

Report To: Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council  
Re: Mississippi Voter Registration Project  
From: Bob Moses

### I. Introduction:

The report covers the entire Mississippi project starting from last May with particular emphasis on the second phase of the project, beginning August/September.

We began with projects in Jackson, Greenwood, Greenville, Hattiesburg, Hollysprings, Cleveland. We added projects in Clarksdale and Ruleville in August. The Jackson project was dropped in September, along with Vicksburg and the Greenville project was discontinued for a month and one half.

We currently have projects, i.e. workers stationed in Clarksdale, Ruleville, Cleveland, Greenville, Hollysprings, Greenwood and Hattiesburg.

The change in administration of the finances and direction of the program from the several Civil Rights agencies: NAACP, CORE, SNCC, Woman Power Unlimited, to a Council of Federated Organizations did not change the day to day operation of the projects.

### II. Significant figures:

The significant figure in any registration drive in Mississippi is the one giving the number of people who attempt registration. We are powerless to register people in significant numbers, anywhere in the State and will remain so until the power of the Citizens Council over state politics is broken, the Dept. of Justice secures for Negroes across the board the right to register, or Negroes rise up en masse with an unsophisticated blatant demand for immediate registration to vote. Very likely all three will be necessary before a breakdown can be obtained.

The conservative estimate for the number of Negroes who have attempted registration for the entire program is slightly over 1,100. Broken down as follows:

265 Forrest Co.	161 Hinds Co.	10 Warren Co.
40 Sunflower Co.	50 Leflore Co.	
80 Washington Co.	35 Bolivar Co.	
250 Coahoma Co.	40 Pike Co.	
150 Marshall Co.	20 Amite Co.	

We have no accurate means of checking on those people in other counties who have attempted to register on their own, and no reason to believe that they total more than 100 across the state.

### III. Registration and the Department of Justice

We estimate that less than 10% of those who attempt to register actually succeed. What is the Justice Department doing? They are engaged in court suits which have as their immediate aim the registration of this specific list of voters; the condemnation of this or that registrar. Admittedly they are experimenting in this area, just as we are; however, it should be clear by now that this type of approach will not do the job. If we are to register Negroes and the Department of Justice is to make a serious inroad on the voting picture in Mississippi then they must:

1. File a broad suit to stop economic reprisals and physical violence to prospective registrants and those who work to get others registered.
2. File a suit to abolish the poll tax in Mississippi for state and local as well as federal elections.
3. Press forward immediately with its current suit to abolish the literacy test and the other voting laws aimed at discouraging and preventing Negroes from registering to vote.

The Department is reluctant to file "intimidation suits", as our recent experiences in Sunflower County have borne out; and we will probably have to face arrest and a stay in jail in Indianola before a suit is filed there.

In a similar manner, there will probably have to occur more evictions and widespread publicity before they will file a suit to stop economic reprisals in Sunflower county.

The poll tax was historically part of a plan to keep Negroes from voting and its required payment two years in succession at times when there is otherwise no political activity, to say nothing of intimidations from the sheriffs who are charged with its collection, all argue that it is still used for this purpose and should be abolished by the courts. In this connection it should be remembered that congress is powerless to abolish the poll tax for state and local elections.

Finally there is some fear that after the Ole Miss. fiasco the Department will be reluctant to press its suits: U.S. vs Mississippi, filed August 22, 1962 and granted a good three judge panel from the fifth circuit: Tuttle, Brown and Cox. It is my understanding that the Judges are waiting on the Department and it is my feeling that even though the suit could not be won in time to effect the coming primaries and general elections in 1963, (particularly since Justice will not file a poll tax suit) it should not be delayed for the following reason: Most Negroes, and I imagine whites as well, are under the illusion that the current test required of applicants for registration to vote is legal; they then feel that they have to "prepare" themselves in order to go down to try. This results in a great deal of delay. Finally when they have gone down and tried, then wait while their names are run in the papers and then are told that they have failed the test, they are under the illusion that they need to 'study' in order to be better 'prepared'. The act of pressing the case and the reluctant publicity will remove the literacy test and the current registration procedure from this Wonderland atmosphere and put it in the framework of a calculated procedure to prevent the registration of Negroes, where it belongs. A very beneficial side effect will be an increase in the number of Negro applicants.

#### IV. Techniques:

We have relied almost solely on door to door canvassing and have contacted an estimated 10,000 people in this fashion. There have, of course, in addition been mass meetings, speaking engagements, at churches and leaflets and other material handed out. In this last category the weekly distribution of 2,000 to 3,000 copies of the Free Press is of special note. This paper has carried a series of articles entitled: Close up. Voter Registration. Those have been

articles written by the workers detailing the events of the Sunflower county drive.

