

minutes of the COFO Convention, March 1, 1965
Dr. Henry R. ...
The meeting began with singing. Uninspired.

Dr. Henry introduced Rev. Bob Beech, who made the opening prayer.

Dr. Henry mentioned the shortage of time, and suggested that a timed agenda be decided upon. He presented the following agenda topics.

- review of past activities
- present program
- future program
- future policies
- programs of other civil rights groups
- appointment of a nominating committee
- date of the next meeting.

Dr. Henry invited other topics. A lady added "student movements" and "students". "Position of the Chairman of COFO" was suggested.

There was a short discussion, wherein some objected to the use of strict parliamentary procedure. Mrs. V. Nicolaus, from COFO staff in Jackson, moved that parliamentary procedure be waived. Moved, seconded and passed. Upon clarification, it was decided that an agenda was proper, but not votes and motions. Dr. Henry called for a "coach", in view of the unusual and, for him, strange procedure.

Mrs. Davison of Columbus objected. She favors rules and regulations. She questioned how we could tell when a consensus was reached. Mr. Hollis Watkins, of Tougaloo College, said that with a consensus, we could talk and discuss and come to an agreement without parliamentary obstruction. Dr. Henry and Mr. Hardaway continued to object to a lack of order. A gentleman from Moss Point explained that we could proceed with order, but without undue formality. This was not objected to, and it ~~xxxxx~~ apparently seemed feasible to the convention. Dr. Henry decided to proceed with the first agenda topic, that of "past activities".

Dr. Henry reviewed the program since the last COFO Convention in the spring of 1964. The summer program of 1964 put COFO on the map, but it also raised problems. We should discuss problems before we proceed with other programs. He invited discussion from other cities and towns about the success of last summer's program. There was none. Dr. Henry continued, reporting that some NAACP branch presidents had questioned the activities and developments of COFO. The most serious complaint was----

At this point, Mrs. Grandison from Moss Point had a complaint about the NAACP in Moss Point- Pascagoula branch. Dr. Henry offered some explanations about the procedure of giving money to people, but the disagreement was not resolved. A man from Moss point brought up the problem of a split between the NAACP and COFO. The split is confusing to many people; they don't know who is responsible for a specific problem. The other civil rights groups don't have this problem of separate organizations.

Dr. Henry explained that when a branch makes a financial request before the money is actually needed, the national office will support the request.

Dr. Henry explained that when a branch makes a financial request before the money is actually needed, the national office of NAACP will support the project. But if a project has not received prior consent, the national office may or may not support the project.

Mrs. Hamer of Ruleville brought up the statement of Roy Wilkins where he disavowed NAACP support of COFO. In reply, Dr. Henry reported that the Miss. NAACP branch presidents had voted not to participate in COFO for the following reasons:

1. In general, NAACP leadership was not contacted in the planning stage of COFO projects, but only after people were in jail. The branch presidents were informed about activities only after the bills came due.
2. Branch presidents objected to the conduct of COFO summer workers, especially their "take-over" attitude. Many derogatory statements about the NAACP, both on local projects and out of the state, were made ~~xxxxx~~ by COFO workers.

The national NAACP monitored speeches of COFO workers out of the state, and the national office, on the basis of these remarks, asked the state NAACP to reevaluate its participation in COFO.

Mrs. Hamer further objected to a statement in a memo from Gloster Current of the national NAACP saying that local people in Miss. needed someone to think for them. In this memo he particularly mentioned Mr. Steptoe of Amite County.

Mrs. Grandison from Moss Point, still felt that the NAACP had failed to solve her problem when she was fired from her job because she took workers into her home.

In response, Mr. Evers, of the Jackson NAACP office, explained the NAACP's policy on bond, and in aid generally (referring to Mrs. Grandison's complaint). He said that last spring he had encouraged people to take workers into their homes. He said, however, that he could not afford to take responsibility for the consequences of every civil rights action, although they give what help they can. He said that all of us have suffered. If projects expect the NAACP to get them out of jail, they must notify the NAACP beforehand.

Mrs. Grandison ~~xxx~~ disagreed with some parts of Mr. Evers' interpretation of her request. Another man from Moss Point also raised a question for Mr. Evers about the events in Moss Point. The matter was dropped after some further explanation.

Mr. Hardaway of Clarke Co. said that people have to depend upon their own resources, rather than turn to the NAACP all the time.

Mrs. Pigeon of Clarksdale recalled the original purpose of COFO. It was, she said, supposed to unify, not criticize, the civil rights groups. She also said, in reference to Mrs. Hamer's remarks about Roy Wilkins, that you can't believe what you read in the papers. She defended the NAACP's conduct in Moss Point. She feels that we should not be meeting here today to fight the organizations. She said the NAACP was being put on trial unfairly, and hinted that somebody had planned beforehand

to put the NAA on trial. Again, this is not constructive; we should stick together.

