

**Organizing  
in the Depression South**

*A Communist's Memoir*



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**by James S. Allen**

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# Preface

The years 1930 and 1931 may be considered the beginning of a new phase of Southern history, although few may have realized it at the time. Consider the events of those days.

The nine Black Scottsboro Boys were saved from the electric chair by a nationwide mass protest movement, projected on a world scale as well. Previously, the mere accusation of raping a white woman would customarily have assured the destruction of a Black male by a mob or court.

The miners of the Kentucky fields, centered in Harlan, engaged in a long, bloody strike against a conspiracy to deny them a decent life. Big mine operators; the local and state governments; sheriffs' posses and thugs hired by the employers, supported by troops, combined against them. The miners finally gained union recognition, better conditions, and the right to live in their own homes instead of company houses, and to buy provisions wherever they pleased—in a word, to enjoy a breath of freedom. Black sharecroppers and poor farmers of Tallapoosa County, Alabama, organized their first union, beat back armed bands numbering hundreds who raided their homes and shot on sight. They not only survived, but grew into a force to be reckoned with by the planters and credit merchants.

The impact of these events was lasting, for they challenged the central pillars of Southern society. The union in Tallapoosa challenged the sharecropping plantation system. The Scottsboro defense movement challenged the entire false ideology of white

superiority and Black inferiority that distorted and disfigured the juridical and political structure of the region, diseased the mentality of practically the entire white population, and kept the Blacks in submission. The militant Harlan miners gave warning, as did the Gastonia, North Carolina, textile strikers of 1929, of the new unrest to be expected from the industrialization that was to bring about a "New South." The latter had been predicted since the turn of the century and was still to be long in coming.

Much has already been truly recorded about each of these episodes, and the telling continues to the present day, a half-century after their occurrence. The Scottsboro story has been told in full-length books, including a substantial scholarly work, in a popular television documentary, in poetry, in numerous essays and commentaries. Harlan is accorded an honored place in labor history, is the subject of an exciting television drama, shown at commercial movie theaters as well, and of other literary efforts. The events at Camp Hill and Reeltown, Alabama, are prominently reported in a study by the federal government of efforts to organize rural unions. The sharecroppers' epic is also preserved in a lengthy academic oral history, in books, in poems, and in other literary works. The folk songs born in these struggles have become a part of our national heritage.

Yet nothing of substance has been written about the Communist initiative in bringing about this primary awakening. True, there have been some passing references to the Communist contribution in a few histories. Whatever more extended remarks have appeared are mostly of a derogatory nature, sometimes outrageously libelous and calumnious, ignorant or unthinking repetitions of outright lies and myths. I do not mean to imply that amid all this debris there is not also some critical comment worthy of serious consideration, with which I intend to deal. The crucial Communist effort nevertheless remains unknown or obscure.

This book is an attempt to fill the gap. It makes no pretense at being a history, formal or otherwise, of the period as a whole. That is still to be done by an enterprising historian. Mine is a personal memoir—a political memoir—if you please, for which I alone am responsible.



I was a member of a small team of Communists who ventured into the Deep South in early 1930; I was a participant and close observer of this first effort at Communist organization in the region. Even after leaving, I remained a student of its history and continuing development.

Few contemporaries of that time are still around with whom to compare and consult, but fortunately I had many of my own writings of the period to use critically when memory alone proved insufficient or unreliable, as it often does. I drew heavily on the weekly tabloid periodical, the *Southern Worker*, which I edited and which recorded the events and opinions as reported and written about at the time and on the spot by our many correspondents as well as by staff. I had kept a file of letters to family and friends and many of the articles and essays written later. My own two books on the South (*The Negro Question in the U.S.* and *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy*), products of long and arduous studies begun while I was still in the region, supplied background and historical perspective.

I must admit at the start that we were subversives, as so often charged. We did conspire to change the Southern social order, to uproot its remnants of slavery, to improve the life conditions of Blacks—and whites as well—and to humanize, to civilize relations between them. Yes, as again often charged, socialism was our goal—for the South as well as the North—but we knew it was in the future. In the meantime, the order of things had to be improved. Along the way we wanted to overcome racism and the know-nothingism and obscurantism that continued to mar our history and current perceptions. And if socialism is the outcome of efforts such as these, why not?

I do not write here in condemnation of an entire region and its white people. Rather, I explore the distortions and disfigurements brought about by the specific turns and twists of history resulting in the particular class and ethnic formations that generated the superstitions and prejudices implanted in a people otherwise often well-meaning, civil, and friendly. These disfigurements are human failings that people can overcome, as they have been in the process of doing, as underlying conditions shift.

New York, January 1984

## Abbreviations

ANLC	American Negro Labor Congress
CPUSA	Communist Party USA
ILD	International Labor Defense
IWO	International Workers Order
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
LSNR	League of Struggle for Negro Rights
NMU	National Miners Union
MWIU	Marine Workers Industrial Union
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
RILU	Red International of Labor Unions
TCI	Tennessee Coal and Iron Corporation
T.U.E.L.	Trade Union Educational League
TUUL	Trade Union Unity League
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
YCL	Young Communist League
Y.W.C.L.	Young Workers Communist League

# 1

## The “Negro Question”

The first Communist efforts at organization in the Deep South in 1930 were the result of a gradual evolution of policy over a period of ten years. This was not, as some simplistically assume, on “orders from Moscow,” or out of a self-serving desire to enhance the prestige of the Party merely by making a gesture in the direction of impressing Black Americans. The initiative for this new crusade arose from multiple impulses and pressures, inside the Party and from the outside.

The decade of the 1920s was, for the Communists of the United States, a period of transition, during which program and policies were defined in their essentials and the nature of the organization and its activities was determined. The split in the Socialist Party in 1919, when its left wing broke away to form, initially, two new parties—the Communist Labor Party and the Communist Party (to be merged in 1921)—marked clearly enough the basic divisions between the reformist and the revolutionary wings of the socialist movement. The crisis had been brewing in every socialist party for years and led inexorably to the chasm between those supporting World War I and the opponents of their country’s participation in an imperialist war. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was the catalyst that brought the crisis to a head.

The split, however, was only a beginning. The substance and the form of the new party were still to be worked out. This is not

the place to go into the trials, experiments, failures, and successes of the process. The Party was engulfed in a fierce factional struggle during most of this period. Subject to constant persecution and harassment—a condition that was to be repeated periodically—the Communist Party finally did emerge as a single, unified organization in 1929, coincident with the outbreak of the Great Depression. It had also, despite numerous handicaps and obstruction, gained experience in the labor movement. Particularly in efforts to organize the unorganized into industrial unions, it engaged in coalition politics in the cause of Black freedom, and in defense of the foreign-born. The Party also perfected the policy and techniques of mass defense on behalf of labor leaders and activists prosecuted for their activities.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the transition involved the understanding of and approach to the situation of Black Americans. The prevailing position of the Socialist Party, shared generally by its left wing before the split, can be expressed simply: The Negro question will be solved along with the labor question since, in the vast majority of cases, Blacks are part of the laboring classes; thus socialism will in the end assure full equality. The special situation of Black Americans was hardly recognized, the specific demands of Black workers in addition to those common to the established unions were, on the whole, neglected, and the racist stereotypes that prevailed in society were to be found in the Socialist Party as well.

Among the Socialists there were notable exceptions, of course. Attempts were made to oppose the exclusion policy of the trade unions, and some outstanding Socialists, Black and white (W. E. B. Du Bois, William English Walling, and Charles Edward Russell, among others) supported militantly the defense of civil rights, notably in the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. NAACP support came almost entirely from the middle class.

That was not the only diverse current among the Socialists. A number of Black members felt that their party was overlooking the color question. Chandler Owens and A. Philip Randolph (who was later to organize the Pullman porters) issued the *Messenger*, a socialist magazine published in New York which

focused on the situation and problems of Black Americans. With the split, the editors remained in the old party, but from the group gathered around them emerged a new publication, the *Crusader*, edited by Cyril Briggs. It was favorably inclined toward the Soviet Revolution, welcomed the appeal of the Communist International to fight imperialism, and also leaned toward the Communist Party of the United States. From its inspiration and its ranks arose the African Blood Brotherhood, which supplied the first Black Communist recruits in the early 1920s, among them members who became top-ranking Party leaders. During the great race riots of 1919–20, the Brotherhood, many among them veterans of the World War, urged armed resistance by Blacks, helped organize and lead it, and in some places turned racist attacks on them into virtual battles.

Racism runs deep in this country, and in those days it was practically universal, affecting all classes and strata of people. The established unions were deeply infected with race prejudice, sharpened by competition for jobs as Blacks came into Northern industry from the South in greater numbers. This also affected the white immigrants from Europe who formed so large a segment of the expanding working class before World War I. The greater part of the old Socialist Party consisted of the language federations of the foreign-born, and the largest of them went with the Communists in the split.

Neither of the new Communist Parties at their formation had either a Black delegate or a substantial reference to the Black condition in the initial programs. No one really challenged the Socialist position on this question at that time. If, as the old program held, the Negro question was simply part of the labor question, there was little need to direct any special attention to the condition or the specific needs of the Black population, including its workers. Lynching, race riots, and other excesses were to be condemned, of course, but the protests against them did not go beyond the limits of "legality" set by the NAACP and the reformers. Only the African Blood Brotherhood, some other outspoken Blacks (among them the poet Claude McKay), and even ministers from their pulpits called for armed defense against mobs and lynchers.

All this soon affected the early Communists, but no doubt the greater and most direct influence arose from the exodus of Blacks from the South into Northern industry. With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, the supply of immigrant labor was cut off at a time when American industry had begun one of its great cycles of expansion to meet the demand for armaments abroad.

Previously, Northern industry—spurred by the Civil War and later by the “Manifest Destiny” concept that set the country on the imperialist road at the turn of the century—had depended upon the succeeding waves of immigrants from Europe. In later phases, peasants from Eastern Europe predominated, and they were joined by the farmers of the western reaches of North America who were being displaced by the efficient new machinery, the onerous burden of mortgage and credit debt, price disparities, and giant farms. Now, under the necessities created by the world crisis, the Northern industrialists for the first time seriously tapped the Black labor supply that had been bound to the soil in the South and hampered by all-encompassing racial restrictions. Agents were sent South to recruit this labor force directly with glorified accounts of the new life awaiting them. The resistance, even violent intervention, of the planters could not stem the tide.

At least one million Black workers came into Northern industry directly from the rural South during the war, and another million in the first half of the 1920s. They were raw, inexperienced in any kind of mass organization, ignorant of the struggle for unionism. In the new environment, they again found themselves placed at the lowest economic and social levels, housed in slums, and subjected to mob attack. At first ignored by the unions, which saw them merely as job competitors and strike-breakers, the new Black proletarians remained on the fringes of society. A very basic change had occurred, however: a Black industrial proletariat had been created overnight—late in history, it is true, but nonetheless crucial for the freedom and progress of the African American people.

The mass migrations were induced by outside forces, over which neither the Blacks nor their bosses had any control. Yet the exodus was a form of rebellion against the semislavery of

their Southern existence, or the Blacks would not have departed so readily or eagerly. In the second decade of the twentieth century, the memory of the earlier rebellions, to speak only of the Civil War and its aftermath, had dimmed or had given way to hopelessness and despair. After the defeat of the slave-owning South, Reconstruction was a valiant attempt to revolutionize the old society and to give the freedmen a rightful place in the life and governance of the region.

The failure of Reconstruction left, as a heritage of the old days, the restored or reconstituted plantation based on sharecropping and related forms of tenancy. Upon that renewed socioeconomic foundation, the planters restored their power over Southern society ("Home Rule," as it was called), at least in the Deep South states where their dominance had hardly been challenged in the past. They also resumed an influential position in federal government (always on the reactionary side), although by then the aggressive industrial-financial oligarchy activated by the Civil War was irrevocably on top.

The modes of labor exploitation peculiar to the reconstituted agrarian system and the racist ideology that it generated penetrated into practically every nook and corner of society. The brief interim of the Southern phase of the populist revolt in the 1890s seemed to promise some kind of coalition between white and Black farm people against the ruling combination of planter, credit merchant, and banker, now supported by the North and its important business institutions. But the revolt foundered on the rocks of racism. Populist leaders like Tom Watson and Ben Tillman introduced a new brand of racist demagogues who plagued the South and the rest of the country as well. Then came the grandfather clauses and the restoration of many restrictions against Blacks that had been set aside in most states during Reconstruction. Between that period and the great wartime exodus, a dark interval of despair and hopelessness intervened, with little prospect of change. No wonder, then, that the trek to the North soon became a torrent that cut deep gullies into the old South and transformed the composition of the Northern laboring class.

For the Blacks, it was not only an escape from ancient bondage, but a transformation of their entire social structure. Those who came North—and also the smaller number who migrated to the few Southern industrial centers—not only changed their position geographically but also changed their class status. From a half-free peasantry, they became a half-free working class. In this new situation, even with its limitations and disadvantages, the Black wage earner had found a place in modern capitalist society, although as a segregated and underprivileged member of the working class as a whole. A new potential was thus created for overcoming the restrictions imposed upon the Black worker and Black people in general.

Communists could not for long remain impervious to the import and potential of such a fundamental change in class composition, in effect the instantaneous emergence of a new sector of the class. The Communists saw the necessity of organizing Black workers together with whites, or, failing that, of setting up independent unions of Black workers as a means of forcing their entry into a resistant labor movement. Calling often for such solidarity, Communists made some valiant efforts in that direction.

Their projection was outward, toward the mass of Negro workers. An official Party delegation, as well as one from the African Blood Brotherhood, took part in the Sanhedrin,<sup>1</sup> the All-Race Assembly, which convened in Chicago in 1924. It was the first significant postwar attempt at a nationwide gathering of all Black civil rights forces. The Party and Brotherhood delegations, with little support among the delegates, sought to commit the assembly to a prolabor position. They failed, since the Assembly was completely dominated by aspiring middle-class and professional elements, aloof from the mass of Black labor. In this climate, the Assembly proved abortive.

The following year, almost on their own and without taking the trouble to find allies, the Communists organized the American Labor Congress in Chicago. The broad, far-reaching resolutions and positions worked out there went well beyond the demands of labor to include the social and political complaints of the Black population. Many of these demands were to become accepted standards and laws in years to come, and the program



was even then recognized as one every Black civil rights group could accept. The young corps of Black organizers of the Congress, drawn mostly from the African Blood Brotherhood, became valuable Communist activists. But this Congress also proved abortive, for it was so narrowly conceived and formed that it turned out to be more like a Black replica of the Communist Party than the beginning of an effective mass organization—as was soon acknowledged by the Communist leaders themselves when they turned to a critical examination of their work.

What was wrong? Why did the Communists, despite their determination to reach the most exploited layers of the working class, have only a handful of Black members toward the end of the decade?<sup>2</sup> Their public pronouncements against lynching and other depredations, their position favoring equality, their stand on civil rights, their urgent calls to organize Black workers into the existing unions—these were to the point and in the right direction, far exceeding their own initial approach. Why no real progress?

In brief, it may be answered that the Communists, even then, still failed to understand in what respect the "Negro question" was more than a pure class question. While discrimination arising from race prejudice could not possibly be ignored, it was seen largely as it applied to the exploitation of Black workers and not as characteristic of attitudes toward the entire Black population. The Communists may have made substantial progress toward overcoming the neglect characteristic of the labor movement, as well as the old Socialist movement, but they had not touched the heart of the problem, nor undertaken the fundamental thinking that was needed to find the way.

Symptomatic of this failing was the ambivalence toward the Garvey movement, by far the biggest mass upsurge among Black Americans since Reconstruction. With all its fantastic fanfare and regalia, and despite its mistaken slogan of "Back to Africa," during its brief heyday in the first half of the 1920s it was an extraordinarily significant expression of the rebellious sentiment of millions of Black Americans, of their hopes and aspirations for some form of greater freedom. It was certainly nationalist, as

then expressed in race terms, in the sense that it sought to establish identity as a distinct people seeking an acknowledged and honored place among the nations.

This the American Communists (with a few notable exceptions) could not grasp, although they were impressed by the sweep of the upsurge and the early prolabor stand of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). They sent delegations to its conventions and offered cooperation on issues shared in common. At the same time, they condemned the "Back to Africa" idea as utopian and a diversion from the real problems faced here at home. They also deplored the gradual departure from the initial prolabor program and anti-imperialist emphasis of the Association, as well as its refusal to condemn the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>3</sup> When Garvey was prosecuted by the federal government on convenient mail-fraud charges, the *Daily Worker*, organ of the Communist Party, charged frame-up and rose to his defense. After his conviction and imprisonment, the UNIA was split by an internal struggle for power, and in 1925 began to disintegrate. Upon serving his prison term, Garvey was deported to Jamaica and his influence waned almost entirely. In the end, the Communists turned completely against the remaining Garvey organizations as obstacles to working-class solidarity and objectives.

Here then was one source of the trouble—the failure to perceive the nationalist quality of the fight for Black freedom as an authentic and potent force in the struggle for social change. While a few saw that potential, the tendency to condemn it as anti-working class prevailed. In general, the Party took a "for or against" position—a confrontation on the basis of the contradictions rather than a recognition that the Black freedom cause had both nationalist and class content, often in conflict as contradictions are bound to be, but nevertheless components of a single movement.

A deeper and more pernicious source can also be discerned, which to a large measure was responsible for the inability to appreciate the nationalist quality. It is a revealing commentary on the prevailing atmosphere in the Party that it was the few Black members who most persistently and constantly raised the

problem of racism as it existed in the organization itself. True, some white leaders did so as well, but the Black Communists were the ones who had to identify the personal indignities they suffered, the lack of consultation with them, and their absence from the higher, directing posts and committees. Many Black comrades who had joined in the earlier years left the Party because of the racism they encountered there and the asperity with which their charges were often met. Others remained to carry on the struggle, taking it into the international gatherings of Communists, where their complaints were better understood and encouraged.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the primary lesson was still to be learned: the Party was also victim to the racism prevailing in the country, the heritage of a long historical development, renewed constantly by the continuing persistence of the old Southern structure. It was bolstered by the expansionism and imperialism of the United States. U.S. wars of conquest, in addition to the African slave trade, were waged against other races. We fought the Indians of our own land, as well as the Indians and their descendants in Mexico and in large parts of Central America and the Caribbean, where there were also many of African descent. We subjugated Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Filipinos, and later fought wars of conquest against Koreans and Vietnamese. For a long time, we excluded Asians from our country and during World War II, we placed Japanese-Americans in concentrations camps under onerous conditions. Thus, great-power imperialist chauvinism, with its arrogance and pretenses of superiority, and the racism born of our own internal history, nurtured each other.

It cannot be said that the Party succumbed to this general ambiance, for it understood early on and fought against the aggressive, interventionist actions of its own government—from opposition to the first World War as imperialist through every armed intervention or threat to the peoples of Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere.

The Party was not immune to prevailing racial attitudes, but the racism that penetrated the Party was transmitted primarily through the working class, from whose struggles it was formed and which is its fundamental base. This is a significant

consideration, not because racism among workers is any less obnoxious than among others, but because it is more susceptible to change. The racism that filtered through the working-class medium to affect the Party and labor militant is deeply class-tinged. To be sure, this did not prevent the exclusion of Blacks from trade unions or other discriminatory practices. But it is also true that prejudices against national minorities of whatever race—and they were probably the majority in the industrial proletariat—are prone to be set aside when they interfere with practical class objectives, such as winning a great strike, as had been demonstrated in many such instances in our labor history. When this happened, it did not mean that national chauvinism and racism in various guises had been eliminated, but it did signify progress in that direction.

More time and much experience would be required to recognize that the particular needs of Black workers, which arise from their late entry into the working class and their underprivileged position in it and in society, must be incorporated in the demands of labor, and that Black workers need to be accorded an equal place in labor organizations. Without such steps, their solidarity on an enduring basis cannot be gained. It would take still more effort, and hard critical thinking, to appreciate the broad strategic advantage of gaining the confidence not only of Black workers but of other Black Americans in order to make real progress toward a new and just social order.

Unfortunately, the past record of militants and the Left, including the Communists, in fighting racism in the labor movement could hardly be considered successful.

It is true that many efforts were made to overcome this obstacle, going back to the years immediately following the Civil War. The leaders of the National Labor Union, formed in 1866 as the first effort at nationwide organization in the modern period, did see the need to organize the Black craft workers and laborers. In the South there were many more Black mechanics and laborers than white in industry, and the Blacks had their own unions among craftsmen and in the tobacco, shipcaulking, construction, and lumber industries, as well as on the docks. Attempts were made both by the National Labor Union and by the Colored National Labor Union, formed in 1869, to bring

about unity. These efforts foundered on the rocks of racism, as expressed in the refusal of Northern white unions (there were few in the South) to admit Blacks as members, and on the political differences arising from opposing outlooks concerning Reconstruction.

The American Marxists of the time, members of the First International, were instrumental in organizing unions among Black workers in the North but failed to recognize the revolutionary implication of Reconstruction. They seemed to ignore entirely the main body of Black toilers in the South in transition from slavery to a half-free form of land tenancy. At times, the Knights of Labor, precursor of the American Federation of Labor, did pay attention to the needs of Black workers, and the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies) in the years before World War I, did include Negro labor in some of its great, but sporadic, organizing drives. The left wing of labor, led first by Socialists and then by Communists, fought the conservative leadership of the American Federation of Labor. They opposed its narrow concept of craft unionism and favored industrial unions and the organization of the vast body of the unorganized. This of necessity included, perhaps overwhelmingly, all ethnic and racial groups. But successes were few and did not result in any significant changes in the movement at a whole. The concerted effort to recruit Black workers did not come until the rise of the new industrial unions of the CIO in the 1930s. By then, the Black workers, more experienced and class conscious, more assertive of their rights, joined on their own in the organization drives. By then, also, Communists and other left militants had learned the essential lesson and become prime movers in the vast undertaking.

Before this could happen, a virtual internal revolution had to take place in the Party. At the height of the inner-Party warfare late in the 1920s, Jay Lovestone, then its leader, declared that the Black peasantry of the South, which fed the stream of Black labor into the North, was "the reserve of reaction."<sup>5</sup> This assertion was a revelation of his outlook and that of many of his supporters. The position revealed ignorance or total disregard of American history, and the nature of the present reality of the

South and of the oppression of Blacks. It also departed from the Leninist concept of the alliance of the working class with the peasantry and with oppressed peoples fighting for freedom. That judgment was indignantly repudiated by the Black comrades and by the opposing faction led by William Z. Foster as an unforgivable concession to reaction and racism.

Nevertheless, by 1928 the Party was making progress in overcoming its difficulties in this respect. Its national nominating convention in May had twenty-four Black delegates. The section of the election platform dealing with Black Americans was comprehensive and may be considered among the most satisfactory statements on the subject until then. It spoke vaguely of the "racial class system," but also declared, "The Communist Party is the party of the liberation of the Negro race from all white oppression." It recognized the unique and semifeudal nature of the Southern agrarian system. A number of Negro candidates were run for local and legislative offices.

Outstanding in the campaign was the tour of the South by William Z. Foster, the presidential candidate of the Party. He had meetings in Louisville, Birmingham, New Orleans, Atlanta, Norfolk, and Richmond. Foster and campaign workers were arrested in Wilmington, Delaware, because publicity for the meeting included the demand for Black equality, a demand that the authorities considered a breach of the peace. These were the first Communist meetings to be held in most of those cities. In an article in the November 1928 *Communist*, Foster urged the elaboration of a Party program for the South and the founding of Party organizations in that region. Significant also were the inclusion of some Black comrades in the top national and regional committees and the appointment in Buffalo of the first Black district organizer.

Obviously, the Party was by now more keenly aware of the need for a fundamental change in its position on the "Negro question." But by itself it seemed unable to accomplish the decisive turn. It needed help from the outside, from associates unaffected by the American race epidemic and with the experience of dealing with movements of a nationalist type. This help came from the Communist International. To understand this

properly, it is necessary to dispense with the mistaken and distorted view that the Communist International was an alien, evil force responsible for all the mistakes and failures of the Communist Party of the United States.<sup>6</sup> Like other political associations, the International did make some serious mistakes, as did the American Party. But among its many benefits was the unique aid it rendered the American Party on the problem that had been plaguing it from the start. The position elaborated through the International on the situation of Black Americans proved not only a great boon to the Party, but was an invaluable contribution in the struggle to overcome racism in the United States as a whole. This may appear at first to be an overdrawn conclusion, but this conclusion stands the test of time.

The position was expounded in two resolutions of the International. One was a consequence of discussion before and during the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928, and the other was a more elaborate statement by its executive body in 1930. These documents were preceded by years of discussion and debate, begun by Lenin as early as 1913<sup>7</sup> and with the participation of American Communist leaders to some extent since 1920, and more intensively during the months of preparation for the Sixth World Congress. Leading American Communists were in the preparatory committees charged with presenting the question in the form of a draft resolution to the Congress as a whole.

This is not the place to record a full history of the question. Suffice it to recall that Lenin included, in a draft resolution on the national and colonial question he presented to the Second World Congress of the Communist International in 1920, the American Negro people among the oppressed *nations* of the world, and continued to press this view in subsequent articles. In an early study he had defined the semislave condition of Black Americans and compared it with the semifeudal situation of Russian peasants after the abolition of serfdom.<sup>8</sup> He had also shown the distinctive characteristics of Southern society based on this historical development, as distinguished from the rest of American society. Now, by 1920, he had concluded, historical development had resulted in the formation of an oppressed

Negro nation within the confines of American society. Negro freedom struggles should be supported by the world Communist movements, he urged, along with the liberation movements of other oppressed peoples.

This stand was disputed from the beginning by American Communists. At the very Congress where it was first proposed, John Reed, delegate of the Communist Labor Party, spoke against it. The Negroes, he held, were part of the American people, though underprivileged, and they wanted to be accorded their rightful place as such, with full equal rights. He rejected nationalist tendencies, as represented by the Garvey movement, as harmful to working-class interests, and urged integration as the ongoing policy, with emphasis upon unity of white and Black workers, although demands for social and political equality were also to be supported.<sup>9</sup> This remained essentially the acknowledged stand of the American Communists, allowing for divergent views on Garvey and variations in the direction of nationalist sentiment, until the beginning of the crucial change in 1928–1930.

Public debate and polemic centered on the most novel and dramatic program demand of the International resolutions: the proposal for self-determination of Black Americans, based on their majority in the Black Belt of the old South, where they had the right to constitute a republic and choose between separation or federation with the federal government of the United States. The theoretical and historical derivation of this proposition and its subsequent history require further discussion elsewhere. Here let it be noted that this demand, common to most national independence struggles, was applied to the striving for Black freedom in the United States as a matter of general policy, without regard to the specific and unique context within which the struggle was taking place. Eventually, it was to be subordinated and dropped entirely. It did have the advantage at the time of centering Communist attention on the Black majority in the South, the region's semifeudal formation as the internal source of racism, and most especially on the oppressive conditions of its Black population.



However, the real and lasting significance of the new position insofar as it affected the policies of the Party rests not so much on the form in which self-determination was projected but on the analysis and interpretation of the Black condition in America.

The prime importance of the new outlook was its recognition of Black Americans not only as racially distinct but as an oppressed national people and their struggle for equality as a freedom movement of a national type. The false dichotomy of nation (or race) versus class was thus overcome, for the interchange as well as the contradictions were seen within the context of the striving for equality and freedom. Effectively disposed of was the old dictum that for so long had hampered labor and radicals—the supposedly pure class nature of the Negro question in the United States—by comprehending its national-type quality as well as its mass base in the working class.

That very comprehension brought into central play the critical distinction between the respective working classes of the oppressing and the oppressed nations. In this situation workers of the former shared in the national chauvinism of their nation and those of the latter distrusted the oppressing nation as a whole, without distinction as to class. In the new understanding, it was the responsibility of the white workers, and particularly the Communists, to combat racism in their own ranks and elsewhere if the distrust of all whites by Blacks was to be mitigated. Black workers, and especially Communists among them, were expected to oppose separatist tendencies, to urge the unity of white and Black workers against the common enemy. In time, this distinction also had a countervailing effect, in encouraging the sense of identity and the consciousness of Blacks as a people—that is, of an identity of a national kind, impelled and accelerated by the very condition of oppression by whites.

The distinction between the working classes of the oppressing and oppressed peoples provided the key to an effective struggle against racism in the American Communist Party and outward to the white working class in particular. A far-seeing, strategic revolutionary concept was associated with this distinction. Equality was not only a humanitarian and just aspiration that had been

shared by abolitionists and latter-day reformers alike. It was required to assure reliable allies in the everyday working-class struggle against capitalist exploitation and social injustice. Beyond that, it was meant to gain a permanent ally along the road of basic social change. Thus, the entire problem of fighting racism in the Party and outward was placed as an axiom of the revolutionary perspective—and not only into the future. Making proclamations about equality would hardly suffice. That axiom had to be imperatively and constantly proved in current action to gain the trust and confidence of the Black ally.

