

NOTES FROM SELMA

At the convention of the C.O.F.O. last Sunday, an appeal was made for as many COFO workers as possible to come to Selma, Ala. The following is an eyewitness account of what happened between March 8 and March 13.

We are now passing by the Greystone motel on U.S. 80 east from Meridian, Miss. to Selma, Ala. ... about 25 sheriffs and state troopers cars parked in front of the rooms.... we arrive at Brown's Chapel. It's been filled with speeches and meetings for the past eight weeks... the stronghold, the headquarters of the demonstrations here, press and ministers, elementary, high school and college students from selma, montgomery, the university of calif., yale, boioit, the univ. of chicago, old ladies with old coats, and old men with wrinkled walnut faces. that night the place is filled, the aisles are packed, the window ledges occupied one hour before the mass meeting was scheduled, baptist preachers from nearby churches talk about jesus and two middle aged and fat ladies are overcome by visions, they swoon and flail their arms to reach the lord but the songs continue, people look, some photographers hesitate and then snap pictures but there's no delay, the sermonizing continues, it is strange to see this town so ready for action, and its been going on for eight weeks, people shake your hand everywhere--little kids and old men, whites--snick and sole workers as well as visiting ministers are received like american soldiers during the liberation of paris in world war ii. there is great militancy on the part of the kids and yet they are not surly.

midway during the meeting the crowd breaks into "glory, glory, hallelujah," as dozens of white and a few negro ministers stream into the church. a minister is asked to speak: "they set up roadblocks all the way from montgomery but we made it." the crowd goes wild, more choruses of "glory, glory..." rev. anderson, a baptist leader and one of the first to open his door to snick here, asks negroes to give up their seats for the ministers. i hoped that the ministers would have refused or else that the people would have done that spontaneously.

mrs. amelia boynton, one of the local ladies who first housed snick workers, and a quiet, powerful looking leader of the dallas county voters league, talks about the blows she received sunday. everyone so far has talked about those blows.

The people for the most part are ready to form a flying wedge against the state troopers... despite rev. reese's descriptions of the broken legs and bones, young kids limp around the church and bear their injuries with the pride of war heroes. it is clear-- they are war heroes.

At the chapel, james foreman, sncc executive secretary is asked to speak to the group. he feels energy should be directed towards political organization-- another freedom democratic party which teaches the people to organize themselves and make their own demands even though they are not registered voters. he says, "you don't have to be able to vote to demand that your city taxes help pave the street you live on. that right should be yours as a citizen-- whether you're qualified to vote or not."

i wondered what foreman would say when he rose quietly, unsailing. he took off his grey-white felt derby. his outfit that day was super snick: blue overalls which looked brand new. he had a stubble of growth on his chin and he needed a haircut. the uniform you wear should depend on the battle you're fighting. foreman had passed himself as a black belt farmer coming to town for saturday's shopping. a sharcropper would feel at ease with a man dressed like that.

he walked up on the altar and started speaking in a voice different from the others, he was not giving another pep talk, he was not looking for applause or "amens." he was trying to explain things to the people. he said:

"the question is not whether you get the right to vote..we'll get that. the question is what are we going to do with the vote after we get it. are we going to send people to office who will exploit us as much as the white man exploits us? i've seen people who sell their vote for \$3 or \$5 in chicago...the real question is what are we going to do with our vote after we get it. it's more than just politics, its economics and the whole system of exploitation. we've got to think of the long haul. i want to tell you about the mississippi freedom democratic party which is organizing negroes like you, you and you. you must organize. You don't need the vote to have a political race. you need to organize in precincts, counties and congressional districts. what would you do if the top people back here (savin' towards king, farmer et al) died? would you let the

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movement die? it's you, the people, that must organize, leaders must come from each and every precinct and county. that's when this movement will be strong. and you and i will be strong. right now we have no power..nothing."

