

A
REPORT AND ANALYSIS
of
COMMUNITY ORGANIZING
in
GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI

July, 1965

The following paper tells of thirteen months of work by a COFO staff. It is written by two members of that staff.

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- I. ECONOMIC BACKGROUND
- II. RESULTING ATMOSPHERE
- III. BLACK LEADERSHIP
- IV. 1964 SUMMER PROJECT
- V. DIGGING IN
 - a.) North Gulfport
 - b.) Memorial March: Victory and Revealed Loyalties
 - c.) Project Head Start: Fall of a Regime
- VI. ANALYSIS IN RETROSPECT
- VII. PRESENT DIRECTION

I. ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

To understand Gulfport, one must begin with the economic facts of Harrison County. By Mississippi standards, Harrison is rich and growing; this is true for all three coast counties. However, Harrison differs because of the peculiar types of industry located there.

According to the Chamber of Commerce, the two main industries in Harrison County are Keesler Air Base and the tourist trade. They are almost equal in their contribution to the county's economy. These particular industries are significant in that they both exert cosmopolitan and liberal influences. The air base brings in uniformed personnel of both races from all over the country; further, it hires a considerable number of civilians on a non-discriminatory basis, at wage scales considerably in excess of local standards. The tourist business also brings in people from across the country, as a quick survey of license plates along the beach will reveal. To maintain this lucrative business, therefore, it is necessary that racial incidents and the resulting headlines be avoided. The tourist business has suffered in the past as a result of beach riots in Biloxi in 1961 and 1963 and as a result of the bad publicity emanating from the state during the summer project of 1964.

Another important factor in Harrison County is the low percentage of Negroes, who constitute only 20% of the total population. They are not, therefore, the potentially overwhelming political force that they are in the Delta. ("Delta" refers to the northwestern quarter of the state, where the rich plantations are located, and where some counties are as much as 80% Negro.)

Gulfport also has traditionally been the more quiet and sedate town compared to Biloxi. A tour of the coast will reveal that clubs and motels are concentrated in Biloxi and virtually absent from Gulfport. This peculiar circumstance goes back to the founding of the two cities. Biloxi was settled from the sea and became the port for high-living sailors on leave. Gulfport was settled from inland by a more sober and puritanical group. So today, Gulfport prides itself on being a "clean" town and strives to maintain the peace, quiet, and harmony befitting such a clean town.

Due to these influences, a very tolerant and liberal atmosphere has prevailed in Gulfport and in the county. One manifestation of this is the fact that, prior to January, 1964, when a new administration took office, residents could register to vote without having to trouble themselves with the state literacy test. Black and white were able to register by simply signing the voting book.

Twenty-five percent of the Negro population is already registered; and in the past this bloc of votes has proved decisive in close elections. This is a situation almost unique in Mississippi.

In many respects, then, Gulfport could be described as a northern city. Racial separation is maintained without resort to the medieval tactics of the Klan or of blatant legal oppression. Economically, the entire coast is a land of opportunity. There is a very strong longshoreman's union for Negroes whose members may make in the neighborhood of \$4,000 annually.

Also, the air base hires instructors and technicians whose salaries are in the neighborhood of \$6,000 annually. There are several small factories in the area--a glass factory, an aluminum plant, and a milk of magnesia plant--and two Veterans' Administration hospitals, all of which provide other employment opportunities. For young people, there is considerable opportunity for employment at the various resort establishments.

A Negro in Gulfport is not, therefore, condemned to a lifetime of picking cotton. There are a variety of jobs available, many at good pay, and, through the air base, opportunity for a college-educated person to advance himself.

II. RESULTING ATMOSPHERE

It is not without good reason, then, that the local saying is that "things are better here on the coast." In canvassing Gulfport, volunteers encountered this frequently. It is important to understand that this is more than just a saying, but an expression of a whole reaction to an environment. What is left unsaid is that one should enjoy the advantages that are to be found here and not risk losing them by rocking that boat and asking for more. To a Movement-oriented person, that "advantages" of living on the coast are laughable, but to someone who must live here, they are considerable. This is especially true for those residents who have moved here from the Delta and other less cosmopolitan areas of the state; and there are a good number of such people.

What this means in terms of the Movement is that the community cannot be mobilized as a "protest" movement. Residents are most concerned about enjoying the relative advantages of living here rather than protesting remaining injustices. In more practical terms, the community cannot be mobilized around an obstinant registrar as Hattiesburg was; nor can it be mobilized around desperate economic conditions as the Delta.

