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“A Left-Wing Confederacy?”: The Southern Student Organizing Committee and the 1966-1967 Cone Mills Strikes

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Abstract

Founded in 1964 by white Southern college students inspired by the civil rights movement, the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) has been largely overlooked in historiography of radical New Left activism. SSOC platformed ideas like opposition to the Vietnam War, support for the civil rights movement, and Black Power, but it paradoxically also proudly embraced a Southern identity rooted in Confederate symbolism. In 1966-1967 SSOC engaged in a campaign to support members of the Textile Workers Union of America in a series of strikes against the Cone Mills Corporation in North Carolina. This thesis examines the rationale behind SSOC's support of the striking workers. Examining SSOC's emphasis on Southern identity, and its usage of anticolonial ideology drawn from the Black Freedom Struggle reveals that the organization hoped to recruit white moderates for a Southern working-class revolution. SSOC believed that an interracial working-class revolution would eradicate racial and class oppression, but in its efforts to appeal to reluctant white Southerners the organization inadvertently supported white supremacist narratives. Examining SSOC's support of North Carolina textile workers sheds light on the groundbreaking but mercurial reality of student activism in the 1960s American South.

In Greensboro North Carolina on February 5, 1967, Cone Mills workers who were organized through the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) engaged in a protest against Cone Mills Corporation.[1] Over two hundred college students from the University of North Carolina and other colleges across the South supported the workers at the picket and the union meeting that occurred later that night.[2] Across the street, members of the Ku Klux Klan screamed racial slurs at the protesting workers and students.[3] This strike was one of many in which college students supported textile workers from Cone Mills as they struggled against the company's unfair labor practices in 1966 and 1967. The students came to support striking workers, but they were also motivated by the complex ideology of a multifaceted student organization.[4] They were the members and recruits of the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), a predominantly white student organization that was committed to antiracist activism, but which sported the Confederate flag as its organizational emblem and openly debated the efficacy of creating a neo-national "left-wing Confederacy" in the American South.[5]

On the surface, SSOC's involvement in the strike is paradoxical. SSOC embraced Confederate Southern identity, but also platformed radical ideas like opposition to the Vietnam War, support for the civil rights movement, and Black Power,

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[1] Bill Amlong, "We Have Come to Bury Caesar Not to Praise Him," *The Daily Tar Heel,* February 7, 1967, https://www.newspapers.com/image/67895240/, 1.

[2] Amlong, "We Have Come to Bury Caesar Not to Praise Him," 4.

[3] Amlong, "We Have Come to Bury Caesar Not to Praise Him," 4.

[4] Amlong, "We Have Come to Bury Caesar Not to Praise Him," 1.

[5] Ed Richer, "Nation-Making Right and Left" *The New South Student Vol IV, No. 2*., March 1967, Box 1, Folder 6, Wayne Hurder Papers #05445, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

ideas that some Cone workers verbally opposed.[6] Despite this, the seemingly disparate groups were ideologically connected through SSOC's belief that the South was exploited by Northern capitalists, a view that closely paralleled TWUA's message to Southern textile workers during the strikes. Throughout the strikes, SSOC emphasized its Southern identity and utilized a modified version of the Black Freedom Struggle's anticolonial ideology to recruit white moderates. A closer analysis of the strikes reveals that SSOC members saw supporting Cone Mills workers as a key step in creating an interracial working-class revolution in the South, but they inadvertently supported white supremacist ideologies through their embrace of Confederate symbolism.

No comprehensive collection of SSOC's organizational material and correspondence exists. The organization's files were reportedly burned by members concerned about the potential of a government inquiry into SSOC's communist ties.[7] Despite this loss, the collections of publications and organizational material preserved by former members and contemporaries, the memoirs and oral histories of members, and newspaper reporting of the time allows us a glimpse into the experiences and perspectives of those directly involved with SSOC and Cone Mills. The materials held in the Wayne Hurder Papers at University of North Carolina's Wilson Library, the Don Roy Papers and David M. Henderson Papers at Duke University's Rubenstein Library, and the Southern Student Organizing Committee Papers and Thomas N. Gardner Papers at

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[6] Ann Schunior, "Students and Workers Unite," *The New South Student Vol. IV, No. 3*, April 1967, box 1, folder 6, Wayne Hurder Papers #05445, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[7] Sue Thrasher, interview by Andrew Reisinger, June 5, 2017, recording, Great Speckled Bird Collection, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, GA, https://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/digital/collection/GSB/id/10238/.

the University of Virginia have been significant in uncovering SSOC's ideology and participation in the strikes.[8]

There is little scholarship on SSOC and the Cone Mills strikes. Christina Greene's 1994 article "We'll Take Our Stand" is notable for its attention to the dynamics of gender and race within the organization.[9] Greene reveals the contradiction between SSOC's message of racial harmony and its focus on Southern identity.[10] She highlights the predominantly white nature of SSOC's membership and its reliance on Confederate imagery and symbolism in publications and activist work.[11] Greene argues that SSOC focused on building an ideology of Southern consciousness and nationalism to create a unique purpose for themselves in the New Left movement, alleviate white Southerners' guilt about the South's racist past, and reach white moderates with their ideology and activism.[12]

Historian Gregg Michel is the foremost scholar on SSOC. His work is essential to understanding the organization's scope and undertakings. Michel's 2004 book, *Struggle for a Better South,* examines the history of the Southern Student Organizing Committee from its inception in 1964 to its dissolution in 1969.[13] Michel's extensive work on SSOC

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[8] Wayne Hurder Papers #05445, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.; David M. Henderson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.; Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.; Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

[9] Christina Greene, "'We'll Take Our Stand': Race, Class, and Gender in the Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969," In *Hidden Histories of Women in the South,* ed. by Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Theda Perdue, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

[10] Greene, "'We'll Take Our Stand,"' 180.

