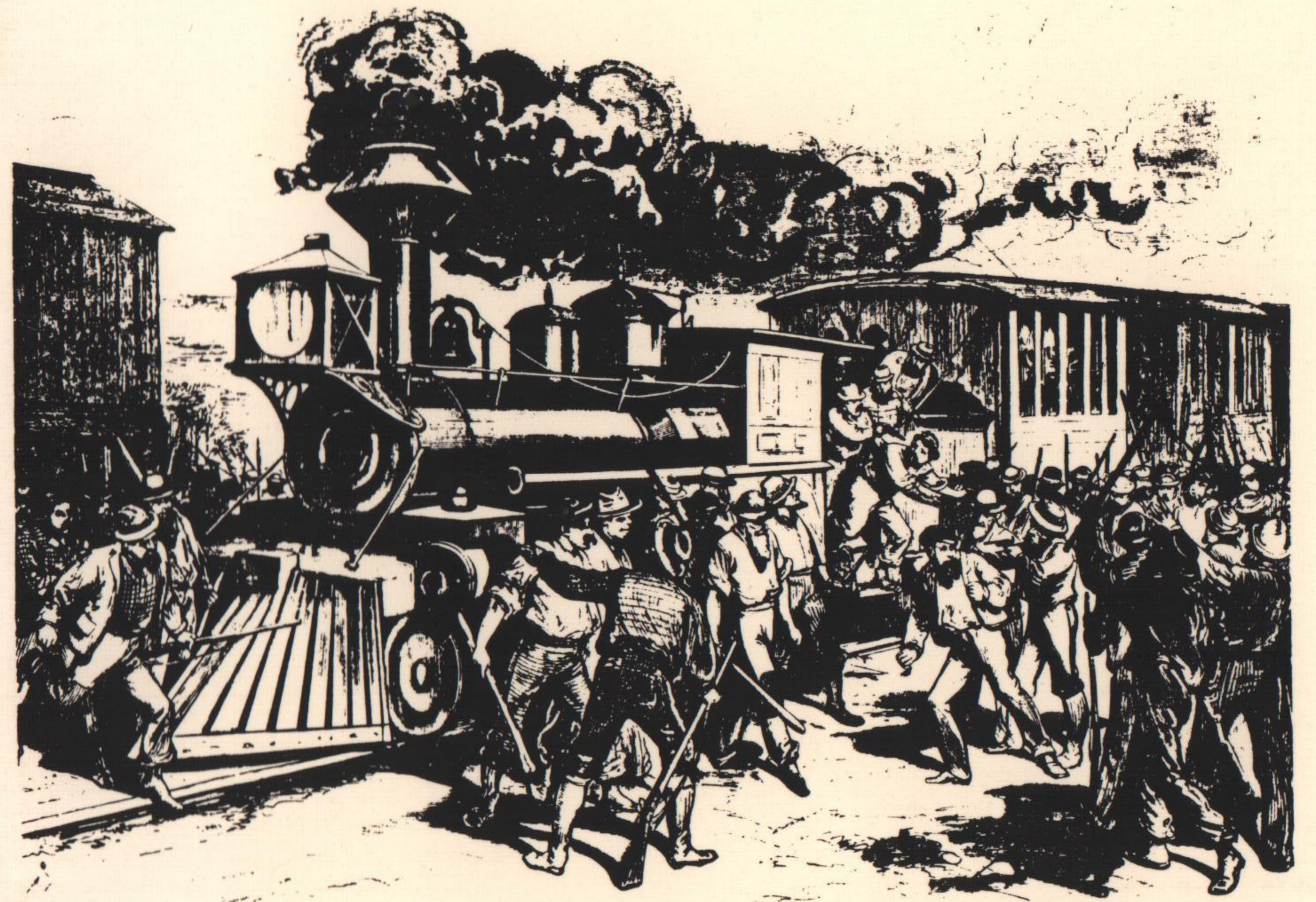


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# **the roots of class struggle in the south**



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**by ken lawrence**



This article is an edited and abridged transcription of a talk labor history by Ken Lawrence at a Labor Workshop on May 2-6, 1973. Revised and corrected, 1975.

# **the roots of class struggle in the south**

The answers are that the most unionized state is away.

The reason I start with that is that I want to draw a picture of the working class of the South a little bit different from the familiar one, which is Southerners as victims, Southerners as helpless, and so on. I think that's a picture that's useful to liberal politicians and businessmen who have certain designs on the South— which entail the working class being subservient to their ends, etc. But I don't think it's a very helpful picture of what's decisive about the South for workers—in terms of their ability to fight and win what they're after. What I think is decisive about the South, in the sense that we're interested in, is the tremendous unevenness of development.

That's reflected by the fact that West Virginia is the most unionized state in the country, and North Carolina is the least unionized state, and they're not very far apart. And they both are part of the Southern region, the region in which we are active. And so you have had over the years a kind of a split in the layers of the working class. In the South, workers have gotten themselves together and fought

**by ken lawrence**

This article is an edited and abridged transcription of a talk on labor history by Ken Lawrence at a Labor Workshop sponsored by the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) at Birmingham, Alabama, on May 5-6, 1973. Revised and corrected, 1975.

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Cover: The strike of 1877 began on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in Martinsburg, West Virginia. Engraving from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper courtesy of Library of Congress.

## THE ROOTS OF CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE SOUTH

How many people know which is the most unionized state in the United States? . . . the least unionized?

The answers are that the most unionized state is West Virginia and the least unionized state is North Carolina, with South Carolina less than two per cent away.

The reason I start with that is that I want to draw a picture of the working class of the South a little bit different from the familiar one, which is Southerners as victims, Southerners as helpless, and so on. I think that's a picture that's useful to liberal politicians and businessmen who have certain designs on the South—which entail the working class being subservient to their ends, etc. But I don't think it's a very helpful picture of what's decisive about the South for workers—in terms of their ability to fight and win what they're after. What I think is decisive about the South, in the sense that we're interested in, is the tremendous unevenness of development.

That's reflected by the fact that West Virginia is the most unionized state in the country, and North Carolina is the least unionized state, and they're not very far apart. And they both are part of the Southern region, the region in which we are active. And so you have—and over and over again we're going to see this kind of thing happening, where you have advanced layers of the working class (advanced in the sense that workers have gotten themselves together and fought together and won what they were fighting for) side

by side with the most oppressed layers of the working class in the whole country, black and white. This is the situation of working people in the South. And what this offers, more than any other part of the country, is a real explosive combination—on the one hand, an example of development, side by side with perhaps the greatest need for struggle and victory. And this, in turn, allows the concept of combined development, that is, where the most oppressed layers are capable of leaping over whole stages of development and appearing on stage with all the equipment that the most advanced layers have already achieved, because the example is right there before them.

So anyway this is not going to be the traditional picture of the South enumerating how poor it is, or something like that, but rather the peaks of struggle which have thrust the whole working class, not just in the South but throughout the country, forward.

