

THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY: "RACE HAS KEPT US BOTH IN POVERTY."

Mike Miller. May, 1965.

The Movement.

Only one year old, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) is one of the most exciting political phenomena of the country. Born of the voter registration drive initiated in Mississippi by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the MFDP now is an independent organization, claiming before the nation its right to be recognized by the national Democratic Party as the Democratic Party of Mississippi. The MFDP first came to the attention of the nation when it challenged the seating of the so-called "regular" Democrats at last summer's Atlantic City Democratic Convention. Again the country was aroused by the Mississippians when, on opening day of Congress, they challenged the right of Mississippi's five Congressmen-elect to sit as the Representatives of the State of Mississippi. Behind these national confrontations is a quiet, but even more dramatic, story of people in Mississippi creating their own statewide political organization, an organization growing up from the grass-roots, expressing the demands of the movement in Mississippi and reflecting the problems of poverty and deprivation faced by the vast majority of Mississippians, both black and white.

TO RALLY AGAINST FEAR

Beginning in 1961, Negro citizens increasingly sought to register -to vote. For SNCC, two basic problems had to be faced. First, the overwhelming fear based on the experience of beatings, killings, home bombings, evictions and firings that confront Negroes who seek their constitutional rights in the State; second, more subtle, and more difficult to work with, was the feeling shared by many Negroes in the State that politics wasn't their business. The phrase commonly used was, "politics is white folks business". The oppression of the caste system leaves its mark on the consciousness of those who must live under it. Behind that phrase was a sense of inferiority, a sense of being "unqualified," that was shared by many of the Negroes in Mississippi. For two years, first one at a time, then in tens, then in hundreds, Negroes went to the country courthouses seeking to register to vote. In some cases, they were not even allowed to fill out the application form that precedes registration. In most cases, they were told they failed to successfully complete the application. Two questions were generally used to flunk the applicant: (1) interpret the following section (chosen from 383 sections of the Mississippi State Constitution) of the Constitution; (2) interpret the duties and obligations of citizenship under a constitutional form of government. Whether the applicant

passed or failed was determined by the registrar of voters, usually a member of the White Citizens Council.

THE FIRST BALLOTS CAST

Early in the summer of 1963, a Yale law student who had come to Mississippi to work with SNCC, discovered a statute which allowed any person who believes he is being illegally denied the right to vote to cast a ballot along with an affidavit stating that he is an elector in the State. In a state-wide meeting with local movement leadership, the statute was described and discussed. It was decided that a concerted effort would be made across the State to get Negro voters to the polls with affidavits and that they would seek to vote. In the first state primary election, thousands of Negroes in Mississippi went to the polls for the first time. The response across the State varied. In some places, like Greenwood, ballots and affidavits were accepted and later disqualified by local officials. In other places, like Ruleville, Negro voters were met with guns and driven away from the polling places. Despite the fact that no votes counted, the confrontation was an important one. State officials became apprehensive over the national publicity around the voting and in some cases Negroes had their first polite treatment by a white official.

Equally important, the primary election Negro turnout demonstrated to civil rights workers in the State that their painstaking door-to-door, church to church, bar to bar work was paying off. Morale was bolstered, both among the full-time SNCC workers and among the Negroes in the communities where election challenges took place.

83,000 FOR FREEDOM

Out of the summer election came new discussions about politics in Mississippi -- and a new concept, the "freedom vote". Excluded from the official elections in the state, Negroes in Mississippi decided to hold their own election.

The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) met on Oct. 6, 1963 and named Aaron Henry and Rev. Ed A. King as freedom candidates for Governor and Lt. Governor of the State. (COFO, probably the most misinterpreted civil rights organization in the country, is a loose coalition of local movements in the State of Mississippi, including some branches of the NAACP, and of full-time staff workers from SNCC, CORE and SCLC). A freedom ballot, naming the "regular" candidates -- Democrat Paul Johnson and Republican Rubel Phillips -- and the freedom candidates, was printed. Freedom registration forms were used to enroll voters. The

first experiment with Northern college students coming into the State as volunteers was initiated as some 30 students from Stanford and Yale joined regular staff and local community activists in the circulation of the freedom registration forms and the election day collection and tabulation of ballots. When all the ballots were turned in, 83,000 Negroes had cast freedom votes, with the overwhelming majority cast for Aaron Henry and Ed King.

