**CounterPunch**

WEEKEND EDITION JULY 11-13, 2014

***Notes of a Veteran***

# The Mississippi Summer Project 50th Anniversary Reunion

by MIKE MILLER

*Mike Miller directs the San Francisco-based ORGANIZE Training Center (OTC). He has been a community organizer for 50 years, and is co-editor of the forthcoming* People Power: The Saul Alinsky Community Organizing Tradition (Vanderbilt University Press).

**Looking Back**

It is always with some trepidation that I reconnect with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Movement veterans from the 1960s. Those were the best of times and the worst of times for me. The best because it was a privilege to be part of the Deep South civil rights movement, and a “field secretary” in that most extraordinary organization, led by young black people who emerged from the sit-ins and freedom rides to become full-time community organizers. The worst because the pain of SNCC’s disintegration, and of black people deciding they would no longer talk with former white comrades, is still palpable.

The reunion for the 50th anniversary of the Mississippi Summer Project was a magnet I couldn’t resist. I was in Mississippi the summer before the Project. Dick Frey and I were the first white staff to be based in the Delta—Greenwood to be exact. Greenwood was a Movement center—the place where the first major cracks in the wall of Mississippi racism were broken open.

When we were picked up by a cop and brought to the city jail, he shouted upstairs to white prisoners, “Got me some nigger-lovers here, boys.” We thought we were going to be badly beaten. Waiting for the inevitable at the booking desk, seconds turned into minutes. Then the cop came out of the chief’s office and told us to get back into his car. Now our fear level rose even higher. But after having a new school and recreation center in the black community pointed out to us, the cop dropped us back at the “freedom house” and told us to get out of town in the next 48 hours. “You’re guilty of co-habitation of the races,” he told us.

Inside the freedom house—our office and general gathering place—we were greeted by applause and laughter. “What’s so funny?” one of us asked. The answer actually was funny. Sam Block, the project director, called Police Chief Larry and told him, “Chief, don’t mess with those white boys; they know the Governor of California.” It was a total bluff, but it saved our butts!

**The Memphis Civil Rights Museum**

On the way to Mississippi, I stopped at the Memphis Civil Rights Museum, a fantastic place.  You can stand on the balcony where Martin Luther King was assassinated, and look across the way at the window through which his assassin fired the fatal shot; then you can cross the street and visit the assassin’s spot as well. I didn't stand on the balcony; too painful.  I wondered how history might have been different had King, Malcolm X and Robert Kennedy not fallen to assassin’s bullets. Might a different political configuration have led to something other than the country’s turn to the right?

Making a left turn in one of the halls, I saw a well-known SNCC brochure photo of Martha Prescod, Bob Moses and me (along with some unidentified local people) on the wall and said to a friend, "There I am!" Martha was in Greenwood in 1963 as well. She became a Movement historian, and is a co-editor of one of the SNCC women’s books. Bob, of course, is the legendary organizer who was SNCC’s Mississippi Project Director.

Hearing my “There I am,” a guy next to me wanted to know the story.  One thing led to another. He wanted a picture with me. Then about 20 black kids making a museum visit together did as well--so I did it one-by-one.  Their faces and comments showed a feeling of standing next to a piece of history. It was a touching moment.

The rest of the museum is a terrific collection of visual and narrative material about "The Movement"—which we always wrote in capital letters.  It, along with the one in Birmingham and, hopefully, a soon-to-be opened Mississippi civil rights museum, should not be missed.

**The Delta**

Delta counties had 70% and 80% black population, with five percent registered to vote at the maximum; in some it was closer to zero.  Fear was deep because people were fired, evicted, denied credit, refused cotton ginning, beaten, their houses fire-bombed, and at the brutal worst, murdered. Internalized oppression led many to consider politics “white folks business.”  By and large, none of that exists now. Blacks now work where they never could before; there are local towns and counties with black elected officials, cops and sheriffs. Black people now staff restaurants, motels, gas stations and other establishments. Ebony, a 31 year-old black woman, picked me up at Tougaloo for my Enterprise car rental. We chatted. While she insisted on the southern “sir,” there was none of the deference that characterized black-white interactions 50 years ago.

