

CITIZENS FOR FARM LABOR

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A UNION THAT REALLY WAS ONE
by Donald Grubbs

The urge toward union has always been one of the most fundamental passions of mankind. Unity rather than alienation, to live as brothers rather than as strangers, is a dream which has driven millions of men.

Most of the tough-minded leaders of American unionism have indulged in no such mysticism. Union, to them, was been nothing more or less than the best way for workers to put pork chops on the table. For such people, the unity of workers has been a tool, not a goal--a means, not an end. It has been a unity operative in the economic sphere only. One of the severe limitations of this conception of unity is the fact that, in practice, it defeats itself: as the union succeeds, it fails. The more secure a man's job becomes, the less his union means to him. It loses its relevance to his problems. It becomes stagnant, as, indeed, the American labor movement has become today.

Thirty years ago, in a most unlikely location, there flourished an organization whose history can teach us profound lessons about union in a higher and broader sense. Its members were farm tenants and sharecroppers, poor people bound to a rich soil, the fertile black Mississippi Delta around Memphis. They called their organization the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

People who conceive of unions in the limited, manipulative, purely economic sense would probably question whether the S.T.F.U. can even be called a union. Its impoverished members, grubbing an existence in the rural South, were so thoroughly at their employers' mercy that collective bargaining was out of the question. At most, in areas where they were strongest, they could occasionally stay out of the fields, "sick," on a given date.

Even to carry out a minimum program, to operate on any level at all, it was necessary to enroll a great percentage of the farm laborers in an area. For this, as well as more theoretical reasons, both Negroes and Caucasians were welcomed into the union and treated exactly alike from the beginning. This, remember, in the Mississippi Delta of the dardest Dixie. Surely a practical man might regard such a policy as the climax of folly.

W. J. Cash, in his classic Mind of the South, shows that the spread of the plantation system introduced class distinctions that could have been galling to the egalitarian settlers of the region, but then compensated them by introducing the "vastly ego-warming and ego-expanding distinction between the white man and the black." This artificial "proto-Dorian front" among the whites, as Cash called it, provided a gratifying sense of worth and power to every member of the Caucasian caste: "Come what may, he would always be a white man."

Leaders of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, particularly a rugged Virginian named Howard Kester, saw quite clearly this relationship between white supremacy and the human need to feel oneself worthy and masterful. They concluded, therefore that as Caucasians found union to be a more satisfactory means of gaining human dignity and winning a degree of control over their situation, they could shed white supremacy like a garment. It was an attractive theory, but would it work?

The first two locals of the S.T.F.U. were composed of sharecroppers who had toiled together in the fields and knew each other as individuals, so the Caucasians never thought to invoke their racial superstitions. But around Marked Tree, the second largest town in Poinsett County, Arkansas, word of the union quickly spread to a great many people who were not acquainted with one another, and the ruddy-faced workers were reluctant to organize with the dark-skinned workers. At this point, the union leaders made a major tactical decision. They would allow a Negro local and a white local in Marked Tree, but each would have to meet in the Negro lodge hall, which happened to be the only building large enough to accommodate either of the two groups. Soon the Negro local began requesting visits from individual Caucasian members who, outnumbered, could hardly tell the Negroes to sit at the rear of their own hall. In greater and greater numbers, each week, the whites drifted in, gazing in wonder as they listened to the wisdom of the Negro local's president, jabbing their ruddy-hued friends in the ribs and whispering, "You know, that nigger's got more sense than any white man here."

The Negroes were generally more literate because of their greater respect for education, a fact that never failed to amaze poor white sharecroppers new to the union. Besides, in Marked Tree, the Negro leader was a minister; the white leader was a bootlegger. This gave the former a bit more prestige, although the services of both were probably in equal demand.

Within a few months, S.T.F.U. Secretary H. L. Mitchell was happily observing that the only way to tell which local was meeting was to note the color of the officers on the platform. After the success of the two-local tactic in Marked Tree, the union leaders felt free to adopt it in any area where the whites' folk beliefs hindered their immediate association with people of a different color. Mitchell was quoted as saying, "It is quite all right for the two races to organize in separate locals just so long as they are all in the same union and fighting for the same things." Mitchell and the other union officers knew that as members came to comprehend what "fighting for the same things" meant, the irrationality that underlay the demand for two locals would begin to fade away.

