Charleston’s Legacy to the Poor People’s Campaign

This essay provides a detailed, ground-level account of an important labor and civil rights campaign of the late 1960s, the Charleston, South Carolina, hospital workers strike. O’Dell worked as an advisor to the campaign upon his return to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1969. The essay is an excellent example of the kind of “organic intellectual” work he advanced as an organizer within a larger social movement. O’Dell argues that this women-led campaign, coming shortly after the terrible blow of the King assassination and involving predominantly black and poorly paid licensed practical nurses, aides, orderlies, kitchen and laundry workers, and cleaners, offered indispensable insights into how to advance the movement beyond its stalled “civil rights phase.”

Indeed, for O’Dell, the Charleston strike represented a promising model for advancing King’s abortive “Poor People’s Campaign.” It is worth recalling that King was assassinated in Memphis while supporting a strike by that city’s predominantly black sanitation workers. His call for a “Poor People’s Campaign” was an effort to refocus social justice struggles on the needs and demands of low-wage, unprotected, and unemployed workers. By revisiting the concept of a synthesis between labor and civil rights activism—the organized working class and the racialized working poor—Charleston advanced this agenda and suggested a new impetus for organizing the unorganized, often described today under the rubric “social movement unionism.” This essay is another example of O’Dell’s determination to constantly theorize his own social and political conjuncture: the contemporary relations of force and the ever-changing horizons of progressive movement and possibility.

In this current age of many-leveled communications, millions of people are put in touch with a particular situation as the realities of that situation are communicated to them via television and news media. More often than not, while being caught up in the contemporary as spectators or as activists, we are at once put in touch with the long span of history which has helped to shape the contemporary situation. So a particular development which is brought to our attention in 1969 is really opening up for examination the roots of a situation which may date to 1690, and we become, sometimes belatedly, aware that a large piece of history is at work in a contemporary movement on which we are focusing at the moment.

Charleston, like so many seaport towns in the South, has that slow-paced atmosphere of peaceful calm which has traditionally tended to cover up some of the clashing contradictions in the southern way of life. This deceptive, superficial calm which has become a kind of accompaniment to the humid, tropical climate has long been a disarming feature of southern life. Even the oppressed, the colonized, have a tendency to accommodate to this facade, smothering their true feelings and going along with polite society. “Man, if you can’t make it here, you can’t make it nowhere. This is Big Easy,” one used to hear so often among black folk in New Orleans as the harsh realities of segregation were avoided. And so people continued to follow their daily routines all over the South—waiting table at Antoine’s in the French Quarter, working as domestics in the private homes of professionals, loading cotton on the docks of Galveston or Savannah or unloading bananas in Tampa, brought in from the Latin American division of the Empire. Peaceful, calm, routine ways of life partially disturbed only by the quickened pace of urban development in the larger cities, but above all unchallenged and apparently quite content. Then comes an explosion from down below and everyone appears to be caught by surprise—both the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressed are surprised at their unity and the kind of power it has wrought; and the oppressor is surprised that his assumptions and system of containment are being challenged. The explosion is even peaceful.
but it is a peacefulness embracing a determined effort to establish justice, in contrast to the “peacefulness” which is a mask for injustice.

All of us remember Montgomery—which is legend; now there is Charleston, which is destined to be recognized as being to the Poor People’s Campaign what Montgomery was to the mass action phase of the Civil Rights Movement. The events in Charleston in this recent period developed upon a background as old as the American Republic and yet as contemporary as the initiatives of the civil rights era of this decade.