But the conditions of that time are, in many ways, what they were then and, in some ways, worse.  The schools are still largely segregated, and awful; poverty for the majority is still a fact of life; un- and under-employment are widespread; drugs have penetrated the area, and form an underground economy. Together, these elements create the school-to-prison pipeline, which is alive and well in the state. Mississippi is the poorest state in the country, and no place is poorer than the Delta.

In Indianola, two black students told us about their schools: old books, a strict dress code, suspension for slight infractions of the rules, inadequate staffing. “It’s like a prison,” one of them said. They are part of a Southern Echo school reform organizing effort, whose organizer Betty Petty was our host. Southern Echo is the organization that carries on the Movement organizing tradition in the state. Its full-time President is Hollis Watkins, who was one of SNCC’s first Mississippi recruits. It describes its “underlying goal [as] to empower local communities through effective community organizing work…to create a process through which community people can build broad-based organizations necessary to hold…systems accountable to the needs and interests of the African-American community.”

**Delta Blues Museum.**

The Blues were born in the 1920s in the shacks and "juke joints" of the Delta.  In Clarksdale, a Delta Blues Museum celebrates that history. B.B. King is the best known of the "bluesmen." (There’s now a B.B. King Museum in Indianola, about an hour away.)

I stopped to talk with the museum custodian, a man in his 60s who remembered the bad old days, and whose father was part of The Movement. I gave him a poster (I brought about a dozen of them with me for this purpose) that includes the photo of Bob Moses, Martha Prescod and me described above.  He shook my hand for what seemed like minutes, excitedly thanking me for coming down to his state some 50 years ago. “You all did good things back then,” he exclaimed.

**Fannie Lou Hamer Museum.**

“Mrs. Hamer,” as we all called her even when we knew her pretty well, is a legendary leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.  She electrified the country with her speech to the Democratic Convention's Credentials Committee in 1964; listen to it on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TchoKJrvFQ>. Here’s its conclusion: “Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?” At the time, the TV networks were angered by a last minute, no-content, news conference called by President Johnson with the obvious purpose of pulling the cameras from Mrs. Hamer’s speech. So they re-played it several times. Delegates on the convention floor cried when they heard her.

Mrs. Hamer was one of the early people to go down to the courthouse to register to vote. She was told by her plantation owner to remove her application or she would be fired.  She didn't, and was. Her house was fired into a few nights later; luckily, no one was killed.  She refused to budge, and went on to become a nationally known leader. She is a heroine of The Movement.

She later established a pig farm coop, and provided food to both black and white people in and around her country who were living on the edge of starvation. The pig farm was run in an interesting way. Hungry families were given two piglets, a male and a female. When these pigs had a litter, the family had the responsibility to give a male and female pair to another hungry family. Both whites and blacks were beneficiaries of this program, and I’m told the relationships among them were often good—indicating that the wall of racism can be broken relatively quickly if the circumstances are right.

The Fannie Lou Hamer Museum is small, but its collection includes graphic documentation of those earlier times. Photos of Mrs. Hamer, a reconstruction of the shack she lived in, flyers and other documents from the period are all there. We were fortunate to show up when the curator was there on other business. (The museum was officially closed.) She took us on a personal tour. A few hundred yards away there is a Fannie Lou Hamer shrine and burial place. It brought back vivid memories of the times I was with her. In 1963, I went through Ruleville and visited her after purchasing the 1963 memorial issue of *Ebony Magazine* that celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation. She loved going through it with me as we sat in her house. I bought it for myself—and on my $10 a week income it was pretty pricey. I left it with her as a present. Seeing her joy at reading that history was a far greater satisfaction than having the magazine.

I also remember Mrs. Hamer at the infamous Peg Leg Bates SNCC staff meeting of December, 1966. (Bates was an African-American one-legged tap dancer who supported good causes.) I arrived to bid adieu to my friends; I was on the way to Kansas City, MO to direct Saul Alinsky’s black community organizing project. When the vote to exclude whites from the SNCC staff passed, Mrs. Hamer was in tears. “Mike,” she said to me, “I just don’t understand what they’re doing.” Her deep Christian faith told Mrs. Hamer we are all children of God. It was the last time I saw her. She died of cancer about 10 years later.

