

'Don't They Know They've Won?'

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A busload of Negro workers and sharecroppers traveled from Mississippi to Atlantic City last week to make a moral protest before the nation; they returned home after effecting a political tour de force which firmly set the Democratic Party in a direction it had only toyed with traveling before.

The Democratic Convention's support of the Freedom Democratic Party represented a conscious choice to end the liberals' alliance with the Southern racists and to seek to build an interracial party in the South.

It is true that national Democratic leaders in the past have supported moderate whites like Georgia's Governor Sanders against more extreme forces in the party. It is also likely that the Mississippi Democrats will themselves reject the party by supporting Goldwater against Johnson. Still, the action of the Convention was a sharp repudiation of powerful national politicians like Eastland and Stennis in favor of a group whose followers are largely not even registered to vote.

The Freedom Party delegates and SNCC workers were angry at the compromise which awarded them two seats at large. Most delegates and newsmen believed that without President Johnson's threats and promises to delegates, the Credentials Committee might have adopted Representative Edith Green's proposal to seat all delegates from both groups who pledged loyalty to

the ticket.

Although there was talk of requiring loyalty oaths from the Mississippi and Alabama delegations, the Administration originally had no intention of giving any recognition to the Freedom Democrats. It feared a walk-out by other Southern states, and it hesitated to set a legal precedent for challenging state delegations to future party conventions. Numerous delegates

avowed later that it was the moving and shocking testimony of the Freedom Party delegates in the Credentials Committee hearing and the callousness of the white Mississippians that changed their minds and made them refuse to go along with Johnson.

Political Neophytes

Walter Reuther was called in to urge the civil rights leaders to accept the compromise. Humphrey promised that the Freedom Democrats would be the legitimate party by 1968 and offered them control of federal patronage. Aaron Henry, head of the Freedom Democratic delegation, and Ed King, party committeemen, ultimately supported the compromise, but they were voted down by people like Fanny Lou Hamer who wanted the Green plan and appeared completely oblivious of the significance of Humphrey's offer. When the white delegation walked out and the Freedom Party delegates continued to refuse the "at large" seats, most observers asked incredulously, "But don't they know they've won?" The answer probably lies in the fact that most of the delegates are political neophytes and don't understand when it is time to stop protesting and start bargaining.

However, their refusal is not too important; there will be other meetings. The significance lies in the fact that the Democrats made the offer.

The action of the Convention must be examined in the light of San Francisco. The Democrats had the choice of trying to recoup with a turn to the right and inducements to the South, or accepting the gauntlet and extending the lines of the new political alignment. They ended by calling for a loyalty oath and thereby effectively rejecting the Mississippi Democrats after Governor Paul Johnson had made it clear to everyone that "our Mississippi Democratic party is entirely independent and free of the influence of any national party."

It was the challenge of the Freedom Democratic party and the continued demands of the civil rights movement, unperturbed by fears of "white backlash," that permitted the Democrats to repudiate the forces to Goldwater and tie the party's future more securely to a liberal-labor-Negro anchor. One white Mississippi delegate with an eye to the future even sought to confer with Henry on the Johnson campaign and federal patronage.

The Freedom Democrats need only a petition of 1000 voters to give President Johnson a line on the Mississippi ballot in November. In spite of Governor Johnson's promise that the people of his state would have a choice in the election, it is assumed that the regular Democratic electors will remain un-

pledged or declare for Goldwater. The chief organized base for white moderate politics in Mississippi is the trade union movement, and its leader, State AFL-CIO President Claude Ramsey, talks animatedly of the time when labor and Negroes can join politically and openly to revive the best features of Southern populism. The number of votes for Johnson on a Freedom Party line would be a clue to the extent of this potential today—a number which would unhappily likely be far below the votes moderate J. B. Coleman won in the governor's race last year.

There has been no public speculation about one of the most important possible consequences of the Mississippi party's decision to separate itself from the national party which Gov. Johnson emphasized after the Credentials Committee resolution. That is the status of the State's Congressmen. Can Eastland and Stennis and the Mississippi members of the House claim to hold seniority in a majority party which their state party has repudiated? And, in view of their decision to write off Mississippi, what answer will the national Democratic leaders have to the challenge that will undoubtedly come from the Freedom Democrats?

The significance of the Freedom Democratic Party's challenge to the Democratic Convention is that it gave the liberal Democrats an opportunity—or virtually forced them to begin to do what they had been plaintively saying for years they were unable to do: expel the Dixiecrats and seek a realignment of the political parties. Johnson feared a Southern walk-out, but no one seriously argued for the old New Deal alliance between the Northern liberals and the South.

For most of us, it happened so quickly that we still cannot believe it, but the fact is that a ragged, improverished band of Mississippi Negroes and youthful civil rights workers has been the catalyst for a radical shift in the Democratic party that may result in the political realignment that so many more "sophisticated" liberals have vainly sought for so long.