[11] Greene, "'We'll Take Our Stand,"' 183, 180.

[12] Greene, "'We'll Take Our Stand,"' 185-186.

[13] Gregg, L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1964-1969* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

has shown that despite being hindered and ultimately dissolved by its own internal disorganization, lack of focus, and insistence on a distinct Southern identity, SSOC still engaged in impactful activism. Michel's work also exposes how SSOC's reliance on Southern identity and Confederate imagery limited the effectiveness of the organizations' antiracist messaging.[14] Michel briefly addresses the organization's involvement in the Cone Mills strikes, arguing that SSOC aimed to cultivate ties with white laborers to foster interracial cooperation and spread their antiracist ideology.[15]

Jeffrey Turner's 2010 book, *Sitting in and Speaking Out,* adds important context on student organizations and activism on Southern college campuses in the 1960s, and offers an analysis of SSOC's ideological development.[16] Turner asserts that the South was an epicenter of activism due to Black Southern students' key role in spearheading sit-in movements and other crucial civil rights activism.[17] The anticolonial and revolutionary ideas and strategies of Black activists and intellectuals were inspiring to white activist students. Turner argues that beginning in 1966, SSOC developed an ideology of Southern nationalism that conceptualized the South as a colony exploited and controlled by Northern corporate capitalism.[18] As Turner's work shows, SSOC's Southern identity was a key part of its platform, and its eventual turn towards a more radical ideology.

Scholarship has shown that SSOC's ideology of reform and Southern nationalism impacted its anti-racist platform, but the organization's commitment to antiracism was

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[14] Michel, *Struggle for a Better South,* 83-84.
[15] Michel, *Struggle for a Better South,* 153.
[16] Jeffrey A. Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out: Student Movements in the American South, 1960-1970,* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy177.nclive.org/lib/unca/detail.action?docID=3038888.
[17] Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out,* 5.
[18] Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out,* 162.

still radical when compared to the general attitudes of white Southerners during the 1960s. Jason Sokol's 2008 work, *There Goes My Everything,* examines the attitudes of white Southerners during the civil rights movement.[19] Sokol argues that white southerners had a variety of responses to African American activism during the civil rights movement. Some experienced shock as Black activists exposed their racism, while others responded by doubling down on their racist attitudes.[20] While he does not directly touch on SSOC, Sokol argues that some white Southerners who were favorable to the civil rights movement saw antiracist reform as an avenue for personal enlightenment and liberation.[21] This idea is key to understanding SSOC's simultaneous embrace of Black Power and focus on liberating the white Southern working class.

Alan Draper's 1994 work, *Conflict of Interest,* offers insight into the complex relationship between organized labor and the civil rights movement in the American South.[22] Draper's work exposes the rift between labor union officials and rank-and-file white union members.[23] While white Southern union members often espoused racist attitudes, union leadership saw the civil rights movement as a way to achieve more equitable labor conditions and even financially supported antiracist activism and legislation.[24] Peter Levy's 1994 book, *The New Left And Labor in the 1960s,* examines the relationship between labor organizing and the progressive New Left movement of the 1960s.[25] Levy argues that the New Left and labor movements had interconnected

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[19] Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights 1945-1975,* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

[20] Sokol, *There Goes My Everything,* 57, 59, 83.

[21] Sokol, *There Goes My Everything,* 311.

[22] Alan Draper, *Conflict of Interest: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954-1968,* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv3s8nbn.

[23] Draper, *Conflict of Interest,* 39, 60.

[24] Draper, *Conflict of Interest,* 169.

[25] Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s,* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

goals as many union members and leftists understood that racial equality would advance workers' rights.[26] Union officials had an added incentive to support antiracist activism because gaining the support of Black workers would strengthen their organizing efforts.[27] Despite the goals of national union leadership, local union members impacted the relationships between unions and progressive activists. Many local members held negative views of antiracist action, antiwar activism, counterculture, and Black Power that drove labor and the New Left movement into confrontation in the mid-1960s.[28]

SSOC was founded in 1964 by a group of forty-five students from several predominantly white Southern universities.[29] Scholarship on SSOC often conceptualizes the organization as part of the New Left movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which emerged as student involvement in the civil rights movement encouraged greater student participation in liberal politics and social justice activism.[30] Many founding SSOC members had previously been involved with civil rights activism and New Left through organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Nashville Christian Leadership Council, and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and they were strongly influenced by their involvement with these organizations.[31]

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[26] Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s,* 23.
[27] Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s,* 23.
[28] Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s,* 5.
[29] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Proposal of Organization," 1964, Box 1, Folder 1, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.
[30] Harlon Joye, "Dixie's New Left," *Trans-Action* 7, (September 1970): 50–56, 62. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02804041, 50.; Michel, *Struggle for a better South*, 6.
[31] Sue Thrasher, "Circle of Trust," in *Deep in our Hearts*, (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 232.; Thrasher, interview.; J. Eugene Guerrero, interview by Ronald J. Grele, 1984, recording, Columbia Center for Oral History, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries, New York, https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/11335299.