there were some things the press failed to report about the sunday brutality: troopers chased Negro teenagers into homes and struck them with billy clubs and in some cases it is reported they threw tear gas bombs into the homes. Also, the press didn't make clear that troopers and possemen charged into the crowd without the customary several minute warning. Eyewitness reports differ. Some say there was a warning of two minutes for people to disperse. Others say there was none at all. In many cases, people at either end of the line - the first to be attacked - didn't have a chance to disperse. Many said they never heard any warning. As one SNCC leader said, "the police didn't regard us as human beings. we were simply the enemy. First they used tear gas to blind us, then they came in with horses and billy clubs when we couldn't see." During the siege in Selma, doctors briefed people on what to do about tear gas: "You think you're blinded and the danger is you'll panic and rub your eyes. Don't rub your eyes. You'll be blinded only temporarily. Don't panic." SNCC and SCLC workers told people what to do about horses hoofs - "Don't run away wildly with a horse behind you. Try to grab the reins and stay in front of him. The only trouble is another horse might get you from behind or tear gas may blind you or billy clubs will knock you down so the horse can stomp on you." Horses hoofs are the worst kind of beating. There's no safe, "limp" position you can take. Billy clubs are kid stuff in comparison.

THE MARCH, Tuesday, March 9, 1965. No one knew where the line would be stopped. at the church? a block away? at the bridge again as on Sunday?

one clue was that none of the leaders, King, Abernathy, Foreman, et al, took along walking shoes or sleeping bags. (dozens of kids did.)

the street leading to the bridge was partly filled by two lanes of state troopers cars. the line passed one block, then two and then several more to the bridge, the ministers were integrated with the crowd. at one point, Hosea Williams, one of King's aides suggested that the ministers, 90% white, stay together at the front of the line.

we passed by white houses. people showed no emotion. some from upper windows panted and laughed at us. we passed by factories where negro workers stood in one door and white workers in another. they were "eyeballing" us and we were eyeballing them." it was just five feet between the line and them. some people smiled and joked with the whites: "come on and join us on the march." the negro workers smiled; the whites turned away.

we got up to the front of the line. a federal marshal told us about the court order stopping the march until the hearing on Thursday. King answered, slowly, without the slightest note of tension "we are aware of the injunction but we are acting on conscience... to protest to the governor..." the marshal, in a polite southern accent answered: "we won't interfere with your movement."

we reached the bridge. the Alabama river some 200-300 feet below, was muddy green-gray, shining with gold from the warm March sun. it was a splendid day for a walk.

at one point during the march it appeared that the troopers would once again attack as they had Sunday/ An official screamed through the bullhorn, "All press without press cards cannot go farther. Press must stay on the sidewalks." It was thought this might mean the press would be blocked off from the battle scene, but there were signs that things would be different: there were no horses or tear gas masks present and besides the "white shield" of ministers and students made it seem unlikely there would be any crashing of skulls.

A few hundred yards from the other side of the bridge the order came to stop and go no farther. King asked in a confident voice, "Could we allow our ministers to lead us in worship?" The prayers and sermons began. Moments later, the official ordered troopers to clear the highways and return to the sidewalks. A clear path to Montgomery was open on Highway 80. People murmured "Does this mean we can go through?" People throughout the line murmured, "Why don't we go on?" and several marched back toward the church in anger. But we returned to the church. Later, I learned that 4 of 5 ambulances staffed by a dozen nurses and doctors from the Medical Committee for Human Rights were told they could not cross the bridge. Dr. Jack Geiger, of New York City, was picked up by the sheriff and told he would be arrested if he gave first aid to anyone. The head of the state licensing board was asked by Geiger if that meant Geiger wouldn't have

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been allowed to treat Rev. Roeb the night before and the official said, "That's exactly right." Later that day, King and his aides discussed with local leaders and SNCC workers the strategy for the next few days. It was agreed that a prayer vigil for Rev. Roeb would be held at the Dallas County Courthouse. Rev. Roeb was near death at the time. That evening the 500 marchers got as far as 200 yards from the courthouse before they were ordered back. The vigil was on.

During the week of waiting in front of the church, it was incredible to see old women refuse to return from the rain into the church. One SNCC worker asked a lady who'd been on the line for about 24 hours to go inside and get warm. She snapped, "I'm going to stay out here as long as I can. Rain don't bother me."

