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## BOOK PROPOSAL

### LEE BROWN: AFRICAN AMERICAN LABOR ACTIVIST

By Lee Brown and Robert L. Allen

For more than 50 years Lee Brown has been at the forefront of the struggle for the rights of working people in this country. A self-educated man, Brown led grass-roots labor campaigns on the waterfronts of New Orleans and the railroads in Arizona, fought for jobs for black actors in the Hollywood film industry, and led struggles in the great hotels of San Francisco.

Brown made history as one of the top leaders of a militant, interracial union in the Deep South during the 1940s and 1950s, Local 207, Warehouse and Distribution Workers' Union (affiliated with the International Longshoremens' and Warehousemens' Union) in New Orleans. Also a member of the Communist Party, Lee Brown paid a high price for his commitment. In 1956 he was investigated by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. Brown refused to cooperate with HUAC. At the hearings he created a sensation when he declared that he would not answer any questions until the Committee first answered his question: Was Senator Eastland a member of the Ku Klux Klan? Brown was charged with violating the Taft-Hartley law, which prohibited union leaders from being members of the Communist Party. He became the first labor leader imprisoned during the McCarthyite withhunts. Brown was sentenced to five years imprisonment in the Federal Penitentiary at Taxarkana, Texas.

Born to a farming family in Louisiana in 1921, Lee Brown first joined a union at age 17 when he was working on the dry docks in Galveston, Texas. It was there he had his first taste of labor conflict when the union called a strike in 1939 for better wages.

Later he worked on the railroads in Arizona. When a foreman unfairly dismissed a worker, Lee told the others: "Let's call a meeting. Together we should stand up for this brother." The effort was successful, and Lee was started along a course of lifelong labor activism.

By the time of World War II Lee was in Los Angeles working for RKO Studios and actively involved in the NAACP. He campaigned for better jobs for blacks in the film industry, and along the way he met many legendary black stars including Lena Horne and Paul Robeson. He even had a couple of bit parts in films.

It was while working in Los Angeles at a warehouse that he joined the ILWU and became acquainted with its controversial leader, Harry Bridges.

After the war Lee returned to New Orleans where he got a job on the waterfront. He became an organizer for Local 207 of the packinghouse workers' union. Local 207 was known for its militancy and consequently disliked by the employers. With black and white members, its president, Andrew Nelson, was black -- a situation virtually unheard of in the South, and especially galling to local authorities. Brown's fearlessness and militancy got him chosen as vice-president of Local 207.

Like many other black activists at the time, he also joined the U.S. Communist Party. In an effort to decapitate the militant black

leadership of Local 207, both Lee Brown and Andrew Nelson were indicted under the Taft-Hartley law, the National Labor Relations Act. Nelson was also convicted, but died before being imprisoned. <sup>In Nov 1957</sup> Brown was sentenced to five years, and actually served three at Texarkana.

Serving time in Texas was not easy, but Lee was not dissuaded from his politics. When he was released in 1960 he moved to San Francisco and joined Local 110 of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union at the famous Fairmont Hotel. Working later at the Jack Tar Hotel, he became the first shop steward in any hotel in San Francisco. For more than 20 years he was a union organizer and a leader of the struggle against discrimination in employment for black workers in hotel and restaurant industry in San Francisco. During this period he met and married Grace Oliver, who was also a union activist in the hotel industry.

At one point, disillusioned by racism within the Party, Brown left the CP and flirted with various Black Nationalist groups, including the Nation of Islam. Nevertheless, his fundamental belief that grass-roots organizing of all people is the key to social change eventually brought him back into the labor movement and the CP. Although he left the Party for good in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing schisms in the CPUSA, he remains committed to the ideals of socialism.

Since retirement, Lee Brown's activism has not diminished. He has thrown himself into the senior citizen's movement, working with such organizations as the National Council of Senior Citizens and the National Caucus and Center on Black Aged, and leading demonstrations in Sacramento demanding more state aid for seniors.

Lee Brown's life spans the period of greatest labor activism in this country. Other recent black labor autobiographies, such as the books by Hosea Hudson and Harry Haywood, have focussed on the experiences of activists in the North and Southeast. Lee Brown's story is unique: A black labor activist in the South, Southwest and the West who worked with several different labor unions, as well as the NAACP and the Communist Party; an activist who paid the price of imprisonment for his political principles; a Communist who lived to see the collapse of the socialist world but who remains committed to the struggle for radical change. For Lee Brown, life and the struggle for change are one and the same. As he put it: "I have dedicated my life in the service of poor people."

A gritty, earthy story, appealingly told in his own words, Lee Brown, will also contain excerpts from Brown's trial transcript, newspaper accounts, and the FBI files of his investigation. It will be of interest to a wide audience of general readers, trade unionists, students, community activists and libraries.

## Chapter 5/New Orleans 2

The Progressive Party was nationally known for running Henry A. Wallace for President of the United States in 1948. Members of the Progressive Party were very active in the struggle for the workingclass and poor people. I was a member of Local 207, Warehouse and Distribution Workers' Union, affiliated with the International Longshoremens' and Warehousemens' Union-CIO. Our union organized a Labor Committee for Henry A. Wallace for President. In fact, I was on this Labor Committee.

We went in rural areas teaching people how to register, so they could vote for Henry Wallace for president. We also explained to people why we thought he would be the right man for president. One thing, for sure, we explained that he was for small farmers and sharecroppers and the working people as a whole. He was for labor and supported organized labor; that was why we thought it was very important to become registered voters, particularly all the poor people. Registering voters would become one of the main weapons to achieve some of the things we wanted and needed to improve our living condition.

With deep concern for poor Black people, I told them to tell all their neighbors and friends, whatever they do, try and get out to register, so they can vote! It is known through experience that voting power is poor peoples' power. In my opinion, poor people should be educated politically and become trade-union-conscious, from the

grassroot level. I believed that we as trade unionists should be interested in organizing the unorganized throughout the U.S.A.

I gained knowledge from taking part in many political activities: Aside from attending union meetings, getting elected to different committees, being a shop steward, being a member of the Trustee Board, Executive Board and Political Action Committee, I also carried a press-card for The Dispatcher, which was the longshoremen's newspaper. But the most important thing to me was the organizing work.

One afternoon in February 1948 I went to the Palace Theatre in New Orleans with a letter from Local 207. The letter read: "Dear Sir: This will introduce Mr. Lee Brown, member of the Political Action Committee of our Local. The membership at their February 1 meeting instructed Mr. Brown through resolution, passed by overwhelming majority, that he pay you a visit and hold conference with you concerning a very important matter. The membership as well as the undersigned will deeply appreciate your honoring Mr. Brown with such a conference." The letter was signed by the first vice president of the Local, which was me.

When the manager finished reading the letter, I asked, "Would you agree to show a picture at your theatre? The name of the film is The Roosevelt Story." I added, "Our Local is campaigning for Henry A. Wallace to become the president of the United States."

