## The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party: 50 Years Later A Time for Evaluation  — [Mike Miller](http://www.crmvet.org/vet/mikemill.htm) March, 2014

#### Slightly revised version of an article that was published in the

#### Spring, 2014 issue of Social Policy

### Preface

This article draws upon the forthcoming *Politics of Change: The MFDP and the Emergence of a Black Political Voice in Mississippi* by Rachel Reinhard (Vanderbilt University Press) who graciously let me read it in draft form.

The following [books] will be of interest to those who wish to pursue these questions further: [*Thunder of Freedom: Black Leadership and the Transformation of 1960s Mississippi*](http://www.crmvet.org/biblio.htm#bibtofsls) by [Sue (Lorenzi) Sojourner](http://www.crmvet.org/vet/sojourne.htm) (Civil Rights and the Struggle for Black Equality in the Twentieth Century); [*Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*](http://www.crmvet.org/biblio.htm#bibblcrbpa), by Kwame Hasan Jeffries; [*Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986*](http://www.crmvet.org/biblio.htm#bibltpdsc), by J. Todd Moye; [*A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi*](http://www.crmvet.org/biblio.htm#bibltofbfscc), by Emilye Crosby; [*Barefootin': Life Lessons from the Road to Freedom*](http://www.crmvet.org/biblio.htm#bibbllrf), by Unita Blackwell and Joanne Prichard Morris. The two classics on whose shoulders all these books stand — necessary reading to understand that period — are John Dittmer's [*Local People*](http://www.crmvet.org/biblio.htm#biblpscrm) and Charles Payne's [*I've Got The Light of Freedom*](http://www.crmvet.org/biblio.htm#bibiglfotmfs).

—Mike Miller]

Fifty years ago, the 1964 Atlantic City Democratic Party National Convention was the scene of a dramatic confrontation between President Lyndon Johnson and his allies, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and its principal organizer and ally, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Johnson, seeking nomination as the Party's presidential candidate (as vice-president, he had assumed the office upon the assassination of John F. Kennedy), demonstrated the power of an incumbent president and his skill as one of the country's most adept political insiders. MFDP demonstrated the power of the Deep South civil rights movement, then at near-peak strength both in the south and in the support given it by people across the country. That confrontation still reverberates in the discussions that go on about organizing versus mobilizing, "top-down" versus "bottom-up" organizing, and whether the Democratic Party should be a vehicle in which reform strategies are pursued.

### Background

Here's a sketch of the context and immediate history. In 1960, Mississippi was the most rigidly segregated state in the nation. Only a handful of African-Americans were registered voters. The rest were excluded by means of a poll-tax and the discriminatory application of a test, administered by the local county clerk, that a person had to pass in order to get on the voter rolls.

SNCC, in the person of Bob Moses, had quietly begun organizing for the right to vote in 1962. By 1964, SNCC's work in Mississippi was internationally known. Murder, beating, shooting, church and home burning and bombing, firing, eviction, and credit denial were inflicted upon the black community by the state's racist power structure — by both government and non-government actors. State infiltration of civil rights organizations took place. Mississippi was as close to being a police-state as was possible in the U.S.A. Its national counterpart, the FBI's COINTELPRO, was monitoring and infiltrating civil rights and community organizations.

SNCC field secretary Bob Moses was introduced into the state by a small number of black leaders and activists whose agenda was to crack Mississippi racism. A number of them were World War 2 veterans, who fought to "make the world safe for democracy," and were determined now to "make democracy safe for the world." Moses was introduced to them by Ella Baker, legendary in civil rights movement circles but not well- known beyond them, who had been the NAACP's director of branches and interim director of the Martin Luther King-led Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She was also an early and major supporter of SNCC, enjoying the confidence of its leadership as no other Movement "elder" did. An early handful of potential registrants slowly grow into dozens, then hundreds. A staff of organizers grew as well until SNCC had a presence in a number of places, particularly those with 70%+ black population, in the state's old Delta plantation counties.

