

SNCC 40th Workshop: “Where Are We Today? Issues of Race, Justice, and Peace” (CONT’D)

Session: “Where Are We Today? Issues of Race, Justice, and Peace”

Date: April 2000

Location: Raleigh, NC - Shaw University

Panelists:

[**James Lawson**](#) - Nonviolence Theorist / SNCC Mentor

[**Charles Sherrod**](#) - SNCC Field Secretary / Albany Movement Leader

Comments:

[**Lawrence Guyot**](#) - SNCC Organizer / Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Leader

CONTINUED FROM [PART 4](#)

NOTE: The video continues with a gap. Some dialogue is missing at the beginning.

Lawrence Guyot: ...tonal quality to get a good one going. And all I'm saying is we must consciously understand that we must do both simultaneously. That's all I'm saying, see. And I think the point that was left hanging—what your statement was—what we did in the movement was politicize the movement.

We said, “Jim Lawson’s a good man. We’ll elect him to Congress. We’ll check on him every two years, and we’ll stop teaching this. We’ll stop mobilization. We’ll stop mass political education. We’ll stop supporting the rise of local leadership.” We politicized it.

Now what we’ve got to do is take governance back from the government. That’s what we got to do. And we do it neighborhood by neighborhood.

Audience Comment: This is about whether racism has changed—I think it is really important to note that there has been, I think, some shifts in meaning. And a lot of racist agendas get perpetuated because people do not agree on what words mean, and they don’t agree on what issues mean.

For example, this whole thing about school vouchers, which I think is both an assault on the public school system, an assault on the public sphere of life, and also a way to begin reinstating

class and racial differences. But the reason why this isn't that clear is that a lot of working-class, blue-collar Black people feel exploited, manipulated, and cheated by the public schools, and are therefore perfectly willing to go along with an agenda which poses itself as being democratic, about educational empowerment, so on and so forth, about resentment of arrogant teachers' unions, so on, so forth.

But which, in fact, also has another agenda. I think until we can somehow disentangle this question about meaning and language, there's a lot of racism that's masquerading under facially neutral stuff.

Charles Sherrod: That's what I said had to change. That's what I mean when I said it had to change. Answer another question...I'm trying to answer another question that we haven't forgotten about. And then a question comes up about, did we do right in desegregation of schools? Did we do right in the integration of students? Do we like the results of what we have?

Audience Question: That question—I have asked that question since 1972. I went into the fifth grade from a segregated school in North Carolina. And then I went to college at Central College. And now I'm back in college now, private school, which is Shaw [University], which is basically a segregated school. Which is better? Which is worse? And was the result better?

But I like knowing that if I want to transfer from Shaw and go to [North Carolina] State [University], I can. I think it's a personal choice whether you want to go to a predominantly Black or predominantly white or totally mixed or—but the choice, the option, the freedom to do it—yes, it was worth it.

But I think that the choice—if you want to go to a predominantly Black or dominant white or mixed school or whatever—it's yours. But to have the freedom to do that, to make that choice...

Audience Question: Did you have the choice when you were in high school?

Audience Response: Yes, I could have gone to a private school. And there are schools in North Carolina—many church schools in North Carolina now—that are basically Black, predominantly Black. And if my parents could afford it and could pay for it I could. I do now have the choice. To me that is what it's all about. At one time, we didn't have the choice. There wasn't an option.

James Lawson: May I say something about that? I think that violence, racism, sexism, greed—capitalism and greed, which in many ways are the same thing—have all taught the American people a lot of individualism, rather than teaching us democratic values of community.

The issue is more than an issue of choice. And I can speak as one who had choice all of his life. I have always gone to desegregated schools. I grew up in Ohio. So I'm not talking about whether or not choice is important or not. That was the only thing available to me in Ohio.

I'm talking about the fact that it is the responsibility of a democratic society to have quality education available for every child—whether they live in Ohio or Mississippi or in Guam. And a quality education that is accessible, that helps them to become literate human beings—human beings who are able to tap the resources that are in them to accept life, and to grow in life, and to become life. That, it seems to me, is the fundamental question—literate and human beings.

