

NO FREEDOM IN SCHOOL!

852 Short Street
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Here is the story that no Mississippi newspaper dares to print:

More than a thousand students in Issaquena and Sharkey counties have refused to go back to school because the principal, following the orders of an all-white school board, has not permitted them to wear SNCC pins. Most of these students are now attending Freedom Schools which they themselves organized in local churches.

It all started in the last week of January, when Becky Merrill, 19, who was born in Issaquena county and has been an active COFO worker there, gave out some pins that show a Negro and a white shaking hands, and the letters SNCC. That stands for Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the militant civil rights organization which started COFO.

About twenty high school students from Sharkey county who had never been active in the Freedom Movement before, decided they liked the SNCC pins and wanted to wear them to school the next day. Ten members of the Issaquena county Mississippi Student Union (MSU) also wore the pins. One of them said: "We had no special plan in mind. We just wanted to wear the pins, that's all."

When the principal of the school, a Negro appointed by an all-white school board, found out that the students were wearing the SNCC pins, he called them into the office. He told them that he didn't mind the students wearing pins, he just didn't want them to wear that pin. He didn't say why.

"That night," said one of the students, "we got together with a lot of other kids and we all decided to wear the SNCC pins on the next school day, which was Monday."

Monday morning the principal called all of them into his office--or tried to. But there were too many students with SNCC pins to fit into his office! So he made them stand in the hallway and come into his office one by one and give their names to the secretary. One hundred and seventy-nine students came into his office to show that they were not afraid.

Then the principal did not know what to do. He told all the students to wait in the hallway while he went to talk to the white Superintendent of the school board. Two hours later he came back and told the students to take off their SNCC pins and go back to class. Hardly anyone took off the pin, but everybody tried to get back into their classroom.

But now the teachers were afraid. They told the students that the students could not come to class unless they took off the SNCC pins. The students kept their pins on. They went back to the office and told the principal that they wanted to go back to class but the teachers wouldn't let them in.

Then the principal led all the students to the gym and told them to wait again. This time he stopped all classes while he talked to all the teachers. Then he came back and "he said he wanted to talk to us."

"We decided," said one of the students, "that we wanted to ask him some questions. We asked him, how would he feel if his own daughter was forced to bend over, touch her toes, and get whipped on the backside like we do. And we asked him, how come there was no colored people on the school board even though 70 per cent of the county is colored people? And we asked him, was he registered to vote?"

Then the principal stopped them asking more questions, and told them to get back to class. However, by that time the school day was about over, so the students went home. That was Monday.

Tuesday morning, February 2, "so many kids came to school wearing SNCC pins that we couldn't count them all," said one of the students. The principal began the day by calling a general assembly. He said that he would like to no more questions. Then he read from a book a rule saying that "any student who disrupts school can be suspended or expelled by the principal." He told the students that the SNCC pins were disrupting school. Any student who wore a pin the next day would be suspended, and any student who wore a SNCC pin on Thursday, said the principal, would be expelled and not allowed to go to school anywhere in Mississippi.

The students wore their pins to class all the rest of that day.

Wednesday morning, February 3, more than 300 students wore SNCC pins. The principal had to start the day out with another assembly. He announced that he was suspending everybody who wore a pin. But only the 179 students whose names he had taken on Monday were actually suspended. Everybody who wore a pin that day then went home.

That night the parents and students in the community held a meeting. Most of the parents thought that the students should have the right to wear any kind of pin they wanted to. Many of the parents were members of the Freedom Democratic Party. They and the students decided that the only way they could win their right to wear the SNCC pins was by getting all the other students out of school too.

The principal said that he would let the students back into school only if they would sign a promise not to participate in any kind of civil rights activity, including wearing SNCC pins. The students and parents saw that the principal was taking orders from the white school board. If they signed the promise, they could not work for COFO any more. They could not join the Freedom Democratic Party. They could not join the Mississippi Student Union. They could not have mass meetings, and they could not go together to the court house to register, if they signed the promise. They refused to sign the promise.

The next day, 700 students in the elementary schools were kept at home by the parents. The same day, the school board refused to sit in the same room with the parents' committee to discuss the situation. Since then, the school board and the newspapers and the radio stations have tried to cover up the boycott in Issaquena and Sharkey counties. They hope that the other students in the state of Mississippi will not find out.

Three days after they were suspended, the striking students set up Freedom Schools, like the COFO Freedom Schools last summer. Some of the older students teach the younger ones. Some Northern white students who are members of SNCC or COFO are helping to teach, also. Other Freedom Schools in the state have sent pencils, paper, and books to help out.

"We are ready to stay in Freedom Schools for the rest of the year," said one of the students. "The teachers in high school never did try to teach us anything. They don't care about us or about Freedom."

"So what if we don't get our diplomas," added another student, a senior in high school. "All we can do in this county is chop cotton anyhow. We don't need a diploma to chop cotton."

"We want our Freedom!"