



council
of
federated
organizations

COFO:

WHAT IT IS

WHAT IT DOES

NEW YORK OFFICE
STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE
100 FIFTH AVENUE
YU9-1313

HATTIESBURG, MISSISSIPPI (Dec. 10, 1964) -- More than 350 people -- native Mississippians, staff members and volunteer workers -- for the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) gathered here last weekend to chart future programs in their attack on Mississippi's segregated structure. The group agreed to support the challenge being mounted by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and to continue their state-wide program reaching into almost every phase of political and social activity.

They represent the single largest collection of civil rights workers ever gathered together. They are working on the largest group of programs any civil rights drive in history has ever undertaken.

COFO as it is today had its organizational beginnings in a Clarksdale, Mississippi Methodist Church in August, 1962, but the name COFO goes back nearly two years before that meeting.

COFO was a name decided upon by a group of Negro Mississippians when they were seeking an audience with the then Mississippi Governor, Ross Barnett. Thinking that Barnett would turn down a meeting with representatives of the older, established civil rights organizations, they used the name COFO -- Council of Federated Organizations -- for a meeting with him in the Spring of 1961, to negotiate the release of "Freedom Riders" arrested because they violated Mississippi's segregation laws.

Among the organizers of the first COFO were Medgar Evers, slain NAACP field secretary; Dr. Aaron Henry, State President of the Mississippi NAACP Branches; and Carsie Hall, one of Mississippi's four Negro lawyers. Dr. Henry was elected president and Attorney Hall, secretary.

After the Barnett meeting, the group became inactive, but it was revitalized in January, 1962 when Robert Moses, head of voter registration in Mississippi for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Thomas Gaither, Mississippi representative for the Congress of Racial

Equality (CORE), wrote a memorandum proposing that the civil rights groups working in Mississippi band together to work on registering the state's Negroes. Moses had been working on voter registration in rural Mississippi since August, 1961; his experience showed him that discrimination in Mississippi would only yield to an all-out unified attack by as strong a force as possible.

COFO submitted a proposal to the newly formed Voter Education Project (VEP) of the Southern Regional Council in February, 1962, under the signature of Dr. Henry, then, as now, state NAACP head and head of COFO.

VEP had announced it would finance voter registration drives in the South, but it did not support COFO's plan until after the August, 1962 organizational meeting.

All of the full-time civil rights workers in Mississippi at that time were present at the Clarksdale meeting, except Evers, whose busy schedule kept him away. Attending were CORE's David Dennis (who had replaced Thomas Gaither as CORE's man in Mississippi); the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Rev. James Bevel; SNCC's Moses; SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman; and the other ten SNCC workers then scattered throughout the Mississippi Delta.

The meeting renominated and elected Aaron Henry president and Attorney Hall secretary. The Reverend R.L.T. Smith of Jackson was named treasurer and CORE's Dennis was elected to the Executive Committee. Bob Moses was named program director.

A VEP grant in September, 1962 enabled COFO to begin work in Bolivar, Coahoma, Leflore, and Sunflower counties where SNCC staff members already had done crucial ground work.

COFO moved next into Washington County. The entire staff came together again in February, 1963 for a concerted push in Leflore County after the near-fatal machine-gunning of SNCC Field Secretary Jimmy Travis. A food

and clothing drive launched in the winter of 1962-1963 helped sustain many of the Delta families victimized because of their participation in the vote drive, and began to solidify support by Northern college campuses.

After Greenwood, workers moved into Holmes and Madison Counties and made inroads into other Delta locations. By Fall, 1963, a statewide "Freedom Vote" with regular COFO workers bolstered by volunteers from Yale and Stanford Universities placed permanent civil rights workers in the city of Jackson and in Hinds, Warren, Adams, Forrest, Lauderdale, Lowndes and Jones Counties.

Following the "Freedom Vote" the Mississippi staff, then numbering about 50 full-time workers, met in the SNCC office in November, 1963 to chart future plans. The state was divided along congressional district lines and a project head elected for each district. SNCC's Lawrence Guyot, now state chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, was project head in the 5th District, based in Hattiesburg; SNCC worker Frank Smith operated in the 1st District from Holly Springs; CORE staff member Matteo Suarez directed activities in the 4th District from Canton; and SNCC's McArthur Cotton reactivated voter registration in McComb -- the site of SNCC's first Mississippi project in 1961 -- and became 3rd District Project Director. I

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Additional workers from SNCC, CORE and SCLC entered the state. The November, 1963 "Freedom Vote" had shown that Northern, white college students could work effectively in Mississippi, and plans were laid for the Mississippi Summer Project, which involved 900 students, doctors, lawyers and teachers, working in community centers, freedom schools and voter registration programs.

Details of each aspect of the summer program were ironed out at large staff meetings. COFO workers believed then, as now, that decisions about projects and techniques in Mississippi were best made by those who lived and worked there, and not by those unfamiliar with the state.

The Summer Project ended in August, 1964 and the Mississippi Freedom Project began almost immediately afterward. Over 200 volunteers remained in Mississippi to continue voter registration work and keep some of the 32 community centers and 41 Freedom Schools open. Fifty of these volunteers were put on the SNCC staff; the remainder form the Freedom Force, for whom SNCC is attempting to get subsistence pay of \$10 a week.

From the beginning, financial support and staff for COFO have come primarily from SNCC and CORE. COFO itself employs no staff, but borrows workers for its programs from cooperating civil rights organizations. (At present, 125 of SNCC's staff of 225 are working in Mississippi on COFO projects.) In October, 1963, the VEP withdrew its funds from COFO because the state-wide organization engaged in "political programs" not allowable under VEP grants. In the fall of 1963 SNCC's Moses met with NAACP's Roy Wilkins, SCLC's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and CORE's James Farmer to solicit their support. SNCC and CORE agreed to contribute money to take up the slack. CORE supports the work in Mississippi's 4th Congressional District, and SNCC the work in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th Districts, supplying staff, cars and the funds necessary to operate the various programs.

SCLC has cooperated with COFO's programs through their Citizenship Teacher Program of training local people to become teachers; the state conference of NAACP branches has supported COFO through its member units.

The national NAACP never considered itself a part of COFO, of which Dr. Henry (head of the state conference of NAACP branches) is president. The state conference did vote to withdraw its support pending discussion at the National Board meeting in January, 1965. The reason for withdrawal was given as non-involvement in decision making. But Aaron Henry reports that he sent notices to each branch chapter each time COFO meetings took place and encouraged them to attend. (COFO meetings are open to all

people in Mississippi working on the various aspects of its program.)

The Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches trained most of last summer's volunteers and has directed a steady flow of ministers -- acting as counselors -- into and out of Mississippi since the summer began.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., the National Lawyers Guild and other legal groups have supplied lawyers and legal advice.

"The most important thing about COFO is not its name or its history," a volunteer worker has said, "but that it has been able to involve so many people and groups, both black and white, from Mississippi and elsewhere, in a total program aimed at completely eliminating discrimination and segregation from every corner of the state."