

THE LESSONS OF LAUREL

GRASS-ROOTS ORGANIZING IN THE SOUTH



For several years, staff members of GROW, the Deep South organizing project of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, have been working with white trade unionists in Laurel, Miss.—helping them first to see the need for and then to seek alliances with the black community.

Since many people seeking to build such alliances elsewhere have asked us about how this work started and the progress and problems that have developed, we are publishing this two-part report.

The first section, about the beginning of the work, was written in the fall of 1968 by Robert Analavage. It was prepared as a discussion paper for a conference of white people in Mississippi who were seeking new ways to organize in the white community. Analavage worked on the staff of SCEF from 1966 until 1969, first as Deep South correspondent for The Southern Patriot and later also as a member of the GROW project. He is now living in California, doing free-lance writing.

The second section of this report, giving more recent developments, was written in the spring of 1970 by Dottie Zellner. She worked on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee for five years in the 1960's. In 1967 she helped to found SCEF's GROW project and serves as its co-director.



Part I

By *ROBERT ANALAVAGE*
November, 1968

Rallies are held every Saturday in a cow pasture. The crowds vary in size from 55 (one cold, rainy day) to over 800 on a nice, sunny one. Cars stand in dual lines, many bumpers distinguished by faded WALLACE stickers. There are some black people in the crowd, but most are white.

A flatbed truck is situated in the middle of the

pasture, and the speakers are talking about the struggles of working people and the need for black-white unity. The speakers are members of the GROW Project, which says it wants to build a mass movement across the South, to link black and white to change the system under which we live.

This is all taking place in Laurel, Miss., said to be headquarters for the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. It is a beginning.

GROW stands for Grass Roots Organizing Work, and is headquartered in New Orleans. It is a part of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). The GROW project is staffed by white veterans of the civil-rights movement (mostly former SNCC people). Its director is Bob Zellner, a 28-year-old Alabamian who was the first white field secretary for SNCC (1961), and one of the last whites to leave that organization.

The idea of such a project was conceived by Bob and Dottie Zellner, and two other white Southerners, Carl and Anne Braden, executive directors of SCEF. GROW field work began in 1967, and has made some modest but important gains.

Reaching White Southerners

How to begin to reach the poor and working whites in the South was the first question. The GROW staff had worked in the black communities of the Mississippi Delta, and had some credibility there. They went and talked with the local black people, old friends who had lived in that area for generations, and knew all there was to know about how people lived and worked and died there.

We got names of some poor whites and directions (there are no addresses in the rurals except a mailbox) and went visitin'.

We don't quite know what it was, perhaps Movement propaganda, but we were afraid of approaching these people. After all, in the innocence of the '64 Summer Project, we were told that these people were the enemy. They were said to be the ones who shot into the COFO freedom house, beat you when you were walking picket lines, poured the catsup over your head when you were integrating those greasy spoons fighting for the right of black people to eat terrible hamburgers—even if they could not afford them.

What a pitiful mess we found.

The woman was obese—the kind of obesity that comes from eating all the greasy, fatty stuff

the poor use to fill their bellies. She was lying in bed under a multitude of blankets, with a three- or four-year old child beside her. Periodically, the child—whose only clothing was a shirt, would get up and walk outside. The child was what the medical profession calls mongoloid. It was 20 degrees outside, and there were puddles of ice in the yard.

The woman was sick with flu. Her husband, who worked in a nearby factory for \$1.35 an hour, was sick too. His wife said she thought he had TB, but so far they had not got around to checking into it. She had a bottle of patent medicine and wondered if it might help her. However, she couldn't read and she asked us to check the label to see if there was anything harmful in it.

Before we left she wanted to know if we were connected with the War on Poverty. No, we told her—not the Government's, anyway.

We met a lot of these people.

Some dealt with the wretchedness of their lives with dreams and illusions, like the woman who was writing songs and sending them to a radio station (along with \$2) in the hopes that someone would set her words to music and she would make a bundle, just like the announcer said she would.

Then there were those who faced reality with their own reality, like the man in Smith County who was peddling illegal booze and making a few bucks until he was arrested. His wife brought three children into the world, each one dying shortly after birth. And there was the chicken caretaker who looked after 35,000 chickens and made \$35 a week. He was one of the more successful ones. But then his house did not have a bathroom, and the family performed the necessary bodily functions off the back porch, and emaciated dogs carried the mess away.

