

NEWS RELEASE
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OFFICE ONLY

HATTIESBURG, MISSISSIPPI - More than 350 people - native Mississippians staff members and volunteer workers - for the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) gathered here last weekend to chart future programs in their attack on Mississippi's segregated structure. The group agreed to support the challenge being mounted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and to continue their state-wide programs reaching into almost every phase of political and social activity.

They represent the single largest collection of civil rights workers ever gathered together. They are working on the largest group of programs any civil rights drive in history has ever undertaken.

COFO as it is today had its organizational beginnings in a Clarksdale, Mississippi Methodist Church in August, 1962, but the name, COFO, goes back nearly two years before that meeting.

COFO was a name decided upon by a group of Negro Mississippians when they were seeking an audience with the then-Mississippi Governor, Ross Barnett. Thinking that Barnett would turn down a meeting with representatives of the older, established civil rights organizations, they used the name COFO - Council of Federated Organizations - for a meeting with him in the spring of 1961, to negotiate the release of "Freedom Riders" arrested because they violated Mississippi's segregation laws.

Among the organizers of the first COFO were Medgar Evers, slain NAACP field secretary; Dr. Aaron Henry, State President of Mississippi NAACP Branches; and Carsie Hall, one of Mississippi's four Negro lawyers. Dr. Henry was elected President and Attorney Hall, secretary.

After the Barnett meeting, the group became inactive, but it was revitalized in January, 1962 when Robert Moses, head of voter registration in Mississippi for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Thomas Gaither, Mississippi representative for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), wrote a memorandum proposing that the civil rights groups working in Mississippi band together to work on registering the state's Negroes. Moses had been working on voter registration in rural Mississippi since August, 1961; his experience showed him that discrimination in Mississippi would only yield to an all-out unified attack by as strong a force as possible.

COFO submitted a proposal to the newly formed Voter Education Project (VEP) of the Southern Regional Council in February, 1962,

under the signature of Dr. Henry, then as now, NAACP head and head of COFO.

VEP had announced it would finance voter registration drives in the South, but it did not support COFO's plan until after the August, 1962 organizational meeting.

All of the full-time civil rights workers in Mississippi at that time were present at the Clarksdale meeting, except Evers, whose busy schedule kept him away. Attending were CORE's David Dennis (who had replaced Thomas Gaither as CORE's man in Mississippi); the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Rev. James Bevel; SNCC's Moses; SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman; and the other ten SNCC workers then scattered throughout the Mississippi Delta.

The meeting renominated and elected Aaron Henry president and Attorney Hall secretary. The Reverend R. L. T. Smith of Jackson was named treasurer and CORE's Dennis was elected to the Executive Committee. Bob Moses was named program director.

A VEP grant in September, 1962 enabled COFO to begin work in Bolivar, Coahoma, Leflore, and Sunflower Counties where SNCC staff members already had done crucial ground work.

COFO moved next into Washington County. The entire staff came together again in February, 1963 for a concerted push in Leflore County after the near fatal machine-gunning of SNCC Field Secretary Jimmy Travis. A food and clothing drive launched the winter of 1962-1963 helped support many of the Dental families victimized because of their participation in the vote drive, and began to solidify support with Northern college campuses.

After Greenwood, workers moved into Holmes and Madison Counties and made in-roads into other Delta locations. By fall, 1963, a state-wide "Freedom Vote" with regular COFO workers bolstered by volunteers from Yale and Stanford Universities extended permanent civil rights workers into the city of Jackson and Hinds County, Warren, Adams, Forrest, Lauderdale, Lowndes and Jones Counties.

Following the "Freedom Vote", the Mississippi staff, then numbering about 50 full-time workers, met in SNCC's office in November, 1963 to chart future plans. The state was divided along congressional district lines and workers elected a project head for each district. SNCC's Lawrence Guyot, now state chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, was project head in the 5th

District, based in Hattiesburg, SNCC worker Sam Block directed the 2nd District from Greenwood; SNCC worker Frank Smith operated in the 1st District from Holly Springs; and CORE staff member Matteo Suarez directed activities in the 4th District from Canton.

McArthur Cotton, a SNCC worker, reactivated voter registration in McComb, and became 3rd District Project Director. McComb had been the site of SNCC's first Mississippi project in 1961.

Additional workers from SNCC, CORE and SCLC entered the state. The November, 1962 Freedom Vote had shown that Northern, white college students could work effectively in Mississippi and plans were laid for a Mississippi summer project, involving 900 students, doctors, lawyers and teachers, working on programs of community centers, freedom schools and voter registration.

Details of each aspect of the summer program were ironed out at a large staff meetings. COFO workers believed then, as now, that decisions about program and techniques in Mississippi were best made by those who lived and work there, and not by those unfamiliar with the state.

The summer project ended in August, 1964 and the Mississippi Freedom Project began almost immediately afterward. Over 200 volunteer workers remained in Mississippi to continue voter registration work and keep some of the 32 Community Centers and 41 Freedom Schools operating.

SNCC's Moses met with the NAACP's Wilkins, SCLC's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and CORE's James Farmer to solicit their support.

Financial support and staff for COFO have come from the beginning from SNCC and CORE predominantly. SNCC is responsible for 125 of COFO's staff members. When the VEP withdrew its funds from COFO in October, 1963 because the state-wide organization engaged in "political programs" not allowable under VEP grants, SNCC and CORE agreed to contribute money toward "taking up the slack". SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman said, "we thought COFO's assault on Mississippi had to survive."

In February, 1964 CORE decided to send extra staff members into the state and concentrated most of them in the 4th District.

SCLC has cooperated with COFO's programs through their Citizenship Teacher Program of training local people to become teachers, and the state conference of NAACP Branches has supported COFO through its member units.

The Council on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches trained most of last summer's volunteers and has kept a steady flow of ministers-acting as counselors-in and out of Mississippi since the summer began.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., the National Lawyers Guild and other legal groups have supplied lawyers and legal advice.

"The most important thing about COFO is not its name or its history," a volunteer worker said, "but that it has been able to involve so many people and groups, both black and white, from Mississippi and elsewhere, in a total program aimed at completely eliminating discrimination and segregation from every corner of the state."