SNCC organized the Conference of Federated Organizations (COFO) as a vehicle for cooperation in the state between the major civil rights organizations; the State Conference of NAACP branches, Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and SCLC were the other members. Toward the end of 1963, under COFO auspices, 83,000 blacks participated in an unofficial parallel "freedom election". It was undertaken because of the refusal of the Federal government to guarantee the right to vote (SNCC argued that grounds to do so existed under the 15th Amendment and old Reconstruction Era legislation), and to demonstrate that black Mississippians would vote if they were allowed to. The freedom election gave rise in 1964 to a parallel political party — MFDP — and the strategy of challenging the seating of the "regular Democrats" at the Party's Atlantic City Convention. Late 1963 also saw the decision to invite about 1,000 northerners to come to Mississippi for a "freedom summer" in 1964.

As Convention time drew close, MFDP and its supporters believed they had the votes to get a "minority report" out of the Credentials Committee to the Convention floor. There, under the scrutiny of international media (the Cold War was going strong, and the Communist bloc used U.S. racism as a propaganda tool in third world countries), with civil rights still a national agenda item supported by a majority of Americans, at least a split delegation compromise would be adopted (half MFDP and half "regulars"). This was a solution used in the past when competing state delegations presented themselves to convention credentials committees. With MFDP support, Congresswoman Edith Green presented it as a compromise at the 1964 Convention.

The Administration, however, only offered two seats "at large" and a required loyalty pledge from the "regulars" to support the party's nominee in the general election. The national NAACP, Auto Workers Union President Walter Reuther — a key player and big supporter of vice-presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey, King, CORE's James Farmer and others urged MFDP to accept the offer. But the MFDP delegates refused to do so. As the by-then nationally known MFDP leader Fannie Lou Hamer put it, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats."

But MFDP was unable to prevail. Support it thought it had on the Credentials Committee dissolved. Behind the scenes, Lyndon Johnson was in constant conversations with key power players in the Convention. Threats to appointments and patronage, and promises of the same, accompanied an argument about giving conservative Republican nominee Barry Goldwater ammunition if "radicals" from Mississippi were seated. Despite its treatment by party officialdom, MFDP returned to Mississippi and campaigned for the national Party ticket.

SNCC, on the other hand, was outraged by the entire process. Anger and new militancy, and soon thereafter adoption of "black power" as the organization's slogan and strategy, followed, as did the relatively rapid unraveling of the organization.

The difference between SNCC and MFDP is important. SNCC field secretaries were young people who were becoming organizers. Infused with the spirit of the sit-ins and freedom rides, they wanted "freedom now!" MFDP leaders were typically older and rooted in their home communities; they had seen more, and knew in their hearts that freedom is a continuing struggle not won in a single event.

Despite MFDP's loyalty to the Democrats, the newly-elected President Johnson began funneling poverty program funds into the state through organizations that were integrated into the national party structure, thus bypassing MFDP. As voting became safer in the state after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the campaign to create an alternative to the MFDP grew as well; the Mississippi Democratic Conference (MDC) was its name. By the time of the 1968 national convention, an entirely new delegate body represented the state — neither MFDP nor segregationist "Regulars". These were the "Loyalists," a quarter of whose delegates were called "MFDP," but most were newcomers moving into the now-open space for black political participation; they lacked a movement background.

At the time, I was directly involved. My SNCC regional representative responsibilities in the San Francisco Bay Area included recruiting volunteers to go to Mississippi and lining up the California Democratic Party behind MFDP's challenge. I lived these issues intensely, and have thought about them ever since!

There is little doubt in my mind that a more visionary Democratic Party leadership might have changed the direction of the nation if it had seated the MFDP. In so doing, it would have declared unequivocal war on the old guard Dixiecrats. Having crossed this Rubicon, the Democrats might have gone on to pass serious full employment legislation. Other things might have followed that might have moved the Party in a more liberal direction.

But my interest is less in what the Democrats might, or should, have done. It is more what "we" should have done. In what follows, I pose a series of questions. Some of my answers are confident; others are, at best, tentative. The questions SNCC faced then remain, and face us today if we are going to figure out how to turn the country (and world) around.

### Question: Should COFO have launched MFDP, or was there a better way to break the wall of Mississippi racism?

The emphasis on the right to vote led inevitably to the question, "Who would we vote for if we could vote?" which, in turn, led to the question, "Do we want to be part of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party?" which, in turn, led to, "Why not form our own party?" (Whether that should have been a third party was not seriously discussed until later when, in Alabama, SNCC took advantage of an obscure piece of state legislation that allowed for the formation of county third parties. The result was the Lowndes County Freedom Organization.)

