
In Introduction to the *Southern Worker*

by Dick Reavis

Introduction

The *Southern Worker* was a weekly newspaper clandestinely published by the Communist Party USA in Chattanooga, Tennessee and Birmingham, Alabama from 1930 to 1937.

But to say as much is to pose three mysteries. The Communist Party is withered and forgotten; most people do not know that it exists or even that it ever did. The South is not today the blighted, bigoted, and economically underdeveloped region that it was during the Depression years, and the *Southern Worker* is a newspaper known only to handful of scholars.

All three elements demand explanation, though once they are understood, I think that the *Southern Worker* will stand out, in the minds of many readers, as a landmark publication, though perhaps only because it was the first Southern newspaper published largely by whites to take an unflinching stand against Jim Crow in its myriad forms.

The Communist Party

The Communist Party USA is today an organization which advocates peaceful and incremental steps toward socialism. It accepts new members over the Internet and asks them, not to pledge themselves to revolutionary aims, but to help rebuild American labor unions and to support “progressive” Democrats in electoral campaigns. The Party’s wild and wooly, outrageous and courageous days are long behind. It has for at least 50 years been trying to join the mainstream.

Today's CPUSA is also numerically diminished. Some 9,300 people belonged to the Party at the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, at a time when the nation's population, about 125 million, was less than half as numerous as today. By the usual estimates, the Party's national membership peaked at some 75,000 in 1937-38, and at about the same time its Southern districts — which had not been organized in 1929 — peaked between 2,000 and 2,500. Today the Communist Party's Southern membership is negligible and its national membership does not exceed 1,000.

A summary of the consensus of most contemporary scholars of the Communist Party is provided in a 1998 tome, *Many Are the Crimes*, by historian Ellen Schrecker:

“On the one hand, the CP was a highly disciplined, undemocratic outfit that tried to apply Soviet prescriptions to American life. On the other hand, it was also a genuinely forward-looking organization that stimulated many of the most dynamic political and social movements of the 1930s and 1940s. And it was often both at once.”

Scholars have not made the comparison — which Communists and corporatists will regard as simply heretical — but the organizational form of the Depression-era CPUSA was much like a subsidiary of a global corporation. That “corporation” was the Communist International, which, like most transnational companies today, was better known by an abbreviated name, the Comintern. Its headquarters was not in New York, London or Tokyo, but in Moscow, the capital of an empire where Communist ideology, the Comintern's “brand,” had won a “market share” approaching monopoly.

Much as Japanese executives were the prime movers in the global expansion of Toyota Motors and the Sony Corporation, the most important figures in the Comintern were Soviet Bolsheviks. They exercised a disproportionate influence because, like home-country executives at Sony or Toyota, they provided seed money for “expansion markets,” overseas affiliates of the firm. Like those corporations, the Comintern placed executives from important national branches onto its governing boards and even elevated one of them, the Bulgarian Georgi Dimitrov to its chairmanship.

The Comintern's executive committees advised their national affiliates, and until the mid-'Thirties, like any modern transnational board of directors, also dispatched representatives on temporary assignments overseas. Dozens of first-and second-rung CPUSA leaders spent months working at Comintern headquarters and others were assigned to represent the organization abroad. In 1921 the Comintern dispatched Sen Katayama, a founder of both the American and Japanese Communist parties, to help the Mexican Communist Party get on its feet, and Earl Browder, who led the American party for most of the 'Thirties, spent 1928 in China as a representative of the Red International of Trade Unions, a Comintern branch. The most important organizational difference between subsidiaries of transnational corporations and Comintern affiliates was probably that the latter were sometimes illegal in their territories of operation, including several of the Southern states.

When global corporations launch a new service or product, they inundate their markets with advertisements and sales teams. In the same way, when American campaigns like that to free Angelo Herndon or the Scottsboro Boys were waged, the Communist Party USA called simultaneous demonstrations in dozens of American cities and through the Comintern, in other countries as well. Thanks to global organization, defense committees sprung up in Europe, the U.S.S.R. and Latin America, even attracting the support of a physics whiz who then lived in Germany, Albert Einstein.

The domestic operation of the Communist Party was always suspect because it was subordinate to the Comintern and also because internally, it was arguably a top-down, authoritarian group. But publicly-held corporations are top-down and authoritarian, too, even if like Communist parties, their structures embody democratic features.

Corporations whose shares are sold on stock markets are in theory democratic because thousands of shareholders elect their boards, which set strategy and name the executives who run corporate affairs day to day.

In a roughly parallel way, the organizational form adopted by the Comintern called for "democratic centralism," which, though it em-

bodied top-down features, in some ways was more democratic than corporate governance.

Though anybody can buy a share in a publicly-held company and with it, acquire a right to a stockholder's vote, company employees — who certainly devote much of their lives to corporate ends — are usually voiceless. In Communist organizations, members voted on policy. Though they were akin to corporate employees in the hierarchies in which they worked, in theory they were the ultimate source of authority, just as corporate stockholders are.

Until World War II prospective members could not join a Communist Party by simply signing a card. Like job-seekers, they had to apply and be accepted by the local unit they sought to join. Units or "clubs" were usually groups of three to five who worked in the same factories or neighborhoods. Decisions to accept applicants into a unit were made not by "human resources" workers or executives, but by a vote of the members. Sometimes the club required applicants to enter as probationary or "candidate members," a practice akin to the internships or temporary labor contracts of today.

Local clubs elected delegates to higher bodies, which then elected delegates to even higher bodies, all the way to the Comintern. The basic party units, composed of three to seven members, each elected delegates to a "section" convention of nine to eleven members. A section was a neighborhood, workplace or municipal leadership body. Those sections elected delegates to district conventions; a district, in the South, was a state or combination of states, which usually employed a full-time director and sometimes, an organizer or two. District conventions picked delegates to national conventions, which elected members to a Central Committee of about three dozen members. The "CC," as it was abbreviated, elected the members of a standing national committee or "politburo" of seven to nine, the highest level of party authority. Politburo members, the CEOs, CFOs and CPOs of the Communist world, picked delegates to congresses of the Comintern.

This bottom-up process would have been regarded as highly democratic by the supporters of any representative form of government, except that it also worked in reverse; as in corporations, higher levels commanded lower levels. Congresses of the Comintern could

replace politburos, and politburos held veto power over district leaderships, which could reject the leaders chosen at section levels, just as in the corporate world, where executives can fire janitors. Because higher bodies did sometimes dictate personnel and policy matters, Communist parties acquired notoriety as top-down organizations.

Bolshevik founder V.I. Lenin had defined party members as “professional revolutionaries,” just as corporations call their executives “professionals.” But in corporations, professionals earn salaries and bonuses; in pre-revolutionary Communist parties, the term “professional revolutionary” had more to do with commitment than wages. In the U.S., probably no more than 500 Communists ever drew salaries from the Party on any payday, and their wages—when paid!—were subprofessional by any standard.

Party members in the United States became professional revolutionaries by obligating themselves in several ways. Just as implementing company policy, even if one disagrees with it, is a duty in the corporate world, Communists were subject to a “party discipline” that required them to carry out directives from their local units, national bodies and the Comintern. Like corporate employees, they were also enjoined from criticizing the Party or its policies in public.

The Party’s internal life was even more contentious and demanding than that of the business world, and was reflected in slogans like “Every Night for the Party.” Because few recruits — “new hires” in the corporate vocabulary — could manage such commitments, most of them left the Party after mere months in its ranks. But in practice that meant that in public campaigns the Party could count upon the aid of thousands of “fellow travelers” who weren’t counted on membership rolls. Although it would seem that no analog to fellow travelers exists in corporate life, actors and musical groups promote themselves through fan clubs and through reviews by “independent” journalists!

Just as heedless, lax and troublesome corporate employees who do not voluntarily resign are sooner or later fired, unmanageable Party members were suspended or expelled. A central record was kept of such actions, apparently to discourage unreliable elements from rejoining or “being hired” elsewhere. When procedures were followed, local units reported suspensions, expulsions and readmissions to the

Party's Central Control Commission, which recorded such "personnel actions" on 3x5-inch index cards.

An ironic result of this procedure is that disciplinary records are among the most reliable data we have about the Party's membership. Though the Party maintained no national roll of its members, and membership rolls were kept secret by local units, no one who was not already a member could be suspended, readmitted or expelled. Anywhere disciplinary actions were taken, we can know that a club existed, even if we cannot know its precise size. We know, for example, that a Communist Party of more than nine members existed in Ft. Worth, Tex. in 1933, because local units there expelled nine people — three of them brothers — during that year.

A microfilm of the Central Control Commission's disciplinary cards is now among the holdings of New York University's Tamiment Library. It shows some 130 disciplinary incidents for Southern districts during the 'Thirties, and beyond mere numbers, it shows something more: tantalizing, qualitative details, a window into the Party's internal life. The cards point to the type of rough, seat-of-the-pants justice that is inevitable when the accused are judged without the protection of stringent codes of due process — as in corporate firings. But in Communist clubs, dismissals were not usually for the shortcoming and missteps that are often hidden from scrutiny in human resources files, which are also guarded from the public eye.

Allegations that a member was a "stool pigeon" or "spy" led the lists of what might be called "negative personnel actions," accounting for 21 expulsions. Another 20 cards bear terms like "Lovestonite," in reference to an American factional dispute, or "Trotskyite," in reference to a Soviet rift which became global. Eighteen others charge the dismissed members with "slander" or "disruption," terms which apparently point to personality conflicts and other miscellaneous quarrels with fellow members or local leaders.

One card notes the expulsion of a Houston laborer for anti-Semitism and another alleges that a New Orleans comrade "discouraged Negro members from attend. ILD [International Labor Defense] mtgs." In 1934 a Louisville college student was thrown out because he joined the Republican Party and a New Orleans woman removed from her club on "suspicion that she worked with capitalist party dur-

ing election.” These “firings” bear a resemblance to those that occur when Silicon Valley programmers provide tips on software projects to competing firms or carelessly reveal company secrets during coffee house chatter.

The disciplinary records also show expulsions for offenses not ordinarily associated with what Communists call “the class war.” Until the mid-'Thirties most of the Party's membership was drawn from the unemployed, and that perhaps explains 16 disciplinary actions for financial malfeasance, a perennial cause of corporate firings. The embezzlement of proceeds from the sales of Party publications was the most common financial charge during the first half of the decade. Later in the decade, as the New Deal put the unemployed to work and as the Party expanded its reach into mass organizations, charges like the one brought against a Corpus Christi seaman, “gambling with NMU (National Maritime Union) funds,” became more frequent.

An index card for Jack Williams, an Alabama member of the Young Communist League, copies the language of a club report which shows that he was suspended for violating rules governing the use of a “company” car. The entry says that he was “using Sharecroppers Union car for pleasure ride. Car met with accident and damaged to extent of \$80.” It adds that, “The use of car endangered himself and non-Party workers because car was known to police and the whole group might have been jailed.”

Given the Party's somewhat rough-and-ready base, disciplinary actions for ordinary misbehavior were common as well. A Houston seaman, Frank Stevens, was expelled in 1937 because he was “drunk on duty at union hall,” and a New Orleans seaman's card lists “drunk, horseplayer” as a charge. A laborer in Charlotte was booted during that year, the charges allege, because he “threatened his wife,” and a year later a woman in the same club was expelled because she allegedly “Cut P. member with knife in jealous fight.” Phillip Lloyd, a Tampa seaman, was censured in 1938 for “consorting w female spy for shipowners, Jane Steele.” His dismissal was what, in the corporate world, would be called an inappropriate office romance. In most of these expulsions it is also evident that Party members, far from being robotic, conspiratorial or exceptionally intelligent—as they were pic-

tured in the anti-Communist literature of the time—were commonly human and commonly fallible.

Historians still argue about the extent to which the Comintern influenced, or dictated, the strategy and inner life of the Communist Party USA, its American affiliate, though it certainly had nothing to do with expulsions for knife-fights and trysts. But almost all of them agree its August, 1935 World Congress produced a momentous decision about alliances and, in the United States, about racial affairs.