Capitalism since the [19]60s has directed the educational system of America towards: "Stay in school so you can get a better job." Well, we are not just people who get jobs. We are human beings. We bleed and hurt and cry. We love. We hate. We're human beings.

Education should be about helping to enrich children so that they can take full advantage of the gift of life that is in them.

Audience Member: Let the church say amen.

James Lawson: So that does mean we have to find some ways to help—we, the American people—to develop a sense of community. A sense of democratic community that looks at these issues not from my personal situation only or primarily, but from the point of view of the whole people.

Charles Sherrod: And a system that deals with racism in the school system. Let me see if you can go to your belly, okay? Can you understand why a Black man would not want a white man or woman beating on his children—disciplining his children? Can you understand why a white man would not want a Black man or woman beating on his children?

Audience Response: I wouldn't want nobody beating on my children.

Charles Sherrod: You might say that. But there's got to be some discipline. Now, we can argue over that, but I'm saying why it's easy to accept the stopping of all discipline in our schools. There's got to be discipline in our schools. There's got to be some discipline. Some kind of way. I'm from the old school.

Audience Comment: I'd like to speak from my point of view. I'm a young Black male—and I was in school when you were punished by your teacher. Because I used to get some serious whippings from my teacher with wooden sticks.

And it also curbed the appetite of anybody else in class that would want to act up. Because the teacher had the power to keep them from acting up. Because this is what you're here for. You're here to learn. You're here to do this.

And then on the flip side, I went to school where you couldn't do anything. The teachers' hands were tied. And I see the teachers getting hit with chairs, and all different types of things going on in the public school system that don't need to be there.

But the simple fact is, the discipline is gone. And also the whole community is gone. The breakdown of our community and our people—it takes—it's an old African proverb: "It takes a village to raise one child." And the whole thing is, our whole community is broken down.

Now you see little Black kids walking down the street. Before, you couldn't go down the street and do something wrong without your parents knowing. By the time you got home, you would get three whippings.

You'd get a whipping from the person that saw you doing it, then you'd get a whipping from your pops or your mother when you got home, and then you'd get another whipping from your other parent when they got home. You know what I'm saying?

And that's what happens. And that's what's wrong with our people today, because our kids are so lost and so mad because—"Okay, well now you can't touch me. You're not my father. You're not this. You're not that."

And then here come the parents trying to defend that. But yet they don't understand that we all need to help discipline all the little ones, so when they get older, they understand that it's a community and it's all of us together.

James Lawson: May I say we need to stop bashing our children and young people, because our children and young people have been birthed into this American environment. And they have gained from the environment. No matter where there's a birth, whatever that environment has offered, their values have been taken out of the environment in which they've been birthed.

And if there's violence in the schools, that is because we have a violent society that nobody really wants to deal with. And it's equal to the issue of racism. Racism was a violent institution.

What do you think lynching—who do you think went after escaped slaves? The sheriff. The sheriff, the militia then became the police. Who do you think have been a major vanguard to help keep Black folk in their place, especially Black males—but the police? The system has been, from day one, a violent system. And the children did not learn the violence from the man on Mars. They drank the milk of violence here in the United States.

Which is one of the reasons why you cannot be against racism and then for the Iraqi policy of bombing in Iraq. You cannot be against racism and then be for police forces that are able to batter and torture people in jail or kill them on the street, though they are unarmed. And you cannot be against racism and then for an economy which says that it's fine that some people work for nothing and a few have the wealth from the poor switched over to them.

That's why these issues are interconnected and interdependent. What one of the things that the movement of the [19]60s came to—and one of the reasons for a nonviolent perspective—was to recognize fundamentally human problems are interconnected and interdependent.

And you cannot become myopic people who see race as a kind of a singular task and don't see the way in which the tentacles of racism are everywhere across this nation. And you can't cut one off. You've got to deal with all of them to stop the stuff.

Audience Question: Reverend Lawson, I agree with the broad vision that you have. It's beautiful. I love that vision. I wish everybody could embrace it. Can I take us back to the point where we were before, which was on a smaller scale? Think about a specific school. Think about being in a school at the time of desegregation.

And I've read about communities where, when schools were desegregated one of the big problems, of course, is that the surrounding—the majority society, the white society—finally is forced, kicking and screaming, to desegregate schools.

