

"... with a good deal of pride"

TODAY, in Mississippi, the poorest state in the union, there are nine producer co-ops making goods for the general consumer market. The workers in these co-ops are Negroes, many of whom lost their jobs (not very good jobs, to be sure) with white employers because of their participation in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1964, a plantation operator in Ruleville, Miss., told a worker who had registered and attended voter registration rallies: "Get off the place and don't come back. You're messed up in the voter registration and I don't want to have anything to do with you." This is typical. Also working in the co-ops are strikers associated with the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. Then there are people like the seven maids who quit a hotel because they thought they were underpaid at 39 cents an hour.

These nine Mississippi co-ops are providing livelihoods to some 150 previously unemployed people. They are producing quality leather and suede pocketbooks, hats, belts, tote-bags and pouches, patchwork quilts, carpet bags, childrens' and adults' clothing, stuffed toys, and miscellaneous items for wear and household use. By means of intensive training programs, intelligent coordination, and help with marketing by some outside people, these workers have learned the necessary skills and have become economically independent. They are making attractive products at prices so reasonable that the goods are easy to sell, either by mail-order or in stores, anywhere in the United States.

The agency which acts as catalyst and coordinator of these efforts is The Poor People's Corporation, a non-profit, non-share corporation chartered by the state of New Jersey. The following is from a PPC prospectus inviting financial help:

The purposes of the Corporation are to provide technical and financial assistance to low-income groups in Mississippi who want to develop worker-owned and operated cooperatives of various sorts. The program is a logical extension of previous organized attempts to break through the barriers of white supremacy. But the economic and psychological gains are less glamorous, and receive fewer headlines, than the Marches and the Sit-ins. As with any new business, there is

much hard work involved, and a great deal of learning. PPC began without government or foundation help. PPC now seeks financial and technical assistance to meet specific needs, so that it may adequately respond to the growing confidence and faith being shown in its objectives by the poor people of Mississippi. . . . Training programs are available under the auspices of PPC, and are carefully coordinated so far as marketing of products is concerned. Skilled experts and craftsmen are working with the program, both in Mississippi and the North. . . . All contributions are put in a revolving fund which is disbursed by a vote of the Corporation membership at its quarterly meetings. A member is any person in Mississippi who is involved, or hopes to be, in a PPC co-op or training program, and has paid the 25 cents yearly dues. Funds disbursed to co-ops at membership meetings are in the form of long-term, interest-free loans.

At present the products of the nine producer co-ops are marketed by Liberty Outlet House in Jackson, Mississippi (P.O. Box 977, Jackson), also a co-op, established by the Poor People's Corporation. The Outlet House, which is managed by Bill Hutchinson, helps the producer co-ops to get organized and renders technical assistance. A main problem in the early stages is to enable the workers to relate their efforts to the practical requirements of producing goods for the market. This is being accomplished largely by the guidance of Jesse Morris, who understands how to structure the program so that it fits the needs of the workers and at the same time fits the "outside world." The success of the general plan is measured by the fact that four out of the first six co-ops helped by founding loans to begin production last August, have needed no further financial assistance, although they are dependent on Liberty Outlet House for sales and technical counsel. Outlet House issues a well-designed catalog folder with product illustrations and prices, and the response in orders from both mail-order customers and stores indicates high potential of growth for the entire program. (At this point, however, Liberty House adds only for postage and handling overhead, so that its functions need pump-priming support in order to expand.) The New York office of the Poor People's Corporation (5 Beekman Street, New York, N.Y. 10038) is run by Ellen Maslow, who purchases supplies (fabric, thread, etc.) for the producer co-ops and coordinates offers of various kinds

of much-needed technical help. In a progress report dated Dec. 7, 1965, Miss Maslow said:

Craftsmen are needed, especially in sewing and needlework, leather and wood, to train co-op workers; experts in design and production are needed as consultants; people everywhere are needed to distribute our sales catalog and stimulate sales, and to raise funds; subsistence salaries are needed for Doris Derby (coordinator of the Training Program), Bill Hutchinson (Outlet manager) and volunteer craftsmen; a panel truck, a station wagon or micro-bus is urgently needed, since co-ops have to be visited for training, consultation, and pick-up and delivery of finished products; also needed is financial support for the New York and Jackson administrative offices; and, of course, publicity.

The budgets are modest, and all salaries (for the few paying jobs) are at the legal minimum of \$1.25 per hour. Other services, such as legal aid, accounting, etc., are obtained on a volunteer basis. Informative releases are available concerning economic conditions in Mississippi, budget requirements, future plans, and immediate needs. The latter change. For example, there is a particular interest, now, in sales for the products of a new co-op in Prairie, Miss., not listed in the catalog. These are stuffed toys (\$3.00) and "very cute little girls' dresses" (\$3.95). Miss Maslow will gladly answer letters of inquiry (provided she can borrow again the typewriter she used to send MANAS the information for this article). Other current needs are for people skilled in weaving, stained glass, or in almost any activity which might lend itself to forms of production possible in Mississippi. Liberty Outlet House needs a man who knows electrical repair, and there is the hope of starting a diaper service (only one, now, for Negroes in all Mississippi). Following are some basic facts about the co-ops:

Each co-op must be a legal entity, and provide at least ten jobs, within a reasonable amount of time. A workshop must be rented or built, so that work can be done cooperatively, rather than as home industry. Each co-op is autonomous, and makes its own internal decisions, although technical assistance can be asked of PPC at any time.

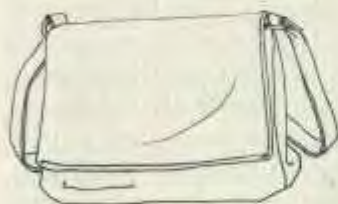
Given the economic situation in Mississippi, worker-owned co-ops seem the only alternative for unskilled, economically and socially vulnerable Negroes. Co-ops provide an independence which is essential for people who are struggling to help themselves, in a hostile environment. Negroes must be their

own "bosses," or they will continue to suffer reprisals when they act contrary to the desires of the white supremacists. (One woman in one of the co-ops always sews standing up, so she can look down the road. Reprisals may come.)

Developing jobs on a sound basis in southern states will counter the mass migration to urban ghettos which has been occurring for years. This migration is undesirable all the way around. No one gains from it except the southern white.

There has been protest all over the country that federally subsidized anti-poverty campaigns leave the poor out of the planning. PPC demonstrates the ability of the poor to make good decisions, and to interpret their own self-interest intelligently.

In a letter replying to some questions about PPC, Miss Maslow said: "We're in business, with a good deal of pride. This is not a 'charity,' or a 'buy pencils' campaign for the blind. The co-op workers have worked very hard to learn new skills, and to change their lives accordingly. A person buying one of their products is getting a good product at a good price. The spirit of the co-op workers is the really inspiring thing...."



SUEDE SHOULDER-STRAP POCKET BOOK—Simple functional design, very stylish. Entirely hand-made of the finest suede. Colors: Loden green, dark brown, rust, tan, navy, and burgundy.

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PRICE \$15.00

Please send payment with order. We pay shipping. Make checks payable to Liberty Outlet House, P.O. Box 3193, Jackson, Mississippi.