

Poverty and the Federal Government:

Five Documents from Greenville Mississippi

1. Now Is the Time for Something Else

On January 28 a four day Poor Peoples conference sponsored by the Freedom Democratic Party, the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union and the Delta Ministry was held at the Mt. Beulah campus near Edwards, Mississippi.

Over 700 poor people, mainly from the Delta discussed the problems they faced—a Jim Crow State Welfare Department, mass evictions from plantations, lack of jobs, and a standstill on the poverty programs. One lady said:

I'm tired of going to Washington. I've been there three times and don't see nothing come of it. They don't want to talk to poor folk, they just want to talk to people they select.

Another member of the conference complained:

When they want to know about people in Mississippi they ask Eastland or Stennis. They don't represent us because they and the other whites made sure we never got a chance to choose our representatives.

A man said,

The poverty program don't speak to us. Poor Negro folk ran a good program this summer—even Shriver said so. But Stennis doesn't want us to have nothing. Five months now the Office of Economic Opportunity promised us money for our Headstart, and nothing's happened. O.E.O.'s more interested in listening to Stennis than to poor peoples.

On Sunday the conference drafted a list of demands, including commodity and job-training programs administered by poor people, federal lands for housing, income for poor people, and the reopening of the Headstart schools with control by poor people.

One woman commented:

We been taking our problems through all the channels of the government for the last three years and ain't got nothing, now its time to do something else.

On Sunday night, January 30, the Conference decided to leave their shacks and move to the abandoned Air Force base near Greenville. There are 13 acres of empty housing facilities. The news of two elderly Negroes freezing to death in their Delta shacks emphasized the need for the action. An elderly Negro man summed it all up:

We need to go there and set us up one of those refugee camps, 'cause that's what we are. And being right by that air strip the government can fly in surplus commodities right to our door and we can give 'em out without them expensive middle men. They say the buildings don't have heat or lights or running water. Well, just as long as it don't leak it'll still be a damn sight better than the shack I been living in.

2. Events at the Air Base

MONDAY, JANUARY 31

About forty poor Negroes drive to the Greenville Air Force Base, where they occupy an abandoned barracks building. A sign is hung outside the door reading "This is our home—please knock before entering."

7:00 am: Lt. Colonel Andrews enters the barracks and orders them to leave. "You are trespassing on government property," he says. He is presented with the group's official statement of demands and replies "My only concern is with this building." He locks all the doors to seal

off the occupants, stumbles into a group of people, and accuses a white volunteer of kicking him in the shins.

9:00 am: Local law officials leave the scene, claiming they have no jurisdiction on property under federal control. Police Chief W. C. Burnley, asked if he is pulling his men out replies, "You're damn right." A local official says, "It is a case of breaking and entering on what may be city property on what might be a federal reservation in what we know is Washington County, Mississippi."

11:00 am: Fifteen more people arrive, including a large

family from a Sunflower County plantation. Coal stoves, food, mattresses and blankets are brought in.

12:00 noon: Air base officials stop traffic through the gate but people and supplies continue to come over and through the surrounding fence.

1:00 pm: An administrative assistant from the Civil Rights Commission calls the Delta Ministry office demanding to know why the people occupied the base. He is told of the general condition of poor people in the Delta and that two Negroes froze to death in their Washington County home last week. He says, "We can't deal with the general condition, give me some specific facts." He says there is no excuse for breaking the law. He is told that if he has anything to say he must speak to those in the barracks.

2:00 pm: A three-man council is elected to represent the occupants. The afternoon is spent holding meetings. Committees are elected to keep barracks clean, prepare food and tend the stoves.

7:30 pm: A spaghetti dinner is served. About ten more people join the group.

12:00 midnight: More supplies arrive through the fence. Occupants bedded down for the night with a few people appointed to keep watch on the stoves. Reports come that police under the command of Maj. Gen. R. W. Puryear are arriving at the base.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 1

7:00 am: Group arises and clean-up committees roll up mattresses and blankets. A meeting is called to discuss plans for the day.