As already stated, the effort to make a change in this direction produced a virtual revolution in the American Communist Party. The Party was surprised, even greatly shocked, by the charge in both International resolutions that it was under racist (“white chauvinist”) influence. Moreover, it faced the pressing demand that it institute a constant fight against racism in its own ranks.

A campaign against racism was the first task seriously undertaken by the Party as a consequence of the new position elaborated at the Sixth Congress. At this point, the undertaking still lacked the theoretical insight that would give it real substance. White members tended to view accusations of racism as a personal insult, as a challenge to their worth as Communists, as a sort of pogrom to split the Party. Black members were emboldened to specify their complaints, and for this were often reprimanded as racist or nationalist, still used as a term of opprobrium. But as a whole, an extensive reeducation took place, as expressions and attitudes common to racist thinking were identified and explained. Such expressions and attitudes, most often used unconsciously and without malice, were resented by Blacks more than outright acts of discrimination and denigration. They revealed insensitivity, a consciousness unaware of the privileges enjoyed as a “superior” race at the expense of Blacks. Black Communists, precisely because of their deeper social understanding, had a keen sense of racial slurs and insults and of their rights, and stood on their dignity as a people on the way to freedom. In any case, the Party was beginning to understand that serious progress would be made in gaining the support of Black Americans not by assigning Black comrades to organize Black

masses, but by the Party as a whole entering the fray as a free association of the races.

It took fully two years to overcome the initial internal resistance and make a meaningful turn in the policy and actions of the Party. The resistance was due not only to the persistent hold of racism in its various forms, although this was the chief obstacle. It was due also to opposition in the organization to the program of self-determination for the Black Belt majority of the South, a problem that was to remain for many years.

This latter problem, however, did not prevent the Party from understanding the crucial importance of the South as the seedbed of racism in the national consciousness. Until then the Party had hardly touched the South, long considered the graveyard of radicals. As already noted, Foster did tour the Southern cities in the 1928 national election campaign, and he proposed sending Communist organizers there. Scattered among Southern cities were a few Party sympathizers, and beached militant seamen carried on some activity in the Gulf ports. A Party branch in Norfolk, Virginia, had to be disbanded because it was so deeply infected by racism that it proved entirely inert.<sup>10</sup>

The first meaningful Communist attempt to organize Southern workers came in 1929, in the hard-fought, bloody strike of textile workers at Gastonia, North Carolina. The workers in the mills were, for the most part, recent migrants from the upcountry, from which they had been ousted by mine operators and by sheer poverty. Blacks were found only as caretakers and general laborers, since they were not employed in the mills as operators. A tacit but firmly followed understanding existed between the planters and the mill owners, who had moved South to exploit cheap and unorganized labor, that the Black labor supply on which the plantations depended would not be recruited by the mills.

Yet the color question did intrude. The Communist-led National Textile Workers Union, which guided the strike, was committed by its policy of industrial unionism to organize all workers within an enterprise, whether operators or laborers, not to speak of the basic commitment of the Communist leaders themselves. There were problems with the white workers, and

even among the Communist organizers, about holding unsegregated meetings of the union. This was the first important experience of Communists with racism in the South. It cannot be said that they had notable success in solving the problem before the strike was broken by force.<sup>11</sup>

However, Gastonia was on the coastal plain, in the recently industrialized area, away from the principal plantation-sharecropping regions of the central plains and the Mississippi Delta. The Party's first serious effort to organize in the Deep South, with its great concentration of Black population, came in early 1930. It was a direct consequence of the internal change in the Party and the new position on the struggle for Black freedom. The decision to proceed with the establishment of Party organization and of an openly Communist periodical in that part of the South confirmed the change in course.

#### NOTES

1. The supreme council of the ancient Hebrew nation was known as the Sanhedrin. That the All-Race Assembly was so designated emphasized the parallel, often drawn at that time, between the oppression of the Negro people and the situation of the Jewish people.

2. In a speech at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928, James W. Ford reported no more than fifty Black members in the CPUSA (*International Press Correspondence*, August 3, 1928, pp. 772–73). At that time the Party may have had no more than 12,000 members.

On the assessment of the American Negro Labor Congress as a replica of the Communist Party, see Otto Huiswood, head of the Negro Department, "Report to the Sixth Communist Party Convention," *Daily Worker*, March 9 and 11, 1929; James Ford and William Wilson (William L. Patterson), "On the Question of the Work of the American Communist Party among Negroes," (Discussion Article), *Die Kommunistische Internationale*, August 29, 1928, pp. 2132–46.

3. The critical support offered by the Party is perhaps best exemplified in its open letter to the Fourth International Convention of the UNIA in August, 1924. One of its central points was to propose a united fight against imperialism in Africa, without mentioning the Garvey slogan of "Back to Africa" (*Daily Worker*, August 5, 1924.) Among the leaders of the Party, Robert Minor and William F. Dunne were outstanding in sensing the nationalist quality of the Black freedom fight. See, for example, Minor, "The Black Ten Million," *Liberator*, February-March, 1924, and "The First Negro Workers Congress," *Workers Monthly*, December 1925; Dunne, "Negroes in American Industry,"

*Workers Monthly*, March-April, 1925; "The Negroes as an Oppressed People," *Workers Monthly*, July, 1925. When the UNIA was being split by internal strife, Minor thought the threatening collapse "would be a calamity to the Negro people and to the working class as a whole" ("Death of a Program," *Workers Monthly*, April, 1926, p. 270).

4. The Congresses of the Communist International and also of the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU) served as tribunals for Black American Communists who attended them as delegates of the U. S. Party. The Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922 was first attended by American Blacks. Otto E. Huiswood, a national organizer of the African Blood Brotherhood, came as part of the official U. S. Party delegation, and Claude McKay, the Black poet and recent coeditor of the *Liberator*, was an invited fraternal delegate. In his speech there, McKay warned that "racism is the greatest difficulty that the Communists of America have still to overcome—the fact that they first have to emancipate themselves from the ideas they entertain towards the Negroes before they can be able to reach the Negroes with any kind of radical program" (*International Press Correspondence*, January 5, 1923, pp. 16–17). That Congress was the first to devote a special session to the Negro and to establish a commission to deal with the Negro question in the United States and other countries. Among many published criticisms of racism in the American Party that may be cited is an article by Lovett Fort-Whiteman, then a student in Moscow and later the national organizer of the American Labor Congress, in the official organ of the Communist International. Writing under the name of James Jackson, he stated that Communist influence among Negroes is weak because "the Communists have not recognized and accepted as a starting base the peculiar social disabilities imposed upon the race" (*Communist International*, November, 1924, pp. 50–54). Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the speech of James W. Ford at the Sixth Comintern Congress, already referred to, as well as the speech of Otto Hall (Jones) at the same congress (*ibid.*, August 8, 1928, pp. 811–12). Also on racism in the CP, see Cyril Briggs, "Our Negro Work," *Communist*, September, 1929. Ford was named a member of the executive committee of the RILU.

5. The phrase appears in his report to the Fifth Party Convention in August, 1927 (*Daily Worker*, September 22, 1927).

6. One may cite, for example, Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party*, Chapel Hill, 1951, long considered in many quarters a standard text on the subject. Though it is well researched and annotated, the text is seriously marred by a simplistic, negative approach to the Communist International and the relation of the CPUSA to it. "Orders from Moscow" were not automatically followed, as the author would have it. The fierce factional fight in the Party, for instance, continued for years, despite pressure from Moscow to stop the "unprincipled" struggle. In his speech, previously cited, at the Sixth World Congress, James W. Ford had this to say: "By investigating the archives of the Comintern, we have discovered that during the last few years no less than 19 resolutions and documents upon the Negro question have been sent by the

Comintern to the American Party, and not a single one of them has been carried into effect or brought before the party.”

7. “Russians and Negroes,” February, 1913 (*Lenin on the United States: Selected Writings by V.I. Lenin*, New York, 1970, pp. 58–59).

8. Lenin, *Capitalism and Agriculture in the United States of America*, *ibid.*, pp. 123–131).

9. See *The Second Congress of the Communist International*, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1920, pp. 151–54.

10. See Irving Keith, “Organizing Virginia,” *Daily Worker*, May 6, 1929.

11. See Cyril Briggs, “The Negro Question in the Southern Textile Strikes,” *Communist*, June, 1929, pp. 324–28, and “Further Notes on the Negro Question in Southern Textile Strikes,” *Communist*, July, 1929, pp. 391–94.

# 2

## We Go South

At a national Party conference in New York in the late spring of 1930, I was asked if I would be interested in editing a weekly Communist paper to be established in the South. At the national conference much attention was devoted to the “Negro question,” a subject under intense discussion throughout the Party. The roots of Black oppression, it was recognized, were deeply embedded in Southern society and the Party had just begun organizing in the Deep South.

Tom Johnson had only recently established headquarters in Birmingham. The year before I had worked with him in Cleveland, where my wife, Isabelle, and I had come from New York to “colonize”—that is, as participants in the campaign, especially among young Communists, to found the Party firmly among the workers in heavy industry. I was stirred by the prospect of participating in this pioneering project and agreed on the spot. Isabelle, with her usual verve and eagerness, was ready to leave immediately.

By the middle of July, having been relieved of my duties as editor of the *Labor Defender*, the monthly magazine of the International Labor Defense,<sup>1</sup> I was ready to leave. Isabelle was to follow as soon as the location of the new paper was determined.

In a general way I knew about the strict segregation in the South, but my first glimpse of the reality proved truly shocking. On the train leaving Washington, all Black passengers were

herded into the first car, next to the steam engine belching smoke into the open windows. I saw the Jim Crow waiting rooms at the stations along the way, the toilets and water fountains marked for the use of each race. It seemed to me impossible to live sanely in such a society, with its array of restraints and prohibitions, announced and unannounced, a labyrinth of humiliation for Blacks and of shame for whites.

Arriving in Birmingham after a sleepless night, I was met at the station by Tom Johnson. The address I had been given was no good, he explained, since it had been raided by the police, and he had found another place to live. He led me to his new furnished room by a circuitous route, to avoid police surveillance. There I found Harry Jackson, a cocky longshoreman from San Francisco, who was responsible for the Trade Union Unity League in the region. That organization had been formed the year before, a transformation of the Trade Union Educational League, composed of militants in opposition to the conservative leaders of the American Federation of Labor. At the founding convention of the TUUL in Cleveland, sixty Black delegates participated, in itself an unprecedented and notable achievement. Besides continuing to work within the established unions, the new League emphasized the organization of industrial unions outside the old structure. One of its newly formed affiliates had led the Gastonia textile strike, and it was now engaged in gathering the nucleus for similar unions in other industries.

I was briefed on the current status. Tom Johnson and Frank Burns, a union organizer, were free on bond on a vagrancy charge. Chief of Detectives Cole told Tom he would be arrested every ten days for vagrancy, and even at shorter intervals, if he did not clear out. Harry Jackson and Joe Carr, organizer for the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Industrial Union, together with Eugene Baxter, a young Black activist, were on appeal from a sentence of one year on the chain gang and \$500 fine on the same charge. Carr and Baxter had been arrested in Ensley, a suburb controlled by the Tennessee Coal and Iron Corporation—a subsidiary of U.S. Steel—while talking with workers on the highway. Jackson had been arrested for vagrancy the same day as he slept in his rented room.



Company guards at the TCI plant in Ensley threatened to shoot the organizers on sight if they were seen on company property. The Ku Klux Klan had made repeated threats against their lives. They were hounded not only by the Birmingham police but also by operatives of the Cooperative Auxiliary Company, an employers' spy agency. Shortly after my meeting with Tom and Harry, the police broke up a demonstration of the unemployed organized by the Communists, ran Tom out of town, and told him he would be in danger of his life if he returned. He returned.

To evade Cole and his men, who dogged their every step, organizers changed their lodgings often and met their contacts surreptitiously. The frequent vagrancy arrests were a form of harassment, since once in court defendants could prove employment and in most cases avoid conviction. In the raids on the lodgings of the organizers, the police hoped to find correspondence and membership lists and addresses. But these were kept elsewhere. It was known to the police that the organizers had guns and these were always confiscated. The possession of weapons was not illegal and most people had guns at home. Their confiscation left the organizers without a means of defense until they could be recovered or replaced. It also deprived them of a source of emergency funds, since guns were pawned when necessary to pay for food or rent.

Tom was of medium height, quick of body and mind, with high cheekbones and a complexion suggestive of Indian ancestry. Soft-spoken and deliberate in speech, he was decisive and determined in action. Tom was a very effective and courageous organizer who inspired admiration and confidence. His only contact among the workers when he arrived in Birmingham a few months before was a white metal worker who received TUUL literature from New York. Through him, Tom met other workers at the Ensley plant of TCI. He recruited the first Communist Party unit at a meeting on a street corner in the Black section of the city. Harry Jackson was no less courageous. Tom, usually calm and collected, and sensitive to the feelings of Blacks, often had to exert a restraining hand on the brusque and impetuous longshoreman.

By the time I arrived, they had already organized a few units among the Blacks. They were struggling with the problem of bringing Southern whites into integrated units of the Party. I realized how complex the problem was when Tom took me along to a Party unit meeting in the home of a Black worker. Six members were present, all employed at the TCI plant. The discussion focused on how to make organizational contact with white workers. Layoffs were increasing, while part-time was becoming the rule and wages were being cut. A few whites, known to all members present, were mentioned by name, and each considered carefully. They had indicated their desire for a union to include both Black and white, unlike the few existing AFL craft bodies. But the Black Communists at the meeting were suspicious and uncertain. They realized full well that the Party ranks should include whites, and that all efforts at industrial organization would have to include all workers. But their distrust of Southern whites, almost universally poisoned by racism, ran very deep. They had no compunction about discussing problems with *Northern* white Communists, but they had not yet known a *Southern* white Communist. The subject was extremely delicate. Too much was at stake—their jobs, the well-being of their families, their very lives. It was decided to continue the discussion at further meetings.

As a precaution, each of us left the meeting place singly and at intervals of a few minutes. As we walked back to our room through the drab unlit streets, Tom told me that he and other white organizers had been in touch with the workers mentioned at the meeting. These workers saw the necessity of organizing Black and white together, but they found it difficult to accept the idea of meeting around the same table with Blacks.

The deepening Depression struck most severely in the South, where even under “normal” conditions living standards for most people were far below the national level. The majority of Southerners were always poverty-stricken, more than elsewhere in the country, and the Blacks more than any. The Great Crisis deepened that poverty almost to the point of no return, and broadened its reach to include many, particularly among whites, who until then had led a comparatively comfortable middle-class life.

The inexorable spread of unemployment into all branches of economic activity was the grim underlying reality. It threatened not only the families it engulfed but the status and wages of those who remained employed. Wages were cut indiscriminately, with the workweek and workday trimmed to suit the employers. Workers seeking to halt this constant deterioration in their conditions knew that they could be displaced easily by the jobless clamoring for any kind of work. Similar conditions prevailed throughout the country, of course. Special to the South was the lower level of economic life at which this took place, and the social and institutional racial restrictions of the region.

This condition was obvious, easily observed as I walked the city streets and was driven around the countryside. In the segregated section of the city, the streets were unpaved, slushy when it rained, the rows of frame houses dilapidated and lacking the simplest repairs. Men idled about, and underfed children, some with the swollen bellies of the starved, played about listlessly. The city itself gave no regular relief of any kind, only maintaining a soup kitchen irregularly. Charity and the Red Cross provided skimpy food rations and occasional used clothing. Indicative of the poverty prevailing in the countryside were ramshackle cabins, often with roofs or entire sides awry, and decayed and often completely collapsed sheds. Only the chain gangs, swollen by the increasing number of Black victims of the Depression, seemed to be working, keeping the main roads in repair. The sight of these prisoners, many convicted of vagrancy or mere misdemeanors, chained at the ankles and under guard of whites with rifles at the ready, bespoke the nature of the Southern system better than any other outward sign.

Wages at twenty-five cents an hour, I soon learned, were common for laborers. At Charleston, South Carolina, six hundred Negro girls and old women were getting four dollars a week (seven dollars for unusually fast workers) in a bagging mill for a ten- to twelve-hour day—before rent for the company house was deducted. At Laurel, Mississippi, workers in the sawmills were paid \$1.50 a day, with rents for the company houses and prices at the company store high. In some textile mill towns in South Carolina, food trucks did not dare enter.<sup>2</sup>

In the TCI-controlled mines near Birmingham wages were as low as two dollars for a ten-hour day, with the workweek cut short. At Jasper, Alabama, no miner was working more than two days a week. At a mine owned by Senator William B. Bankhead, wages were cut from \$3.35 to \$2.88 for a nine-hour day. A worker in one of these mines showed me a two-week pay slip for a grand total of \$12.05 in wages. The deductions for store purchases, commissary, and supplies came to exactly that amount. In the same mines, Negroes were allowed to take out insurance of five hundred dollars compared with one thousand dollars for whites. "Even dead," commented my worker informant, "a white man is worth twice as much as a dead colored man."<sup>3</sup>

Entire steel plants were closing down or going on very short time in the Birmingham suburbs of Ensley, Fairfield, and Bessemer. This led to mass layoffs of thousands not only in the mills but also in the coal mines. At a new overhead pass starting construction in Birmingham, five thousand came seeking jobs, at twenty cents an hour. A demonstration of twenty-five hundred workers in Ensley was dispersed by the police.<sup>4</sup> In Charlotte, North Carolina, a jobless demonstration made modest relief demands: five dollars per person a week or ten dollars per family, no evictions, free meals, and school carfare for the children of the unemployed. It was broken up.<sup>5</sup>

The crisis hit at random—professional and small businessmen as well as workers, small landowners as well as croppers and tenants. By November 1930 tobacco was selling at the average of four cents a pound for the same grade that three weeks before brought twelve cents and the year before eighteen cents at the Winston-Salem, North Carolina, warehouses. Cotton prices were dropping sharply, to reach five cents a pound in 1931, not enough to pay for fertilizer. Small-town banks were closing everywhere, with heavy losses in deposits and personal savings.

Conditions in the turpentine swamps, road gangs, prisons, and penal farms, now severely overcrowded with victims of the crisis, were unbelievably miserable. The following item appeared in the newspapers:

### MEN AND MULES

Montgomery, Ala.—It is more expensive to feed a mule than a Jefferson County convict. The county spent 14½ cents a day for feeding a convict, while it cost them 55 cents a day to feed a mule. John S. Harris, prison board member, prides himself on the fact that by feeding the men worse than mules, he has saved the state \$75,000.

Racism exists in all parts of the country. But it is almost impossible for anyone who has not lived in the Deep South to understand how thoroughly it can permeate every aspect of life and society. Since the 1930s, important inroads have been made against overt racism. In that decade, however, institutionalized segregation was total, as in the school system, housing and all public places. Discrimination against Blacks in jobs, conditions of work, the unions, and the courts was universal. As a Black teenager put it: “The white people live in better houses, have better schools, get better wages, better playgrounds, better shows, better attendants in hospitals, and better churches.”<sup>6</sup>

Civil and political rights were flatly denied. Racism was pernicious in less overt forms as well, a tacit force in all relations between white and Black. The Black had no rights that any white was bound to respect. He had to watch his step, “keep his place,” in no way exceed the limits imposed upon him. The Depression accentuated this central law of Southern life as the competition for jobs or for the means simply to stay alive grew sharper. A grim indicator of this was the frequency of lynchings of Blacks in the South: thirty-four were listed by the American Negro Labor Congress in the first nine months of 1930. In addition were cold-blooded murders of Black croppers by landlords in disputes over division of the crops, and legal lynchings by courts and other branches of “the law.” At the same time, impulses arose among white and Black who shared a common misery to break down the barriers. We tried our best to encourage and abet these impulses.

Liberals in the Northern sense were very few and far between, as least in public. There were some so-called moderates who objected to the most obnoxious racist practices, such as

lynching. Even those who considered themselves radical suffered from the racist disease. Typical was a letter to the Party received from a Winston-Salem, North Carolina, white worker, a former Socialist who had joined the Communist Party. He was now resigning, he informed us, on the ground that the Party paid too much attention to the Blacks. In his view, the Negro could not at present be trusted. "They have to be disciplined for fifty years, since the Negro has just emerged from serfdom," he wrote. First we should sweep the white South, gain political power, and only then grant equality to the Blacks.

We had criticized a Socialist candidate in a Texas election sharply when he expressed the same position. A. F. Von Blon, Socialist candidate for lieutenant governor of Texas in the 1930 elections, wrote A. W. Berry, Black Communist Party candidate for the U.S. Senate: "You know the South well enough to know that it will not be class-conscious enough for at least 50 years to tolerate voting for a colored man."<sup>7</sup> We knew that similar views were common among militant white workers who wanted to cooperate with the Communists.

For us this involved a central principle, upon which we would not compromise. Without the Blacks, we explained, the white workers could not overcome the ravages of the crisis and the ills of capitalism, let alone make real progress. We pointed to the militancy of Black workers in struggle. Only the capitalists and planters gained from disunity of white and Black, we expostulated, and cited instances both historic and contemporary. Racism had its origin with the slavemasters and today served the interests of capitalism, we said. Moreover, and most important, unless white workers set aside race prejudice they would never gain the trust of Black workers in a common struggle.

We asked our readers for comment, and a response came from B. H. Lauderdale of Breckenridge, Texas. He was a former Socialist who went with the Communists in the split of 1919, he informed us. As early as 1922 he visited Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi in an effort to get the Party on the ballot. He admitted "shamefacedly" that Socialist Party ideology lingered too long with him. He wrote:

The time to combat discrimination is now, today, not 50 years hence. The time to defy the mob is when it forms. Every member of the Party has to live up to the principle of full equality.<sup>8</sup>

By and large, the old cultural values that had originated in slavery prevailed. Significant departures, however, could be discerned. A number of Southern liberal sociologists were grouped around *Social Forces*, an academic journal founded in the 1920s by Howard Odum at the University of North Carolina. Known as the Chapel Hill Regionalists, their aim was to modernize the South, bringing it more within the national framework. They saw the South as a colony of Northern capital, but they shunned class analysis of the society and were at best ambiguous about racism. Odum himself considered the Negro inferior, requiring a long process of development to be lifted to the level of the white race.

Others in this group, or influenced by it, were more enlightened on this question and were eventually to challenge the old racist myths. However, their germinal works did not appear until a few years after the period of initial Communist organization in the South. C. Vann Woodward's *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* was published in 1938 (Odum may be considered Woodward's "mentor"). W. J. Cash's *Mind of the South*, a significant break-away from the traditional Southern ideology, was issued in 1941. The path-opening *Black Reconstruction* by W. E. B. Du Bois came in 1935, and was to have considerable influence among the younger Southern historians. Howard K. Beale, then a professor at Chapel Hill, was not to write his often-quoted essay, "Rewriting Reconstruction History," until 1940.<sup>9</sup> He challenged basically the old interpretations of this revolutionary period and his initiative was to bear fruit in a number of subsequent "revisionist" works.

In contrast to this trend originating at Chapel Hill was the Nashville group of Agrarians, whose leading figures were John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate. The group was largely literary, writing in the genteel tradition, hankering after the values of the old slavemaster aristocracy and glorifying feudalism. They opposed industrialization and all its works. Ransom and Tate

later founded the New Criticism, which sought literary values exclusively in structure and texture, devoid of any reference to social forces.

Aside from these rather restricted groups and controversies, the South at the time about which I write was a spiritual desert, with an occasional oasis here and there. Numerous intellectuals who found the atmosphere restrictive escaped by exiling themselves in the North, following the earlier example of George W. Cable, the novelist and critic of racist norms. But others remained. Among them I recall especially Dr. Olive W. Stone, a young professor and dean of women at Huntington College in Montgomery, Alabama. Awarded a research grant from the Tennessee Valley Authority, and with the help of student assistants, she culled the collection of newspapers of the Reconstruction period in the Alabama State Archives. Knowing of my own interest in Southern history, particularly the Reconstruction era, she supplied me with copies of their findings. This whetted my appetite for more, and I began my own researches while still in the South. I was to draw heavily upon the primary data supplied by this research group in my work on Reconstruction.<sup>10</sup>

#### NOTES

1. The International Labor Defense was organized in 1925 to defend "victims of the class war." Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a veteran of great strike struggles led by the Industrial Workers of the World and of mass defense campaigns on behalf of labor leaders (including Tom Mooney-Warren Billings and Sacco-Vanzetti), was named chairman. The ILD provided legal advice, lawyers, and leadership in defense of the many charged under the antisindicalist and sedition laws, and for workers arrested during strikes, unemployed demonstrations, and other radical activities. It also provided financial aid to class-war prisoners and their families. When I was editor of its official organ, the *Labor Defender*, J. Louis Engdahl, an experienced Socialist and then Communist journalist, was its secretary. He died from pneumonia during a speaking tour in Europe on behalf of the Scottsboro Boys. His place was taken by William L. Patterson, the Black Communist leader who came to be known as "Mr. Civil Rights." Under his leadership, the ILD defended the Scottsboro Boys and later Angelo Herndon in court and in great mass campaigns.

2. *Southern Worker*, September 3 and 27, 1930; October 4, 1930.

3. *Southern Worker*, August 30 and October 4, 1930.

4. *Southern Worker*, December 27, 1930.



5. *Southern Worker*, January, 1931.

6. *Southern Worker*, September 27, 1930.

7. *Southern Worker*, December 1, 1930. Berry was to become a leading Communist journalist, writing for the *Daily Worker* and other publications.

8. Both the letter in full and the reply are given in the *Southern Worker*, November 15, 1930. The letter from Lauderdale ran in the *Southern Worker*, December 13, 1930.

9. *American Historical Review*, July, 1940. Professor Beale cited Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and my book, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy* (New York, 1937). He also raised the need for a basic reexamination of the traditional schools.

10. At the time my *Reconstruction* was published, it was thought unwise to credit Dr. Stone since it might create difficulties for her at the college. I now make belated and grateful acknowledgment. A copy of her manuscript can be found in the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina (Archive #4107).



# 3

## Founding the *Southern Worker*

I was only twenty-four years of age, with but few qualifications for the post. I had taught philosophy briefly at a university before joining the Party two years before. By then some of my writings had been published in a national student paper and a prize-winning essay had appeared in the *Nation*. In the Party I had acquired some experience in journalism, first on the staff of the *Daily Worker* for one year and then as editor of the *Labor Defender* for another year. At both publications, staff was so slim that everyone had to learn the printing routines and procedures as well as the editorial side of the job—which was to prove very useful in my new undertaking. I was awed by the responsibilities, but it was not unusual then for young and inexperienced Party members to undertake tasks that appeared beyond their reach.

The grand sum of two hundred dollars had been given me in New York to start the weekly paper, with the promise that more might be available in emergencies. Branches of the International Workers Order, a left fraternal society, and the foreign-language Communist papers published by the federations of foreign-born each pledged a few dollars a month. Party organizations in the South, barely formed and with members living from hand to mouth, could hardly be expected to give financial aid, but they were to assume responsibility for distribution in their areas. The paper was to sell for two cents a copy, it was agreed in our

discussions in Birmingham, with subscriptions at one dollar a year and 50 cents the half year. Quantity orders were to be priced at one cent a copy. With advertising out of the question, the paper's income would amount to but a tiny fraction of the resources required.

I was ordered to remain strictly "underground," to avoid too open association with Party people or participation in any conspicuous way in public activities. These prohibitions proved burdensome and at times impossible to observe, but they were necessary to assure the regular appearance of the paper.

It was agreed that Birmingham was too tightly controlled to launch the paper there, and Atlanta was just as tough. Chattanooga would provide greater freedom of action, it was thought. So I went off to that city, close by the northern border of Georgia and not far from Alabama. Unlike Birmingham, which was held in the iron grip of a U.S. Steel Company subsidiary, no single large industrial corporation dominated Chattanooga. To be sure, Southern-style segregation prevailed, but the history of the city had given it a somewhat freer atmosphere. Distant from the plantation areas and less subject to planter influence, it had played a border role in the Civil War. In more recent times a tradition of trade unionism had grown among both white and Black, although the craft unions remained segregated. In comparison with Deep South cities, Chattanooga appeared almost "Northern."

A printer now had to be found who could be counted on to publish an avowedly Communist paper with regularity and at a reasonable price. A canvass of the small shops in the city was unsuccessful—either proper equipment was lacking, the price was too high, or they seemed untrustworthy. Turning to the environs of the city, I found a small print shop in the town of Rossville, just across the border in Georgia. It occupied a small detached building on the outskirts of town, and printed the official county weekly newspaper. A quick glance around revealed that the shop was suitably equipped to handle our tabloid newspaper.

Facing me at the counter was a tall lanky, taciturn Southerner. I approached the main question cautiously. The bottom had been knocked out of the printing trades by the Depression. The man

before me would be eager for business, especially if it were assured weekly. He showed no visible emotion when I told him it was to be a "labor" paper. It was to be not an official labor paper, I then informed him, but an independent, left-wing paper. His face remained impassive. At my request, he took pencil in hand and figured the basic cost for a four-page tabloid at three thousand copies, and for each additional page and for every thousand copies. He came up with a basic cost of sixty dollars, cash on the barrelhead. I agreed immediately. It was much below any previous estimate. I told him I would stop in the next day with copy for a subscription blank.