Many of SSOC's founding members came from working-class white families and were radicalized during their college years when they encountered organizations devoted to the Black Freedom Struggle. Sue Thrasher, the organization's first executive secretary, came from a working-class family that romanticized their Confederate heritage, but her worldview was transformed when she attended Nashville Christian Leadership Council meeting and heard Black individuals articulate their experiences of racism.[32]

At its inception, SSOC was deeply connected to civil rights organizing. Its founding members were recruited by a SNCC staff member as part of an initiative funded by the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) to draw white southerners into civil rights activism.[33] While some movement leaders expressed concern about the creation of a white student group, others agreed that creating a separate organization reflected the unique role that white students could serve in antiracist activism.[34] The students who formed SSOC believed that the South faced unique social and economic problems which they were especially equipped to address due to their own Southern heritage.[35] As an organization of mostly white students, they believed they would be able to effectively organize other whites into a revolution that could bring about a new South liberated from oppression.[36]

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[32] Sue Thrasher, "Circle of Trust," 214, 222, 232.

[33] Guerrero, interview.

[34] Thrasher, interview. Catherine Fosl. *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South,* (Lexington KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 301.

[35] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Constitution of the Southern Student Organizing Committee" June 1966, box 1, folder 1, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

[36] Robb Burlage, "We'll Take Our Stand," 1964, box 1, Folder 1, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

SSOC was originally founded with a focus on antiracist activism, but it quickly began organizing around other leftist causes of interest to students, including university reform, the Vietnam War, and anti-poverty efforts.[37] SSOC was not an explicitly white organization, and as early as 1964 made efforts to recruit African American students, but it remained predominantly white until its dissolution in 1969.[38] Historian Christina Greene estimates that at most, African American students made up just five percent of the organization's members.[39] This discrepancy can be explained by SSOC's focus on Southern identity. SSOC platformed liberal ideas and supported civil rights, but its conception of Southern identity relied mainly on Confederate symbolism that alienated Black students.[40] The organization called for a Southern secession to protest the Vietnam war draft in 1968, originally entitled its publication the *New Rebel,* and publicly discussed the effectiveness of Southern Nationalism as an organizational strategy.[41] Most egregiously, for much of SSOC's existence, its organizational emblem showed the Confederate flag behind clasping black and white hands.[42]

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[37] Sue Thrasher, "Circle of Trust," 239.

[38] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Report on the Southwide Fall Conference" 1964, box 1, folder 1, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

[39] Greene, "'We'll Take Our Stand,'" 183.

[40] Greene, "'We'll Take Our Stand,'" 180.

[41] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Worklist #7," April 1968, box 7, folder 1, Student Organizations Reference Collection, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.; Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Second SSOC Conference," n.d., box 1, folder 1, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.; Southern Student Organizing Committee, *The New South Student Vol. IV, No. 2.,* March 1967, box 1, folder 6, Wayne Hurder Papers #05445, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[42] David Simpson, Lynn Wells and George Vlasits, "Letter to SSOC members" May 25, 1969, box 17, Boyte Family Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.; SSOC was not the only New Left organization that utilized Southern identity and the Confederate flag as part of their organizing strategy. The Young Patriots, members of the Black Panther and Young Lords' Rainbow Coalition also sported the flag. For more on the Young Patriots see Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times,* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2011) 66-100.

Originating as the Confederate battle flag of the army of Northern Virginia, the Confederate flag has historically symbolized white supremacy.[43] By the 1960s, it was commonly utilized by racist organizations supporting segregation.[44] Despite this, SSOC members and other white Southerners interpreted the flag as representing Southern pride because of the pseudohistorical myth of the Confederate Lost Cause, which reconceptualized the Confederacy as a heroic defender of state rights.[45] SSOC believed that by harnessing symbols of revolutionary Southern heritage they could empower poor whites to support civil rights and fight against their own class oppression.[46] This strategy alienated Black activists and had dangerous implications.[47] In 1966, Anne Braden, a seasoned activist who served as a mentor to SSOC in its early days, warned the organization about its efforts to organize whites.[48] Braden argued that unless SSOC was careful to work with Black organizations and explicitly confront racism in working-class whites, they could create a "Frankenstein" organization that supported white supremacy.[49] She stressed the importance of remembering that even working-class whites who experienced class oppression were white supremacist oppressors.[50]

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[43] Logan Strother, "Racism and Pride in Attitudes Toward Confederate Symbols," *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 6 (2021): 7, https://go.exlibris.link/ZtClqhmd.

