

MEMO

Re: The Mississippi Farmers League
To: All COFO Projects
From: Jesse Morris

Consider the following:

(1) In Itta Bena, a group of low-income movement people want to know what they can do to get better housing and how they might go about getting new homes.

(2) In Panola County, a group of movement oriented okra-farmers decided that they were not getting enough for their okra (they were receiving 4½¢ per lb.) and petitioned the broker that they were selling their okra to for more money. He turned them down. They then considered either not growing any okra next season or forming a cooperative and marketing their okra for themselves. They liked the cooperative idea, but did not know how to go about setting one up and also felt that they did not have the money to do it.

(3) In Madison County, a cooperative was formed in September, the people in the cooperative are overwhelmingly movement. They had intended to buy their farm supplies together (in order to eliminate the middle man and then form their own cotton gin). They have been slowed down largely, because they lack an organizer-manager type.

(4) In Walthall County, the local people sent a COFO worker to Jackson to find out about how a rural group goes about forming a credit union. One of the things that they will need is money with which to get started.

(5) In Amite County, farmers are asking for assistance to set up a farm supply co-op.

(6) In Meridian, Erie Weinberger seems to be getting his sandal making cooperative off the ground, but finding a market for the sandals is a problem that has to be solved.

In many places throughout the state poor people are getting together probably for the first time in their lives and defining some of their problems, putting forth suggestions as to how their problems might be solved and finally realizing that they don't have the technical knowledge or financial means to bring about the remedial alternatives.

A notable characteristic that all of these groups have is that they are the active movement people in their communities. People of whom it can truly be said have been brought together as a direct result of the Mississippi movements' voter registration work (Panola), food and clothing distribution (Itta Bena), freedom days (Madison), community center program (Meridian), canvassing (Walthall) and the FDP.

If it is the case that those people have been brought together by movement work and are movement people who are themselves asking for assistance along lives that are different from what has been done by the Mississippi Staff Workers in the past; how is the staff suppose to respond? Do we watch our projects get bagged down and proclaim

" this project is busy, ain't nothin' happening here?" Do we keep trying to ram voter registration down the throats of people who are registered and will not buy the argument that better homes, jobs, roads and schools will come when everyone is registered and can vote the devils out?

Some people say, no! Some people say we should try to organize the poor and give them assistance that will enable them to solve their problems when they need it. Here is how some people propose to do just that.

A corporation is being formed its legal name will be: The Resource Development Corporation, it will be known generally as the Mississippi Farmers League. The corporation will not issue stock, but will sell memberships at 10¢ per year, in order that every poor person who wants to be a member can do so. The Farmers League is not restricted to farmers. City people can become members also (that is the reason for the legal name).

The purpose of the Farmers League will be to: (1) raise money (by issuing bonds, obtaining grants from unions and foundations, and soliciting contributions), (2) to lend to local people the money they need to form a group that will solve their problems, (3) to get local people the training they need to acquire the technical skill to run their own organization, (4) to provide the local organizations with technical assistance.

THE FARMERS LEAGUE WILL WORK LIKE SO:

Let us say a group wants to form a credit union, but doesn't have a financial base needed to get started; the Farmers League could lend \$500.00 to the local group to get it started, or: say a group of sharecroppers want to move from the plantation they are on into new homes, the Farmers League could buy the land and supplies and hire a skilled carpenter and the sharecroppers could supply the labor and build their own homes, or: a group of rural people might want to stop farming, but continue to live in the rural and desire to start a small industry (shirt making, leather goods, pottery, etc) and need the initial investment and the technical assistance, or: a co-op might be formed that sells stock and there might be people who can not afford the price, the Farmers League could lend them money to buy shares in the cooperative, or: a group of poor people might have a proposal that needs funding, the Farmers League could lend them the money also....

WHO WILL DETERMINE WHAT PROPOSALS GET FUNDED

Every three months, the members of the corporation (Farmers League) will meet. This means that all those people who have paid a dime for a membership will come together. At these meetings the members will be told how much money the corporation (Farmers League) has. The members will then listen to proposals that various local groups needing money will have drawn up. The entire membership or at least those at the meeting will decide what local groups get money and how much.

During the period between the quarterly meetings no money will be given out (thus keeping monetary control completely in the hands of the membership). However, during this period, work will be carried on which entails giving the various projects the technical assistance they might request.

If you feel that there is a group in the area you are located that is thinking about forming a co-operative or credit union have someone from the area come to Jackson and get a three-hour orientation on forming co-ops, credit unions, corporations for housing programs.

The corporation papers for the League are presently being processed as soon as they are complete, membership blanks will be sent to the local groups for distribution.