And the man in the Delta who received \$10 a week, plus the right to live in a three-room shack, for herding cows for his boss-man. He had eight children, one a small infant, and he

“supplemented” his income with government surplus food. There was the 28-year-old man who had no toes on either foot (he cut them off while chopping wood), who was going to marry his 12-year-old first cousin, and who didn’t even have a job prospect. This is what sociologists must mean when they talk about the cycle of poverty.

We invited about 30 of these people, which included some small children and teenagers, to New Orleans for a weekend of workshops. It was impossible to meet in their own communities, because they were as frightened of the authorities as black people were until the sixties (a share-cropper wanted to attend a literacy class, but was sure his boss-man would disapprove of it).

That New Orleans workshop, plus subsequent visits to the poor people in the Delta, in their own communities, led us to conclude that they were thoroughly and tragically beaten. Unlike poor blacks, who have the strength of an organized movement to look to, they lacked spirit, and the hope that something could be done which might alter their lives.

What they desperately need now is welfare, housing, food, medicine—in other words, social services. We do not have the resources to provide these things and do not see it as part of our program to do so. These are people who must eventually be a part of any movement we build, but they do not have the strength to be the spearhead of it.



In the summer of 1967 we began making visits to Laurel, Miss., where there was a labor struggle between Local 5-443 of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and the Masonite Corporation, the largest producer of hardboard in the world. The plant had been organized since 1939.

Both management and labor agreed that Local 5-443 has been the most militant union in the South on economic issues. In 1967 the local had a membership of close to 3,000, about 75 per cent of it white. The company tried to push through a plant-reorganization plan (partial automation) which would have eliminated jobs and increased individual work loads. The local struck. The strike lasted 7½ months and it was bitter; the repercussions have yet to be fully felt. The struggle is still going on. This report has not the space to tell all that happened; a fuller account can be had from *The Southern Patriot*, 3210 W. Broadway, Louisville, Ky. 40211. A capsule of what occurred is:

(1) The company effectively ‘Klan-baited’ the local. This was not hard to do in Jones County, where in the past many klan members have been arrested on charges ranging from intimidation to murder. Yet to charge the local with being klan-controlled is absurd. In 1964, after the local did away with its all-black sub-local and brought black and white workers together, an officer of the local was flogged by klansmen. The local officials bought a full-page ad in the *Laurel Leader-Call* and threatened war on the Klan. They warned that “blood would flow in the streets” if further such incidents occurred. They did not occur. Just before the strike ended in December, 1967, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, mostly black, passed a resolution supporting it. Yet, it is important to note that there are people in the rank and file of the klan who are also in the rank and file of the local.

(2) Management posed as the friend of black people by integrating showers, drinking fountains, etc. Of course the company was simply complying with a federal order, but it must be

pointed out that the local had supported certain segregationist practices inside the plant. The company's pose as a friend of the black workers, however, became more ludicrous when our research showed that it has a plant in Johannesburg, South Africa. Yet this tactic lured at least half of the black strikers back to work. White strikebreakers were imported from across the South. During the summer of 1967, almost the entire football squads from Ole Miss and the University of Southern Mississippi at Hattiesburg were recruited.

(3) Injunctions were obtained against the local to end picketing. Even before the strike began, however, Masonite hired Wackenhut security guards and set up sandbag bunkers and machine-gun nests on company property. Gun towers still dot the plant area. The company even bought a gas station situated near a plant entrance, where workers would congregate and ordered them off the property. During the strike, five men were alleged to have been killed. We have been able to authenticate one death—that of a Wackenhut guard who had been killed with a shotgun.

(4) Masonite production declined both in quantity and quality; it had to sell 35 million dollars worth of prime timber to St. Regis Paper Company. It brought a 3 million dollar suit against the international union. The international then (a) negotiated a new contract with the company, and (b) imposed a trusteeship on the local, seizing the local union hall and its finances, and then removing the local officers. Masonite then dropped its suit.

