

By John H. Owens.
N. Y. City, N. Y., April 13, 1929.

34

Report of Trip to Strike Area In Gastonia, N. C.

Pelos
1602

Arrived in Gastonia, North Carolina in company with Bill Sroka. Located the headquarters of the strikers at 1242 Franklin St., and met Beal, Pershing, Dawson, etc., etc., and made an address to the strikers at the invitation of Beal. Made a talk showing the necessity of organizing both the black and white workers, and that prejudice is merely a smoke screen behind which the capitalists hide in order to keep the workers of both races divided in order to better exploit both the black and white workers. Further pointed out that with the continued industrialization of the South, this would be the chief tactic of the bosses and that the workers begin immediately the task of organizing the black and white workers in the same unions wherever possible, and that when properly approached and organized, Negroes made just as good material for struggle in the working class battles as workers of other races.

Talk was well received and I could clearly ^{see} that the strikers were impressed, and showed by their earnest attention that they realized that this was a true picture of conditions. However, it was very unfortunate that there was not a single Negro at the strike headquarters, not a single Negro on the strike committee, and that prior to the strike, no organizational plans had been made to draw the Negro into the strike, and I understand that no efforts had been made to draw such Negroes as had left their jobs into the center of activities. This may have been due to the natural diffidence of the Southern Negro in associating with white workers, or it may have been due to oversight on the part

Report of Trip To Gastonia, North Carolina.

of the white workers, themselves, when planning their organization.

Unfortunately, in the South, the attitude is taken by the average person that the burden of organizing the Negro should be on the Negro. This, of course, is a fallacy. Many of the Negroes who left their jobs, I understand, were of the migratory type, and as soon as trouble ~~started~~ drifted away. I was told by ~~from~~ by one of the white strikers, who had intimate contact ~~x~~ with the Negro workers that three Negroes who had gone out on strike and who lived in company owned homes were forced back to work at the points of guns in the hands of local constabulary, who simply went to their homes and routed them out. I asked two Negro workers who I made contact with if this were really true. They said it was, but could not furnish the names of the Negro workers who had been thus intimidated, and refused to give their own names through fear. I asked three more white workers if they had any knowledge of this affair. They said it was ~~really~~ true, but in that section of the country the burden of protecting the Negro must rest on the shoulders of the Negro himself. (Which, of course, is really true). We must pay considerable attention to this in working out organizational plans for Negro work in the South. I made an actual check up, and I found that out of ~~nine~~ ^{twenty} ~~ten~~ Negroes interviewed, of all ~~shades of economic~~ classes, and of varying economic status, eighteen out of the twenty were more interested in some sort of physical defense organization rather than an organization along purely economic lines.

While poverty of the extremest sort was apparent on every hand, most of the talk ~~centered~~ on the brutality of the local constabulary in dealing with Negroes. All of the Negroes expressed

De los
1667

Report of Trip To Gastonia, North Carolina.

the need for organization , but refused to take any initiative until they could see something concrete.

I was told further that three other Negroes who walked off of their jobs were displaced by white scabs. This was told to me by a white worker at the strike headquarters. He was censured and asked if he was sure that this information was accurate. He said that it was accurate and that he could verify the statement. He was cautioned by another white worker against making such statements in a crowd, as he did not know who might be listening.

The fact that the average worker in the South feels that the burden of organizing the Negro must rest upon the Negro himself was evinced by the introductory speech Beal made. He said in part: "Here is a Negro organizer come down here to pull these Negroes out of the mill. The Negroes should be organized, and no one can do this better than a Negro. " While this may sound true, upon closer analysis we find that it is not always a correct party line, and would only tend to widen the gap already existing between the Negro and white worker.

I made a personal visit to the homes of nearly all the Negroes living in the company owned homes. They live in the Loray mill district, "on the hill" in the vernacular of the town. They are highly overworked and underpaid. The men are employed as yard men and in the picking rooms of the mill. There are not more than a total of **twenty-five** now employed at the mill. They work eleven, twelve, and fourteen hours a day, and receive a maximum of twelve dollars a week. The great majority of Negroes receive less than ten dollars a week, and many of them, six, seven, and

36

Dolos
1662

37

Report of Trip to Gastonia, North Carolina.

and seven-fifty a week. One Negro who had a wage of six dollars coming for the week, was docked five dollars by the foreman because of alleged irregularities. I was unable to learn how it was finally adjusted.

Delos
1662

Visited the home of Walter Long, Negro employee of the mill. He seemed to have the confidence of ~~most~~ of the white workers who accompanied me. Long was working about fourteen hours each day, and extra time Saturday, etc., and the week before he earned fourteen dollars for about eighty-four hours' labor. He admitted the need ^{for} of organization, but felt that the Negro workers could not afford to strike at this late stage of the game. Since no efforts had been made to organize them at the time organizational work was being carried on ~~by~~ among the white workers, he felt that their participation at this time would be equivalent to quitting their jobs and being replaced by other whites and Negroes. This was the prevalent sentiment among the Negro workers.

Negro workers were not being used to scab on white workers, and a real friendly feeling existed between the white strikers and the Negroes on the job. There was more antagonism manifested between the white scabs and the white strikers than between the Negro workers and white strikers, since the Negro workers were not competitors for the white strikers jobs, and were only used in the mill in certain fixed capacities. The whites seemed to understand the double oppression under which the Negro worker labors.

The Negroes are especially hampered because of the fact that

131

Section #5.

Report of Trip To Gastonia, North Carolina.

they have so few opportunities for employment. They cannot make a living even when working long hours, and could not quite understand how they could be expected to survive by ceasing to work altogether. The minute a Negro quits producing in the South he is automatically cut off from every channel of opportunity. I ran across an excellent example of this. One Negro had been working for some contractors. His ribs were crushed in an accident at five in the evening. His pay was immediately cut off and although he was to have finished up at five thirty, he was not paid for the extra thirty minutes. Neither was his family given any consideration. They were in terribly destitute circumstances, and hardly knew where their next meal was coming from. I hired a car out of my own funds, and had him removed to another town where he had friends or relatives.

I talked with small Negro business men (cockroach variety), the local ministers, and other workers not employed in the mills. They all seemed to feel that organization was necessary, but having been misled so frequently they had adopted an attitude of doubt. Of course, the ministers were sympathetic, but refused to take the lead in making contact with the Negro workers in the mills. I tried in every way to persuade them to allow me to put them in touch with the local white leaders of the strike, or else to allow one of the white leaders to talk to a colored audience. This of course, they refused. I further tried to get one of them to accompany me to the strike area to formulate certain demands for the Negro workers in the mills. This was also turned down. The same answer was received on every

38

De los
16627

Hand: "We are not interested in propaganda; when you have started something concrete, we will come in."

I made about fourteen actual contacts which had all expressed interest and will be glad to hear from us further. But aside from contacts, I am unable to understand the practical value of such trips. They cost money without netting any practical results in most cases. This leads me to conclude that we must devise ~~upon~~ specific and practical plans for the invasion of the South, well laid-out. We must have a basis for our operations, and not wait trusting to luck and circumstances.

I must add that unemployment was acute in Gastonia, apart from the strike situation, and that there were two to four men for every job. This was a further fact which deterred the Negro workers from hastily walking away from what limited employment they already enjoyed. Since I was accomplishing nothing practical I did not feel that I would be honest toward either the party or myself to remain any longer. Until we establish definite contacts in the South, and centers for carrying on organizational campaigns in a concrete manner, I feel that we can hope to do little in a practical organizational way.

39

X

X

X

X

39

Delos
26