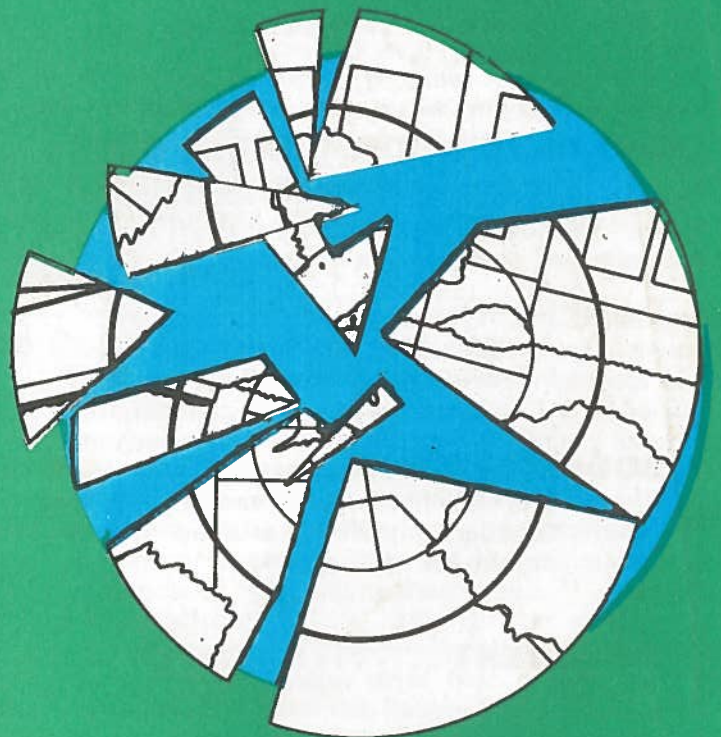
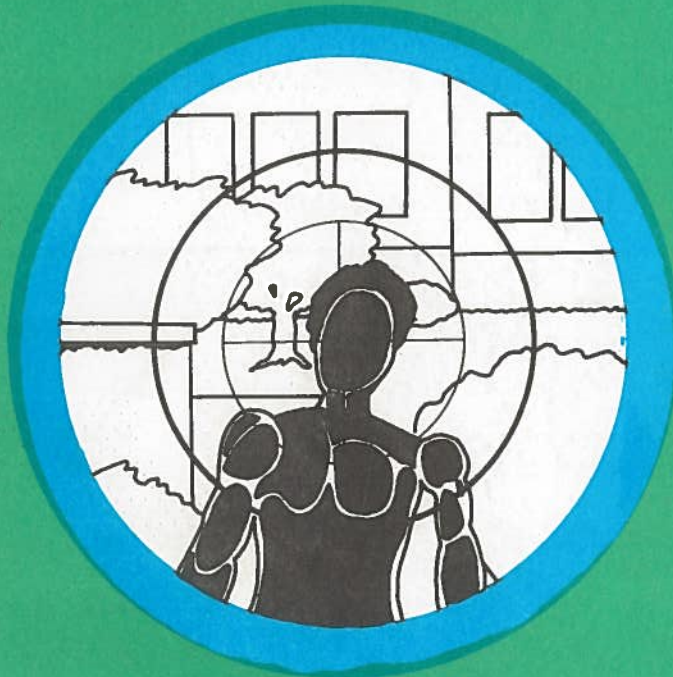
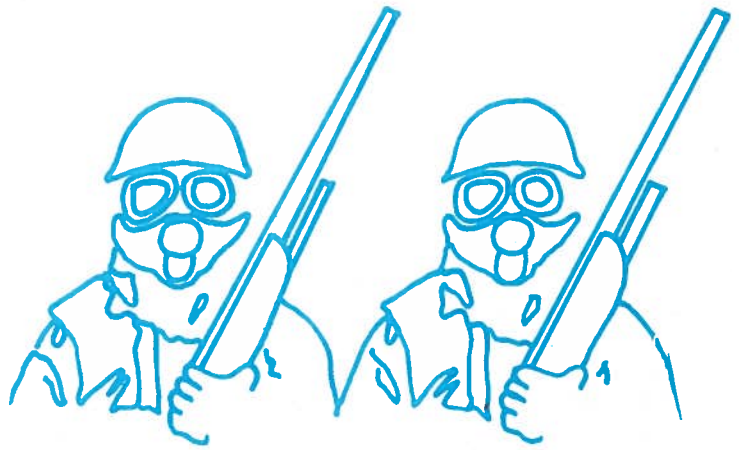


# edcentric

The Killings at Southern University:



A Case of Political Assassination?