That was the first test. The next day, trembling inside, I placed the copy for the blank before him: "SOUTHERN WORKER—Issued Weekly by Communist Party of U.S.A.—White and Colored Workers Unite!" This time he perceptibly blanched. He took it and told me when the blanks would be ready. When I returned, not at the appointed time, but somewhat later, he placed a neatly wrapped package on the counter. The single white linotype operator barely glanced at me. I paid the agreed price and arranged the schedule for the first edition. At the designated time, I arrived with all but the last-minute copy, including headlines and type specifications, which was to be composed immediately. We agreed when I would come to make up the edition.

This was the crucial test, for the material I had left covered the entire range of issues, including a two-column credo putting forth the policies of the paper. When I arrived, he was at the stone, placing the type and headlines helter-skelter into the frames. He was nervous and wanted to get the type out of the way as fast as he could. But I had my own layout for each page, with a designated spot for every story and illustration. I put my dummy layout on the stone, asked him to remove the type he had placed in the frames, and to begin all over again. He did so without a word. We worked together until the four frames were locked and ready for the press. He printed that night. The entire edition, well wrapped, was ready for me to pick up in the morning. I paid him \$60 in cash. From then on, no matter what other

pressing needs we had, the cash arrangements was strictly adhered to.

I soon discovered another reason, entirely unexpected, that assured the security of the printing arrangement. The shop was owned by two partners and had only one paid worker. The second partner did not put in an appearance until a few weeks after our first issue. He was a short, pudgy man whose face turned red when I entered the shop. He did not even greet me, but turned sharply and walked to the rear. On making inquiries in the town, we learned he was the local kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan. At first we were deeply disturbed. On second thought we realized that he was as concerned as we were to conceal the fact his shop printed the *Southern Worker*. Not a single issue was missed during the time I was editor.

Under the law, our paper was legal, but according to Southern practice and mores, it definitely was not. If they became known, the printer and the editors would be subject to serious harassment to force the closing of the paper.

For the first six months we were a three-state operation. The *Southern Worker* was datelined Birmingham, Alabama, its mailing address a box in the Birmingham post office. Its editorial office was in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and its printer in Georgia. Isabelle and I moved often, usually from one furnished room to another, our home serving as the office. Our comrades picked up the mail at the Birmingham box and forwarded it to us. In February 1931, when it became too difficult to avoid surveillance at the original post office, we changed the address to another post office box in Chattanooga.

In the first issue, dated August 16, 1930, our policy was set forth in a full-length, two-column box on page one, headed "What Do We Stand For?" The credo of the paper was stated simply, without flourishes or purple phrases. We were the first Communist paper ever to be published in the South, we announced, established to voice the needs of its white and Black workers and farmers. We would devote ourselves to the fight against "the state of starvation, suffering and persecution to which they have been subjected by the white ruling class." The *Southern Worker* is "neither a 'white' paper nor a 'Negro'

paper,” we wrote. “It is a paper of and for both the white and Black workers and farmers. . . . It stands always, without exception, unflinchingly, for the workers.”

The credo outlined the oppressive conditions and the severity of the Depression as it affected sharecroppers, tenants, and owners of small farms, as well as wage workers. It pledged to fight for their immediate needs, adding that these needs could be fully met only through socialist revolution, citing the Soviet Union as the example.

It emphasized that the Negro was the most oppressed, and proclaimed: “The *Southern Worker* stands unalterably for full social, economic and political equality for the Negro workers and farmers.” It called for “firm and solid organization in militant unions, and, politically, in the Communist Party.” It attacked the “jim-crowded, weak-kneed unions of the American Federation of Labor,” citing recent sellouts of strikes in the South, and the alliance of its local unions with the KKK. It warned against the threat of war and urged the defense of the Soviet Union.

“Persecutions cannot drive us away,” it concluded. “We are here and we will stay.” Workers were asked to write for the paper, to spread and build it. The first page also featured white and Black Communist candidates in the state elections of Alabama, Tennessee, and North Carolina. In the latter state, the Communist candidate for the U.S. Senate ran against Major Bulwinkle, leader of the strikebreaking gang in Gastonia the previous year and prosecutor of the strike leaders.<sup>1</sup>

The editorial statement reflected the rather sectarian policy of the Communist Party at the time and its failure as yet to appreciate the need for a broader view of the Black liberation movement and the problem of adequately confronting racism among white workers. Nevertheless, it was a forthright challenge to the powers dominating the South, who did not take long to respond. The response came in the September 4 issue of the *Manufacturers Record* of Richmond, Virginia, the central voice of Southern industrialists and businessmen.

The editorial was headed “Communism Openly Attacks the South.” Quoting at length from the credo in the first *Southern Worker*, it expressed great alarm at the call for “white and Black

alike” to organize unions together. It evoked first the theme of white supremacy: “The Communist industrial army to subjugate the South is to be composed mostly of Negroes, the agitators plan.” But the hated foreigner is not far behind: “It is against the tremendous American percentage of the South that the great foreign percentage of other sections and of foreign lands is arrayed.” Then, building to the grand climax:

The hitherto guerrilla warfare is announced now as a deliberate invasion by a horde of reds determined to destroy the peace, to wreck the prosperity and to subjugate the Americanism of the American Southern states.<sup>2</sup>

With millions jobless, this lurid diatribe could hardly hit the mark, even with its thick coating of jingoism. But it was not intended for the masses. In language reminiscent of the Bourbon harangues of Reconstruction times, the editorial summoned “the Americanism of the South to repel this communistic invasion and to protect the great American area of the land from pollution and degradation and to defend it against their potential and actual danger.”

A month later Hamilton Fish, congressman from New York, announced his Congressional Committee to Investigate Communism would hold hearings in Chattanooga, Birmingham, Atlanta, and New Orleans. This committee was one of a string of similar inquisitorial bodies of Congress that were to plague the nation for the next five decades.<sup>3</sup> Open hearings began on November 13 at the courthouse in Chattanooga. I sat in the audience.

One of the star witnesses was Paul Aymon, president of the Tennessee AFL. He boasted of his close cooperation with the police to ferret out Reds from the unions. The chief of police in Chattanooga, he testified, had told him he could arrest the entire “central committee” any moment. Another leading witness was Randolph Neal, an erstwhile attorney for the Gastonia strike leaders, who had dismissed him early in the case. In his testimony he attacked the International Labor Defense as a “red” organization. Representative Nelson of Maine, a Committee member, asked if he thought it lawful to deport foreign-born militants, bar Russians from the country, and deny use of the mails



to Communist papers. His reply was an unconditional “yes.” When asked his opinion, he favored the suppression of the Communist Party, even lacking overt action against the government, since its writings and speeches could be interpreted as such.

Of special interest to me was Hamilton Fish’s interrogation of the police chief and the head of detectives concerning the *Southern Worker*. Waving a copy of the paper, Fish wanted to know if they had any knowledge of where it was printed and of its editor. They could not enlighten him. They ventured guesses that it might be printed in Birmingham or Atlanta, even in the North, but they were certain it was not printed in the Chattanooga area. About the editor they knew nothing. Nor did they supply information about the local Party, although it was active in the city and environs. On the eve of Fish’s arrival, Mayor Bass of Chattanooga had boasted that the “Committee would have no organizations to probe.” The police chief obviously wanted to maintain that image.

Fish found a more convivial reception in Birmingham. Chief of Police McDuff urged Congress to adopt the same tactics he had been using. The Department of Justice, he suggested, should be empowered to send its agents to spy upon the Communist Party and supply the information to the police, who would then take the necessary measures. McDuff turned over to the Committee the literature and documents his force had confiscated in raids on the organizer’s rooms. He estimated there were two to three thousand Communists and their supporters in Birmingham alone.

L. N. Shannon, vice president of Stockham Pipe Company—where a Communist shop unit was organizing against layoffs and wage cuts—told of his system of spying in the plant which, he complained, had little success in stopping the agitation. Another witness, whose name was withheld, said he was employed by Governor Bibb Graves of Alabama to spy on the Communists. He estimated there were eight thousand members and sympathizers of the Communist Party in the state. J. C. Murphy, an AFL official, testified as a member of the KKK. He told of the spying activity of his group and submitted a list of fifty people who he claimed were connected with the Communist Party.

The police were hard put to explain why they could supply no information about the *Southern Worker*, which carried a Birmingham date line and address. They had searched and watched every print shop in the area and were certain, they assured the committee, it was printed elsewhere.

The only “cooperative” Negro witness to appear in the series of hearings was in Atlanta. The Black witness was expected to provide the sensation the Committee needed, but it proved a fiasco. R. C. Miller was brought to the hearing under police protection. He said he had been a delegate to a state convention of the Party in Rome, Georgia, and to a regional gathering in Charlotte, North Carolina. But his memory failed him entirely under questioning. He could give no information about the Party or its organizers; he left his “secrets” at home, he said. Besides, he continued, the “secrets” of the Party are “borne in the bosom of the Negroes.” Indeed, he asserted, the Blacks want better wages and living conditions. For these reasons, he said, there were 100,000 Black Communists in the South. Fish hastened to dismiss him. The only apparent gain for the Committee in the Atlanta hearings was a present from the city prosecutor’s office of posters, placards, and pamphlets gathered by the police in the case of the Atlanta Six.<sup>4</sup>

I changed names several times, but James Bigelow remained the standby. This proved somewhat awkward since there was a famous local baseball player by that name, and I was asked if I was related to him. On the paper I was listed as “Jim Allen, Managing Editor,” and I wrote a column under that name entitled “The Reds Say.” This was the origin of the name by which I came to be known. It was chosen to achieve anonymity in a profusion of Jim Allens. When I submitted my first pamphlet, *The American Negro*, for publication under my natal name of Sol Auerbach, the head of International Publishers, Alexander Trachtenberg, demurred. He insisted on “Jim Allen,” for, he held, as a name associated with the *Southern Worker* it would give the pamphlet greater authority. We finally agreed on “James S. Allen” to establish an identity of a sort. And so it remained.

The paper was prepared from wherever we happened to live. We moved often from one furnished lodging to another, packing our "office" and few personal possessions in the old Dodge automobile we managed to acquire. The office consisted of a portable typewriter and one or two cardboard boxes of files and books. Isabelle shared many editorial tasks with me, besides taking care of circulation and correspondence. She wrote articles occasionally under her pen name of Helen Marcy, and helped cull the newspapers, rewriting suitable news items. Her radiant personality was informed by a keen intelligence and the capacity to learn quickly. She mastered easily the daily tasks of the paper and of our simple household combined. In the circumstances in which we worked, I learned to appreciate even more deeply her self-reliance and courage. Hardships made her only more determined, and even seemed to nourish her good spirits.

An incident characteristic of her remains bright in my memory. Once I had to go off for a week to a national Party meeting in New York, leaving Isabelle with the material for the next issue of the paper to see through the press. I also warned her not to use the old Dodge that I left in a garage, for she had barely learned how to drive. But during my absence a need arose to transport a large bundle of *Southern Workers*. She took the car and parked it in the center of town, leaving in it the newspapers and some bags of food—as well as the key—while doing some further shopping. When she returned the car was gone. She could have died a thousand deaths, she told me, for the car was indispensable for trips to the out-of-town printer and would be almost impossible to replace. After spending a sleepless night, she returned forlorn to the spot she had left the car, and there it was, none the worse for wear, but the food and some of the papers were gone. Was it not obvious, she explained to me, that whoever took it was hungry but when he saw the *Southern Worker* he decided to return the car, keeping some copies of the paper for himself and his friend? The near disaster had turned into a victory.

We could barely scrape together enough money to pay the printer, which had to be done weekly without fail. The monthly

pledges of the International Workers Order lodges and foreign-language press were met irregularly and sometimes not at all. From time to time, when things became really desperate, the hard-pressed national Party office would send enough to pay for a few issues. Our own financial appeals in the paper produced little from our poverty-stricken readers. As stray copies of the paper reached other regions of the country, donations came from more affluent readers. A group of invalids at a sanatorium in Spivak, Colorado, donated regularly from collections among themselves. Contributions of small amounts came from as far away as Ontario. Income from sales of the paper was puny. Few could afford even our half-yearly subscription. We offered a three-month subscription at 25 cents, our "Hard Times Offer," which did not even pay for postage, since the paper was sent in closed, first-class envelopes to protect the subscriber. Payments for bundle orders, the principal means of distribution, were long delayed, sometimes not sent in at all.

We depended largely on family and friends for living expenses. Our families helped by sending packages of food, tobacco, and clothing. Fraternal IWO comrades would take turns inviting us to dinner. At grocery stores owned by them we could obtain supplies free or on credit at very low prices, but we did so only when we were in very dire straits. The local Party and TUUL organizers were no better off. When we received a food package from home, we invited them to share it. Their sure haven was Sam Borenstein, who had a small grocery store in a racially mixed neighborhood. Without a family of his own, he fed and, when necessary, lodged them as if they were his kin. The Party section committee often met in the room in the back of the store that served as kitchen and sitting room. It was a convenient meeting place since the room was entered from the store and both Black and white members could come unnoticed.

Sam's partner and butcher, Zipper, lived there also. His great passion was the Civil War in China, news of which he followed avidly in the daily papers. He marked with tiny red flags the latest positions of the Red Army on a large map of China posted on the wall. The Red Army was fighting in south-central China

against the repeated attempts of Chiang Kai-shek to encircle them. Some years later the Red Army broke out of the blockade to make its famous long march to Yen-an.

The minimum printing of the *Southern Worker* was three thousand copies. From time to time, the paper would be enlarged to six pages, with a printing of ten or fifteen thousand for special campaigns, such as the Scottsboro case, the Tallapoosa sharecroppers, or the strike of the Harlan, Kentucky, miners. Funds for these enlarged editions were raised in advance by the Party and associated organizations in the South, with some help from the North. We had only a few hundred mail subscribers. ("It suits my complexion," wrote a new reader.) The paper was distributed by hand, practically the entire edition as it came off the press going out in regular bundle orders. The main centers were Birmingham, Chattanooga, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Houston; the textile towns of Elizabeton, Tennessee; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Danville, Virginia; the coal county of Harlan, Kentucky, and the ports of Houston and Galveston, Texas. From these centers it reached into small rural and industrial towns. In New Orleans, for example, Luke Jackman, literature agent for the Marine Workers Industrial Union, was jailed twice and each time fined \$100 for selling the paper on the streets. (He was successfully defended by the I.L.D.) Often mere possession of the paper was considered sufficient cause for persecution.

Public distribution was hazardous. In the cities, street distributors were subject to physical attack and arrest. In Birmingham, where police raids on private homes were common, finding a copy of the paper could lead to beatings, even shootings, or a "vagrancy" arrest. Several miners in Harlan County were black-listed when found with a copy; some were arrested and charged with criminal syndicalism. Al W. McBride, a seaman and member of the Marine Industrial Workers Union, traveled the Gulf ports to distribute the paper, and often acted as a correspondent. He wore a shirt with the hammer and sickle emblazoned on front and back. But he was the quixotic exception. (Fortunately, very few in the South knew the meaning of the emblem.)

For the most part, clandestine methods had to be developed, especially in rural areas and company towns. In Tallapoosa

County, Alabama, for example, the rural mailmen were in cahoots with the planters and credit merchants, so the *Southern Worker* was brought in from Birmingham by car. Small bundles were left for the croppers to pick up at designated spots, perhaps an old barn or the hollow of a conveniently situated tree.

In the cities the most reliable method was hand-to-hand delivery, usually at night, to homes; regular routes were set up by the Party. The paper was also distributed secretly in the shops, much to the alarm of the bosses, who placed guards to prevent the distribution and called meetings of the workers to warn them against sinister influences. In Black sections of the city, a single copy would often serve an entire block, to be passed from hand to hand or read aloud to a group. In a somewhat freer atmosphere, a *Southern Worker* Reading and Writing Club held weekly sessions in the Union Hall in Chattanooga. A Negro minister in Memphis opened a campaign to raise \$500 to combat the Communist propaganda of the paper.

In addition to my weekly column, I wrote editorials, the leading news stories, and special articles as needed. Tom Johnson and other Party organizers occasionally contributed articles, and often letters and news items from their areas. We had some special features as well. "Lynch Law at Work," a column of news items gathered from the Southern press, ran regularly every week. For a number of issues, we published an autobiography written for us by a Black farm woman, recounting her family history as sharecroppers and small farm owners. Our most constant and best news contacts were in areas where the Party had established district organizations, as in the Alabama-Tennessee-Georgia District 17 and in the Carolinas-Virginia District 16. But we also developed reliable connections elsewhere, as in the Kentucky coal fields, among the seamen of the Marine Workers Industrial Union in the Gulf ports, and in other places like New Orleans and Tampa among the tobacco workers.

From week to week, the *Southern Worker* gave a vivid, first-hand account of the devastation caused by the Great Crisis. This was done largely in published correspondence from its readers. At least one page in every issue was devoted to letters "From the Mills, Mines and Farms." Often newsworthy letters would

appear on page one, sometimes even as the lead story. They told in a few words, sometimes barely literate, of life on the verge of starvation. Letters from rural areas, often scribbled on a piece of sack or crumpled wrapping paper, told of crops confiscated without accounting by landowner and merchant, of skimpy food allowances, of evictions from land worked by cropper, tenant, or small landowner for decades, of entire families starving and sick. Others related personal incidents of insult and injury to Blacks, of murder by the “law,” of discrimination in the miserly relief granted by the Red Cross or some other charity. Steel and metal workers, as well as coal miners, in the Birmingham area wrote about the layoffs, wage-cuts, and police surveillance. Miners and their wives described industrial peonage in Harlan County, Kentucky. From the textile towns of Charlotte, North Carolina; Greenville, South Carolina; Danville, Virginia; and Elizabethton, Tennessee, came a constant flow of letters about the stretch-out system, layoffs, part-time, the turning off of water and utilities, evictions from company houses, pellagra-inducing diets, lack of clothes and fuel. Seamen on the “beach”—at Houston, Galveston, Mobile, Tampa—related their stories of want and persecution as vagrants.

Our first anniversary issue, August 22, 1931, printed greetings from Party organizations in the South; from sharecroppers of Sumter County, South Carolina; the National Miners Union in Harlan; and the Marine Workers Industrial Union of Galveston and New Orleans. We were also greeted by the *Daily Worker* and the Downtown Unemployed Council of New York. The Central Committee of the Party recalled the “many accomplishments” of the paper as “militant leader and organizer.” Others greeted us as “our fearless little paper.” In the name of its two hundred members, the Marine Workers Industrial Union in Galveston wrote:

The SW is part of our very lives; it reflects our sentiments; it shows us ourselves as we are and pictures the goal for which we are fighting. It enters into all our struggles and with the patience of a comrade it points out our mistakes.

The SW is humanly imperfect. It makes no pretense of being intellectual but is plainly and simply a WORKER, the same as we.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

1. *Southern Worker*, vol. 1, no. 1, August 16, 1930. A bound file of the *Southern Worker*, 1930–31, almost complete, is in the author's possession. Other files may be found at the New York Public Library, University of Texas (Austin), Howard University Library, and the U. S. Agricultural Library, Washington, D.C., the holdings of which are listed in the Serial Guide. In addition, a quite complete file of the first two years is at the Tamiment Library of the Bobst Library at New York University. It should be noted that in his generally well-researched book, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge, 1969), Professor Dan T. Carter seems to be unaware of the existence of the *Southern Worker* as a weekly appearing regularly in 1930 and 1931, referring vaguely to a paper by that name "sporadically published" (pp. 121, 151). If he had consulted the files of that weekly, he might have written a more authentic account of the Scottsboro movement in the South.

2. An editorial reply appears in the *Southern Worker*, September 13, 1930.

3. It had been preceded by the Committee of the House, established in 1931 and also headed by Fish. It was followed by the House Committee of 1935, headed by John W. McCormack of Massachusetts. The Dies Committee (House Un-American Activities Committee, HUAC) was named in 1938, the same year the Smith Act was passed, under which many Communist leaders were to be jailed during the McCarthy-Cold War period after World War II.

4. The hearings in the three cities are summarized in a news account and in an editorial in the *Southern Worker*, November 22, 1930.

5. *Southern Worker*, August 22, 1931.



# 4

## The Beginning of Communist Organization

Aside from isolated and ineffective Communist groups in a few spots, Party organization in the South did not begin seriously until early in 1930. After the defeat of the Gastonia strike, elements of some Party units remained in the Carolinas and an effort was made to organize in Atlanta. That attempt was halted for a time by the arrest of these pioneers, who became known as the “Atlanta Six.”<sup>1</sup> Attempting to organize the unemployed, they were charged with “insurrection” under an old slightly altered slave law, which carried the death penalty, and under which Angelo Herndon was later arrested. They were kept in jail for almost two months, until bailed out by the ILD. The charges against them were eventually dropped.

The principal effort to reach into the Deep South began with the first Party organizations in Birmingham in January 1930. Birmingham was chosen as the center of the new Party District 17 to comprise Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee, because it was the only heavy industrial concentration in the region. It had a sizable steel industry, run by the Tennessee Iron and Coal Company, a subsidiary of U.S. Steel. Coal mines in the area were controlled by the same company. Other metal-working and industrial enterprises were located in the city. Its working class

was almost evenly white and Black. The city was on the fringe of the Alabama Black Belt to the South, from which many of its workers had come. We placed our main reliance on the working class as the leading force for social change and Birmingham seemed a natural choice as the most appropriate center.

By ordinary standards, the Party itself was very small. In August 1930 it probably had no more than fifty members in Birmingham, with another twenty or so in Chattanooga. In that month Party membership almost doubled when forty-one (twenty white) new members were recruited in Birmingham. New units were set up in three metal shops, in a mine, and on a cotton plantation in Whitney, Alabama, about forty miles north of Birmingham, not in the Black Belt area. For the workers of the U.S. Pipe Company in Birmingham, the Party published a shop paper, *Red Hammer*, which reported on conditions there and urged union organization. In Chattanooga twenty new members were recruited, of whom seventeen were Black. A steel “nucleus” and a unit of tunnel workers were established.<sup>2</sup> The first training school for Southern organizers was started.

The Party also organized children into Pioneer groups: one of thirty-five children in Chattanooga, and another in Charlotte, North Carolina. Both included child laborers. This is not surprising when it is considered that, according to the U.S. Census of 1930, Alabama had 31,565 child workers aged 10 to 13, and 31,837 aged 14 to 15. The Census did not report child labor under 10 years of age.

As small as the Party organization was, it was a significant beginning. We had made an important start in bringing both white and Black workers into the Party. Units were of two kinds—the neighborhood branch and the shop unit—and in this early effort not all basic units were fully integrated. Since neighborhoods were completely segregated, the branches formed there were either white or Black. They sent delegates to combined section and district meetings, however, and we always tried to see to it that a white Party organizer attended meetings of a branch in the Black neighborhood, and a Negro representative attended a branch in the white section of the city.

Many members were in shop units—that is, in Party groups formed according to the place of work. We preferred this type of organization, because the Party could be engaged directly in the problems and struggles of the workers. Here we insisted upon the principle of fully integrated organization. It was not easy, for we had to overcome somehow the residual prejudice among the whites; to the extent that we were able to do this, the distrust of the whites by the Blacks could be minimized. Security also had to be considered, because any conspicuous gathering of white and Black together aroused the suspicion of the police. Much depended upon finding the suitable meeting place where such gatherings would not attract undue attention. This situation began to change gradually for the better as white and Black participated in joint mass actions and as security measures were improved.

We insisted upon completely integrated meetings of all organizations in which the Party was involved, such as the Unemployed Councils, locals of the industrial unions of the TUUL, and ILD groups. But in time we also came to realize that Blacks wanted to carry on their activities within their own organizations as well, such as the churches and the fraternal orders. The importance of the church, particularly, as a channel for Black activity became quite obvious in the Scottsboro defense campaign, about which more later.

At this point we did not expect an influx of members, as was shown by the quotas set for a three-month “Lenin Recruiting Drive” beginning in January 1931. During this period Birmingham was expected to recruit fifty-five new members, of whom twenty-two were to be white, and set up nine new shop units. Chattanooga was to obtain thirty-six new members, among them eleven whites, and found two new shop units. Two new areas were to be opened: Atlanta, with eighteen recruits, five white, and two shop units; Elizabethton, Tennessee, a synthetic-textile center near Chattanooga, with thirty-nine members about evenly divided between white and Black, and two shop units. In the farm area of the Alabama Black Belt, the goal was thirty members.<sup>3</sup>

In the states of North and South Carolina and Virginia (CP District 16), the Party was based largely in the textile centers, and consisted mostly of white workers, although it sought to increase its Black membership. In a drive for new members to run from December 15 to February 4, the quotas were set for three centers of activity. Charlotte, North Carolina, was to recruit sixty Black and forty white members, of whom thirty were to be women; Danville, Virginia, the seat of a hard-fought textile strike in which troops were called out, was expected to gain seventy-five new white members and twenty-five Black, of whom thirty were to be women; and Greenville, South Carolina, the scene of repeated demonstrations by the unemployed usually broken up by the police and the KKK, had a quota of twenty-five white and fifteen Black, of whom ten were to be women.<sup>4</sup> The Party had some organization also in Winston-Salem, Gastonia, and Bessemer City, North Carolina; in Charleston, South Carolina; and in Richmond and Norfolk, Virginia. Some Southern leaders of the Gastonia strike of 1929, among them Dewey Martin and W. G. Brinkley, remained active for some time as organizers of the National Textile Workers Union, and also were on the Communist ticket in the elections of 1930.

Actually, the expectations indicated by the quotas cited above proved too modest. For recruitment was accelerated significantly after March 1931 by the impact of the Scottsboro case, the sharecroppers' struggle in Tallapoosa County, Alabama, and the miners' strikes in Harlan County, Kentucky, as well as the mounting movement of the unemployed.

The Party also carried on activity in other places not formally attached to a district organization. In Dallas, Texas, for example, two Communist organizers of a demonstration of the unemployed were arrested, beaten in jail, released to an armed gang that drove them out of town, where they were beaten again and left naked in a desolate spot. Fortunately, they were found by nearby Black farmers and nursed by them until they were able to travel.<sup>5</sup> New Orleans was a constant field of battle between organizers of the Marine Workers Industrial Union (an affiliate of the TUUL) and the authorities. Angelo Herndon and Eugene Braxton were arrested there in May 1931 while organizing on the

waterfront. The TUUL opened a union hall in Houston in November 1930. And as already mentioned, the seamen of the MWIU were active among the unemployed in the Gulf ports. There was also a strong core of militants among the tobacco workers of Ybor City in Tampa, Florida.

A good estimate of mid-1931 Party membership in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia would be below five hundred, with perhaps another hundred in Louisiana, Kentucky, and Texas. It took great courage to join the Party in the South. Henry Fuller, a descendant of the first governor of Tennessee, was kept in jail over a weekend when he inquired at police headquarters in Memphis for the address of the Communist Party. Not many would be that foolhardy.

The Party emphasized the fight for unemployment relief and social insurance, militant industrial unionism, and the organization of the sharecroppers, other farm tenants, and small landowners. A central theme in all these endeavors was the need to fight Jim Crow and racism in order to meet even minimum needs.

Strange as it may seem, the Party placed little emphasis in its agitation on the goal of Black self-determination. It may have been explained as an ultimate program at educational sessions of the Party units, or at training classes held from time to time. During a trip to the South Carolina Black Belt, I did describe to a small gathering of sharecroppers the extent of the area of Black majority in the South, and the objective of full self-government there. Those present knew that Blacks were in the majority not only in their own area but also toward the south into Georgia. But few realized that the Black Belt stretched from Virginia southward well into Georgia, across the southern tier of states as far as Texas and into Arkansas. But self-determination evoked hardly any response there. The croppers were most concerned with how they were going to get through the winter. I can only conjecture that they probably felt Black self-government was utopian and, in any case, far off. It is noteworthy that not a word was said about self-determination in the credo of the *Southern Worker*. Three articles on that question by Tom Johnson did appear in the paper, and it was mentioned in the occasional literature of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights. Otherwise

practically no mention was made of the slogan. Obviously, this was not then considered a suitable agitational theme in the daily work of the Party, at least in the South.

As small as the Party was, it initiated activity over a wide field. Many non-Party militants participated in the Unemployed Councils, in the labor groups organized by the unions of the TUUL, and in the campaigns of the International Labor Defense. The ILD had a number of branches in southern cities. Lowell Wakefield was the ILD regional representative for the South, with headquarters in Chattanooga, early in the Scottsboro defense movement, and his wife, Jessie, represented the ILD in Harlan County. Jennie Cooper, an old friend from my home town of Philadelphia, undertook the defense of the Atlanta Six and set up branches of the organization in the Carolinas. A branch in Charlotte was named Ella May, after Ella May Wiggins, who was shot and killed by a mill guard while on the way to a union meeting during the Gastonia strike. A mill worker with nine children, she was loved as a folksinger, composing union songs to old melodies.

Some beginnings were made in the organization of a Young Communist League by Harris Gilbert, a Black Communist, and Dave Doran, who was killed as a volunteer on the Republican side during the civil war in Spain. There were groups in Birmingham and Atlanta, and the YCL held the first-ever integrated dance in Charlotte. It held open-air meetings there at which self-defense measures were adopted to resist attacks by the KKK.

