



“On Time” In Mississippi: 1964-1994

Confronting immoral power with moral power

By Elizabeth Martinez

Outside the red brick county courthouse in Philadelphia, Mississippi a middle-aged Black man named Ben Chaney stood facing some 75 people gathered for a rally on June 25, 1994. About ten miles away his brother James had been murdered at midnight along with two young whites from the North—Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner. All three were civil rights workers. Their killers, local Klansmen, included the deputy sheriff who had been based in that courthouse.

Thirty years had passed since the murder. Ben Chaney began his brief speech by asking the crowd, “How many of you are from Philadelphia?” A janitor and a policeman; nobody else. “That shows,” said Chaney slowly, “how far we have to go.” His question and its answer hung in the afternoon stillness.

The courthouse rally, part of a weekend reunion of civil rights workers, ended after four others spoke. I walked through the courthouse, passing the door marked “Sheriff.” Outside, the main street looked as though it had changed little in 30 years: a few blocks of small shops, the “Bible Book Store” (and no other), large well-built churches, and not a single cafe. A sullen kind of silence muffled the street, as if whites in this small, notorious town resented being once again the center of national attention.

It was time to drive out to the site of Mount Zion Methodist Church, the Black community church whose destruction by arson had led Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner to come and investigate. They had been arrested by Sheriff Lawrence Rainey of Neshoba County (known for boasting to people about having killed two

Black men “in the line of duty”). Released from jail late at night, they suddenly found themselves being chased by a police car, stopped and taken from their station wagon, driven down a remote dirt lane, and shot to death. Mount Zion symbolized the beginning of that end. It was also one of 35 Black churches set on fire by racists during the summer of 1964.

Our group needed directions to the church, and someone asked a state trooper standing by. He said it was hard to find so he would escort us. A police escort? Too many old images came rushing by. Then I saw the trooper: he was tall, thin, and Black. In that moment the world around seemed much safer.

The rebuilt Mount Zion church lies on a narrow, road with little sign of life except an occasional trailer or rundown shack. In front of its entrance stand three towering, hand-hewn wooden crosses and nearby the original church’s bell on display. A metal plaque tells the story of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. The truth of that brutality and sacrifice is here, but hidden away in a remote corner of Neshoba County where few whites will have to look at it.

Still, the trooper was—yes he was—Black.

One Discovery After Another

Mississippi Homecoming 1994, the Jackson-based reunion and conference of June 23-26, marked the anniversary of the 1964 Summer Project when over 1,000 volunteer civil rights workers—most of them

white, college-age youth from the North—came to the state. The Project's goal: to break the racist grip of fear and isolation on Mississippi by bringing the outside world there, including federal protection. Voter registration, a life-threatening action for Mississippi's Black people in the early 1960s, was key to that strategy. Volunteers also worked at Freedom Schools in 47 towns and community centers. The Summer Project involved four major civil rights groups under the umbrella of the Council of Federated Organizations, COFO. But its roots and inspiration lay primarily in work done by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Project director Robert Moses.

Thirty years later, some 400-500 former volunteers, SNCC staff members, and other activists gathered in a reunion that seemed to be joyous for most, and wondrous for all. A 1964 volunteer not given to superlatives was heard to say after one day, "this is about as perfect as anything can get." I realized one morning that I had been smiling steadily for two straight days. The media would make sure to report that people had grown grayer, fatter, balder, or whatever, and it was true enough, but they could not see what we saw in each other's faces: the remembered trust, courage, commitment, oneness in a cause.

Politically most people seemed to be in a progressive place. Many were active for social justice, from organizing against homelessness to producing anti-racist educational material like the TV series "Eyes on the Prize." New projects spontaneously emerged during the reunion, such as some native Mississippians who had moved away long ago deciding to organize support for reforms in their old hometown. The non-profit Mississippi Community Foundation, which sponsored the reunion as part of its work to review and document the history of the Movement, has various plans. They include working with Universal Studios on a feature film to counter the distorted movie *Mississippi Burning* that made FBI agents into anti-racist heroes.

Willie (now Wazir) Peacock, a SNCC Field Secretary from Greenwood, Mississippi, had two words—perhaps the best—for the weekend. "It was," he said, "on time." People came from all over the country who had not come to any previous reunion. Local leaders attended along with Black

and white former volunteers, and ex-staff from SNCC's hardy band of photographers to movement celebrities like Julian Bond, Mary King, former SNCC chair and now U.S. Congressperson John Lewis, and Bernice Reagon. People embraced across the Black/white line, the staff/volunteer line, and the North/South line with an ease often absent during the Summer Project or the last difficult years of SNCC. Volunteers were praised by SNCC staff members for their historic contribution. On the plane going to Jackson Bob Moses had said the reunion might be an occasion for healing, and so it seemed in various ways.

