



# The Struggle for Voting Rights in Mississippi ~ the Early Years

Excerpted from "[History & Timeline](#)"

## Mississippi — the Eye of the Storm

It is a truism of the era that as you travel from the north to the south the deeper grows the racism, the worse the poverty, and the more brutal the repression. In the geography of the Freedom Movement the South is divided into mental zones according to the virulence of bigotry and oppression: the "Border States" (Delaware, Kentucky, Missouri, and the urban areas of Maryland); the "Mid South" (Virginia, the East Shore of Maryland, North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas); and the "Deep South" (South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana). And then there is Mississippi, in a class by itself — the absolute deepest pit of racism, violence, and poverty.

During the post-Depression decades of the 1940s and 1950s, most of the South experiences enormous economic changes. "King Cotton" declines as agriculture diversifies and mechanizes. In 1920, almost a million southern Blacks work in agriculture, by 1960 that number has declined by 75% to around 250,000 — resulting in a huge migration off the land into the cities both North and South. By 1960, almost 60% of southern Blacks live in urban areas (compared to roughly 30% in 1930).

But those economic changes come slowly, if at all, to Mississippi and the Black Belt areas of Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana. In 1960, almost 70% of Mississippi Blacks still live in rural areas, and more than a third (twice the percentage in the rest of the South) work the land as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and farm laborers. The median income for Blacks in Mississippi is just \$1,444 (equal to \$9,600 in 2006), the median income for Mississippi whites is three times higher. More than 85% of Mississippi Blacks live below the official Federal poverty line.

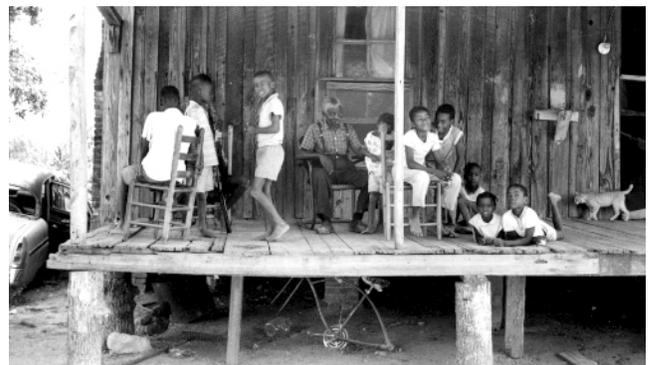


Photo by Alan Reich.

In 1960, segregated education for Blacks is severely limited. The average funding for Black schools is less than a quarter of that spent to educate white students, and in rural areas the ratio is even more skewed, Pike County, for example, spends \$30.89 to educate each white student and only \$0.76 cents per Black pupil. It is no surprise then that only 7% of Mississippi Blacks finish high school, and in the rural areas where children are sent to the fields early in life, functional illiteracy is widespread.

Mississippi is still dominated — economically and politically — by less than 100 plantation barons who lord it over vast cotton fields worked by Black hand-labor using hoes and fingers the way it was done in slavery times. And they are determined to keep that labor cheap and docile. The arch-segregationist

Senator James Eastland provides a clear example of the economic riches that underlie racism in Mississippi. In 1961, his huge plantation in Sunflower County produces 5,394 bales of cotton. He sells this cotton for \$890,000 (equivalent to about \$5,850,000 in 2006 dollars). It costs Eastland \$566,000 to produce his cotton for a profit of \$324,000 (equal to \$2,130,000 in 2006). This represents profit of 57%. (For comparison, a modern corporation is doing well if it returns 10-15% profit.) The Black men, women, and children who labor in his fields under the blazing sun — plowing, planting, hoeing, and picking — are paid 30 cents an hour (equal to \$1.97 in 2006). That's \$3.00 for a 10 hour day, \$18.00 for a six-day, 60-hour week.



This system of agricultural feudalism is maintained by Jim Crow laws, state repression, white terrorism, and the systematic disenfranchisement of Blacks. While whites outnumber Blacks in Mississippi overall, the ratio of Blacks to whites is higher than in any other state in the union. And in a number of rural counties Blacks outnumber whites, often by large majorities. Given these demographic realities, the power elites know that to maintain white supremacy they have to prevent Blacks from voting, and they are ruthless in doing so — using rigged “literacy” tests, poll taxes, white-only primaries, arrests, economic retaliation, Klan violence, and assassinations. On average, seven Blacks are lynched or assassinated each year in Mississippi since the 1880s.

In 1961, less than 7% of Mississippi Blacks are registered to vote — in many Black-majority counties not a single Black citizen is registered — not even decorated military veterans. And of those few on the voter rolls, only a handful dare to actually cast a ballot. This systematic denial of Black voting rights is replicated in the Black Belt areas of Louisiana, Alabama, South Carolina, and Southwest Georgia.

### **Direct-Action or Voter Registration?**

In the summer of 1960, Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, and other local Black leaders in Mississippi tell Bob Moses that they need help with voter registration more than demonstrations against segregation. Bob promises he will return in the summer of '61, and in July he begins voter registration work in McComb. Staunch, long-time, Movement supporters such as Harry Belafonte and many of SNCC's student leaders also believe that SNCC should focus on voter registration rather than direct-action such as sit-ins and Freedom Rides. They argue that poor, rural Blacks have no money for lunch counters or other public facilities and what they need most is political power that in Mississippi has to begin with winning the right to vote.



Bob Moses, Julian Bond, Curtis Hayes, unidentified, Hollis Watkins, Amzie Moore, and E.W. Steptoe.

Other SNCC leaders — many just released from Parchman Prison and Hinds County Jail — argue that the Freedom Rides and other forms of direct-action must continue. The protests are gaining momentum and bringing the Movement into the darkest corners of the Deep South, raising awareness, building courage, and inspiring young and old. They are deeply suspicious of Kennedy's demand that they switch from demonstrations to voter registration, and they are unwilling to abandon the tactics that have brought the Movement so far in so short a time.

In August, the issue comes to a head when SNCC meets at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. After three days of passionate debate, SNCC is split right down the middle — half favor continuing direct-action, the other half favor switching to voter registration. Ella Baker proposes a compromise — do

both. Her suggestion is adopted. Diane Nash is chosen to head direct-action efforts and Charles Jones is chosen to head voter registration activity. Both groups send activists to join Bob Moses in McComb.



James Forman, SNCC

Amid the fires of the Freedom Rides and the heat of debate, SNCC as an organization is rapidly evolving away from its campus/student roots. More and more SNCC activists are leaving school to become full-time freedom fighters. With money raised by Belafonte, first Charles Sherrod, then Bob Moses, then others are hired as SNCC “field secretaries,” devoting their lives to the struggle in the rural areas and small towns of the south. In September, James Forman becomes SNCC's Executive Director to coordinate and lead far-flung projects and a growing staff. Increasingly, it will be the SNCC field staff from projects in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas, Virginia and Maryland who will shape and lead SNCC in the years to come.

