

[1964, Aug. 3]

LAW STUDENT'S REPORT CANTON, MISSISSIPPI

I. NATURE OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES

The activities of the Canton COFO project can be classified in the following manner:

1. Political Programs
 - (a.) Voter Registration
 - (b.) Freedom Registration
2. Freedom School Program
3. Community Center Program

The purpose of the voter registration program is to encourage Negroes to become eligible to vote and to inform them of the importance of voting. This program also includes a great deal of instruction as to the importance of political action generally.

Since this was a convention year, there was a great deal of emphasis placed upon registration in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which plans to challenge the seating of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party delegation to the National Convention in Atlantic City. Negroes are not allowed to participate in any functions of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party. The reason for having people register in the Freedom Democratic Party is to show how many are dissatisfied with the present structure of the regular Democratic Party in Mississippi.

The purpose of the Freedom School program is to give those subjects that are not taught in the Mississippi schools (such as Negro History). The program also attempts to help students who have weaknesses in certain areas and to aid those students with special interests.

The Community Center Program was to provide a place for meetings, day care for preschoolers, political discussion, adult education, and health education. The program, it was hoped, would give Negroes some of the cultural and educational facilities and instruction that are denied them in the South.

II. INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT BY PRIVATE PERSONS

There have been instances of violence by private persons committed against people associated with the Civil Rights program in Canton.

Joe Lee Watts, Scott Smith, Bill Carney, and Michael Fiore were assaulted by different persons in the white community within the last three months. None of these workers were seriously injured but they were all struck or kicked at least once by the white men.

The Freedom House is kept under constant surveillance by the white community. Automobiles with two way radios drive back and forth past the house throughout the day and night.

There have been so many crank telephone calls that the number has had to be changed three times in the last three months. The crank callers either shout obscenities or threats or hang up when the phone is answered. These calls come at all hours of the night, making it impossible for the workers who live in the Freedom House to get a good night's sleep.

There have been two bombs thrown at the Freedom House, one on June 8, 1964 and one on July 11, 1964. A bomb was also thrown at the house of Mrs. Marion Robinson, a Negro lady who is quite active in the movement.

III. INTIMIDATION, HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE BY OFFICIALS

While there have been problems with private persons, by and large the greatest harassment and violence come from the local officialdom.

People who work with the civil rights movement who do not live in Madison County are "asked" to come to the city police station to register. Registration involves a person giving his name, description, local telephone number, local address, as well as his home address and home telephone number. They are told that unless they cooperate with the police in this matter they will be picked up individually and held for questioning until the information is obtained. After the registration is completed the police give the person a card saying that he has registered with the Canton Police Department. Several ministers were picked up by the police at the bus station and taken to headquarters and forced to register before they were allowed to make any contact with the COFO office in Canton at all.

The most frequent type of harassment from the local police comes in the form of alleged violations of city ordinances or very seldomly enforced state statutes.

There have been frequent arrests for reckless driving, speeding, not stopping at stop signs (which sometimes do not even exist) or improper license. These charges were and are totally without merit, as witnesses to the events would testify. The Justices of the Peace set the fines so low that it would be foolish to plead innocent and attempt to defend against the charge. So the workers have generally pleaded guilty and paid a small fine (plus court costs) in order to get back to their normal work as soon as possible. They don't have the time to become involved in a legal suit which they would eventually lose.

Recently five volunteers and one staff worker were arrested in the Negro business section of Canton on a charge of distributing leaflets without a permit. They were not distributing anything; they were only attempting to get Negroes to fill out Freedom registration forms and urging them to go to the courthouse to register.

The above paragraphs give a general picture of the harassment and intimidation by private persons and local officials; but this is not

a complete picture. The most successful attempts at intimidation of local N-groes have been economic intimidation. Local people who work with the Civil Rights Movement have their rents suddenly doubled, their property reassessed, thus raising their tax payments considerably. Many people who have been openly active with the movement have lost their jobs even though their work had been satisfactory for years before their becoming involved in civil rights work.

IV. PROTECTION BY STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS AGAINST VIOLENCE

There has been little or no violence because the COFO staff have taken active steps to avoid it. The police, state and local, have said they are doing all in their power to prevent violence, but they have been conspicuously absent until after the acts of violence have occurred.

V. RELATIONS WITH JUSTICE DEPARTMENT AND FBI IN THE INVESTIGATION OF INCIDENTS

The FBI and the Justice Department have been quite cooperative in investigating incidents that we have reported to them. However, there is a great deal of concern in that nothing seems to be done after the incidents are investigated.

Robert P. Watkins
Law Student
Canton, Miss