## Tragedy at Southern U:

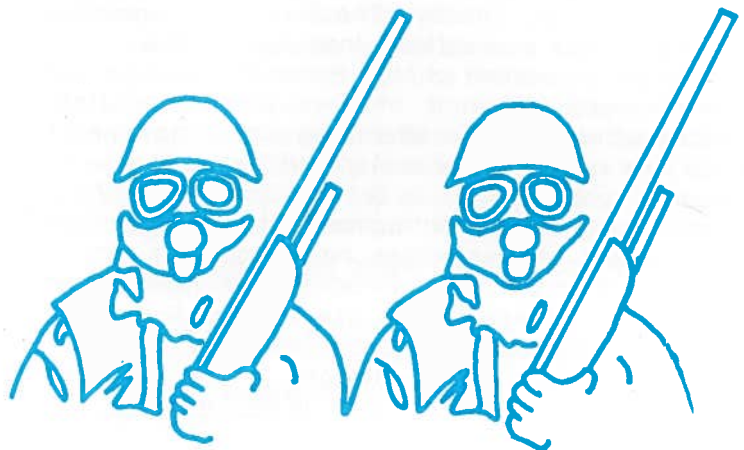
# Accident – or Political Assassination?

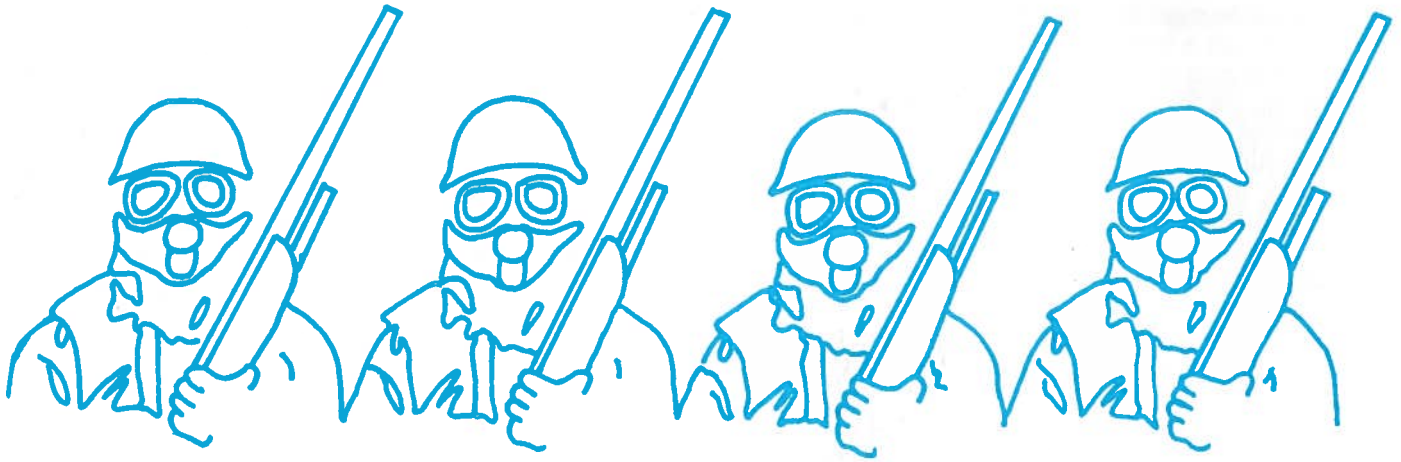
by Gerald McWorter

First came the tear gas, then the shotgun blasts. Two unarmed students crumpled. One of the students died instantly. The second lay bleeding for half an hour. When he finally arrived at the hospital, he too was dead.