And as so often turns out to be the case when committed activists passionately disagree over strategy, both sides are proven correct. Both direct-action and voter registration are needed. Each supports and strengthens the other. The determination and courage of student protesters inspires and encourages their elders, and the growing political power of adults organized around the right to vote supports and sustains the young demonstrators.

**An important point.** As Movement veterans, we look back today and recall that SNCC was torn between direct-action and voter registration. But instead of splitting the organization apart, they forged a unifying compromise. By respecting that fellow activists could passionately disagree over strategy and tactics — yet remain allies — they strengthened SNCC and the Movement as a whole. Unfortunately, in later years, some radicals and leftists in the North all too often adopted the opposite approach, treating anyone who disagreed with them as enemies — thereby splitting organizations and undermining their effectiveness.



SNCC meeting. Highlander Center photo

## Voter Registration & Direct-action in McComb, Mississippi

In 1961, Black voter registration in the Deep South is entirely controlled by the white power structure.



SNCC photo.

Voter registration procedures in the Deep South — which vary from state to state and county to county — are based on an application and a so-called “[literacy test](#)” that prospective voters must pass in order to be registered. The system is designed to allow the county Voter Registrars (all of whom are white, of course) to rig the outcome however they wish. Whites are encouraged to register regardless of their education (or lack thereof), while applications from most Blacks are denied even if they answer every question correctly.

In McComb, for example, the “literacy test” consists in part of the Registrar choosing one of the 285 sections of the Mississippi constitution and asking the applicant to read it aloud and interpret it to his satisfaction. He can assign an easy section, or a dense block of legal bafflegab that even law professors cannot agree on. Then it is entirely up to the Registrar to decide if the applicant's reading and interpretation are adequate. Voters are also required to be of “good moral character,” and again the Registrar has sole authority to decide who does, or does not, possess sufficient “moral character.”

Blacks who attempt to register in defiance of the white power structure are harassed and threatened. They are fired from their jobs and evicted from their homes. Many are beaten. Some are murdered.

In urban areas of the Deep South, a few token Blacks — usually ministers, teachers, doctors, and other professionals — are allowed to register, but never enough to affect the outcome of an election. In the rural counties, particularly those with large Black populations, only a handful — or none at all — are permitted to register. In the three Southwest Mississippi counties around McComb, for example:

Pike County (McComb) Adult Blacks - 8,000 Registered - 200 (2.5%)  
Amite County Adult Blacks - 5,000 Registered - 1 (0%)  
Walthall County Adult Blacks - 3,000 Registered - 0 (0%)

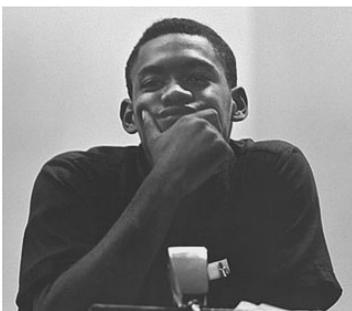
In July, NAACP leader Reverend C.C. Bryant invites Bob Moses to begin a voter registration project in McComb, the main town of Pike County. Moses is soon joined by SNCC members John Hardy of the [Nashville Student Movement](#) and Reginald Robinson from the [Civic Interest Group in Baltimore](#). Rev. Bryant introduces Moses to Amite County NAACP leader E.W. Steptoe, and the project spreads to cover adjacent Amite and Walthall Counties. McComb NAACP officer Webb Owens finds housing for the students and takes them to the cafe owned by activist Aylene Quinn, *"Whenever any of [the SNCC workers] come by, you feed 'em, you feed 'em whether they got money or not,"* he tells her.



Bob Moses, SNCC

Before beginning work, Bob Moses writes to the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) asking what the Federal response will be if Blacks are prevented from registering. In line with the Kennedy administration's [promise](#) to defend voting rights if the students will turn away from direct-action, the DOJ replies that it will "vigorously enforce" Federal statutes forbidding the use of intimidation, threats, and coercion against voter aspirants.

In August, SNCC workers in McComb begin teaching Blacks the complexities of the voter registration process. All 21 questions on the application form have to be studied and understood, and all 285 sections of the Mississippi constitution have to be mastered. After attending the class, 16 local Blacks journey through a century of fear to the Pike County courthouse in Magnolia. Six manage to pass the test and be registered.



Curtis (Hayes) Muhammad  
Photo by Matt Herron

More SNCC workers arrive in McComb direct from the Highlander meeting: Ruby Doris Smith, Marion Barry, Charles Jones, and others. In late August, after training in the tactics of Nonviolent Resistance by the SNCC direct-action veterans, two local teenagers — Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes (Muhammad), both of whom go on to become SNCC field secretaries of renown — sit-in at the local Woolworth's lunch counter. They are arrested.

On the last day of August, Bob Moses takes two Blacks to the Amite County courthouse in Liberty Mississippi. He is brutally beaten in the street by Bill Caston, cousin to the sheriff and son-in-law of E. H. Hurst the State Representative. That night in McComb, more than 200 Blacks attend the first Civil Rights Movement mass meeting in the town's history to protest the arrest of the students and the beating of Moses. They vow to continue the struggle.

Moses files charges against Caston who is quickly found innocent by an all-white jury. But this is the first time since Reconstruction that a Black man has filed charges against a white for racial violence in Amite County.

Brenda Travis, a 15 year old high school student in McComb, canvasses the streets with the SNCC voter-registration workers. To awaken and inspire the adults, she leads other students on a sit-in. For the crime of ordering a hamburger, she is sentenced to a year in the state juvenile prison. She is also expelled from school. In response, McComb's Black students form the Pike County Nonviolent Movement — Hollis Watkins is President, Curtis Hayes is Vice President.

SNCC workers John Hardy and Travis Britt are beaten by whites and arrested on trumped up charges when they bring Blacks to the courthouse to register in Walthall and Amite counties. In Amite County, Herbert Lee is one of those working with Moses. In late September, he is murdered by State Representative E. H. Hurst. In early October, more than 100 Black high-school students march in McComb to protest Lee's killing and the expulsion of Brenda Travis. When they kneel in prayer, they are arrested, as are the SNCC staff who are with them. Bob Moses, Chuck McDew, and Bob Zellner (SNCC's first white field secretary) are beaten. The SNCC workers are charged with "Contributing to the delinquency of minors," a serious felony.

More than 100 students boycott the Black high-school rather than sign a mandatory pledge that they will not participate in civil rights activity. SNCC sets up "Nonviolent High" for the boycotting students with Moses teaching math, Dion Diamond teaching science, and Chuck McDew teaching history. Nonviolent High is one of the seeds from which grow the "Freedom Schools" that spread across the state three years later in the summer of '64.



Student protest in McComb, MS. Photo by Erle Johnson

Late in October, an all-white jury convicts the SNCC members on the "Contributing" charge. Their attorneys appeal, but bail is set at \$14,000 (equal to \$92,000 in 2006 dollars). Unable to raise such a huge amount, they languish in prison. With their SNCC teachers in jail, Nonviolent High cannot continue, and the boycotting students are accepted by Campbell Junior College in Jackson.



