

CORE in The South (Sept. Dec. 1964)

January 28, 1965

In other reports the programs of projects within the Southern area have been described in some detail. This report will be given to broader outlines, stressing the continuity of program that ties the projects together.

To begin, voter registration is the characteristic activity of CORE across the South. Mississippi is the only important exception; there, Freedom Registration (MFDP) has been the main concern. However, Mississippi's program has an increasingly significant effect on our voter registration programs. Now we work to interest the Negro community in political education, an out growth of the "Political Programs" of COFO.

Political education deals with the governmental structure of towns, counties (parishes) and states. It attempts to analyze just what is the theoretical effect of important official functions on the community, and what is the real effect. It searches for statutes whose operation will provide benefit and protection for Negroes in their relation to the officials. It studies precinct organization and measures Negro potential for exerting influence in such a structure.

Political education programs are still new to CORE in the southern region, although we have discussed them for a long time. But there is a clear consensus among the southern staff that this is one of the most important keys to developing the "psychology of equality" in the southern Negro; it has potential both for community organization—which may reach out into various areas of need—and for implementing the entry of the Negro into the decision-making structure of various levels of government.

The Louisiana staff has made several efforts in this direction. We attempted months ago to join together registrants and interested eligibles in the Capital Voters League, involving five parishes. The project was not successful, but a good learning experience for future efforts. Since national elections, CORE in Louisiana has worked mostly in areas other than political education; some of these will be described later.

In Florida the CORE staff concentrated on voter registration, but assisted in the formation of a Civic Interest Group that held classes in citizenship. Not only were their combined efforts successful in bringing out a 90% plus Negro vote, but two weeks after the election the Negro section of Quincy, Florida had new street lights installed and the promise of pavement for the unspeakable dirt roads in the Neighborhood.

In Mississippi, political education has led to various organized forays into actual community politics—ASCA (Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service) elections as well as the conventional ones. In the other states the emphasis is still on voter registration, but our proposed South Carolina campaign must lean heavily on extensive political education if it is to realize its potential.

CORE's work on discrimination in employment has not been extensive. One sustained program is that concerning Olin-Mathieson Corporation in Monroe, Louisiana. This campaign was initiated by the CORE staff in the spring of 1964, marked by two investigations of company practices by representatives of the Army—both abortive—and recently, evidence given to the Louisiana Advisory Committee to the Civil Rights Commission by Negro employees of Olin-Mathieson. With the coming-of-age of Title VII, (Equal Employment Opportunity) of the Civil Rights Act, the Southern Program

Director has the responsibility of searching for means of effectively exploiting this provision in the southern region.

The CORE group in Tulsa also conducted a lengthy campaign for open employment in a local bank.

Another significant area of CORE concern is problems of the rural Negro. The campaign in behalf of the sweet potato farmers in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana is such an example. In this case the problem was the capricious use of the power to withhold contracts by Princeville Canning Company, which cans sweet potatoes. Not only did CORE expose this company practice (used to discourage Negroes from registering to vote), but we also began to work on the possibility of setting up a producers' co-operative among the farmers.

The rural program is further developed in Mississippi. In Madison County (Canton) the COFO-sponsored Farmers League took a very active part in the ASCS election—which, like the Congressional elections, is also being challenged. The League has spearheaded the formation of a co-op also. A charter has been obtained, but as yet no program has been set up.

A brief trip through South Carolina, following the Durham Conference, disclosed potential for rural program in that state. Such a program is very nebulous in our thinking presently, but we discovered both political and economic interest in two of the communities where we stopped, together with already established leadership of a militant sympathy. And of course our Voter Registration program in this state provides a solid basis for community organization.

Rural programs offer a good example of the service being developed by the research department of the southern office. Already a variety of kinds of information on any rural area in the South is available—voting statistics, population, principal crops, etc. (The research department will be described more fully in the report on the southern office.)

The southern staff has come out in favor of a more integrated, aggressive legal program. However, the period generally covered by this report (September to December) has been a high point of our financial indebtedness to lawyers as well as to other commercial services. Therefore legal action during this time was mostly limited to fighting discriminatory charges. With the recent easement of our legal debts and the executive implementation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, we look forward to challenges of discrimination in education, public housing, Hill-Burton hospitals and other federally-assisted programs. We also anticipate further action in voter registration, against discriminatory action under color of police power and possibly something in the area of election challenge.

The abovementioned programs do not in themselves lay stress on direct action, non-violent or otherwise. There have been numerous tests on public accommodations and facilities, however, across the area. In Florida the CORE workers tested restaurants both in small towns and on the highways; in Meridian, similar tests led to arrests of the workers; in Monroe, Louisiana most of the downtown facilities have been tested—and opened; in Canton, the attempts of Negro high school students to enter the white high school falls in this category. The general philosophy is, "Wherever direct action in public accommodations or facilities expresses the real wishes of the community, it is our responsibility to assist them in fulfilling this desire. Out of such co-operation we can possibly realize the beginning of community organization, which in turn will expand its interest beyond the narrow problem of public accommodations."

While the concepts of freedom schools and community centers are still very much alive, these projects are experiencing difficulties. To conduct either activity on a year-round basis requires equipment, facilities, imaginative leadership, money, etc. The present time might be said to be the "learning phase" for staff involved in these programs.

