

"WE HAVE NO GOVERNMENT"

This is an edited transcription of a press conference held in the Greenville office of the Delta Ministry Tuesday evening, February 1, 1966. The participants include the three spokesmen for the over 70 poor Negroes who occupied the barracks of the Greenville Air Force Base. They were Mr. Isaac Foster of Tribbett, a leader in last spring's strike of plantation workers; Mrs. Unita Blackwell of Mayersville, a member of the Freedom Democratic Party executive committee; Mrs. Ida Mae Lawrence of Rosedale, chairman of her Mississippi Freedom Labor Union local; and Rev. Arthur Thomas of Greenville, director of the Delta Ministry of the National Council of Churches.

Mr. Foster: The people are going to set up at Tent City out at Tribbett and work on getting poor peoples to come and build a new city. Because of the fact that we was refused by the federal government and evicted, it's important that we start planning our own government.

Mrs. Blackwell: I feel that the federal government have proven that it don't care about poor people. Everything that we have asked for through these years has been handed down on paper. It's never been a reality.

We the poor people of Mississippi is tired. We're tired of it so we're going to build for ourselves, because we don't have a government that represents us.

Mrs. Lawrence: See, you can only accept poor peoples by being poor and really know what being poor is like. And all this stuff about poverty programs and federal funds, that's out for poor peoples.

We were looked upon as just a civil rights demonstration. But really we were there demanding and waiting and asking that these things be brought there to fill some desperate needs. And we was asking that the poor peoples be accepted as they stood. And instead of getting what we was asking, we got the whole air force troopers in on us. To me, that's our government.

Mr. Foster: Was.

Mrs. Lawrence: Yeah, was. Now, we're our own government - government by poor people. Where do we go from here? To brighter days on our own. And we know we'll reach that goal. But in their world, that's something that doesn't exist.

Reporter: About the poor peoples government. Would this be an idea for a lot of people to come and live around Tribbett or

somewhere in particular? Would this be a larger tent city?

Mr. Foster: I know and you know that the tents are not going to stand forever. But I wouldn't be surprised if it wouldn't start that way.

Reporter: Does this mean that you would not consider yourselves bound by the restraints, the actions of county, state or federal law enforcement officers?

Mr. Foster: From nothing we must start building a new country, with our own laws, our own enforcement. No part of the system has any authority or control over us. Our goal is leading away from depending on the system for anything. And I would like to say that every poor person that will come is welcome.

Mrs. Blackwell: Not only from Mississippi but from all over the United States. And elsewhere, if they want to join. We will be sending telegrams to other nations, including African nations, for support.

Reporter: Does this mean that you won't sit down and talk to the Attorney General or other government representatives about your grievances?

Mr. Foster: If they would like to talk, we'll be willing to talk. But they didn't want to talk. They sent some Mississippian - chief or sergeant or something. He said give me the names of people who need relocation and I'll see what can be done about it. How can we leave the base when peoples don't have a house to stay in?

Mrs. Lawrence: The base is more thought of than the poor peoples was. The buildings weren't doing anything but just sitting there. The building was more respectable than poor hungry peoples with nothing and nowhere to go. If the peoples was satisfied and willing to sit there to find ways for themselves, the government should have let them stay there. The building was more important than poor folks.

Mr. Foster: The only reason that Colonel Jones could give for eviction was that the building that we was in didn't have running water and didn't have any type of fire protection. And see I know that the federal government can't tell me that was the reason

we was put out, because all over Mississippi houses don't have running water or fire protection.

Rev. Thomas: It was cruel and inhuman of Orville Freeman and Nicholas Katzenbach to send the kind of message to us at the air base they sent today. They said nothing to us that hasn't been said for months and years. We were tired of waiting around for these people to live up to their words.

Reporter: Mr. Thomas, could you go a little more into Operation HELP?

Rev. Thomas: Over a year ago the Delta Ministry, in cooperation with the National Students Association, pointed out the need for a commodity program for Mississippi poor people. And we gave as an example of what local people could do, what was happening in Forrest County, where the people had set up their own distribution system for contributed food and clothing. It works very well.

