believed that *all* Black prisoners were political prisoners—so the fight was not against individual cases, but against the entire prison system. Simmons, who had been chairman

[39] Black Community News Communique, May 10, 1973.
[40] Helen Greever, Letter to Community, June 15, 1973, 2.

and one of the founding members of the KPPC, could not resolve the contradictions between the two organizations, and he ultimately resigned on January 26, 1973, the night before the statewide conference on political prisoners.

Simmons, in addition to serving as chairman of the KPPC, was a prominent leader in Louisville's Black Panther Party and had worked with SCEF as a member of both JOMO and the Black Committee for Self Defense.[41] However, immediately following his resignation from KPPC, Simmons instructed the Panthers to move out of the SCEF office, severing the physical ties between the two organizations. Simmons believed that the Panthers had grown too dependent on SCEF, arguing that there were "no ideological ties or programmatic" unity between the two organizations. This position represented a tremendous change from only a few months earlier, when both organizations saw themselves as working together toward the common goal of freeing political prisoners and ending police brutality during the Louisville Seven trial. At the same time that Simmons was growing distant from SCEF, he was also moving away from the CP, which by 1972 some SCEF staff members—including Greever, its director—openly embraced. Ben's wife Judi Simmons, on the other hand, was moving in the opposite direction, toward the Party and SCEF and away from the Panthers, a group she would formally quit in February of 1973.[42]

This period of hostility reached a climax on April 6, 1973, when Ben Simmons apparently entered the SCEF office and robbed staff of $900 at gunpoint. The following night, SCEF was again robbed—this time of typewriters, folding machine, a postage meter, a copying machine, a lamp, and some petty cash.[43] Greever theorized that the robbers, who were never

[41] Judi Simmons interview with Special Committee, 1973.
[42] Judi Simmons interview with Special Committee, 1973.
[43] Greever, June 15, 1973, 3.

decisively identified, used a staff member's key to enter the building and tied up the woman on guard at gunpoint before removing most of SCEF's equipment.[44] The Panthers never claimed responsibility for the robberies and instead credited them as the unauthorized actions of individual members. However, Judi Simmons believed they were planned attacks on SCEF, an organization that the Panthers saw as an "easy target," she said later, due to the common belief that SCEF would not retaliate or involve the authorities.[45] While the extent of organized premeditation is unclear, the situation resembled closely that of JOMO, in that both JOMO and the Panthers saw SCEF equipment as their own since, in their view, SCEF and its equipment "did not belong in the West End."[46]

On April 17, 1973, Greever addressed a memo to Michael Clarkson, who took on a leadership role within the Panthers during Simmons's absence, with the hopes of organizing a meeting between the two groups in order to resolve the conflict at hand. In the memo, Greever stressed the urgency of the situation, which had only been intensified by the recent robberies, and she noted that SCEF had the responsibility to protect its own staff. Greever's memo to Clarkson marks a significant shift in the ways SCEF had traditionally approached conflict, as in her conclusion, Greever threatened to involve the authorities, saying that an escalation of the present situation would leave SCEF with "little choice" but to call the police.[47] This development points to the increased severity of the conflict, in which the danger no longer just involved the loss of property, but the potential loss of life. Clarkson never responded to Greever's invitation to meet, but the situation between the two organizations reached a boiling point just a few short weeks later.

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Judi Simmons interview with Special Committee, 1973.
[46] Helen Greever letter to community, June 15, 1973.
[47] Helen Greever memo to Michael Clarkson, April 17, 1973.

On April 24, 1973, Ben Simmons, according to later reports given by SCEF staff, arrived at the SCEF office with a gun and threatened to kill his now estranged wife, who was inside the office. After several failed attempts to defuse the situation, Judi Simmons, Helen Greever, and Mike Welch—with the assistance of SCEF lawyer Bill Allison—made the decision to sign a mental inquest warrant against Simmons, which incarcerated him in Central State Hospital for nearly a month. They maintained that their desire to ensure the safety of both Ben and the staff motivated their decision to pursue such a warrant. Judi Simmons and other SCEF staff believed that involving the police could result in the murder of Ben; however, they also feared that if the situation escalated any further, the lives of the Louisville office staff would all be at serious risk. In her interview with the Special Committee, Simmons said that she and other SCEF members took out the warrant "to help [Ben Simmons], not to get rid of him or anything like that."[48] Strangely, perhaps, neither Judi nor any others in SCEF mentioned then or later the issue of domestic violence she seems to have faced, even though the organization would have been surrounded by the coalescing currents of the women's liberation movement.

The decision to take out a mental inquest warrant triggered a harsh backlash from the Panthers, the wider Black community, and a handful of SCEF board and staff members. A few weeks after the signing of the warrant, the Panthers published a leaflet that criticized SCEF's decision to arrest, hospitalize, and finally transfer Simmons to Central State. This leaflet highlights the Panthers' view of SCEF as a white organization that used its connection with the oppressive forces of the state in order to get rid of a Black community leader through incarceration. This assertion equated SCEF with the increasing forces of state suppression in

[48] Judi Simmons interview with Special Committee, 1973.

which U.S. and local government officials used law enforcement and the courts to incarcerate Black leaders as a way to fracture Black led movement groups.

SCEF would not hear from the Panthers again until May 24, when Michael Clarkson and Herb Jones entered the SCEF office and allegedly demanded from the staff $29,000—one thousand dollars for each day Simmons had been incarcerated in the mental institution.[49] Coincidentally perhaps, Simmons was released from Central State the following day. The next week, nearly all of SCEF's board and staff met in Louisville to decide what to do about the situation. At this meeting, disagreement arose over the role of the state in the current situation. Although no one was yet in favor of prosecuting the Panthers, many questioned what SCEF should do if the police were to approach the organization about the situation. Anne Braden later recalled being in the minority during this discussion, as she believed that under no circumstances should SCEF involve the state in the conflict.[50] Although the discussion never reached a resolution, the question of whether a movement organization should ever involve the state in a dispute with another movement organization, especially when the former was white-led and the latter Black-led, would act as a divisive factor in the later SCEF split.