Tom Hayden assaulted in McComb

Meanwhile, arrests, beatings, and shootings continue. CORE Freedom Riders are brutally attacked by a white mob when they try to integrate the McComb Greyhound station. Paul Potter and Tom Hayden of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) are dragged from their car and beaten in the street when they come to McComb to support the Movement. Shotgun blasts from a Klan nightrider almost kill Dion Diamond and John Hardy.

Despite their repeated promises of protection for voter registration, Kennedy, the Justice Department, and the FBI do nothing. The DOJ's legal efforts are feeble and ineffective. The arrests, the reign of terror, and the brazen murder of Herbert Lee by a state official, all take their toll. The McComb-area voter registration drive is suppressed — for the moment.

In November, Bob Moses manages to slip a message from prison to SNCC headquarters in Atlanta:

We are smuggling this note from the drunk tank of the county jail in Magnolia, Mississippi. Twelve of us are here, sprawled out along the concrete bunker; Curtis Hayes, Hollis Watkins, Ike Lewis and Robert Talbert, four veterans of the bunker, are sitting up talking — mostly

about girls; Charles McDew ("Tell the story") is curled into the concrete and the wall; Harold Robinson, Stephen Ashley, James Wells, Lee Chester Vick, Leotus Eubanks, and Ivory Diggs lay cramped on the cold bunks; I'm sitting with smuggled pen and paper, thinking a little, writing a little; Myrtis Bennett and Janie Campbell are across the way wedded to a different icy cubicle.

Later on, Hollis will lead out with a clear tenor into a freedom song, Talbert and Lewis will supply jokes, and McDew will discourse on the history of the Black man and the Jew. McDew – a black by birth, a Jew by choice, and a revolutionary by necessity – has taken on the deep hates and deep loves which America and the world reserve for those who dare to stand in a strong sun and cast a sharp shadow.  
...

This is Mississippi, the middle of the iceberg. Hollis is leading off with his tenor, "Michael row the boat ashore, Alleluia; Christian brothers don't be slow, Alleluia; Mississippi's next to go, Alleluia." There is a tremor in the middle of the iceberg – from a stone that the builders rejected.

Finally, in December, SNCC manages to raise the bail money and the jailed SNCC staff are released on appeal.

In a narrow sense, McComb is a defeat for SNCC — the project is suppressed and driven out by arrests, brutality, and murder. But in a broader sense it is an important milestone, the crucial lessons learned in McComb form the foundation for years of organizing to come, not just in Mississippi but in hard places across the South — places like Selma Alabama and Southwest Georgia. In McComb they discover that courage is contagious and that local people — particularly young people — will respond to outside organizers. They discover that as student activists they have much to teach, but also much to learn from the community, and that if they respect the community the community will in turn protect, feed, and nurture them. And from the community will come new leaders and new organizers to expand and sustain the struggle. Looking back, Bob Moses later observed:

*"One of the things that we learned out here [in Amite County] was that we could find family in Mississippi. We could go anyplace in Mississippi before we were through, and we knew that somewhere down some road there was family. And we could show up there unannounced with no money or no anything and there were people there ready to take care of us. That's what we had here in Amite. One of the things that happened in the movement was that there was a joining of a young generation of people with an older generation that nurtured and sustained them. ... It was an amazing experience. I've never before or since had that experience where it's almost literally like you're throwing yourself on the people and they have actually picked you up and gone on to carry you so you don't really need money, you don't really need transportation. ... They're going to see that you eat. It's a liberating kind of experience."*



Out of McComb comes the hard kernel that transforms SNCC into an organization of organizers who in a few short years move the Movement from protest to social revolution. Building on the lessons learned in McComb, they shift the voter registration campaign into the Delta — the most segregated region of

Mississippi. And out of McComb they bring five young organizers on to the growing SNCC staff — Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, Emma Bell, Ike Lewis and Bobby Talbot — the first of many to come not from college campuses but from the red dust roads of the rural South.

## Herbert Lee Murdered

Herbert Lee, a Black farmer with 9 children, is a founding member of the NAACP in Amite County Mississippi and one of the few rural Blacks who dares to work on voter registration with Bob Moses and the McComb Project. State Assemblyman E.H. Hurst (white, of course) lives across the street from Lee. They are friends and neighbors. But trying to register Black voters is a challenge to white supremacy that Hurst cannot accept and he orders Lee to stop.



Herbert Lee.

On the morning of September 25, 1961, Lee takes a truckload of cotton to the gin in Liberty Mississippi, the Amite County seat. Hurst follows him. According to witnesses, Lee is sitting in his truck when Hurst angrily walks up, begins arguing, and pulls out a pistol. *"I'm not fooling around this time, I really mean business,"* shouts Hurst.

*"Put the gun down,"* responds Lee. *"I won't talk to you unless you put the gun down."*

Lee slides out of his truck on the other side. Hurst runs around the truck and shoots Lee in the head, killing him instantly.

The Amite County Sheriff surrounds Hurst with armed men — not to keep him from escaping but to protect him from possible retaliation by Blacks. An all-white Coroner's Jury is summoned. Hurst (6'-3" over 200 pounds) claims that Lee (5'-4" 150 pounds) "attacked" him with a tire iron and he shot in "self-defense." Louis Allen and other witnesses are pressured to confirm Hurst's claim. They know that the same thing can happen to them if they disobey. The jury accepts the "self-defense" story — the typical result when a white Southerner kills a Black man. Hurst never spends a day in jail.

## Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) Formed in Mississippi

After being released from jail in December of 1961, Bob Moses and the other SNCC organizers analyze the successes and failures of the McComb voter registration campaign. It is clear that racist opposition to Black voting rights in Mississippi is so ferocious, so violent, so widespread, that only by uniting all of the state's civil rights organizations into a coordinated effort is there any hope of success.

Moses and Tom Gaither of CORE circulate a memo proposing formation of a coalition. They are determined not to repeat in Mississippi the unproductive conflicts between national civil rights organizations that have so often occurred elsewhere. Statewide NAACP Chairman Aaron Henry agrees with them. In February of 1962, representatives of SNCC, CORE, and the NAACP, along with local community leaders, create the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to be a vehicle through which civil rights organizations working in Mississippi can work together. The name is taken from an earlier coalition effort to support the Freedom Riders. A grant request to fund COFO voter registration activities is submitted to the [Voter Education Project](#) (VEP).



Highlander Center photo

The national leaders of the three organizations initially oppose the idea out of fear that each will lose visibility within it — with consequent loss of northern funds. But the local activists and leaders on the ground in Mississippi, those who are closest to the suffering of the people and the necessities of the struggle in that state, insist that success — indeed, survival — require organizational cooperation rather than competition.