The Party was able to hold some unsegregated public meetings. A Lenin Memorial Meeting was held at Union Hall in Chattanooga in January 1931, with 150 whites and Blacks in attendance. A similar meeting was successfully held in Atlanta. May Day 1931 was celebrated in small unsegregated gatherings in Birmingham, Chattanooga, Charlotte, Atlanta, and New Orleans, probably for the first time in the South. A march in Greenville, South Carolina, was broken up by the police and its organizer put on the chain gain.

The Party ran Black and white candidates in the 1930 state elections. In Alabama a Negro was nominated for governor and a white for senator; in Tennessee a white for governor and a Black

for senator; in North Carolina three white textile workers ran—one for the Senate and two for the House; in Virginia, a Black for the Senate and two whites for the House; in Texas, whites for lieutenant governor and senator, and a Negro for the Senate also. The severe restrictions that later kept minority parties off the ballot in many states had not yet at that time been imposed.

The highest votes were recorded in Tennessee. As we sat in Sam Borenstein's back room listening to the returns on the radio, we were astounded by the Communist vote, particularly from remote areas of the state. Sherman Bell, the Black Communist candidate for senator, registered by official count 3,382 votes, Borenstein for governor 1,296 votes. The Party was able to campaign only in Chattanooga, and only in a limited way. Yet well over half the votes came from outside that city. We considered this a significant expression of radical discontent.

In the city elections in Chattanooga in 1931, the Party ran J. F. Ledford, a white blacksmith, for mayor, and two Blacks—Albert Cassidy for commissioner and Mack Coads for judge. Their platform called for immediate cash relief for the jobless, abolition of the chain gang with all city work done by free labor at \$15 a week, repeal of the poll tax, release of all arrested at unemployed demonstrations, no evictions, and coal and free transportation for the jobless. Election rallies were dispersed by the police. The Communist line was omitted on the sample ballot published in the press. Coads was arrested, charged with vagrancy and loitering, and kept in jail until after the elections. On the eve of the vote, the press and radio spread false rumors that he had renounced the Communist Party. With no election watchers permitted, he was conceded 128 votes, Cassidy 118 and Leford 99. We were certain the Communist vote actually cast was several times higher.

An All-Southern Anti-lynching Conference was held in Chattanooga, November 9, 1930, under the auspices of the American Negro Labor Congress. Fifty-four delegates, of whom nineteen were white, came from three states, representing fourteen organizations and three churches. In contrast to the commissions established at different times by church groups and moderates to

“investigate” lynching, the Conference called for organized defense and raised the cry, “Death Penalty for Lynchers.” Nine delegates were appointed to a national convention in St. Louis where the ANLC united with others to form the League of Struggle for Negro Rights.<sup>6</sup> Tom Johnson spoke on the Communist self-determination program, and it was endorsed by the Conference.

A similar conference had met in Charlotte on a regional basis October 27, with fifteen Negro and twenty-five white delegates, mostly from the textile union. Delegates were elected to the national convention in St. Louis. The self-determination slogan was also included in its program.

The most impressive joint actions by white and Black took place in the struggle for unemployment relief, led by the Unemployed Councils of the TUUL. In Chattanooga the first Council was organized in August 1930, with about thirty members, four of whom were white. One of the first large jobless demonstrations occurred in Charlotte on September 1, 1930, when some three thousand workers demanded “Work or Wages,” and withstood constant police harassment.<sup>7</sup> Councils were organized in cities where the Party and the TUUL were active. They led delegations to city councils and the Red Cross to obtain food and clothing allotments, since these were the only agencies providing any emergency relief. They fought evictions by gathering neighbors to put the furniture back, and turned on water and utilities when these were shut off. Many arrested as a result of such actions were defended by the ILLD.

A sense of the spirit animating the Unemployed Councils in the fight-back against hunger and eviction may be gathered from the speech of Mrs. Fanny Herbert at the City Council of Greenville, South Carolina, on behalf of a jobless delegation asking for relief.

I was born in this town. I’ve lived here all my life, I’ve worked in every cotton mill in Greenville since I was eight years old and I want to tell you that men working in these mills today make as little now as I did then.

No woman on seven and eight dollars a week can pay rent and buy food and fuel for her family. Men and



women who tramp for six days a week between forty-eight looms you've stretched them out to [the City Council included the top executives of two mills in town], are going to break down. There will be ten on starvation a year from now for every one that is today. We are starving, those who work and those that don't work. Those who eat, eat fatback and beans.

And we don't want charity. There are thousands of us that want jobs. Every day when I tramp the streets looking for work they tell me, "Sorry, come back later." I hate that word "sorry"! And when I die at least Christ won't say, "Sorry, come back Monday."

When you gentlemen in your nice clothes sit down at your table and have plenty to eat, I wonder if you ever think of the half-naked children of Greenville who have nothing to eat. Something must be done and done quickly.<sup>8</sup>

The Unemployed Council of Greenville obtained some food relief from the Red Cross for starving families and also from local merchants by simply taking it. Retaliation was organized through the KKK, which marched in full regalia into the union hall to prevent a meeting of the Council. And the mayor of West Greenville called the KKK into his office when a delegation of the unemployed came to demand relief. Nevertheless, five new neighborhood Unemployed Councils were organized in that town, with several hundred members.<sup>9</sup>

Simultaneous unemployed demonstrations took place in Southern cities and towns about February 10, 1931, as well as in the rest of the country, in support of a delegation to Congress to present a petition with over a million signatures for a Federal Unemployment Insurance bill. In Charlotte, in defiance of KKK threats, over seven hundred took part in a march on City Hall to demand relief.

I witnessed the demonstration on February 10 in Chattanooga of some twenty-five hundred, one of the largest outdoor meetings ever held there. It was on a Tuesday morning at Main and Market Streets, a central intersection. White and Black, including women and children, converged from all directions around

the crude wooden platform that had been set up for the occasion. The purpose of the meeting, well publicized in advance, was to form a committee to present Mayor Bass with demands for relief at \$12.50 per week for a family, reduction in rents, and an end to evictions. Practically the entire city and county police force had been mobilized, and members of the Chamber of Commerce were deputized.

The meeting was not even allowed to start. First Hy Gordon, TUUL organizer, then Mary Dalton, the local Communist organizer, were pulled off the stand by the police as they tried to speak, and arrested. Elizabeth (Elsa) Lawson, Party organizer in Elizabethton and an imposing figure, mounted the stand. Sensing the growing anger of the crowd, the police captain asked her politely to step down. She insisted on speaking and was also arrested. As this point, with cries of "On to City Hall," the crowd turned to march in that direction. They were blocked by a solid wall of police who proceeded to attack and disperse them.

I joined a few score demonstrators as they came into the Union Hall on Main Street, headquarters of the TUUL and Unemployed Council. Here, uninhibited, Black and white sat side by side on the benches, listening to speakers and discussing next steps. By this time, common action of Black and white on issues vital to both was not an unusual experience in our work. We had learned that one could discuss Black-white unity on general grounds with white workers for hours and not get very far. But common action on matters that deeply concerned both tended to override bias. Not that racism was eradicated by a single demonstration—far from it. But segregation at meetings, even separate white and Black organization, could be set aside.

The turnout for the demonstration reflected the plight of the jobless in the city. More than half the Blacks were without work, and unemployment among the whites was almost as great. The single city soup station, known as the "slop kitchen," was closed from time to time on the ground that "things were getting better." But after the demonstration, the mayor had bread handed out to twelve thousand needy families. City relief jobs at fifteen cents an hour for work on the roads were also offered. Food vouchers of one dollar for a family of five were issued. The mayor

promised used shoes for all who needed them. Children trudged barefooted in the midst of winter from all parts of the city to get them. There were hardly enough for half.

Gordon, Dalton, and Lawson were charged with inciting to riot, vagrancy, and blocking traffic. The charge of "lewdness" was added against Gordon and Dalton. Under high bail, they were kept in jail for two months pending trial. They were defended by George W. ("General") Chamlee, a descendant of a decorated Confederate officer. He owed the title "General" to his previous service as the elected attorney general of Hamilton County, where Chattanooga is situated. General Chamlee was an anachronism in the South of those days. He had a traditional Southern courtly manner, and his attitude to Blacks was paternalistic, but he could say "Negro" rather than "Nigra," the compromise term used by polite Southern moderates. He had a reputation as a labor attorney and often defended Blacks in court. He was an able and honest lawyer, and a man of his word.

The trial lasted four days. As the first court action against Communists in Chattanooga, it was something of a sensation. The prosecutor sounded all the themes of patriotism and anti-Communism in the florid Southern style. Chamlee punctured his balloon by reminding the court that their forefathers had participated in armed insurrection against the government of the United States. The defendants took most of the time. From the witness stand they lectured on Marxism and the Communist program, almost without hindrance from prosecutor or judge. They were acquitted on all counts except inciting to riot, for which they were fined. On appeal, the fines were reversed.

The charge of "lewdness" had been brought with the obvious intent of impugning the character of the defendants. It was the first, and perhaps the only, time it was to be invoked against Communists on trial. The district Party committee decided we had enough prejudices operating against us without that. It ordered all comrades living together to get legally married. On St. Valentine's Day, Isabelle and I went off to the justice of the peace in Rossville, Georgia, where the *Southern Worker* was printed. The ritual took no more than two minutes. The justice mumbled some words and had us hold hands. I placed a ring,

purchased in the ten-cent store, on Isabelle's finger. Hardly had the justice of the peace intoned "So help you God!" when he asked for his five dollars. I had only three dollars in my pocket. Having just solemnly pledged to support my wife for life, I had to borrow the balance from a friend who had come along as a witness. We were married under the names of James Bigelow and Helen Marcy. A few years later, when we were married under our own names at City Hall in New York, we joked about how we might be charged with bigamy.

The constant harassment and persecution of Communists did not always result in dramatic court cases. It was pernicious, dragging on from day to day. We learned to live with it and carry on our work. Sometimes the molestation assumed bizarre forms. Elsa Lawson was arrested on a vagrancy charge in Elizabethton. She had been threatened with jail unless she left town. After a farcical, kangaroo-court trial, the judge sentenced her to spend a night in jail and in the morning make bacon and eggs in the prison kitchen to prove her womanhood and sanity. Elsa passed the test with flying colors. More often the persecution, particularly of Black Communists, was more serious, even leading to tragic consequences. Gilbert Lewis, a promising young Black writer, came down from New York to Chattanooga as a Trade Union Unity League organizer. After serving a term on a chain gang, where his tubercular condition was aggravated, he was sent by the Party for study in Moscow, but died shortly after in a Yalta sanatorium.

In Birmingham, three young Black Communists, including Eugene Braxton, were pulled from bed while asleep, and beaten unconscious in an effort to get names. In the same city, Charlie Horton was shot in back of the head and killed when police found Communist literature in a night raid on his house; a companion was seriously wounded and left on the roadside. Many other instances could be cited.

As the crisis deepened and mass unrest grew, efforts were made to obtain legislation directed specifically against Communists or anyone who could be labeled as such. In March 1931 a law to outlaw the Communist Party was introduced into the Alabama legislature. Attorney General Knight, who was to become

the state prosecutor in the Scottsboro case, revealed that his department was investigating Communist activity with a view to action. It was proposed to amend the vagrancy law to include Communists as ipso facto vagrants. In the same month, the North Carolina and Texas legislatures had before them criminal syndicalist laws, carrying sentences in the former of ten years and in the latter of fourteen years. A similar law was being considered in Alabama, providing for a ten-year prison term and a five thousand dollar fine. But while such state legislation was pending, new city ordinances were introduced against the publication and distribution of "subversive" literature, a sort of miniature criminal-syndicalist and antiseditious code. In the midst of a bitterly fought longshoremen's strike in New Orleans, the city council was considering an ordinance to ban "seditious" meetings and the printing of "seditious" literature.

During that strike, three organizers of the Marine Workers Industrial Union were arrested on the urging of Holt Ross, president of the Mississippi AFL, who had come to New Orleans to "settle" the conflict. He wrote in the local AFL paper:

A great amount of literature has been circulated by the Communists who advocate that the strikers act in mass and go on the docks and smash the injunction. I would like to know if the New Orleans Steamship Association has requested the Federal authorities to raid the Communist headquarters and cite the guilty parties for contempt?

Holt had testified before the Fish Committee in New Orleans:

We have an agreement where representatives of the AFL immediately report to the local officers the presence of any Communists. The leading employers of labor also make these reports and the minute we get in touch with any of these Communists we make arrangements to get him out of the state.<sup>10</sup>

Evidently such "arrangements" were widespread.

During its first year or so of initial organization in the Deep South, the Party played a germinal part in three major struggles, aside from its leadership of the unemployed. These were Harlan

County, Kentucky, the Alabama sharecroppers union, and the Scottsboro case. The first to develop was in Harlan, although the three struggles overlapped. Strictly speaking, Kentucky is not in the Deep South, and Party participation in that struggle was mainly through the National Miners Union, an affiliate of the TUUL, and an outgrowth of the long-term opposition of the left wing in the United Mine Workers against the leadership of John L. Lewis. At the time, the National Miners Union was leading a strike of thirty-five thousand coal miners in Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, and was beginning to organize in the Kentucky fields. The Southern Party districts contributed in a tangential way to the Harlan conflict by sending some organizers into the mine field and through the *Southern Worker*.

In February 1931, the *Southern Worker* printed a letter from a coal miner in Harlan County, Kentucky. He wrote of wage-cuts, layoffs, short weeks, evictions from the company houses, and the terror regime imposed by company guards and police deputies. Wages had been cut to the bone, to as low as thirteen cents a ton in some mines, with daily earnings less than one dollar, and the mine working no more than two or three days a week. Evictions of the unemployed and of rebellious miners from the company houses were common. Credit was being cut off at the company stores in the mining camps.

Harlan County was run lock, stock, and barrel by the coal companies. Since the turn of the century, first the lumber rights, then the mineral rights to the subsoil were swindled from the independent mountaineers by agents of industrial and financial combines. The mountain people were not aware of the wealth that lay hidden under their farmlands, or of the extensive rights they were giving up in the contracts they signed. Many became miners as the tipples and coal camps spread over the slopes and in the hollows. The large mining companies dominated the life of the entire coal region, including the local governments, the courts, the police, the tax commissions, the schools and, in the mine camps and towns, the stores and houses as well. The companies' power reached into the state legislature and the governor's office.<sup>11</sup> When the Great Depression struck, they used that immense power to protect their interests at the expense of

the welfare of their workers. The miners, about evenly white and Black, fought back.

It was a fierce struggle. Anyone suspected of organizing or joining the union was evicted from the company house and run out of town by the company thugs. Some were slain and their bodies left in a creek or in the bush. As often as not, a miner packed a pistol in his lunch box to protect himself. Harlan County, the center of the struggle, was a private feudal preserve, guarded against intruders by company, local, and state police. A pitched battle took place in May between the company guards and striking miners at Evarts, a mining town belonging to the Black Mountain Coal Company, subsidiary of the giant Peabody Coal Company, in turn owned by the U.S. Steel Corporation. Three company police and a miner were killed, 12 miners arrested. This was followed by a march of a thousand miners in support of the strikers. An open state of war now reigned. Within a week, the Governor of Kentucky went in the militia to "preserve order against the Reds and Communists." By the end of the month a sweeping injunction against picketing was obtained by the Black Mountain Company from an entirely subservient court, with four hundred soldiers on hand to enforce it. Twenty-eight miners were indicted for murder and for "banding and confederating." By mid-June eighty miners were in jail.<sup>12</sup>

Our miner correspondents, who kept us abreast of these events, complained that the United Mine Workers was sending little aid. The union was doing practically nothing to defend the arrested miners, although local UMW leaders were among those jailed. One of these, Frank Perkins, was charged with criminal syndicalism when deputies found a copy of the *Southern Worker* in his house. His wife, who wrote us about his arrest, defiantly asked that the paper be sent her. The post offices were closely watched to block all literature intended for the miners. By July, four thousand miners were on strike, and many more were coming to their support. The National Miners Union had come into the field to organize, and entire UMW locals joined it. Delegates were elected to a national rank-and-file miners conference in Pittsburgh. It met on July 6 to work out a unity program for forty

thousand striking miners in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky.

The battle intensified. The companies imported more thugs. Jesse Wakefield, the ILD organizer in the area, was arrested and charged with criminal syndicalism. Her car, which was used to deliver food to the strikers' food kitchen, was bombed and demolished. She was arrested again with Arnold Johnson, representing the American Civil Liberties Union. Boris Israel, reporter for the Federated Press, a labor news agency, was taken for a ride and shot. A food kitchen at Evarts was dynamited. Tom Meyerscough, president of the NMU, and a fellow organizer were taken for a ride by a sheriff's posse, driven to the state line, severely beaten, and dumped from the car. The young Communist, Harry Sims, who had worked with us in the South, was killed by company thugs.

In early September, 175 miners faced trial—forty-seven for murder, twenty for criminal syndicalism, forty-eight for “banding and confederating,” and sixty for robbery.<sup>13</sup> Not a single thug had been arrested. Cases were being transferred for trial to conservative farm counties, as almost universal support of the strikers in Harlan County began to sap the operators' control of the courts. The Coal Operators Association of Harlan County continued its complete and stringent blacklist of strikers and unionists.

The atrocities committed against the miners and their families in Harlan County aroused indignation nationally. A Committee of Inquiry, headed by Theodore Dreiser, was named by the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. Among its sponsors were outstanding writers, including Lincoln Steffens, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Henry Elmer Barnes, Franz Boas, and Malcolm Cowley. When the Committee opened hearings in Harlan toward the end of the year, witnesses appearing before it were beaten, evicted from their homes, and driven from the county. The NMU issued a call for a general miners' strike in Harlan and adjoining Bell counties to begin January 1.

And so the struggle raged, until even the most obdurate mine operators were forced to sign union contracts during the New Deal general labor upsurge of the midthirties. Like the other left



unions of the TUUL, the National Miners Union disbanded and merged its membership into the United Mine Workers.

The sharp and bloody class war in Harlan County had its reverberations throughout the South. Like the Gastonia textile strike before it, the Harlan miners' struggle against the powerful combination of corporate-state power revealed a fighting temper among the workers as the Great Depression deepened. It was a harbinger of the massive struggles still to come in the effort to organize the Southern working class. Those who fought in Harlan had chosen to remain as miners when their lands were grabbed up for a song by the mine developers. But others of their kind had left the mountains to settle in the coastal plain and become workers in the new textile mills. There they were also exploited beyond measure and without any help or relief when unemployed. They also fought back in strikes and unemployment demonstrations. As with the Harlan miners, it was still to take some years before a modicum of decent organization was reached in the steel mills and mines of the Birmingham area, and even more years in the textile mill towns.

A heritage of the early Harlan strike is the popular labor song, "Which Side Are You On?" by Florence Reece, wife of a coal miner and union organizer and herself an energetic union supporter. The words were set to an old Baptist hymn. Here are two stanzas:

They say in Harlan County  
There are no neutrals there:  
You'll either be a union man  
Or a thug for J. H. Blair.  
Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on?

Oh, workers, can you stand it?  
Oh, tell me how you can.  
Will you be a lousy scab  
Or will you be a man?  
Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on?<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1. The Atlanta Six were: M. H. Powers, who became the organizer of Party District 16, comprising the Carolinas and Virginia; Joe Carr, of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Industrial Union (TUUL affiliate), who subsequently became active in Birmingham; Herbert Newton, Black organizer of the American Negro Labor Congress; Mary Dalton, of the National Textile Workers Union, who was to become Party organizer in Chattanooga; Ann Burlak, then of the International Labor Defense, who returned North to lead textile strikers; and Henry Storey, a local Black Communist.

2. *Southern Worker*, September 27, 1930.

3. *Southern Worker*, February 14, 1931.

4. *Southern Worker*, *ibid.*

5. *Southern Worker*, March 21, 1931.

6. The American Negro Labor Congress was organized by the Communist Party in 1925 on a program directed primarily at overcoming the color line in the trade unions, but also including antidiscrimination and social demands. It did not prove successful, for it was too narrow—a “Black replica” of the Communist Party, as it was characterized by the Communist leaders themselves. In an effort to correct this, it was reorganized as the League of Struggle for Negro Rights in 1930, on a broad program. It published a monthly for a time (the *Liberator*), and formed local groups, including some in the South. But it also proved ineffective and in 1935 gave way to the American Negro Congress, a really broad United Front organization that played a key role in bringing Black workers into the CIO unions.

7. *Southern Worker*, August 30 and September 13, 1930.

8. *Southern Worker*, April 4, 1931.

9. *Southern Worker*, April 4, 18 and 25, 1931; May 2, 1931.

10. *Southern Worker*, March 21, 1931.

11. Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963).

12. *Southern Worker*, June 30, July 4, and August 22, 1931.

13. *Southern Worker*, September 5, 1931.

14. John Henry Blair was the high sheriff of Harlan County.

# 5

## Tallapoosa

I drove east over the Alleghenies in June 1931, headed for the cotton plantations of South Carolina. At Greenville I picked up Bill Johnson, a young Black Communist, whose parents we were going to visit. They were sharecroppers in Sumter County, in the midst of the Black Belt. We drove along the old Savannah highway, turning off at Columbia. Fresh green cotton plants stood almost a foot high, in long, newly cultivated rows. Barefooted Black men, women, boys, and girls were hoeing the vegetable fields. A chain gang was at work on the highway. Two white guards with Winchesters and holstered revolvers guarded the Black prisoners as they cleared the gullies. The prisoners were in stripes, their legs in chains.

We passed the town of Rembert, named after the family that owned much of the surrounding land since slavery, then turned off the highway onto a dirt road through a cotton field and came within view of a cabin shaded by some trees. The walls were of crude whitewashed boards, the roof covered with tar paper. Bill's father, an old man, gaunt and worn, dressed in work overalls, was resting on the small porch. Bill's brothers could be seen returning from the fields. A half dozen youngsters ventured timidly from the cabin to have a better look at the approaching car. They retreated into the house when they saw a white man at the wheel. The old man seemed outwardly unconcerned, and showed no trace of emotion as the car drew near and he recognized his

son. We hid the car under the trees on the side of the cabin facing away from the road.

A strange white man bringing his son home might bode ill. As we came up to him, the father eyed Bill quizzically, greeting him, "May God bless you, son." At the doorway was the mother, a small, emaciated woman, who had a warm smile and nod for Bill. "He is one of us," said Bill. I extended my hand. Hesitantly the old man placed a limp hand in mine. Shaking hands with a white man was simply not done. "Have a seat, boss," he responded to my greeting.

Bill was impatient with his father. "He is not a boss. He is a comrade, one of us, just like you and me. That's what comrade means." The old man took the lesson from his son with an apologetic smile. "That's the way we are used to here, boss," he said, beckoning us to enter the cabin.

The cabin had three rooms. On the ground floor were the kitchen, which served also as living room, and a bedroom with a double bed in the center and cots along the walls. In the attic was another bedroom. The dwelling housed the parents, seven children, and three grandchildren.

Over the evening meal, "boss" began to wear off. Another son, eighteen years old, had been invited to join the old man, Bill, and me around the board table. The mother cooked the meal over the wood stove and served us. The earth showed through the spaced floorboards. There was a single window and a screen door opening on the back yard. We had hominy in lard gravy, fatback, and coffee as a young girl stood by the table and fanned the flies away.

Mr. Johnson and his family farmed twenty-five acres, fifteen in cotton and the rest in corn. The landowner took half the crop at the end of the season for use of the land and cabin. From the remaining half he took whatever portion was due, as calculated by himself, for the food, fertilizer, and anything else he might have advanced ("furnished") during the year, at interest rates as high as sixty or seventy percent, including any debt left over from the previous season. Mr. Johnson was not permitted to take any part of the crop to market.

These conditions, typical of sharecropping throughout the plantation area, evolved during Reconstruction. They proved more effective than wage labor in keeping the freedmen bound to the soil to pay off their indebtedness to the landlord. In reality, sharecropping was a form of peonage embodying remnants of the slave system. Share-tenants were somewhat better off, in that they invested on their own a greater part of the costs of production, and therefore had to give a lesser share of the crop to the landlord. These restrictive tenure arrangements radiated outward to affect white tenure as well.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Johnson explained from the wood stove that last year all they had left after the harvest was some corn. When they picked their cotton and were bringing it in, the boss appeared and said, "Bring it all 'round to my barn where it's dry." They took in the peas and potatoes—which they had last year—and there he was again, "Up this way, Alec. You got no place to keep it." If Mrs. Johnson had not dumped a good bit of corn in the kitchen before the boss had a chance to see it, they would have had none for the winter. The old man pointed to his barn through the doorway. The walls had given way on two sides and the roof formed a crazy triangle with the ground. It was that way last year, he explained, and will remain that way, for the boss refused to fix it or allow him to do so. It was the same on all the places, he said.

The family lived on the weekly food "furnishing" from the boss: twelve pounds of corn meal, two quarts of rye, ten pounds of fatback, a pound of coffee, two pounds of sugar, and two pounds of lard. The boss family ran half a dozen small plantations, with five or six cropper or tenant families each, as well as two large farms employing at times as many as a hundred farm laborers each. The cropper families would be called on to chop (cultivate) peas or cotton on these lands. Even the twenty-five or fifty cents a day paid for this labor was given in the form of credit at the general store in Rembert, owned by the big boss. A little cash could be realized occasionally from the sale of a chicken or vegetables if the cropper was permitted to have a patch of his own.

The Johnsons hoped they would salvage part of the crop for the coming winter. They were fattening a hog that was in danger

of ending up in the boss's barn to make up for the "debt" not covered by the cotton and corn. Their mule went that way when cotton sold at ten cents a pound last year. They now had use of a mule from the small white landowner down the road in return for plowing his land—two days for every day plowing their own.

I asked what they would do in the winter with cotton at five cents. Mrs. Johnson shrugged her shoulders. All the winters of her life had been spent in this county, and her family before her and been slaves on the same land. There had been times at Christmas when some cash was doled out by the planters. There was none last winter and none could be expected now.

Old man Johnson, Bill, and I rode over the back roads to visit reliable kinsfolk and friends. The story was the same everywhere. They could expect no more than twenty-five cents a hundred pounds for picking cotton on the big plantation, the extra source they counted on to provide for the winter ahead, they whispered. Didn't the three Williams kids chop seven acres of cotton in four and a half days and get paid only one dollar? How were they going to manage in the perilous winter ahead? These fears were confided only after Bill had assured them I was a different kind of white man, a "comrade." Old man Johnson had told them I had eaten with the family at the same table and slept in their house, and they were comfortable, "like his color and mine was the same."

In a wooded section by a creek, we came upon a chain-gang camp. The prisoners were at work on the road and the Black trustee cook had no objection to our investigation. The bunk wagon was a steel cage on wheels. Every night the prisoners were collectively locked into the tier of bunks with a long chain that was run through the chains permanently fastened around the ankles of each prisoner. The human cargo was wheeled from one place to another in the county to work on the roads. We saw the long spikes that were appended to the band around the ankle of a recalcitrant captive to make movement even more difficult. There was a long upright box that looked like an outhouse. We were told it was the sweatbox used for punishment. When locked into the box, a man could just about stand upright. There was a

small hole at about mouth level for air. After a few hours in it in a broiling sun the victim would be dragged out unconscious.

As dusk, we took Mr. Johnson in my car to see the doctor at Rembert. I dropped the old man and Bill down the road a bit, for it would not do to see them in town with a strange white man. Bill told me what happened. They knocked at the back door. The doctor spent a few minutes examining the old man in the barn, the regular office being reserved for whites only. He gave him some drugs to ease the pain. The account of Alec Johnson was charged three dollars to be taken out of his crop by the boss. The old man was silent as we drove back to the cabin.

That night some neighbors gathered around the kitchen lamp on the table. A watcher was posted on the porch, smoking his pipe. They had come to meet the young Black man from Greenville with a new message and the white man who ate from a Black table and slept in a Black bed. Alec Johnson found new uses for words out of the Bible to simplify the newer language of his son. They discussed how to organize so that together with their fellow croppers they could manage to retain some of the crop at settlement time and force the planter to continue food allowances.

In January 1931, some five hundred desperate farmers, white and Black, marched into the town of England, Arkansas, on a Saturday afternoon and helped themselves to the food in the stores. Lonoke County, where the town is situated, was almost entirely rural, close by the Mississippi Valley Black Belt. One-third of its population was Black and over three-fourths of all farm families were tenants and sharecroppers. A drought had multiplied the miseries of the crisis; starvation was widespread. The meager, strictly rationed handouts of the Red Cross only exasperated the farmers further, and they had decided to take matters into their own hands. A leading planter warned: "The merchants of England either must move their goods or mount machine guns on their stores."

Newspapers throughout the South cited the event as a harbinger of even greater calamities to come. Indeed, violence was becoming a daily occurrence in the cotton country as planters and merchants cut off the credit needed by poor farmers to tide

them over the winter months. The Alabama Department of Agriculture predicted that half the tenant farm families of the state would be starving.

