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MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY
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REPORT FROM MISSISSIPPI

Realizing the importance of keeping MFDP friends and supporters informed of daily developments within the State, we have compiled the following report on MFDP activities in Mississippi. The information is taken from the State MFDP Newsletter, newsletters put out by several county MFDP offices, affidavits and complaints filed with the Justice Department, and the Jackson WATS Reports. (The WATS Reports are day-by-day reports from local MFDP offices compiled by the Jackson Office by means of their WATS Line -- Wide Area Telephone Service Line -- which covers the entire State.)

PREPARATION FOR THE 1966 ELECTIONS

VOTER REGISTRATION is, of course, the key to providing free and open elections in 1966. Since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, some significant gains have been made, but these have been concentrated in a few areas: the nine counties where there are federal examiners, in a few large cities like Natchez and Vicksburg, and on the relatively "liberal" Gulf Coast.

Statistics demonstrate how much work needs to be done on registration and how much progress depends upon the presence of federal examiners. Since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the number of registered Mississippi Negroes has gone from about 28,000 to 57,000. Of the newly registered Negroes, about one half are in the four counties where federal examiners have been since August. The remaining 15,000 come from the other 79 Mississippi counties and about half of them are concentrated in cities like Natchez and Vicksburg and on the Gulf Coast. Thus, in a few areas, registration is going very well because of the presence of federal registrars, local conditions, or the presence of a strong local movement. But in the rest of the State, the rate of registration is extremely slow.

To be able to participate in the 1966 June primaries, voters must register by early April. If the remaining 383,000 unregistered Negroes are to be able to vote, registration must be stepped up from its present rate of about 14,000 a month to 77,000 a month. The MFDP is placing priority on voter registration for the next six months in order to raise the present rate. On October 24th, a nine-county intensive registration drive was begun in Bolivar County; on the 31st, staff will concentrate on Jones County. These two counties, and the others selected for the registration drive, have been the scene of much harassment and violence since the arrival of federal registrars in the State.

Harassment and violence have been greatly responsible for the difficulty in registration. For example:

CLEVELAND, MISS. WATS Report from Joadine Henderson. 10/22/65. Lou King was arrested in the court house for taking some people in to register. He is in the county jail. He was just standing there when the sheriff asked him what he was doing there. Lou said he came to bring some people so they could register. The sheriff pushed him out the door and told him to leave. Lou went back into the court house and was then arrested by the deputy sheriff Stanley Weeks. Charges were for disturbing the peace in a public place.

MAYERSVILLE, MISS. WATS Report from Mrs. Unita Blackwell. 10/14/65. Twelve crosses burned last night in Issequena and Sharkey Counties. The first cross was burned at 9:30 in the front lawn of Mrs. Blackwell's home. It was about 5'8" tall. Other crosses burned include: one burned up on the levee right above Mayersville where everyone could see it; another at the junction of Highways 14 and 1, near where L.C. Dorsey, local MFDP worker, lives; one in front of the Wollen Baptist Church where project Headstart was held and where the MFDP meets. In Sharkey, two crosses were burned in front of the houses of three families that have their children in integrated schools in Rollingford. When the sheriff's office was called after the first cross was burned, the deputy said that the sheriff could not be reached, but that he would try to find out what he could. About 2 hours later, the sheriff arrived at Mrs. Blackwell's. He asked her if she had set fire to the crosses herself.

BELZONI, MISS. WATS Report. 10/14/65. Three crosses were burned tonight in Belzoni, all at the same time, about 11:50. One in front of the COFO office, one 12 miles outside of town, and one near Hollandale. The sheriff told James Bass, MFDP worker, that the crosses may have been for him, but were probably the work of some kids. The sheriff made the Negro cafes close up at about 7 p.m. -- before the crosses were burned. Today a federal registrar came into Belzoni for the first time.

In addition to cross burnings, harassment, and arrests, the state and local government have taken official positions to discourage registration and to violate the Voting Rights Act. Most county registrars are still refusing to register illiterates in defiance of federal law under the direction of the State Attorney General, Joe Patterson. Arnold Weiss, an attorney who was working in the State, reported the following conversation with Patterson:

I told him that Mr. Henderson (a county registrar) stated that he was refusing to register qualified Negro citizens who could not write their name, based upon the instructions of Mr. Patterson. I stated to Mr. Patterson that such action was in direct conflict with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which forbade literacy tests.... Mr. Patterson acknowledged that he had advised Mr. Henderson as well as other Registrars in the State of Mississippi not to register persons who could not sign their name.... Mr. Patterson made it clear that the refusal to register Negro voters who could not write was the official policy of the State of Mississippi and was being implemented throughout the State of Mississippi on his advice. Mr. Patterson also stated to me that such policy was not open to change but that it was final and would stand and continue to be implemented throughout the State of Mississippi so far as he was concerned.

This quotation is from an affidavit filed by Mr. Weiss with the U.S. Department of Justice; as yet, no significant action has been taken by the Federal Government. The MFDP has collected and sent several hundred complaints to the Justice Department, but there still remain only 9 federal examiners in the State.