From 1928 until 1935, during what historians call its “Third Period,” the orthodoxy of the international Communist movement was that capitalism was headed for collapse within months or years unless reformers distracted the working class from its revolutionary tasks. During this period, American Communists sometimes assailed the other left-of-center groups, particularly the American Federation of Labor and the NAACP as “social fascist” organizations. Such brashness created conflict between Communists and their likely allies and kept membership numbers small. But it also encouraged Party leaders to speak openly and fully about their ultimate aims. Even though they wanted to see the Party expand, their approach to prospective supporters amounted to an impatient “take it or leave it” proposition, leaving little room for temporizing or compromise.

In those days, instead of joining reformist groups and working from within to make them more militant, Communists organized “united fronts” — unions, racial justice and anti-fascist groups — which aimed at mass memberships but whose direction and policies were set by Party members and trusted fellow travelers. While the term “united front” may bring a chill to American spines, it shouldn’t. A united front, in the corporate world, would be a subsidiary in which a single stockholder’s group owns a controlling interest.

The memoirs and publications of Communists from several countries, including the United States, claim that national Comintern affiliates were making turns to a broader, less sectarian strategy before the 1935, when the Comintern adopted a radically new strategy, replacing the united front with what it called the “Popular Front.” The impetus originally came, not from the Soviets, but from the Communist Party of Germany, which in the early 1930s had assailed Socialist and Social-Democratic parties as obstacles to revolution, while

downplaying the threat of Nazism. The German Party had faced a rude awakening: After Adolph Hitler's 1932 election he undertook the imprisonment and extermination of Socialists and Communists alike, and began laying plans to attack the Soviet Union.

In the United States, the turn toward the Popular Front coincided with the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1935, the most important reforms of the New Deal, and the 1936 re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Party chairman Earl Browder captured the Popular Front's optimism by coining a slogan that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier: "Communism Is 20th Century Americanism." The Party's friendlier and more cooperative posture in popular front organizations—and an aggressive campaign against fascism—paid off quickly. Soon Communists were being hired by burgeoning industrial unions, government welfare agencies and public works programs, and were being favorably assessed in mainstream newspapers and national magazines. While the shift in many ways encouraged Communists to conceal their revolutionary aims and even their Party membership, if the term 'Popular Front' today sounds pinko to American ears, it shouldn't. A popular front was an organization in which the Communist Party owned minority stock, or acted as if it were a minority partner by promoting non-socialist and non-revolutionary goals and slogans.

The South

The Popular Front was not, however, the key to the Party's entry into the South. The decision to open work in the South evolved from the 1928 Comintern policy concerning the status of African-Americans.

The Party was founded in 1919 largely as an anti-war split from the Socialist Party, most of whose leaders had supported World War I and denounced the Bolsheviks for making a separate peace with Germany. The Socialist Party, though broad enough to have won dozens of municipal and legislative elections, even in locales as conservative as today's Oklahoma, had drawn most of its members from the immigrant population of the North and Northeast. Most SP members in those regions did not read English and spoke it only with dif-

ficulty. They joined through “language federations” which published newspapers and conducted meetings in mother tongues. When the Communist Party was formed, it too was dominated by recent immigrants, most of whom had previously belonged to the SP. In time the *Daily Worker*, an English-language organ published in New York, became its principal organ. But its foreign-language publications circulated more widely until the mid-'Thirties, when native-born Americans came to outnumber immigrants in the Party's ranks.

The new-born Communist Party, like the Socialists and the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical union, accepted African-Americans into membership in an era when most labor unions and Southern units of the Democratic Party barred them. But the Communists, like the Socialists, made only piddling efforts to recruit African-Americans, and few joined. In the late 'Twenties, historians believe, blacks accounted for less than 250 — by some accounts, not more than 50 — of some 8,000 of its members.

The Soviets had taken an early theoretical interest in the status of American blacks, and several African-American Communists who visited or studied in Moscow complained that their white American comrades did not seem to understand, or care, that racism was more than an annoying feature of the labor market. Soviet party and Comintern representatives saw in the American Party's behavior what they regarded as woeful ignorance of “the question of oppressed nationalities.” The USSR had resolved that problem, the Bolsheviks believed, by granting autonomy to the subject nations of the Russian Empire, and they thought that a kindred solution might work in the United States. At its 1928 Congress, after months of consultation, the Comintern promulgated a variant of the Soviet doctrine of “national self-determination” to fit conditions in both the United States and South Africa. The essential idea of the new policy was sloganized in South Africa as a call for a “Native Republic,” and in the United States, as a call for a “Negro Soviet Republic.”

Under its terms the CPUSA was ordered to crusade not only against all forms of white supremacy, but also for the “right” of blacks across a swath of the South in which they were a majority, to separate from the United States. The notion of Black Belt secession was never wildly popular among either blacks or whites in the American party,

but it did put an exclamation point after the Comintern's command that the American CP transform itself into a thoroughly anti-racist and biracial organization. To do that, the Comintern said, it had to organize the South, where two-thirds of American blacks lived.

Scholarly disputations about the origin, development and implementation of the Party's line on "the Negro question" now fill more than 30 volumes — a whole library shelf — but its essence was the view that American, and especially Southern, workers could not be organized to challenge the power of capital so long as racial prejudice kept the working class divided. Long-time Socialists had regarded the deep South as a region where reactionaries wielded doubled power: If its whites didn't become strikebreakers, the thinking went, its African-Americans would. In four paragraphs of a 1936 pamphlet, *The Reds in Dixie*, Birmingham steel industry organizer and one-time CP district chairman Tom Johnson put the problem into kitchen-table terms:

Let us take a foundry, for example, where 50 white and 50 Negro moulders are employed. Let us say that all the whites belong to the Moulders Union and that their local refuses to admit Negroes to membership (and many Southern Locals of the Moulders Union do bar Negroes) on the usual ground that colored moulders are just "niggers" and should not be allowed to join an organization of the "superior" whites. Moreover, let us suppose that the white moulders and their Union are continually trying to get the boss to fire the Negroes and hire whites in their places (and this is going on in almost every foundry in the South that employs both white and colored moulders.) And last, let us say that the Negro moulders are getting less pay for the same work than the whites (and this is the usual thing in the South.)

Then there is a wage cut and the whites are cut to the same pay as the Negroes. They decide to strike. They ask the Negroes to come out with them, for they realize that unless the Negro moulders also strike, they cannot hope to win. As soon as the boss gets wind of the strike plans he rushes to the Negroes and tell them the same old story, "Why should you strike together with that white trash? They refused to accept you in their union, they abused you in the shop and then even tried to get me to fire all of you and hire white men in your place. If you boys go out and help them win they'll start the same thing all over again when they get back in the shop. Better stick with me and get some of your col-

ored friends to come in and break the strike of this white trash. I'll see that you colored boys get a square deal."

Now those Negro moulders may strike or they may fall for the fine promises of the boss and refuse to go out—and considering the treatment they have received from the white workers, who could blame them if they refused to strike? ...

If the Negro moulders go on strike, the boss merely works the same trick in reverse. He brings in white moulders as strike-breakers and he sings them a different tune: "Those strikers are just a bunch of dirty 'niggers' anyway. It isn't like scabbing on white men. And besides, if you'll help me break the strike I will agree to do what you have always wanted — kick all the 'niggers' out and hire only white moulders. Come on in and take the jobs; we whites have got to stick together against those black apes." And so the strike is broken.

The Comintern's decision that the Party should launch a campaign to organize the South, and especially its blacks, forced the CPUSA to challenge not only the racial division and tyranny of the South, but also to contend with an environment largely outside the heritage of American radicalism.

Inherent in the Marxist outlook was a preference for big cities, where industrial workers were clustered by the thousands. Nearly seven million people lived in New York, the Party's stronghold, at the time. But the three largest cities in the South, New Orleans, Louisville and Houston had a combined population of only one million. The states in which the Party did most of its work, North Carolina, Georgia and Alabama had a combined population of nearly nine million — compared to 24 million for New York, Illinois, and Massachusetts, but all three Southern states were locales in which half of the population lived on farms. Atlanta was the largest city in the three states, with a mere 270,000 residents. The smallest city in the key Northern states was Boston, nearly three times as populous.

Southern ignorance matched its rural character. Illiteracy rates — important to plans for building a newspaper like the *Southern Worker* — were three to four times as high in the South as in the North and Northeast. The table below shows the illiteracy rates by race as self-reported in interviews with Census-takers during 1930:

Illiterate Persons 10 Years of Age and Older:

	native-born whites	blacks
Massachusetts	0.4	5.4
New York	0.5	2.5
Illinois	0.6	3.0
North Carolina	5.6	20.6
Georgia	9.4	19.9
Alabama	4.8	26.2

While the rate of illiteracy among African-Americans in the northern states was lower than for native whites in the southern locales, African-Americans formed a nearly insignificant proportion of the industrial North: 1 percent in Massachusetts, 3 percent in New York, 4 percent in Illinois, as compared to 29 percent in North Carolina, 37 percent in Georgia and 35 percent in Alabama.

Illiteracy was a notable problem in northern settlements of foreign-born whites, who accounted for about a fifth of the populations of the three northern states — but at about ten percent, it was still less than half the rate among Southern blacks. And in the South, which had only been lightly touched by recent immigrations, the illiteracy rate among the foreign-born was lower than that of native whites!

Nor was the future promising. Public schools in the South lagged as much as literacy did. Annual per-pupil expenditures were \$86 to \$104 in the key northern states for 1930, \$21 to \$36 in the three southern locales. Teacher salaries ranged from \$1630 to \$1875 annually in the industrial North, but only half as much in the South.

A great part of Southern backwardness was due to the region's semi-feudal, rural character. Its agriculture was plagued by boll weevils and bedeviled by the inequalities inherent in the sharecropping system. So personalized and subject to local variation was the picture of the era's Southern farm economy — with differing arrangements governing tenancy and sharecropping in every locale — that drawing a quantitative picture was nearly impossible. The figures that speak

most loudly are those that describe farm mechanization. Below are statistics from 1930 showing the average dollar value of implements and machinery owned by farmers in the North and South:

North:

New England	\$ 682
Middle Atlantic	921
East North Central	576

South:

South Atlantic	\$ 264
East South Central	226
West South Central	390

Southern farms were mostly subsistence farms, worked by mules and family labor.

Southern workers weren't prosperous, either. Even operatives in the South's most modern plants and mills were subject to what was popularly called "the Southern wage differential." The average hourly wage for entry-level industrial workers in the United States was 44.9 cents an hour. In the Southeast, it was 29.4 cents. In the low-wage and largely rural sawmill industry, the average entry-level wage in the United States was 31 cents per hour. In Southeastern sawmills, it was a mere 21 cents.

Not only were Southern workers paid lower wages, but in hard times, they suffered sharper wage cuts. In a 1929 address in Philadelphia, Ethelbert Stewart, the United States Commissioner of Labor Statistics, revealed that since 1920 textile wages had been cut by 26 percent in Massachusetts, 41 percent in South Carolina, 36 percent in North Carolina and 32 percent in Georgia.

Business interests maintained that low wages in the South were offset by lower living costs, but figures for food prices reported in the Statistical Abstract of the United States for 1930 give negligible support to that claim. The government's comparison, based on average national costs for 1913, showed that in 1930 prices in New York City were 150 percent higher than in 1913, those in Boston, 151 percent

higher. Prices in Atlanta were 147 percent higher, and in Birmingham, 150 percent.

The South was cursed with poverty. In his seminal 1943 work, *Divided We Stand*, Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb separated the nation into three regions: the North, the South and the West. Webb found that according to federal reports for 1931, a year when those who had earned more than \$3,500 were required to file income tax returns, 84 percent of the taxpayers lived in the North and only 9 percent in the South — yet 27 percent of the nation's people were Southerners.

But it was not as if Southern capitalists were growing fat on a diet of cheap labor, because most Southern industries were not home-owned; Southern operators remitted their profits to the North. Webb's figures showed that of the nation's 200 biggest corporations, 90 percent were headquartered in the North, 4.5 percent, in the South. The disparity was reflected on the balance sheets of financial firms. Though about a third of the insurance industry's income came from the South and West, 96 percent of insurance industry profits went to the North, which also captured 82 percent of the funds in savings accounts. Only 5.6 percent of the dollars in savings accounts was in the vaults of Southern banks. The conclusion that Webb and other Southern scholars drew —some of them seriously, some in jest — was that the South was not really a part of the United States but was its internal colony.

