

Sunflower County COFO Project
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

INDIANOLA, MISS., Jan. 4, 1965—"This is the beginning of a new day in Sunflower County," Charles MacLaurin, 23, SNCC field secretary, told 275 people assembled around the Sunflower County Courthouse today. The gathering of Negroes was the first demonstration of its kind in the history of this cotton-rich Delta county and the first county-wide Freedom Day since the movement for voting rights began here.

Sunflower County is the birthplace of the White Citizens Councils and the home of Sen. James Eastland. It is also the home of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, Freedom Democratic Party candidate for the contested congressional seat of Jamie Whitten, representative from Mississippi's Second District.

The unexpectedly large and increasingly exuberant throng had just concluded a six-hour picket of the courthouse, singing freedom songs and resting on the grass and on the courthouse steps.

There were no arrests, even though Mississippi law prohibits picketing. About 30 local police wearing riot helmets and sheriff's deputies witnessed the proceedings. Some were kept busy directing traffic. Most stood around idly. Besides a low-flying yellow plane which buzzed the courthouse for about an hour, there was only one minor incident causing no injury.

Over 400 people walked in the picket line at some time during the day. It was the largest of seven Freedom Day demonstrations in Mississippi today to demand the right to vote and to support the Freedom Democratic Party's Congressional Challenge of the regular Mississippi congressmen.

The picketers carried signs reading: "One Man--One Vote," "Abolish Taxation Without Representation," "Black and White Equal and Right," "Support the Freedom Democratic Party Challenge," "We Want Mrs. Haner Not Jamie Whitten" and "Mr. Eastland, My Father Wants to Vote."

The picket line began at 10:30 a.m. with 70 picketers who were prepared to go to jail. It grew steadily as the first group was joined by those who had come to register to vote but were turned away by the registrar, C. C. Campbell, who closed his office for the day. During the last hour the line swelled to 275 when picketers joined in a swaying human chain extending around three sides of the courthouse square to sing "We Shall Overcome" before leaving and walking single file, singing, down the main street of the Negro ghetto to the COFO Freedom School. The picket line was led throughout the day and through the town by serious-faced young Negroes, one carrying the American flag and the other a sign crying "Uhuru!" which is Swahili for "Freedom!"

"Sunflower County will never be the same because of what happened here today," MacLaurin said from the courthouse lawn. White county officials and employees watched from the courthouse steps in the waning afternoon sun as MacLaurin spoke of the day when "Negroes will again elect black men to Congress, the state legislature and county offices, men who will pass legislation in the interests of all the people, black and white."

Freedom Day had special significance for MacLaurin, a native of Jackson, Miss. In 1962, under conditions of constant police harassment, MacLaurin had spearheaded voter registration work in Sunflower County. Since then over 1,000 Negroes have tried to register in the county. Despite the registration drive and a federal suit against the county registrar, less than 200 out of 13,500 eligible Negroes are on

the voting rolls because of the discriminatory registration test.

If Freedom Day was a day of deep personal meaning to MacLaurin, it was a collective triumph for the Negro community, a triumph over the climate of oppression and fear that is the lot of the county's 31,000 Negroes. There is widespread, well founded fear of economic reprisals as well as of physical violence. Countless Negroes have lost their jobs or have been driven off plantations or removed from welfare rolls for trying to register to vote or for participating in the Freedom Movement. The record is one of the most notorious in the state.

But the people came. When police did not arrest anyone in the first group of picketers, others were encouraged to join. Still they face the possibility of losing their jobs or being expelled from school. Several policemen spent most of the day taking people's pictures, and many of the white onlookers, sitting in their cars with the windows closed, came to the courthouse for the purpose of finding out if their maids or farm workers were there. But the maids and farm workers and unemployed people and students and school drop-outs sang about not being moved, and shouted "Uhuru!" and were answered "Freedom Now!" by others on the line. They seemed not to care who was watching them exercise their constitutional rights at the courthouse.

The day started with a band of 35 people, most of them old and infirm, standing in the chilly corridor of the courthouse where officials kept the doors of entrances on three sides open. Barred from the registrar's office and shivering from the cold, these people had every reason to feel weary and powerless. But the day found the people shedding their coats and their fear, feeling a new sense of their own strength, standing hopeful, confident, united.