

## HISTORY AND PLANS OF THE INDIANOLA FREEDOM SCHOOL

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% Negro). The building was used for mass meetings (sometimes as many as 400 people attended), freedom school classes, various committee meetings, library and community center activities. More than anything the building, which had painted on its front, a black and white handshake, 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 thirty miles away. The NAACP chapter, forced out by local whites, was the only bit of civil rights for Indianola Negroes until COFO came into town in the summer of '64 and leased the building which was owned by the Sunflower County Colored Baptist Association. The Baptist Association used the building for religious training and meetings; although it hadn't been used actively over the past ten years. Prior to the building of the Negro elementary and high schools, the Baptist School was the only source of public education for Indianola Negroes.

After the building was leased to COFO for meetings, freedom school classes, and voter registration workshops, 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 two hundred dollar wiring job done. A deposit of fifty dollars was required for the electricity, although the normal charge is fifteen. Seventy-five dollars deposit was charged for the phone and one hundred dollars for the gas deposit. Since a court challenge would involve a lengthy process, the overly high charges were paid under protest and civil rights activities continued.

The first organized activity in the Freedom School was the program of the Council of Federated Organizations' Mississippi Summer Project. Civil rights workers, mostly from the north, conducted freedom school classes in Negro history, American history, painting and drawing, geography, reading and writing, and dance. Voter registration and literacy classes were held for adults, usually at night. Weekly mass meetings were held on Thursday nights. Crowds of 300-400 heard such people as Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and James Forman of SNCC. The Freedom Democratic Party held meetings in the building also.

The program of the Freedom School generally remained the same after the summer. There were less younger people in the classes around September and October because of cotton picking, but adult interest became crystallized. People began to identify with the purposes and goals of the movement. The FDP became more active and serious about its business. People were going to the courthouse to register. From July to September, some three hundred Negroes had taken the voter registration test although only ten passed.

The first act of violence towards the Freedom School came just two days prior to the "freedom vote". (Oct. 29 - Nov. 1) A fire was discovered 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 thirty minutes earlier. Because



of the early discovery, the fire was limited to the front section of the building. The fire did, however, damage the wiring. Because it is hard to get a licenced plumber or electrician to do work for anything directly or indirectly connected with civil rights and because the city inspectors stalled on every point of the repair on the Freedom School, the building could not be used for six weeks. Outside meetings were held when the weather permitted. The first outside meeting was broken up by the cops. Three weeks before the fire, an airplane flew over the building during a mass meeting and dropped flares and explosives in an attempt to break up the meeting and set fire to the building.

Finally in December, operations moved back to Jefferson Street. But meanwhile the movement suffered no real setbacks. The town was organized on a precinct basis. Six precincts were meeting regularly at the homes of FDP members. This is still continuing.

Some activity on the part of the movement usually spurs acts of violence by the racists. When the school was burned in October, several people were going down to register for the first time. Also for about two weeks the freedom vote campaign was going on. Several large meetings were held and many Negroes in town had Johnson-Humphery-Hamer campaign stickers on their cars. This was quite a contrast to the Goldwater-Miller stickers on the cars of most whites in Indianola. It was quite upsetting to Mississippians to see Negroes so interested in politics.

In February and early March, as in October, 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 January 4. Four hundred people participated. There were no arrests, so many white bystanders were pretty upset. It is suspected that Senator Eastland called down and told the cops to lay off. This was the same day that the Mississippi Congressmen were being challenged in Washington and there could have been national publicity if Negroes were arrested in Eastland's own home county for protesting the denial of their right to vote.

In January and February, the community was mobilized around the right to use the public library. After about fifty Negroes had gone to the "all-white" library, the city council decided to open a "Negro" library. They cleaned out a former grocery store in the Negro section of town, put in three tables, one large dictionary and four hundred books and opened it up for the Negro community. The community did not accept it. The dedication ceremony was greeted with one hundred pickets demanding that the facility be closed. The next week the "white" public library was picketed. People were still asking for library cards at the "white" library and being refused. Also, a boycott of the so-called Negro library has been one hundred percent effective ever since it opened.

Picketing continued at the "white" library until late February. During that time, seventy-nine people were arrested and some were victims of police brutality. Those arrested, youth and adults, engaged the sympathy of the community, thus strengthening the movement. When a group of fifty some demonstrators were arrested for picketing the library one day, within thirty minutes a wave of fifty people were at the courthouse, singing freedom songs and marching back and forth to protest the arrests.



The library was finally desegregated during the last week of February. Negroes have been checking books out since then. This was a great blow to the white segregationists in town who vowed that integration would never come to Indianola. Besides, Indianola is the birth place (1964) of the White Citizen's Council of America. 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 depending on the eagerness of the Indianola fire department. With two hoses they started spraying water around the fire after being at the scene for fifteen minutes. With the reflection of 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. The blaze continued for another two hours. After that nothing was left but the old brick walls. Mimeograph machine, typewriters, books (two thousand), records, files, office supplies, furniture, everything, was destroyed.

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 fireproof materials. All labor will come from volunteers in the community. A skilled electrician may be paid. Several skilled carpenters and brick masons have volunteered their labor. Estimates for the materials vary between four and seven thousand dollars. This includes bricks, cement, steel beams, asbestos, and electrical and plumbing supplies. Plans have been laid and the community is ready to start. Several offers of help have come from the north. Northern groups and individuals are working on money for building supplies and supplies and materials for the office. Some books have been offered and some have already been delivered. Good paperbacks are needed. Fund raising drives are starting in Indianola, mostly through the churches. Funds will have to be raised right away from all possible sources.

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. Already, the city engineer is giving trouble. When COFO workers applied for a building permit last week, the city engineer indicated that the plans were ok and the only question he had was about the zoning ordinance. Four days later, workers received word from the engineer that the plans which were ok'd had been rejected. That means that another week will be wasted with the plans and the city engineer. This includes getting a Mississippi registered architect to approve the plan, find the engineer in his office, and await his word on approval. This is not all; even if the plans are approved, the application has to be passed by the Board of Aldermen. They will get around to the application when they find the time. When the aldermen meet on the application, it is doubtful they will issue the permit. A leading board member happens to be chairman of the Indianola White Citizen's Council. An editorial in the local paper in a couple of sentences 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 hitime an earnest effort be made to stop this sort of trouble making". This generally reflects the opinion of most white people in Indianola. The Negroes of Indianola have quite a different attitude. An attitude that 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. Most of all, people expressed their feelings for freedom and the Freedom School in their tears the morning the school burned,