

In her 1967 autobiography *To Praise Our Bridges*, Fannie Lou Hamer recalled two powerful moments of food power that shaped her civil rights activism. At the height of the Great Depression, her family rose out of the shackles of sharecropping. Her father, Jim Townsend, after saving pennies on end, bought and successfully ran a small farm in Sunflower County. The Townsends were able to procure a small house, a car, and livestock, to young Fannie Lou their material gains became a marker of their social mobility. But for rural Black people in Mississippi the promise of economic prosperity was always precarious. And Fannie Lou Hamer recalls how her family's fate was sealed under the climate of white supremacy. Hamer describes a moment of “jealously,” when an unknown white neighbor poisoned her family's livestock by filling the animal trough with Paris Green, an insecticide. He killed two mules instantly, and soon after the rest of their livestock died of poisoning. Even though Hamer could not identify the assailant, she described it as a fit of jealousy under the context that during the Great Depression while her white neighbors were struggling economically, her father was able to move her family on and successfully operate a small farm. Paris Green was an interesting and timely choice. At the height of the Victorian era, it was a popular paint color, as well as a powerful and cheaply produced insecticide that was used to combat the boar beetle, one of the many culprits of the Great Depression's crop collapse. Even as local municipalities readily approved the use of Paris Green on food crops, its poisonous capabilities were well known enough for a jealous neighbor, frustrated by the upward mobility of an African American family, to use it to end Hamer's family's dreams of economic prosperity.¹ In the end, the loss of the livestock meant that everything else had to be sold off to recoup their losses.

After this malicious act, Hamer's mother and father returned to their former plantation to sharecrop, never again ascending from the system again. It was on that same plantation where

¹ Alison Matthews David *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2015)

Hamer worked as a field hand and later bookkeeper as an adult. That was of course before 1961, when she was fired and evicted after registering to vote. Even though nearly thirty years had passed, Hamer eloquently remembered and connected her family’s experience of hunger and racial violence to the very same hunger and racial violence she experienced after her eviction decades later. White power’s ruthlessness knew no bounds and it resorted to all sorts of economic reprisals, even hunger and poisoning to maintain the status quo.

The second moment of food power happened to Hamer in 1964. She reflected how “there was this white man going around selling watermelons off of his truck, you know. This white lady saw him coming down the road...when she asked him to look at his watermelons, he started acting sort of funny, like he didn’t want to sell to her.” Hamer continued, “finally he told her that he couldn’t sell her a watermelon because he had poisoned them and was going to sell them to the colored people. Sixty watermelons! And he had poisoned all of them.” She ended her reflection acknowledging that after the police were called, they confirmed that there was deadly poison inside of them. Hamer connected these experiences – of poisoning animals and plants to poisoning people – to the power of food as a political weapon.² Historians and geographers have long theorized the cultural and political power of food, particularly on the international level. Nik Heynen theorizes hunger as an intentional process that reveals a set of power relations under capitalism where food access is a negotiating chip to maintain domination and coercion.³ Bobby Smith and Bryan McDonald use the term food power to signal how wealthy nations, politicians, corporations, and in the case of Mississippi, white supremacists use food as a way to both signal a country’s abundance and coercively influence politics and culture.

² Ibid and see also Chana Kai Lee, “For Freedom’s Sake : The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer /,” c1999.

³ Nik Heynen, Hilda E. Kurtz, and Amy Trauger, “Food Justice, Hunger and the City,” *Geography Compass* 6, no. 5 (2012): 304–11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2012.00486.x>.

For example, in 1974, secretary of agriculture Earl Butz claimed that “you have something more powerful than atom bombs. You have protein.”⁴ The power of Butz's statement became two fold on the one hand the Green Revolution, which promised economic prosperity to so-called developing countries, alongside the long impacts of war and European and American colonization, left many countries trapped into large monocultural agricultural industries that delivered wealth into the hands of American and European businesses.⁵ In the case of the South, Smith argues that politicians and government workers cut welfare benefits, food commodities, and food stamps for anyone known to associate with the civil rights movement.⁶ The U.S. domestic agricultural revolution produced narratives of surplus over scarcity, as the surplus food produced from American agriculture had become a powerful extension of U.S. imperialism and white supremacy, where food access became more persuasive than the threat of bombs. In this way, Hamer's own experiences show how food power operated in the Delta. In fact in eerily similar ideologies as Butz, in 1962 Charles Dorrrough, mayor of Ruleville boasted how he used the threat of hunger to discourage African Americans from registering to vote. He argued that, “we gonna see how tight we can make it--gonna rougher, rougher than you think it is.”⁷ And for Dorrrough nothing was rougher than using the threat of starvation and even deeper economic hardship to undercut the growing collective power of the Black freedom movement. Under this context, Hamer made a lifelong career in the Black Freedom Struggle, motivated by her own experiences of food insecurity and power. In her world of the Mississippi Delta, Hamer was fully aware that white power structures would stop at

⁴ As cited in Bryan McDonald, *Food Power: The Rise and Fall of the Postwar American Food System*, 2017.

⁵ There has been much work on the manufacturing of food insecurity globally through the Green Revolution, the World Bank and its International Monetary Fund, and the rise of multinational conglomerates. I fail to do justice to the histories of violence that exist today, but suggest for a more detailed account you see: Vandana Shiva *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* for a deeper account of the devastating impacts of commercial agriculture and monoculture systems in India.