Early Charleston served as the door through which the plantation system was introduced into mainland North America in the seventeenth century. English planters who had developed this technique of efficient large-scale agricultural production in Barbados extended this to the Charleston area because of the abundance of land available, and this was welded to a rice-growing culture brought from Madagascar. To provide the basic labor force for this new economic institution, the Charleston traders specialized in importing Mandingo from the Western Sudan whose roots in independent African societal institutions dated from the thirteenth century, and proud men and women from Angola and the Congo Basin who had resisted the Portuguese slave traders a half-century before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. By reducing these to a slave labor force on the rice and indigo plantations, the Charleston “aristocracy”—planters, auctioneers and commission agents—flourished in wealth and comfort. The sale of Africans in Charleston was routinely reported in the Courier alongside the regular announcements of meetings of the Literary Society and the Carolina Art Association. Made affluent on the African slave trade, the Charleston aristocracy set the fashion for the other British-American colonies along the Eastern seaboard in sending their sons abroad to Eton and Oxford—or to Charleston College and The Citadel, the local military academy. And when the signers of the U.S. Constitution were debating the issue of the slave trade, it was John Rutledge of South Carolina who provided the leadership for the slave holders when he argued, “Religion and humanity have nothing to do with this question. Interest alone is the governing principle of nations.” Since “interest” in this equation is synonymous with investments and profits, the South Carolina planter had given the rising young American Republic its basic economic philosophy. We are reminded of how durable this rationale for slavery has been when we hear the same argument being used today in defense of U.S. business investments in South Africa.

The Charleston hospital workers’ strike is also the product of the activities of the last decade of the civil rights struggle. The years of day-to-day voter registration work done by Esau Jenkins and his colleagues and the political education which the community has gotten from this are part of the groundwork that was laid. Septima Clark’s pioneering work on John’s Island, outside the city, in developing a Citizen’s Education Program to wipe out illiteracy and replace this handicap with a new sense of confidence is another part of the foundation. Many residents of the Island work in the hospitals in Charleston. Then there is the emergence in recent years of a group of young brothers in Charleston of Afro-American expression who are properly sensitive to economic conditions and are producing a leadership of the quality of William Saunders.

The Charleston hospital strike also represents a landmark in the growth of concern in the
Southern Christian Leadership Conference with the problems of the poor in general, the working poor included. Beginning in 1963 with a limited involvement with the grievances of Negro steel workers in Atlanta and active participation with striking workers at the Scripto Pen Company in that city a couple of years later; then active involvement with garbage workers in Memphis, Atlanta and St. Petersburg last year; and the tragic assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., its founder and first president—these experiences profoundly helped to shape the SCLC commitment to the striking hospital workers in Charleston.

The nearly three million hospital and nursing home workers throughout the country are probably the largest bloc of underpaid urban workers in the nation. They represent a powerful potential for the Poor People’s Campaign and in their ethnic composition embrace a cross-section of the poor. Consequently, SCLC responded favorably to a proposal from Local 1199 that they cooperate in an organizing campaign among hospital workers. Local 1199 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Workers (AFL-CIO) had a record of achievement in organizing hospital workers in New York and New Jersey, improving wages and conditions. Having formed a National Organizing Committee they were now prepared to extend themselves to projects in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Charleston. They recognized that SCLC had an important body of experience in organizing the communities, so the basis for a cooperative effort was there. After a rather slow, plodding beginning in the fall of 1968 for several months the cooperative effort underwent severe stresses and strains due to a number of internal factors. Then Charleston provided the spark which galvanized the whole and transformed it into a positive, workable relationship.

The Strike Begins

On March 20, the administration at the state-owned South Carolina Medical College Hospital fired twelve workers who had been among the most active in organizing the non-professional licensed practical nurses, nurse’s aides, kitchen helpers, laundry workers, maids and orderlies for union recognition. In taking this action the hospital administration was following the advice of a highly paid lawyer who specializes as a consultant to several South Carolina industries on how to keep unions out. Paid at the rate of one hundred fifty dollars an hour, his fee for this job was reported as $17,000.

A month before this, a section of the Longshoremen employed by the State Ports Authority had tried to secure “union recognition.” These waterfront workers move cargo from the docks to the warehouse as distinct from the longshoremen who unload the ships and place the cargo on the docks. The latter already are members of the International Longshoremen’s Association. So, 350 dock workers struck for union recognition. The State secured a temporary injunction from Judge Singletary; then after a few days made the injunction permanent. The longshoremen went back to work; within a week a half dozen of the key strike leaders were fired—and that was it.

The hospital administration evidently hoped to be able to repeat this pattern but it back-fired. When the twelve hospital workers were fired, some 450 others walked off their jobs and the strike was on. The demands were:
Union recognition
—An end to discrimination in wages and hiring practices
—The rehiring of the twelve workers who had been fired

These hospital workers constituted the five-month-old Local 1199B, with a dynamic young woman, Mary Moultrie, as its President.

