

February 9, 1965

For general release to interested friends

Memo To: SNCC Communications  
Re: Discussions at Mt. Beulah Poor Peoples meetings  
From: Charlie Cobb

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A recent New York Times article estimates that of the 30,000 workers used on plantations in Mississippi this past year, only about 8-10,000 will be needed in this comming cotton season. The slightest scratching at the surface of this situation in Mississippi, demonstrates that it is not simply a question of economics.

As white persons of power in Mississippi developed the White Citizens Council in reaction to the Supreme Court ruling on school segregation, and the intensified voter registration drives being sponsored by local Negro groups; they projected as a key part of their program, the need to drive Negroes out of Mississippi. For, there has historically been tremendous fear among white people in the state of the large numbers of Negroes living here (at the time of the founding of the citizens councils approximately 1/2 the state was "egro. Even now, about 40% of Mississippi is "egro). The most effective way seen of dealing with the "Negro question" has traditionally been "get rid of-em" -- from klu klux klan assasinations, to economic deprivation.

The cash crop ~~in~~ (cotton) Delta has become mechanized, eliminating a key source of income for thousands of Negroes with hopeless inadequacies in terms of any immediate fitting into the technological society they are increasingly being thrown into. This is coupled with the most blatant of racism that affects even those few Negroes who are potentially able to meet the demands of production required today. Some examples: discrimination in hiring, the refusal to meet the criteria necessary to take advantage of federal training programs such as MDTA.

The sum total of all of this is that Negroes - especially those dependent on work on the plantations - have found that their alternatives for existing are limited to dependence on inadequate welfare programs such as the surplus food program or the monthly welfare check; leaving the state in search of opportunity elsewhere, or starving. A circle really, for leaving the state often means an inadequate welfare program elsewhere, starving elsewhere, or comming back to Mississippi hoping.

An increasingly articulated issue among Mississippi poor people caught between technological requirements for production which they cannot meet, and a racist desire to eliminate them if they are black, is food. Can it be gotten without begging? Does one have to sacrifice his dignity to eat? Does eating have to mean commodity meal, navy beans, and canned some kind of undefined meat? To be given food by the state means to be given government surplus foods - commodities, with the control of this program completely in the hands of the most well fed, and those most

resistant to programs that would put the initiative for the welfare of "negroes and poor people (too often these two are one and the same thing) in the hands of "egroes and poor people. One reflection of this is the difficult time those active in civil rights have with those in control of the welfare aid they need. The state's retaliatory actions are often couched within explanations of "eliminating irregularities".

A tentative step towards cutting through some of these problems seemed forthcoming when the United States department of Agriculture agreed along with the Mississippi State Department of Welfare, for a six month demonstration food distribution program, to distribute twenty four million dollars worth of surplus food commodities to all Mississippi needy.. One point six million dollars in anti poverty funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity were to cover the cost of administrating the distribution of these ~~free~~ foods. Community action programs were to be set up to get needy people involved in the jobs created around the distribution of these foods. Mississippi received the 1.6 million dollars on November 24th. To date, none of the food has been distributed and the winter is  $\frac{1}{2}$  over. The USDA has estimated that an additional 500,000 persons could be helped in addition to the regular load of 300,000 persons, with this program.

It was the delay in this program that was the catalyst for people from all over Mississippi getting together at Mt. Beulah Center at Edwards, Mississippi on January 29th through 31st -- to talk about their problem -- being hungry and poor.

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"----- We used to waitin til the white man reach us and feed us and do all like that. Now we come to a place where we can do for ourselves. Lets don't wait for that man. Lets be men an women an go out an get that food.

Lots of peoples slighted. The ones who don't gee haw for these white people, they can't get it. And so, we heard Mr. Johnson speak about poverty. He's gonna restrict poverty. Everybody's gonna get well treated. Get money. Get homes. And get food - stuff like that.

When it be issued out through that Sunflower KKK, you just ain't gonna get it. While they're figuring an all like that, you have these peoples on the plantations who are starving. Which is quite unfair.

The peoples have nothing but themselves.")

Every category of job created by this proposed and accepted food distribution program - called "Operation Help" except for one, requires at least a high school education, and some clerical experience. \$900,000

of the \$1.5 million dollars is slated for salaries. There is no provision for a trainning program. Help who?

