

[1964, Feb.]

Commission on Religion and Race
National Council of Churches

REPORT TO THE COMMISSION ON CANTON, MISSISSIPPI

Canton, Mississippi in Madison County is 25 miles north of Jackson. The Negro population is 6,200 of a total population of 9,700. Only 6% of the eligible Negroes are registered.

BACKGROUND:

In April of 1963 COFO began a voter registration campaign in Canton. This program has continued until the present. In June of 1963 retaliatory measures against the COFO workers began. In June their office was ransacked. Workers were shot at. At that time local white people were arrested and fined \$500 for illegal discharge of firearms. Through the summer over 200 people attempted to register. Less than 10% were approved. During this time the white community threatened the workers and blocked roads to prevent people from coming to meetings. In December of 1963 George Ryamond, COFO worker, was pistol-whipped by a police officer and arrested for intimidating a police officer.

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Also in December the Negro community, in addition to the voter registration drive, began a boycott of white businesses. Once again the COFO office was ransacked. The town council passed an ordinance restricting distribution of leaflets. Workers in the COFO community center were arrested on a variety of charges such as repairing buildings without a permit, disturbing the peace, intimidation of police officers, intimidation of local Negroes, the distribution of libelous leaflets and the distribution of leaflets without a permit.

Boycott

In January of 1964 a COFO worker was arrested for burning trash without a permit. A COFO worker was arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. On the 25th Canton police set up road blocks at the entrance of the city limits and inspected all incoming and outgoing cars. On January 28th about 35 Negroes attempted to register and five were accepted. On January 30th the police revoked the operating permits of all Negro taxi cabs. The gas pumps at a filling station owned by a civil rights leader were removed by the Amoco representative. On February 3rd trials were held for many of those previously arrested, and civil rights leaders were convicted. As an example, Carole Merritt, age 23, a COFO worker from Cincinnati, Ohio, was convicted of contributing to delinquency of a minor and publishing libel. She was sentenced to a \$500 fine and six months in jail on each charge. COFO reports that after a voter registration rally the first week of February two of the workers were taken behind the jail by the police and beaten with fists, hose and a night stick. One also reports that the police shot a bullet in the floor near his feet, cut off some of his hair and fired blanks into his body. Both were advised against further participation in voter registration campaigns.

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At the present time the Negro community is in turmoil. About 200 people continue to publicly support the freedom movement by attending mass meetings. The boycott remains effective. Some Negroes, however, are apparently so intimidated that they are willing to file charges against the COFO work-

ers. The Negro ministers are apparently nervous about the activities in their community and have set up a committee separate from the civil rights committee to negotiate with the white leaders.

PROPOSED ACTION:

The following leaflet is to be distributed in Canton:

Citizens of Madison County, "Freedom Day - February 28, 1964" is the day when everyone should be at the courthouse in unity, to express to everyone that Negroes do and will vote in Madison County. No one knows the frustration Negroes encounter when attempting to register. It is time to make known our dissatisfaction with the procedure of the Circuit Clerk when registering Negroes. Negroes do not register nor vote freely in Madison County. We know it; America must know it. Go to the County Court House on February 28. We will be there to help you register to vote.

Madison County Movement

COFO workers estimate that 100 local adults, no students, will march to the courthouse to register on February 28th. The National Chairman of CORE is prepared to lead this march. The Madison County Registrar is being advised of the march and is being requested to secure additional assistants for that day to handle the large number of applicants. Even though COFO rejects the constitutionality of the local leaflet ordinance they plan to request a distribution permit. Rev B Elton Cox, the UCC minister from North Carolina who indicates that he might burn himself in Chapel Hill on Easter Day, he is going to Canton February 24th to address the mass meetings. Mr. Dave Dennis, assistant program director of COFO and the person in charge of the Canton operation, indicates that there will be a follow-up response to the activities of the 28th, dependent in part upon the reaction of the white community to the voter registration march. Both Mr Dennis and Dr. Aaron Henry, director of COFO, have requested that ministers accompany the local residents in their march.

PROPOSAL:

Without citing all of the recommendations of the National Council of Churches and our Commission, it should be pointed out that at the last meeting of the Commission on January 16th it was voted that the Commission on Religion and Race believes the issue of the right to vote ~~and~~ to be one of the crucial priority. At that time there was some discussion that voter registration drives take different shapes in different communities because of the local conditions and the orientation of particular civil rights organizations. "Now is the time for action -- even costly action that may jeopardize the organizational goals, and institutional structures of the Church, and may disrupt any fellowship that is less than fully obedient to the Lord of the Church."*

It is recommended that we support the voter registration march in Canton, Mississippi on February 28th. Our effort should be one of acting in concert with COFO and at the same time acting with a real openness towards and intention of reconciling the white community. The following steps seem appropriate:

- A. That a prominent member of this Commission accompanied by staff representation approach the governor of Mississippi. Recognition should be given to the reaction to the Hattiesburg demonstration, to the governor's inaugural address, and expression should be made of our expectation that the same kind of response to prospective voter registration would be extended in Canton.
- B. Local civic leaders and police officials should be approached and told of the support for the registration drive.
- C. The leaders of the religious communities in Canton, both Negro and white should be approached. They should be told of the support of the Church for the voter registration drive and an effort should be made to interpret the present racial conflict within a Christian understanding.
- D. In order to carry out the above it is recommended that 15 to 20 clergymen meet in Jackson, Mississippi no later than February 26. From this group persons could be selected to make the preparatory contacts in Canton. Part of this group would participate in the march on the 28th and the remainder of the group be in readiness for any follow-up action that is appropriate to the nature of our commitment.

Arthur C. Thomas
Field Representative

* A Report of the President's Temporary Committee of Six on Race, Approved by the General Board on June 7, 1963