

[Feb. 1963]

From Operation Freedom:
Notes on the delta area of Mississippi

The Negro people of the Mississippi delta, and of the entire nation, have always lived under the ruthless suppression of white people. In the past few months, a voter registration campaign being conducted in the delta has increased the pressure under which the Negro sharecropper and worker of this area must live.

Economic pressure has been applied to many people who are active in the voter registration campaign, but the white people haven't limited the pressure to these people alone. People who have not been connected with the registration campaign or with anything else having to do with civil rights have also had pressure put on them. One example of this occurred recently when a sharecropper registered, and not only was he thrown off the plantation by the landowner but the other families on this same plantation, who had not been engaged in registration activities, were also thrown off.

This economic pressure is expected to get much worse, especially pressure in the form of mass evictions of sharecroppers by white landowners, more increased and violent opposition to the voter registration campaign, and cutting people off of the federal government surplus food program. During the past 100 years very few Negroes in all of the South, not just in the Mississippi delta, have ever succeeded in registering and voting and now that registration campaigns are occurring, the white man is getting desperate in his attempts to prevent this partial step toward desegregation.

A recent issue of The White Citizen (publication of The Citizens' Councils of America) carried an editorial that read, in part:

"...if the white South is to survive, it must do so through its own resources. The white South must unite its political and economic power in order to prevent negro political domination and racial amalgamation from becoming realities.... our only salvation lies in organized, united political and economic action against individuals and organizations which would destroy us....we hereby serve notice on the racial perverts and ruthless politicians who would destroy the South: We have only begun to fight!"

The editorial was signed by Robert B. Patterson, who organized the first chapter of the White Citizens Council and is presently executive secretary of the Citizens' Councils of Mississippi. In 1955 he was quoted by Homer Bigart of the New York Herald Tribune as saying: "This is not the United States of America; this is Sunflower County, Mississippi."

Many Negro families in the delta are reporting no income for the past year. Reasons for this are that the cotton picking season ended earlier than usual due to a long dry spell in the summer and a greater use was made of the mechanical cotton pickers. Approximately 80% of all the cotton grown in the delta was picked by mechanical pickers this year. It was just a few years ago that the mechanical pickers would cut the cotton fibers fairly short, resulting in a

less valuable crop than if picked by hand. The mechanical pickers are now beginning to be perfected in this sense but they still leave a small amount of usable cotton laying on the ground in the fields. To prevent the sharecroppers on his land from gathering up this cotton, a plantation owner will plow this remaining cotton under. With all of these things against him, the sharecropper found himself without work and without an income.

In Coahoma County, a family with 13 children ranging in age from 8 months to 19 years reported no income.

In Tunica County, a family with 7 children ranging in age from 8 years to 20 years reported no income.

In Tunica County, a family of 5 elderly people, ages 52 to 62, reported no income.

In a delta town, 2 elderly women both over 70 years old reported no income. They said that if it had not been for their neighbor, they would have starved.

The sharecropper is also plagued by a vicious circle. In the spring he has to borrow money in order to plant a crop and to get by for the year, and when he harvests that crop he has to use what profit he has made to pay off the borrowed money. So when planting time comes around again he finds himself having to borrow money again in order to plant a crop. This goes on year after year.

In Leflore County, Mississippi, the county officials administering the federal government surplus food (commodities) program recently cut off 22,000 people from this program. A few welfare cases still receive commodities. County officials said they had to drop these 22,000 from the program because the county could not afford the number of personnel, the amount of equipment, and the facilities required to run this program for these 22,000 people. But since this action was taken, the county has not reduced the number of personnel nor the amount of equipment nor the facilities that existed when the 22,000 were still receiving commodities.

The people who were cut off from commodities are families who depend upon chopping and picking cotton for their livelihood and they depended upon the commodities to help carry them over from the end of one cotton season to the beginning of the next. For this purpose commodities were given out either for a 3 month period (January to March) or a 4 month period (December to March), the period differing by county. Welfare cases receive commodities all year round.

Handed out only once each month, one family of four in Sunflower County reported that for the month of December 1962, they received the following:

2 cans lard, 2 jars peanut butter, 4 small cans meat,
about 16 pounds meal, and about 30 pounds flour

As you can see this is hardly enough food to feed one person for 10 days, let alone four people for a month.

Some delta counties this year required persons wanting commodities to fill out forms which had to be signed by their white employers. In many instances the employer would refuse to sign and the people would not get the food.