[44] Strother, "Racism and Pride in Attitudes Toward Confederate Symbols," 7.

[45] Michel, *Struggle for a Better South,* 192-193.

[46] Jody Palmour, "Southern Mythology Politics and Identity," *The New South Student Vol. IV, No. 2*, March 1967, box 1, folder 6, Wayne Hurder Papers #05445, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[47] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Report on the Southwide Fall Conference."

[48] Catherine Fosl. *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South,* (Lexington KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 300. Anne Braden was a highly influential figure in SSOC's early history due to her work with SNCC and SCEF and her ideas about the importance of whites supporting the civil rights movement. See Fosl's *Subversive Southerner* for a more extensive look at Braden's role in antiracist activism.; Anne Braden, "To The Southern Student Organizing Committee," February 1967, Civil Rights Movement Archive, accessed November 6, 2023, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/ssoc_braden.pdf.

[49] Braden, "To The Southern Student Organizing Committee."

[50] Braden, "To The Southern Student Organizing Committee."

By 1969, SSOC's contradictory messaging and ideology, loosely organized structure, and turn towards Southern regionalism had created internal divisions and drawn the ire of some SSOC staff members and powerful members of SDS.[51] Under the weight of external and internal criticism, the organization collapsed. The reasoning behind SSOC's conflicting messaging is complex. Their goal of reaching white students and moderates in the South made embracing Southern identity an advantageous strategy, but SSOC's support of Southern nationalism was also personal. In an article published in 1970, Harlon Joye, a sociologist and former SSOC member, argued that SSOC's white Southern members felt guilt about the South's white supremacist past, while simultaneously harboring resentment against white Northern activists who they saw as interfering in the South without truly understanding the region.[52] While grappling with these complex feelings, SSOC's members reinterpreted Southern identity as a form of nationalism in order to bolster solidarity among Southern radicals and the white working class.[53] Joye believed that instead of crafting solidarity between working-class and Black revolutionaries, SSOC's work fostered what he referred to as "regional and racial chauvinism" in the organization's membership.[54]

Joye's work is critical of SSOC, but his argument is reflected in the reminiscences of SSOC's staff members.[55] Sue Thrasher expressed that in SSOC's early days, she and other Southern students felt "politically inferior" to members of Northern based SDS.[56] It's clear that members also saw Northerners as interfering in the South. When asked about the debates that led to SSOC temporarily discontinuing

[51] Simpson, Wells, and Vlasits, "Letter to SSOC members."
[52] Joye, "Dixie's New Left," 51-52, 55.
[53] Joye, "Dixie's New Left," 51-52.
[54] Joye, "Dixie's New Left," 52.
[55] Joye, "Dixie's New Left," 62.
[56] Thrasher, interview.

use of their Confederate flag emblem in late 1964, former SSOC chairman Eugene Guerrero stated that the only objectors to the flag's usage were "fucking Yankees."[57] His statement displays both his contempt for northerners and his belief that they were interfering with uniquely Southern issues.

The Cone Mills strikes took place at a turning point in SSOC's ideological and organizational history. In the mid-1960s, the rise of the Black Power movement led to an increased effort within SNCC to create separate Black controlled organizations to work within the Black community.[58] Following the advice of leaders in the Black Power movement, and increasingly distanced from the antiracist work they did with SNCC, SSOC resolved to work within their own community and began planning projects to serve that purpose.[59] In 1966, while searching for meaningful activist work outside of the Black freedom struggle, SSOC staff began to focus on radicalizing working-class white Southerners by supporting labor unionization.

In April of 1966 SSOC sponsored a "Students and Labor Conference" which primarily focused on organized labor in North Carolina.[60] Around fifty-three individuals attended, and the conference hosted speakers from several large labor unions, including Peter Brandon of Duke University's Local 77 union, who was later employed with the TWUA during the Cone Mills strikes.[61] At the conference, SSOC decided to

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[57] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Report on the Southwide Fall Conference."; Guerrero, interview.

[58] Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out, 166.;* For more on the impact of the Black Power movement on liberal college students' organizations in the 1960s see Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out, 165-224.*

[59] Jim Williams, "New Myths and Old Realities," *The New South Student Vol IV, No. 3*, April 1967, box 1, folder 6, Wayne Hurder Papers #05445, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[60] Gene Guerrero and Brian Peterson, "Report on Students and Labor Conference," 1966, box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

[61] Guerrero and Peterson, "Report on Students and Labor Conference."; Guerrero, interview.

coordinate with unions to foster greater student involvement in labor organizing.[62] Despite this agreement, the conference revealed tension between SSOC members and organized labor. During discussions, students critiqued unions for their support of the Vietnam War, their capitalist leanings, and their conservative views on antiracist reform.[63] In response, Peter Brandon pointed out that the average worker was unwilling to accept the radical ideas supported by SSOC's members.[64]

SSOC members' critiques at the conference revealed their ignorance about the realities of organized labor in the South. North Carolina's turbulent history of textile unionization influenced the strategy of the TWUA. Small plant size, legislation that limited unions' activities, the racist attitudes of many white mill workers, and the violent nature of some strikes made it especially difficult for the TWUA to organize textile workers in North Carolina.[65] Conservative and white supremacist organizations were especially alluring to working class whites, as they deliberately targeted their economic fears, concerns over integration in the workforce, and their white supremacist beliefs.[66] As Peter Brandon pointed out, national unions' more conservative leanings reflected the beliefs of their local constituents.

