

The Cropper Learns His Fate

By H. L. MITCHELL and J. R. BUTLER

THE Southern Tenant Farmers' Union celebrated its first birthday on July 23, 1935. Its members and officials look back upon a year of struggle against great odds, of painful education in the ways of courts and governments, and of deepening insight into the full bitterness of that ruthless economic system by which cotton is produced. The human consequences of an economy of scarcity have become more clear. The complete failure of the "New Deal" to benefit the men and women who do the work in the fields has been disclosed. The essential dishonesty of the labor sections of the cotton acreage-reduction contract has become manifest, as Washington has refused to combat abuses or construct any effective agency for enforcement.

The union was born out of the suffering of the multitude of tenants—how many thousands we do not know—who were evicted from their lands in consequence of the 40 per cent acreage reduction in 1934, or who found themselves degraded from share-cropper status to the even more precarious condition of casual day laborers. Its first objective was to oppose an extension of these trends, and to secure administrative and legal enforcement of the labor sections of the contract. Trusting much in the reputation of Secretary Wallace and in the protestations of good-will made by some of his staff, the union and its friends made a very earnest effort to secure administrative protection for its members. Detailed reports of specific cases of contract violation were sent to various offices in the Department of Agriculture, and we and other officials of the union laid our cause before the Secretary and his staff in personal visits to the capital. Our reception there varied from a courteous and sympathetic hearing in the Secretary's office to the ugly temper in which Mr. Cully Cobb, head of the cotton section of the AAA, proceeded to accuse us of being "reds," in lieu of listening to our case.

Courtesy and sympathy notwithstanding, the net result of all these efforts has been complete frustration and disillusionment. Our faith in the higher administration of the department survived several earlier "investigations" by Mr. Miller and later by Mr. Davis, who made perfunctory examination of our complaints and applied a thick layer of whitewash in nearly every case. The lack of any vigorous and continuing enforcement policy or machinery prevented any real progress. Even if enforced, the contract itself was grossly inequitable, granting to the landlord four cents per pound for cotton not grown in 1934 and 1935, while the cropper received a sop of one-half cent, which the landlord frequently refused to turn over to him.

Our continuing protests against the threatened eviction of some five hundred of our families, mostly because of their union membership, combined with our court action seeking an injunction against the eviction of twenty-three families by Mr. Hiram Norcross, planter of Tyronza, finally led the Department of Agriculture to make the only really thorough study of the situation which has ever been made. The union contended that, in addition to other abuses, our people were being evicted in violation of Section 7 of the cot-

ton contract, which promised that the landlord "shall permit all tenants to continue in the occupancy of their houses on this farm, rent free, for the years 1934 and 1935." Our lawyers held a letter from Mr. Oscar Johnston, author of this section, in which he definitely confirmed his previous oral assurances that he had meant to insure the tenure of "all tenants *on the farm*" (*italics ours*). An influential section of the Department of Agriculture was inclined to accept this interpretation, which conflicted with a ruling made by the cotton section, and at one time we were led to believe that official instructions in this sense were shortly to be given.

As evictions of our people began, the department dispatched Mrs. Mary Conner Myers, of the AAA legal staff, to study the situation. In a three weeks' investigation she made a detailed survey of nine large plantations in eastern Arkansas and found widespread abuses and violations of contract in every case, exceeding any charges we had made. She returned to Washington laden with hundreds of affidavits and other records. She also carried back hundreds of letters which had come flooding into Memphis from all directions—appeals for aid from dispossessed or defrauded tenants and croppers.

Administrative action came swiftly, but of an unexpected character. Forty-eight hours after the Myers report was put into the hands of Mr. Jerome Frank, chief of the AAA legal staff, he and others of his department were unceremoniously discharged. Other factors than a dispute over Section 7 of the cotton contract were involved, but the tension created within the department by conflicting interpretations of this article was undoubtedly a major factor in precipitating this spectacular "purge." The groups opposing any attempt to protect the Southern agricultural laborer were able to force the Secretary, much against his will and conscience, we may believe, to acquiesce in the final suppression of the Myers report. No action was ever taken against any of the plantations. The report circulated from one unwilling office to another, was read in embarrassment and passed along. We have been assured by one official of the department that its findings will be taken into account in formulating future administrative rulings. Cold comfort indeed for the victims of the cotton program!

Shortly after Secretary Wallace had capitulated to the Southern planter group he issued a ruling that the disputed phraseology of Section 7 meant only that the same number of tenants must be employed, and that the contract gave no guaranty of tenure to any particular family. In the face of this ruling our legal action was dismissed by the Supreme Court of Arkansas. Our attempts to get a Congressional investigation fell to the ground as one friendly Member of Congress after another felt the same pressure which operated upon the Secretary. The cropper was left to his fate.

With the realization by all concerned that the Department of Agriculture had no intention of even trying to enforce the labor sections of the contract, cruel terror closed down on the Arkansas countryside. By night houses of

union leaders were shot up (130 bullet holes were counted in one of them); the home of the union attorney, Mr. C. T. Carpenter of Marked Tree, was surrounded and shot at by a crowd of some forty men; union members and sympathizers were attacked and beaten, a number being wounded and several killed by vigilante bands organized by several of the larger plantation owners. The pattern of violence which is now becoming almost stereotyped in our "free" America was woven anew in the cotton fields. All appeals for protection of civil liberties sent to Washington and Little Rock have gone unanswered. Our people were evicted by the hundreds and many of them were thrown helpless upon the mercy of the FERA.