III. BLACK LEADERSHIP

The combination of liberal atmosphere and economic opportunity has created other circumstances which hinder the development of a community movement. It is possible for Negroes here to rise to positions of wealth and power and for them to be courted by the white power structure. This results in the existence of a black power structure with considerable interest in maintaining the status quo.

It should be understood that this black power structure is not without real power. Mr. D. for instance, nominal spokesman and leader for North Gulfport, does control a sizeable bloc of votes that have proved decisive in past elections.

Mr. E., President of the Longshoreman's Union, has openly admitted that his illegal income exceeds his legal income. This illegal income is derived from a chain of slot machines which he maintains by paying of the local law enforcement officers. Were Mr. E. to become politically active in such a way as to threaten the white power structure, his machines would be seized and his income cut in half. Dr. D., President of the local NAACP chapter also has considerable gambling interests.

Reverend M., who pastors two of the largest churches in Gulfport is probably the most influential Negro in Gulfport. (Dr. D., would be the second). He controls not only his two large congregations but the other ministers in town through his influence in the Ministerial Alliance. We are not sure of his economic position, but he has proved to be quite susceptible to pressure from the white community. It would not be unreasonable to assume that he has received help from them in the financing of his two large churches.

This black power structure is rich and powerful; it is interested in maintaining this and it can exert considerable influence over the Negro community at large. Maintenance of this wealth and power renders it quite subservient to the white community, so it can be counted on to blunt, divert, and openly oppose any aggressive protest activity. Members of this black power structure are among the more active promoters of the "things are better" line.

IV. 1964 SUMMER PROJECT

The Movement arrived in Gulfport with the start of the 1964 Summer Project. The program for the summer quickly became that of building the Freedom Democratic Party, through collecting freedom registration signatures, holding precinct meetings, and developing a network of block captains. The accomplishments and failures of the summer activity need to be carefully evaluated.

The mere fact of the summer project and the presence of the workers aroused considerable interest in the community. A pretty thorough job of canvassing the area also brought the Movement into areas that would not otherwise have been reached. However, much of the interest was in the novelty of the summer project and the presence of white volunteers. When the novelty wore off and when most of the white volunteers went home, much of the interest subsided.

Furthermore, we must deal with the fact that by the end of the summer there was really no effective outlet for the interest that had been developed. It must be understood that the FDP was largely a paper organization, hastily thrown together for the Convention Challenge. It had no real power, and therefore sort of existed in a vacuum. Voter registration was not a wholly successful outlet, for the literacy test still presented a barrier. Furthermore, a voter registration drive cannot be an end in itself; it must lead to something, namely the exercise of political power.

One of the main failures of the summer was that its activity was so superficial. It never really challenged the existing black power structure, nor did it create a viable organization to do so. To put the problem in other words, there was not developed a real political consciousness.

Political consciousness, understood by this writer to be consciousness of power, which comes from the actual exercise of power. Members of the black power structure have political consciousness because they have power and they use it. But the ordinary resident of Gulfport knows isolation, frustration, and powerlessness. It is often said that the poor "know"--that they know a great deal about how things are run in this country. This is true in certain respects; and one of the most important things a poor person knows is that he does not count for a thing when the big decisions are made. Apathy, then, is a genuine response to a real circumstance.

What the summer project did not do and what must be done is to obtain real power for those who have been excluded. Voter registration and the FDP are received rather coolly because the excluded know that it will all amount to nothing; they know this from their own experience. The problem is to counter this past experience with a different one.

The preliminary organization of the FDP failed in this respect, because it was largely done through white people talking to black people. In one respect, this only perpetuated the racial status quo.

For a white person, or even a black person to talk about political organization is a little superficial, for it does not get to the basic fact of the experience of powerlessness. What is needed is viable program of involving people in the exercise of power.

Much of the summer project activity was superficial, for it challenged neither the white nor the black power structures nor provided the experience of power for those it was to involve. When the summer project ended and the white volunteers went home, community interest began to wane. This was abetted by the lack of a viable program and the consequent frustration.

V. DIGGING IN

Beginning in early 1965 the Gulfport Project began to evolve a program that would deal with these real problems in Gulfport. Actually, it is being a little inaccurate to say "program", since most of the order and coherence has been imposed after the fact. This is a very important point: we found that successful ideas were usually stumbled into and that it is virtually impossible to "plan" and "program" in any meaningful sense.

a.) NORTH GULFPORT

We had discovered among our friends in Gulfport considerable discontent over the leadership of the North Gulfport Civic Club, a non-profit chartered organization, nominally open to all residents but in fact controlled by a four or five man clique.