Despite their initially contentious relationship with organized labor, by 1967 SSOC was immersed in supporting the TWUA in a series of strikes at Cone Mills plants

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[62] Guerrero and Peterson, "Report on Students and Labor Conference."

[63] Guerrero and Peterson, "Report on Students and Labor Conference."

[64] Guerrero and Peterson, "Report on Students and Labor Conference."; Speaker Jim Williams also criticized students for holding a "pious, holier-than-thou attitude towards labor."

[65] Timothy J. Minchin, "*What do we need a Union For?" The TWUA in the South, 1945-1955,* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 7, 33, 37, 79, 113, https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy177.nclive.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=41317&site=ehost-live.

[66] Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels and Black Power,* 56, 131-132.

in Greensboro, Haw River, Reidsville, Gibsonville, and Salisbury.[67] Eugene Guerrero, SSOC's first chairman, played a major role in driving SSOC's support of the Cone strikes.[68] Guerrero utilized his position as SSOC staff and his organizational connections to gain support and advertising for the strikes.[69] He and his wife Nan, a fellow SSOC member, even moved to Greensboro to become fully immersed in supporting the TWUA's work with the Cone Mill strikes.[70]

Textile workers at Cone Mills demanded improvements to their working conditions. They wanted a better pension plan, a five percent increase in pay, sick pay, and an improved vacation plan, but they also demanded that Cone Mills work fairly with the TWUA and incorporate a check-off that would automatically take union fees out of worker's pay.[71] The strikes at Cone Mills plants mainly arose from the companies' repeated failure to engage in fair negotiations with the TWUA. A 1967 National Labor Relations Board trial found that the company had violated the National Labor Relations Act by firing workers associated with the union and refusing to negotiate fairly.[72] The company's president, Caesar Cone II, believed that industry wide unionization would result in a total destruction of the American textile industry.[73]

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[67] "Cone Workers Go On Strike In Five N.C. Communities," April 1967, box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

[68] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Second SSOC Conference."

[69] Guerrero, Interview.

[70] Guerrero, Interview.

[71] Gene Guerrero, "Movement of Textile Workers?..." *The New South Student Vol IV, No. 3*, April 1967, box 1, folder 6, Wayne Hurder Papers #05445, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[72] Durham Morning Herald, "Cone Ruled in Violation," July 14, 1967, box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

[73] Caesar Cone, interview by Harry Watkins, January 7, 1983, recording, C-0003 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/C-0003/menu.html.

To protest Cone's unfair dealings, the TWUA engaged in a strike plan that was supported by SSOC members and recruited college students. The TWUA conducted several strikes, slowly increasing their duration to determine the strength of the union in the Cone Mills plants.[74] In October of 1966, the TWUA engaged in a one-day strike of six North Carolina Cone Mills plants and followed this with a three-day strike of seven plants in Greensboro, Haw River, Reidsville, Gibsonville, and Salisbury in February of 1967.[75] A final week-long strike was held in May 1967, and shortly after, the international TWUA determined that there was not enough local union support to engage in an extended strike at Cone Mills and decided to end the strike efforts.[76] In an act that some SSOC members saw as a betrayal, the TWUA withdrew from the Cone unionization drive before the workers' demands had been met.[77]

Throughout the strikes, SSOC members provided crucial support to the TWUA. By February of 1967, a quarter of SSOC's staff was working on the drive, and eventually half of its staff would be dedicated to the project.[78] Members set up information booths on campuses, planned meetings between students and workers, organized rides for students willing to participate in the strikes, advertised upcoming events in their

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[74] Scott Hoyman, interview by William Finger, July 16, 1974, transcript, E-0010, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/16702/rec/2.

[75] Guerrero, "Movement of Textile Workers?...,"; "Cone Workers Go On Strike In Five N.C. Communities."

[76] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill workers Unite," June 1967, box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.; Guerrero, interview.

[77] Guerrero, interview.

[78] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC Executive Committee Minutes, February 25-26, 1967."; Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Students and the Community," n.d, box 2, folder 8, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

publications, and even made lunch for strikers' families during a union event.[79] SSOC engaged in organizing work and sent members to union meetings in Greensboro in between strikes.[80] Workers and student supporters also conducted multiple marches through Downtown Greensboro to publicly protest Cone Mills.[81] SSOC experienced success recruiting North Carolina students because many students had personal connections to Mill workers.[82] By February of 1967, the drives had already involved an estimated one hundred seventy-five students, and SSOC argued that many of these students would not have become involved with more radical Northern activists.[83]

Prior historiography on the strikes has explained SSOC's involvement by focusing on the interracial nature of unionization and the student-worker alliance being built by SSOC.[84] TWUA leadership saw supporting interracial unionization as an effective strategy for organizing. Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Cone Mills became increasingly integrated.[85] Fostering interracial solidarity would strengthen the previously weak unionization at Cone Mills by counteracting mill leaders' efforts to pit white and Black workers against each other to prevent organization.[86] Some white workers at Cone Mills were favorable to this strategy, as they noted the

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[79] Schunior, "Students and Workers Unite."; Ann Schunior, "Student Support for Textile Workers' Rights," n.d., box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.; Guerrero, interview.; *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill workers Unite."