A week later more than 60 workers at the Charleston County Hospital walked off their jobs in sympathy with the workers at the Medical College Hospital and they stayed out for the duration. The union lawyers successfully contested the back-to-work injunction proceedings, but Judge Singletary did issue an injunction limiting the number of pickets to “ten people picketing at a time—twenty yards apart.” There were also other provisions of the injunction that were vaguely worded.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled against such injunctions, declaring that they cannot be enforced by the police. Nevertheless, the injunction was enforced; more than 150 were arrested during the early weeks of the strike for violating this illegal injunction. The courts set bond for those arrested at $500 for the first offense, $1500 for the second offense, and $5000 for the third. The union had little chance to secure relief in Federal Court because the presiding judge at the time was Strom Thurmond’s former law partner, Judge Charles E. Simons. Judge Simons is one of several segregationist judges appointed to the Federal Courts in the South by the Kennedy Administration.

Following nationwide April 4 activities commemorating the first anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., SCLC turned its attention to helping the Charleston hospital workers. Much of the national focus which had been built up around April 4 now shifted to Charleston as the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy and other members of his staff entered into the struggle. One of the immediate by-products of their presence was a sharp decline in the kind of night-riding terrorism which some of the hospital workers had been experiencing. “It was really rough here those early weeks of the strike,” commented Henry Nicholas, one of the top leaders of the union who had been sent in from New York to assist the local organization. His room had been fire-bombed the night before the Charleston County Hospital workers went on strike. “We were glad to see Reverend Abernathy and the others come in here because it certainly eased the pressure on us. Up to that time the workers had to organize security for the Union Hall and take other measures to guarantee the safety of the union leaders.”

The SCLC staff, of course, brought to the Charleston situation their rich experience in organizing civil rights demonstrations—with particular talents in organizing the black community in support actions. Carl Farris, James Orange, Stoney Cooks and others of the Field Staff organized daily marches and toured the sea islands around Charleston, organizing for mass meetings to rally the community to support the hospital workers. In press conferences, television appearances and mass meetings in many parts of the country, the Reverend Andrew Young brought the issues of the Charleston strike to a large nationwide audience with impressive clarity.
Military Intervention

Most of the nightly mass meetings in Charleston were held at historic Morris Brown African Methodist Episcopal Church. With the community beginning to be effectively organized and the hospital workers firm in their determination to win, there was mounting pressure on the hospital administration to settle the strike. Furthermore, there were rumors of some inclination on their part to do so. It was at this point that The State intervened with a massive military presence. Two battalions of National Guardsmen augmented by hundreds of state troopers and city policemen cordoned off the whole area of the city in the vicinity of the hospital complex. The hospital workers, as state employees, were seeking the right to union recognition and better conditions. The State proceeded to take any decision-making authority out of the hands of the hospital administration and imposed its military power into the situation.

Charleston still had its balmy spring weather and its calm, peaceful routines—but these now seemed to clash incongruously with the steel-helmeted, bayonet-rifled, sun-goggle-wearing military presence. I had not seen such overriding presence of the military since Grant Park in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention in 1968. All of this because some underpaid hospital workers were seeking the dignity of union recognition from The State.

With the jailing of Reverend Ralph Abernathy, the President of SCLC, and Leon Davis, President of Local 1199 from New York, for leading a non-violent demonstration (the charges were “parading without a permit”), the issues were joined and the polarization sharpened.

The Charleston Medical Association (white) opposed the strike but the Negro Medical Association endorsed the hospital workers’ demands. A small Committee of Concerned Clergy in addition to the Catholic Archbishop were on public record in support of the hospital workers, and a bi-partisan group of U.S. Senators in Washington provided some leverage for confronting the Nixon Administration with its responsibility to avoid another tragedy as in Memphis.

