



SUPERMAN

MISSISSIPPI: 1961-1962

BOB MOSES

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... When somebody asks about an alliance between Negroes and whites, I always ask them a question: "Whom do Negroes ally with? Where is the movement in the white community that they can ally with?" And it doesn't seem to me that the answer is the trade union movement. For a lot of different reasons.

Mainly it seems to me that the trade union movement is part of the establishment. And is not available as an ally. And that what they are primarily concerned with is in keeping jobs for those who already have them, making sure that those who are going to lose them lose them with good retirement. And making sure that people move up in the jobs they already have.

They don't seem to be concerned about the people who are not working. That these people should be organized. That the trade union movement should do something with these people.

If the unions are in that position, it doesn't seem to us that we can ally with them . . .

... Now we were shut out from politics. Couldn't register. Had no say about who got elected. So we did our own. We had our own registration. Called it freedom registration. Held our own vote. Called it freedom vote.

I think we have the freedom vote and they have the mock election.

And with the germ of that we got the freedom schools. You form your own schools. Because when you come right down to it, why integrate their schools? What is it that you will learn in their schools? Many of the Negroes can learn it, but what can they do with it? What they really need to learn is how to be organized to work on the society to change it. They can't learn that in schools.

Now, why can't we setup our own schools? If you carry it all the way through, train people to do what needs to be done. And why can't our schools be accredited? And we graduate people and they go out in our society?

That's what we're doing. We're building a society. We're getting people who are educated to do what needs to be done in our society — which is they work and they change society. Now, we're not doing that, of course, but that's what is evolving.

It takes a long time for that because people don't think that way. They're all trapped up. They think they have to be qualified in order to run society. That they have to be qualified in order to vote. And they can't get behind the qualifications to who sets them. If they could do that, they would know that they could set their own qualifications. Therefore, they could determine what the standards are for who's qualified. What it means to be qualified. Then they can run their lives. Because then they're qualified to do that.

Cause they say they are. And the people who say they're not qualified don't want them to run their lives.

Now nobody sat down and theorized all this. It's just that you went down there and started to try to do something. You didn't know what there was to do. You started working and you learned what couldn't be done. That helped define what could be done. And certain things became clear. One of the things that became clear was all that's involved in setting up a society. In government. In how people run their lives. Who decides . . .

... (Someone commented that civil rights has received vast publicity and a lot of issues have been clearly defined, much more than in foreign policy) I would argue that foreign policy and domestic issues are not defined at all. In fact, they're covered up. So the people don't know.

To use them as a measure for definition of civil rights issues is simply to indicate that civil rights problems themselves are just beginning to be aired.

The question before this country really is: does it have the ability to probe deeply into any issue? And does it have the stamina once it starts probing to keep going until it gets to the bottom of the problem? And that's a real question . . .

... The compromise the Democratic Party offered at Atlantic City (the national convention) is that precinct meetings be open to registered voters regardless of race. That doesn't help us. Cause we can't register people.

So we asked Humphrey in a closed session: "Okay, the precinct meetings are open to registered voters. How many voters do you guarantee us in Mississippi in the next four years? 400,000? 100,000? 10,000? Any?" And he said, "We can't guarantee you any because the Democratic Party doesn't run the administration."

So you don't expect that the decision offered us at the convention will have any practical effect. In fact, we can



Precinct work in Hattiesburg. SNCC canvasser urges farmer to go down to the courthouse to register.

SNCC photo by George Ballis

expect the opposite. That it will kill any real chance of participation by Negroes in the Democratic Party in the deep South. In this sense: the whites who are smart will say, "We got to let a few Negroes in now cause it's in the convention call." And they'll argue to the other people, "Now, you got to overcome your prejudice. You got to sit in some of these meetings with some of these Negroes. But outvote them. Just come out in larger numbers. And maybe we'll let one come through. We'll go back to the convention in '68 and we'll say, 'we've complied with your call. In fact, we have a Negro here with us.'" And that's it.

There are real problems in that whole decision and what it means for 1968. In the meantime, we go on with our same thing. Again just like the schools we have to ask ourselves what is the government? Who sets it up? The people set it up. And if they do, we're people. Why can't we set up our own government? So that in 1967, if we get organized enough between now and then, we can set up our own government and declare the other one no good. And say the federal government should recognize us . . .

. . . The gangs in northern cities form a kind of community around senseless violence. Senseless in the way that it ends in their own destruction.

What's going to happen with them? The program which society has for them is really a program of violence. Because that's where it leads. In the end the program of the social worker which takes two or three of them and tries to place them in jobs which are in a sense meaningless. Can't all get jobs. And they're back out on the streets soon. In the end, the harvest of that is violence—riots because the people don't have anything and can't get anything from that program.

Now it seems to me that the nonviolent program for that group would be not to break them up, but to find some way to keep them together. To find some way to get them to attack the institution which has them in a box. That's the only way to find for them some kind of community so that they won't have the need and they won't participate in that kind of senseless violence.

Now that's a long way off. And there are lots of questions about that. Thing is nobody's doing that. Anywhere in the North.