Was SNCC's work too skewed toward electoral politics? Might there have been a greater emphasis on:

* Direct negotiations, backed up with "Main Street" boycotts, with local employers (over hiring and service issues), and with local governments (over police treatment, city services--black topping roads, street lights, drainage, etc, voter registration, public accommodations and school desegregation)?
* Self-help and mutual aid, done through buying clubs, producer and consumer cooperatives, support groups of various kinds and other means that, on their face, appear more conservative because they don't involve direct confrontation with the powers-the-be?
* Workplace organization, with the possibility of national and international boycotts to place pressure on products bearing a "made in Mississippi" label?

SNCC did support efforts in some of these directions, but they were not a major focus. A brief strike of tractor drivers was organized by the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU). The Poor Peoples' Corporation (PPC) helped local black craftspeople organize themselves and market their products through northern outlets that were, in part, identified through Friends of SNCC networks. In a few towns, negotiations with "downtown" did take place, but I'm not aware of any sustained boycotts that SNCC-related groups organized to back them up.

There is a deeper set of questions related to the timing of electorally focused action. Had we then known what we were soon to learn, we might have wanted to have greater depth of organization in counties before directly engaging in politics. As the next five years unfolded, it turned out that SNCC built the road, but it was someone else's car that drove down it. With passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the presence in the state of Federal "examiners" to register people to vote, a whole new set of players entered the electoral arena. The more cautious people, including most of the church leadership and many of the people in the pews, now became engaged in voting. They were the base for the reformed Democrats who got support from the national Democratic Party by means of the Poverty Program. They were the more traditional black leadership. Charles Evers was emblematic of them.

By 1969, in Claiborne County, Evers was able to defeat an MFDP supported candidate for mayor of the small town of Fayette. As much as Medgar Evers was respected by SNCC people I knew, the opposite can be said of their attitudes toward his older brother, Charles. The latter took over for his younger brother after his 1963 assassination. There is no doubt about Charles' courage, and there was widespread agreement among SNCC people on his being a "watch out for number one" kind of guy. He embodied everything in his leadership style that SNCC was against: macho, flamboyant, a political chameleon, willing to use patronage, personal favors or whatever to further his interests; it is a style associated with the ward boss, not democratic politics.

On the other hand, in Holmes County SNCC/MFDP left a strong legacy. There an independent black politics emerged within the framework of the Democratic Party as early as 1965/66. SNCC's on-the-ground organizing presence in Holmes paved the way for what MFDP accomplished there. Holmes County had the largest percentage of independent black farmers that existed in the Delta. Because of its rolling hills, there were no vast plantations; it was these plantations that carried on a de facto slavery long after slavery had been made unconstitutional. The community SNCC had to work with was, therefore, an easier one to organize for independence. Indeed, the black farmers were already organizing themselves before SNCC even arrived. In the absence of their kind of base to begin with, the community organizing job is even more difficult if your purpose is to develop strong local leadership deeply rooted in the community.

There was a further complication for SNCC. For the most part, SNCC's organizing bypassed the churches. Pastors who became involved were a distinct minority of the black clergy. Historically, the three major leadership groups in the Mississippi black community were teachers, preachers and independent black business and professional people. SNCC focused on the 80+% of the black population who were unemployed, on welfare, day laborers, domestics, sharecroppers, tenant farmers and other low-income people. It was, in effect, dealing with both class and race in its organizing work. Race, of course, was a unifying factor even with the spectrum of moderate to militant. But dealing with class meant also raising economic issues and the question of qualifications — i.e. overcoming the deference toward one's "betters" often found in a setting like Mississippi. SNCC lacked the tools to fully overcome this organizing challenge. But the challenge was made more difficult by the immediate focus on electoral politics.

### Question: Should MFDP have accepted the two-seat “compromise”?

There was a time when I hardly entertained the question. Indeed, I was probably quite arrogant about it. All SNCC people at the time thought the offer was insulting at best. But over the years, I've had second thoughts. I come to the same conclusion—the offer wasn't enough. But I have some additional thoughts.