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⁷ Ibid

nothing to ensure that African Americans remained at the bottom of the social, political, and economic hierarchy.⁸

In subsequent decades, Hamer’s acknowledgement of food as a political weapon shaped her broader political activism. It was these very same forces of economic racism and violence that inspired Hamer to get involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1961. As organizations like SNCC entered the Mississippi Delta in the 1960s to launch their voter’s education and registration drive, they immediately bore witness to the massive poverty and hunger experienced by the Delta’s underclass. As a regional coordinator, Hamer held voter registration drives and food drives, to do everything within her power to end the suffering of rural Black communities in Mississippi.⁹ The connections between food and early civil rights organizing at first gaze may seem peripheral. The big turns in civil rights history seemed to in one way or another coalesce around school integration, the right to vote, and the end of segregation.¹⁰ Even SNCC’s earliest attempts to connect with Black sharecroppers in the 1960s blamed rural communities’ long sustained poverty on their lack of political power and obstacles to their presence at the polls.¹¹ However, it was the call for food, land and jobs that brought down the houses in churches across Mississippi, and that encouraged the Black rural poor to participate in the rural rebellion. It was the possibility of communal housing, universal basic income, and free food stamps that encouraged 1000 sharecroppers and domestic workers to unite, unionize and strike just one year after Freedom Summer.¹²

⁸H Maegan Parker Brooks, and Davis W Houck, *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It like It Is* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

⁹ Lee *For Freedom Sake*

¹⁰ Bobby Smith, “The War on Poverty in Mississippi,” accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.upress.state.ms.us/Books/T/The-War-on-Poverty-in-Mississippi>. and Amy Jordan, “Citizenship, Welfare Rights, and the Politics of Respectability in Rural and Urban Mississippi, 1900–1980” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2003).

¹¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening in the 1960s*. (Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹² James Cobb “Somebody Done Nailed Us on the Cross”: Federal Farm and Welfare Policy and the Civil Rights Movement in the Mississippi Delta.” *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (1990): 912–36.

SNCC soon came to realize how white paternalist structures aimed at fomenting Black dependency to maintain a plantocracy in Mississippi. They quickly recognized how white planters were not above manipulating agricultural, welfare, and disaster policy in order to stave off any rural rebellion.¹³ In response, civil rights organizations like SNCC shaped their national mobilization efforts to speak to the economic conditions of states like Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. They enacted food distribution drives in order to dramatize the plight of the Black sharecropper and to garner national support for federal intervention in Mississippi. The food programs were largely enacted and run by rural Black women, whose relationship with organizations like SNCC allowed them to cut their teeth in what would become a battle for war on poverty funds distributed by the Office of Economic Opportunity.¹⁴ And the work of rural women revealed tensions in such pathways to freedom. Many viewed the burgeoning agribusiness in Mississippi as being responsible for their economic plight, leading many SNCC activists to turn to intensive welfare reform – including food stamps, guaranteed income, and job training, as well as farming cooperatives – as holding the key to the future for Black communities in the South.

A focus on the centrality of food, land, and welfare relief in early civil rights organizing reveals three important arguments. First, the everyday, inescapable preoccupation with food made the exploitation of food systems a useful tactic for white officials and landowners to extend the white power system in the Delta, and to dissuade the Black rural poor from joining in on civil rights activities. Second, food came to symbolize, perhaps more powerfully than voters’ education, the economic and gendered dimensions of a rural Black organizing tradition. Third, the work of rural Black women in food access work revealed overlapping and, at times, competing visions of food, racial, and economic justice in Mississippi in particular, but also throughout the South writ

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¹⁴ Smith III “Mississippi’s War on the War on Poverty”

large. The civil rights movement created a moment of possibility and innovation where rural activists were on the forefront of experimenting with different food and environmentally just futures.

Weaving together historical fabrics from civil rights, economic, social and welfare rights reveal the power of food and economic justice as central organizing principles in Mississippi and beyond. Rural Black feminists could no more detangle the battle for civil rights from food access than they could detangle their identities as Black people and women. In fact, Uita Blackwell, a prominent SNCC activist, sharecropper, and grassroots leader, reflected on as much during her testimony for the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty in April 1967 in Jackson, Mississippi. Blackwell, she reflected on how food insecurity had stirred up Black people across the South to organize for civil rights. Blackwell reflected:

People [are] very angry because they can't eat. It is just that crucial... These are the kinds of things people found out that they could do something about [in] their own lives. Maybe they would call it civil rights, but it wasn't civil rights, it was just to eat.¹⁵

For Blackwell the demand for civil rights was really a demand for food and demands for food became symbol that everyday people wanted to mobilize around and for. In this way the beacon of the welfare rights movement and anti poverty movement is not limited to urban centers mostly in the north and west. And it predates and extends beyond the formation of the National Welfare Organization. By taking seriously the grassroots and mutual aid inflected activities of the Black South reveal how Black women's struggle for welfare becomes tied into their demands for fair labor conditions and food access, which informed how they approach civil rights organization before and after 1964.¹⁶ In what follows, then, is an exploration of food justice in Mississippi, long before food justice and food sovereignty had coalesced in the 1990s. It brings together the work of SNCC, the

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¹⁶ There is a growing body of literature on reframing welfare and labor as part of a longer movement for civil rights, see: Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*. (Beacon Press, 2006), and Corky Lee et al., *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, ed. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, Illustrated edition (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

Mississippi Freedom Labor Union and Freedom Village through the lens of doo and welfare, to explore exciting turns in civil rights historiography. While I open with the weaponization of food both through food insecurity, it is only to set up the scene in which dramatic and powerful contestations for food justice emerged in Mississippi. Starting with the birth of the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, I explore the rise of a daring, if short lived, radical experiment of communal living, that occurred when Ida Mae Lawrence and Unita Blackwell plotted to take over the Greenville Air Force base. Leading to a forty-eight-hour stalemate between the federal government, national guard, and displaced Black sharecroppers who demanded the base be turned over to the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, where it would be converted to free housing, job training centers, and a freedom school. In this way, Black women’s food justice activism becomes the driving force behind the narrative to come.

