

COFO NEWS
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Mississippi Student Union Convention - December 1964

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it. I was never in a white school before. They have a greenhouse in their science room and their library is fantastic. All their rooms are big enough so you don't have to double up. They have tape recorders for their foreign language classes. Have you ever seen a colored school like that anywhere in Mississippi?"

Roscoe Jones, the 17 year old president of the newly born Mississippi Student Union, was speaking to some 50 delegates in Jackson. They came from ten cities all over the state. This was the fourth state-wide meeting of the group and the first since last October. The main item on the agenda was whether to declare a public school boycott against the Super-Jim Crow-educational-system of Mississippi.

The MSU was founded last January by ten high school students in Hattiesburg who wanted to participate in the Freedom Day Voter Registration drive sponsored by the Council of Federated Organizations. Since there was school that day they decided to join in the Freedom Day picket and declare a one day boycott of classes in protest against "the system". Three months later, in April, over 200 students met at Tougaloo College near Jackson and the MSU was on its way.

The second state-wide meeting was called for August 8-9 in Meridian. Three delegates came from each town where the MSU operated, and they hammered out resolutions which touched on everything from integrated schools, housing and jobs to the paving of streets and sidewalks. The resolutions paralleled those drawn up by some of their parents in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Although at first, COFO members helped organize MSU meetings, by summer the students were doing most of the work. Liz Fusco, the 28 year old Freedom School Coordinator for COFO, describes the relations between COFO and the MSU today:

"COFO was the father of the MSU but now they're entirely weaned and they run their own meetings and come to their own decisions. All I ask them is to put my name on their mailing list. They still look to us for advice sometimes but they're really on their way to independence."

Before the Jackson meeting a shy, unemployed high school graduate from that city talked about the "system":

"We wanted to protest against the bad teaching at our school the overcrowded classes, the old books, the lousy food. About 300 or 350 of us were involved in a demonstration and the principal told us that those who took part wouldn't be able to graduate. A few of us got arrested but the principal backed down.

"What's really bad is that I can only think of two teachers who really would discuss civil rights with us... but never at school. They have to sign a paper about what organizations they go to and they got to be careful or they lose their jobs. Us students even have to sign a pledge when we register that we're not involved in no civil rights stuff."

Another former Jackson high school student (from a different school) said that fear really permeates the whole system. His sister was expelled for a month just for singing a Freedom song, and he was threatened with expulsion by the principal when he wore a civil rights shirt to class. Besides, he says, "parents are afraid of their kids standing up to their teachers. That's why you just can't learn about the truth in the schools down here. There's just about no one to tell it to you."

This was the first meetin for some of the delegates, and at first they were a bit shy and unresponsive. A light-skinned girl from Jackson with skinny knees kept her eyes riveted on the speakers and didn't say a word throughout the whole meeting. Sitting on another side of the circle was a round, dark-faced, smiling boy from Starkville who was expelled last month for passing around an MSU petition in his school. While munching a sandwich during the lunch break he talked about some of the problems he had experienced lately:

"My teacher told me that it would be good if I left town because of my work for the MSU. If I moved to a town 150 miles away from Starkville the whites wouldn't go that far to burn it down, but my mother's house is right in town ... and she hasn't paid for it yet. I wouldn't want my family to get hurt. I don't care about me."

Inside the lodge hall the students wrapped their coats around themselves tightly. It was chilly inside. Gradually the discussion livened up a bit although it always remained polite. Everyone referred to Roscoe Jones as "Mr. President", and the girls as "young ladies". They explained to each other that they were ordered away or never received a reply, when they tried to register at white schools. And when they asked for permission to publicize meetings of their organization, they were almost always turned down.

An articulate girl from Jackson posed the first objection to the idea of a state-wide boycott. The schools in Jackson, she said, were much better than those in the rest of the state. Foreign language classes, for example, have tape recording equipment. Besides, she added:

"We might lose what we already have if we join the boycott. And our principal told us that if any of us walk out of school we should just keep on walking and he'll give us some walking papers to carry along."

Someone else added that parents would also be against a boycott. The Starkville boy had an answer to that:

"We got to talk to parents because they don't understand. Some are like real Uncle Toms and all they do is listen to the white man. They're going to try to make us go to school, and they'll know if we don't get on that bus."

The Jackson delegate continued her objections to a state-wide boycott. Teachers here, she said, are really for civil rights and COFO, but it's the principals who are against the movement. Then Roscoe Jones put one foot gently on a chair and reached both hands out to explain:

"We all been thinking about this for a long time. All the principals and almost all the teachers tell us we got to get an education and that means listening to Mr. Charley (the white man). They been talking to him for a lot of years and they been brain-washing us with that talk."

But the Jackson delegate brought forth even stronger arguments against a state-wide boycott and almost everybody had to agree with her: most students in Mississippi just didn't care. A tall, serious looking delegate from Vicksburg said that almost all the students in his city would support a boycott but many other delegates admitted that they would have a hard time getting even 50 percent of their class-mates to join them. It was agreed that at least 85 per cent of the students in a school should be willing to sign a boycott petition before one is called. Somebody said:

"I don't think that any of you have tried to talk to all of the students in your schools. You can't just ask them to sign a petition without talking to them. And you just can't expect them to come to your meetings unless we give them something to come for... some singing group for example. Once you got them inside then you can tell them all about the MSU."

When the vote was taken the state-wide boycott was defeated; the group decided instead to let MSU local affiliates call for boycotts in their area when they were ready. Everyone would support the local boycotts if they could.

Nothing dramatic was accomplished at the meeting, but it was clear that the group was growing more cohesive and that there was a strong consensus on important issues. Even the Jackson delegate changed her mind, and before the vote, without fuss or embarrassment, she announced that her delegation would go along with whatever the majority decided.

What has the MSU done so far? Once again, nothing dramatic, but in some schools members are regularly asking their teachers to discuss Negro history, civil rights, and "what we're doing in South Vietnam". And in some places MSU libraries have been set up and members teach in Freedom Schools, community centers and help register people to vote. In Meridian, students protested against the expulsion of two pupils who wore LBJ buttons to class, and they were successful.

In most cities the big issue of school integration has to wait. "Right now", Roscoe Jones explains, "we're still trying to get on our feet. It was only last summer when Mickey (Schwerner) took over the Meridian COFO project that I got very involved in this organization". Roscoe was sitting down after the meeting and talking to a few people and he chose his words carefully:

"But you can be sure of this -- if we ever do get on our feet we're going to show Mississippi that they've got a fight on their hands.

"Already some kids have been asking what is the best way for us to get our freedom and what should we do if we could be in the Governor's chair.

"You know that resolution we drew up in Meridian. It wasn't just words, and we haven't forgot about it. Did you know that it was written by young people... and we all came from right down here in Mississippi?"