

POLITICAL WORKSHOP IN SUNFLOWER

led by Mrs. Victoria Gray

May 7 ---

(there were people present for all or part of the workshop, largely from the city of Sunflower, and from Morehead, a nearby town; from Atlanta -

SCLC- citizenship staff- ~~Tougaloo~~ Tougaloo, Ed King, Holmes Co., including Mr. Hayes, Shelby, Marks, West Point, Starkville, Jackson, Canton, Hattiesberg.)

Mr. Hayes and Ed King, two candidates for Congress were introduced at the workshop. Mr. Hayes described the redistricting that the legislature has passed, which has chopped up the Delta, and McLauren plan, which we will press in the courts, for a fair redistricting of the state. He also pointed out that the FDP is trying to put off the elections primary June 7 for two weeks, through a suit that will be heard Monday in federal court. Ed King said that the state redistricted because they were afraid...they are responding to what negroes in the state are doing, now...they were afraid of the power of negroes voting together, and possibly winning elections. If the Sunflower election can be won, he felt this would encourage many negroes in the state to go out and register.

Mr. Hayes felt that the whites in Sunflower Co. are probably meeting and talking about this Sunflower election. They're watching the town to see how the negroes turnout to vote on June 7, in the primary, to judge how strong they are, and what their own reaction will be.

Dr. Bob Green, Mrs. Dorothy Cotton, and Mrs. Septima Clark were introduced --- as members of SCLC citizenship staff, from Atlanta, who had worked in the Alabama elections recently. They led much of the day's workshop.

The question of why negroes sometimes vote for a white candidate over a negro candidate came up and was discussed:

.....they think maybe that's the way its supposed to be

.....many don't believe the negroes have no business in office, that many negroes believe that

~~negroes believe that~~ ...we don't know our own strength

...some feel they wouldn't get any benefits from a Negro being in office,people aren't used to a man coming to them and standing up for a platform...the white man never did that

.....some are afraid after being threatened by a white plantation owner or another ~~hard~~ boss

The ideas ~~fix~~ about "qualffications" for office was discussed; Mr. Hayes pointed out that the rules didn't list any education requirement at all for public office in Miss; and Ed King said that the colleges didn't teach anyone how to be a mayor..you learn after you are in, and have advisors to help you...don't look at the qualification, look at what a man can do for the people once he's in office

one person suggested that we should be getting small groups of negroes together who say they'll vote for whites, and explain some of the conditions we're all living under, and who is responsible in part for them, and trying to convince them to vote for Negroes. (a teenager from West Point, suggested encouraging more teenagers to canvass, to tell people about the vote, and its importance.)

Some people from Sunflower said that since they are 2/3 of the pop. they want 2/3 representation in the city government. (it seems to be still not settled in this community if they are running 3, 4 or 5 men for city aldermen)

Mrs. Clark described some of the ways the people in Alabama tried to insure fair elections:

1. have each candidate authorize a POLLWATCHER in each precinct - to be inside, near the ballot box, observing the mechanism of voting, checking off the names of the people who vote, and the numbers of people voting. He should have a list of all potential voters and their precincts. (the list must be gotten in advance from the courthouse and from the federal registrar)
2. POLL WORKERS --they should be outside, at least 50 feet from the polling place, passing out literature, if people want this, encouraging people as they come to register. (at some time during the day, the poll watcher can come out and give a list of those who've already voted to the poll worker --and she can check this list with those eligible to vote, and canvass to get the others down to vote)

3. we need to get an Election Code of Miss.

(we should be allowed to get a list of all registered voters ...its public record. They may cause some trouble - for ex. - in Sunflower, the list is at the bank, in a looseleaf book--and you may take it to the city hall, and look at it, when the police chief is there. This could, of course intimidate whoever goes to copy names)

Mrs. Clark described the fear some have when they go up to vote. In one precinct in Wilcox Co, a plantation owner was a poll watcher; which made at least one negro man so nervous, he couldn't remember the negro candidate's name, whom he had wanted to vote for. She explained that it would be valuable to have small workshops for people who can't read and write at all, or just a little...to teach them to recognize the names of

the Negro candidates...she demonstrated the writing of LONEY ECHOL'S name...the negro candidate for mayor of Sunflower, and recommended showing the people a Sample Ballot, and how its marked. (The Miss. state sample ballot is now available.) We should find out the name of the democratic committee chairman, and get a sample ballot from him.

Dr. Green talked briefly of the disappointment and accomplishments in Alabama, where 1,4 million negroes are registered...there were 69 running for office there; now, after the primary May 3, there are 24 negroes in the runoff...(4 of whom are seeking the office of sheriff.) They were able to get negro poll watchers at all precincts where the candidates asked for them, and a federal officials, who did little.

