

REPORT FROM INDIANOLA, MISS.

By John Harris, COFO Project Director

INDIANOLA, Miss. — Since the last week of July 1964, the one-story brick building on Jefferson Street in Indianola had served as the center of civil-rights activity in this Mississippi delta town of 7,000 (54 per cent Negro). The building was used for mass meetings, freedom school classes, various committee meetings, library and community center activities. More than anything, the building served as a symbol of freedom for the community.

There had been an NAACP chapter here in 1955, but it collapsed after Herbert Lee was killed in Belzoni, some 30 miles away. This NAACP chapter was the only bit of civil rights for Indianola Negroes until COFO [Council of Federated Organizations] came into town in the summer of '64 and leased the building.

Typical Harassment

After the building was leased to COFO, the city of Indianola started to apply their typical methods of harassment towards civil-rights activity. The city inspector came out and told COFO workers they would have to have the building rewired for "safety purposes." The wiring was better than that in the county jail. Nevertheless, we were forced to have a \$200 wiring job done. A deposit of \$50 was required for the electricity, although the normal charge is \$15. A deposit of \$75 was charged for the phone and \$100 for gas. The first organized activity in the Freedom School, as the building was named, was the program of the Mississippi Summer Project. Civil-rights workers, mostly from the North, conducted freedom school classes in Negro history, American history, reading and writing, art, etc. Voter registration and literacy classes were held for adults, usually at night. Weekly mass meetings were held on Thursday nights. The Freedom Democratic Party held meetings in the building also.

First Violence

The first act of violence came just two days prior to the "freedom vote" that was held last Oct. 29-Nov. 1. A fire was dis-

covered at the building around 1:30 a.m. by COFO workers who came to get a first-aid kit for a youth who was injured when a bomb was tossed in the freedom house in Sunflower, just 30 minutes earlier.

Because of the early discovery, the fire was limited to the front section of the building. It did, however, damage the wiring. Because it is hard to get a licensed plumber or electrician to do work for anything connected with civil rights and because the city inspectors stalled on every point, the building could not be used for six weeks. Outside meetings were held when weather permitted. The first outside meeting was broken up by cops.

Some activity on the part of the movement usually spurs acts of violence by the racists. In February and March the white folks must have become very upset over what they were seeing. First of all, there was a demonstration about voting rights at the courthouse on Jan. 4. Four hundred people participated. There were no arrests, so many white bystanders were pretty upset.

In January and February the Negro community was mobilized around the right to use the public library. After about 50 Negroes had gone to the "all-white" library, the city council decided to open a "Negro" library. Picketing continued at the "white" library through February, and a boycott of the "Negro" library was one hundred per cent effective.

The library was finally desegregated during the last week of February. This was a great blow to the white segregationists in town who vowed that integration would never come to Indianola. They knew that the Freedom School was to blame for all the "freedom" trouble. So get rid of the school and you get rid of the trouble.

At about 2:30 a.m. on March 5, a fire was started at the Indianola Freedom School. It was not until 3 a.m. when neighbors woke COFO workers that the fire was reported. At that time it was almost too late to save the building — too late, that is if one is de-

termined and the eagerness of the Indianola fire department. With two hoses they started spraying water around the fire after being at the scene for 15 minutes. In the light from the fire, one could see tears in many of the people's eyes. They were seeing something which meant so much being destroyed so easily.

Rebuild School

The immediate reaction from people in the community and COFO workers was that the building should be rebuilt as soon as possible. A building committee was formed two days later. It made plans to rebuild the Freedom School on the same property, with additions. The meeting room will be larger. There will be a recreation room, an FDP office and a kitchen.

The building will be constructed with brick and concrete and fire-proof materials. All labor will come from volunteers in the community. Estimates for the materials vary between \$4,000 and \$7,000. Plans have been laid and the community is ready to start.

Several offers of help have come from the North. Groups and individuals are working on money for building supplies and materials for the office. Some books have been offered and some have already been delivered. Good paperbacks are needed. [If you want to help, send contributions to P.O. Box 30, Indianola, Miss.]

In an ordinary situation, the building should be completed in four weeks. But the situation here is not "ordinary." We expect all kinds of harassment from the city. An editorial in the local paper stated that "the city should not give the COFO workers a permit to rebuild the recently burned headquarters. This property has been a source of trouble for a number of months and it is high time an earnest effort be made to stop this sort of troublemaking."

While this article generally reflects the opinion of most white people in Indianola, the Negroes of Indianola have quite a different attitude. Their attitude has been expressed by the large and sincere numbers at the mass meetings, the excited eyes in the Freedom School classes. And the strong legs and voices on the picket lines cannot be mistaken.