When they did it, they didn't do it in the best way possible. Usually what they did is they just threw some Black kids into white schools and expected them to deal with the majority culture [indistinct] to respond at all in any kind of reciprocal way.

But that having been done in that bad way, a lot of teachers, both Black and white, would say that some things that had been present in the old schools—maybe not lost in the whole Black schools—had been lost as far as teachers supporting students, letting them know that they were loved as well as disciplined.

Because all of a sudden, you've got white teachers and Black teachers having difficulties figuring out how to still express that concern that goes beyond academic concerns for students that they feel like they don't know.

And I think that the expressions that I've heard from many African-Americans who experienced segregated schools and remember them as being nurturing places—despite the fact that the books were old and they were torn up and the desks were old and whatever—remember them as being nurturing places.

What they feel was lost was some of that nurturance that was there in the segregated setting. Leaving aside the questions of Iraq—when I think about desegregation of schools and maybe what was lost, I wonder if you could respond to the idea that what could schools do to sort of regain some of that feeling of community that was present before desegregation?

Charles Sherrod: Go back to the basics. It comes down to human relations, right? We're talking about—teachers have to—have to know, we gotta reclaim our schools.

Audience Question: It comes down to human relations, right? We're talking about teachers have to know—

Charles Sherrod: We've got to reclaim our schools.

Audience Comment: I'll just tell you—I've been very involved with these school issues. I worked for a desegregating school system when I was right out of college and participated in the desegregation. We were really excited at the time. We thought, "This is great." We didn't realize all these issues that were emerging.

And of course, part of what was happening was that Black teachers were losing their jobs. Black principals were losing their jobs. These community institutions were being shut down. A lot of times, the schools were sacrificed. And we did it wrong. That's the reality—is that it was done wrong.

James Lawson: It wasn't done according to the wishes of the African-American community. It was done by the school board that had maintained segregated schooling and who thought that segregated schooling meant that the Black folk were inferior, and the Black folk got the secondhand textbooks—if they got textbooks—and all the rest of it.

It was the passion of the teachers in the segregated school systems—primarily, the South. It was the passion of the teachers and educators who, in spite of the circumstances, caused the school to become a productive community for learning and for becoming.

Lawrence Guyot: Let us please not make a mistake of trying to enhance segregated schools. But let us look at what we're not talking about—what we have to go back to—and that is stability, order, the respect that education was given by the Black community.

I lived in a small town. I knew everyone in that town. Everyone in that town knew me. And from the time I was 10 years old until I left at 17 to go to college, I was told by everyone in that town, "Whatever you learn cannot be taken away from you. Your land can be taken away from you, your property, all of your money."

So I'm saying that to say this: I was buttressed by an entire community that knew that I was going to be the first one in my family to graduate from college—that I was going to do that. And it became a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. We don't have that anymore. Let us understand that we do not have that.

And if we start looking at the school system without that social underpinning of a community that says—in my day and age, it would have been treasonous for someone to say that, because I'm trying to get A's, I'm trying to be white. Young Blacks are faced with that in the educational school system today.

When we romanticize, practice pragmatism in that romanticism, and say we need to build that culture that supports and gives credence and credibility to education—and not to a segregated school system.

James Lawson: Yes, sir. In the back. I see your hand.

Audience Question: Thank you. First off, I want to say that it's a real privilege to be here, to actually connect names to faces with all the people that you've been kind of reading about and hearing about. I'm a student in Charles Payne's class over at Duke, and so I'm really excited to be here.

I have a question kind of related to some of the things that we've talked about in terms of education and people's relationship to education, and also kind of a democratic response to undemocratic initiatives, namely this voucher program.

Here in North Carolina—and I know Mr. Love, you probably do this better in terms of—there's a large number of African-American families and children who are moving into charter schools in the state of North Carolina. I think the state of North Carolina has the highest per capita percentage of African-American students from all income levels in charter schools. It's pretty high, if not the highest, in the country.

And one of the phenomenons that's going on—one of the things that's happening in places like Durham and in Charlotte and in other cities in North Carolina—is that low-income families are being approached by charter schools and by charter institutions and are being told, "Look, your schools—the schools that your kids are in right now—areen't providing them with the things, with the basic essentials that they need. And here's an opportunity for you to take your kid out of that school and come into this charter school."