On Saturday former volunteers traveled back to towns where they had been stationed in 1964: Greenwood, McComb, Ruleville, Vicksburg and others. One group found the local Black barber, still there after 30 years, who gave them all free haircuts. Another knocked on the door of an elderly Black woman who peered out the window at a person unseen for 30 years and without hesitation asked: "Kathy?"

What Has Changed—Or Not?

That weekend found some people saying that nothing has really changed for Black people in Mississippi, and others pointing to changes like the Black state trooper. To debate this issue would keep us trapped between two absolutes, two abstractions, without a sense of history or process. Instead, we need to look at precisely what has changed for the better and what hasn't and why; what has happened to some of the changes; and who is doing what about it. A host of revelations then appear.



Jackson, MI, June 1994: Youth speak out at reunion workshop

Matt Herron/Take Stock

At the reunion, the sense of positive change began at the airport, where a large official banner proclaimed "Welcome Homecoming 1964-94" to my disbelieving eyes. It grew with the big roadside sign at the Holiday Inn announcing "Welcome Freedom Summer Reunion." It mushroomed when former staff and volunteers returning to visit towns where they had once worked, whose white residents had often wished them dead, were given golden keys-to-the-city. Not quite the Mississippi most remembered, of white supremacist hate, jailings and bombings; a world where we kept a sharp eye out for Dixie flags and pickups with gun-racks.

Again and again we heard about Black Mississippians now in political positions unimaginable three decades ago. The Summer Project laid the foundation for such victories by exposing Black people's near-total exclusion from the electoral process. That in turn led to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. As a result Mississippi—where only 6.7 percent of African Americans had been able to register by 1964—has more Black elected officials today than any other state.

Many examples of these and other gains linked to the Summer Project emerged that weekend. In Greenwood SNCC staff members found a progressive Black woman elected to the City Council whom they remembered as a high school student in 1964: "she came by the office after school every day, every day." When former volunteers went to Hattiesburg they were met by a group of Freedom School "alumni" who are now MAs and PhDs, and who said they never would have gone on to college without that 1964 inspiration. Longtime freedom fighter, Aaron Henry, who was once refused TV time for a campaign ("no, nigger"), is now chair of the station's board.

All these advances could be described as simply bringing Mississippi up to the level of other states. But no one should take that lightly, as today's nationwide war on redistricting tells us. Using the Voting Rights Act, lawsuits have been successfully filed to create districts where Blacks or Latinos could win office. Today those victories are under sharp reactionary attack, with recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions sustaining the assault. But almost none of the Blacks elected to Congress, and very few other officials, won their seats in majority-white districts. The attack on redistricting would protect such areas, thus guaranteeing racist white voters their longtime monopoly.

Such setbacks continue nationally even as electoral advances are made. In Mississippi there is one area where the reunion revealed almost no positive change: the economy. Its unemployment rate runs as high as 50 percent, one speaker reported. Another speaker pointed out that there were now middle and even upper-middle class Blacks but improved status has not reached the lower echelons. Dorie Ladner, former SNCC staffer, bluntly stated that the Black people elected to political office had no economic power.

It would have been good to have more discussion of these problems and related class issues in the reunion panels and workshops. Along with the focus on electoral politics, politicians, and upward mobility it would have helped to include a strong dose of the historic SNCC worldview: its commitment to serve plantation workers, sharecroppers, janitors, hotel maids, and all manner of poor folk. The voice of the grass-roots, for whom Fannie Lou Hamer spoke so powerfully, must always be heard if we are to understand the past and move effectively toward the future.

Youth In Leadership

Nothing spoke more energetically to those questions of "what has changed for the better and what not" than the young people at the reunion. Almost all were African American students, with many from Tougaloo College or Jackson State University where reunion events took place. Over 20 came from junior and senior high schools in Washington, DC, sponsored by Frank Smith, former SNCC worker and now a DC Councilperson. A significant number had movement parents. Altogether they created the most dynamic moments of the weekend.

It began Friday during the "Workshop for Children: Telling the Story of the Civil Rights Movement," whose title was turned upside down before the afternoon ended. During the discussion, only one youth spoke at first. Then, as the elders continued, three young African Americans standing in a row raised their hands high and kept them there, waiting with silent persistence to speak.