By showing this picture, we hoped to bring in more votes. Mostly, all the poor people wanted Henry Wallace, because they remembered he used to be Vice President under President Roosevelt's Administration. In Wallace's program he said he would

get sixty million jobs for people, better houses for low-income families, better education and better health institutions. When I finished explaining the reasons, the manager agreed to run the picture for two days.

Black people and poor people wanted Henry Wallace for president but the ruling class and the middle class were afraid of him because he claimed to be a progressive capitalist, with socialist ideals.

Meanwhile, Paul Robeson came to New Orleans. He came to our Local and we had a discussion about Wallace's campaign. I was glad to see Paul Robeson and honored to be in his presence. The last time I saw Paul Robeson, he was on stage in the Shakespeare play, "Othello," in Los Angeles.

Paul Robeson was loved by everyone who got a chance to meet him. Often we sat on floors to discuss the conditions of Black people. Paul Robeson had all the Black workers at heart and spoke very plainly so everyone could understand what he was talking about. Despite his fame and stardom, his speech and actions showed him to be down to earth.

During the time Paul Robeson was in New Orleans the unions took every means of precaution for his safety. I was Paul Robeson's bodyguard every place he went in New Orleans. The restaurant he ate in was located on Orleans and Gavelson Streets. When Paul Robeson went to eat in a restaurant, sometimes I would stand up over him, sometimes I would sit down. I would check all public restrooms to see if they were secure.

One day we had a meeting in the community with the editors of the Louisiana Weekly newspaper and other intellectual and professional Black people. Another time Paul Robeson came to our union meeting and made a talk to members of our local. He also sang at the Coliseum before leaving New Orleans. Everyone was so glad to see him. When he left, Black and white people shook his hand and told him, "You are welcome in New Orleans whenever you come back"

I personally talked with Paul Robeson about issues facing Black workers and their problems as a whole here in America. I asked him, "Would socialism help some of the workers' problems?" He answered, "Socialism would solve the workers' problems as a whole here in America. In order to fight racism, we have to fight imperialism and capitalism." Paul Robeson had progressive ideals for the advance of the working class.

Millions of Black people in the Southern states weren't registered to vote. Some white people didn't want Black people to vote. So it was hard to get them to register. Our union went to the country to teach Black farmhands politics and how important casting votes was. If you are not registered, we said, go and try to get registered. If you vote for an independent candidate, he can get some things you want and need, or work some issue for you to help your family and the community.

When we finished trying to teach politics to some farmhands, some church ministers would take a group of Black people to try and register so they could vote. But they were often turned back.

I was living in New Orleans Parish, but had to go back and forth sixteen times before I was registered. The fact was, white people didn't want Black people registering to vote. I filled out a registration card and I presented it to the white man who was in charge. He looked at the card, tore it up and said, "You are not qualified." I asked him, "What rules and regulations make me eligible?" He answered, "I am the one who decides who is qualified to vote or not to vote." I wouldn't quarrel, knowing this would have been a good chance for him to call the police and have me arrested. Instead I told him, "I will be back tomorrow and bring my lunch." This went on day after day for sixteen days!

This man saw how determined I was in getting registered. I was about to wear him out. Then one day he looked at the card and went back and got this huge registration book. The moment I signed my name, I knew I was a registered voter.

In small cities, towns, and throughout the rural areas, it was even harder for Black people to register. I along with the other union representatives continued teaching farmhands politics.

Sometimes this turned out to be dangerous for us, since white people opposed the idea. In particular, I remember one night, four union representatives went with me to a church in the countryside. This church was crowded with Black people. Some were registered to vote, some weren't. Each one of us made a talk about the importance of votes. When the meeting was over, the four of us left together in our car to drive back to New Orleans. A union representative named Red was driving the car. Suddenly, we heard some shots; it seemed as if someone was shooting at us! We looked back; a car was trying to

overtake us. Red started driving faster. Then he reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a gun and started shooting back. Then Red swerved the car off on another road. We weren't sure if it was the Klan or the sheriff. Undoubtedly, white people in the Southern states hated the idea so much they were willing to kill anyone who tried to teach Black people about politics. After the shooting Red drove at a steady speed until we got back onto the highway. No one was hurt, just shook up.

Henry Wallace lost the election, but we continued teaching politics in our union and whenever we were in any large gathering.

Strikes were going on in Grammar, Louisiana and Reserve, Louisiana with United Packinghouse & Food Allied Workers' Local 591. The local representative asked if I would go and try to settle the strikes in those two sugar refineries. I made a speech at Grammar at one o'clock P.M., and another one at Reserve at three P.M. My speech was about unity, working conditions, and what unity would mean in winning strikes in small places. White workers and Black workers in both places were in unions. When I arrived, all the workers met in the union hall.

My speech went like this: "We must get rid of Jim Crowism and white supremacy and racism throughout the nation. To achieve this, all workers, regardless of race, color, creed, must organize together. Those responsible for these evil things are the bosses in the nation; bankers, industrial firms, plantation owners, factory owners, landlords. Any considerable business is capitalism. These facts remain the real enemy of the people in America and all workers must fight."

My speeches to Black and white workers went on for eight months. Slowly the Black and white workers began to change toward one another. For the first time Black and white workers were sitting together in the union hall; they even started using the same restrooms. The workers began to realize this was a bread and butter issue. If you are starving together, you'll fight together.

As time went on all the workers would applaud everytime I walked into the union hall, even the sheriff of Grammar, and his detective. They came to the union meetings to keep peace, if trouble arose. The sheriff stayed on the outside of the hall; he told me to speak loudly so he could hear me because he also liked the way I spoke and the things I was speaking about. Every day I spoke to the workers on different subjects: better wages, better working conditions, decent houses, better schools.

At the beginning of both strikes much violence occurred, some people got hurt. Some were thrown into the river and drowned. All the bloodshed happened in these strikes because non-union members were trying to take the union members' jobs when the strikes first started. I continued every day with one subject: unity, so we could win the demands against the bosses. I was calling for trade union democracy among the workers.

By the time both strikes were won, the whole environment had changed. One Sunday morning, the officers asked me to be the guest speaker at a church in a rural area. The church was packed with Black and white workers. Later, the workers and union officers took me to a community hall where refreshments were being served. Everyone was enjoying eating crabs and crawfish. I, in particular,

enjoyed this event; just to be able to stand back and actually see Black and white workers united against the bosses. . . realizing the power isn't in the power structure but lies in the hands of the workingclass.

I shook hands with all the people and got comments about the victory we had accomplished with Black and white workers in the South. Before I left, the workers said: "Brother Brown, you encouraged us to win this victory. We got rid of Jim Crowism on the jobs and we have better understanding." All the officers, the director of District Five, among others, congratulated me on the victory that was won.

I had a feeling of joy, being able to help win those strikes, meeting new friends, and talking among all the workers. This gave me courage to fight more in my Local and in the community for things the workers wanted and needed for survival. I continued working among workers in other places in the Deep South.

