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## CHAPTER SIX

# FIGHTING SOUTHERN INJUSTICE

In 1947 I and other workers rallied to try to defeat the Taft-Hartley law. Black labor representatives, religious leaders, political leaders, and black community leaders had mass meetings in Shakespeare Park. Ernest J. Wright, who was head of the Peoples Defense League, organized these meetings and asked me to speak. Crowds of people turned out to support the workers and to hear speeches against the Taft-Hartley law. All the workers knew this law was brought about to weaken and break the unions. We raised money to send telegrams to the president, as well as senators and congressmen from the state of Louisiana. Andrew Nelson sent me, his troubleshooter, to the meetings and to play a part in this fight against the Taft-Hartley law. We discussed where it was best for me to go to hit it hard. My union, Local 207, was behind me all the way. We discussed in the union how dangerous this bill was for workers. We rallied and sent telegrams from the local. I went to different meetings all around New Orleans.

President Harry Truman vetoed the bill, but Congress overrode his veto. Despite strong working-class opposition, the Congress voted this bill into law in the United States of America—against American workers!

Among other things, under the Taft-Hartley law no union officers could be members of the Communist Party. The officers of Local 207 called a meeting to discuss this law. Nelson then discussed it with the top officers of the ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union]. During that time Harry Bridges was in trouble with the law. They was trying to deport



him for being a Communist. We didn't want to add no oil to the fire. The international decided not to break the law but to go along with it to protect the international and the local unions. We decided to withdraw our membership in the Communist Party. Nelson and I also knew they wanted to get rid of Local 207 and put us all in jail. So this was a way to protect the international and the local. We stopped going to Communist Party meetings. But this did not mean we lessened our militancy; as progressive trade unionists, we continued fighting for decent wages, decent working conditions, seniority rights, pensions, welfare funds, better schools, and better health institutions in the communities. And I still felt deeply that socialism was needed to solve the problems of all oppressed workers.

Another bill came up in the state of Louisiana, the right-to-work bill. It was aimed at busting the unions. Andrew Nelson and I took a delegation to the State Capitol at Baton Rouge to speak against this right-to-work bill. Many speakers were lined up to speak against the bill. We had many businessmen, middle-class people, ministers, progressive labor leaders, and politicians who was against the bill, along with members of the unions. We were speaking before a nine-man committee and urging them not to pass this bill. Finally the decision came: five to four; five for the bill, four against. We lost the fight. We lived with that law for two years. However, the unions managed to survive through this struggle.

Later Earl K. Long, Huey P. Long's brother, was running for governor of Louisiana. The labor movement said it would support him, and he pledged to repeal the law if he became governor. We elected him governor. Earl Long did repeal the right-to-work law, and it was knocked out. However, the unions were still facing national antilabor laws like the Kennedy-Landrum law and the Griffin Act, as well as the Taft-Hartley law.

The employers didn't want progressive trade union activities being in operation. Naturally, that was one reason the Taft-Hartley law was passed. The aim was to break up union activities, particularly in the South. The workers were aware of these things from the start. This made us more militant in carrying on union activities. We started organizing the unorganized throughout Louisiana and Mississippi, fighting Jim Crowism.

During this time I was working at Federal Barge Lines. In June 1948 a letter came from the loyalty board of the Commerce Department saying that I was violating the loyalty rules by working for a government agency if I was a member of the Communist Party. They wanted to get me off the Federal Barge Lines, which was then a government-run agency.

Andrew Nelson and I discussed this letter to decide what I should do. We also wrote a letter to the international vice president of the ILWU in San Francisco.

I refused to answer the questions the Department of Commerce sent. I had until August 9 to answer the questions or be discharged from the job. But Fed-



eral Barge Lines changed hands from a government agency to a private agency. The private agency was named Inland Waterways Corporation, and the government rules didn't apply to a private agency. Companies and government agents was attacking us on all sides. Even so, we were determined to win demands for union members. Moreover, the Southern states was antiunion. This was one reason that union demands for workers was hard to obtain without a struggle. And my own job was often on the line.

