

CARTON 8.9

STRONG IN THE STRUGGLE

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The Progressive Party was nationally known for running Henry A. Wallace for President of the United States in 1948. We discussed the Wallace campaign in Communist Party meetings. Wallace had been the Vice President under Roosevelt's administration and we felt that he was the best candidate for the working people, and particularly in the deep South. He was against racism and prejudice and Jim Crowism. Members of the Progressive Party was very active in the struggle for the workingclass and poor people. The Party decided to support Wallace, and Andrew Nelson and I brought up the Wallace campaign in the union. Our union, Local 207, organized a Labor Committee for Wallace for President, and I was on this Labor Committee.

The Labor Committee sent us into 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 country.

Millions of black people in the Southern states wasn't registered to vote. Some white people didn't want black people to vote. So it was hard to get them registered. 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.

We had meetings at churches and lots of the country people came to the meetings. We had a good response. The churches would be packed at night in the countryside. They was concerned about learning. All they needed was some leadership to get mobilized. We talked to them about freedom and justice and equality, and jobs and health and schools, and they responded. We just had to bring it to them. When we finished trying to teach politics to the farm people, some



church ministers would take a group of black people to try and register so they could vote. But they was often turned back.

I had trouble getting registered myself. 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 I'm gonna bring my lunch." I decided to worry him down. I was determined to register, cause I was voting in Los Angeles during the Roosevelt Administration. Why couldn't I vote here? So I kept coming back. 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. When 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 was registered to vote, some wasn'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 white union rep named Red O'Brien, with the food and tobacco workers union, was driving the car. Suddenly, we heard some shots; somebody was shooting at us! We looked back and saw a car was trying to overtake us. Red started driving faster. Then he said, "Hell, I got a gun in my glove compartment." He reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a gun and started shooting back. Them bastards turned off. Scared their asses! We wasn't sure if it was the Klan or the sheriff. No doubt, white people in the Southern states hated the idea so much they was willing to try to kill anyone who tried to teach black people about politics and voting. After the shooting Red drove at a steady speed back to New Orleans. No one was hurt, just shook up.

Things wasn't always this exciting. 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 see the manager of the Palace Theater in New Orleans with a letter from Local 207. The letter said: "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 our business agent, August Harris.

When the manager finished reading the letter, I asked, "Would you agree to show a picture at your theater? The name of the film is 'The Roosevelt Story'." I said, "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 A. Wallace because they remembered he used to be Vice President under President Roosevelt. 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 A. Wallace for president but the ruling class and the middle class was afraid of him because he claimed to be a progressive capitalist, with socialist ideals.

Meanwhile, Paul Robeson came to New Orleans during the 1948 campaign. He was campaigning for Wallace. 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 him, 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. Despite his fame and stardom, his speech and actions showed him to be down to earth. In fact, at our committee meetings he would often sit on the floor, and we would sit with him on the floor at the union hall to discuss the conditions of black people. (That's what Harry Bridges used do, too, when he came -- sit on the floor.) Paul Robeson had all the black workers at heart, and he spoke very plainly so everyone could understand what he was talking about.

Paul Robeson was at that time the chair of the Council on African Affairs and a member of the Executive Committee of the World Peace Congress, and a national leader of the Progressive party. And I add to his activity that he was a concert singer and actor of world renown. I was with him for fourteen days in New Orleans.

During the time Paul Robeson was in New Orleans the unions took every means of precaution for his safety. Nelson



appointed me to be security, so I was Paul Robeson's bodyguard every place he went in New Orleans. We had two more guys from the Transport Workers Union who was also bodyguards.

First I took Paul Robeson to a good place to eat, Dookie Chase's restaurant on Orleans and Galveston Streets. He could eat, too. He liked to eat plank steaks, two large planks and two large glasses of lemonade. I told him, I said, "No wonder they call you 'big fella'!" He had to laugh. Him and I got down tight. He used to call me "Brownie" and he called Nelson "Andy."

We had tight security. When he went to eat in the restaurant, sometimes I would stand up over him, sometimes I would sit down. So many people when they realized that was Paul Robeson they wanted to get to him, so I had to stand by and not let them crowd him. When he wanted to go to the bathroom I would go in first to check it out and see if there was anybody in there. Then I wouldn't let nobody else in while he was in there. He stayed at a friend's home while he was in New Orleans. At meetings I stood with him and the other two guys was in the audience. In case I needed them I had a sign I would make.

I learned something about Robeson. I wondered why he didn't carry no whole lot of clothes, just his little briefcase and one suit. I used to take him to get his suit pressed at the cleaners. If he had to move fast, he didn't have to worry about packing no clothes! He travelled light.



I would take him around to different meetings. One day we had a meeting with the editors of the Louisiana Weekly newspaper and other business and professional black people. Then there was community meetings at churches. Another time Paul Robeson came to our union meeting and made a talk to members of our local. He met with other unions, too. 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"

One time I asked him about his films. He said there was one film he didn't like and that was "Emperor Jones." "I didn't like to kill my people," he said. I told him I saw him in Los Angeles in "Othello." "You liked that?" he said. I said I did. "That was great acting," he said. I didn't know he was a football player til later.