Food for Freedom: The Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union 1965-1966

The birth of the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU), a labor union made up of Black agricultural workers and domestics – including maids, cooks, and laundry workers, became a powerful organizing structure in the early welfare rights movement in Mississippi. As an organization of sharecroppers, domestics, and cooks, the MFLU in particular, continued to mobilize rural Black communities around questions of food access, communal housing, and employment.¹⁷ Organized in April 1965, the MFLU drafted a radical constitution that set its mission as raising “the standard of living, to raise the living wage for all laborers, to raise the standard of living and security to those making less than the minimum wage, to end the obligation of children and old people to

¹⁷ In March of 1965, COFO and SNCC voted to disband and leave all of its resources and contacts with the MFDP. Only the Delta Ministry and the National Council of Negro Women remained as national civil rights organizations that remained in the state post 1965, though the Delta Ministry collapsed by 1973, and the Council moves on to international issues beginning in 1975. For more on SNCC and COFO leaving Mississippi see Dittmer, Payne, and Carson. In their wake, many regional development organizations took their place, many who cut their teeth in SNCC, this included New Communities—the first Black land trust in the U.S., the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, the Southern Regional Council, and the Emergency Land Fund, who all organized around cooperative economics, support for Black landowners, job training to help agricultural laborers transition to new industries. While I discuss the Black cooperative movement in more detail in Chapter 2, see: de Jong You Can’t Eat Freedom, for more information of the Federation, and Alec Hickmott “Blackbelt Capitalism” for more histories on the Emergency Land Trust and the Southern Regional Council.

work, and to have social security, health and hazard insurance cover all workers, and sick pay.”¹⁸ In their member contract, MFLU members’ statement read, “I believe that everyone should get at least 1.25 an hour for their work. I believe that children under the age of 16 should not have to work. I believe that poor people should not have to work for more than 8 hours a day...I believe that all poor people who cannot get full-time jobs should get full compensation from the government. I believe that all work security Social Security and insurance.”¹⁹ In many ways, the MFLU called upon the same demands as the Black Left, who long centered the importance of workers’ rights and protections.²⁰ Through the MFLU, the demands of agricultural and domestic laborers, who had been denied the right to formally unionize and receive social status by the New Deal’s 1935 Wagner Act, were finally addressed. Their calls to finally be given the same protections and rights as other workers took center stage. The MFLU’s creation also shows how the power of the Black Left in the 1960s was no doubt influenced by earlier demands by Black Southerners of groups like the Southern Tenant Farmers Union of the 1930s.²¹

The MFLU’s president was Ida Mae Lawrence, a midwife and former SNCC activist from Rosedale, and she immediately helped to organize a strike of 200 tractor workers and sharecroppers, who walked off the A.L Andrew Plantation in Leflore County in order to increase their wages to 1.00 per hour of work. The MFLU soon garnered 1000 members and secured 15,000 dollars in funding from organizations like that United Automobile Workers Union.²² SNCC reported that at the height of the spring strike that “more than 850 people are striking during this cotton-picking season.”²³ The MFLU organized another statewide strike in the fall of 1965 to support the Shaw agricultural workers who continued to strike through the summer and fall months.²⁴ This second

¹⁸ MFLU Constitution SNCC

¹⁹ MFLU union card

²⁰ Civil rights unionism

²¹ Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998).

²² SNCC Notes on MFLU

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Statewide meeting MFLU found in SNCC papers

strike was organized by Rosedale civil rights activist Ida Mae Lawrence, a midwife, and Willie Peacock, a black sharecropper from Leflore. The MFLU also reported the breakdown of its members on strike through the fall, noting: “Shaw—100, Indianola—11, Tribett—80, Rosedale—30, Cleveland—40, and McComb—7.” Thus, at least 268 MFLU members continued to strike through the fall.²⁵ In support of MFLU’s members on strike, SNCC expanded their food-access efforts, raising funds to also purchase food and clothes for these striking workers as well as to help compensate them for the loss of wages they suffered by going on strike. In a document titled “An appeal from the MFLU,” SNCC shared that “we have found that here in the Delta there is a serious need for more and proper food. We have a welfare committee which distributes food and clothing to the community, if you can organize groups, we may be able to at least start getting children drinking milk.”²⁶

