

"THE DELTA SPEAKS - ABOUT THE POWER STRUCTURE AND O.E.O."

Why is the Mississippi Delta - which contains some of the richest farmland in the world - why is this rich delta where the topsoil is as much as 35 feet deep - why is this beautiful delta one of the worst economically depressed areas in the nation?

Why are thousands of poor negroes every year leaving the delta to fill the slums of Chicago and St. Louis and other northern ghettos?

Because the poor negroes are being systematically driven out of the delta and the south by the rich and powerful owners of land, Government, and people.

The rich lords of the land are finding that they can no longer make the huge profits of the past by keeping the negro in debt slavery and ignorance. The poor sharecropper - white or negro - and field hands have done their jobs. They have made the boss man rich and now they must go.

This man who is slightly different from a slave has no rights to his home. He has no rights to the land he has worked for so long for his master. He has no rights to his dignity.

He is in the way. And what is worse, he might someday vote. And what is yet worse, he might someday very soon begin fighting in bloody violent anger for the rights to live on his land and to feed his children and to have a decent job. He must be driven out.

How is he being driven out?

By making his poverty so bitter that he can no longer tolerate the brutality and horror of the delta.

It must be made clear that the cause of poverty in the Mississippi Delta is the combination of the plantation economy which has kept people in debt slavery and the power structure which is either made up of plantation owners or of people who do the bidding of the plantation owners.

People are poor in the delta because the power structure has always worked very hard to keep them poor so that they would have to work for the low wages of the plantations.

The power structure is now working overtime to drive out many of the poor negroes from the delta and keep the rest poor to do their bidding.

Allowing poverty money to be controlled by the power structures which have traditionally been the cause of poverty in the delta is to make sure that the fundamental causes of poverty will be reinforced, rather than ended.

Therefore, in the delta at least, we need to find new ways to administer poverty money other than through the traditional power structures. We need to have new guidelines for poverty programs. Those guidelines need to be made on the basis of the experience of the poor people themselves who know about poverty and the power structures because they have suffered poverty for so long at the hands of the power structures. The Government must consult with the poor to learn what they feel and experience and want.

Every negro in Mississippi could give dozens or hundreds of examples of rotten corrupt nature of the power structures. Since my time is limited today I will only touch on three examples of the rotten and corrupt nature of the power structure in my county - Holmes County, Mississippi.

* * * * *

Before I give those examples, I think it will be instructive to know just how bad poverty is in Holmes County. 80% of all families, white and negro, earn less than \$4,000 a year. These people are poor. But fully 43% of all families in Holmes County earn less than \$1,000 a year. These people are bitterly poor. For every one bitterly poor white family there are ten bitterly poor negro families.

* * * * *

In the area of education, negroes (who make up the vast majority of the poor) have inferior schools and education.

Up until the 1954 Supreme Court decision throwing out the separate but equal doctrine, negro communities either had no schools, or had small vastly inferior schools out in the hills, often built by the negroes themselves because the county refused to provide schools for negroes. There was no bus transportation for negro children, though our taxes went to pay for busses for white children.

In the last 12 years since 1954 the local officials have built a number of consolidated negro schools which are rigidly segregated and still vastly inferior. But they are made of brick and the local power structure boasts that they are now (and only now) equal. They do not say outloud that they are designed to be separate. They do not admit the truth - that in fact they are still vastly inferior behind the brick walls.

Negro teachers have inferior training. Science classes have no labs or equipment to work with. Hand me down books come from the white schools. And many courses common in white schools are not taught at all in the negro schools.

Negro schools in the delta have traditionally had a split session so that negro children could be available for work on the plantation fields during cultivating and picking times. Whites have never had split sessions. Plantation owners have been able to keep negro children out of schools any time there was work to be done on the plantation fields.

Only in the last year have split sessions been eliminated. And only in the last year have negro schools been open nine months like the white schools.

Now in Holmes County the power structure has set up a private grade school to keep the segregated education going in the face of federal orders to desegregate. Almost all of the directors, backers, and officers of this rump school are part of the power structure.

A second example of the thoroughly corrupt nature of the power structure in Holmes County is in the area of hospital care. The local hospitals, built or operated with the help of federal funds, are totally segregated. But what is worse, the hospitals refuse to take welfare patients and other very poor people. People have died because they were refused treatment in the Holmes County hospitals because they were too poor.