On May 1, The State imposed a 9:00 p.m. curfew on Charleston which, in effect, banned all night marches. The hospital workers and SCLC countered by tightening up a boycott of downtown stores which had begun the last week in April. DON’T SHOP ON KING STREET was the battle cry as the community was urged to buy only food and medicine. The black middle-class was asked to cancel charge accounts in stores—all of this was a way of making the merchants of Charleston, as part of the “power structure,” feel the seriousness of the strike for it must be kept in mind that up to this point the hospital administration had not yet even agreed to discuss the hospital workers’ demands. The administrators considered as unthinkable the rehiring of the twelve workers who had been fired. The official attitude had been expressed by Dr. William M. McCord, the Chairman of the South Carolina Medical College Hospital when he said, “I am not about to turn a $25-million complex over to a bunch of people who don’t have a grammar school education.”

Confronting this official policy, the growing strength of the hospital workers’ support was clearly demonstrated in the Mother’s Day March on May 11. Some 15,000 people participated in the march that day led by Miss Mary Moultrie, Reverend Abernathy, who came out of jail for the occasion, Mrs. Martin Luther King and Walter Reuther, President of the United Automobile Workers of America. Reuther’s presence on this occasion and the support he gave
on behalf of his union created repercussions in the Executive Board of the national AFL-CIO. As a result, they too gave some formal support to the hospital workers’ strike.

The entire month of May was a kind of test of strength with the curfew, the troops, arrests and the courts being countered by day-time demonstrations, picketing on King Street as a way of enforcing the boycott, and evening mass meetings in many parts of the city to keep up the spirit of the movement. There were several hundred additional arrests and one of the most expensive items for the union was fees to local bail bondsmen. Meanwhile, the Medical College Hospital Administration finally agreed to discussions with representatives of the union. However, reminiscent of the disagreements at the Paris peace talks about the shape of the table, the hospital authorities balked at any of the workers who had been fired being in on the negotiations. Nevertheless, this was resolved because the pressure was on from all sides.

On May 27 the SCLC staff decided to give major attention to convincing the longshoremen to close the port of Charleston. This was a major source of untapped support for the hospital workers and it was recalled that the longshoremen in Charleston had closed the port on the day of Martin Luther King’s funeral—along with other ports on the Atlantic seaboard and Gulf areas.

The Charleston merchants were definitely feeling the loss of revenue resulting from the combination of the downtown boycott, the curfew and general military atmosphere of tension in the city. Losses from a drastic drop in the tourist trade and the cancellation of conventions were estimated at some fifteen million dollars. So the merchants were putting pressure both on the hospital administration and on Governor McNair, whose intervention in the strike was deeply resented by them, to settle the strike.

By this time the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) had entered the picture and raised certain false hopes of being an additional pressure for settling the strike. This federal agency had been reviewing the practices of the Medical College and County Hospitals for almost a year since it was found that many of their practices were in violation of the Civil Rights Acts. These hospitals were anticipating aid in the amount of some fourteen million dollars from HEW. A recommendation from the regional office of HEW in Atlanta that the federal aid be withheld until these hospitals were in compliance with the Civil Rights Act was sent to Washington to Secretary Finch. Had this action been taken by the Federal Government it unmistakably would have been another form of pressure toward constructive settlement of the strike. As SCLC and the hospital workers viewed it, it even offered Governor McNair and the hospital administrators a “way out” of the impasse since they could blame it on the federal government. However, as we shall see, the sequence of events in general revealed the obstinance of The State by its formidable, sophisticated tactics in attempting to wear the movement down.

On June 2, Governor McNair moved the curfew back to midnight and a large number of the troops were withdrawn from the city. This was a concession to the Charleston business community. Information was also leaked that the minimum wage was going to be raised from $1.30 to $1.50 an hour—that is, up to federal standards, for some twelve thousand hospital workers who are state employees and an additional five thousand other state employees. In addition the reclassification of jobs in state employment to eliminate discrimination in hiring and job practices was to be put into effect. These two concessions were designed to show that
South Carolina was complying with the standards set forth in the Civil Rights Bill.

This combination of concessions had the immediate result of relaxing the tense situation in Charleston. Business began to pick up, convention bookings increased and with negotiations between the union and hospital authorities still going on, a general public impression was left that the strike was just a few hours away from full settlement. People even began to shop downtown again thinking that it would “not be long now.” But the central issues of union recognition and the rehiring of the workers who had been fired were still unresolved. The concessions that had been publicly announced resulted in a serious let-down in the fighting spirit which had kept the strikers and their supporters on the offensive.