Sometimes the struggle took unexpected turns. One night we had an integrated party: Black and white workers. Our group didn't believe in discrimination; we believed in relating with each other, and working together toward accomplishing our cause. All of us knew that Jim Crowism (discrimination) was one of the bosses' main weapons for lower wages, bad housing, bad schooling, bad health institutions, etc; while they get richer and richer and we get poorer and poorer; exploiting workers in the South, pitching one worker against the other workers. That night there were seventy-five of us partying in a white friend's home, in the white community. We had plenty of food, drinks, and good music playing. About 11 o'clock, as

the party was getting off to a good start, all of a sudden we heard loud knocking on the door. It was the next door neighbor who came to complain to the lady of the house about the loud noise we were making. When the lady of the house swung her door wide open and her neighbor saw all the Black and white workers dancing and drinking together, it must have made her so excited that she went home and called the police. No doubt, she told the police that Black and white people were mixing at a party next door, because two cars loaded with police, plus the police sergeant, came to the house.

When the sergeant knocked on the door, the lady of the house opened the door. Of course, the police sergeant noticed this was a mixed party with Black and white dancing together. The sergeant said, "I got a complaint that you are making too much noise -- and all the niggers have to leave!"

The lady of the house replied, "All my guests are welcome in my home. No one has to leave. We have no discrimination here. They are all my friends." At that point, the police sergeant took his two cars full of police and left the house.

About this time the party was in high gear. An hour later the police sergeant returned with four patrol wagons. When the lady of the house opened the door, the police sergeant announced, "All of you are under arrest. You are violating Louisiana State Law. It's against the law to have mixing of races in this state."

By this time I was well known in New Orleans. The police sergeant singled me out of the crowd. I was arrested first. He told me to put my hands up over my head against the wall and spread my

legs. I knew he was trying to harass me, because I was the only one out of the whole group he told to do this.

While this was happening some of my friends ran from the house and got away. The rest of us, 64 in number, were put in the patrol car and taken to the 12th precinct and booked for "disturbing the peace".

Later a friend was contacted by someone in the group. During the night we got an answer from our contact. We were told that there would be someone coming down to the precinct to bail us out right away. Our contact didn't want any of the Blacks staying in jail overnight, because they were afraid some harm would come to us during the night. Interestingly, a judge's daughter, who was white, and one of our attorney's sons, also white, were arrested with the group.

This happened on a Saturday night. Bail money was hard to get on weekends. Bail for all 64 was set at \$75,000. In the meantime, we were led to separate cells. Black women in one cell, white women in another cell; the same arrangement was done with the Black men and white men.

When the Black men were being led to their separate cells, policemen were standing around. From the expression on their faces, they were glad to see so many Black men in jail at one time. They tried to provoke us by pushing each individual into the cell. When the policemen pushed me, I turned around to make a remark on the harrassment, but a Black school teacher advised me not to utter one word--just walk on into the cell, because police were waiting for an excuse to beat or kill one of us in jail and nothing would ever be

done about their act of violence. The policemen in New Orleans were known for their terrorizing, harassment, and brutality toward Black people in jails, as well as in Black communities. So, all the Black men went quietly into their cells with no trouble from any one of us.

About 4 o'clock that morning we were released from jail. We were all happy to be out. Our hearings were set for Sunday at noon. Our defense attorneys said they wanted to rush the hearing and be as brief as possible, so the it wouldn't be going on into the night, for safety reasons. Our attorneys were worried that some trouble would occur when we left the court. It seems that some anti-labor, Ku Klux Klansmen, and reactionaries would be waiting outside when court dismissed.

At the hearing on Sunday we had five defense attorneys. Instead of the judge putting all of us on trial at the same time, he called each one up to stand trial individually. We found out why they couldn't charge us with anything except "disturbing the peace". The reason was that we were in Orleans Parish within the city limits and there were no laws against race mixing. All sixty-four, Black and white were found guilty of disturbing the peace. Fines were ten dollars each.

We were displeased with the judge's decision and called a meeting with our attorneys outside the court to instruct our attorneys that we weren't going to pay the fines. After all, our opinion was that if white workers wanted to associate with Black workers in the State of Louisiana or any other state, it shouldn't have been any crime. We weren't going to let the reactionaries take away our rights as human beings, particularly Black workers who have

suffered so long to make the South a better place for all human beings to live.

Later, the case of the 64 was presented before a high court and we were found not guilty. We helped establish the right to associate and visit each others' homes regardless of race, color or creed. Another victory was won for the workingclass in the South!

One evening I was sitting alone in the Elite restaurant located on Rampo Street in New Orleans. The Elite restaurant was where I usually enjoyed eating. I sat down and ordered fried chicken and Miller High Life beer. Suddenly a man came over to the table and asked me, "Is anyone sitting at the table with you?" I told him, "No, you're welcome to sit down." When the man sat down, I noticed he had a sad, worried look in his eyes. He started to talk on different subjects. He told me his name was Brown, that he had been working in Empire, Louisiana on a fishing boat, but had quit his job and come to New Orleans looking for a better job.

Then Brown began telling me this story: "All the Black men worked on the boats. These Black men went out to sea to catch big fish to bring back to make fertilizer. Men would stay five to six months at a time on the water. Conditions on the boats were so bad that men had to sleep on bunks stuffed with hay. Food wasn't worth eating. Working conditions were bad. If the men caught a large number of fish they only made only a few cents a thousand pounds, and they had to pay for room and board on payday, when they came back to Empire."

After a short pause, he continued with his story: "Payday for the men was only when they got a good catch. This was the time the

men were given money. When this captain of the boat paid off the men, he waited until night. Then he sent to town and got the sheriff and detective. The captain paid off the men by candlelight. A candle was placed on the table, and he threw the money on the floor. When the men went to pick up their money it was hard to see. While doing this, the captain also kept some of the money. If one of the men complained to the captain about his money, he called in the sheriff or the detective and said the man was causing trouble. Then the sheriff would arrest him and put him in jail overnight. Mostly the men wouldn't say anything to the captain; they took his treatment only because they didn't have anyone to back them up. Sometimes a few men from the boat would leave and go looking for other work, with no luck, and they soon returned to the boat."

Being a union representative, I told Brown that maybe I could help -- after I finished talking with Bro. Andrew Nelson, the president of my union, Local 207. I asked Brown, if the president and I went to Empire, would he be afraid to go back and show us the way? Brown said no.

Andrew Nelson, Brown and I went to Empire, Louisiana. When we arrived, the workers happened to be back from the river, sitting in a bar, drinking beer with the little money they had. Beer was all the fish workers could afford to drink. This bar was owned by a Black lady. The president and I started talking to some workers, but we only told one man what business we had in Empire.

This man told the other workers, "These brothers are here to help us. Come on the outside and listen to them talk." The lady-owner of the bar hollered out loud, "You don't have to go on the

outside and talk. Cut off the juke box! No more playing music until this meeting is over."