In August, a meeting is held in Clarksdale to formalize COFO. Attending are Moses, Jim Forman and a dozen other SNCC workers, Dave Dennis of CORE, James Bevel of SCLC, and others. NAACP leader Aaron Henry is elected President, Rev. R.L.T. Smith is named Treasurer, attorney Carsie Hall becomes Secretary, and Bob Moses is appointed the COFO state-wide Project Director. An agreement is made that CORE will focus its registration efforts in Mississippi's 4th Congressional District centered around Meridian and Canton, SNCC will work the other four districts including the Delta region around Greenwood and the Pearl River area around McComb. For their part, SCLC will continue its [Citizenship school](#) program throughout the state, and the NAACP will concentrate on the judicial aspects of the struggle.

### Mississippi Voter Registration — Greenwood

When they are released from jail in McComb, SNCC field secretaries, many newly hired with VEP money, resume voter registration work in Mississippi. Bob Moses, Paul & Catherine Brooks, James Bevel & Diane Nash (newly married), and Bernard Lafayette in Jackson; Lester McKinnie in Laurel; Charles McLaurin, Dorie Ladner, and Colia Lidell in Ruleville; James Jones in Clarksdale, Mattie Bivens in Cleveland, Frank Smith in Holly Springs; Emma Bell in Greenville; and Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins in Hattiesburg.



Sam Block, SNCC.

Sam Block, a young Mississippi native and former SCLC Citizenship School teacher, is assigned to Greenwood, capital of Leflore county in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. Cotton is still king in the Delta — hand-labor, plantation-style — and 800,000 bales pass through Greenwood each year. Segregation remains absolute and the effects are stark.

	White	Black
1960 population	Approx 33%	Approx 64%
Land owned	90%	10%
Median income	\$5,200	\$1,400 (equal to \$9,436 in 2006)
Median education	11.2 years	5.1 years
Voter registration	Almost 100%	2%
Political offices	All	None

For Blacks, segregation, exploitation, and abuse permeate every aspect of life. 82% of Blacks live in dwellings rated "sub-standard." Blacks, living in tar-paper shacks with a single light bulb are charged more for electricity than whites living in modern homes. Of the county's 168 hospital beds, 131 are reserved for whites-only.

In Leflore county, almost 100% of whites are registered to vote, compared to just 268 Blacks (2%). In the seven years since the *Brown* decision, only 40 Blacks have been allowed to register (compared to 1,664

whites). With Blacks a 2 to 1 majority, whites know that Black voter registration threatens their economic and political control. One white voter tells a reporter: *"We killed two-month-old indian babies to take this country, and now they want us to give it away to the niggers."*

Sam is soon joined by Rust College graduate [Willie \(Wazir\) Peacock](#), and then Luvaugn Brown, and Lawrence Guyot. Sam Block describes the work:

*I canvassed every day and every night until I found about seven or eight people to carry up to register ... We went up to register and it was the first time visiting the courthouse in Greenwood, Mississippi, and the sheriff came up to me and he asked me, he said, "Nigger, where you from?" I told him, "Well, I'm a native Mississippian." He said, "Yeh, yeh, I know that, but where you from? ... I know you ain't from here, cause I know every nigger and his mammy." I said, "Well, you know all the niggers, do you know any colored people?" He got angry. He spat in my face and walked. So he came back and turned around and told me, "I don't want to see you in town any more. The best thing you better do is pack your clothes and get out and don't never come back no more." I said, "Well, sheriff, if you don't want to see me here, I think the best thing for you to do is pack your clothes and leave, get out of town, 'cause I'm here to stay, I came here to do a job and this is my intention, I'm going to do this job."*

White racists attack the SNCC office, and the SNCC organizers barely escape over the roof tops. The building is trashed, and the frightened landlord evicts them. The fear is so intense that people cross to the other side of the street rather than walk past Sam or Wazir and risk whites observing them in proximity to the "race-mixing agitators." It is months before anyone else in the Black community will rent space intended for voter registration work.

Sam and Wazir dig in deep, and hold on. They continue organizing in Greenwood without an office. Fear is pervasive among Greenwood Blacks. Fear of being fired. Fear of being evicted. Fear of beatings, bombings, and murder. Fear that the SNCC workers will stir up trouble and violence and then leave. But gradually, week by week, month by month, as Sam and Wazir hold on, trust is built and their courage inspires first the young students and then their parents.

Wazir describes what it was like:

*Greenwood was so organized — there was not one block that we couldn't have — it was like guerrilla war, we could stop anywhere and duck out of sight, go into somebody's house. At every block in the Black neighborhood. So that's one thing that kept us alive 'cause they would see us at night and the cops would think it was an opportunity to get us, speed up and try to turn around. When they turned around we'd be watching out a window somewhere, see them come back to try to find us.*

A new office is finally rented, a church dares to open its doors for a voter registration meeting, and the community begins coming together. Slowly, one by one, two by two, a trickle of Leflore County Blacks begin to make the dangerous journey down to the courthouse to try to register to vote. But in the first six months, only five Blacks of the dozens who try are actually registered.



Daring to register, Greenwood, MS.

By the end of 1962, SNCC's Mississippi field staff has grown to 20 organizers, all but three of them from Mississippi itself. Bob Moses later writes:

... I had become part of something else besides a civil rights organization in Mississippi. Everywhere we went, I and other civil rights workers were adopted and nurtured, even protected, as though we were family. We were the community's children, and that closeness rendered moot the label of "outside agitator." Indeed, if we had any label at all, it was "freedom riders." It did not matter whether we had arrived in that fashion or not. This identity was liberating, conferring respect in every community we worked in. In calling us freedom riders these communities were finding the most defiant image they could to signal their approval of our work, even if they crossed the street when they saw us, or were not yet prepared to brave the dangers of trying to register down at the county courthouse.

## Greenwood Food Blockade

As a small, but steady, trickle of Leflore county Blacks continue to show up at the courthouse to register, the White Citizens Council strikes back. For sharecroppers and farm laborers in the Mississippi Delta, winter is the lean time, the hard time. One-third of the population struggles to survive on an annual income of less than \$500 per year (equal to \$3300 in 2006). With no work and nothing to eat, they rely on Federal surplus food commodities for survival.

[Before Food Stamps, there were Federal "surplus commodity" programs. Under these programs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture provided food supplies – flour, rice, beans, canned goods, dairy, etc – to states, counties, and private welfare agencies who distributed them to poor and hungry families. These surplus commodities were also used for school lunch programs. Begun in the 1930s under the Roosevelt administration, the stated purpose of these programs was to provide subsidies and price support for farmers and agri-business corporations.]

The Citizens Council controls Greenwood politics, no politician can win election without their support, and as winter closes in they order the County Board of Supervisors to stop distributing Federal food aid to 22,000 Leflore County citizens — most of them Black, a few poor white or Choctaw indian.