As it prepared to begin work in the South, the Communist Party's strategists no doubt scratched their heads and rubbed their chins. The Party would have to confront not only the educational and economic backwardness of the South — and its menacing racial codes —but its own numerical weakness. It had no clubs and only a handful of contacts in the region.

Indeed, in all of the Southern states, the Party could have counted its supporters on one hand. In March 1929, the *Labor Defender*, the monthly magazine of the Party's legal defense arm, reported on contributions to its Christmas fund-raising drive. Among some 550 contributors, 196 came from New York, 36 from Illinois, and 26 from Massachusetts, but only 3 came from Texas, 2 from Louisiana, and 2

from Florida —and none came from the balance of the Southern states.

Somehow an organization composed mostly of white immigrants and Yankees had to extend its operations into a region where Northerners were widely distrusted, foreigners were few, unions were anathema and the advocacy of racial equality was ordinarily a crime.

Gastonia

On the rise of a hill two blocks south of Franklin Boulevard, in the Charlotte, NC suburb of Gastonia, sits a monumental red-brick structure, six stories tall and nearly three blocks long. Built more than a hundred years ago, almost all of its 25,000 window panes — set in more than 900 arched, floor-to-ceiling windows — are intact, though the building was long ago abandoned.

A tower, nine stories tall, stands in the middle of the structure's front, or north, side. A sign painted over brick, "Loray Mills / Retail and Industrial Properties / Now Available," spans its sixth through ninth floors. The sign is an advertisement for a scheme to rehabilitate the gargantuan edifice. A web page touted on the sign includes a plan to turn its 537,000 square feet into 172 condominiums and 145,000 square feet of commercial space, including a 40,000 square-foot charter school. The sign's lettering announces a schedule for this metamorphosis: "Begin construction — Q1 2007/ Move first commercial tenants — Q3 2007 / Complete Renovations — Q2 2008."

Those deadlines have not been met. The Loray building is today a monument to the 2008 collapse of the American real estate bubble.

In a margin of the sign is a red circle whose message only locals and historians understand. "I Gave To Free Gastonia Prisoners," it says. The Loray mill was the site of the tumultuous 1929 strike with which the Communist's Party's effort to organize the South began.

My plan for this book forbids as unnecessary the recounting of stories that the *Southern Worker* covered; its pages describe those events. What happened at Gastonia was the prelude the *Southern Worker's* founding; it set the priorities for the newspaper's coverage of both Party activities and the broader life of the South.

The Loray story began in late 1928, when Communist trade union leader William Z. Foster dispatched Fred Erwin Beal to open the Party's Southern campaign. He arrived in Charlotte, N.C., 20 miles east of Gastonia, on Jan. 1, 1929.

Beal, 32, whom a colleague described as "rather stout, of medium height...with reddish-blond hair and very blue eyes with pale lashes," had worked in New England textile mills since the age of fourteen. In his youth he had participated in a 1912 Lawrence, Mass. strike, and had joined the IWW and the Socialist Party. Probably as a member of the CP, he had sparked a massive 1928 New Bedford strike for the newly-formed, Communist-led National Textile Workers Union (usually abbreviated NTWU.) Far from being a hard-bitten union thug, associates always described him as soft-spoken, even cowardly.

In a 1937 autobiography, *Proletarian Journey*, Beal said that Foster had picked him because he was of "the American type," a designation that was important in an industry whose Northern workers were mostly immigrants. In an advertisement aimed at luring investors, the Spartanburg, South Carolina Chamber of Commerce touted the "American" character of its workforce as an advantage:

The available labor supply is all American, native white. Spartanburg County ranks first in the State of South Carolina in white population; and the State, of all the Southern States, leads the country with only 1 per cent of foreign born. The population of New England shows 60.2 per cent of foreign born. The native white labor on which Spartanburg draws comes largely from the mountaineers of the Blue Ridge; sturdy, dependable, reliable men and women who are efficient, with the will to work, and receptive to new methods of manufacturing.¹

Neither Foster nor Beal provided a thorough account of the origin of their plan, but it is likely that they picked North Carolina because they had learned that a rival union, the United Textile Workers of America (UTW) — an affiliate of the conservative American Federation of Labor — was planning a return to the South. Though spread south into Georgia and west into Tennessee, the textile indus-

¹ The figure given for the foreign-born population of New England more than doubles that provided in the Censuses of 1920 and 1930, which show foreign-born populations of 25 and 22 percent. It may have been accurate, however, for the population of textile towns.

try was densest in North Carolina, and Charlotte had been its urban anchor since the Southern industry's inception during the post-Reconstruction era. Hard-pressed "hillbilly" subsistence farmers had provided regional captains of industry with an ample source of labor at wages as much as a third below those of Northeastern textile centers.

As would-be workers streamed from the mountains into one-horse valley towns, housing supplies came under strain. Mill owners found it convenient, even profitable, to offer prospective workers housing as well as jobs. In hiring, they showed preference for family groups, and in their mill villages, they allocated space according to the number of household members employed at their mills; one bedroom per worker was the usual rule. Rents were deducted from paychecks, and workers at some mills — the Lora was one of them — received part of their pay in coupons redeemable only at company stores located inside the villages where they lived.

The paternalism of the arrangement went beyond economics. Alcohol and gambling were forbidden in most mill villages, which were patrolled by company guards. Church attendance was encouraged and in some locales was compulsory. Workers whom managers deemed rowdy, troublesome or unreliable often lost their jobs and shelter in a single day.

Southern textile workers, a slim majority of them women and children, had learned that they could occasionally improve their conditions by playing to the roles assigned them by paternalism. Peeved when employers wouldn't meet their demands, in small groups they had sometimes walked off their jobs and stayed out until their bosses gave in, as if to say to their employees, "Honey, I'm sorry. Things will be different from now on." But the outcomes of such spontaneous actions were unpredictable. Sometimes managers and owners threatened to lock out or blacklist absentee workers, as if to say, "If you're not home by Monday, I'm going to file for divorce." Arrangements by which labor-management relations could be governed by contract — unionism — promised workers not only a means of raising their wages and shortening their workweeks, but also a means of regularizing class conflict.

The Southern textile industry had boomed in response to government orders during World War I, but when peace came, orders and profits plummeted. Workers at more than a dozen mills went on strike in 1919-21, some of them spontaneously, some fanned by the AFL's United Textile Workers. As many as 20,000 North Carolina "lintheads" walked out, including those at the Loray mill. But in a matter of weeks the mills were running again, having made no important concessions. The UTW largely abandoned the region, leaving both mill hands and their bosses embittered.

The postwar downturn also led to purchases and mergers which brought Southern mills under the ownership of Northeastern firms. Ownership consolidation meant that mill owners were in a position to benefit from closures in higher-wage, Northeastern locales. Because the Southern mills were low-wage shops, Northeastern workers looked upon the industry's growth in the South much as today's American workers look upon outsourcing to China. The AFL's UTW, struggling to survive in the Northeast, saw a renewed campaign to unionize "runaway shops" as a means of protecting its Northeastern members. That same motive probably persuaded Foster to dispatch Beal to Charlotte.

Racial considerations apparently had little to do with UTW's plans to organize the South; the textile workforce was almost lily-white. African-American workers who were hired were assigned mostly to "outside jobs" in warehousing, waste processing and maintenance, and black women weren't hired by the mills.

Beal's initial contact in Charlotte was an aging, nearly blind Jewish junk dealer who was probably a subscriber to the *Daily Worker* and a contributor to the Party's legal-defense campaigns. While a guest in the junkman's home, Beal tried to land a job in nearby mills. Despite his textile experience, none would hire him, no doubt because his New England accent marked him as worker who might have a bit of union experience.

But within weeks he had chartered a small NTWU local at Pineville, a Charlotte suburb. Mill No. 5 of the Chadwick-Hoskins Company had been built in 1894, and had in 1908 come into the hands of Northern investors, who sometimes tweaked the time-tested customs of Jim Crow. Years later, after Beal had soured on Communism,

he alleged that his Pineville success “was not due to my eloquence...nearly as much as to the fact that the bosses in this village had tried the experiment of working Negroes instead of whites.” Some of the homes in the mill village had formerly been occupied by African-American workers, a fact that didn’t sit well with their 1929 occupants, who feared that the bosses might resort to hiring black labor again. The company’s managers, Beal noted, “had succeeded in antagonizing the white mill-hands to such a point that they flocked into our union.”

Beal’s confession, however, cannot be taken as a thorough explanation. Though fear of blacks no doubt motivated some of the unionists, nothing racial was mentioned in the demands they issued when, weeks later, they struck, along with workers across the region. Instead, they demanded the cancellation of wage cuts and of labor-intensification schemes that they called “the stretch-out,” a term which, as the *Raleigh News and Observer* noted, “in plain English...means getting the same amount of work done with a smaller number of employees.” Neither Beal’s “eloquence” nor any racial animosity had been responsible for the implementation of the stretch-out.

Once a Pineville UTW was on its feet, Beal set his eyes on Gastonia, home to some 100 mills. The Loray mill, founded in 1900, was its prize. It manufactured fabric used in automobile tires.

Tellingly, the mill’s name graced more than a workplace. It had been concocted from the surnames of two its early-day factotums, John F. Love, hence ‘Lo’, and George A. Gray, hence ‘ray.’ Thanks to it and smaller mills, Gastonia had grown to a population of seventeen thousand, more than 2,000 of them Loray workers, most of whom lived in its 450-unit village. When the mill owners offered to donate nearby lots for the construction of a new church, its congregants were so grateful that they named it — after the mill! — the Loray Baptist Church. It still stands on a hill two blocks away, overlooking the abandoned mill.

But the gods did not bless the Loray. During the postwar textile downturn, its local owners sold the mill to the Manville-Jenkes Company, a Rhode Island firm. Its new owners introduced the “stretch-out,” reducing the Loray’s workforce from about 3,500 to about

2,200. According to the most thorough scholar of the mill's labor history, Australian professor John A. Salmond, a series of cuts in 1927-28 trimmed wages by 25 to 50 percent. In 1929 Loray's white employees were laboring 55 to 66 hours per week for \$12-\$20, while their children worked 55 to 60 hours for as little as \$5 per payday. The lowest-paid adult workers in the mill, a correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun* found, were African-American "scrubbers," who earned \$10.20 per week.

In early 1928 about 50 workers in the plant's weave room briefly walked out, only to return within days. Later that year Loray workers staged a carnivalesque parade in which they carried an effigy of a mill executive whom they'd nicknamed "Stretch-Out." At intervals, the effigy would sit up and ask, "How many men are carrying this thing?" "Eight," the marchers responded. "Lay off two," the effigy would cry. "Six can do the work." But neither of the protests brought better conditions or higher pay.

Guided by his newfound Pineville supporters, Beal began holding clandestine meetings with knots of Loray workers. While these talks were still in the whispering stage, unorganized workers walked out at cotton mills in Greenville, and Ware Shoals, S.C., and at a rayon mill in Elizabethton, Tennessee; all three towns lay within a radius of 125 miles. When his prospective Gastonia members learned about these strikes, Beal argued in his autobiography, they prevailed on him to invite the whole Loray workforce to a big, public, open-air union rally, called for Saturday afternoon, March 30, 1929. Management spies were in attendance, and Monday, when workers returned to the mill, five of those who had attended the Saturday "speaking" were summarily fired. By nightfall a strike was on and the mill was nearly idle, manned by African-American "outside men," supervisory workers, and a handful of non-strikers. NTWU supporters surrounded it with picket lines. Beal estimated that 1,800 workers had walked out. Among their demands were the eight-hour day, the five-day week and "Equal pay for equal work, for women and youth."

Two days later, North Carolina governor Max Gardner, himself a textile operator, sent National Guardsmen to occupy the Loray's grounds; the Guard arrested ten pickets during its first duty day. By then, leaderless strikes had spread to mills in Spartanburg, Union and

Buffalo, S.C., all with a 60-mile radius of Gastonia, and to Woodruff and Anderson, S.C., about 100 miles distant. Days later, mills in Lexington and Forest City, N.C. walked out. As the wave gathered momentum, Beal persuaded the Pineville workers to strike, too.