Even as MFLU continued to strike and successfully recruit members, an all-members meeting held on September 4th, 1965, revealed deep tensions in the group. Organizers reported in the meeting minutes that “a woman from Sidon, a small town in Leflore, said they’re trying to get a strike, but can’t get all the members to agree.”²⁷ Another woman from Indianola reported that “the people won’t hold together, there are only people on strike.”²⁸ With the writing on the wall forecasting the end of a Black labor pool supported by an agricultural wage economy in the South, many union members did not always see the benefit in striking. Still others held firm to the value of a union and the benefits of a statewide strike. A Mrs. Adkins declared in that meeting, “I think I’ve been on strike all my days cuz I’ve been suffering all my days. I don’t mind suffering. Let me suffer till I get to the good for God’s sake, stop grumbling and see the right thing right.”²⁹ The idea of the lifetime strikes further served as a powerful reminder of the role of hunger and poverty in shaping

²⁵ SNCC “By the numbers”

²⁶ An appeal from MFLU found in SNCC papers

²⁷ MFLU statewide meeting found in the SNCC papers

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

poor displaced laborers’ civil rights philosophies. As the demographics of the participation in the meeting suggests, the leadership of the MFLU evidenced Black women’s prominent role in the Black Left.³⁰ Stemming from the work of Mrs. Ida Mae Lawrence and an unnamed woman organizer from Indianola, the MFLU became a gendered space where Black women held up and fought for the rights of the black working class, oftentimes doing this work in leadership positions.

Through these women’s and their fellow activists’ labor – and their deep sacrifices – the MFLU grew, marking another transformation in Black activism in the Delta. This transformation represented the courage and imagination of local people who were willing to try almost anything to secure economic rights. The MFLU members did this in and outside of the organization: by making demands of those with power over poverty programs, advocating for communal housing, calling for a universal basic income until jobs became guaranteed, and continually bring to the fore the human cost of the anti-Black agricultural modernization policies implemented at the state and national level.

Despite their tireless work, the reality remained that most of the strikes yielded few positive results, and they often resulted in permanent unemployment for Black workers who took part in them.³¹ Perhaps with the power and on-the-ground effects of mechanization supporting them, A.L. Andrew and other planters were able to squash the MFLU’s strikes. For the strike in the fall of 1965, Andrew obtained an injunction that limited the number of picketers allowed near his property, and restricted the ones allowed to the side of the highway. On at least one occasion on the highway, the strikers were subjected to violence by white vigilantes, including an event where one white woman grocer shot at them from the highway.³² After receiving this injunction, Andrew quickly evicted the strikers, relying on the Sheriff and incarcerated people in the county prison to dump the strikers’ material goods and furniture onto the highway. He eventually replaced the Black striking workers

³⁰ Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*, 1st Edition (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011).

³¹ MFLU mission statement found in the SNCC papers.

³² Michael Siström, *Freedom Labor: Economic Justice and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi* in *Reconsidering Southern Labor History* eds Matthew Hild and Kerri Leigh Merritt (University of Florida Press, 2018).

with white workers and immediately paid these new workers more than the federal minimum wage of 1.25 an hour.

Andrews also worked closely with the White Citizens Council (WCC) to end the strike. The WCC used its tactic of infiltrating the union, securing information on their leaders and whereabouts of organizers, in order to support Andrew’s attack on the strike and the strikers. In the end, the state (which was comprised of members of the WCC) was able to effectively squash the strike.

Additionally, even as some strikers were able to return to their employment and received a .50 cent payback, most were fired permanently.³³ Andrews relied successfully on white supremacist public officials and judges, and the statewide WCC networks, to end the strike. Furthermore, he exploited the tropes of the lazy Black worker to support his decision to hire whites at almost the triple daily wage offered to African Americans. As his success with squashing the strike became clear, Andrew sought the WCC’s advice about lifting the injunction, as he now had “ample white labor to replace the Negro labor,” noting that “white families moved into the tenant homes.” Even Andrew offhandedly recognized the benefit of fair pay when dealing with these white workers when he reflected on how, now that he paid (white) workers 6.00 a day, “far more work is accomplished.” In response to Andrew’s success, Eric Johnston Jr., director of the WCC, replied “we doubted that the labor party would tangle with the white tenants who now live on the place.” If MFLU members were hesitant to strike before the Andrew plantation strike, no doubt the outcome of that strike deterred members’ willingness to risk the meager wages they could at the very least count on.³⁴ Thus, the MFLU’s influence, and membership declined.

The formation of the MFLU, and these early challenges to its members’ success became one of the pivotal strategies in using food to expand the success of civil rights organizing. Yet ameliorating the outcome of the strikes seemed especially urgent as the majority of the 868 strikers

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Eric Johnston statement July 1, 1965, files subject file MFLU found in the WCC Papers at the MDAH.

were now homeless, and were forced to form tent cities along major highways in the Delta.³⁵ SNCC described the tent cities as “occupying as many as one hundred people during the winter and set up near Greenville on land owned by a Negro.”³⁶ SNCC observed with concern how most of MFLU’s funding went to purchasing more tents and food supplies, rather than being able to be used to build out the strength of a statewide union. SNCC also noted how strikers had now become identified for their activism by white landowners and local officials, they had “suffered a bitter winter,” and they had received “virtually no support from local welfare agencies or federal anti-poverty funds.”³⁷

Ensuring food continued to be able to be harnessed as a political weapon, white politicians enacted waves of new food insecurity and access issues as punishment for the strike and union activities. And it was not just strikers who occupied the tent city, as newly homeless sharecropper populations fled to Greenville in hopes of securing shelter in the tents during the same period. Mrs. Willie Jane Eaton reported that she and her children were asked to leave a plantation in Sunflower, where she worked for 22 years, because she was about to have another baby and could not work. The baby was 3 days old when they arrived at Greenville.³⁸ Thus, SNCC and local activists faced the challenge of materially supporting an ever-growing population of folks in the tent city who faced extreme food insecurity for a variety of reasons, reasons that could by and large all be traced back to white supremacists’ actions.