**Enlarging the Strike Strategy**

Fortunately, the SCLC seized the initiative and prevented this slippage from going too far. On June 11, at a Harlem mass meeting called by Local 1199 in New York, Reverend Ralph Abernathy in his keynote address called attention to the fact that the textile industry in South Carolina, as the largest industry in the state, was the major influence in shaping the hard line policy toward the hospital workers. “Therefore,” declared Reverend Abernathy, “we want Local 1199 here in New York to take the responsibility to maintain picket lines in front of each of the following textile company national headquarters.” Reverend Abernathy then named The J. P. Stevens Company, which owns twenty-three textile manufacturing plants in South Carolina; the Deering-Milliken Company, sixteen manufacturing plants, and M. Lowenstein & Sons, who have ten plants in South Carolina.

Reverend Abernathy also announced that he had instructed SCLC affiliates in Danville, Virginia, and Greensboro, North Carolina, to begin the picketing of the respective national headquarters of Dan River Mills, Burlington Industries and Cone Mills in those cities. He also stated that the Director of Organization of the AFL-CIO was on his way to the Longshoremen’s Convention in Miami with a recommendation that “the port of Charleston be closed” in support of the hospital workers. The port of Charleston is the fourth largest on the East Coast. It handles a half-billion dollars in cargo annually and therefore affects the entire economy of the state. It is also the major port outlet for South Carolina textiles.

The textile industry, on the other hand, is not only the largest industry in the South, it is notorious for its opposition to unions. The J. P. Stevens Company, the biggest of the textile giants operating in South Carolina, is the largest supplier of textiles to the Federal Government. Its President, Robert Stevens, was Secretary of the Army in the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration.

This effort to win the full support of the longshoremen, together with the picketing of the national headquarters of the various absentee-owned textile firms operating in South Carolina, marks the beginning of a very significant enlargement of the strike strategy followed by the hospital workers and SCLC. And the nation’s news media, including the South Carolina press, quickly picked up on this development. “CHARLESTON PORT MAY FACE WALKOUT BY LONGSHOREMEN” reported the *Greenville News*, while a staff reporter of the *Charleston News and Courier* listed in an article the textile companies whose headquarters were to be picketed. With these two key industries now becoming a target of agitational focus by the
strikers, and with the threat of HEW withholding federal funds from the hospital still possible, Dr. William McCord told the union negotiators that the administration at the Medical College Hospital was in agreement about rehiring the twelve workers who had been dismissed. This was the last major obstacle to a strike settlement. The union had earlier agreed to accept a grievance machinery and a dues check-off system as a reasonable beginning towards union recognition. There was also reason to believe that this decision by the hospital administration had the approval of Governor McNair. It was at this crucial point, the weekend of Friday, June 13, that U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond and Congressman Mendel Rivers, in whose eight-county congressional district Charleston is located, intervened in the strike situation. They announced they had met with the top HEW officials in Washington and had received “assurances” that no immediate action would be taken on the withholding of federal funds from the Medical College Hospital. This had the effect, of course, of sabotaging the negotiations because it removed a major pressure point. Dr. McCord immediately withdrew his offer to rehire the twelve workers, then suddenly became “ill” and unavailable for further talks; so the breakdown in negotiations was complete. The hardline, no-union policy of The State was still in effect.

This intervention by Strom Thurmond and Mendel Rivers at the federal level further clarified the power relationships at work in the Charleston situation. Rivers, the Democrat, as Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, has been mainly responsible for handling legislation which has given the Military Establishment upwards of $80 billion a year out of the national budget. A recipient of the “Minute Man Award” of the Reserve Officers Association and the “Citation of Honor” awarded by the Air Force Association, as a good politician Mendel Rivers has also seen to it that Charleston has received a generous share of these billions set aside for military spending. As a consequence, the military-industrial complex of State capitalism has a considerable physical presence in Charleston. A Polaris missile base, a Naval weapons station, a Marine weapons station and recruit depot, an Air Force base, and an Army supply depot are among the military installations interlocked with defense contracts for new industrial plants to J. P. Stevens, General Electric, McDonnell-Douglas, Lockheed and United Aircraft—such is the military-industrial complex in Charleston.

