Don't forget us here in Mississippi

By JOHN FRANKS

Mr. Franks, an occasional contributor on political affairs to the Thresher, spent part of his summer with COFO in Mississippi. This is his report.—Ed."

Near the end of the summer I had the opportunity to work in Mississippi for the Council of Federated Organizations—a loose confederation of civil rights groups including SNCC, CORE and the NAACP. After a short stay in Jackson I went to Clarksdale where I stayed in the home of Aaron Henry, president of the Mississippi NAACP.

The long range goals of COFO are equitable political representation for Mississippi Negroes and a substantial improvement in their social and economic status.

Voting Rights

Adequate representation in state and federal parliamentary bodies is dependent on the right to vote, which has been systematically denied Negroes in Mississippi. Negroes who attempt to register face both economic and physical reprisals. Some of those who lost jobs attempting to register are now supported by COFO or its member organizations.

Of the literates who try to register only a small percentage pass the literacy tests. But even if discriminatory voting practices could be eliminated, only 21% of the eligible voters would be Negro though Negroes constitute 42% of the population.

The basic problem is the high rate of illiteracy among Mississippi Negroes due to inadequate schools and the economic pressures to leave school. Compulsory education legislation is desperately needed.

PTA Snubs Negro

At present the Mississippi State Public Welfare Department administrators money raised by local PTAs to indigent whites for school lunches and book fees; while Negro children go without lunch and fail because they have no books. Welfare money for all indigent school children is badly needed.

In an attempt to remedy this problem COFO has organized "Freedom Schools" throughout the state. A Freedom School is a full time tutoring program carried out, for the most part, by qualified teachers from the North. The primary aim of the curriculum is to supplement the work done in local schools, but the brief courses in Negro history are also given a brief course in Negro history.

Endemic Poverty

The social and economic situation of the Mississippi Negro is intolerable. Two-thirds of all Negro families in Mississippi have a yearly income of less than $2,600. Families tend to be abnormally large and the illegitimacy rate is extremely high.

To help alleviate this situation, COFO has set up community centers. The centers offer classes taught by local people in sewing, typing, carpentry and other useful skills. The Clarksdale center in which I worked is organizing a day-care center for the children of working parents.

The most farsighted and ambitious COFO project is the work being done with poor whites. White workers sent into an area acquaint themselves with the people and their problems. When the workers have gained the confidence of the poor whites, community centers and Freedom Schools are established and integrated staffs brought in.

Black-White Union?

Work with whites is considerably more difficult than with Negroes and has already met with some failure. In a Negro community there is always local leadership with which to work, but whites with leadership ability rise to the middle class where COFO has nothing to offer them.

The ultimate aim of this program is a Negro—poor white voter coalition, but the prospects are as yet tenuous at best.

All COFO projects are severely hindered by harassment from local police. Arrests take place almost daily on charges ranging from vagrancy to running yellow lights. Civil rights workers are jailed rather than fined for traffic violations. Local Negroes are frequently beaten in jail, but police seem reluctant to injure whites.

Police Vanish

Much more dangerous are local terrorists. There have been at least four murders as well as numerous less publicized acts of violence.

A man with a shot gun sits nightly in the Henry home. Police protection is non-existent and though the FBI provides some protection many local agents are sympathetic with white supremacists. The Justice Department has been consistently reluctant to prosecute terrorists because they are unable to obtain convictions.

I was surprised to discover how meaningless the recently (Continued on Page 7)
passed Civil Rights Act is to the Mississippi Negro. The law benefits only middle class Negroes—a very small group in Mississippi. The average Mississippi Negro cannot afford to eat at the desegregated restaurant or stay in desegregated motel. He hasn't the qualifications to get a decent job even if discrimination is eliminated.

Law Helps Little
The Civil Rights Act does nothing about the Mississippi Negro's poverty and economic dependence on whites, nor does it protect him from terrorism or guarantee him justice at the hands of a white jury. These things are far more important to the Mississippi Negro than segregated public accommodations.

I was deeply impressed by the total acceptance of white volunteers by the Negro community and the corresponding complete alienation from the white community. On one occasion, with two other volunteers and some small Negro children, I accidently wandered into the white section of town. We were stared at, jeered, and cursed. Thereafter I was careful to remain in the Negro district.

In sharp contrast the Negroes of Clarksdale accepted white volunteers into their community with warmth and hospitality I have never before seen. As I was preparing to leave the state I was stopped by a Negro man, a stranger to me, who said, "Please don't forget us here in Mississippi." I never will.