In late March Beal had been joined by two assistants, George Pershing—a correspondent for the *Daily Worker*, said to be a relative of the then-famous general of that surname—and Ellen Dawson, a Scottish immigrant, textile worker and veteran of Northeastern strikes. The daily *Gastonia Gazette*, though it would also declare that “In many respects this paper sympathizes with the textile workers,” on April 3 published a full-page advertisement which very nearly called for mob action against the unionists. The advertisement, which the *Gazette* claimed was paid for by “Citizens of Gaston county,” urged that:

The very existence, the happiness, and the very life even, of every citizen of Gaston county, is threatened, and is in the balance, if Beal and his Bolshevik associates succeed in having their way.

The question in the minds of many people who belong to the Christian church, who belong to the various patriotic and fraternal organizations is, shall men and women of the type of Beal and associates, with their Bolshevik ideas, with their calls for violence and bloodshed, be permitted to remain in Gaston county?

Government officials joined into the denunciation. Charles G. Wood, a conciliator with the U.S. Department of Labor, along with the North Carolina Commissioner of Labor on April 4 refused to offer mediation services at Loray. Wood, who was visiting mill managers in the region, told the *Raleigh News and Observer* that the Gastonia walkout was:

...not a strike as strikes are defined, it is a form of revolution created by those committed to revolution by mass action. There is not here any existing common ground upon which employees and employers can stand. No conciliation is possible until the misled workers divorce themselves from their communistic leaders.

As it would during a half-dozen subsequent Southern industrial and racial conflicts, the Communist Party soon dispatched troubleshooters of its own: relief providers, speakers, journalists and lawyers, dozens of them over the next four months. Among them was Vera Buch, a 22-year-old Hunter College graduate from New York who was a tuberculosis survivor — a noteworthy distinction in those days — and a veteran of a 1926 textile strike in Passaic, New Jersey.

Buch was also a careful observer and an honest reporter. In a memoir written years after she had left the Party, *A Radical Life*, she noted that within days of her April 5 arrival in Gastonia, she was seeing a strike far weaker than the one that she'd read about in the *Daily Worker*. "It was clear," she wrote, "that there were no eighteen hundred strikers, there were not one thousand, there were a few hundred at best."

Most of those who walked the picket lines — as would later be true in the civil rights movement of the 1960s — were women and children. The men, when they didn't drift back to work, often returned to the hills of their childhood days.

Buch reported that within two weeks, even members of the local strike committee began to vanish, much to her consternation. "Days would pass," she wrote. "Then after a week or longer, when we had given them up for lost, the departed members would reappear cheerful and unconcerned."

Using the condescending spellings by which educated people often recorded Southern speech, Buch also reported that when she asked the missing members where they'd been, they provided explanations that were dismaying:

"No'm, I wasn't scabbin'. I just went back to the hills to see my folks for a spell. Git me some home cookin'. Or, 'Oh, I done went in to work for a week, just to git me a bit of foldin' money.'"

"Never for one moment," Buch observed, "did it occur to them to notify the staff of their departures. Hill people turned mill workers, they were complete individualists. The union was all right if it could win their strike, but of union discipline they had no conception."

Her report on the human raw material that the South provided for Communist transformation was probably not far off the mark,

nor applicable only to Appalachian-bred whites. A little more than a year later, policemen in Birmingham, Ala. raided a Party office and among its papers found a letter in which district organizer Tom Johnson told his Party superiors in New York that the South wasn't ready to host a cadre-training school for his mostly African-American recruits because:

“The overwhelming majority of our members are new, without even any previous organizational experience such as comes from participating in union activity. They are not old sympathizers ... who have been on the fringe of the movement for some time and have absorbed some of our theory and philosophy. They are raw, green workers, with a much lower educational standard than northern workers. Many are illiterate. They have not the slightest idea when they come into the party of how the party operates.”

But simple hunger as well as individualism and ignorance no doubt motivated many of Gastonia's defectors. The NTWU had rented a former post office, built of wood, as its headquarters, and also a nearby brick building at which Party organizers dispensed groceries under the sponsorship of a Comintern subsidiary, the Workers International Relief (WIR). But the WIR, the Party and its affiliates were underfunded; just a month earlier, the *Daily Worker's* telephone lines had been disconnected for nonpayment.

According to the Buch memoir, each morning the WIR's relief coordinator, Amy Schechter, a graduate of Barnard College who had been an NTWU press agent during the New Bedford strike, telephoned the union's New York headquarters with an appeal for aid, “and by late afternoon there would usually be some money telegraphed in to her. She would then rush to Gastonia to buy food and would give out packages of beans, flour and other staples to the strikers.”

Rations were scarce. “It was a hand-to-mouth affair, a wretched situation, beyond our control and also beyond our understanding,” Buch complained. Schechter told the *News and Observer* that the relief operation especially suffered from a lack of luxury goods. “What they want most is tobacco and coffee, but we haven't the money for that and can give them very little sugar,” she said.

Reporters for regional newspapers noted that the relief office was often closed for lack of provisions and sometimes limited its aid to families of seven and more. The *Gazette* noted in an April 12 editorial that the usual fare consisted of “a head of cabbage and a pint or two of meal, no lard, no seasoning, no flour to speak of.”

In the midst of these troubles, Albert Weisbord, a 29-year-old Brooklynite and Harvard law graduate whom the Party had tapped to head the NTWU’s national office, paid a visit to Gastonia. He came with at least two goals in mind: To visit Vera Buch, his wife — the two had met during a 1926 Passaic, NJ strike — and, as Beal grumpily recalled in his autobiography, to bring “orders from the Comintern and from the Central Committee that I emphasize the Negro Question.” Weisbord pursued the latter goal, not only in a tense meeting with Beal, but in public speeches, including an April 10 Gastonia address in which he declared that “Our union knows no political or religious distinction. We have no color line, although the bosses wish you did ...”

Weisbord’s lecture on race relations did not win the ardor of Lora workers, all of whom had grown up under Jim Crow, and it irritated some of them. “We did see some union people tearing up their cards,” Buch noted. Nor was Weisbord’s message entirely of his own inspiration. In October John Pepper, aka József Pogány, a Hungarian Communist originally sent by the Comintern to aid the Hungarian-speaking section of the CPUSA, wrote an article in the Party’s discussion journal that warned that “The prejudices created in the minds of large sections of the white workers against the Negroes are the most dangerous obstacles to the unity of the American working class,” and in orders to the Party, the Comintern had stipulated that “The Negro problem must be part and parcel of all and every campaign conducted by the Party.” In New York and other urban centers, an inner-Party crusade was underway to live up to that goal.

Beal probably did not know of the Comintern order until February, when its text was first published in the *Daily Worker*, and he certainly had not adjusted to the news. “I failed to understand how it was possible to bring into the strike the question of Negro rights when there were no Negroes involved,” he pleaded in his autobiography.

The *Gazette* had for days been assailing NTWU organizers as atheists and advocates of free love, and of both anarchism and communism, but its arguments had not gained much traction. Weisbord's April 10-11 remarks gave it a new opportunity to destroy the NTWU by slandering its leaders as advocates of "racial miscegenation ... and indiscriminate intermarriage." As evidence for its charge, while changing the orthography of 'Negro' to 'negro', it reprinted the Party's program for racial reform:

1. A federal law against lynching and the protection of the negro masses in their right of self-defense.
2. Abolition of the whole system of race discrimination. Full racial, political and social equality for the negro race.
3. Abolition of all laws which result in segregation of negroes. Abolition of all Jim Crow laws. The law shall forbid all discrimination against negroes in selling or renting houses.
4. Abolition of all laws which disenfranchise the negroes.
5. Abolition of laws forbidding intermarriage of persons of different races.
6. Abolition of all laws and public administration measures which prohibit, or in practice prevent, negro children or youth from attending general public schools or universities.
7. Full and equal admittance of negroes to all railway station waiting rooms, trains, restaurant, hotels and theatres.

At the end of these lines, it also made plain what lay ahead for the NTWU:

How long are the authorities going to put up with this sort of drivel? How much longer will the good people of this community stand for stuff like this? ...

The good people of the community are getting tired of these wops from the east side of New York telling our folks what to do and how to do it. It is time we are being rid of them ... Get them out of town, and the strike will be settled and in a way that will be satisfactory to all.

The *Gazette's* editorial diatribe may have been encouraged, not only by Weisbord's speeches, but also by an event in Forest City, some 50 miles west. Unorganized workers at its Florence Mill had spontaneously walked out a week earlier and had promptly entered into ne-

gotiations with management. On April 11, they returned to work after winning satisfaction of two of three grievances: the removal of an unpopular supervisor and the cancellation of “stretch-out” A physician, Dr. Amos C. Duncan, had acted as spokesmen and negotiator for the strikers; Duncan was identified in the regional press as the local grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. The NTWU’s demands led to bitter fights between labor and capital, it seemed. Ku Klux leadership, by contrast, had brought about a prompt and happy reconciliation.

Following Weisbord’s visit, the *Gazette* editorial, and the Forest City settlement, a Loray worker and lay preacher who had sometimes spoken from the podium at NTWU rallies, the Rev. B.L. Mull, quit the union, telling the *News and Observer* that union loyalty conflicted with “my obligation, which is to put the Anglo-Saxon race first and to have no mixing of colors.” About the same time a member of the strike committee, Leo Small, disappeared from Gastonia, requesting that a paycheck the mill owed him be sent to his family home in South Carolina.

On the night of April 17, only days after the *Gazette’s* call to action — a mob of masked men, presumably members of a recently-formed a vigilante group, the Committee of 100, descended on the NTWU’s Gastonia offices. After overpowering unarmed guards, the night raiders reduced the union’s headquarters to rubble with sledgehammers and axes. Unable to destroy the brick structure that housed the relief operations, the mob scattered the W.I.R.’s thin supplies on the street and set them afire with kerosene. National Guardsmen encamped about 200 yards away later claimed that they had seen and heard nothing, though they did arrest the ten guards whom the raiders had subdued. A pair of handcuffs and a deputy sheriff’s badge were found in the ruins when daylight came “but there was no explanation for their presence,” the *News and Observer* reported. Evictions of the strikers and their families from mill village homes began at the end of the month.

In May NTWU militants erected a tent city for the evicted strikers and a new office building, from which Beal began laying plans to revive the strike. Workers on the Loray’s night shift, many of whom had returned to the mill, told him that they would again walk out on pay day evening, Saturday, June 7. To support the walk-out, Beal

called a late afternoon march to the plant gates. About 200 women and youngsters joined the procession, led by Buch and Schechter, but Beal, who had consistently avoided picket duty, stayed in the union hall, to catch up on paperwork, he said.

As they had a half-dozen times before, lawmen attacked the march, and while they were dispersing its participants with blackjacks and rifle butts, several women said that they heard one the officers, Tom Gilbert, tell the others that it was time to get rid of the union agitators, once and for all.

Minutes later, while the battered marchers were straggling towards the union office in retreat, they were passed by a car packed with lawmen, including Gastonia police chief O. F. Aderholt. Several armed men stood on its running boards, among them the policeman Gilbert and his buddy, former officer Arthur Road, both of whom had passed a busy day.

That morning they had driven to Charlotte to witness a Confederate Veterans' Day parade. On their way back, apparently already drunk, they stopped at an out-of-the-way gasoline station whose operator, they knew, sold moonshine. When he denied having any, they chased him into a nearby river, firing shots as he fled. Rural patrolmen for Mecklenburg county, in which Charlotte sits, appeared on the scene and arrested the two miscreants. But when the station's operator said that he didn't want to press charges, the officers merely ordered the two moonshine-seekers back to Gastonia.

The Aderholt party drove to the NTWU hall, dismounted and tried to enter. Its guards held them back, demanding a search warrant which the raiding party didn't have. That led to an altercation, and to gunfire. Four lawmen, including Chief Aderholt, and one union man were felled in a short-lived exchange. After both sides had driven their wounded to a hospital, a posse—presumably the Committee of 100 again—destroyed the union's tent city. Its occupants fled into the outlying woods. Chief Aderholt died of his wounds the following afternoon. "The blood of these men cries out to the high heavens for vengeance. This community has been too lenient with these despicable curs and snakes from the dives of Passaic, Hoboken and New York," the *Gazette* decried that morning. By sundown, some 75 un-

ionists were in jail, charged with conspiracy and capital murder. Vera Buch and Amy Schechter were among them.