(5) 2,100 men, many of whom had worked at Masonite for 20 and 30 years, were thrown out of work. Christmas was three weeks away. They felt that their own international had sold them out. They couldn't even get a local attorney to help them—indeed, the local attorney who had represented them received \$25,000 on condition that he would not represent the local in any future litigation. At the end of 1968, more than 800 of the strikers have not been taken back because they are considered strong unionists. About

1,600 now do the work than once required 2,100 men.

Anyone who is serious about building a movement in the South would do well to recognize what formidable opponents we have, as shown by the power and resources used by Masonite in this strike. GROW's Mike Higson adds:

In Laurel, Masonite has economic, political and propagandistic control. It is a company town. Masonite is the largest employer in a two- or three-county area. In 1966 it effectively shut out St. Regis Paper Company by the simple expedient of upping its labor force by 1,000. It did not want a competitor in the local labor market. Masonite doesn't own the local media, but since it is a heavy advertiser, the one TV station, several radio stations, and the only newspaper all reflect a pro-business, conservative stance. Outside of these institutions are the banks, the businesses, and the Chamber of Commerce, all of which depend heavily on the weekly Masonite payroll. Jones County is a colony and the mother country is in Chicago. This year ('68) the labor in Laurel will send back a good part of Masonite's net profit of 8.4 million dollars to Chicago, where the company has its head office.

While the strike was going on, the GROW staff met many times with the strikers. At the time of the strike, what the local needed most was to get the black men out of the plant and back on the strike. But the black unionists were bitter over the second-class role they had in the local; on the other hand, they had profited from a strong union and their wages were higher than other black Mississippi workers.

The winds of change blow—and the winds said that whites do not work and organize in black communities. Our hope was to form a joint project with some black organizers around common interests, to defeat the company in its efforts to divide. We would work with the whites—as we already were—and the black organ-

izers would work in the black community. If we could show that a black-white coalition could be built in Mississippi, its impact on the movement would be tremendous and spur others. Concessions would have to be made by the white unionists—that is, participation by black men in union affairs—and a strong black caucus would probably have to be built. But black groups contacted in Mississippi and on the national level were unresponsive. GROW could not wait until it had the cooperation of black groups in the movement, and decided to go it alone. The situation was drastic, the men now had nobody to turn to, morale was bad, and people began drifting away. The men wanted to battle it out in the courts and they wanted our assistance.

Jack Minnis, SCEF's Research Director, has a talent for finding flaws in the system. He used to be in charge of research for SNCC, where he found an obscure Alabama law that eventually led to the formation of the Lowndes County Freedom Party (whose symbol is the black panther). Minnis pored over all the strike data he could find, and learned that the international union had violated its own constitution in imposing the trusteeship and signing the contract with Masonite. Jack Peebles, a New Orleans attorney and a vice-president of SCEF, went to court for the local. The suit is still in the courts because of charges and counter-charges brought by the international and Masonite. The intensity of the court battle may best be appreciated if it is mentioned that Hulse Hayes, of the law firm which wrote the Taft-Hartley Act of 1946, heads a five-lawyer team for Masonite, while the international is using a Little Rock law firm which includes one ex-Governor, plus the former Commissioner of the Arkansas Public Service Commission.

On the organizational level, we have been holding rallies and workshops, building trust and a feeling of unity. Good rapport exists between GROW and the white working class community in Laurel. We have been able to do this while keeping our relations with black, anti-war and student movements. It has been honest from the beginning; in our first meetings

with the strikers, we told them about our background with SCEF and SNCC. After a pause, their response was: "We don't care about that—what can you do to help us?" A five-man committee has been formed from the local union to coordinate their struggle. Three are white, two are black. Morale is still a problem, but these are hard men.



None of this is really dramatic, but we feel it is fruitful. For instance, Jack Minnis used one rally to explain their law suit in terms of the whole nature of the state and federal judicial systems and Sen. James Eastland's role in selecting federal judges. "If there's justice in the courts we will win," he said, "because the law is supposed to be on your side. If we can't win in the courts, we will have to try something else." His theory is that if you are going to change the system, you must first understand it. A lot of people in Jones County are beginning to.