I also talked with Paul Robeson about issues facing black workers and their problems in this country. I asked him, "Would socialism help some of the workers' problems?" He answered, "We need socialism in this country. Socialism would solve the workers' problems as a whole here in America. In order to fight racism, we have to fight imperialism and capitalism. We're not going to get freedom under capitalism. Only a very few black people are going to get the crumbs that fall through the cracks -- the intellectuals, professionals, middle-class, bourgeois. The masses of black working people, or any other working people, are not going to achieve



complete freedom as long as we have capitalism. Who's going to profit? Big business -- and those who support the capitalist system and help to hold back the masses of the people to keep them from organizing. Movements have to organize to change things. A new labor movement, new unity, new struggle." He said the Communist Party was a political party just like any other, and that you had a right to join any political party. Paul Robeson had very progressive ideas for the advance of the working class.

We talked about Africa, and Paul Robeson said the same thing as Kwame Nkrumah -- that Africa must unite. Africa gonna have to get together, he said. I agreed with what he said. Black people throughout the world must get together. That don't mean that we should be fighting against other people, but we have to get ourselves together and work with other people to set the working people free. We got too many people that's suffering in Africa and Latin America, dying from starvation. No child should go to bed hungry. And they got people fooled, talking about this is God's will. That's a lie. It's a system causing people to starve, suffer and die. Tell me people can't see that? That's bullshit!

Another thing Paul Robeson and I talked about was books about Africa. He recommended some books to me, and over the years I've added more books to the list, including some books on Paul Robeson himself. Here is my list:

1. "Africa's Gift to America," by J.A. Rogers
2. "The Whole World in His Hands," by Susan Robeson



3. "Apartheid, The Facts," International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa
4. "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa," by Walter Rodney
5. "Southern Africa/Black America: Same Struggle/Same Fight," by Bill Sales
6. "Organize or Starve," by Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Hall
7. "African Socialism," edited by William Friedland and Carl Rosberg
8. "The Real Facts About Ethiopia," by J.A. Rogers
9. "Ethiopia: Population, Resources, Economy," by Georgi Galperin
10. "The Challenge of Nationhood," by Tom Mboya
11. "A Guide to African History," by Basil Davidson
12. "A Glorious Age in Africa," by Daniel Chu and Elliott Skinner
13. "Great Rulers of the African Past," by Lavinia Dobler and William Brown
14. "Here I Stand," by Paul Robeson
15. "The World and Africa," by W.E. Burghardt Du Bois
16. "Inside Africa," by John Gunther
17. "South Africa: Foreign Investment & Apartheid," by Lawrence Litvak, Robert DeGrasse and Kathleen McTigue
18. "Philosophy and Class Struggle," by Dialego
19. "What Africa Thinks of Karl Marx," from "The African Communist," No. 94, Third Quarter, 1983
20. "Apartheid," by Alex La Guma
21. "The Apartheid Handbook," by Roger Omond



22. "Axiom's of Kwame Nkrumah," Freedom Fighter's Edition
23. "Zed Pan Africa," by Henry Freedman and R. Molteno
24. "Class Struggle in Africa," by Kwame Nkrumah
25. "Africa Must Unite," by Kwame Nkrumah
26. "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade," by W.E.B.

Du Bois

27. "Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah"
28. "No Easy Walk to Freedom," by Nelson Mandela
29. "Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare," by Kwame Nkrumah
30. "U.S.S.R. & Countries of Africa," General Editor E.A.

Tarabrin

31. "Resistance Against Fascist Enslavement in South Africa,"

New Century Publishers

32. "Great African Thinkers," by Cheikh Anta Diop

(NEED TO VERIFY TITLES AND AUTHORS)

Paul Robeson and I also talked about the people in China under Mao Tse-tung fighting for freedom. I had a lot of faith in Mao Tse-tung. Later, at the National Democratic Committee meeting in New Orleans I raised the issue of international trade with the people of China. I was the only black man in the crowd that shot that question. Oh, brother! I was sent there by the Local. Nelson called me his troubleshooter. And I was shooting! I think he sometimes sent me places where he was afraid to go. But I didn't have no fear cause I believed that everybody had the right to talk about what they wanted. Freedom of speech. And I was right! Shit, I'm a citizen just like anybody else, and if they try to deny that to me then



something is wrong with the system. They ain't living up to the Constitution. Why tell me all this shit about the Constitution and then try to stop me, which I did get some time. When they sent me to the penitentiary in the 50s that was as fake as a three-dollar bill. They ain't had no more business sending me to the penitentiary than they had sending the pope!

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

Strikes was going on in the sugar refineries in the towns of Gramercy and Reserve, with United Packinghouse & Food Allied Workers' Local 591. The local representative asked for help to try to settle the strikes in the two sugar refineries. Nelson decided to send his troubleshooter. I started going there and talking to the workers. Three or four other union reps came along to watch my back, cause I was raising hell. Everyday I made a speech at Gramercy at twelve o'clock and another one at Reserve at three pm. My speech was about unity, working conditions, and what unity would mean in helping to win strikes in. White workers and black workers in both places was in unions, but they wasn't as united as they needed to be to win. When I arrived, all the workers met in the union hall, but they was separated, blacks on one side, whites on the other.

My speech went like this: "Workers suffer because they are kept separated. 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 the workers went on for eight months. Slowly the black and white workers began to change toward one another. One day I came in and for the first time black and white workers was sitting together in the union hall. They took down the signs that said "white" and "colored." They even started using the same bathrooms. 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 every time I walked into the union hall, even the deputy sheriff of Gramercy, and his detective. They came to the union meetings to "keep peace", if trouble arose. The deputy sheriff stayed on the outside of the hall; he told me to speak loudly so he could hear me because he said he liked the things I was saying. 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 was thrown into the river and drowned. All the bloodshed happened in these strikes because



non-union members was trying to take the union members' jobs when the strikes first started. I continued every day with one main subject: unity, so we could win the demands against the bosses. I was calling for trade union democracy among the workers.