A PARALLEL POLITICAL FORCE

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was a logical extension of the concept of freedom votes and freedom candidates. That the new Party be a Democratic Party was a matter of some discussion in the State. Following the November, 1963 freedom election success, another state-wide meeting of civil rights activists in Mississippi, held April 2, 1964, discussed the future.

Their decision was to create a parallel Democratic Party -- one that would, in every respect, comply with the rules and regulations set down by the Mississippi State Constitution for the conduct of political parties, and that would be Democratic because it was in the Democratic Party that significant decisions about the lives of the people in the State were made. However, the MFDP was independent in the sense that it owed no patronage or appointments to the National or State Party. This double character of the Freedom Democratic Party, at once inside and outside the system, is a major source of its national strength and the fear that it later caused the "pros" of the National Democratic Party.

Underlying the Atlantic City Convention challenge were three basic considerations. A special MFDP report named them as "(1) the long history of systematic and studied exclusion of Negro citizens from equal participation in the political processes of the state ... ; (2) the conclusive demonstration by the Mississippi Democratic Party of its lack of loyalty to the National Democratic Party in the past ... ; (3) the intransigent and fanatical determination of the State's political power structure to maintain the status-quo, .. " At its founding meeting, the MFDP stated, "We are not allowed to function effectively in Mississippi's traditional Democratic Party; therefore, we must find another way to align ourselves with the National Democratic Party." So that such an alignment could be established, the MFDP began organizing meetings throughout the State to send delegates to the Atlantic City Democratic Convention.

THE PEOPLE COME TO ATLANTIC CITY

Beginning at the precinct level, moving then to county meetings and Congressional District caucuses, and ending with a State Convention on August 9, 1964 in Jackson, Mississippi, the Freedom Democrats went to work. The meetings were conducted under the leadership of a temporary State MFDP Executive Committee which had been chosen on April 26th. Out of the meetings came a full delegation, ready to go to Atlantic City claiming the right to sit as the Democrats of Mississippi.

NATION-WIDE SUPPORT: BUT NOT FROM THE WHITE HOUSE

At the same time as work was being done in the State, representatives of the MFDP were traveling across the country seeking support from Democratic Party delegations for the Challenge. As Convention opening drew near, the following States were among those whose State Democratic Executive Committees or State Conventions had passed resolutions (some of them not binding) supporting the MFDP's Challenge: New York, Massachusetts, District of Columbia, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Oregon, California, and Colorado. A SNCC worker who traveled across the Country seeking support for the MFDP later described the Convention experience.

Writing in the October, 1964 *Liberator* (an independent Negro monthly), Frank Smith said, "... by the time the Convention started, there were eight state delegations which had passed resolutions supporting the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, but word had come down from Washington that President Johnson wanted the Regulars seated and the FDP ousted. The word from the President came as an unexpected shock to the FDP, because their basic strategy had been built around the idea that the President would either be on their side or be neutral. There were, however, political considerations involved, and there is an old political adage that says 'whenever there is cake to be cut, never fail to get your two cents' worth.' With this in mind, it now seems foolish that the FDP could have ever expected the President to be either on their side or neutral."

"The hearing at the Credentials Committee added more brush to the fire. The FDP had developed a strategy of getting the required 12 signatures out of the Credentials Committee to file a minority report, and thus get their fight to the floor of the Convention, and to get the required eight state caucuses to sign a petition to get a roll-call vote on the floor. So· that when Washington decided to bring pressure, it first started on the Credentials people from the states that had already passed resolutions in support of the FDP. By Sunday, the second day of the Credentials

Committee hearings, there were reports of threats of bank charters and judgeships being denied and various kinds of appointments being in jeopardy."

Smith notes that FDP delegates learned a great deal at the Convention. It was clear, he said, that at the Convention "the delegates did not vote on anything... It seems, however, that the delegates were satisfied to have their right to vote us urged, and the decision handed down to them." He points to the contradiction between this and the FDP position. "The FDP philosophy was one-man, one-vote, a philosophy born of the democratic process, and fostered in the faith that if the people are allowed to decide they will make the right and just decisions."