By mid-winter, conditions are desperate. Sam Block and Wazir Peacock write to SNCC headquarters in Atlanta:

Saturday, January 19, 1963. ... these people here are in a very, very bad need for food and clothes. Look at a case like this man, named

Mr. Meeks, who is thirty-seven years old. His wife is thirty-three years old, and they have eleven children, ages ranging from seventeen down to eight months. Seven of the children are school age and not a one is attending school because they have no money, no food, no clothes, and no wood to keep warm by, and they now want to go register. The house they are living in has no paper or nothing on the walls and you can look at the ground through the floor and if you are not careful you will step in one of those holes and break your leg.

And as Bob Moses later writes in a letter to a northern supporter:

We do need the actual food. ... Just this afternoon, I was sitting reading, having finished a bowl of stew, and a silent hand reached over from behind, its owner mumbling some words of apology and stumbling up with a neckbone from the plate under the bowl, one which I had discarded, which had some meat on it. The hand was back again, five seconds later, groping for the potato I had left in the bowl. I never saw the face. I didn't look. The hand was dark, dry and wind-cracked, a man's hand, from the cotton chopping and cotton picking. Lafayette and I got up and walked out. What the hell are you going to do when a man has to pick up a left-over potato from a bowl of stew?



Dick Gregory delivers food to Clarksdale, MS. 1962.  
Photo by Ernest Withers.

SNCC sends word to its supporters in communities, college campuses, and Friends of SNCC chapters throughout the country, and people respond. Comedian Dick Gregory charts a plane to deliver emergency food supplies to Greenwood to stave off starvation. He becomes a Movement stalwart, raising funds, participating in demonstrations, enduring beatings and arrests in the cause of Freedom.

Michigan State students Ivanhoe Donaldson and Ben Taylor drive a truckload of food, clothing, and medicine 1,000 miles down into the Mississippi Delta over the Christmas holidays. The local cops are tipped off — perhaps by some Federal agency — and the two are busted in Clarksdale, MS for “possession of narcotics.” The supposed “narcotics” are actually just aspirin and vitamins. They are held on \$15,000 bail (equal to almost \$100,000 in 2006). After 11 days in jail, a nation-wide protest gets them released, but the food, clothing, and medicine are confiscated and disappear. Ivanhoe is not intimidated, in the following months he delivers a dozen truckloads of food to embattled Greenwood and goes on to become a SNCC field secretary.



Annelle Ponder, SCLC.  
Photo by Marion Palfi

Meanwhile, the Kennedy administration and U.S. Department of Justice do nothing effective to protect the voting rights of Black citizens. With legal support provided by Dr. King, SNCC sues Attorney General Robert Kennedy and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in January of 1963 demanding that they enforce existing Federal voting rights laws. Rather than performing their Constitutionally-required duty to protect the rights of all citizens, government lawyers quash the suit.

But violence, intimidation, beatings, arrests, and Federal dereliction, all fail to halt the growing movement. And the food blockade backfires. Says Bob Moses:

*“Whenever we were able to get a little something to give to a hungry family, we also talked about how they ought to register. The food was ...identified in the minds of everyone as food for those who want to be free, and the minimum requirement for freedom is identified as registration to vote.*”

## Marching For Freedom in Greenwood (Feb-Mar)

By late February, some 600 people are lining up in Greenwood to receive food and clothing distributed by SNCC field secretaries Sam Block and Wazir Peacock. An anonymous caller warns that the new office that SNCC was finally able to rent is going to be destroyed. Four adjacent Black businesses are burnt in a bungled arson attempt, but they miss the SNCC office. When Sam describes the fire as arson at a mass meeting he is arrested for “statements calculated to breach the peace.” It is his 7th Movement arrest in Greenwood.

More than one hundred Black protesters show up at City Hall on the day of Sam's trial — the first mass protest by Greenwood Blacks in living memory. Sam is sentenced to 6 months in jail and a \$500 fine. The Judge offers to suspend the sentence if Sam agrees to leave town and halt efforts to register Black voters. Replies Sam: “*Judge, I ain't gonna do that.*” He is released on bond pending appeal, and that night addresses a mass meeting of 250 people — the largest mass meeting to date.

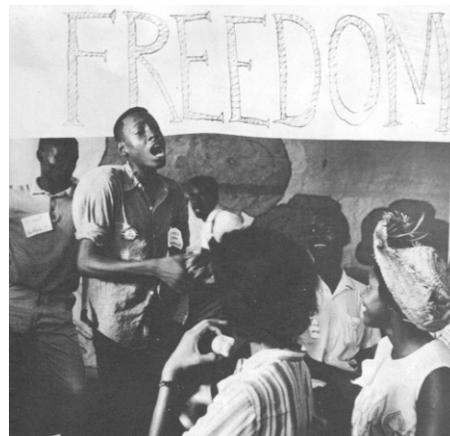
On Tuesday, February 26, more than 200 Blacks line up at the Courthouse to register to vote. They know they will not be allowed to register, but attempting to do so is a symbol of pride and defiance, and the white power structure recognizes it as such. The police order them to disperse. They hold their ground, remaining in line. The Registrar delays and evades, admitting only a few to fill out the application and take the so-called “literacy test,” and those few are rejected. But fear is losing its grip.

That night, KKK nightriders ambush a SNCC car on the road, firing 13 rounds from a .45 caliber machine gun at Jimmy Travis, Bob Moses, and VEP Field Director Randolph Blackwell. Jimmy is hit twice, in the neck and shoulder, and has to be rushed to a hospital willing to treat Black freedom fighters. Protests and demands for protection, and enforcement of Federal voting-rights laws, are sent to Washington. The Kennedy administration takes no noticeable action.

COFO calls on all voter-registration workers in Mississippi to concentrate on Greenwood to show that Klan terror cannot halt the growing freedom movement. By early March, dozens of SNCC organizers, plus some CORE field secretaries and SCLC staff members are working out of the Greenwood SNCC/COFO office in defiance of Klan terror, police repression, and Citizen Council economic retaliation. Whites fire a shotgun at a car containing Sam, Wazir, and local students working with the movement. Though he knows full well who is responsible, Greenwood mayor Charles Sampson denies that white racists are the perpetrators. He falsely accuses SNCC of faking the attack to garner support.

On March 24th the Klan finally succeeds in fire-bombing the office, destroying it. The Movement continues.

The Greene family is particularly active — father Dewey Greene taking a leading role in encouraging voter-registration, son George and daughter Freddie leaders among the local students. On the night of March 26, the Klan shoots into the Greene home, narrowly missing three of the children. The Greens



Greenwood, MS.  
Photo by Ken Thompson

are a well-respected family in Greenwood's Black community and instead of intimidating people the shooting does just the opposite.

Bob Moses describes what happened the next day, March 27th:

*"Now the morning of the march we were at the church there and began singing. Forman came by; he was actually on his way out of town, he was driving. So he suggested that maybe we ought to go down to city hall and protest the shooting. We did not anticipate that the police would react as they did. We were simply going to the police station and request a conference with the police chief asking for police protection in light of the shooting. And they met us there with the dogs and with guns and so forth and I guess, as Jim says, they simply went berserk for a little while. ..."*



Photo by Cliff Vaughns.