11:15 am: Major General Puryear and 150 air police march in and assemble outside barracks. The General tells the group that he has a message from the Justice and Agriculture Departments telling them to inform the departments of their grievances and they will try to help. He says the group has twenty minutes to abandon the barracks. Occupants discuss the offer and vote to reject it, stating that Washington has been informed of their grievances for the last three years.

11:30 am: The one hundred and fifty air police break windows spattering glass over the people and open the doors of the barracks. People are dragged roughly from the building. A lady from Hattiesburg collapses while being hauled away and is taken to a Negro doctor in Greenville at the insistence of her friends. One man says "four of them approached me and said 'let's get that son-of-a-bitch.' They threw me out, tearing my clothes." A few moments later an elderly Negro lady is arrested on alleged profanity charges.

12:00 noon: All the people expelled from the base begin an eight mile walk back to town through the mud alongside the highway.

3. "Why We Are Here"

We are here because we are hungry and cold and we have no jobs or land. We don't want charity. We are willing to work for ourselves if given a chance. We need help to get started now.

We are at the Greenville Air Force Base because it is federal property and there are dozens of empty houses and buildings. We need those houses and the land.

WE DEMAND FOOD. We are here because we are hungry. Our children can't be taught in school because they are hungry. They can't even get food in school because they have to buy it and don't have the money.

WE DEMAND JOBS. Many of us have been thrown off the plantations where we worked for nothing all our lives. We don't want charity. We demand our right to jobs, so that we can do something with our lives and build us a future.

WE DEMAND JOB TRAINING. We demand that people be trained for things that they want to do and that they be paid while they are being trained.

WE DEMAND INCOME. We demand that poor people be given an income. But until we get an income for our families we want commodities which are fit to eat. The commodities we get now are old and full of bugs and weevils. We want fresh vegetables, fruit and meat. We want to decide what foods we want to eat.

The federal government tells us to go directly to the state and county for help but when we go there they don't know what we are talking about.

WE DEMAND LAND. There are thousands of acres here that the government owns. We are supposed to be part of that government. We want the clear land and the unclear land and we'll clear the unclear land ourselves.

WE WANT "OPERATION HELP" TO BE STOPPED. We don't want the Mississippi county boards of supervisors to have another chance to decide whether poor people should get food. We don't recognize these county boards because they don't recognize us. We want the Office of Economic Opportunity and the U. S. Department of Agriculture to hire poor people we say represent us. We the poor people want to distribute the food.

WE DEMAND THAT OPERATION HEAD START SCHOOLS BE STARTED NOW. We demand that the Office of Economic Opportunity give us the money which they promised us last September so that our children can be taught in the headstart schools.

We are ready now to ask of President Johnson: "Whose side are you on — the poor people's or the millionaires'?"

THE POOR PEOPLES CONFERENCE

4. Fact Sheet

- Median income of Negroes in the Delta: \$456 a year (U.S. Department of Agriculture report, November 1964).
- Of 26,000 tractor drivers living with their families on Delta plantations, 6,500 will be jobless by Spring (Ralph Alewine, Mississippi Employment Security Commission, November 18, 1965).
- Eight counties of Mississippi have no commodities distribution at all. Thirty-nine counties give them only to people on welfare. Only 13 of the 82 counties give surplus commodities to all poor people.
- On November 24 the state got \$1.5 million dollars in anti-poverty funds to distribute \$24 million worth of surplus commodities in a special six-months program. None of this food has been distributed. Many people have been told by county welfare officials that they never heard of the program, called Operation HELP.
- The chances of a Negro baby's dying in its first year in Mississippi are more than twice those of a white baby's — and higher than that of a white baby in 1913 (U. S. Census, 1960).

5. "We Have No Government"

This is an edited transcript of a press conference held in the Greenville office of the Delta Ministry Tuesday evening, February 1. The participants were: Mr. Isaac Foster of Tribbett, a leader in last spring's strike of plantation workers; Mrs. Ida Mae Lawrence of Rosedale, chairman of her Mississippi Freedom Labor Union local; and Rev. Arthur Thomas of Greenville, director of the Delta Ministry of the National Council of Churches.

