

The Poor White Project

Although the Negro has made many strides forward since the Supreme Court decision in 1954 his economic position remains nearly the same, and the conditions which have fostered this position have not been hard enough attacked to warrant the thought that any important changes will occur in the near future. It, however, must be noted that Negroes, especially in Mississippi, have begun to move toward effective political organizations which hopefully will bring about this needed change. Although Negroes make up about about 10% of the nation and about 42% of Mississippi, it will be difficult, even with the strictest sort of discipline, for them ever to have their grievances justly answered unless they are able to form some sort of a coalition with the larger, and in many ways similiar, poor white community. Bearing this in mind eight of the twenty-two white folks COFO community workers went to Biloxi, Mississippi this summer with the intention of exploring ^{some of} the channels from which ~~which~~ we might eventually form this coalition. We failed to find any definite answers but from our failure we were able to pick up many important facts.

Mississippi in the midst of a much publicized Freedom Summer was not the place to start our work. The populace, continually told by their newspapers and politicians to be on the lookout for bearded Jewish Communists, were afraid of even the most inostentatious actions of outsiders. We, for instance, had difficulty getting information from the board of education as the director seemed almost instinctively to know who we were. The essence of the white backlash is that whites feel that the Negro is moving ahead at the expence of the whiteman. If we are to get whites moving alongside Negroes we must do it in an atmosphere in which the white does not feel openly threatened. Aside from this Biloxi was in many ways an ideal place to organize. The town was once the home of an active though non nationally affiliated

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shrimiboat workers union. The union had been broken after it had been caught in an anti-trust pricefixing suit, and the workers, a large percentage of the male employed populace, were now getting thirty-five dollars a barrel of shrimp where they once had got one-hundred and five. A new local had been chartered to Vincent Cruise by the A.M.W. in Biloxi without Cruise ever getting it any real membership. If Cruise was to keep his local he had to fill in the blanks of his paper charter. As we had hoped at first to work through existing institutions some of us volunteered our services. We were turned down do to our affiliations and told that we would do more harm than good. We began to look elsewhere at other organizations and we began to get the same answers; as soon as they found out that we were with COFO we were asked to leave.

One afternoon we hit upon a scheme which because of its early success we incorporated and later made an important part of our overall program. ^{THAT DAY} ~~One afternoon when~~ some of us were canvassing for membership in the Freedom Democratic Party ^{AND} we thought that we would try some of the white houses directly adjacent to those of the Negroes'. We met with mixed success finding most of the people willing to talk but apathetic and not interested in any political action. As we had been in mixed groups, white and negro, we decided to again the next day, lily white, and into an all white neighborhood. We had about the same success and as the program gave us something to do which was at least doing something we took to it more and more. At this time we also rented a store front in the poor white section of Biloxi. We did this as part of an overall program which was to include a Freedom School type political education. At this time we did not have a base and were still not sure how to find one. Fortunately, the FDP canvassing

began to pay off and we found four whites who expressed a great deal of interest--enough we felt to warrant calling a meeting in our store front. The meeting was called and publicized, and the store front was decorated with a SNCC poster depicting a young poor white girl asking for "food and freedom." This proved to be a mistake for the local neighborhood came alive with rumors, and the next day the owner came to us explaining that he had had bomb threats and that he would like to refund our money if we would return the lease. We did, and we pressed him in order to gain information about the threats. He said that the local people were under the impression that we were trying to bring Negroes down there to get jobs; it seemed that SNCC was not as foreign as first thought. We felt by this time that we had alienated the majority of poor whites in Biloxi, and we left shortly thereafter.

The one great advantage that the people working in the Negro communities have over us is that they do not go in cold. There is a certain spirit that exists in the Negro community that does not exist in the white. There has been now for some time an effective Negro movement which, in fact, seems ^{each} year to gain more momentum and become more powerful. Montgomery taught Negroes a valuable lesson that whites seemed to have forgotten. That is if they (Negroes) would band together and work together they could build for themselves and their children a better world.

The poor Southern white was once the most radical force in American politics; now he forms the base for such demagogues as Wallace and Barnett. He needs to be shown again that he does not have much of a stake in keeping things the way they are and that he has a stake in a movement that makes this country into a democratic land. Maybe it is whites going to jail for whites. It needs to be something big; something that whites can say was done for them.