**Indianola/Catfish Workers.**

The successor to Delta cotton as a major employer of Delta blacks was catfish farming.  The mechanical cotton picker and chemical fertilizers eliminated many, many jobs in cotton.  About 175 cotton plantation owners flooded their land and turned it into catfish farms. At the peak, they employed more than 5,000 people, 90% of them black.

The work was difficult and dangerous. Rapid hand movement on the assembly line led to carpal tunnel problems. Speed-up led to bad knife cuts and, at the worst, lost fingers. Indignities in the workplace (no doors on the stalls in the women's bathroom, asking permission from a supervisor to take a bathroom break, workers called derogatory names) were reminders of the worst period of second-class citizenship. Workers were forced to show up and then hang around waiting for a shipment to arrive. During the wait-time, they weren’t allowed to clock in, so they didn’t get paid. Poor pay and no benefits were standard.

Between 1985-90 there was an extended organizing drive and strike that finally led to a contract that increased pay, defined work hours and overtime, and created a pension—which hadn’t previously existed. Most important to the workers we met, they now had a voice. The arbitrary and capricious behavior to which they’d earlier been exposed was no longer possible because they had a union. Since then, because of foreign competition and increases in the cost of feed, the industry has shrunk.

We met with nine of the women who'd been through the '85-'90 organizing, including Sarah White, one of the original two organizers, at the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1529 in Indianola. Mary Young, the first person to step up as pro-union, was married to a member of the Steelworkers Union. From him, she learned about authorization cards and the benefits of having a union. Sarah White tells her story in a rich contralto voice. She now speaks in behalf of the union at various places; we reconnected at a panel at the reunion.

Eddie Steel, the UFCW field rep, is an inspiring guy; he joined the women and was a gracious host.  He was very clear about his accountability to the membership because they elect him, pay his salary with their dues, and tell him what he ought to be doing.  (This was a refreshing contrast on a trip in which much of the action is based in what I call “the plague of the nonprofits,” all of which are foundation funded and accountable to no one beyond their own self-perpetuating boards of directors.)

It was an incredible afternoon; I was on the edge of tears from some of their stories. Here are some of the things they said; I wish I’d had a tape-recorder!

--“we stood together, we were in a bond together, and by the grace of God we made it.”

--“I just had that fear in me. That fear had me going. I had the fear about talking to people at work. I talk to anyone now.”

--“We had to fight ‘em tooth and toenail; we was out there for months in the cold 1990 first big strike. They was surprised; they didn’t think we was going to do it when we struck. But we was family; we have to stick together...I seriously don’t know where we’d be without the union.”

--“No one can do you any of the old way; you have a chance to speak up for you; you have that respect; [the union] does make a whole lot of difference.”

--“I used to snap at people and I had to learn how to treat my brothers and sisters…you come up under a good leader and you just watch your leader some; just have to be a follower [for a while] and we have to learn how to give each other respect.”

--“I’ve been fired three times; I was young at the time. The work was hard; you didn’t know when to come in; [if] they didn’t have the product you had to sit and wait; they didn’t put on the clock. [When I was approached about the union] I said Okay. Respect—it mean the world to people who been treated so bad.”

--“You got to read your contract, and I learned knowledge is power and if you know you’re right, then you’re right…I had to put that fear to the side and speak out.”

--“If I had to work at a place where there wasn’t a union, I’d be organizing one. [With a union] we have issues and problems, but we get it fixed because of the strength within us. Together we stand; divided we fall. With us being union, we have a voice; without a union we have no voice.”

--“Everybody is not a leader; everybody’s not going to come out, but you as a follower, you look at that leader to come out of your fearness. I’m not going to remain a coward because the strong leader is someone I’ll come up under. So much has to do with the strength of your leader.”

--“I associated with bold people and stick around those bold people and some of that will rub off on you.”

Steel emphasized his accountability to the membership because they elect him and pay his salary. It was a refreshing contrast to the world of unaccountable nonprofits that depend for their money on foundations.

