

March 16, 1964

TO: COFO staff &amp; supporters

## FREEDOM DAY -- LEFLORE COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI -- MARCH 25, 1964

## I. Purposes.

- A. To dramatize to Leflore County and the U.S.A. the fact that Negroes have not been and are not now allowed to register to vote, thus pressuring Circuit Clerk Martha Lamb, the U. S. Justice Department, and the U. S. Congress to open registration rolls to Negro citizens.
- B. To break down the fear which still prevents many Negroes from trying to register in the Delta.
- C. To demonstrate to Leflore County Negroes the importance of the vote in gaining more and better jobs, good education, spending of government money on improvements for all citizens--not just one group, freedom from police brutality, just laws and fair trials for all.
- D. To provide a basis for continuing pressure and attention on Martha Lamb and voter registration in the Delta.

## II. How?

## A. Freedom Day itself.

1. Program. To put maximum pressure on the Justice Department for protection of people and inspection and correction of registration procedures, all of our actions which may challenge the local authorities will be directly aimed at voter registration.

a. There will be a massive attempt to register by people from all over the county--starting when the office opens in the morning and continuing until it closes. People will come from Greenwood, Itta Bena, Sidon, Winter City, Schlater and several other rural localities. It will be organized like this: Some people who want to register will walk or drive to the courthouse individually. Others will meet at a Freedom Day Headquarters (place to be announced) early in the morning on Freedom Day and go to the courthouse by car. If cars are stopped groups of no more than about five will continue on foot. At the courthouse those trying to register will line up, starting at the door of the circuit clerk's office; as many as she will let in will take the test.

b. Shortly after the time when the circuit clerk's office opens, a picket line will be formed on the sidewalk outside the courthouse. The pickets will be, we hope, both local residents, especially those who have tried to register before and been refused, and people from other parts of the state and the country who believe that denial of the right to vote is so wrong that they feel impelled to help to change the situation by their own personal witness to local officials and the entire country. We hope the picket line will include some of the ministers who picketed in Hattiesburg. We also are trying to bring some national "opinion makers"--movie stars, public officials, civil rights leaders, and other people the public watches to Greenwood for the Day. Some of them may picket. The pickets will carry and wear signs explaining their demands.

## 2. Immediate Results.

a. Increased local awareness of voter registration issues--that the vote is vital to gaining the things we want, that under present conditions it is impossible to register, that by concerted action we may gain the right to register.

b. Local pressure to register will be felt by the circuit clerk. There will be many applications to process and many people demanding registration. There



may be a slow-down in downtown Easter shopping as a side-effect, resulting in pressure from merchants on Martha Lamb.

c. National pressure will result on the Justice Department to knock out the test and at least to force speedy and fair processing of applicants. The attention of the senate will be focused on voting rights as they consider the civil rights bill. The people of the U. S. A. will understand better the necessity for federal action to enforce the right to vote.

#### B. Pro-Freedom Day organizing to make the Day work.

1. Mass meetings have been set up for every night from now until Freedom Day in various parts of the county.
2. Door-to-door canvassing and block captain organizing is being done by COFO staff members including SNCC field workers and SCLC citizenship teachers.
3. Carpools for transportation to the courthouse will be formed, possibly in the framework of a local transportation committee. Names and tag numbers of responsible people will be recorded. We also hope to use people and cars that come down to Greenwood for the Day.
4. Leaflets and posters will be obtained and distributed. Leaflets will be printed in either Atlanta or San Jose, Calif. Redesigned Freedom Vote Posters are being put up in a few places in town to let people know about the Day who don't often come out to meetings.
5. People from outside Leflore County are now being contacted. It is hoped that some of the ministers who picketed in Hattiesburg will be here. Entertainers and public figures are being contacted and asked to come to Greenwood by the Atlanta and Greenwood offices.
6. Publicity work is being done from Greenwood and Atlanta. A fact sheet will be prepared for distribution to Friends of SNCC groups and News Media. Press releases will be issued as the situation develops here in Greenwood. We hope for TV coverage; TV men are being informed and told about the possibilities by the Atlanta and Greenwood SNCC offices.
7. The staff and the community must consider the probabilities and possibilities of Freedom Day. We must decide what course to follow if there are jailings, and who will carry on with the program if key people are arrested.

#### C. Follow-up.

1. If not stopped by arrests, the picket line will continue daily, keeping attention focused on voting and making known our demands, and keeping open a gate in the wall of fear which now keeps people away from the courthouse.
2. Registration attempts will continue in the form of daily trips to the courthouse and perhaps more Freedom Days. The form of the later Freedom Days would depend on how the first one goes--if there are not mass arrests, later days can include bigger picket lines and even more militant kinds of protest.
3. The county-wide nature of the Day will provide a chance for real rural organization, which has not been achieved here. Perhaps while county people are in town we can get a start on the Freedom Registration and use the contacts we make to spread the COFO political program throughout the county.
4. Participants in Freedom day here can help move project elsewhere in the state by canvassing, picketing, and attending mass meetings of all kinds.
5. If the Senate is still filibustering, people from Leflore county as well as other parts of the state can hold a Freedom Day in the U. S. Senate! Could picket Eastland, visit all senators, etc.
6. COFO organizations can follow up nationally with letters, telegrams, visits to congressmen and senators, the president, the Justice Department, the Federal Voting Commission.
7. COFO staff and visiting ministers and public figures can tell the story of denial of the right to vote in Mississippi by writing articles and speaking before every audience possible.