We believe that the most important aspect of this project is that we have broken out of the isolation from working whites which has plagued the movement for freedom. Our relationship with them is good. We have been accepted into their homes, eaten and slept there, and they have visited us in New Orleans at the GROW Educational Center. This is a large building we've purchased for use as a training center for future struggles—presently shut down by the City of New Orleans in a maze of harassing building regulations.

Discussions range from our experiences in the civil-rights movement to various political positions we and they hold. Right now we have fraternal relations with rank-and-file members of the Klan. We've sipped moonshine, discussed Wallace, and drunk beer into the wee small hours in a bar which we were told was a headquarters for the Klan.

We've talked to similar folk in the Carolinas, in Georgia, in Alabama, in Louisiana. They've been used—badly—and they've been ignored.

If there is any possibility of changing this country for the better, these people *must* be organized. George Wallace has exploited their plight, and they voted for him because they did not have anyone else to vote for. The Movement must offer an alternative to Wallace and his organization, and that is what we are trying to do. In the fall of 1968, in Lowndes County, Ala., we met some Black Panthers from Oakland, Calif., who had come down to make sure

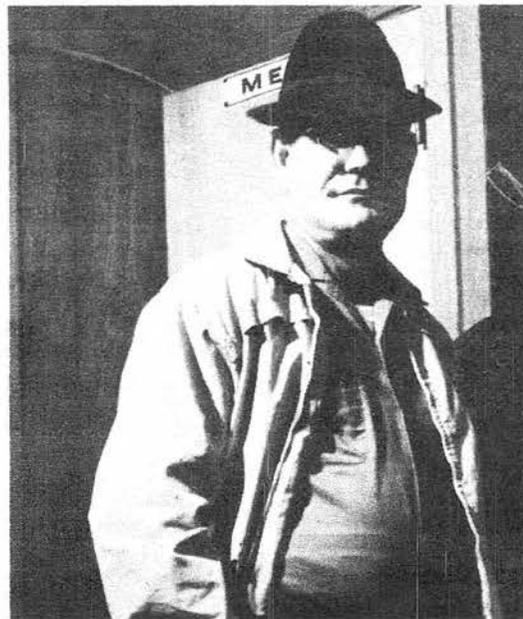
nothing happened to local people on election day. We discussed what we were doing and one of them said: "If you can get to those kind of white folks and we could get to the blacks—man, nothing would stop a movement like that!"

The South is a colony and its black and white inhabitants are exploited like the inhabitants of any colony (check out where the board of Southern companies reside and where the profits go. For example, Masonite). We must begin to develop research and consciousness along these lines, and we must be able to explain this to people at the *grass roots*. And to get information to people at the grass roots, you must first go there and gain their confidence and trust.

The way Bob Zellner put it at a workshop with Laurel unionists is:

"What we are trying to do is carry on the work of really organizing grass roots in the South like in Laurel, Miss. If we had the kind of organization we hope to have in a year or so, the fight would involve a lot of people across the South, and not just be between labor and management in one town.

"The question is—have we started something that will get the working people of the South together, politically and economically? I believe that we have."



Part II

By DOTTIE ZELLNER
April, 1970

After the strike in Laurel ended, most of the ex-Masonite workers were forced to seek other jobs, and in some cases went to other counties or other states. What were once crowds of 500 to 600 people meeting in a cow pasture across the county line had shrunk to 40 or 50. Yet the ones who remained wanted to continue their struggle. By this time, of course, their struggle was somewhat different from the strike situation in which we had met them.

The union was no longer *their* union; it was under trusteeship. The workers knew that if, by some chance, they did win their suit against the company and the international, it might take so long that the trusteeship would be lifted of its own accord. Most of the long-term union people had received "Dear John" letters (firing notices). Some other union people were called back into the plant, not to get their old jobs back, but to become part of a "labor pool," which meant that they had to do whatever job at whatever rate of pay was required on that day. And there were still other members of the old union, black men and women, who had defied the strike from the outset and were still working at the plant.

Yet the workers who did not go back, who sought other jobs, blacks and whites, still wanted to make an impact on the community of Laurel and raise the questions of what Masonite had done to their union, what the international had done to their local, and more important than all of these, what the Establishment had done to them, the workers.

