

Preface

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party: Lessons From Another Day. Mike Miller, April 23, 2020

Sixty years ago, four African American students sat in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, seeking to be served. That service was denied. For the next several months, sit-ins spread like wildfire across the south, led by Black students at historically black colleges, universities and seminaries across the south. In April of that year, leaders of the different campus-based groups met at Shaw University in Raleigh, NC and formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or "snick" as it was known at the time.

The conference had been called by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), whose principal leader was Martin Luther King, Jr. It had hoped the student movement would become an SCLC youth division. But Ella Baker was the SCLC person most responsible organizing the conference; she advised the students that they might be better off as an independent organization. (She, by the way, remains the unsung heroine of the Deep South freedom movement.)

In 1961, the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE) engaged in "freedom rides" to end segregation in interstate transportation. Greyhound and Trailways, the major bus companies, forced African Americans to ride in the last rows of the bus. CORE ended the Freedom Ride when one of the buses was burned in Anniston, Alabama, and its freedom riders were badly beaten.

But Diane Nash, leader of the Fiske University student SNCC affiliate thought ending the rides was a capitulation to southern racism. The Nashville student organization decided to resume the rides. With federal escort, including an army helicopter flying overhead, they made it to Jackson, Mississippi where they were promptly arrested and sentenced to terms in Parchman Penitentiary, a hellhole among prisons. The Parchman experience was formative for a number of students who dropped out of school to become full-time workers in the freedom movement.

The students were dissatisfied with two things: the absence of substantive response by the Federal government to their demand for civil rights legislation, and the absence from their activities of everyday Black people in the south—the domestics, plantation workers, welfare recipients, independent farmers, and others. In their conversations among themselves, and in conversations they had with the handful of NAACP and other civil rights leaders in the south who had not been driven out of town or killed, they discovered that the right to vote is what most of these leaders thought was the important goal to be achieved. Some counties in the "Black Belt" had 80% and more African American population with very few, and in some cases none, registered to vote because of the intimidation, firings, evictions, beatings and killings of those who had tried attempted to register

Voter Registration

SNCC had a deep internal discussion that initially pitted "direct action" against "voter registration". Ella Baker suggested they do both, and a resolution to that effect was

adopted. Initially, a handful of students dropped out of school to become full-time voter registration workers. The number grew. By late 1963, SNCC's full time "field" staff numbered well over a hundred, with a support staff headquartered in Atlanta, and in northern offices that had the job of raising money for SNCC, placing political pressure on the Federal government to enact and enforce civil rights and voting rights legislation, and generally educating northerners about what we then called "The Movement."

By 1962, under the direction of SNCC field secretary Bob Moses, there were 16 full-time Black young people working just in Mississippi. These young organizers dug roots in local Black communities. As Bob Moses later described their presence and police and private racist efforts to drive them out, "they'd knock us down, and we'd get back up." Their respect for local people, persistence, patience, commitment, energy and talent won them "the right to meddle."

Soon handfuls turned into dozens and hundreds of people willing to go to a county courthouse to apply to register. Voting rights had broad appeal because any concern in the Black community could fit within its program: black top roads to replace dirt ones that got muddy in the rainy season; sidewalks where there were none; decent schools; jobs for cotton workers displaced from plantations by mechanization and chemical fertilizers (taking away hand picking and hoeing); and end to police brutality; indeed, whatever was of concern and amenable to political solution.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Forms

In 1963, 80,000+ African Americans participated in a freedom ballot—casting "votes" in barber shops, beauty salons, restaurants, juke joints, churches, pool halls and other gathering places— demonstrating that, if given the opportunity, people would vote. In 1962, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), uniting and coordinating the statewide work of the NAACP State Conference of Branches, CORE, SNCC and SCLC, took on the task of leading voter registration work in the Mississippi. SNCC's Bob Moses was its program director; CORE's Dave Dennis its assistant program director, and NAACP leader Aaron Henry was its chairman.

In 1963, under COFO auspices, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was formed as a state Democratic Party paralleling the officially recognized racist Democratic Party. Which of these two parties would represent Mississippi became the subject of a challenge to the seating of the "regulars" by MFDP at the national party's 1964 convention. The question galvanized the convention and captured the attention of the nation. President Lyndon Johnson used every tool at his disposal to successfully block the challenge.