For practical purposes, when Aderholt died the Gastonia walkout came to an end. In other strikes that the NTW had inspired, only to tire out its followers, exhaust its funds or see its leaders disappear into jails, UTW officials had come in, taken over locals that the Reds had organized, then signed watered-down agreements with mill owners and managers. But in the Carolinas, textile barons rebuffed the UTW's offers to pact a peace.

For the next five months, the Communist Party and ILD spent most of their resources to mount a defense in hearings, a mistrial, and finally, two Charlotte jury proceedings for the NTW defendants whose indictments their lawyers had been unable to defeat.

The first trial of 16 accused strike leaders opened on Aug. 26 but ended in a mistrial on Monday, Sept. 9 after a juryman simply went insane. The Committee of 100, the *Gazette* and other foes of the union were enraged by the setback. That night in Gastonia, by the account of one witness, a mob of some 200 to 300 men formed convoy of 105 cars—led by a motorcycle patrolman. They ransacked the NTW's Gastonia headquarters building, then headed to Bessemer City, a mere five miles away, to riffle an NTW outpost there. The convoy then doubled-back to Gastonia to raid a boarding house run by a Loray striker, Mrs. Helen Lodge, and her husband, a carpenter. Once inside, some members of the mob serenaded Mrs. Lodge with "My County 'Tis of Three" and the hymn "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow," while others kidnapped two NTW members with local backgrounds and Ben Wells, an immigrant Englishman who had replaced the jailed Beal, who remained in jail.

The main body of the caravan headed into Charlotte in a fruitless attempt to kidnap Tom P. Jimison, a local attorney hired by the ILD, while two cars carrying the Gastonia abductees headed into the countryside, where they forced their charges into a grove. Once there, the kidnappers ordered the local unionists to flog Wells. Both refused. Momentarily casting aside their irritation, the kidnappers set about whipping Wells themselves, only to be halted by the sound of barking. Farmer R.B. McDonald and a friend were nearby, coon hunting with their animals. Alerted by screams from the wailing Wells, they

called their dogs to return, but the kidnappers heard them and drove away, leaving their captives behind. Wells was so bloodied and bruised that he was unable to leave his bed the next day to attend a grand session that had been called to investigate the incident. In response to the near-lynching, the NTW called a Gastonia rally for Saturday, Sept. 14.

A group of 22 Bessemer city textile workers Saturday afternoon climbed onto the bed of a truck that they'd hired to drive them to the Gastonia protest. As the truck drew near, a line of about 30 parked cars blocked the roadway. Men standing beside them ordered its driver to return, then gave chase when he did. As the trucker was nearing Bessemer City, at a spot still unmarked, an auto passed him, and according to subsequent testimony, stopped and blocked the road. The trucker braked, but said that he couldn't bring his vehicle to a stop in time to avoid colliding with the auto, an Essex, which rolled over and off the road without hurting its occupants, all Loray strikebreakers. Armed men emerged from the pursuit vehicles, and their first shot struck a Bessemer worker, Ella Mae Wiggins, in the right breast, killing her instantly. As the other occupants of the truck leaped out and headed into surrounding wilds, the pursuers continued to fire — but none of their shots struck anyone.

Ella May Wiggins was not an ordinary striker. Short and dumpy, at 29 she was the mother of nine children, three of whom had died of "the croup" and a fourth of pellagra, one of the earmark diseases of Southern poverty. Born into a logger's family in the Appalachians, in her teens she had married and become a textile worker in the lowlands. Her husband had left her before the birth of her last child, some eighteen months earlier, and the boy's birth certificate bore the name of another man, whom she called her "cousin." A textile industry publication issued during the 1929 upheaval pointed out that however popular Wiggins was at union rallies, she did not enjoy a reputation for virtue.

She had been an employee of the American Mills company, half of whose workers were African-American. Like the Loray, the Bessemer City mills produced cord for auto tires, but paid lower wages. Probably because the quarters she found were more spacious and a bit cheaper than at American's village, she had also moved her family into

“Stumptown,” the Bessemer City ghetto. Wiggins was a white female who had crossed the color line twice.

She had joined the NTWU when the Bessemer workers struck, only days after the Loray walkout. Since adolescence she had composed and sung, and she turned her talents to chronicling the region’s strike wave. When the NTWU opened its office in Bessemer City, she became the link between its black and white sympathizers.

Newspapers in the region, including the *Gazette*, condemned her murder, and the *News and Observer* pointed out that its most poignant moment came when her children trundled into the mortuary where her corpse was being examined, looking for their mom, apparently unaware of her fate.

Survivors of the attack identified her assailants, and based on their grand jury testimony, early in 1930 five Loray strikebreakers were brought to trial — but were acquitted.

The death of Ella May, as she had taken to calling herself, raised an important question in party circles. Was she killed because she was merely a striker? Or was she “singled-out,” as Buch put it, because she was a striker who had too often defied sexual and racial mores? “I am certain it was as an organizer of the Negroes that Mrs. Wiggins was killed,” Buch opined.

When the trial of the Gastonia leaders began anew on Sept. 30, 1929, accusations were dismissed against nine of the defendants, including Buch and two other women. Though they testified for three weeks, witnesses did not resolve mysteries about who killed Aderholt, or which side in the shoot-out had fired first. The tenor of the proceedings was evident in the prosecutor’s Oct. 21 summation before the jury:

“Do you believe in the flag of your country floating in the breeze, kissing the sunlight, singing the song of freedom?” Do you believe in North Carolina? Do you believe in good roads, the good roads of North Carolina on which the heaven-bannered hosts could walk as far as San Francisco? Gastonia into which the union organizers came, fiends incarnate, stripped of their hoofs and horns, bearing guns instead of pitchforks. They came into peaceful, contented Gastonia with its flowers, birds and churches — sweeping like a cyclone and tornado to sink damnable fangs into the heart and life blood of my community. They

stood it till the great God looked down from the battlements of Heaven and broke the chains and traces of their patience and caused them to call the officers to the lot and stop the infernal scenes that came sweeping down from the wild plains of Soviet Russia into the peaceful community of Gastonia bringing bloodshed and death, creeping like the hellish serpent into the Garden of Eden. Do your duty, men.”

The jury did as it was told, convicting the seven defendants. It sentenced Beal and three other Northerners to terms of 17-20 years. Two Gastonia strikers were sentenced to 12-15 years, and another to 7 years.

At the close of the trial most observers concluded that the Loray strike had been a catastrophe on all sides, though a few Party leaders argued that it had achieved a small gain. In August the North Carolina legislature had passed a law limiting the workweek to 55 hours and Gastonia’s mill operators had complied, without reducing the workers’ pay.

Other commentators noted that though the Loray strikers had not won a union contract, they had not been alone in defeat. Almost all the participants in the Carolinas strike wave, which involved some 15 mills, three of them under UTW leadership, had come away empty-handed. And if Ella May’s murder had been a notable moment for “lynch law,” even it had been overshadowed: A strike led by the UTW in Marion, N.C. had ended on Oct. 2, when six pickets were shot dead and another dozen were wounded by sheriff’s deputies, none of whom was scratched.

In a series of articles in a party discussion journal, *Labor Unity*, Central Committee member Jack Johnstone pointed out that the Loray strike had been hastily called. At the time of the walkout, he revealed, only 47 Loray workers had signed union cards, a number so small that it failed to distinguish the Gastonia action from spontaneous walkouts or the strikes led by the UTW. He also revealed that Beal had not circulated any propaganda, not even a leaflet, before the Loray action was called. Once the strike was on, the Party had time and again shipped bundles of the *Daily Worker* to Buch and Beal, but both admitted that they often didn’t distribute them because, they said, the paper’s accounts of the strike didn’t match its reality. In an

effort to solicit relief contributions in New York, the *Worker's* editors frequently sweetened their copy with lines like “hundreds and and thousands of North Carolina workers are joining the National Textile Workers Union.” For any second thrust into the difficult South, the Party’s leadership now agreed — conveniently, if belatedly, complying with the Comintern’s 1928 plan — that the South needed a newspaper of its own, and veterans of the Gastonia campaign vowed that it had to report the news with more accuracy.

Several Party critics, though perhaps motivated by factional considerations, also chastised Gastonia organizers for having failed to implement the Party’s racial mission. The chief item of evidence came from the strike by workers at the American Mills. Their walkout had challenged the Party to live up to its vow to surmount racial division, but Beal assistant George Pershing had dropped the ball by letting segregationists have their way.

In *A Radical Life*, Buch paraphrased Beal’s apology for what had happened:

“You know, a few Negroes were there in Bessemer City when we called all the strikers to a meeting. This is the South. Workers don’t like Negroes here. The whites insisted there had to be a rope put up to keep the Negroes separate. Well, it was the workers who wanted it; they don’t understand much about white chauvinism down here.”

Perhaps in an effort to atone for the incident, the Party brought African-American organizer Otto Hall onto the scene. White workers essentially rebuffed him, African-Americans did not join, and he was soon back in New York. In a subsequent *Labor Unity* critique, he admitted that at several open-air union meetings Party and NTWU speakers had stressed the need for unity, and that a few of “the [white] strikers themselves admitted that they had been mistaken in their prejudiced attitudes.” But he added that “The Negroes were very skeptical at first at what appeared to them as a sudden change of heart on the part of the white workers.” They were wary, he said, because:

Before the advent of the textile industry in this section, there were very few white laborers, in the towns. Nearly all the work was done by Negroes. With the development of the textile indus-

try many thousands of poor whites, farmers, and mountaineers, were drawn into the towns and cities. These workers are now steadily crowding the Negroes out of most of the skilled and semi-skilled work, and even out of such jobs as were formerly considered "Negro jobs."

Hall's observations made it clear that African-American workers, like the whites, were watching the strike with an eye to the destiny of their race as much as their class.

Most of the black millhands probably held back from fear as well as suspicion. The union's white leaders and pickets, it was plain, were continually at peril; if the whites had to fear beatings and jailings, blacks knew that more severe forms of repression awaited them. If whites would not stand with them shoulder-to-shoulder at a union rallies, they reasoned, what would they do if blacks came under racist attack?

In their Gastonia postmortems, however, no one in Party circles drew the obvious conclusion, which was that white Southern workers were politically too naive, or too poor, to stick to any strike not backed by an overflowing relief fund. To have said as much would have been to cast doubt prospects for organizing the South for a generation or more.

In the aftermath of Ella May's death and the sentencing of the strike leaders, unrest in the Southern textile industry faded away, not to be revived until 1934, when the UTW called a national general strike, only to again be defeated. The seven convicted men, certain that their sentences would be upheld on appeal, jumped bond to find refuge in Moscow, just as Black Panthers did in the Havana of the 'Sixties.

Despite these disappointments, the Party persisted in its plan to organize the South, though with more caution and more determination than in 1929. In future Southern operations, its organizers vowed, they would spend months building party units, union committees and unemployed leagues — teaching discipline as well as building support — before undertaking to challenge the local power structure.

But perhaps most important of all, the Party's hierarchy rebuked the "white chauvinism" that, in the aftermath of the Gaston county

defeats, it imputed to Beal and even to Weisbord. African-Americans in the South, through the NAACP, civic clubs and their own press, had been chaffing against Jim Crow since at least the end of World War I. But whites had not supported them, and at Bessemer City, the Party had failed, too. As the Party prepared to open new beachheads in Atlanta and Birmingham, stoking enthusiasm with a purely Southern newspaper, it vowed to make Communists the unquestioned pioneers of racial equality among Southern whites. The old Socialist legacy of hoping that blacks would join in the struggles of white labor was at an end. Now the Party would try to persuade whites to join battles in which blacks were the main force.

The Southern Worker

Most of what is known about the *Southern Worker* comes from a 1984 autobiography, *Organizing in the Deep South: A Communist's Memoir*, by James S. "Jim" Allen, and from hearings held by the Fish and Dies Committees, forerunners to a Congressional group that did not take its name until 1938, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or HUAC.