By the summer of 1931, prices for that year's cotton crop were expected to be the lowest on record. The Federal Farm Board proposed plowing under every third row of cotton to keep prices up for the great surpluses on hand. On the insistence of Governor Huey Long, the Louisiana legislature offered to ban the planting of cotton in the state if other states, together accounting for three-fourths of the national crop, did likewise.

Conditions among white tenants and small farmers were not much better than among the Black peasants. The wife of a white tenant farmer in Riesel, Texas, with eleven children, eight at home, wrote the *Southern Worker* about the short crop caused by drought. With cotton at eight to ten cents a pound, they could not pay their debts to the landlord and the bank and lost their entire crop. Not enough remained for food or for winter clothing. They had only enough food on hand to last another two weeks, and after that she wondered what would happen.<sup>2</sup>

The Party called on farmers to follow the example of England, Arkansas.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the *Southern Worker* received letters from many rural places in Alabama, North and South Carolina, Arkansas, and other states asking for information and advice on how to organize. The letters came not only from the Black Belt but also from areas like Northern Alabama, a predominantly white farm area, where the economic crisis had been aggravated by drought. Many small farm owners were foreclosed for failure to pay their debts throughout the rural areas. More and more land was being concentrated in the hands of the merchants and the banks.

In July the newspapers carried hair-raising accounts of a shooting battle between croppers and deputy posses at Camp Hill in Tallapoosa County, Alabama. I was aware of the effort by the Party over the past few months to organize a sharecropper's union in this area.<sup>4</sup> Black workers in Birmingham visited family and friends who farmed in Tallapoosa. Among these workers were Communists. The same Mack Coats who had run for office in Chattanooga had gone to Camp Hill as an organizer.



One of the better known efforts to organize sharecroppers and land workers had resulted in the massacre at Elaine, in Phillip County, Arkansas, in 1919, in which as many as one hundred may have been killed. Twelve Blacks were sentenced to death and eighty to prison terms of from one to twenty years. As a result, the all-Black Progressive Farmers and Householders Union, consisting mostly of croppers and plantation laborers, was destroyed. Would the same happen at Camp Hill?

The *Southern Worker* had printed letters from Tallapoosa County, some scribbled on pieces of sacking. The first appeared on March 7, pleading for help to organize against starvation. Another, signed E. Braxton, the young Black Communist from Birmingham, told of a meeting at Camp Hill to set up a union organizing committee. These were followed by letters from other towns in the area. "Help to learn us how to fight for better conditions," said one. We are "ready to follow the Arkansas way," said another. One cropper correspondent told of farm labor getting one dollar a week: "We all eat Hoover's greens and lard gravy." Landowners were planning to replace tenants and croppers with farm labor, men at fifty cents a day, women at twenty-five cents. The sawmills were paying one dollar a day for skilled workers and fifty cents for laborers. In June our correspondents reported the planters and merchants would give no further credit to either white or Black until cotton-picking time. Black farmers in the Camp Hill area were preparing to send a delegation to a conference in Chattanooga on the Scottsboro case.

Accounts of what happened at Camp Hill vary. Here is the story as told to me by Mack Coads a few days after the shooting. He had succeeded in evading the posse and returned safely to his home in Chattanooga. On Thursday night, July 6, a meeting called by the Sharecroppers Union took place in a vacant house used as a church near Camp Hill. About eighty were present. The meeting was raided by armed deputies led by Sheriff Kyle Young of Dadeville, the county seat. They hoped to capture Coads, who was speaking at the meeting, but he made his get-away through a back door. The sheriff arrested an armed cropper and seized some *Southern Workers* and other literature. News reports that union records and a list of its members were found

were untrue. The reports were fabricated in the hope of terrorizing the croppers. After the raid a posse broke into a Black farmer's cabin and beat up the entire family, fracturing the wife's skull, in an effort to obtain information about the "outside" organizer. Ralph Gray, a local union leader, supported by friends who had gathered, forced the sheriff to stop the beating at the point of a gun.

The mob grew and rode through the country firing into the Blacks' cabins. A carload of these armed men, including Police Chief J. M. Wilson of Camp Hill and Sheriff Young, passed Ralph Gray on the road and opened fire on him point blank, smashing his legs. Gray returned the fire from the ground, slightly wounding the sheriff, and the car sped off.

Gray was carried to a cabin by friends. Here he was found by Chief Wilson and his deputies. Coads heard that he was killed while lying defenseless in bed when the posse riddled the cabin with gunfire. Others said that Gray offered no resistance when he was placed under arrest, but was murdered somewhere between the cabin and the jail. In this account, the posse was led by Deputy Sheriff Ware and included three landowners whose names were known. No investigation was held.

Everyone in the cabin where Gray was found was arrested, and the next morning it was burned to the ground. The church where the meeting took place was also burned down. Grey's body was left on the courthouse lawn in Dadeville. During that day skirmishes took place between croppers defending their homes and the roving posses; eight croppers and two deputies were wounded. The wounded croppers were thrown into jail without treatment.

Of the Black croppers rounded up by the deputies, twenty-nine were lodged in the jail at Dadeville. Nine were under eighteen years of age, including two under fourteen. Four croppers were reported "missing" from jail. According to Chief Wilson, they "went to cut stove-wood." When asked by reporters when they would return, he answered, "They had lots to cut." The assumption was they had been taken for a ride, beaten, run out of the county, or murdered. It was rumored that one of them, Buddy Davis, had been drowned in the artificial lake of the Alabama

Power Company. These stories were spread to terrorize the croppers. Fortunately, the four had hidden in the woods and swamps, getting food at night from friends, until they were able to make their way to homes of relatives out of the area.

Dosie Miner, T. Patterson, William Gribb, and John and Tommy Finch were charged with assault to murder, and the last three also with conspiracy to murder. Some of the others in jail were charged with conspiracy and the rest with carrying concealed weapons.

Tallapoosa County, with a population one-third Negro, is situated on the fringe of the Alabama Black Belt. Camp Hill is in the southern part of the county where it projects into the Black Belt proper, adjoining Chambers and Lee counties to the East and Macon County to the South, areas in which large plantations and Negro majorities prevailed. The Camp Hill region had a larger proportion of Blacks than in the rest of the county, although both Black and white tenants and croppers worked on scattered lands rather than on big plantation units. But the general atmosphere was no less repressive than in the surrounding Black Belt counties. The union was a real challenge to the dominant white landowners, the credit merchants, and the local banks.

The press reported that the posses, composed of as many as five hundred armed whites, were determined to teach the Blacks a lesson. Sensational rumors were circulated by the newspapers of an imminent Black uprising, of armed caravans from Atlanta and Chattanooga. The *Montgomery Advertiser*, a leading Black Belt newspaper, printed stories alleging that machine guns and dynamite were being gathered in preparation for a Black uprising to take place on August 28.

Under ordinary circumstances, there might well have been a horrible massacre of the Blacks as at Elaine. But within a week or two the hysteria subsided. For one thing, the Blacks were not cowed; they defended themselves. For another, although poor whites had joined the posses, there was considerable sympathy for the union among small white farmers who were alarmed at the threat of the planters and merchants to cut off credit. Indicative of this mood were two letters from poor white farmers at Camp Hill in the issue of the *Southern Worker* a week after the

shootings. One told how his family of five was starving and ended, "Wake up, Cropper Union, let us get together." In fact, a number of whites were already in the Union then.

A wave of protest greeted the first news of the attack on the Blacks. The governor's office and the police at Dadeville were receiving telegrams demanding an end to the raids and guarantees of safety for the prisoners. The ILD sent Attorney Chamlee to Dadeville, where he found the county officials on the defensive. The district solicitor and the judge admitted they had no evidence against most of the prisoners and wanted to postpone hearings for a month to allow things to cool off. Within three weeks, twenty-two prisoners were released for "insufficient evidence." This in itself was an innovation, since in cases of this kind the nature of the evidence had been entirely irrelevant. Only seven remained under charges, and when the hearings were held, their cases were postponed indefinitely and they were released.

Another consideration, perhaps the most important, served to restrain the mob violence. The ruling powers in Alabama had become extremely sensitive over the nationwide, even world-wide, protest aroused by the Scottsboro case, in the four months since the nine Black youths had been taken off the freight train at Paint Rock and charged with rape. The immediate support for the cause of the sharecroppers was a warning. Alabama wanted no more "Scottsboro cases."

The demands of the union went to the heart of the planter-tenant relationship. Of most immediate concern was the demand for continuation of food advances that the planters and merchants were curtailing and threatening to cut off entirely. The union wanted a cash settlement when the crops were gathered, as well as the right of croppers to market them directly. It demanded the right of every cropper or tenant to his own vegetable patch and its produce. The union program also called for a nine-month school for Black children, with a free school bus. Many were paying a five-dollar annual school tax and a seventy-five cent bus tax for a school that lasted no more than three months and for a bus that was not used.

At that time, the U.S. Office of Education reported that only one out of every twenty-one Black children enrolled in the first

grade of the Alabama public schools reached the eighth grade. Not all were enrolled, by any means. For the South as a whole, less than half the Black children of school age received any schooling at all. In the completely segregated school system, the gap in the quality of education between white and Black was immense. In a typical Black Belt community in Alabama, fifteen pupils in a white school had two trained teachers. In the same town, the Black school had seventy pupils taught by a single Black girl who lacked training. The term for whites was nine months, for Blacks three months.

The bloody attacks on the croppers did not destroy the union. Meetings were suspended for a time. The ILD provided some financial help to the families of the men in jail or in hiding. The landlords were worried. A potential had been revealed that could lead to the undermining of the system that had assured them unchallenged authority over the work and lives of white and Black subjects alike. Reluctantly and partially, some of the planters and merchants conceded to the principal demand of the union, the continuation of food advances into the picking season. Seizures of livestock and other possessions were suspended for a time. Those Blacks who had aided or abetted the "law" found themselves ostracized or forced out of the community. One, Rev. E. W. Ellis, had preached from his pulpit against the "Reds." He had also acted as an informer against a cropper family who, he told the authorities, had a store of ammunition in their cabin. The daughter of the family had been severely beaten by the deputies to force a "confession," and she had sustained permanent injuries. His congregation forced him out of the church and the community.

The Camp Hill experience taught the croppers a lesson—but not the one intended by the posses. The organization had been very loose. Almost every Black cropper or poor farmer considered himself a member. There was a sense of brotherhood in a common cause, but no organized structure. Meetings were held from time to time, such as the one that had been raided. No dues were collected, although in this money-scarce economy they could have been at best only token. There were no union posts,

no election of officers—perhaps more out of consideration of security than anything else.

After Camp Hill, locals or groups were formed on a community basis, each having a captain, secretary, and literature agent. The Sharecroppers Union was extended into the Black Belt counties of Lee, Chambers, and Macon. Tallapoosa remained the center, with the chief points at Dadeville, Camp Hill, and East Tallasee. A few women's auxiliaries and youth groups were set up, and their captains met on a county basis.<sup>5</sup> There were also three Party units—at Camp Hill and Dadeville in Tallapoosa County, and at Notasulga in Lee County.

The union had no white members now. Poor whites had participated in the posses, and the Black croppers trusted none to be in the union. Nevertheless, there were poor white farmers who wanted to join, as a union organizer told me, for here and there additional concessions were wrested from the planters. One agreed to cancel the debts; another permitted his croppers to market their share of the crop. A union committee obtained clothes and cash from a planter for his tenants. Union demands were detailed in leaflets left on the porches of landowners. A union leader told me, "The comrades do not spare the rod and spoil the stool pigeons."

Another effort was made to destroy the union by violence and terror. It occurred at Reeltown in the Camp Hill area in December 1932. A leading slogan of the union was, "Let it stick where it is picked"—meaning the croppers should not be forced to pool their crop with the landlord's but sell it themselves. Another leading demand was an end to the confiscation of livestock or farm implements for debts. The struggle at Reeltown arose over the latter issue. Sheriff Young searched the home of Cliff James, a union leader and small landowner, and found some literature and union membership blanks. A few days later a merchant who had a lien on James's farm claimed his two mules and some other livestock in payment of debt. The sheriff arrived at the farm, accompanied by deputies, to collect the mules. A dozen or so croppers gathered at the cabin. One of them, Ned Cobb, tried to talk the sheriff out of seizing the work animals. As he turned to enter the cabin, he was shot in the back. In the general

shooting that followed, James was wounded in the back as he ran from the cabin. Another cropper, Milo Bentley, was seriously wounded.

White posses were again formed, riding the country and shooting into the cabins. It was reported that officials at Tuskegee Institute, where James had gone for aid, turned him over to the police. The Institute, located in adjoining Macon County, had been established by Booker T. Washington, and had become a leading Black vocational school. James and Bentley later died from their untreated wounds while in jail. Others were killed and wounded in the raids; how many is not known. Again, protests came from all parts of the country, and lawyers supplied by the ILD and others were able to obtain the release of some of those jailed. But Ned Cobb served twelve years in prison, and on his release remained staunch in his beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

This second attempt to destroy the union also failed. At least part of the reason was indicated in a lead editorial in the *Birmingham Post*.<sup>7</sup> Entitled "No Race Riot," the editorial held that the cause of the "riot" was primarily economic, the croppers refusing to give up their work animals, and was parallel to the battles fought in Iowa and Wisconsin between farmers and sheriffs' deputies seeking to serve eviction notices. The editorial noted that newspapermen on the spot were impressed most deeply "in finding that a good many white farmers, ground down by the same relentless economic pressures from which the Negroes were suffering, expressed sympathy with the Negroes' desperate plight." This time the local white farmers were not so ready to go along with the posse. It had to be gathered from four counties and numbered only between one and two hundred men, recruited from the planters and their hangers-on. The press printed resolutions of protest. But a subcommittee of the Alabama Interracial Commission, including leading "moderates," issued a statement in which it sought "to put the people of Alabama on guard against certain sinister alien influences. . . . Race hatred and discord of every type may be said, without exaggeration, to be their immediate object." They meant the Communists, of course. The ILD office in Birmingham was raided and ransacked. Alice Burke, wife of ILD organizer Donald Burke,

was arrested at a protest meeting of whites at East Lake, Alabama.

The Sharecroppers Union persisted, claiming over five thousand members at the end of 1933. The following year the Socialists helped organize a Tenants Union in Arkansas. During the New Deal era, as new types of organization arose in the South, it played an important role in the founding of a bigger biracial farm union.

## NOTES

1. For a full discussion of the tenure system in the Deep South, see James S. Allen, *The Negro Question in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1936).

2. *Southern Worker*, June 6, 1931.

3. *Southern Worker*, January 21, 1931. Other letters cited here began appearing in March.

4. The term *sharecropper* (or *cropper*) is used here broadly. The Sharecroppers Union of Tallapoosa and adjoining counties also included farm tenants of various categories as well as small landowners.

5. By the summer of 1932, according to a Party report from Birmingham, 591 union members were registered in Tallapoosa in twenty-eight locals, and there were also ten youth and twelve women's groups. Lee County, in the Black Belt proper, had 67 members in five locals on the plantations and four in the town of Notasulga; in Chambers County, also in the Black Belt, 30 members in three locals in the Dudleyville section; and in Black Belt Macon County, 30 members in five locals. (Report by Al Murphy, dated September 1932, a copy of which is in the author's possession. It was published in part in *Party Organizer*, New York, November 15, 1932.) Al Murphy, former steel worker and Black Communist, came in as secretary of the Sharecropper Union, probably in the spring of 1932, and reorganized the union on a more stable and firm basis.

6. Ned Cobb is the real Nate Shaw in *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, in which he tells his life story to the compiler and editor, Theodore Rosengarten. The book was published in 1974, more than four decades after the events at Camp Hill and Reeltown. It received wide and well-deserved acclaim.

7. *Birmingham Post*, December 22, 1932.



# 6

## Scottsboro

On the evening of March 25, 1931, an alarming report came over the radio. Nine Black youths had been taken off a freight train by a deputy posse at the small town of Paint Rock, Alabama. The oldest of the boys, we learned later, was twenty; the youngest were twelve and thirteen. The ominous charge of rape was in the air, for two white women were also taken from the same freight. The next morning we learned that a large white mob had gathered the night before in Scottsboro, where the captives had been lodged in the Jackson County jail. National guardsmen were sent by the governor on the request of the local sheriff.

We wired the International Labor Defense in New York, alerting them to the danger of a mass lynching. The local ILD telegraphed Governor B. M. Miller of Alabama and Judge Alfred E. Hawkins at Scottsboro, charging them with responsibility for the safety of the prisoners.

Five days later a special session of the Jackson County grand jury charged the nine Black youths with “forcefully ravaging and debasing Victoria Price and Ruby Bates,” the two women on the train. It had heard testimony only from Victoria Price and a white companion, Orville Gilley, in a session that lasted no more than an hour. The hearing was set for the next day before Judge Hawkins.

On that day, March 31, my wife Isabelle and Lowell Wakefield, Southern representative of the ILD, went to Scottsboro for the hearing. Isabelle described the lynch-charged scene in an article under the pen name Helen Marcy in the April 4 *Southern Worker*. National guardsmen with fixed bayonets stood between the nine terrified boys facing the judge and a threatening mob inside and outside the courthouse. The mob consisted mostly of farmers in ragged overalls, their faces thin and emaciated. Pistols protruded from pockets as they surged in and out of the courthouse. They were restrained by the assurance of the judge that, if left to the courts, justice would be served speedily in the true Southern style. No lawyers were present on behalf of the defendants. They pleaded “not guilty” to the charges, and the trial was set for April 6. They were then marched down the main street, through the mob, to the city jail—a ramshackle affair that could not withstand a determined assault. After three frightful hours, they were finally taken to Gadsden, where they had been held for safekeeping pending indictment.

Indicative of the charged atmosphere surrounding the case from the very beginning was an editorial in the *Chattanooga News*. Its editor, George Fort Milton, who considered himself a liberal, was chairman of the Southern Commission for the Study of Lynching. Before evidence had been heard in court, and accepting without question the sensational stories of a mass rape told by the two white women to reporters and to anyone who would listen, the paper let loose this blast:

How far has our vaunted Southern Chivalry sunk? How far has humanity sunk when we must contemplate the frightful things that occurred in that gravel car? How is it possible that in the venture of man can exist souls like these nine?<sup>1</sup>

When the trial opened on April 6, an immense crowd had gathered, estimated at some eight thousand by Lowell Wakefield, who was present as observer for the ILD. It was the first Monday of the month, the traditional Fair Day, when farmers gathered from predominantly rural Jackson County. A

macabre celebration of the anticipated verdict took place. The Scottsboro Hosier Mill band entertained the crowd. A caravan of Ford trucks, provided by the local agency, blared recorded music through amplifiers as it circled the courthouse.

Defense counsel was utterly inadequate. The Interdenominational Ministers Alliance of Chattanooga, a Black organization, had engaged Stephen Roddy of that city as defense lawyer. He was a down-and-out lawyer, an alcoholic who appeared at the trial drunk. Milo Moody, a senile Scottsboro lawyer, was appointed by the judge to aid the defense. They made no preparations for the trial, interviewing the defendants for barely a half hour before it opened. Victoria Price told her story of mass attack in lurid detail. The testimony of Ruby Bates differed in essential details but Roddy made no effort to bring this out.

The most damaging testimony for the prosecution was given by their own witnesses, Dr. R. R. Bridges and Dr. Marvin Lynch, who had examined the women within ninety minutes of the alleged rape. No bruises were found, they said, although the women claim they had been thrown about on the gravel of the gondola. The women swore each had been raped by six men, but the doctors testified they could find hardly enough semen in the vagina to make a smear slide. The sperm they did find was "non-motile," inactive. They discerned no emotional stress such as would be expected from the frightful mass rape the women described. The doctors would neither affirm nor deny conclusively that a mass rape had taken place, although one did testify it was "possible." The defense lawyers failed to argue any of the cases before the jury, and the judge refused to admit any reference to the past of the two women, both known as prostitutes.

Three trials were held in rapid succession. Charles Weems and Clarence Norris were the first to be tried. No sooner did their case go to the jury than the trial of Haywood Patterson was opened. While it was in progress, the jury returned a verdict of death for Weems and Norris. A jubilant roar resounded in the courtroom, followed by cheers from the crowd outside. In less than thirty minutes, the Patterson jury returned the same verdict, even as the case of the remaining five was being heard. Andrew and Roy Wright, Eugene Williams, Olen Montgomery, Willie

Roberson, and Ozie Powell were also sentenced to death. A mistrial was declared for twelve-year-old Roy Wright, since the jury could not agree on a prison term as asked by the prosecutor because of his extreme youth. Seven held out for the death penalty.

The trials were over on April 9, in barely three days. Within two weeks after they had been taken off the freight train, the Scottsboro boys had been indicted, tried, and sentenced to death. The formalities had been completed in record time. Judge Hawkins set July 10 as the day of execution. He had fulfilled his promise to the mob with exemplary speed.

A few hours after the sentences were imposed, the Communist Party telegraphed Governor Miller of Alabama and the judge denouncing the trials as “legal lynching.” At the same time, the ILD demanded stays of execution and opportunity to prepare for a new trial. Other organizations and individuals in the North also protested the verdicts. A week after the trials, Joseph Brodsky, who headed the ILD legal department, was in Chattanooga. General Chamlee was retained as Southern counsel for the ILD, and both went to Birmingham to visit the boys in jail. Allen Taub, a young ILD lawyer, also came down to make preliminary investigations.

The ILD called for a mass campaign to save the boys from the electric chair. It announced it would fight for a new trial, with Blacks on the jury, unheard of in the deep South since Reconstruction. The *Jackson County Sentinel*, a Scottsboro weekly, responded, “A Negro juror in Jackson County would be a curiosity—and some curiosities are embalmed, you know.”<sup>2</sup>

The long, uphill battle that would be required to save the boys was foreshadowed by the editorial comment on the verdicts in the Southern press. The samples here given are from leading newspapers generally considered responsible and respectable, even “moderate.”

*Chattanooga Times*: “Alabama is to be commended upon the dispatch with which this matter was disposed of.”

*Atlanta Constitution*: “The government and people of Alabama deserve the praise of the whole country for the manner in which they handled the perpetrators of the repulsive outrage.”

*Birmingham News*: “The ILD should know the trials were conducted in an orderly manner, that there was no mob violence, that all legal forms were strictly observed. . . . The activity of the International Labor Defense can be regarded only as meddling.”<sup>3</sup>

We knew immediately that without an effective mass defense campaign, the lives of the boys could not be saved. Such a crusade would by its very nature challenge the entire way of life and society in the South, and would also need to contest racist bias in the rest of the country. The very circumstances of the case touched the most sensitive core of the Southern mythology. The charge of rape of white female by Black male played a special, terrorizing role, the signal for innumerable lynchings, mutilations, and murders. A white woman, no matter her station in life, had only to accuse a Black of rape to assure his destruction whether by mob or court. The myth of “pure white Southern womanhood,” in the name of which the state demanded death at the Scottsboro trial to the acclaim of practically the entire white South, arose only to serve this myth. The myth hardly prevented the lily-white mill owners from brutally exploiting white women and teenage girls, forcing some into prostitution as an escape from mill slavery, as happened with Victoria Price and Ruby Bates.

The Communists were the only force in the country willing and able to initiate a mass defense movement that would be powerful enough, when coupled with effective court action, to breach the fortress of racism. Since 1928, they had been evolving a new approach to what was then called the Negro question. As we have seen, this entailed the beginning of Communist organization in the Deep South, which was recognized as the prime source of racism in the country as a whole. Great emphasis was placed upon the need to eradicate racial discrimination within labor and progressive ranks if the trust of Blacks was to be won and the fight carried successfully against Negrophobe attitudes and practices.

The Communists began with themselves. On March 1, 1931, three weeks before the nine youths were dragged from the freight train at Paint Rock, a public trial of August Yokinen dramatized the struggle against white chauvinism in the Party. Yokinen was

a member of the Party and of the Finnish Workers Club in the heart of Harlem, an area formerly populated by Finns. He was accused of participating in the exclusion of three Blacks from a social event held at the Finnish Hall. The audience of two thousand included elected delegates from Party and fraternal organizations. Clarence A. Hathaway, representing the New York Communist Party, was the prosecutor. The defense attorney was Richard B. Moore, the fiery Black orator and ILD leader. Alfred Wagenknecht, veteran Socialist and Communist, now a TUUL organizer, was chairman and judge. A jury of his peers found Yokinen guilty and sentenced him to expulsion from the Party, to the hearty approval of the audience. It was provided that on completing tasks assigned him in the fight against racism, he could apply for readmission. The trial was widely reported in the press, and particularly in the Black journals.<sup>4</sup>

It was not surprising, then, that the Party leadership should respond instantaneously to the Scottsboro outrage. As we have seen, an ILD observer was present at Scottsboro; the call went out for mass protests; moves for a new trial were immediately initiated; the jury issue was raised. But it did not necessarily follow that an effective mass defense would be built. Racist influences were at work in the North as well, reaching into radical and even Party circles. The special role of the rape charge in the South was not easily understood elsewhere in the country.

Virulent anti-Communism was also a force to contend with. Many charged the Communists with seeking to further their revolutionary program by linking the Scottsboro case with a critique of the Southern social system to the disadvantage of the defense of the boys. But how else could a mass defense be built? How could people be educated about the significance of the case and aroused to action unless its entire social context was made clear? Without exposing the racist system itself, how was it possible to explain the otherwise inexplicable obduracy of the total Southern establishment in insisting upon the death of the boys despite an obviously lynch-type trial and the accumulating evidence of their innocence?

It was a new departure for the ILD to take on such a case. The mass campaigns it had led on behalf of labor and left causes

were almost entirely struggles against “class justice.” In a sense, the Scottsboro boys could be considered victims of the class war. They came from the poorest and most oppressed sector of the working class. When entrapped, they were riding the freights in search of work, as so many tens of thousands did during those Depression years. But they themselves were not engaged in class struggle, had little knowledge of or identity with it. They were not victims of a labor frame-up, but victims of a frame-up by an entire system of racial oppression. The ILD now faced a new kind of struggle with new issues and new dimensions.

In the past, of course, notable campaigns against racial injustice had been waged by middle-class liberals and reformers. Now for the first time a mass campaign on a grand scale on behalf of the Black cause was launched from a working-class base, in the tradition evolved over years in labor cases. This in itself was a challenge to traditional middle-class liberals who considered themselves the authentic inheritors of the Abolitionist tradition and the fight for Black rights. They had fought lynching, court frame-ups of Blacks, denial of civil rights and the like, but in their own manner—that is, by central reliance upon the sanctity of the law and the courts. They had an almost inborn distrust of mass movements of any kind, let alone those led by Communists. That attitude is exemplified well by a report on unemployment among Blacks by the National Urban League, a middle-class Negro organization. The report concludes: “The whole situation has produced a fertile atmosphere for Communist propagandists.” It deplored the “unparalleled spread of [their] doctrines in parts of the South and mid-West,” which, it urged, must be stemmed as proposed by the Fish Committee.<sup>5</sup>

While the liberals and moderates were still trying to decide whether the boys were innocent or guilty of rape, the outcry against the frame-up resounded everywhere. An enormous work of research would be required to do justice to the Scottsboro movement set in motion by the Communists. It reached throughout the country and evoked response in many parts of the world. There were parades of thousands, mass meetings, citywide and regional defense conferences, innumerable resolutions and telegrams of protest, sermons, speeches, tours by the Scottsboro

mothers. Among many prominent people who spoke up for the boys were Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Leopold Stokowski, and Lincoln Steffens. Abroad, protest demonstrations took place at U.S. embassies and consulates, and prominent personalities such as Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, and H. G. Wells denounced the frame-up. Mrs. Ada Wright, mother of two of the defendants, toured Europe, together with J. Louis Engdahl, national secretary of the ILD, who died of pneumonia at the end of the journey in Moscow. His place in the ILD was taken by William L. Patterson, formerly a lawyer and now a rising Black Communist who was to become known as "Mr. Civil Rights" in the course of the lengthy Scottsboro campaign and in other outstanding battles. By his own admission, the governor of Alabama received two thousand protests within the first three months.

While the mass defense movement was gathering impetus, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) dragged its feet. The NAACP was the most important Black rights organization. It was based largely on middle-class and professional circles in the Black communities of the North and had the support of white liberals and reformers. It disapproved of the mass campaign that, it held, inflamed Southern prejudices. In the style to which it was accustomed, it would rather rely upon a legal defense while seeking support of well-placed and respectable Southern whites. Among the latter, precious few could be found who would support any kind of defense.

The initial efforts of the NAACP were directed toward ousting the ILD from the case. In this, it relied heavily upon the Negro Ministers Alliance of Chattanooga, which was able to keep its hands in the legal defense because it had retained Stephen Roddy for the first Scottsboro trials. Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, was an early visitor to Chattanooga, where he hoped to convince the parents of the boys to renounce the ILD lawyers and accept the sponsorship of the organization. The fight for control of the case between the NAACP and the ILD, which lasted until the end of 1931, revolved around winning the confidence of both parents and defendants.