MFDP Marginalized

Despite the defeat, MFDP returned to Mississippi and campaigned for the national ticket of Johnson for President and Hubert Humphrey for Vice-President. Johnson won the election in a landslide victory. And he remembered MFDP as something he did not want in a Democratic Party that he led. A new struggle now took place in the state: MFDP versus a new Democratic Party formation, the Mississippi Democratic Conference (MDC), a bi-racial effort formed led by Claude Ramsey of the State AFL-CIO and Charles Evers of the NAACP that bypassed COFO and the MFDP, leaving its leaders out of its formative meetings.

MFDP had been based in the everyday majority of Mississippi's Black population; MDC was based in its narrow middle-class with a small, but growing, number of whites who were willing to see Mississippi's wall of racism broken. By the opening of the 1968 Democratic Party Convention, an integrated Mississippi Democratic Party presented itself and was granted credentials to represent the state's Democrats. But MFDP constituted only one quarter of the MDC delegation. MFDP had been defeated in its effort to represent Mississippi's African American citizens in the Democratic Party, and began an unending process that finally eliminated it from Mississippi politics.

With voting rights now established, and enforced by the Federal Department of Justice, a struggle took place between militants and moderates over tactics, between centrists versus progressives and radicals over program and policy, and between elite Democrats who thought properly credentialed people should lead and grassroots Democrats who thought domestics, plantation workers, welfare recipients and others who constituted the vast majority of the state's Black population could lead as well.

Reform, Revolution and Revorm or Reforlution

What happened to MFDP is as old as the struggle between reform and revolution, or in MFDP's case *revorm* and *reforlution*, an idea that better represents what MFDP was since it sought to play by the pre-existing rules and to enter a pre-existing political structure, but to do so on its own terms.

In its approach, MFDP was an echo of the struggle over Reconstruction that followed the Civil War. Radical Reconstructionists sought to keep the U.S. Army in the south until a full transition to equal rights had taken place, including the disarmament of the old Confederates who were still fighting to keep de facto if not de jure slavery. They also sought a land reform program that would give the newly freed slaves farms by confiscating plantation land, and the support they needed to make them successful. In both these efforts, they were defeated by a legislative alliance of "moderates" and "centrists". For almost 100 years, slavery by another name persisted in the Deep South.

Lessons for Today

At its peak in the south, the freedom movement mobilized tens of thousands of people. That wasn't enough. Don't conclude from the presence of tens, and even hundreds, of thousands of people showing up for a big event that lasts hours, or even days and weeks, that you have built the sustained people power required to hold accountable and significantly change the status quo. What do the global climate change movement, and campaigns for immigration reform, health care reform, labor reform and others need to learn if they are to slow, halt, reverse, then end, the dominant power of major corporations and financial institutions over the Democratic Party?

Recognize these twin strategies of status quo power: marginalization and cooptation, and that repression can be a final resort. The MDC coopted some leaders, engaged some who had previously been on the outside of the newly emerging politics in the state, and marginalized MFDP.

If you lose touch with your base/constituency, you will be marginalized by attacks from news media, politicians, pundits and others. If you fail to correct course and get back in touch with

the people in whose name you claim to speak, you will lose leaders who were once united, members who once were with you, and followers whose support is essential. While initially formed by SNCC organizers who dug roots in the Black community, MFDP was unable to sink those roots deeply enough to withstand the counter-organizing it faced.

Division follows marginalization: The rise of ideological rigidity within your organization as you seek explanations for defeat where there had been victories will cripple you internally. SNCC was ultimately torn apart by these rigidities as arguments over ideology, program, strategy and tactics divided people who had once worked together and forced out those who did not go along with a program that was losing touch with its constituency.

Cooptation will absorb those of your leaders who think they are “realistic”—that small gains are better than none, as well as those who are more crudely bought off with money, status, appointments and honors, some that provide the illusion of power. Condemnation of “sell-outs” is not analysis, nor will it help you with your base—indeed it will be perceived as sour grapes by those whose support you need.

And if neither of those succeeds, repression and violence are among the tools used by status quo power throughout American history.

The DMC realists replaced the MFDP as more and more African Americans were elected to local and state offices, and fewer and fewer of them came from the ranks of MFDP. Marginalization substituted for repression, which had been the mode of operation of the state’s earlier racists.

The heart of our contemporary problem is to heed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) distinction between “mobilizing” and “organizing”. SNCC was right about that, though these are not incompatible, rather it is a matter of when to do what. It is sporadic mobilizations that turn out tens of thousands for dramatic events but lack the structure, leadership and rootedness for on-going participation that characterize most contemporary American movements for change. Electoral mobilization lasts for an election cycle; rarely does it go beyond that. Status quo power isn’t sporadic; it won’t be transformed by sporadic action.

