

REVOLT IN THE DELTA

by ALVIN RAMP, Chairman, Cleveland NAACP

In the Mississippi Delta there is more cotton being grown than in any other part of America. Since there has been no minimum wage law established regarding farm labor, especially in the Mississippi area, the people in a small town named Shaw, Mississippi felt very strongly about doing something regarding the wages we are now getting for chopping cotton, which are \$3.50 for a ten hour day. So a small group of these people who have been working with civil rights committees decided in May of 1965 that they would form a labor union, and call all of the cotton choppers and truck drivers together to ask them if they would be willing to join the union and go on strike for higher wages.

Since working in the cotton fields is the chief source of income for most Negroes in the summer and fall of the year, they felt a little reluctant about joining the labor union, which was later named the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. After talking to these people, the small group of people who formed the Union sat down and began to write letters to different people and firms in the North to help support us in our struggle for higher wages, which would be \$1.25 an hour for common labor.

Two weeks after the people in Shaw started the labor union the idea spread to Cleveland, Mississippi, which is about eleven miles north of Shaw. The procedures we took were these: The night before we began to strike we got twenty-five or more people who were members of the Union to catch trucks that carried cotton choppers. The following morning the twenty-five or more people caught a truck and went on the Thompson plantation. Ten minutes after we had arrived on the Thompson's plantation the Union people began putting on freedom butt ons and asking people to go on strike for more than \$3.50 a day. The younger people were willing to go on strike because they were tired of chopping every summer for \$3.50 or less. So they threw their hoes down and walked out of the fields, but there were five old ladies who remained in the field. They were later forced to leave the field because most of the people had loaded up to go and talk to the plantation owner and ask for more money. Mr. Thompson offered \$5.00 a day for chopping, but he wanted to pick twenty-five of the older people. The group did not agree with him. They said to Mr. Thompson, "If you can't use all of us then we'll leave."

Thompson was stunned to see all of his choppers walk off his plantation. The day following the Thompson strike two busloads of people went on strike, totaling 113 people. In Cleveland, Mississippi there are about 35 vehicles carrying cotton choppers; we had all of these on strike except four.

On the 10th of June six people from Cleveland were arrested on false charges in Boyle, Mississippi because they were talking to people on a bus, trying to convince them to go on strike. The people who were arrested in Boyle were released on \$900 bail. The local people raised the bail for the six people who were arrested. On Monday, June 14th, about 150 people who were on strike and members of the Union were arrested for parading without a permit in Jackson, Mississippi while protesting a special session of the legislature that was called by Governor Johnson to pass laws to keep the Negro from voting.

We were in Jail for two weeks and during this time most of the people we had on strike went back to the fields for \$4.00 and \$4.50 a day. These people figured since we were in Jail they wouldn't be able to get money to pay their bills and buy food.

There are only one or two more days in the cotton chopping season now, so it would be silly to try to get these people back on strike. But in August when the cotton picking season opens we do plan to get men who drive cotton picking machines to go on strike for \$1.25 per hour instead of \$.50 or \$1.00 per hour like they have been doing in the past, and we are going to get people who pick cotton by hand to go on strike for \$5.00 a hundred pounds, not \$3.00 or \$2.50 like they have been in the past.

Not only are we going to have people in the fields going on strike, but we will also have maids and people with other vocations who are not getting the minimum wage which is \$1.25 an hour.

Therefore we will need the support of our many friends in the North who are deeply concerned with the wage problem we are confronted with. What we need most is money, but food and clothes