

COFO RADIO NEWS
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THIS WEEK IN MISSISSIPPI:

FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY PASSES CONGRESSIONAL CHALLENGE IN PUBLIC HEARINGS---STATE OFFICIALS INTERROGATED BY FDP ATTORNEYS---NEGROES PICKET JIM CROW LIBRARY---POLICE THREATS AND COURT ACTION CHECKS PROTEST DEMONSTRATION

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For the first time since Reconstruction the segregationist practices of Mississippi's state officials are being challenged in public hearings as the Freedom Democratic Party presses its efforts to unseat the five white Mississippi congressmen

Throughout the state Negroes have been testifying about their experiences in trying to become registered voters and telling of the terror and intimidation directed against them. In Natchez, witnesses told of the constant threat of economic reprisals which keep Negroes from participating in political life. FDP workers told of losing their jobs, of phony arrests and other police harassment against Negroes active in civil rights efforts.

Negroes from Humphreys county gave depositions in neighboring Washington county because no Negro notary could be found in Humphreys county to preside over the hearings. They told of the murder of a Belzoni Negro leader in 1955 and of how white terror following the murder forced about 400 Negroes to withdraw their names from the voter registration books.

In Jackson, FDP attorneys took on state officials in their effort to demonstrate the state's systematic denial of Negroes of their voting rights and the powerful role of segregationist organizations in the states affairs.

Secretary of State Heber Ladner, aided by a battery of attorneys headed up by Attorney General Joe Patterson and ex-Governor J. P. Coleman, was the first of the hostile witnesses to testify. He refused answers to many questions as to why he had ruled FDP candidates off the November ballot and declined knowledge of communications between his office and the FDP about the groups efforts to become registered as a political party in the state. Attorneys also interrogated Ladner on discriminatory voting laws in the state and asked him to define a section of the state's constitution as required of voter registration applicants, which he refused to do.

Attorney General Patterson followed Ladner on the witness stand and was asked to explain what he, as the chief law officer for the state, had done about Justice Department suits charging about 3/4's of the state's registrar with discriminatory practices. Under aggressive examination by FDP attorney Morton Stavis, of Newark, N.J., Patterson revealed that his office had intervened in the defense of the registrars without once conducting an investigation into the charges against them. When asked if his office had ever done anything to insure Negro voting rights he replied, "I haven't done a thing."

In an effort to demonstrate the influence of the segregationist White Citizens' Council in state affairs, FDP attorneys continued examination of the Attorney General and also called Citizens' Council official Richard Morphew. Patterson contradicted earlier testimony that he had never belonged to the Council and said he was a member up until 1960. Morphew testified that at least one fourth of the state's House and Senate members had participated in the WCC's public activities. Many anti-Negro statements and articles from Citizen's Council publications were read into the record, including statements praising the Council's segregationist stand from four of the five challenged congressmen. FDP attorney William Kunstler of N.Y., summed up the interrogation by saying of the Council, "it is part and parcel of the government and where one begins and the other ends is impossible to say."

FDP attorneys next took on the State Sovereignty Commission, a tax-supported agency created, in the words of its director, to "protect the sovereign state of Mississippi from encroachment by the federal government." Director Erle Johnston testified that the commission spent tax payer's money financing investigation of civil rights work in the state, especially Negro voter registration efforts, and makes contributions to private segregationist groups. In the last year, the White Citizens' Council has received \$193,500 from the Commission.

An investigator for the Commission, ex-FBI agent Andrew Hopkins, revealed that he had been assigned to investigate at least two massive voter registration efforts by Negroes in Madison and Pike counties. Although Hopkins' investigations enabled him to numbers and names of people involved, he was unable to tell how many Negroes were actually allowed to take the voter registration test in the Freedom Day efforts and said he had no information on police harassment and beatings in connection with the Freedom Days. He said he had also investigated some church burnings and implied that they were burned by pro-civil rights elements. Although interested in civil rights activity and some church burnings, testimony revealed that the Commission was not at all interested in cases of discrimination against Negroes trying to register to vote.

Public hearings will continue until Feb 14, the end of the 40 day period allowed by federal statutes to the FDP. The five congressmen then have 40 days to present their case, following which the FDP has an additional 10 days for rebuttal. All testimony will then be submitted to the House of Representatives, who will decide the challenge.

Mississippi officials are clearly worried about the outcome of the challenge. Governor Paul Johnson has issued statements to the press assuring Mississippians that the congressmen will have the best possible defense in protecting their seats, and hinted that the State Sovereignty Commission would provide funds for their defense. He further urged that Mississippians maintain what he called "good order" during the period of the deposition taking. In further Capitol action, the Governor postponed a special session of the legislature until next spring. Called to discuss the problems posed by federal orders to desegregate schools or lose federal aid, anti-government action is expected which could adversely affect the five congressmen's chances in the challenge. The five themselves have been present at most of the deposition hearings.

In future hearings Negroes will confront their sheriff's and county registrars with testimony on voter registration discrimination and intimidation. In Meridian today, Sheriff Lawrence Rainey of Neshoba county and his deputy Cecil Price--both implicated in the murder of three civil rights workers last summer--refused to appear for depositions as subpoenaed.

In Indianola last Sunday over 100 Negro members of the Freedom Democratic Party and the Mississippi Student Union held the second picket line in the county's history to protest the opening of a Negro library. The City began work on the library, housed in an old grocery store, following desegregation attempts at the Semore Public Library. Negroes are demanding the closing of the Negro library and integration of the public library and threaten sit-ins if their demands are not met.

In Jackson, civil rights group's plans to picket in protest of the slaying of an 18 year old Negro in the Hinds County Jail were checked by police threats and county court actions. According to the sheriff's office, the youth was shot and killed by a deputy sheriff after he attacked four armed deputies who were transferring him to another cell. Negro groups demanded suspension of the four officers along with an investigation of the slaying and threatened protest demonstrations if their demands were not met. The police and sheriff's departments immediately countered with threats of mass arrests in the event of demonstrations and announced preparations to convert the city's fairgrounds into a temporary jail. On the heels of the police action came two court orders from county courts outlawing demonstrations in front of county buildings. NAACP state field secretary Charles Evers announced that demonstrations would be indefinitely postponed and that NAACP attorneys would seek to have the court orders declared unconstitutional by a federal court. Evers urged Negroes present at a protest meeting to go to the FDP congressional challenge hearings.

In Columbus a Negro COFO worker was arrested and charged with "grand larceny" for taking a fellow worker's car to drive two other civil rights workers to the COFO office. Ron Carver, an 18 year old white volunteer from Withrop, Mass, was attending a movie with the three when police called him to the lobby and arrested him for "illegal parking." Following the arrest, Ron Bridgeforth, a 20 year old Negro COFO worker from Los Angeles, drove the car back to the office. Bridgeforth, who carries a standard COFO authorization slip for use of the car, was later arrested on grand larceny charges by the sheriff and a deputy. Bond was set a \$5000 but later reduced to \$1000. Carver, released the following morning on \$400 bond, reports being beaten in the jail by a white trustee.