The President of the Civic Club is Mr. D., who has been mentioned earlier. Mr. D. was generally regarded as a crook by our friends in the community. It was common knowledge, for instance, that he had taken pay-offs from both white candidates in one recent election. In another instance, Mr. D. and his friends burned crosses on their own property to give the impression that they were hated by the whites for their aggressive leadership.

However, the people who expressed the discontent about the Civic Club had given up the idea that they had the power to change and improve the situation. So we brought together a group of these people for the purpose of discussing the problem.

We emphasized several points: that they were the group that had been complaining; that they, indeed, were a group and therefore had some power; that they were the only group likely to make any changes; that they must take the initiative, decide what changes were to be made, how they were to make, and who would assume the necessary positions of responsibility.

The value of this particular issue lay not only in the fact that it was a felt need on their part, but also that it was something they could deal with immediately and directly.

Regular weekly meetings were held for some time. Very soon, however, the COFO project began receiving regular checks from a group in New York to support a community center in Gulfport. We immediately turned to handling of the money and the consideration of the community center over to the group we had brought together (here-after referred to as the ST group, for "straight thinkers").

The problems of the Civic Club and the Community Center immediately became one, since the Civic Club holds a 25 year lease on the "Old School," a two-room affair that has been abandoned for the past six years. It is a logical site for a community center, but use of it necessitated dealing with, if not controlling, the Civic Club.

After some maneuvering around this issue Project Head Start popped up. Some background on the whole anti-poverty program in Mississippi is necessary here.

For ten months the state ignored the entire anti-poverty program. Federal stipulations regarding integration and local control were too strong for the established political interests.

However, the National Council of Churches helped organize the Child Development Group of Mississippi under Mary Holmes Junior College to establish Head Start centers throughout the state. Since CDGM was operating through an institution of higher learning, the Governor could not veto the federal funds.

This presented a crisis for the state: anti-poverty money would be entering the state, it would be used on an integrated basis and it would be subject to local control. The Governor responded by calling a meeting of all County Supervisors at which he encouraged them to establish committees in their respective areas to receive funds and, hopefully, prevent recurrences such as CDGM.

Harrison County was one of the first to respond. A committee of twelve was soon appointed by the supervisors and mayors to represent the entire county. The committee was headed by a state legislator who is also a member of the segregationist State Sovereignty Commission. Three Negroes were appointed: Dr. T., a wealthy dentist who owns one of the worst blocks of shacks in the city; Dr. L., a civic non-entity; and Mr. K., who is a head waiter at one of the resort hotels and obviously subject to white pressure.

The committee not only ignored poor people, but completely ignored the whole community of North Gulfport which is the largest Negro community in the county and the poorest area.

Members of the ST group were dissatisfied with the Harrison County Civic Action Committee and became interested in establishing their own Civic Action Committee to represent just the North Gulfport Community. Members of the ST group were very enthusiastic about this and did much of the work without our assistance. This also involved the original problem of the Civic Club, since a Civic Action Committee must be sponsored by a non-profit, chartered organization.

Considerable maneuvering ensued between the ST group and the established Civic Club clique. A major breakthrough was the development of the belief that the Civic Club belongs to everyone and therefore, everyone should have a voice in its operation. Several special public meetings were held for the election of a Civic Action Committee. At these meetings, the ruling clique was overruled by the general membership.

The final selection of the Committee resulted in two very significant developments. First, the leadership of the Civic Club has been changed; all that remained was the election of different officers, but the present ones no longer controlled the group and votes at meetings were generally of a 30-5 margin. The second important development was that the initiation of the Civic Action Committee and the presentation of its application was reported in the local newspaper on the front page. This has had considerable impact on the entire county; members of both the white and black power structures suddenly realized that they had been outflanked by a new group which they did not control. Among the general Negro populace the impression was generally given that "those people in North Gulfport are really doing things."

The whole value of the war on poverty may well be questioned; there is good reason to believe that the Governor will veto projects involving Negroes; but even assuming approval, there is some doubt as to the real benefits of the whole program.

Nevertheless, several things have been accomplished as a result of the mere organization of a Civic Action Committee. A group of people have had a real political experience, in the maneuverings with the Civic Club; further, this experience has been reinforced by the success of the original venture which was a change in the leadership of that group. The whole rhetoric of self-hatred, that "Negroes can't work together", has been challenged by this experience. And finally, the white and black power structures have felt their power challenged; it was not a direct confrontation, but possibly the more shocking because it was done so indirectly.

b.) MEMORIAL MARCH: VICTORY AND REVEALED LOYALTIES

There have been two other developments in Gulfport which have significantly altered the status-quo. The first was the Memorial March for those who died in Alabama, and the second was the advent of Project Head Start. Both of these events affected the black power structure very strongly.

