

THE CONVENTION CHALLENGE

Many friends of the FDP have expressed concern and confusion as to why the FDP delegation at Atlantic City refused to accept the decision of the Credentials Committee. That decision gave Dr. Aaron Henry and Rev. Ed King votes as Delegates-At-Large, required that the Regular Democratic Party of Mississippi pledge support to Johnson Humphrey in November, and provided for a committee to work on requiring that at the 1968 convention all delegates be chosen through processes which do not exclude Negro registered voters.

In analyzing why the FDP did not accept this compromise, it is important to understand first what the FDP delegation represented and what it accomplished at the convention. The FDP delegation was not simply an "alternative" delegation chosen by Negro instead of white Mississippians. The FDP is not a Negro party, but an integrated party, open to all whites. It grows directly out of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. It came to Atlantic City demanding, not simply that Negroes be represented, but that racism be ended - in Mississippi and in the Democratic Party.

Moreover, the conditions under which the FDP delegation was chosen were certainly unique. Though the FDP delegation was chosen according to the laws of Mississippi, its role was only partially political. This is so because simply to take part in the political process of the state makes the Negro in Mississippi automatically a rebel against the segregated society. This means that he is in immediate and grave danger of losing his job, his home, and possibly his life. Many of those who represented the FDP at Atlantic City have suffered the most brutal and continual reprisals ever since they began working for their political rights. This lends a peculiar and unique air to their efforts to attend the Convention, and means that they were literally gambling their lives against the right of being seated in Atlantic City.

The third thing that must be understood is that the FDP had the support it needed to win the fight at Atlantic City. Within the Credentials Committee their was sufficient support to get the FDP's demands on the floor of the Convention, through the signing of a minority report. On the floor, there was sufficient support to force a roll call vote. Once a roll call was allowed, most observers agreed that the FDP would have been seated. What prevented this was the most massive pressure from the White House, through the mediation of Hubert Humphrey. The FDP delegation was aware of all of this, and it therefore knew that the leadership of the party and the Convention was denying it what in fact it had the popular support to win. This kind of dictation is what Negroes in Mississippi face and have always faced, and it is precisely this that they are learning to stand up against.

The specific reasons for the rejection of the Committee's decision follow:

1. Supporters of the compromise argued that the two seats would have great symbolic value. But 68 symbols would have been a lot better than two. We must stop playing the game of accepting token recognition for real change and of allowing the opposition to choose a few "leaders" to represent the people at large - especially if, as at the Convention, the opposition is all white and the people are all Negro. If the people are going to be heard in this country, then we must make the country talk with and listen to them, and not a handpicked committee. The people sent 68 representatives that they chose in open convention. The delegation could not violate that trust.

2. The first provision of that compromise was that the Regular delegation would be fully seated and recognized. The FDP did not go to Atlantic City to vote for a proposal which would recognize the Regular party as the Democratic representative in Mississippi. The FDP came to unseat the regulars because they don't represent the people of Mississippi. Even the two seats offered to the FDP would not have been Mississippi votes, but merely votes at large.

3. The compromise made pretense at setting up means of challenging delegations in 1968 from states which interfere with Negro participation in the party. But the Credentials Committee, in private talks with the FDP delegation, said that it would not guarantee a single registered voter added to the lists in the next four years. Less than 6 percent of voting-age Negroes are now registered in the state. In order to participate in regular democratic party politics in Mississippi you must be a registered voter. The compromise proposal dealt only with "voters". So, even if Negroes are permitted to attend meetings in 1968 to prove the party is "open", they don't stand any real chance of having a voice in the decision of that party.

4. Some supporters of the compromise argued that the FDP was representing all Negroes in the country and the two seats offered would mean a lot to them in the Northern cities, where rioting has been taking place. But the 68 persons came to Atlantic City to represent the Negroes of Mississippi and not the country as a whole. That is the nature of all delegations at the convention. It is unreasonable to ask the Mississippi delegation to bear the burden of the entire country - especially since it is one of the most powerless groups in the country to actually affect conditions. There is no reason why the Negroes of Mississippi should be sacrificed on the altar of national politics.

5. The compromise offered no precedent for the future, especially since it was not based on any precedent in the past. It offered the FDP nothing in the way of permanent recognition, patronage, official status or a guarantee of participation in the 1968 convention. The compromise was a completely one-shot affair; the FDP is not.

6. The committee set up to review such matters for the 1968 convention has no official status or power with regard to the 1968 convention. It may look good on paper, but its strength lies there on the paper and nowhere else.