For Food is a Human Right: The Takeover of the Greenville Airforce Base 1966-1967

The MFLU’s dreams were deferred with the backlash against union organizing and the limits of federal intervention in ending hunger in the Delta. And by 1966, the housing and economic conditions faced in northern Mississippi continued to reach a breaking point. SNCC estimated that some 60,000 sharecroppers lost their jobs, livelihoods, and homes by the end of 1965.³⁹ The winter

³⁵ Sstrom “Freedom Labor”

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³⁷ Ibid

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³⁹ *ibid*

of 1965- was particularly brutal – SNCC activists noted how the ruthless frost had hardened the typically loamy soil much earlier than expected at the end of the previous year. This ended the cotton-picking season earlier than anticipated, which led many more homeless and hungry people to seek refuge in the tent city established in Greenville. Compounded with the Mississippi’s Business Bureau report that 30,000 unskilled laborers would lose work due to a 35% decrease in the cotton allotment, and the OEO refusal to release grant funds under Operation HELP that would guarantee 24 million dollars’ worth of food commodities sent to Mississippi, the Delta Ministry, MFLU and MDFP called for an emergency meeting at Mt. Beulah Church to discuss how to get food, housing and employment as an extension to the gains made from the Voting Rights Act.⁴⁰

On January 29, 1966, seven hundred people filled Mt. Beulah Church for a three-day meeting under the moniker “Poor People’s Conference.” During the conference, flyers circulated, stating, “If you make under 3000 a year then you are one of poor peoples...The poverty program can you get you a better job, housing, and better medical care...FOOD, JOBS, HOUSING, we need it now, come to Mt. Beulah.”⁴¹ Mrs. Aura Wilson – one of the many brave strikers – declared, “we was all hungry, it was real bad, and we were looking for some way out!”⁴² Another woman who remained unnamed declared, “President Johnson, We are not surviving a little bit. There are hungry children.”⁴³ The energy of the room was clear: it was time to act, it was time to gain national attention. Some argued that the group should take over a highway, blocking a major interstate to force the government to acknowledge what Black sharecroppers faced.

During the three-day meeting, all three civil rights organizations realized that relying on donations for tents and food would not solve the increasingly dire situation that folks living in the tent city faced, many who were literally starving through the winter. They decided to build on the

⁴⁰ Mark Newsome *Divine Agitators*, Chapter 7 “Freedom City.”

⁴¹ Flyer found in the SNCC Papers

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⁴³ *ibid*

meeting by organizing another Poor People’s Conference on Food and Jobs, that was to take place in the fall of 1966. Through this conference, SNCC and the Delta Ministry not only hoped to help organize and maximize the political efforts of the poor, but they also hoped to bring in federal agents from the OEO and USDA in order to secure federal funding and protection.⁴⁴ The conference was to be held in Washington D.C. months later, but the urgency of needs of the attendees at Mt. Beulah, put the conference planning on hold. As attendees wanted their demands met immediately and did not want to wait until the Fall to gain relief.

With the cries for food, jobs, and housing echoing across the tent city, organizers Ida Mae Lawrence, Unita Blackwell and Isaac Forster, alongside the Delta Ministry and remaining lineages of COFO, made one bolder move to gain national attention to Black starvation in the Delta at that Mt. Beulah meeting. If the federal government refused to at the very least provide shelter for the now thousands of homeless Black sharecroppers in the area, then these same folks would force its hands and take the shelter themselves. Blackwell, Lawrence, and Forster volunteered to lead the newly Black homeless population to an abandoned air force base in Greenville. Three unnamed people had recently visited a bird sanctuary on the abandoned federal airstrip. The director seemed particularly excited to show them his garden and the running joke amongst organizers became that he had no idea that they were in fact scouting places for a takeover. The takeover of the base was strategic on multiple levels. First, taking over federal property would force the federal government to intervene. After two years of organizers failed attempt to humanitarian aid sent to the Delta, the organizers felt a public act would force the federal government’s Second, the abandoned base had a host of kitchens, classrooms, and bunkers that would immediately allow people to move out of tents and into more stable, protective, and habitable housing. And it was the last point which became the most powerful, perhaps the most urgent.⁴⁵ The gripping hunger, as Blackwell later reflected, is what

⁴⁴ Unauthored Poor people’s conference notes found in the SNCC Papers, see also Newsome *Divine Agitators*.

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sparked most civil rights organizing, both broadly and in this specific case. She testified to Congress that “Maybe they would call it civil rights, but it wasn’t civil rights, it was just living. It consists of not having money to buy food.” The demand for food is what drove thousands of poor Black people across the state to act.