Meetings were then held week after week in a rural roadhouse. There were many suggestions: —to have a car caravan with signs driving through town; to have a boycott against the downtown merchants; to have a march through the downtown area. And so forth. The women, some of them wives of workers, and some of them workers at Masonite themselves, first had to insist on votes in the decision-making com-

mittee. After they won on this question, they became prominent in all the activities of the group.

The car caravans took place every weekend for about six weeks. At first, though everyone had talked enthusiastically about the idea, only a handful volunteered. Apparently many people were threatened, directly or indirectly, with loss of their jobs.

The women were among the most courageous. They led the caravans winding their way through the downtown area. They leaned out of the windows, shouting at passers-by to elicit their aid, rang cowbells furiously, and then drove slowly by the Masonite plant itself, glaring at the guards in their watchtowers.

It was during this period that a historic confrontation took place between the black and white unionists and some of the black movement people in Laurel. The movement group was led by a black woman who had been a leader in the Freedom Democratic Party in Laurel and in the movement that grew up there in the early 1960's. She had supported the black strikebreakers at Masonite because she felt it was important to support black men whatever they were doing.

The meeting started off very tense but the conversation quickly got to fundamentals and ended with sincere feelings of comradeship on both sides. Samples of the conversation at this meeting:

ORGANIZER: "We're here to help bring white and black poor people together to fight the man, the companies, the rich people. We've seen this division go on too long."

BLACK WOMAN: (*to the white people*): "You let them do this to you." (*She gave the parable of a chicken so busy scratching in the dirt for food that he never looks up to see who is giving the food out.*)

Several people, black and white, spoke about the need for getting and staying together.

WHITE UNION LEADER: *Mr. _____, if you run for mayor, I'll be your campaign manager!*" (*Mr. _____ is a black union member.*) *Mrs. _____, if you run I'll be behind you all the way (Mrs. _____ is a black movement leader) . . . Naturally (smiling) if I run, I'll expect the same from you."*

Interchanges continued. After the meeting, one black woman came over to the one of the members of our project, grabbed his arm and said: "A year ago I told you that you'd never be able to do this—but you have!"

Then a tragic train explosion occurred in Laurel, causing great damage in the black community. The union collected clothing for black people whose homes had been damaged and traveled through the city in a car caravan with signs saying "Local 5-433 Supports the Black Community."

The distribution of clothes ended in a black church. White people were standing in a black church for the first time in their lives. One of our organizers started to sing and the black deaconess accompanied him on the piano. Soon everybody was singing, and black people were coming from all over the neighborhood . . . Black people stood up and said: "We're sure glad to see you all (to the whites) but we want you to know, we don't want any hypocrites here!"

It ended up with black and white women in a meeting, talking about the strike and their problems. A sample interchange between two white women, one a very strong union woman and also very racist:

FIRST WOMAN: "I never thought I could bring myself to shake a colored person's hand."

SECOND WOMAN: "I hate Masonite and the rich people so much I'm willing to do anything."

As we watched these things happen, our confidence began to grow that what we had set out to do in the Deep South was *not*, as so many people had told us, impossible. We

did not delude ourselves that the millenium had arrived—but we began to feel that even if the whole thing collapsed completely we had done one very important thing:—we had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that on a grass-roots level it *is* possible to create working-class interracial coalitions. Period.

As the weeks wore on, however, fewer and fewer people took part in the union caravans, and ultimately they stopped. There followed weeks of discussion among the Laurel people about what to do. Finally it was decided to run an independent slate of working-class candidates in the upcoming municipal elections—for mayor and two posts on the city commission. The campaign was conducted for two months prior to the general election. Even now as I write this, I am amazed that it happened in the heartland of Klan country.

The Search for An Interracial Ticket

From the outset, it was decided that the Workingman's Ticket, as it later came to be called, would be interracial. Strenuous efforts were undertaken by the white Laurel workers themselves to see that this happened. They urged an elderly black woman, a veteran of SNCC days, to run for mayor. Many of the white workers accused of being Klansmen phoned, visited, and literally begged the black woman to head the ticket. She declined, for personal and family reasons.

The workers then not only asked several other black people, but actually had petitions circulated for them, should they agree to run. Each time they thought it was definite, last-minute economic or political pressure would force a withdrawal. Eventually the ticket was all-white—but not for lack of trying. And, the union women's demand that one of the three candidates be a woman was agreed upon.

