

FREEDOM SCHOOLS

(Joint Meeting with 3rd District.)

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Jessie Harris...Thinks that direct action should talk about the system.

Sam Walker--White freedom school teachers ineffective. Just talk. Show no relationship between freedom school and daily experiences. Charlie Cobb in his Freedom School proposal says students should canvass half a day, discuss experiences the rest of the day Get education through direct action--eg, In march in Gulfport, students found out something about power structure and "Toms".

Lorne--Questions whether a white can teach--some things have to be said by blacks to blacks.

Forman--Right that in freedom school proposal the emphasis was supposed to be on the students getting out in the afternoon doing work in their community and reevaluating those experiences and supplementing them in the morning in the freedom schools. What happened is important to us. That is that the original idea of something, the way that you want to put it into practice, can be altered if you don't pay attention to it. My criticism is not of the freedom school teachers but of the SNCC staff, which includes myself, because we actually did not pay close attention to what the curriculum was and also what was going on in those freedom schools and we didn't have evaluations of the freedom schools and we didn't have evaluations of the freedom school teachers and what was being taught during the summer. On projects, staff was out doing voter registration and they just let the freedom schools sit over there and the staff didn't visit the freedom schools. On the other hand, I support what Jesse is talking about in terms of who are freedom school teachers. I think it's a very important question, because a person's background and experience is going to determine a lot of what he is going to teach, I push for the staff to be freedom school teachers,. What we did with the boy scouts last night was not irrelevant. Suppose you had those kids for two to three weeks, talking to them about what you've been doing and so forth...

Joyce Brown--In the summer when freedom school started, you had things like Negro History, math, chemistry, French. I thought the whole concept was to draw in students to really make them become involved, to realize what was going on. Things like ~~this was never~~ really discussed in class. So when fall came, the kids went back to those same subjects. So why come to freedom school for the same stuff you get five days a week?

Lorne--I don't know whether a lot of people even though they've been here almost a year can teach in a freedom school, because of some of the things that I think have to be said in the freedom schools. Unfortunately what I'm talking about has to do with being black and white. It seems to me that the only reason for talking about Negro history in the freedom schools is not so that Negroes know that there were some Negroes who did something some time ago, but so that it has some meaning in an individual's life right here and now. And I think that perhaps that has not been dealt with. That Negro history has sort of like just been French and Spanish, in a sense. And I don't think the people really need that, like that, but they need it another way. And I think that until people are really willing to deal with that.

And I'm not saying that I can, because maybe I grew up almost trying to be white or something like that... I think white people don't usually talk to black people like they're black people. And they don't do that because they don't know how. It's not their fault. It's because we live in a kind of bad horrible world. And we don't know very much about each other. If black kids are going to change or have anything to do with changing the world, then they've got to understand what being black is. The only way to begin to do that is to begin to talk about it. I think most black people have gone through some changes in order to be free.

Doug... I tend to agree with Lorne. The whole idea of ^{white northern} freedom school teachers really frightens the hell out of me. In Hattiesburg this summer I was talking with some of the freedom school teachers, and the cats couldn't even communicate with me on a level that we were sitting down and trying to talk to one another and really try to understand one another. And I was trying to get some idea of what he was teaching freedom schools and they was accepting everything that this person was saying and I got the feeling that this was first because this white person had always been a superior race and Negroes have always looked up to whites and the whole idea of whites coming down from the North to free the Negroes in the South is something that the Negroes looked up to and anything that a white kid can come into a freedom school and say, the Negro community accepts that. In one freedom school class I heard a guy say, "You should try to straighten your hair like mine". And all the kids, said, "How can we do that"? that really frightens me. To me a freedom school is nothing but a discussion group that's trying to understand some of the problems not only in Mississippi but the United States. I feel what happened last summer is that teachers talked to kids and there was no basis for discussions. And that frightens me.

Jesse Harris.... The book Students on the Left tells of people who have attacked the system. The people involved in this whole book were Negroes, whites and Puerto Ricans. These people had some radical idea how to force somebody to do them right. These are the people who can teach in freedom school... people who are concerned with some type of action and who understand the importance of applying some force in this country to change. I don't care if the people be white, black or yellow or orange. I think if you're involved in something like this, I think you can be a freedom school teacher. What I'm saying is this, the whole idea of freedom schools to me is the people who want action and who understand, who've been involved.. and I can't see a cat coming down from Yale University with a PhD in law coming down to teach in f.s.