Hollis Watkins peaceably related that different groups have differences; it can't be helped, but it's bad. He doesn't believe in having different groups. He further said he was disturbed about Mrs. Pigee's charge of the "takeover" attitude of summer workers.

Sandy Leigh, of COFO staff, described more explicitly the New York Times article outlining Wilkins' charges against COFO, mentioning the SNCC takeover and Communism. He said that these statements hurt COFO. Then he asked how much NAACP had contributed to the summer project through COFO. Dr. Henry said it had contributed nothing through the Jackson COFO office, because NAACP is not willing to participate unless it has more to say than paying the bills. He denied that the communism charge came from a state level.

Mrs. Palmer of Jackson asked why the Jackson NAACP branch had not supported the summer project. Dr. Henry directed her to the Jackson NAA leadership.

A young lady from Jackson County said that all organizations should ~~work~~ work together and she would work with all of them. She said that we should really judge by what an organization is going to help the movement. She said that the Moss Point NAACP works consistently against COFO, that a few old-time leaders in the NAA are holding back and blocking everything. We won't have a good local movement until everybody pulls together. She asked what the NAACP had done to improve the schools in Moss Point (referring to a COFO-sponsored school boycott, I think). Dr. Henry replied that the NAACP has filed a school suit in Jackson Co. The NAA is not interested in bolstering segregated schools, but in integrating the school system.

Cleve Sellers, of SNCC, asked about the ~~distinction~~ distinction between the NAACP and the Inc. Fund. Dr. Henry said that there is a distinction, but claimed that legal action is a joint project of NAA chapters and the Inc. Fund.

Mrs. Palmer repeated her original question about Jackson. Mr. Bobby Plump of Mattiesburg said that people in Jackson should go to the Jackson NAACP before they take problems to statewide meetings. There was some random discussion. Dr. Henry, in reference to the action taken by the Conference of Branches (withdrawal from COFO) and in response to the complaints from Moss Point and Jackson, called for branch chairmen to bring out their specific complaints about COFO.

Mrs. Pigee spoke to that. She related some unkind remarks made about the NAA by COFO volunteers. She told about project disagreements in Clarksdale.

Mrs. Dodd of McComb criticized NAA action in McComb and gave the opinion that the NAACP leadership from outside the state should not make decisions for local projects.

Mrs. Hamer defended people making decisions on the project level, also defended people wearing jeans. How much have the people with suits done? If they, dressed up, had been here, then the kids in jeans wouldn't be here.

Preachers and teachers look down on littlepeople, but now these little people are speaking up now.

Mrs. Idessa Johnson of Clarksdale said she has worked with all organizations and she wants them to work together. She thinks being clean is important, and she is concerned about the kinds of words we use. She herself has been helped by the NAACP; she'd still be in jail if the NAA hadn't bonded her out.

Mr. Fairly of Hattiesburg explained that he had heard Guyot in Washington attack the NAACP. This is wrong. He believes that, regardless of Wilkins, local branches can best decide about their problems, and he will continue to work with everybody. He knows, though, that a lot of bad attacks have been made against the NAA. He has been snubbed in making decisions in Hattiesburg by COFO people. He said that as soon as the NAACP branch started a program of its own, there was friction with the Hattiesburg COFO project.

Dr. Henry, in response to a request for an explanation, said that the Conference of Branches had voted to withdraw from COFO (with some opposition), and that this body had requested the national policy-making body to sanction its position. He further said that no decision, so far, has been made nationally.

Mr. Fairley said that he felt that although it should work with COFO, the NAA has a right to have independent projects. Here, however, he said, friction developed with the COFO people. Mr. Douglas, of the Hattiesburg COFO staff, gave his side of the conflict in Hattiesburg. He criticized Mr. Evers most stragly, saying that Mr. Evers had left the people in H'burg in the lurch. Dr. Fairley disagreed. Doug Smith went on with a charge about Mr. Fairley in 1963. He further said that if the NAA withdrew from COFO, this should be made plain to the branches and members. Mr. Fairley denied Mr. Smith's personal charge (the 1963 business). He went on to defend Mr. Evers' conduct in Hattiesburg, saying that it was due to a series of misunderstandings.

Mrs. Palmer reiterated her questions about action in Jackson. She talked about her experiences in the movement. She has never been able to get people moving through the NAACP in Jackson. She said that NAACP people have to take orders from the national office, and that the purpose of the FDP is to allow people to make decisions themselves. She said that she was working for a deeper freedom, and people in Jackson just play at freedom.