Allen, by his own latter-day admission, was also known as James Bigelow, and according to the FBI, as George Watson, too: His name depended on his role. In those days, when government-issued photo identification was rare, people were generally assumed to be who they said they were, and falsifying one's identity was generally not a crime.

Indeed, the man known as James S. Allen was actually Solomon Auerbach, who said that he was a Philadelphia native, born in 1906. His parents were Yiddish-speaking Russian immigrants who achieved a middle-class prosperity in the real estate business there. About 1925 Auerbach enrolled as a graduate student, and became a teaching assistant, in the city's University of Pennsylvania. He showed his skill as a memoirist by winning a *Nation* magazine contest for a short story, "Taxi Mister?" about a 1926 summer job. In 1927 he toured the USSR, and upon his return was fired from his assistanceship, whereupon he went to New York as a reporter for the *Daily Worker*. During the spring of 1930, while on the staff of the ILD's monthly *Labor Defender*, also published in New York, Party leaders offered him the edi-

torship of the Southern weekly they'd been promising to start for two years.

Auerbach had never seen the South before he boarded a train for Birmingham in mid-July, 1930 — only to find himself in the middle of what must have seemed to be a scene from a cops-and-robbers movie. “Arriving in Birmingham after a sleepless night,” he recalled in his memoir:

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. ...Tom Johnson and Frank Burns, a union organizer, were free on bond on a vagrancy charge ... 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.

But Auerbach's brief account only scratches the surface.

The comrades whom he named in connection with Birmingham arrests were not alone; more than a half-dozen followers and new recruits had been arrested for vagrancy, too. The term “vagrancy” generally meant “having no visible means of support,” though statutory language in Alabama carried an additional accusation, “leading a profligate life”!

Auerbach's account of the legal status of his Alabama comrades also did mention their recent out-of-state run-ins with the law. On the day that the Birmingham police collared Carr, he was free on bond from a March 9 Atlanta arrest under an 1869 statute aimed at intimidating Freedmen, “circulating insurrectionary literature.” Johnson, then 26, whom Auerbach described as “of medium height, quick of body and mind, with high cheekbones and a complexion suggestive of Indian ancestry,” had been jailed on June 17 in Memphis, Tenn., then told to get out of town. In January he'd been released from a month in an Ohio prison after its governor suspended his 5-10 year sentence for “criminal syndicalism,” i.e., trying to organize a union with revolutionary aims. In Ohio, prison records show, Johnson had also been known as James Layton.

The vagrancy charges that Auerbach mentioned were stand-outs, however, because they revealed the subjective nature of everyday Southern justice. John G. Murphy of the Birmingham Knights of the Ku Klux Klan gave an operative definition of “vagrancy” five months later, when he was allowed to testify before the Fish Committee. While ranting to the Committee about Jews in Communist ranks, Murphy discoursed as if he were an insider at the police department. “I might state, gentlemen,” he told the Congressional investigators, “my understanding of the law in this state is that the only thing we can handle these fellows on is vagrancy, which covers a multitude of sins, of course.”

Murphy probably was speaking for the police. His organization, they testified, had been helpful to the authorities. Auerbach’s comrades, it seems, were without transportation, and Klan lookouts had built a log of license plate numbers and owners of the cars which gave them rides, mostly Jew-cars, Murphy said.

In point of fact, the Party staffers who were accused of vagrancy were probably not guilty — if the Party was meeting its payrolls, anyway.

After hearing a suit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union and several civil rights workers, the U.S. Supreme Court in 1966 declared all vagrancy laws unconstitutional. By then, it was too late to help Depression-era agitators.

Auerbach’s citation of the Birmingham arrests shows an unusual and perhaps puzzling feature of the effects his exposure to Southern justice had on him. His memoir’s report on the arrest of “Eugene Baxter, a young black activist,” does not reveal that “Baxter” was an alias of Eugene Angelo Braxton Herndon, then 27, who became famous in 1932 when he was charged and convicted of a capital offense under the Georgia insurrection law, for leafleting at a demonstration of the unemployed in Atlanta.

Auerbach’s memoir also mentions a March 7, 1931 letter by “E. Braxton” from Camp Hill, Alabama, scene of a massacre of members of the Party-backed Sharecroppers Union. On a subsequent page of *Organizing in the Depression South*, Auerbach notes the May, 1931 arrests of both Angelo Herndon and Eugene Braxton on New Orleans waterfront — as if Herndon and Braxton were different people. He

did so, perhaps, because in *Southern Worker* stories about the port city — entitled “Jail Braxton, Marine Organizer, In Orleans” and “Jail Another Marine Organizer in Orleans” — editor James S. Allen had honored the distinction. Sometime between 1972 and his death in 1986, Auerbach repeated his amnesiac performance in a short memoir of his tenure during the 1960s as chief of the Party’s book-publishing arm, International Publishers. In that piece, unpublished until 2011, he reported that International had brought into print several works by James S. Allen.

If any logic unites his reluctance to connect real names and aliases, it probably dates to the Red Scare of the 1950s, when Communists became especially careful about what they disclosed regarding their comrades. Even today, most of the few surviving Party veterans of that period refuse to comment on the membership or identities even of former associates who are safely in their graves; Herndon died in 1997, some 50 years after he wandered out of the Party. But by the time Auerbach penned his 1970’s memoir, scholars had for years known Herndon by all of his Party names.

Birmingham had been picked as a Party target because it was a fast-growing city of some 250,000 — a coal-and-steel center whose anchor industries were largely owned or controlled by the Tennessee Coal Iron and Railroad Company, or TCI, a subsidiary of the giant U.S. Steel. Most of the mines and foundries in the region employed whites in “cushy,” or technical and supervisory jobs, while hiring African-Americans for labor-intensive unskilled and semi-skilled positions. Birmingham’s industrialists learned of Communist union-organizing efforts early in 1930, within weeks of their beginning. They had lost no time in hiring guardians to keep an eye on the Reds. The most notable of their industrial watchmen were Milton McDuff, a private detective who was the brother of city’s chief of police, and a security executive and latter-day politician, Eugene “Bull” Conner, infamous for presiding over the 1963 fire-hosing of the followers of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

During his short stay in Birmingham Auerbach noted a reversal of the problem that the NTWU had faced in Gastonia:

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... 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.

Auerbach, whom a prominent Party leader described as “a scholarly, serene man,” didn’t mention it, but at the moment, the black comrades probably had sufficient reason to distrust local whites. During a July 18 raid on Johnson’s house Birmingham police seized a cache of carbon copies, including a July 11 letter in which he advised his New York superiors that a key aide, “my first connection when I came to Birmingham...is working for one of the largest labor spying agencies in the country — the Corporations Auxiliary Co.” The suspect, T.L. James, whose real name, according to Congressional testimony, was T.S. Rawlings, was promptly expelled and denounced.

But all was not going badly for the Party in Birmingham, even according to detective McDuff, who (while again railing against Jews) testified to the Fish Committee that on May 29, the Communists had held a rally at Capitol Park and “there were between 700 and 800 people at this meeting, a large majority of whom were negroes. “ An effort to suppress the Reds was picking up steam, he boasted in a description of a subsequent meeting at the same spot:

On June 28, 1930, the meeting was held with about 200 negroes and five or six white men present and approximately 150 white curiosity seekers, including city detectives and City Commissioner Jones. The principal speaker was Harry Jackson who, after speaking one hour, introduced Gilbert Lewis (negro), negro organizer. Lewis did not speak but a short while before Commissioner Jones ordered the speaking stopped (this speech would have caused trouble had Lewis been allowed to continue), and the crowd dispersed.

One of the grievances which brought Birmingham workers to the Communist-led rallies was the Party's crusade for what it called "The Workers Unemployment and Social Insurance Bill," a federal proposal which it introduced that year through a friendly Congressman. The bill called for employer-paid unemployment compensation, and for a retirement system based on taxing the rich. Though its 1930 bill was never heard by a Congressional committee, the Party kept up its clamor until 1935, when the Roosevelt administration passed a milder measure, the Social Security Act.

The Party's rallies also drew crowds, Auerbach learned, not only because unemployment was rising, but also because, like Gastonia, Birmingham was not a high-wage locale. In his memoir he reported that:

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 mines 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 for 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."

At the conclusion of his visit to the city, Auerbach stated in his memoir, "It was agreed that Birmingham was too tightly controlled to launch the paper there, and Atlanta was just as tough." Instead his comrades advised him to seek out the Party's contacts in Chattanooga, 150 miles north, which had an established, if lily-white, matrix of AFL unions. "In comparison with Deep South cities," Auerbach observed, "Chattanooga appeared almost Northern."

After he settled-in under the name James Bigelow, Auerbach sent for his wife, Isabelle, then 20, who had remained in New York. When she arrived the two began work on their kitchen table to produce the first issue of the *Southern Worker*. Isabelle contributed articles from time to time under the pen or Party name Helen Marcy.

Only the idealism of missionaries can explain the optimism which enabled the couple to get out its first edition, on Aug. 16, 1930. Their immediate problem had been finding a printer. As the Atlanta arrest of Carr had shown, "Under the law, our paper was legal, but according to Southern practice and mores, it definitely was not." During its years in publication, Atlanta and Birmingham passed ordinances outlawing its circulation, and shipments of the paper were seized in a dozen other locales.

Auerbach couldn't find a suitable printshop in Tennessee, but, according to the tale he told in *Organizing in the Depression South*, he ran into luck just across the Georgia state line, in the Chattanooga suburb of Rossville. A financially-pressed local weekly there took in printing work for other newspapers. One of its two owners, however, always behaved strangely when Auerbach came through its doors:

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 that his shop produced the *Southern Worker*.

Auerbach's account of the affair reads like romantic fiction, and is therefore worthy of skepticism. But because the printers required him to pay with cash, in advance of delivery, and because no receipts or other records have survived — if ever any existed — nothing can be proved. Rossville indeed was the home of a local weekly, the *Open Gate*, which also printed other newspapers and was owned by two partners. Compositors in those days tended to develop a style, or matrix of habits, which provide at least speculative clues about their identities. Both the *Open Gate* and the *Southern Worker*, typographers tell me, display a common "stair-stepped primary headline layout: first line flush left, second line column-centered, third line flush right." They also share a "column centered" layout for secondary headlines, and "horizontal separator" lines of "similar size and spacing" as well as a commonality in "primary headline" type sizing and leading. In other words, they may have been composed by the same

hands. Both also used the Cheltenham typeface in most headlines. Though microfilms of the two newspapers are of poor quality, they also appear to share a text typeface, Ionic No. 5 — but more than 3,000 newspapers were using Ionic at the time.

A glance at the two newspapers shows different designs. The *Open Gate* was a “bedsheet,” 7 columns and about 16 inches wide. The *Southern Worker* was a tabloid, 5 columns and about 12 inches wide. But the size difference tells us nothing — bedsheet presses could produce tabloids, too. Design clues, however, indicate that another newspaper probably links both the *Southern Worker* and the *Open Gate*.

The *Gate*, like most dailies of the era, had a “showy” feel; the *Southern Worker* was drab and newsletter-like in comparison. Auerbach apparently copied his austere design, not from the Rossville newspaper, but from the *Labor World*, a weekly of dull organizational news published by the AFL council in Chattanooga. The “ears of the labor newspaper,” the upper-left and right corners of the front page, carried messages, “Say to the Advertisers: / I saw it in the Labor World,” and “United We Stand; / Divided We Fall.” The ears of the *Southern Worker* during Auerbach’s tenure as editor also carried slogans “Don’t Starve- / Fight for Social / Insurance!” on the left and “White and / Colored Workers,/Unite!” on the right. The *Labor World* used a similar typeface, headline style and use of spacing markers, but also included a union label. The *Open Gate*’s two partners had but one employee, Auerbach reported. Maybe he was a union member.

Though it seems probable, and even likely, that the Party’s newspaper was printed by the *Open Gate*, the Klan membership Auerbach claimed for of one of its partners is beyond investigation. From time to time, a klavern existed in Rossville, but like the Party, the Klan kept its membership lists secret.

Funding for the newspaper was chancy from the first. According to Auerbach, printing 3,000 copies cost \$60 for each 4-page edition, more if he opted for a 6- or 8-page issue, as he sometimes did, especially on election days when Communist candidates were listed on ballots.