### USING STATISTICS

I just want to add one more preliminary note, which is that ordinarily, statistical studies, which are largely sociological, are the place people begin in making these evaluations. And historically that's an excellent guide, and we will use it a great deal. But in periods like the one we're entering today, statistics become less a weapon, as they don't serve our immediate needs. In other words, in 1955, if you were trying to draw a statistical picture of the working people in the South, the 1950 census would give you a pretty good approximation of where you were five years later and the situation you were dealing with. In 1965, the 1960 census wouldn't have been as adequate because things

were changing more rapidly, especially urbanization and mechanization of agriculture, but it still would have been pretty close. But today, in 1973, things are changing so rapidly that the 1970 census is already largely outmoded in terms of providing the kind of information that we need. And for that reason among others, the historic picture, the sweep, and the similarities to past periods are a more decisive weapon to be put at the service of working people to see where we are now in comparison to similar periods in the past, and where we're going, and how to get there. And that's really the purpose of this work.

I want to give you an example of this business of where we are today, because it was quite a shock to me to find out. Just to run down a comparison, I'll take Mississippi, where I live, and compare it with the United States. Only about seven per cent of Mississippi's workers are engaged in agriculture, and that percentage is falling rapidly. These are statistics for non-agricultural employment in 1966. In the United States, mining had 1% of non-agricultural employment; Mississippi had 1.1%. Contract construction: the United States had 5.1%, Mississippi had 6.0%. Manufacturing: the United States had 29.9%, Mississippi had 31.9%. Transportation and public utilities: the United States had 6.5%, Mississippi had 5.2%. Trade: the United States had 20.7%, Mississippi had 18.8%. Finance, insurance and real estate: the United States had 4.8%, Mississippi had 3.4%. Services: the United States had 15%, Mississippi had 11.6%. Government employees: in the United States there were 17.0%, in Mississippi there were 22%. So you can see the United States has caught up with Mississippi.

And that's pretty much the general picture. There's

throughout the country no longer the image that many of us have carried around with us, of the South; and especially the places that have been traditionally the rural agricultural South are industrially and sociologically not very different any more from the rest of the country. So, again we can say that the picture we're drawing and the needs we feel are very contemporary; they're not backward, they're not retarded, but the situation we're confronted with in the South, at least as far as the nation's economy and political structure are concerned, are as advanced as almost any place in the country, and certainly as advanced as the country as a whole.

Now, in this presentation it's not going to be possible for me to be comprehensive in terms of telling you even all the things that I think are important in the history of labor in the South. And I'm going to try to cover what I think are a few very significant happenings that will illustrate, I hope, situations that are valuable as precedents for the kinds of things that we're going to be spending the rest of the weekend on, especially the question of fighting racism and the question of organizing the unorganized. So I hope nobody will be disappointed if I leave out their favorite strike or anything like that. I'm not trying to be comprehensive. This is a kind of introduction to study for anyone who wishes to pursue it.

Now especially in the South, it's really important to distinguish between the history of workers and the history of unions, even though most historians write them up as one and the same. They're not the same. And above all, they're not the same in the South. And the fact that historians usually don't make the distinc-

tion means that most labor history, as written, is pretty distorted. And you'll see examples of this. Ray Marshall of the University of Texas is today the recognized authority on Southern labor, after publishing a book a few years ago called *Labor in the South*, which is the most comprehensive book in recent times on the subject. And he's received platitudes from everybody, saying that it's the greatest thing. And because it's the only thing available, there's no question about it. It's got a lot of good information, and I recommend that people read it, but very cautiously.

#### BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

Marshall tells us that the first union in the South was the Typographers Union in New Orleans, founded in 1810. By 1863, the labor movement in the South was running behind that in the rest of the country. There were only 10 city labor assemblies in the United States in 1863, one of which was in Louisville, Kentucky, and the rest of the South didn't have any such institutions. But anyway, from 1810 up until the Civil War, unions were scattered, small and weak, but they were increasingly frequent and they were developing and growing. One of the earliest strikes was organized by workers at the Tredegar Steel Co., in Richmond, Virginia, where 200 white workers struck in 1847 when the company was preparing to increase its slave work force to more than 600 workers. Two hundred white workers struck to prevent that, but they lost.

And this brings us to the point that's the big problem in studying labor history as union history, which is that the bulk of the work force of the South was not free white workers but was African slaves who



Gordon, a Mississippi slave, freed himself and fought to free his people. On his first escape attempt he was caught by patrollers, flogged, and returned to his master. The next time he ran, he successfully escaped to Union Army lines, where this picture was taken, and became a soldier. U.S. Signal Corps photo, Brady Collection, courtesy of National Archives.

were working on plantations. And they weren't allowed to unionize legally. Nonetheless, the strike, which was not a very powerful tool in the hands of white workers—who could be threatened and replaced by black slaves—the strike was a very important weapon which was used very effectively by slaves. And throughout the period in the 20 or 30 years before the Civil War, there were slave strikes over and over again. The major demand of slaves when they struck was to replace the sunup to sundown gang labor system with the task system. The way they would do it usually was that all the slaves on a given plantation or several plantations would run off and hide in the woods or the swamps, and send one person in to negotiate with the overseer or the master, demanding that the slaves get the task system, which would allow them, after they had finished their assigned daily tasks, to tend to their own gardens, their families, or what have you. And they very commonly won this. The task system became the norm by the time of the Civil War. But of course none of that working class militancy shows up in histories of unions because none of that was conducted by unions. And yet, there's no question in my mind that it was the most significant, and certainly the most victorious, kind of struggle going on among the working people of the South at the time.

#### THE CIVIL WAR

And for the next period, the period of the Civil War and its aftermath, the most important book of history, from the standpoint of working people, is *Black Reconstruction in America* by W. E. B. DuBois. In fact, it's remarkable that when you look around for a history of working people in the South of that

period, there's almost nothing else, and certainly nothing as detailed and explicit as the book by DuBois. He begins: Chapter One is called "The Black Worker." Chapter Two is "The White Worker." Chapter Three is "The Planter." Chapter Four is "The General Strike." And we kind of get the image that he's speaking our language—telling us about how things happened then that are the things that we're interested in. And very few of us, that I know of, were taught in school to view the Civil War as a general strike of working people. And that was what won it. But that was what DuBois not only says but proves, and seals his case by offering Abraham Lincoln's testimony to the effect that what he's saying is true. DuBois says it was the black worker—as the founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century, and for the modern world—who brought Civil War in America.

And the point of this is, of course, that up until the 1850's, the rulers of the North and the rulers of the South made every possible attempt to reach a compromise that would avoid open warfare between them. That the one group that was not willing to compromise, that constantly, regardless of any compromise that was made, was going to continue to fight for its freedom, was the black slaves. And they did. And as a result, none of the compromises worked, and the Civil War was brought on. And DuBois goes further than that. He says that the plight of white workers throughout the world is traceable to Negro slavery in America. And that's a remarkable statement. That says to me, and I take it seriously, that in order to understand the problems of white workers, not just back then, but in the world today, you have to have an understanding of Negro slavery in the United States.