Nobody's really addressing themselves to the ghetto and those kinds of problems . . .

. . . The progress we experience is mostly progress in terms of what happens to the people we are working with. It's that they, in many communities, have found a new kind of strength.

In their individual acts just going to the courthouse (to register) is a revolutionary act. Given their lives.

A community has developed in places because of those acts. Local people have really begun to find a way they can use a meeting as a tool for running their own lives. For having something to say about it. That's very slow, but it's happening.

In a sense, these people have found freedom. They don't have any participation in society but they're free now. They can do things that they've wanted to do for a long time.

They've been able to confront people who are on their backs. They take whatever is dished out—bombings, shootings, beatings, whatever it is. After people live through that they have a scope that they didn't have before. There's a whole new dimension in their lives that wasn't there before.

Now I don't equate that with democracy.

Here are people risking their lives challenging a whole context that they've had to live in. Which has told them all the time that they couldn't do anything. But doing it anyway.

In that sense it's a revolution . . .

. . . Some of the Negro organizers for SNCC feel that this is their movement. That it belongs to them. In a way in which nothing else in the country belongs to them. It belongs to them not that they thought of it, but that it's their energy that made it, so it's theirs. They have put all their energies into it in a way people in this country don't put energy in anything.

That's at the heart of the whole question of relationships in the movement between white and black people. Because in many cases the white people are looked upon as other people. Just as the society looks upon Negroes as other people. And thinks about whether it will let them in or not.

So the white people who come down are looked upon by the staff people as other people. Then there are very deep tensions. They're too complicated to describe. They're the kind of things that don't seem to be exhaustible. In some people. In some situations. That is, you can have it out. Talk it out. And the deep things come welling out like poison and they spew out all over everybody. But that doesn't do it cause the next time it comes out the same way. It's a real problem. And it seems to me it's a problem that will be faced all over the country as the Negro movement spreads out and begins to hit the ghettos.

From the point of view of the fellow who grew up in Sunflower County, he grew up hating whites. I mean he really hated them, because they killed him inside and they killed his people. He saw them. They killed an uncle. Or they killed a guy down the street. And he couldn't do anything about it. So he hates whites.

Now he's working in the movement, and he's got to get used to that funny thing where you can't say everything against all people. Can't say you hate all whites because you know this guy and he's white and you don't hate him. And maybe you like him very much.

Part of that feeling is that they know that white people think about them in the same way. That white people think of them as other people . . .

. . . Now I listened to a white person who's on our staff raising the question of why don't more Negroes participate (as volunteers). From the point of view that there must be something wrong with college Negroes that they don't participate in the movement.

I asked him to consider it from another point of view. That there's something wrong with the society and that the people are trapped in it. Because when you look at

the college Negro population, particularly in the South and the Negro schools, and who goes to them, and what a small crust of the Negro population they are, and how they evolved from the businessmen and the teachers, and the middle class people who got concerned with education. And those people evolved from mixed marriages—and what happens in the South in terms of white men and Negro women—so that the whole layer of mulattos—and it's everywhere you go down in the deep South if you look at the structure, at the colors of the skins of the people who are, say, in the middle class positions.

And then you think about Tougaloo College which was started as a school for the sons and daughters of white men and Negro women. Really that was the purpose it was set up. It was felt that these people should have a better chance at an education, because they were better people, and when you think how that pervades, really pervades, the whole education system in the South; if you really analyze that, those kids in those colleges are already trapped up in something.

They're not fertile ground for recruiting. Some of them come, yes; but we're operating from a very specialized thing. Now a better place to recruit Negroes is probably the ghettos in the big cities . . .

. . . College kids come down, some of the Negroes who have come down, and are now trying to get back in school, can't relate to it. That raises for them the whole question of education. What is the degree? What do I need it for? What do I do with it after I get it?

And then all the questions about security. In our society. Because the feeling is that we need that degree because what happens if the movement doesn't happen? If it dries out? If it drops dead? Where will I be? What will I do? I'll be too old to go to school. I'll have a family. I'll have kids. I might not be able to earn anymore.

And the whole anxiety that surrounds people about what the hitch is going to be and how they're going to fit into society. Now, people in SNCC are going through that. I mean can you imagine going through all your life only—I mean at some point in your life you got to earn over \$30 a week. Don't you? . . .

. . . We asked this one guy why he came. What he was doing. And he said, for his own personal self, he found out what work meant. He found out what it meant to live. What it meant to relate to people. What society meant. That's what he was getting in SNCC. Because who determines what work is? How many people come up to the SNCC people and say, "Well, when are you going back to work?" And they mean, "When are you going to fit into society?"

Now what the SNCC people have found in a slow process is that they don't have to accept that definition of work. That they can define their own. And that they understand a little better what it means to work. That is to really put energy into something and to make something that's meaningful to yourself.

In the process of that they begin to understand what it means to relate to people, to being at least able to break down all these things that happen in our society.

This is part of what is happening in SNCC and this is why in a sense it is unique. I mean that these people

have worked these last two or three years and are gradually coming to the realization that they will have to do this the rest of their lives.

