

STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE

8 1/2 Raymond Street, NW
Atlanta, Georgia

September 24, 1964

MEMO

TO: FRIENDS OF SNCC
FROM: ATLANTA OFFICE
RE: MCCOMB, MISSISSIPPI

FURTHER NEWS

Since our last correspondence the picture of the developments in McComb has become increasingly clear. On Monday night while our six civil rights workers were being held by local police and being subjected to intensive and intimidating interrogation, Negroes all over the city were being subjected to intimidation by a combination of local and state police. Throughout the day, state police poured into the city and by evening roadblocks had been set up all over the city, especially in the Negro community. Virtually all Negroes on the street, whether driving cars or walking, were stopped. All were verbally abused: "Nigger, where are you going?" or "Nigger, what are you doing?" Many were slapped around; others were arrested on trumped up charges varying from traffic violations to criminal syndicalism (see copy of enclosed law). By Tuesday it had become clear that up to fifty people had been arrested and that many more were to follow. Tuesday night the roadblock was repeated and Negroes were again subjected to intimidation and humiliation. More were arrested. The arrest toll mounted significantly on Wednesday. Twenty five Negroes were arrested for criminal syndicalism and placed under bonds ranging from \$1000 to \$5000. Dennis Sweeney, a volunteer from Portland, Oregon, was arrested for a second time and charged with being "an accessory after the fact of possessing explosives." Despite all our efforts to create public awareness of the situation in McComb there seems still to be no restraint to the ruthlessness of police action against the Negro community.

Last night, ^{WEDNESDAY} ~~Thursday~~, the degree of collusion which exists between state and local police and the organized terrorists was strikingly revealed. Around 11 PM (Mississippi time), the home of Ardis Garner was bomb-d. Garner was a former Negro policeman who had been fired from the force two weeks earlier. He had served for a little more than a month. For over a week, local workers had sought to convince him to leave McComb and reveal all he knew of the activities of the police. Yesterday morning, apparently after learning that his life was in danger, he consented. Yesterday afternoon he testified before the Mississippi Civil Rights Advisory Committee and told of the close connection between local police and Klan leaders. On the basis of his testimony the Committee decided to fly him immediately to Washington to testify before the Civil Rights Commission and to confer with Justice DEpartment officials. The same night his house was bombed. His wife and child had only left a few hours earlier after local workers decided that for their safety they should leave McComb immediately. The bombing came at the time when almost a hundred state, county, and city police were in the city. An hour later a second bombing of a Negro home occurred, this one outside the city; the sixteenth since the start of the summer project and the 11th since August 28.

Today ~~Friday~~ ^{THURSDAY} the police and local officials extended their assault on the Negro community in an effort to get at those community leaders not hit by their roadblock and criminal syndicalism charges.

The McComb Enterprise Journal quoted the sheriff, R.R. Warren, as saying "The explosions are being staged in an effort to induce the federal government to declare martial law here." He said he believed that there is a close struggle in progress which will either end with government imposing martial law in Pike County or with local officers finally pinning down the origin of the mysterious blasts. Warren s stated that "he feels that the bombings are being staged to bompile a basis for a possible ceclaration of martial law in McComb and that this possibility came after his probe of the two blasts last night." The article notes that C.C. Bryant, who is local NAACP president and who has himself been the victim of two bombings, had been the one who notified local FBI of the second bombing last night. (This indicates close cooperation existing between local police and the FBI who not only informed local police about the bombing but also revealed who told them about it.) Then the article notes that Rev. Ned Taylor, who was minister of the church bombed Sunday night was seen driving past the homebombed last night minutes before the explosion took place. Today both Bryant and Taylor were hauled into custody by the local police and were subjected to intensive and intimidatng interrogation.

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AN ANALYSIS

The meaning of McComb is becoming clearer. The summer project was expected to end August 28. Nowhere was that expectation more prevalant than in McComb. The moment it became apparent that there would be no COFO withdrawal, an intensive campaign was initiated to force COFO out. A combination of intensified police intimidatation and terrorist violence was begun. Bombings became almost a nightly occurence (11 since August 28). Police began to threaten local people associated with COFO. Mrs. Quinn (whose house was destroyed in the Sunday night bombing) had her cafe raided twice. Her white landlord, under considerable pressure, demanded that she either stop serving COFO people or close down. When she agreed to close, he responded, "Good, now I can tell the police chief and she-riff and your place wouldn't be bombed." Mrs. Quinn is the movement's pillar of strength in McComb. To have broken her would have resulted in a serious collapse of community morale and might have critically isolated COFO workers from the Negro community. But Mrs. Quinn refused to be intimidated. She immediately made preparations to open another cafe, this one in a place owned by a Negro. Word must have leaked out. More drastic measures were needed to deal with Mrs. Quinn. And so last Sunday night her home was bombed.