Once before the Federal Barge Lines was trying to fire me. I was dismissed because I was too militant, although they didn't say that. The president of my union, Brother Nelson took action immediately. My union local called an emergency meeting with the company's five shop stewards (I myself was a shop steward). Some workers called for an immediate strike action. Some workers called for a work slowdown. When the decision was put to a vote, the majority of workers voted for a work slowdown.

Next day, union members staged a work slowdown. Each member was slow going to their working position. Naturally, the company's superintendent, supervisors, and foremen objected to this move. Throughout the day, the work slowdown continued. Some workers was asked, "Can you work faster?" The workers answered, "We are working." Some foremen said, "You are on the job, but not working."

The work slowdown lasted a day and a half. Finally, the superintendent called the president of the local for an emergency meeting at two o'clock that afternoon. The shop stewards, the president of my union, and I went to the office. The company presented statements; the union presented my statements. A decision was made at company headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri. Finally, when the decision was sent back to Local 207, the company president in St. Louis recommended that I be suspended for thirty days before returning to work. The union accepted this decision with the understanding that no seniority was lost. The president and shop stewards notified the workers that "the work slowdown has been called off." That was a victory for the union. Most of all, this proved how strong and well organized Local 207 was in those days in the South.

In the meantime, I worked at Higgins Warehouse until the thirty days was up. Then I returned to Federal Barge Lines.

When I returned to work I was still dock steward and sat on the negotiating committee, the executive board, the trustee board, and the political action committee. And I remained a progressive trade unionist.

What Federal Barge Lines didn't know was that I was vice president of my local, and even if I was removed from the docks I would still be active on the negotiating committee, working on all contracts with all companies that had contracts with our local.

Every two years an election for union representatives of Local 207 was held. The general membership would elect a five-man election committee.



The election committee traveled in a car from plant to plant, so each member could get a chance to vote. This took two or three days traveling time. The election committee members who had to take days off the job to do this work would receive the same pay from the union as on the job. When all votes were collected, the election committee came to the Local headquarters at 420 Gravier Street and counted each candidate's votes. Some union representatives would lose, some would win. This was trade union democracy. Both Nelson and I was reelected as president and vice president. I continued in my local fighting for better wages and better working conditions as a member of the negotiating committee facing the company, even while I was suspended from the job on the docks.

Other organizations besides the unions tried to educate black and white workers in the South. One of these was the Southern Conference Education Fund. SCEF played an important role in helping workers throughout the South. One time in 1948 they organized a three-day conference in New Orleans that I attended. At the conference I met Walter White and his wife, Gladys. Walter White was executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He was the guest speaker one night during the conference. I sat with his wife while he spoke. "Can't he speak!" she said. To tell the truth I never had any great confidence in Walter White. I respected him but he didn't seem too militant. He was very light-skinned and could pass for white. The best thing he did was go to Klan meetings in the South and get information on them. One time he nearly got caught and they was gonna kill him, but he got out. I respected him for doing that undercover work.

The next night I met Henry A. Wallace, who was also a guest speaker. The crowd was very responsive to him. It was black and white sitting together in the hall—no separation. Afterward, we shook hands and talked briefly about the need to register and vote. He was very friendly and supportive.

The third night, Mary McLeod Bethune, the educator and founder of Bethune-Cookman College, was guest speaker. She talked about problems facing black people in the nation. I was very impressed with the knowledge and feeling coming from her. When she was on her way out, coming down the aisle, I spoke with her and embraced her. I couldn't help but embrace her, I was so impressed. We didn't talk long because she had to catch a plane and her time was limited.

In 1951 I was acting executive secretary of the Louisiana Civil Rights Congress. This was a branch of the national Civil Rights Congress based in New York. The purpose of the organization was to fight for the civil rights and voting rights of black people, and especially people unjustly put in jail, and get lawyers for them. We fought against Jim Crow and segregation. Dr. Oakley Johnson had been the head of the Louisiana chapter but he got fired from his



teaching job at Dillard University and he had to step down. It was just a few of us. Brother Nelson and I worked on different cases in the Civil Rights Congress. Its existence was a great comfort to black people—just by knowing hope was around and active in this time of violence, which was every place, especially in the South.

