

Freedom Summer

Over 10 memorable weeks in 1964 known as Freedom Summer, more than 700 student volunteers from around the country joined organizers and local African Americans in a historic effort to shatter the foundations of white supremacy in what was one of the nation's most viciously racist, segregated states.



A documentary written, produced, and directed by Stanley Nelson, Jr.

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)

and

South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)

invite you to join a very special free screening of *Freedom Summer*, followed by a panel connecting *Freedom Summer* to today's ongoing and critical Civil Rights struggles and strategies for building collective action.

Thursday, October 23, 5:30–8:30PM

Gompers Room, AFL-CIO

815 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC

Light refreshments will be provided. Venue is accessible.

The film will be screened in English with no subtitles.

Interpretation for the panel may be available upon advance request.

Please RSVP at <http://bit.ly/FreedomSummerNow>.

Please direct all inquiries to info@saalt.org.

AFL-CIO
AMERICA'S UNIONS

In attendance:

Elizabeth Shuler, *Secretary-Treasurer*, AFL-CIO
Suman Raghunathan, *Executive Director*, SAALT

saalt
SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS LEADING TOGETHER

**“I’m going down to Mississippi
I’m going down a Southern road
And if you never see me again
Remember that I had to go”**

In 1964, less than 7% of Mississippi’s African Americans were registered to vote, compared to between 50 and 70% in other southern states. In many rural counties, African Americans made up the majority of the population and the segregationist white establishment was prepared to use any means necessary to keep them away from the polls and out of elected office. As Mississippian William Winter recalls, “A lot of white people thought that African Americans in the South would literally take over and white people would have to move, would have to get out of the state.”

For years, local civil rights workers had tried unsuccessfully to increase voter registration amongst African Americans. Those who wished to vote had to face the local registrar, an all-powerful white functionary who would often publish their names in the paper and pass the word on to their employers and bankers. And if loss of jobs and the threat of violence wasn’t enough to dissuade them, the complex and arcane testing policies were certain to keep them off the rolls.

In 1964, a new plan was hatched by Bob Moses, a local secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For 10 weeks, white students from the North would join activists on the ground for a massive effort that would do what had been impossible so far: force the media and the country to take notice of the shocking violence and massive injustice taking place in Mississippi.

Word of the coming influx spread and Mississippi officials geared up for the newcomers by increasing police forces, passing new ordinances, and purchasing riot gear and weapons. Meanwhile, Mississippi Summer Project (later known as Freedom Summer) students gathered on the campus of Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio to meet with SNCC leaders for training. After the first week, the volunteers learned that three members of their group—Mickey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney—had gone missing in Mississippi. As the days passed and the young men were not heard from, people began to fear the worst -- that they had been murdered by the Klan.

Undaunted, Freedom Summer volunteers went down to Mississippi, fanning out across the state, embedding themselves with local families, and setting up Freedom Schools for children where African American history and culture were taught—subjects forbidden in their regular public schools.

On August 4, 1964, the bodies of the three missing men were finally found, buried beneath an earthen dam. But despite the brutal murders, volunteers and locals were more committed to their cause than ever; they focused their attention on signing people up for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which planned to challenge the all-white Mississippi delegation at the upcoming Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Delegates included Fannie Lou Hamer, a former sharecropper who had been beaten while trying to register to vote and who had emerged as an authentic and passionate spokeswoman. At the convention, Hamer’s speech moved the crowd but proved no match for the Johnson machine, which feared the upheaval would threaten his candidacy.

As activist Charles McLaurin remarks in the film, “I felt really bad that we had not unseated the Mississippi delegation. But Fannie Lou and I came home with the feeling that our mission had not ended. We were coming home to continue to fight for the right to vote. We were charged because we had stuff back here to do.” A year later, Congress finally passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

—from *Introduction: Freedom Summer* at pbs.org