

RURAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

by
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The dilemmas faced in rural community organization attempts can best be related in a sad and simple story. A sharecropper who has been very active in the project, has eight children, works 12 acres of cotton, 10 acres of corn and 5 acres of sweet potatoes. All of his children but one are of school age. This September he sent one of his children to integrate the first grade at the local white elementary school. When I went by his farm in mid-October (almost two months after school had opened) three of his children were in the field digging potatoes...they had not as yet attended a day of the school session. Here was a man so radical in his social beliefs that he challenged one of the power structure's most prized institutions, yet he was unable to free himself and was a captive of a traditional economic system somewhat akin to slavery. It was clear that if this man did not keep his children in the field he would have had no income on which to support his family and send the others to school. (Just as a note of academic interest, when all seven of his children attend school, it costs him \$75 a year to pay for the "family plan" of the Federal FREE School Lunch Program for them!)

People have been moving off the land and into urban areas ever since about the time Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed "the frontier closed." The number of rural people, especially Negroes who have moved up to the ghettos of our Northern cities from the South, must be staggering. It is clear that if a man is a small farmer and has a big family, they will be an asset until they grow old enough to want to strike out for themselves. At this point they must leave to find work. Most of them don't find it on the farms but join the ranks of poorly educated unskilled workers. This is mostly due to economic and school segregation experienced by Negroes due to the intimidation and pervasiveness of the power structure in the South.

Nowadays people are being kicked off the land by landlords who are turning to the economies of scale offered in mechanized agriculture. A cotton picker can do the work of fifteen (15) hand pickers in a single day - with only two men needed to operate it. Some of the plantation hands or 'croppers' are hired back as day laborers for fifty cents an hour (50¢) and make about \$6 a day for working from can to can't (see the sun, that is). In Louisiana, many of the farmers who used to market their sweet potatoes with local shippers are finding these shippers are renting large tracts of land (displacing the small farmer) and becoming large growers as well. These grower-shippers are using four-row tractors and implements, mechanized sweet potato digging machines and hiring large amounts of labor at harvesting time for sub-standard wages (they often hire the children of the small growers). Thus, they are producing sweet potatoes at a

lower cost per crate than the small grower who farms intensively, often with a mule team or at best a one-row tractor. When the small farmer comes to sell his potatoes he gets less than it actually cost to produce them while the shipper is still in a position by strict grading to reap a handsome profit through his marketing knowhow and contacts.

Since most small farmers grow one or two "cash crops" they are caught in a squeeze because they do not have the resources, knowhow or encouragement to diversify their crops. The Cooperative Extension Service, while connected with the United States Department of Agriculture, is primarily an agency of the state affiliate with the states white land grant college. In the South, the Extension Service has been unresponsive and has lacked initiative in working for or with small Negro farmers. The Soil Conservation Service works primarily with larger farmers who have some spare land to conserve rather than with small farmers who seem to be people in need of a certain amount of conserving before they all disappear from the land. The ACP program, which is part of the services of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service is supposed to subsidize 50% of the costs of certain conservation practices such as fertilization, irrigation and drainage of the land. Most poor farmers cannot put up the other half; some are never informed or fully knowledgeable about these benefits; some do not have enough land to benefit and others (sharecroppers) do not own the land and often the bossman is uninterested because it would take his funds to improve a tenant's land. Part of our organizing attempts among poor small Negro farmers must be in the area of agronomics, agribusiness, conservation and other agricultural techniques. Possibly mid-Western state university schools of agriculture are the places to hunt for volunteers. If it seems far fetched to see a civil rights worker running a "freedom school" on agricultural techniques it may be the only way out. This is not to say that poor farmers should not demand their rights to equal and fair service with large and white farmers. Many letters and petitions have been sent but the USDA hierarchy moves slowly. One reason for this is that the Senate and House Committees on Agriculture are chaired by southerners Ellender (D. La.) and Cooley (D. SC) and dominated by conservative legislators.