POLITICAL ORGANIZING

A State Convention was held in Jackson on October 3rd. Over 600 delegates from all parts of the State attended at their own expense. After a discussion of the Challenge, attention was turned to the 1966 elections and MFDP plans for them. In addition to plans for stepped-up voter registration activity, campaigns in the June primaries for all five Congressional seats and against Senator Eastland were discussed. Candidates were announced for these six positions. The ties between the MFDP and the National Democratic Party were reaffirmed. Recognition by the National Democratic Committee continues to be an MFDP goal. This is essential before the June primaries, because, under Mississippi State Law, the recognized party has the sole authority to conduct the primary. Three days after the State Convention, Lawrence Guyot and Mrs. Victoria Gray appeared before a special committee of the Democratic National Committee and moved for immediate recognition. This special committee was set up by the Atlantic City Democratic Convention last year after the MFDP challenge to the seating of the regular Democratic Party from Mississippi.

Locally, political organization is being carried out around a number of issues -- depending upon the problems of the area. In a few counties there will be elections for local offices in 1966, although in most areas, county and city officials will not be up for election until 1967. But where there are local elections, MFDP candidates are beginning efforts to get on the ballot. In other areas political involvement and activity is centered around issues related to federal programs. For example, in Gulfport the Harrison County FDP has been active in problems relating to the Food Stamp Program. The regional director of the program has come to the MFDP meetings there to discuss the program and to get suggestions from the members about its administration.

Several projects are also being undertaken to expand the MFDP state-wide, to facilitate the exchange of information, and to coordinate activities among the county MFDP offices. Roving teams have been set up for each Congressional district. They are presently travelling among the county offices to encourage the voter registration drives, to distribute printed material like the Newsletter, and to set up and conduct workshops on federal programs and community organizing. The teams will also serve an important role as the Congressional campaigns get under way. District conventions are planned for each Congressional district in the coming months. Another project is the state-wide selective buying program for the holidays. MFDP members are being encouraged to buy from the various co-ops that exist throughout the State and to use the money saved through the boycotts to support the

EDUCATION

The Mississippi State Legislature adopted a new law in the special session last June requiring tuition payments for all students in public schools who do not have a parent or legal guardian residing within the State. The amount averaged about \$300 a year. As a result, between 7,000 and 10,000 were denied admission to public schools. These are children who are residing with relatives who are taxpayers, but who have not formally adopted the children. A court suit has been initiated to challenge the constitutionality of the law and it is presently before Judge Cox's court. The Federal Government has entered the suit as an amicus curiae, asking that the law be invalidated. About a week ago, Judge Cox ruled that the students affected be re-admitted (after having missed about two months of school), but the outcome of the case is not decided and the law remains on the books.

Desegregation of public schools has been proceeding quite slowly. The problem here is primarily the fault of the Office of Education, which has accepted plans which are hopelessly inadequate. There are only three staff members in the Office of Education to deal with compliance plans of all Southern school districts and they have been approving plans that should be rejected. Almost all Mississippi desegregation plans are "freedom of choice" plans: i.e., the parents of Negro children are "free" to choose to enroll their children in previously all-white schools. In many counties, only two or four grades are open to transfers from Negro schools, although in some counties, all twelve grades are open.

Only about 1500 Negro children are attending desegregated schools because of these plans. The initiative must come from the Negro community, which is often not fully informed that schools are open to its children. Transfers have been denied for little or no reason, and transportation is often denied to Negro students in integrated schools. But harassment and violence has been the major reason for the low Negro enrollment in previously all-white schools.

LEXINGTON, MISS. WATS Report. 10/8/65. The house of Mr. John Henry McLong, whose children are going to the white school, was shot into last night about 10 times -- 5 shots in the house and 5 in his car which was parked outside at the time. Last week a paper was put in his mailbox saying that if he did not take his kids out of the white school he would be killed.

ENTERPRISE, MISS. WATS Report. 10/22/65. A young Negro boy (3rd grade) was beaten by a white boy a couple of days ago at school. The parents spoke to the superintendent about it and several other incidents that have occurred at the school, but he seemed very unconcerned about the situation.

ABERDEEN, MISS. WATS Report. Two children have enrolled at formerly all-white schools. Both are second graders. During the second week, the home of one child was shot into 32 times. The parent of another received telephone threats: "Integration and dead niggers go together."

NATCHEZ

The events in Natchez of the past two months shockingly demonstrate how little conditions of terror and intimidation have changed. The explosive situation in that city is the direct result of violence against members of the civil rights movement and the city government's total disregard for equitable law enforcement and individual liberties. Natchez is no isolated incident; it is merely a more dramatic version of conditions across the state -- the same conditions that inhibit voter registration, political organizing, and school desegregation.

Natchez has a long history of violence against local Negroes and civil rights workers. But since the sharp rise in Negro voter registration (4300 since the beginning of August), conditions have reached crisis proportions. With a population of 12,300 Negroes to 11,400 whites, the white population felt an imminent threat in this increase in registration. The Klan is particularly strong in this city; the Grand Dragon of the United Klans of America for Mississippi is from Natchez. The city was ripe for the events of the past two months.

