

Meeting of National Negro Opt. April 15, 1939

Case of Comrade Owens.

Proposed Tour of Nathaniel Francis, Virginia Island
leader.

Present: Hall, Williams, Briggs, Owens.

The meeting was opened with the reading of the Gastonia report of Comrade Owens. (Report attached)

Two letters written Comrade Owens by Comrade Miner were then read. These letters gave Comrade Owens specific instructions to remain at his post. These letters were not received by Comrade Owens because Comrade Owens returned before they could be mailed him. (Letters attached)

A letter from Comrade Hall to Comrade Owens, in which the necessity of remaining at his post was also stressed, was then read. (Letter attached)

Comrade Briggs then took the floor to give the following report:

"The day that Comrade Owens left for Gastonia, N. C., I had a long talk with him. Among other things I told him that while very few Negro workers were involved in the strike at present, it was the belief of the party that since the masses down there were stirring it was good policy to have a Negro Comrade on the spot. I told him we had no definite different policy for organizing the Negro in the South, apart from our general line, and that he should study the situation and communicate with us on his findings and his opinions. I advised him to work under cover the first two or three days, until he had his bearings. He would, of course, communicate his findings to the Negro Dept., and receive instructions from time to time. In the meantime, he was to use his own discretion as to what form of organization would be best suited for the Negro workers there, the ANLC or "even the Relief Committee". It was understood he would take an active part in the Communist fraction there and work thru that fraction to correct any errors or failings on the part of the strike committee in relation to the Negro mill workers.

On Friday I received several letters from Comrade Owens, one in particular, marked "confidential". I had previously been informed by Comrade Dumont that she had received a letter in which Comrade Owens asked her not to send him any letters. I was therefore waiting for Comrade Owens' official report. In the letters I received on Friday Comrade Owens spoke of having been called upon to address a strike meeting shortly after his arrival in Gastonia, thus exposing him at the outset. He asked that his return fare be sent him immediately so that he could have it on hand in case of emergency. I took the matter up with the Negro Opt., and Comrade Hall and I had a talk with Comrade Miner. We also called Comrade Weisbord into the meeting of the Negro Opt. that evening to thresh out other questions raised by Comrade Owens. The Opt. passed a motion that Comrade Owens be instructed to remain at his post, but that the party should be at once send his return fare so that he would be able to leave on a moment's notice in case of real emergency. A motion was also passed instructing the party fraction at Gastonia to give

Case of John Owens

25
I did not have time to write Comrade Owens that evening, and on Saturday morning when I came to the office I found Comrade Owens waiting for me. I am informed he arrived back in the city on Friday afternoon.

In his report Comrade Owens states he was "started off without knowing whether I was to go merely as an observer/an official of the ANLC, a member of the Communist Party, or as an organizer for the National Amalgamated Workers Union". Comrade Owens surely knew he was not going as an observer or publicly as a member of the Communist Party. He was to report conditions, giving his opinions, etc. He was to try to organize the negroes into the ANLC or "even into the relief committee", and to help in the conduct of the strike, carrying the message of the union to the negro workers. He would naturally be under the discipline of the local fraction as well as of the Center.

Comrade Owens makes several suggestions. His first is for immediate steps for permanent organizational work in the South. He seems not to understand that his trip to Gastonia was designed as such a start.

Another suggestion made by Comrade Owens is that the comrades sent to the south for this work be given a degree of latitude consistent with the conditions in the penetrated regions. That is just what was done in the case of Comrade Owens. Comrade Owens adds that these comrades should always be amenable to "proper Communist discipline". I don't know what the comrade means by "proper" Communist discipline. There is only one sort of Communist discipline. And this is always proper until reversed by a higher body. And Communist discipline demanded that Comrade Owens should have remained at his post until he received instructions to leave - such instructions coming from the Center or from the local Communist fraction. His leaving Gastonia without instructions is absolutely indefensible and calls for the sharpest criticism on the part of this Party department."

Comrade Hall heartily endorsed the statements of Comrade Briggs. Further questioning of Comrade Owens brought out the fact that he had not spoken to any of the Gastonia comrades about his decision to leave Gastonia.

The following motion was made by Comrade Briggs and unanimously adopted:

Motion that Comrade Owens be sharply censured for leaving his post of duty without instructions from the Party.

A letter from Rothschild Francis, Virgin Islands editor and leader, was then read, notifying of his desire to visit the United States on an agitational tour and asking the co-operation of the ANLC in getting him a hearing.

Motion by Briggs that relief committee and ANLC should arrange meetings for the purpose of exposing United States imperialism during Francis' trip, using him as a speaker.

Amendment by Williams that the party should participate and that Virgin island societies be asked to co-operate.

Meeting Adjourned.