Mr. Foster: The people are going to set up at Tent City out at Tribbett and work on getting poor peoples to come and build a new city. Because of the fact that we was refused by the federal government and evicted, it's important that we start planning our own government.

Mrs. Blackwell: I feel that the federal government have proven that it don't care about poor people. Everything that we have asked for through these years has been handed down on paper. It's never been a reality.

We the poor people of Mississippi is tired. We're tired of it so we're going to build for ourselves, because we don't have a government that represents us.

Mrs. Lawrence: See, you can only accept poor peoples by being poor and really know what being poor is like. And all this stuff about poverty programs and federal funds, that's out for poor peoples.

We were looked upon as just a civil-rights demonstration. But really we were there demanding and waiting and asking that these things be brought there to fill some desperate needs. And we was asking that the poor peoples be accepted as they stood. And instead of getting what we was asking, we

- Over 90 per cent of the Negro, rural homes in Mississippi have no flush toilets, no bathtub and no shower. Only one-third are in sound condition (1960 census).
- The standard pay for tractor drivers in the Delta is \$6 a day and for cotton choppers is \$3 a day — sunrise to sunset. Plantation families have no income during the six months between growing seasons; owners often make advances against the coming year's wages.
- A family of five without a breadwinner (or whose breadwinner is unemployed) must live on \$627 a year in general assistance (about \$12 a week.) The federal government says a family of five making less than \$4,000 is living in poverty.
- Less than one-half per cent of Negro children in the state go to school with white children. Fifteen Mississippi school districts have no desegregation at all.
- In the Delta, over half the males over 25 years old have less than a sixth-grade education. Mississippi does not at present have a compulsory school attendance law.
- Greenville Air Force Base, formerly a jet training facility, has not been in use by the air force in more than a year. Its residential area includes 30 apartments and covers 13 acres. (A recent local news story says the housing area will be deeded to the state.)

got the whole air force troopers in on us. To me, that's our government.

Mr. Foster: Was.

Mrs. Lawrence: Yeah, was. Now, we're our own government — government by poor people. Where do we go from here? To brighter days on our own. And we know we'll reach that goal. But in their world, that's something that doesn't exist.

Reporter: About the poor peoples government. Would this be an idea for a lot of people to come and live around Tribbett or somewhere in particular? Would this be a larger tent city?

Mr. Foster: I know and you know that the tents are not going to stand forever. But I wouldn't be surprised if it wouldn't start that way.

Reporter: Does this mean that you would not consider yourselves bound by the restraints, the actions of county, state or federal law enforcement officers?

Mr. Foster: From nothing we must start building a new country, with our own laws, our own enforcement. No part of the system has any authority or control over us. Our goal is leading away from depending on the system for anything. And I would like to say that every poor person that will come is welcome.

Reporter: Does this mean that you won't sit down and talk to the Attorney General or other government representatives about your grievances?

Mr. Foster: If they would like to talk, we'll be willing to talk. But they didn't want to talk. They sent some Mississippian chief or sergeant or something. He said give me the names of people who need relocation and I'll see what can be done about it. How can we leave the base when peoples don't have a house to stay in?

Mr. Foster: The only reason that Colonel Jones could give for eviction was that the building that we was in didn't have running water and didn't have any type of fire protection. And see I know that the federal government can't tell me that

was the reason we was put out, because all over Mississippi houses don't have running water or fire protection.

Rev. Thomas: It was cruel and inhuman of Orville Freeman and Nicholas Katzenbach to send the kind of message to us at the air base they sent today. They said nothing to us that hasn't been said for months and years. We were tired of waiting around for these people to live up to their words.

Reporter: Mr. Thomas, could you go a little more into Operation HELP?

Rev. Thomas: Over a year ago the Delta Ministry, in cooperation with the National Students Association, pointed out the need for a commodity program for Mississippi poor people. And we gave as an example of what local people could do, what was happening in Forrest County, where the people had set up their own distribution system for contributed food and clothing. It works very well.

We offered to make Forrest County a trial case for food distribution if the Department would release the commodities to us.