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Every Last year I talked with house of congressmen. I give them the story of me, and what it was like to be a Negro in Mississippi. And I wonder today, why we have to keep on tellin them and tellin them; cause they keep on sayin they haven't got the story. I know they got the story.

I feel like it was 700 Negroes from the state of Mississippi there. And I feel like every one of them told the story. And I wonder too, why he would give the powers~~s~~ structured men the money to issue out to us, when I told him how cheap a wage they was payin us here in Mississippi. You know they gonna do the same thing.

The money that is going to help the poor, I don't see where it has done very much for the poor. Just about the second year is at hand for the help, and how much has it helped us? What has it done for us? Still we are struggling for money.

I know when the poverty program was designed, it was to help the poor. But I can't see anything that it has really done for the real poor peoples. It still leaves us begging for money. Begging for food. Begging for houses.

Just one thing that I can see would cure the problem - create jobs - give us money to create jobs, so we can have some way to take care.

We don't want no handout. We are just wanting an opportunity to work an make a living as any other decent citizen in the U.S.

What do he expect the poor peoples to get? If they was going to do so much for the poor here in Jackson, then he wouldn't have had to create this anti-poverty bill. Because, they would have been doin somethin about it. They know about it.

They know we go to the fields all day long and chop for \$3 a day. They know we go into these houses and work for 10, 12, and 15 dollars a week.

They knows all these things.

Then he gonna let that money run through that source and then we won't get any benefit from it. He knows it.

President Johnson knows that the needy peoples are here.

That commodity he's givin - he wouldn't be givin those commodities if he didn't know we was in need. He still let it go through the same hands. He's not changin the program.

Look s like to me, if he was really gonna do anything, he would change this system where this food comes through, and let it come through where somebody would do somethin fair?"

Eight Mississippi counties have no commodity distribution program at all. Thirty-nine counties only give commodities to people on the welfare. There are only thirteen counties that give commodities to all poor people. The entire program remains firmly entrenched in the hands of local authority, with all the inequities that implies in terms of being "egro and poor in Mississippi. Mrs. Ida Mae Lawrence of Rosedale, Mississippi, tells of welfare and commodity in words that match the experiences of almost a thousand people who were listening.

"----- If you go to the welfare office to apply for the - let's see, what do you call that stuff - the ADC, for women with children who ain't got no husband; the ol welfare lady tell you you got to be seperated 6 months. Well hell, how you gonna live til the 6 months is out. What about him who don't know he had a daddy? "e got to live too.

An the commodities they sittin on they say you can git - you ain't gittin nothin nut that'll hurry up an k ill you. An you ain't gettin but a little of it.

You git down to the commodity house at eight in the morning, an you stand til three, while they have a coffee break every ten minutes. An some ol peckerwood come in an say, "I come in right behind him". They don't care if you stay there all day. An then what you git ain't fit to eat. If you stayed there all day, you liable to drop it on the way home.

This is terrible.

People ain't got nothin but that commodity, an it ain't worth eatin. Worthless milk, red meal, an them yellow grits. An that meat they got, it look like a bunch of canned up dog. That stuff ain't fit to eat! If the government ain't got no more than that to give us, he can keep it. Ain't doin nothin but makin us sick nohow.

Make you sick. You ain't got no money, so how you goin to pay the doctor? Doctor ~~sube~~ ain't goin to treat you if you ain't got no money.

If it ain't gonna be bo better'n it is now, I don't know if I want

to put my vote in that ballot box or not. I wanna get all them out that's been in there, an put a whole new crew in there. Maybe we'll git some changes.

Lord have mercy now. They say you can git welfare. They say you can git free medicine. But you ain't gittin nothin free but the cemetary. An you have to pay for it.

What does we want ourselves for?

An that president, don't tell me nothin bout him. He just talkin bout this, that, and the other thing -- an ain't doin a doggone thing but send all that money over yonder to Vietnam. An all them people dyin there every day, an we dirty down here, an ain't nobody changed nothin. Supposed to be some change made before everybody die.

If somebody don't hurry up an do somethin, ain't gonna be nobody here to know that change come.)

Other stories from other people began to spill out:

----- We can't pick no cotton cause they put cotton pickers in the field. Won't let us chop cause they say I know you got money cause you been down in Jackson jail (note: reference to the FDP sponsored demonstrations in Jackson this summer, when hundreds of Negroes from around the state were arrested).

