

Southern Idea

Poor People's Corporation Lets the Poor Speak Out

by Lucy Kornisar

Some one recently said "It seems the whole country is off prospecting for poverty"—scrambling to stake a claim in the newest government bonanza. While civic and welfare organizations compete for control with local government officials, they all are pretty generally agreed that the poor cannot be given the power to make policy or to direct anti-poverty projects.

However, some of the poorest people in the country have decided to test that proposition. In the rural towns and counties of Mississippi impoverished Negroes—about 200 of them—have established a community deve-

lopment corporation that promises to "put the control directly in the hands of the poor people and make them totally responsible for the planning."

The purpose of the Poor People's Corporation, which is what it is called, is to give financial and technical aid to people with small incomes who want to start cooperatives or other self-help programs. SNCC worker Jesse Morris came to New York early this month to talk about the plan and to try to get help.

Morris, a man in his late 20's, who grew up in Los Angeles and went to college in Iowa has been in Mississippi for two years. While there, he married a Tougaloo College coed.

Wrote Economic Analysis

Morris, a Negro, sees economic development as the key to change in Mississippi. Out of his experience organizing sharecroppers into economic self-help projects, he wrote an economic analysis called "The General Conditions of the Mississippi Negro."

Morris talked confidently about the development of the Poor People's Corporation. It is a non-profit operation which will establish a loan fund financed by contributions and the sale of "freedom bonds" ranging in denominations from \$10 to \$500. At quarterly meetings dues-paying members—25 cents annually—will hear requests for loans and vote on the allocation of funds.

Requests for money must come from groups of 10 or more people, chartered by the state as cooperatives or corporations. No interest will be charged, and the schedule of repayments will be based on the ability to pay. The money will be used to finance handicraft works, light industry, farm cooperatives, and even low-income cooperative housing.

Seeks Teachers

Capital is not the only asset needed to put the corporation in business. Its job program cannot get off the ground without skilled labor and market outlets. Morris says he is looking for people skilled in woodworking, leathercraft, and other handicrafts to train jobless Mississippians, most of whom are farm workers.

He is aware that a successful

industry cannot depend on artificial markets created by civil-rights supporters. The Poor People's Corporation has come up with several solutions—general stores in a number of Mississippi's larger cities, a mail-order house, and a New York office to seek regular outlets in Northern shops and department stores. The prices of the products will be competitive, but projects will be undertaken only if the shared profits assure workers a decent wage, Morris said.

Ellen Maslow, a 25-year-old Brandeis College graduate who was in Mississippi for several months in the fall, will run the New York office. She said that a number of skilled craftsmen have already offered to go to Mississippi to help train the people.

The corporation is interested in producing, among other things, geodesic domes for low-cost, simple-to-make housing that has proved successful in Africa. However, a less complex cooperative made up of a dozen Ruleville women, is showing a profit based on local sales. The Fayette County tote bag industry employs 87 people on a part-time basis. Each worker earns about \$200 a year from the bags, about a third of his annual income. The tote bags were originally sold by CORE chapters. Now, word-of-mouth advertising leads to enough orders to keep the project a money-making venture.

The first meeting of the Poor People's Corporation will be held

in Jackson on August 29. Although 10 civil-rights volunteers are spearheading the organization, the statewide membership will decide how to spend the money.

"The groups that want money," Morris said, "will have to give us as much information as they can. It's the only way they will learn. People who don't usually participate in decision-making processes have to be given an opportunity. The Poor People's Corporation is a direct result of the fact that people feel the government isn't interested in poor people participating in a meaningful way."

The establishment of the corporation is tied to the theory that parallel institutions must be created for people who cannot participate in the existing ones. At present, few people will deny that the poor Negro can only dream the American dream—never participate in it.

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