Under the leadership of Blackwell, Lawrence, and Foster, activists in the tent city decided that 45 displaced sharecroppers would move onto the base. People expressed fear, but the group became unified after Mrs. Lawrence called out, “dammit I’m going... all of you too afraid, go home and eat some more greens, but I’m going.”⁴⁶ On January 31st, 1966, at 6:45 a.m., the sharecroppers descended on the base. Quickly they realized how the infrastructure could house and feed up to 300 people. They broke past the guard and set up tents in the Officer’s Club. *The Washington Post* reported on February 1st, “a group of Negroes invaded a deactivated Greenville Air Force Base because they are hungry and cold and have nowhere else to go.”⁴⁷ The *Post* continued, outlining how the protesters had made clear, “we are at the Greenville Air Force Base because it is federal property and there are hundreds of empty houses and buildings. We need those houses; in them we can be trained for jobs in the building...to President Johnson which side are you on, the poor people or the millionaires.”⁴⁸ Their powerful demands for food and communal housing amplified the deep organizing power that food access had long on the civil rights movement. And although the seeming success of the passage of the 1965 Voting Act had at first prompted many national activist organizations to turn their attention away from Mississippi, these Mississippi activists’ demands for food and shelter in many ways re-catapulted Mississippi into the national spotlight.

The new residents of the base made their plight and their demands powerfully clear in their document, “Greenville AFB—why are we here?” In the document, they shared in their own words

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⁴⁷ Washington Post, “Greenville Airforce Base Takeover, : 1966

⁴⁸ *ibid*

how “We are here because we are hungry and cold...we are the air force base because there are hundreds of empty houses and buildings. We need those houses. We demand food. We are here because we are hungry. Our children can’t be taught in school because they are hungry.”⁴⁹ The demand letter continued, “We demand an income. We demand that poor people be given an income instead of handouts and food commodities. We want fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats.”⁵⁰ Here residents made inextricable their demands for food access with their demands for universal basic income for the rural poor. The residents ended their demand with a forceful critique of the federal government’s insistence that Black Mississippians organize and work with the Mississippi County boards. They declared, “We don't want the Mississippi County Board of Supervisors to have another chance to decide whether the poor people should get food. We don't recognize these County boards because they don't represent us.”⁵¹ Recognizing the anti-Black racism embedded in Mississippi welfare policies, and the anti-Black logics that shaped Mississippi politicians’ threats to do away with welfare altogether, the residents demanded that the federal government take responsibility for executing relief and aid to Black communities across Mississippi, not just in the Delta.

The presence of people living on the air force base soon created confusion between state and federal agents.⁵² At the local level, the Greenville sheriff’s office ultimately declined to intervene, arguing that it was federal territory and therefore a federal problem. This confusion resulted in the new residents being allowed to stay on the property for almost 32 hours without much intervention. However, President Johnson eventually called in the National Guard and the army to force the residents off of the base. By 11a.m. on February 2nd, the army issued a statement: “You have become a source of danger to government property, and to yourselves.”⁵³ One soldier pointed out that the building was without proper sanitation or water, and thus it was a fire and health hazard. This

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⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² Greenwood Commonwealth “Takeover of Air Force Base”

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language of liability remained unconvincing for activists like Foster, who retorted, “This can't be your reason for wanting us out, because all over Mississippi homes don't have water or fire protection.”⁵⁴ In fact, many of the new residents felt that the abandoned barracks provided an improvement to their daily lives. A woman named Mrs. Ella Williams exclaimed to the soldiers, “it is a whole lot warmer here.”⁵⁵ Williams was referring to how she and other new residents had quickly set up the space with quilts and donated food supplies and, while doing so, they set up stoves to provide heat to the 300 people that resided on the base shortly after the original occupation. They hung up signs boldly claiming that “this is our home now, please knock before entering.”⁵⁶

As these new residents showed a unified unwillingness to leave the base, the federal government soon turned to more violent tactics to evict them. A hundred and fifty U.S. army soldiers broke the windows and doors of the barracks and dragged-out all the new residents, ranging from elderly women to small children. Charles Cobb reported on the callousness of how people were expelled from the base, stating, “150 Air Force police break windows, sliding glass over people and forced open the doors of the barracks, people are dragged roughly from the building, a lady from Hattiesburg collapsed while being hauled away...One man says four of them approached me and said let's get that son of a b**** they threw me out, tearing my clothes.”⁵⁷

With nowhere else to go, the group walked back down the muddy highway and squatted in downtown Greenville. Robert Kennedy's comments, where he demanded the federal government supply temporary housing and food for the area, highlighted how the hundreds of residents of the base had quickly been forced to become hundreds of squatters. In response, Johnson approved a 5-acre lot as a temporary refuge, an area that became the foundations of Freedom City.⁵⁸ Not satisfied with a temporary lot, SNCC demanded that the federal government forgo selling the base

⁵⁴ Blackwell et al.

⁵⁵ Blackwell et al.

⁵⁶ Ibid

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⁵⁸ Washington Post AFB Takeover

to Greenville City and instead called for “the program at the base be developed and coordinated by a group consisting of federal and other officials and 2. The immediate action be taken to provide decent housing for hundreds of negro families now critically in need of such housing.”⁵⁹ In response, the federal government assured that, under Operation HELP, it would send food down to the Delta and employ the rural poor to disseminate the food and clothing – a promise that never came into fruition⁶⁰ Through Operation HELP, over 350,000 African Americans received food commodities that year, however, the success was short lived, as ultimately federal policy failed to meet most of the AFB refugees demands.