In the same meeting, the board and staff worked together to draft a letter to the community that explained the events from the SCEF staff perspective and asked for the advice of other community leaders. In the letter, Greever reaffirmed SCEF as an interracial organization committed to organizing whites in the struggle against racism. She also recounted the organization's relationship with the Panthers and emphasized that the hostility from the Panthers

[49] According to Greever's June 15 letter to the community, the SCEF administration refused to pay this ransom, as they believed they had attempted to resolve the conflict through Greever's memo to Clarkson in mid-April. While Greever argued that Ben's situation was being used by the Panthers as an excuse to attack SCEF through the demand of money, the Panthers saw the attempt as a way to force SCEF to release Ben from the institution.
[50] Anne Braden, August 26, 1973.

increased "with no cause on [SCEF's] part."[51] According to Greever, this hostility was motivated by the Panthers' belief that SCEF was a white organization and therefore did not belong in the West End. When SCEF's headquarters moved to Louisville's West End in 1966, the area consisted of both Blacks and whites. After the West End uprising of 1968, however, many whites and white-owned business fled the area, and the West End became a predominantly Black area. This demographic shift only contributed to the growing strains on interracial organizing in the early 1970s.

Greever cited the SCEF office's location, along with the idea that the Panthers had been infiltrated by an undercover government agent, as the cause for the breakdown in SCEF's relationship with the Panthers. During the 1970s, many movement organizations were infiltrated by undercover police agents as a way to create internal conflict, and this became a popular theory among many of SCEF's staff despite little evidence of any such agents in SCEF. The end of Greever's letter called for aid and advice from the community, in hopes that SCEF and the Panthers could reach unity on common goals in order to bring together "movements for justice, freedom and peace."[52]

SCEF never achieved this point of unity with the Panthers, as only a few weeks later, three members of the Black Panther Party kidnapped and held Helen Greever and her husband Earl Scott hostage. According to Greever's retelling of the evening, the Panthers tied up both Greever and Scott and forced them to lie face down on their living room floor while they asked Greever a series of questions about SCEF's finances. The three Panthers eventually directed the two into separate cars in which they were driven around Louisville for a couple hours before ending up at a second location. Throughout the entire morning and afternoon, Scott had

[51] Greever, June 15, 1973, 2.
[52] Greever, June 15, 1973, 4.

complained of his heart condition, which was rapidly worsening due to his inability to take his medicine. Scott was eventually able to convince one of the Panthers that he might soon die without his medicine, and the two were eventually released and taken by a rescue vehicle to General Hospital. At General Hospital, Greever and Scott managed to contact the SCEF office to report that they were safe. Later that night, the couple went with SCEF lawyer Bill Allison to the police, who assisted them in the process of taking out warrants for kidnapping against the three men.

Following the kidnapping, SCEF leaders called for an Interim Committee meeting, in which the SCEF board and staff voted almost unanimously in support of potentially prosecuting the Panthers on kidnapping charges.[53] It was clear from this vote that the SCEF board, with the exception of a few dissenting figures—among them Anne Braden—had decided that the state *could* be used in a conflict between movement organizations, especially if the life of a staff member was threatened. Braden, who had been out of town and unreachable during the kidnapping and the Interim Committee meeting, arrived back in Louisville on July 9 and was distressed to find an organization that had arrived at what she considered a disastrous resolution.

In order to halt the charges against the Panthers, Braden quickly worked to organize a meeting with Walter Collins, another SCEF leader who also fervently opposed the prosecution. Collins, a Black activist who had previously been jailed for draft resistance in a case SCEF championed, had years of experience in building Black-white unity amongst workers in the South.[54] He was the son of Virginia Collins, a long-time civil rights activist in New Orleans who was influential in the Republic of New Africa (RNA) and the Women's International League of

[53] Anne Braden letter of resignation, 16-17.
[54] As a member of the SCEF staff, Collins had worked within the Masonite Corporation in Lauren, Mississippi, where he organized a large-scale woodcutters strike.

Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Because of his years of experience and his "sensible" demeanor, Collins was well-respected by many members of the SCEF board and staff.[55] Braden and Collins then set out to convince Helen Greever of the need for an expanded Interim Committee meeting in August that would more directly analyze the conflict and the decision to prosecute the Panthers, a process to which she reluctantly agreed.

By the time that the SCEF board and staff met in Birmingham in early August, the situation had mellowed enough to allow the SCEF board members to more rationally discuss the kidnapping, and they eventually decided to drop the charges, allowing for the release of the two Panthers who had been arrested. At this same meeting, the board decided that it was necessary to create a Special Committee, to be led by Walter Collins. The committee would investigate the events leading up to the kidnapping in order to find a cause for the deterioration of the relationship between SCEF and the Panthers.

During the course of the investigation, Anne Braden published a letter to the members of the Special Committee members that reflected upon the first Interim Committee meeting. In it, she described the guilt that she grappled with after Greever and Scott had been kidnapped, writing:

> I remembered what had been said in that June Louisville meeting—that if someone was killed, it would be the fault of people like me who said nothing. Well, no one had been killed yet—but people had been kidnapped, and could have been killed—so was it my fault? I was not sure it was—but I was not sure either that it was not.[56]

By accepting her own guilt over the situation and continuing to stand by her stance, Braden's letter reveals how strongly she was opposed to the prosecution.

