

Fifty years since the murder of the Mississippi civil rights workers

Fred Mazelis
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This Saturday marked the 50th anniversary of one of the most heinous crimes carried out during the long struggle to destroy the barriers of Jim Crow segregation in the American South. On the night of June 21, 1964, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, participants in the Freedom Summer campaign that aimed to add tens of thousands of disenfranchised African Americans to the voter rolls in the state of Mississippi, were murdered by a gang of Ku Klux Klansmen.

The three civil rights workers were shot to death and buried in an earthen dam. While their bodies were not discovered until 44 days later, their disappearance immediately became national and international news.

The Freedom Summer campaign focused on Mississippi, long notorious for the daily abuse and brutality suffered by its black citizens. As of 1962, less than 7 percent of eligible African Americans in that state were registered to vote. The Freedom Summer voter education and registration drive was led by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which included the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The radicalized students of SNCC took the lead.

The battle for the most basic democratic rights, a century after the US Civil War and nearly twenty years after World War II, was one that involved the efforts of millions of people. Centered in the Southern states of the US in the decade between 1955 and 1965, the movement was overwhelmingly working class in composition. The struggle attracted the passionate and deeply felt support of millions of workers, students, youth and intellectuals in the North. Over 1,000 out-of-state volunteers came to Mississippi during the summer of 1964, and they were joined by thousands of black students and youth from within the state.

Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney reflected the nationwide and multiracial character of Freedom Summer. Schwerner and Goodman, both of Jewish background, were among the Northern supporters of the movement. At 24 years of age, Schwerner was older and more experienced than the 20-year-old Goodman and the 21-year-old Chaney, from Meridian, Mississippi.

Schwerner grew up in the suburbs immediately north of New York City. He and his wife Rita had arrived in Meridian in January 1964, partly to lay the groundwork for the forthcoming summer campaign. Working as a field representative for CORE, Schwerner helped establish a local community center and also tried to speak to white workers in the area. He was immediately observed and targeted by the Klan.

Goodman, raised in Manhattan and a student at Queens College, came from a family that was culturally involved and politically active. A brother later recalled Leonard Bernstein playing the piano at the Goodman home. Goodman had arrived in Mississippi only hours before he fell victim to the white supremacists.

Chaney's background and evolution typified that of many young African Americans in Mississippi and across the South in this period. He

became politically active in high school, and was suspended for a week after participating in a protest at the age of 15. After high school, he joined a union apprentice program while continuing his civil rights activism.

The details of the murder plot are by now well known. The three young men were investigating the burning of a local church, a provocation by the Klan that was designed at least in part to draw them closer to the area where they were killed.

Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, closely tied to local Klansmen, arrested them, supposedly for speeding, in the town of Philadelphia, Mississippi on the afternoon of June 21. Taken to the local Neshoba County jail, they were held for several hours while Price contacted the gang of racist killers, including Edgar Ray Killen, a local Klan leader. It was Killen who organized the group that followed the men when they were released. The timing of the release was part of the murder plot, designed to leave them at the mercy of the Klan.

Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney were shot dead, with Chaney brutally beaten before he was killed. The murders were intended to terrorize the thousands of young people who had enlisted in Freedom Summer. The bodies were finally discovered in early August, after an informant tipped off the FBI.

Under the notorious racist and anticommunist J. Edgar Hoover, the supposed crime-fighting agency was known for its policy of ignoring white supremacist terror. In this case, however, the eyes of the world were on Mississippi and action was deemed imperative. US Attorney General Robert Kennedy sent 150 federal agents to the area. President Lyndon Johnson met with the parents of Schwerner and Goodman at the White House.

The killing of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman was by no means an isolated event, although the fact that in this instance two of the victims were Northern supporters attracted wide publicity. The six-week search for the young men, according to the Wikipedia article on the Freedom Summer murders, turned up "the bodies of Henry Hezekiah Dee, Charles Eddie Moore, 14-year-old Herbert Oarsby, and five other unidentified blacks whose recent disappearances had not attracted attention outside of their local communities."

Eighteen men were tried in 1967 in connection with the 1964 killings, but because the state government refused to bring murder charges, they faced only federal charges of depriving the victims of their civil rights. Only seven were found guilty, and none spent more than six years in prison. There was strong evidence implicating Edgar Ray Killen as the ringleader of the mob, but he walked free after one juror, as later reported, said she "could never convict a preacher."

It was not until 2005, more than 40 years after the killings, that anyone was put on trial for murder. A journalist for the Jackson [Mississippi] *Clarion-Ledger*, who had written about the case for years, was able to develop new evidence. Killen, at the age of 79, finally faced murder charges in January 2005.

Again, he avoided a murder conviction, but the jury's guilty verdict on three separate counts of manslaughter led to consecutive 20-year terms, amounting de facto to a life sentence. Killen, having literally gotten away with murder for 40 years, remains in the state penitentiary at the age of 89.

The witnesses in the 2005 trial included the two surviving mothers of the young men, as well as Michael Schwerner's widow, Rita Schwerner Bender. The mothers were already in their 80s, but came to court to bear witness to their sons' struggle and ultimate sacrifice.

