

702 Wall Street
McComb, Mississippi
September 9, 1964

Mr. Burke Marshall
Civil Rights Division
Justice Department
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Marshall:

From the inception of the Mississippi Summer Project, there was widespread fear among staff and local people that retaliatory violence and intimidation would greatly increase with the withdrawal of the summer volunteers at the end of the project. While this situation has not yet been realized in most parts of the state, events of the past two weeks have clearly demonstrated that these fears were fully justified as regards Pike County, Mississippi. There is reason to believe that the current situation for both COFO workers and the Negro community is extremely dangerous.

The situation, which is developing in Pike County resembles that which developed throughout Mississippi immediately before the Summer Project, culminating in the murders of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia. If the present increase in violence is not halted it is almost certain that within the coming weeks there will be a civil rights worker killed in Pike County. We want to make you clearly aware of this situation now so that such a disaster may be prevented. We are asking those in positions of responsibility to take immediate action to stem the growing tide of official and private violence in this region.

Since the beginning of civil rights work there in 1961, Pike County has been considered perhaps the most violent county in the state. This record was continued this summer. But despite three bombings, including that of the COFO Freedom House; four churches burned; one COFO worker beaten; and numerous other incidents of harassment and intimidation during July and the first half of August, significant restraints were being applied to prevent what could have been a still more dangerous situation. Largely because of national attention, law enforcement officers played at least a neutral role in Pike County, helping to restrain open violence, neither was there serious police harassment of civil rights workers or local Negroes.

These restraints have become increasingly less evident in the period since August 15, when the Burglund Supermarket was bombed. A turn in the attitude of local officials was signaled the following night by a raid on the COFO Freedom Houses by over twenty city, county, and state police officers, virtually every law enforcement agent in the county. On the pretence of looking for illegal liquor the police examined important papers and documents located in the Freedom House.

During a voter registration drive from August 17-22, the official intimidation and harassment continued. McComb Chief of Police George Guy threatened the whole COFO staff with arrest for the distribution of leaflets promoting voter registration. One COFO worker was arrested inside the courthouse for loitering. Another COFO worker who attempted to bond him out had a gun pulled on him by the jailer, who

later told him, "Black boy, I ought to kill you right now".

On August 23, local police began a crackdown on local Negro business establishments which had been regularly patronized by COFO workers. Early that morning local police raided the tavern belonging to a Negro whom they had already beaten earlier in the summer, arrested him after, we believe, having planted some whiskey on the premises, and threatened to kill him. There were several such raids in the following two weeks.

Meanwhile, throughout the state the white community has been convincing itself that the Summer Project would end as scheduled on August 27, and that the white volunteers would then all go back North. In reality, some 200 volunteers are continuing work in the state this winter, as well as 100 staff workers. In Pike County, apparently, August 27 was considered the cut-off date for the relative restraint shown during the summer. Since that date incidents of violence and open police intimidation have markedly increased.

On August 28, a bomb exploded on the lawn of the home of Mr. Willie J. Dillon, whose family has been active in civil rights (his children regularly attended Freedom School and his wife had attempted to register to vote and was an active participant in the Freedom Democratic Party). A few hours after the bombing, Mr. Dillon was arrested on charges of tapping electricity and running an unlicensed garage. He was convicted the next day, his trial having been kept secret from the lawyer who had been retained to defend him. Mrs. Dillon was told by Sheriff Warren, "If you don't cooperate with us and not COFO, there will be a lot more happening to you". On the day of the bombing, Mrs. Dillon was also shown some sticks of dynamite by Mississippi State Highway Patrolman Bobby Felder, who told her they could kill her if she didn't stay away from COFO. On September 2, while interrogating Mrs. Dillon about her relations with COFO and the FBI, Patrolman Felder told her, "I hope the next time they drop it in the middle of your home, and you can tell the FBI if you want to".

On August 29, police cars together with cars driven by local white hoodlums circled the Freedom House from midnight until 5:00 a.m. On September 2, three COFO workers were beaten, one badly, in two separate incidents in broad daylight in the heart of downtown McComb.

In the past 72 hours there has been an even further serious deterioration of the situation. In this period 6 bombings have occurred in the McComb area. In addition, Mrs. Ernestine Bishop, whose daughter attempted yesterday to integrate a Summit grade school, was told today that she must leave Mississippi by Saturday, September 12, in a threat delivered by a local white. In recent knowledge, this is the first time that a local Negro has actually been ordered to leave Pike County, although such incidents have been common in some of the surrounding counties.

Mrs. Bishop probably will not leave. But whatever her decision, the COFO workers definitely will not leave. The present COFO project will continue throughout the coming months, and white volunteers from the North and West will continue to join Negro staff and volunteers in manning the Pike County project. The question is not whether they will be there, but whether the local state and Federal governments will be able to provide them the protection they need. If they do not, the national shock of June 21, 1964, is likely to be repeated once again.

A newspaperman with reliable contacts in the white community has reported that there is a definite plan to "get" three of the

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COFO workers: Dennis Sweeney, Jesse Harris, and Merdy Samstein. After firing a Negro policeman who apparently was not being sufficiently cooperative with the white community's plans, the McComb police have just put on the force a local Negro bootlegger known to have served time at the state penitentiary, to have shot two persons, and to have seriously beaten at least three others, including a local NAACP official. Various sources have indicated that he has been put on the force to deal with COFO workers.

Finally, at present there are only four FBI agents in McComb, a significant decrease from the peak of 16 reached during the summer. The decrease apparently represents the attitude by the Federal Government, shared by most Mississippians, that the summer volunteers have now gone home and that the Federal Government need no longer take an interest in the situation. Not only does this attitude represent an illusion as to what has happened in regard to the "summer" volunteers, it represents a betrayal of the Negroes of Mississippi, who cannot leave, and who require, if anything, more protection than the volunteers.

We, of the McComb project are convinced that our situation has become critical. We must again make it clear that unless responsible forces are brought to bear in McComb, what happened in Neshoba County will happen here. We plead with you to take action now before it is too late.

Sincerely,

Jesse Harris
McComb Project Director

and for:

Mrs. Ernestine Bishop
Malcom Campbell
David Gerber
Cenhas Hughes
Douglas Jenkins
Merdy Samstein
Reverend Everett Simpson
Reverend Michael Yasutaki
Dennis Sweeney
Mrs. Evelyn Singer
Joseph White

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