Taking Down the Voters List in Jones County

When the campaign was under way, the workers tried to obtain a voters' list of all the registered voters in Laurel so they could send out campaign mailings. All the other candidates

had such a list, but when the workers appeared at City Hall, somehow the list was never available. So it became necessary to copy all the 8,000 voters' names from the registration rolls—by hand.

Scene: Jones County Courthouse, where numerous demonstrations about voting rights for blacks had taken place in 1964 and 1965. Now, in 1969, two white women, a white candidate, a black woman, and two of our organizers, one black and one white, wrote all the names down in school notebooks. Together.

A beefy policeman came inside and whispered into the ear of the candidate, gesturing toward the black organizer. Courthouse personnel, including the mayor, found their way into the voter-registration office all day long, looking at the group, astonished. Five years ago, no one would have thought this scene was possible.

The Radio Ads

As the campaign went into high gear, the candidates placed several advertisements on local radio stations. They were all brief, clever position papers, written by Jack Minnis of our staff. They started with the words of a Johnny Cash song, followed by comment from one of the candidates, Herbert Ishee, John Owens, or Hazel Bush. They were very popular. Here are samples.

Ad I

Johnny Cash: Well, I'd like to do a couple of love songs for you now—(sings) Well, he's not very handsome to look at/ Well, he's shaggy and eats like a hog/ And he's always killin' my chickens/ That dirty ol' egg-sucking dog.

Herbert Ishee: There's been a lot of egg-suckin' going on down there at the Laurel City Hall, but we mean to run those egg-suckers out of our hen house. This is Herbert Ishee. When me and John Owens and Hazel Bush are voted into city hall in the June 3rd election, the workin' people of Laurel can rest easy, 'cause the egg-

suckers and the chicken thieves are goin' to have to find some other hen house to steal from.

Johnny Cash: (sings) If he don't stop eatin' my eggs up/ Though I'm not a real bad guy/ I'm goin' to get my rifle and send him/To that great chicken house in the sky.

Ad II

Johnny Cash:

Johnny Yuma was a rebel,
He roamed thru the west,
Johnny Yuma was a rebel,
He got fighting mad, this rebel lad,
He'd pack no star as he wandered far,
Where the only law was a hook and a draw.
The rebel, Johnny Yuma.

Johnny Yuma was a rebel,
He roamed thru the west.
Johnny Yuma was a rebel, he wandered along.
He searched the land, this restless land,
He was panther quick and leather tough,
He figured that he'd been pushed enough,
The rebel, Johnny Yuma.

Hazel Bush: There's some Johnny Yumas here in Laurel y'know—they're folks who've been doing the town's work all these years and getting nothing for it but a pushing around. This is Hazel Bush. When the workers in Laurel elect me and Herbert Ishee and John Owens to City Hall, June 3, the big shots of Laurel are gonna find out some things. They're gonna find out that the Johnny Yumas of Laurel are ready to start pushing back.

Johnny Cash:

Johnny Yuma was a rebel,
He roamed through the west.
Johnny Yuma was a rebel, he wandered
along.
Johnny Yuma.

Then the manager of one of the stations said he could no longer use the ads because Cash's recording company had protested the use of his

copyrighted songs. When a call was placed to Cash's manager, it became clear that somebody had complained from Laurel directly to the recording company, which forbade the use of the songs. All the ads had to be rewritten.

The Rights of Man

Our organizers put out a paper before election day called, *The Rights of Man*. It was a working-class paper, by and for the workers in Laurel, and nearby areas. The Laurel workers chose the name for it. Two issues were published before the election, and they contained lengthy statements by all of the candidates and were very popular in Laurel. The candidates, their families and supporters, spent many evenings rolling up the papers, fastening them with rubber bands, and then going out early the next morning, throwing them, newsboy-fashion, onto the lawns and porches of homes. In this way, 11,000 papers were distributed.

The Election

When it appeared to the Powers-That-Be in Laurel that the ticket seemed to have a chance of garnering some support, a few of the other candidates (in a familiar pattern) began to sound suspiciously like the insurgents. Not only the slogans were taken up, but in some cases the very words of the workers' candidates themselves were used.