And so my question is—and it seems to me that this—I'm thinking a lot more about these things. My wife is pregnant with our first kid, and so I'm already thinking about, "Okay, schools. What's up? Where are we gonna have to move to? What are we gonna have to do? Who am I gonna have to smack?" I'm not above smacking somebody if somebody wants to mess with my kid. I'm not there yet, Reverend Lawson.

And so I guess my question is—with this phenomenon, what is the kind of the democratic response to this phenomenon? Which, to me, seems like one of those really serious intersections of personal and political. When I don't have any kids, yes, I'm an avid supporter of public schools and I'm an avid supporter of this.

But what happens when it comes down to the come down? When I'm given an opportunity to make this move—my question again is, what is the democratic response? What should be the democratic response to that phenomenon?

James Lawson: Yes, sir.

Audience Comment: I want to say two things. One is, we can't go back to where we were because we're not the same people. We're no longer a southern—with three generations, two or three generations removed from the South. It's not a question of whether or not some Black

schools were nurturing and some were strict, and some of us were at the integrated schools—they got the [indistinct] like your white confrères did. You cannot recreate those situations.

But part of the discussion revolves around symptoms. When Jim Lawson talks about, “We have to change the culture in the White House and the prison system,” one of the developments that came out of the movement is we began talking about system—that we were fighting a system. We are still fighting a system.

As Jim also said, it’s all connected. It doesn’t matter whether it’s the—what is vouchers? When Jim talks about the names of people—the Republican Party is the organized expression of reaction in this country today. They define conventional discourse.

Vouchers are simply one of their fundamental tenets, which is raid the public treasury. Privatization. That’s what vouchers and charters are. They want the public treasury—whether it’s privatizing the schools, whether it’s privatizing the prisons, privatizing the sky, air, Earth or water: it’s to raid the public treasury.

And that’s where WTO [World Trade Organization] comes from. Who funds the IMF [International Monetary Fund]? Who funds it? And that’s where it’s no longer simply a question of surplus coming from the labor. The times are different.

Audience Comment: Can I just say one thing about charter schools?

Audience Comment: Our people are not the same. We used to say—it was implied—it was very clear we had to be twice as good as white boys to make it. That was clear. That was how we were taught, right?

But now you have a situation where a little 12-year-old kid on a crew, being a lookout for the gangbangers, makes more money than his daddy—if he has a daddy. So the myth of America that it’s about education, when it was always about power—the myth of education no longer holds, no longer obtains. It is not the way.

In fact, it’s not the golden rule. You can be as ignorant as you want to be vis-à-vis George W. Bush Jr. or Ronald Regan. The era of confusion in which [we] continue to be misinformed, disinforming, given false explanations, false rationales, false analyses. And our task is to try to see through a glass darkly.

Lawrence Guyot: I think one response to your question is...the way to stop violence in schools is to bring more creativity and more involvement of parents and students into the curriculum and into the day-to-day activities of schools.

The [Freedom Schools](#) proved that. The success of the Freedom Schools was—people felt a sense of ownership. And unless we can work that kind of—the labor unions and the parents and the students into that equation—because we can't argue for the sake of argument—they're going to want to look at the test scores.

Because we gave the charter schools test scores, we gave your schools test scores, and said, “Look at this.” And the mistake we shouldn't make is using goodwill and altruism as an argument.

[Jumps to new part of video]

James Lawson: Right now, the most exciting union organizing in the country is in Los Angeles [CA], where a number of our unions are waking up to the necessity of organizing. The poor workers have discovered that it can't be done ten by ten—it has to be done one by one. Because the management is harassing and making people fear for that little bit of money so badly.

So there has to be a one-on-one process until that person—at the New Otani Hotel, where we've had a struggle going on now for four years—until that one person in fear, who needs that money for his household or her household, gains from that one-on-one relationship enough courage to recognize: “I could do something about this, and I will do something about it,” and join the cause.

