

COUNCIL OF FEDERATED ORGANIZATIONS

June 11, 1965

State Office:
507½ N. Farish
Jackson, Miss.

Financial Office:
P.O. Box 555
McComb, Miss.

Dear Friend,

Thank you very much for your contribution to the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) and our work in Mississippi. Without your kind of support and consideration we could not continue our work here in the South. I am sure you realize how essential your help is in the fight for freedom.

There has been a change in financial personnel, so you may have already received acknowledgement of your contribution. Since we have been rather negligent in our correspondence, I would like to tell you of some of the things we are doing this summer in Mississippi.

There will be a Summer Project in Mississippi this year, in which Northern college students will work as volunteers on various projects across the state. They will work on programs similar to those last summer: voter registration, adult education, freedom schools, and community work. The one great difference is that this summer the program is being sponsored and developed by an indigenous political party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

This is the same party which is currently challenging the right of the five Mississippi Congressmen to sit in the U.S. Congress because they do not represent all the citizens of Mississippi. Through discrimination and violence, the State of Mississippi has succeeded in excluding Negroes from any political participation. There has been much activity and excitement around the Challenge: deposition hearings were held in Mississippi in Jan. and Feb., and people from Mississippi have been lobbying in Washington as well as demonstrating in their own communities.

Hundreds of F.D.P. members will meet in Jackson this coming Monday to protest the special session of the State Legislature called by Gov. Paul Johnson for the purpose of "amending" the state's voting laws. If some of the laws are changed to conform more with the requirements of the soon-to-be-passed voting bill, then federal intervention in the state after the bill is passed will not be necessary, and state's rights will be maintained. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, F.D.P. Congresswoman, issued the following statement: "This is proof that the voting bill won't mean anything until effective federal action is taken to enforce it. In 1870, Mississippi was re-admitted to the Union because their laws said they wouldn't discriminate against Negroes. They have been discriminating against Negroes ever since. Governor Johnson is just as illegal in office as the five Congressmen, because we didn't get a chance to vote for him either, and he has no right to make laws about voting."

There is a growing realization across the state that the vote has no meaning if one's only choice is between two racist candidates. Therefore, the F.D.P. has become involved in running its own candidates in local elections. In March of this year, Mr. L.J. Martin of McComb ran on the official local ballot for City Selectman of McComb (city council). Mr. Martin was the first Negro to be on a local ballot in Mississippi since Reconstruction, and the first Negro candidate ever in McComb. The community held numerous meetings in the three months preceeding the election, in which they discussed candidates, what it means to be "qualified," local government, how tax money is spent, etc. The community wrote a campaign platform for Mr. Martin in which they raised issues such as voting, police brutality, city services, taxes, civic improvements, bond issues, employment, and schools. Not only was the Negro community very involved in this campaign, but it also apparently started some real thinking in the white community, for Mr. Martin received votes from every precinct in McComb -- and 4 of them are all white. The real significance of this campaign was that a great many people who have never been able to voice an opinion became directly involved in making decisions that affect their lives.

The average annual income of a Negro family in Mississippi is \$606 a year - therefore COFO and the FDP are active in the field of economic democracy. In the delta area (cotton plantations) the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union has been formed. As a result of this union, today there are over 1,700 laborers on strike in the delta from a number of plantations. They are demanding \$1.25 an hour, an 8 hour day, social security, and insurance. (They now receive up to \$3 a day for a 10-12 hour day).

Another group that has been formed is the Poor Peoples Corporation. The Poor Peoples Corporation is simply an organization of poor people. The corporation does not issue shares and does not pay dividends - it is a non-profit-making organization. People become members by paying dues of 25¢ per year. Money is raised from persons who are sympathetic to the civil rights movement. Every three months, the members of the Poor Peoples Corporation have a membership meeting in which they hear requests from groups that need money to start businesses to provide jobs for themselves and people in their community. Sewing co-ops in two communities are already being financed through the Poor Peoples Corporation.

Freedom Schools were started throughout Mississippi last summer, and have continued since. The following is a figurative description of what takes place in a Freedom School:

"Mississippi is a prison, a prison whose inmates have not been told what crime they have committed: a prison guarded by jailers whose function is to remind the prisoners that they have no real control over their own lives. The prison has schools for the children of the prisoners, schools taught by prisoners chosen by the warden. Their task under the rules of the prison is to teach the children that they are prisoners by birthright, and that they too must exist subject to rules that they had no part in developing, that they cannot change. The purpose of the school is to kill dissent, to give the impression that the prison system is too big to change.

"One day some of these imprisoned students get together and decide that the prison really belongs to them: it is they who live there, and it is they who must attend the school. They decide that they can do something about the society in which they live; that they can tear down the walls and drive out the jailers; that they can make the prison a better place to live in."

As you can see, COFO did not end with last year's summer project. We will stay in Mississippi until there is no longer a need for our presence. Right now we are in dire financial need. We have pressing bills and no money in the bank - in fact, we have not been able to send budget checks to any projects for over a month. We need your help.

In the same way that we cannot continue our work without your financial help, the Challenge will not succeed without your active support. Please urge others in your community to write letters to your Congressmen and Congresswomen seeking more support for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's Congressional Challenge.

Once again, thank you for your contribution and your continuing support of our work.

Yours in freedom,

Karen Pate

Karen Pate
Financial Secretary