Isabelle was the first to locate the families of the boys living in Chattanooga. I accompanied her on visits to the Patterson and Wright families, who lived in the western part of the city, on the banks of the Tennessee River, in small frame row houses on an unpaved street. Mrs. Janie Patterson received us in a neat, even cheery, kitchen. Forlorn and helpless, she greeted us with open arms when she learned why we had come. When we told her of plans to obtain a new trial, her face was illuminated with hope for the first time since the tragic events. We learned from her that her son, Haywood, had hopped the freight in Chattanooga together with his friends, Eugene Williams and the two Wright brothers. They were on their way to Memphis, where they hoped to find work. She showed us a letter from her son, written in the Scottsboro jail soon after his conviction.

My dearest Sweet Mother and Father:

This is to let you know of my present life and worried to think that your poor son is going to die for nothing.

Do all you can to save me from being put to death for nothing. Mother, do what you can to save your son.

We did not get a fair trial, and you try to have it moved somewhere else, if you can get a new trial. Do you all try to come down here and try to get me a new trial, or I will be put to death the 10th day of July.

I am in jail for something I did not do. You know that it hurt me to my heart. I will be moved to Kilby Prison. Good-bye and good luck.

Haywood

April 8, Scottsboro, Alabama<sup>6</sup>

The father, Claude Patterson, a former Georgia sharecropper, was at work in a brakeshoe shop when we visited. In the “good days” he used to make \$28 a week, but with the stagger system and wage cuts he was making only \$7 for his three days of labor. Mrs. Patterson did domestic work to help sustain the family of eight. Haywood had picked up whatever jobs he could find. The father’s fellow workers at the plant raised a collection among themselves of \$10.36 for the defense of his son.

Mrs. Ada Wright also greeted us jubilantly. Andy and Roy lost their father seven years before. The oldest, Andy, had worked as a truck driver until the previous year, but since then had not been able to find a job. He could no longer bear being a burden on his mother, who made \$6 a week as a domestic servant. So, taking along his twelve-year-old brother, he hopped that fateful freight to Memphis together with his two friends. An aunt of Roy and Andy lived in that city and they hoped to stay with her until they found work.

The other parents were also soon reached, and together with the nine youths agreed to retain the ILD lawyers. Rounds of visits to the parents and the imprisoned boys now began, first by the NAACP with Roddy tagging along in an effort to get the boys to repudiate the ILD. Confused, some of the boys wavered and signed for the NAACP. After visits by the parents and the ILD lawyers, they would again affirm their trust in the ILD. These comings and goings continued for most of the year. "Don't let Roddy put no sweetnin' on your brain," Mrs. Patterson warned Haywood. Finally, in January, the NAACP announced its withdrawal from the case.

The truth of the matter was that the NAACP lagged far behind the times. It failed to realize the increasingly radical temper of the masses as the Depression deepened and neither the government nor the old parties offered any way out. The NAACP leaders had a typical middle-class aloofness toward the common man, and were out of touch with the Black masses, particularly in the South. The NAACP was doomed to lose the fight in which it found itself arrayed against a militant mass movement. It could not even form a branch in Chattanooga. The Ministers Alliance called a meeting for that purpose, with publicity in the press. Only fifteen people came, none of whom joined. At the same time, the ILD-led defense committees were holding well-attended meetings in the Black sections of the city, and their speakers were welcomed at churches whose ministers were members of the Alliance.

In the struggle for the confidence of the nine boys and their relatives, the defense movement in the South played a crucial role. The Blacks were profoundly aroused by the instantaneous

and sweeping defense projected by the ILD. Not since Reconstruction had there been so clear and militant a challenge to the racist system.

The Scottsboro movement found its expression in the South largely through the churches, the principal forums in which Blacks could voice their feelings with a minimum of interference. In Chattanooga, within a few days after the ILD entered the case, we were flooded with requests for speakers on the case at Sunday services. The same was true in other Southern cities. After their tours of the North, Mrs. Patterson and Mrs. Wright were hard put to fill invitations from the churches, and the other mothers spoke to many congregations in the Carolinas and Georgia. Meetings on May Day following the tragic April 9 in a dozen Southern cities were devoted to the case, some broken up by the police and the KKK.

The role of the Black churches in defense of the Scottsboro boys altered the attitude of the Communists toward them. In general, following a misinterpretation of Marx's famous dictum that "religion is the *opium* of the people," they had an entirely negative view of the church. Ministers were often denounced as "Black Judases" in the service of the status quo. But during the Scottsboro mass movement, particularly in the South, it was soon discovered that Black ministers, if not themselves aroused, were subject to the pressure of their congregations. And it was here, in their churches, that Southern Blacks were able to exercise their social will most freely.

Public meetings and conferences were out of the question in most of the South; only in Chattanooga, Charlotte, and New Orleans could they be organized quickly. The first effort to coordinate the movement was the All-Southern Scottsboro Defense Conference, which met on Sunday, May 31, at the Masonic Hall in Chattanooga, under the auspices of the ILD and the League of Struggle for Negro Rights. It comprised 104 delegates from fourteen cities in seven states. Credentials for 175 had been received in advance, but many were kept away by intimidation. Four delegates elected by the Tallapoosa croppers were arrested as they left Birmingham in a car together with white delegates from that city. Sixty delegates had been designated in Atlanta, where Mary

Dalton spoke in a score of churches. Her steps were dogged by a member of the Chattanooga Ministers Alliance, who advised the delegates not to go since the meeting would be broken up. Nevertheless, half did come. A Black minister represented fifteen churches in St. Petersburg, Florida.

While most came from Black churches, white textile workers from the Carolinas and white seamen from the Gulf Coast also attended. Elder Carter of Chattanooga, who had seen slavery, greeted the delegates, urged unity of white and Black, and denounced Black leaders who were attacking the ILD. Louis Engdahl came down from New York to outline defense plans, and the conference was also attended by Robert Minor and Harry Haywood for the national Communist Party, Jack Johnstone for the TUUL, and B. C. Amis for the LSNR. A Southern Scottsboro Defense Committee of twenty-eight was elected, and it was decided to build city and block committees.

On the eve of the conference, the Chattanooga Ministers Alliance declared that the ILD-led movement “if successful, will tear the South asunder and destroy the peace and harmony existing for many years.” What that “peace and harmony” amounted to was made painfully clear by a statement of the Interracial Commission of Chattanooga, which included moderates like George Milton. The Commission declared that it would have nothing to do with the defense of the Scottsboro boys, since they had been given a “fair and impartial trial.”<sup>7</sup>

The Ministers Alliance—and similar Black leaders in the South—could not bring victory to the NAACP for the simple reason that most of the congregations were against them. With or without the support of the church, Blacks organized Scottsboro defense block committees, in which entire neighborhoods participated. They collected pennies house to house for the defense, held meetings and organized the congregation to support the ILD. Isabelle and I attended an outdoor food fair on a Sunday afternoon organized jointly by a few block committees (violating the instructions from the Party district committee to stay away from all public affairs to safeguard the *Southern Worker*). Stands with home-prepared food had been set up the full length of a street, jammed with men, women, and children in their Sunday

best. We were the only whites to be seen. At first we were looked at askance or greeted diffidently, until we were recognized by a Black Party comrade, well known in the area, who joined us as we walked around sampling the food at the stands. We were welcomed as we partook of the sandwiches and cold drinks and chatted with the folk. Such grass-roots activity in many Southern cities helped to restrain ministers who were prone to follow Alliance-type leadership.

A few days after the All-Southern Conference, William Pickens, NAACP national field organizer, came to Chattanooga. In a letter to the *Daily Worker*, dated April 19, 1931, from Kansas City, he had at first greeted enthusiastically the ILD initiative and sent a donation for the defense. He wrote, "This is one occasion for every Negro who has intelligence enough to read, to send aid to you and to the ILD."<sup>8</sup> But by now he had joined the chorus of denunciation. Speaking at the St. Paul A.M.E. Church under the auspices of the Alliance, he said: "The most serious menace in the whole matter is the Communist activity and propaganda among colored people in the South, based on the pretext of defending the boys. . . . The sane and just among Negroes and whites must not let them get away with it." He urged his audience to put its faith in obtaining justice for the boys on "the law-abiding Negro and the influential and just-minded whites."<sup>9</sup> That was the heart of the NAACP appeal. His listeners knew all about this, having lived with that philosophy for many years.

Not a single leading Southern white liberal or moderate had raised his voice on behalf of the Scottsboro boys. In fact, they took pains to disassociate themselves from their defense. At most, some called for a careful review of the case to dispel any doubts about the fairness of the Scottsboro trials, as did the Alabama Interracial Commission.

The Southern Commission on Interracial Cooperation, organized in 1920, had state and city branches. Its executive secretary from the beginning was Will Alexander, considered by many an outstanding Southern white liberal. It carried out some investigations of the case, including the background of the two women involved, but the results were buried in its files. The Commission

took no public part in the defense during the many years of its duration. Its members comprised the respected white and Black leaders of the church, the universities, the press, and the community. The Commission emphasized the need to stop lynching and for the most part its adherents considered as progress the observation of the legal formalities. Southern liberalism as it then existed was mired in racism. With rare exceptions, both liberals and moderates, white and Black, accepted segregation as the law of life.

While liberals in the South said a plague on both your houses, liberals in the North for the most part supported the NAACP against the ILD. Both the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, outstanding liberal organs, took that position. The Communists, the usual charge went, were concerned not with saving the nine boys but with advancing their own revolutionary program. Their efforts were painting the Scottsboro case red, the complaint ran, when Black was enough of a burden to bear. The Communists were putting into their own coffers the funds raised for defense, it was charged, without proof and without any regard to the mounting expenses both of the defense and the public campaign that were never fully met. It did not seem to occur to these critics that only a radical and revolutionary initiative could arouse the mass indignation that would save the boys from execution, while the liberals dragged their feet and dillydallied.

In the South the NAACP had no support from the white moderates and won to its side only the stand-pat Black leaders, as in the Ministers Alliance. In the North it was alienating its own middle-class and professional base by its attack on the ILD. Leading Black journals—like the *Chicago Defender*, the largest in the nation, and the prestigious *Baltimore Afro-American*—urged support for the ILD. Feelings ran high when the NAACP denied the floor to Mrs. Patterson at its national convention in Pittsburgh. Oscar De Priest, the only Black in Congress, was the kind of leader welcomed by the NAACP. Together with officials of that organization, he signed charges against eight members of an audience who had heckled William Pickens at a meeting in Chicago, as a result of which they were sentenced to six months.

Later, De Priest toured the South to warn Blacks against the danger of Communism, but in the end all such efforts served only to discredit the NAACP further. By mid-July, as the *Baltimore Afro-American* put it, the NAACP was “beaten” and was “without clients.” Nevertheless, it struggled on stubbornly and hopelessly to the end of the year.

Joseph Brodsky came to Chattanooga often in connection with the case. He was an experienced and resourceful lawyer who had handled many labor and political cases. A “movement” lawyer in every sense of the word, he kept his door always open to give counsel and advice. He was jovial and outgoing, and his plump body shook in laughter easily. We looked forward to his visits all the more because he loved food and loved still better preparing it. He was a splendid cook. During his visits he allowed for a day of relaxation, in which he went to market, loaded up with victuals of all kinds, and brought them to our rooms. He spent hours meticulously preparing the meal, dicing up the ingredients with his pudgy but nimble fingers. The local organizers were invited to the great feast. Joe glowed with joy over our enthusiastic appreciation. Later, during the trial at Decatur, he invited the newsmen to a giant steak dinner in his apartment. With soldiers on guard outside against threatened mob action, he turned out steaks one after another, each done to specification.

Joe was aware in a general way of the tremendous obstacles to be overcome in the Scottsboro defense. General Chamlee, of course, had a more practical and intimate knowledge of these difficulties. But it did not take long for Joe to experience the hard reality.

He had his first taste of Southern racism early in the case when he came South in June to argue motions for a new trial. For the first of these hearings in Fort Payne, Alabama, Lowell Wakefield and I drove into town early in the day, while Brodsky and Chamlee proceeded by train from Chattanooga. If feelings were to run high at the hearing, we would be on hand to drive Brodsky back to Chattanooga while Chamlee returned by rail. On arriving at the courthouse, Lowell and I found about a

hundred whites gathered on the lawn, and a smaller group of Blacks on one side. We mingled with the whites and tried to converse with them, but they proved sullen and uncommunicative.

The benches in the courtroom were jammed, but we did manage to find places in back of the defense counsels' table. Blacks were standing in the rear, by the wall. The initial formalities were without incident until Brodsky arose to register an objection. He spoke in his natural booming voice. As his "I object" rang out, the courtroom audience rose as one man, pressing toward the rail. We could hear the muttered threat, "Get that Jew lawyer from New York." The judge transferred the hearing to chambers, and the courtroom was cleared.

The situation looked critical, to say the least. Lowell pushed his way through the crowd to bring the car around to the back entrance of the courthouse. I waited in the corridor for Joe to emerge from the judge's chamber. When he came out I rushed him to the rear door, shoved him into the car and we "sped" off in our old Dodge, which could do no more than forty miles an hour. I was at the wheel, Joe in the back, and Lowell on the front seat beside me. I noticed him open the flap of the side pocket where we had stored an old army .45 revolver and a small .22. As we drove as fast as our old car could go along the road leading to the Tennessee border, some forty miles from Fort Payne, I noticed in the rearview mirror a row of cars following us. They blocked any car that tried to pass them on the narrow two-lane highway, but they did not seek to pass us. As we crossed the Tennessee state border, I saw the cars turn around, some five or six of them, and head back. They were full of Blacks—a security escort to see us safely on our way! Joe let out a triumphant roar and boomed, "Stop at the first restaurant you see."

Judge Hawkins denied the motion for a new trial. Joe Brodsky argued the appeal before the Alabama Supreme Court, contending the defendants did not have a fair trial, had inadequate counsel, and suffered from the systematic exclusion of Blacks from juries. In March 1932 the court upheld the verdicts against seven defendants and granted Eugene Williams a new trial because he was a juvenile at the time of the alleged crime. (Roy Wright, the other juvenile, was not convicted at Scottsboro,



it will be recalled, because of the hung jury in the case, although he remained in jail.) The first break in the case came in December of the same year. After hearing arguments by the eminent constitutional lawyer Walter Pollack, who had been retained by the ILD, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the Scottsboro verdicts on the ground of inadequate counsel, ignoring the other two issues raised by the defense. New trials were ordered and a change of venue was obtained.

#### NOTES

1. Quoted in editorial, *Southern Worker*, April 11, 1931.
2. *Jackson Sentinel*, April 23, 1931.
3. Quoted in editorial, *Southern Worker*, April 18, 1931.
4. Unfortunately, due to the publicity, Yokinen, a noncitizen, was later deported. But before that he did fulfill his obligations and was readmitted to the Party.
5. *Southern Worker*, November 22, 1930.
6. *Southern Worker*, April 18, 1931.
7. Quoted in *Southern Worker*, June 6, 1931.
8. His letter is reprinted in *Southern Worker*, May 2, 1931.
9. *Southern Worker*, June 13, 1931.



# 7

## The Decatur Trial

The new trials were to take place in the Morgan County Courthouse in Decatur, Alabama. Haywood Patterson was the first of the Scottsboro defendants to be retried. Proceedings opened on March 27, 1933, at about the time Hitler came to power. Judge James E. Horton presided. The Decatur trial was the first in which the case for the defendants was adequately and fully presented, the frame-up completely exposed.

I returned to the South to cover the trial for the *Daily Worker* and the *Federated Press*, a left-wing labor news service. My daily reports appeared under the byline of "Special Correspondent." Fortunately, I retained among my papers the original accounts as they were written on the spot, and before they were altered by the editors. Most of these were handwritten in the courtroom as the trial went on, others typewritten in my hotel room at the end of the day. They were sent through the telegraph office set up opposite the courthouse for the convenience of the press, and the originals were returned every morning. They now serve to recall to mind my own direct impressions of that crucial trial.

The Morgan County Courthouse, set back under trees, was fronted by a wide expanse of lawn. There stood the traditional memorial statue of a Confederate soldier, with the inscription: "This monument is erected in the memory of those who offered their lives for a just cause, the defense of state rights." The

monument was a fitting symbol for what was to take place in the courthouse.

On the eve of the trial I moved freely, engaging townsfolk in conversation about the approaching court battle. It was known that the trial would open with the defense challenge to the all-white jury system. Everyone acknowledged freely that Blacks did not serve on juries. As a Decatur school teacher told me, "It just isn't done and hasn't been done in the last sixty years." A court official of Jackson County, of which the town of Scottsboro is the seat, confided: "We don't consider niggers fit for jury service." A Decatur storekeeper said, "No nice, respectable, decent nigger would want to get on a jury."

It was taken for granted that the boys were guilty and should suffer the extreme penalty. A man in work overalls, who said he farmed nearby, was outspoken: "They should burn. If they don't, we'll mob them. They'll never get out of here alive." The defense lawyers were cursed as "Russian Jews," "Jews from New York," or "nigger lovers who ought to be hung."

Some were more restrained. A local businessman held that the trial at Scottsboro had been fair and impartial and hoped the defense would not try "anything funny," because "we are going to stick by the letter of the law." When I tried to draw out an educated middle-class Southerner, he said, "I was born and raised in the South. Is it necessary for me to say anything else?" A local doctor, trying to explain his race bias, said, "It's just in my blood. I can't explain it. That's the way it is." It was from people such as these that the venire of one hundred for the trial jury was to be drawn. There may have been white people with a different approach, but I did not meet them.

And yet Morgan County was not in the plantation, Black Belt region. Of its 46,000 people, only one-fifth were Black. The land was farmed for the most part by small tenant farmers. Illiteracy was lower than usual in the Deep South: 4.6 percent for white, 23.4 for Blacks. Decatur, the county seat with a population of 16,000 of whom 3,000 were Black, had some industry. Its silk mill employed mostly young white women who were paid from 84 cents to \$1.50 a day, and the mill worked only two or three days a week. About fifty Black workers were employed in the

cotton seed press at \$1.50 a day, and Blacks were also employed at a stave mill. Unemployment was severe. The railroad shops, which had been an important source of jobs, were closed down. Some 6,000 had just applied for a federally financed road construction project, of whom 1,500 were hired at a dollar a day.

As a precaution, thirty national guardsmen had been called in from Hartsnelle, some thirteen miles away. I interviewed their captain, John W. Burleson, a trim, youngish figure in his dapper uniform. He was a building contractor who came from a wealthy landed family. He had an open mind about the trial, he said. He was not certain whether the trial at Scottsboro had been fair, in view of the threatening mob. But he was certain that the new trial would be fair: if the boys were proven innocent they should go free; if guilty "they should get what's coming to them." As we talked, Jacob Burck, the *Daily Worker* artist who had come down for the trial, drew a flattering picture of the captain, and gave it to him. He became more confidential, recalling his days in the North as an actor, and comparing his own "enlightened" views on race with those of the "rednecks." "I have worked five hundred niggers and treated them fine," he boasted.

He would not agree that Blacks were mistreated. He put it this way: "If the nigger knows his place and keeps it, we will keep ours. If he treats us right, we will treat him right. If he is good, we will take care of him." Only "irresponsible elements" were threatening to assault the jail and lynch the boys, he asserted, particularly those from Huntsville, the home town of the two women. He was worried lest they provide the impulse and organization for mob action. Would he order his men to use their weapons? He was bound to uphold the law, he replied, with a harried look.<sup>1</sup>

By nine o'clock on the opening day of the trial the courtroom was packed, and some three hundred whites milled around on the lawn. Off on the side were about one hundred Blacks, men and women. Captain Burleson glanced toward them repeatedly and assured the reporters, "They are all local niggers and they are good ones, or we wouldn't have them around."

The patrol did not deliver the defendants until two that afternoon, having traveled a circuitous route to avoid interference. As

the cars drew up, the crown surged across the lawn to the line drawn by the guardsmen. Roy Wright, the youngest, led the way, followed by the others in blue overalls, manacled by the wrists in pairs. Samuel S. Leibowitz, the prominent trial lawyer engaged by the ILD, stepped forward to greet Roy Wright, in full sight of the crowd. "Did you see that!" exclaimed an amazed white standing next to me. "He went and shook hands with the nigger!" With a score of soldiers in front and back, the boys were marched through the crowd into the courthouse.

The first week was taken up with the jury challenge, based on the Fourteenth Amendment. There were three separate challenges. The first was to the Jackson County grand jury that indicted them, the second to the Scottsboro trial jury that convicted them, and the third to the jury roll of Morgan County from which the venire and then the jury for the new trial were to be chosen. The defense wanted to place the systematic exclusion of Blacks from jury service clearly and indisputably on the record to serve as a basis for appeal to the higher courts. The prosecution, led by Alabama Attorney General Thomas G. Knight, tried to prevent such a clear record by claiming that Blacks were disqualified for reasons other than color. They were balked by their own jury officials, who had been called as witnesses by the defense.

One of the thirty-five witnesses called from Jackson County was James S. Benson, editor of the Scottsboro *Progressive Age*, a misnomer if there ever was one. He admitted that he had never seen or heard of a Black as a juror in his county. Did he know of any Negroes fit to sit on juries? Leibowitz wanted to know. The editor replied, "I know some niggers are intelligent, as far as niggers go," and added: "The nigger has not been trained, I don't think their judgment can be depended upon. They have not made a study of the law. The nigger doesn't have character. They all steal."

J. H. Stewart, a forty-eight-year-old member of the jury commission of Jackson County, did not remember seeing or hearing of any Black on the jury roll. Asked if he ever had the occasion to exclude Blacks from the jury roll because they were not qualified, he replied, "No, that has never been discussed." J. E.

Moody, chairman of the county jury commission, could give no clear account of the qualifications required for jury service.

Then occurred the first great dramatic moment of a trial full of such moments. A number of Blacks from Jackson County who met all jury qualifications had volunteered to bear witness for the defense, facing danger to life and livelihood. The first to testify was John Sandford, a plasterer living in Scottsboro. In a tense courtroom, in response to calm and systematic questioning by Leibowitz, he established his qualifications as a juror and testified that neither he nor any other qualified Black had ever been called for jury service.

Knight arose to cross-examine the witness. His face was flushed with anger, his short, wiry body taut as a wound-up spring. He pointed his finger at Sandford, and began, "John . . ." Leibowitz was on his feet in a flash. "Call my witness *Mister* Sandford," he demanded. Knight rebounded stunned, and the courtroom heaved a collective gasp. I am not sure Leibowitz realized the full significance of his demand. He had reacted as an alert lawyer normally would to incivility to his witness. But in the Southern context this was a sharp challenge to the established mores of race relations. A Southern white did not call a Black "Mr." or "Mrs." nor by any title. Knight cried defiantly, "I'm not doing *that!*" Thus it remained throughout the trial. The defense addressed Black witnesses by their titles and full names, the state by their first names only. The state said "nigger" or at best "nigra," the judge settled on "nigra," and the defense said "Negro," as was the civilized custom at the time. Thus were the two sides differentiated from the very beginning, in terms of plain humanity and respect for human dignity.

Other fully qualified Black witnesses came from Jackson County to testify they were never called for jury service. The defense brought in affidavits from others to the same effect. If the state refused to admit that Blacks were systematically excluded, the defense declared, it was ready to bring every man in that county into court to prove it. As this point Judge Horton dismissed the motion to quash the indictment.

When the trial of Haywood Patterson was called, the defense moved again to quash the indictment on the ground that no

Blacks were included on the jury roll from which the venire for the trial jury was to be chosen. The defense had been flooded with requests from many Blacks in Morgan County to be called as witnesses. Among these were ministers, doctors, teachers, and businessmen. The judge ruled that twelve would be permitted to testify. Henry J. Banks, 55, a local tradesman—"Henry" to the prosecutor—sent Knight reeling, red as a turnip, when he refused to answer insinuating or insulting questions. The Reverend W. J. Wilson—college graduate, school principal, and Baptist minister—faced the attorney general's threatening forefinger and in astonishment heard him ask, "Do you by any chance happen to belong to the Communist Party?" He added, "I mean to challenge the fitness of this man for jury service." Wilson informed the court that he was a Republican.

Dr. Frank J. Sykes, a Decatur dentist and a graduate of Howard University, presented a list of 125 Blacks eligible for jury service who had never been called. Other Black witnesses submitted similar lists, containing a total of more than four hundred names.

Dr. N. E. Cashin, a Morgan County physician and graduate of Phillips-Exeter Academy and the University of Illinois, testified he had never been called for jury service. Subpoenaed by the defense, neither Sheriff Bud Davis of Morgan County nor Captain Burleson of the national guard could recall a single Black serving on a jury. Heated objections were raised by the prosecution, supported by the judge, when the defense made the point that Mr. Banks, as one of the few Black voters in the county, was certainly fit for jury service, considering the obstacles that had to be overcome for a Black citizen to vote.

When the state still refused to concede systematic exclusion despite the volume of evidence presented, Leibowitz said he would subpoena the entire jury roll. Judge Horton ordered the tome containing fifteen hundred names brought into court. Arthur J. Tidwell, one of the three county jury commissioners, was forced to call off all the names he knew, all of whom turned out to be white. On cross-examination, Knight asked Tidwell to name a leading Black citizen of Morgan County. He answered, "I don't know any such." Asked if there was a single Black in



the county qualified for jury service, he replied, "Not that I know of." As expected, Judge Horton overruled the defense motion, but he did concede the defense had made a *prima facie* case of exclusion. The main objective had been obtained. For the first time as far as I know, the systematic denial of the civil right of Blacks to serve on juries, in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, had been conclusively registered in a court.

The issue went far beyond the challenge to the jury system alone. It reached into the entire complex of the social structure of the South. It threatened the central theme of the legal cover used to preserve that system, as inscribed on the monument to the Confederate soldier on the courthouse lawn. The *Birmingham News* said as much editorially:

Whether the obviously punitive amendments (13th, 14th and 15th), set up in the heat of passion against the South immediately following the war between the states, shall remain inflexible at this late date, to the obliteration of the principle of state rights, is a matter of more interest to the South than to any other section of the country.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, it did not strike the editor that "at this late date" it was despicable to characterize the amendments as "punitive," and to suggest under cover of "state rights" that they be applied flexibly in the South. The position was stated more simply and directly by the editor of the only newspaper in Limestone County, adjoining Morgan, in a conversation with me. He had been a farmer, had served twice in the state legislature, and was also a teacher in the all-white grade school. Once Blacks were allowed on juries, he said, we would have Reconstruction all over again—"uppity niggers and Black domination." The vote would follow jury rights "and the next thing you know you'll have is social equality. I have nothing against niggers, I like them—if they know their place and keep it." Each state should be allowed to decide whether or not to observe the Fourteenth Amendment, he held, just as the question of beer is left to each state. That was certainly flexible enough to please the *Birmingham News*.

Those were not the only reactions. “This is greater than Ghandi and the untouchables in India,” a Black doctor told me in the privacy of his living room to the rear of his office. He was a tall, husky man, animated by the events in the Decatur courtroom. “There has not been much trouble between the whites and Negroes in this town,” he said. “We have ‘kept in our place’—but don’t misunderstand me—without scratching our heads and bowing down before white folks. Of course, this *is* the South and we are *niggers*.” His eyes shone brightly as he recalled time and again how Mr. Banks had told the attorney general, “I refuse to answer that question,” and how Knight had recoiled like a rubber ball. He laughed with delight as he imitated the dignified, potbellied jury commissioner Tidwell squirming in the witness stand and trying to avoid any admission that Blacks were excluded from the jury roll. He slapped his knee with his broad palm, chuckling in glee, as he described the attorney general turning turtle when Leibowitz demanded he call the Black witness “Mr.” “They tell me the Reds are doing this,” he said. “As long as they do this I am with them. I feel that those boys are going to get off, and if anyone tries any monkey business we are ready for them.” He turned up the cushion of a sofa to reveal a gun.

On a free court day during the jury challenge, I visited the defendants in the Decatur jail, escorted by Captain Burlison. Jacob Burck came along to draw their portraits.<sup>3</sup> The jail was in back of the courthouse, an ancient two-story red brick structure. It was so insecure and unsanitary that it had not been used for white prisoners in the last two years. Every morning the boys were marched to the side entrance of the courthouse, a distance of some thirty yards, marched back to court for the afternoon, and then in the evening back again to jail. They were guarded by soldiers, front and back. Scores of spectators, including Blacks, always gathered along this short line of march. National guardsmen stationed at the jail told us of the complete change in the bearing and spirit of the prisoners as soon as they left the jail door. After spending two hours with them in the jail we understood better why they felt more at ease and self-confident as soon as they emerged.

We entered the jail through the living quarters of Sheriff Bud Davis. When the door to the jailhouse was opened we were assailed by an acid stench, a mixture of waste matter and antiseptic. With its stone slab floors, dank and stuffy, the prison seemed like a medieval dungeon. The boys were the only inmates. They were lodged on the second floor in a barred cell block, with a narrow corridor around it. Within the cell block were six individual cells with bunks. The light from the small windows across the corridor barely penetrated. In the center of the block was an uncovered toilet for common use. The dirty cream paint on the walls had peeled, and bugs of all kinds and sizes roamed about. When we first caught sight of the youths they were attempting to clean out a mattress.

