

## SHAW, MISSISSIPPI: NEW SOUNDS IN THE DELTA

Shaw, Mississippi, is a dusty little town (population 2700, 2/3) Negro, divided by a bayou and surrounded on all sides by endless cotton fields. It is in the heart of the Delta, 32 miles from the Mississippi river. Besides some cotton gins and fertilizer plants the only industry is a sewing plant. At least a hundred Negroes applied for jobs, but according to reports there, not one Negro has been hired. Negroes in the area almost universally agree that something has to be done.

On April 9, 1965, eighty-five years since the end of the Reconstruction, 45 cotton day laborers, tractor drivers, haulers, domestic servants, part time carpenters, mechanics, headymen, former sharecroppers and renters met in a tiny Negro church and formed the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union.

Traditionally no Negroes go on strike in this state. Even union organizing provokes Klan activity and strikes by any but the strongest unions can be dangerous. Yet within two weeks after the organizing meeting 1,000 persons joined the union and more than 200 of them declared themselves on strike. Their demands were simple: a \$1.25 minimum wage per hour, an eight hour day with time and a half for overtime, sick pay, health and accident insurance and equal employment practices in wages, hiring and working conditions.

What the union is fighting is the rich farmer who operates his plantation as if it were a huge industrial corporation--so completely automated, so efficient, so inhuman that it is a wonder there is any resistance to it at all. Foreign visitors come here to see one of the world's largest plantations, the Delta Land and Pine Corporation, which occupies more than 60 square miles of land in Bolivar county alone. They marvel at how so few men can run so many acres with such cold efficiency.

This English controlled Corporation is typical of the growing concentration of agriculture in this country. From the civil war to about 1930 the large slave owners plantations were divided among increasing numbers of sharecroppers. But since then the trend has reversed. Negro share-croppers and renters have dwindled because farm land costs too much for poor people today--\$500 per acre. And very little is for sale. For the Negro there is practically none at all.

Although the share-croppers has never been able to earn a stable, decent income in the Delta, he at least had some feel for the land. In a sense, the land was his. But for the day laborer this was never true. For him, the corporation is his boss man and he works for him on a day-to-day basis, without security, without tenure, without rights of any kind. The important change that has come about is that the overwhelming number of Negroes in this part of the state are day laborers, completely "proletarianized", without capital, without property, without security beyond today's piece of bread and lard. In this "Age of Affluence" the forgotten man in Southern agriculture is the Negro day laborer. And, with automation he too is rapidly on his way to becoming extinct.

So far day laborers (choppers and pickers) constitute over 90% of the union membership. For years the going wage was \$2.50 or \$3.00 for ten or more hours work. This year, Shaw residents say that white farmers are talking about paying only \$1.75 per day. There is no work at all when it rains, no unemployment compensation, minimum wage or social security protection from the government. It is almost impossible for a day laborer to get loans from the Farmer's Home Administration since he has no collateral and already is deeply in debt. Loans from private finance companies are available but at rates of interest usually over 33 1/3%. As one union member said at a recent meeting: "I've taken people to Greenville to get loans and most come back just as they left--with nothing. But if you borrow it, you get to pay it back and with what? If you got a dark skin you're in trouble."

A 75-year old chopper, Miller Larks, a tiny man, with a wonderful ability to get to the heart of an issue, is a typical union member. On the hottest days, he might wear a clean though badly frayed shirt, tie, and long woolen jacket which reaches down four inches above his knees. He sometimes closes his eyes when he talks and he usually has



a grin on his face. As much as anyone, he helped to get the union started. He describes the system:

"I began farming when I was eight years old. Only went to school till the fourth grade. My father needed me to help out in the fields I moved to Arkansas when I was 24 and joined a farmer's union. But we couldn't get it through because the white folks cut us out. They said we couldn't have a union in the south. I came back to Shaw and rented till I couldn't rent no more. It got so that I was losing money. Then white folks got that they wouldn't rent to colored folks. That was about in 1949. They just got land out from under the colored peoples because of the debts. I remember it was in 1947 that I got some parity checks--about \$2,400. The white folk, they didn't want you to have no parity checks. They took it all from me in 1947. After that I couldn't rent for cash no more. I couldn't even fourth-rent (an arrangement where the renter pays a fourth of his cash earnings to the landowner). I couldn't rent no way. I had to work the shares (sharecropping) but I wasn't making any living at all.

"Then I got a truck and I hauled day labor but I couldn't get enough people--just two or three. I couldn't keep up my truck. The boss man, he only paid you .50¢ for each person you brought. Now I'm too old to do a hard day's work. I live on old age checks and I get a government check for my kids."

