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1960

American People's Movements:

THE SOUTHERN TENANT FARMER'S UNION

EDITED FROM TAPE RECORDINGS MADE BY
H.L. MITCHELL, CO FOUNDER OF THE STFU

I started to work on a farm at the age of 8 working in cottonfields, chopping and picking mainly. We also produced some strawberries and tomatoes. There was a lot of work involved in all. I have worked for as little as 50¢ a day for ten hours' work. . . That sort of experience was pretty typical. . . During the fall months I picked cotton. I always stayed out of school until the cotton picking season was over. . . after Christmas.

We lived in Ruleville, Mississippi, in the Delta country, for a time and I got my first experience there in making a sharecrop of my own. I was about fifteen years old and there was some land around the house. I arranged to make a sharecrop with (the landlord). . . I made a crop on these several acres of land, raised some cotton. That was in 1920. I recall I wasn't too successful. We had expected a good price. . . but it went down so low that we got less than ten cents a pound. All I got out of my year's work was a suit of clothes, and I didn't have anything else to go with it after I paid what I owed.

I got married. . . in 1926. My wife and I made a sharecrop. We worked all year and made \$385 for all that year's work. . . Then we moved to Arkansas in 1927, to the town of Tyronza. . . It is thirty-five miles west of Memphis. . . The land was much richer over there, but when I got there I didn't like the conditions. . . People lived and worked on very large plantations, and the conditions were much different from what they were in Tennessee on smaller farms. I decided not to make a sharecrop on an Arkansas plantation. . . so I went into the cleaning business. . . Most of my customers were people who lived on nearby plantations. I travelled around through the plantation country, getting business. . .

1000 Members in Tyronza, Arkansas

. . . In 1932, during the political campaign, we heard Norman Thomas. . . It was the first time we'd ever really heard anybody speak on Socialism. . . We decided that if we were going to do anything, we should organize. . . We probably had as many members in our Tyronza local as the entire Socialist Party has in the whole country now. The vast majority were sharecroppers. We must have had a thousand members down in that area of Arkansas alone. . .

Thomas said that he would raise some money to make a survey of conditions among sharecroppers in Arkansas and nearby states. A college professor at the medical college of the University of Tennessee in Memphis was selected to direct this survey. . . We found that the average family income was less than \$250 a year. . . This gave us a basis for organization of the union. We had facts about the conditions of the people, and we could talk with knowledge about what we were trying to do.

Blacks and Whites

The first (Union) meeting. . . was held on. . . the Fairview plantation some two or three miles south of Tyronza. . . That was the place where the seven Negroes and eleven whites met to form the organization. We didn't know what to call it at this time. We just called it "the union." . . Probably because of some of the educational work the Socialists did preliminary to forming a union, the sharecroppers were willing to forget their race prejudices or set them aside, and to unite and form one union. There was discussion as to whether there should be a union for Negroes and a union for whites. I remember one old white man who got up and said that he'd once been a member of the Ku Klux Klan. . . but that everybody was in the same boat in this fight here. Negroes were on the plantations and John lived next door to him, and the union should include both white and colored and fight for the rights of everyone.

Just Wanted Federal Benefits

. . . On July 13, 1934, the name Southern Tenant Farmers Union was selected. . . There was no intention at this time of. . . spreading the union any further than just Arkansas. We thought in terms of eastern Arkansas, where the large plantations existed, and that we'd help these fellows get their share of the government benefits. That was just about the extent of our thinking. . . There were social economic and race problems that needed solution, but none of us were capable of thinking them through at that time. . .

We realized that one of our chief problems in organizing was that most of the people didn't know how to read or write. . . (We) set up education classes in connection with the union and taught members of the union to read and write and also to "figure", as they called arithmetic. We were all doing the organizing work. . . We'd send word out that we were going to be there at a certain time and the sharecroppers would gather at the nearest church or school, or whatever might be convenient. They came voluntarily. Nobody even had to persuade them. You'd just announce that there was going to be a meeting there, and they'd all be there. We'd have meetings with five hundred or a thousand in attendance. Practically all of them would join the union. Our membership dues were a dollar a year, and if they had the money, they were asked to pay, but if they didn't, they'd just promise to pay and they would still be counted as members.

KKK Attacks

(In 1935) we had the first really violent outbreak against the union, its members and leaders, by organized groups of night riders. A newspaper reporter asked a plantation owner if this violence against the union was not a revival of the Ku Klux Klan and the planter said no, the Ku Klux Klan had a bad reputation, so they just called it the Nightriders. The home of E.B. McKinney was shot into late one night. Two of his boys were in the house at the time. . . A similar attack occurred when a group of the Nightriders appeared at the home of A.B. Brookins and his daughter was struck by a bullet. Brookins . . . was a cotton patch preacher who had the ability to get people to sing, and they would sing songs like. . . "We Shall Not Be Moved." The union members sang that song particularly in connection with the eviction notices. At some places we had eviction demonstrations. When the officers moved people's possessions out from the house, we put them back in after the officers had left. There were a lot of other union songs that were developed during the first 3 or 4 years.