I highly recommend *Black Reconstruction* as a place to start. It'll not only tell you a great deal, but it also provides a way of reading other material that doesn't give the information in the form that we need it, and allows you to see things that you might not see otherwise. DuBois says that the South lost the Civil War because of economic weakness, because its "whole labor class, black and white, went into economic revolt." And in his Chapter Four, "The General Strike," he's got an introductory note. This is his description of the general strike: *How the Civil War meant emancipation and how the black worker won the war by a general strike which transferred his labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader, in whose army lines workers began to be organized as a new labor force.*

That's a remarkable thing, and it's a remarkable chapter. And if ever there was a proof of the central role of black working people in the whole development of the working class in the United States, that furnishes the absolute proof. He says that half a million black slaves withdrew their labor from their Southern planter masters, and the South was doomed. Shortly after the black general strike, poor whites in the South went into open revolt against the Confederacy. In one year alone, 1864, DuBois notes that 100,000 poor whites deserted the Confederate armies.

I agree with DuBois that the Civil War was the greatest upheaval of working people in U.S. history, even though official labor history doesn't see it that way. The revolution was so successful in terms of building alliances, and then actually creating black-white unity after the Civil War, that the planter class was



In liberated areas of the South, black people openly celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation; in areas still controlled by Confederate Forces, Loyal Leagues were organized to spread the news of freedom secretly from plantation to plantation. Engraving from *Le Monde Illustré* courtesy of Chicago Historical Society.

forced to enact what they called the Black Codes in order to try to re-establish their domination over working people. And it's interesting to see who they were scared of when they were enacting the Black Codes. DuBois quotes the Mississippi statute: *That all freedmen, free negroes and mulattoes in this state over the age of 18 years, found on the second Monday in January, 1866, or thereafter, with no lawful employment or business, or found unlawfully assembling themselves together, either in the day or night time, and all white persons so assembling, with freedmen, free negroes or mulattoes, on terms of equality, or living in adultery or fornication with a freed woman, free negro or mulatto, shall be deemed vagrants, and*

*on conviction thereof shall be fined in the sum of not exceeding, in the case of a freedman, free negro or mulatto \$50.00 and a white man \$200.00 and imprisoned at the discretion of the court, the free negro not exceeding ten days and the white man, not exceeding six months.* Now, I think that's pretty remarkable that the rulers of Mississippi, while they were passing their racist slave codes, decided that the people they had to punish the most severely were the whites who got together with the blacks, that this unity was clearly the biggest threat they could see, and they outlawed it accordingly.

#### HOW TO READ LABOR HISTORY

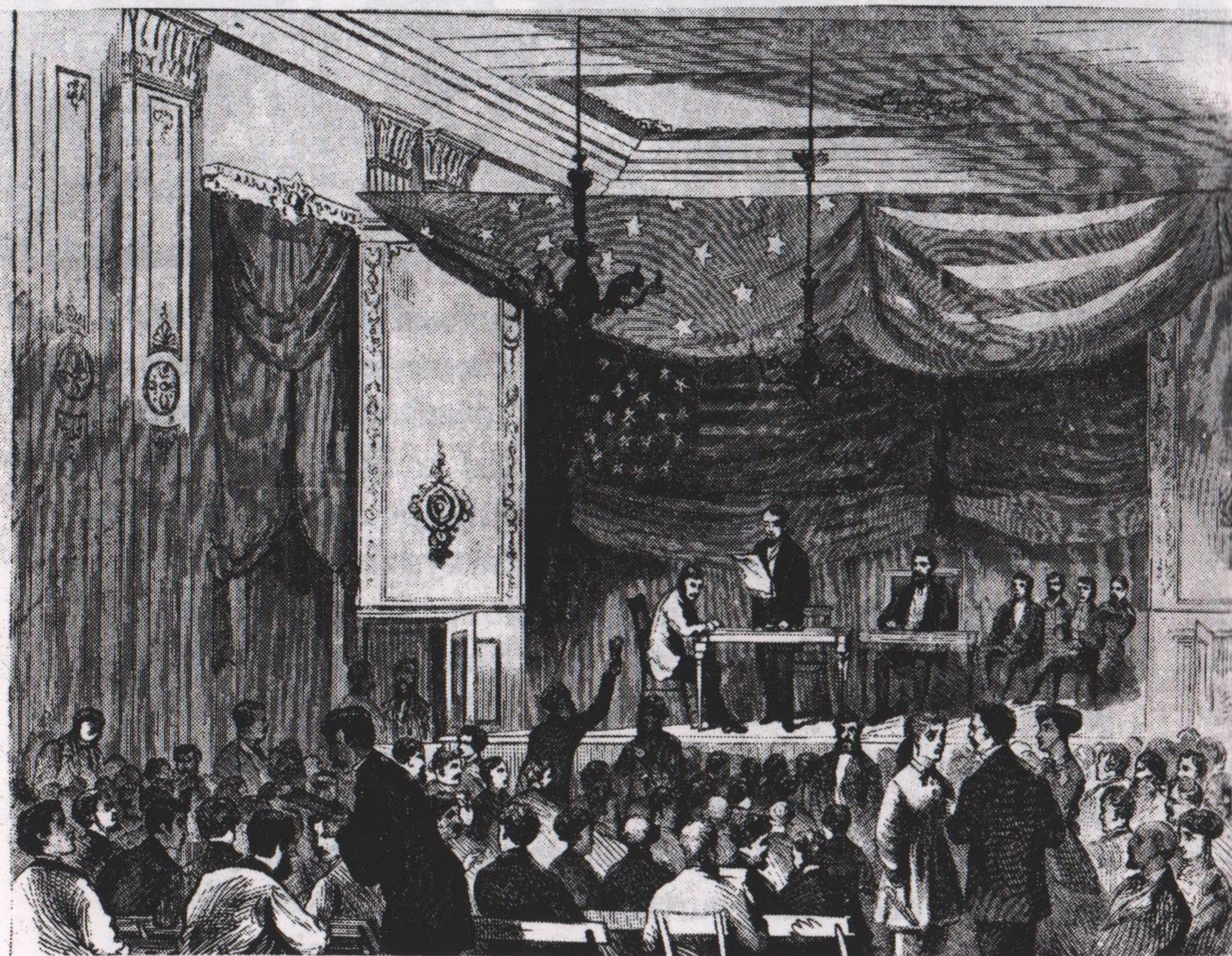
I want to show you here one of the problems with the people who think they're writing objective history and really aren't. Just what we've already examined up to the Civil War and a little bit after, I think, makes it pretty clear that the people who were in the forefront of struggle were always the black slaves and later black freedmen. For a long time the greatest hindrance to them was the fact that the poor whites were in one way or another manipulated into serving as agencies of oppression by the planter class, and so on. And yet in this labor history by Marshall, Marshall says on page four, "The presence of the Negro depresses wages, reduces skill, curtails purchasing power, diverts white workers' attention from the economics of the race issue, and furnishes an enormous potential supply of industrial workers." Now just from what I've gone through so far, I would expect any historian who was just dealing with these facts fairly, to have written instead, "The presence of the whites depresses wages, reduces skill, curtails purchasing power," and so on,



because in fact that is what happened for the first hundred years or so of capitalist development in the South, more often than not.