I went out there for eight months. By the time both strikes was 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 was 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 was determined to continue working among workers in other places in the Deep South.

Sometimes the struggle took unexpected turns. One night in New Orleans we had an integrated party: Black and white workers together. 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 was one of the bosses' main weapons for lower wages, bad housing, bad schooling, bad health institutions, and so on, while they get richer and richer and we get poorer and poorer. They was exploiting workers in the South, pitching one worker against the other workers. That night there was a big group of us partying in a white friend's home, in the white community. Some of the white people had come down from the North to help break up Jim Crow. The lady whose house it was was a member of the Progressive Party. We had plenty of food, drinks, and good music playing. They had a lady playing the guitar. Said she was from Paris or someplace. Black people and white people was dancing together and raising sand. Rose was there with me. Nelson didn't come; he never did come to the parties we had. I reckon because of his health, he had asthma real bad.

I had me a fifth of liquor that I kept under the sofa. Every now and then I'd get me a little sip. I didn't want to go in the kitchen where everybody else was drinking, cause I didn't want them to know I was drinking. I was supposed to be a labor leader; I didn't want to get too far out there.



About 11 o'clock, as the party was getting off to a good start. Rose was dancing with somebody and we was having a good time. 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 was making. When the lady of the house opened her door 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 was 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 police couldn't stand to see black men dancing with white girls. The sergeant said, "I got a complaint that you are disturbing the peace -- 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 and grabbed me out of the crowd. I was arrested first. He told me to put my hands up over my head and lean 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 the people ran from the house and got away. The rest of us, 64 in number, was put in the patrol car and taken to the 12th precinct and booked for "disturbing the peace." Shit, I even forgot my damn whiskey!

Later a friend was contacted by someone in the group. During the night we got an answer from our contact. We was 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 was afraid some harm would come to us. Interestingly, a judge's daughter, who was white, and one of our attorney's sons, also white, was 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 was put in separate cells. Black women in one cell, white women in another cell; the same arrangement was done with the Black men and white men. Rose was scared. This was the first time she was arrested. I told her to take it easy, that everything would be okay.



When the black men was being led to their separate cells, the police was standing all around. From the expression on their faces, they was 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 a policeman pushed me, I turned around to make a remark on the harassment, but a black school teacher advised me not to utter one word--just walk on into the cell, because police was 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 was 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.

Early that Sunday morning we was released from jail. Dr. Oakley Johnson, who used to teach at Dillard University, got the money for bail. We was all happy to be out. Our hearing was set for Monday at noon. Our defense attorneys said they wanted to rush the hearing and be as brief as possible, so that it wouldn't be going on into the night, for safety reasons. Our attorneys worried that some trouble would occur when we left the court. They had heard that some Ku Klux Klansmen would be waiting outside when court dismissed.

At the hearing on Monday 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 was in Orleans Parish within the city limits and there was no laws against race mixing. All sixty-four, black and white, was found guilty of disturbing the peace. The judge fined us five dollars each. I never did see no Klansmen.

We was displeased with the judge's decision and called a meeting with our attorneys outside the court to instruct our attorneys that we didn't like paying 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 wasn'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 appealed before a high court and we was found not guilty. We helped establish the right to associate and visit each others' homes and attend meetings or demonstrate together regardless of race, color or creed. To me this was a victory for the workingclass in the South -- not just black workers or white workers. It was the working people as a whole that won. We put a nail in the coffin of Jim Crowism!

One evening I was sitting alone in the Elite restaurant located on Rampart 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 he 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 in Empire worked on the boats. We went out to sea to catch big fish to bring back to make fishmeal fertilizer. Men would stay five to six months at a time on the water. Conditions on the boats was bad. Men had to sleep on bunks stuffed with hay. Food wasn't worth eating. Working conditions was 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: "When the 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 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 nobody to back them up. Sometimes a few men from the boats would leave and go looking for other work. But usually they didn't have no luck, and they soon returned to the boats."

Being a union representative, I told Brown that maybe I could help. I discussed the whole thing with Brother Nelson. He thought we should do something. I asked Brown if Nelson and I went to Empire would he be afraid to go back and show us the way? Brown said no.

The three of us drove down to Empire. 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, vacation pay, health and welfare plans. A union means better schools for children, better health institutions. A union means that we are in a fighting position for the right to vote and to fight against Jim Crowism. A union can 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."

Brown talked to the workers also. Then I asked the fishermen to tell their stories about the job. They told us pretty much the same stories as Brown told 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 was facing. He explained to the union representatives that all the men working on the fish boats was black men. The union representatives said, "We are willing to help organize, but we have to contact our international representative to get permission and pledges for funds to organize." In a few days



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 was fishing, some was still on shore. One fisherman was put in charge to be responsible for pledge cards getting to the other fishermen who was 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 was signed, all the fishermen was 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. The Negotiating Committee had to call strikes. Then some unions started calling other unions for support. Nelson contacted the food and tobacco workers, the fur and leather workers, the packing house workers, and some others. People started sending in money, food, clothing. Communities from many different areas gave support.

The companies tried to break the strikes by using strikebreakers, but 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 big struggle took place at Armour Packing Company in New Orleans. We tried to negotiate a new contract with the Negotiating Committee and employer. We was forced out on strike. The union threw up a picket line in front of Armour plant. A soup kitchen was organized. A picket captain was elected to carry on activities on the picket lines. There was both males and females on the picket lines.

