

[1964 August]

MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATS

AND

THE 1964 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

Wednesday, August 19: Three busloads of FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY delegates and alternates left from the Pratt Memorial Methodist Church in Jackson, bound for Atlantic City, amidst crowds of freedom-singing well-wishers.

Friday, August 21: FREEDOM DEMOCRATS arrive at their Atlantic City headquarters, the Gem Hotel.

Saturday, August 22: The integrated FREEDOM DEMOCRATS and the segregated Mississippi regulars were each given one hour to present their cases before the Credentials Committee of the Convention. Under the leadership of Credentials Committee member and Washington, D.C. attorney Joseph Rauh, FREEDOM DEMOCRATS told of the brutal and systematic denial of Negro political rights in Mississippi. Among those testifying were Dr. Aaron Henry, Clarksdale, FDP delegation chairman; Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, Fuleville, FDP delegation vice-chairman; the Reverend Edwin King, Tougaloo, FDP National Committeeman; the Reverend Martin Luther King, SCLC; Roy Wilkins, NAACP; James Farmer, CORE, and Mrs. Michael Schwerner. Their testimony was a chronicle of the beatings, economic harassment, official intimidation, and murder that come to the Mississippi Negro who attempts to become a voter and participate in the Democratic Party in this state.

State Senator J. C. Collins, Laurel, attempted to defend the all-white delegation. Dollins, the new Mississippi Democratic Party State Chairman, said Negroes are "absolutely free" to take part in party affairs in Mississippi, including selection of delegates to the National Convention. "Categorically, I assure you that Negroes did attend precinct meetings," Mr. Johnson said, saying nothing of the discrimination those Negroes met at the meetings of the segregationist party.

The Credentials Committee hearing, and the testimony of FREEDOM delegates and supporters, were carried on nationwide television and radio, as were interviews with such FREEDOM DEMOCRATS as James Travis, Jackson, and Mrs. Dona Moses.

Sunday, August 23: The Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention was unable to reach a decision over whom to seat as the national party's delegates from Mississippi, the segregated regulars or the integrated FREEDOM DEMOCRATS. A subcommittee made up of delegates from Minnesota, Michigan, Georgia, Texas and Iowa, was appointed to consider the Mississippi situation and report back to the full committee.

Credentials Committee Chairman Governor David Lawrence of Pennsylvania ignored reporters' questioning of whether the FDP could take the seats of Mississippi regulars who refused to sign a standard pledge of loyalty to the national party and its candidates.

Monday, August 24: The Convention officially opened, and the New York Times commented, "Almost up to the opening gavel it appeared that the keynote address might be overshadowed by a battle between two delegations seeking accreditation from Mississippi." In order to prevent the decision being made by individual delegates in an open floor debate, Governor Lawrence postponed the final report yet one more day. "Spectator" seats were made available to both the segregated party and the FREEDOM DEMOCRATS. Neither group yet had the official right to occupy Mississippi seats.

Tuesday, August 25: The Mississippi regulars withdrew from the Democratic National Convention after a "compromise" was announced that would seat all of the all-white delegation plus Dr. Aaron Henry and the Reverend Edwin King of the FREEDOM DEMOCRATS. Only 3 members of the segregated delegation signed a party loyalty oath and took seats on the floor. Dr. Henry and the Reverend King, who had status as "delegates-at-large" first took seats on the floor with the Alaska delegation, upon invitation from that state. Less than an hour later, five FREEDOM delegates appeared with official badges to take seats in the Mississippi section. The three members of the white delegation then left, meaning that the only Mississippians at the Democratic National Convention from the time the platform was read through the nomination of the candidates to the close of the Convention were FREEDOM DEMOCRATS. During most of the reading of the platform, the eye of the nation was focused on the FREEDOM DEMOCRATS, as reporters and cameramen flocked around the Mississippi section to find 21 FREEDOM DEMOCRATS in the seats.

Americans in 50 states heard FREEDOM delegate Mrs. Hazel Palmer of Jackson singing "We Shall Overcome" from her place in the heart of the Mississippi seats, amid shouts of "Freedom Now" from other parts of Convention Hall; Negro and white delegates from all parts of the nation came to congratulate their FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC friends in the Mississippi seats. Only three days before, a Credentials Committee witness had said of Mississippi that no other state has gone "to such lengths" to force Negro citizens to sacrifice their rights and responsibilities as American citizens.

In addition to the seating decisions, the Credentials Committee "compromise" provided that the call to the 1968 Convention would insure selection of delegates without racial discrimination; a special committee is to be appointed to assure the non-discrimination ruling is obeyed. According to the New York Times, Governor Lawrence "called the decision a 'turning point' in the history of the Democratic Party, which for most of its history has been profoundly influenced by all-white delegations from the Southern states."

Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson came on Mississippi television to say, "Mississippi's debt to the national Democratic party is now paid in full...." His talk was paid for by the "Southern Committee to Help Elect the Next President of the United States," a group originally formed to aid Alabama Governor George Wallace's Presidential primary campaigns, and which is now reported to be working to help right-wing Republican candidate Senator Barry Goldwater.

After Governor Johnson's televised statement, former Governor Ross Barnett issued a statement saying that the Governor had "formally and finally severed relations between Mississippi and the national Democratic Party."

The final words of the all-white Mississippi regular delegation were, "The Mississippi Democratic delegation did not leave the national Democratic Party; it left us."

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