

[post 1968]

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EASTABUCHIE, Miss. -- Civil rights groups, including the NAACP and SCLC, are rallying to support a group based here that is headed by a white Mississippian.

The NAACP and SCLC recently sponsored rallies and marches in Mississippi and Alabama to strengthen a strike called in early September by the Gulfcoast Pulpwood Assn. whose president is 58-year-old Fred Walters.

The union, which has some 6,000 members in the two states, 65 per cent of them black, has struck wood dealers and pulp mills in an effort to gain pay raises, accident insurance, uniform cord measurements for the wood they sell and other benefits.

"We're trying to organize white and colored where we can get a better price for what we do," commented Walters whose weathered face reflects warmth and confidence. "You hear a lot about white and colored getting together but this is the real thing. This is not bosh."

When the union began in 1968 it was predominantly white. It's small successes have brought more blacks into the work and the support for an earlier strike from Charles Evers, black mayor of Fayette, Miss., brought more blacks into the union.

The men cut wood from private lands for a fee and then sell it to dealers or mills who lease or sell them their trucks, saws and other equipment. Until a few years ago, few blacks were able to get this needed equipment.

Walters said that after equipment costs are deducted from that a man is paid for the wood, he is lucky to make \$15 a day, when weather permits him to work.

Although the GPA began in 1968, it really got going when a strike began in September, 1971, after mills increased the size of a unit of wood without any increase in price. The strike spread quickly and within weeks 43 woodyards were shut down. After more than three months the paper companies granted the cutters raises of from \$1 to \$3 per unit.

There were few blacks in the business then. Walters sees a large number of black members and the black as well as white support for the GPA as a sign of progress--and also a sign that the use of race baiting to divide and conquer workers is failing.

"It used to be more whites because when it all started a colored man couldn't get a wood truck," Walters related while sitting in the remodeled storage building here that serves as GPA headquarters. "Back in '67, when they had the strike at Masonite, they let a few of the colored men have the trucks. That caused a little bit of friction between the white and colored man.

"Then in the '71 strike they again gave the colored man a truck to haul past the picket line and break the strike. But the colored man was smart and it didn't work this time. So they had to give us \$1 and \$3 more and now a colored man can get a truck as quick as a white man."

Walters said that not only is wood cutting low paying work with the equipment expensive and easily broken, but also is "one of the most dangerous things that a man ever done in his life."

"Just one little mistake," he explained, "and that's it. He can lose a leg or an arm, or even his head."



But Walters and others still stay with the work.

"A guy's been in the woods all his life and it's hard to get out of," he explained. "You're not under a bossman, with the bossman looking down your shirt collar all day."

As well as trying to present a strong front against the paper and pulp industry in its strike, the GPA still works among cutters and their families to improve relations between whites and blacks.

"What we're trying to do is give parties, barbecues, fish fries, to get these white and colored families together," Walters said. "This is getting people together beautifully."

One story signifies this new racial solidarity. Two years ago six women, three white and three black, all wives of wood cutters, traveled together from Laurel to northern Mississippi. Cafe after cafe refused to serve the black women lunch inside. Although the black women asked the white women to carry food out to them under these circumstances, the white women refused to agree to such an indignity. After traveling about 100 miles, they finally all were able to sit down together for lunch.

"We're going to move together and it doesn't matter if it's the Ku Klux Klan or the damn law or who in hell tries to get in our way, we're going to move," Walters declared, his voice rising, but still with a soft edge to it.

"The reason they have been able to control the poor people," he stressed, "is because they've always had the white man and the colored man at one another, to keep them separated. But when we got on that first picket line and stayed and won the \$2 and \$3 raise, we saw what people could really do by grouping up."