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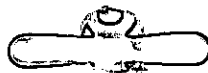
HARASSMENT OF MFDP WEST
POINT, MISS.

(Title)

(File No.) 157-3738-1A

1- 8-25-65 "Write Up" of event at Pheba, Miss. 8-20-65

Disposition:



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Date Received 8/20/65

From Jay Lockart
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MFDP-451 Cottrell
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West Point, Miss
(CITY AND STATE)

By Lynn P. Smith
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To Be Returned Yes
No

Description:

"Write up" of
Events at
Pheba, Miss.

Pheba, Mississippi
August 16, 1965

In early July a three-room shack in Pheba, Mississippi was repaired and painted and opened as a Freedom Democratic Party Freedom Center. It was staffed by five FDP volunteer workers. The Center was to service the rural, western half of Clay County which had never been worked before. From the time it was opened the Freedom Center was an irritation to the white residents of Pheba and the surrounding area. There was continual harassment, people prowling at night, a cross burned, tacks put in the driveway.

Meeting and talking to people in Pheba and the surrounding communities, the workers soon learned that a major discontent among Negro citizens was the condition of their children's school. Beasley School is the Negro school in rural, western Clay County. It draws children from eight, widespread communities who are brought to the school by ten school buses. Beasley is only about five years old and has a nice looking building, but facilities within the building are totally inadequate. No class has enough books for all the children, often there are but five or six books for a class which might have as many as 50 or 60 students. The few books there are are hand-me-downs from the white school, and in very poor condition. At the end of the school year children lucky enough to have one of these books are made to pay for its damages. Beasley has no science laboratories, no home economics, no industrial courses, no foreign language, not enough desks, poor heating so children have to wear coats in cold weather, and no fans or air conditioning in mid-summer when the split session is being held.

There has been proven corruption in the administration of the county schools. In Spring of 1964 the County Superintendent of Schools, a man named Littlejohn, was convicted of stealing a sum of money from the schools. He was suspended from his job. The principal of Beasley, E.E. Heard, had been given authority over the hiring and firing of teachers, and the running of Beasley, by Littlejohn and was kept on as principal by Littlejohn's successor, J.W. McCuiston, even though parents had requested that he be removed. Heard used his authority to fire several good teachers who opposed him on one thing or another. He also refused to let parents form a PTA.

Another grievance parents have is the constant fund raising going on in the school. Parents were paying for damages on books every year. Each class, at least once a year and sometimes more often, was asked to raise \$30 or \$40 in Queen Drives. The class raising most money would be privileged to provide the queen. No accounting was ever given of the money raised.

On July 15, after the condition and needs of Beasley had been discussed at FDP precinct meeting in several communities, a list of 20 demands was drawn up and presented to the Superintendent of Schools, J.W. McCuiston, by four Negro citizens of the area. Nothing was done to meet any of these demands.

Anger over the conditions of the school and the inaction of the Superintendent led students and parents to begin discussing and planning for a boycott of the school. It began on July 26, 1965. This was the beginning of the second week of the summer session, the 'split' session which runs for eight weeks in July and August to allow students to be free in spring and fall to work in the fields. On July 26, at 7am, before the school bell rang, about 200 Beasley students walked out of Beasley School, singing, and down the street to Beasley Methodist Church to attend Freedom School. Two FDP workers and several students were leafletting at the school that morning to spread word of the boycott. Many students had heard already and stayed home. About 100 remained in school that day. The Average Daily Attendance of Beasley had been about 550. The total enrollment was 700.

About 8am that morning Sheriff Joe Ed Strickland came into the church. It was packed with students; they were singing Freedom Songs. The Sheriff arrested three

FDP workers who were sitting in the back of the church. He came back and walked to the front of the church, and the students stopped singing. He began talking, telling the students that they had a good school, that they shouldn't let themselves be led out of school, and that he, their sheriff, was 100%. The students began laughing. Mr. Strickl then attempted to arrest two more workers who were in the front section of the church. Neither co-operated, and he left saying he would be back to arrest them later. He didn't return until students had left Freedom School to return to the school buses.

In Freedom School that Monday there was a non-violent workshop and a discussion of non-violence. Students agreed to be non-violent for the boycott. There was discussion and role playing about what to do should students not be allowed on the buses at noon. Students believed it was their right to ride those buses home, and decided to sit down in front of them if they were not allowed on.

At about 11:30am students left the church and marched back to Beasley School. They boarded the buses with no trouble. However, at the road in front of the school, and in front of Beasley Church, seven more FDP workers were arrested. There were a total of ten arrests that day, all staff workers. Charges against five of them, who had only driven in from town to observe, were dropped. The other five were charged with disturbing peace, and were all out on bond by Tuesday evening.

With all the workers in jail, the students took over, spreading word of the boycott, and conducting Freedom School. In the local newspaper, the Daily Times Leader, articles about the failure of the boycott began appearing. The Superintendent of Schools called for a meeting of parents for Wednesday at Beasley. Parents and students called a special meeting Tuesday night and decided to boycott the Wednesday meeting, feeling its only purpose was to defeat the boycott and feeling it would be controlled by the Superintendent and Principal. About four people attended the Wednesday meeting, and it was called off. But the next day in the Daily Times Leader it was announced that forty parents voted to continue the split session at Beasley. Students then added a 21st demand to their list of 20--an end to Beasley's split session. Though there are a number of families who are in favor of the split session because they need their children in the fields, it is clear that a majority of students and parents want it ended.

The next move of the Superintendent was to put pressure on the bus drivers. They were told not to pick up children known to be going to Freedom School. Children in school were told they would not be able to ride home if they went to the church to Freedom School. Because of this, attendance at Freedom School declined slightly the first week, and a great deal the second week as pressure increased. But children continued to stay at home. There were between 100 and 200 at Beasley School each day of the first week of the boycott, and about 200 to 250 the second week. More and more pressure was put on the bus drivers. They were given lists of students not to be allowed on the buses. Students, however, were always successful in getting on the buses to ride home from Freedom School, though some were not able to get to school in the morning.

But on Thursday, August 5, seven city policemen and the sheriff were on hand from 7am on to guard the buses from the boycotters at Freedom School. When they walked, singing, from Freedom School toward Beasley about 11:45am, 55 of them were arrested. The youngest child arrested was 10, the oldest 19. They were taken to city and county jails in West Point, fingerprinted and photographed, and released without charges in the late afternoon. Three FDP workers were also arrested at the county jail for 'obstructing justice'; they were attempting to take photographs.

On Thursday afternoon at 3pm parents met with the Superintendent of Schools, J.W. McCuiston, substituting for

