

Madison-Canton

Postmark
May 10, 1965

Canton COFO
838 Lutz St.
Canton, Miss.

This letter is written as a follow-up to the ones sent out after last December's ASC elections in Madison County and after the first word from the Agriculture Department on re-elections in two communities of the county. A month ago we sent out a mailing to explain certain actions of the farmers of the county which had angered the Department of Agriculture. The department found it hard to believe that the farmers were not overjoyed at having re-elections in just two of eight communities and that we refused to counsel them as to what course of action was the "wisest" - in view of what the department considered its gift of re-elections in two communities.

The view from here presents a different perspective; we find it hard to believe that the department was unable to find enough evidence to hold re-elections throughout the county. As an example, in communities which are not having re-elections staff members saw or experienced having a gun pulled on a poll-watcher, wholesale eviction of poll-watchers, three arrests of poll-watchers for "trespassing," constant intimidation of voters by county and state officers of the law and such incidents as a man being asked if he "wanted to go to jail" when he said he was voting for the Negro candidate.

To the farmers and the staff it seems incredible that the Agriculture Department cannot understand that re-election throughout the county represents a just demand. They ask for no gifts; they are merely asking that the Department of Agriculture recognize its failure last December and enforce its own rulebook, which was so flagrantly ignored. Even were the farmers to win the two elections being run now, the outcome would not affect the membership of the county board; the conduct of these boards in the past is what led the Negro farmers in the county to run their own candidates in the first place. Thus, the action of the department is meaningless, except as an indication of its realization of the fact that the election was not run in the manner prescribed by its own rulebook.

The farmers of the county and of each community involved voted separately to reject the Department's offer, to boycott the two elections and to sign petitions to the State Committee and the Department in Washington expressing their dissatisfaction with what they term the department's insufficient and overdue action and petitioning for comprehensive re-elections throughout Madison County. They hope that, by their boycott, they will cause the State Committee to order re-elections in those communities because of "insufficient participation." This might cause the Department to consider re-elections for the entire county. We fear, however, that, whatever the provocation, the Department will consider first the reaction of the Southern-oriented Agriculture Committees in the House and Senate, and only second the welfare of disenfranchised Negro farmers in the South.

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It seems to us that, if the Department of Agriculture is serious about eliminating the tacit acceptance of discrimination which has, unfortunately, characterized many of its programs in the South, something more is to be expected than the half-hearted acknowledgement of injustice. We expect and hope that, as time goes on, more and more Negro farmers in the South will attempt to participate actively in programs of the Agriculture Department. If they cannot look forward to more rigid enforcement of the rules in the department and more active concern for the rights of the oppressed than we have seen in Madison County to date, I have not much hope for their success.

Sincerely yours,

W. H. Forsyth, Jr., f.
W.H. Forsyth, Jr.
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