It is important to note that “compromise” isn’t what was going on. President Lyndon Johnson said we’re offering two seats *and Aaron Henry and Rev. Edwin King* are the people who will occupy them. This was a unilateral take-it-or-leave-it dictate, not the result of a negotiation. What if MFDP had said, “the number of seats is negotiable, but our delegation is going to name who fills them.” Could Johnson have easily ignored that response? Could real negotiations have followed? If they had, would they have provided a space within which SNCC and MFDP could have returned home and deepened their base in the black community? In fact, I doubt any of these would have made a difference in the outcome. Note that Hubert Humphrey, Johnson’s choice for the vice-presidential nomination, said, “The President will not all that illiterate woman [Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer] to speak from the floor of the convention.”

At the time, SNCC juxtaposed its "moral" position to the "pragmatic" politics of wheeling and dealing. But that's what politics is: wheeling and dealing. Indeed, when there is a rough equality among the parties, there's nothing the matter with wheeling and dealing properly understood. Different groups have different interests and points of view. Politics is the means by which they make agreements so that we can all live together. That entails compromise. Nothing wrong with that. It becomes wrong when there are vast economic inequalities that distort the process, or when there are whole groups of people excluded because of their race, religion, economic status or some other characteristic of their identity.

I'm now more open to the view that, under some additional conditions, some compromise could have been accepted — for SNCC/MFDP, not national Democratic Party--reasons; I don't write it off. Having decided to play in the electoral arena, there are rules by which that game is played. To change those rules required power that the SNCC/MFDP alliance did not have. Lacking that power, the criteria for making the decision should not have been an abstract moral one, but an organizational one — namely, will the compromise contribute more to strengthening our work — so that we can more effectively pursue our moral ends — than its rejection? That remains a very good question. But what the evidence points to is that it was Johnson, not the MFDP, that was unwilling to negotiate.

**After The Convention**

MFDP became a target for the national leadership of the Democratic Party. It sought whatever means were at its disposal to bypass MFDP's principal leadership. State NAACP Chair Aaron Henry abandoned MFDP, and became a key figure in the emerging new Democratic Party formation within Mississippi. Unfortunately, the remaining MFDP leadership lacked the depth of base at home to force the Democratic Establishment to deal with it as the voice of Black Mississippians. Lawrence Guyot, Victoria Jackson Gray and Annie Devine continued working in movement politics, but after 1968 Fannie Lou Hamer withdrew to her home in Ruleville where she started a pig farm cooperative and otherwise engaged in local non-electoral work. Guyot, a brilliant tactician, did the best that could be done by a leader who didn't have many resources at his disposal. Too often, deference to more middle-class leadership combined with patronage combined with doubts about SNCC's militant rhetoric provided openings at the base to the new political configuration that MFDP leaders could not overcome. They thus had to find a path between cooptation and isolation. They couldn't find it. Though they were part of the 1968 delegation that was seated, they were a distinct minority, and their fortunes as a statewide party (there remained pockets of strength in some counties) afterward declined precipitously.

The SNCC/MFDP legacy remains in the state, expressed in the 2013 election of Jackson's mayor, Chokwe Lumumba — who tragically died in February, 2014 before he could put his agenda for reform in place. [2017 postscript: that victory was repeated in 2017 with the election of his son, Cokwe Lumumba, Jr., who promises that his city will become “the most radical on the planet”]. He described himself as a "Fannie Lou Hamer Democrat." It is also expressed in the persistence of various local organizations and organizing that carry on the SNCC tradition.

### Question: What lessons are there for today when we think about the relationship between community organizing and electoral politics?

In those days, SNCC people, myself included, thought that we organized while Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) mobilized. It is an important distinction. Indeed, it continues to play itself out in the multiple revolutions taking place around the world — Egypt being the clearest recent example of a mobilization. But our formulation of it was too one-dimensional. We ignored the fact that King often mobilized through deeply rooted local organizations, namely through the black churches, the only fully-owned indigenous mass-based organization of the black community. As former Mississippian Rev. Dr. Amos C. Brown said, "The black church is the only institution we own lock, stock and barrel." While SNCC organized many church people, particularly the women of the churches, and while pastors were often pushed from within by their own members to endorse SNCC's work, these pastors were never wholeheartedly in "The Movement." When an alternative opened, they moved toward it — and often took most of their congregation with them.