So we have rediscovered the importance of that one-on-one business for the terrible organizing we have to do. So focus in and get started. Do something. That is, in large measure, what many people did in the [19]50s and the [19]60s that produced the movements of the [19]60s. Focus. Work at it. Research it. Develop strategies for acting. Train people to do it. Go to work on it.

Lawrence Guyot: And please, before you use the [\[Mississippi\] Freedom Democratic Party](#) as a justification for not acting, please listen—all of you—to Lyndon Baines Johnson's tapes for the two weeks of the convention. He spent his entire time stopping that movement. He pitted the entire federal government on us. There are tapes to demonstrate that.

James Lawson: That's right. Exactly. And incidentally, that is one of the historic tools of nonviolence—to create a parallel institution. The Freedom Democratic Party is a classic, one of the beautiful examples of creating the parallel institution.

Charles Sherrod: But you can do that, son—part time. When you get off work.

Audience Member: Between classes. Stop assigning so much reading.

Charles Sherrod: But we do need people to commit themselves and drop out and fight. We need that. Where is it gonna come from? I don't know. But when it comes, I'm gonna be supporting it.

Audience Comment: But you also need to have a tight relationship between the local issues that we're fighting on and the national agenda. Because there are people sitting around little rooms—like smaller rooms than this—who are plotting, as when Jim talks about the Heritage Institute or the vouchers and the charter schools. People sitting around plotting. Their plots may manifest themselves, impact a variety of institutions in a variety of ways, but they are plotting to take over.

In fact, the right wing now controls the House and Senate of the United States. They've appointed two-thirds of all the federal judges—which is why Kenneth Starr kept winning all those deals. And if Bushy Wushy wins the White House, they will be in control of all three branches of the American government.

Charles Sherrod: My assumption is that these guys here—whoever on the—the hearing of my weak voice—will commit themselves. Drop out. I'm not talking about dropping out of school. I'm talking about...drop out of society. Don't be touched by the golden apples, the \$200,000 house. Some things got to wait. It's getting hard now.

James Lawson: He's right, though. He's absolutely right. We must have no loyalty to racism, sexism, to violence, greed. Capitalism as presently structured. Sexism. Withdraw all loyalties.

Charles Sherrod: We need a group like that. If there's a group like that. If you got ten guys that committed themselves to go for it, and all you doing is going for it—like we used to do—you got time to read. You got time to get on the internet. You got time to see what the national issues are and who are acting. You got time to get in a push-mobile and go to California and hook up with them guys, and go to Minnesota and hook up with those guys, and go to Chicago, and go to New York. You got time to do it. And that's what it's gone take—the hookups. The hookups.

And I just hope I'm alive. My dream is that in about 15 years—numerically, [indistinct] number-wise—and it's going to be possible for some political things to happen that never happened before in the history of our country. And I hope that I'll be alive when it does happen.

Audience Question: Just a couple of things—

James Lawson: I've got to see some women's hands. I haven't been—I see one. Men are talking too much.

Audience Question: My name is Wally Roberts I worked in Mississippi in [19]64 and one of the things I learned and I still carry with me is that freedom is a constant struggle. And there's not little solutions that solve it, like integrated schools that can solve a problem, right? The problem is there. It's a system, like Bill said. And you may have a victory, or you may have a defeat, but that's not the end of it. It's there, and it's going to take the rest of our lives to straighten it all out. And you just gotta keep on going.

And with a kid on the way, go into that community where he's going to go to school and start running for the school board now. Or better yet, go to the people who've lived there for a long time and get them organized.

Audience Comment: This sort of piggybacks on what was just said. Because I think part of this young person's frustration that I was hearing was this idea that no matter how hard people fought, the system didn't respond in the way that it should have.

And I think when we say things are the same, it might give the impression that no progress was made. Vincent Harding said this once—it must be a movie or something—but if you think things haven't changed from how they were...

We have to understand [that] while struggle is eternal and constant, each generation has a destiny to fulfill. It's a quote—I know [William] Strickland knows.

William Strickland: This is quoting [Frantz] Fanon: "Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it."

Audience member: Thank you. What's that page number again? There has been progress and there has been change. While there's still racism, it is in a different form today. And each generation has to figure out the particularities of injustice and oppression.