The industry has shrunk due to foreign competition and increased costs of feed. In 2003, domestic producers accounted for 80% of the market; today, only 20%. While down to a little over 700 members in the catfish plants (of a 1,600 potential), the union still has an industry-wide impact because non-union places want to keep it out. And in the unionized places they are still in constant struggle with their employers. The UFCW local has also expanded to organize nursing homes, chain grocery stores and other establishments.

I hope this Local grows. It is addressing what I believe to be the central issues now facing black and other working people in Mississippi—whether or not they will have union representation. They have a strong rank-and-file orientation toward their union.

On the critical side, my perhaps over-sensitive ear caught a little bit of the “do for” mind-set that I think is a central problem facing the American labor movement. When I asked how members reacted when their grievances took as long as three and four years before resolution, several people talked about the difficulties that arose. While they keep the members informed, it is “the union”—in some ways a third party—that is representing them. And Eddie Steele’s strength as an advocate may also be a weakness because they depend too much upon him.

**The Reunion.**

The truth is that I was deeply disappointed with the format. Panel after panel talked to an audience, followed by a stream of people who lined up at microphones to ask questions or make their own statements. Some of the panels were good, but there was too much being talked at rather than talking with one another.

In contrast, when the San Francisco Bay Area Civil Rights Movement Veterans had a local reunion last April, the day was spent in small groups where 80-some participants shared stories and answered a couple of key questions that got the conversation going. At the Mississippi reunion, there could have been small groups in which veterans and the many young people who came addressed current issues and spoke of lessons to be learned from the earlier experience. Critical questions, some of which I raise below, could have framed the conversations.  None of that happened.

The reunion was at Tougaloo, one of the historically black colleges of the south. It was established during the Reconstruction period by northern missionaries for the education of newly-freed slaves. Before the defeat of reconstruction in 1876, it was actually funded by the state of Mississippi to serve as a teacher’s college.

In the 1960s when I was in Mississippi, this was one of the few places in the state where whites and blacks could meet as equals. A state legislature effort to close it was somehow thwarted because its charter was issued in the pre-Jim Crow/segregation laws period. Why the power structure didn’t find another way to shut it down remains an unanswered question for me.

Beverly W. Hogan, the college’s African-American woman president gave us a warm and inspiring welcome! “As we gather this week to look back to remember Freedom Summer…we are also looking towards the future, gleaning from the valuable lessons of this transformative period, the guiding principles that will continue to inspire us to build a more fair, inclusive and equitable world for all humankind. Thank you for joining us on this historic intellectual battle ground as we continue to educate for democracy,” she said.

We reminisced about the past, and discussed the current situation. I think an important connection was missing, and could have been established with the questions, "What, if any, were our 1960s mistakes?" And, "What might have been done differently or better?"  An opportunity missed!

There are two big questions that beg further discussion. I do not believe that the power to address black poverty in Mississippi, or for that matter anyplace, will be built without strategically looking at these questions.

**Break The White Bloc Voting**

First, is there the possibility to break the almost-solid bloc of white votes that now supports the Republicans? Two approaches are usually put on the table. One is to woo white “moderates”. While important, on the major poverty-related and economic justice issues I do not think it is sufficient—for two reasons. When these moderates do enter alliances with Democrats, it is typically with “corporate Democrats” and they will not entertain the kinds of proposals that are necessary to address black poverty, poverty in general, and the growing gap between the wealthy few and everyone else. Further, the black Democrats who pursue these alliances are, themselves, unwilling to engage significantly with black poverty. The policy options required to address poverty are now beyond the narrow frame of “realistic” politics in the country. That means major demand “from below” will have to push this agenda to make it realistic.

Another place to look for a break in the now-racist white bloc is at low-to-moderate income whites who view race as a central part of their identity. An old story comes to mind: a union organizer in a deep-south state was organizing a factory where whites made $2.00 and hour and blacks made $1.00. He said to a white worker, “If you have a union, you can both make $3.00 an hour.” “Yeh,” the white worker replied, “but then I’d be making the same as the nigger.”

But there’s another, and opposite, story as well. A 1930s union organizer told me this one. A white worker he was trying to interest in the United Mine Workers said to him, “Ain’t you the union let’s in the niggers?” The organizer pointed to a nearby black worker and this exchange followed:

 “See that fellow over there?”

 “Yeh.”