SNCC, on the other hand, was deeply influenced by Ella Baker who was suspicious of the kind of strong leadership exercised by most black pastors. She had a lifetime of experience in dealing with it. As she put it, "strong people don't need strong leaders." And she saw organization as key to developing strong people. But building strong organization outside the framework of the black church proved to be a difficult proposition. Indeed, often the strong people around whom Baker imagined organization being built were, themselves, reluctant to see others develop. Amzie Moore, one of the Delta's most courageous black strong people and one of Bob Moses' first contacts in the state, was himself rather controlling within his own turf in Bolivar County.

The issue doesn't go away. Writing in *Waging Nonviolence* (February 14, 2014) about the recent revolution in Egypt, Mark Engler and Paul Engler look back to the U.S. civil rights movement.

From the U.S. civil rights movement, to the "color revolutions" in the former Soviet bloc, to the Occupy movement, one can see a similar scenario play out: the most established, well-structured organizations on a given political landscape are taken by surprise by little-known upstarts who launch nonviolent rebellions that capture the public imagination. These new groups have far fewer resources and much weaker institutional structures than conventional labor unions, community-based organizations or political parties. But they use these traits to their advantage by organizing outside of the structure of any traditional dissident group. They specialize in a different type of social movement activity: momentum-driven mass mobilization.

This type of protest activity goes by different names. Sociologist Frances Fox Piven calls it the exercise of "disruptive power," distinguishing it from the typical practices of membership organizations. Historian Charles Payne, identifying two different strains within the U.S. civil rights movement, calls it the community mobilizing tradition —  a lineage "focused on large- scale, relatively short-term public events" such as the famous campaigns in Birmingham and Selma — which he contrasts with the patient community organizing and local leadership development carried out by the likes of Ella BakerIn each case, the groups on the disruptive side of the equation look a lot less like the Muslim Brotherhood and a lot more like Egypt's scrappy April 6 Youth Movement.

They repeat the mistake that I think I earlier made: it is not simply mobilization versus organization. Rather, it is whether organization is the vehicle through which mobilization takes place, and whether organization is built or strengthened during a period of mobilization.

Thus I think they are wrong on two counts: first, the mobilizing to which they refer was done very differently in Egypt. Whatever role social media may have played, unions and younger people trained by the Muslim Brotherhood were a key element of the mobilization. In the south, it was done through the black church. Though the Southern Christian Leadership Conference — which Fran Piven cites as her major illustration of "disruptive power" — was not a membership organization, it's member pastors were the strong leaders of the black community's strongest organization. And though Charles Payne correctly identifies SNCC as doing "the patient community organizing and local leadership development carried out by the likes of Ella Baker," he omits the fact that SNCC was unable to build with sufficient depth to provide a base that could withstand the assault that took place against MFDP. (For that matter, neither were CORE nor SCLC able to do this in their work in other southern states.)

Such combinations of organizing and mobilizing are not alien to the American reform tradition. They were clearly present in the organization of industrial workers in the 1930s. In city after city across the United States strong union locals reached deeply into the lives of their members, and extended that reach into their families and to the communities in which they lived—making an impact on politics and community life.

In the second half of the last century, Fred Ross, Sr. built the Community Service Organization (CSO), a strong Mexican-American organization in California that mobilized the registration of half a million voters. The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), predecessor to the farm workers union, was built in the same way by Cesar Chavez. The union, of course, later mobilized successful international boycotts as part of its effort to win grower recognition and contracts. ACORN successfully organized chapters, regional and state configurations that negotiated, disrupted, registered voters and otherwise mobilized their constituency.

In the last 50 years, I hope we have learned enough to say that these are not either/or activities. Good organizations can, should and will mobilize. Good mobilizations can and should strengthen organization. The organizer's question about any given mobilization should be this: "Can organization be built in the context of this mobilization?" For that to happen, organization has to accomplish concrete results—victories. Everyday people may turn out for a mobilization on a big cause. They won’t engage in sustained participation in an organization if there are concrete benefits won along the way.. Organization isn't built out of defeat. In part, that is a question of whether there exist within the timeline of the mobilization opportunities to do the evaluation, reflection, internal education, careful leadership training and other activities that are the building blocks of solid people power organizing.

*\*Mike Miller was on the SNCC staff from mid-1962 – end of 1966; he directs the San Francisco-based ORGANIZE Training Center* [www.organizetrainingcenter.org](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org)

Copyright © Mike Miller, 2014