Now the County Board of Supervisors (which is the very body the Office of Economic Opportunity is dealing with in the setting up of a Community Action Program in Holmes County and counties all over the delta and the state) is attempting to float a \$200,000 bond issue to convert the Holmes County Hospital in Lexington into a hospital with all private rooms. This is a clear attempt to avoid integration orders by installing partitions to make small stalls which will be called private rooms.

Medicare rules will not allow medicare patients to have private rooms. This is another example of the power structure actively working against the poor.

This \$200,000 could be used to build a new wing or ward for welfare and other poor patients.

The list of examples could go on and on. Negroes (who it must be remembered make up 90% of the poor) have traditionally been kept out of the high paying jobs. Negroes are paid less than whites in the same jobs. I was an Extension Service employee for 25 years and in all that time the negro County Agents and Home Demonstration Agents were paid less than the whites in the same job.

If there were time I could go into the corruption in the Welfare Department, the Law Enforcement Agencies, the Federal Agencies such as the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, and every other area of the power structure.

If the Federal Government is serious in this so-called War on Poverty, and if the Federal Government both wants the benefits of the Poverty Program to reach the poor and wants the poor involved in the administration of the program, then some very fundamental changes in the poverty guidelines will have to be made.

If, as it is stated on page seven of the Community Action Program Guidebook:

"The long-range objective of every Community Action Program is to effect a permanent increase in the capacity of individuals, groups, and communities afflicted by poverty to deal effectively with their own problems so that they need no further assistance."

If this is true and actually the goal of the Federal Government, then the policy must be changed that allows the corrupt power structures to administer the Poverty Program.

The Community Action Program Workbook in Section III.A.2. states:

"... it is required that every Community Action Agency give priority attention to resident participation, that is to increasing the capability of the client populations to gain representation and influence community affairs. This mandate both explicit in, and essential to the functions of CAP."

In Mississippi we have an outstanding example of a large scale poverty program which meets these standards. It is perhaps the only program in the south which does meet these standards. It is meeting these standards precisely because it is being run outside of the traditional power structure. This is the Child Development Group of Mississippi (or CDGM) Headstart. All across the state in hundreds of poor communities local poor residents are running their own Headstart centers in a program which is a model of success, efficiency, and of maximum feasible involvement of the poor.

And all over the state power structure backed Community Action Programs are blocking, attacking, and trying to take over CDGM Headstart programs.

* * * * *

"THE DELTA SPEAKS - ABOUT THE POWER STRUCTURE AND O.E.O."

4

Another way such a program could be run in Holmes County would be through the 6 Community Centers in the county which serve the negro communities (and are available to the poor whites as well). These centers are non-profit agencies run by and for the poor. They involve participation of hundreds of poor people every week. They are in fact the largest and most effective institution in the county which serves the real needs of the poor - and that is because they are operated by the poor themselves.

The Holmes County Community Center Association has prepared a draft proposal for a Community Action Program in Holmes County and has submitted this proposal to the Office of Economic Opportunity's regional office in Atlanta. In this draft proposal some of the other necessary changes in poverty guidelines were brought out. It was suggested that there be no provisions for indirect elections which can be manipulated by the power structure. In the case of Holmes County it was suggested that a period of about two months be used for holding workshops in every poor community around the county to inform the poor people of the purposes and possibilities of this program, and that they should have a major part in the decisions in the work. We felt that they could not intelligently vote for representatives unless they had some understanding of what the program was about. Interest is very high in Holmes County. 30 communities had heavy turnouts to elect representatives to the Holmes County Community Action Program Advisory Committee. Proper attempts to involve the poor and prior community organization can ensure large turnouts and "maximum feasible participation of the poor". The Office of Economic Opportunity needs a vastly enlarged field staff, perhaps drawn from the local people themselves, to do this preparatory groundwork.

We proposed that an Advisory Committee of the Poor, composed only of poor people, be formed by direct community elections which would "have authority to make proposals to the communities for their approval, and to the Community Action Program Board, which would then have to act to approve or reject them. It should also have authority to review policy decisions before they are implemented".

The Advisory Committee of the Poor was designed to act as a check on the Community Action Program Board which would be dominated by the corrupt power structure. Having had more experience with the Atlanta office of O.E.O. and having heard of other Community Action Programs in the delta (the one in Bolivar County is a particularly bad situation), as well as experience with our power structure in the Community Action Program, we feel that this part of the proposal was too weak.