 “Who’s he work for?”

 “Peabody.”

 “Who do you work for?”

 “Peabody.”

 “You think about it. I’ll be back, and we can talk some more.”

In the recognition election, the UMW won. It took white worker votes to win.

You don’t have to go back to the ‘30s to find similar or hopeful stories in this regard. In the late 1960s, former SNCC field secretaries Bob Zellner and Jack Minnis worked in the midst of a strike at the Laurel, MS Masonite plant in which whites struck and blacks scabbed, and had encouraging results. Dottie Zellner wrote the story up. Both Dottie and Bob were at the reunion. As far as I know, no one asked them to discuss this experience.

Fannie Lou Hamer’s earlier described pig coop is another example. That experience is written up in the biographies about her. My understanding is that she was respected and loved by poor whites and blacks.

More removed from involvement in The Movement, some Pentecostal churches in Mississippi include both black and white members, and are led by both blacks and whites. The stereotype of these churches is that you can’t involve them in matters of economic justice. Maybe if you talk about it that way you can’t. To them, that’s the language of theological “liberals.” But if you talk about how family life is made immensely more difficult by economic pressures, then you can because that’s a language that works for theological (though not necessarily political or economic) conservatives. White Pentecostal coal mine workers in West Virginia leveraged their status as part-time “jack-leg” preachers to get Pat Robertson, hardly a pro-union clergyman, to endorse a strike. Latino Pentecostals are increasingly engaged in the immigration rights movement as they see the consequences of Obama’s present deportation policies for their member families. In a recent UFCW campaign in North Carolina, organizer Gene Bruskin got Latino and Black workers to overcome past tension and achieve a major victory at a Smithfield pork plant.

Indeed, when you start looking there are lots of examples. But you have to look. Historically, Mississippi white Democrats were divided between racist populists and racist plantation owners and their supporters. The former really hated the latter. But they hated blacks as much, if not more. If you start with the premise that this can’t be changed, you won’t change it.

There’s yet another dimension to this. In my SNCC days, it was not uncommon for a field secretary to speak of “crackers,” “honkies,” or “rednecks.” African-Americans who would never utter the negative terms “spik,” or “kike,” and for whom “nigger” (except when used among one another) was a fighting term, thought this negative was o.k. Indeed, it often got a chuckle. Why is that? And can we use the understanding we get from looking at that to look at poor whites? I think so. People want to be “ok.” If to do that they need to be better than someone else, they will. And the someone else is typically lower on the status pole than they are. The reason for that is that those lower are also more powerless. They can’t effectively strike back. It’s risky to say things like that about the more powerful; they can hurt you.

**Build Deep and Broad Black Power**

The second area that begs for evaluation and critical discussion is the cooptation of The Movement, and why SNCC, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and their allies couldn’t build sufficient power at the base to prevent the more moderate and middle class African-American “leadership class” from reasserting its prominence when it became safe—because of Federal registrars assigned to Mississippi after passage of the Voting Rights Act—to participate in politics. That period spans 1963/64 – 1968/70. Multiple questions need to be asked, but fundamental to all of them was our inability at the time to build black power of sufficient breadth and depth to project leaders, from whatever background they may have come, who would remain true to the economic, educational and criminal justice interests of the vast majority of blacks in the state, and to the underlying value of equality for the most marginalized that was at the heart of SNCC’s work.

SNCC was an organization of organizers, or so we thought at the time. With the sometimes-diverging guidance of people like Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, Myles Horton and a few other older veterans of the struggle, we did amazingly well and accomplished extraordinary things. But we really didn’t know how to be an organization of organizers. And our own internal divisions prevented us from figuring that out. One of my hopes at the time was for a relationship between SNCC and Saul Alinsky, who I went to work for after four years on the SNCC staff.

For a very brief period in the mid-1960s, Stokely Carmichael and Alinsky discussed the possibility of a relationship. They shared a platform in Detroit that was originally billed as a debate on black power. Alinsky said, “If you came here expecting disagreement, you’re in for a disappointment. We don’t go into a black community and come out at the end with pastel power.” The relationship did not develop. The field of community organizing still needs to explore ways of pulling together different strands of thinking and practice in order to maximize the people power it promises to deliver.

