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SUNFLOWER COUNTY: A CALL TO ACTION

THE DECISION

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 invalidation of an election because a class of potential voters had been excluded.


The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party brought the suit in April of 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 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. It was the MFDP appeal to the Circuit Court of Appeals that resulted in this historic decision to void the elections. The Court of Appeals has now remanded the case to the District Court for a decree that will set the new election dates in Sunflower city and for decision with regard to the other five towns in the county. (The question in these other five towns is merely technical -- whether or not the plaintiffs had standing to bring the suit.)

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Nationally, this decision sets a precedent for the voiding of elections that bar Negroes and sounds a warning to segregated politics. The Justice Department halted the decision saying "This willingness of the Fifth Circuit to set aside elections where Negroes have been excluded means that the registration of Negroes under the Voting Rights Act will not be just a paper right."

SUNFLOWER COUNTY

To Miss Negroes
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, makes his home in Sunflower and, in fact, owns a 5,800 acre plantation there. Also found in Sunflower is Parchman State Penitentiary -- where Freedom Riders, civil rights demonstrators, and hundreds of others have been held, and often made to work on chain gangs.

To the Mississippi Negro, Sunflower is the archtype of his past and present. Most of the county's Negro population work the cotton fields of the plantation owners. Cotton is king and no provision is made for alternative employment when cotton chopping jobs fall off. Between 1950 and 1960 a 50% drop in agricultural jobs resulted in mass unemployment, the intensification of poverty and the migration of one fifth of the population from the county. Negroes who are employed make 30¢ an hour in the cotton fields of \$2.50 a day in the kitchens of the whites. Many live in shacks with no running water. The county has only one eighty-bed hospital to serve its 45,000 citizens.



A POVERTY PROGRAM IN SUNFLOWER

Sunflower County has received a \$27,000 grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity for a Community Action Program. The administrator of the program is Bryce Alexander, the former police chief of Indianola. Alexander has stated in a deposition taken by MFDP lawyers during the Congressional Challenge that he had broken up voter registration meetings and arrested civil rights workers in Indianola. The appointment of Alexander to administer the Sunflower County poverty program makes a mockery of the whole intent of the program. The poor of Sunflower see no help coming to them from the program; further, the appointment of such an obvious symbol of past terror and degradation serves as a warning to them that any involvement in civil rights would mean automatic exclusion from the program. Thus, the only evidence of federal presence in Sunflower County is a negative one -- that of a so called poverty program run by a Mississippi chief of police.

MFDP PLANS FOR ACTION

Following notice of this decision, 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; to request a state-wide MFDP concentration on the Sunflower elections; and to wire Attorney General Katzenbach immediately requesting a sufficient number of federal examiners to effectuate the decision.

The State Executive Committee has endorsed this program and is developing plans for an intensive effort in Sunflower, calling for national support to defeat Eastland in his home county. Some FDP Executive Committee members have already gone into Sunflower to aid in the registration drive.

The Sunflower decision presents a unique opportunity to the MFDP. It is the first modern law suit of this type to be won, and it calls for elections which the MFDP can win. Both the town and the county of Sunflower have over a 60% Negro majority. A victory in Eastland's backyard will give hope and alternatives to the thousands of Negroes who, out of fear, have still not registered. This campaign, with the MFDP's state-wide concentration, will be the base for the congressional race against Jamie Whitten and the state campaign against Eastland.

MFDP CALLS FOR ACTION

Friends in the North are called upon to help by immediately:

1. Wiring or writing Attorney General Katzenbach demanding that mobile federal registrars and federal protection be sent to Sunflower, for now that the last "legal" outlet for discrimination has been closed, there is great fear that the racists will turn to violence.
2. Wiring or writing Sargent Shriver of the OEO demanding the removal of former police chief Bryce Alexander from his position as director of the Sunflower County poverty program.
3. Visiting or writing your congressman asking that mobile federal registrars be immediately assigned to Sunflower; that Alexander be removed; and that federal protection be given the people of Sunflower County.

4. Raising funds for the Sunflower campaigns.
5. Contacting organizations in your community for support of the Sunflower campaigns.

Enclosed with this mailing is a post card on which you can indicate the steps you are taking on behalf of the Sunflower campaigns. If you would like to request speakers for meetings, rallies, or fund-raising parties, or additional copies of the reprints or this bulletin, please indicate this on the card.