

Mississippi: Structure of the Movement, Present Operations, and Prospectus for this summer.

What is COFO?

The Mississippi Council of Federated Organizations is a federation of all the national civil rights organizations active in Mississippi, local political and action groups and some fraternal and social organizations. Anyone active under any of these groupings is entitled to attend COFO conventions and participate in policy-making decisions of the organization. The COFO staff, consisting of anyone working full time with any civil rights organization in Mississippi, implements the decisions of the COFO conventions, and prepares recommendations for the consideration of the COFO convention. Below the level of the state-wide COFO convention, there are district organizations corresponding to the five Congressional districts. These district organizations are presently in the planning stages for practical purposes. The staff, however, is broken down into Congressional districts, with five district directors; this organization structure actually functions. The state organization has four standing committees: Welfare and Relief, Political Action, Finance and Federal Programs. The district organizations have, or will have, similar standing committees. Dr. Aaron E. Henry of Clarksdale, State President of the NAACP, is President of the Council of Federated Organizations. Robert Moses, Field Secretary and Mississippi Project Director for SNCC, is the Program Director, who supervises the Mississippi staff and is elected by it. David Dennis, Mississippi Field Secretary for CORE, is Assistant Program Director, and is similarly elected.

How is COFO financed?

The expenses for COFO's projects are paid by direct grants from national civil rights groups as these groups volunteer to contribute. This accounts for nearly all of COFO's income. Expenses of staff workers are paid by the national civil rights groups also, the arrangements varying with the group. At present, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee supports COFO projects in the First, Second, Third, and Fifth Congressional Districts as well as the state COFO office in Jackson. The Congress of Racial Equality assumes responsibility, on a direct-to-the-project basis, for the Fourth Congressional District. COFO does not solicit funds for itself, by agreement with the civil rights organizations which support it, for, it is felt that it would thus compete with the supporting groups. Negligible amounts are sent directly to COFO, however, and these moneys are not credited to any national civil rights organization. Usually such small donations are earmarked for particular projects, such as the book drive or welfare relief (Food for Freedom) funds, and are dispensed according to the direction of the donor.

What is COFO's relationship to National Civil Rights Organizations?

COFO represents the effort of all civil rights workers in Mississippi to coordinate their efforts in one direction for maximum efficiency. Staff members, however, are paid by separate organizations and do not lose the organizational identity or their affiliation with the national office of whatever organization they work for. SNCC and CORE workers work together on joint "COFO" projects, and thus must make all plans

and decisions in common; on the project they are not separate. But they maintain their special relationship with the organization which hired and pays them.

COFO - Short History

COFO has evolved through three distinct phases in its short history. In its first phase it was little more than an ad hoc committee called together after the Freedom Rides of 1961, in a successful effort to obtain a meeting with Governor Ross Barnett. This committee of Mississippi civil rights leaders proved a convenient vehicle for channeling the voter registration programs of the Voter Education Project into Mississippi. This injection of funds led to the second phase of COFO as an umbrella for voter registration drives in the Mississippi Delta, and other isolated cities in Mississippi. During this period, beginning in February 1962, COFO added a small full-time staff, mostly SNCC and a few CORE workers, and developed a voter registration program. The staff worked with local NAACP leaders, and SCLC citizenship teachers in an effort to give the Mississippi Negroes the broadest possible support. COFO continued essentially as a committee with a staff and a program until the fall of 1963. There were many doubts about the validity of COFO during this period; some thought it should be abandoned. But always, we come back to the inescapable fact that the Negro people in Mississippi needed some organization which could belong to them (as opposed to their belonging to it) which would serve as a unifying force among the isolated Negro communities. The emergence of the Ruleville Citizenship group, and the Holmes County Voters League, testified to the possibility of starting strong local groups. We felt the need to develop horizontal ties among these groups, with the strongest common denominator possible within the general aims of the Civil Rights Movement. Thus there was continuing effort on our part to cut across county and organizational lines and have people from different areas meet with each other, sponsor county, regional and statewide meetings, to bring students together from different parts of the state for workshops, to help send groups outside of the state to meetings, conferences, workshops and SCLC citizenship schools - anything to help break the despair of aloneness the isolated Mississippi Negro feels. During this second phase we began to feel more and more that the "Committee" could be based in a network of local adult groups sprung from the Movement as we worked the state.

We are presently in the third stage which really began with the Freedom Vote for Governor campaign of the fall of 1963. This marked our first statewide effort and coincided with the establishment of a statewide office in Jackson and a trunk line to reach into the Mississippi Delta and hill country. During this stage we have broadened the staff to include more CORE and SNCC workers and more citizenship teachers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, have established working relationships with a great many local organizations, and have established in our own minds the validity and necessity of COFO.