On September 28, after a month of investigations involving multiple recorded interviews, the Special Committee published an update on the situation. The Special Committee concluded

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[55] Conversation between Tom Gardner and author via Zoom, February 2021.
[56] Anne Braden, August 26, 1973, 4.

that from an organizational perspective, the conflict between the Panthers and SCEF had come about as a result of police agents exacerbating what investigators saw as objective conditions within the organization. Some of these conditions included "the contradiction between the fact of the SCEF house being the headquarters of a region-wide organization vs. the needs of local community radicals; the inevitability of conflict between an interracial organization like SCEF and a nationalist organization like the Black Panther Party; and the advancing decay of capitalist society in the United States."[57] On the other hand, the Panthers rejected the idea that there were police agents in SCEF and viewed the conflict as "a result of SCEF administrators and the Communist Party." The Panthers saw the situation as an instance of a white organization attempting to organize in the black community and intervene in the political and personal lives of Black radical leadership, specifically that of Ben Simmons.[58]

After the release of the initial findings, the Special Committee reconvened in early October to complete the investigation and put together a conclusive statement of findings to be presented to the SCEF Board. This Statement of Findings was written and published by Walter Collins in October of 1973. Collins began the statement, which relied heavily on his own experiences during the conflict, by concluding that despite significant investigation, the Committee was unable to support the theory that a police agent had infiltrated either organization. Collins saw the police agent theory to be a very "grave" threat and warned of the dangers of relying on the theory:

> On the other hand, it is important to recognize that one of the favorite tactics of government infiltrators is to accuse others of being agents—thus arousing suspicions which serve to undermine the confidence and camaraderie of the movement. This is an especially dangerous ruling class tactic because it is almost never possible to prove or

[57] Progress Report on the Special Committee of the SCEF Board, August 17-September 3, 1973, 2.
[58] Progress Report, 3.

> disprove such a charge. It can place a cloud of doubt over the work of the most dedicated activist. And this doubt can serve to obscure very real and vital political issues.[59]

For many members of the SCEF board and staff, the current situation was strikingly similar to the JOMO conflict. The most crucial difference in the two situations, however, was SCEF's willingness to use state power as a way to settle the dispute with the Panthers, which the organization had refused to do during the JOMO conflict. In the Statement of Findings, Collins also argued that the descriptions leaders gave of SCEF shifted significantly between the two situations. During the JOMO conflict, correspondence from Anne Braden highlighted the "predominantly white reality of SCEF and its special responsibility," which was to organize other whites against racism. However, Greever's June letter to the community stressed the "interracial aspect" of SCEF and "castigates the Panthers for viewing SCEF as white."[60]

Collins saw the incarceration of Ben Simmons in particular as the breaking point in the relationship between SCEF and the Panthers. He wrote, "short of murdering Ben, I know nothing worse that SCEF could have done to Ben." Simmons's incarceration re-exposed him to the drugs he had been working to remove from his own community, as well as made him a "marked man" in which police, or any other person with a vendetta against him, now would be able to justify violence toward him due to the fact that he had been institutionalized. He wrote:

> I cannot understand how white people sensitive to the racism and racist history of this society could send the most visible black political activist in Louisville, Kentucky to a mental hospital and not understand how black people who knew and worked with him could only see this action as a modern-day version of an old traditional method of white people.[61]

Toward the end of his findings, Collins discussed SCEF's relationship with the CP, a matter which would become a major point of contention with Anne and Carl Braden and a few

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[59] Walter Collins, Special Committee of SCEF's Board and Staff, A Statement of Findings, 1973, 3.
[60] Collins, 6.
[61] Collins, 28.

other leaders in SCEF. From Collins's perspective, SCEF had become almost synonymous with the CP in Louisville. For this reason, he concluded that there was no SCEF program in Louisville but instead a "Communist Party program that functions out of the SCEF office." Collins ended by arguing that the Panthers' conflict was never with SCEF, but with the CP and that "as members of SCEF we should demand that they face their criticisms and take their blows as members of the Communist Party not as members of SCEF."

These attacks against SCEF's association with the CP would take on significant consequences in the weeks to follow, in which the SCEF board and staff would eventually vote for the resignation and firing of any SCEF staff who had close associations to the CP. In the final months of 1973, much of SCEF's correspondence and meeting time was dedicated to discussing the role of the CP in its ranks. However, these discussions often obscured those regarding race, and the SCEF staff was never able to fully grapple with how their relationship with the Panthers deteriorated.

CHAPTER THREE

"People felt back in the sixties and early seventies that we could really change this country. I mean, you really had a feeling that we could do it and were gonna do it… You're talking about some very hard times. I mean, marriages broke up. People went to jail. People died. It was very difficult times… I think what people did was the most important thing in the world… And I wouldn't have changed anything."

-Bill Allison[62]

Following the release of the Special Committee's Statement of Findings, the SCEF board and staff met over the weekend of October 19, 1973, to discuss how the organization should move forward. Much of the discussion was centered around the influence of the CP within SCEF, and members of SCEF that openly affiliated with the CP—Helen Greever, Jan Phillips, and Judi Simmons—came under intense scrutiny from other members of the board. In a series of motions that Anne Braden would later condemn as red baiting, the three women were removed from their positions on the SCEF staff. The outcomes of the October meeting triggered a landslide of events that eventually signaled the dissolution of SCEF by the mid-1970s.