8. SNCC workers can tell the Spring Conference in Atlanta about the Freedom Day; this will be a push for the Summer project.
9. The schools will be closed on Freedom Day and the day after for a teachers' meeting in Jackson. Perhaps we can organize a school boycott in the wake of Freedom Day on Friday the 27th, when both teachers and students will be due to return. The students could join the pickets at the courthouse and demand that their teachers register to vote—"How can a 2nd class citizen be a good teacher?" etc. School boycott should be used if there is any large number of arrests, too.
10. If there are arrests, of course a barrage of pressure on the Justice Department will be of great importance.
11. This will have to be played by ear, but if there are arrests, people are ready, and the arrests are for activity clearly protected by the constitution, perhaps there should be a jail-filling operation—people continuing to act in the way which caused the original arrests.

### III. Why a Freedom Day in Leflore County?

A. Local context. Although there have been over 2500 registration attempts by Negroes in the past year, it is estimated that fifty or less Negroes "passed" the test and were registered in that period. Many of the people, frustrated in these first tries, understand the importance of the vote to themselves; they want to put some pressure on the circuit clerk. There are also many Negroes in Leflore County who are afraid to go to the courthouse to register. A massive and open registration attempt and a picket line may free these people of some of their fear. It will certainly force the Justice Department to watch Martha Lamb, the police and other officials; if well publicized it will speed J.D. action to open the registration books.

B. Mississippi context. Martha Lamb is one of the circuit clerks most resistant to Negro voter registration in Mississippi. She is also one of the registrars named in the pending Justice Department suit to knock out the state's voter registration prevention laws. Registrars in nearby counties such as Sunflower and in many other parts of the state will at least register people if they complete the registration form. Martha Lamb, however, sometimes won't let people take the test, has failed to register ~~the~~ people who can easily complete the test—and have done so three or four times, and allows only from one to three people (if they are Negroes) to take the test at a time. She often loud-talks applicants and tells them not to come back again. She has ordered voter registration workers out of her office frequently.

Other Leflore County officials and citizens interfere with voter registration attempts. They have jailed workers, threatened them with death if they ever came back to the courthouse, and photographed them—all at the courthouse/as the workers accompanied prospective voters and recorded the registration attempts.

Leflore County is a part of the Delta, where there has never been (with the exception of "moderate" Greenville) a demonstration which did not end in immediate arrests and failure. People all over the state and particularly the Delta know of the demonstrations in Greenwood last year. Many are watching from the sidelines to see whether the voter registration drive has been limited, if not crushed, by jailings. A successful Freedom Day will convince these people and give all confidence that the Movement cannot be stopped by illegal police action.

C. National context. Leflore County and Greenwood are already known for their adamant stand against registration by Negroes, so any mass effort to challenge this stand will be news.

We are right next to Senator Eastland's county.



A challenge of Jamie Whitten's seat in Congress (2nd Congressional Dist.-- the Delta) has already been kicked around by congressional leaders such as Emanuel Celler; this would be a further demonstration of the disenfranchisement of a large part of his constituency.

The Leflore County white power structure receives a great deal of financial support from the federal government, yet it fails to obey the federal constitution. The financial base of the county is cotton; without the minimum price guarantees of the federal government it would collapse. The total cotton acreage allotment for the county is over 71,500 acres, and every bale grown on these acres is guaranteed a certain minimum price by the federal government. In the past few months the City of Greenwood has received \$227,000 in federal grants for improvement of streets and sewers and the building of a bridge. Although the sewer drainage is so bad in part of the Negro section of town that you cannot flush a toilet, all the sewer improvements were made in the white section. Although there is a very dangerous railroad crossing has neither bridge nor signal in the Negro section, the bridge is being from the downtown area across the river to a white section--and it is being built only three blocks from an already existing bridge across the same river.

#### IV. Why a Freedom Day Now?

A. Local context. The hard winter is coming to a close; the need for change in Mississippi is fresh in everyone's mind. People are ready to push now; many will soon return to work. As a side-effect Freedom Day may put a crimp in the Easter shopping week, thus adding to pressure. A successful demonstration will blast open the county for expansion into the summer project.

#### B. Mississippi context.

A Freedom Day in the Delta is a logical follow-up to those in Hattiesburg and Canton. The over the Delta and the 2nd Congressional District people have been knocking on the voter registration door for over a year-- new pressure is needed and the people know it.

C. National Context. The civil rights bill is before Congress. The week before Easter will be a good time to focus national on denial of the right to vote.

#### V. Summary.

These pages lay out the purpose, projected program, and rationale of the Leflore County Freedom Day. What the Greenwood Voter Registration Office needs now, from people like you who are reading this, is criticism, help in carrying out and publicizing the day, and support in whatever kind of follow-up is necessary when the day is over.

ONE MAN...ONE VOTE...NOW!