Fannie Lee Chaney, a bakery worker in Mississippi, had been fired from her job and harassed after her son's death and moved north to New York. She died in May 2007 at the age of 84, at her daughter's home in New Jersey. Carolyn Goodman, a professor emeritus of psychiatry at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, died less than three months later at the age of 91.

Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner gave their lives in the struggle for basic democratic rights, and their sacrifice will continue to inspire future generations in the still unfinished struggle for social equality. A historical assessment of the events is necessary to draw important lessons for the future.

The 1964-65 period of Freedom Summer and the Selma-to-Montgomery march of the following March in some ways represented the high-water mark of the civil rights movement. The struggles of an increasingly mass character had begun after the murder of Emmett Till in 1955. Later that year, the yearlong Montgomery Bus Boycott was launched. This was followed by the Southern sit-in movement beginning in February 1960, the Freedom Rides of 1961 and afterwards, and other struggles for voting rights and desegregation, led primarily by the SCLC and SNCC.

The legislative achievements that followed these actions, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, are often presented as gifts handed down by an enlightened ruling class. In fact, they were won only out of the bitterest struggles and in the teeth of fierce opposition. The 1964 Act was signed into law less than two weeks after the murders of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney.

The brutality and terror meted out to those who stood up in the fight for racial and social equality reflected the violent death throes of an outmoded social order. The Klansmen were the instruments in a campaign of violence whose backers reached into some of the highest levels of the ruling establishment, primarily, but not exclusively, in the South.

The struggles that put an end to lynchings and open racist terror were, in essence, part of the movement of the American working class in the post-World War II period. African-American workers and youth took the lead in the South, but they mobilized enormous support in other sections of the working class as well.

The three civil rights martyrs of 1964 joined a long list of others, including Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and the four schoolgirls killed in the Birmingham, Alabama church bombing of 1963. These victims of racism symbolized the struggle for the unity of black and white workers and the desire for social equality.

That is why it should also be noted that the years immediately following the Mississippi murders saw the assassinations of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Both were killed just at the moment when they began to address, if in a limited fashion, the underlying class contradictions of American capitalist society.

The civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s, along with the establishment of Medicare and several other antipoverty measures from this period, was the last gasp of social reformism in the US. This was a period of deepening class struggle and political radicalization, which found expression in the massive social rebellions in the Northern ghettos, a growing strike wave and the mass movement against the war in Vietnam.

American capitalism faced deepening economic contradictions and the threat of a restive and revolutionary global working class. In the decade

following the civil rights victories and the "War on Poverty," the ruling class shifted towards a policy of social counterrevolution, an assault on the working class that continues to this day.

This shift was reflected in the infamous action of candidate Ronald Reagan in 1980, when he launched his presidential campaign by brazenly signaling his support for every other form of reaction, singing the praises of "states' rights" in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of the 1964 murders.

The Democratic Party has been a partner in the escalating attacks on past social reforms. This party of big business, which for at least a century has fraudulently presented itself as the party of working people, was until the 1960s the party of the Southern Dixiecrats, the very same forces behind segregation and racist terror. Under the impact of the pressures of the Cold War against the Soviet Union and the movement of the working class at home, however, it was forced to shift its policy, a shift reflected in the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965.

Even at this time, however, the Democrats' fear of the working class far outweighed their opposition to Southern racism. This was demonstrated even at the high point of the civil rights struggle, at the 1964 Democratic Convention that nominated Johnson for a full term in the White House, where a rotten deal was imposed to seat the Dixiecrat delegation and deny the credentials of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats.

Today, while the Democrats pay lip service to civil rights history, their policy is diametrically opposed to the progressive traditions embodied by the sacrifice of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney. The Democrats' rightward trajectory has been accompanied by and based on the use of identity politics, turning the struggle for social equality into its opposite through the cultivation of a thin, privileged layer of the black upper-middle class. The class limitations and political weaknesses of the civil rights movement have been used to claim that the election of the first black president represents the fulfillment of the civil rights struggle, while in actuality the Obama administration presides over ruthless attacks on the gains of all of the past struggles of the working class.

The betrayal of the ideals of the civil rights movement also required the indispensable assistance of the trade unions. Even at the height of the struggle, the union bureaucracy did little but issue pro forma statements. The mobilization of working class support for the Southern struggle was not accomplished by the unions, which then organized at least one-third of the workforce. The gains of the civil rights battles were largely the product of the independent mobilization of millions of workers and youth, partly through such organizations as the SCLC and SNCC. In the decades since, the unions have been transformed into adjuncts of big business and the capitalist state, pillars of the status quo and enemies of everything the civil rights martyrs fought for.

Today, while Jim Crow is gone, the attacks on basic democratic rights—including the right to vote, the rights of free speech and assembly, and the basic social rights to decent employment, education, housing and health care—worsen daily. The only consistent defender and fighter for these rights is the working class, but its tremendous strength can only be brought to bear through the building of a new leadership that will finally break from the Democratic Party and the pro-capitalist trade unions. As we pay tribute to the civil rights martyrs, we must rededicate ourselves to the task of building the revolutionary leadership that will complete the struggle for which they gave their lives.



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