### THE RECONSTRUCTION ERA

Following the Civil War, there were several different kinds of labor organizing. The first attempt nationwide was the National Labor Union, organized primarily by a man named William Sylvis, who, despite



The National Labor Union's Philadelphia Congress, August 1869; the NLU voted to exclude black workers, and its leaders opposed the Reconstruction governments in the South. Black workers then organized their own National Labor Union, closely allied with Radical Reconstruction. The refusal of white workers to unite with blacks weakened the entire labor movement nationally. Engraving from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper courtesy of Library of Congress.

his racism, considered it essential to build unity between black and white working people. He toured the South in 1868, attempting to establish this. However, the National Labor Union itself very quickly faltered on this issue, despite appeals by Sylvis, by Frederick Douglass, by every leading black leader in the country. The union would not take a forthright stand on a completely open policy for all workers, and it fairly quickly faded from the scene.

During the same period one very interesting thing happened in the South. In 1868, in Pensacola, Florida, stevedores, who were mostly black, formed the Pensacola Workingmen's Association and went on strike the same year. And very soon after they were organized, they began to run into a different kind of trouble. This was the center of a rich supply of Southern lumber at the time, and for many years Canadian lumberjacks came to Florida in the wintertime to cut wood. In the winter of 1873, job competition, because of a general depression, strained to the breaking point. And the Canadians, who had come down to work in lumber, attempted to steal jobs from the blacks—the jobs as stevedores on the docks. So the Pensacola Workingmen's Association members armed themselves and protected their jobs. The British government requested of the American government that British citizens of Pensacola be protected from "riotous mobs of colored men." The American government sympathized, but it was not capable of suppressing the union, and the Canadians were in fact not allowed by the workers to take the jobs. The governments of Pensacola and of Florida tended to side with the Canadians, since they were white, but did not actually intervene to try to destroy the union, and so it won. And the union was quite

popular in Pensacola, as a matter of fact, and had such great support that in the next session of the Florida legislature, the legislature essentially protected the union by licensing stevedores and requiring six months' residence in Florida before they could get a license. So this early, nearly all-black union fought from 1868 to 1873, didn't compromise, and won just about everything that it was actually fighting for.

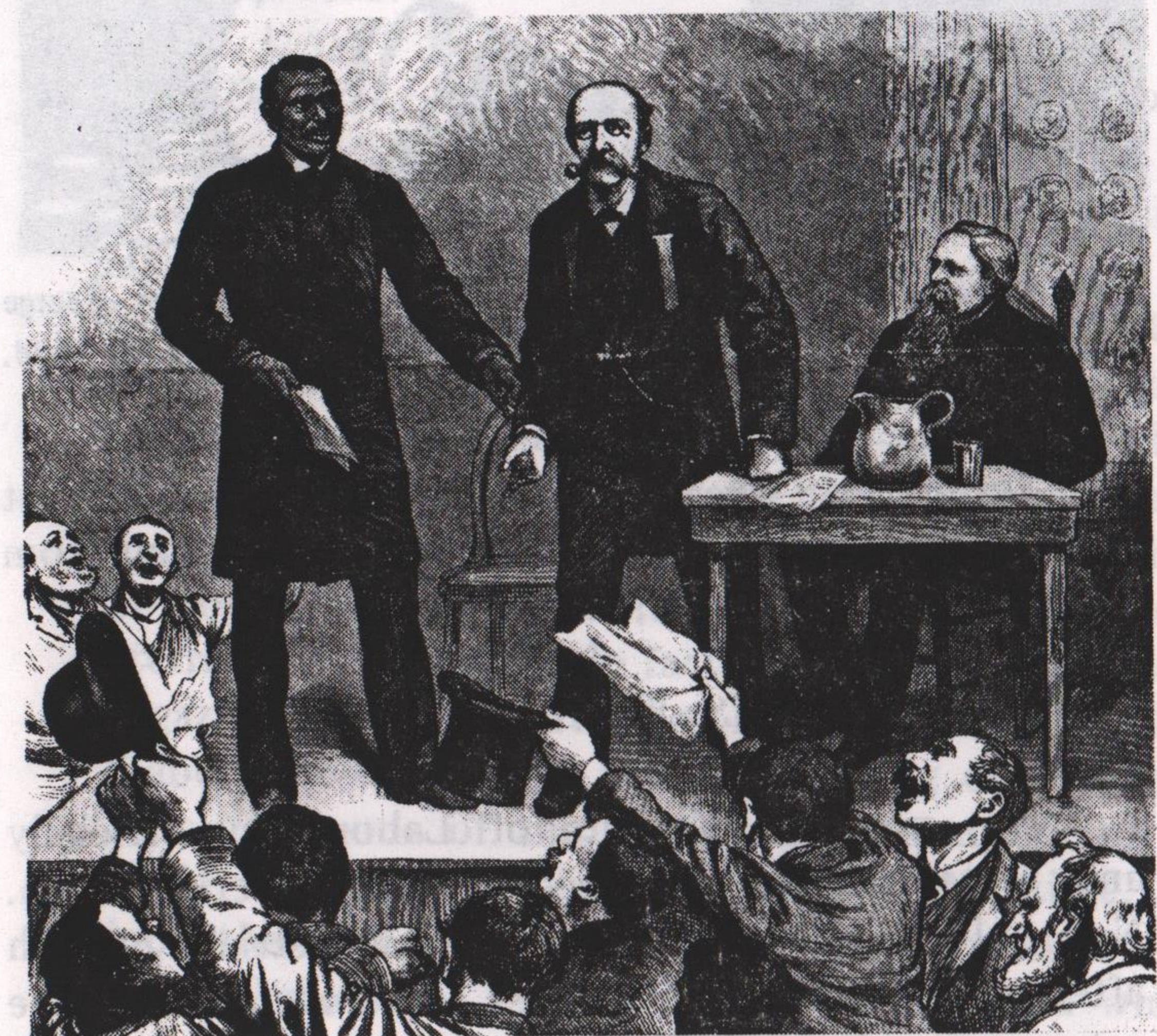
Now the next remarkable thing, to me, that happened in the South was that, following the Hayes-Tilden compromise that removed the Reconstruction armies from the Southern states (the last vestiges of them; there weren't too many left), 1877 was also the year that mass proletarian violence swept the United States. As a matter of fact, there's a book by Robert V. Bruce called *1877: Year of Violence*, which describes the whole thing. And interestingly enough, it was black and white railroad workers together in Martinsburg, West Virginia, who began the strike. And because the armies, as part of the compromise, were not paid and therefore not available to break strikes, as they always had been up until that time, the strike swept along railroad lines that covered the whole country, and taught the ruling class quite a lesson, I think. It was probably the biggest nationwide upheaval there's ever been in the United States.

### THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

Now, the next organized labor movement in the country was the Knights of Labor, which actually was organized in 1869 but did not get into the South that early. But the success of the Knights of Labor is very sobering for people who have been raised to believe

that Southern workers are somehow congenitally anti-union, which is a theory that's frequently offered.

Here are the figures: The Knights of Labor came into the South for the first time in 1879. In the first year they had 475 members. The next year, they had 1,855 members. The first year they had 6 locals; the second year they had 28 locals. By 1886, which was the peak year of the Knights of Labor nationwide, in the Southern states there were 21,208 members in



The Knights of Labor did not practice discrimination. Frank J. Farrell introduces General Master Workman Terence Powderly to the Knights' 1886 convention at Richmond, Virginia. Engraving from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper—courtesy of Library of Congress.



More delegates to the 1886 Knights of Labor convention. Mrs. George Rogers, the first female Master Workman, holds her 2-week-old child. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

487 locals. So we have this anti-union South that we're told so much about, in seven years going from 475 members to over 20,000.

*CLAUDE WILLIAMS: Was that white?*

No, no. The Knights of Labor very officially and systematically organized without discrimination. Not only racially—they organized industrially, which after their fade, didn't happen again overall until the occurrence of the CIO. They did discriminate against a few people. Their constitution excluded lawyers, politicians, physicians, and rum-sellers from member-

ship in the Knights, but otherwise they organized everybody, black and white. But I'll tell you, one of the interesting things is that a lot of writers have written that the Knights were segregated in some places; even though they organized everybody, they supposedly organized them into segregated locals. And Jan and I have been doing a great deal of research on the Knights in southern Mississippi, who were overwhelmingly black in the lumber industry and the sawmill workers and so on. And I believe that the reason why that impression is given is not because of the racism of the Knights of Labor, but because of the racism of the newspaper reporters and editors who were writing about it that historians read.

*CLAUDE WILLIAMS: That's a very important point.*

So, you see things like a reporter for a Mississippi paper, a Pascagoula paper, describing a meeting of the Knights of Labor and talking about the president of the local. And since the president of the local is black, the reporter writes in the report, "so-and-so, president of the Negro section," because to him it's inconceivable that there could have been a racially unified union in the South. Because of course there wasn't anything else interracial by that time. In fact, as late as 1946, *Fortune* magazine wrote a big article on labor in the South called "Labor Drives South," at the beginning of Operation Dixie. And one of the points that the author of the article makes is that in the South at that time, and since the end of World War I, the only institution found throughout the South where blacks and whites came together on an equal basis, if they did at all, was in labor unions. And yet, of course, we're told frequently by our liberal friends that workers are the

most racist people of all. But that's in itself something that ought to be examined.

The Knights of Labor led strikes all over the South during this period: in the coal mines of Alabama and Tennessee, the cotton mills in Georgia and Alabama, sugar workers in Louisiana, lumber in Louisiana and Mississippi. They were not just a union. They also organized co-ops, producers co-ops. They owned a tobacco co-op in Raleigh, North Carolina; a cooperative coal mine at Mercer, Kentucky; a black cooperative cotton gin at Stewart's Station, Alabama; a co-operative clothing factory at Morgan City, Louisiana; and consumer co-ops which they set up to fight company stores in Pittsburgh, Kentucky; New Iberia, Louisiana; Pulaski City, Virginia; and other places that I haven't found the details of yet. And they also entered politics, and they elected a great number of people. In 1877, the Knights elected a Congressman and 11 of 15 city councilmen in Lynchburg, Virginia. They elected a majority of the city and county government in Macon, Georgia. They elected an alderman in Statesville, North Carolina, and several city officials in Mobile. The following year, they elected the mayor of Jacksonville, Florida, and the mayor of Vicksburg, Mississippi. And in Anniston, Alabama, they elected a carpenter as mayor, and two molders, a brickmaker, a butcher, a watch maker, a rental agent, and a shoemaker as councilmen.

Throughout most of the country, the Knights of Labor declined after 1886 because it was discovered that the Knights' leadership, primarily its president, Terence Powderly, was secretly working to sabotage the eight-hour movement. That news doesn't seem to have reached the South as quickly as the rest of the country,

so we find that the Knights are still leading militant activity even as late as a little after the turn of the century. But generally they began to decline in 1886 and didn't amount to too much after that.



Some workers formed cooperatives and utopian communities. This picture shows the settlers at Co-opolis, near D'Iberville, Mississippi, in the 1890's. Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

## THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR

And in most areas, they were succeeded by the American Federation of Labor under Samuel Gompers, which was a distinct backward step in several ways. One was that while the Knights had gone out of their way to advance the cause of working people in the political sphere, the AFL specifically rejected politics as a method of workers' advance. And in addition, the AFL rejected organizing all workers on an equal basis, and instead only organized a craft at a time into separate unions, often at odds with one another, and

so on. At first the AFL was officially and rigorously anti-racist. But that was the first thing to go, and by 1895 the AFL had admitted the International Association of Machinists, which had a racist bar in its constitution, and by 1900 the racism had gotten so bad that there were official resolutions of the AFL allowing the executive board to segregate and discriminate whenever they found that it would be to their advantage to do so. And by 1918 the AFL for the most part wasn't even willing to organize blacks under any circumstances. But even here, it's interesting that this tendency was the greatest in the North, and so much so that Frederick Douglass encouraged black workers to return South because skilled crafts were still open to them in the South and were not in the North. So it's interesting that even to the extent that racism was step-by-step imposed, that the people who run the country had their greatest difficulty in imposing it in the South, again not the traditional picture that we're offered.

In 1892, there was a racially unified general strike in New Orleans, which I believe was probably most significant in laying the groundwork for a lot of things that were to come. Jeremy Brecher, writing in his book, *Strike!*, said that the New Orleans general strike revealed an extraordinary solidarity among all races and classes of labor. And he says it helped to pave the way to the nationwide strike of 1894, two years later.

#### THE ALABAMA MINERS' STRIKE OF 1894

A book has recently appeared called *Labor Revolt in Alabama*, by Robert D. Ward and William W. Rogers, which is about the great strike of 1894, and I want to

deal in some detail with this. This is an interesting book. Almost unwittingly, the authors have told the story of how, step by step, racism was imposed on black and white workers in Alabama. They haven't set out to do it, and I don't think they even realize that that's what they do. But they provide all the evidence, and reading it from that perspective is well worth doing. This is a tremendous book if you don't expect too much sophistication from the authors themselves, because it has a richness of detail that makes for good reading.

In 1889, 46.2% of Alabama coal miners were black. To me, that's a very striking statistic. And so I want to compare that fact in the book with the way the book's authors interpret its bearing on the strike. Here's what these authors of *Labor Revolt in Alabama* said about black workers: "While they did not outnumber the whites, they served as a bar to an effective labor movement and as a strike-breaking force always available to the coal miners." What this book proves, by the way, is that that is untrue. While the whites did outnumber the blacks slightly, they served as an effective bar to the labor movement and ultimately divided it.