For the first two years of the union's existence, I did not get any pay, other than the expenses I got for my gas and oil. Now and then someone would send \$5 or \$10 and say, "This is for your own use." . . It wasn't until 1937 that the union convention passed a resolution that I should be paid a salary of \$25 a week. Most of the time, though, we didn't have that so I wasn't paid.

First Picket in Washington

(In 1935) we made up a delegation to go to Washington. . . There were 9 men. We went to Washington, had some signs printed and we picketed the Secretary of Agriculture's office, Mr. Henry Wallace's office. This was the first time such a thing had happened in Washington.

Then, in the fall of 1935, we decided something must be done about the wages of cotton pickers. We called a meeting before the cotton picking season started and each union local sent a delegate to the meeting. . . We decided that the union would raise a demand for \$1 per 100 pounds. . . At that time cotton had just begun to open and wages were 40 and 50¢ per 100 pounds. . . The average picker would pick about 150 pounds in day's time. . . It was my idea that. . . nobody would go to work after the meeting. The committee decided differently and they represented all of our locals -- we must have had 25 or 30. They decided that the thing to do was for everybody to go to the fields and pick cotton

for the first two or three weeks and save money until they had enough to buy groceries, and then call the strike. That plan prevailed. . .

Strike Successful - But No Negotiations

Our system, used for the first time, was to have handbills printed and the delegates would take back several hundred copies of this handbill and then on a specified night, these handbills were distributed all over the plantations at the same time. The handbills were put on fence posts and telephone poles, barn doors, everywhere -- saying that a strike was on and to stay out of the fields. It was the most effective demonstration that could be imagined. In three counties where we had just a few members, practically all work stopped. . . The results of the strike was that the planters raised wages to 75¢ per 100 pounds, and in some places to \$1. There weren't any negotiations. There never have been.

Our membership leaped skyward. . . I think our 1935 report showed that we had 30,000 members enrolled. We held what we called a wage conference early in the spring of 1936 and decided that we would set wages for the planting and cultivating of cotton. We. . . decided that unless by May 18th the wages were raised, we would strike again. No one offered to pay the wage and we again called a strike. All sorts of things began happening. . . The plantation owners had by that time formed informal organizations in each area to fight the union. The local law enforcement officers were alerted and were prepared to arrest union members. Near the town of Earle, Arkansas, a group of workers started what was equivalent to a picket line and this picketing was forcibly broken up by a deputy sheriff named Paul Peacher. The men picketing were arrested, most of them were Negroes, and were sentenced to work on a privately owned plantation owned by Paul Peacher. . .

Nonviolent Marches

. . . A group of people who lived on the edge of the delta plantation area. . . took the lead in the strike. They organized a demonstration which they called the "Marches." They lined people up, with each man about 6 or 8 feet apart, forming a long thin picket line and they marched down the roads from one plantation to the other. . . This sharecropper kind of picketing was very effective. Our members told about how they began with possibly a hundred men, to start the day's march of 25 or 30 miles through the plantations. And when they came to a plantation where people were out in the cotton fields, the marchers would call out to the people at work, saying, "Come and join us." . . The marches were quite effective. There was no violence -- just people lined up, walking down the roads singing and calling on others to join them.

In the beginning, we never received any actual support from organized labor. . . The local labor people, for instance in Memphis, said the union could only lead to uprisings among the Negroes and that no one could organize a union of people as poor as the sharecroppers. . . It depends upon what one's own approach to the labor movement is. If labor is just a business operation, then the attitude of the trade union leaders toward sharecroppers and agricultural workers is correct because it will take a lot of money to organize and establish a strong union, and returns on the investment made will be slow in coming. I know that agricultural workers can be organized but actually it has never been tried in the U.S.A. Even today the attitude of the typical labor leader is that these people are too low on the economic scale to be organized. They can't be counted on to pay dues. . . immediately, so why should the labor movement invest its money. . .

The Disinherited

If the leadership really wanted to organize the unorganized, . . it could be done. It would also help if we managed to bring agricultural workers within the scope of the N.L.R.B.* However, I don't expect that will be done, nor will there be a minimum wage in agriculture, until there is an effective organization of workers. That has been the history of most of our social legislation. Until there is organization of the workers on the farms, we cannot affect the processes of government to any great extent.

One of the old Southern Tenant Farmers Union slogans we used 25 years ago was, "To the disinherited belongs the future." Perhaps it does. The past years have been rewarding. While I might do many things differently if they were to be done again, I would not trade my experiences for all the millions in the treasuries of all the big unions in America.

* National Labor Relations Board; 30 years later this has still not been done(ED.)



Photo by March of Time

H. L. Mitchell, Executive Secretary
STFU in 1936

FROM . . .

H. L. MITCHELL

• 1966 •

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