As the Selma crisis was at its peak and demonstrations were being held all over the country it occurred to us that a march or demonstration would appropriate in Gulfport. We discussed the idea with some of our friends in the community and it was decided to raise it at the NAACP meeting that was to be held soon. The NAACP chapter in Gulfport is very curious, because its membership is potentially very aggressive in spite of domination by the President, Dr. D. (see above). The march proposal was brought to a vote and put through over the resistance of the President.

Between Monday night and Sunday afternoon some very revealing things took place. First, Dr. D saw to it that mention of the NAACP was deleted in the newspaper articles preceding and following the march. Second, in cooperation with city officials, articles on the march, before and after, appeared on

pages 6 and 13 as compared by the front page coverage of the Biloxi march a week before. Third, Dr. D. and other NAACP officers did not join the march. This clearly exposed Dr. D. to the Negro community, showing where his real loyalties lay.

Furthermore, the march was adamantly opposed by Reverend M., the most influential Negro in the area. When four other ministers participated in the march, they were openly repudiating his leadership. This was particularly significant in the case of Rev. G., who pastors one of the larger congregations and is a very respected and capable minister. Direct pressure from both Dr. D. and Reverend M. was exerted on Rev. G. and it was only after much soul searching that he did participate.

The real significance of the march lay not so much in that Negroes did demonstrate publicly and thereby challenge the "peaceful" relations of the town as it did in challenging the black power structure. Dr. D. and Reverend M. were forced to show their true colors and their respect and influence diminished accordingly. Not only did they lose esteem among Negroes for opposing the march, but also among whites for letting it happen.

Something should be said of the effects of the march upon those who participated. Immediately after it was over, there was tremendous elation among the participants. The march must be viewed as a genuinely creative group experience. More specifically, it was an experience of a group of Negroes, acting as Negroes and cooperating in an open challenge of the racist status-quo. The experience of self-affirmation and group cooperation were the source of the exhilaration.

There are reactions of many individual participants which might be related. Perhaps the most significant was the remark of Rev. G. who said "There was something in that march which has been missing from the Church; there was love in that march."

c.) PROJECT HEAD START: THE FALL OF A REGIME

The organization of Project Head Start had an impact in two important areas. Insofar as Negroes did in fact do the actual organization of the program it helped to break down the fatalism that pervades the community. Also, there was some politics involved in the organization which worked in such a way as to be the coup de gras for Reverend M.

As mentioned above, Project Head Start is operated under the Child Development Group of Mississippi, an integrated group very closely aligned with the Movement. Rev. M. organized Head Start in the two communities where his churches stand. But when the politicians formed the Harrison County Civic Action Committee, Rev. M. was pressured to withdraw his group from the CDGM and place it under the HCCAC. This would show Washington that the HCCAC had the support of the Negro community and would enhance their chances of immediate approval as an anti-poverty agency.

Rev. M. went along with the political group and withdrew his communities from the CDGM. He also urged all the other ministers to do the same, but they refused. Just before the deadline for applying, a public meeting was held by the HCCAC in which a representative from Head Start office in Washington

made it clear that the HCCAC had not yet been approved and therefore couldn't be a channel for Head Start funds. This left Rev. M. and his two communities out in the cold and greatly embarrassed.

In one of the communities, however, a trustee of Rev. M's. church placed the program back with the CDGM under the sponsorship of the community Civic Club. The other community was the only area of the city left without the program. With volunteer help and the assistance of the other communities, this community was able to piece together a very small token program.

The Memorial March and the politics of Head Start were two major factors which, together with a few other incidents that arose about the same time, led to a change in the leadership of the Minister's Alliance. For shortly after these events election time came up and Rev. M.'s name was not placed for president, in spite of the fact that he had held the office for over 10 years and custom has made it a life-time office. Rev. G., the most capable and most liberal of the ministers who participates in the alliance became the new president. (We might say that we have no great confidence in Rev. G., but he does represent the best that the Minister's Alliance had to offer.)

VI. AN ANALYSIS IN RETROSPECT

In retrospect, then, we have begun to be able to conceptualize what has happened and what our role has been. Basically, our work has been trying to create structures within the Negro community which would make it possible for the feelings and the voice of the Negro people to be heard. Present leadership serves only itself and is an instrument of stifling the voice of the people rather than of making it heard.