Another union member, Mrs. Willie Mae Martin, about, 35, has seven children and has chopped cotton for years. A few years ago her husband died and in 1961 she was forced to apply for welfare. She receives food through the government commodity program. During one of the union meetings in the wood-frame Church of God in Christ in the heart of Shaw's South-town section, Mrs. Martin asked if I would talk to her outside. When nobody could hear she asked "Do you think it's right for a person to live on \$35 a month with seven children? What can a person do for his children when there's not enough food to eat?" The commodities ended last April 1. They don't begin again until the dead season sometime in November. Mrs. Martin's monthly notes total \$24 for a washing machine, gas heater and refrigerator. Insurance premiums come to \$7.60 and rent is \$13 a month. That leaves her \$8.60 in debt each month.

The secretary of the union is Mrs. Edna Mae Garner. From her wooden shack you could see the white plantation boss's son across the field about a half mile away. "The man's looking this-a-way," someone in our integrated group said. "Makes no difference," She responded, "I don't figure to live here much longer no how." Mrs. Garner explained that since she has been cut off from welfare in 1959 she has fallen behind in her \$10 a month rent. The three room shack has holes in the floor so you can see daylight; there is no electricity or indoor plumbing. The linoleum is worn through and the wall paper is peeling off the wall. She has seven children living with her, is separated and receives no income from her husband. The last commodities she received are just about gone now. Mrs. Garner says this about the welfare authorities:

"No matter how bad you're starving and you're kids are doing without, they don't care. They listen to what peoples tells them, they don't go by how bad is your need. The lady I used to work for her and she would give me dinner, and let me off early. I used to do chopping later in the day and I would make \$3 a day but after James Meredith at Ole Miss, in 1962 she let me off. The last times I worked for her she wouldn't even give me my dinner. "I expect the boss man's going to come round here to ask me to leave any time now. When he ask me 'will I do some chopping?' and I tell him 'no, I'm on strike till I get \$1.25 an hour, 'I expects he's going to ask me to move on."

The first few weeks of May is zero hour for the MFLU. The weeds will be popping through the light yellow brown Delta soil and the plantation operators will be scouring the nearby town for choppers. Before then, arrangements must be made between the operators and the haulers who transport the day laborers to the fields. William Brewer, 63, a short, solidly built man was a sharecropper, but for the past few years he has worked as a hauler. Last week he signed the strike pledge form. Brewer describes how he earns his living:

"I work directly with the landlords. I've never gone to the Federal Government Employment Office to get choppers and pickers



The landlord pays me directly .50¢ for everyone I bring. I work five or six months on the average. We only work at most five days a week unless it rains. I have hauled twenty-four people on my truck, and I usually have about sixteen. That means about \$8 a day. The choppers pay for their lunches which I buy in town. I am supposed to be with my group all day and service them. Lots don't eat early in the morning so right away I go to town to get lunch and ice. I got to be up before dawn. Don't go home till dark.

"I earned about \$701 last year. From that I had to pay \$85 liability insurance and \$180 for an overhaul on my truck. Of course I got to pay for all the gas and oil and other work that goes in. I only pay \$5 rent a month but with all the expenses and all, I'm three months back due. So far this year I did construction work in Cleveland for about 12 hours and I did some moving people around. I charge about \$3.50 or \$4 for moving families. I'll do just about any kind of work that comes around."

Since the work year has been shortened, it's especially difficult to make a living. Brewer says: "Since they been using chemicals, we're getting a later start. Now there's not much doing till June and they're improving the stuff all the time. There's no future for the little man here any more."

Union leaders realize that unless more haulers like Brewer go on strike, the strike is in trouble. Tractor drivers are also crucial to the success of the strike. They are the highest paid (\$5 to \$8 per ten to twelve hours a day) and most skilled cotton field workers besides mechanics. For weeks now they have been plowing and planting the fields and so far only a handful have gone on strike. One driver explained: "I started working for my boss man two years ago. He started me off at \$5 a day but within a few weeks he raised me to \$6 and now I'm getting \$7.50. I didn't even have to ask him for it. He came up to me and said he's just going to give me a raise."

At the union meetings last week it was clear that not much could be expected from the drivers. George Shelton, 19, of Shaw, a husky, persuasive, hard working organizer and MFLU chairman, called for volunteers to recruit tractor drivers: "We got to show them that this fight is their fight too. We got to talk with them right away. We only got two more weeks. We can't expect to get all of them signed up but we can get some. Then some more might follow...But don't let's go in the fields to talk with them. We'll just get run out. Get them when they're at home they can listen."