The Greenville AFB takeover and the Poor People’s Conference was successful in that it brought together, both during the conference and in the months leading up to it, hundreds of people who were part of the rural poor, people who dared to organize against economic racism and food insecurity. On the other hand, the conference and the government’s response to the takeover also exposed the depths of the federal government’s ineptitude in supporting the rural Black poor in Mississippi. Following the conference, the USDA sent SNCC a lengthy breakdown on how the food stamp and commodity program functioned. It ended its explanation by stating that welfare was a local, and not a federal, issue. The OEO concurred, refusing to help provide housing for those living in tents. Instead, they encouraged strikers to turn to their local welfare offices for housing and food.⁶¹ In response, Reverend Arthur Thomas criticized the food distribution of Mississippi state, arguing that it was supposed to have aided strikers, and exposing how the Mississippi food distribution model was based on “the untenable assumption that welfare agencies and county boards of supervisors will act in a nondiscriminatory manner.”⁶²

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⁶¹ USDA to SNCC -correspondence 1966 found in the SNCC Papers

⁶² Delta Ministry notes on AFB Takeover found in the SNCC Papers

The aftermath of the Greenville takeover continued to emphasize the centrality of food to rural Black political organizing and mobilization. Even as civil rights organizations moved on, white power structures hardened, and the reality of federal apathy steepened, rural African Americans used the possibilities of antipoverty organizing as a way to extend the political and social successes of the Civil Rights Movement. But in addition to that, it also prompted overlapping visions of freedom to emerge in rural Black activist circles, and it propelled Mississippi’s black activists to sustain their demands through increasingly imaginative and innovative means.

Defining Black Futures at the collapse of Jim Crow

As the struggle for welfare, food, and land brought new activists to the battleground in the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi, it simultaneously revealed both overlapping and contrasting visions of what Mississippi should be like for the next generation of African Americans. The civil rights movement broadly marked a turbulent time, so much so that SNCC activists like Hamer called it the “Second Reconstruction.”⁶³ Such a description called attention to contemporary connections with the radical possibilities of and for freedom that emerged in the time between the emancipation of enslaved African and Afro-descended people in the U.S. and the hardening of Jim Crow policies throughout the country.⁶⁴ As the civil rights era brought about radical changes, it also created an opening for varied responses about what Black freedom ought to mean. The case of the air force takeover provides a prime example of the range of these visions of Black freedom. On the one hand, the aftermath of the takeover left activists such as Blackwell and Lawrence frustrated at the state and federal government. In response, Blackwell and Lawrence rejected both entities and subsequently made their claims through the language of Black nationalism. On the other hand, both Blackwell and Lawrence – whether directly or in a supportive role – were still aligned with the welfare rights movement that dominated post-civil rights act protests and demands. Many of the same activists

⁶³ Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993).

⁶⁴ Ibid

who had pushed for the takeover later conducted sit-ins and takeovers of county welfare offices in the hopes of winning free food stamps and free housing. In this way rural organizing modeled a multi-prong approach that centered food access and economic security.

While SNCC experimented with cooperative endeavors early on in the civil rights movement – be it cooperative grocery stores in Greenwood or cooperative credit unions across the state, – its visions for Black land cooperatism matured in the aftermath of the Greenville air force base takeover.⁶⁵ Faced with serving the needs of hundreds of homeless sharecroppers and domestics, they realized that they would need to find creative ways to rehouse people. As noted, in February 1966 President Johnson secured five acres of abandoned land outside of Greenville and encouraged now-former residents of the air force base to go. The Delta Ministry successfully fundraised for “a couple of circus sized tents” that served as temporary shelter.⁶⁶ Yet the Delta Ministry leader Owen Brooks found himself in a precarious situation, as the Ministry was now responsible for AFB refugees who remained homeless. In response, Owens decided to act quickly on fellow Ministry leader Charles McKenna's dream of a utopian communal city. McKenna hoped that Freedom City would give former sharecroppers the opportunity to gain independence and freedom in their transition from tenant farming systems. In support of McKenna's vision, Owen procured funding from a northern sympathizer and the Ford Foundation to buy 400 acres of land for communal housing in April 1966. They used these funds to also hire staff for the housing, including Ida Mae Lawrence, who would help run the operation. They called the cooperative Freedom City.⁶⁷

Located in Swiftwater Mississippi, just twelve miles outside of Greenville, by July 1966, Freedom City consisted of twenty-one prefabricated houses, as well as a sizeable farm where residents worked for wages.⁶⁸ Freedom City represented a potential solution to residents' demands

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for self-governance, self-help, and self-determination, after failed attempts to secure federal and state funding to aid displaced sharecroppers. However, the Delta Ministry reported that, in response to the promised grant by the OEO, the ministry found “despite many assurances by federal officials that funding is imminent, and despite the promise of 125,000 in matching funds from a major foundation, is still snarled in red tape and hostile political pressure.”⁶⁹

In response to the stalled allocation of resources to displaced laborers, in 1966, Blackwell, Foster, and Lawrence (who were key to the takeover of the Greenville air force base) sat on a panel-style interview titled “We have no government.” Blackwell opened the interview by sharing that “I feel that the federal government has proven that it doesn't care about poor people. Everything that we have asked for through these years has been handed down on paper. It's never been a reality...we're going to build it for ourselves, because we don't have a government that represents us.”⁷⁰ Blackwell's assertion that the government no longer represented the poor aptly described the reasoning behind the turn toward cooperative movements across the South.