Brother Nelson, spoke first. He told the workers: "We are here to organize a union on all boats, but we have to contact other unions, so funds can be raised to set up an Organizing Committee in different areas where boats are going out to catch fish." Then I spoke to the workers: "Conditions would be improved by forming a union. A union means better working conditions, increase in pay, seniority, health and welfare plans. A union means better schools for children, better health institutions, vacation pay. A union means that we are in a fighting position for a right to vote. Fight against Jim Crowism. Also put pressure on our local, State and national representatives in Washington, D.C. so we can get things we want and need. All workers should register, so they can get political power to get the necessities of life to survive. This is very plain as a bread and butter issue."

I asked all the fishermen to tell their stories about the job. Brown talked to the workers also. All the fishermen told us the same stories as Brown told it to me in New Orleans.

Then Brother Nelson and I told the fishermen that we had to contact other unions. If successful, next time we would bring some pledge cards. After talking to all the workers present, Brother Nelson, Brown and I left Empire and returned to New Orleans. Brother Nelson phoned representatives from a few unions to discuss the problems that the fishermen were facing in Empire. He explained to the union representatives that all the men working on the fish boats were Black men. The union representative said, "We are willing to help organize, but have to contact the international representative to get

permission and pledges for funds to organize." In a few days Bro. Nelson got a phone call from the union representatives. They said for him to start the ball rolling. Our union Local 207 was sent pledge cards.

Brother Nelson, four union representatives and myself went to Empire. When we arrived, some fishermen were fishing, some were still on shore. One fisherman was put in charge to be responsible for pledge cards getting to the other fishermen who were out fishing. The fishermen on shore signed pledge cards. Shortly, this news spread like wildfire throughout several other areas where fishmeal for fertilizer was being made.

After all pledge cards were signed, all the fishermen were organized. Later, we sent in union representatives to help draft a working agreement. This agreement was sent to all companies. Of course, the companies refused to talk with the Negotiation Committee in some locations. Unions had to call strikes. Then some unions started calling other unions for support. People started sending in money, food, clothing. Communities from many different areas gave support.

Companies tried to break the strikes by using strikebreakers; evenso, that didn't work. Every trick was tried but nothing was able to break the strikes. Finally after nine months, workers won the strikes in several locations in the state of Louisiana. The story of these strikes was told in a pamphlet, which one union published. The pamphlet was called "'The Black Fishermen In The South Are Organized."

The next struggle took place at Armour Packing Company in New Orleans. We tried to negotiate a new contract with the Negotiating Committee and employer. We were forced out on strike. The union president threw up a picket line in front of Armour plant. A soup kitchen was organized. Then a picket captain was elected to carry on activities on the picket lines. There were both male and female on the picket lines.

Afterward a general membership meeting was called with other plants with whom the union had contracts. They were informed about this strike that was going on at Armour Packing Company. Shop stewards and members from other plants made pledges to support Armour strike workers. Members set up a Strike Fund Committee. Every week the Strike Fund Committee went around to each union shop we had under contract and the members gave donations.

At this time, Armour Packing Company started using tactics against the strikers and myself. They called a police sergeant to warn the picketers that they were trespassing on Armour property. Cars loaded with policemen came and ordered us off the sidewalk in front of Armour Packing Company. I told the picket captain to take all picketers off the sidewalk and let them walk in the streets; but be careful not to let passing cars hit any of the picketers.

In the meantime the president and I went to the Survey Department in City Hall to find out whether Armour Company really owned the sidewalk in front of the building. It wasn't long before we found out that Armour Company did own the sidewalk in front of

their building. That was one tactic Armour used to temporarily win against the union and rank-and-file members.

We weren't through yet; we had to use another strategy. Armour Company had several engineers who weren't members of our Union. Our union president contacted the Engineers' Union and explained the situation we were having with Armour Packing Company, that the Armour Company had called the police in to put our members on the picket line in the streets, where cars were running, so it would be difficult for picketers to stay in the streets in peace. A representative of the Engineers' Union told us not to worry that his members wouldn't go beyond our picket lines anymore.

Brother Nelson and I explained that this is what it means for all workers in the South to unify, regardless of race, creed, or color, in this bread-and-butter issue. The Engineers' Union members did respect the picket lines. But of course, some of Armour's truck drivers went through the picket. Despite this, Armour Company really began to worry about the strike.

Brother Nelson and I were tipped off that Armour was sending several truckloads of meat to load up on the ship at the docks. During that time we had information picket signs, asking the public not to buy scab products. The signs read: "Don't eat scab meat" with our Local number and the name of Armour Packing Company. "Don't eat their products." We were on strike because Armour Packing Company refused to negotiate a new contract with our union Local 207.

We went out to the dock where the ship was loading. It was Bro. Nelson, myself, Sis. Della Burton, who was a member of the union

who worked at the feed mill, and some others. We threw up a picket line. The chief steward on the ship talked to us over the ship rail. "What's going on?" he asked. We told him the reason for our picket. Two picketers stayed on the picket line twenty-four hours, day and night.

When the ship's crew came onto the ship, they voted not to stay on a ship loaded with scab meat. The crew threatened to walk off the ship. Then the captain of this ship had to call Armour Packing Company to get the meat off the ship and put the meat back on the dock. By the way, the name of the ship was "Looking Back."

Restaurants and people shopping at stores stopped buying Armour products. The public gave overwhelming support, particularly in the Black communities. Black churches supported our union in their communities. In fact the people knew we were fighting for the interest of all workers in the communities. This was one reason Brother Nelson and I were being attacked by the reactionary forces. Brother Nelson and I dedicated ourselves to the union struggle in the interest of the workers as a whole and believed a labor movement must be built in the South. If it took our lives, this was understood and we knew what we were up against.

Finally, after forty-five days of constant picketing, Armour Packing Company called our Negotiating Committee back in to start negotiating again on our contract. But we still maintained our picket lines around the building. None of our members on the picketlines ever weakened. The longer they picketed, the stronger and more militant they became. Our Negotiating Committee didn't get

everything we wanted; but we obtained some agreements that were for the good and welfare of our rank-and-file members.

A special meeting was called with brothers and sisters who were working at Armour Packing Company. Our negotiating committee brought the contract to the membership to accept or reject. A majority of members voted in favor of the contract. Our negotiators were able to get some improvements in the contract: job security, vacations wage increases. If any worker got hurt on the job, they were sent to company doctors. We didn't have health and welfare plans on jobs or pension plans. The president and I were thinking and planning for health and welfare plans for the rank-and-file members on union jobs.

Contracts were signed between Armour Packing and Local 207 Negotiating Committee. The Union brothers and sisters went back to work on the job as usual; picket signs were removed. This strike was over, but we continued the struggle within the union as a whole.

At Inland Waterways Corporation, Black and white workers worked on the docks. Brother Nelson and I were discussing some conditions that needed to be changed on the dock. We felt it was time to upgrade Black workers. Brother Nelson and I said: "We are going to put our talk into action." We wrote down our proposals on paper and presented them to the general membership on a Sunday. We thought these proposals should be added to the contract. Brother Nelson and I discussed these proposals with the membership very simple and plain: As soon as new jobs come available, companies should place all vacancies on bulletin boards for five days, so

employees can read them and apply for new jobs on the basis of seniority, regardless of race, creed or color.