The marchers — men, women, and children — sing and pray as they approach the city hall. They are attacked by police dogs and beaten by club-wielding cops. SNCC leaders Bob Moses, Jim Forman, Wazir Peacock, Frank Smith, and six Greenwood activists are arrested. Yale law student Marian Wright — Atlanta student sit-in leader and today Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund — describes the scene:

*"I had been with Bob Moses one evening and dogs kept following us down the street. Bob was saying how he wasn't used to dogs, that he wasn't brought up around dogs, and he was really afraid of them. Then came the march, and the dogs growling and the police pushing us back. And there was Bob, refusing to move back, walking, walking towards the dogs."*

The Greenwood Movement is not intimidated by dogs or cops or arrests. Where a year earlier local Blacks feared to be seen in the company of Sam Block or Wazir Peacock, now a thousand or more are involved in the Movement in one way or another — protesting, canvassing, trying to register, attending meetings, housing and feeding organizers, providing bail money, and so on. By 10am the next morning there are 50 Blacks lined up at the courthouse to register, by noon more than 100. A small army of helmeted police confront them. Again they attack with dogs and clubs. SNCC field secretary Charlie Cobb reports:

With the events of the morning of the 28th, the issues in Greenwood broadened beyond voter registration and became more basic. The issue now was, Did people have a right to walk the streets which they had paid for, with whomever they please, as long as they are orderly and obey all traffic laws? The city's answer was, Not if you're a nigger! There was a very direct link between this issue and voter registration, because for years attempting to register to vote for Negroes meant preparing alone to suffer physical assault while making the attempt, economic reprisals after the attempt, and sometimes death. To go with friends and neighbors made the attempt less frightening and reduced the chances of physical assault at the courthouse, since cowards don't like to openly attack numbers. It also reduced the chance of economic reprisal, since the firing of one hundred Negro maids would put the good white housewives of Greenwood in a bind ('tis a grim life for Miss Ann without Mary, Sally, or Sam).

Photos of police dogs savaging nonviolent protesters and news stories describing denial of basic voting rights flash across the world, deeply embarrassing the Kennedy administration on the world stage. Moses and the others arrested on the 27th are convicted of “disorderly conduct” and given the maximum sentence, four months in prison and a \$200 fine. Hoping to force the Department of Justice to file suit against the county's interference with the right to vote, they refuse to pay the fine or pay bail while the case is appealed.

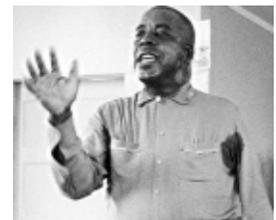
But the Department of Justice under Attorney General Robert Kennedy cuts a deal with Greenwood instead. The Feds agree not to file a voting rights suit against local officials. In return, the Greenwood power structure agrees to release Moses and the others without bond while their case is appealed, and to stop using police brutality against Blacks trying to register. The county also agrees to resume food distribution so long as it is paid for by the Federal government (in other words, the Feds supply not only the food, but also pick up the distribution costs which everywhere else in the nation are carried by the county). This allows Leflore politicians to assure their segregationist supporters that local taxes are not being used to “reward uppity Blacks” with food.

With the cops no longer attacking Blacks trying to register to vote, embarrassing photos and news stories no longer come out of Greenwood, which relieves the Kennedys. But the deal only halts police repression. The KKK continues to threaten Black voters with terrorist violence and the Citizens Council continues to coerce Blacks with economic terror, firing and evicting those who try to register. And without Federal voting-rights enforcement, the Registrar is free to continue rigging the application and “literacy test” to prevent most Blacks from actually registering. In the following months, 1500 Blacks risk life and economic survival by journeying to the courthouse, but only a handful are added to the voting rolls. By the end of 1963 there are only 268 Black voters in Leflore County compared to 10,000 white voters, even though 60% of the population is Black.

## **Voter Registration Movement Expands in Mississippi**

After the Greenwood cops agree to stop assaulting Blacks trying to register and LeFlore county resumes food distribution, voter registration organizers once again expand outward into surrounding counties. Greenwood becomes the hub of activity for the Delta counties of LeFlore, Holmes, Carroll, Tallahatchie, Sunflower, and Humphreys. And organizers return to the areas around Laurel, Meridian, Hattiesburg, Holly Springs, and Vicksburg.

White resistance remains vicious. In Holmes county, Hartman Turnbow, a farmer, is one of the first Blacks to try to register since the end of Reconstruction. He leads 12 others to the county courthouse. Klan nightriders surround his home, firebomb it, and then shoot at him, his wife, and daughter when they try to escape the burning building. Turnbow grabs his rifle and returns fire, driving them off. The county Sheriff arrests Turnbow, accusing him of firebombing his own house and shooting it full of holes to win sympathy from northern movement supporters. Bob Moses and three other SNCC organizers are also arrested. A local court convicts them without a shred of evidence, but the charges are eventually dismissed when appealed to Federal Court.



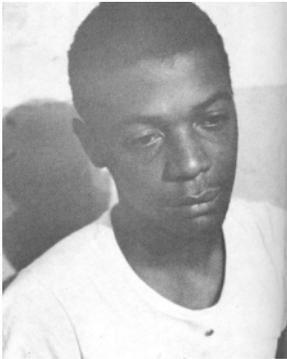
Hartman Turnbow  
Photo by Sue Sojourner

The Movement persists, and people of courage respond. In Sunflower County, Fannie Lou Hamer, 46 years old, mother of two children, a sharecropper and plantation worker all her life, steps up to register after talking to SNCC organizers and attending a voter registration mass meeting. She and almost 20 others go down to the courthouse in Indianola. The cops stop the old bus they are using, and arrest the driver because the bus is “the wrong color.” When Mrs. Hamer returns home she is fired from her job and evicted from her home of 18 years. Klan marauders shoot up the house of a friend who gives her shelter. Fannie Lou Hamer is not intimidated, she commits her life and soul to the Freedom Movement,

first as an SCLC Citizenship School teacher, then as a SNCC field secretary and MFDP candidate for Congress.

## Struggle for the Vote Continues in Mississippi

In mid-June, 150 Blacks hold a “Medgar Evers Memorial” voter registration mass meeting at the little Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church in rural Itta Bena. This is deep in the heart of the Delta — plantation country, Klan country. Klansmen in cars circle around the meeting, a tear gas bomb is thrown under the church and the noxious fumes rise up through the wooden floor boards. Singing freedom songs, SNCC organizer Silas McGee leads them out of the building where they face rocks and bottles and other missiles hurled at them from the speeding cars.



Silas McGee, SNCC.