I'm a historian and one of the things that I find comforting about history is that things don't stay the same. They do change. The one thing you know about the future is it's going to be different than today. It can be better. It can be worse. But it's going to change.

And human agency plays a role in that. Human beings—and what we do or what we don't do—really does matter. That's the ultimate source of—not that we're going to achieve some utopia—but that what we do matters is what keeps me from being terribly, terribly cynical.

So I think things that people in SNCC and the [19]60s did was absolutely heroic. It made a difference. It didn't solve all the problems, but it did make a difference. And that's part of what I think we have to understand in order to give young people confidence.

And the last thing I want to say is: there are student struggles going on. You mentioned the sweatshop movement, which is very active.¹ University of Michigan just had a—what was it?—18-day sit-in over a racist club that exists there. And I'm always getting emails about struggles.

I think one thing about understanding the new situation is that our enemies—and I think we ought to say it like that—have gotten more sophisticated in measures of not allowing movements

¹ This quote references the student-led sweatshop movement, which mobilized against university ties to exploitative labor practices and often intersected with broader campus struggles for racial and social justice.

to spread. One of the ways the sit-ins spread was partly through word of mouth, but also through the media, through the Black press, etc.

Media doesn't cover a lot of struggles that happen on campuses and so forth. So we have to develop other networks to do that.

James Lawson: To be fair, I need to say to you what many of us from the [19]60s have said about today: that everything has changed and nothing has changed. There's sort of two parts to the picture. Now, one of the biggest [pieces of] evidence that things did change is the organization of the religious and the political right to turn it back. Still fighting.

Another illustration that things did change is that no president since the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 has ever funded the affirmative action entitlement—Section Seven, Title VII—with staff and the educational resources. Because Title VII was to convince the American people that we do not have a meritocracy—that you get hired by who you know—and to convince the American public and marketplace of the necessity of genuinely desegregating and de-sexinizing the marketplace.

Now, that has never been done. And that's why the right has been able to say, "Oh, reverse discrimination. Preferential treatment," all of which are lies. But that's what you hear. Because they organized so vigorously and thoroughly, with a great deal of money from right-wing foundations for the purpose of reversing the changes that the [19]60s did begin to initiate. Everything has changed. Nothing has changed.

Lawrence Guyot: The other thing that is most effective is they removed the respectability from dissent—and the right to dissent. We must restore that and we must regenerate and rewrite it.

We must be very concerned with evaluating social movements and mobilizations by the number of people they get involved, as well as the objectives. And I think once you get someone to join a labor union or to register to vote or to speak out against the World Trade Organization, they don't suddenly retreat: "I'll never do that again." They find other things.

Audience Question: I would like to ask if y'all are going to be around the rest of the conference. I teach at Ole Miss. I advise a student group that's [indistinct] that hosted a statewide student summit on race last October, attended by 180 students from all eight public institutes of higher learning, plus four private schools.

And some of it is that they had to go back to their schools and organize. On some of those campuses, there wasn't any organizing. But there's a core there now, and they're interested in reaching out. And there's some of those students here. And if y'all meet, maybe you can energize each other. And then you submit this expertise [indistinct]. You can start an organization that you're talking about right now. Don't wait for somebody.

Audience Comment: We've just formed a Progressive Alliance at Duke that is attempting to network all the progressive organizations—Students Against Sweatshops.

Audience Member: Let's hook up [the two student groups]

Audience Member: So, despite my frustration—

Audience Member: You're frustrated, but you're doing the work.

[crosstalk]

James Lawson: I see any other hand? It ends at 4:45. Period. It is 4:45.

Lawrence Guyot: I have a reading list here. My reading list is a special reading list. Those people who do not read the books have afflictions, and they go to hell.

[crosstalk]

Lawrence Guyot: If we run out I want to reproduce it because I want you to have it. I concentrate on Mississippi and on race, and I especially refer you to *By the Color of Our Skin* and *A Nation of Strangers*. To read those two books is to understand racism in America.

Audience Member: We were talking about this one in school—something that Dr. Pickens didn't point out about Shaw in his welcome this morning: Shaw was instrumental in 1865 in health policy—so, non-discrimination in 1865. One of the few schools in America that had the—