The positions Black workers were placed in were some of the dirtiest, lowest paying jobs on the dock. Brother Nelson and I felt Black workers should be upgraded; for instance, working as crane operators, tractor drivers, watchmen, sack sewers. These proposals were added to our contract to be negotiated. We were ready---both Black and white on our Negotiating Committee Our Local asked for other things in the contract: Union seniority, paid vacations, paid holidays, pension plans.

The president and I were getting ideas from other unions and their contracts, which were in the interest of our members. When we asked for a 25 cents raise across the board, one of our Union members brought a deck of playing cards and taped a quarter on the deck. When our Negotiating Committee walked into the negotiating room, the union member took the deck of cards with the 25 cents coin taped on it, slammed the deck of cards on the table and told the Company representatives: "That means we want 25 cents across the board!" Then, we started negotiating. The Company representatives presented their proposal; Union representatives presented the rank-and-file proposal. Now the battle was on! Brother Nelson, Union President was Chief Negotiator, and I, Vice-President, was second in line. Both of us Black, heads of a negotiating committee in the deep South! Even though we were facing the anti-union movement, reactionaries, Jim Crowism and racism, we were determined to build a strong union, especially at cotton compresses, feed mills, fertilizer plants, packing houses, among dock workers, working barges and

boxcar workers. Our union, Local 207, New Orleans, Louisiana, was among the most militant, courageous, and active in the South. Our President and Vice President were Black but our rank-and-file were both Black and white. We had white business agents, white shop stewards, whites on the Negotiating Committee. Our white members had overcome Jim Crowism and discrimination. White workers had become union-conscious and were united on bread-and-butter issues.

This was a high point of our union organizing in Louisiana. I felt proud.

## Chapter 5/New Orleans 2

The Progressive Party was nationally known for running Henry A. Wallace for President of the United States in 1948. Members of the Progressive Party were very active in the struggle for the workingclass and poor people. I was a member of Local 207, Warehouse and Distribution Workers' Union, affiliated with the International Longshoremens' and Warehousemens' Union-CIO. Our union organized a Labor Committee for Henry A. Wallace for President. In fact, I was on this Labor Committee.

We went in rural areas teaching people how to register, so they could vote for Henry Wallace for president. We also explained to people why we thought he would be the right man for president. One thing, for sure, we explained that he was for small farmers and ~~X~~ sharecroppers and the working people as a whole. He was for labor and supported organized labor; that was why we thought it was very important to become registered voters, particularly all the poor people. Registering voters would become one of the main weapons to achieve some of the things we wanted and needed to improve our living condition.

With deep concern for poor Black people, I told them to tell all their neighbors and friends, whatever they do, try and get out to ~~X~~ register, so they can vote! It is known through<sup>h</sup> experience that voting power is poor peoples' power. In my opinion, poor people should be educated politically and become trade-union-conscious, from the

grassroot level. I believed that we as trade unionists should be interested in organizing the unorganized throughout the U.S.A.

I gained knowledge from taking part in many political activities: Aside from attending union meetings, getting elected to different committees, being a shop steward, being a member of the Trustee Board, Executive Board and Political Action Committee, I also carried a press-card for the Dispatcher, which was the longshoremen's newspaper. But the most important thing to me was the organizing work.

One afternoon in February 1948 I went to the Palace Theatre in New Orleans with a letter from Local 207. The letter read: "Dear Sir: This will introduce Mr. Lee Brown, member of the Political Action Committee of our Local. The membership at their February 1 meeting instructed Mr. Brown through resolution, passed by overwhelming majority, that he pay you a visit and hold conference with you concerning a very important matter. The membership as well as the undersigned will deeply appreciate your honoring Mr. Brown with such a conference." The letter was signed by the first vice president of the Local, *which was me.*

When the manager finished reading the letter, I asked, "Would you agree to show a picture at your theatre? The name of the film is The Roosevelt Story." I added, "Our Local is campaigning for Henry A. Wallace to become the president of the United States."

By showing this picture, we hoped to bring in more votes. Mostly, all the poor people wanted Henry Wallace, because they remembered he used to be Vice President under President Roosevelt's Administration. In Wallace's program he said he would

get sixty million jobs for people, better houses for low-income families, better education and better health ~~and~~ institutions. When I finished explaining the reasons, the manager agreed to run the picture for two days.

Black people and poor people wanted Henry Wallace for president but the ruling class and the middle class were afraid of him because he claimed to be a progressive capitalist, with socialist ~~ideas~~ ideals.

Meanwhile, Paul Robeson came to New Orleans. He came to our Local and we had a discussion about Wallace's campaign. I was glad to see Paul Robeson and honored to be in his presence. The last time I saw Paul Robeson, he was on stage in the Shakespeare play, "Othello," in Los Angeles.

Paul Robeson was loved by everyone who got a chance to meet him. Often we sat on floors to discuss the conditions of Black people. Paul Robeson had all the Black workers at heart and spoke very plainly so everyone could understand what he was talking about. Despite his fame and stardom, his speech and actions showed him to be down to earth.

During the time Paul Robeson was in New Orleans the unions took every means of precaution for his safety. I was Paul Robeson's bodyguard every place he went in New Orleans. The restaurant he ate in was located on Orleans and Gavelson Streets. <sup>W</sup>hen Paul Robeson went to eat in a restaurant, sometimes I would stand up over him, sometimes I would sit down. I would check all public restrooms to see if they were secure.

One day we had a meeting in the community with the editors of the Louisiana Weekly newspaper and other intellectual and professional Black people. Another time Paul Robeson came to our union meeting and made a talk to members of our local. He also sang at the Coliseum before leaving New Orleans. Everyone was so glad to see him. When he left, Black and white people shook his hand and told him, "You are welcome in New Orleans whenever you come back"

I personally talked with Paul Robeson about issues facing Black workers and their problems as a whole here in America. I asked him, "Would socialism help some of the workers' problems?" He answered, "Socialism would solve the workers' problems as a whole here in America. In order to fight racism, we have to fight imperialism and capitalism." Paul Robeson had progressive ideals for the advance of the working class.

Millions of Black people in the Southern states weren't registered to vote. Some white people didn't want Black people to vote. So it was hard to get them to register. Our union went to the country to teach Black farmhands politics and how important casting votes was. If you are not registered, we said, go and try to get registered. If you vote for an independent candidate, he can get some things you want and need, or work some issue for you to help your family and the community.

When we finished trying to teach politics to some farmhands, some church ministers would take a group of Black people to try and register so they could vote. But they were often turned back.

I was living in New Orleans Parish, but had to go back and forth sixteen times before I was registered. The fact was, white people didn't want Black people registering to vote. I filled out a registration card and I presented it to the white man who was in charge. He looked at the card, tore it up and said, "You are not qualified." I asked him, "What rules and regulations make me eligible?" He answered, "I am the one who decides who is qualified to vote or not to vote." I wouldn't quarrel, knowing this would have been a good chance for him to call the police and have me arrested. Instead I told him, "I will be back tomorrow and bring my lunch." This went on day after day for sixteen days!