NO TO THE COMPROMISE

The credentials committee, reflecting the Johnson Administration, offered a series of compromises. The "best" compromise they offered was to give Aaron Henry and Rev. Ed King votes as Delegates-at-Large, to require the Regular Democratic Party of Mississippi to pledge support for the national Democratic ticket and to establish a committee to work on requirements for ending racial discrimination in the Party by the 1968 Convention. Liberal spokesmen across the country could not understand why the FDP refused to accept the compromise. Among other things, they called the decision "apolitical".

The FDP answered its critics--though the press never saw fit to carry the answer. In its reply to critics, the FDP said, "In analyzing why the FDP did not accept this compromise, it is important to understand first what the FDP delegation represented and what it accomplished at the convention. The FDP delegation was not simply an "alternative" delegation chosen by Negro instead of white Mississippians. The FDP is not a Negro party, but an integrated party, open to all whites. It grows directly out of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. It came to Atlantic City demanding, not simply that Negroes be represented, but that racism be ended - in Mississippi and in the Democratic Party. Moreover, the conditions under which the FDP delegation was chosen were certainly unique. Though the MFDP delegation was chosen according to the laws of Mississippi, its role was only partially political.

This is so because simply to take part in political processes of the state makes the Negro in Mississippi automatically a rebel against the segregated society. This means that he is in immediate and grave danger of losing his job, his home, and possibly his life. Many of those who represented the FDP at Atlantic City have suffered the most brutal and continual reprisals ever since they began working for their political rights. This lends a peculiar and unique air to their efforts to attend the Convention and means that they were literally gambling their lives against the right of being seated in Atlantic City."

The third thing that must be understood is that the FDP had the support it needed to win the fight at Atlantic City. Within the Credentials committee there was sufficient support to get the FDP's demands on the floor there was sufficient support to force a roll call vote. Once a roll call was allowed most observers agreed that the FDP would-have been seated.

What prevented this was the massive pressure from the White House through the mediation of Hubert Humphrey. The FDP delegation was aware of all of this and if therefore know that the leadership of the Party and the Convention was denying it what if fact it had the popular support to win. This kind of dictation is what Negroes in Mississippi face and have always faced, and it is precisely this that they are learning to stand up against.

THE FREEDOM PRIMERS

The FDP has launched a major new educational program in the state through the use of Freedom Primers. The Freedom Primers are short, simple booklets on different phases of politics economics, and civil rights as they effect Mississippians.

The first primer concerned The Convention Challenge and The Freedom Vote. The primers will be distributed to MFDP activists and to students in the Mississippi Project's Freedom Schools. As much as possible, MFDP distribution will be made through local officers of the party.

In this way they will serve an organizational as well as an educational function.

The primers will be used as the basis of discussion at precinct and county meetings and at voter registration meetings. It is hoped that the primers can be published once every 10 days for a full year, each issue on a different topic. It is hoped the primers will provide a breadth of facts and concepts more vital to the growth of political understanding than a more rigid educational program.

DECISIONS RISE TO THE TOP

The basic tool of political education and decision-making in the FDP at the local level is the workshop. Workshops are designed to do two things: (1) to share information; (2) to open discussion and begin to break through the feeling of being unqualified that still exists among many Negroes in the State.

In most places, workshops are now led by members of the MFDP. Only in new, unorganized areas do staff members organize initial workshops and these are soon led by people from the local community. Workshops deal with real problems confronting the FDP, like organizing in the next community or county, or

developing a program for coming county elections, or circulating Freedom Registration forms, or selecting local Freedom candidates to run for council, sheriff and other local posts.

