

WHITE FOLK'S PROJECT

Background

The White Folk's Project (WFP) was conceived by Sam Shirah, white Southern student's project director for SNCC, in early 1964. It was hoped, as announced in the SNCC brochure on the summer project, that the work in the white community might closely parallel the work done in the Negro community with voter registration, community centers, and Freedom Schools geared for white Mississippians. Applications which prospective volunteers received made it possible for them to indicate interest in this project. Only white students were eligible; Southerners were preferred. Approximately thirty-five people received communications on the project; about three were turned down and the remaining seven decided against working due to parental pressure, community pressure, or other reasons.

Orientation

The twenty-five people who came to work received two weeks of orientation--the first at Oxford and the second under the direction of Myles Horton at Highlander center in Knoxville, Tenn. Since we had no base in any community, the idea of holding schools or of developing community centers was tabled for the time-being. It was felt that volunteers should attempt to make contacts in the white community through labor organizations, churches, service and civic organizations, and canvassing in working-class communities. Volunteers were allowed to pick one or two of these for emphasis. It was also hoped that work might go on in research and federal programs. Role-playing was also utilized at orientation.

The Summer's Situation

Two communities were selected--Biloxi and Jackson--with most of the volunteers situated in Biloxi, which has a higher concentration of whites than most areas in the state.

Jackson. The five to seven people working here have worked with middle-class moderates and liberals through churches and organizations such as The Human Relations Council. Their work has been largely interpretive of COFO's program.

Biloxi. Work there has been of two main types, with the breakdown coming along class lines. 1) Interpretation of COFO's program and the general social, economic and political evolution which has begun in the state, and 2) work with lower-class whites for programs along lines of their self-interest and toward political alliance with the Negro.

Problems

1. Conflict in Biloxi growing out of too many people living together. A counter-community was set up. Conflict also between those interested in working with middle-class moderates and those interested in working with the lower-classes.

2. Problem of ignorance in white community of what is coming in the state or of what is needed if change is to come peacefully.

3. Lack of realization on part of lower-class whites that the Negro is their natural ally.

4. APATHY.

5. Need of volunteers for identification with Negro community.

Solutions

1. We moved into smaller groups. A house was located in a working-class neighborhood for those who were interested in work there. An office was set up for coordination and communication. Some workers moved into the Negro community, taught Freedom Schools, and canvassed for the FDP in integrated groups in the white community.

2. Myles Horton conducted a workshop for us at the end of July to help us see what had been accomplished and what needed to be done.

3. Work continues in the attack on ignorance and apathy. Attempts are made to convince lower-class people that white supremacy will not feed their kids.

Results and Evaluation

As far as measureable results go, our work largely defies definition of clear results. It is extremely frustrating work. Many who realize what needs to be done fear to act; others are angry with outside agitators; others have been duped by the power structure.

Much of what we have learned has been of a negative slant--we know what many of the problems are; we know what not to do. Still some results can be innumeraed:

1. Six people registered for the FDP.
2. One white delegate to the National Convention.
3. A storefront rented for a community center and employment office. The building was rented to us by a man interested in our statement that we wanted to get a fisherman's union organized. A meeting scheduled there for last Wed. night was announced, and community pressure forced the owner to evict us.

4. Those working with the state Human Relations Council were able to convince the leadership to send out information of the FDP to the 1,200 people on their mailing list, many of whom could not have been reached by us in any other way.

5. One Mississippian who will be working with us full-time and possibility of another within the week.

6. Numerous contacts in Jackson and Biloxi.

7. More comprehensive picture of Biloxi power-structure through research.

We feel that this work must go on. Though three-fourth's of our people are Southerners, Northern students have worked out extremely well--better in some cases than Southern students. Ideally, of course, we would look to the day when we can surrender our jobs to Mississippi whites (or blacks). The name COFO has hurt us. Perhaps next year we might have people come in under a different name. It is believed that people who have not worked closely with the Negro community should not be selected. Most need this identification before effective work with whites can go on.

We made a mistake by not orienting ourselves for more intensive work around the FDP. We should push this more. It is something around which people can be organized. Many whites realize that they are not getting a fair shake from the in-group.

Several people will be staying over for work this fall. This work will be aimed at the lower class primarily. We hope that we can have at least five times as many people working here next summer.

Ed Hamlett
WFP Director