Since its very first years of activity, SCEF had carried the reputation of being a "communist group" because it allowed CP supporters and members to participate. This charge gained steam later because of the organization's association with the Bradens, who had been branded as communists for their dedication to ending segregation in the South. The decision to include Communists—and those affiliated with other strands of Marxism—in SCEF was partly because of its history within the Popular Front of the 1940s, in which the CPUSA had organized alongside Black workers and leftist groups against racism, fascism, and capitalism.[63] However, Cold War anticommunism and government suppression largely obliterated CP membership, and

[62] Bill Allison, interview by Catherine Fosl, *Anne Braden Oral History Project,* June 23, 1991, https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt769p2w4562.
[63] Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 117-118.

many civil rights groups purged CP members from their ranks in an attempt to evade FBI harassment.

SCEF leaders, on the other hand, saw the discussion surrounding Communists in civil rights groups as one that distracted from the real issue of the South: segregation.[64] The Bradens, who often worked closely alongside CP members on CP-led projects, never answered the lingering question of their allegiance to the Party, arguing that the question of one's CP membership was often used as a way to "legitimate or de-legitimate political action."[65] Despite the organization's inclusion policy, many members and leaders fell prey to a similar issue in the conflict with the Panthers. Instead of focusing on how to confront the difficulties of interracial organizing, much of the discussion surrounding the Panther conflict was dedicated to the role of the CP in SCEF.

Internal struggles within SCEF regarding the Communist Party were a small example of a larger shift from the Soviet-aligned Communist Party USA (CPUSA) toward emerging Third World liberation Marxism-Leninism groups. The CPUSA, for its "seemingly half-hearted" support of global liberation movements and unwavering allegiance to the Soviet Union, was largely unimpressive to a new generation of radicals.[66] Despite remaining the largest socialist organization in the United States with a significant Black participation, the CPUSA was, according to Max Elbaum, "hostile to all expressions of African American radical nationalism" during the 1970s, which further alienated younger, more militant radicals.[67] The CPUSA, for these reasons and others, largely missed out on connecting with the new generation of sixties

[64] When a Communist ban was proposed in a SCEF board meeting, SCEF leader Jim Dombrowski pointed out the ways in which red-baiting forced attention away from the violence of segregation. *See* Fosl, 230.
[65] Fosl, 334.
[66] Elbaum, 48.
[67] Elbaum, 49.

radicals, and many turned to Marxism-Leninism groups instead.[68] In SCEF, similar tensions manifested themselves in the trial-like atmosphere of the October Interim Committee meeting, in which SCEF'S association with the CP, via a handful of its members, became a sticking point for dissent and contention.

By the end of the decade, sixties protests, including both civil rights protests and the growing resistance to U.S. imperialism and capitalism, had transformative effects on the political landscape. A new generation of radicals, who hailed from poor and working-class backgrounds, felt a sense of solidarity with liberation movements in countries like China, Cuba, and Vietnam and critiqued the U.S. government for its involvement in suppressing these movements. The protest era of the late 1960s saw a surge in membership of youth-led movement groups, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which saw its ranks swell from 30,000 members in 1967 to nearly 100,000 in 1968.[69] Although the organization self-consciously did not take on a particular ideology at its inception, its members were increasingly influenced by interweaving strands of antiracism, anti-imperialism, and anticapitalism, and many of these new radicals within SDS turned to emerging Marxist-Leninist (ML) tendencies as a guiding philosophy. However, ML factions often conflicted, and divisions over allegiances to opposing ML groups drove a wedge in the organization in 1969. By 1970, the majority of members had already moved on from the organization, and SDS completely dissolved.

Movement groups did not operate in isolation from one another, and SDS's demise had a lasting impact on several other organizations, including the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). Although SSOC was short-lived, only operating from 1964 to 1969, it had a tremendous influence amongst progressive whites on southern college campuses. Born out of the

[68] Elbaum, 50.
[69] Elbaum, 69.

work of SNCC's outreach to white students and from the involvement of whites in Nashville's public accommodations movement, SSOC created a network of young white activists who looked to the Black student-led freedom movement as inspiration. SDS, which had prominently focused on organizing within northern campuses, viewed SSOC as a vehicle to expand its programs in the South. The motivation to gain influence in the South was in part generated by a desire to win support for the internal divisions that wracked SDS, and both of the competing ML factions within SDS worked to infiltrate the ranks of SSOC for this reason. In this sense, the factional divisions seen in SDS were thus replicated in SSOC, which only worsened existing internal tensions that led to the organization's collapse in 1969.[70]

While SCEF remained active longer than some of its contemporary movement groups, it was not immune to the sectarianism that plagued the beginning of the new decade, and a handful of SCEF participants had already lived through similar conflicts in other groups. Following the release of the Special Committee's final report, the SCEF board and staff quickly reconvened in Louisville. It was at this October meeting that, as Bill Allison later reflected, "all hell broke loose."[71] While the meeting began fairly innocuously, with Carl Braden discussing the importance of fundraising in the South, the weekend took a turn the following day when those in attendance began to discuss the recent crisis in SCEF. In the Panthers' view, SCEF's relationship with the CP played a crucial role in the way that each group viewed the motivation behind the kidnappings and the robberies. While both the kidnapping of Greever and Scott and the decision to incarcerate Ben Simmons were acts of violence, the Panthers argued that the acts of violence

[70] Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
[71] Bill Allison conversation with author via Zoom, February 14, 2021.

that they committed were directed against the CP and not SCEF. This view met "strenuous objection" from those in attendance.[72]

By the end of the second day, the meeting reached its breaking point when the question arose of whether Helen Greever, Jan Phillips, and Judi Simmons should continue in their current positions. This question sparked a heated debate, with Carl Braden (who had left the directorship of SCEF in 1971 but remained on the board) characterizing the discussion as "red-baiting and scapegoating" and threatening to leave SCEF completely if the three women were fired.[73] He, like a handful of others in SCEF, saw the purging of those affiliated with the CP as a way to avoid assuming responsibility for the decision to incarcerate Ben Simmons and for the prosecution of the three Panthers that had kidnapped Greever. Braden's threat to cut himself off from the organization to which he had given so many years ultimately did not have a major effect on the results of the meeting, however, as it was eventually moved and seconded to fire Jan and Judi. However, this same motion was almost immediately tabled to be revisited at a later time.