One woman who tried to obtain commodities for her family was told

that since she had money to register (this refers to the county poll tax, which is 2 dollars per year in some counties and 3 dollars per year in others) she should have money to eat. Another woman, who is a very active registration worker, applied for and received commodities. When she went to the distribution center to pick them up for the month of December 1962, she gave her name and noticed that her card was in a separate pile. The man handing out commodities picked her card up and told her: "You one of them trouble makers and I shouldn't give you nothing." After waiting a short while she was finally given the commodities.

Mayor C.M. Dorrough of Ruleville, Sunflower County, Mississippi, reportedly said that all Negroes who went down to register would not get commodities this year. In referring to the voter registration drive, the mayor also reportedly said: "We gonna see how tight we can make it - gonna make it just as tight as we can - gonna be rougher, rougher than you think it is."

Negroes who have become involved in voter registration activities have encountered many forms of resistance from white landowners, employers, businessmen, police, and politicians. For example:

- sharecroppers have been evicted for attempting to register and for attending meetings where registration is discussed
- workers other than sharecroppers have lost their jobs for attempting to register and a man who does not register may still lose his job if his wife or some other relative attempts to register
- some storeowners will refuse credit to Negroes whether or not they have registered
- people attempting to register have their names listed in the banks by the bankers and are then unable to borrow money
- some people are shot at; during the last 5 months of 1962 about 12 people in the delta were shot at with 2 of the people being wounded and requiring medical attention
- voter registration workers are constantly harassed by the police; they get tickets for speeding when they haven't been speeding and some are less fortunate - they get beaten; one state patrolman told a vote worker that if he valued his life he better leave the state
- in Tunica County, the circuit clerk tells Negroes that they have to pay two poll taxes before they can register - of course, paying your poll tax before you have registered is meaningless

In 1955 the Mississippi state legislature passed a law requiring people to fill out a sworn written application for registration to vote - more commonly known as the "literacy test." This test usually asks 21 questions and a test in current use now asks the following: write the date of this application/what is your full name/state your age and date of birth/what is your occupation/where is your business carried on/by whom are you employed/are you a citizen of the United States and an inhabitant of Mississippi/for how long have you resided in Mississippi/where is your place of residence in the district/specify the date when such residence began/what is your prior place of residence if any/check which oath you desire to take: general, minister's, minister's wife, if under 21 years at present but 21 years at date of general election/if there

is more than one person with the same name in the precinct, by what name do you wish to be called/have you ever been convicted of any of the following crimes: bribery, theft, arson, obtaining money or goods under false pretenses, perjury, forgery, embezzlement or bigamy/if your answer to question 14 is yes, name the crime or crimes of which you have been convicted, and the date and place of such conviction or convictions/are you a minister of the gospel in charge of an organized church, or the wife of such a minister/if your answer to question 16 is yes, state the length of your residence in the election district/write and copy in the space below, Section (blank) of the Constitution of Mississippi: instruction to the registrar: you will designate the section of the Constitution and point out same to applicant/write in the space below a reasonable interpretation - the meaning - of the Section of the Constitution of Miss. which you have just copied/write in the space below a statement setting forth your understanding of the duties and obligations of citizenship under a constitutional form of government/sign and attach hereto the oath or affirmation named in question 12.

Many Negroes have failed this literacy test because their interpretation of one section of the 285 section state constitution was not satisfactory to the registrar, or circuit clerk as he is also called. One woman who is a college graduate and taught school for 14 years failed the literacy test the first time she took it. She passed it the second time.

The circuit clerk in Washington County has been telling people they must wait one year for another chance to take the literacy test if they fail it the first time they take it. He recently stated: "We can't have them coming back every other day. The policy we follow is to make them wait 12 months." When asked if the state laws specified a year's wait, he said: "I don't believe the law is very definite on the waiting period. That's the way I'm interpreting it." The law (Mississippi Code of 1942, section 3211, not amended since 1942) reads, in part: "The registrar shall keep his books open at his office and shall register the electors of his county at any time."

But this point is minor when you consider that, according to Mississippi law, the circuit clerk is sole judge as to who passes the literacy test and he alone has the power to place an applicant's name on the registration books or to declare the applicant not qualified.

