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Cooperatives Run by Negroes A Growing Trend in the South

By GENE ROBERTS
Special to The New York Times

JACKSON, Miss., Nov. 20—Ten Negro women reported to work at a small manufacturing plant in nearby Canton at 8 o'clock each morning this week, worked until 6 P.M., and last night took home \$5 as their week's wages. No one complained about the pay.

"We been getting about \$5 a week for 10 weeks now," said Mrs. Ella Mae Jackson, "but the way we figure it, we're working for ourselves and some day it's going to get better."

The women are sewing machine operators, part-time janitors and corporate policy-makers in the Madison County Sewing Firm, a dressmaking cooperative organized last summer to provide jobs for unemployed Negroes.

Since then, the formation of Negro cooperatives has become a growing trend in the civil rights movement in the South. Civil rights organizations see the cooperatives as a way of freeing Negroes from segregationist economic pressure in many areas of the region.

This week, Negroes were on the job in newly created "self-help" businesses in McComb, Mileston and Jackson, Miss., in Selma and Forkland, Ala., and in a surplus Army tent in an open field near Greenville, Miss.

Thus far, almost all the businesses are still struggling to meet their payrolls. At the end of the week, however, Negroes were shaping plans for still more self-help businesses in such widely scattered Southern cities and towns as those in Bolivar County, Miss., Tallahatchie County, Ga., and Greenville, Ala.

The most ambitious of the self-help programs began early this year when Jesse Morris, a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who came to Mississippi from Jacksonville, Fla., dreamed up the idea of a network

of cooperatives known as the Poor People's Corporation. With the help of student committee workers, he began mailing out brochures to Northern civil rights supporters. In return for contributions, he sent the donors "freedom bonds."

The "stockholders" in the corporation are Negroes who join for an annual membership fee of 25 cents and vote in quarterly meetings on what projects, if any, should be funded with "bond" money.

To date, Poor People's Corporation has provided \$1,000 for the Madison County sewing firm; \$400 for an eight-employee company in McComb that makes suede handbags for women; \$400 for an eight-employee concern in Mileston that makes leather belts and repairs shoes, and \$400 for a mail order and retail outlet in Jackson.

"If the cooperatives succeed, we plan to raise salaries to \$1.25 an hour, then use any surplus to improve facilities, start new businesses and provide more employment," Mr. Morris said. "The whole idea is to provide work at the minimum wage and give Negroes economic independence."

One of the paradoxes of the civil rights movement, Mr. Morris said, is that many Negroes will not feel free to take advantage of integrated public facilities in some areas until they have segregated themselves economically.

"You are going to hesitate to send your children to a white school, for example," he said, "if you know your white employer might fire you for doing it."

"So far, all this is only a drop in the bucket in solving Negro employment problems in the South," said Nash Basom of the Delta Ministry, a civil rights arm of the National Council of Churches. "But it is a start."

COOPERATIVES IN MISSISSIPPI

The Poor Peoples Corp.: A venture in job-making

THE POOR PEOPLES CORPORATION is not a corporation in the common usage of the term. It is a non-profit, non-share assemblage of people in need of a means of income; members pay 25c a year dues. It was formed to develop cooperative shops in areas in which people were seeking an alternative to the slave-wage jobs open to them. Begun only four months ago in Mississippi by SNCC worker Jesse Morris, the PPC now has six cooperatives in operation in that state and they are rapidly multiplying.



An apron made at a Poor Peoples Corporation sewing coop is modeled by Doris Derby. She will be the head of the PPC's training center in Jackson, Miss. The cooperative projects, begun in Mississippi, are spreading rapidly.

Guardian photo by Robert Joyce

The aim of the PPC is to launch cooperatives which can become self-sustaining and self-reproducing. The PPC provides technical and financial assistance to groups which want to found coops, training people in the needed skills and making loans for equipment and materials from a revolving fund of contributions, coming largely from the North. They depend heavily upon wholesale manufacturers and distributors for donations of supplies and equipment.

THE PPC looks largely to a Northern market, for man-order and contract sales. To maximize efficiency and profit, all purchases and sales are handled centrally, in Jackson. Coops are supplied with equipment and materials from Jackson, and send their goods to Jackson for marketing. This relieves local coops of bookkeeping and technical burdens. As one coop becomes established, members begin to train others in the area who wish to set up their own shops. Training centers in Mt. Buelah and Jackson are now moving into new fields such as stained glass and jewelry.

