

# “We Have No Country!”

Various Authors

1966

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is an edited transcription of a press conference held in the Greenville office of the Delta Ministry Tuesday evening, February 1, 1966. The participants include three spokesmen of the over 70 poor Negroes who occupied the barracks of the Greenville Air Force Base. They were Mr. Isaac Foster of Tribbett, a leader of last spring's strike of plantation workers; Mrs. Unita Blackwell of Mayersville, a member of the Freedom Democratic Party executive committee; Mrs. Ida Mae Lawrence of Rosedale, chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union local; and Rev. Arthur Thomas of Greenville, director of the National Council of Churches.

MR. FOSTER: The people are going to set up a Tent City out at Tribbett and work on getting poor peoples to come up and build a new city. Because of the fact that we was refused the federal government and evicted, it's important that we start planning our own government.

MRS. BLACKWELL: I feel that the federal government have proven that it don'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, the poor people of Mississippi is tired. We're tired of it so we are going to build for ourselves, because we don't have a government that represents us.

MRS. LAWRENCE: See, you can only accept poor people by being poor and really know what being poor is like. And all this stuff about the poverty program and federal funds—that's out for poor peoples.

We were looked upon as just a civil rights demonstration. But really we were there demanding and asking that these things be brought there to fill some desperate needs. And we was asking that the poor peoples be accepted as they stood. And instead of getting what we was asking, we got the whole air force troopers on us. To me, that's our government.

MR. FOSTER: was...

MRS. LAWRENCE: Yeah, was

Now we're our own government—government by poor people. Where do we go from here? To brighter days on our own. And we know we'll reach that goal. But in their world, that is something that doesn't exist.

REPORTER: About the poor peoples government—would this be an idea for a lot of people to come and live around Tribbett or somewhere in particular? Would this be a larger Tent City?

MR. FOSTER: I know and you know that the tents are not going to stand forever. But I wouldn't be surprised if it wouldn't start that way.

REPORTER: Does this mean that you would not consider yourselves bound by the restraints, the actions of county, state or federal law enforcement officers? Would you sit down and talk to the Attorney General or other representatives about your grievances?

MR. FOSTER: If they want to talk, we'll be willing to talk. But they didn't want to talk. They sent some Mississippian—chief or sergeant or something. He said give me the names of the people who need relocation and I'll see what can be done about it. How can we leave the base when peoples don't have a house to stay in?

MRS. LAWRENCE: The base is more thought of than the poor peoples was. The buildings weren't doing anything but just sitting there. The building was more respectable than poor hungry peoples with nothing and nowhere

to go. If the peoples were satisfied and willing to sit there to find ways for themselves, the government should have let them stay there. The building was more important than poor folks.

MR. FOSTER: The only reason that Colonel Jones could give for eviction was that the building that we was in did not have running water and didn't have any type of fire protection. And see, I know that the federal government can't tell me that was the reason we was put out, because all over Mississippi houses don't have running water or fire protection.

MRS. BLACKWELL: And also they tell you all the time that the poverty programs is going to do everything for us, but that ain't so either. If you belong to any civil rights group or participate, they tell you that you can't get a job with the poverty program, because that's political and you know you can't have that. And that is what's happening with the poverty program; it's political—that's the reason it's not doing anything for the poor.

REPORTER: Mr. Thomas, do you feel that the federal government is afraid to let Negroes actively participate and run the programs?

REV. THOMAS: I could try to avoid that question and say that it is their problem. There people have the problem of not being fed. I will not avoid it and say nobody's aware of the power of Congressman Whitten in the House Subcommittee on Agriculture. Nobody is aware of the critical power of John Stennis on the Senate and its Finance Appropriations Committee. And they are the kinds of people who are supposed to represent the poor people in Congress.

REPORTER: Are you saying that the people who run the poverty programs are kowtowing to the white power structure from here?

REV. THOMAS: That's what I'm saying. The poverty program and the Department of Agriculture.

MRS. LAWRENCE: You know, we ain't dumb, even if we are poor. We need jobs. We need food. We need houses. But even with the poverty program we ain't got nothin' but needs. That's why we was pulled off that building that wasn't being used for anything. We is ignored by the government. The thing about property upsets them, but the things about poor people don't. So there's no way out but to begin with your own beginning, whatever way you can. So far as I'm concerned, that is all I got to say about the past. We're beginning a new future.

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