The *Daily Worker* carried dozens of small ads each week, most of them from independent restaurants, movie houses and doctors. But given its clandestine nature, advertisements were out of the question for the *Southern Worker*. Except for those announcing Party pamphlets and books, only one ad was ever published in the *Southern Worker*, it from Bishop William Montgomery Brown, a left-wing Episcopalian in Galion, Ohio. Funds were always in short supply. Auerbach noted that:

The grand sum of two hundred dollars had been given me 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 hand to mouth, could hardly be expected to give financial aid...

Neither he nor Isabelle could engage in fund-raising activity, either. To ensure the regular appearance of the newspaper, they had been ordered “to remain strictly ‘underground,’ to avoid too open association with Party people or participation in any conspicuous way in public activities.”

More than “the regular appearance of the newspaper” was involved, too. If newspapers like the *Gastonia Gazette* — what the Party called “the boss press,” i.e., what is today called “the mainstream press” — sometimes overdrew their picture of the villainy of Communists, the *Southern Worker* repaid “the bosses” and their henchmen in kind. It frequently libeled them.

For example, it is an elementary principle of libel law in the United States that until a person has been convicted of a crime, to call him or her a “murderer,” a “thief,” etc. is libelous. The offended person may file a lawsuit complaining that he or she was falsely accused. If a court finds that the writer or editor of the allegedly libelous material knew that its charges were false, or did not take proper precautions to determine the veracity, the complainant can collect money damages; libel is a violation of civil law. In the South during the Depression era, libel was also a violation of criminal law; writers and editors could be jailed for presumed libel. The *Southern Worker* fre-

quently published stories that were libelous, and even libelous headlines like “Court Frees Murderer.”

If avoiding arrest and financing the *Southern Worker* were headaches, distribution was no cakewalk, either. The newspaper did not have a bulk or second-class mailing permit: Subscription copies had to be delivered by first-class mail, no doubt in unmarked envelopes, and postage cost two cents per copy — the same as the paper’s retail price. In the countryside, mailing was not advisable because rural mail carriers kept an eye on sharecroppers and tenants, who, if they were African-American, were subject to eviction and flogging for their reading habits.

Auerbach drove to Birmingham to deliver most of the press run for each edition. Party members there paid a penny per copy for bundle orders. They distributed copies house-to-house, usually at night. Friends and relatives in Birmingham took single copies to relatives who lived on Black Belt farms. Bundles of newspapers were shipped into states in the readership area that, in practice, defined the ‘South’ for editorial purposes: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Tennessee and Kentucky. Atlanta, Charlotte, Miami, Tampa, New Orleans and Houston apparently received regular shipments by railroad express and bus. Though in most of the South possession of more than one copy of a “subversive” publication was a criminal offense, the *Southern Worker* never missed an issue during the 14 months that the Auerbachs were its editors.

To make tracking the newspaper difficult for lawmen, the *Southern Worker’s* masthead said that it was published in Birmingham and listed a post office box as its address, but more than once, either because the box or the Party was under surveillance, the newspaper shifted to a box in Chattanooga. Authorities in Birmingham initially suspected that the newspaper was being published by a James J. Giglio, who was probably James G. or James D. Giglio, a leader of the CP-led Metal Workers Industrial League, whose home had been bombed in early 1930, presumably the Ku Klux Klan. Giglio, the authorities said, had previously published an Italian-language newspaper from Birmingham. But within months, their suspicions shifted

to the suburbs of Bessemer City and Gadsden, Alabama, to Chattanooga, and even New York.

On Aug. 22, 1930, a year after the Auerbachs had founded the *Southern Worker*, readers saw a startling new look in its “flag” or nameplate. Formerly the nameplate had been set in a condensed typeface; now it was set in boldface, and in between the words of its name a hammer appeared, held by a black fist crossed by a white fist holding a sickle. The slogans on the ears of the paper were gone, too. Changes in the design of a newspaper, especially of its flag, are ordinarily the prerogative of its editor-in-chief. Nobody explained the change, but it probably heralded the Chattanooga arrival in of Harry M. Wicks, who on Sept. 12, 1931 took over the editorship, even though the paper’s masthead continued to list Jim Allen as its chief. The Auerbachs returned to New York. Solomon Auerbach apparently returned to the South in a journalistic capacity only once, in 1933, to cover the Scottsboro case for a left-wing news service under the name James Bigelow.

Allen went on to a career as a mid-level leader of the Communist Party. He was an author of more than 20 books and pamphlets, and a Party authority on sharecropping and the status of African-Americans. In the late 1930s he was a Comintern representative to the Philippines and a foreign editor for the *Daily Worker*. Both HUAC and Senator Joe McCarthy’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations called him during the Red Scare of the ‘Fifties; he refused to give answers to substantive questions. Auerbach was still in the Party’s ranks when he died in 1986.

Wicks, the son of a carpenter, was by 1931 a Communist old-timer. Born in Illinois and a printer by trade, he’d joined the Socialist Party in 1916 and two years later had become a Congressional candidate for the SP in Oregon. At times, he was an editor of SP publications. He had been a founder of the Communist Party and an early member of its politburo, jailed during the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920. The Party postulated him as its Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidate in 1926. Known for salty speeches during textile strikes in Paterson and Passaic, NJ, he had also been a delegate to the 1928 Comintern Congress. In 1929 Wicks was on the staff of the *Daily Worker*, along with Auerbach. According to the anti-communist wit-

ness Whittaker Chambers, the difference between the two men was that Wicks was paid \$40 a week, while Auerbach earned \$30! Wicks had been in Australia for the Comintern during the year before his assignment to Chattanooga. By the time he came South, he was a headstrong gray eminence whom the 25-year-old Auerbach could not overrule.

Oakley C. Johnson, a longtime SP and CP colleague, wrote that Wicks “had extraordinary intellectual vanity (knew everything, was always right) and very little charm. He was a fattish man, with plump hips, eyes that were round and small.” Wicks apparently had no interest in the South: in a posthumously-published autobiography, he made no mention of his time in Chattanooga, and in a chapter about the 1928 Comintern meeting, he dwelt on international disputes, never mentioning body’s dictum concerning African-Americans. During the 1929 Gastonia strike he wrote an article in the Party’s discussion journal, *The Communist*, not about Southern textile affairs, but instead, “The Revolutionary Struggle Against Imperialist War.” Its language, as in most of his essay-form writings, was bombastic and bellicose. “At the present moment in the United States we must concentrate on the organization of the unorganized in the war industries,” he declared. “We do not indulge in the social-democratic twaddle about disarmament,” he continued. “We will not tell the soldiers in the army to throw away their guns and run home. We tell them to hold their guns in their hands and use them against their own capitalist oppressors.”

It is likely that whatever were the Party’s motives for sending him to Chattanooga, Wicks, then 42, probably missed podiums, praise and applause, and felt slighted because he’d been sent to replace a younger man. But as always in the American left, organizational leaders in New York wanted promising talent close at hand; the Party may have sent an old war horse South in order to bring a rising star to its headquarters and home. After a few months at the *Southern Worker*, Wicks returned to the limelight as the Party’s Pennsylvania U.S. Senatorial candidate in 1934.

Many of his comrades were no doubt relieved when he was expelled from the Party in 1937. He thereafter became a self-styled Trotskyist and returned to the printing trades. During the McCarthy

era, he several times consented to FBI interviews, all the while insisting that he was redder than the Reds.

Auerbach devotes two lines to his successor in his memoir: “He was Harry Wicks, an erstwhile associate editor of the *Daily Worker*. But he did not last long.” Although the only available microfilm of the *Southern Worker* may be missing several editions because it was built from a mail subscription — and perhaps Wicks let mailings lapse — it shows that he may have published only five issues. Only two more editions were published in the some 18 months from the date of his apparent departure in mid-October, 1931, and May, 1933, when the *Southern Worker* came to life again, this time under the editorship of a woman in her mid-forties chiefly known by her pen name, Elizabeth Lawson — the only person mentioned by Auerbach or HUAC witnesses as the paper’s editor for the rest of its years.

Details about her are scarce. HUAC witnesses said that her real name was Elsa Block, a Birmingham resident who was a former student at the University of Minnesota. Her father’s name was apparently Blum, Blaum, or Bloom, a German immigrant. By 1920, she was married to Laurence Block, a dry goods retailer in Birmingham who was also the son of German immigrants. Her name occurs in HUAC records as late as 1957, though in connection with work at a Northern youth camp popular in the Party.

The identification of Lawson with Elsa Block, however, is not entirely satisfactory. As the wife of a retailer whose operations were in no way clandestine, even though ordinances restricting “subversive” publications were easing, authorities could have located her had they wanted. So, too, could the cross-burners of the Ku Klux Klan. Yet we have no record of any legal or extra-legal actions against Block. Either local authorities and their forces of terror spared Block because of her gender or status, or HUAC witnesses named her as Lawson to settle a private grudge.

Lawson, whoever she was, became the newspaper’s editor on or before May 20, 1933. She removed the hammer and sickle logo Wicks had introduced, and changed the editor’s name from Jim Allen — to Jim Mallory! She also added a muralistic, art deco heading to its Page 3, reserved for “Letters from Workers and Farmers.” Sometimes

she wrote fiction for the *New Masses*, a literary magazine allied to the CP.

Given its underground character, however, that only three people edited the *Southern Worker* cannot be taken for granted. Perhaps others took the helm between Wicks and Lawson, or after her turn. In 1938, when he departed for the civil war in Spain with the CP-organized Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a Pennsylvania native, former college student and newspaper circulation clerk, Harold George Forsha, then 32, listed himself as having joined the Tennessee Communist Party in October 1931 — a month after the Auerbachs returned to New York. Forsha's Abraham Lincoln Brigade records show him as having been both a section organizer and a "manager" of the *Southern Worker* prior to his enlistment. Yet the newspaper never announced the presence of any manager. Perhaps Forsha assumed Isabelle Auerbach's duties when she left, or edited at a later time.

A microfilm of the *Southern Worker*, produced in 1952 from a mail subscription photographed by the New York Public Library is the most complete record of the newspaper. It is missing at least three and possibly a dozen issues. In my research I located three paper editions that preceded the start of the subscription filmed by the NYPL, and scholarly footnotes indicate that perhaps as many more unfiled paper editions were in library holdings as late as a decade ago. If so, they do not appear in online catalogs of library holdings. The result is that all we can inspect today are 96 editions, 54 of them produced under the editorship of the Auerbachs; all 96 are included in the index that accompanies this book. After the departure of the Auerbachs, if measured by the regularity of its publication, the newspaper went into a decline. According to the microfilm record, the *Southern Worker* ceased to be a weekly when Wicks left. It produced only two monthly editions in early 1932, then ceased publication until May 1933. It published eight monthly issues in 1934, five in 1935. But in 1936 it re-emerged in a significant way as the result of a seismic shift in the nation's political character and an ostensible upturn in the Party's fortunes.

The summer of 1935 had been a landmark in American history. In May, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a law creating the Workers Progress Administration, or WPA, a job-creation program

that Communists and other radicals had been demanding since the onset of the Depression. In July he signed the National Labor Relations Act, known more widely as the Wagner Act, which facilitated the formation, a year later, of the Congress of Industrial Unions, or CIO — the CIO that is today part of the AFL-CIO federation. Unlike the mostly lily-white guilds of craftsmen organized by the AFL, the new federation aimed to unionize all the workers in industry, regardless of race or levels of skill, as American radicals had been advocating since before World War I. In Aug. 1935, the President approved the bill which gave the United States both its Social Security system and federal programs for unemployment compensation.

The summer of 1935 was a time of upheaval not only in the United States. In July and August the Comintern held its Seventh World Congress, the first since 1928. Alarmed by the rise of fascist power in Italy and Germany, it issued a radical new order, instructing Communists to treat Socialists and liberals, not as obstacles to their aims, but as potential allies. Its mandate gave birth to the era of the Anti-Fascist People's, or Popular Front.