One example of what we did was a young black married man named Paul Washington. Washington, and another black man by the name of Ocie Jugger, was charged with raping a white woman in Algiers, Louisiana. Washington was in jail six or seven months before our Local 207 heard about the case. We learned about Paul Washington through another black man who was a member of our union. This union brother said he had talked with a black trustee in jail who told him about the case. Paul Washington and Ocie Jugger had received the death penalty.

Brother Nelson and I got in contact with the William L. Patterson, National Executive Secretary of the Civil Rights Congress in New York. We turned over the information we had received about the case.

William Patterson came to New Orleans and we went to see Paul Washington. He asked if the Civil Rights Congress could help him in any way because he was innocent of the rape charge and felt he didn't get a fair trial, since he had an court-appointed attorney and an all-white jury. President Nelson called our attorney, James McCain, and asked if he would look into the case.

After the attorney reported back, President Nelson presented Washington's case before our local's executive board to see if our local could help. I spoke before the executive board in favor of supporting Paul Washington. I said, "Lots of our black people have been railroaded on false charges of rape. Our people have been continuously lynched legally and it is about time for our people, especially our trade union sisters and brothers, to fight against this so-called rape charge that is attacking our people. I call it legal lynching and I ask the executive board to give us their support!" I also told the members of the executive board that I would work with Brother Nelson on this case.

In the meantime, our local set up a defense committee to raise funds to work together with the Louisiana Civil Rights Congress. William L. Patterson and lawyers from the national office started plans to have the case appealed. Louis Berry, a local black attorney, also worked on the case. Dances and raffles was given to raise funds for the defense appeal. We brought the case to the black communities and churches. Ministers gave us permission to come before their congregations to present the case.

In the churches and communities I made a speech that went like this: "There are a lot of Paul Washingtons and Ocie Juggers in the South being framed. This is a big fight and we are not fighting this battle alone. There are many organizations who are helping us fight for justice in the South. But we must also help ourselves if we want others to help us. Numbers of unions are with us in our fight. Local unions and international unions are with us."



When the attorneys came to New Orleans, I was with them in a local attorney's office when they prepared the appeal brief. I was part of their security. I went with the attorneys every place. I also went along when the attorneys went to jail to talk with Paul Washington. I had the opportunity to shake his hand and inquire about his health. Under the circumstances, Paul Washington was feeling all right at that time. When the time came for Paul Washington to talk to the attorneys about his case, the union brothers and I left them in privacy.

Union officials found out where Paul Washington's wife was living. They asked me to keep in touch with her. I visited his wife and little girl often. The only time Paul Washington got a chance to see his little girl was behind prison bars.

The attorneys got Paul Washington a new hearing with the State of Louisiana Supreme Court. The State Supreme Court upheld the lower court decision. So Paul Washington was still facing the death penalty. Then the attorneys made a motion to the United States Supreme Court, but the motion was denied. I can't recall on what grounds the motion was denied. We fought hard to save Paul Washington's life. Unfortunately, due to this unfair "justice," the death sentence was carried out. Paul Washington was executed on a Friday in July 1952. I felt terrible, especially for his wife and daughter.

Ocie Jugger's statement during the trial was that he had only asked this white woman for some food because he was hungry. The court attorney gave our attorneys this report about the case. They said the police had a written confession that was signed by Ocie Jugger. We knew this statement was a lie because Jugger couldn't read or write.

In court, before an all-white jury, Jugger was asked to read the name that was signed on the confession. He didn't know his own name on the paper. Then the attorney gave Jugger a piece of paper and asked him to write his name. He didn't know how to write his name. The attorney proved that point. Someone else had signed Ocie Jugger's name on the confession of rape. Ocie Jugger couldn't read or write, so it was impossible for him to sign a confession or any other thing.

During the trial, Ocie Jugger's lawyers kept asking the white woman had he raped her. During the whole trial, she never answered the question yes or no. Every time the attorneys asked her had he raped her, the woman pretended to faint.

The all-white jury found Ocie Jugger guilty as charged, based on circumstantial evidence. This judge sentenced him to death by the electric chair. Then the judge set the date for the execution. Our attorneys got involved in the appeal and made a motion for a new trial, which was denied.