THE MODERATE OPPOSITION

Atlantic City represented a major new stage in the development of the FDP. Conservative civil rights spokesmen joined with conservative -- and some liberal -- Democrats in questioning this new maverick party. Since Atlantic City, FDP leaders have been warned against starting a Third Party. They are told to be "realistic". They are urged not to move too fast. These warnings are reflected by the behavior of the NAACP National Staff person in Mississippi, Charles Evers. The NAACP said it was pulling out of COFO (though the National was never really in) and Evers became the spokesman within the State of this position. Despite Evers' position, branches of the NAACP in Mississippi remained active in the FDP, some of them providing the Party with active members. In other places, local people had their first real internal political fights. It is interesting to note that recently national columnists, like Evans and Novak have sought to use these internal debates as a lever to split the FDP and to weaken its Northern support. In their nationally syndicated column, Evans and Novak spoke of three known Communists in the FDP delegation. Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer, former sharecropper and now a major spokesman for the FDP, whose testimony before the Atlantic City Credentials Committee stirred the Nation, was recently called "demagogic". More interesting and important than the attacks has been their apparent lack of success in changing the minds of either Negroes in Mississippi or people across the country who are tired of the Eastlands and Whittens who have for so long represented the Magnolia State in Congress.

With Atlantic City behind them, the Freedom Democrats went back to Mississippi to begin work on two new endeavors. First, and by this time almost a routine, was a freedom election with freedom candidates from the FDP running for office and supporting the national Democratic ticket. Second, and now the major national effort of the FDP, was the Congressional Challenge.

ROCKING THE BOAT FROM THE BOTTOM

The Congressional Challenge is based simply on the idea that the Congressmen of Mississippi have been illegally elected and should, therefore, not sit in the House of Representatives. On the opening day of Congress, acting in close contact with the MFDP, but using a different legal base for the Challenge, Congressman William

Fitz Ryan of New York introduced a "Fairness Resolution" which stated that in all due fairness to the challenging MFDP candidates and in recognition of the discriminatory practices of the Mississippi Democrats, the Mississippi Congressional delegation should not be seated and the contestants, Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer, Mrs. Victoria Gray, and Mrs. Annie Devine, should be given floor privileges through the session of the House so that should their challenge be successful, and should they later be named Congresswomen, they would have the opportunity of knowing the history of the session of Congress. Again the Freedom Democrats stirred the nation -- and rocked the political boat. Working through ad hoc committees in many Congressional districts, through Friends of SNCC groups, CORE chapters, some NAACP branches, ACLUs, ADA chapters and other organizations, the FDP was able to build a movement that led, finally, to 150 votes in support of the Challenge. While the final result is impressive, it was not enough to win. Equally impressive was the way in which the coalition backing the challenge was built. Many of the national organizations that were to finally back the FDP's challenge only did so after they began to receive pressure from their own members at home. The final January 4th grouping that was around FDP was built from the bottom up, beginning first with maverick chapters, branches and locals of national organizations that only after questions from below began to move.

The California vote for the January 4th Fairness Resolution is a clear indicator of how Congressmen may be expected to vote on the Statutory Challenge when it comes to the floor of the House again. It should not be taken for granted that Congressmen who voted for the opening day Fairness Resolution will also vote for the Challenge.

The voting record of the California Congressmen follows:

(R) Republican; (D) Democrat;

(Number of Congressional District)

Against seating the Mississippians; supporting the MFDP:

Robert L. Legett (D) (4th)

Phillip Burton (D) (5th)

William S. Mailliard (R) (6th)

Jeffery Cohelan (D) (7th)

George P. Miller (D) (8th)

Don Edwards (D) (9th)

John F. Baldwin, Jr. (R) (14th)

Chet Holifield (D) (19th)

Augustus F. Hawkins (D) (21st)

James C. Corman (D) (22nd)

Ronald Brooks Cameron (D) (25th)
James Roosevelt (D) (26th)
Alphonzo Bell (R) (28th)
George E. Brown, Jr. (D) (29th)
Edward Roybal (D) (30th)
Ken W. Dyal (D) (33rd)
Lionel Van Deerlin (D) (37th)

For seating the Mississippians; opposing the MFDP:

Don H. Clausen (R) (1st)
Harold T. Johnson (D) (2nd)
John E. Moss (D) (3rd)
Charles S. Gubser (R) (10th)
J. Arthur Younger (R) (11th)
Burt L. Talcott (R) (12th)
Charles M. Teague (R) (13th)
John J. McFall (D) (15th)
B. F. Sisk (D) (16th)
Cecil R. King (D) (17th)
Harlan Hagen (D) (18th)
H. Allen Smith (R) (20th)
Del Clawson (R) (23rd)
Genard P. Lipscomb (R) (24th)
Ed Reinecke (R) (27th)
Charles H. Wilson (D) (31st)
Craig Hosmer (R) (32nd)
Richard T. Hanna (D) (34th)
James B. Utt (R) (36th)
John V. Tunney (D) (38th)

The Statutory Challenge to the seating of the five Mississippi Congressmen now is supported by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the National Council of Churches (NCC), and the Louisiana Committee of Concerned Citizens. In addition, numerous organizations at the state and local level have given support to the Challenge, as well as many less known national organizations.

THE MFDP: CANNOT BE BOUGHT AND SOLD

Within this national coalition and within the State of Mississippi a quiet struggle goes on over the Freedom Democratic Party. Two central issues are involved. One has to do with the militant stance of the FDP, especially in regard to the national Democratic Administration. No State Democratic Party is as independent as the MFDP would be if it were to become the Democratic Party of Mississippi. Despite the fact that our civics books tell us that the national parties are weak, there is a web of Presidential power that keeps most State Democratic Parties in line. The web is held together by powers of patronage and appointment, by the discretionary powers involved in the awarding of contracts and the selection of sites for public spending. The tools of national power that can be mobilized against recalcitrant Congressmen and maverick State parties are many, and they are manipulated by a master in the arts of politics. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society does not seem to include room for the MFDP; nor does his style of consensus politics allow the sharp raising of fundamental questions that has been so characteristic of the MFDP in its short history.

THE MFDP: BELONGS TO ITSELF

This quiet struggle goes on, perhaps even more intensely in Mississippi.

Here is the second aspect of the fight over FDP. Just as the FDP raises fundamental questions and issues, so does it also function in a way that is frightening to the manners of polite society. The FDP is genuinely a party of the grass-roots people in Mississippi. They participate in and run the Party. Sharecroppers and domestics, laborers and unemployed, they make up and control the destiny of their Party. Because this kind of participation has become so alien to American political thinking (the Town Meeting was alright then, but after all ...), many Doubting Thomases have questioned its existence. Generally, they advance a conspiracy theory regarding the FDP. It is, they say, manipulated from someplace else - - most frequently it is alleged that SNCC manipulates the FDP. And the more SNCC staff pulls out of Mississippi to begin work in other places where the movement has not yet begun to take hold, the more sinister is SNCC's control over the MFDP.

The two qualities of MFDP - its rank and file participation and its ability and desire to raise basic issues and questions - - are related. It is, after all, those who are hungry. Ill-housed and ill-clothed, those who are denied the right to vote and who are beaten and abused by local police who are most likely to raise questions of poverty and civil rights. And because they have nothing to lose, having nothing to begin with, they are also least likely to "sell out". Thus their participation in and control of the MFDP is intrinsic to its ability to remain a voice of honesty, dealing

with central issues, refusing to substitute rhetorical gains for substantive victories. And it is here, in this area, that the day to day politics of the MFDP is fought out. For some time, it was argued that the Mississippi movement ought to be guided by a national Board of Directors that would include representatives of the major liberal and civil rights organizations in the Country. It was always SNCC's position -- and others came to share it -- that such an idea was a direct violation of the spirit of one man, one-vote. SNCC workers took the position that people who lived and worked in the State of Mississippi would have to be the ones who made the decisions. This did not mean that everyone had to automatically accept these decisions; it did, however, mean that control of decision making would have to be in the hands of the people of the State.

This decision has now been accepted -- in part because it is a reality, and, in part because some have come to see the merit of the view.

There tends to be a correlation between social status in the Negro community and the militancy advocated for the movement and the issues to be raised. The moderates tend to be the people with more status in the community -- whether this be the status of money or education or position. The moderates also tend to be the traditional leaders (or non-leaders) of the community, and this relates to the whole question of qualifications and who can participate in politics. There is now a new leadership in the State, built around people like Mrs. Hamer. Some of the people of status in the Negro community have joined with this new leadership in raising basic questions. Most have not.

