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MISSISSIPPI FIELD REPORT

Richard Jewett
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Report covers September, 1964 -- January, 1965

The combination of Summer Project, Civil Rights Act, outside focus, and federal presence has changed Mississippi. The Summer Project program has faded, but the present activity is in the best direction--extensive activity on the part of local people themselves. Workers can travel much more freely in all areas and can talk with local people more freely. Local people can talk more freely and are willing to do more.

Local Movement

Freedom Democratic Party Far and away the most significant outgrowth of the Summer Project is the Freedom Democratic Party and related political activities. Before the summer the movement did nothing more than just try to convince people to go to the courthouse and register to vote. Workshops were run on filling out the voting application form. This fall people have been much more deeply involved in the whole political structure. More and more meetings are discussing the ways in which the federal and local government enter into local problems and the ways in which the federal and local governments can be made to respond to pressure from Mississippi Negroes.

The Freedom election this fall was not successful in terms of education and was only partly successful in terms of getting more people interested in political activity. The challenge to the seating of the Mississippi Congressional delegation caught local imagination in a big way, however. In less than a month local Mississippians all over the state raised enough money to send 500 of themselves to Washington to demonstrate at the opening of Congress and to talk with government agencies about their problems back in Mississippi. Staff helped to arrange the trip machanically, but the main thrust was entirely in local hands.

The connection with Washington may lead to a further emphasis on federal programs and on federal involvement in Mississippi as the local people continue their pressure. It will take time to see if the development is strongly in this direction or if people turn strongly to local government.

Open Discussion Another more subtle but in the long run probably most significant outgrowth of the summer is the new-found willingness of local Mississippi Negroes to speak up for themselves, to try to attack their own problems in areas that were formerly forbidden to them. Several workshops for FDP (at Biloxi and at Batesville) have had minimal staff participation and have been run almost entirely by local people. These workshops have talked in detail about how political involvement and action can work changes in Mississippi. The FDP state convention December 20 was not addressed once by a Northern staff person. This willingness to talk comes from all over the state. Out of even hard counties like Neshoba, the Delta, and the Southwest. People are openly talking with other people about common problems and how to solve them.

The feeling of the staff now is to encourage this sort of talking and searching. Staff is spending or trying to spend much of its time listening to local people and trying to bring together local feeling instead of trying to impose a program from outside. It appears as though money will be available for a series of workshops -- three or four day meetings to discuss whatever local people want to discuss. Urban organization, FDP, plantation organization-workshops tied to specific topics in this way. Again local people will organize and run the workshops themselves.

In line with this new feeling the 4th Congressional District (largely CORE) held a three day meeting in the Harmony Community Center in Leake County January 15 through January 17. Perhaps 20 staff and 10 to 20 local Mississippians from all parts of the district gathered to discuss both staff and local problems. An attempt was made to discuss at least the beginnings of solutions to some problems. In the past staff meetings and meetings of local people have always been separate.

It is interesting to note that organizations working with COFO have adopted the same policy and are not bringing in programs and imposing them. The National Council of Churches for instance is moving ahead very slowly on its Delta Ministry program. The NCC only moves on programs as local people want them and as local people can take an active part in them.

Staff Direction

The COFO rhetoric of the summer is somewhat stale by now. The community center idea has certainly been pushed into the background. There is a perhaps unconscious realization that COFO lacks the talent, the money, the continuity, and perhaps even the inclination to carry on really significant community center operations in most areas. Community center buildings and libraries are being turned over to local people, and no large programs in this direction are being generated. Some isolated programs are being carried on with success.

The freedom school idea is still with us, but there are few active freedom schools which involve the same teacher and the same kids in regular contact; the freedom schools that do exist tend to be rather helter-skelter and to change with the time of year and with the feeling of whoever is around. In the CORE area there is no significant freedom school activity.

This leaves the political program as the apparent central focus of the staff work. As mentioned above, however, the staff is called upon to do more now, [illegible]. It must actively listen to local people and must encourage local people to talk. This process demands a different kind of staff person, and there are no clear guidelines to follow. Many people find it frustrating not to have a program to work on, and the seeming lack of clear program is difficult for staff to understand and to work with. It is hard to take the time to listen with the expectation that some unknown program will actually emerge. But this is generally a time of reassessment in the state, and it will take a while to develop a new direction.

As the fall and winter have developed the CORE-SNCC differences in the state have resumed their pre-summer size, i.e. virtually non-existent. The state-wide sense is very strong, and there is little organizational difficulty.

The COFO money-drawing ability of the summer has largely disappeared, and funds come in now very slowly. SNCC and CORE are both in financial difficulty and cannot assume a full burden. Projects during the summer developed outside contacts, and these contacts are being used to help support the projects. The records of these outside contacts are not centralized, however, and the fund-raising within COFO needs clarification.

The independent COFO legal office was developing slowly but surely. The staff counsel, Henry Aronson, has just resigned, however, and this returns us to former times and opens up the legal aid question once again.

Brief Sketch of Projects

Madison County (Canton) -- took a while to settle down after the summer and the shift of people out of the area. Faulty staff understanding combined with long-existing local movement problems turned the Freedom election into a very bad experience. This was reversed by a good county-wide ASC election push, but a very serious staff polarization developed which almost destroyed the gains of the election. The FDP trip to Washington was only moderately responded to; the local people apparently do not see their FDP representative as close to them. The staff is still beset with internal difficulties -- the tendency has been strong to turn in on themselves rather than to involve themselves in the community and to absorb community problems; a start of a change is evident, but it will take time to see results.

Leake County
Ofahoma — worked only very sketchily because Glenn has been in Madison county or away much of the time. Good local people appear to be ready to respond and to do their own work, but only the surface has been scratched.

Harmony — very bad shape. Staff, lacking transportation and direction and communication with other areas, has lacked the ability to work out their own problems. Strong local people appear to suppress some community voices, but staff appears to have been unable to help what is probably an excellent possibility.

Rankin County — fastest growing project in the district. Local people willing to do all their own work, raise their own funds, and handle all jobs with a minimum of fuss and outside help. Shows promise of being a model project if it continues in this way. A good group went to Washington, and that ought to encourage them even further.

Lauderdale County (Meridian) — Only the barest beginnings of a real project. Many staff people, but no real involvement in the community and no sense of where they are headed. Somewhat stifled by old line Negro leadership, and staff cannot yet overcome it. Too easy to raise funds, too easy to move around. Much of it a mess.

Neshoba County — nice start during the summer, but project has not yet developed staying power. Local leadership is active state-wide, but second level leadership is only slowly emerging. Strong spirit.

Clarke County — good new project. Good local leadership and a relatively sympathetic white power structure ought to allow the development of an excellent project. Community people doing their own work. Should develop like Rankin.

Recommendations

The role of staff in the state is changing very rapidly. There is little talk of danger now, very little fear of either the police or local whites. With the freedom of local people to involve themselves staff's job becomes twofold: 1) to get people together to let them talk, and 2) to bring information as people desire it. This is very different from even a few short months ago, and there is going to be a rocky period as this transition is made.

To encourage the positive side of the change we should thin out and tighten up the staff. Change staff to include more local Mississippians. Close some of the existing offices or else let local people take over payment. Stress staff mobility in sense of putting only a very few people in each area. Get people from different areas together; let this interchange provide safety and direction. Try as quickly as possible to open up the entire 4th District. Get people to workshops, to state and county meetings. Use only local leadership on all levels, staff playing no leadership roles. Open no new offices unless local people pay for them and help to staff them. Cut down expenses to include only salaries and transportation.