The next morning, the discussion continued, and a participant suggested that SCEF should create a co-directorship between Collins and Greever, an idea to which Collins appeared amenable. However, Greever refused, as she "didn't think that there could be unity with this coalition administration."[74] Ultimately, Greever left the SCEF administration not because of a firing, but through a resignation motivated by what she perceived as suspicion and lack of confidence in her from the rest of the board. The group then appointed Collins as the new

[72] October 19-21, 1973 board meeting minutes, 2.
[73] October board meeting minutes, 3.
[74] October board meeting minutes, 4.

Executive Director of SCEF. After a motion to fire Jan Phillips and Judi Simmons generated lengthy discussion, Collins fired both women and the board gave its approval.

The decision to fire Phillips and Simmons, as well as the resignation of Greever, generated new rounds of conflict. In a letter to the SCEF Board and Advisory Committee, the remaining six members of the Louisville office staff, which was composed of a handful of Black and white women, stated that they believed the "forced resigning" of Helen Greever would "prove to be the downfall" of SCEF.[75] To them, Greever's self-admitted inexperience was used against her as part of a larger plot to remove her from SCEF and that "because of her forced resignation, other people who we feel are vital to the organization have also resigned." They also posited that her resignation was planned as a way for the organization to have its first Black executive director, which they criticized as a "very clear case of tokenism."[76] Other members of the SCEF Board were at odds with the events of the October meeting and a handful resigned from the Board in the first few days of November.[77] As SCEF activities continued into the new year, additional letters of resignation poured in from rank-and-file members and supporters across the region, which pointed to the widespread disappointment with the events of the October meeting.

In the wake of the October Interim Committee meeting, letters of confusion and anger arrived from SCEF friends and funders across the nation, who were troubled by both the decision to involve the authorities in movement matter and by the removal of Communists from the SCEF staff. Friends of SCEF from Los Angeles, for example, wrote to the board and staff to argue for the reversal of the firings, saying that "SCEF has projected a vision, a program, and a set of

[75] Louisville office staff, Memo to SCEF Board and Advisory Committee, October 30, 1973.
[76] Louisville office staff, 2.
[77] Among these that resigned were Yvonne Pappenheim and Odella Griffin.

principles that captured the imaginations of people all over the country. In so doing, it won from many people a commitment that goes beyond financial support. And in so doing it assumed certain obligations to the people whose commitment it won.[78]" The Los Angeles Friends of SCEF were only a handful of many activists who were devastated by the SCEF split, as many saw the group as a beacon of interracial and ideological unity in the South. Disappointment over the actions of the SCEF staff in 1973, along with the departure of the Bradens soon after, weakened SCEF's stature within movement organizations and caused significant damage toward the group's sources of funding.

Perhaps the most significant backlash came in the form of Anne Braden's resignation from the SCEF staff, which she submitted on October 31, 1973. As the editor of the *Southern Patriot* since 1957 and one of the central leaders of SCEF since then, Braden was a highly respected senior staff member. By this time, Braden was respected both regionally and nationally for her endurance in the face of political attacks and government harassment. Her resignation from an organization in which she had invested nearly two decades of her life was a moment of great tragedy for both Braden and for her supporters far and wide, and the impact of her decision reverberated across SCEF's entire network.

Braden had responded to the events of the October meeting by saying that she felt she had just witnessed a "lynching," a remark that spoke to the emotional intensity of the October meeting and the hysteria within the SCEF board and staff.[79] She elaborated on that response and explained her reasons for resigning in a memo. She began by reflecting upon the other only time she considered resigning from SCEF—the moment in which SCEF decided to prosecute the Panthers. She believed that the prosecution of the Panthers went against everything SCEF stood

[78] Friends of SCEF Los Angeles, letter to SCEF Board and Advisory Committee, 1974.
[79] October board meeting minutes, 4.

for in that it allowed an oppressive force—the state—to act as a mediator in a conflict between movement organizations. Braden's willingness to resign from an organization in which she had poured years of time, energy, and love into underscores the gravity of the question at hand, which was whether the use of predominantly white authorities against Blacks could ever be justified.

Braden's memo echoed the sentiment that her husband Carl had expressed at the October meeting in that she too argued that the removal of Greever, Phillips, and Simmons was just another attempt to solve a conflict via anticommunist scapegoating. In the memo, Braden wrote:

> The problems between SCEF and the Panthers involve the life-and-death issues of the relationships between white people and black people in the movement to tear down the evil society we live in and to build a new one. SCEF historically has made great contributions to the struggle for a new society by meeting such issues head-on. To retreat now to scapegoating is a corruption of all we have stood for.[80]

Braden drew a distinction between the scapegoating of the Panthers and the scapegoating of the SCEF staff, which was that the staff in particular were able to be successfully used as scapegoats because of their affiliation with the CP. If this had not been the case, Braden believed that SCEF would have found an alternate solution to the problem at hand. She wrote that in this way, SCEF had "succumbed to the conspiracy view of the Communist Party, which it has always in the past rejected."[81] Braden's remark that anticommunism played a role in the conflict is significant. If her claims were correct, that stance marked a complete break from SCEF's history, which had always been a history of inclusion of CP members, even when faced with intense scrutiny and pressure from the state and other movement organizations for that very position. It was also a notable departure because it represented what she called "red baiting from the left."[82]

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[80] Anne Braden, "My resignation from the staff", October 31, 1973, 2.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Anne Braden, "My view of recent events in Louisville and the crisis in SCEF," November 1973.