As for Strom Thurmond, his role in the 1968 presidential elections has made him one of the king-makers in the Nixon Administration, with political debts to collect on. Thurmond is, for all intents and purposes, “Mr. Republican” in the South. Together Thurmond and Rivers are a bi-partisan symbol of fascist-like conservative power in the affairs of the nation.

Faced with the sudden breakdown in negotiations, a breakdown filled with disappointment and frustrations, the hospital workers and SCLC were forced to take a good look at how the opposition was using “negotiations” to wear the movement down. Caught up in its own contradictions, the hospital administration was pursuing a pattern which called into question whether they were negotiating in good faith or trying to disarm and undercut the strike movement by a series of deliberate, sophisticated tactics. At any rate, it became clear that only a tightening up of the strike as a community-supported mass movement would produce meaningful negotiations. Consequently in the week that followed, the hospital workers and SCLC intensified their leafleting activities among the rank and file workers in other industries in Charleston, such as tobacco, clothing, as well as maritime. The objective was to bring the strike issues to them and to solicit their support. Then at the end of the week, on June 20, Rev.
Abernathy and Hosea Williams, the Director of SCLC’s Voter Registration Department, led a prayer meeting downtown. They were charged with “inciting to riot”; held along with two others on $50,000 bail; a troop build-up was ordered for Charleston; and the 9:00 p.m. curfew was reinstated.

On June 25, as the press in Spartanburg, Columbia, and elsewhere in South Carolina was carrying reports which confirmed that the federal government had no intention of immediately withholding funds from the hospitals in Charleston, Local 1199 in New York threw a large picket line in front of the main entrances of the J. P. Stevens Corporation. The pickets distributed leaflets to the public explaining the reason for their action. The next day, the trade paper for the textile industry carried an article originating from its Greenville, South Carolina bureau. The opening paragraphs from this article stated the following:

Is the Charleston hospital strike a bombshell set to explode at the back door of the South Carolina textile industry? Some State textile leaders believe so. And union leaders have predicted that victory in the current struggle would lead ultimately to unionization of workers in government and industry throughout the state.

The day after the above article appeared, the administration at the Medical College Hospital announced the settlement of the strike. The Charleston County Hospital strike was to take another three weeks, until mid-July. Many of the strike breakers hired at the County Hospital were people who had no desire to be put in that kind of a situation. Some among them were welfare mothers, who had been suddenly cut off the welfare rolls by The State during the strike and told to get a job at the County Hospital.

A 113-Day Battle

To the working poor, especially the low wage urban workers employed in service industries, the Charleston Hospital strike is a beacon light. Its significance is heightened precisely because it occurred within the larger context of SCLC-led “Hunger Marches” in Alabama, Mississippi and Illinois and demonstrations by the National Welfare Rights Organization in many parts of the country. The Hospital workers in Charleston, from the very beginning, viewed their activities as part of the movement to end poverty in America. One of the earliest leaflets distributed by the National Organizing Committee in Charleston carried the caption “LET US END POVERTY IN CHARLESTON (OUR OWN).”

Just as Montgomery, more than a decade ago, forged a model for a mass movement assault upon the public practice of racial segregation, the Charleston hospital workers have given us one model for beginning to develop a nation-wide mass movement of the poor. And only a sustained militant mass movement will push this nation towards making a firm national commitment to abolish poverty. Contrary to the fantasies and folklore of this society, there is no inherent good in the American Way of Life which makes progress and social change automatic.

Charleston forged a unity between the community-organizing techniques developed during the civil rights era of the Freedom Movement and the working class organizational techniques of strike action developed by the labor movement. This is an effective combination of applied techniques which will undoubtedly be sharpened by experience in the months ahead. One of the special qualities to be noted in the Battle of Charleston is that this experience tested and
proved, once again, the tenacity and fighting spirit of women workers when confronted with the arrogant power of The State.