Finally all three were called on, beginning with Derrick Johnson, soon to be a law student. A powerful speaker, he countered a statement by one older workshop participant that there was no movement today. Johnson then laid out the Ayers case, which began with a 1975 lawsuit to win for the state's historically Black colleges and universities (referred to as HBCUs) resources equal to those of white schools. A 1992 U.S. Supreme Court ruling avoided the issue by ordering Mississippi to "disestablish" segregation. In response the state proposed to merge one of its three historically Black universities with a white school—and make another part of the prison system. Thousands of students all over the South, calling that plan educational genocide, have marched, rallied, and petitioned (25,000 signatures on one) in a "Save Our Schools" campaign.

The Ayers case speaks bitterly to what has and hasn't changed in Mississippi. It reveals the same old racism against Blacks: a refusal to upgrade plantation-style education that includes run-down schools tattered textbooks, and ill-paid teachers. The SOS campaign shows how the intensified racism of the last 25 years

has left Black youth today pressing much less for inclusion in the white world, and much more for upgrading historically Black institutions. The Ayers case is controversial among some progressives. What does not seem controversial is that many African-American youth today must find it hard to imagine the moral climate of the 1960s, resonating as it did with "Black and white together, we shall overcome."

At the reunion's "Workshop for Children," it soon became clear that the youth and the elders wanted to hear from each other. So Bob Moses did not speak as scheduled but instead asked everyone born after 1964 to move to the center of the group. Those over 30 moved to the fringes. For people who knew Moses in SNCC, or his current Algebra Project with its goal of empowering young Blacks, the request was in keeping with his liberatory style of leadership. It guaranteed that youth would dominate discussion for the rest of the afternoon.

One person, son of a former SNCC Field Secretary, launched a dialogue with his comment that activists are too often conscious people talking to other conscious people. How to reach the grassroots, "the people at the bottom of the totem pole?" Another asked, how can we overcome all our differences? They found no neat answers but they did ask crucial questions.

Many of the youth who spoke were women. This made a happy contrast to most reunion panels. Although the panels were generally excellent, with presenters who spoke strongly and relevantly, all but two of them had a 3-1, 4-1, 5-1 or even 6-1 ratio of male to female participants. And one of those two exceptions addressed parenting skills. The youth workshop pointed in a different direction.

Another sign of positive change: one young African-American woman, daughter of two SNCC veterans, announced without hesitation "I'm a lesbian. That doesn't mean I'm not a Black woman." Rejecting the frequent demand for a single identity, she explained: "I want to deal with sexism and homophobia, not just racism." Perhaps a quarter or a third of the room clapped for her comments but it is impossible to imagine any such openness 30 years ago. We can also be cheered by the fact that Representative John Lewis spoke against homophobia—strongly and unasked.

Sitting among the students, a daughter of Pakistani immigrants told how her mother had been fired from her job because "you smell"—which came, she said, from the spices used in traditional Pakistani cooking. "And people told my mother to try harder to understand English. But why don't *they* try harder to understand us?" Young Blacks and others clapped loud for her angry rejection of cultural racism. They seemed to have room for people who did not look like them, including immigrants, but with whom they share being despised. Without romanticizing I felt all the young in-

tensity signaled political energy and a promise of a new youth movement. The civil rights movement was, after all, not an event; it is a process.

At the roundtable on "The Civil Rights Movement in Retrospect," movement veterans spoke chillingly about what we are all up against today. Bill Strickland, now teaching at the University of Massachusetts, observed how the political climate had worsened with the Reagan-Bush years. "The civil rights movement smashed American mythology, which isn't easy today because the opposition is more sneaky...Every issue today is a coded racial issue...and when you tell the truth about racism it gets called discrimination."

In our era of devaluated dreams and mocked hopes, we need to confront immoral power with moral power—the message of SNCC founder Ella Baker and the essence of the 1960s movements. The importance of linkage between past and present was, I think, central to the Jackson reunion. We need a new civil rights movement. Call it human rights if you prefer, but we still live in a time when the denial of civil rights becomes the denial of humanity. Look at the beating of Rodney King, the repeated lynchings of Blacks in Mississippi jails, so many current examples. Look at the forces seeking to deny health care and schooling to Latino and other immigrant children because they lack the right piece of paper. We need to fight all such barbarity with a movement that calls upon all colors.

That rally at the Philadelphia courthouse on June 25 ended, as you might expect, with people singing "We Shall Overcome." For years I have half-dreaded this moment because the song makes me cry; holding hands as we do with "We Shall Overcome," how to wipe away the tears? But on this day, for the first time in three decades, the song did not make me cry.

Don't ask why but one answer might go like this. "We Shall Overcome" gave us a vision of community in an era of collective defiance whose courage brought prideful tears! With time you could also weep for the elusive beauty of our vision. But the reunion transcended that past and pointed to a renewed movement building, with new dimensions. No time for tears, it's just harder—more complicated—to make that freedom train come now. So get on board if you aren't.

That was coming home, 1964-94.

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