Dr. Henry explained that he could not answer her questions, but that she had expressed her views. He disagreed with her interpretation of the NAACP and the FDP, saying that there is no conflict between their respective positions. Mrs. Palmer, however, persisted in making the distinction of local people vs. national people making the basic decisions. She further said that people can't have things both ways, i.e. work equally in the NAA and the FDP. XXX She said that Dr. Henry is has a high position in both organizations, and she belongs to both, but that she has never had any real communication with Dr. Henry. Dr. Henry explained that this was a COFO meeting, not an FDP meeting.

We should meet to talk about next summer, not the past stuff. The Freedom Democratic Party is made of local people, and it is presently making up its own program for the summer. We shouldn't let a few people ~~XXXXXX~~ determine what's going to happen in Miss. Everybody, even "little people" should have a voice in deciding what kind of project we're going to have.

Before last summer a lot of things were under the cover. Since the summer, the kids have done a job and it's different. We shouldn't let others make a decisions and speak for us.

Some say that we're fighting for equality, but I can't want to be equal to murderers. We're fighting for democracy. If we had it, the Freedom School in Indianola would not have been burned, or the people put in jail. We want to make Mississippi a democracy, where we make our own decisions. (applause)

Mr. Eddie Thomas of Vicksburg took the floor. He said that Dr. Henry had appointed him to chair the ~~meeting~~ meeting. He described his background in the movement. We should ask what each individual has done, not what each organization has done. COFO has helped us, but we should shoulder our own load. These problems should be worked out at the precinct ~~xxx~~ level, then brought to the county and state meetings. He described the cooperation between the organizations in Vicksburg. He thinks one organization pulling out of another should be decided at the local level. We should work with whoever is making our community better. He said that only the separate organizations can decide whether we should work together.

Joyce Brown from McComb said that we should look around and see who is in COFO. We can't work with people who make decisions in New York. COFO isn't all those civil rights organizations; it's the local community. National organizations can only support or not support COFO; they don't make up COFO. If we know our needs, and make up our own programs, then we don't need others to make up our minds.

Mr. Thomas said that he agreed. Settle things locally.

Mrs. Carter from Meridian said that COFO is a group of organizations working for a common cause; therefore ~~xxx~~ we shouldn't talk about each other. We should decide what we're going to do about all the young people coming.

Mr. Thomas suggested that we proceed with the agenda. Time is short. Another short discussion on whether we have to empty the building. Mr. Thomas said that unless the owner of the building was willing to come ~~xxx~~ up and explain publicly what the trouble was all about, they would ignore the messages that we should leave.

Mrs. Stewart from Benton County said that the question is Do we want the NAACP to bring in a summer project? We shouldn't throw away what we have with SCCC and with our local people. We don't need the NAACP. We don't need to start over again.

Mrs. Dodd of McComb agreed.

Mr. Thomas also agrees. We should work with what we have. If it wasn't good, 149 Congressmen would not have voted for us in January. What the NAACP does doesn't bother us; we should go ahead on our own.

Man from Tippah County said we're proud of the help we had last summer, but now we don't need help. He made a motion to that effect. There was a short discussion about whether the rules allowed a motion. Lois Chaffee explained what is meant by consensus rule, and how it usually works in COFO meetings. If a subject is thoroughly discussed, and then somebody expresses (either the chairman or somebody else) what he thinks most of the people want to do. If ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ any substantial number disagree with what this person says, then there is no consensus, but if the subject has been thoroughly discussed, then there is ~~xxxx~~ usually general agreement. Mr. Thomas accordingly enunciated what he felt to be the consensus: that we go along in 1965 with the same general program as in 1964, working with COFO staff and the local community, but without large numbers of newcomers. We will accept help from anybody, but without any bosses. We don't want money given to the project if the people who give it tell us how to use it. General ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ expressions of agreement and no objections.

Rev. E.O. Wheaden from Columbus said that the First District is in bad shape. People come from all over the country and sometimes we can't get homes for them. We should open our doors and take people in. This is what we should be talking about, instead of fighting with each other.

Miss Joyce Brown of McComb, took exception to the general consensus. She said the NAACP is planning to send thousands into the state. We know they have ~~not~~ withdrawn from COFO, and all those workers will just be undoing all that COFO has done, wipe it all out. We should not welcome them with open arms.

Mr. Thomas disagreed, saying that they can't undo anything if our local communities understand what has been done. They can send carloads from anywhere, but they can't change my mind about working with COFO and the FDP. If the NAACP has a different plan, I don't know what it will be. If it is different from what we've already laid out, I won't support it. It has to follow the same lines we have followed so far.

We have to be aware of the wolves. When we get this thing moving, then the preachers and teachers, etc. will come in and want to rule it. Then they'll sell you to the white man, and it will be ~~xxxxxx~~ another 100 years before we get something half as good. But, if we beware of the wolves, then they can't change us.