This man saw how determined I was in getting registered. I was about to wear him out. Then one day he looked at the card and went back and got this huge registration book. The moment I signed my name, I knew I was a registered voter.

~~But~~ in small cities, towns, and throughout the rural areas, it was even harder for Black people to register. ~~But~~ I along with the other union representatives continued teaching farmhands politics.

Sometimes this turned out to be dangerous for us, since white people opposed the idea. In particular, I remember one night, four union representatives went with me to a church in the countryside. This church was crowded with Black people. Some were registered to vote, some weren't. Each one of us made a talk about the importance of votes. When the meeting was over, the four of us left together in our car to drive back to New Orleans. A union representative named Red was driving the car. Suddenly, we heard some shots; it seemed as if someone was shooting at us! We looked back; a car was trying to

set description pulling glove  
gun out of trunk.  
complaint  
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overtake us. Red started driving faster -- and shooting back. Then Red swerved the car off on another road. We weren't sure if it was the Klan or the sheriff. Undoubtedly, white people in the Southern states hated the idea so much they were willing to kill anyone who tried to teach Black people about politics. After the shooting Red drove at a steady speed until we got back onto the highway. No one was hurt, just shook up.

Henry Wallace lost the election, but we continued teaching politics in our union and when ever we were in any large gathering.

X

Strikes were going on in Grammar, Louisiana and Reserve, Louisiana with United Packinghouse & Food Allied Workers' Local 591. The local representative asked if I would go and try to settle the strikes in those two sugar refineries. I made a speech at Grammar at one o'clock P.M., and another one at Reserve at three P.M. My speech was about unity, working conditions, and what unity would mean in winning strikes in small places. White workers and Black workers in both places were in unions. When I arrived, all the workers met in the ~~Union Hall~~.

X

My speech went like this: "We must get rid of Jim Crowism and white supremacy and racism throughout the nation. To achieve this, all workers, regardless of race, color, creed, must organize together. Those responsible for these evil things are the bosses in the nation; bankers, industrial firms, plantation owners, factory owners, landlords. Any considerable business is capitalism. These facts remain the real enemy of the people in America and all workers must fight."

My speeches to Black and white workers went on for eight months. Slowly the Black and white workers began to change toward one another. For the first time Black and white workers were sitting together in the union hall; they even started using the same restrooms. The workers began to realize this was a bread and butter issue. If you are starving together, you'll fight together. x

x As time went on all the workers would applaud everytime I walked into the Union Hall, even the sheriff of Grammer, and his detective. They came to the union meetings to keep peace, if trouble arose. The sheriff stayed on the outside of the hall; he told me to speak loudly so he could hear me because he also liked the way I spoke and the things I was speaking about. Every day I spoke to the workers on different subjects: better wages, better working conditions, decent houses, better schools. x

At the beginning of both strikes much violence occurred, some people got hurt. Some were thrown into the river and drowned. All the bloodshed happened in these strikes because non-union members were trying to take the union members' jobs when the strikes first started. I continued every day with one subject: unity, so we could win the demands against the bosses. I was calling for trade union democracy among the workers.

By the time both strikes were won, the whole environment had changed. One Sunday morning, the officers asked me to be the guest speaker at a church in the rural area. The church was packed with Black and white workers. Later, the workers and union officers took me to a community hall where refreshments were being served. Everyone was enjoying eating crabs and crawfish. I, in particular, x

enjoyed this event; just to be able to stand back and actually see Black and white workers united against the bosses. . . realizing the power isn't in the power structure but lies in the hands of the workingclass.

I shook hands with all the people and got comments about the victory <sup>WE</sup> I had accomplished with Black and white workers in the South. Before I left, the workers said: "Brother Brown, you encouraged us to win this victory. We got rid of Jim Crowism on the jobs and we have better understanding." All the officers, the director of District Five, among others, congratulated me on the victory that was won.

I had a feeling of joy, being able to help win those strikes, meeting new friends, and talking among all the workers. This gave me courage to fight more in my Local and in the community for things the workers wanted and needed for survival. I continued working among workers in other places in the Deep South.

\* Sometimes the struggle <sup>take</sup> takes unexpected turns. One night we had an integrated party: Black and white workers. Our group didn't believe in discrimination; we believed in relating with each other, and working together toward accomplishing our cause. All of us knew that Jim Crowism (discrimination) was one of the bosses' main weapons for lower wages, bad housing, bad schooling, bad health institutions, etc; while they get richer and richer and we get poorer and poorer; exploiting workers in the South, pitching one worker against the other workers. That night there were seventy-five of us partying in a white friend's home, in the white community. We had plenty of food, drinks, and good music playing. About 11 o'clock, as

the party was getting off to a good start, all of a sudden we heard loud knocking on the door. It was the next door neighbor who came to complain to the lady of the house about the loud noise we were making, When the lady of the house swung her door wide open and her neighbor saw all the Black and white workers dancing and drinking together, it must have made her so excited that she went home and called the police. No doubt, she told the police that Black and white people were mixing at a party next door, because two cars loaded with police, plus the police sergeant, came to the house. X

When the sergeant knocked on the door, the lady of the house opened the door. Of course, the police sergeant noticed this was a mixed party with Black and white dancing together. The sergeant said, "I got a complaint that you are making too much noise, and all the niggers have to leave!" X

The lady of the house replied, "All my guests are welcome in my home. No one has to leave. We have no discrimination here. They are all my friends." At that point, the police sergeant took his two cars full of police and left the house.

About this time the party was in high gear. An hour later the police sergeant returned with four patrol wagons. When the lady of the house opened the door, the police sergeant announced, "All of you are under arrest. You are violating Louisiana State Law. It's against the law to have mixing of races in this state."

By this time I was well known in New Orleans. The police sergeant singled me out of the crowd. I was arrested first. He told me to put my hands up over my head against the wall and spread my

legs. I knew he was trying to harass me, because I was the only one out of the whole group he told to do this.

While this was happening some of my friends ran from the house and got away. The rest of us, 64 in number, were put in the patrol car and taken to the 12th precinct and booked for "disturbing the peace".

Later a friend was ~~contacted~~ by someone in the group. During the night we got an answer from our contact. We were told that there would be someone coming down to the precinct to bail us out right away. Our contact didn't want any of the Blacks staying in jail overnight, because they were afraid some harm would come to us during the night. Interestingly, a judge's daughter, who was white, and one of our attorney's sons, also white, were arrested with the group. \*

This happened on a Saturday night. Bail money was hard to get on weekends. Bail for all 64 was set at \$75,000. In the meantime, we were led to separate cells. Black women in one cell, white women in another cell; the same arrangement was done with the Black men and white men.

