

c/o COFO

Box 654

Batesville, Mississippi

Sunday, Independence Day

Dear Friends:

We are finally at home in Batesville, Mississippi, a small farming community in north western part of the state. When I say 'at home' I mean it, because excluding our forced twelve day stay in the hands of the Jackson City Police, we have been traveling all over the state. Mississippi is fascinating, full of contradictions and frustrations, but also rich in possibilities. The movement has gone far beyond the stage where the presence of civil rights workers means that segregation is evil. We are now in the midst of ferment; the Freedom Democratic Party is functioning in 32 counties, the Freedom Labor Union is involved in a strike which has taken more than 1700 farm laborers off their plantations, here in Batesville a marketing Co-op is about to sell its first okra crop to Northern markets, in several towns there is talk of a maids union, of running Negro candidates, of massive attempts at school integration. But there are tremendous questions: is the FDP tending toward political behavior typical of our establishment? Is it feasible for "local people" to make decisions which come from the bottom up? Is it possible to create a new political structure, or must we concede that we can do no better than deal with what exists, and make it better? and more specifically, when men strike or talk of striking, what is there to offer them in the face of automation and an already severely reduced work load? how do we regard the movement people who now talk of violence as imminent? how do we deal with poor people whose aspirations are justifiable middle class? and again a serious question: what do workers do who are worn out from the strain of organizing, but for whom SNCC has become a way of life? These were some of the questions which occupied us for our twelve days in the Jackson City Jail, and for the three days we visited in Hattiesburg with our friend Jonnie Mae Walker. These are the questions that are so serious to the future of the Movement. I tend to see organizing around economic issues as most important, but recognizing that \$3.00 a day is a wage for a piece of farm equipment and not for a man does not go toward creating a program. The sharecropper who knows the situation more thoroughly than we do is also at a loss.

A note about jail and Jackson - and then on to Batesville. Being herded into garbage trucks three blocks from the origin of our march made me more angry than I have ever been in my life. The cops, both Negro and white, swing their billyclubs incessantly. When women faint from lack of air, they force the crowd to keep them on their feet. They kick and beat pregnant women so that they miscarry (several did). During the two week stay, they demoralized the prisoners by taking all leaders to the isolation of the city jail. And at the fairground, mattresses are forbidden during the day. The mattresses lie stacked in the corner while prisoners have only concrete to sit on. Yet the women backed twenty-five cops up against a wall and taunted them so successfully that one law enforcement officer had to be transferred to the men's compound (called, significantly, 'Vietnam' by the Movement). In my cell in the city jail (four beds, ten inmates, and luxury compared with the fairground) we sang incessantly, banged our metal plates and cups so that they

had to buy paper ones, and we asked questions. One that sticks in my mind is this: Is the 'jail-in' as a technique now useless? The nation is used to mass arrests and now will not react unless Mrs. Liusso or Reverend Reeb (both white) are killed. Why should people who have been beaten for several hundred years by white men's clubs have to put themselves in such a position deliberately? My feeling is that such a tactic puts the white power structure in the dictatorial position and in effect, calls the moves for the Negro protestors. This does not seem to be the way to develop independent political and economic organization – by independent I mean organization which does not depend on what the white power structure says or does, but on what the Negroes decide they want for themselves. But again, our jail-in met with a measure of success. The injunction issued by the Fifth Circuit Court gave us permission (at least temporarily) to march in Jackson, and we have been marching without incident since.

Batesville...If you want to know about the Challenge, about Mississippi, and specifically about Batesville (which is in Panola County) read an excellent article in the NATION, May 17, "The Mississippi Challenge" by George Slaff.

Tonight we are at the home of Robert Miles, county FDP chairman and one of the men to organize a voters' league here long before outside agitators arrived. On weekends there are armed guards here through the night. The living room wall has bullet holes from periodic shootings. Not long ago a fire bomb exploded on the front lawn. There was also a tear gas bombing. But Mr. Miles and his wife continue to house and feed us, and continue to build their lives around the Movement. Since this is July fourth weekend, our guards are especially alert for drunken white folks living it up in this "dry" country.

Panola County is very much at the stage I've outlined by my questions in the first part of this letter. The Movement here has registered 1800 voters in a year, and registration and literacy will be one of our projects this summer. Already we have visited the Hays Plantation where Negroes can register without severe economic reprisal. The strongest family on the plantation are the Nelsons who live with their five children in a wooden shack which is badly in need of repair. While Mrs. Nelson works in the cotton fields– this is chopping season, picking starts in September – her husband drives a tractor. Although his wages are between \$5-8 per day (not when there is rain or during the winter), his total income last year was about \$175 after the plantation owner had taken his share for rent, loans, fertilizer, seed. A few more notes on the Hays Plantation and the Nelsons – more about Batesville in another letter.

Last FRIDAY WE ATTENDED A MEETING OF The Freedom Labor Union which Mr. Nelson organized on his plantation. The meeting was larger than usual – about 25 people. A box of clothing had arrived in which we discovered the issue of Life Magazine containing those fantastic photographs of the fetus from the first days after conception to birth. The Nelsons sat down together to look and then began to share the magazine with others. People here are not afraid to react to beauty. Particularly the women, tired and worn from the ten hour day in the fields, reacted to the photographs with wonder and pride. The magazine passed from hand to hand.

People here are doing things their own way. The meeting opened itself spontaneously with a song. Mr. Nelson talked about the union and solicited new members. Several came forward, but there were also those who could not afford a fee of \$1.00 and then dues of 50¢ per month. This money, Mr. Nelson

explained, was to be used as a strike fund. So the people are organizing and beginning to talk, but they and we have no feasible plans. There are so few jobs already – several people reluctantly admitted that they were getting less work this year, and that the winter would be harder. The heart of the Delta is automating more quickly than this corner of Mississippi, but people feel the threat already. With fewer jobs, there are, of course, more people who will scab. The union men have already talked about beating up tractor drivers to prevent them from going out, or burning cotton crops, or slashing the tires of the trucks which carry people to the fields, but none of those tactics are satisfactory. White power, and white wealth determine that the Negro shall remain in poverty, and perhaps that his situation will become more desperate in the next years. We ask questions, we are provocative, the people speak reluctantly. We cannot feel that they are holding back. They are “sick and tired of being sick and tired” as their freedom congresswoman, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer says, but the future looks bleak. COFO can’t industrialize Mississippi, and the Federal Government isn’t going to try and besides machines and factories.

Our meeting closed with “We Shall Overcome”. I joined hands with a girl who lives on a plantation so bad that COFO workers can go there only at night, and then with extreme caution. Yet a friend of Mrs. Nelson, 78 year old Mrs. Barry, has already collected names of people who cannot read and write, and we will soon organize a literacy class oriented toward voter registration. Mrs. Nelson will call together a group of women who want classes on birth control.. We will keep talking and questioning and learning. Please think about Mississippi too, it is only a grotesque of the America in which you and I live.

In case you are near a typewriter, please write to your Congressman and demand that he oppose the nomination of former Mississippi Governor J.P.Coleman to fill the vacant place on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. His appointment will destroy the favorable majority which hears civil rights cases. Coleman is the choice of our President Johnson who said in his civil rights speech – We Shall Overcome. I hope you realize now that he did not mean a word of it. Also demand that McCormick have the Clerk of the House print the depositions taken in Mississippi during the winter, so that the Challenge can go on.

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