The part of the recommendation that gives the Advisory Committee of the Poor authority to recommend proposals to the communities or the Community Action Program Board is still desirable. This forces the hand of the Community Action Program Board to act publicly to reject programs of the poor and will force them to have sound reasons for doing so. But we feel now that the Advisory Committee of the Poor should have veto power over proposals of the Board so that it cannot easily implement programs which are designed to help the rich or buy off the poor.

We see the necessity of this veto power in the fact that the Atlanta regional O.E.O. office has ignored significant protests from poor people in Holmes County and has conferred with the power structure and acted in such a manner as to support unfair practices by the Community Action Program Organizing Committee, controlled by the power structure.

The Delta Speaks

"THE DELTA SPEAKS - ABOUT THE POWER STRUCTURE AND O.E.O."

5

Exhibits B - F attached to the copies of this speech for distribution to the Government, the Press, Citizens Crusade Against Poverty, and others, are a few examples of the scores of letters and petitions containing hundreds of signatures of poor Holmes Countians protesting the speed of the elections in Holmes County and the fact that the power structure was not willing to take the time to hold the necessary workshops to explain the program before elections.

As far as we can determine, only two of all those letters and petitions were answered. Those answers were polite, meaningless, and showed complete unconcern on the part of the regional office for the problems voiced by the poor.

Exhibits B and C raise fundamental and detailed questions which the Community Center and the Holmes County Freedom Democratic Party thought must be answered before the people in the community could understand the program well enough to hold elections. The Atlanta regional office of O.E.O. did not even have the courtesy to reply, though both letters were sent well before the date of the elections.

If the Southern Regional Office is going to back up the corrupt power structures, then it is absolutely necessary that we have new guidelines that severely limit the ability of the power structure to subvert the goals of this Poverty War.

Another reason that the Advisory Committee of the Poor must have veto power is that the power structure, not being poor cannot see the problems of the poor because they do not live the life of the poor. They cannot see past their vested interests.

The proposals offered the poor of Holmes County by the power structure in the March 7th mass meeting in the Holmes County Court House were either designed to help the small white businessman (and therefore the whole white business community), or to buy off negro discontent by offering free commodities and insignificant make-work jobs for some teenagers.

Ladies and Gentlemen, 80% of the people in Holmes County are poor. The few Small Business Administration loans offered under the Small Business Administration Program offered us can only help a very tiny number of people. This proposal was not a joke. It was an insult.

And our kindly masters had a free food program for us workers to keep us alive to work on their plantations or to keep us from getting violently hungry. We already have two commodity programs operating in the state. Once we eat this free food we are still poor. We cannot be bought so easily.

Then our kindly old masters planned a National Youth Corps Program to buy off a few teenagers. What about the thousands of heads of families who need jobs - good paying jobs so they can support their families in dignity? What do we have from our kindly masters for them? Nothing!

Our kindly masters had better understand that we do not want charity. We want jobs, land, and dignity.

The Holmes County Community Center draft proposal (attached as exhibit A) gets right to the heart of the issue. Our kindly masters say we need education (and blame us because they did not provide it in the past). But poverty is defined by income. Therefore income is the first and most important problem. We need jobs first and education second.

"THE DELTA SPEAKS - ABOUT THE POWER STRUCTURE AND O.E.O."

6

The state of the public works in all Mississippi counties is scarcely better than the public works in the rest of the nation 50 years ago. The roads are a disgrace, usually gravel instead of black top in the negro sections. The houses are worse than barns, most without running water or indoor plumbing. Sanitation facilities are primitive or non-existent. The schools for negroes and whites offer the lowest quality education in the nation. The medical facilities in the counties are so inadequate that people have to travel long distances, often while desperately sick or injured, to get proper treatment.

People could be put to work rebuilding the public facilities of the state. That is the first way to stop them from being poor. There are jobs that need to be done. The poor should be doing those jobs.

Time does not permit me to go through our whole draft proposal. But we present it as a draft proposal of poor people to solve their own problems.

Time is running out for the poor people in Mississippi. They will not much longer stand idly by and be starved out of the state.

The Office of Economic Opportunity had better understand - and understand this clearly - that we will not allow the Poverty War to go wrong. We will do whatever is necessary to see that the corrupt power structure does not use this poverty to further enslave us.

Mrs. Daisy Lewis, Director
Holmes County Community Center