The first strikes in Alabama mines—and all of this is right in this area, by the way, in the five counties right around here; and it's a remarkable history—the first strikes were in 1879 and 1880, and they were broken by convict labor. And as a result, one of the earliest demands of miners in Alabama was the abolition of convict labor, and that was one of the things that they constantly struggled for, over and over again.

There were still strikes going on up until 1893,

and the economic condition of mining as a whole was deteriorating at the time, because most of the coal was used to produce iron, and the iron industry was in a state of decline, as the country was entering a depression. So the major companies, led by the Tennessee Company, slashed wages. And at about this time, the United Mine Workers of Alabama was formed, not to be confused with the United Mine Workers of America, because it's not the same. They had a state-wide convention and they made the following demands. They said they would accept a 10% wage cut, provided that they would get the following: all coal weighed before dumping; a checkweighman chosen by the miners for every mine; and reductions in their rent, their store purchases, their mining supplies purchases, and their medical costs.

At first the company's tactic was to try to negotiate separately with black miners and with white miners. But the black miners, who were invited first, told the white miners about it, and invited the white miners to the meeting. The company was furious, and nothing came of the negotiations. And when the pay cut went into effect, the UMW of Alabama voted to strike on April 14 of 1894. And the strike spread immediately throughout the five-county area. The first day there were approximately 6,000 on strike and it grew to almost 9,000. The vice president of the Tennessee Company called his system of strike-breaking (he came in to break the strike personally) "division" of the workers. He said if he could divide the workers, it would make them easier to handle. And his strategy was to import black workers. He wasn't able to get any of the Alabama black miners to scab, but he figured that he could divide the workers by importing black

scabs, because he imported them all the way from Kansas to Birmingham to put them to work in the mines.

At this time, it's interesting to know what was on the picket signs of the strikers, because the newspapers kept reporting it as if it was white strikers and black strike-breakers. Here's what some of the picket signs said: They said, *Convicts Must Go*. They said, *United We Stand*. And some of the signs said, *We the Colored Miners of Alabama Stand With Our White Brothers*. On April 23, after the first week of the strike, there was a demonstration of 4,000 miners in Birmingham that was 50% black. And one newspaper, writing about the strike, complained about the stubbornness and unity of black miners, "who seemed as determined in their purpose as the white."

On May 16 a black strikebreaker was killed while recruiting scabs. And interestingly enough, three people were charged with the murder: two were white and one was black. Ten days later the governor called out the troops and the war was really on.

The first day that the troops were called out, the commander discovered that one of the bands of Guardsmen called up from Birmingham was unionized, so they were quickly dismissed and replaced by troops from some other part of the state.

The workers held firm. There was a meeting on June 18 at Adamsville, where 800 white and 300 black miners met to reaffirm their support of the strike. And one of the motions of the meeting thanked "our colored brothers for standing firm against attempts

to divide them." The miners also understood what was going on. And by this time, the political campaign was beginning to steam up, the campaign for governor and for legislature. And several miners were running for legislature, and a candidate jointly endorsed by the populists and the Jeffersonian Democrats was being supported by the strikers.

Finally, the strike was settled as a compromise, and in typical fashion, from every strike I've ever seen in my life, where workers (just like companies) demand more than they expect to get, so that they will get part of what they're demanding. But these authors (as almost all labor historians), when the workers don't get everything they ask for, write it down as a defeat. And actually, it was not at all, in my opinion. For instance, the wages they won were somewhere in between what they had demanded and what the company had offered. The price of blasting powder, which was a big issue, was reduced. They were not given any new checkweighmen, but the ones that the company had tried to take away were kept. Rents on company houses were cut 10%. And there was no discrimination in rehiring strikers and strike leaders. So that's how that strike ended.

If you read most standard labor history, what you read about going on at this time is not this strike, as interesting and as big a strike as this was, and racially unified in spite of all the handicaps. The strike you read about is the Pullman strike by the lily-white American Railway Union, led by Eugene Debs. But this Alabama one certainly gives a much deeper picture to me of the kinds of struggles the workers were confronted with than anything I've ever read about the Pullman strike.

As far as I know, the Alabama miners' strike was the last important struggle that grew out of the Knights of Labor's philosophy of industry-wide organizing of all people without discrimination. The result, in terms of the labor movement, was that the whole period went into eclipse with the rise of the AFL. Racism was built into unions.

#### A STUDY OF RACISM IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

There is a recent article by Herbert Hill in *Society* magazine, called "Anti-Oriental Agitation and the Rise of Working Class Racism," which shows, among other things, how Gompers, using the issue of so-called "coolie labor," was able to confuse the whole AFL with racism. In fact, it's interesting that he came from the tobacco industry, from the cigar union. And one of the first things that happened in this anti-Oriental campaign was that a new racist institution was introduced into the labor movement—the union label. The union label was first introduced by white cigarmakers in a "buy only white cigars" campaign—"These cigars are made by white union labor. Don't buy Chinese-made cigars." And that was the first union label on record, and was part of Gompers' campaign. And as a result of the anti-Oriental drive, according to Hill, the model was built by which the AFL craft unions then proceeded to expel blacks from all the skilled trades.

And that was accomplished by 1920. Up until 1920, from 1900 to 1920, you found blacks in virtually all the skilled trades. But step by step by step they were expelled by the white tradesmen, under the leadership of the AFL and Samuel Gompers. There were excep-

tions during this period, and they're important, and they're almost all in the South.

The biggest exception was the Brotherhood of Timber Workers, which was very strong in Louisiana and Texas, and also had members in Arkansas and Mississippi. It was formed in 1910, black and white united; it grew to 30,000 members. Two years later it affiliated with the IWW and conducted a very militant strike in 1912. Again, this is a situation that historians write up as a defeat, because all they can see is unions and not workers. The IWW did disappear from the scene, but much that was demanded in those organizing drives, and fought for, was won by the workers. And once again it becomes necessary to separate the two histories in order to see the reality.

There was a tremendous number of successful or unsuccessful strikes, a great deal of proletarian turbulence, up until World War I. After the war, the labor movement (the AFL and the railroad brotherhoods) grew somewhat in the early and mid-twenties. But following about 1925, as the country's economy became more turbulent, the ruling class made a tremendous attack on the working class, slashed wages across the board, smashed unions, etc. The AFL went into a state of decline, and it was just spiraling downward, not recruiting anywhere, above all collapsing in the South.