Poor Peoples Corporation Mississippi Co-op - HELP NEEDED



A typical Negro home in Mississippi

Jeane Morris, a director and Secretary of the corporation, who played a leading role in establishing the project, had been part of a COFO task force for educating low-income groups about the advantages of co-ops and credit unions. It was soon realized that for lack of necessary funds and techniques of organization, the poor could never put their plans into action. Thus, the Poor Peoples Corporation was formed.

The corporation is non-profit, non-share and non-discriminatory. All who can pay the twenty-five cent membership dues are accepted as members and it is these Mississippians who plan and control the organization's activities. Members meet four times a year to hear proposals from budding cooperatives and non-profit groups. Money is allocated on the basis of the possibility for success, the need for assistance, and widening employment opportunities for the impoverished.

At its first quarterly meeting in August held at Tougaloo College, in Mississippi, three hundred members debated the merits of nine proposals. These ranged from requests for money to buy sewing machines (from a co-op which was making clothing for children in a Head-Start Project and saw a market in women's clothes which they could supply if they had the equipment) to a plan to set up a cooperative super-market in a Negro community which would soon be without one. The request, though gaining the applause of the group (the profits were to be put back into sorely needed improvements for the town), could not be considered: the needed capital was ten times the amount available for all projects — \$5,000.

When all of the realistic proposals had been approved, the group found that the cost was in excess of the \$5,000 budget, so most projects were given less than asked for, with hopes that future contributions might make up the difference. But the self-help projects were assured of a good beginning. Women's and children's clothing, men's shirts, various leather articles — handbags, purses, and pouches, and wooden toys will be produced by people who will be given their first chance for an equal opportunity. Most of the workers had lost their menial jobs because of civil rights activities and now they can look forward to better jobs and a living wage. As domestics, the women had earned \$12 a week; now, paying themselves the Minimum wage as sewing machine operators, for only half their working hours they earn twice as much. The establishment of the \$1.25 hourly-wage will remake not only the lives of those involved but also the economy of a state where \$600 a year is a magnificent wage for most of the people.

Contributions to support the work of the Poor People's Corporation are being sought in every amount in all parts of the nation. The Corporation issues "Freedom Bonds" in denominations of \$10, \$20, \$50, \$100, and \$500.

Garbo Hats Down in the Miss. Delta

By Gail Sheehy

Greenwich Village artistry, already transplanted to the Lower East Side, has sprouted another root—in the Mississippi Delta. Field hands in Mileston, Miss., for instance, are now turning out suede Garbo slouch hats.

For an annual membership fee of 25 cents, anyone may join and bid for loan money to start a work co-operative. A non-profit corporation, PPC finances its loan fund by contributions and the sale of "freedom bonds."

As essential as capital to the self-help project are people to teach the skills and markets for the resulting products. This is where Lower East Siders come in. Bright red and blue signs in many shop windows entreat: "Your Skills Are Needed in Mississippi."

Several bright young women shopkeepers started out with a donation of their vacations, driving down to set up and teach the co-ops. They stayed on and on.

Nancy Chandler, wife of the activist ballad-writer Len Chandler, has become as peripatetic as her husband. She trail-blazed last August with a leather project. After a month's "vacation" establishing co-ops in Mileston, McComb and Natchez, Nancy trucked home for industrial sewing machines and more leather. (The first meeting of the Poor People's Corporation had voted \$400 to her leather co-ops.)

Days later she was back in her truck, rented with money from selling rides to Head Starters, grinding down to the Delta for another two months.

Barbara Shaum, a ginger-haired figure once familiar in the East Village setting sandals to dry outside her shop at 13 E. 7th St., left for Mississippi in September. She left with one extra skirt and blouse stuffed in a shopping bag. Two weeks later she sent home for lingerie, her green shoes and some salami and cheese. She's still down there.

Barbara is now teaching the Mileston co-op to make shoes for their own children, having already passed on her sandal-making skills.

CRAFT HORIZONS

Job Opportunity

Ellen Maslow, who runs the New York office, has said that a number of craftsmen have already offered their services, but that more are needed. The idea behind the project, she states, is to train local people so that they can organize cooperative workshops or industries which will help give them the economic self-sufficiency so urgently needed. Volunteer craftsmen will be provided with free transportation and subsistence wages, and a minimum of two months' service is required.

Stated Ellen Maslow, "We are especially seeking craftsmen skilled in the areas of stained glass, wood, leather, and jewelry. Funds also are needed, since the corporation relies wholly on contributions. Groups and individuals may prefer to 'adopt' a specific cooperative workshop, so their relationship would be more personal and continuous. Contributions of supplies and equipment would, of course, be appreciated as well. Our job is to produce jobs, qualitatively as well as quantitatively!"

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