After her resignation, Anne Braden produced a characteristically long set of writings that explained her resignation and reflected upon the last few years in SCEF. Among this writing was a 55-page document that detailed SCEF's relationship with Black organizations in Louisville, including JOMO and the Panthers. Braden drew a connection between SCEF's period of inactivity following the Louisville Seven trial and the non-reciprocal relationships SCEF formed with some of Louisville's Black movement groups. Without that momentous decision to take the mental inquest warrant against Simmons, Braden believed that the conflict between the Panthers and SCEF would have eventually melted away in the same way that the one with JOMO had. At the time, she argued, the decision was justified by the SCEF staff as the only option that guaranteed not only the safety of the SCEF staff, but of Simmons as well. However, when reflecting back on the decision, Braden acknowledged that it was insensitive and did nothing to keep him out of harm's way.

Braden believed that the biggest lesson was the answer to the question no one had ever grappled with before: a movement organization, such as SCEF, can never use courts or the police to solve a conflict with another movement organization. This decision, Braden believed, only works to further oppress Black activists. She also wrote that "aside from this, it became apparent that even when SCEF thought it was using the state, *the state was always using us*." Despite Collins' claim that there was little evidence of government infiltration with SCEF, Braden continued to believe that an agent had infiltrated SCEF during the conflict, but she conceded that—as Collins had stated in his Committee Findings—relying on the agent theory minimized SCEF's responsibility for its own shortcomings.

Following Anne Braden's resignation, SCEF—now under the directorship of Walter Collins—met in Atlanta, Georgia, to draft a statement on what he termed the "crisis in the

organization."[83] Most of the letter was a response to Braden's 1974 missive, specifically refuting the idea that there had been "red-baiting from the left." Collins, on behalf of the board and staff, argued that to equate criticism of the CP with red-baiting only worked to "fan the flames" of anticommunism, as it made those within the CP to be above human error and therefore beyond reproach by people who were not communists. He also disagreed that the resignations and firings of Greever, Phillips, and Simmons were part of a Communist purge, arguing that "SCEF is not a political party where such purgings occur." An important distinction in Collins's update regarding SCEF was that he now formally recognized SCEF as a "white organization" that was attempting to create a united front of "left groups and progressive individuals." This was a departure from Greever's description of SCEF, which was that SCEF was an interracial organization that worked to build up support against racism within the white community.

The dialogue between the Bradens and the former administrative staff and Walter Collins and the new administrative staff continued into 1974, during which SCEF entered a transitional period in which the organization was forced to simultaneously grapple with the events of the past year and decide how it should move forward. The former leaders of SCEF, including Anne Braden and the administrative staff, worked to tie up any loose ends from their positions, such as finalizing editions of the *Southern Patriot* and transferring control of SCEF's finances over to the new leadership. The environment within SCEF remained contentious during this transitional period, as many who stayed on continued to harbor ill feelings about the events of 1973. These tensions appeared in many of the subsequent meetings and correspondence between SCEF staff and board members across the entire organization's regional network. As SCEF staff confronted the departure of longtime donors and contentious letters from activists across in the nation, the

[83] Draft Statement on Recent Changes in SCEF, November 23, 1973.

organization became increasingly influenced by members of new Marxism-Leninist groups, the most significant of which was the October League.

By 1974, SCEF was grappling with deep organizational divisions and factions, yet the issues that had divided the members were never clearly stated. As Anne Braden later reflected, many SCEF members had "chosen up sides in the 'split' without totally considering and deciding where they stand on this issue that underlies it all.[84]" In the year following the split, SCEF correspondence was fraught with disagreements, many of which were left over from the October meeting in which Collins became Executive Director and a handful of members associated with the CP were fired or resigned. Among these tensions were frequent accusations of both racism and red-baiting between the former SCEF staff, of many of whom were openly or quietly affiliated with the CP, and a new SCEF staff that was increasingly dominated by those that favored Marxism-Leninism and the emerging organizations associated with Third World liberation.

Throughout 1974 and 1975, the new SCEF staff struggled to find programmatic unity, and floundered with the task of locating funding for an organization no longer associated with the Bradens. As SCEF transitioned in leadership and in membership composition, the staff and board became increasingly composed of members of the October League (OL), a Marxist-Leninist group based in Atlanta. The October League, a product of the merging of Los Angeles's October League collective and the Georgia Communist League, had been launched as a nationwide New Communist organization in 1972. Shortly after its formation, the October League became involved in a seven-week wildcat strike by the Mead Packaging Company in

[84] Anne Braden to the Board and Advisory Committee, "The issue that has divided SCEF: Another look," June 10, 1974.

Atlanta, which gave the Chinese Communist Party-aligned group experience with both labor organizing and broadcasting a local campaign on a national stage.[85] It also increased the October League's Black base in the South, as many Black Mead workers worked closely with the group during the strike. Interracial coalition-building was common across New Communist groups, and the movement saw more participation and leadership than many other New Left organizations during the 1970s.[86]

Although it is unclear from meeting notes the exact number of OL participants active within SCEF during 1974 and 1975, there were a handful who fought for influence within SCEF during board meetings, in which many brought proposals for structural changes that closely aligned SCEF to New Communist groups. The new structure created and proposed by the October League called for SCEF to become a "mass, multinational, membership organization open to anyone who will support its program and pay dues.[87]" These structural changes were proposed in hopes of growing SCEF's membership to include large ranks with local chapters that would work to carry out SCEF programming. Shortly after the resignations of the Bradens, the new staff also moved the *Southern Patriot* to Atlanta, where SCEF members changed its name to the *Southern Struggle* in 1977.