McGee leads the people on a five block protest march to the town hall, dodging into the roadside ditch when cars try to run them down. The town marshal ignores the Klansmen. Instead he arrests 45 of the demonstrators. The next morning they're given one of Mississippi's famous “5-minute” trials and sentenced to the Leflore County prison farm. Movement headquarters in nearby Greenwood has no money to bail them out. A week later, 200 Blacks show up at the courthouse to try to register and as a show of support for the Itta Bena prisoners. Thirteen Movement activists and leaders, including SNCC field secretaries Hollis Watkins and Lawrence Guyot, are arrested. They are given an instant summary trial, sentenced to four months and a \$500 fine, and shipped off to chain-gang labor on the prison farm where they join those arrested in Itta Bena.

Mississippi holds elections in 1963 for state offices such as Governor. In later years, white racists abandon the Democratic Party and become hard-line Republicans out of fury at the Kennedys, Lyndon Johnson, and other national-level Democrats. But in 1963, that sea change has not yet occurred and Mississippi is still a one-party state, Democrats always win, so the real election is the Democratic Primary.

Lt. Governor Paul Johnson is running for Governor on a staunch segregationist platform that proclaims his efforts to block [James Meredith's integration of 'Ole Miss](#) in 1962. His theme is “Stand tall with Paul against those wanting to change Mississippi's way of life.” One of his favorite stump speech lines is: “*You know what the NAACP stands for: Niggers, Alligators, Apes, Coons, and Possums.*”

To dramatize denial of voting rights, SNCC organizes Blacks in the Delta to show up at the polls on primary voting day, August 6th. There is an old Reconstruction Era law — originally passed to let former Confederate soldiers vote — that says people who claim they have been illegally prevented from registering can cast provisional ballots that are set aside pending appeal of their exclusion. Mass meetings are held in Delta communities explaining the strategy and teaching Movement supporters how to cast provisional ballots. Just before election day, Mississippi Attorney General Joe Patterson threatens to “summarily arrest” any Blacks who attempt to cast provisional ballots in the all-white primary.

Almost 1,000 courageous Blacks across the state defy the threat of arrest, Klan intimidation, and Citizens Council retaliation to cast their protest votes. In Greenwood, Billie Johnson, older sister of young activist June Johnson, tells it as it was:

*“I had fear in my heart because as soon as morning came, I had to face a big problem. That was going downtown and getting a beating. I know when the police see me they will hit me. I had it all in my mind how it was going to be: one [policeman] would hit me on the head with a night stick, and the other*

*would hit me in the mouth. Another was going to sic five or six dogs on me. I knew they were going to knock me down and kick me in the face. The moment came for me to go downtown. My mind was made up: I looked at the clock — quarter to nine. I was going at nine. If they whipped me for my freedom, I would not mind. And all at once Sam Block came in and said the police said they would not arrest anyone ... I said 'Thank God' three times."*

Under the deal cut between the Kennedys and Greenwood's white power structure earlier in the year, the police promise that they will no longer harass, attack, or arrest Blacks trying to exercise their voting rights. As a result, more than 400 Blacks in Leflore County try to vote in the primary. So many that some polling places are flooded and dozens are unable to get in before the polls close.



Attempting to vote in the Democratic primary, 1963.

Democratic Party officials later reject all claims that Blacks had been illegally prevented from registering to vote and none of the provisional ballots are counted. With Blacks across the state denied the right to vote, the racist campaigns of Paul Johnson and other staunch segregationists win solid primary victories.

Historian and activist Howard Zinn is in Greenwood observing the protest vote. A few days later, those in jail on the prison farm are finally released on bond, Zinn provides the following description:

My wife and I were in Greenwood in August, 1963, when those fifty-eight people finally were freed [from the prison farm] on bond money supplied via the National Council of Churches. That night SNCC headquarters had the eerie quality of a field hospital after a battle. Youngsters out of jail — sixteen and seventeen years old — were sprawled here and there. Two of them lay on the narrow cots upstairs while a few of the SNCC girls dabbed their eyes with boric acid solutions; some dietary deficiency in jail had affected their eyes. One boy nursed an infected hand. Another boy's foot was swollen. He had started to lose feeling in it while in the "hot box" and had stamped on it desperately to restore circulation. Medical attention was refused them in prison.

Young Willie Rogers and Jesse James Glover describe the "hot box."

We stayed in the hot box two nights. It's a cell about six foot square, which they call the hot box. Long as they don't turn the heat on — with three in there — you can make it. There's no openings for light or air; there was a little crack under the door, but you couldn't see your hand before your face less you get down on your knees. When they got ready to feed you they hand the tray through a little door which they close — and then you can't eat unless you get down on your knees by the light comin' in the door — then you can see how to eat. And they had a little round hole in the floor which was a commode. — Willie Rogers.

We were making it okay about thirty minutes with the fan off, breathing in this oxygen, letting out this carbon dioxide — and the air was evaporating on top of the building, and it got so hot the water was falling off the top of the building all around the sides

like it was raining. ... [The guard] came down and told Lawrence Guyot, "I'm going to put these niggers up to this damn bar if I hear any of this racket" [freedom songs] – so they hung MacArthur Cotton and Willie Rogers on the bars – MacArthur was singin' some Freedom songs. ... Altogether, I was thirteen days in the hot box. ... How did I get in the movement? I was at a mass meeting in Itta Bena. I'd been walkin' and canvassin' on my own. Bob Moses asked me, did I want to work with SNCC? I told him yes. ... I'm seventeen. I got involved with the movement back in 1960, when SNCC came up. I was fourteen then. – Jesse James Glover.

Zindn, continues...

The next afternoon we drove in two cars, with Bob Moses, Stokely Carmichael, and several others, to Itta Bena. People came out of the cotton fields to meet in a dilapidated little church, welcoming back the prisoners, singing freedom songs with an overpowering spirit. One of the returned prisoners was Mother Perkins, fragile and small, seventy-five years old, who had just spent, like the rest, two months on the county prison farm for wanting to register to vote. Cars filled with white men rumbled by along the road that passed by the church door, but the meeting and the singing went on.

## Freedom Ballot in Mississippi

By late 1963, roughly a third of SNCC's 130 staff members are concentrated in Mississippi. Of the 41 field secretaries on SNCC's Mississippi staff at the end of 1963, 35 are Black and 6 are white. They range in age from 15 to 50 with most in their late teens or early twenties. Two of the whites and 25 of the Blacks are from the Deep South — the sons and daughters of working class families whose parents are maids, laborers, farmers, and construction workers. Their work is hard and dangerous, with long hours and little success.



Matt (Flukey) Suarez, CORE.  
photo by Miriam Glickman

Month by month, white resistance to Black voter registration efforts in Mississippi intensifies — bombings, arrests, beatings, shootings, firings, evictions, and other forms of retaliation. Few Blacks dare defy this white terror by trying to register, and only a handful of those that do make the attempt are added to the voter rolls. The NAACP files lawsuits which are often eventually won, but county Voter Registrars find ever more devious methods of circumventing court rulings to deny even the most "qualified" applicants.