From Louisiana's governor to the president of Southern University at Baton Rouge, the officials responsible for the deaths of these two Black students dismiss them as regrettable accidents. But the investigations of the Black Peoples' Committee of Inquiry strongly indicate that Denver Smith and Leonard Brown were the victims of deliberate political murder. According to the committee, the November 16th murders dramatically demonstrate the state's determination to maintain control over its Black citizens.

However, this police terrorism has actually strengthened Blacks' resolve to fight racism both on and off the campus of Southern University at Baton Rouge. November 16th has become a symbol of struggle rather than of fear, a call to action rather than a successful suppression of dissent. Students United, the activist group at Southern, has pledged continued struggle in making the university responsive to the needs of Black people. Furthermore, they have declared themselves dedicated to the liberation of oppressed peoples





everywhere.

In order to clarify the political significance of November 16th, this article will show how Southern University's structure reflects and reinforces the state's structure. The events preceding November 16th and the events of the day itself will be summarized. Finally, this article will examine the aftermath of November 16th, including four major investigations of the murders and the continuing struggle of Students United.

### **Who Rules Louisiana?**

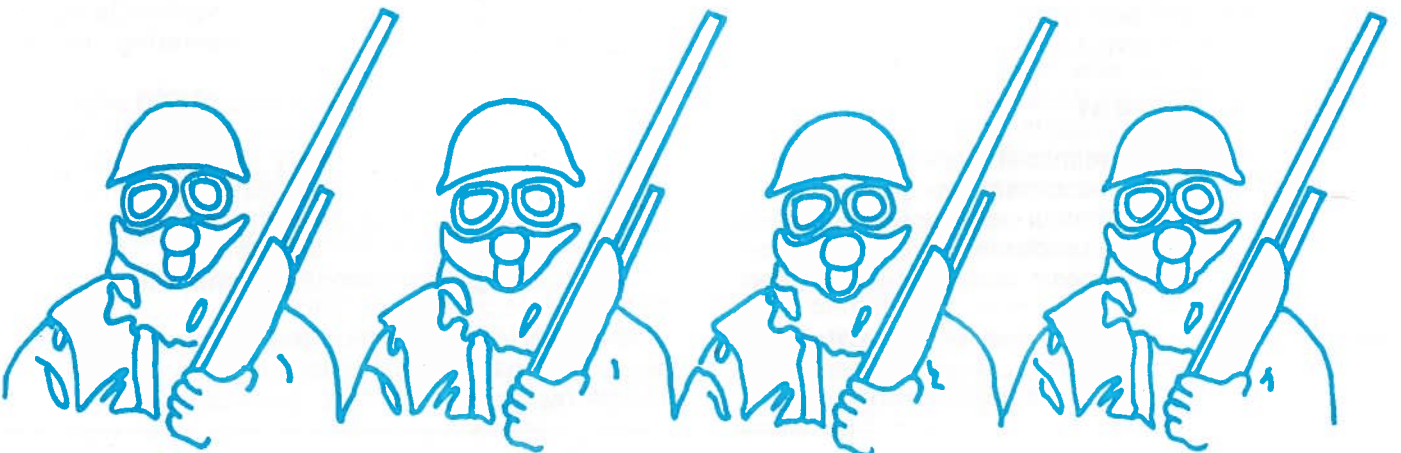
Southern University functions in the context of certain class and economic forces in Louisiana. Those which play most directly on Southern are in four major categories. There are two segments within the white middle class: WASPs and cajun bourgeois. Similarly, there are two segments of the Black middle class: old and new petty bourgeois.

The two dominant groups in Louisiana are the WASPs and the creole-cajuns (a blend of French Catholic and native bayou peoples). The WASPs are most influential in northern Louisiana, where the economy is largely based on gas, cotton and timber.

They tend to represent local petty bourgeois interests tied to land-owning "native" Louisianans. The cajun group is most influential in southern Louisiana, where the economic base is petroleum, chemicals, sugar cane and rice. The cajuns appear to be tied to the national bourgeois, especially around the cosmopolitan center of New Orleans. This description has been characteristic of Louisiana since the era of French control before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

Both WASPs and cajuns are dependent upon the success of the multinational corporations operating out of Louisiana. (Humble Oil, Kaiser Aluminum, Dow Chemical, Gulf, and Exxon are only a few.) The success of these corporations depends not only on their continued use of Louisiana's natural resources, but on the continuation of their longstanding "sweetheart relationship" with Louisiana state power (tax favors being one major component of this collaboration). Thus both the corporations and the white middle class have vested interests in maintaining the existing socio-economic structure of Louisiana.

