

NOTES ON MISSISSIPPI

Perhaps the most significant result of the Freedom Vote campaign was in the area of organizational development. For the first time a genuinely state-wide operation was put into effect. (A central office was set up in Jackson with the task of coordinating activities around the state. A Mississippi Wats line was installed to aid in this purpose.) The five congressional district offices, established in September, became organizational bases for penetration into neighboring cities and towns, and in practice expanded their operational scope beyond the city in which they were primarily based. Contacts were made in cities and towns previously untouched by the movement. A beginning was made in the compilation of enormous state-wide contact lists, centered in files in the Jackson office. A collection of phone books from around the state was begun. Lists of all physicians, funeral directors, barbers, beauticians, and ministers in the state were compiled. (There were glimmerings of the organizational uses to which the Wats line could be put: 1) as an information relay center 2) for coordination of staff activities 3) for the gathering of information about local problems, either of a community or personal nature 4) for informing people about federal programs 5) for contacting people about the payment of poll taxes 6) for contacting people about registering to vote 7) for setting up meetings in different parts of the state 8) for arranging for speakers at meetings 9) for arranging for the movement of staff and people in general from one place to another)

The Freedom Vote campaign, completed on November 4, was followed by a lull in activities throughout the state. On November 10 thirty staff people were brought together for a five day workshop which culminated in a weekend staff meeting.

The November 14-16 Greenville staff meeting was primarily concerned with four problems: 1) the role of whites in the movement 2) the number of Northern students to be brought into Mississippi this summer 3) programs which might lead to greater federal involvement in the state and 4) whether COFO should sponsor an independent political party or work within the framework of the existing parties. None of these problems were essentially resolved at the Greenville meeting. Perhaps the greatest amount of discussion was devoted to the question of the role of whites in the movement. A number of people seemed to question whether whites had any role working within the Negro community. While acknowledging certain educational advantages to the image of black and white working together, they maintained that this image often became one of white leading black and that in order to undermine and ultimately destroy the belief in white supremacy, it was imperative that the movement maintain black leadership. For a while, some argued that whites should only work in white communities.

Some of this conflict over the role of whites arose inevitably as part of the backwash of the Freedom Vote Campaign in which over eighty Yale and Stanford students came into the state to work. But a large part of the conflict, whether understood at the time or not, stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the nature in which decisions were made during the Freedom Vote Campaign. Both the lack of any clearly defined decision-making machinery and the hecticness of the campaign necessitated that decisions, if they were to be made at all, be made in Jackson and on the spot. Inevitably, it seemed to many on the staff as though they were being excluded from the decision-making process. With the concentration of whites in the central office as a result of the expansion in state-wide activities and

concurrent need for specialized people, it seemed to people in the field as though whites were intimately involved in the decision-making process whereas they themselves were excluded. (This impression was not entirely without basis. But to the extent that it was true it was more the result of necessity--i.e., who was in the office to discuss and implement ideas--than of design.)

No essential changes, however, emerged from this discussion. There was simply no one willing to come out of the field in order to work in the Jackson office. On the other hand, there was a strong mandate directed to the entire staff, though in effect primarily to the central office, to attempt to involve more Negro Mississippians (e.g. from Jackson State College) into the movement.

Considerable time was spent at Greenville discussing whether to invite a massive number of Northern whites into Mississippi for the summer. It was clear from the nature of the publicity derived from the Freedom Vote campaign that the press would respond to the beating of a Yale student as it simply would not do to the beating of a local Negro. The New York Times headlined its stories about the campaign with the news that Yale and Stanford students were working "for a Negro gubernatorial candidate in Mississippi." During the Freedom Rally in Jackson which concluded the campaign, TV men from N.B.C. spent most of their time shooting film of the Yalies and seemed hardly aware of the local people and full-time SNCC workers. While it was agreed by all that this was a sorry state of affairs, many contended that such publicity was essential for awakening the national conscience and preparing a climate for greater federal involvement in Mississippi. (It was noted that for the first time the Justice Department had people on hand in the eventuality of trouble.) It was argued that by flooding Mississippi with Northern whites the entire country would be made dramatically aware of the denial of freedom which existed in the state and that the federal government would be inevitably faced with a crisis of sufficient magnitude that it would have to act. Others, however, maintained that the reality of such a program would be chaos, if not actual bloodshed. The staff could never handle a massive number of whites either organizationally (supply them with sufficient things to do) or administratively (house, feed, and bond them out of jail). The organizational development of the Negroes of Mississippi would be more setback than advanced by such an invasion. Furthermore, psychologically it would be a duplication of the same pattern--one of whites leading blacks--as the one we were trying to destroy. Local

Negro leadership would be stifled rather than encouraged.

The argument was never clearly resolved at the Greenville meeting; though many seemed in favor of bringing in a limited number of whites to perform certain specified functions. In general, it was agreed that there needed to be more emphasis placed on recruiting Negroes, and especially native Mississippians.

Also discussed at the Greenville meeting was the need for some dramatic action which would bring about a significant federal presence in Mississippi. Howard Zinn introduced the discussion by asserting that organizational protest in Mississippi could not succeed without outside assistance. Techniques that worked in other places (sit-ins, pickets, etc.) would not work in Mississippi because they would not be tolerated by the police power of the state. Therefore, no matter how strong the movement became, it would inevitably require the power of the federal government to restrain the use of police clubs, if it was to make any important gains in the state. The question then posed was how to generate enough pressure to force the government to intervene in Mississippi to ensure Negro voting rights. A number of projects were discussed (see minutes) but nothing specific was adopted at the time.

Bob Moses followed by discussing the need for institutionalizing a number of long-range projects which are now being put into operation. (See minutes) Throughout the week-long workshop it was repeatedly recognized that since the achievement of any political gains was still in the distant future the movement would have to develop its own structure, outside the state, for servicing vital needs. Along these lines the most important project which emerged from the Greenville meeting was the plan for setting up a network of community centers which would perform functions ranging from pre-natal care to political education. In addition, emphasis was placed on making greater use of federal programs, such as ~~like~~ PHA, MDTA, and RAD, and on promoting more home industries, such as the one initiated in Ruleville. It was made clear, however, that these added activities were not to detract from (but rather to supplement) our primary concern with politics.

A great deal of time at the Greenville meeting was given over to discussing our relationship with the NAACP. There was strong sentiment that if the NAACP was not going to lend its full weight behind COFO it should not be a member. But in the final analysis it was agreed that the use of the NAACP's name was of benefit to us; and that as long as the NAACP did not openly oppose our program it might be well to tolerate its lack of active cooperation.