What are COFO's programs?

COFO works in two major areas. Most of its resources are directed toward various voters' activities. It has a large and growing number of programs, however, which come under a classification of "educational and social". Each program can be described briefly.

The "educational and social" programs are the Freedom Schools, Federal Programs, Literacy, Work-Study, Food and Clothing, and Community Centers projects.

A. The Freedom Schools are planned for the summer of 1964. Freedom Schools will be geared to high-school age children and will run for six weeks during the summer. The students will be given remedial instruction in basic educational skills, and exposed to cultural influences which are not normally available to them, but the main emphasis of the schools will be to implant habits of free thinking and ideas of how a free society works. Hopefully, too, the schools will lay the groundwork for a statewide youth movement, which would coordinate projects of special interest to young people, such as a statewide school boycott in sympathy with voter registration efforts.

B. The goal of the federal programs project is to make the programs of the federal government which are designed to alleviate poverty and ignorance reach the people of Mississippi. Such programs as the Area Redevelopment Act, the Manpower Development and Training Act, and such bureaus as the Farmers Home Administration and the Office of Manpower, Automation and Training cannot benefit the people of Mississippi as things now stand because the normal channel of information, the State agencies, do not properly present these programs. The federal government insists that any federal aid be given on a nondiscriminatory and integrated basis, and the State of Mississippi is not reconciled to this. So private agencies must act as liason between the federal programs and the people they are designed to help. COFO projects in the program so far have included a Conference on Jobs and Job Training, where leading industrial and governmental officials discussed the expansion of job training opportunities in Mississippi in connection with the space facility now being built by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and a planned conference with the National Sharecroppers Fund to present agricultural opportunities to Mississippi farmers scheduled for the end of February.

C. The literacy project at Tougaloo College is a research project under the direction of John Diebold and Associates company, and is financed by an anonymous grant to Tougaloo College. The goal of the project is to write self-instructional materials which will teach adult illiterates in lower social and economic groups to read and write. Such educational materials do not now exist, and they must be developed before there can be any comprehensive program to eliminate illiteracy in Mississippi. Staff workers are being trained to develop these materials under the direction of the Diebold group.

D. The Work-Study project is an attempt to solve one of the more pressing staff problems in the Southern Movement, that of the conflict between full-time civil rights work and school for the college-age worker. Under the work-study program, students spend a year in full-time field work for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, under the direction of COFO field staff, and with special academic work designed to complement their field work and keep them familiar with learning and intellec-

tual discipline. After this year of field work, they get a full scholarship to Tougaloo College for one year. The academic expenses of the project, both the Tougaloo scholarships and the first-year scholastic program, are financed by a grant from the Field Foundation. Project and personal expenses of the work-study group during the first year of field work are financed by SNCC. the group plans to expand next year to other campuses, but this year it is based in Jackson and Tougaloo.

E. The food and clothing program is a privately-financed distribution program of the necessities of life for persons whose needs are so basic that they cannot feed their families one meal a day per person.

Food

The adequacy of dietary levels are measured by two criteria: caloric intake (quantity) and nutritional content (quality). The caloric intake of some--not all--poor rural Mississippians is at some--not all--times sufficient. These times are usually 1. when they receive government commodities, 2. when the tenant or low-income farmer receives money from his cotton and other minor crops, usually in early and mid-fall, and 3. when landlords give credit to tenant families, usually from late March to July. The rest of the time the poor rural families, the under- and un-employed, fare as best they can. Usually this means tightening their belts, surviving off one meal a day, adults going without so that children may eat--in short, it means starving. Even when people get enough feed, it is largely starches and fats. There is great reliance on corn bread, sweet potatoes, rice and fat or side pork. Even the government commodities are not sufficient for adequate nutrition. The poor in Mississippi do not get enough protein, calcium, essential vitamins and minerals for proper nutrition.

Our goal, of course, is to see that these people are ultimately paid a living wage--but malnutrition can be cut down by distribution of a few food commodities and massive distribution of inexpensive vitamins.

Clothing

The clothing situation of both the urban and rural poor is desperate. Mothers do not go around the house in dirty robes or ragged dresses or even in their slips because they are basically unclean, but because they have nothing to change into. Fathers don't lounge around in the filthy, smelly overalls they work in during the day because they are too lazy to change their clothes, but because they have nothing else to put on. Children do not walk around barefoot because they want to pat their feet in the Mississippi mud, but because their parents cannot buy them shoes. And in the winter the Mississippi mud becomes hard, frozen ground.