**The 1964 Democratic Convention Challenge**

Revisiting the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) Atlantic City challenge might have been instructive as well. (For those too young to remember, MFDP members were excluded from Democratic Party pre-convention meetings. They organized a parallel process through the vehicle of the MFDP, following all the national party’s rules for sending a delegation to the quadrennial convention. They then presented themselves to the convention’s credentials committee and sought recognition as the Democratic Party of Mississippi.) The discussion is generally cast as a moral one. As Fannie Lou Hamer put it, “We didn’t come here for no two seats.”

What if MFDP had asked for half the seats instead of all of them—i.e. a split delegation? Granted, that would have been an implicit acceptance of the racism that dominated the “regulars.” But wouldn’t that have made an interesting proposal? Had it been granted, and had the regulars remained at the convention, they would have found themselves in an “integrated” Mississippi delegation—more accurately one characterized by equal voting rights. Of course they wouldn’t have stood for that, and would have walked out—as they did anyway even after MFDP rejected the two seats at large offer. Would the split delegation proposal have won additional credential committee votes? Might it have blunted the fear of white voter backlash expressed in now-released private tape recordings of Lyndon Johnson rounding up votes to deny MFDP’s challenge? Would it have made a difference with labor, liberal and other allies? We have no way of knowing. But on the face of it, I think it might have been a better proposal.

Indeed, it is arguable that even the two seats at large might have presented MFDP with a wedge into 1968 recognition as the official party from the state. Instead, the labor-liberal-national civil rights leadership alliance bypassed MFDP’s leadership, except for state NAACP president Aaron Henry, and created a new “moderate” Democratic Party in the state.

I don’t have a firm view regarding these options. I am convinced of the importance of learning by evaluating the past.

While there is a lot of remaining Movement energy in the state, and while there were some impressive young people carrying on the struggle, I thought the big absence was a real discussion of black power, and what it would mean to have and use it in today’s context of roll-backs of past victories (particularly in voting rights), and continuing problems of poverty, under- and unemployment, low wages and other workplace issues, quality education, health care, incarceration rates, political representation and more.

**My Highlight**

The reunion’s highlight was seeing old friends, and having some good informal conversations. The Hilton Hotel near Tougaloo is where many participants stayed; its lounge was the gathering place for many conversations.

**Other Events**

The Freedom Singers sang old Movement songs. I always enjoy both the songs and the singers. Back in the ‘60s, they led us in those songs during some of the most tense moments of SNCC multi-day staff meetings. The singing was a bond that held SNCC together. Deeply rooted movements for change always create their own music. None is better than that of the civil rights movement.

Congressman Bennie Thompson, the African-American representative from the Delta’s 2nd Congressional District, had some interesting things to say: he bemoaned black politicians who want safe districts (80+% black voters) when by spreading their constituency into adjoining districts there would be the possibility of electing more blacks while retaining their own seats. He noted that a number of elected black politicians aren’t really representing the interests of those who put them in office, and indicated the need for effective organizing to hold them accountable. He is one of not-too-many politicians who understand the necessity for independent organization at the base. On the other hand, the black elected officials who want safe seats often enter into unholy alliances with conservative white Republicans who are only too happy to ghettoize the black vote.

An immigration rights panel indicated a strong alliance between the growing Latino community, particularly in the southern part of the state, and the black community. Bill Chandler, Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance’s executive director, comes out of a Community Service Organization/United Farm Workers Union background, and Saul Alinsky-associate Fred Ross’s training. He has been working for immigrants’ rights for 45 years.

There were some powerful movies about the '60s, including one on the gay marriage issue in the black community. It included footage of passionate black preachers denouncing gay marriage, showed the transition that some people went through from opposition to support, and vividly reported the affirmation of gay marriage in a recent Maryland initiative. While views are changing, this remains a deeply divisive issue, particularly in black churches.

Another film, “Dirt and Deeds in Mississippi”, recounts the story of struggle in Holmes County, and the important Movement role played by black independent farmers, some of whom owed their land ownership to the short-lived New Deal Farm Security Administration. I met co-director Charlayne Haynes. I hope this film will be widely seen.

