

Mississippi: A War on Poverty or Civil Rights?

Atlanta, Ga.

The biggest threat to the civil rights movement in Mississippi now is no longer the violent bands of night riders, it is the federal government itself.

Already some \$20 million in funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity has been approved by the federal office and okayed by Gov. Paul Johnson. Last winter, when the "War on Poverty" program was beginning, Gov. Johnson stated, "We will use such funds as long as this program does not interfere with our traditional customs and particular way of life." Activities financed through this money range from the Head Start programs for pre-school children this past summer to programs to educate illiterate adults and retrain sharecroppers whose jobs have been displaced by machines. These programs are being run by the same power structure which has kept the state's Negroes down in a segregated society.

Almost \$7 million is going to the Catholic diocese of Natchez-Jackson, Mississippi—\$5.3 million from the Office of Economic Opportunity, \$1.6 million from the Department of Labor—to educate illiterate adults. Local officials dominate the staff. In the delta, \$5 million is going into a program to retrain sharecroppers. The chairman of the board is an official in the State Sovereignty Commission, the official state segregation watchdog group; his assistant is Aaron Henry, state NAACP chairman and a former leader in the Freedom Democratic Party. Over \$2 million went to local communities this past summer for Operation Head Start schools. The classes were strictly segregated, with one exception. Classes at the Unitarian Church in Jackson were integrated. The pastor there is the Rev. Donald Thompson, who was recently shot while entering his apartment building.

Besides being conservative in content, these programs can also be used as a lever to halt or slow down civil rights activities. In Jackson, where over \$200,000 went into the Head Start program, local Head Start officials put pressure on Negro ministers. During the demonstrations there early in the summer, places were needed for meetings. Head Start officials warned Negro ministers that if they permitted civil rights meetings, Head Start classes would not meet at their churches and they would not get Head Start money. Ministers complied.

AN ADDITIONAL \$1.6 million in Head Start funds went to the Child Development Group of Mississippi (C.D.G.M.) through a grant to all-Negro Mary Holmes Junior College in West Point, Miss. Using an approach similar to last year's freedom school programs, C.D.G.M. operated 83 centers for over 3,000 children. About half the staff were former civil rights workers, many of whom had had freedom school experience. C.D.G.M. rented space for its headquarters from the Delta Ministry headquarters of the National Council of Churches.

The C.D.G.M. program led the Jackson Daily News, one of the state's two leading newspapers, to quote an earlier editorial: "However, as all federal programs are now designed, here is one of the most subtle mediums for instilling the acceptance of racial integration and ultimate mongrelization ever perpetrated in this country."

The paper then quickly pointed out that the C.D.G.M. stated it was "aggressively complying" with racial integration. This of course has not been true of other federal programs in the state.

The presence of many civil rights activists in the C.D.G.M. program and its sharing of quarters with the N.C.C. led Sen. John Stennis (D-Miss.) to make charges against C.D.G.M. To end the resulting uproar, President Johnson ordered that C.D.G.M. move to Mary Holmes Junior College. The Delta Ministry center, midway between Jackson and the Mississippi River, is in the heart of the C.D.G.M. project area, and the college is located away from everything, 20 miles from the Alabama border. Some staff members were willing to go along with the move, arguing that even a weak program was better than no program at all. Others—those with civil rights experience—refused and won out, and the strong program continued.

However, after this display of local democracy resulting in a decision contrary to orders from Washington, it is doubtful whether C.D.G.M. will be able to get any more money to continue its programs into the fall. Unlike other federally financed programs in the state, C.D.G.M. did not work to preserve the status quo.

On the political front, President Johnson is pushing the new Democratic Council, which is made up of moderate white and conservative Negro leaders. This is an attempt to undercut the support for the civil rights-oriented, integrated Freedom Democratic Party which is challenging the all-white reactionary state Democratic Party. Here too the administration wants something it can control. With rules against an all-white state party stemming from last year's party convention, the President must fear that the F.D.P. will gain even more support in the future and want to stop it now.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS can cut off political support for the civil rights movement, strengthen the existing power structure, lure away civil rights participants, and establish conservative programs for superficial change to undercut civil rights programs which attack basic situations. □

ON ORGANIZING

To sing so others hear
and join the song
requires a silence far inside
secured by suffering
and
in ease with solitude.

Perhaps
the bugle call's
a whisper passed along
a sigh swiftly shared.

Perhaps
the song
is
sad.

TO MENDY—ON ORGANIZING II

to enter softly
speak silently
smile a freedom song

to live revolt
without the god of should

to transform pain
to a caress
untying
uniting
unspokenly saying
"I, too"

CASEY HAYDEN