Shelter

Many people in the deep South live in housing unfit for human habitation. The 1960 census showed that in Mississippi over 50% of the rural occupied farm housing was classified as either deteriorating or dilapidated. Furthermore, more than 50% of the rural occupied homes have no piped water and more than 75% have no flush toilets, bathtubs or showers. For Negroes the housing situation is even worse. The 1960 census showed that in Mississippi, 66% of all Negro housing was "dilapidated or deteriorating"--71% in rural areas. More than 90% of rural Negro homes in Mississippi have neither flush toilets nor bathing or shower facilities.

COFO's food and clothing program cannot cope with poverty this serious (State welfare aid is totally inadequate), but it helps, especially in

some especially pressing areas. The program gives special attention to persons in need because of their participation in other programs, such as attempting to register to vote. Food distribution is along the same lines as government commodity programs administered by the counties. There is presently no vitamin distribution could probably be arranged if administrative difficulties could be resolved (i.e. securing the cooperation of doctors). Clothing distribution involves a national coordinating effort. Sympathetic individuals and groups collect clothing in drives all over the country and ship it to Mississippi with the cooperation of a national relief agency. Present COFO has no program to deal with the housing conditions in Mississippi, but when the community centers are better organized they can begin a program of home-repair workshops and volunteer workers assisting people to repair their homes, all working out of a community center.

F. The community centers program projects a network of community centers across the state. Conceived as a long-range institution, the centers will provide a structure for a sweeping range of recreational and educational programs. In doing this, they will not only address the basic needs of Negro communities now ignored by the state's political structure, but will form a dynamic focus for the development of community organization. The educational features of the program will include job training programs for the unskilled and uneducated, literacy and remedial programs for adults as well as young people, public health programs such as prenatal and infant care, nutrition, etc. to alleviate some of the serious health problems of Mississippians (for instance, Negro infant mortality rates in some counties are so high as to invite comparison with "underdeveloped nations."), adult education workshops which would deal with social relations, federal service programs, home improvement and information vital to the needs of Negro communities, and also extracurricular programs for grade school and high school students which not only supplement educational deficiencies but would provide an outlet for critical thought and creative expression. Each center will have a well-rounded library--to which Negroes in many communities have no access.

Though the community centers program is primarily education

The development of this wide range of social and educational programs has emerged almost inevitably out of the urgent necessity to create institutions outside the existing structure to meet the vastly neglected needs of the Negro communities of Mississippi. But COFO's primary objective remains in the area of voter education, because it is only by the creation of a broadly-based and informed electorate that Mississippi's system of racial oppression can be destroyed ultimately. Thus, most of COFO's staff work is presently in the area of voter registration. Through neighborhood canvassing, mass meetings, and citizenship classes teaching the difficult registration form, COFO's staff members work continuously to encourage as many Negroes as possible to register to vote. In areas where there are already local organizations COFO workers provide incentive and technical skill to voting efforts. But often the COFO worker must work in areas where there are no established community groups and in such places he must undertake the organization of the local people into a durable civic structure.

All this voter activity must operate under extremely hostile conditions. In the past two years alone, hundreds of civil rights workers have been arrested in the course of promoting registration efforts: for distributing leaflets ("littering the sidewalks", "publishing libel", etc.), for picketing, and for an untold variety of trumped-up charges ranging from armed robbery to traffic violations. In addition, workers have been beaten frequently, often by local or state officials, and sometime even shot. (One, Jimmy Travis, missed death by inches last winter when he was hit with a bullet in the neck.) But local citizens are often the worst victims of the atmosphere of political oppression which exist in Mississippi, for they are not only subject to harassment, intimidation and arrest, but economic reprisals as well. Countless numbers have lost their jobs, been evicted from plantations, or had their credit suddenly discontinued for the simple act of attempting to register. But despite these conditions, thousands of Negroes, in the past two years have filed into county courthouses around the state in an effort to become qualified voters. In Mississippi, however, to attempt to register is rarely a guarantee of gaining the right to vote. By means of arbitrary powers endowed in local registrars, the state has ensured the systematic rejection of Negro applicants. For instance, one requirement for successful registration is a correct interpretation of a section of the Mississippi constitution. As a result, of some sixty thousand Negroes who have attempted to register in the past four years, only about six thousand have been inscribed on the voting rolls.

The frustration of regular efforts to register voters led to the "Free-com" concept of political action. In the fall of 1963, COFO held a statewide nominating convention to choose a candidate for Governor

cause of discriminatory registration practices, not because they are apathetic and have no idea of where their political interests lie. The Freedom Vote clearly supported this contention: when they were given a chance, 83,000 Negro Mississippians did in fact vote.