Still the union stands—and grows. Our headquarters were moved to Memphis, where civil liberty still has its defenders. Partly underground, partly in the light of day, the organization work proceeds. Neither by benefit of Washington nor by action through the courts can we hope to protect ourselves, or win security from bitter exploitation. We now see the cruel mockery of the protestations of democracy which the Department of Agriculture made in setting up its county control committees. At least in the cotton country no tenant or cropper ever sits upon these boards. We have no rights which anyone need respect. Under the existing system no contract will be written which will give us our just share of the government benefits or will protect us in our tenure of our land. No contractual pledge can or will be enforced.

But we are discovering that in a stern and bitter world we have, and can have, the fellowship and support of our neighbors. For the first time in the lives of most of us we are coming together—we have, so far, 125 locals—to discuss our common problems. We are struggling toward articulation of our needs and hopes. We have bridged the abyss of misunderstanding which has previously divided the races.

Some of our people are still confused and can be led astray. Only recently the planters sought to disrupt the union by sending hirelings into our ranks, who persuaded a former president to turn against his comrades. Under their dictation this man left union headquarters with his family, only to return shortly with a writ of replevin by which he removed much of the union property. In the court hearing there appeared, as advocates for the planter gang, none other than those old enemies of the union, Mr. Fred Stafford, deputy prosecuting attorney of Poinsett County, and the Reverend J. Abner Sage, labor-baiting Methodist parson of Marked Tree, who has sullied his priestly office by assuming the role of supreme tactician for the vigilante bands. The union property was duly awarded to the plotters by a justice who is himself a large landholder. But the enemies of the union overplayed their hand. Our former president, realizing at last the character of his support, came secretly to us, admitted his error, and gave an affidavit by whose aid the union was able to recover its property by winning a plea of abatement. The attack from within collapsed.

But now the offensive against us develops new forms. In recent weeks there has appeared a new organization, ostensibly of working farmers, whose members wear green shirts, have a military discipline, and flaunt as their sacred emblem—the swastika. Hitler over the plantations!

We are now asking for more adequate wages in cotton picking. Refusing any longer to accept wages of 35 cents to

65 cents a hundred pounds, our membership has just voted, 11,186 to 450, to strike for \$1 a hundred. Only day laborers will strike, since the problems of the share-cropper must be met in other ways. As this strike starts, terror will again close down on our countryside. We are resolved to adopt no methods of violence in retaliation, but by peaceful and passive resistance win that fairer share of the products of our labor which we have been so long denied.

On the Alabama Front

By ALBERT JACKSON

APPROXIMATELY 3,000 cotton pickers and wage hands are already on strike in the cotton fields in central Alabama, and the strike is spreading rapidly into other counties in which the Share-Croppers' Union is organized. This strike differs from a factory strike in that the cotton opens at different times in different places and the pickers must wait until they are called to work before they announce that they are striking.

The strike began on J. R. Bell's plantation in Lowndes County on August 19. Bell had said he would "let the cows eat it" before he would pay \$1 a hundred pounds to have his cotton picked. He said he might pay wage hands \$1 a day, but he immediately started planning new "rent" charges in order to retrieve the bulk of the wage increase. Bell decided on the morning of August 19 that he wanted his cotton picked at 40 cents a hundred and that he would use any means to get it done. Sheriff R. E. Woodruff of Haynesville was called. In spite of a flourish of pistols and rifles by Woodruff and his deputies, coupled with soft talk about "poor Mr. Bell not being able to pay any more than 40 cents," the strikers stated flatly that they would not pick any cotton until they got their price. Willie Witcher, a local strike leader, said he didn't want to hear any of that talk and started back to his shack. A deputy heard the remark and called Woodruff, who ordered Witcher to stop. Because Witcher didn't "run" back, Woodruff shot at him five times, hitting him in the leg. They rushed to Witcher as he lay on the ground and Woodruff smashed him over the head with a pistol butt yelling, "I'll kill you, you black son of a bitch." Witcher replied, "You might kill me but you'll never scare me." Then he was carried to jail. The strike held solid.

At this point Sheriff R. E. Woodruff organized a gang of vigilantes which roved around nights breaking into strikers' homes and carrying them off about ten miles, beating them almost to death, and leaving them in the swamps. This terror failed to break the strike. Even the few scabs that had been mustered quit the fields.

On Thursday, August 22, the vigilantes raided Georgia Gray's place, beating her and her sisters. While the beating was going on, Jim Press Meriwether, a striker, walked by the door unarmed and was shot down. The gang then proceeded to Bennie Calloway's place, where they beat up Callie Calloway and Jim Meriwether's wife, tying a rope around Mrs. Meriwether's neck and hanging her from the rafters for awhile before releasing her. Then they went back to pick up Jim Meriwether, who was mortally wounded, carried him a few miles out on a hillside, and

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