They were pragmatists. To reach and convince whites who would otherwise be antagonized, they used white organizers; to gain the confidence of Negroes who had good reason to be suspicious of a "white man's organization," they used Negro organizers. For the same reasons, they encouraged the balancing of officeholders by race. Pickets, emissaries to Washington or Little Rock, and other spokesmen before the public were chosen from both races.

Officers and organizers were chosen with cognizance of their race in order to create a movement in which race would become unimportant to the largest possible number of people. "Most of the trouble between the races is directly rooted in the problem of bread and jobs and economic security. It is not primarily a problem of color," the union declared. In other words, the S.T.F.U. rejected most of the quasi-sociological aphorisms about "deeply rooted traditions," "getting too far ahead of public opinion," "changing men's hearts through education," and so on. Union leaders disdained intellectualizing and egg-treading. They plunged into the task of revealing concretely to both races that men united are happier, more valuable to themselves and others, and more effective than men divided.

This faith was rewarded with almost unbelievable results. One case is illustrative: a Negro union member from Arkansas' Cross County was beaten so severely by planters and their riding-bosses that, during a long period of invalidism, he could not hold his body wastes. A white sharecropper couple with a long pre-union background of bitter race hatred took the battered man into their cabin and nursed him like a brother.

Some poor whites grew almost aggressive about their new beliefs. For example, one said:

They eat the same kind of food that we eat; they live in the same kind of shacks that we live in; they work for the same boss-men that we work for; they hoe beside us in the fields; they drink out of the same bucket that we drink out of; ignorance is a-killin' them jest the same as it's a -killin' us... Why shouldn't they belong to the same union that we belong to?

The S.T.F.U. experiment had notable social and political results as well as personal and individual results. Its difficulties inspired formation of the LaFollette Committee which investigated violations of workers' rights of speech and association. The S.T.F.U. exposed the fact that the early New Deal's AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Administration), like the NRA, was -- especially in the South -- primarily a large property owner's device. The S.T.F.U. secured a nationally publicized conviction of a Dixie deputy sheriff for using his office to hold men in peonage. The S.T.F.U. convinced President Roosevelt that rural poverty must be attacked in new ways. He named a tenancy commission which included an S.T.F.U. member. The findings of Roosevelt's tenancy commission were translated into the Farm Security Administration until Virginia's Harry Byrd killed the FSA on the pretext of "economy" during World War II.

Probably no all-white organization and certainly no all-Negro organization could have achieved these results. But simply getting people into the same room would not, by itself, have built an interracial union on any permanent basis. How was it done?

To begin with, the union's leaders set an example. Members saw that people of both races were willing to get out into the fields with them, white leaders risking their skins for black members and black for white; this happened constantly. Such actions were the rocks on which mutual trust was slowly established. In addition, union officials and organizers insisted on non-violence regardless of provocation, a policy which was indispensable to the very existence of the S.T.F.U. Only fifteen years before and a short distance away, Negroes who were trying to organize a sharecroppers' union had been massacred like animals at a town called Elaine -- because one of them allegedly shot a white man who tried to break up a union meeting.

The promotion of members' self-respect was a constant and conscious task the S.T.F.U. leaders set themselves, and another reason for the success of racial integration in the union. For the first time in their lives, sharecroppers found themselves regarded as being human. They were given aid when they were sick, hungry, or in jail. They were given responsibilities and rewards. They were addressed as "Mister." Above, all, they were encouraged to think about cooperative action and the ways it might alter their world. Rapidly their need for protective prejudice disappeared.

The leaders of the S.T.F.U. never underestimated the intelligence of the members. Though unschooled, weakened by a lifetime of malnutrition and hookworm, often illiterate, many sharecroppers had fine minds which their society had discouraged from development. These people could comprehend the reasons for race hatred, and the necessity of replacing it through united action, almost as fast as these things were explained to them.

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Today, millions of young Negroes are condemned to unemployment and pointless lives because the ruling caste simply refused to believe union is desirable or possible. The dark-skinned beat and stab the light-skinned without really knowing why, or where they ought to strike. And vice versa. And, all the while, a candidate for President assures us that no law can change men's hearts.

For every man who believes in elementary decency, "Freedom Now" is a fine slogan. But might it not be supplemented with "Union Now"? Real union. Not union among men who merely want a bigger slice of society, but among men who want to transform it.

In 1964, as in 1934, the lower Mississippi Valley might be the best place to begin.