Instead, the Department of Agriculture notified the State Department of Welfare that volunteer groups were willing and able to distribute commodities in Forrest County. In the face of that kind of possibility, the county Board of Supervisors voted for the first time in years and years to participate in a commodity program. Immediately, the Department of Agriculture found it necessary to send an investigator in there to investigate charges of discrimination in that program.

We then made the same offer in regard to Madison County. Again Washington called the state welfare people, who notified the County Board of Supervisors. They came up with a Food Stamp program. Of course poor people can't afford to be in a food stamp program because it costs money and they don't have any income.

We then offered to set up distribution in any county that didn't have a program. In the face of this possibility the state Welfare Department came up with the proposal called Operation HELP — and keep in mind this was in August. All over the state people had gone without food through the winter while the welfare department and the Agriculture Department played politics with each other.

Under this plan, the Welfare Department will get 24 million dollars worth of surplus commodities from the Department of Agriculture and 1.6 million dollars from the Office of Economic Opportunity to distribute the food to 500,000 people for six months.

In view of the criticisms of the program—which is based on the untenable assumption that welfare agencies and county boards of supervisors will act in a nondiscriminatory manner—O.E.O. put certain conditions on the grant: one, that a biracial committee supervise the program and, two, that hiring and distribution be done on a non-discriminatory basis.

Our information has it that no such committee has been set up, although the proposal was submitted in August and granted in November. Dr. Aaron Henry, head of the state N.A.A.C.P. was asked to nominate the Negroes for the committee. Why weren't poor people asked to nominate people? In regard to the second condition, the food was supposed to be ready for distribution by January 23. When that day came

we could not find one poor person employed in the program and no food being given out. And now it's February.

Mrs. Lawrence: I'd like to add to that. To live, we got to go out and chop cotton for \$3 a day, maybe two or three days a week. At the end of cotton picking, we gets the same for picking the scrap the machines leave. Then in November when they start qualifying you for the commodities, they say you got to find out how many people you worked for and get them to sign for you as being poor. If they don't feel like signing, like maybe they don't like you for civil-rights activities, you don't get commodities. But you still poor, whether the white boss says so or not.

Mrs. Blackwell: See, if you belong to any civil-rights group or participate, they tell you you can't get a job with the poverty program, because that's political and you know, you can't have that. And that's what's happening with the poverty program: it's political—that's the reason it's not doing anything for the poor.

Reporter: Mr. Thomas, why do you think the federal government is afraid to let poor Negroes go ahead and run the program?

Rev. Thomas: I could try to avoid that question and say that it is their problem. These people have the problem of not being fed. I will not avoid it and say nobody is unaware of the power of Congressman Whitten in the House Subcommittee on Agriculture. Nobody is unaware of the critical power of John Stennis in the Senate and its Finance Appropriations Committee. And those are the kinds of people who are supposed to represent the poor people in Congress.

Reporter: Are you saying that the people who run the poverty programs are kowtowing to the white power structure from here?

Rev. Thomas: That's what I'm saying. The poverty program and the Department of Agriculture.

I'd like to add one footnote. O.E.O. says it's introducing an experimental program for food distribution. Well, I don't think these people ought to be experimented on. They're hungry now. They need food now. And there's no reason why food could not have been airlifted in to those people.

Also, poor people in this state last year organized themselves into a Headstart program through the Child Development Group of Mississippi. Shriver and others said it was one of the best Headstarts anywhere in the country. In September they were told they would be funded in October; in October the money was coming in November; in November the money was coming in December and so on each month. Over 1100 local Mississippi poor people who have been promised money have been cheated by O.E.O.

Mrs. Lawrence: You know, we ain't dumb, even if we are poor. We need jobs. We need food. We need houses. But even with the poverty program we ain't got nothin but needs. That's why we was pulled off that building that wasn't being used for anything. We is ignored by the government. The thing about property upset them, but the thing about poor people don't. So there's no way out but to begin your own beginning... whatever way you can. So far as I'm concerned, that's all I got to say about the past. We're beginning a new future.