When the Black men were being led to their separate cells, policemen were standing around. From the expression on their faces, they were glad to see so many Black men in jail at one time. They tried to provoke us by pushing each individual into the cell. When the policemen pushed me, I turned around to make a remark on the harrassment, but a Black school teacher advised me not to utter one word--just walk on into the cell, because police were waiting for an excuse to beat or kill one of us in jail and nothing would ever be

done about their act of violence. The policemen in New Orleans were known for their terrorizing, harassment, and brutality toward Black people in jails, as well as in Black communities. So, all the Black men went quietly into their cells with no trouble from any ~~one~~ of us. WA

About 4 o'clock that morning we were release<sup>d</sup> from jail. We were all happy to be out. Our hearing were set the following Sunday, at noon. Our defense att<sup>o</sup>rneys said they wanted to rush<sup>e</sup> the hearing and be as brief as possible, so the it wouldn't be going on into the night, for safety reasons. Our attorneys were worried that some trouble would occur when we left the court. It seems that some anti-labor, Ku Klux Klansmen, and reactionaries would be waiting outside when court dismissed. X

At the hearing on Sunday we had five defense attorneys. Instead of the judge putting all of us on trial at the same time, he called each one up to stand trial individually. We found out why they couldn't charge us with anything except "disturbing the peace". The reason was that we were in Orleans Parish within the city limits and there were no laws against race mixing. All sixty-four, Black and white were found guilty of disturbing the peace. Fines were ten dollars each.

We were displeased with the judge's decision and called a meeting with our attorneys outside the court to instruct our attorneys that we weren't going to pay the fines. After all, our opinion was that if white workers wanted to associate with Black workers in the State of Louisiana or any other state, it shouldn't have <sup>x</sup> been any <sup>i</sup> crime. We weren't going to let the reactionaries take away our rights as human beings, particularly Black workers who have

suffered so long to make the South a better place for all human beings to live.

Later, the case of the 64 was presented before a high court and ~~was~~ <sup>we</sup> found not guilty. We helped established ~~the~~ the right to associate and visit each others' homes regardless of race, color or creed. Another victory was won for the workingclass in the South!

One evening I was sitting alone in the Elite restaurant located on Rambo Street in New Orleans. The Elite restaurant was where I usually enjoyed eating. I sat down and ordered fried chicken and Miller High Life beer. Suddenly a man came over to the table and ~~asked~~ <sup>x</sup> me, "Is anyone sitting at the table with you?" I told him, "No, you're welcome to sit down." When the man sat down, I noticed he had a sad, worried look in his eyes. He started to talk on different subjects. He told me his name was Brown, that he had been working in Empire, Louisiana on a fishing boat, but had quit his job and come to New Orleans looking for a better job.

Then Brown began telling me this story: "All the Black men worked on the boats. These Black men went out to sea to catch big fish to bring back to make fertilizer. Men would stay five to six months at a time on the water. Conditions on the boats were so bad that men had to sleep on bunks stuffed with hay. Food wasn't worth eating. Working conditions were bad. If the men caught a large number of fish they only made <sup>only a few</sup> cents a thousand, and they had to pay for room and board on payday, when they came back to Empire." <sup>x</sup>

After a short pause, he continued with his story: "Payday for <sup>x</sup> the men was only when they got a good catch. This was the time the men were given money. When this captain of the boat paid off the

men, he waited until night. Then he sent to town and got the sheriff and detective. The captain paid off the men by candlelight, <sup>A candle</sup> ~~that~~ was placed on the table, and he threw the money on the floor. When time came for the men to pick up their money, <sup>it was hard to see by the</sup> ~~the captain put the candle~~ <sup>light</sup> ~~back~~ <sup>while</sup> on the table. <sup>also</sup> In doing this, the captain kept some of the money. If one of the men complained to the captain about his money, he called in the sheriff or the detective and said the man was causing trouble. Then the sheriff would arrest him and put him in jail overnight. Some men wouldn't say anything to the captain; they ~~only~~ took <sup>his</sup> treatment, because the ~~men~~ didn't have anyone to back them up. <sup>Some</sup> A few men from the boat <sup>also</sup> would leave and go looking for other work, with no luck, and they soon returned to the boat."

Being a union representative, I told Brown that maybe I could help -- after I finished talking with Bro. Andrew Nelson, the president of my union, Local 207. I asked Brown, if the president and I went to Empire, would he be afraid to go back and show us the way? Brown said no.

Andrew Nelson, Brown and I went to Empire, Louisiana. When we arrived, the workers happened to be back from the river, sitting in a bar, drinking beer with the little money they had. Beer was all the fish workers could afford to drink. This bar was owned by a Black lady. The president and I started talking to some workers, but we only told one man what business we had in Empire.

This man told the other workers, "These brothers are here to help us. Come on the outside and listen to them talk." <sup>o</sup> The lady-owner of the bar hollered out loud, "You don't have to go on the

X  
outside and talk. Cut off the juke box! . . . No more playing music until this meeting is over."

Brother Nelson, spoke first. He told the workers: "We are here to organize a union on all boats, but we have to contact other unions, so funds can be raised to set up an Organizing Committee in different areas where boats are going out to catch fish." Then I spoke to the workers: "Conditions would be improved by forming a union. Union means better working conditions, increase in pay, seniority, health and welfare plans. Union means better schools for children, better health institutions, vacation pay. A union means that we are in a fighting position for a right to vote. Fight against Jim Crowism. Also put pressure on our local, State and national representatives in Washington, D.C. so we can get things we want and need. All workers should register, so they can get political power to get the necessities of life to survive. This is very plain as a bread and butter issue."

I asked all the fishermen to tell their stories about the job. Brown talked to the workers also. All the fishermen told us the same stories as Brown told it to me in New Orleans.

Then Brother Nelson and I told the fishermen that we had to contact other unions. If successful, next time we would bring some pledge cards. After talking to all the workers present, Brother Nelson, Brown and I left Empire and returned to New Orleans. Brother Nelson phoned representatives from a few unions to discuss the problems that the fishermen were facing in Empire. He explained to the union representatives that all the men working on the fish boats were Black men. The union representative said, "We are willing to help organize, but have to contact the international representative to get

permission and pledges for funds to organize." In a few days Bro. Nelson got a phone call from the union representatives. They said for him to start the ball rolling. Our union Local 207 ~~were~~<sup>was</sup> sent pleage cards.

Brother Nelson, four union representatives and myself went to Empire. When we arrived, some fishermen were fishing, some were still on shore. One fisherman was put in charge to be responsible for pledge cards getting to the other fishermen who were out fishing. The fishermen on shore signed pledge cards. Shortly, this news spread like wildfire throughout ~~several other Southern states~~<sup>the area</sup>, where fishmeal for fertilizer was being made.

After all pledge cards were signed, ~~throughout several Southern states~~<sup>the</sup>, all fishermen were organized. Later, we sent in union representatives to help draft a working agreement. This agreement was sent to all companies. Of course, the companies refused to talk with the Negotiation Committee in ~~all~~<sup>some</sup> locations. Unions had to call strikes. Then some unions started calling other unions for support. \* People started sending in money, food, clothing. Communities from many different areas gave support.