The second contention was that if Negroes were registered without discrimination and intimidation, they not only would vote, but that their votes would change the results of Mississippi elections, and therefore of the political structure of the state, now dominated by white, conservative racists. Aaron Henry's 83,000 votes certainly would have influenced an election where the losing official candidate received only about 10,000 votes, and the winner around 200,000, if they had been registered.

A third reason for the campaign was to provide a forum for discussion of the real issues in Mississippi; discussion of this kind is not possible in the context of regular Mississippi political campaigns.

One of the most significant results of the Freedom Vote campaign was in the area of organizational development. For the first time a statewide operation took effect. A central office was set up in Jackson to coordinate activities around the state. The five regional district offices, established in September, became operational bases for penetration of neighboring cities and towns. The practice expanded their operational scope beyond the city in which they were based. The campaign workers made contact with cities and towns previously untouched by the movement.

The Freedom Registration program grew logically out of the Freedom Vote. The plan of the Freedom Registration is to register a large portion of the 425,000 Negroes of voting age in Mississippi on the Freedom Registration books, using COFO requirements, rather than official state registration requirements. The COFO requirements are the same as the state requirements concerning age, residence and moral character, but COFO registration would have no literacy or tax requirements. Local people will serve as registrars in their communities, under the supervision of a County Board of Registrars. Registration places will be put wherever people normally go--churches, schools, places, lodge halls, beauty parlors and barbershops, etc. Registration books would be open in the evenings and on Saturday and Sunday. The idea would be to encourage registration, not to make it difficult and inconvenient. This will be consistent with our belief that voting should be encouraged by the civic authorities, as the taking of oral vows is.

In all elections, those persons who are freedom registered and who have their freedom registration cards, will be entitled to vote in freedom elections. Negro candidates will run against the regular candidates in both the freedom and the official elections, and the comparison of totals is expected to prove that Negroes are now denied the right to be a significant voice in Mississippi political affairs. In political campaigns, where there is no question of actually holding public office, the question is raised as to why put forth all this effort. Besides the value of the campaigns in organizing Negroes, and the dramatic demonstration of the denial of the right to vote, there is one more important reason. One of the most effective ways to create interest in voter registration is to have candidates

running who discuss the real issues publicly, and who attract the attention and interest of the Negro community simply because there is great novelty in a Negro candidate for public office. The discussion of the issues is especially important because regular party campaigns do not normally allow a forum for honest debate of the state's real problems. Also the mass communications media do not permit those who oppose the official economic and racial policies a wide audience for their views. A political campaign with federal guarantees of equal time is one of the few opportunities to reach a large audience with an accurate presentation of the COFO goals and programs. Negro candidates in this fall's elections will create this discussion, at least in the Negro community.

Related to the Freedom election activity is a planned challenge of the Mississippi Democratic party. In 1960, both parties published civil rights platforms which, if implemented, would have brought racial and economic justice closer to reality. They were, however, not enacted. In 1964, the civil rights organizations must bring this discrepancy of promise and accomplishment to the attention of the American public. There will be activity at the national conventions around this theme. COFO in Mississippi plans to send a "freedom" delegation to challenge the right of Eastland Democrats to represent the people of Mississippi. Beginning with precinct conventions in February which send delegates to the county conventions, then to the district and state conventions and finally to the Democratic National Convention, COFO plans to challenge the segregationist Democratic delegates on all levels and over as large an area as possible. The challenge will be based on: 1. attempts to participate in the regular party conventions, 2. presumed expulsion, 3. duplication of party conventions in rival, "freedom" proceedings, 4. election of rival, freedom delegates at all levels, and 5. presentation of the state Freedom delegates at the National Democratic Convention to challenge the seating of the regular delegates. The most recent COFO convention also voted to challenge the Republican National Convention in some more modified manner, but more specific plans have not yet been made.

Much of this projected political and educational activity depends upon a staff much larger than is now in operation, or could be in permanent operation, on COFO's budget. COFO plans to provide the necessary manpower with a massive summer project, using college students from all over the country, but especially from Southern Negro colleges to organize the Mississippi Negro community, register voters both on the county and the Freedom books, operate the Freedom Schools, begin the community centers projects. The participants will be divided into three categories for administrative feasibility. The Freedom Schools would have one overall director for the state and district supervisors for each Congressional district. The community centers would be organized on the same basis. Political activity is already organized this way; the summer project would add to the present structure of political activity, besides a general beef-up, two new categories: mobile units of four men and a car which would fill gaps in the state political program plus moving into crisis areas if the regular staff is depleted; also two or three "saturation" areas where masses of field workers would concentrate on a city (as many as one worker to every twenty eligible Negroes.) to register every possible Negro, both official and freedom, and promote other protest activities.

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