In 1962 the Mississippi state legislature passed a law requiring another type of voter registration test in addition to the literacy test. This new test is known as the "morality test" and says, in part: "within 10 days after the receipt (the registrar) shall deliver for publication in a newspaper...the name and address of such applicant...and shall cause same to be published once each week for two consecutive weeks..."

If, after seeing your name in the paper, any person questions your moral character, he can so inform the circuit clerk. The circuit clerk will tell you that unless you can defend your character against the charge made, you will not be permitted to register.

When a person goes to the county courthouse with the intent of registering, he will encounter trouble with both the circuit clerk and the circuit clerk's secretary. The secretaries have been known to say such things as: "the clerk is home sick today" or "the clerk

won't be in anymore this afternoon." When the person finally gets to see the clerk, he will still have difficulties in trying to register. Circuit clerks have been known to say such things as: "What do you want to register for?"; "I'm going to the bank so you can't register now."; "Court is in session now and I have to be there."; and one clerk even said: "I'm just too plain tired to register you today."

The Aid to Dependant Children program (ADC) is one of the favorite targets of segregationist attack. ADC is a state aid program that provides funds for the support of children with one or both parents missing. Segregationists claim that ADC promotes and encourages immorality and illegitimacy. One segregationist publication had, in part, the following to say about ADC:

"Negress have learned to be assured a steady income without working, they must have more and more children and no husbands. Then the White taxpayers will support them in idleness as they out-breed the White population. They can have 'boyfriends' and even husbands, too, as long as they are not around when the social workers call..."

"Among negresses receiving ADC, having boy friends is an accepted thing...then too, boy friends usually help with expenses such as for liquid refreshments. Since the negro race is amoral - without morals - no shame is attached to 'working' for the ADC. It's just a good, easy way of making a living."

"...there is little demand for ADC reforms because the press doesn't tell the overburdened White taxpayer how he is being exploited by negresses who make a career of having babies for him to support. Many daughters, watching their mothers, decide 'working' for ADC would be a good profession for them too. Honest social workers admit ADC encourages unscrupulous negro women to have one illegitimate child after another, boosting the high negro birth rate and flooding cities with children unwanted except for the money ADC pays. White parents having difficulty making ends meet with only 2 or 3 children, are taxed to support ADC recipients having 10 and 12. These swell the ranks of the black masses conquering Northern cities and driving out the White inhabitants. By being taxed to pay bounties for negro babies, the White man is contributing to his own destruction."

In the delta and throughout most of the South, ADC workers are white because no Negro can get such a job, regardless of his qualifications. These white ADC workers show Negroes no respect. Common practice in the delta is for them to enter homes without first knocking and then start looking in closets for mens' clothing. They will even ask the small children if a man lives with their mother and they will ask neighbors if a man has been seen entering or leaving the house.

Another depressing aspect of Mississippi is the Negro grade and high schools. A white school board controls all schools, resulting in Negro schools having less adequate facilities, less money, less books, and many frightened teachers. The teachers are warned to be careful of what they say wherever they are because if they lose their teaching job, they can be kept from ever teaching again in Mississippi. Most teachers give in to this system and in keeping their jobs, they avoid such topics as civil rights, voting, and anything else the white people feel is subversive to the "culture" of Mississippi. In addition to this pressure from the white school boards, there is a state law in Mississippi which prohibits the teaching of controversial subjects.

Some children do not go to school regularly or at all because they haven't adequate clothing and shoes to wear. There are some children in the delta who have never worn a pair of shoes. Of those who do go to school, many do not have the 15 or 20 cents a day with which to buy lunch. And many of these children who don't have the money to buy lunch can't even bring a lunch from home because at home there isn't enough food.

One immediate thought occuppues the minds of many young Negroes in the delta. And that is the dream of the day they will go to Chicago or to Detroit or to some other city in the North and leave Mississippi forever. But when they get there, what have they then?

The segregationists make a big effort to harass Negro children. The Negro child in the delta learns at an early age the treatment he will receive from white people. A little girl, whose mother works as a cleaning woman in a department store in one of the larger delta towns, telephoned her mother one day after school and asked: "Is Mrs. Wright there?" The white person who had answered the telephone replied: "There isn't no Mrs. Wright over here - only a nigger named Ella." You wonder how people can be so cruel. This sort of treatment is common. It happens every day. It is a part of the Southern "way of life."