There is programmatic division between those states which have projects and those which are "chapter areas." Texas and Oklahoma have witnessed sharp, temporary increases in CORE interest, usually coinciding with a dramatic direct action in progress at the time. The southwest staff set up one conference in December, but chapters did not respond well to it. We do not maintain regular communication with these chapters, but field secretary reports convey the general impression of some potential but only sporadic action and no continuous program. The chapter in Fort Smith, Arkansas has not had as much servicing as the other southwest chapters; perhaps this accounts for its apparent complete inactivity.

A special consideration must be given our relations with COFO and MFDP.

In its beginning, and for a long time thereafter, COFO decision-making seems to have been largely the province of full-time staff workers in Mississippi SNCC and CORE. While they were influenced by local thought, the staff people possessed both mobility and full-time freedom; naturally they must have dominated COFO councils. MFDP has recently claimed the interest of most of the active local people, so that COFO is staff, and perhaps not much more. It has (Congressional) district directors, local staff, a budget supported by contributions from private citizens, SNCC and CORE. Organizationally, when we deal with COFO we deal with staff. This works hardship mostly on the Fourth District staff; as part of a state operation, it must work with COFO; as part of a national body it must work with CORE. This should not be hard in the day-to-day working of the staff inside the state, except that decisions involving budget and personnel changes usually must have prior clearance at the source of financial support. But in its relations outside the state, each situation must be judged in terms of its dual effect: on CORE and on COFO.

MFDP seems to be the predominant interest of the Mississippi militants presently. However, it must be understood that MFDP is not a competitor of COFO; rather, COFO has been one of the prime movers in the development of MFDP and continues so. CORE is presently handicapped in dealing with MFDP because we have no constant line of communication, as far as I can see, between the two. This is important because the line between actions and policies of local concern, and those of national impact, is harder to determine than in the case of non-political COFO. The Southern office will emphasize the importance of full communication regarding staff participation in MFDP plans and projects. I suggest that the least we can do nationally is to be placed on the MFDP mailing list; better, to seek periodic briefings, or the placement of a CORE person in the Washington MFDP office.

Something should be said about the present CORE staff in the South. There are 54 listed on the payroll, eleven of whom are field secretaries with two more in administration. This is the largest concentration of CORE staff in any area. Of that number, there are six in the New Orleans office, one on special assignment in New Orleans and seven traveling staff members; the rest work on projects in Mississippi, Louisiana or Florida. (This includes only a few of the volunteers, who themselves number about thirty.) We will be held back until we get either more cars or more people. There is a fair-sized number of persons who have already volunteered for service but we only consider bona fide (hopefully) self-supporting applicants presently.

Another staff problem is lack of certain kinds of training. Community centers, for instance, exhibit this problem. In the recent New Orleans workshop many COFO workers showed lack of orientation on CORE. Emergence of new civil rights directives and procedures points up another area of needed training. Finally, many of our staff

are still insufficiently acquainted with the total program beyond their own special sphere of interest.

This problem is presently being met by regional workshops, two more of which are scheduled before summer. These will be supplemented by small-scale workshops, and perhaps by training sessions carried on by other organizations such as National Council of Churches, National Sharecroppers Fund, etc.

Our staff is presently composed mostly of what might be termed "veterans". Some are stronger than others, of course, but I question the existence of any other program where sustained, needful activity is carried on on such a broad scale at such a low investment in salary. It need not be said this comment is based on our desperate financial condition, not on gleeful reflections of successful exploitation of labor.

To summarize: Our efforts to organize Negro communities through political awareness have been successful in a few cases, enough to convince the staff that we can extend that success much further and within a reasonable time.

The painful dragging-out of the Olin-Mathieson case emphasizes the hardships to be faced in fighting employment-discrimination. The federal contract is our primary basis for challenging industry, but the federal government must be prodded constantly; even then action comes slowly. Perhaps Title VII will help accelerate our progress.

Each of our southern states has its "Black Belt." This is the logical area in which to introduce ASCS, FHA, co-ops and small industry. But the farm problem certainly transcends race; we are not presently sure if we're helping preserve and strengthen the small farmer or simply postponing the inevitable.

Both voter registration and the legal program exemplify fundamental changes in CORE. In 1960 these were brushed aside, sort of, as necessary evils at best; public accommodations projects set our focus for direct action. Now, the legal program especially is looking toward expansion; voter registration provides the base for our political program. But public accommodations problems seem superficial in the face of the push for broad changes in some of our basic social institutions.

There are several gradations of opinion among staff on "Chapter Development vs. Community Organization." However, either a chapter or a staff is a small CORE cadre in a community, a cadre which may turn either toward community involvement or exclusive "in-group" action for that community. Either chapter or staff has its own structural advantages; effectiveness is to be determined more by the quality of people involved than by group-structure. However, it must be marked that the most significant actions of the past year have come from projects, not chapters.

The southern staff is having its problems making the change from loose structure to an integrated one, from a high degree of local autonomy to clear, constant lines of responsibility. It minimizes romance, restricts individual initiative; but is unavoidable as CORE grows in size, complexity and national effectiveness.

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