The issue is particularly painful as the voting bill nears passage. Even on its face, the bill has serious inadequacies. In particular, it offers no protection against economic harassment against Negroes who seek to vote, nor is it clear why this bill will be any more forcefully executed than the many good laws already on the books. It is clear, however, that some Negroes are going to register to vote -- and that this number may, in some cases, be a key bloc vote able to carry primary elections or even general elections one way or the other. So basic questions are raised. Will Negroes continue to support the MFDP and its present positions?

Will Negroes support white "moderates" when they run against blatant racists?

THE "REGULARS" FEUD.

Within the State's Democratic Party, a split appears to exist just below the surface of racist unity. One wing of the Party seems to be ready to concede that the days of Southern style racism are done. They are the realists who recognize that de facto segregation will have to be tried now, and who are learning how to do that from the

North. The white patriots who defend "the Southern way of life" to the end are now on the defensive. With the voting bill, the national Party will be able to align itself with the realists in the State. This means that tremendous resources will suddenly become available to those who will make some concessions toward joining the rest of the country in its more subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice.

The realists are joined by a tiny number of white Mississippians who are committed to racial justice but who have been silent. Generally these are churchmen professionals and others in the middleclass.

THE NEGROES MAY SPLIT

The Negro moderates see in the development of the white realists an ally. Since their major concerns have to do with civil rights and not poverty, they do not demand a program of social reform along with a promise of legal reform. To the extent that their voices are still respected in the broad Negro community, their advocacy of moderation may well be extremely powerful.

They might even take the position that the MFDP ought to be allowed to die and that Negroes ought to join in the formation of a new Democratic Party which would force the rabid racists into the State's Goldwater Republican Party.

NEEDED: A WIDER INSURGENT MOVEMENT

The moderate's position is strengthened by two other facts. First, the MFDP, as it is now constituted, has no counterparts anywhere in the country. There are movements, such as the county movement in Louisiana, Virginia, Alabama and other places in the South; there are small pockets of insurgency in poverty areas, such as Appalachia, the California farm valley, and the urban ghettos. But nowhere is there a full fledged insurgent Democratic Party. The reform Democratic movements in the North tend to be led by professionals - - lawyers, businessmen and professors.

Thus poor Negroes in Mississippi who now lead a political party must feel themselves quite alone and must, indeed, wonder at times whether they really can do what they are doing. Second, within the State, there is no movement among poor whites which could be a counter-part to the realists who have emerged within the Democratic Party.

The white community project, initiated well over a year ago by COFO under the slogan, "Race has kept us both in poverty", remains more an organizing goal and political strategy than a reality. Efforts to bring whites together to discuss their

problems of poverty have invariably failed because of the identification of the white COFO workers who were in the project with the Negro based movement.

FREEDOM LABOR UNIONS, CO-OPS

COFO staff in Mississippi is beginning to deal with some of these problems. A Mississippi Freedom Labor Union is being organized specifically to raise issues of wages, hours and conditions. Farmers' Leagues are growing in the State and making demands for just treatment for the small farmer. Small co-ops are being talked about and, in Ruleville, the first start to building them is underway. Federal programs, such as those under the Department of Agriculture, the Housing and Home Finance Administration, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the Office of Economic Opportunity, are being investigated. Still a weak point in the COFO program is its white community project.

THE CHALLENGE

For MFDP, the problems of the immediate now take priority. Calls to the country for support of the Challenge are now out. SNCC Chairman John Lewis recently called the Challenge the most important political event of 1965. To support the Challenge and to raise the issue of home rule in Washington, D.C., SNCC is calling for students from across the country to come to the Capital from June 13 to July 4. During that time there will be a student lobby for the MFDP. Subsequent to the lobby, some students will be asked to return home to engage in lobbying activities in their home districts; others will go South to join in summer projects.

Whatever the future for MFDP, it constitutes, in the eyes of many, the most exciting political event of post World War II era. Whether, the MFDP will be able to maintain itself as a movement of the poor or whether it is only the first in the development of new movements at the grass roots level that are soon to join in the development of a program that addresses itself to the basic problems of the society can only, at this point, be a question.