[80] *The Daily Tar Heel*, "Students May Help in Cone Strike No. 2," April 14, 1967, box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

[81] Nat Walker, "TWUA Conducts March Here," n.d., box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.; "Workers Plan March," November 1966, box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

[82] Schunior, "Students and Workers Unite."

[83] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC Executive Committee Minutes, February 25-26, 1967."

[84] Michel, *Struggle for a Better South,* 153.

[85] Guerrero, interview.

[86] Hoyman, interview.; Paul Swaity, "Address to Southern Conference of Textile Workers, Students and Church Leaders," April 1967, box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.; *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill workers Unite."

success of African American activists organizing around civil rights.[87] The involvement of SSOC, an organization born out of civil rights activism, could help to improve the relationships between Black and white workers while boosting SSOC's student engagement.[88]

SSOC students working on the drives tried to foster better relationships between white and Black workers. At the Cone plant in Haw River, SSOC hosted social events designed to build relationships between the workers.[89] SSOC was also able to gain support for the strikers from African American students attending Livingstone College in Salisbury NC, the location of one of the striking plants.[90] While SSOC clearly wanted to support interracial unionization, this was not their main motivation. The bulk of their work on the Cone strikes was focused on supporting white strikers, something that Gene Guerrero admitted was an extreme departure from the civil rights activism he had previously been involved with.[91] Like many of SSOC's staff, Guerrero's activism started with supporting Black students participating in sit-ins to protest segregation.[92] His work with Cone Mills was more community based, and involved sometimes directly supporting white supremacists.

Cone Mills was not an ideal location for fostering interracial unionization. Despite increasing numbers of African American workers following the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Guerrero recalled the workforce of the mills as being primarily white, estimating that as little as ten percent of Cone workers were African American.[93] More importantly, white

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[87] Guerrero, interview.
[88] Guerrero, interview.
[89] Schunior, "Student Support for Textile Workers' Rights."
[90] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill Workers Unite."
[91] Guerrero, interview.
[92] Guerrero, interview.
[93] Guerrero, interview.

workers on both sides of the labor struggle were associated with the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK protested the interracial nature of the TWUA's picket lines, but the strikers themselves were also affiliated with the Klan.[94] A former Klavern leader allegedly participated in one of the TWUA's protest marches.[95] Guerrero also recalled that when Black students from Livingstone were unable to support the strikers due to KKK threats, a white strike leader phoned someone within the KKK who immediately called off the threats.[96]

Cone workers who interacted with SSOC's staff and recruits were not likely to become radicalized, in fact, they were initially very suspicious of SSOC member's intentions. The workers at Haw River suspected that they were "beatnik communists – or worse yet – civil rights workers" and even demanded that they shave their beards to show they were not associated with counterculture movements.[97] SSOC presented their interactions with workers in a positive light, highlighting how the worker-student alliance was helping students and workers to confront their prejudices about each other.[98] They celebrated white workers' minor concessions as signs of interracial progress, and it's clear that for some workers, like those who called off the threat to Livingstone students, the potential benefits of class solidarity in unionization could outweigh their racism. Still, there's little indication that these actions resulted from a permanent change in workers' ideas, and SSOC's new focus on organizing white workers cannot be explained solely as an attempt to foster interracial unionization.

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[94] Amlong, "We Have Come to Bury Caesar Not to Praise Him," 4.
[95] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill Workers Unite."
[96] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill Workers Unite."
[97] Schunior, "Students and Workers Unite."
[98] Schunior, "Students and Workers Unite."

SSOC saw the strikes as a key step in their mission to revolutionize the South. As Jason Sokol highlighted in *There Goes My Everything*, some whites involved with civil rights activism saw antiracism as a staging point for a larger liberation for whites.[99] SSOC's efforts to foster interracial unionization and activism were part of their mission to create Southern liberation. Tom Gardner, SSOC's chairman in 1967, believed that creating a class revolution in the South would ultimately result in equality.[100] He argued that white radicals had a unique role in this revolution, writing, "the goal of the white revolutionary is to build a socialist revolution, and to work toward it in such a way that will help guarantee the liberation of the black colony."[101]

As SSOC searched for a justification for existing as a regionally based organization increasingly divorced from the civil rights movement, it focused on developing a "Southern consciousness" and creating a radical revolution that would address what it saw as "unique" problems in the South.[102] SSOC's version of liberation was fed on symbols of Southern nationalism and Confederate heritage. It is no coincidence that at the same time SSOC was supporting the TWUA, they also resumed selling buttons with their Confederate flag emblem.[103] Rather, SSOC's work with the TWUA was part of their embrace of a "left-wing Confederate spirit," an attempt to

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[99] Sokol, *There Goes My Everything,* 311.