Lorne... I think that what Jesse said is part of the problem. But I think that what I'm saying is another part. I think that radical change and stuff like that is great, but I think that for people who've been stifled and put upon all their life, some other things are relevant because sometimes some of this has to do with how you begin to be able to feel that you are a person who can do some of those things.

Jesse... I think COFO should concern itself with teachers in the f.s. the type of background they come from. A person who lives in the slum who disagrees with the power structure who will be willing to teach in a freedom school.. I think he's more qualified to teach in f.s. than a Ph.D... I think he's more qualified because he has suffered. The same thing about this communications with Negroes. I think anybody communicate with another person who lives in the same situation, who

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... have the same background and the same thoughts about the power structure.... Food drive was an approach to a way to communicate to be confronted with the problem they have. The stuff that was sent.... I don't go out in the community and just start distributing food and clothes... just giving them to people. I'd say take the box of food to a person's house and set the box right down on the floor and say, "Look, I'm giving you this food, but before I give it to you I want to talk. And I want you to say something back. I want to have a conversation with you around this whole box of food. I can't give you enough food and clothes to last you. The only way I can give it to you is you accept this and be willing to fight for more" I can see that as an approach using this in communication. But I don't think it would work if a person don't understand, or don't come from the same background in terms of putting on the power structure. Take some of the guys in the freedom core. I know they carry a knife, I know they hang on the block, I know they quit school, and I know they come from real poor families, and I know that these people is willing to do something. These are the people that I can trust to go out in the community and teach in a freedom school. I think they'd be the best teachers in the freedom school in terms of attacking the administration and the structure.

Forman.. I think that the first problem is, what's the program of the freedom schools. That even has to be talked about before you talk about who's going to teach it. If the program of f.s. is going to be around building a feeling of dignity in the people who are in the school, and mobilizing them or educating them for action.. I think everybody ought to get an education so they can act, so they can equip themselves with some understanding of how to move. If that's the case, then a lot of people can't teach in f.s. If you talk about building a sense of dignity within people, then you have to understand the backgrounds from which they came. And if in fact you're willing to get out in the shacks and try to learn the language of the people so that you can understand what they mean when they say something.. 'cause what they say is not what you take it usually. If you're willing to spend a lot of time to understand, and to really try to suffer along with the people before you start talking about teaching people, then that's a different thing. This summer, people came down to teach who had not these experiences.... Lorne, "If I were white and I had to go into a freedom school, the first thing I would say is 'I'm white, and you see the color of my skin; it is white, and you know what white folks have done in this country. Let's talk about that.'" Then people would begin to talk about what it means to be white and black and you'd get over that.... and you could go onto something else. You have to face the fact that there is a difference and it means a lot. But a lot of people suppress that, you see, and they don't understand the experience of a lot of people, because, one, they haven't been through these experiences themselves... and that's what Jesse is talking about... If you want to talk about a sense of dignity, some Negroes cannot teach other Negroes, 'cause they don't know what's happening. I mean they really don't understand the experiences of a lot of people who've been involved in the struggle have some understanding of what it means to be poor, what it means to suffer. It seems to me you're going to have to have somebody like that to teach.... I think that the aim of a freedom school ought to be to get people in motion, to get them in positions of wanting to take a lot of action against the things that are around them in a sense.

Joyce Brown... I knew that there was a problem. But it took me a long long time to realize that I was a Negro. Many people still don't rea-

ize that fact. I don't think until people really know that you are a Negro that you can really become involved. Until you feel like you're black, until you really know what it means to be black, you just aren't. ^{in it} until you finally realize the fact that you're black.

Forman.. I think it's important that Negroes do have to find themselves. They do have to come to grips with the fact that they're black, but not so much with the fact that they're black, but not so much with the fact that they're black, but, what do you do about the blackness? What do you do about the fact that some people because of your color have put these shackles around us? In order to do something about that, you have to have a sense of dignity about your own worth as a human being. That's why I think that what happens in demonstrations and what happens in a lot of these towns that we go into, that for the first time people discover that just being black does not mean that they can't have a dignity and that they can get that dignity through action. sense of

TOWARDS A BETTER COMMUNICATION:

Forman.. I think what's involved here is a question of language and of feelings, and a question of these two things being compounded by experiences in the past. What you have here is a very diverse group. A lot of words that people use are really not understood because that's really not what they're trying to say, and then you have people with different cultural backgrounds. I think that everybody has to be sensitive to that, especially working in Mississippi or in any rural area, where these diverse backgrounds meet. You can't talk about that kind of a problem when people get very defensive about it. I think it should be talked about. I am convinced that a lot of people have come into rural areas in these black belt counties and don't understand the customs and the habits of the people they have to work with, and that produces certain frustrations.