In his dissertation, Kieran Taylor posits that the SCEF split was entirely the product of a takeover by Atlanta's October League in which its members seized on the inner turmoil of SCEF in order to drive out the members associated with the CP.[88] While the motivations of the new SCEF staff are not entirely clear in the correspondence, and in many cases people did not openly identify with any faction, meeting notes and organizational memos during this transitional period

[85] Elbaum 102.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Bob Berschinski, "A Proposal for Structure of SCEF," June 14, 1974.
[88] Taylor, 103.

highlight a clear departure from an era of SCEF that emphasized unity across ideological differences. Later encounters between those involved in SCEF during the time of the split—such as one between Charlie Orrock and Anne Braden in 2003, in which Orrock tearfully apologized for the events of 1973—demonstrate remorsefulness regarding this lack of unity, if not for the takeover of the organization itself.[89]

Although SCEF continued to externally support movement work across the South—such as a miners strike in Harlan County, KY and the efforts of the Woodcutters in the Deep South—the internal workings of the organization never managed to confront and move on from the events of 1973. The work of SCEF leaders, perhaps especially Walter Collins, its first Black director, was dedicated to countering a significant loss of funding and attacks from former SCEF members, who singled him out for "carrying out the instructions of a board that has befouled the shining image that SCEF has borne through the years."[90] SCEF was never able to recover from the overwhelming dismissal of support from its national network. The *Southern Patriot* hemorrhaged subscriptions and SCEF's programmatic work dwindled, which combined with a wave of resignations from board and staff to signal the end of SCEF by the mid-seventies.[91]

[89] Conversation between Catherine Fosl and Charlie Orrock, who saw Anne Braden at a history conference in Memphis in 2003.
[90] Ralph Russel, Letter to the Board of Directors of SCEF, March 18, 1974.
[91] Taylor, 104.

OUTCOMES & IMPLICATIONS

"Not every principle any of us hold to is basic enough to our lives to take this kind of position about. Some can be compromised. But to me there are some that are that basic. One of them is the fight against racism and the commitment to doing whatever is necessary to defy history and build black-white coalitions. I think, this principle is also basic to SCEF—and that if it betrays that, in an effort to survive, its survival will be meaningless because its life will be meaningless from then on."

- Anne Braden[92]

Out of the 1960s, protest movements erupted across the globe, and with them came a host of activists and leaders from a wide array of ideological backgrounds and political experiences. The meeting of so many contrasting views, combined with SCEF's historic lack of a singular ideological framework and its openness to various political perspectives, made the organization a hotbed for dissent among emerging left-wing ideologies of the early seventies. Chief among this dissent were disagreements about the Communist Party's actual and appropriate role and influence within SCEF's ranks. In the 1950s, when the Cold War had gained a new kind of fury that was domestic as well as international, civil rights organizations—especially those in the South—were plagued by red-baiting from both conservatives and liberals, who often equated white support for integration with being communist. In response, many civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP in 1956, took on an anti-communist approach, going as far to purge members of the CP from their ranks, in order to avoid additional attacks and scrutiny from the United States government.[93] However, after the transformative protest era of the sixties, anticommunism became a less powerful tool of government repression. Even as a younger generation of sixties radicals embraced various strands of Marxist ideologies, many remained wary of the Communist Party and those associated with it. "Red baiting from the left" became a

[92] Anne Braden, "To members of special committee of SCEF Board," August 15, 1973.
[93] Fosl, 144.

way to describe that enduring suspicion of the Communist Party, which often manifested itself in attacks from those aligned with emerging Marxist-Leninist groups of the late sixties.

SCEF, on the other hand, stood out prior to late 1973, for the refusal of its leaders to seek out and purge Communist members. Over its entire lifespan, SCEF came under countless attacks for this stance and lost major sources of support—one of these being Eleanor Roosevelt, who separated herself from the organization in 1960 for its alleged Communist ties.[94] Because SCEF refused to ban communists, the battle for civil liberties became another central focus for SCEF members, as leaders were forced to fight for their own participation in the civil rights movement. Securing the right to organize and the right to print movement news in the *Southern Patriot* and in community leaflets were crucial in the building of coalitions across both racial and ideological lines. Although SCEF allowed participation from communists, there still remained forms of anti-communism within its ranks, which deepened ideological tensions and obscured a major underlying issue leading up to the SCEF split—i.e., SCEF's inability to grapple with the difficulties of interracial organizing in the 1970s. Much of the discussion regarding SCEF's conflict with the Panthers was wrapped up in the real or imagined prominence of the CP in SCEF and the ties that a handful of staff had to the Party. When the SCEF board and staff removed only those openly associated with the Party in 1973, they washed their hands of the conflict without ever grappling with the organization's complicity in an act of violence—the use of white authorities against Black activists. They also sidestepped the need to respond to or even comment on other related violent acts such as domestic violence and kidnapping.

From the organization's inception, SCEF members and leaders recognized the power of interracial organizing, as well as—implicitly perhaps—the importance of whites using their

[94] Klibaner, 172.

privilege to organize other whites in the battle against racism. The strength of SCEF always came from the unity between Black and white organizers in the South, and many of SCEF's large-scale projects during the 1950s and 1960s involved battles for both civil liberties and civil rights. When the Black Power movement arose in the mid-to-late 1960s, many Black activists saw all-Black movement organizations as the best vehicle for the struggle against racism. In response, some white radicals began to organize separately from Black activists, with the hope that eventually the two groups could come back together. SCEF took a different approach. While supporting the Black Power movement and the development of all-Black organizations, SCEF leadership under the Bradens saw the formation of all-white groups as destructive to the movement and continued to act on the idea that interracial unity was central to the struggle against racism.