Next a general membership meeting was called with workers at other plants where the union had contracts. They was 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 was trespassing on Armour property. Cars loaded with policemen came and ordered us off the sidewalk in front of the 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 wasn't through yet. We had to use another strategy. Armour Company had several engineers who wasn't members of our Union. Brother Nelson contacted the Engineers' Union and explained the situation we was having with Armour Packing Company. Nelson and I explained the need for all workers in the South to unify, regardless of race, creed, or color, around bread-and-butter issues. A representative of the Engineers' Union told us not to worry, that his members wouldn't cross our picket lines anymore. 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.

Someone tipped off Brother Nelson and I that Armour was sending several truckloads of meat to load up on a ship at the docks. During that time we had information picket signs, asking the public not to buy scab products. The signs said, "Don't eat scab meat" with our Local number and the name of Armour Packing Company. "Don't eat their products." The signs said we was 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 Nelson, myself, sister 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."

We started calling people on the telephone to ask them not to buy scab meat. We got numbers out of the telephone book. I remember one lady I called said she wasn't eating meat nohow cause she was sick! I said I was sorry she was sick but I hope she would support us when she got well. She said she would. I talked to a lot of white people cause they was the ones that mainly had telephones. We got a lot of support.

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. The people knew we was fighting for the interest of all workers in the communities. This was one reason Brother Nelson and I was 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 was 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 picket lines 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 was for the good and welfare of our rank-and-file members.

A special meeting was called with the brothers and sisters who was 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 was able to get some improvements in the contract: job security, vacations, wage increases, upgrading and seniority. If any worker got hurt on the job, they was sent to company doctors. We didn't win health and welfare plans or pension plans, but Brother Nelson and I was thinking and planning about how to get health and welfare plans for the rank-and-file members on union jobs.

Contracts was signed between Armour Packing and Local 207 Negotiating Committee. The union brothers and sisters went back to work on the job as usual and picket signs came



down. This strike was over, but we continued the struggle as a whole.

At Inland Waterways Corporation, black and white workers worked on the docks. One day brother Nelson and I was discussing some conditions that needed to be changed on the dock. We often talked at lunch at an oyster bar. (The waitress at the Elite knew just what I liked: a half a dozen raw and a half a dozen cooked oysters with some Miller High Life beer.) We felt it was time to upgrade black workers at Inland Waterways. Brother Nelson and I said, "We're 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, the company 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 was placed in was some of the dirtiest, lowest paying jobs on the dock. Brother Nelson and I felt black workers should be upgraded, for instance, to working as crane operators, tractor drivers, watchmen, sack sewers. These proposals was added to our contract to be negotiated. Our Local also asked for other things in the contract: seniority, paid vacations, paid holidays, pension plans.



The president and I got ideas from other unions and their contracts, which was in the interest of our members. I've also got to say that we learned a lot about tactics and negotiating in the Communist Party. Like I always said, and still say, the Party has a good program but some of its leaders was bad in later days. We had good district organizers, like Emanuel Leven. The Party taught us a lot of things. To me the Communist Party was the party for the people, and I was a militant Communist and trade unionist.

We was ready---both black and white workers on our Negotiating Committee. When we asked Inland Waterways 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 representative, Mr. Mooney, the big boss himself from St. Louis: "That means we want 25 cents across the board!" Mooney didn't know what to say. Then, we started negotiating. The company representatives presented their proposal; union representatives presented the rank-and-file proposal. Now the battle was on! And we had a weapon we could use -- slow downs! They didn't like that at all. We had them between the Devil and the deep blue sea! We won the 25 cents across the board increase. We won upgrading and we won seniority.



Brother Nelson, the union president was chief negotiator, and by then I was elected vice-president so I was second in line. Both of us black, heads of a negotiating committee in the deep South! Even though we was facing the anti-union movement, reactionaries, Jim Crowism and racism, we was determined to build a strong union, especially at cotton compresses, feed mills, fertilizer plants, packing houses, among dock workers, barge 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 was black but our rank-and-file was 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 we was united on bread-and-butter issues.

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



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Chapter 5/New Orleans (2)

(Version 2, 7/3/98)

The Progressive Party was nationally known for running Henry A. Wallace for President of the United States in 1948. We discussed the Wallace campaign in Communist Party meetings. Wallace had been the Vice President under Roosevelt's administration and we felt that he was the best candidate for the working people, and particularly in the deep South. He was against racism and prejudice and Jim Crowism. Members of the Progressive Party was very active in the struggle for the workingclass and poor people. The Party decided to support Wallace, and Andrew Nelson and I brought up the Wallace campaign in the union. Our union, Local 207, organized a Labor Committee for Wallace for President, and I was on this Labor Committee.

The Labor Committee sent us into 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 country.

Millions of black people in the Southern states wasn't registered to vote. Some white people didn't want black people to vote. So it was hard to get them registered. 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.

We had meetings at churches and lots of the country people came to the meetings. We had a good response. The churches would be packed at night in the countryside. They was concerned about learning. All they needed was some leadership to get mobilized. We talked to them about freedom and justice and equality, and jobs and health and schools, and they responded. We just had to bring it to them. When we finished trying to teach politics to the farm people, some



church ministers would take a group of black people to try and register so they could vote. But they was often turned back.