Many policies and programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture structurally exclude the sharecropper. He is, in most instances, excluded from borrowing under most of the regular FHA loan programs. Only the new Economic Opportunity Loan under Title III of the Economic Opportunity Act provides some relief. Under this program a farmer or resident of a rural town may borrow up to \$2,500 for anything that will increase his family income. Several ladies have acquired sewing machines under this provision on the supposition that they would sew for their neighbors to make some money toward the liberal repayment terms of the loan. Several mechanics and blacksmiths shops have been modernized with these funds. But even when the government goes out of its way to help people with a loan program there are provisions clearly discrimin-

atory to the small Negro farmer. Because of Hurricane Betsy there is in Louisiana a program to give farmers an FHA Emergency Loan at 3% interest. Part of the principal amount borrowed will be excused if a farmer can show crop losses due to the storm. Up to \$1,800 will be excused in this way. However, no matter how much you borrow you must pay back the first \$500 of the loan although you can get the next thousand excused. Thus the small operator whose borrowing is done in the hundreds and not the thousands receives no pro-rated principal excuse provision. The poorest man gets the least help--the usual story.

The credit problems of the poor farmer would make material in itself. Most poor people borrow with a local grocer or the bossman at 8 to 10% interest. But they start borrowing on April 1 and pay back in October, so they only have the money for half a year, which doubles the interest rate. Most farmers do not get the entire principal amount on the first day of the interest period but collect it as they need it. All of this added together means that the small farmer often pays a twenty percent (20%) interest rate for his money. Organizing farmers for education on credit practices and demanding a special low interest, possibly a rate only to cover processing costs by FHA, should be instituted to help low income farmers.

One of the best programs around which to organize rural people is the allotment program as administered by the local Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) Committee and Office. Since a man's allotment and parity check often determine his income this program reaches all the farmers on the basis of economic interest and direct importance. The ASC structure superficially appears to be very democratic in that all people who have an interest in the allotment program: landowners, tenants, sharecroppers and their wives, are all supposed to vote for the committees that administer this program on a local level. In the South, until the civil rights organizations began to tackle ASCS elections, no ballots were sent to sharecroppers. In Louisiana and Mississippi there was wholesale and as yet uninvestigated fraud in the ASCS elections. The elections do give farmers, especially Negro farmers, a chance for political participation linked with basic economic issues. The elections are not like ordinary projects but have a certain limited goal (election of a Negro county committeeman) toward which people can work and measure their accomplishment. By running candidates in each ward of the parish where I am working last summer we were able to create an informal parish-wide farmers organization with natural leaders (the men who had run as ASCS candidates and those who worked hardest to elect them). The election gave the people in some wards a chance to participate in a nominating convention where more people wanted to run than there were places. Since there was adversity on the part of the ASCS Office Manager in his reluctance to send ballots to sharecroppers, we drew closer together by having to take direct action in terms of a "crowd-in and complain -in" at his office as well as some letterwriting to Washington. We won a victory in terms of his grudging concession to send ballots to all eligible voters. In the end he cheated us by sending ballots to all white ladies because they owned a little property but not sending any ballots to Negro ladies

because he said he did not know which Negro farmers were married.

Out of contacts between farmers from different parts of the parish came a discussion of other common problems. One of these was the low price farmer's were getting for sweet potatoes. Various alternatives to this problem were discussed including a co-op or a union to withhold crops from the market until a basic and fair return price was paid. These farmers are now planning to borrow a quarter of a million dollars from the FHA under the loans to cooperatives section, Title III, Section 303 of the Economic Opportunity Act to open a sweet potato marketing co-op. If the co-op does well in the fresh market, its members hope to negotiate a loan for a processing plant to can their own sweet potatoes in the coming years. These OEO loans to cooperatives can be helpful in organizing farmers to acquire machinery comparable to that owned by bigger operators. Six to ten small cotton farmers having a combined acreage of 100 acres of cotton can buy a \$15,000 cotton picker from the FHA under its OEO loaning power. They do not need any capital; all they have to do is form themselves together as a co-op. One group who bought a cotton picker cooperatively last year in my area was able to pay their note despite Hurricane Betsy and send their children to school on the first day. A group of ten men can form a feeder pig co-op. The co-op can buy some land (less than an acre will do) and put a building and buy the pigs for breeding. All of this will be financed by the FHA. Each man will have a certain day when he must take care of the operation so no one man is burdened by the load. All share in the business's profits and a small amount is set aside in retains to pay back the FHA co-op loan. This type of co-op would give sharecroppers and day laborers something to fall back on, or a supplement to their income that the bossman could not share in or control.