However, by the time SCEF entered the 1970s, the organization was becoming increasingly composed of white radicals, with a mere handful of Black leaders and advisors. Many of these young white radicals had grown into their activism without prior experience with the interracial coalition-building that had been central to SCEF's mission for decades. The overwhelmingly white makeup of SCEF during the early 1970s, combined with a generational gap in movement experience, were central to the organization's conflict with the Panthers. The unwillingness of SCEF members to examine forms of racism within its own ranks created wider internal struggles, which was the unrelenting attacks Walter Collins faced as the organization's first Black Executive Director. Additionally, the hesitancy of SCEF members to criticize the questionable actions of Black radicals in this particular conflict negatively impacted Judi Simmons, a Black woman, as well as the victims of a kidnapping and a series of armed robberies.

The Panthers' use of violence against women was never unpacked fully by the SCEF staff, at least in official meeting minutes and correspondence. The refusal to address violence against women was strange, as influences of the women's movement could be seen in other instances. One of these instances was Jan Phillips's interview with the Special Committee, in which she criticized the committee for how they treated Simmons "as a woman," specifically referring to their expectation that Simmons care for her child and complete a series of interviews simultaneously.[95] Walter Collins, in a memo to the board and Advisory Committee, acknowledged the lack of female representation on the current special committee and invited more women to join.[96] While influences from the women's movement were present during the conflict, they did not reach the heart of the conflict between the Panthers and the women of SCEF, particularly Judi Simmons.

Anne Braden, who remained as the *Patriot* editor and board until the first months of 1974, saw the white makeup of SCEF as its most "fatal flaw."[97] After spending several months attempting to rescue the organization she had led for 16 years, Braden resolved never to spend "another minute of [her] life building something all-white or predominantly white."[98] Her next major project, a new southern network she co-founded in 1975 called the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC), reflected this personal resolution. Braden worked with other members who had left SCEF after its 1973 split to build SOC as a biracial organization with aims to unite a network of organizers in their efforts against antiracism. With

[95] Jan Phillips interview with the Special Committee, 1973.
[96] Walter Collins, "Women on the SCEF Board and Advisory Committee," 1973.
[97] Fosl, 321.
[98] Ibid.

interracial organizing at its forefront, SOC became a vehicle for coalition work that confronted the effects of both race and class in the South throughout the rest of the twentieth century.[99]

Many of SCEF's members joined with other southern activists in the type of labor organizing that was central to the early work of the New Communist Movement. In the early 1970s, the New Communist Movement attracted nearly ten thousand participants. Many of these participants engaged in the process of "proletarianizing," sending members into factory jobs as a way to move the labor movement to the left from the inside.[100] One of the most notable NCM organizations in the South was the October League, which became a leading organization in Atlanta's strike wave of 1972. However, as the 1970s progressed, OL labor activism became increasingly impeded by an "emphasis on party building and ideological rigidity."[101] Although the October League ultimately failed in creating a lasting base within the South's working class, the work of its members—as well as the work of many others in the New Communist Movement—enlarges our understanding of a less visible but nonetheless crucial and increasingly relevant era of Southern social justice history.

SCEF's efforts in the 1970s demonstrate that movement work continued in the face of large-scale political repression and backlash, which runs counter to historical frameworks that argue that movement work, crushed by the government infiltration and suppression, declined in both numbers and influence throughout the decade and into the 1980s.[102] Tom Gardner, a SCEF board member and former chairman of the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), when reflecting back on SCEF's lasting impact, says "SCEF being there and having held its ground through one of the most repressive periods in our country's history, and then being a

[99] Fosl, 324.
[100] Taylor, 59-60.
[101] Taylor, 100.
[102] See n.8 for more details regarding this argument.

source of resource, support, and training for the movements growing up in the South…that's how SCEF really should be remembered."[103] Because much of the organization's work was dedicated to creating and supporting a network of antiracist white southerners, organizing against racism amongst whites in the South did not disappear alongside SCEF. While tragic, the dissolution of SCEF did not mean that its members and supporters faded away into oblivion—in fact, many of them created or joined new organizations, continuing to take up the struggle in new positions across the nation. This continuous striving toward justice exemplifies of one of Anne Braden's reflections of the split:

> I do not think the answer for whites who want to change this society is to retreat into our own "white radical things." I think we have to do more. And I think we have to find ways—even if we fail again and again and must constantly start over—to do it in a joint black-white situation.[104]

New organizations that sprang up across the South throughout the 1970s and 1980s—such as the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC)—are worthy of future study for their dedication to antiracist work but are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Although there have been significant efforts from historians such as Reed, Klibaner, and Fosl, SCEF has largely been sidelined or excluded from most other analyses of Southern civil rights movement history, and the organization's full story through its 1970s experiences has never been unpacked. This thesis makes a start at rectifying this gap in southern social movement history. A deeper look at SCEF's legacy, with all its successes and failures, offers critical guidance for current and future generations of activists and white antiracists. Former SCEF attorney Bill Allison, who remained active in social justice activism in Louisville for decades afterward, serving as both a local alderman and an attorney for the local teachers' union, sees

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[103] Tom Gardner conversation with author via Zoom, February 2021.
[104] Braden, June 10, 1974.

similarities between current movements for racial justice in 2020 and the work of SCEF in the sixties and seventies, reflecting that “the legacy of SCEF now is almost stronger than it was when SCEF died in the seventies.” It is in this sense that unpacking what SCEF managed to achieve, as well as where it ultimately fell short, becomes an increasingly urgent task.