MFDP was an organization that emerged in the African American community of Mississippi, particularly in its Black Belt counties (predominantly African American), but with a presence throughout the state. It sought to plant itself there; it sought to dig roots there. And it mobilized both its direct constituency and allies across the country to support its challenge to the seating of Mississippi’s racist delegation at the 1964 national Democratic Party Convention.

But MFDP could not sustain the support it had in the face of the national power directed against it by President Lyndon Johnson in his successful effort to defeat it. Following the 1964 Democratic Party Convention defeat, there should have been a time-out, a time for analysis, internal education, mutual support, singing, praying, reflection on the meaning of what was accomplished even if the principal goal was defeated, credit given to all those who played a role in the fight, pledges to one another to continue on a program that could unite “all of us”, sharing of stories and deepening of relationships that are the glue of any successful continuing organization that fights for social change, healing of wounds that developed between the internal militants and moderates, centrists and radicals.

People power organizations must learn the distinction between sell-outs and centrists. The former need to be exposed and isolated; the latter need to be accommodated. Their centrism and moderation is legitimate if they represent the views of a significant portion of an organization's base. If you lose touch with people "where they are", you will not be able to move them to where you think they ought to be. That is a lesson radical—people who want to get to the root of problems—must continuously learn. Keep your feet on the ground and your eyes on the stars; failure to do both is a guarantee of defeat.

The thing that protects against marginalization, cooptation and the threat of repression is people power sufficiently deep and wide in important constituencies so that those in power who might consider cooptation or repression conclude they would lose more than they could gain should they so act. In our lifetimes, we have few examples of that for organizations that sought significant change that brought benefits beyond the middle class—i.e. that addressed the twin evils of economic injustice and the racism that is faced by the overwhelming majority of African-American people. We will never know whether SNCC and MFDP could have more successfully pursued a different course. But if we don't ask that question, there will be nothing earned from their filled-with-lessons experience.

I am writing during the Corona virus crisis. It is another "movement moment," like the mid-1930s was for industrial unionism and the 1955-1966 period was for the Deep South civil rights/black power movement. This time, the vast majority of Americans are aware of the great inequities that exist in the nation. I hope something will be built that will win important Corona response gains, and contribute to the defeat of Donald Trump. And I hope what is built will have the capacity and vision to gain more members, new allies, become more competent, and develop a unified leadership that can challenge the underlying structural injustices made so apparent in these pandemic days--the vast inequality of wealth, status and power that exists in the country today.

Ultimately, that something will have to be multi-issue in character if it is to encompass the demands of:

- Immigrants and their citizen children or children who came here too young to be anything other than Americans.
- The poor and working-class whites in a stretch of land going from central Ohio into the Appalachian Mountains and spreading both east and west whose communities are poisoned by opioids knowingly marketed by pharmaceutical companies that were warned by regulators of their addictive character and deadly use.
- Debt-burdened students whose future looks bleak in an economy that is now heading into recession that might become depression.
- Homeowners facing foreclosure; renters facing eviction; small businesses unable to make payroll and keep their doors open.
- Working and middle-class people who live from paycheck to paycheck and now are not getting paid, and whose jobs may permanently disappear.
- Exploited workers in places like Amazon who badly need the revival of the labor movement and labor reform legislation that eliminates the employer-won limitations

on what was once the positive role played by the National Labor Relations Act.

- Climate reformers who are struggling to save the planet.
- ...the list goes on.

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As well as being multi-issue, the winning united front that needs to be formed will make use of two major strategies:

- Mutual aid (coops, credit unions, buying clubs, carpools) that solve problems by creating new forms that fill empty social space, and;
- Institutional change that makes major institutions accountable to the interests and needs of all the people, so they act for the common good rather than the narrow interests of a few.

The tactics for institutional change are many, including nonviolent disruptive direct action, boycotts, strikes, shop-ins, sick-outs, slow-downs, electoral campaigns, legislative campaigns, accountability sessions with public and private decision-makers, corporate campaigns and more. In all cases, the aim has to be good faith negotiations with institutional decision-makers leading to substantive victories.

We need to practice radical patience. If you build deeper and wider, people power will grow. Growing power allows you to more deeply affect and change status quo practices, policies and structures. Fading people power or sporadic people power doesn't have that effect. At best, it wins concessions that are soon undermined and reversed when big event demonstrators go home and status quo power plugs away at undermining whatever was won.

It is the long-distance runner, not the sprinter, who will bring about transformational change.