Walter Evans of Holly Springs spoke. I feel that we're not strong enough to tell people they can't come in to fight segregation. We can disagree with them, but we aren't strong enough to decide who can come and who can't. The idea is not who gets the credit, but to keep up with our program. I'm not a member of any organization except COFO and FDP, but I'll work with any of them. The power structure would like to see us fighting. They would like to have seen some of the stuff that has gone on here today. If we close others out, it will destroy us.

Joyce Brown of McComb: We shouldn't say who can come and who can't. But you know what's been done, and you've learned that local people must make decisions and think for themselves. If people are going to come who take

COFO convention, ¹⁹⁶⁶ page 8 nobody cared about Negroes in Mississippi. No one
ask why

local people must make decisions and think for themselves. If people are going to come who take orders from outside, we have to tell our people not to tolerate all that stuff and not let them unlearn what they've learned.

Howard Spencer of Rust College: We want anybody who's ~~mass~~ here to help us, but we want them to know that they have to come on our terms, not on Roy Wilkins' terms. We have the power to make our own decisions. We have to get involved with the FDP, which is our organization. We can't listen to people who tell us what we want. I've traveled in the North, and I know lots of people are interested, and for all kinds of reasons, both good and bad. But we have to get our own sons and daughters involved in it here. COFO is a people's movement, not a group of organizations. We have tremendous power if we get our people together. I'm the son of a Methodist minister, but I know that educated people aren't any different or better than ordinary people. Applause.

Mr. Thomas: That pretty well solves that problem. What about housing? I've been going to meetings for over a year now. At COFO meetings last year we used to hear the workers talk. I just listened. But this year the local people are doing the talking.

Mrs. Anderson from Hattiesburg: The FDP is sponsoring the summer project, and the FDP is composed of local people. The FDP will be responsible for getting the housing for the people it wants to have.

Muriel Tillinghast, of Jackson COFO staff had a few things still bothering her. For 300 years nobody cared about Negroes in Mississippi. We should ask why there is all this interest now. We are all these people worried about us? We have to decide when we're going to tell people to look at their own communities in the North, not at us--that we don't need them. We need to have meetings to plan the summer project. We need to choose our friends and realize that if there are two organizations working in the same place, doing the same thing, they may be working against each other. This could undermine the FDP, and we shouldn't just assume it won't.

Mr. Thomas: It's true that an organization could come in and organize all the satisfied people against the FDP.

Mrs. Palmer: We should help plan the FDP project now--appoint a committee to work on it. Mr. Thomas said that the FDP executive committee could handle that.

Lee Bankhead: We could have a meeting with the NAACP leaders upstairs to find out what they're doing. There has been a lot of confusion about what they're planning. We have decided that we won't let them make decisions, but we owe them the respect to listen to what they're planning. Also, if they won't tell us what they are doing, then we'll have a better idea about what their intentions are. They owe it to us to tell us what they're planning.

James Mays: There have been a lot of statements made saying that the NAACP represents only middle-class Negroes. If they're making decisions about all Negroes in that upper room, then we can just tell them we're not going along, and next time they'll know better. If, however, they're making decisions about that other group that we've not a part of, then we

Muriel Tillinghast: The NAACP can present its program to COFO under the "future programs" section of Dr. Henry's agenda.

Mr. Thomas: I don't think they have a program now, but when they get it, it will be known. Also, I'm not sure they really can get all the students they say. They're trying now to come up with a program.

One young man thought all the groups are working for the same purpose. We won't get any place if we are divided. I don't think anybody is trying to tear down what we've got.

Mr. Thomas: There may not be anybody who will tear down your program, but there are lots who will slow it down.

Young man: Before we can condemn them, we have to know what they're planning.

Mr. Choice Collier of Leake County: COFO and NAACP have both helped us. If they haven't we should look at ourselves to find out why. We will work with anybody.

Howard Spenser of Rust College: Did Dr. Henry and Mr. Evers make it clear what the NAACP is planning? We ought to go upstairs and ask them.

Mrs. Hamer: This is the thing which puzzles me. Why can't they tell us now, if they want to work with us? I don't like to criticize, but a lot of things can happen when money is involved. She then told about a meeting with Mr. Evers on the way to Chicago, where he told her she shouldn't be working for nothing. She doesn't feel she can climb without all the others going with her. We're not fighting for Miss.; we're fighting for the whole country. I learned that in Washington, D.C. when they threw us out of Congress. I'm not saying the NAACP hasn't done good in its time, but we move in the present, not the past. We poor people will have to move without them.

Mr. Thomas: We shouldn't have any further discussion about the NAACP project unless they come here and make a report to us. (General agreement).

There were several miscellaneous announcements, and a few more speeches declaring unity among the groups. The body decided to meet every three months regularly, and to meet May 1 and 2 next, at a place to be announced.

Lois Chaffee, secretary