

# I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired – Dec. 20, 1964

**Fannie Lou Hamer**

December 20, 2019— Harlem, New York

*Hamer delivered this speech with Malcolm X at a rally at the Williams Institutional CME Church, Harlem, New York, that was organized to support the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's Congressional Challenge.*

My name is Fannie Lou Hamer and I exist at 626 East Lafayette Street in Ruleville, Mississippi. The reason I say "exist" [is] because we're excluded from everything in Mississippi but the tombs and the graves. That's why it is called that instead of the "land of the free and the home of the brave." it's called in Mississippi "the land of the tree and the home of the grave."

It was the 31st of August of 1962, that eighteen of us traveled 26 miles to the county courthouse in Indianola, Mississippi, to try to register to become first-class citizens. It was the 31st of August in 1962, that I was fired for trying to become a first-class citizen.

When we got to Indianola on the 31st of August in 1962, we was met there by the state highway patrolmen, the city policemen and anybody — as some of you know that have worked in Mississippi, any white man that is able to wear a khaki pair of pants without them falling off him and holding two guns can make a good law officer — so we was met by them there.

After taking this literacy test, some of you have seen it, we have 21 questions and some is not questions. It began with: "Write the date of this application. What is your full name. By whom are you employed" — so we can be fired by the time we get back home — "Are you a citizen of the United States and an inhabitant of Mississippi. Have you ever been convicted of any of the following crimes." — when, if the people would be convicted of the following crimes, the registrar wouldn't be there. But after we go through this process of filling out this literacy form, we are asked to copy a section of the constitution of Mississippi and after we've copied this section of the constitution of Mississippi we are asked to give a reasonable interpretation to tell what it meant, what we just copied that we just seen for the first time.

After finishing this form, we started on this trip back to Ruleville, Mississippi, and we was stopped by the same city policeman that I had seen in Indianola and a state highway patrolman. We was ordered to get off the bus. After we got off the bus, we was ordered to get back on the bus and told to go back to Indianola. When we got back to Indianola the bus driver was charged with driving a bus the wrong color. That's very true. This same bus had been used year after year to haul people to the cotton fields to pick cotton and to chop cotton. But, this day, for the first time that this bus had been used for voter registration it had the wrong color. They first charged this man one hundred dollars. And from a hundred dollars they cut down to fifty. And from fifty to thirty, and after they got down to thirty dollars the eighteen of us had enough among ourselves to pay his fine.

[See [Charlie Cobb Interview: Ruleville](#) for additional information on the above incident.]

Then we continued this journey back to Ruleville. When we got to Ruleville, Reverend Jeff Sunny drove me out to this rural area where I had been existing for the past eighteen years as a timekeeper and a sharecropper. I was met there by my daughter and my husband's cousin that told me this man was raising a lot of Cain because I had went to Indianola. My oldest girl said that she believed I would have to leave there. Then my husband came and during the time he was talking this white man walked up and asked him had I made it

back: And he told him I had. And he said, "Well, did you tell her what I said!" My husband told him he did and I walked out. He said, "Fannie Lou," he say, "did Pap tell you what I said!" And I told him he did. He said, "I mean that. You will have to go down and withdraw or you will have to leave."

I said, "Mr. Marlow," I said, "I wasn't trying to register for you today. I was trying to register for myself." And this was it. I had to leave that same night.

On the tenth of September in 1962, sixteen bullets were fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker, where I'd been living after I was fired from this plantation. That same night, two girls was shot in Ruleville. They also shot in Mr. Joe McDonald's home that same night. And until this day the place was swamped with FBI, until this day — it's a very small town where everybody knows everybody — it hadn't been one arrest made.

That's why about four months ago when the FBI came to talk to me about my life being threatened — they wanted to know what could I tell them about it — I told them until they straightened out some of the things that we had done happened, don't come asking about the things that just happened. Do something about the problems that we'd already had. And I made it plain. I said, "If there is a God and a heaven." I said, "if I was going to see you two up there, I would tell them to send me back to Mississippi because I know He wouldn't be just to let you up there." This probably don't sound too good to everybody, but if I can't tell the truth — just tell me to sit down — because I have to tell it like it is.