The government has traditionally been in the hands of WASPs. In 1972, however, a new "liberal" leadership emerged with the election of Edwin Edwards, Louisiana's first cajun governor.



Both segments of the Black middle class are linked to white counterparts. The "old" Black petty bourgeoisie has a business character, and has functioned in the role of managing the segregated Black community. Its interests are tied in with the local WASP power structure. Historically, this class has included such groups as the Negro Chamber of Commerce in Shreveport, Black secret fraternal societies, Black churches, etc. In terms of what is defined as success in the United States, then, the older petty bourgeois have an objective basis for race pride within the segregated system.

The new Black petty bourgeoisie, on the other hand, has a comprador character. Its influence is linked to the recent rise in governmental power of the cajun bourgeoisie. The new petty bourgeoisie are based in the southern region, thus affiliated with the cosmopolitan cajun-creole power base around New Orleans. This class segment includes most of the Black officials in state government and professionals employed to represent the Black community.

### **Who Controls Southern?**

Since Southern University is the largest organization in the Black community of Louisiana, control is an important question for the established powers. Twelve thousand Black students are in attendance at Southern's three campuses (Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Shreveport). Its operating budget for the fiscal year 1971-72 was almost twenty million dollars (over 75% of this figure was allocated to the Baton Rouge campus). A significant portion of this money comes from the multinational corporations important to Louisiana's economy. Moreover, these corporations present a "Great White Father" image of generosity — while their profits aid countries such as Portugal in struggles against the African people.

Management of the university is a mixture of direct and indirect rule. Immediate state control is in the hands of an all-white state board of education. The men on the board watch the limits which have been set on the institution. In addition, they monitor expenditure of funds. All else is left up to the administration. (The administration has historically had a scholarly, if dynastic, orientation with a succession of presidents from the Clark family. This orientation changed, however, with the 1968 appointment to the presidency of former financial officer George Netterville.)

### **History of Dissent**

For over a decade, students at Southern have been acutely aware of the inaccessibility of the power structure on all levels. Their dissatisfaction with this kind of control has been made clear in peaceful and organized ways. But these attempts have been consistently ignored or put down. Expulsions have been used to maintain control of students who demanded a greater voice in running the university; similarly, firings in disguise have been used for faculty members who expressed dissent. Even more

significantly, in both 1963 and 1967 the university administration set a precedent for the nation in shutting the school down through police power. Such actions are supported by a 1963 state law prohibiting the "interruption" of an educational institution (a law used to suppress dissent as indiscriminately as the infamous anti-communism act in South Africa).

In the fall of 1972, student dissenters joined to form Students United (SU). This group has its origins in various student attempts to participate in the community and in the governance of the university. The catalyst for the group's formation was the firing-in-disguise of the chairman of the psychology department. (Dr. Charles Waddell found his authority usurped twice by the university administration: he was by-passed on both faculty hiring and research funding issues. For these reasons he resigned from the chairmanship.) Waddell represented the kind of model that the students found desirable: he was a young Black scholar committed not only to understanding the world, but also to changing it. Therefore student reaction to Waddell's so-called resignation was prompt. The original members of Students United rallied a wide range of members, prepared a platform, and planned actions.

The group's initial effort to rectify the injustices they saw was to attempt to negotiate with Southern president George Netterville. Not surprisingly, Netterville avoided the meeting with an excuse which later proved to be a lie. Students United then called a boycott, and proceeded to develop an administrative reform proposal for three types of councils: one for each department, one for each of twelve colleges, and an executive council for the entire university. In all cases students would outnumber faculty and/or administration two to one, and have equal voting power. Netterville offered a counter-proposal which would have allowed students to become members of the University Senate. But the Senate has never been a functional vehicle for change since its inception in 1968. Student members would thus have no real power, only a tarnished image of it.

It became apparent to members of Students United that Southern was not only built on the land of a former plantation; it was still being managed like one. No one had the power to resist a few almighty administrators. The students realized that it was imperative to push beyond Netterville to the real authority of state power operating in the interests of the ruling class.