[100] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC in the South with Programs," n.d., box 1, folder 5, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

[101] Tom Gardner, "A Political Criticism of the Political Criticism," n.d., box 13, folder 1, Social Movements Collection, ca. 1959-2000, #9430-f, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.

[102] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Resolution to Dissolve SSOC," 1969, box 1, folder 1, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

[103] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC Executive Committee Minutes, February 25-26, 1967," February 1967, box 1, folder 2, Southern Student Organizing Committee and Thomas N. Gardner Papers, 1948-1994, #11192-a, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

reinterpret the South's past by focusing on White Southerner's heritage and radical Southern activism.[104]

SSOC drew on the radical anticolonial ideas of the Black freedom struggle and reinterpreted them through a white Southern lens. In the mid-1960s, members of SSOC faced an increasingly industrialized South with massive labor inequalities. Many of SSOC's publications grappled with these ideas, using the frameworks of Marxism and anticolonialism to explain Southern poverty. An economic analysis written by Robb Burlage and published by SSOC argued that Southern states' industrialization in the years following World War II had focused on bringing in "Yankee" plants, rather than enacting needed welfare measures.[105] In his writing, Burlage drew a colonial parallel between global underdeveloped countries and what he saw as the underdevelopment of the South.[106] SSOC's ideas also incorporated their antipathy towards the North. If the South was an underdeveloped country, the North was their colonial oppressor. An article printed in SSOC's *New South Student* asserted that the South was "owned from the outside" by Northern economic investment.[107]

SSOC deliberately utilized the anticolonial language of the Black freedom struggle in an attempt to radicalize the white working class. A 1967 article by Jody Palmour, a SSOC staffer, reveals that some SSOC members believed labor unionization would lead to anticolonial Southern revolution.[108] Palmour believed that

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[104] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC Executive Committee Minutes, February 25-26, 1967."; Ed Richer, "Nation-Making Right and Left."

[105] Robb Burlage, "The South as an Underdeveloped Country," n.d., box 7, folder 10, David M. Henderson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

[106] Burlage, "The South as an Underdeveloped Country."

[107] Jim Williams, "New Myths and Old Realities."

[108] Palmour, "Southern Mythology Politics and Identity."

SSOC should consciously reinterpret the history of the South to build a revolution.[109] He was inspired by the way SNCC's ideology of Black Power and anticolonialism had created revolutionary solidarity across the global African diaspora.[110] A key part of Palmour's strategy was its reliance on utilizing an outside force, in the form of an oppressive national corporation, to introduce anticapitalist and anticolonial ideas to working class whites.[111] Palmour even suggested the use of a workers' rights campaign to introduce these ideas, arguing that "By attacking a plant on specific issues of workers' rights and responsibilities, but doing so with terms pointing to alien control and stressing the principle of decolonization, one could prepare the way for local control, and popular sovereignty."[112]

To Palmour, supporting the rights of workers, like those at Cone Mills, was the first step in creating a Southern revolution. While not all of the students recruited by SSOC shared Palmour's ideas, it is clear that many did. Anne Schunior, an activist who worked on the strikes with SSOC, believed that there were three main types of activists assisting the strikes.[113] Some activists were motivated by personal connections to workers, others by the desire to work on a clear case for human rights.[114] A crucial third category sought to revolutionize the South.[115] Schunior asserted that because of their

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[109] Palmour, "Southern Mythology Politics and Identity"; In the same document, Palmour rests his strategy for historical reinterpretation in the work of SNCC organizers. He argues that SNCC staff strategically reinterpreted the history of the African diaspora to create solidarity and provide a direction for fostering national revolution.

[110] Palmour, "Southern Mythology Politics and Identity."

[111] Palmour, "Southern Mythology Politics and Identity."

[112] Palmour, "Southern Mythology Politics and Identity."

[113] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill Workers Unite."

[114] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill Workers Unite."

[115] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill Workers Unite."

nature as a power struggle between Cone's employees and owners, the strikes were appealing "to many of us who hope to see radical social change in the South."[116]

To SSOC, the Cone strikes were an ideal starting point for a revolution. The Cone Corporation could be characterized as Northern extraction. By 1967 Cone had relocated its headquarters to Greensboro, but it had originally opened in New York in 1891 as the Cone Export and Commission Company.[117] The Cone Mills Corporation had historically served as a middleman, selling Southern textile goods to Northern markets.[118] The company was also extremely successful. A 1950s advertisement boasted that just two of Cone's many plants contributed one-third of total global denim production.[119] Workers saw very little of the profits of Cone Mills' success. As the TWUA's Peter Brandon asserted in a 1967 pamphlet, the textile industry shattered profit records in the 1960s, but North Carolina textile workers continued to make ninety-two cents per hour less than the average American worker.[120]

SSOC's theory of Southern exploitation connected well with the ideology of TWUA leaders. The parallel between the organizations' beliefs can be seen in an April 1967 speech given by the TWUA's director of organization, Paul Swaity, to the Southern Conference of Textile Workers, Students, and Church Leaders, which was organized to foster greater solidarity among workers and allies.[121] Swaity argued that the textile

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[116] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill Workers Unite."