### THE COMMUNIST UNIONS

At that time, in the late twenties, the Communist Party formed a new, nationwide industrial union called the Trade Union Unity League, under the leadership

of William Z. Foster. Two of the most important strikes in the history of the South were led by the Communists. One was the Gastonia textile strike, led by the National Textile Workers Union. (It was that strike, among other things, that led to the formation of the Trade Union Unity League. The NTWU was actually formed before the whole nationwide union and it became one of the first member unions.) And of course following that, the Harlan, Kentucky, miners strike, led by the National Miners Union. The interesting thing about those to me is that even our own SCEF history book has, by only seeing the union, and not the workers, written up the NMU strike as a defeat for the union. And I would say once again, it takes nothing more than a comparison of how long the workers in Kentucky were able to hold out at previous conditions, compared to miners in any of the other coal fields, to realize that that fight protected those miners longer and better throughout the coming depression and what was to come than other miners who did not engage in a similar struggle. And those unions, as vehicles of that struggle, certainly were a great necessity, and were victorious.

And once again, every time there seems to be new real thrust in the direction of organizing the unorganized, the key, throughout the country, was placing the fight against racism at the front of the struggle. It's interesting, there's a book in which one of the Gastonia organizers wrote his own story of what happened, and he often felt that it was a shame that the Communists insisted on putting the struggle against racism at the center. It wasn't so easy to organize workers, he felt, if he did. But in the long run it was absolutely proven that by making the fight against



racism as a matter of principle, the only major strikes that successfully defended Southern workers in that period were the ones that the Communists fought very hard to keep racially unified.

### TENANT FARMERS AND SHARECROPPERS

Also in the thirties, and another situation which deserves careful study but I'm just going to mention, were the organizations among black and white sharecroppers and tenant farmers. In Arkansas and surrounding states, it was the Southern Tenant Farmers Union that did the organizing, and it was mostly led by socialists. And in Alabama it was the Alabama Sharecroppers Union, which was a Communist union, which conducted some of the great struggles that protected and advanced the lives of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers. And all of these are above all important in understanding the groundwork of the CIO. Without this it's inconceivable that the CIO could have built itself a base. But the tradition of struggle, of militant unionism when the official labor movement was disintegrating in the South, certainly laid the groundwork.

### THE FIRST SIT-DOWN IN AUTO

And when the sit-downs hit the auto industry, the first auto sit-down was in Atlanta in November of 1936. And that's really where the famous Flint sit-down began, because it was the auto workers of Atlanta who sat down and called up all the auto workers in the country to come to their defense. And the workers in Flint, Michigan, who have gotten all the attention, came out a full month ahead of their leader-



Above: Sharecroppers evicted from the Dibble plantation near Parkin, Arkansas, during the Southern Tenant Farmers Union strike, January 1936. Below: The STFU and leading socialists founded Delta Cooperative Farm at Hillhouse, Mississippi, for STFU members evicted during the strike; this picture shows the new cabins at the co-op in July 1936. Later another branch of Delta Cooperative Farm was established at Cruger, Mississippi. Farm Security Administration photos by Vachon and Lange, courtesy of Library of Congress.





Above: A workers' meeting in Andalusia, Alabama, in 1946. Below: Songs written by striking members of Local 489, Amalgamated Clothing Workers (CIO), during their 77-day strike at Alatex, Andala, and S&B garment factories in Andalusia in March, April, and May 1946. The songs are from Local 489's book, "Picket Line Songs." Photo and songs courtesy of Frieda Schwenkmeyer, former ACW-CIO organizer.

### STRIKERS SWING

by a group of Andala pickets

*The Andalusia girls all fall in line,  
 We're gonna win this strike another time,  
 For the CIO will see us through,  
 You can bet your life we'll all be true.  
 We're gonna fight, fight, for every one,  
 For boys and girls we're having fun,  
 We're gonna make OLD SCHERF sign,  
 On the line, on the line, SOON, REAL SOON.*



### BOSS'S WORRIES

by Mollie Crowder

*We don't want the boss's worries,  
 We don't want his watch and chain,  
 All we want is a Union Contract,  
 J. G. Scherf must sign his name.*

*If you scabs don't want our Union money,  
 If you don't want our Union pay,  
 Then all you want is a hard, hard struggle,  
 All the live, the live long day.*

*We're going to press this battle forward,  
 We're going to see our battle won,  
 We're going to see the South Organized,  
 Before we feel our victory's won.*

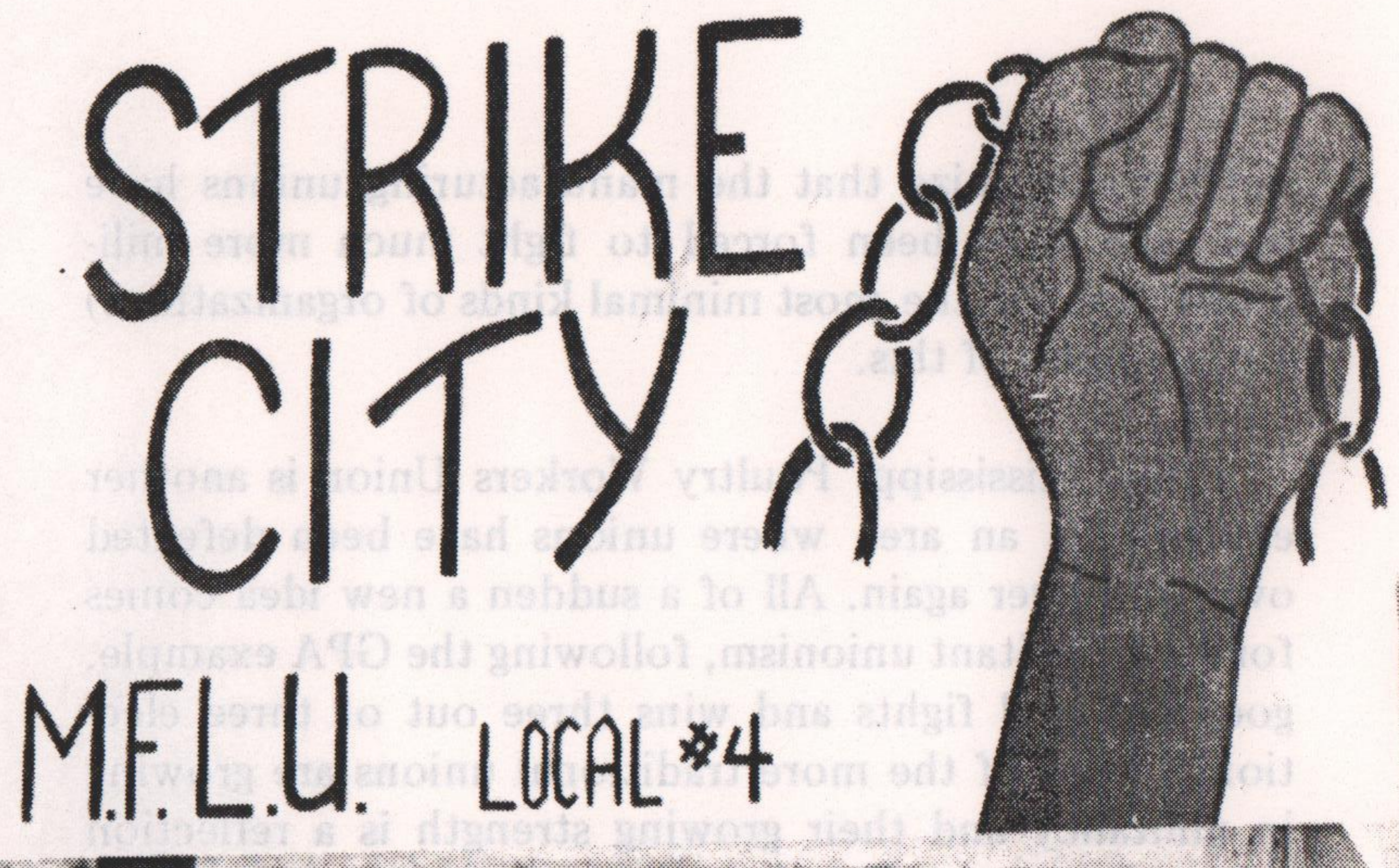
ship's schedule of struggle, in order to demonstrate their solidarity with the workers at the Atlanta Lakewood plant.