A union of agricultural workers was in the people's minds for years. Some even remember their grandparents talk about the Southern Farmers' Alliance which developed into the Populist party in the 1890's. In Parts of the South the Populists voted to get rid of politicians who favored the big planters and the rich "Bourbons." For a short time the Alliance and Populist party leaders, like Tom Watson of Georgia, told poor whites and Negroes that they were being kept apart so that they might more easily be robbed by the big landowners. Later the Party under attack from racist extremists, turned against the Negro as well as Jews and Catholics.

Shelton said the impetus for beginning a union came out of Freedom School meetings conducted by white COFO workers Mary Sue Gellatly and Bob Weil. But Mr. Larks, who faithfully attended these meetings says that he thought about forming a union here long ago. He Adds:

"I have people in the north who belong to the union. When we gets together that's mainly what we talk about--the union. So we began talking about it here that \$3 a day from sun-up-to dark wasn't enough. We couldn't support our families. We all talked about how much we needed to live and we talked and talked about it for a month. We decided on \$1.25. That will be good on condition we can get the work. But we know that if he has to pay us that much he's likely to give us nothing."

Mrs. Josie Atkins, about 65, was another person who helped form the union: "I thought that the whole problem is that we rely on cotton chopping and picking too long now. We got to either get a decent wage or think of going at something else." Mrs. Atkins says that a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party workshop in Biloxi inspired her to work for



a union.

Andrew Hawkins, of Shaw, the FDP County Chairman, also helped get the union off the ground. Hawkins, a carpenter, hopes to run for mayor. Along with over 100 other Negroes, mainly day laborers, he helped form the Bolivar County Improvement Association last August. The group tried unsuccessfully to help bring industry to the area. Since the fall the BCIA died out and members merged with the FDP and later with the union.

Most union members realize they're fighting against enormous odds, but they are convinced that right is on their side. A thin fair looking man in a soft voice explained at the meeting: "A man shouldn't get angry if all we is asking is \$1.25 an hour. That's nothing considering we worked for so long for nothing. Let's love the white man but let's stand up for what's right." And Mr. Larks smiling, added: "I enjoyed going to jail (last local school's segregated and inferior conditions). We had a big time when we marched down to that jail. We followed together. I was proud to go to jail. We got to stick together in the union the same way."

To help members on strike, members voted to collect .50¢ a month dues from each member. A barber and beautician offered their service at cut rates, women promised to sew aprons and bed quilts and some people planned to hold fish fries. Everyone agreed to enlarge the size of their garden plots, and plant one large plot in common. One person suggested that small Negro farmers be approached for help: "We can't strike against them. Maybe we could help him feed his hogs and he could help feed us."

"But some people," Mr. Larks said, "Want to strike but won't be able because they going to have to have something for the children to live on. If," he added, "the union can support those unfortunate ones, then we can do something." The union voted to give all food and clothing from friends in the North only to those people on the strike list. It also was decided that only the strikers should get help.

Ever since the Movement began in Shaw the white man has fought it. Traffic arrests and other harassments are more frequent than ever before and now things are expected to get worse. Mrs. Beatrice Miller, 51, a union member, whose husband rents a 40 acre farm nearby says:

"Practically every job that comes in around here, they hired whites, not colored. Anybody they know participates in the movement they get turned off his job. And they won't give you a job if they know you're in the movement.

"We can't borrow the money we need to grow cotton right. We just can't afford the soda, the poison and the good kind of cotton seeds, and we can't afford to plow and plow the land the way the white people do.

"It used to be that when you owed some to the white people they'd go along with you. But things are changed now. One colored man had 13 acres but when his wife died owing \$200 they closed him out. A lady I know lost her 60 acres because she owed \$900. My husband's grandfather had 120 acres and he paid a down payment on it to white people. On his death bed he said 'I hoped I could leave land for my children but now I'm going and leaving nothing'. The white took it from us and left us nothing. They don't want you to have nothing."

Mr Larks told people at one of the meetings: "My man told me 'Look, you been living in this house for a long time. Now we got to change all that. You got to get some more money, if you still want to stay here.' The majority of these white men are angry with us because of this union. They knows about us."

On April 28, a two day meeting of the MFLU began in Shaw. Poor Negroes came from areas all over the state. The Freedom Democratic Party started in somewhat the same way last year. Now Negroes throughout the whole country have come to this state to study its political ideology and tactics. The MFLU may become the economic arm of the revolution. But before that happens, there is much suffering to be done.