As we worked, we quickly discovered that there were three (perhaps four) centers of power in the Negro community. The strongest was the Minister's Alliance, but its leadership seemed immovable. The second was the NAACP, whose leadership seemed almost as invulnerable. The third was the North Gulfport Civic Club (NGCC), against whose leadership there was the most conscious discontent. (The fourth is the Negro ILA union, with its president, Mr. E.)

Since the NGCC leadership seemed the most vulnerable, that is where we began. However, we suddenly discovered that events which arose had made both the NAACP and the Ministers' Alliance leadership vulnerable to change. Now, at least in essence, the change of leadership has occurred in the NGCC. We hope that when the elections came up in October the implicit change will become explicit. (It seems now that the community center cannot be developed until this change of officers has occurred.)

We have come to see that our presence has "created collisions" which would not have otherwise occurred and which the leadership did not wish to have occur. By our presence we have been able to make known programs about which the community would not have heard, encourage programs that otherwise would have died in their initial stages because of the present Negro power structure, and encourage individuals and groups that would have given up in the initial stages of their ideas and efforts for the same reason.

By our presence, then, good things for the community have arisen which have forced the present leadership to show their true colors--to take positions which it has sought to avoid taking, to show where its real obligations lie. The people may even have suspected the leaders, but when the "collisions" occur and the leaders have to make it clear where they stand, the situation comes out of the shadows and into the spotlight. When the truth is shouted forth then change begins to take place.

After this year of work we are at a point where much change has taken place. Many new leaders have emerged, much discouragement has been dispelled, and, as a result of Head Start, a unity has been created that has brought all seven of the Negro communities in metropolitan Gulfport together to work. We have begun to feel, therefore, that the time is ripe to seek to create more of a mass organization than we have thus far even been able to dream of. We also feel that it is time that the guidance for our work should come completely from the community and that we should cease to be accountable only to ourselves.

VII. PRESENT DIRECTION

One of the vivid lessons that has come from our experience is that circumstances seem to present themselves or issues seem to arise--almost out of nowhere--which, if used well, advance the work much more rapidly than any of the well-planned programs that a staff may have devised. This was true of Head Start, the community center money, the HCCAC, and most of the other issues around which our progress toward change has centered.

As we began to think seriously of an area-wide organization, such an opportunity presented itself again. The NAACP was supposed to have 260 volunteers come into Mississippi this summer to work on voter registration (10 to each of the 26 chapters). However, recruitment did not go well and no chapter received more than three volunteers; Gulfport chapter did not receive any. But the president of the NAACP decided that we would have a campaign anyway and in the July meeting of the chapter asked John Else to help him do this. Now the fact that he would ask one of our staff to help is itself significant; it is a recognition of actual power. Dr. D. knows that we know people, that we have a great deal of influence in North Gulfport (which contains half of the entire Negro population of the area), and that we have the time to work to make sure a drive a success.

However, our present estimate of the situation is that Dr. D.'s only concern is to have an impressive figure (of the number of votes added to the books) to report to the state NAACP rally which will conclude the summer. The problem for him is that the only effective way to have such a drive, and the method that the national NAACP office is suggesting, is to have a "block captain" for every square block in the area. The problem that this presents for him is that organizing by such a method could create a political machine which would live beyond the immediate purpose for which he wants it; such a machine would involve so many people that it would quite likely create the setting for the democratic processes to function and thus take the power out of the hands of a small leadership group and put it into the hands of a larger, representative body of citizens.

This is exactly what we are hoping for and what we will be working for as we pitch in and try to make this effort a success. We could not create such a political group on our own; but with the name of the NAACP behind the original organizing effort, no one will fight the program and split the community, which should make it possible to create an organization which will hopefully become independent from its founder.

One of the ways that we feel that this organization can develop is if there is an executive committee established to guide its work. This will serve two functions: (1) it will avoid a dictatorial control by Dr. D., who can then dissolve the body when he is finished with it; and (2) if the executive committee is made up of one person from each precinct who is elected by the block captains in that precinct, then some precinct-consciousness will be created and the groundwork will be laid for precinct organizations.

Obviously, then, Dr. D. is trying to use us for his ends and we are trying to use him for ours. We have no blueprint for we know that we have to use situations as they arise and respond to crises as they come. Hopefully, out of this endeavor will come a strong, organized, political body which can wield real power and confront the white community as equals.