### THE CIO

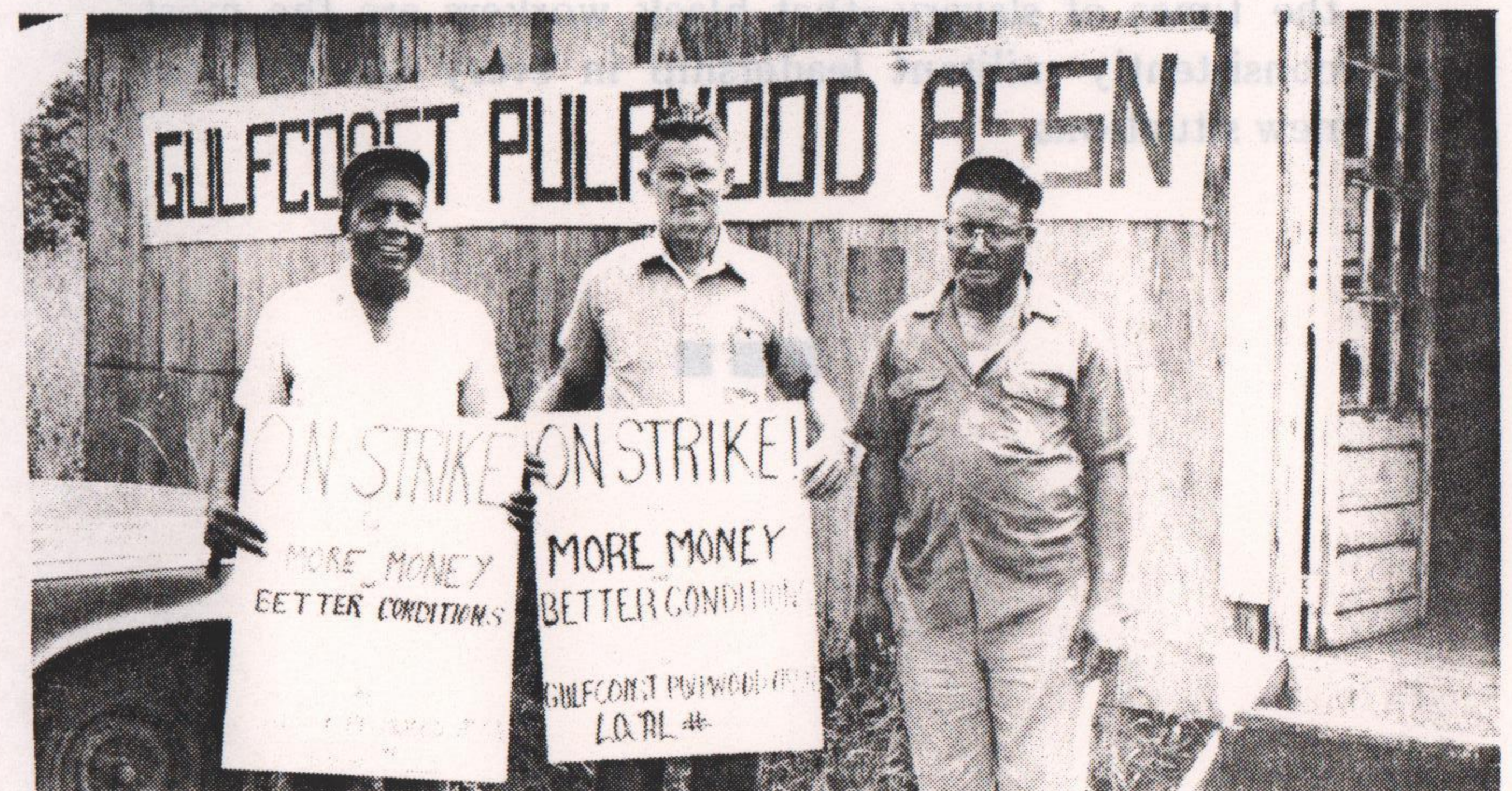
The CIO didn't organize in the South with the same vigor that it organized in the North, but finally it was forced to, at the end of World War II, just in order to defend itself from runaway plants. And the remarkable thing is that in the period from 1939 to 1953, in spite of a great deal of reluctance on the part of the labor movement to continue its advance, union membership tripled in the Southern states in that period, and in fact continued to grow up until Walter Reuther took over as head of the CIO (which coincided with the onset of the full blast cold war red-baiting of the unions and the expulsion of the left unions). In the South, as in the rest of the country, the labor movement went into a state of decline, which it's still in today.

### THE NEW MILITANCY

Today, although we don't have a clear pattern, we do see that the new upheavals are taking place in new ways, in many cases outside the official, established labor movement, as was the case in the CIO, or with the Communist unions, or the IWW, or the Knights of Labor. The Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association, the United Farm Workers (which is part of the AFL-CIO but has had to develop whole new strategies and methods of operating and reliance on its own methods), and the AFSCME unions (which have not had the



Above: The Mississippi Freedom Labor Union struck cotton fields in the Delta in 1965. SCEF photo. Below: The Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association, organized in 1969, went on strike against Masonite and the paper trusts in 1971 and 1973. This picture was taken at GPA headquarters in Eastabuchie, Mississippi, on the first day of the 1973 strike. Ken Lawrence photo.



rights to organize that the manufacturing unions have had, and have been forced to fight much more militantly just for the most minimal kinds of organizations) are examples of this.

The Mississippi Poultry Workers Union is another example in an area where unions have been defeated over and over again. All of a sudden a new idea comes forward. Militant unionism, following the GPA example, goes out and fights and wins three out of three elections. Some of the more traditional unions are growing in militancy and their growing strength is a reflection of it. For example, the triumph of the Miners for Democracy. And UE has begun to come alive among electrical workers in the South in the last couple of years and recently won a tremendous victory in Tampa in a Westinghouse plant. And throughout, in these organizing drives, we see what we've seen ever since the times of slavery—that black workers are the most consistently militant leadership in every one of these new situations.



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