Thus October 24th found over 2,000 students seeking out the superintendent. He put them off. They proceeded immediately to the governor's mansion. Edwards did meet with them, and said: "This is important enough for me to take part in negotiations to settle the differences."

But resulting negotiations (a committee process through the board of education) failed. It was evident that neither the board nor the administration was going to really listen to the students' grievances. Therefore, on October 31st the students moved to "escort" Netterville and the vice president off

campus. At this point the university was closed down, and all levels of state police put on alert. Meanwhile, the governor had changed from the fox to the wolf in five days' time, now saying: "We will not permit violence or destruction of property. We will do whatever is necessary to maintain law and order, and to prosecute any who violate rules and regulations."

A new set of rules was drawn up accordingly, rules designed to prevent the continued actions of Students United. The students moved in spite of these rules. Warrants were soon sworn out on all known leaders. As the boycott continued, police forces were often seen on campus. Twice they appeared in full riot gear. The students, however, remained nonviolent.

Two student leaders were arrested shortly after the warrants were sworn out. These arrests were justified by the 1963 law mentioned earlier. More attempts were made at negotiation, but they failed. The administration continued to ignore the heart of the demands: Students United wanted power involvement, not just the image of it.

## **Details of November 16th**

At 4:00 a.m. on November 16th, four more student leaders were arrested. Shortly thereafter, Sheriff Amiss is quoted to have said in a phone conversation that he was out to get the students, and if they harmed a deputy he would "be on their ass for years." Later, at about 9:00 a.m., a group of students went to Netterville's office to ask him to find out why the four students had been arrested and what he could do to free them. Five students entered the building peacefully to wait for him to go downtown. About twenty other students were inside the building, and several hundred were outside. The offices were functioning normally.

At 10:30 a.m., state police, sheriff's deputies, helicopters, and even an armored tank appeared on Southern's campus. Suddenly the students inside the building were blasted with tear gas cannisters. A few cannisters were thrown back at police. Then, just as suddenly, bullets claimed the lives of Denver Smith and Leonard Brown. The remaining students were driven off campus and the university was shut down.

## **The Investigations of the Murders**

Four investigations were begun soon after the violence of November 16th. These are tied to four national (racial) and class formations:

1. The F.B.I. began an investigation to discover if there had been any violation of federal law. This investigation represents the national-bourgeois-state power of the Federal Government.

2. Louisiana Attorney General Guste, at the request of Governor Edwards, formed a bi-racial committee to examine the circumstances surrounding

the killings. Here Louisiana bourgeois-state power is represented.

3. Sheriff Al Amiss announced that he would start an official investigation to find out who led the "take-over" of the administration building and who "intimidated" students into boycotting. This action is rooted in WASP, rural landowner, and small town interests.

4. The Black community formed the "Black Peoples' Committee of Inquiry" to examine the killings and related details. This is an ad hoc grouping from among the new Black middle class. Its members range from Berkeley City Councilman D'Army Bailey to Annie Smart, regional director of the National Welfare Rights Organization.

Only the Guste Commission and the Black committee revealed any of their findings. The F.B.I.'s 1,300-page report is confidential, pending litigation in federal courts. Sheriff Amiss won't even reveal the name of the person in charge of his investigation.

The Guste Commission's releases indicated that the students were killed by a deputy sheriff's shotgun blast — maybe both students by the same shot. Other findings of the commission are still undisclosed.

The Black Peoples' Committee held open hearings for their investigations, and also made public all of their findings. This committee indicted both law enforcement officials and college administrators as responsible for the violence on November 16th. It also added new information to known details of that day.

Law officers were declared the real precipitators of the violence. The committee found that the first tear gas cannister was thrown and the first shot fired by law enforcement officials. As a group, these authorities "failed to adhere to (accepted guidelines) for crowd control." The sheriff was "ill-equipped to cope. . .to the point of a clear, demonstrative, wanton disregard for human life." Governor Edwards was "negligent in his failure to assume control... pursuant to his responsibilities. . .where tensions and lack of subordinate control created a clear, present, and continuing danger to human life." In addition, the governor's "erroneous judgments... resulted in the serious impairment of the due process right" of many students and faculty members.

