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says things
look pretty good -
try to get lunch
low arrangements to
negro people -



most recent
reference of
5/5/66

Sunflower County

On March 11, 1966, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals handed down an historic decision invalidating the municipal elections in the town of Sunflower, Mississippi. This decision, which has gone almost unnoticed by the national press, is perhaps the most important court decree in the field of voting rights for it is the first time an election has been invalidated because a class of potential voters had been excluded.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) brought the suit in April, 1965 shortly after a Federal Court ruled that the Sunflower County Registrar had to register Negroes without administering literacy tests. The MFDP argued that the forthcoming municipal elections in Sunflower and five other towns in that county should be postponed, because any Negroes registered under the new liberal requirements would be unable to vote due to the four month waiting period required by state law. The District Court which heard the case originally, found against the MFDP and the elections were held as scheduled. On appeal the elections were set aside in Sunflower City. The Court of Appeals then remanded the case to the District Court for a decree that will set new elections dates and ~~make~~ a decision with regard to the other five towns in that county. The question in these other five towns is merely technical--whether the plaintiffs had standing to bring the suit.

This case is vital for a number of reasons. Sunflower County has long been a symbol of Mississippi politics at its very worst. James O. Eastland, Senator from Mississippi and chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee is from Sunflower, where he owns a 5,800 acre plantation. To the Mississippi Negro Sunflower is the archtype of this past and present. Most of the county's

Negro population work in the cotton fields of the plantation owners. Negroes who are employed in the cotton fields make 30¢ an hour, if they work as domestics they get \$2.50 a day. The County has only two hospitals with a total of 100 beds to serve its 45,000 citizens of which 31,000 are black.

Following notice of the Court's decision the Sunflower County MFDP held a meeting at which 100 members were present. At that time it was decided to run candidates for all local offices. Both the town and the county of Sunflower have over a sixty per cent Negro majority. Organizing for these elections was begun immediately. As a result of this organizing effort, Negroes now hold a voting majority in Sunflower City, one of the towns scheduled for new elections.

The people of Sunflower County saw the Mississippi primaries on last June 7th as an opportunity to test their organizing efforts. The turnout at the polls on that day ranged from sixty to eighty per cent of the Negroes who had registered, despite the numerous irregularities at the polls.

During the Summer, members of the MFDP will continue to prepare for the municipal elections. More Negroes will be registered, prospective candidates will discuss the duties of municipal office holders, and work shops will be held for poll watchers and voters to ensure the free and open carrying out of these elections.

Nationally Sunflower County has stirred the interest of members of civil rights organizations, the church, labor and academia. This grouping and other MFDP support groups are pressing for mobile federal registrars in Sunflower County and are supporting the efforts of local people in other ways.

In conclusion, a victory in Sunflower County is of vital concern not only to citizens of Mississippi but to interested persons across this land. And electoral victory for Negroes there will be a large crack in the wall of segregated politics in Mississippi.