The 3rd day of June, we went to a voter educational workshop and was returning back to Mississippi. We arrived in Winona, Mississippi, between ten-thirty and eleven o'clock on the 9th of June. Some of the people got off the bus to go in the restaurant and two of the people got off the bus to use the washroom. I was still on the Continental Trailways bus and looking through the window, I saw the people rush out of the restaurant and then the two people rush out had got off to use the washroom. One of the people that had got off to use the washroom got on the bus and I got off the bus. I went straight to Miss [Annell] Ponder, it was five of them had got off the bus, six in all but one had got back on the bus, so that was five. I went to talk to Miss Ponder to ask of her what had happened. And she said that it was state highway patrolmen and a city chief of police had tapped them all on the shoulder with billy clubs and ordered them out. And I said, "Well, this is Mississippi."

I went back and got on the bus. When I looked back through the window they was putting those people in the patrolmen's car. I got off of the bus, holding the eyes of Miss Ponder and she screamed to tell me to get back on the bus when somebody screamed from her car and said, "Get that one, too." And a man jumped out of his car and said, "You are under arrest." As he went to open the door, he opened the door and told me to get in. And as I started to get in, he kicked me and I was carried to the county jailhouse by this county deputy and a plainclothesman. They would call me all kinds of names. They would ask me questions and when I would attempt to answer the questions, they would curse and tell me to hush.

I was carried to the county jail and when I got inside of the jail, they had the other five already in the booking room. When I walked in the booking room, one of the city policemen just walked over, a very tall man, walked over and jumped on one of the young men's feet, James West from Itta Bena, Mississippi. Then they began to place us in cells. They left some of the people out of the cell and I was placed in a cell with Miss Euvester Simpson from Itta Bena.

After they left the people in the booking room I began to hear the sounds of licks and I began to hear screams. I couldn't see the people, but I could hear them. And I would hear somebody when they would say, "Can't you say 'yes, sir: nigger? Can't you say 'yes, sir'?" And they would call Annell Ponder awful names.

And she would say, "Yes, I can say 'yes, sir.'"

And they would tell her, "Well, say it."

She said, "I don't know you well enough."

And I would hear when she would hit the floor again. I don't know how long this happened until after awhile I saw Miss Ponder pass my cell. And her clothes had been ripped off from the shoulder down to the waist. Her hair was standing up on her head. Her mouth was swollen and bleeding. And one of her eyes looked like blood. And they put her in a cell where I couldn't see her.

And then three men came to my cell. The state highway patrolman asked me where I was from. And I told him I was from Ruleville. He said, "We're going to check that." And they left the cell and after awhile they came back. And he told me, said, "You were right." he said. "You's from Ruleville all right and we going to make you wish you was dead." I was led out of that cell and into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The state highway patrolman gave the first Negro prisoner the blackjack. It was a long heavy leather something made with something you could hold it, and it was loaded with either rocks or something metal. And they ordered me to lie down on the bed on my face. And I was beat by that first Negro until he was exhausted. I was beat until he was ordered by the state highway patrolman to stop.

After he told the first Negro to stop, he gave the blackjack to the second Negro. When the second Negro began to beat, it seemed like it was more than I could bear. I began to work my feet, and the state highway patrolman ordered the first Negro that had beat me to set on my feet where I was kicking them. My dress worked up real high and I smoothed my clothes down. And one of the city policemen walked over and pulled my dress as high as he could. I was trying to shield as many licks from my left side as I could because I had polio when I was six or eight years old. But when they had finished beating me, they were, while they was beating, I was screaming. One of the white men got up and began to beat me in my head.

A couple of Saturdays ago, I went to a doctor in Washington, D.C, a specialist, and he said one of the arteries behind this left eye had a blood clot. After this happened in jail, we was in jail from Monday until Wednesday without seeing a doctor. They had our trial on Tuesday and we was charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. I was in jail when Medgar Evers was killed.

What I'm trying to point out now is when you take a very close look at this American society, it's time to question these things. We have made an appeal for the president of the United States and the attorney general to please protect us in Mississippi. And I can't understand how it's out of their power to protect people in Mississippi. They can't do that, but when a white man is killed in the Congo, they send people there.

