

## Fact Sheet - Sunflower County Project, Mississippi

### BACKGROUND

Sunflower County is both one of the strongest Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party organizations and the center of Senator Eastland's political power.

In May 1965 a suit was filed by five members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in the Federal District Court. The object of the suit was to get an injunction holding up municipal elections until Negroes were given the opportunity to register to vote and file for candidacy without being discriminated against.

The areas of discrimination named in the suit were poll tax (also now forbidden by the Voting Rights Act as Discriminatory); actual discriminatory practice in the registration procedure; and thirdly, once registered, voters, according to Mississippi law, had to wait 4 months before exercising the franchise - for those registered under an April 8, 1965 court order enjoining the registrar from discriminating, it was impossible to vote in the June municipal elections.

Although the injunction was denied, the court held that if the suit were filed again under less hurried circumstances, it had the right to throw out the elections and call for a new one.

That is exactly what happened. On March 11, 1966 the historic decision, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer vs. Cecil C. Campbell, Circuit Clerk and Registrar of Sunflower County, was handed down by the Circuit Court of Appeals, the municipal election was thrown out, and in a few days the court will set a new date for the election, allowing sufficient time for open registration of those Negroes in the town of Sunflower.

Because of a technicality (only one of the five plaintiffs happened to have registered less than four months prior to the date for the original elections and therefore, so said the court, only she could technically represent that "class of people" which had clearly been discriminated against), the elections were thrown out in only one municipality, the town of Sunflower.

### THE URGENT NEED

At present, only 160 Negroes in the town of Sunflower are registered and 154 whites, while the Negroes are over 75% of the population. This unprecedented opportunity for Mississippi Negroes to win political office in a key part of the state cannot be missed.

The Sunflower MFDP project unfortunately has practically no money. A Voter registration drive costs a great deal; gasoline is needed for workers to reach outlying areas; there must be transportation to get people to the courthouse; voter registration workers in many cases must have subsistence allowances; mimeograph paper and other materials add to the cost.

The Delta is Mississippi's poorest area. There is not money enough to support all the people living there let alone have an intensive voter registration drive.

## Fact Sheet - The Mississippi Freedom Labor Union

A state-wide union, with locals in 16 towns.

The MFLU was organized in the spring of 1965 with the aid of the National Council of Churches' Delta Ministry and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The affiliated locals, while predominantly Negro farm workers, include maids, cooks, and laundry workers. At the time of its semi-annual (by a farm calender) report in September of 1965, the union had 268 workers in 6 counties on strike. Eight of the families which were later to occupy the tent city in Tribbett, Mississippi had been evicted from the Andrews plantation.

Funds collected and dispersed up to September totalled \$14,600, a large portion of which came from the United Auto Workers. Since the fall those who remained on strike have continued to receive support from certain segments of organized labor.

### TENT CITY

A tent city, occupying as many as one hundred people during the winter, was set up near Greenville on land owned by a Negro, after evictions in that area from the plantation shacks where the striking farm workers had lived. These people suffered a bitter winter, and received virtually no support either from local welfare agencies or from federal anti-poverty funds. In March some of these people moved to temporary quarters in Issaquena County and then Mt. Beulah. Members of the group are now seeking land to buy with no-interest loans from private sources on which to establish themselves. Part of the group set up their tents across from the White House for over a week to protest the Office of Economic Opportunity refusal to provide any assistance.

Rev. Arthur Thomas, director of the Delta Ministry, criticized the food distribution program in Mississippi, which was supposed to have aided the strikers. The program is based "on the untenable assumption that welfare agencies and county boards of supervisors will act in a nondiscriminatory manner."

### The Future

There is every reason to believe that as Negroes push for higher wages and the right to vote, there will be increasing loss of jobs and evictions.

The Mississippi Employment Security Commission reports that even semi-skilled jobs are on the decline as farms and industries mechanize: "Of 26, 000 tractor drivers living with their families on Delta plantations, 6,500 will be jobless by spring."

The State and Federal governments have proved unwilling to give the assistance necessary to prevent hardship among those displaced. The MFLU is organizing the workers to fight for this and to provide the necessary short term assistance to keep people alive.