Some people slept on blankets under tents set up on lawns nearby. Others rested on blankets soaked from the muddy lawns. But Negro families in projects surrounding the church opened their doors and shared beds, food, telephones, and clothing. Some had never met a friendly white man, at least in their homes, before the siege. Women prepared doughnuts, coffee, fried chicken, and bologna sandwiches 24 hours a day for free.

Mississippi civil rights workers and Alabama Negroes shared their experiences. The idea of starting an FDP spread.

On the surface Alabama is just like Miss. The boundary lines are artificial, man-made. The Alabama per capita income, literacy rate, percentage of registered Negro voters is only slightly higher than in Miss. But Alabama has the same "undeveloped" feeling. Many teenagers drop out of high school, knowing an education provides few opportunities. Unemployment is high. Many people move to the north in search of better conditions. Everybody seems to have kinfolks in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, or California. Few youth plan to stay here to live. Alabamians told about some things peculiar to their state, such as the volunteer, unpaid possemen on call 24 hours a day who come from the hills and valleys to get billy clubs and help defend the white power structure. One white northerner who lives in Selma said that a posseman lives in the same building he does and that he dares not bring Negroes or white people, who look like civil rights workers into his home. As a result his only contacts are with Negroes in their homes and occasional white visitors from the north.

But under the surface Alabama is better than Mississippi in some ways: The Alabama Attorney General criticizes the governor for permitting police brutality in Selma, and Selma Public Safety Director (Police Chief) Wilson Baker threatens to resign because he disagrees with police tactics of the Highway patrol and sheriff. Last week Baker said Negroes could march to Dallas County but several hours later, the mayor reversed Baker and ordered the march halted. Conflicts within the power structure are more visible in Alabama.

Editorials in Birmingham and Montgomery papers attack the governor's handling of civil rights matters. In Miss., the state's largest newspapers echo the governor's policies and those of the power structure. Why the difference? Partly the presence of the federal government is felt more strongly on Alabama. Missile bases and space projects at Huntsville and Mobile influence the state, and create splits within the power structure. Besides, there is more industry--both heavy and light--in Alabama. The church's role is sometimes different also--in Selma, the white Roman Catholic priest of a Negro parish led the line waiting to protest at the courthouse. And Alabama teachers joined the march in Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham, Marion, Tuscaloosa.

King is King in Alabama, most people admit. He represents not only the moral conscience and outrage of Negroes but security and protection against the white man. When King lends his name to a demonstration or is on the picket line, the press, ministers, peace groups, and students are sure to be there. When he failed to appear, Sunday in Selma, violence erupted. Tuesday, when he was there with his great following, there was no violence.

Some Mississippi civil rights workers who are now working in Alabama feel that if King should die, there would be little movement in Alabama and Selma. They see the need for grass roots organization of a political body similar to the MFDP. Candidates have been run in local elections in Selma, Marion, and Tuskegee but no statewide party has yet been developed. Therefore, attention has not been attracted to problems of Alabama as a whole.

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What you learn in Selma, if you have been there during the 9 week siogo is the meaning of "confrontation." The "soul-force" which Gandhi, King, Forman, and Farmer talk about is tested every time you look into the eyes of a state trooper or sheriff's possiman. Soul-force could mean nothing more than looking into the eyes of the trooper without hate and with the sometimes absurd fooling that he will see you as a human being and have a change of hoart. It's a way of pros-olytizing and refusal to believe that your onery is bad at hoart.

In Selma, peoplo tell stories about how Negroes have thrown rocks at police and in the poorest Negro ghotto, East Selma, people say that the police are afraid to come.

Northerners who witness the confrontations in Selma get the fooling of what they they had only road and heard before. They are tested when they stand in line on Sylvan Street and look into the eyes - cyoballing - its called-- of state troopers. Many spoke to Sheriff Clark and came away saying, "All he would talk about was which kids they were going to beat with billy clubs next and how Communists have fooled everybody. I've never soon such hatred, ospocially from someone in Authority. You can watch TV, and read the New York Times, but it's nothing like listening to these things yourself."

And some northerners will go back to their own communities more sensitive to similar problems in their own backyard.. yet the northerners are not outsiders -- as one Chicago protest put it: "Alabama is still a part of the U.S. and as long as this is true--we are not outsiders. This is our fight. We Shall Not Be Turned Around, We Shall Overcome!"

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