On December 18, 1962, a 14-year-old Negro youth was looking forward to going to a basketball game that night in Ruleville, Miss. He and five other friends started out for the game that night but never got there. As they were on their way, a Ruleville policeman stopped them, and in the words of the 14-year-old youth, this is what happened:

"...officer Milam pulled up beside us and told us...to walk to City Hall. We were put in a cell...he went out and later returned with a man I did not know (this man was later identified as Mayor C.M. Dorrrough of Ruleville) the man said he was not going to have that integration and other mess...I asked the officer why he arrested me...he then pushed me and hit me in the face, he (the mayor) hit me twice (again) and started to hit me again but I ducked. He then cursed me and told me to get out of there...the mayor told me that he would put the dogs on me. There were six of us arrested, 2 boys and 4 girls."

(note: the police filed formal charges against none of the six youngsters)

This 14-year-old youth is the son of a man who owns his own land and who registered to vote nearly 10 years ago. He and members of his family have constantly been harassed by white people ever since he registered.

Then, just a month later and only 10 miles from Ruleville, in Cleveland, Miss., another Negro youth encountered difficulties with the police. This youth, a high school senior, was picked up at his home on the night of January 22, 1963 by the police, arrested, and held in jail overnight. No formal charge was made against him but the police said he was arrested for "talking to a white woman on the telephone."

A white woman was brought to the police station and identified this youth's voice as the one who had called her. No mention was made of what he was supposed to have said over the telephone. He denies having made a call to any white woman.

This youth is fortunate because he was able to walk away from the police station when the police released him the following morning. A Negro man in the late 1940's in Cleveland, Miss. wasn't so fortunate. He was arrested on a charge of "talking to a white woman on the telephone" and he ended up dead with about five bullet wounds in his chest. The police said he had tried to escape as they were bringing him in.

Such is justice in Mississippi. At the whim of the police any person can be picked up and jailed...and beaten...and murdered.

In one delta town there lives a woman with 4 children, all of school age. Her husband is dead and because of poor health she cannot work. She still receives commodities on a year round welfare basis and she also receives a 30 dollar a month welfare check. This is her only income and she is supposed to raise her 4 children on this. No wonder she is in poor health. Comparatively, this woman is one of the fortunate ones because she still receives not only commodities, but a welfare check as well.

In this same town there lives another woman. This woman has 10 children (ages 3 to 17 years) and her husband is dead. She also received commodities and a welfare check, but in October 1962 the county stopped both her check and the commodities. When she went to the County Welfare Office to ask why these had been stopped, she received no answer. She has no income at all now.

Of the more disturbing aspects of Mississippi's delta area is the situation centering around the white doctors and hospitals. One night in September of 1962 two girls were shot while sitting in the home of friends. The shots were fired by white men from a passing car. The two girls were taken to the local hospital, which is two blocks from where the shooting occurred. For two hours the girls lay unattended and the hospital staff refused to give them anything for the pain. While there they were given no treatment. They finally received treatment when one of the girls was taken to

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another hospital 10 miles away and the other girl was taken 120 miles away, to a hospital in Jackson, Miss.

One hospital which was built recently has one wing for Negro patients. This is in a county where Negroes make up 67% of the population.

In Coahoma County, a modern 3-story hospital was built in the mid-1950's. The first floor is for Negroes and the other two floors are for whites. Such facilities as the operating room are shared and there are separate entrances and lobbies. This hospital has Negro nurses but they are limited to working on the first floor. Meals are different for Negroes and whites, and recently a Negro minister had trouble getting the diet in the hospital that his doctor had prescribed for him. If you telephone this hospital for information on a Negro patient and you use a title of respect (such as Mr. or Mrs. or Rev.) the hospital switchboard operator will not put your call through.

Negroes throughout the delta tell of the mistreatment or lack of treatment they receive in the hospitals. Welfare cases are given an especially hard time.

A Northern minister, after hearing about some of the above things, told me not to take them too seriously, that this sort of thing has been happening for over a hundred years in the South. It appears that not much progress has been made in abolishing race prejudice because people have this sort of attitude. They feel that there is nothing that can be done or else they want to leave it up to the other guy. But we must begin taking these things seriously and acting upon them, or else they will surely continue for another few hundred years.

No human being has a right to have peace of mind while others suffer. No one has a right to sit back and say that it is not his responsibility. Every man must share the guilt for permitting such a system to continue.

(These notes are based upon two trips to the Mississippi delta area, made on December 17-21, 1962 and January 18-30, 1963)

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