

This letter is to tell you something about what we are doing in Mississippi and what you can do to help us, the Summer Project volunteers in the City of Hattiesburg, Forrest County, Mississippi.

In James Silver's recent book, Mississippi: The Closed Society, he writes that "during the 20th century never as much as 10%, and normally less than 5%, of the Negro voting population has been allowed to register (in Mississippi). In 1899, 82% of the white voting population was registered, as compared with 9% of the Negroes. In 1954 the figures were 63% and 5%, and in 1960, 67% and 5%." In the 1963 gubernatorial election, only 114,000 people, Negro and white, voted, out of 932,000 citizens of voting age. There are, then, 818,000 people whose voices are not heard.

If white people do not register, it is due to ignorance and apathy and also to the systematic methods of disenfranchisement employed, such as poll taxes, and literacy tests which create a generally overwhelming obstacle course between the citizen's conscience and the right of the ballot.

These factors may also be important in the Negro community, but the Negroes who do want to register to vote are prevented by all these methods plus the more drastic means of general intimidation and economic reprisals. Of 435,000 Negroes of voting age in Mississippi, only some 21,000, or fewer than 5%, are registered voters.

The power of government is, therefore, concentrated in the hands of a very few people who are not responsible to the population. This power is exercised through what is virtually a one-party system which holds all but one seat in the state legislature. The one party system also makes it possible for these few people to exercise undue influence in the Congress of the United States, through the control of committees which their seniority made possible by the absence of opposition at home gives them.

This oligarchic control is, of course, exercised through and over the state Democratic party, which means that the delegates to the Democratic National Convention and the resolutions they will support there were chosen without regard to the wishes of a majority of the people of Mississippi. Moreover, the Mississippi Democratic Party is a Democratic Party in name only; in official literature it denies support of the policies and platforms of the national party. It has plans to offer a slate of unpledged electors who will not support the candidate of the national party.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) has been organized to give a voice to the Negroes and whites of Mississippi who have been excluded from the Mississippi party and who want to support the national Democratic party. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is in the process of electing delegates who will challenge the seating of the Mississippi delegation to the National Convention. Their activities will also serve to demonstrate the number of Negroes who would participate in political activities if they were allowed the opportunity.

So far in Forrest County, where only 250 of a total of 7,500 Negroes of voting age have succeeded in registering to vote, over 3,000 have registered in the MFDP. (To be eligible to register in the MFDP, one must be over 21 and have lived in Mississippi for two years and the county for one year).

MFDP precinct meetings in the county were held last Saturday, July 25. Attendance at the four meetings ranged from 35 to more than 100. At these meetings resolutions were passed and delegates elected to the county convention on Sunday, July 26. The county convention was attended by every delegate and most of the alternates. The people are extremely serious about these meetings; they are fully aware of the benefits of getting some control over the political machinery and of getting a voice in the National Convention.

We are helping them in a variety of ways. Voter registration workers are canvassing the city to enroll people in the party and explain its program. In freedom schools in addition to the regular courses, mock precinct and county meetings were held---a lesson in practical politics for the younger students, and practice for the adults who participated on Saturday and Sunday.

And you can help us. The MFDP can unseat the regular Mississippi delegation with the aid of other states' delegations. Already six states -- Michigan, Minnesota, Colorado, New York, Wisconsin, and Oregon -- have pledged support to the MFDP. You can help to get such a pledge from your state's Democratic delegation.