I had trouble getting registered myself. 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 I'm gonna bring my lunch." I decided to worry him down. I was determined to register, cause I was voting in Los Angeles during the Roosevelt Administration. Why couldn't I vote here? So I kept coming back. 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. When 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 was registered to vote, some wasn'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 white union rep named Red O'Brien, with the food and tobacco workers union, was driving the car. Suddenly, we heard some shots; somebody was shooting at us! We looked back and saw a car was trying to overtake us. Red started driving faster. Then he said, "Hell, I got a gun in my glove compartment." He reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a gun and started shooting back. Them bastards turned off. Scared their asses! We wasn't sure if it was the Klan or the sheriff. No doubt, white people in the Southern states hated the idea so much they was willing to try to kill anyone who tried to teach black people about politics and voting. After the shooting Red drove at a steady speed back to New Orleans. No one was hurt, just shook up.

Things wasn't always this exciting. 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 see the manager of the Palace Theater in New Orleans with a letter from Local 207. The letter said: "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 our business agent, August Harris.

When the manager finished reading the letter, I asked, "Would you agree to show a picture at your theater? The name of the film is 'The Roosevelt Story'." I said, "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 A. Wallace because they remembered he used to be Vice President under President Roosevelt. 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 A. Wallace for president but the ruling class and the middle class was afraid of him because he claimed to be a progressive capitalist, with socialist ideals.

Meanwhile, Paul Robeson came to New Orleans during the 1948 campaign. He was campaigning for Wallace. 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 him, 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. Despite his fame and stardom, his speech and actions showed him to be down to earth. In fact, at our committee meetings he would often sit on the floor, and we would sit <sup>with him</sup> on the floor at the union hall, to discuss the conditions of black people. (That's what Harry Bridges used to do, too, when he came -- sit on the floor.) Paul Robeson had all the black workers at heart, and he spoke very plainly so everyone could understand what he was talking about. —

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During the time Paul Robeson was in New Orleans the unions took every means of precaution for his safety. Nelson appointed me to be security, so I was Paul Robeson's bodyguard every place he went in New Orleans. We had two more guys from the Transport Workers Union who was also bodyguards.

First I took Paul Robeson to a good place to eat, Dookie Chase's restaurant on Orleans and Galveston Streets. He could



eat, too. He liked to eat plank steaks, two large planks and two large glasses of lemonade. I told him, I said, "No wonder they call you 'big fella'!" He had to laugh. Him and I got down tight. He used to call me "Brownie" and he called Nelson "Andy."

We had tight security. When he went to eat in the restaurant, sometimes I would stand up over him, sometimes I would sit down. So many people when they realized that was Paul Robeson they wanted to get to him, so I had to stand by and not let them crowd him. When he wanted to go to the bathroom I would go in first to check it out and see if there was anybody in there. Then I wouldn't let nobody else in while he was in there. He stayed at a friend's home while he was in New Orleans. At meetings I stood with him and the other two guys was in the audience. In case I needed them I had a sign I would make.

I learned something about Robeson. I wondered why he didn't carry no whole lot of clothes, just his little briefcase and one suit. I used to take him to get his suit pressed at the cleaners. If <sup>he</sup> had to move fast, he didn't have to worry about packing no clothes! He travelled light.

I would take him around to different meetings. One day we had a meeting with the editors of the Louisiana Weekly newspaper and other business and professional black people. Then there was community meetings at churches. Another time Paul Robeson came to our union meeting and made a talk to members of our local. He met with other unions, too. 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"

One time I asked him about his films. He said there was one film he didn't like and that was "Emperor Jones." "I didn't like to kill my people," he said. I told him I saw him in Los Angeles in "Othello." "You liked that?" he said. I said I did. "That was great acting," he said. I didn't know he was a football player til later.

I also talked with Paul Robeson about issues facing black workers and their problems in this country. I asked him, "Would socialism help some of the workers' problems?" He answered, "We need socialism in this country. Socialism would solve the workers' problems as a whole here in America. In order to fight racism, we have to fight imperialism and capitalism. We're not going to get freedom under capitalism. Only a very few black people are going to get the crumbs that fall through the cracks -- the intellectuals, professionals, middle-class, bourgeois. The masses of black working people, or any other working people, <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ not going to achieve complete freedom as long as we have capitalism. Who's going to profit? Big business -- and those who support the capitalist system and help to hold back the masses of the people to keep them from organizing. Movements have to organize to change things. A new labor movement, new unity, new struggle. He said the Communist Party was a political party just like any



other, and that you had a right to join any political party."

Paul Robeson had very progressive ideas for the advance of the working class.

We talked about Africa, and Paul Robeson said the same thing as Kwame Nkrumah -- that Africa must unite. Africa *he said. I agreed with what he said.* gonna have to get together, Black people throughout the world must get together. That don't mean that we should be fighting against other people, but we have to get ourselves together and work with other people to set the working people free. We got too many people that's suffering in Africa and Latin America, dying from starvation. No child should go to bed hungry. And they got people fooled, talking about this is God's will. That's a lie. It's a system causing people to starve, suffer and die. Tell me people can't see that? That's bullshit! *← Insert Le Krown book List*

We also talked about the people in China under Mao Tse-tung fighting for freedom. I had a lot of faith in Mao Tse-tung. Later, at the National Democratic Committee in New Orleans I raised the issue of international trade with the people of China. I was the only black man in the crowd that shot that question. Oh, brother! I was sent there by the Local. Nelson called me his troubleshooter. And I was shooting! I think he sometimes sent me places where he was afraid to go. But I didn't have no fear cause I believed that everybody had the right to talk about what they wanted. Freedom of speech. And I was right! Shit, I'm a citizen just like anybody else, and if they try to deny that to me then