The University's guilt was found to lie in its "flagrantly political use of the judicial process to suppress legitimate student dissent" (the early arrests). University officers were accused of consistently denying legal rights to students and faculty. Finally, some members showed "wanton disregard for students' lives. . .when (they) failed and refused to provide immediate medical attention and treatment."

The Black Peoples' Committee and the Guste Commission agree that the fatal shot or shots were indeed fired from the area where the deputy sheriffs were gathered. However, it is the Blacks' contention that Commission officials know which deputy fired

the shot, are withholding the man's name, and are making no move to bring charges against him.

Both federal and state officials have denied these charges. In fact, Governor Edwards and others have tried to promote the theory that the shooting was accidental. They claim that the tear gas cannister shells and shotgun shells are similar in size and shape. Thus a deputy under pressure could load his gun with the wrong kind of shell "and even he may not know he did it," according to Edwards. This statement conveniently relieves the authorities of the responsibility for discovering and revealing who fired the fatal shot.

But even if the two kinds of shells do look alike (which is questionable), why were the deputies armed with shotgun shells at all?

## Significance of Southern's Struggle

A statement by Students United answers that question: "Southern University is another of the many oppressive tools used by 'White America' to keep Black people oppressed."

In fact, Students United has stated that Southern is not only an oppressive tool — it's a murderous weapon:

When we began to talk about Southern University moving to speak to the needs of the Black community, and when we began to question white people's control over institutions populated predominantly by Black people, our questions raised some very fundamental issues that prompted forces of imperialism to try and suppress our movement by committing two brutal murders on November 16th. Those questions reached deep into the political and economic process that kept Southern University stagnant. (From **Documents of Students United.**)

As we have seen, this "political and economic process" encompasses a middle class with great investment in maintaining the present (racist) social structure of Louisiana. Rural or urban, northern or southern, the propertied bourgeoisie cannot afford to loosen their ties with the multinational corporations — or their hold on Southern University as the largest organization in the Black community of Louisiana. Blacks linked to these classes also hold tenaciously to their position of influence in the power structure of the state and the university. A university full of dissatisfied Black students, aware of these power dynamics, constitutes a very real threat to both groups.

This interrelationship between the university and the Louisiana power structure led to an almost inevitable progression of student demands and repression: the harder the students pushed, the more they were pushed back. Student struggle began with expressed discontent in one department. Dissatisfaction grew and university-wide forces joined together. The demands of this united group soon were refined into the specific proposal for the crea-

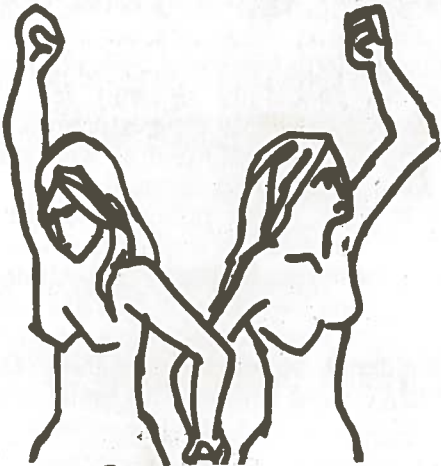
tion of new administrative councils with greatly increased student participation. Finally the demands culminated in the call for the resignation of many Southern administrators (president, vice-presidents, deans). Repression went through four stages: negotiations, intimidation, imprisonment, and finally murder. Governor Edwards has inadvertently acknowledged this by stating that the government is willing to keep order "by any means necessary."

Yet the bullets fired on November 16th have not intimidated activists at Southern University. On the contrary, the struggle has widened. Since the murders of Denver Smith and Leonard Brown, Students United has gained fresh support on campus, in local communities, and in colleges and universities across the nation.

Nowhere is the issue limited to the events of November 16th, or even to the campus at Baton Rouge. The universality of the issue is reflected in the ultimate objective of Students United: "to transform the present educational system so that it will aid in the building of a more humane society."

Abdul (Gerald McWorter) teaches at Fisk University in Nashville. His long history of activism in Black liberation struggles includes organizing at Nashville's People's College and involvement in the National Association of Black Students.

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