Charleston as an experience also had its share of weaknesses. Neither the South Carolina AFL-CIO nor the Central Trades and Labor Council in Charleston really supported the hospital workers’ organizing effort. The leadership of these bodies gave the lame excuse that this was a “civil rights struggle” so they couldn’t support it! Despite this distorted view by the top bureaucracy, a number of individual union locals in South Carolina did make donations to the hospital workers. Even if it were strictly a civil rights issue, labor should have supported the strike. This limited support from labor saved the legislature from having to really deal with the issues in the strike. The South Carolina Legislature was in session during this entire time and the hospital administrators had been using as a dodge the excuse that there was no legislation which recognized the right of state employees to have a union. Had labor done its part, sufficient pressure could have been put on the South Carolina Legislature to make them write such legislation during this session. This obviously would have benefited tens of thousands of workers, black and white. Once again racism blinded the labor leadership to its responsibility to the white workers, who are certainly a majority of state employees in South Carolina. As a consequence, the legislative arm of The State was able to ignore the hospital workers’ strike and proceed with business as usual. One could also be constructively critical of the inadequate involvement of the New York membership of Local 1199 in organizing public support for Charleston.

These were some of the missed opportunities which the Charleston experience presented and it is important to call attention to them as a way of preparing for the future.

From the community-organizing side of the picture, the Charleston strike was also instructive in regards to the response it received from the black middle-class. The “black bourgeoisie” in Charleston, while not hostile, was quite cool towards the events taking place. This surprised some of our most experienced activists, accustomed as we are to the more positive response from them to civil rights issues. What this reflects, of course, is that poverty as an issue does not touch the black middle-class in the same direct way as the struggle against segregation did. Many of the black bourgeoisie have never known poverty of the kind we are dealing with in the Poor People’s Campaign, but they have known the insult of segregation. The black middle-class related to the issue of ending segregation more easily and more readily than they do to the issue of ending poverty in America. One of the important challenges for the Poor People’s Campaign is to define the ways for the middle-class to relate to this new stage of the Freedom Movement. It’s a challenge because it is class prejudice towards the poor which has to be boldly confronted and patiently dealt with in working with the black bourgeoisie. These prejudices were not as evident during the civil rights era because the black middle-class found it relatively easy to identify its self-interest in the movement to end segregation.

The process of an emerging multi-ethnic social force representing the most exploited among the workers of our country is leaving its impact upon and profoundly influencing the program and strategic direction of SCLC, as the primary mass-action organization of the Freedom Movement. At “Resurrection City” in the Spring of 1968, SCLC led representatives of the poor in “making a witness” before the nation, calling attention to the existence of poverty. That witness was violently dispersed by the police power of The State in the nation’s capital. In the
Spring and Summer of 1969, the leadership of SCLC was engaged in a major tactical and strategic battle with The State at a local level over the issue of the human rights of the poor. These two events, a year apart, are really to be seen as one continuous process. It signals the opening of a whole new period in the evolution of the Freedom Movement nationally and what Dr. Du Bois called, in a pamphlet in 1911, the social evolution of the black South.

At “Resurrection City” as well as Charleston, The State acted out the real meaning of the law and order syndrome, so dear to certain politicians in this country today. But the poor of America are determined they “ain’t gonna let nobody turn them roun’.” The immediate improvements won, the beginnings made towards full union recognition, the brief lesson in political economy learned, and the refreshing vitality any community gains from being involved in an organizational effort for change, add up to an important victory for the Poor People’s Campaign and the hospital workers in Charleston. It is a victory, however, which will have to be guarded and boldly extended to other parts of the South in order to prevent the achievements from being eroded and undermined by the opposition.

The growing movement to fulfill the goals of the Poor People’s Campaign will move the United States a long ways towards becoming a civilized society. This will be a society worthy of our epoch in human history when mankind, in its scientific and technological prowess, has stepped foot upon the surface of the moon.

1. Charleston College—Founded in 1770, three years after Harvard.
2. Quoted from Bancroft’s Slave Trading in the Old South.
3. In 1822, the basement of the AME Church was used by Denmark Vesey for meetings planning his slave revolt. When this was discovered the church was burned to the ground by the slave holders. The pastor was Rev. Morris Brown.
4. In 1966 they were subsidized to the amount of $76,000,000 in “defense” contracts.
5. Greenville, South Carolina, Friday, June 13, 1969.