Companies tried to break the strikes by using strikebreakers; evenso, that didn't work. Every trick was tried but nothing was able to break the strikes. Finally after nine months, workers won the strikes in several ~~l~~ locations in the state of Louisiana. The story of these strikes was told in a pamphlet, which one union published. The pamphlet was called "'The Black Fishermen In The South Are Organized."

The next struggle took place at Armour Packing Company in New Orleans. We tried to negotiate a new contract with the Negotiating Committee and employer. We were forced out on strike. The union president threw up a picket line in front of Armour plant. A soup kitchen was organized. Then a picket captain was elected to carry on activities on the picket lines. There were both male and female on the picket lines.

Afterward a general membership meeting was called with other plants with whom the union had contracts. They were informed about this strike that was going on at Armour Packing Company. Shop stewards and members from other plants made pledges to support Armour strike workers. Members set up a Strike Fund Committee. Every week the Strike Fund Committee went around to each union shop we had under contract and the members gave donations.

At this time, Armour Packing Company started using tactics against the strikers and myself. They called the police sergeant to warn the picketers that they were trespassing on Armour property. Cars loaded with policemen came and ordered us off the sidewalk in front of Armour Packing Company. I told the picket captain to take all picketers off the sidewalk and let them walk in the streets; but be careful not to let passing cars hit any of the picketers.

In the meantime the president and I went to the Survey Department in City Hall to find out whether Armour Company really owned the sidewalk in front of the building. It wasn't long before we found out that Armour Company did own the sidewalk in front of

their building. That was one tactic Armour used to temporarily win against the union and rank-and-file members.

We weren't through yet; we had to use another strategy. Armour Company had several engineers who weren't members of our Union. Our union president contacted the Engineers' Union and explained the situation we were having with Armour Packing Company, that the Armour Company had called the police in to put our members on the picket line in the streets, where cars were running, so it would be difficult for picketers to stay in the streets in peace. A representative of the Engineers' Union told us not to worry that his members wouldn't go beyond our picket lines anymore.

Brother Nelson and I explained that this is what it means for all workers in the South to unify, regardless of race, creed, or color, in this bread-and-butter issue. The Engineers' Union members did respect the picket lines. But of course, some of Armour's truck drivers went through the picket. Despite this, Armour Company really began to worry about the strike.

Brother Nelson and I were tipped off that Armour was sending several truckloads of meat to load up on the ship at the docks. During that time we had information picket signs, asking the public not to buy scab products. The signs read: "Don't eat scab meat" with our Local number and the name of Armour Packing Company. "Don't eat their products." We were on strike because Armour Packing Company refused to negotiate a new contract with our union Local 207. *Even though we went to the docks when the ship was loading* the chief steward on the ship talked to me over the ship rail. "What's going on?" he asked. I told the chief steward what I had told his representative earlier. Two picketers stayed on the

picket line twenty-four hours, day and night. A sister member and I stayed out on the picket line day and night.

Della Kinton  
3/2/64  
tape

When the ship's crew came onto the ship, they voted not to stay on a ship loaded with scab meat. The crew threatened to walk off the ship. Then the captain of this ship had to call Armour packing Company to get the meat off the ship and put the meat back on the dock. By the way, the name of the ship was "Looking Back".

Restaurants and people shopping at stores stopped buying Armour products. The public gave overwhelming support, particularly in the Black communities. Black churches supported our union in their communities. In fact the people knew we were fighting for the interest of all workers in the communities. This was one reason Brother Nelson and I were being attacked by the reactionary forces. Brother Nelson and I dedicated ourselves to the union struggle in the interest of the workers as a whole and believed a labor movement must be built in the South. If it took our lives, this was understood and we knew what we were up against.

Finally, after forty-five days of constant picketing, Armour Packing Company called our Negotiating Committee back in to start negotiating again on our contract. But we still maintained our picket lines around the building. None of our members on the picketlines ever weakened. The longer they picketed, the stronger and more militant they became. ~~to achieve the important things we wanted.~~ Our Negotiating Committee didn't get everything we wanted; but, some agreements we obtained ~~were~~ <sup>for</sup> in the good and welfare of our rank-and-file members. A special meeting was called with brothers and sisters who were working at Armour Packing Company. Our

negotiating committee brought the contract to the membership to accept or reject. A majority of members voted in favor of the contract. Our negotiators were able to get some improvements in the contract: job security, vacations wage increases. If any worker got hurt on the job, they were sent to company doctors. We didn't have health and welfare plans on jobs or pension plans. The president and I were thinking and planning for health and welfare plans for the rank-and-file members on union jobs.

Contracts were signed between Armour Packing and Local 207 Negotiating Committee. The Union brothers and sisters went back to work on the job as usual; picket signs were removed. This strike was over, but we continued the struggle within the union as a whole.

At Inland Waterways Corporation, Black and white workers worked on the docks. Brother Nelson and I were discussing some conditions that needed to be changed on the dock. We felt it was time to upgrade Black workers. Brother Nelson and I said: "We are going to put our talk into action." We wrote down our proposals on paper and presented them to the general membership on a Sunday. These proposals should ~~have been~~<sup>be</sup> added to the contract. Brother Nelson and I discussed these proposals with the membership very simple and plain: As soon as new jobs come available, companies should place all vacancies on bulletin boards for five days, so employees can read them and apply for new jobs on the basis of seniority, regardless of race, creed or color.

The positions Black workers were placed in were lifting boxes and sacks. Some of the ~~airtiest~~<sup>darriest</sup>, lowest paying jobs on the dock. Brother Nelson and I felt Black workers should be upgraded; for

instance, working as crane operators, tractor drivers, watchmen, sack sewers. These proposals were added to our contract to be negotiated. We were ready---both Black and white on our Negotiating Committee. Our Local asked for other things in the contract: Union seniority, paid vacations, paid holidays, pension plans.

The president and I were getting ideas from other Unions and their contracts, which were in the interest of our members. When we asked for a 25 cents raise across the board, one of our Union members brought a deck of playing cards and taped a quarter on the deck. When our Negotiating Committee walked into the negotiating room, the Union member took the deck of cards with the 25 cents coin taped on it, slammed the deck of cards on the table and told the Company representatives: "That means we want 25 cents across the board!" Then, we started negotiating. The Company representatives presented their proposal; Union Representatives presented the rank-and-file proposal. Now the battle was on! Brother Nelson, Union President and Chief Negotiator, and I, Vice-President, was second in line. Both of us Black, heads of a negotiating committee in the deep South! Even though we were facing the anti-union movement, reactionaries, Jim Crowism and racism, we were determined to build a strong union, especially at cotton compresses, feed mills, fertilizer plants, packing houses, among dock workers, working barges and boxcar workers. Our union, Local 207, New Orleans, Louisiana, was among the most militant, courageous, and active in the South. Our President and Vice President were Black but our rank-and-file were both Black and white. We had white business agents, white shop stewards, whites on the Negotiating Committee. Our white members

had overcome Jim Crowism and discrimination. White workers had become union-conscious and were united on bread-and-butter issues.

This was a high point of our union organizing in Louisiana. I felt proud.