IN Sort

Lee Brown's Book List on Africa

One of the things Paul Robeson and I talked about in <sup>about</sup> ~~1948~~ was books on Africa. He recommended some books to me, and over the years I have added more books to the list, including some books on Robeson himself. Here is <sup>my</sup> ~~the~~ list:

1. "Africa's Gift to America," by J.A. Rogers
2. "The Whole World in His Hands," by Susan Robeson
3. "Apartheid, The Facts," International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa
4. "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa," by Walter Rodney
5. "Southern Africa/Black America: Same Struggle/Same Fight," by Bill Sales
6. "Organize or Starve," by Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Hall
7. "African Socialism," edited by William Friedland and Carl Rosberg
8. "The Real Facts About Ethiopia," by J.A. Rogers
9. "Ethiopia: Population, Resources, Economy," by Georgi Galperin
10. "The Challenge of Nationhood," by Tom Mboya
11. "A Guide to African History," by Basil Davidson
12. "A Glorious Age in Africa," by Daniel Chu and Elliott Skinner
13. "Great Rulers of the African Past," by Lavinia Dobler and William Brown



14. "Here I Stand," by Paul Robeson
15. "The World and Africa," by W.E. Burghardt Du Bois
16. "Inside Africa," by John Gunther
17. "South Africa: Foreign Investment & Apartheid," by Lawrence Litvak, Robert DeGrasse and Kathleen McTigue
18. "Philosophy and Class Struggle," by Dialego
19. "What Africa Thinks of Karl Marx," from "The African Communist," No. 94, Third Quarter, 1983
20. "Apartheid," by Alex La Guma
21. "The Apartheid Handbook," by Roger Omond
22. "Axiom's of Kwame Nkrumah," Freedom Fighter's Edition
23. "Zed Pan Africa," by Henry Freedman and R. Molteno
24. "Class Struggle in Africa," by Kwame Nkrumah
25. "Africa Must Unite," by Kwame Nkrumah
26. "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade," by W.E.B. Du Bois
27. "Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah"
28. "No Easy Walk to Freedom," by Nelson Mandela
29. "Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare," by Kwame Nkrumah
30. "U.S.S.R. & Countries of Africa," General Editor E.A. Tarabrin
31. "Resistance Against Fascist Enslavement in South Africa," New Century Publishers
32. <sup>"Great African Thinkers"</sup>  
~~"The African Origins of Civilization,"~~ by Cheikh Anta Diop

(NEED TO VERIFY TITLES AND AUTHORS)



something is wrong with the system. They ain't living up to the Constitution. Why tell me all this shit about the Constitution and then try to stop me, which I did get some time. When they sent me to the penitentiary in the 50s that was as fake as a three-dollar bill. They ain't had no more business sending me to the penitentiary than they had sending the pope!

Paul Robeson was at that time the chair of the Council on African Affairs and a member of the Executive Committee of the World Peace Congress, and a national leader of the Progressive party. And I add to his activity that he was a concert singer and actor of world renown. I was with him for fourteen days in New Orleans.

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

Strikes was going on in the sugar refineries in the towns of Gramercy and Reserve, with United Packinghouse & Food Allied Workers' Local 591. The local representative asked for help to try to settle the strikes in the two sugar refineries. Nelson decided to send his troubleshooter. I started going there and <sup>talkng to the workers.</sup> ~~organizing~~. Three or four other union reps came along to watch my back, cause I was raising hell. Everyday I made a speech at Gramercy at twelve o'clock and another one at Reserve at three pm. My speech was about unity, working conditions, and what unity would mean in <sup>helping</sup> ~~winning~~ strikes, ~~in small places~~. White workers and black

to



workers in both places was in unions, When I arrived, all the  
*as they needed to be to win.*  
workers met in the union hall, *but they was separated - blacks on*  
*one side, whites on the other.*

My speech went like this: "Workers suffer because they  
are kept separated. 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 <sup>the</sup> ~~black and white~~ workers went on for eight  
months. Slowly the black and white workers began to change  
toward one another. One day I came in and for the first time  
black and white workers was sitting together in the union  
hall. They took down the signs that said "white" and  
"colored." They even started using the same bathrooms. 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 every time  
I walked into the union hall, even the deputy sheriff of  
Gramercy, and his detective. They came to the union meetings  
to "keep peace", if trouble arose. The deputy sheriff stayed  
on the outside of the hall; he told me to speak loudly so he  
could hear me because he said he liked the things I was  
saying. 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 was thrown into the river and drowned. All the bloodshed happened in these strikes because non-union members was trying to take the union members' jobs when the strikes first started. I continued every day with one main subject: unity, so we could win the demands against the bosses. I was calling for trade union democracy among the workers.

I went out there for <sup>eight</sup>~~nine~~ months. By the time both strikes was 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 was 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 was determined to continue working among workers in other places in the Deep South.

Sometimes the struggle took unexpected turns. One night in New Orleans we had an integrated party: Black and white workers together. 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 was one of the bosses' main weapons for lower wages, bad housing, bad schooling, bad health institutions, and so on, while they get richer and richer and we get poorer and poorer. They was exploiting workers in the South, pitching one worker against the other workers. That night there was a big group of us partying in a white friend's home, in the white community. Some of the white people had come down from the North to help break up Jim Crow. The lady whose house it was was a member of the Progressive Party. We had plenty of food, drinks, and good music playing. They had a lady playing the guitar. Said she was from Paris or someplace. Black people and white people was dancing together and raising sand. Rose was there with me. Nelson didn't come; he never



did come to the parties we had. I reckon because of his health, he had asthma real bad.