7. The compromise was an effort by the Administration, led by President Johnson, to prevent a floor fight on the issue at the convention. The compromise was not designed to deal with the issues raised by the FDP in challenging the regular delegation. The FDP delegation came to Atlantic City to raise the issue of racism, not simply to demand recognition. It could not accept a token decision which had as its goal the avoidance of the question of racism.

Finally it must be understood that the FDP delegation did not come to Atlantic City begging for crumbs. They came demanding full rights, for themselves and for 1,000,000 other human beings. They would have accepted any honorable compromise between reasonable men. The test was not whether the FDP could accept "political realism", but rather whether the Convention and the National Democratic Party could accept the challenge presented by the FDP. The Convention and the National Democratic Party failed that test.

PLANS OF THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Under the impetus of the Convention Challenge at Atlantic City, the Freedom Democratic Party has undergone great growth and solidification throughout Mississippi. Local leadership is taking over a larger and larger share of the organizational work of the party and the related efforts of voter registration and education. District, County, and Precinct meetings are being held all over the state to further these programs. The main task of the FDP in the next few months will be to see that focus is given to the political work and that materials are available to further the educational program. These efforts will center around the Freedom Vote and the new Freedom Primers.

THE FREEDOM VOTE

The main effort of the FDP in the next six weeks will be a Freedom Vote to be held October 31 and November 1 and 2. The Freedom Vote will be open to all people, Negro and white, registered or unregistered, who are at least 21 and residents of Mississippi. Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey will be placed against Barry Goldwater and William Miller in the Freedom Vote. The FDP will also run Dr. Aaron Henry for the Senate, Mr. Harold Roby for Congress in the 1st District, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer in the 2nd District, Mrs. Annie Devine in the 4th District, and Mrs. Victoria Gray in the 5th District.

The FDP is also supporting the Johnson-Humphrey ticket in the regular election November 3. The FDP candidates (except Mr. Roby) will enter that election as Independents. The FDP will be the only major group in Mississippi supporting Johnson-Humphrey in November.

The Regular Democratic Party of Mississippi has openly endorsed^{4.} the Barry Goldwater-William Miller ticket.

The FDP is supporting Johnson and Humphrey even though it was Johnson and Humphrey who blocked the seating of the FDP at Atlantic City. It is doing this because it recognizes the importance of a Johnson-Humphrey victory in November; and because it believes, despite Atlantic City, in the ultimate ability of the Democratic Party to meet the challenge of the FDP and eliminate racism from its ranks. It also knows that support for Johnson will help in its fight against the Regular Democratic Party because of the latter's opposition to the candidates and Platform of the National Party.

But since 94% of Mississippi's Negroes of voting age still are not registered, the FDP can offer only token support for candidates in the regular election. Instead, its efforts will focus on the Freedom Vote, where anyone can vote. The importance of the Freedom Vote is that it gives to Mississippi's disenfranchised Negroes the chance to participate in politics and indicate their political preferences.

The FDP hopes to have more votes cast for its candidates in the Freedom Vote than are cast for the opposition candidates in the regular election. In this way, the Freedom Vote will show, not only that Mississippi's Negroes would vote if they were allowed to do so, but that the outcome of the elections under such circumstance would be radically different. It would also show that Negroes would be elected to public offices in Mississippi if the Negro half of the state's population were allowed to vote.

The 1964 Freedom Vote will lead to further challenges on the national level. In January the FDP will attempt to have the Mississippi representatives to Congress unseated on the grounds that they were chosen through a discriminatory voting procedure. The FDP will show through the Freedom Vote that some at least of the regular candidates would not have been elected if Negroes had the right to vote. If this effort fails, the FDP will ask the Democratic caucus to strip all Mississippi representatives of their seniority in Congress. This will also be done on the grounds of voting discrimination, and on the grounds of regular party disloyalty. The FDP expects to emerge from the Freedom Vote with a much strengthened organization at the local level and with much broader awareness of its goals among the Negroes of the state.

THE FREEDOM PRIMERS - The FDP has launched a major new educational program in the state through the use of the Freedom Primers. The Freedom Primers are short, simple booklets on different phases of politics, economics, and civil rights as they effect Mississippians. The first primer concerned The Convention Challenge and The Freedom Vote.

The primers will be distributed to MFDP activists and to students in the Mississippi Project's Freedom Schools. As much as possible, MFDP distribution will be made through local officers of the party. In this way they will serve an organizational as well as an educational function.

The primers will be used as the basis of discussion at precinct and county meetings and at voter registration meetings. It is hoped that the primers can be published once every 10 days for a full year, each issue on a different topic. It is hoped the primers will provide a breadth of facts and concepts more vital to the growth of political understanding than a more rigid educational program.