And that this is their work . . .

. . . Did the yes vote on proposition 14 honestly reflect the opinion of the electorate of this state? That raises a central problem of democracy. You talk about honest reflection of opinion. The question is education. What do the people know? What do the people in California know about housing? About laws? About the way people live? Who tells them? How do they learn? TV, newspapers, radio? How do they find out? What access do they have to real information? Can they make an intelligent decision? How much is propaganda and how much is the society really concerned about the people having information so they can know?

I have certain feelings about people in general. I feel that they're manipulated. I don't happen to believe that they, if they were presented with real information about people and how they live, if they weren't forced to live under myths about themselves and other people, that they would consciously choose to isolate other people. To force them into ghettos. To restrict their participation in society.

Now that's just a faith principle . . .

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Bob Moses was the principle organizer of the voter registration campaign in Mississippi in the early sixties. In the Fall of 1962, he made a tape describing SNCC's work in Mississippi up to that point. Howard Zinn used this tape as the basis of his account of the years 1961-1962 in *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, chapter 4, but neither Howard nor I know exactly when, under what circumstances, and by whom the tape was recorded. A complete transcript is here published for the first time.

Moses was probably the most respected, even revered, leader in the experience of the American New Left. He believed very strongly in participatory democracy. When Bob was asked to speak at a meeting he would decline, or stand up in his place in the rear of the hall, or come to the front but ask questions. SNCC staff members recall a parallel concern to make sure that all feelings had been expressed, that every co-worker in a venture felt comfortable with decisions. In 1964-65 Moses led the struggle within SNCC to keep decision-making decentralized (see Zinn, pp. 267-268) and to transfer decision-making so far as possible to grass roots leaders outside the SNCC structure. He became extremely hostile toward organizing which placed undo emphasis on media coverage: let the event happen, he would say, and then there will be something to report. His desire to prevent the development of bureaucracy also expressed itself in an insistence on taking any risks which he asked others to assume.

At the same time, Moses was very skillful in building coalitions and making his case to the widest possible audience. After the early period dealt with in the tape, he was the leading spirit in the organization of COFO (Council of Federated Organizations), a coalition of civil rights groups working in Mississippi, and in the creation of MFDP (Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party). At the National Democratic Party Convention in 1964, Moses as participatory democrat came into conflict with Moses, builder of coalitions. The climactic moment came when Bob, the Rev. Ed King, and others were meeting with Hubert Humphrey. Persuaded that Humphrey was holding him in conversation so that President Johnson might the more effectively undercut the MFDP effort at the convention, Moses, gentlest of men, sprang to his feet and ran out of the room, slamming the door after him.

It is well-known that Bob was a reader of Camus. More intense in my own memory is the recollection of how, at the orientation sessions prior to the freedom summer of 1964, Bob referred to Tolkein's *Ring Trilogy* in an effort to describe how he felt in sending volunteers to possible death. His point was that the power to make such decisions

is corrupting, just as the ring which Frodo carried so far to destroy affected him to the point that he almost failed to destroy it. At such moments Bob would speak very slowly, sometimes simply standing quietly before a large group for many minutes before the words came.

From that summer I also remember Bob speaking at a memorial service for Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney in Neshoba County, where they were killed. He emphasized that their bodies were discovered almost simultaneously with the United States bombing of North Vietnam after the Tonkin Bay incident. It was one of the first expressions of an attitude which led Bob to try to connect the civil rights and peace movements throughout 1965. The next to last time I saw him, he said that the peace movement was a strange medium for him and that he couldn't seem to get his feet on the ground.

People who know Bob Moses well feel that one of his reasons for leaving Mississippi was that so many persons had been killed as an indirect result of his activity, while he and other SNCC staff members miraculously remained alive. Bob's account on the tape of the death of Herbert Lee tends to confirm this. What he told me, in response to a direct question, was that he left because he thought his presence had become an obstacle for a number of persons and organizations in the state.

Soon after that conversation, Bob visited Africa. I saw him only once after his return. He said he had had been very much upset by State Department publications circulating in Africa which portrayed his activity as proof of the vitality of American democracy. In the Spring of 1966 he systematically broke off relationships with white friends and, at about the same time, withdrew from all public political activity. Rumor had him organizing guerrilla bands here, teaching pre-school children there. Apparently he now lives on the west coast of Africa.

During the years he worked in the South, Bob Moses believed not only in participatory democracy, but in nonviolence and the possibility of an interracial movement. There are stories of Bob's driving lonely Mississippi roads with local civil rights leaders and gently teasing them when hidden weapons came to light. When SNCC staff discussed the projected Mississippi Summer projects in the winter of 1963-64, some voices were raised in opposition to inviting so many whites. Moses offered his resignation with the comment that he refused to work in a segregated movement.

One thinks of Bob with a heavy sense of possibilities lost, roads not taken, hopes unnecessarily destroyed. There was a deep well of gaiety in the man, very rarely expressed. Jack Newfield quotes Bob's roommate in New York City before Bob