I had me a fifth of liquor that I kept under the sofa. Every now and then I'd get me a little sip. I didn't want to go in the kitchen where everybody else was drinking, cause I didn't want them to know I was drinking. I was supposed to be a labor leader; I didn't want to get too far out there.

About 11 o'clock, as the party was getting off to a good start. Rose was dancing with somebody and we was having a good time. 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 was making. When the lady of the house opened her door 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 was 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 police couldn't stand to see black men dancing with white girls. The sergeant said, "I got a complaint that you are disturbing the peace -- 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 and grabbed me out of the crowd. I was arrested first. He told me to put my hands up over my <sup>attache</sup> 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 the people ran from the house and got away. The rest of us, 64 in number, was put in the patrol car and taken to the 12th precinct and booked for "disturbing the peace." Shit, I even <sup>forgot</sup> left my damn whiskey!

Later a friend was contacted by someone in the group. During the night we got an answer from our contact. We was 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 was afraid some harm would come to us. Interestingly, a judge's daughter, who was white, and one of our attorney's sons, also white, was 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 was put in separate cells. Black women in one cell, white women in another cell; the same arrangement was done with the Black men and white men. Rose was scared. This was the first time she was arrested. I told her to take it easy, that everything would be okay.

When the black men was being led to their separate cells, the police was standing all around. From the expression on their faces, they was 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 a policeman pushed me, I turned around to make a remark on the harassment, but a black school teacher advised me not to utter one word--just walk on into the cell, because police was 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 was 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 was released from jail. Dr. Aubrey Johnson, who used to teach at Xavier, got the money for bail. We was all happy to be out. Our hearing was set for Sunday at noon. Our defense attorneys said they wanted to rush the hearing and be as brief as possible, so that it wouldn't be going on into the night, for safety



reasons. Our attorneys worried that some trouble would occur when we left the court. They had heard that some 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 was in Orleans Parish within the city limits and there was no laws against race mixing. All sixty-four, black and white, was found guilty of disturbing the peace. The judge fined us five dollars each. I never did see no Klansmen.

We was displeased with the judge's decision and called a meeting with our attorneys outside the court to instruct our attorneys that we didn't like paying 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 wasn'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 appealed before a high court and we was found not guilty. We helped establish the right to associate and visit each others' homes and attend meetings or demonstrate together regardless of race, color or creed. To me this was a victory for the workingclass in the



not  
South -- just black workers or white workers. It was the working people as a whole that won. We put a nail in the coffin of Jim Crowism!

One evening I was sitting alone in the Elite restaurant located on Rampart 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 he 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 in Empire worked on the boats. We went out to sea to catch big fish to bring back to make fishmeal fertilizer. Men would stay five to six months at a time on the water. Conditions on the boats was bad. Men had to sleep on bunks stuffed with hay. Food wasn't worth eating. Working conditions was 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: "When the 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 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 nobody to back them up. Sometimes a few men from the boats would leave and go looking for other work. But usually they didn't have no luck, and they soon returned to the boats."

Being a union representative, I told Brown that maybe I could help. I discussed the whole thing with Brother Nelson. He thought we should do something. I asked Brown if Nelson and I went to Empire would he be afraid to go back and show us the way? Brown said no.

The three of us drove down to Empire. 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, vacation pay, health and welfare plans. A union means better schools for children, better health institutions. A union means that we are in a fighting position for the right to vote and to fight against Jim Crowism. A union can 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 pretty much the same stories as Brown told 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 was facing. He explained to the union representatives that all the men working on the fish boats was black men. The union representatives said, "We are willing to help organize, but we have to contact our international representative to get permission and pledges for funds to organize." In a few days 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 was fishing, some was still on shore. One fisherman was put in charge to be responsible for pledge cards getting to the other fishermen who was 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 was signed, all the fishermen was 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. The Negotiating Committee had to call strikes. Then some unions started calling other unions for support. Nelson contacted the food



and tobacco workers, the fur and leather workers, the packing house workers, and some others. People started sending in money, food, clothing. Communities from many different areas gave support.

The companies tried to break the strikes by using strikebreakers, but 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 big struggle took place at Armour Packing Company in New Orleans. We tried to negotiate a new contract with the Negotiating Committee and employer. We was forced out on strike. The union threw up a picket line in front of Armour plant. A soup kitchen was organized. A picket captain was elected to carry on activities on the picket lines. There was both males and females on the picket lines.

Next a general membership meeting was called with workers at other plants where the union had contracts. They was 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 was trespassing on Armour property. Cars loaded with policemen came and ordered us off the sidewalk in front of the 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 wasn't through yet. We had to use another strategy. Armour Company had several engineers who wasn't members of our Union. Brother Nelson contacted the Engineers' Union and explained the situation we was having with Armour Packing Company. Nelson and I explained the need for all workers in the South to unify, regardless of race, creed, or color, around bread-and-butter issues. A representative of the Engineers' Union told us not to worry, that his members wouldn't cross our picket lines anymore. 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.



Someone tipped off Brother Nelson and I that Armour was sending several truckloads of meat to load up on a ship at the docks. During that time we had information picket signs, asking the public not to buy scab products. The signs said, "Don't eat scab meat" with our Local number and the name of .  
Armour Packing Company. "Don't eat their products." <sup>The signs said</sup> We was 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 Nelson, myself, sister 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."