A labor panel included Sanchioni Butler, a lively African-American woman organizer for the United Auto Workers (UAW), which now has an organizing campaign at the union-hostile Canton Nissan plant whose work force is largely black. UAW is moving carefully after their recent loss at a VW plant in Chattanooga, TN. Hopefully, they learned some lessons from that defeat. The major one is that you build power through relationships, and you can’t build relationships when you give up the right to meet people in their homes—something they did in Tennessee as part of a deal they cut with Volkwagon to insure employer neutrality in the organizing drive.

Busses took reunion participants to a site demonstration one afternoon. Community support is a strategic part of the campaign, and this was an example of it. Because of such support, a fired worker was recently reinstated in his job.

Sarah White, whom I’d earlier met in Indianola, effectively discussed the issues faced by black workers in the state and talked about her Local in Indianola. It was interesting to see her comfortably mixing with the wide breadth of participants at the reunion. I suspect had you told her 20 years ago that she would be doing this kind of public speaking she would have thought you were crazy.

The Mississippi Museum of Art had an exhibit of Movement photographer’s work organized by Matt Heron. Our evening there was introduced by a Mississippi white woman museum staff member. Nothing better illustrated the fact that some significant changes have come to the state. But Jackson still has a long way to go. Tragically, the very promising mayor, Chokwe Lumumba, died of a heart attack before he could put into place a cooperative economic development program and other innovative ideas. A mainstream Democrat (black) candidate defeated Lumumba’s son in the election to fill the vacancy. But I learned at one of our panels that the cooperative economic development program is continuing without government support. I think it might be better off being launched in this way.

A somber session acknowledged those who have died, and honored those murdered, including both the well-known and unknown. Rita Schwerner spoke; her then-husband Mickey is one of the three people murdered early in the summer of 1964. His murder, and the murder of James Cheney and Andrew Goodman, fulfilled an expectation of the Summer Project—that lives were likely to be lost. The federal government descended upon Mississippi. When rivers were dredged for the three victims, other bodies were found. They were local blacks who didn’t warrant federal intervention.

A final day panel was titled, “Our Southern Strategy: ‘Where Do We Go From Here?’” It is instructive that the moderator and panelists were all politicians. There was no speaker on mass-based non-violent disruptive direct action, mass boycotts, public shaming, mutual aid (coops, credit unions and buying clubs all being examples), direct negotiation with business and major nonprofit decision makers, and workplace action and strikes as central organizing tools to express people power. Indeed, community organizing as a strategic approach, with electoral politics as one of its expressions, seems to have been forgotten. Mississippi Freedom Summer is largely remembered as voter registration and freedom schools.

This point was made on several occasions during the four days: “minorities will soon be the majority.” While demographically true, don’t count on it making a lot of political change. There are Democratic “moderates” of all colors who won’t challenge corporate power or the growing concentration of income and wealth in a few hands while the standard of living of the majority declines. What is happening to that majority is happening more drastically in the black community.

**Bob Moses’ Challenge**

In one of the concluding sessions, Bob Moses asked everyone to rise and repeat after him the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. At the end, he emphatically said, “Own it.” A friend of mine said Bob is seeking a new moral center around which to rebuild The Movement. After “We the people,” he said, “It doesn’t say government, or states; it says ‘people’.” Just in case it’s not handy, here it is:

*We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

**Diamondhead, MS.**

I rented a car in Jackson, and drove to Diamondhead, which is on the Gulf, and visited a friend there.  There are still foundations with nothing standing on them--testimony to the power of Hurricane Katrina.  My friend lives back from the water, and about 40 feet above sea level, so her house wasn't touched.

We talked a bit about the recent election.  A Tea Party candidate was defeated in the Republican run-off because blacks “crossed over” from the Democrats and voted for his opponent in sufficient number to affect the outcome of the election. An unusual provision in Mississippi law let registered Democrats (which is what most blacks are) vote in the run-off election between two Republicans.

The nominated Thad Cochran is better than the candidate he defeated. But the Mississippi potential is for someone and something much better. I hope the potential will be realized. The pieces and the legacy for something strikingly different are there.

*This is a corrected version of the published text. Mike Miller. 7/12/14.*