Doug.. The thing that frightens me the most is silent people. It frightens me that people tell me, "I'm afraid to speak before that group because certain people try to cut you down with their education."

Foreman.. You have to be sensitive to the people with whom you work. Let's raise the question, "Why am I in the movement?" and "What does the movement mean to me?"

Bennie Jackson.. I can't exactly say why I'm in the movement because it's different from what it was when I first come into the movement. Before the summer volunteers we didn't have these kind of hangups. Now I sit back because I don't understand what's going on.

Lonnie Johnson.. I told Doug I don't like to talk. I told Doug I want to be part of this movement and somebody get up and cut me down.

(laughter)

Doug.. See that's not funny. See that's the Goddamn problem! People laugh when people say stuff like that....

Foreman.. Go ahead Lonnie, talk about what you were saying. You say you get up in a meeting and somebody cut you down. How do they cut you down?

Lonnie... Throwing all them big words at my face and all that stuff. Although I have finished high school, some of them big words they say, man, I just don't know the meaning of them.

Arthur L. Jacob (Jake)... I think what he means is that with the vocabulary that a lot of people use around here, if you don't understand the meaning of it, how can you speak to what people have to say? I don't think he really means that they cut him down but he just don't know what to say to contribute to the discussion that usually go on at a meeting. I think that's what he's trying to say.

Dickie Flowers... In Atlanta a lot of people cut a lot of people down.

Jake... It is true ain't nobody like to be made like a fool when he come to contribute something.

Lonnie... And I ain't gonna look like a fool, neither. I'm gonna keep my mouth shut.

Paul... I don't think it shows any ignorance to ask what a person means, it shows interest, and you shouldn't be afraid to ask what a person means. Cutting down shows ignorance on the part of the person who's cutting you down. Maybe he's afraid of what he's talking about. Maybe he can't go into it deeper himself, and can't explain it better.

John Henry Davis... I just didn't have anything to say, not that I was afraid of being cut down. And another reason why I didn't say nothing was because a lot of things that were said I didn't understand. I didn't ask because I didn't want to stop the discussion.

Bennie... Maybe that's part of our trouble at these staff meetings we had in Jackson and Hattiesburg. You had the same people getting up and cutting down everybody got up to say something, and they didn't try to understand what the rest of the people were speaking about.

Phyllis... I've seen quite a few people cut down other people at meetings and I think that sometimes people knew what was happening and sometimes they didn't. They couldn't be sure. But I know sometimes when people want to railroad things through they'll use big words and they'll intimidate people who try to question or try to propose something different. I think all of us have felt that at one time or another. I think that certainly stops a person from trying to talk, because you don't really know what's happening because you can't really cope with what people are saying, so you don't say anything. I haven't been aware of any of this here, but I know it has happened in the past and that might be one of the reasons why people wouldn't talk.

James Bass... I don't think it's so much being afraid of being cut down. There's a reason why the people don't want to talk. My reason is because I don't feel important on the project. I feel like I'm just a dummy, just used for sit-ins or a march or something like that. I come in handy then. Anything else like going out trying to get something over to the peoples in the community, especially with my background in Moss Point, people just don't listen to me.

Foreman... Why is it that you feel that with that background people won't give you certain responsibilities?

...long talk on people's backgrounds and how the backgrounds affect

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their work. Some people feel that in their hometowns people who knew them before they joined the Movement remember what they were before they joined the movement--fighting, stealing, drinking--and because of that won't listen to them. Several spoke of how they had changed since they joined the movement...talk about respect...

Foreman.. When whites go to Negro churches wearing blue jeans, Negroes say the whites don't respect the church..What's behind that, what's beneath that?

Moses Jackson.. White people go to Negro churches any way, the colored people don't say nothing...White people think they got the advantage over Negroes because they can go any way and Negroes can't.

