

Freedom Information Service
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NATCHEZ LAUNDRY WORKERS' STRIKE--A Transcription of a Tape Recording

(Sound of steam laundry press)

Narrator: The sound of a steam laundry. Here in Natchez, where Negroes have been engaged in a protracted battle to get city officials to negotiate desegregation demands, steam laundries are part of what its all about. On October 6, during the height of protest demonstrations, some 30 Negro ladies employed at the Natchez Steam Laundry walked off the job on strike. The action was precipitated by the firing of a fellow worker for civil rights activities, but for some time now the ladies have planned to organize to seek shorter hours and better pay.

First lady: "The first get paid three cents a shirt, to be divided by two people, that means one and one half cents a shirt."

Second lady: "We want a dollar and twenty-five cents an hour and vacation with pay, and have the same kind of treatment that white peoples have."

Third lady: "We have nine hours a day to work, half an hour for dinner and fifteen minute break for nine, fifteen minute break for three."

Narr: Pay raises from 30 cents an hour to \$1.25 an hour, a 40 hour work week instead of the present 54 hours. And most of all, a Union. The civil rights groups aiding the ladies with their strike contacted the Laundry and Dry Cleaning Workers Union of the AFL CIO. And late last week, Cleveland Harris, a young Negro from Baltimore and a representative of the Union, came to town to help the ladies organize and tell them something about unions.

Cleveland Harris: "A union is first of all an organization of togetherness on the part of workers in a specific plant or industry. In your case it's the laundry and dry cleaning. Whatever happens to one happens to all. You have demonstrated in a true spirit of unionism by sticking together and walking out of the place where you were paid a starvation wage."

Narr: The ladies learn that to organize themselves successfully they must work to organize all their fellow tradesmen in Natchez.

Mr. Harris: "I am also concerned with organizing whatever other workers in there--white, pink, yellow, green, brown, or any other color--because we realize that race has been played against race in order to keep wages down in our industries."

Narr: And an elderly Negro man, a long time worker at the Armstrong Rubber Company in Natchez, teaches them something of Negroes' past efforts in local union organizing.

Negro worker: "We organized back in nineteen and forty-four, when the Citizens' Council wouldn't even allow anyone to organize. We had to go out on the Pine Ridge Road, out on the hillside, to organize the Union. That union was more or less opened up by Negroes, out on Pine Ridge Road, down back of an old store on the hill side."

Narr: A dollar twenty-five cents an hour, a forty hour work week, and the right to have a union. These are the demands of the striking ladies of the Natchez Steam Laundry. What are their chances for success?

Mr. Harris: "A dollar and twenty-five cents an hour is very low, that's true. However, a dollar and twenty-five cents an hour in some cases is not being paid today in Northern states, in Northern cities, in the laundry and dry cleaning field."

Narr: The 32 ladies from the Natchez Steam Laundry face a tremendous task. To win their demands they must convince all the laundry workers of Natchez, white and Negro, to join with them in building a union. All this in the anti-union Ku Klux Klan stronghold of Natchez, in the

state of Mississippi, where the right-to-work law keeps black and white laborers among the poorest paid in the nation. But, the ladies have decided, 54 hours a week away from home and family for often less than \$25 just isn't worth it anymore.

Lady: "Different peoples sat down and decided they had problems at home--you know, they didn't have enough money. They wanted to be at work, but they wasn't making a high enough salary for to take care of their children, and they couldn't pay somebody to keep 'em. So we just got on the agreement that if we could have a union, we could make a sum of money that we could take care of our families at home, because some of us don't have husbands, and so that's the way it is."

Narr: And a young man, helping the ladies in their fight, sums it all up.

Young man: "Well, I think the trouble we're having with the racial situation is that it seems the white man don't want us to be equal with them in the dollar. That's all it seems to be to me. I mean, that's what I really believe segregation is--nothing but that dollar, they don't want you to make equal with them in the money part."

Narr: Like the Negro farm laborers in the Freedom Labor Union, the Natchez strikers face the spectre of violence from white vigilante groups and the threat of indifference from institutionalized labor groups. As with the farm laborers in the Delta, the civil rights movement will provide most of the support for the strikers and pressure the organized unions to take up the cause of the laundry workers. All of the civil rights groups active in Natchez, including the NAACP, the Freedom Democratic Party, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, have pledged continued aid to the strikers and the organizing drive.

Mr. Harris: "Labor and civil rights are brothers. I'm certain they cannot be seperated."

Narr: The civil rights movement in Mississippi is working and watching and waiting, hoping to see these words followed by action

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