#### V. The Young Negro and the Voting Drive:

Not the least important feature of the Mississippi project has been the successful recruitment of young high school graduates and College students to take leaves of absences from school or work to put full time in on the voting campaigns. In any political struggle it is imperative to identify the "agencies" for change. In Mississippi, the adult population in urban areas must be eliminated from those who will publically sponsor and conduct voter registration drives. Those adults who have the time are economically independent of the white man, are willing to join in the struggle, and are not afraid of the tremendous pressure they will face, are a negligible number and the only city I know of where their energies have been successfully channelled into a sustained drive is Clarksdale. It doesn't seem likely that this situation will change very much in the near future.

This leaves the young people to be the organizers, the agents of social and political change in Mississippi. They operate at extreme disadvantages; they suffer from the most backward educational system in the U.S.; they very seldom are free to work in their own home towns because of the pressure brought to bear on their parents and/or their relatives. And then, when this situation does not prevail, they are likely to be prophets without honor at home. Thus Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins were able to recruit 250 people to go down and register in Hattiesburg and Forrest county, but were not successful in recruiting more than two or three in McComb, their home city. La Fayette Surney, on the other hand, cannot work in Ruleville, his home town, because his parents are afraid of the pressure that would follow. They have little knowledge of procedures and skills involved in writing, newsletters, press releases, reports, etc., so their ability to analyze and report on their activities is limited. They do not have a functioning adult structure, to provide a framework, for their operations. Such structure as exists is usually paper organization with no active program they are capable of implementing..... It is a sign of hope that we have been able to find young people to shoulder the responsibility for carrying out the voting drive. They are the seeds of change. They are gathering around them a larger group of youngsters who will provide replacements for them as they go back to school, and if an independent economic base can be found for them it is not difficult to visualize a self-replenishing staff of thirty to fifty students working full time on political changes across the state of Mississippi for the next ten or twelve years.

#### VI. Staff:

1. Greenwood: Samuel Block and Willie Peacock are working in Greenwood. Sam is originally from Cleveland, Miss. He spent several years in the Army and was attending school at Mississippi Vocational College, before he joined the project. Willie is from a rural county contiguous to Leflore county where Greenwood is situated. It is a tough county and since his parents live in the county seat and are subject to economic pressure, we do not disclose the name. He is a graduate of Rust College and joined the project this fall when he was refused a teaching job in his home town because Lindsey, who ran for congress in the second congressional district

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was also a graduate of Rust College.

Ruleville: James Jones, Charles McLaurin and Jessie Harris are stationed in Ruleville and working Sunflower and Bolivar county. They are all from Jackson, all participated in the Freedom Riders and all spent upwards of a month in Parchman prison, which lies twelve miles north of Ruleville in Sunflower county. Jessie Harris and James Jones are recent graduates from high school in Jackson. James has been working to save money for College before he joined the project. Jessie has been working with the movement since he graduated. Charles is a high school graduate, but was in the Army and then working before he joined.

Greenville: Lafayette Surney, Charles Cobb, Emma Bell and Bob Moses are stationed in Greenville. Lafayette is a native of Ruleville and was recruited this summer by the boys working in that town. He graduated from high school last June and postponed going to Mississippi Vocational College this fall, to work with the project. Charles is from Springfield, Massachusetts, and a sophomore on leave of absence from Howard University. Emma Bell is a recent addition to the staff. From McComb, she participated in the walk-out from Burglund High School and finished her senior year at Campbell college. She was working part time in Mc Comb this fall before we persuaded her to join us.

Holly Spring: Frank Smith is carrying that operation by himself and comes from Atlanta where he was a student at Morehouse College -- his home is in Augusta, Georgia.

Hattiesburg: Mrs. Victoria Gray and Mattie Bevins. Mattie comes from Hattiesburg and began working with Curtis and Hollis when they were there last summer. When she decided to work full time she did not want to work at home because of the pressure on her parents; now she thinks she will be able to work in Hattiesburg. She is on leave of absence from Tougaloo College. Mrs. Gray is a woman in her thirties, married and with her family; she brought into contact with the drive through Curtiss and Hollis. She helped considerably during the summer and fall, and attended the second workshop at Mt. Beulah, where she says she began to see more complete situation of the predicament of Negroes in Mississippi. She agreed to work with the project full time in November, for the \$25.00 week expense allowance. This involved some sacrifice for her since she left her job as a saleslady to work with the project.

Three of our staff took leave of absences this past month: Colia Liddell from Jackson left to enter College....Lawrence Guyot, from Pass Christian, a senior of Tougaloo College left for a rest.

Summer staff now studying at Tougaloo College include: Curtiss Hayes, Hollis Watkins, Dorie Ladner, Joan Trumpower, Otis Thomas and Hugh Bell. Arthur Williams, who worked in Greenville this summer, is currently studying at Moharry Medical School.

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January 21, 1963