John Else.. During the summer the response of some of the community people in Gulfport was that the way the people dressed continually, not just to go to church, was offensive mainly because they felt that these people were dressing down in order to try to look like them and they weren't being themselves. And that if they were in their own home town they wouldn't be dressing like that. I think this is something of what Moses was saying about the church situation.

Sam Walker (?).. How were things before the summer volunteers came? How have they changed?

Doug.. The people in Hattiesburg had known each other for years, in some sense understood each other. Similar backgrounds. When summer came, people who had been running the project before had nothing to say about that office. They had nothing to say about decision-making for Hattiesburg. The people in Hattiesburg got the impression, we're too ignorant to work in that movement. People were not recruited from Mississippi to work in that program. Also people from Hattiesburg went to other places, were split up...it's hard to adjust to the new movement. The old movement was primarily all Negroes and quite a few of the old movementers were from Mississippi and in a sense they understood what the problems were in Mississippi and how they could cope with that problem.

Foreman.. From one point of view, summer volunteers really helped to open up the state. In a sense, we won the right to organize in the state. There was a tremendous concern about the lives of the people who were here. You didn't have the time to have the kinds of meetings we're having now. Then look at what happened to the people who were involved. The differences in background led to a feeling of isolation.

We know that we can't isolate people. We cannot have a situation where in a fifth district meeting you got 12 or 15 Negroes and the rest of the people around are white from the outside. I'm not against outsiders. But that brings in a certain isolation for people in a sense. And that isolation cuts off their ability to work. I mean it really does. It frustrates people in a sense. I, you don't think that there's anybody who shares your values, or whom you can talk to and he understands what you're saying, you become isolated and you become frustrated and you're unable to work.

And then there was a new element introduced. And I don't know how this got introduced. There was this talk about who makes decisions. The whole role of organization itself became a question in the state. The whole question some people began, what's freedom? I say that the movement doesn't have the time or the resources to deal with some of

those questions. And I may be wrong, and some people do think I'm wrong and I'm ready to discuss it. But that got introduced and that's one of the frustrating things now. Some people felt that SNCC should be the better society or is SNCC just an instrument to bring about the better society? These problems have helped to keep the isolation. I think it can be overcome. And the way that it can be overcome is that there has to be the kinds of meetings that we're having now. I think also that there has to be an interested and sympathetic person involved who can also help draw out some of those issues in terms of trying to understand what people are trying to say and maybe trying to get people to discuss those things. I would say that the movement didn't go downward in terms of getting the right to organize and organizing certain things which are going to be of long-range benefit. What happened was that the movement changed in terms of the personal relationships that people had with one another. I think that that's part of what Bennie was trying to say when he says, "after the summer project..." That raises some interesting questions. Within SNCC itself we've been grappling with them and I think we've come up with some general ideas. We're convinced that we've got to get more Negroes into the movement. We just have to, for a lot of reasons. One of the reasons is that Negroes in the movement, especially southern Negroes, are in need of people who will live, we hope for the rest of their lives with different sets of problems but also because of the fact that they live in the south there is a feeling that well we've got to deal with these problems and that we're going to be the people of tomorrow who must grapple with some of these problems and we have to begin now. The time of commitment made and that they really can't escape. A lot of people can go back and this can become an experience for them. It's a one-year experience. But for the Negroes it's been an experience all their lives, and what we have to do try to do is to take that experience and put it into creative channels.

But then you see I think that the movement is in a new phase where it's going to require a lot of technical information and that information cannot be given in large groups. It has to be given in very small groups and people have to really grasp. More meetings of this nature have to occur right within the fifth district. People have to think of it on a district basis as I see it, more so than on a project basis.

Now having won the right to organize, then the question comes, what do you do? You have the right to organize in the state of Mississippi and you didn't have that right a year ago. I mean you really didn't. A lot of the frustration comes about because of the technical material, which we can't deny. A lot of people just don't understand what's written on those papers. I mean they really don't. I don't understand some of it myself. I like to think of the staff in two phases. I think that for the first three years you had groundbreaking experience. A lot of people can really break ground. There are certain things you need to do to break ground. You've got to be able to sing, you've got to be able to mobilize a lot of people, you've got to overcome their fear. And we were really struggling to overcome people's fears, and to get them in motion and to be willing to face the man. That was an important aspect. That job still hasn't been done completely.

I think that the discussion that went on tonight was a very good discussion because here people who have in a sense found a new direction for their lives through the movement.