The comments by Blackwell's colleagues on the panel further demonstrate the reasoning for this turn toward cooperative movements. For example, Lawrence built on Blackwell's rejection of the government by declaring, “Instead of getting what we were asking we got the whole Air Force Troopers and honest to me that's our government. Now we're our own government run by poor people. And we know we'll reach that goal. But in their world that is something that doesn't exist.”⁷¹ Lawrence's statement powerfully articulated a vision of self-governance that placed those marginalized historically in places of empowerment. She also signaled that it was these more equitable visions of society that were the very thing the state was fighting against, as demonstrated by its unwillingness to change with the times. Lawrence continued, “We need food. We need houses.

⁶⁹ Delta Ministry “Report on Freedom City”

⁷⁰ We have no government

⁷¹ *ibid*

But even with the poverty programs we ain't got nothing but needs. We are ignored by the government. The things about property upset them, but the things about poor people don't. So, there is no way out but to begin your own beginning... We're beginning a new future.”⁷² Lawrence ended the interview by reminding viewers that sharecroppers’ circumstances in the Greenwood area showed how the government and white leaders held property at a higher value than the livelihoods of hundreds of starving people who occupied the base.

The political hostility to supporting these sharecroppers, and the refusal to meet their pressing material needs, evidenced the continued power of white politicians to determine the futures and well-being of their Black constituents. It became readily clear that these constituents’ demands for grants, land, houses, jobs, and food would not be delivered by the federal government.⁷³ And in the end, Freedom City faced the same fate as other similarly sized cooperative endeavors that emerged in the late 1960s. The presence of Freedom City continued to stir the ire of Mississippi politicians, who did everything in their power to deter federal funding to the cooperative and find other ways to make it increasingly difficult for Freedom City to survive. As a result, the original twenty-four urethane plastic houses made quickly to house twenty two families, were never replaced with more sturdy materials and became in disrepair within the first few months of the endeavor. Even as the Delta Ministry attempted to attract other industries to the area, which would ideally provide additional labor avenues outside of agriculture, they faced a hostile and racist environment which prevented them from attracting new industries or from receiving state support to start their own.⁷⁴ In particular new industries did not want to enter the community that was mostly unskilled workers, women and children. Further, there were instances of documented violence against Freedom City. In one instance, the Ministry noted that “threats of violence continue to erupt as in

⁷² *ibid*

⁷³ *ibid*

⁷⁴ Newsome

the case of shooting into Freedom City in February 1967. The Delta Ministry has called for a possible impeachment of a federal judge who is holding up prosecution.”⁷⁵ Owen Brooks, the interim chair of the ministry also noted that “the judge’s actions make it open season on Mississippi Negroes who dare to work toward freedom.”⁷⁶

The difficulties Freedom City had faced from the onset led many to feel that the government had sabotaged their efforts. On this issue, residents issued a searing pamphlet titled “The Sabotage of Freedom City: How the Farmers Home Administration blocked housing for the rural poor in Mississippi—A sorry tale of bureaucratic chicanery, double talk and double dealing.”⁷⁷ Further, the WCC documented how the Delta Ministry had trouble securing a long-term leadership team, which led to the organization’s internal collapse. Finally, the National Council of Churches, who bankrolled the ministry, refused to include Freedom City in its budget because they argued that it may lead to a mismanagement of funds. By 1970, those who remained in Freedom City decided to lease 320 acres to a local white farmer and the last remaining residents moved on.⁷⁸ Even as people like Blackwell and Lawrence embraced land cooperatism, independence, and self-governance, Freedom City lacked the funding and resources necessary that would ensure the success of the movement.

As activists turned their energies toward cooperative efforts and self-governance with mixed success, Blackwell and other rural women activists continued to struggle for antiracist welfare policies in Mississippi simultaneously.⁷⁹ By the 1960s, welfare became entangled with the larger landscape of social upheaval of the civil rights era even as much of the racist discourse was adapted from previous decades.⁸⁰ In 1964, the state director of the welfare office, Fred Ross, famously claimed “Negroes paid only a small portion of Mississippi’s taxes yet received a disproportionate

⁷⁵ WCC delta ministry files mdah

⁷⁶ *ibid*

⁷⁷ Flh papers pamphlet on freedom city in ffc files box 10

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⁷⁹ Ncnw files project turnkey

⁸⁰ *ibid*

share of welfare benefits.”⁸¹ The language of welfare abuse became a strategy of using coded language and accusations to attack poor Black Mississippians’ livelihoods and survival. Further, welfare agencies cut off the benefits of those suspected or accused of being involved in civil rights activities. For example, Mrs. Ora Wilson, a resident of Freedom City, shared that she became homeless after participating in a sit-in in Jackson. When her county agent found out, they cut her food commodities and housing assistance. Thus, rural Black feminists such as Blackwell and Hamer continued to campaign to end discrimination in welfare relief, setting up workshops to help women fill out their applications, and organizing protests to end discrimination. They saw little contradictions in demanding for self-help and self-governance while simultaneously arguing for more federal government assistance and reparations as the fall of Jim Crow in Mississippi ushered in new forms of white supremacy, meaning that the women strategically fought on all fronts in order to ensure the survival of their communities.

Both the state of Mississippi and the federal government were only ever interested in continuing a white supremacist, capitalist vision of development where Black people would always be forced to the bottom of the hierarchy. As such, the white power structure of Mississippi continued to work to squash Black eco-relations and to reject Black folks’ demands to no longer have to labor in order to live. Yet, African Americans continued to struggle against the systems that sought to erase their futures in Mississippi.

⁸¹ Ross amalgamation