He suggested:

1. try to use very strong poll watchers, who would be less likely to be intimidated by the whites (In miss, the poll watchers don't necessarily have to be from Miss)
2. we need poll watchers who will carefully count the people, and later count the ballots
3. have negroes outside the polls to greet and encourage the people (he pointed out that if there are registered negroes afraid to come to mass meetings, they'll also be afraid to go and vote)
4. if you know of people having trouble reading and writing, have small workshops to teach people to identify candidates(names.

He suggested that when teaching individuals' names, to vote for, you can teach them only the names of negro or white FDP candidates.

5. never underestimate that people might say they'll vote for a Negro candidate, and go ahead and vote for Eastland...because they're scared.
6. ask the justice Department and federal observers to come in, but don't expect them to do much

ORGANIZING A COMMUNITY FOR THE VOTE

get a small group of people together in homes and churches, to talk about showing others how to recognize candidates' names on the ballots when you find out the total eligible negroes, find the total registered, and the total unregistered...

you could then give 5 or 6 cards of names of unreg. negro voters to someone and ask them to get those 5 or 6 people registered

....try to get an election committee chairman in charge of everything

....find a person to be street captain, who could:

a. contact all neighbors on the street, encourage the unregistered to register; teach those registered who can't read and write some reading and writing, and how to recognize names of FDP candidates on ballot

....set up general committees--perhaps getting members from already organized movement committees in the community--and then you could have the chairman of each committee make up the members of the election committee

1. street captains

2. transportation

3. poll workers and poll watchers

4. get out the vote comm. (could be the same as the street captains

5. research

6. youth

a few people from Sunflower volunteered to be poll watchers

a group split up into the committees to talk a little about what they'd do...then we went through a demonstration of voting, with ballots, ballot

boxes, election officials, poll watchers for each side, etc...and voters

coming ~~xx~~ up to vote. (it was pointed out that if an official is going to help someone mark a ballot, 1 poll watcher from each side should be allowed to watch this...if you ~~xxxx~~ can't read and they say that your name is not on the list, ask a poll watcher to check the list for your name)...

when the votes were counted, 9 were disqualified because they were supposed to mark 5 names for alderman and some marked three and four. We discussed ~~the~~ these kinds of mistakes made in voting

At the workshop on Friday, Mrs. Devine, head of the Welfare and health committee of the state FDP, asked about welfare problems in the county, and Sunflower people said that commodities had been cut off in the county from those not on welfare. Mrs. Devine and Mrs. Grey explained that according to the agriculture dept. and the state welfare dept. every county in the state, by March 1, was supposed to start a six month commodity program, except those few which already have a food stamp program...so it didn't look like anyone should be now cut off. Mrs. Grey suggested that a committee, including someone who had been put off commodities go down that afternoon to Indianola and find out about it, and also find out what new jobs were opening up through welfare programs...

(Mrs. Devine suggested also seeing Mrs. Gandy, in Jackson, and writing Washington, but it was decided to first go to Indianola)

They came back and gave a report to the meeting--the welfare woman, Mrs. Neighbors would only see one at a time, so Mrs. Devine went in and introduced herself, and said that Wash. is concerned that Operation Help is being terminated in Sunflower Co. Mrs. Neighbors said she thought it would end this week, but they just got a call from Jackson which said it would be on until July. Mrs. Devine asked her how they will publicise that it will continue, and suggested radio, newspapers.

the question was asked how many negroes are working in the welfare to get this work-experience program,)the lady who came with them who had been cut off commodities, was put back on, and also on commodities.

In the discussion which followed, it was decided that when these issues come up, we should go up in numbers. Harry Bowie suggested that these programs are coming in both to help and to hurt us. If we mistakenly think that this ~~xxxx~~ money is coming in from local whites, rather than from Washington, people might be afraid to lose it if they stand up for their rights. It was pointed out local agencies will tell people that the money and the programs is coming directly from them, and that people need to get the right information, through mailings, meetings.

Altogether, the committee formed to get this information served as a good, concrete example of what we can get accomplished by becoming more organized, in our movement work.

Mr. Hayes spoke Sat. before the workshop ended. He spoke of the government spending money for war "to preserve freedom" while we are unfree

in Miss. and unsafe driving the highways home at night...
...He raised the question that if these government programs are designed to help the poor, why aren't poor people in charge of them. Whites are getting most of the top jobs. He thinks this was planned even from Washington...an example is the CAP program Holmes Co. has ~~xxx~~ joined, Central Miss. Why should Mr. Trapp, already working as a schoolteacher, get a job running Central Miss? We have to protest those things we find wrong with these programs.

The workshop closed with the idea of going back to home communities and starting to organize now for the upcoming primaries and elections.