[117] Cone Mills Corporation, "American Spinning: Cone Mills Corporation."

[118] Cone Mills Corporation, "American Spinning: Cone Mills Corporation."

[119] Cone Mills Corporation, "77 Thousand Miles of Denim," n.d., box 104, folder 1054, Cone Mills Corporation Records #5247, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[120] Peter Brandon, "History of the Cone Textile Organizing Drive," 1967, box 1, file 3, Wayne Hurder Papers #05445, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.; Brandon asserts that between 1963 and 1964 textile profits had risen forty-three percent.

[121] Swaity, "Address to Southern Conference of Textile Workers, Students and Church Leaders."

industry had moved into the South to exploit its cheap labor and anti-union sentiment, and had been assisted by traitorous Southern politicians who wished to industrialize.[122] Swaity characterized the nature of the textile industry in the South as a "conspiracy" that used intimidation, violence, government allies, and racial discrimination to keep Southern workers non-unionized and in a state of poverty.[123] Like SSOC, the TWUA saw the exploitation of Southern workers as an extractive conspiracy of Northern capitalists, and like SSOC, it believed in a radical new movement rooted in the unification of textile workers.[124]

Despite these perceived similarities, the TWUA did not have the same radical agenda as SSOC. When situated in the context of the organizations' similar ideologies, SSOC members' feeling of betrayal when the TWUA withdrew from Cone can be seen as a disillusionment.[125] SSOC's simultaneous celebration of white Southern identity and pursuit of antiracist reform may have been misguided, but it was rooted in idealism. SSOC members believed in the possibility of a revolutionary South, and they believed that they could bring about that transformation in their own lifetimes.[126] At Cone Mills, SSOC was confronted with the complexity and impossibility of its goal of a Southern anticolonial revolution. Working with the TWUA forced the organization into contact with working-class whites who focused on bread-and-butter work issues, and sometimes even supported white supremacy. The TWUA was optimistic, but ultimately realistic about both its own reach and members.

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[122] Swaity, "Address to Southern Conference of Textile Workers, Students and Church Leaders."
[123] Swaity, "Address to Southern Conference of Textile Workers, Students and Church Leaders."
[124] Cone Workers' Joint Policy Committee, "Textile Workers' Program for their Rights," n.d., box 2, Don Roy Papers, Duke University Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
[125] *The Southern Patriot*, "Mill workers Unite."; Guerrero, interview.
[126] Burlage, "We'll Take Our Stand."

SSOC's work with the TWUA made the organization even more regionally focused. After SSOC's success recruiting students for the Cone Mills strikes, the organization changed its strategy to focus on local projects that could bring in more students and community support.[127] While SSOC's support of the TWUA may not have liberated the South or even achieved a check-off for the TWUA, it was a transformative experience for the students and the organization. SSOC continued to work with labor unionization in the South, supporting strikes in Whiteville NC and on university campuses.[128] Working with the TWUA, SSOC came dangerously close to becoming the "Frankenstein" organization that Anne Braden had warned about.[129] It is telling that as SSOC focused on recruiting working-class whites for the strikes, it revived its usage of Confederate imagery.[130] In 1964, when SSOC focused on antiracism and creating an interracial organization, this imagery had harmed their goal, but their work with white Cone Mills workers signaled a departure in SSOC's intended audience. In an attempt to radicalize the South, SSOC inadvertently supported white supremacist Southern narratives. This ultimately contributed to the organization's downfall because it lost the crucial support of SDS members and its activist network.[131]

Historiography has largely overlooked SSOC's participation in the TWUA's strikes of Cone Mills Corporation or has attributed SSOC's participation to a desire to foster interracial unionization. A more critical examination reveals SSOC's complex ideology of

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[127] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC Handbook Spring 1969," Spring 1969, box 17, Boyte Family Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

[128] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC Handbook Spring 1969."

[129] Braden, "To The Southern Student Organizing Committee."

[130] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC Executive Committee Minutes, February 25-26, 1967."

[131] Southern Student Organizing Committee, "SSOC Handbook Spring 1969."; Simpson, Wells and Vlasits, "Letter to SSOC members."; Southern Student Organizing Committee, "Resolution to Dissolve SSOC."

class revolution through the lens of white Southern heritage. SSOC simultaneously drew on white supremacist beliefs and the ideology of the Black freedom struggle. It saw the South as a distinctive region that faced oppression by Northern extractive capitalists and complicit Southern politicians. SSOC believed that by radicalizing workers it could set in motion a Southern revolution that would eradicate inequality, and it saw the Cone Mills strikes as an ideal organizing opportunity. SSOC's work at Cone Mills transformed its organizational strategy and increased its focus on regional organizing and working-class resistance. Ultimately, SSOC's work at Cone Mills also led the organization to inadvertently affirm white supremacist symbolism and rhetoric in an effort to reach working-class whites.

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