We started calling people on the telephone to ask them not to buy scab meat. We got numbers out of the telephone book. I remember one lady I called said she wasn't eating meat nohow cause she was sick! I said I was sorry she was sick but I hope she would support us when she got well. She said she would. I talked to a lot of white people cause they



was the ones that mainly had telephones. We got a lot of support.

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. The people knew we was fighting for the interest of all workers in the communities. This was one reason Brother Nelson and I was 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 was 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 was for the good and welfare of our rank-and-file members.

A special meeting was called with the brothers and sisters who was 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 was able to get some



improvements in the contract: job security, vacations, wage increases, upgrading and seniority. If any worker got hurt on the job, they was sent to company doctors. We didn't win health and welfare plans or pension plans, but Brother Nelson and I was thinking and planning about how to get health and welfare plans for the rank-and-file members on union jobs.

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

At Inland Waterways Corporation, black and white workers worked on the docks. One day brother Nelson and I was discussing some conditions that needed to be changed on the dock. We often talked at lunch at an oyster bar. (The waitress at the Elite knew what I <sup>fixed</sup> ~~wanted~~: a half a dozen raw and a half a dozen cooked oysters with some Miller High Life beer.) We felt it was time to upgrade black workers at Inland Waterways. Brother Nelson and I said, "We're 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, the company 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 was placed in was some of the dirtiest, lowest paying jobs on the dock. Brother Nelson and I felt black workers should be upgraded, for instance, to working as crane operators, tractor drivers, watchmen, sack sewers. These proposals was added to our contract to be negotiated. Our Local also asked for other things in the contract: seniority, paid vacations, paid holidays, pension plans.

The president and I got ideas from other unions and their contracts, which was in the interest of our members. I've also got to say that we learned a lot about tactics and negotiating in the Communist Party. Like I always said, and still say, the Party has a good program but some of its leaders was bad in later days. We had good district organizers <sup>like Emanuel Levin</sup>. The Party taught us a lot of things. To me the Communist Party was the party for the people, and I was a militant Communist and trade unionist.

We was ready---both black and white workers on our Negotiating Committee. When we asked Inland Waterways 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 representative, Mr. Mooney,



the big boss himself from St. Louis: "That means we want 25 cents across the board!" Mooney didn't know what to say. Then, we started negotiating. The company representatives presented their proposal; union representatives presented the rank-and-file proposal. Now the battle was on! And we had a weapon we could use -- slow downs! They didn't like that at all.

Brother Nelson, the union president was chief negotiator, and I, <sup>by then I was elected (an l 50)</sup> vice-president, was second in line. Both of us black, heads of a negotiating committee in the deep South! Even though we was facing the anti-union movement, reactionaries, Jim Crowism and racism, we was determined to build a strong union, especially at cotton compresses, feed mills, fertilizer plants, packing houses, among dock workers, barge 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 was black but our rank-and-file was 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 we was united on bread-and-butter issues.

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



## CHAPTER FIVE



New Orleans

In New Orleans, Louisiana, about the year 1948, there was 'The case of the 64'. Let me first give some historical background and then tell 'the story of the 64'.

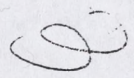
The Progress Party was nationally known for running Henry A. Wallace for president of the United States in 1948. Members of the Progress Labor Party were very active in the struggle for the working-class and poor people.

I was a member of Local 207 , Warehouse and Distribution Workers' Union, affiliated with 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 A. 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 my 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! (not only in the year 1948, but in future years to come.

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. We as Trade-





## Chapter 5/New Orleans (2)

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*example  
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*Henry*

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

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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 ~~the business agent~~ vice president of the Local, which was me. August Harris, ~~who was~~ <sup>See the morning</sup> ~~VP?~~ <sup>when how</sup>

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 <sup>who</sup> were afraid of him because he claimed to be a progressive capitalist, with socialist ideals.

1948  
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.

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Raymond Till  
#1 other bodyguard



C.C. Derwood, editor of Louisiana Weekly

One day we had a meeting in the community with the editors of the Louisiana Weekly newspaper and other <sup>business</sup> 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"

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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.

more  
details

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CP work  
in black  
belt region?

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.

now  
p. 67

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!

retell

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.

example  
points

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 <sup>O'Brien</sup> 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

retell



O'Brien

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 <sup>deputy</sup> 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. <sup>retell</sup>

At the beginning of both strikes <sup>a lot of</sup> 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 <sup>is</sup> 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~~ <sup>sixty-four</sup> 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

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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 <sup>as if</sup> 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 <sup>people</sup> 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, <sup>WB</sup> 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 <sup>WB</sup> 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.

*Dr. Gregory Johnson, at Xavier Univ.*

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 <sup>anti-black</sup> anti-labor, Ku Klux Klansmen, and reactionaries would be waiting outside when court dismissed.

Disavows  
racism +  
anti-labor  
attitudes

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!

*Saw this as  
close not  
race issue?*

One evening I was sitting alone in the Elite restaurant located on Ramp<sup>a</sup> 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.

*(Sp?)  
Rampart*

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 <sup>was</sup> were so bad that men had to sleep on bunks stuffed with hay. Food wasn't worth eating. Working conditions <sup>was</sup> 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."

*refill*

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



Wb  
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<sup>s</sup> said, "We are willing to help organize, but have to contact the international representative to get

What  
union?



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 <sup>why</sup> were signed, all the fishermen <sup>why</sup> 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. <sup>Negotiation Comm.</sup> ~~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."

copy?



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 <sup>Nelson?</sup> 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

Mr. Murray was  
company rep



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.