Communists in a dozen countries, including the United States, had been inching toward a Pop Front posture since at least 1934, but the Comintern ruling, as with its command to organize the South, pushed them into it headlong. In June, 1935 the *Southern Worker* published a cartoon entitled "Slave Wage Scale," which showed Roosevelt as a man with alligator teeth. But during the 1936 Presidential election, though they ran a pro-forma campaign of their own, American Communists had become the left wing of the New Deal, Democratic camp.

In 1936, too, the Spanish Civil War began, pitting Italian- and German-backed forces led by Gen. Francisco Franco against a left-leaning republic. Communists from around the world joined the fight to defend the elected government. Records of American contingent, known as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, show that about 80 of its 2,800 troops were recruited from the South; at least a third of them, including CP organizers Dave Doran and Mack Coad, an African-American native of South Carolina, died in combat.

The triumph of the New Deal and the Party's softened stance towards rivals provided its members with personal opportunities that, as members of a hard-line organization, they had never expected. Hundreds, mostly whites, were hired as CIO organizers on WPA projects and by federal agencies like the Tennessee Valley Authority and Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Their new roles opened doors, but at a price; the Reds had to present and conduct themselves as polite "progressives" and "anti-fascists." Many found it convenient to simply drop out of the Party and blend into the current of the times.

With gusto the Party's leadership took to the task of creating a mainstream, even patriotic image, raising the slogan "Communism is 20th Century Americanism" and naming bookstore and front organizations after slaveholders like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The strategy of the Popular Front brought the Party to its peak of membership and influence, and even today, most scholars regard it as the Party's finest hour. But it was not without drawbacks, especially for the South.

According to its Comintern instructions, the Party's duty was to build broad anti-fascist alliances whenever possible, and that meant, for example, courting the cooperation of churches and middle-class groups like the NAACP. It offered friendship to old rivals like those in the Socialist Party — and tried to make its way into the still-segregationist Democratic Party. In one instance, Pop Front efforts produced a happy result: the Southern Negro Youth Congress, founded in 1937, brought together African-American college students and church-based youth groups from across the South. But its overall effect in the region may have undermined the Party's existence as a distinct socialist and anti-racist organization.

Harvey Klehr's 1984 book, *The Heyday of American Communism*, has held its place as the primer on the Depression-era CPUSA, despite its Cold War attitude. In its pages Klehr argues that in most of its Southern districts, the Party gained adherents during the Pop Front years, reaching a regional membership of about 3,000. But most of its recruits outside of Alabama were probably white, and the African-American workforce in Birmingham, unquestionably the Party's stronghold, lost ground.

Robin D.G. Kelley, who wrote the definitive history of the Communist Party of Alabama, *Hammer and Hoe*, noted in his 1990 work that “The combined membership for District 17 (Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia) dropped from 425 in January 1936 to 250 twelve months later — a substantial loss when we take into account that in 1934 Birmingham alone claimed 1,000 members.” He also noted that in 1937 the Party dissolved the city’s chapters of the ILD, which had become mass organizations of working-class African-Americans. It encouraged ILD members to join the NAACP. “The sudden influx of Communists and former ILD activists,” Kelley noted, “nearly quadrupled the Birmingham [NAACP] branch’s membership rolls.” But Communists, he pointed out, did not gain any leadership posts in the NAACP.

The effects of the Party’s new approach, though not immediate, were ultimately fatal to the *Southern Worker*. In July, 1935, as the Comintern was meeting to proclaim the Popular Front, the newspaper missed an issue — and it did not resume until January, 1936. In its March, 1936 issue, the slogan printed beneath its name, analogous to the “All the News That’s Fit to Print” of the *New York Times*, was no longer “The Paper of the Southern Toilers,” but the more populist, “The Paper of the Common People of the South”—a designation that made room among its readers for small businessmen, preachers, and even landlords.

Leaders of organizations such as the NAACP and the AFL soon began to receive favorable, even boosterish mentions in its pages. John Lewis, formerly styled as the tyrannical head of the AFL’s United Mine Workers of America, became the hero of an organizing drive. Apparently, the reconciliation was mutual. William Mitch, who in May 1935 had been the subject of a story entitled “Mitch Attacks Reds, Fails Prepare Strike at U.M.W.A. Meet,” was listed as an endorser of the Party-led National Negro Congress in the *Southern Worker’s* issue of February, 1936. By September, when both he and Lewis were leading a CIO campaign to organize Alabama’s steel workers, both were praised and pictured in a front-page beneath captions entitled “National Leader” and “District Leader.” A 1934 front-page headline read, “F.D.R., Gorman Bust General Textile Strike,”

but FDR's 1936 victory in a post-election headline was styled as a "Victory for America's Common People."

While making these editorial changes probably helped the Party wage anti-lynching campaigns and crusade for unionization and Social Security, the need to produce a publication acceptable to mainstream leaders ultimately vitiated its content. In 1937 it converted to a newsprint-magazine format and its articles grew both longer and less accusatory; 1,000-word essays took up most of its space, and its editorial comments took on a surprising tone, as in "Build the UTW"

In its new magazine format, the *Southern Worker* was edited by "Jim Mallory," presumably Elsa Block, but with the May issue — and a move to Chattanooga from Birmingham, Block's home — it acquired an editorial board of three members: R.F. Hall of Alabama and Ted Wellman of Tennessee, Party figures who had acquired roles in the CIO, and Paul Crouch, a comrade native to North Carolina. Crouch was dropped from the masthead of the final edition and replaced by "J.B. Logan," probably a composite name for two Georgia Party figures, Bart Logan, aka Jack Barton, and Belle West Logan, a married couple who often introduced themselves as "J. and B. Logan." All of those who made up the editorial boards, like the *Southern Worker's* prior editors, were white.

Ultimately, Party leaders apparently decided that publishing a newspaper whose bulletins resembled those of AFL, the CIO and a few "progressive" groups was beside the point. The *Southern Worker* ceased publishing with its September 1937 issue, never to be resurrected.

In 1938, the Party briefly sponsored a successor magazine, *New South*. "Discontinuing local news coverage, workers' correspondence, and other remnants of the past, the *New South* carried sophisticated articles on Democratic politics, the poll tax, the work of Southern liberals, and occasional pieces on Southern history," historian Kelley summarized. By its third issue its masthead had dropped "Published by the Communist Party," and beneath its nameplate it carried the words, "Journal of Progressive Opinion" — a designation that rings more of academia than of foundries or cotton patches. The magazine's editor was Paul Crouch, lately of the *Southern Worker*, a comrade who later named names for HUAC.

In 1938, the Popular Front reached what Kelley pictures as its culminating moment in the South. Early that year, CP figures in Alabama began organizing a congress of Southern liberals and leftists to discuss campaigns against regional restrictions on civil liberties, unionization and voting. Their preparations were so far-reaching that Joe Gelders, a Birmingham white activist legendary for his courage and notorious for his closeness to the Party, presented its plan separately to both the First Lady and the President. When the four-day Southern Conference for Human Welfare opened in the Birmingham municipal auditorium on Nov. 20, it attracted dozens of noteworthy whites, including University of North Carolina president Franklin Porter Graham, Alabama governor Bibb Graves and Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black of Alabama, who had come to receive the meeting's Thomas Jefferson Award.

But, in words of scholar Kelley:

The first day of [racially] mixed sessions alarmed quite a few delegates, but the meetings were held without incident. When proceedings resumed the next day, city commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor [he of machine guns and fire hoses!] and a small contingent of police officers showed up to enforce Birmingham's segregation ordinance.

Connor took a long rope, anchored it to the auditorium's stage and extended it out of the building's entrance, ordering whites to sit on one side, blacks on the other — and the delegates took it, sitting down! It was the Bessemer City incident, all over again.

The Southern Worker Reader

Despite having entertained at least three editors the *Southern Worker* was a stylistically stable. If the reader takes into account its shift from a revolutionary to a reformist editorial stand it reads almost as if only one editor were at its helm — an editor who, unfortunately, often fell short of, or ignored, the standards of orthodox journalism.

The *Southern Worker* divided the newspaper world into two categories. Mainstream newspapers, in its view, were part of the "boss press," whose mission was the defense of the existing social order. The

“proletarian press,” however, had a different purpose, that of stoking the masses with facts and exhortations that would build a “revolutionary consciousness.” As the editors of the *Southern Worker* saw it, the boss press did not fall short of its goals if, in selecting the stories and facts that it published, it apologized for Jim Crow or plutocracy. But the proletarian press failed if it did not assail those hierarchies.

However, both the boss and the proletarian press ostensibly shared a commitment to precision and accuracy. The *Southern Worker* fell short of that standard, even by its own terms. For example, even though the *Associated Press Stylebook* — the bible of the reporter’s trade — did not come into existence until 1953, the editors of all newspapers believed that when the subject of a story is first mentioned in a text, both first names, nicknames, and surnames should be used, as in ‘Eugene “Bull” Connor.’ But the *Southern Worker* in stories about the Scottsboro case, for example, often carelessly referred only to “Judge Hawkins” instead of, at the first mention of his name, to ‘Judge Alfred E. Hawkins.’ In stories about latter-day developments in the case, it often did not state the date of the arrests and original convictions of the Boys, as carefully-edited newspapers did. The cause of such imprecision was probably lack of an archive of prior stories from which to extract those details — or simple amateurism or laziness. The result was that a reader who came to the *Southern Worker* in the midst of a series of stories about an incident often could not piece together the background information needed to fully make sense of the news.

Similar problems often led to misspellings, even in town and company names. Readers who did not know, for example, that the town that the *Southern Worker* called “Dickerson” was really named “Dickinson” were simply misled. Furthermore, out of an instinct for mere sarcasm, it is probable that the *Southern Worker* purposefully misspelled at least one name. During the period in which a New York attorney headed the Scottsboro defense, his name — Samuel Leibowitz — was spelled correctly. After a falling-out between him and the ILD, the *Southern Worker* referred to him as “Liebowitz.”

My reading of the paper indicates that Wicks showed the greatest weakness for libelous headlines, followed by Lawson; Auerbach-Allen was prudent by comparison. Though that argues for his superior skills

as an editor, both of his successors gave greater display to graphics than Auerbach did.

Perhaps because the language of news reporting is usually formulaic, despite its production by a series of editors, the *Southern Worker* reads as if it were edited by one hand. It also stands on its own when compared to the mainstream white press, largely because of its anti-racism. It distinguished itself from *Daily Worker* by being low to the ground, fundamental and concerned, not with high-flown events of theoretical or international importance, but with the nuts and bolts of daily survival in the United States.

The two inner-Party villains of the era, Jay Lovestone and Leon Trotsky, rarely earned a line of type: “Trotskyism” was mentioned twice, Lovestone, never. Like the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper mistakenly published stories praising dubious Soviet accomplishments, but these were occasional pieces, as if its editors had doubts themselves. The *Southern Worker* kept up with the burgeoning revolution in China, the crimes of fascism in Europe, and from time to time, it mentioned Latin American strikes and uprisings. But unlike the *Daily Worker*, it never ran a full page of foreign news because it was short of space, and doubtlessly because it also knew that most of its readers weren’t interested. Instead, it ran summaries of news drawn from mostly-Southern publications, in standing columns with names like “Lynch Law at Work,” and “News of the Month from the South.”

The *Southern Worker’s* signature stories came from scenes of local conflict. Many of them conveyed an almost tangible sense of alarm. Its reports on lynching were often written by correspondents who had talked with the families of victims, and its labor stories were often written by strikers. Because many reports were apparently composed from information the editors gathered by telephone from “worker correspondents,” or from letters sent by witnesses to the events at issue, they lacked the ideological and fund-raising twists that the *Daily Worker* inserted into its reportage.

The *Southern Worker’s* Page 3, reserved for letters to the editor, was almost wholly written by amateurs, and though some of them were Party members, the letters show unique styles of composition and thought, and were salted with local place names and slang. Anyone who reads them comes away with a picture of Jim Crow and the

Depression that cannot be conveyed by the usual statistics or sociological terms. These letters added spontaneity and color that contrasted with the dull and polite fare of the boss press.

In the following pages, in topical categories I present some of the more striking letters and news bulletins that the *Southern Worker's* editors and correspondents composed, in the hope that the reader will be tantalized enough to undertake further research both on its pages and in the local versions of the mainstream press. Sadly, most of the stories that the *Southern Worker* reported have still to be fully told.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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