In the meantime, there was police harassment of people active in the campaign. People were constantly followed and sometimes arrested on minor charges. Even two out-of-towners were arrested. David Holden and Mark Berger, who were in Laurel making a film about the union people and their election campaign, were charged with "contributing to the delinquency of a minor." Interestingly enough, Mark was not even in the state of Mississippi when the so-called incident which inspired this charge took place.

On Election Day, poll watchers for the Workingman's Ticket were threatened by officials and police. Many irregularities took place which, despite protest, were left uncorrected.

The outcome was inevitable: the vote for the three candidates was very small. The election was a good experience for everyone involved, but it would have been unrealistic to hope for any other outcome, considering the history of the region and of the country and the forces arrayed against the Laurel workers.

Though some were discouraged at the small number of votes, some took pride that they were responsible for ousting the incumbent mayor and the election of Laurel's first Republican office holder since Reconstruction. No one seemed to feel that the effort had been wasted: they had all learned and grown and found out something about what political strength can mean.

The Aftermath

After Election Day, things died down in Laurel. The giant Masonite plant, which stands dead center of town, and is, indeed, dead center of life in Laurel, continued to belch smoke day and night. There were no more car caravans in the streets, no more election hustle. The suit, which dragged on for months, was still—and is still—in the courts, with no end in sight. The weekly meetings of the workers, however, continue to take place, attended by the same 20 or 30 people who have weathered all the crises and slow times. It is a remarkable fact in itself that these same people have met weekly for three years.

In September, 1969, a worker at Masonite was acquitted of charges of murdering the Wackenhut guard during the strike. This heartened the people, because they had been reviled by the press and television for this act, when in fact it was unlikely that any striker took part in this murder. (This act of violence was used successfully by the management as the basis for the injunction against picketing and other strike activities.) Several facts uncovered during the trial, instead, pointed to the involvement of some levels of management.

As for the present, we of the SCEF staff have continued to go to Laurel every week or so, to

attend committee meetings, talk about the suit, discuss the conditions at Masonite, and be with the people whom we have come to know so well. In latter 1969, some of the members of our staff left to put out an independent newspaper in New Orleans. Meantime, Bob Zellner worked for a while alongside some of the ex-Masonite workers in the oil fields near Laurel.

In early 1969, a young black organizer, Walter Collins, had joined our staff and had begun to work with people in the black community in Laurel—and with the white unionists also. Later that year, another young black man, Lionel McIntyre, joined us. Walter and Mac have continued to visit with black people in the Laurel community, particularly those who are still working in the Masonite plant. Today we have hopes that a program of action will come out of the needs of both the black and white communities so that they can work together on the common issues that affect them.

Some Tentative Conclusions

While the story of Laurel is not finished, some tentative conclusions and judgments are now possible.

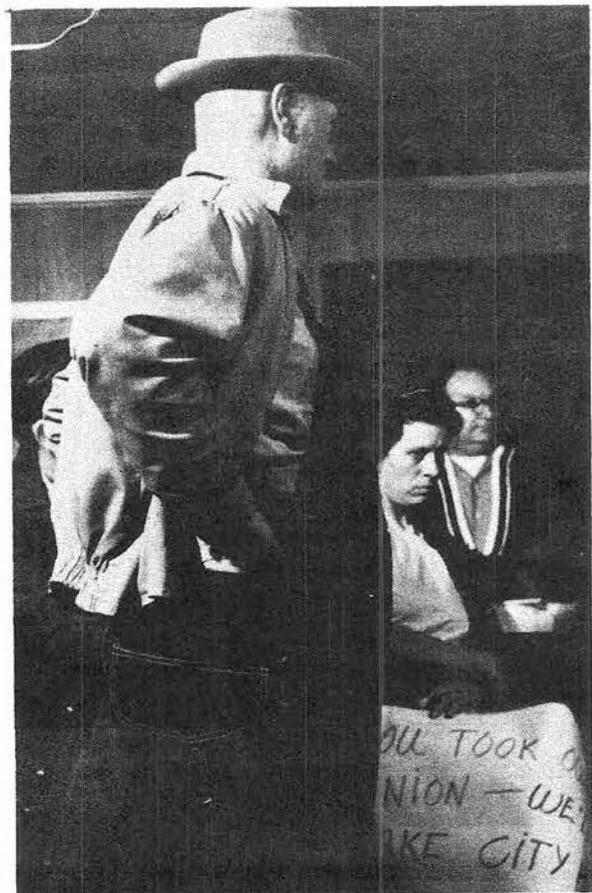
First of all, the most important lesson from the Laurel experience is that white people can be reached. And not only reached, but changed. As far as we can see, this cannot happen by rhetoric, but during conditions of change or crisis. Appeals to conscience or morality cannot work in isolation from struggle. In the Laurel case, the whites needed the blacks—to win a strike, to hold a successful election campaign—and in the act of needing, they became aware of how they had been manipulated before into struggling against the black community instead of their common enemy, in this case, the Masonite management.