We offered to make Forrest County a trial case for food distribution if the Department would release the commodities to us.

Instead, the Department of Agriculture notified the state Department of Welfare that volunteer groups were willing and able to distribute commodities in Forrest County. In the face of that kind of possibility, the county Board of Supervisors voted for the first time in years and years to participate in a commodity program. Immediately, the Department of Agriculture found it necessary to send an investigator in there to investigate charges of discrimination in that program.

We then made the same offer in regard to Madison County. Again Washington called the state welfare people, who notified the county Board of Supervisors. They came up with a Food Stamp program. Of course poor people can't afford to be in a food stamp program because it costs money and they don't have any income.

We then offered to set up distribution in any county that didn't have a program. In the face of this possibility the state Welfare Department came up with the proposal called Operation HELP - and keep in mind this was in August. All over the state people had gone without food through the winter while the welfare department and the Agriculture Department played politics with each other.

Under this plan, the Welfare Department will get 24 million dollars worth of surplus commodities from the Department of Agriculture and 1.6 million dollars from the Office of Economic Opportunity to distribute the food to 500,000 people for six months.

In view of the criticisms of the program - which is based on the untenable assumption that welfare agencies and county boards of supervisors will act in a nondiscriminatory manner - OEO put certain conditions on the grant: one, that a biracial committee supervise the program and, two, that hiring and distribution be done on a nondiscriminatory basis.

Our information has it that no such committee has been set up, although the proposal was submitted in August and granted in November. Dr. Aaron Henry, head of the state NAACP, was asked to nominate the Negroes for the committee. Why weren't poor people asked to nominate people?

In regard to the second condition, the food was supposed to be ready for distribution by January 23. When that day came we could not find one poor person employed in the program and no food being given out. And now it's February.

Mrs. Lawrence: I'd like to add to that. To live, we got to go out and chop cotton for \$3 a day, maybe two or three days a week. At the end of cotton picking, we gets the same for picking the scrap the machines leave. Then in November when they start qualifying you for the commodities, they say you got to find out how many people you worked for and get them to sign for you as being poor. If they don't feel like signing, like maybe they don't like you for civil rights activities, you don't get commodities. But you still poor, whether the white boss says so or not.

Mrs. Blackwell: See, if you belong to any civil rights group or participate, they tell you you can't get a job with the poverty program, because that's political and you know, you can't have that. And that's what's happening with the poverty program: it's political - that's the reason it's not doing anything for the poor.

Reporter: Mr. Thomas, why do you think the federal government is afraid to let poor Negroes go ahead and run the program?

Rev. Thomas: I could try to avoid that question and say that it is their problem. These people have the problem of not being fed. I will not avoid it and say nobody is unaware of the power of Congressman Whitten in the House Subcommittee on Agriculture. Nobody is unaware of the critical power of John Stennis in the Senate and its Finance Appropriations Committee. And those are the kinds of people who are supposed to represent the poor people in Congress.

Reporter: Are you saying that the people who run the poverty programs are kowtowing to the white power structure from here?

Rev. Thomas: That's what I'm saying. The poverty program and the Department of Agriculture.

I'd like to add one footnote. OEO says it's introducing an experimental program for food distribution. Well, I don't think these people ought to be experimented on. They're hungry now. They need food now. And there's no reason why food could not have been airlifted in to those people.

Also, poor people in this state last year organized themselves into a Headstart program through the Child Development Group of Mississippi. Shriver and others said it was one of the best Headstarts anywhere in the country. In September they were told they would be funded in October; in October the money was coming in November; in November the money was coming in December and so on and so on each month. Over 1100 local Mississippi poor people who have been promised money have been cheated by OEO.

Mrs. Lawrence: You know, we ain't dumb, even if we are poor. We need jobs. We need food. We need houses. But even with the poverty program we ain't got nothin but needs. That's why we was pulled off that building that wasn't being used for anything. We is ignored by the government. The thing about property upset them, but the thing about poor people don't. So there's no way out but to begin your own beginning, whatever way you can. So far as I'm concerned, that's all I got to say about the past. We're beginning a new future.