When our young boys git of age, they have to leave home to git a job. My oldest boy is 17 years old, an when he gits outta school, he ain't got nothin to do to make his livin and git his clothes, cause \$3 a day sure won't keep you. And I'm sick an tired ♀ - they done killed my daddy, they done killed my grandmomma, and now they done killed me -- for \$3 a day. I'm ready for a change be made for them youngsters. Let-em have somethin to do when they come outta school, cause we mot able to take care of our children. If they git some work to do, we don't have to be goin to these welfare folks, cause God knows I'm sick of them.

They ask you if you got a man stayin in the house with you. One lady asked me, "who cut your wood?"

I don't want my boys to come up like me -- slaves to the white people.

At night we lay down so worried so bad bout what we gonna feed our children the next morning, we can't rest at night. Cause I can't. Lay over an work my pillow with tears bout my little children. Git up the next morning an wonder where I'm gonna get my next meal from for my children

We done got tired )

"----- In Rosedale, we needs some doctors. Lady passed ther, we called him, he didn't come. The doctor we got there, he do not wait on people til he gets ready. We got to go to Shelby, Mound Bayou, Cleaveland for a doctor. When you git to cleaveland, you got to stay all day for a doctor -- and with a whole lot of people. And our doctor, they know he corrupted, but they still keep him there.")

"----- If the food that's somewhere down for us poor peoples in Mississippi doesn't be given to us, I guess somebody'll have to go try an take it. An that's not gonna be long.

Trouble is, Uncle Sam gave the food, and Uncle Tom holdin it.)

"----- Washington was sayin we'll ~~xxx~~ have a bi-racial board. I was thinkin them Uncle Toms an Aunt Jemmiah's, and some of them phoney welfare folks, they has actually got togethers. We all know they is people that do not represent. Like Mrs. Nichols is the county welfare agent in Bolivar county. She gonna cut everybody off welfare that she can. She's on that board of 16 people (note: the "board" referred to is the ~~State Advisory Board~~ responsible for the administration of Operation Help. Appointed by Gov. Paul Johnson.).

They gonna keep us hungry as we been all our days. We still ain't gonna have no food.

I'm thinkin bout gettin them folks off that board and puttin some of these folks on who know what it means if you go in the kitchen to cook an you ain't got but half a package of beans an 8 kids to feed -- you got to put enough water in that pot to have some likker, so when the beans run out, the likker go roun into gravy an you have somethin to sop (note: called "pot likker").)

Three days of talking to let out lifetimes od denial. To understand that what they needed was not going to be given to them. To plan how to take.

"----- I believe in the bible myself, but when you say "lord I'm hungry give me some food", you might as well say "lord I'm starving, let me die quickly". When the preacher says "if you don't have but a little, give it an the lord will bless you", I feel like sayin "let me go home in your cadillac car tēight; I'm walkin an I need shoes".

We have to say, what can we do about ourselves? And how much are we willing to do.

It was snowin last week , an I didn't have a stick of wood, cause

I don't have mules to haul it anymore. And the boss man won't let me have a tractor to go into the woods and get it. The woods are cut down so far I can't tow it, and he won't give me money to buy gas or coal - but I'm workin for him.

These are the problems, how do you make it known to the world?

You say we done demonstrated long enough, but what was we demonstrating for? -- the right to demonstrate. But lets stop using, the word demonstrate, and say we are going to take and demand.

----- (( When you start talkin bout takin things, you got to have a plan to take it. So, everybody want to run out of here an highjack it, go to jail, get a damn heap of people killed, an then back up when the folks come. I don't mind dyin for what I believe in, but I don't want to ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ be lyin cold away from my children and when those folks say "go", the rest of you gonna run.

If we gonna take it, I wanna take it.

You can call that radical, extreme, or whatever you want, an I don't give a damn about that.

I wanna know who is ready? Is you mad enough to stay till we get that \$24 million.

We want homes, and we want houses. I understand the federal gov't got land. I haven't been to reenville, but the way you talk, it's a pretty good amount there. And we gonna take it.

If you gonna take that airport, it ain't gonna be like the Jackson jail - you can just forget it. Cause people gonna be killed. You gotta decide if you ready to die of pneumonia layin out on that ground. You gotta decide if it's worth havin your children out there

See, when you work, you work with everything you have.

That's a little radical for some people cause they wanna be nice. One reason those white folks got that money tied up, is we been sittin around bein nice. ))

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These things can happen when poor folks get together.

They ain't  
goin' out