There is great need to pull together all the organizations of poor Negro farmers to exert pressure on Washington for more liberal loan programs, subsidy payments for crop diversification, higher price supports, greater educational efforts among small farmers, more job training and retraining programs for poorly educated youth and displaced farmers, income supplements to farmers to maintain themselves on the land with limited resources and even more limited incomes. Surely in Louisiana some pressure could be exerted by the vote to rid us of Allen J. Ellender as Senator. One of the best programs to organize for is one which hires and trains poor farmers to work to help and train others in their own ranks. In this way the government could provide an income supplement to every fourth or fifth farmer for him to help the other three or four to do better.

FARMERS ORGANIZE

by John Zippert

The New South must have a just economic structure as well as just political structures. The structures cannot be separated--it is the political strength that whites have wielded which has made possible the preservation of the system of economic suppression. The other side of the coin is that economic inequality has worked to preserve the system; the economic power of the rich and the white have enabled them to control the political apparatus. In order to bring about basic changes in the system, one must not only organize on a political basis by gaining and using the vote, but also attack the system at its economic base.

Whites Control Economy

All over our land, the economy is controlled by whites. White men own the stores, do the hiring and firing, set the prices, and control the sources of capital necessary for an individual to set up a business. It is a closed economic system into which Negroes are brought on the terms set by whites. In order to change this, people have set up various insurgent economic organizations. In the Mississippi Delta, sharecroppers have organized the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. A Poor Peoples Corporation and a brick making factory have been set up. In St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, Negro farmers are joining together to form several co-operatives.

Co-ops Formed

The Opelousas Progressive Co-op, the largest of the co-ops they are forming, has 200 members who have pledged to set up and support a food store, financed by \$10 pledges by each member. In this way, they can raise capital independently of the power structure, and can possibly get money from the poverty program. The planning is being done by the people who belong to the co-op. Each member has one vote; each man participates in the decisions about what will happen in the co-op and what his money will work for. The profits will go back to the share-

holders on the basis of how much they use the store, in order to encourage doing business with the co-op, as well as to realize the profits themselves, rather than giving them to the white man, as in the past. The co-op will make jobs for Negroes as managers, cashiers, and clerks, and buy produce from Negroes.

Dealing more basically with the economic basis of the society are two other organizations for St. Landry Parish small farmers, perhaps to be merged soon, a sweet potato marketing co-op and a farm supply co-op. The farm supply co-op will buy seed, fertilizer, and poison in large quantities and then pass the savings on in the form of lower prices to the individual member. Again, the capital will be raised by the members and borrowed from the government. These same small farmers are organizing a sweet potato marketing co-op, in which they have agreed to sell their sweet potatoes to the co-op. In this way, they will have a large enough quantity to store, ship, and sell the potatoes themselves, rather than being forced to accept the terms of the local buyer. As well as giving people more money for their potatoes, the co-op will also create new jobs.

The Future of the South

It may be that the future lies in the cities--that rural organizing will be outdated by urbanization and the increased efficiency of mechanized large scale agriculture. Nevertheless, some people have made a commitment to the rural South, to stay with it and change it, rather than flee to the dubious haven of the Northern ghetto. These people, forming co-ops in which for the first time they may join together on a basis of trust and competence, forging out an economic organization independent of white dominance, controlling their own resources, and making their own jobs, are creating an island of possibility for the emergence of a New South.