We stopped short in horror before the door to the cell block. Opposite it, in clear view of the prisoners, was an old gallows. The rings for the rope could be seen on the crossbar, and the trap door, we were told, still worked. The gallows were last used in 1926 when Alabama abolished legal hanging. Against the wall by the gallows was a large, grotesque painted wood carving of Mary and the child Jesus. It was completed by a Black prisoner while awaiting execution. He imparted to the drooping figure of the Black mother a deep melancholy, while the child reached out eagerly to life.

On our plea that Burck could not draw the portraits through the bars, Captain Burlison agreed to let us into the cell block. The lock was jammed, and only after considerable difficulty was the turnkey able to open it. I recalled the fire on a Georgia chain gang where Black prisoners roasted to death when the guards could not or would not unlock the door to the cage on wheels.

At first the boys were reticent about letting Burck draw them. "Are you from the local paper?" inquired Haywood Patterson. We explained we were from New York and friendly to the defense. "No Southern paper would print our pictures, anyway," one of the boys said. Whatever suspicion remained was dispelled when they saw the finished drawing of Patterson. There was no mistaking the truthful and sympathetic portrayal. They crowded eagerly around the drawing, and were convinced we meant well. As the artist drew each one, I talked with the prisoners.

How were they treated in prison? They had been held in five jails during the past two years. "We liked none of them best," said Andy Wright. "This is the dirtiest we have ever been in. We want to get out of here." They had counted every day—two years and five days. They still bore scars from beatings by sheriffs and prison guards at the time of the first trial and in subsequent transfers. Their treatment improved as the campaign for their freedom grew, Patterson remarked. He seemed the most perceptive and articulate of the youths. He told how the ILD had succeeded in obtaining their transfer from the death cells at Kilby Prison. It had also won for them the right of prisoners awaiting appeal, such as exercise, family visits, and mail. They were hopeful. They had followed with glee the bold challenge to the jury system, and were confident their innocence would be proved in court. They admired the heroism of the Black witnesses, and were taken by the warmth of the local Blacks who sent them gifts of cigarettes, candy and other delicacies.

Roy Wright showed me a note he had received from a girl with whom he had exchanged a few words through the jail window across the corridor:

Dearest Friend:

I am writing you a few lines to let you know I haven't forgot you and never will forget you because I really love you.

The youngest, Roy Wright and Eugene Williams, were trying to make up lost time in reading and writing. Their youthful vigor burst into laughter, and the others cracked jokes as we talked. They had formed themselves into a chorus and sang spirituals. The guardsmen stationed at the jail encouraged them to sing to relieve the tension, which was greatest when the court day was over and they were returned to their cells. They knew full well the hostility all around them—they saw it in the courtroom, in the eyes of the whites who lined the way to and from the courthouse each day, and in the remarks of others who came to look them over through the bars.

The sheriff had given the danger of escape as his reason for requesting national guardsmen. If the jailhouse was so easy to

break out of, it was also easy to break into. The boys talked of their first night there. No one got a wink of sleep, as they paced nervously around the block. They tried the bars, stamped on the floor, examined the wood to see how easily kindled it might be. The distance to be scaled from the ground outside to the corridor windows would be ten feet, they guessed.

They had good reason to be worried. By the end of the first week of heated court argument on jury exclusion, the illusory peaceful exterior began to dissolve. The Patterson trial was to open on Monday. On Saturday, threats of violence against the defendants and their lawyers were heard among the market crowd gathered in Decatur from the surrounding countryside. There was talk of the high cost to Morgan County of a long trial and how it could be cut short by "you know how." At Paint Rock, defense photographers taking pictures at the scene of the arrests were menaced by a mob. A group of some fifty or so from Scottsboro threatened to execute their own sentence should the jury by any chance acquit Patterson. More militia were called in and on Friday night Judge Horton ordered a guard placed around the Cornelian Arms Apartments, where the defense attorneys were lodged. Over the weekend Decatur police arrested three young New Yorkers who had come to witness the trial as observers for the National Students League, a radical intercollegiate organization. Among them was Muriel Rukeyser, the poet. They were released and told to leave town. On Saturday night five floodlights illuminated the jail, bristling with armaments, and extra guards were placed.

It was in this tense atmosphere that the trial of Patterson opened on Monday morning. The jury had been chosen on Friday afternoon from an all-white, all-male venire. Three were farmers, two were mill workers, two small businessmen, and the rest office employees. They all swore they had an open mind and would not permit prejudice to interfere with their assessment of the evidence. In his address to the venire Judge Horton had said: "It would be a blot on any of you to let anything, any action of yours, mar the court's justice."

Some four hundred spectators crowded the courtroom, with Blacks segregated into a small section at the rear. The white

newsmen sat at a table to the left of the judge and we could see clearly all participants in the drama. To the right of us, in a corner, was a separate table for the Black correspondents of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* and the *Baltimore Afro-American*. In the center, to the right of the judge, were Attorney General Knight and the other state lawyers. At a table opposite us sat the defense counsel—Leibowitz, Brodsky, and Chamlee.

Behind them along the wall were the defendants. They lounged at ease, chatting softly and freely, and laughed heartily when the defense made a good point. In their corner was a window opening out on the lawn. Spring had come, and the leaves and grass were a fresh, rich green. Patterson, a rather lanky youth, sat by the window gazing often at the free, spring world outside. His mother sat by him throughout the trial. Within arms length stood two guardsmen, no older than he.

The overcrowded courtroom was hot and stuffy, clouded with tobacco smoke that the overhead fans did little to dispel. Judge James Edward Horton was a tall, raw-boned man, with rugged features, about fifty years old. He had served in both the Alabama House of Representatives and in the State Senate, and had been a circuit judge since 1923. Judge Horton presided in a quiet manner, rarely raising his voice, leaning far over the bench to catch the words of a witness, or occasionally stepping down to follow vital testimony more closely.

The first witness for the prosecution was Victoria Price. She was a slight woman, with sandy blond hair and features as hard as stone. Led on by Attorney General Knight, she told the same story as at the first trial in Scottsboro, with some variations. She claimed she was raped by six of the nine defendants, with a knife at her throat, while the others held her down. She was beaten on the head with a revolver, she testified, and thrown forcibly upon the hard gravel or chert on the floor of the gondola car. She needed little coaxing by Knight to embellish the tale with many lurid details.

On cross-examination, Leibowitz persistently and patiently questioned every point of her story, from the time she left Huntsville for Chattanooga, her companions along the way and on the freight, the details of the alleged attack, and the variations

from the story as first told in Scottsboro. A toy-train replica of the fateful freight had been set up in the courtroom by the defense. She was unable to identify the car on which she claimed the rape had taken place. She was in turn defiant and evasive. As the questioning hit home, she bit her fingernails, wrung her hands, and turned appealing eyes to Knight and the judge. Leibowitz was laying the basis for the witnesses who would prove her to be a liar. Both she and the prosecutor knew it.

The second state witness was Dr. R. R. Bridges. As at Scottsboro, he again testified that on examination he had found no evidence of the kind of bruises she would have suffered if beaten and thrown about as she held. He found some inactive sperm but was inconclusive as to whether the amount of sperm would definitely indicate a mass rape. On cross-examination, he agreed that the sperm might have remained from previous single intercourse, but added it was impossible to determine with certainty the circumstances under which it had been deposited. He also had to agree that sperm remains motile or alive for from twelve hours to two days in the vagina. Dr. Edward A. Reisman, a Chattanooga gynecologist, called by the defense, found it "inconceivable" that large quantities of motile semen would not be found in the vagina ninety minutes after the alleged mass rape.

It was strange that the co-examining physician, Dr. Marvin Lynch, who had testified at Scottsboro, did not appear for the state in the new trial. The reason for this was not known until much later, when Dan T. Carter's book, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, was published in 1969. In this book Carter tells of his interview with Judge Horton in 1966 and subsequent correspondence in 1969. At the Decatur trial, the judge had agreed in a private conference requested by the state attorneys after Dr. Bridges left the stand to excuse Dr. Lynch on the ground that his testimony would be repetitive. When the lawyers left, the doctor requested to meet privately with Judge Horton. Carter summarizes what transpired then, as told him by Horton:

The young doctor, who appeared unnerved and agitated, went straight to the point. Contrary to Knight's statement, said Lynch, his testimony would not be a repetition of Dr.

Bridges' because he did not believe the girls had been raped. From the very beginning, said Lynch, he was convinced the girls were lying. Even Dr. Bridges had noted at the examination that the two women were "not even red." "My God, Doctor, is this whole thing a horrible mistake?" asked the stunned Horton. "Judge, I looked at both the women and told them they were lying, that they knew they had not been raped," replied the doctor, "and they just laughed at me." Shaken by the news, Horton urged the doctor to testify for the state, but Lynch—with a look of anguish on his face—replied, "Judge, God knows I want to, but I can't. Emotions were running high in Scottsboro," he said. "If I testified for those boys I'd never be able to go back into Jackson County." He had graduated from medical school less than four years before and he did not want to start over again, he said.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, what had transpired between Judge Horton and Dr. Lynch was not known to the defense. Step by step, by cross-examination of prosecution witnesses and testimony of its own, the defense attorneys developed the full story. The four Chattanooga boys had boarded the freight together. The other five, all from Georgia, were traveling separately. Shortly after the train left Chattanooga, a group of whites began molesting the Blacks and a fight broke out between them near Stevenson, Alabama. The whites jumped or were forced off the freight, except for Orville Gilley. He had tried to jump as the train was picking up speed but had been pulled back by Haywood Patterson, saving him from serious injury. A number of Blacks who had been in the fight also jumped off. The fleeing whites reported the fight to the station agent at Stevenson who telephoned Paint Rock, some forty miles along the way. When the train pulled up at the water tower in that town, armed deputies combed the train from engine to caboose, and rounded up everyone they found.

Victoria Price had claimed in her testimony that all the defendants remained on the gondola in which the alleged rape took place between Stevenson and Paint Rock. Defense witness Percy Riggs, a Black fireman on the train, testified that while standing



on the tender by the water tower he saw Blacks being taken by the deputies from four cars widely separated on a train of forty-two cars, and pointed out the cars on the toy replica in the courtroom. He saw the two women, dressed in overalls, climb out of a gondola and run toward the engine along the side of the train away from the station, where they were caught by the deputies. His testimony supported the defense contention that the women concocted the rape story to save themselves from vagrancy or other charges.

Other testimony revealed that the women had lied throughout. Price claimed she had come to Chattanooga in search of work and had spent the night before boarding the train at a rooming house run by a Calley Broaches. Beatrice Maddox, sister of the Wright brothers, swore she had searched for that boarding house but could find no trace of it. Attorney Chamlee testified that he had lived on Seventh Street, where the Broaches house was supposed to be, for twenty-five years. He had never seen or heard of Calley Broaches. She was never produced as a witness by the state.

Actually, Price had spent that night in the hobo jungle at the Chattanooga railroad yards together with a newfound companion, Orville Gilley, and with Ruby Bates and her companion, Lester Carter. The story was told by Lester Carter himself, the first surprise witness for the defense. While serving a fifty-day sentence on a road gang, he met Victoria Price and her boyfriend Jack Tiller, a married man, in the Huntsville jail. They had been convicted of adultery in January 1931, evidence of which had previously been offered by the defense but ruled out by the judge. In the same place he also met Ruby Bates, who came to visit Price. After their release, Carter and Tiller kept company with the two women. They spent the night of March 23 with them on a freight train in the Huntsville railroad yards, and planned a trip together. Tiller was to join them later. On the night of March 24, Carter and the two women hopped a freight for Chattanooga, where they spent the night in the hobo jungle. This confirmed the testimony of Dallas Ramsay and E. L. Lewis, who lived next to the hobo jungle near the Chattanooga yards. Lewis testified he had seen Price about four months before in the same

jungle, together with both white and Black men. Price had said she had never visited Chattanooga before.

Continuing his testimony, Carter said the three caught the freight to Memphis the following morning, accompanied by Orville Gilley, whom they had met in the jungle. Carter witnessed the fight between the whites and Blacks near Stevenson and testified he saw no knives or pistols in the hands of the Blacks. Together with the other whites, he jumped from the train and went along to report the fight to the stationmaster. He was taken by car to Paint Rock and then held in the Scottsboro jail for sixteen days, as a witness for the state. During the trial he was never called. He overheard conversations between Price and the white boys at Paint Rock and in the Scottsboro jail, in which the woman asked them to confirm her story to save her from a vagrancy charge. Gilley, who was called before the grand jury that indicted the Black youths, did not appear as a witness for the state at the Decatur trial.

After the Scottsboro convictions, Carter testified, his conscience troubled him, for he felt the boys had been framed. In his wandering around the country he met an itinerant minister in a hobo jungle in Arkansas, who urged him to reveal his story to the authorities. He tried to see Governor Roosevelt in Albany without success. Brodsky reached him about a month before the Decatur trial in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he was then living.

Patterson steadfastly denied he had ever seen the two women until they were all rounded up at Paint Rock. He told how they had been pestered by the whites and of the resulting fight. His co-prisoners, who were called to testify for the defense, denied the story told by Price. All remained firm under fierce cross-examination by Knight. When he asked Patterson, "Were you tried at Scottsboro?" he replied, "I was framed at Scottsboro." And so it went. Question: "Who did you see raping those girls?" Answer: "No Sir, I told you I didn't see any girls." Patterson was calm and collected throughout the ordeal. At one point he asked Knight, "You think I would save a white man and let him witness such a thing as raping a white woman?" His reference was to Gilley, whom he had pulled back from a dangerous jump.

It was brought out that Roberson was so seriously affected by venereal disease that he could hardly walk, let alone jump over trains, engage in a fight and then join the attack on the women. Olen Montgomery was entirely blind in one eye and had only ten percent vision in the other. They did not take part in the fight and remained in widely separated cars throughout the journey.

The grand climax of the trial came when the defense announced another surprise witness. Attorney General Knight had been wondering aloud over the whereabouts of Ruby Bates, with pointed glances at the defense lawyers. His worst fears were now confirmed. Ruby Bates walked up the aisle, erect and trim in a gray suit. She was accompanied by Mrs. May Jones, who explained from the witness chair that she was a social worker in Birmingham. Dr. Charles Clingman, minister of the Church of the Advent in that city, had asked her to bring Ruby Bates to the trial. The latter had been directed to him by the Reverend Harry Emerson Fosdick of New York.

A heavy silence hung over the courtroom as Ruby Bates took the stand. She denied that either she nor Victoria Price had been raped. The Black lads had not even come into the gondola where they were. In response to Leibowitz's questions, she related the events preceding and during the freight ride, essentially as told by the Black youths and the defense witnesses. Victoria Price had gotten her to support the rape story at the Scottsboro trial to avoid vagrancy charges. The enraged Knight failed to shake Ruby Bates's testimony. His bulldozing was so fierce that the defense moved at least three times for a mistrial.

Tracing her recent wanderings, Ruby Bates said she left Huntsville for Montgomery on February 27 of the previous year in the company of another woman and two men. She had been working in a textile mill two nights a week for \$1.10 a night, taking in washing and sewing on the side. At Montgomery a man gave her some extra money and she proceeded to Chattanooga. From there she went to New York, where she worked for a time as a domestic. Seeing Fosdick's name in the paper, she went to him with her story about a week before the trial opened.

All the evidence was now in. The state had failed to produce any substantial support for the story of Victoria Price. The

defense had clearly shown her to be a liar. In their summations, the state lawyers sought desperately to discredit the devastating testimony of Lester Carter and Ruby Bates by drawing upon all the wellsprings of prejudice in the South.

Solicitor H. G. Bailey, who had been the prosecutor at the Scottsboro trial, said of Victoria Price, "She don't come down here dressed in New York clothes like Ruby Bates." The jury was to believe her story because "she stayed clear of sinister influences from New York." Pointing to "that crowd" at the defense table, he exhorted, "They've come down here to obstruct the course of justice in this court."

Bailey was like a lamb compared to Solicitor Wade Wright of Morgan County, who declaimed and ranted like an old-fashioned revivalist. He referred to Carter as "Carterinsky"—"the prettiest Jew you ever saw, moving his hands thataway. That's Mr. Brodsky in him." He worked up a high rage against Brodsky for trying to "buy justice" by providing Carter and Bates with new clothes. "Ruby Bates could not understand everything they told her in New York because some of it was in Jew language." In a roaring peroration he asked the jury, "Are you doing to declare for justice bought and sold by Jew money from New York?" The audience responded, as at a revivalist jamboree, with "amens," "yees" and "noes." Objecting often, the defense lawyers accused him of attempting to instigate a pogrom against them.

Opening briefly for the defense, Chamlee tried as best he could to dampen the flames of prejudice aroused by Wright. He was Southern-born, he recalled, reared in Georgia and Tennessee. His forebears had fought in the Confederate army. Yet, like the rest of the civilized world, he was shocked at the Scottsboro verdict, for no one could believe the story told by Victoria Price.

Leibowitz spoke for two hours Friday afternoon and another two hours Saturday morning. Highly emotional when he denounced the Jew-baiting of the state attorneys, he proceeded to a calm, detailed and logical consideration of the testimony. Victoria Price is the kernel of the state's case, he declared, and if she is not believed, there is no case. Point by point, covering the entire gamut of events, he broke down her story, showing her to

be a perjurer. "This is a contemptible frame-up, a cock-and-bull story," he declared. He closed with the Lord's prayer.

His presentation was so all-inclusive and convincing that at the press table it was felt he might have turned the tide. Even I, who should have known better, wired: "When he was finished it was evident that he had made a deep impression on the audience in the courtroom which had followed him attentively. . . . He had also visibly impressed the jury."

Attorney General Knight had the last word. Anti-Semitism having been exploited to the full by the preceding state lawyers, he concentrated on the old standby of prejudice against Blacks. "Was I unfair," he asked, "when I did not put a nigger on the stand to corroborate the words of a white man?" Pointing his finger at Patterson, he called him "that thing over there." He described Carter as the "hobo talking with his hands." He passed off Ruby Bates's flat denial that any rape had taken place with, "Yes, she sold out lock stock and barrel for a coat and hat and God knows what else."

At 12:45 P.M., Saturday, April 8, Judge Horton completed his charge to the jury. He instructed the jurors to disregard all appeals to race prejudice and sectional hatred. They were to decide only one issue, whether or not Haywood Patterson was guilty of raping Victoria Price, on the basis of the evidence submitted during the trial. They were not to convict unless they were convinced of his guilt beyond reasonable doubt. The credibility of both Victoria Price and Ruby Bates as witnesses was affected by their character, the judge told the jury. "Much prejudice had come into this case not only from far away but from home," he said. "I would willingly forego anything that might happen to me and I am sure you feel the same way. I want to see the good name of my native land upheld."

Again, hope was lifted. I wired: "Coming after the ignorant ranting of Wade Wright yesterday and appeals again to prejudice by Knight in his final summation, it is doubtful whether his [Judge Horton's] studiously fair charge will overcome the impression already made." But I added, "There is a strong possibility of a hung jury."

The jury began its deliberations at 1:30 Saturday afternoon. The impression that the jurors might really be deliberating came from their request for more exhibits and trial records at about three o'clock that afternoon. At 3:40 the jury filed into the courtroom to obtain further instructions on what evidence should be considered from the first trials at Scottsboro. When the jury reached no decision by 11:30, Judge Horton had them sequestered for the night.

That evening the newsmen held a poll among themselves. What will the verdict be was the first question. Six responded "mistrial" and two "guilty." The second question was: How would you vote if you were on the jury? Vote: six, not guilty; two, don't know.

A better indication of how the jurors were actually thinking was provided by happenings outside the jury room. Tension rose from day to day as the defense relentlessly broke down Victoria Price's story. On Monday afternoon, as she was being cross-examined, a man rose in the courtroom shouting, "Let's get Leibowitz!" He was searched for arms by the soldiers and escorted outside. The upper corridor of the courthouse was cleared and more soldiers were stationed in the courtroom.

A more serious threat came Tuesday afternoon. The defense had its own scouts in Decatur and nearby towns, Southern white Communists. One of these reported that a gathering of some two hundred, led by the KKK, was taking place at another part of town. Its intention was to march on the courthouse at seven that evening when the defense lawyers were meeting with their clients. We were told that Sheriff Bud Davis urged the crowd to disperse, warning them the soldiers would shoot if they attempted such action. The sheriff denied it when questioned by correspondents. But that night emergency consultations took place between Captain Burleson and Attorney General Knight, and additional security measures were taken. The following morning, after consultation with Burleson and Knight, Judge Horton withdrew the jury to make a statement. He had once before, at the opening of the trial, calmly warned against violence. This time he spoke with heat and anger. Leaning forward, his body taut, he warned: "You will have to kill guards before

getting the prisoners. If there are any meetings in this town where mob action is discussed the men should be ashamed of themselves and the citizens should condemn them. . . . Any men attempting such action against the prisoners or lawyers must expect to forfeit their lives.”

Following the judge’s plea, I interviewed Captain Burleson. He admitted the meeting as reported to us had taken place and that the situation was serious. He said the plan for mob action was to divert the national guard to another part of town, leaving the jail poorly protected. Any action will be nipped in the bud, he declared. “The jail is an arsenal. We have plenty of ammunition and we are going to shoot.” In connection with my wired reports of this incident, Frank L. Palmer, Eastern Bureau Manager of the Federated Press, sent me the following message:

Congratulations on the fine way you have handled the Decatur Story so far. I am especially glad that I have grown to feel more and more confident as your wires have come in that I can trust you not to go off half-cocked. As for example: one of the best newspapermen down there sent up a story that the jail was attacked. Unfortunately the *Daily [Worker]* accepted his story. But that is neither your fault nor ours.

The newspaperman that Palmer referred to was John L. Spivak, an ace reporter who was covering the trial for the Associated Negro Press. He also supplied occasional feature stories about Decatur to the *Daily Worker*. His book *Georgia Nigger*, an investigative report on peonage and slave labor in the plantation country, had just been published, and he was to become famous within a few years for his dramatic exposures of the Nazi Fifth Column in the United States. Perhaps from his early training as a journalist on the tabloid press, he had a marked propensity for sensational reporting. His story had the mob actually marching on the jail to lynch the boys, and the *Daily Worker* gave it preference over my own account, running it on the front page under a screaming headline.

The tension continued, despite Judge Horton’s severe warning. Our scouts reported regularly to the defense lawyers at the

Cornelian Arms Apartments, where the attorneys for both sides, the star defense witnesses, and the reporters were housed. I shared living quarters there with Jack Spivak. The reports from the scouts were communicated immediately to the judge, the attorney general, and the captain of the guard. They, of course, had their own sources as well. With the eyes of the world on Decatur and Alabama, they were determined to prevent violence. If there was to be a lynching, it was to be strictly legal.

It was an eerie feeling, after a stormy court session, to see the lawyers from both sides conversing politely on the lawn, which was patrolled by the soldiers. It was on such an occasion on Thursday evening that one of the scouts motioned Brodsky away from the group and whispered in his ear. A meeting had taken place in Huntsville, home town of Victoria Price and only thirty miles away, where it was proposed to drive into Decatur for mob action. Additional guards with riot guns were thrown around the Cornelian Arms. It was an armed camp, with as many as sixty guardsmen and deputies on duty. Knight pleaded with the reporters to await developments before writing the story. The Huntsville mob was dissuaded, but on Friday came another report that plans were afoot among the Scottsboro crowd to attack the jail at night while creating a diversion at the Cornelian Arms.

These threats were being reported daily not only by Jack Spivak and myself, but also by Raymond Daniell of the *New York Times* and by other press correspondents. As a result, the governor, the attorney general, and the judge were being flooded with telegrams from all over the country demanding full protection for the prisoners and the defense attorneys. These were often delivered in the courtroom. From where we sat at the press table we could see Knight grow angrier with each telegram. Livid with rage, he slammed them down on his desk and soon, without even opening them, he crumbled them in his fist and threw them on the floor.

The authorities were also worried about the marked change among the Blacks as the trial proceeded. Daily as many as a hundred Blacks gathered at the courthouse. At the Sunday church services after the week of jury challenge, passionate appeals on



behalf of the boys were made, despite efforts to persuade moderation. Local Black citizens came forward boldly to testify in the jury challenge. Leaders of the Black community were saying openly they would resist any mob action against the nine youths and their lawyers.

On Saturday, while the jury was “deliberating,” Decatur was crowded with farmers and people from nearby towns who had come to hear the verdict. The day before, crosses were burned in Huntsville and other places. The two hardware stores in Decatur had sold out their ammunition, refusing to sell to Blacks. Brodsky had been threatened directly three times since Wade Wright’s tirade. “At this time,” Leibowitz declared in court, “every man connected with the case is in mortal danger.” The *Birmingham Post* had characterized Wright’s summation as “an open appeal to racial prejudice,” citing particularly his call to the jury to “show them that Alabama justice cannot be bought and sold by Jew money from New York.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, on Saturday afternoon while the Patterson jury was still out, Judge Horton refused to grant a change of venue for the remaining trials. He called the case of Charles Weems. Tall and slender in his overalls, Weems stood beside the three defense lawyers and listened without a trace of emotion to the reading of the indictment handed down by the all-white Jackson County grand jury two years before.

At 10 the following morning, Sunday, April 9, two years to the day after the Scottsboro verdicts, word came that the jury had reached a decision. Everyone rushed to the courtroom from the Cornelian Arms. Haywood Patterson was already there, seemingly unconcerned as he lounged on a chair smoking a cigarette. While waiting for Judge Horton to arrive, we heard laughter from the jury room. The jurors were still laughing as they filed into the courtroom in the presence of the judge. Such a mood, the newsmen whispered hopefully, seemed entirely incongruous with a verdict of death. The judge received the written verdict from the chairman of the jury, paused over it a moment and then read: “We find the defendant guilty as charged and fix the punishment at death in the electric chair.”

We learned later that the jury had voted unanimously for a guilty verdict within a few minutes after it entered the jury room. The delay was caused by a juror who held out for life imprisonment.

I was overcome by the verdict and found it almost impossible to sit down at my typewriter in the Cornelian Arms and send the last dispatch. I knew full well the depth of race hatred in the South, or I thought I did. Yet I found it inconceivable that racism could so defile a human being as to deprive him of all rationality and humanity. But it had happened and I had to face it. I finally sat down at my typewriter and began:

Twelve bigoted Southerners exhaling the stench of the slave market walked into the Decatur courtroom today and upheld the system of oppression of the Negro.

As I was writing this, T. M. Davenport, a Southerner covering the trial for the Associated Press, walked into my room and glanced over my shoulders. "You can't send that!" he cried in dismay. His own reporting from Decatur, more widely published in the nation's press than any other, had always been favorable to the prosecution.

#### NOTES

1. In 1976, when Clarence Norris was seeking a pardon to vindicate his name, among many messages of support was one by Burleson. He wrote to the Alabama Attorney General and the Board of Pardons: "After hearing the evidence I was convinced at that time, and I am still convinced, that Clarence Norris and all the other co-defendants in that case were completely innocent. I have often hoped that the opportunity to help these men would come my way" (Clarence Norris and Sybil D. Washington, *The Last of the Scottsboro Boys: An Autobiography*, New York: Putnam, 1979, 237).

2. *Birmingham News*, editorial, as quoted in my dispatch to the *Daily Worker*, dated March 30, 1933.

3. Jacob Burck later became the editorial cartoonist for the Chicago *Sun-Times* group of newspapers, winning a Pulitzer prize in 1940; he died in 1982.

4. Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, Louisiana State University Press, 1969, pp. 214–15.

5. *Birmingham Post*, editorial, as quoted in my dispatch to the *Daily Worker*, dated April 8, 1933.

# 8

## Epilogue

A few days after the verdict, on April 14, 1933, a packed Rockland Palace in Harlem heard “Eye-witness Reports of the Decatur Trial.” Among the speakers were Brodsky, Burck, Spivak, and I. Huge street demonstrations took place in New York and elsewhere to protest the verdict. Five thousand participated in the “Scottsboro March” to Washington, which also presented a civil rights bill to Congress.

That terrible verdict at Decatur was not to stand. Ten weeks after it was handed down, on June 22, 1933, Judge Horton convened court in his home town of Athens to consider the motion for a new trial. Without waiting to hear the arguments of the defense lawyers, he read a carefully argued statement, reviewing and assessing all the evidence in the case. The evidence, he concluded, “greatly preponderates in favor of the defendant.” He set aside the jury verdict and granted the defense motion for a new trial. This was an act of great courage and moral rectitude. He knew full well it meant the end of his career on the bench. He was withdrawn from the case, and was defeated in the Democratic Party’s primary election the following year. In the same election, chief prosecutor Knight was nominated for lieutenant governor of Alabama. In that single-party state, it meant defeat for Horton and the election of Knight. After his defeat, Horton joined the legal staff of the Tennessee Valley Authority; he died at the age of ninety-five in 1973.

