

Raid on the SCEF 1963

In 1938 Birmingham Alabama, southern supporters of Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Southern Conference on Human Welfare (SCHW).

SCHW was a deliberately and strategically integrated group that would draw together the region's social reformers to challenge elite policies of disinvestment and white supremacy that had left the South the least developed section of the country. Over the next decade, the group would make tremendous strides in doing just that: running expansive and effective campaigns for eliminating the poll tax, voter registration, a federal anti-lynching bill, encouraging labor union participation, federal aid for education, and the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Commission.

After backing Henry Wallace in his failed run for president on the Progressive ticket in 1948, however, the SCHW dissolved in a wave of internecine disagreement on electoral strategy that engulfed most of the country's liberal and left organizations. As the last standing auxiliary of the SCHW, the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF) moved its regional headquarters from Nashville to New Orleans in 1946. The next year, the House UnAmerican Activities Committee declared the group "a communist front." Despite the relentless red baiting, which severely strained relationships with local NAACP chapters, in 1953 SCEF put the full weight of its interracial southern leadership and northern fundraising towards the desegregation of Southern schools. In January 1954, Senator William Jenner of Indiana charged the SCEF with "communist activities" and by March of that same year, members of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee had assembled in New Orleans to hold hearings on SCEF as a "vehicle to promote communism." The volatile hearings were covered extensively by the local news, and set the stage for isolating the organization and blacklisting its members. In 1956 the editor of the Chamber of Commerce newsletter was fired for his SCEF membership and the next year, the Times-Picayune music critic was fired for simply signing a SCEF petition.

As McCarthyism and the Korean War reached their peak, the attacks on SCEF, along with most labor and civil rights organizations, would sharply increase in tandem. State sedition laws were used across the South to uphold white supremacist rule, and were wielded with particular force against interracial progressive organizations. Having already served time for charges under Kansas' state sedition law, Carl Braden and his wife Anne, both veteran journalists and organizers, became field directors for SCEF just in time to help build a powerful new wave of intergenerational organizing through their work to support the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as it grew out of the 1960 wave of sit-ins. In 1962, as SNCC struggled to raise funds, SCEF made its own resources available, providing bail and legal support, organizing workshops and trainings for young movement activists, and collecting funds in the North for the citizens of rural black communities who faced economic and physical threats for their resistance to white supremacy.

Sources

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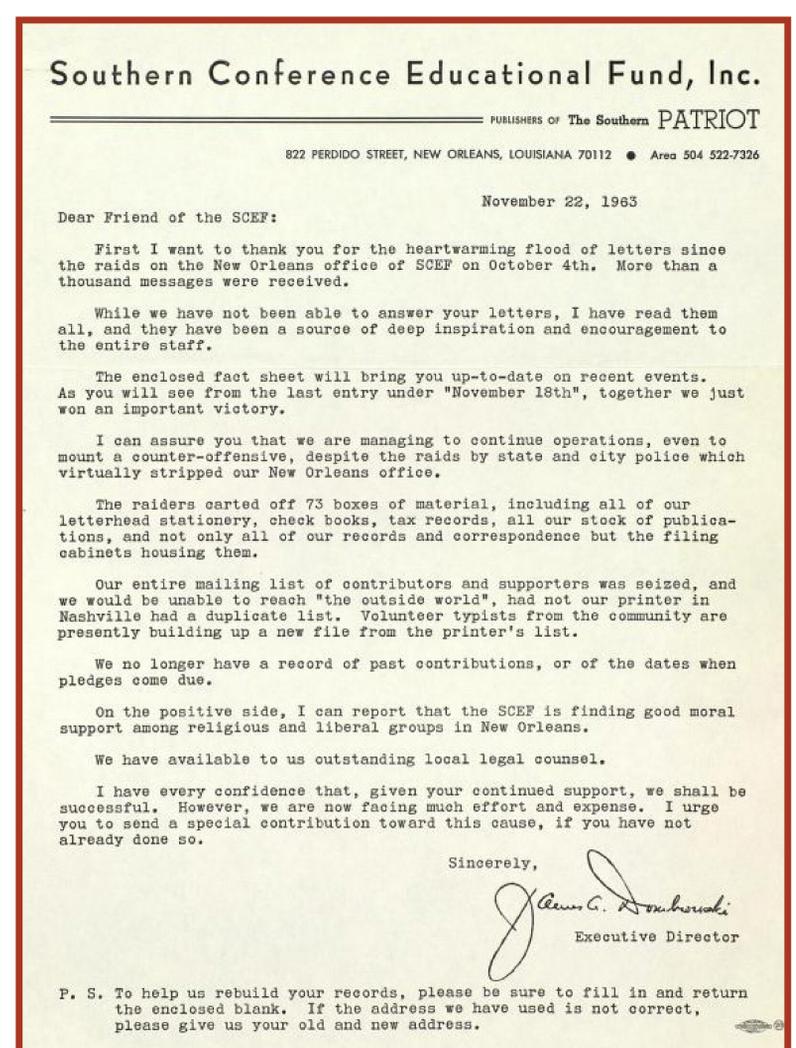
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Left to Right: Bruce Waltzer, Benjamin E. Smith, and James A. Dombrowski in the courtroom facing charges of criminal conspiracy, which were dropped for lack of sufficient evidence. Source: The Times-Picayune.

On October 4, 1963, in a move instigated by Leander Perez, and on the orders of the Louisiana Joint Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities (LUAC), NOPD raided the SCEF offices on Perdido Street, along with the law offices and homes of the organization's leaders. Ben Smith, Bruce Walzer, and Director James Dombrowski were arrested, charged with "violating the state Subversive Activities and Control Law and the Communist Propaganda Control Act." Dombrowski and Smith were indicted on two counts; being a member and an officer of SCEF, Smith and Walzer, who had been pulled out of a National Lawyers Guild (NLG) Conference on Civil Rights and Negligence Law by police for their arrests, were also indicted for their membership in the NLG. The appeals process for the case targeted the use of the 'abstention clause' to keep those charged under state sedition laws from seeking federal relief. In April 1956, the Supreme Court struck down Louisiana's law as both too broad and applied in bad faith, a decision which overturned the abstention clause and created new openings for civil rights advocacy across the country.



Letter to SCEF supporters from executive director James A. Dombrowski after the raid on the New Orleans headquarters. Source: The King Center Archives.