Mississippi is the poorest state in the union and Blacks, who are 45% of the population, are the poorest of all — 85% live below the poverty line. In the Fall of 1963, with the gray days of winter approaching, SNCC organizer Claude Weaver writes:

The Delta lies vacant and barren all day, it broods in the evening and it cries at night. I get the impression that the land is cursed and suffering, groaning under the awful weight of history's sins. I can understand what Faulkner meant; it must be loved or hated ... or both. It's hard to imagine how any music but the blues could have taken root in the Black soil around me.

Federal efforts to enforce voting rights are reluctant and ineffectual. Moreover, they focus on “equal application of the law.” Since Mississippi law requires that prospective voters pass a complex and arcane literacy test, and the state's segregated Black school system has systematically denied an adequate education to the overwhelming majority of Blacks, if equal application of the law ever actually occurred it would simply result in disenfranchisement of a good many illiterate whites, and just a small increase in the number of Black voters.

In response to these realities, SNCC takes a radical step, it decides to challenge the entire concept of voter “qualification.” Voting is about political power, not academic achievement, and all citizens have a right to vote regardless of their education — a position they sum up in the slogan: **“One Man, One Vote,”** and illustrate with a poster of an old sharecropper.

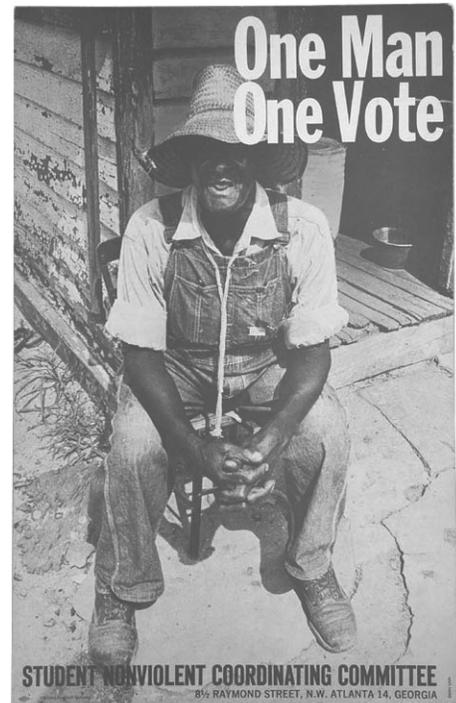
The November general election pits the segregationist Democrat Paul Johnson against the equally segregationist Republican Rubel Phillips. With Blacks prevented from voting — and having little interest in supporting either candidate even if they could vote — COFO decides to hold an unofficial “Freedom Ballot” (or “Freedom Vote”). The Freedom Ballot campaign begins on October 6 with a state-wide convention at the Masonic Temple in Jackson where an interracial slate of candidates is nominated to appear on the Freedom Ballot along with the Democrats and Republican candidates. Heading the Freedom ticket is NAACP leader Aaron Henry of Clarksdale for Governor, and Movement activist Rev. Ed King of Tougaloo College for Lt. Governor.

Based on the “One Man, One Vote” principle — all adult citizens are eligible to vote regardless of whether they are registered or not — the Freedom Ballot is designed to show that Blacks in large numbers want to vote but are denied the right to do so, and that the white segregationists elected to office do not represent Mississippi Blacks.

A state campaign office is set up in Jackson, more SNCC and CORE organizers are added to the COFO staff, and SCLC's Citizenship Schools program is expanded. SNCC member [Mike Miller](#) recalls:

*“[Though this] was obviously not the ‘legal ballot,’ everybody realized that it was a test of whether we can really get people to put their bodies on the line for the right to vote, because they would have to show up in a public place and check a ballot. And nobody really knew what was going to be the turnout for this thing. It was a very precarious place for the Movement to be, to face a test like this, which was very different from militant students or young people doing direct-action.”*

COFO activists, along with local volunteers (mostly young), fan out across the state to organize the Freedom Ballot. The going is tough. Terror lies heavy on the land, people are afraid, Black churches, organizations, and businesses fear they will be bombed or evicted if they allow Freedom Balloting on their premises, and any kind of voting on the part of Blacks — even in an unofficial mock election — risks vicious retaliation from the white power-structure. And there are some counties, such as Issaquena, Amite, Neshoba, and Grenada that are simply too dangerous to enter, the risk of local supporters being murdered just too high.





Freedom Vote rally, Hinds County, 1963  
Photo by Matt Herron.

Across the state, in county after county, police and sheriffs harass and threaten Movement activists. In Jackson, a cop shoves SNCC organizer Ivanhoe Donaldson into the back of a police car, draws his gun and points it at Ivanhoe's head, shouting, "*You and the other goddamn Moses niggers around here ain't gonna git nuthing but a bullet in the haid! Black son of a bitch, I'm gonna kill you, nigger!*" Noticing that there are too many witnesses, another cop suggests that this is not a good time or place for a killing, and Ivanhoe is released.

At a Freedom Ballot campaign rally in Hattiesburg, police cars circle the church with their sirens howling, fire trucks add to the din, and firemen (all of them white, of course) storm into the sanctuary, claiming there is a fire. Shouting over the clamor, Aaron Henry defiantly tells them, "*The fire within us cannot be extinguished with water!*" When Freedom Ballot votes are cast in November, 3500 of 7500 eligible Blacks in Hattiesburg and Forrest County participate — the highest turnout in the state.

In late October, almost 100 students from Yale, Stanford, and other schools — most of them white — are recruited by National Student Association and Democratic Party activist Allard Lowenstein to come work as volunteers on the Freedom Ballot campaign. They represent the first large influx of northern whites into the Mississippi Freedom Movement which is 99% Black. They share the work and the danger that Blacks have endured for years, some are arrested, some are beaten, but overall violence across the state drops noticeably during the two weeks they are in Mississippi. The white students also draw expanded coverage from the press, and with it increased political pressure on the Kennedy administration. Federal presence suddenly increases (temporarily). As Lawrence Guyot put it: "*Wherever those white volunteers went FBI agents followed. It was really a problem to count the number of FBI agents who were there to protect the [white] students. It was just that gross.*"

But the white students also bring culture clashes and ingrained assumptions that spark racial tensions between Blacks and whites within the Movement.

In churches and other venues, Freedom Voting takes place from Friday, November 1st to Tuesday the 5th, with records kept so that no one can vote more than once. More than 80,000 people — four times the total number Blacks registered to vote — defy the cops, the Klan, and the Citizens Council to mark Freedom Ballots. There is significant coverage in the national and northern press and increased demands that the Kennedy administration defend Black voting rights.

The Freedom Ballot is a pilot program for future Movement political organization in Mississippi. It lays the foundation of a powerful, Black-led, state-wide, political organization that soon evolves into the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party](#) (MFDP), and it lays the groundwork for the 1964 MFDP Challenge to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City.

See the "[History & Timeline](#)"  
for descriptions and analyses of other Freedom Movement events and struggles.