Police Distortion Pickdd up by Press

The second important factor to be noted after the of harrassment friends of the COFO effort is the press's picking up the police story on the "riots". The Negro community reacted with momentary anger and tried to prevent police from entering the scene of the bombing. Local and state forces moved quickly to capitalize on the situation. Incredibly distorted reports of Negro rioting were released by police and picked up by wire services.

This was to give a rationale to the public for the carte blanche that was needed for police to move into McComb on a massive scale in the effort to totally demoralize and immobilize the Negro community...and ultimately to drive the movement out.

State Involvement

But the events in McComb extend beyond the efforts of local racism to stamp out the movement. This has been made clear by the massive intervention of the state in the last four days. The state's presence can be seen everywhere. Associated Press reported as many as 147 state police have been moved into McComb, more than a third of the entire state force. It was state investigators who interrogated Sweeney, Junk, and the other four civil rights workers arrested Monday night. It was one of the state laws--criminal anarchy--passed last spring to counter the statewide Mississippi Summer Project which was used in arresting twenty five local people. The state then has thrown its entire weight behind local efforts to batter the Negro community of McComb into submission and ultimately to run out the civil rights movement. McComb

McComb was the obvious place to begin to push back the gains made during the summer. The city is set in the weakest, most unorganized area of the state, an area dominated by organized terrorism (see enclosed statement). The state is undoubtedly aware of this fact. It also knows that the movement hesitated almost two weeks at the start of the summer before sending workers into the area for fear of what might happen to them, and then only sent in experienced staff people. The state must also be aware of the fact that the McComb movement is still in very tenuous phase, still lacking in any significant community organization or even community coherence. Finally, it remembers history, that the movement was forced to withdraw from McComb before, in 1961. All these factors point to McComb as the most vulnerable place for the start of a statewide rollback action.

FBI

The FBI's role in the entire situation becomes more frightening as the role of local police becomes more insidious. The FBI continues to insist that the local police are wonderful people and that COFO should cooperate fully with them. For instance, Tuesday morning agent Ford, apparently the head FBI official in McComb, told Jesse Harris that Sheriff Warren is one of the best investigators he's seen, that he's really a nice guy, that he knows his work and is experienced in his work. Jess quoted Ford as saying, "These people are very fine people and you shouldn't criticize them." The Rev. John Morris, executive director of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity, who spent last week in McComb, said in a statement today, "The FBI agents I met seemed singularly disinterested in anything more than pro forma display of investigation, and at least one agent's conduct in his interrogation of a voter registration worker is reprehensible and indistinguishable from the attitude of local police who attribute the guilt for the crisis to such workers."

Further Dangers

There are immediate dangers in the McComb situation which should be pointed out. The Negro community has been successfully smashed into fragments. While the bombing of the SNCC Freedom House on

July 8th brought the community together, repeated bombings, church burnings and reprisals have reinforced old fears of participation in the movement. Each Negro must live alone with his fears--and his despair. He must face alone persecution from local and state police. He must continue to submit to further humiliation and dehumanization--that is, if he wants to live. But for many Negroes, the will to simple self-preservation is weakening. There is just so much a human being can stand. The situation is predictable. Inevitably some Negro will decide that his dignity is more precious than life itself. And realistically this is the choice they face--the choice between dignity and death. One Negro or several Negroes soon are going to decide that they can take no more. They will be called nigger, nigger over and over again. They will be slapped around. It will be too much. Some protest will be made. And the next day we will read that the McComb police or state police shot an unknown Negro.

WHAT IS NEEDED?

We feel now that a containment approach is no longer feasible. Nothing we are doing now seems sufficient to restrain local and state police. We believe that a more creative response would be to take the initiative and in so doing sharpen the issue for the whole nation. Thus instead of simply trying to hold our own in McComb in the hope that the situation will cool off (there are no signs of this) we feel that the need is to begin a major focus on McComb. This means pouring major resources and people into the area. We need to counter the state, which is pouring everything it has to suppress the Negro community of McComb. This means initiating a massive voter registration drive in which we enlist staff from all over the state and ministers--we hope at least 50--from every part of the country. In this way it should become strikingly clear to the entire country what is at stake in McComb--the right of a people to be free.

Even if we were to contain the current local and state campaign of suppression, at this point the demoralization of the Negro community has proceeded so far that this would hardly be sufficient. The responsibility of the movement is nothing less than a massive all-out campaign to build human dignity and community morale in the Negro people of McComb.

Further thoughts on the McComb situation which should be pointed out. The Negro community has been successfully suppressed since the bombing of the SCLC Freedom House on