For perhaps the first time, the grievances of the black community became real to white people in Laurel—because the grievances affected them. This need forced a change of attitude toward the blacks. In some cases no doubt it was

a change of expediency, but it was a change nevertheless.

And not only the attitudes towards blacks changed. The whites also changed their attitude about themselves. They realized how they had been used. They realized what it meant to be workers, and they took pride in the fact. They talked about how they and black people needed to get together, and it was real, because in the fact of meeting together, eating together, talking together as equals, it was real.

We are trying to test this thesis—that whites can change in conditions of crisis and forsake their skin privilege for a greater benefit—in other areas. If it worked in Laurel, it can work in other places and in other situations, for one example, in the public-school crisis in the South.



We also made a lot of mistakes in Laurel, and they bear writing about so that other people can learn from them.

In the first place, we learned that organizing in white communities cannot be done effectively unless there is simultaneous organizing in the black community. In Laurel, it was fully a year and a half before we were able to find a black person to go into the black community. This meant, in practical terms, that we knew little or nothing about what was going on in the black community or how black people felt about various issues such as the strike. If we had found a black organizer earlier, I am convinced that the whole story in Laurel would have been different.

Our greatest fault, I think, in the white community, was not knowing enough to be able to suggest means of continuing the struggle once a particular facet, like the election, was over. For this reason, the people got involved in separate campaigns and then lost interest or got discouraged when that particular effort was over. We still have not really learned how to do this, but we have some ideas brewing about it.

Then there is the old familiar question about whether an organizer should live outside an area instead of settling in and working under the same conditions as the people themselves. For a long while we were convinced that it was all right to be an "organizer," but gradually we shifted to the position of trying a combination of both methods. We should either work temporarily in the area and also visit, or else some people in the project should be stationary and some mobile.

All of us—organizers and the people who live in Laurel—have had to deal with these questions: Who is a scab? Did Laurel's union history make it inevitable that black people would go back to work in large numbers? What kinds of things must black union members do to make sure that the union represents them? How must white unionists deal with these questions, both in their union and during strike situations? It is obvious that these questions are not limited to Laurel, Mississippi, by any means.

Over all, within the terms of our original goal—that is, to make breakthroughs in the white community for the idea of black-white coalition—we believe that the work so far has been satisfactory. Naturally, however, the evaluation changes if the criteria change. If the criterion is large numbers of people who are in visible motion, then the progress is not satisfactory. Our feeling all along was that we would try to find a few white people who could make common cause with the black community, and that they in turn would find a few, and so on. In this, I think we have done well.

The question now is how to enlarge that beginning, how to make sure that the people we have already met do not fall by the wayside, and how we will be able to show larger numbers of people that it is in fact possible for the working-class white Southerner to fight alongside his black brother against the conditions which oppress them both.

These conclusions are based on what we already know and have experienced. As our experience changes, no doubt the conclusions will change, and this is as it should be. I hope that this report will provoke questions and discussion among people who, like us, want to help build new movements among black and white working people. Maybe in this way, with all of us, we can begin to build the base in the white community for a long-lasting movement.

**WE
LEARN TO
FIGHT
BY
FIGHTING.**

MARY MARCY, IWW, 1911

*Contributions are needed to print and distribute more copies
of this report and to help carry on this work. Send to:*

**SOUTHERN CONFERENCE EDUCATIONAL FUND (SCEF)
3210 W. Broadway, Louisville, Ky. 40211**

**scef press / louisville
labor donated**

cover design by Margaret Rigg