And you can always hear this long sob story: "You know it takes time." For three hundred years, we've given them time. And I've been tired so long, now I am sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we want a change. We want a change in this society in America because, you see, we can no longer ignore the facts and getting our children to sing, "Oh say can you see, by the dawn's early light, what so proudly we hailed." What do we have to hail here? The truth is the only thing going to free us. And you know this whole society is sick. And to prove just how sick it was when we was in Atlantic City challenging the National Convention, when I was testifying before the Credentials Committee, I was cut off because they hate to see what they been knowing all the time and that's the truth.

Yes, a lot of people will roll their eyes at me today but I'm going to tell you just like it is, you see, it's time — you see, this is what got all this like this, there's so much hypocrisy in this society and if we want America to be a free society we have to stop telling lies, that's all. Because we're not free and you know we're not free. You're not free here in Harlem. I've gone to a lot of big cities and I've got my first city to go to where this man wasn't standing with his feet on this black man's neck.

And it's time for you to wake up because, you see, a lot of people say, "Oh, they is afraid of integration." But the white man is not afraid of integration, not with his kids. He's afraid of his wife's kids because he's got them all over the place. Because some of his kids just might be my second cousin.

And the reason we're here today, we're asking for support if this Constitution is really going to be of any help in this American society, the 4th day of January is when we'll find it out. This challenge that we're challenging the five representatives from Mississippi; now how can a man be in Washington, elected by the people, when 95 percent of the people cannot vote in Mississippi? Just taking a chance on trying to register to vote, you can be fired. Not only fired, you can be killed. You know it's true because you know what happened to Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney. And any person that's working down there to change the system can be counted just as another nigger.

But some of the things I've got to say today may be a little sickening. People have said year after year, "Those people in Mississippi can't think." But after we would work ten and eleven hours a day for three lousy dollars and couldn't sleep we couldn't do anything else but think. And we have been thinking a long time. And we are tired of what's going on. And we want to see now, what this here will turn out for the 4th of January. We want to see is democracy real?

We want to see this because the challenge is based upon the violation of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, which hadn't done anything for us yet. And the U.S. courts tied it to Section 201 and 226. Those people were illegally elected and they have been there — the man that I challenged, Jamie L. Whitten, has been in Washington thirteen years and he is not representing the people of Mississippi because not only do they discriminate against the poor Negroes, they discriminated up until the 3rd of November against the poor whites, but they let them vote because they wanted their votes. But it will run until the 1st of July and we need your support — morally, politically, and financially, too. We need your help.

And, people, you don't know in Harlem the power that you got. But you just don't try to use it. People never would have thought — the folks they said was just ignorant, common people out of Mississippi that would have tried to challenge the representatives from Mississippi. But you see the point is: we have been dying in Mississippi year after year for nothing. And I don't know, I may be bumped off as soon as I go back to Mississippi but what we should realize, people have been bumped off for nothing.

It is my goal for the cause of giving those Negro children a decent education in the state of Mississippi and giving them something that they have never had. Then I know my life won't be in vain. Because, not only do we need a change in the state of Mississippi, but we need a change here in Harlem. And it's time for every American citizen to wake up because now the whole world is looking at this American society. I remember, during the time I was in West Africa — some of you may be here today because I don't know what it's all about, but I know I can tell you the truth, too — it was a lot of people there that was called the PIAA. "What are you doing over here? Who are you trying to please?"

I said, "All you criticize us when you at home and you're worried to death when we try to find out about our own people." I said, "If we had been treated as human beings in America, you wouldn't be trailing us now to find out what we is trying to do over here."

But this is something we going to have to learn to do and quit saying that we are free in America when I know we are not free. You are not free in Harlem. The people are not free in Chicago, because I've been there, too. They are not free in Philadelphia, because I've been there, too. And when you get it over with all the way around, some of the places is a Mississippi in disguise. And we want a change. And we hope you support us in this challenge that we'll begin on the 4th of January. And give us what support that you can.

Thank you.

Copyright © Fannie Lou Hamer. 1964.

As published in "Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer, To Tell It Like It Is."

Retrieved on July 17, 2019 from <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/flh64.htm>.

***Neither the Catt Center nor Iowa State University is affiliated with any individual in the Archives or any political party. Inclusion in the Archives is not an endorsement by the center or the university.***