On August 27th, George Metcalf, Natchez NAACP president, turned the ignition switch of his car and set off a bomb hidden beneath the hood. His leg and arm were broken and he suffered severe cuts and burns. This bombing enraged the Negro community and moved them to action. Negro leaders filed a petition with Mayor John Nossier listing 12 demands, including his denunciation of the Klan, the Citizens Council, and the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race. They also demanded an end to police brutality and Klan harassment, desegregation of public schools, more Negroes on the police force, and that officials address Negroes with courtesy titles. They initiated a boycott of downtown stores until the demands were met, and to date none have been accepted by the City Council.

Governor Johnson almost immediately countered with the imposition of a 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. curfew, an end to the sale of beer in the city, and the occupation of the city by 600 all-white National Guardsmen. The Guardsmen were removed after more than a week, but the curfew was in force for almost a month. The state law permitting the curfew order had been passed by the 1964 Legislature -- the same session that passed the school tuition law. It is undoubtedly unconstitutional but it has not yet been challenged in the courts.

Injunctions were issued on September 30th to keep MFDP, SNCC, SCLC, and NAACP leaders from engaging in or encouraging others to engage in any sort of demonstration. The next day, a small number of people were arrested for picketing in front of some white stores. On October 2nd, a march protesting the previous day's

arrests and supporting the 12 demands was held. 271 participants were arrested. All but a few were taken to the state penitentiary at Parchman, long famous for unspeakable treatment of prisoners, although none had yet been tried or convicted. In the next two days, 128 more people were arrested for marching, most of whom were also taken to Parchman. Conditions in the prison are best described by the following quotes from affidavits of people who were held there.

TAPE RECORDED STATEMENT of Rev. Harry Bowie, Delta Ministry.

It was not as bad when we went (to Parchman State Prison) on Monday. They did at least allow us to keep our underwear. Prior to Monday, as I understand it, everyone had - all the males - had to be stripped naked. They put us in a cell, of course, with about six other people, so that there were three of us sleeping on a steel bunk without bedding, without any heat, and with only our under garments on. In addition, as I was waiting outside - we had to wait some hour and a half outside in the cold before we were taken in - I was the last person taken in - but just before I was taken in, a man was brutally beaten, standing in the grass outside of Parchman. Several blows were struck. You could hear a thud with the blows upon this man, for no reason whatsoever. And to the best of my knowledge he was beaten by a highway patrolman - a Mississippi Highway Patrolman - inside the gates, but not inside the building. This man, after he was beaten, stumbled past me into the building - partly stumbled, partly shoved - and he could hardly stand up as he made his way to the building. It appeared that he was hurt very severely by this beating. There was no reason (for the beating - because he was there. One of the other fellows who was closer to him at the time said that when they found out he was from Georgia they began to beat him because he was from SCLC, its staff.

(The cells were) very small, I'd say about six feet by about thirteen feet. They're built for two people: two bunk beds. In the cell I was in and other cells, up to nine people were put in these cells.

TAPE RECORDED STATEMENT OF Miss Posey Lombard, MFD worker in Natchez.

We had probably 8 or 9 people in the cell. It was very crowded. We were told to take off shoes and stockings and any outer clothing you had at all, so most people were left with pretty flimsy dresses on. They continually threatened us the whole time. They'd turn on the fan and have the air conditioner like they had in the men's cell, but they never did that (make the women strip) and as far as I know they didn't hit any of the women.

But they forced some of the women to take more than one cup of that medicine. Later on, they came down to the cells - about 5:00 in the morning - and picked out girls and make them drink more, another cup or two of milk of magnesia or whatever it was. And then they scarcely gave us any toilet paper, so we were using bread and biscuits to wipe ourselves with. One girl in my cell got very sick and when the doctor came by he ordered her to come up to the front of the cell. And when she didn't say "Yes, sir," "No, sir," to all his questions, he got very angry. And she had very bad cramps and couldn't stand up straight and she was holding onto the bars. The doctor said, "Why can't you stand up straight, girl? Look over that bar; let me see you." She just couldn't let go of that bar, so the doctor looked her over and left her there for about six hours and then came back and they took her to the hospital. But most of the women who were sick were sick were very scared of the doctor and very scared to leave the cell.

We had male guards just about the whole time. Two women searched us after we had removed our belongings, and we didn't see them for the next two days. But the men guards would walk up and down the corridor any time they wanted to and the girls would be sort of in stages of half-dress or undress, trying to keep our feet warm or our neck warm or our head warm. There was a broken window right across from my cell which caused a strong draft in our cell. We had slips wrapped around us, trying to keep warm.

At present, there is a moratorium on demonstrations while the Natchez City Council considers the 12 demands. But the situation remains unpredictable. The community was aroused and mobilized by these events to a greater extent than ever before. But the continuous task of directing this activity into serious and meaningful political expression remains.