Judge Horton's heroic action was a sign that the tide of struggle to save the Scottsboro boys was turning in their favor, although the struggle was to continue for many years. The last of the Scottsboro "boys" was not released until May 1950, nineteen years after their first trial. It was not until 1976 that Alabama granted a full pardon to Clarence Norris, then 64 years old and the last of the Scottsboro victims still known to be alive. The pardon relied upon the findings of Judge Horton in 1933—forty-three years before!

The dismal legal record reflects the obduracy of the Southern establishment, which resisted concessions to plain justice at every turn. With the obviously biased and imperious Judge William W. Callahan presiding, Haywood Patterson was subjected to a third trial and Clarence Norris to a second toward the end of 1933 in Decatur, and both were again sentenced to death. In the argument on jury exclusion, it was proved that the names of Black citizens had been forged on the jury roll. After the Alabama Supreme Court upheld the verdicts, the U.S. Supreme Court, on April 1, 1935, ordered new trials for Patterson and Norris. But this time the reversal was based on the systematic exclusion of Blacks from juries, a signal victory for the defense and civil rights.

That ruling was easily circumvented. New indictments were issued by the Jackson County grand jury, which took the precaution of including a lone Black among its fourteen members. Twelve Blacks were included in the venire of one hundred for the fourth trial of Patterson, which opened January 20, 1936, in Decatur, before the same unbending Judge Callahan. Seven were excused on their own request, and the others were struck by the state with peremptory challenges. The all-white jury once more found Patterson guilty, but fixed punishment at seventy-five years although the state had asked for death. This was the first departure from the rule that once found guilty of raping a white woman, a Black could expect nothing less than a death sentence. But in the third trial of Clarence Norris, July 1937, the verdict was again death. The state did not demand the death penalty for Andrew Wright and Charley Weems, whose trials followed.

Instead, the jury gave Wright ninety-nine years and Weems seventy-five years.

The cases of the remaining Scottsboro boys were scheduled to follow immediately. The state dropped the charge of rape against Ozie Powell and charged him instead with assault upon a deputy, for which he received the maximum sentence of twenty years. Then, surprisingly, the prosecution dropped all charges against the youngest, Roy Wright and Eugene Williams, and against the almost totally blind Olen Montgomery and the diseased Willie Roberson. Obviously, the State of Alabama was trying to dispose of the Scottsboro case by condemning some and freeing others. But how could the finding of guilt be sustained against four when on the same evidence five were cleared of the rape charge? In any event, after almost seven tortuous years in the shadow of the electric chair, the first four Scottsboro youths were free.

The U.S. Supreme Court refused to review Patterson's fourth conviction. In 1948 he escaped from a prison farm and went to Detroit. He remained free when Governor G. Mennen Williams of Michigan refused to grant extradition to Alabama. After the Alabama Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of Norris in June 1938, Governor Graves commuted it to life imprisonment. But the governor reneged on his promise in private negotiations with prominent Alabama citizens and representatives of the Scottsboro Defense Committee to pardon all still in jail. Another five years elapsed before parole was granted Weems in November 1943, and then to Wright and Norris the following January. The latter two were sent back to prison for violating parole by leaving Alabama. In 1946 Powell was paroled and Norris was given another parole. Finally, Andy Wright was paroled in 1950.

It was a slow and reluctant retreat by the racist establishment over many agonizing years. The groundwork that forced the retreat was essentially laid during the first two years, from Paint Rock to Decatur, by the Communist-inspired defense movement. After the first Decatur trial in 1933, and particularly after Judge Horton's reversal, the atmosphere in the white South slowly began to change. For the first time, some leading Alabama newspapers expressed "reasonable doubts," or found the death

sentences “unwarranted.” A few prominent whites even ventured to say publicly that the boys were innocent. Some bold souls who joined in the defense activities lost their positions, like Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein of Temple Beth Or in Montgomery and Kenneth E. Barnhart, a sociology professor at Birmingham-Southern College. Mrs. Carik Speed and her daughter Jane, of an old Montgomery family, were forced to leave the state.

As the Great Depression wore on, and during the popular upsurge of the New Deal era, new movements arose in the South, involving whites as well as Blacks. A modern radicalism made itself felt for the first time, and white liberals began to emerge from the woods. This is not to say that the miasma of racism was as yet dispersed to any serious extent. But new pressures were created that contributed to the forced retreat of the state in the Scottsboro case.

Changes were also taking place in the leadership of the defense movement. After the first Decatur trial, Leibowitz turned against the ILD, blaming its activities for losing a case in court that by all the rules of evidence and juridical practice should have been handily won. Compromises were reached allowing him to continue in the case and provisions were made for the pending legal actions in the courts.

At the end of 1935, when the Communists were shifting to a Popular Front policy, the split between them and the NAACP was mended. A united Scottsboro Defense Committee now included, besides the ILD and the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union, the League for Industrial Democracy (an arm of the Socialist Party), and the Methodist Federation for Social Services. Allan Knight Chalmers, a prominent New York minister active in civil liberties causes, was named chairman. The liberals were now effectively in the leadership of the Defense Committee. Attempts were made to form an Alabama Scottsboro Defense Committee among moderates and liberals, but without success. These refused to affirm the innocence of the boys, which was basic to the defense position. They did participate, however, in the long, stretched-out negotiations with the governor.

No doubt the Communists were sectarian in their concept of the United Front in the early stages of the struggle. There was some justice in the complaint of liberals and others that a United Front with Communists was impossible when the Communists insisted that all participants accept their position. If the Communists had followed a broader, more cooperative policy of alliance, the defense movement might have rallied more liberal and intermediate forces, perhaps even among Southern whites. But it is also likely that participation of timid liberals in the guidance of the campaign would have acted as a damper on the militancy needed to arouse mass indignation and action. The greater truth is that the Communists did initiate the mass crusade that saved the boys from death, legal or extralegal, and created the ground for a successful defense. And we may well ask: Would the Scottsboro youths have spent so many excruciating years in prison if the mass drive had not abated as the liberals took command of the defense?

In the larger perspective, it must now be recognized, the Scottsboro mass defense marked the beginning of important changes in the South. It was the first major civil rights crusade since Reconstruction. The movement thus inaugurated, and continuing into the forties and fifties, burst out in the tumultuous civil rights struggles of the sixties that won notable victories.

The first book telling the defendants' side of the case was *Scottsboro Boy* by Haywood Patterson and Earl Conrad, published in 1950. It is Patterson's moving story of his trials and his prison life. An adequately fair and scholarly history of the Scottsboro case appeared only in 1969, in the midst of a renewed and vigorous battle against segregation. Dan T. Carter's *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* is a well-researched and well-written account, showing the roots of the frame-up and the nature of the contending forces. Though the book has an anti-Communist strain, the author credits the Communists with saving the nine Black youths from the electric chair. The book inspired the NBC movie, *Judge Horton and Scottsboro Boys*, which was shown in 1976 to nationwide television audiences and received several awards. In one of those bizarre ironies of history, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, by now

married, sued NBC for slander because the film referred to them as prostitutes at that time! Ruby Bates died two days before Clarence Norris received his full pardon. Victoria Price died in 1982.

Shortly after our return to New York in the fall of 1931, we experienced an extension of the Deep South condition closer to home.

Isabelle went to Snow Hill, Maryland, for the ILD to investigate the case of Yuel Lee, a Black farmworker accused of murdering a white farmer's family of four. Snow Hill is on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, a former slave plantation area where Frederick Douglass was born. Here conditions were characteristic of the Deep South. A confession had been forced from Lee by third-degree methods. Three attempts had been made to lynch him, and he had been removed to the Baltimore jail for safekeeping. Isabelle assumed the name of Helen Mays and as a cosmetic saleslady called on homes in the area, gathering what evidence she could that would be useful to the defense.

I read in the morning newspapers of November 5 alarming accounts of what had happened the day before in Snow Hill. Bernard Ades, an ILD lawyer from Baltimore, had come to argue for a change of venue to that city. Judge Joseph L. Bailey refused to recognize Ades, although he had a signed retainer from Lee. "No representative of an organization of that kind has standing in this court," the judge declared. During the lunch recess Ades and his party, including Isabelle, were threatened as they walked to a restaurant, where service was refused them. On leaving the courthouse in the afternoon after another unsuccessful attempt to be recognized by the judge, Ades and his group were met by a mob of some five hundred with yells of "Lynch them!" They were pummeled and hit by various objects as the sheriff and several deputies attempted to lead them through the crowd to Ades's car. Unable to reach the car, they were given refuge in the courthouse jail and were later taken to Wilmington, Delaware, where they boarded a train. In the meantime, on the complaint of the mayor, Isabelle was charged with carrying a concealed weapon.

When Isabelle came home shortly after I read the newspaper accounts, she was pale and exhausted and had only a few minor bruises. She did have a weapon, she confessed, the same .22



automatic we possessed in the South: "I kept it in my purse open with my hand on the gun so that everyone could see it as we battled through the mob."

Nothing came of the gun charge, but mobs continued to dominate Snow Hill into the next day, while Governor Albert C. Ritchie refused to take any action. The trial was transferred to Cambridge, also on the Eastern Shore, where the jury gave the death sentence after deliberating thirty-two minutes. A reversal was granted because of irregularities in the selection of the jury. At the second trial, the few Blacks on the jury panel were eliminated by peremptory challenges in true Alabama style, and Lee was again sentenced to hang. Governor Ritchie rejected all appeals for commutation of sentence.

The Southern experience had a profound influence upon my own work. For the next few years I was deeply absorbed in research on Southern and Black history. I had learned from my time in the South that the roots of racism in the United States and of the so-called "Negro Question" were to be found there. I wrote a number of pamphlets and books on that theme, trying to provide in a scholarly way the historical and economic-social foundation for the controversial Communist program of Black liberation.

The years 1930 and 1931 were the pioneering time of Communism in the Deep South. There had been previous probes, such as Foster's tour of some Southern cities during the election campaign of 1928. The Communist-led Gastonia, North Carolina, strike of 1929 provided radical leadership for the first time to an important segment of the white workers in the leading industry of the South, but barely touched on the conditions of Blacks. Only with the beginning of organization in Birmingham and the founding of the *Southern Worker* were the problems of the Deep South seriously confronted.

There was a temporary lull as the first battle-weary Communist organizers were withdrawn. Tom Johnson had to leave after one year of exhausting work brought him to the verge of a nervous breakdown. His place was taken by Harry Jackson for a time. And earlier, George Powers had been replaced by Jack Carson in the Carolina district. By the end of 1931, fresh people

from the North and other regions replaced most of the initial organizers. Of crucial significance was the emergence of native Southerners as part of the leadership.

The last issue of the *Southern Worker* put out by Isabelle and me was dated September 5, 1931. For the first time since its founding, a few issues were skipped when the new editor came in. He was Harry Wicks, an erstwhile associate editor of the *Daily Worker*. But he did not last long. Elizabeth Lawson tried to keep the paper going, but it folded early in 1932. Publication was resumed as Vol. III, No. 1 on May 20, 1933, with a Birmingham dateline, under Elizabeth's editorship using the name of Jim Mallory. It appeared irregularly on the average of once a month until November 1936. Then, still using the *Southern Worker* masthead, it was published in small-magazine format as the official organ of the Communist Party of the Alabama-Tennessee district from December 1936 to September 1937.

The Communists showed it was possible, despite formidable obstacles, to challenge from within the peculiar Southern system with its heritage from slavery. They advocated Black freedom and unity of white and Black in the citadel of racism. These pioneers left a significant imprint on Southern society and its way of life. Their initial efforts opened the way to new mass movements on a much broader scale, culminating in the civil rights upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s.

# Appendices

## A. THE WORKERS (COMMUNIST) PARTY IN THE SOUTH

**William Z. Foster**

The Workers (Communist) Party has made a beginning at mass work in the south. The work in the south has been begun by the sending of several organizers into the field, by touring of election speakers, by the issuance of special literature, by the placing of the Party on the ballot in a number of southern states, etc.

It was my part, in this work, to address election meetings in Louisville, Birmingham, New Orleans, Atlanta, Norfolk and Richmond. The meetings in Louisville, Birmingham and New Orleans were the first Communist open mass meetings ever held in the respective states of Kentucky, Alabama and Louisiana.

Manifestly, the south presents many difficult problems of a major character. These must be thoroughly analyzed, a program outlined for them, and the Party organized to solve them. It is highly important that the various organizers, speakers and active comrades, participating in the southern work, carefully compile and present their experiences to the Party. The present article is a contribution in this sense.

The new proletariat in the south is being developed under conditions of hardship and poverty. It is one of the basic tasks of

our Party to organize this increasingly important section of the working class and to lead it in the big struggle it is bound soon to carry on against the employers and the state. Trade unionism is weaker in the south than in any other section of the country. The great armies of workers in the coal, textile, steel, lumber and agricultural industries are completely unorganized.

It is idle to expect the ultra-reactionary southern trade union bureaucracy to lead such a fight, or that the old unions can be used as our chief organizational basis, although we must also work in these unions. To organize the unorganized masses and lead them in struggle is the task of the left wing, led by our Party and the T.U.E.L., and the organizational program must be founded upon the establishment of new industrial unions in the basic industries.

The role of the left wing as the organizer and leader of the working class of the south, is further emphasized by the increasing importance of the Negro workers in southern industry, which stresses our need to organize them. Our Party is the only force that can organize and lead the Negro masses in real struggle. The Republican and Democratic Parties are manifestly the enemies of the Negroes. The trade union bureaucracy, accepting the whole Jim Crow system of the exploiters, persecutes and oppresses the Negroes by barring them from the unions, discriminating against them in industry, and supporting their political disfranchisement and social ostracism. In Atlanta, for example, a typical situation exists. Negroes are not even allowed to come into the Labor Temple. And how little the Negroes can look to the Socialist Party for leadership is exemplified by the fact that Norman Thomas in his election tour through the south, never even mentioned the Negro Question.

### ***The Fight against Jim-Crowism***

The situation in the south, in addition to offering continuing more favorable opportunities for our Party to come forward as the leader of the working class, also progressively facilitates its activities as the organizer and defender of the Negro race. The bitter injustice of the Jim Crow caste system is forced upon one

at every turn in the south. This outrageous thing, ranging from studied insults to the Negro race, rank discrimination in industry, political disfranchisement and social ostracism, to lynching and other forms of terrorism, confronts one on all sides; special railroad cars for Negroes, "colored" restaurants, waiting rooms, libraries, schools, living districts, elevators in office buildings, etc.

It is the historic task of our Party to lead the fight against the organized persecution of the Negroes. This is a revolutionary struggle. It must be carried on under the slogan of "full social, political and industrial equality for Negroes," and "the rights of self-determination for the Negroes." This is necessary not only for the liberation struggle of the Negroes, but for the general revolutionary struggle of the whole working class.

***Need of a Party program for the south***

The Workers (Communist) Party must give active and immediate attention to the development of a special program of work in the south. The Party must establish a southern district; it must get organizers in the field; it must carry through an aggressive campaign to recruit the Party membership and to establish in all the southern centers branches of our Party, the Y.W.C.L., and the auxiliary organizations. The weakness of Party's activities generally in Negro work must be drastically overcome.

Together with this organizational program must be developed a political program for work in the south. We must have concrete demands for the Negroes, and for the workers as a whole based on the actual situation. We must outline definite campaigns to organize actions in the various industries. The decisive factor in all our work in the south is our policy on the Negro Question. We must realize from the outset that it is the basic task of our Party to lead a militant struggle for and with the Negroes. All our activities there, all our successes and failures will turn around this central fact.

In the south we must be vigilantly on our guard to combat all tendencies in our Party to "soft-pedal" the Negro question, and

to compromise with Jim Crowism. This has not been done sufficiently. We must fight resolutely against white chauvinism, because it is exactly in the south, where the fire of race prejudice is the hottest and the revolutionary initiative of the Negro most repressed, that the danger of chauvinism is the greatest in our Party and in the ranks of the workers generally. We must liquidate all such tendencies as the ignoring of the Negro Question in our public speeches, failure to draw Negroes into open propaganda meetings or proposals to form separate white and Negro branches, etc. Those workers who are not willing to join a common branch with Negroes and participate with them in Party activities are not yet ready for membership in the Workers (Communist) Party.

Especially must our Party combat and liquidate the idea of building our Party in the south primarily of whites on the theory the "if you get the white workers, you've got the Negroes." This erroneous theory is simply a crystallization of white chauvinism under a mask of left phrases. It denies the revolutionary role of the Negro. It leads to the acceptance of Jim Crowism and implies the abandonment of all struggle for and with the Negroes. It is the working theory of the socialists and the A.F. of L. fakers. It has nothing in common with a Communist program. Our Party must reject and eradicate it completely. The central task of our Party in the south is to unite the Negroes directly and to lead them in the struggle. Only in this way can our Party fulfill its historic task.

*The Communist*, November 1928. (Abridged.)

## **B. CREDO OF THE *SOUTHERN WORKER***

### ***What Do We Stand For?***

This is the first number of the *Southern Worker*, which is to be published regularly every week by the Communist Party of the U.S.A.

The *Southern Worker* is the Communist paper for the South.

It is being published because the Southern workers and farmers need it and want it. The *Southern Worker* is the voice of the Negro and white workers and farmers of the South crying in united protest against the state of starvation, suffering and persecution to which they have been subjected by the white ruling class.

This is the first really workers' paper ever published below the Mason and Dixon line. It is the first Communist publication ever issued in the South. As such it will carry the Communist program to the white and black workers and farmers, pointing out the path to struggle, offering the militant and understanding leadership of the Communist Party to the millions of Southern toilers.

The *Southern Worker* is neither a "white" paper, nor a "Negro" paper. It is a paper of and for both the white and black workers and farmers. It recognizes only one division, the bosses against the workers and the workers against the bosses. In this class struggle the *Southern Worker* stands always, without exception, unflinchingly, for the workers. It is a workers' paper.

While fighting constantly for all the immediate demands of the workers and farmers, fighting for better conditions, we realize that the only way the workers can fully obtain their demands is through a proletarian revolution. Only by following the example of the Russian workers and farmers, who overthrew tsardom and set up their own Soviet Government, can we finally obtain our liberation. This is the final aim which will be obtained by the organized might of the toiling masses.

Never before have the workers of the South needed their own paper as much as now.

Thousands upon thousand are unemployed. And yet not a cent from either the government or the employers for the unemployed workers, although billions are spent for warships and armaments. The workers and their families are left to starve. And they do starve to death, victims of that dread disease of the South, pellagra, the disease that comes when there is nothing to eat.

The share-croppers and tenant farmers, “poor white” and Negro, face complete ruin. Many of the tenant farmers are losing their crops to the landlords because they cannot hang on long enough to harvest them. When a crop is finally raised, the farmer finds that the prices have been kept so low by the agents of the buyers that he cannot get enough money not only to pay off his debts, but to keep going at all. Potatoes and cabbage is now the only food for many of the farmers in the South.

Those who are “lucky” enough to get a job get miserably low wages, work long hours at a tremendous speed, and are never sure how soon they will be fired.

The Negro worker is the most oppressed worker in the South. His lot is worse than any. Kept jim-crowed at every turn, working at lower wages than the white worker, subject to lynching and persecution, he is kept a virtual slave by the Southern white bosses.

The *Southern Worker* is here to voice the rebellion against these conditions. It is here to serve as the tribunal for the demands of the Southern toilers. It is here to give them Communist leadership in their struggle.

As a Communist paper it realizes that the only way by which the Southern toilers can be victorious in their struggle is through firm and solid organization in militant unions, and, politically, in the Communist Party.

The unions we speak of are not the jim-crowed, weak-kneed unions of the American Federation of Labor. The Southern workers have had their experience with the A.F. of L. Too often have they been betrayed and sold out as at Elizabethton, Tenn., at Marion, N.C., at Anniston, Ala. We stand openly and solidly against the treacherous, boss-controlled American Federation of Labor, which is closely allied with the K.K.K., supports bosses’ candidates in the election campaign, cries for the blood of Communist organizers.

The unions we speak of are the militant, industrial unions of the Trade Union Unity League, which, like us, recognize only one division—the one between the bosses and the workers.



The *Southern Worker* stands unalterably for full social, economic and political equality for the Negro workers and farmers. This is one of its chief planks.

The *Southern Worker* draws the workers of the South closer to the workers of the North and all countries. It builds the strong bond of workers' solidarity. It brings to the Southern workers news of the Soviet Union, the only country in the world where the workers and farmers own and run the factories and farms and have their own government. It will make the Southern workers realize that they, too, must join in the defense of the Soviet Union, must defeat the war that is being planned against it by the bosses' government.

The *Southern Worker* is published from Birmingham, Ala., despite the reign of terror directed by the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, and supported by the A.F. of L. and the K.K.K. against the organizers and members of the Communist Party and Trade Union Unity League. That is a sign of our strength. Persecutions cannot drive us away.

We are here and will stay. Workers of the South, here is your paper. It is for all of us to write in. It is for all of us to spread and build. The *Southern Worker* will grow and expand with the struggles of the Southern workers.

Write for, spread and build the *Southern Worker*!

*Southern Worker*, Volume 1, Number 1, August 16, 1930. p. 1.

### **C. CALL FOR MASS CONFERENCE AGAINST LYNCH LAW**

**Issued by the Provisional Organization Committee for the  
South of the American Negro Labor Congress**

*To all Negro and White Working Class Organizations:*

*To All Labor Unions:*

*Greetings:*

The year of 1930 has already witnessed the brutal murder of 37 Negroes at the hands of boss-led mobs. With guns, with

torture, with the rope of the cowardly lynch mob, the white rulers of the South have this year surpassed their own bloody record in the savage murder of Negro and white workers who dared fight for their rights. In one week three Negroes were lynched in Georgia alone. Two more barely escaped with lives in Huntsville, Ala. Scarcely a week passes without another brutal killing of some working class fighter.

Lynch law is the answer of the Southern ruling class to the demands of the 2½ million Southern workers who are unemployed. It is the answer of our masters to any attempts of the white and colored workers to organize in unions for the struggle for better conditions and more wages in the shops and mines. It is their answer to the demands of the Negro nation for full equality with the whites.

The state and national governments, far from putting a stop to this reign of terror, encourage and condone it. Governor Graves, of Alabama, after the shooting down in cold blood of six Negro workers at Emelle, Ala., last July, offered a reward of \$300.00 for the capture "dead or alive," not of the white mob which did the killing, but of those Negroes who bravely defended their lives from the blood-thirsty mob. In the lynching of George Grant at Darien, Ga., September 8th, it was definitely proven that no lynch mob, but the jailer, who was supposed to guard him from the mob, actually shot the defenseless Negro down in cold blood in his cell.

Nor is lynch law used against the Negro workers alone. In Gastonia, white strikers were shot down by the bosses' gunmen. In Miami, Florida, a few weeks ago, a mob beat up and tarred and feathered a white worker because he advocated the organization of white and colored workers in unions on a basis of equality. In Alabama the organizers of the Communist Party receive death threats from the Ku Klux Klan and the police alike, and their bodies are burned in effigy by the murderous Ku Klux Klan. In Atlanta the boss men of the South are today trying to burn six workers, two Negro and four white, in the electric chair for the "crime" of organizing workers to fight against intolerable conditions.

This bosses' campaign of mass murder of the best fighters of the Southern working class can only be halted by the workers themselves. Only thru the building of a powerful organized mass movement of the Negro and white workers against Lynch law can an end be made to this reign of terror. To organize such a movement, to map out plans for the mobilization of the best forces of the Southern workers for the campaign against Lynch law, the American Negro Labor Congress has called a mass Conference of representatives of white and colored workers and working class organizations to convene in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in the Odd Fellows Hall, 124 East 9th Street, at 1 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 9th.

The American Negro Labor Congress calls on your organization to elect two or more delegates to this conference against Lynch Law and Bosses' Terror. Take up this call in the next meeting of your union, club, lodge or church and see that delegates are elected to represent your organization at this historic conference, where the Negro and white workers of the whole South will meet to plan the fight against Lynch Law, against Jim-Crowism, against all forms of racial discrimination, for full equality for the Negro nation.

Workers in the Shops and Mines! The American Negro Labor Congress calls upon you to organize Committees of Action in the shops, mills and mines, to mobilize the workers for the fight against Lynch Law. Get together with a few of your shop mates now; hold a meeting and elect delegates from your shop.

Down with Lynch Law!

Answer the murder campaign of the boss men with a mass conference of white and Negro workers representing thousands of Southern workers on November 9th, in Chattanooga!

*Southern Worker*, November 1, 1930.

#### **D. FARMERS OF THE SOUTH, FIGHT STARVATION!**

##### **Appeal by Communist Party**

Two ears of corn and 11 people to feed! This is the condition of one family of croppers in northern Alabama as reported by the

Red Cross. This is not an exceptional case. According even to the figures of the Alabama State Department of Agriculture there are today in the state at least 35,000 tenant families no better off.

150,000 men, women and children of Alabama are being slowly murdered by starvation and the State and Counties have not appropriated one single cent for direct relief of these starving thousands. As for the Red Cross, this putrid organization which thrives and grows fat on the starvation of little children, "reports" these conditions—and does nothing. Or, when forced to by the farmers themselves as in Arkansas, generously gives the sum of \$1.19 a month to each family, if the family is lucky.

**FARMERS OF ALABAMA AND OF THE WHOLE SOUTH—BOTH WHITE AND NEGRO FARMERS:** The time has come for action! Our families are being tortured, murdered by degrees, from lack of bread. And while we starve, the bankers, the big landlords, the supply merchants and fertilizer houses who hold our notes and contracts, grow fat on our misery. These people for whom we slave year in and year out will not help us. The County Government, which we keep up by our taxes, will not help us. The State Government, owned body and soul by the big bankers and mill and mine owners, together with the biggest of the landlords, will not help us. **NONE OF THEM WILL LIFT A FINGER TO HELP US HOLD OFF STARVATION UNLESS—WE CAN FORCE THEM TO DO IT!**

The farmers of Arkansas point the way. They were starving and they **REFUSED TO STARVE!** They organized together and in an armed march of 500 men and women, white and colored, **THEY GOT RELIEF.** Every farming community in the South where there is hunger and want can and must do the same thing.

**FARMERS OF THE SOUTH:** The Communist Party, the Party of the workers in the towns and the croppers and poor farmers in the country, calls on you to **ORGANIZE AND FIGHT FOR REAL RELIEF.** Call mass meetings in each township and on each large plantation. Set up **FARMERS RELIEF COUNCILS** at these meetings. Organize hunger marches on the towns to demand food and clothing from the supply merchants and bankers who have sucked you dry year after year. Organize mass demonstrations before the County Courthouses to demand

WORK OR BREAD from the County Government. Join hands with the unemployed workers of the towns and with their organizations which are fighting the same battle for bread.

ORGANIZE AND START THE FIGHT AGAINST STARVATION NOW. Write the Communist Party, Box 1813, Birmingham, Ala., for more information and advice on how to organize and start the fight.

COMMUNIST PARTY, U.S.A., DISTRICT 17

*Southern Worker*, January 24, 1931, p. 1.

### **E. SCOTTSBORO PARENTS STATEMENT**

*The following statement was issued by the parents of the Scottsboro boys when they left to visit the boys at Kilby Prison. The same statement was fully endorsed and signed by the boys in prison.*

This statement made in Chattanooga, Tennessee, May 14, 1931, after a conference with the relatives of the nine boys hereinafter named.

George W. Chamlee, of Tennessee, associate counsel, Joseph R. Brodsky and Lowell Wakefield, representative of the International Labor Defense, are to witness that Bernice Norris, sister-in-law of Clarence Norris, Ida Norris, mother of Clarence Norris, and Viola Montgomery, mother of Olen Montgomery, Mamie Williams, mother of Eugene Williams, Beatrice Maddox, sister of Roy and Andy Wright, Claude Patterson and Janie Patterson, father and mother of Haywood Patterson, and Josephine Powell, mother of Ozie Powell have this day ratified, approved and confirmed the contract and agreement heretofore made with the counsel of the International Labor Defense to make a fight to save the nine boys convicted in Scottsboro, Alabama, and now known as the Scottsboro Case, and we give them full authority to do and perform any and all things that they may deem proper or necessary in order to provide legal defense for the nine boys above mentioned.

We hope that outside organizations will not go into the jail or prison to try to persuade our children to disregard our advice in this matter. We fully appreciate all friendly co-operation but we condemn in unmeasured terms efforts of intermeddlers who have heretofore been interfering and sending out false reports about the case.

We appeal to all organizations throughout the world to cooperate with the International Labor Defense and with the attorneys we have selected jointly with the International Labor Defense in providing funds and assistance in helping to save our innocent boys from a most cruel and unjust punishment ever inflicted upon defendants in a court in the civilized world; and we want to thank our friends and the organizations who have been showing a friendly and financial interest in this case and while we can't thank them in person, we thank the organizations everywhere for their friendship, loyalty, solidarity and co-operations. We will see that our boys sign a similar statement so that once and for all the world may know that we are with the International Labor Defense and its present attorneys in this fight and will stay with them to the end.

Signed:

Claude Patterson  
Janie Patterson  
Bernice Norris  
Josephine Powell  
Viola Montgomery  
Mamie Williams  
Ida Norris

*Southern Worker*, May 23, 1931, p. 4.

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