In the meantime the date for Ocie Jugger's execution was getting closer. Four officials from different unions went to Opelousas on a Thursday to ask for a stay of execution. The state of Louisiana was going to execute Jugger that



Friday. Our attorneys went before a federal judge and asked for a stay of execution for Ocie Jugger. The federal judge turned down the stay of execution.

That Thursday before the execution a large gathering of white people—women, men, old, young, babies, and children of all ages—came to see the electric chair, which was being brought in a truck to the courthouse yard. I never saw the likes of it in all my life! It was outrageous. You should have seen those people's faces, all lit up like a Christmas tree, cheering, laughing, hollering, in a state of excitement, like they was in an amusement park.

Four of us union men was standing among the crowd. Everywhere I looked these white people was picking up their children and putting them on their shoulders so they could see the electric chair. Some white people I was standing near was explaining to their children, "That is an electric chair. It is for a nigger. That's what they are going to use to kill that nigger in tomorrow."

All the black people who lived in that town had left the courthouse yard. Only the white people remained. Only two black men was left there—a black union brother and myself. The other two union brothers was white—one from the leather and fur workers union and one from the tobacco workers union.

Our headquarters for that day was at a barber shop, so the Civil Rights Congress office in New Orleans could keep in touch with us. It was extremely dangerous in this Ku Klux Klan town. When the union brothers and I walked on the streets in this little town going back and forth to the barber shop, white people tried to provoke us by bumping into us on the streets. This was perfectly clear to us. We didn't say anything to these people. We didn't give them any reason to go into their violent act. The white union brothers walked ahead of the black union brother and me and kept their eyes on us for security. When we went back to the barber shop, Dr. Oakley Johnson, who was at the office in New Orleans, had called on the phone and left word with the barber for our delegation to leave that Ku Klux Klan town before dark for our safety.

The next day, on Friday, so-called justice was carried out; Ocie Jugger was executed.

Later, after the execution of Ocie Jugger, Albert Jones, one of our attorneys who defended him, was visiting his own mother in the country in Louisiana. Someone shot him three times with a .22 rifle. He was hospitalized at the Charity Hospital in New Orleans. Often I went to visit him in the hospital. Finally, he recovered and continued in the union and civil rights, fighting for the rights of the poor black people in the South.

The Louisiana Civil Rights Congress tried to help anyone who was seeking our help. But sometimes we lost contact with the people who needed help. We heard about a lady in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who was seeking our help, so I wrote a letter that Mrs. Sims typed up and sent it to her. The letter said: "Dear Mrs. Bailey, the Louisiana Civil Rights Congress has heard about you from our national office in New York and we are interested in helping you, if we can. Since our office is in the South, it will be easier



for us to get in touch with you than for New York to send someone down from up North. Now, we want you to send us more information about your brother and his wife. Please answer the following questions: What was the charge they was convicted of. Was it murder, robbery, rape, or what? Who was the lawyer who defended them? When was they arrested, when tried, when convicted? Do you have newspaper clippings about the case and will you send them to us? Could you or some other relative come to New Orleans later on and tell us all about the case? If we can get more information about the case, so we can know whether or not we can help, we will be very glad." I signed the letter: "Very truly yours, Lee Brown, Acting Executive Secretary, Louisiana Civil Rights Congress."

When I sent this letter and I didn't get an answer from the person, I thought maybe someone opened all their mail and they hadn't received that particular letter. I wouldn't have been too surprised, because the FBI opened all my personal mail and union mail, and letters containing civil rights issues on different people. Sometimes the FBI would wait at the post office when my secretary went to pick up the mail. The FBI told Mrs. Sims that they was FBI and that she had to show them the mail. They intimidated her into showing them the mail; this is what they did. Anyway, after I didn't get any answer from Mrs. Bailey, all I could do was close the case.

A black man who lived in Laurel, Mississippi, named Willie McGee, was in trouble with the authorities of that city, who claimed he raped a white woman. The Civil Rights Congress in New York was handling this case at the time. Since the Civil Rights Congress in New Orleans was closer to Laurel, Mississippi, I was asked if I would get in touch with Dr. Oakley Johnson to work with us on this case.

First, a defense committee involving the union and people of the community was set up. Dr. Johnson often worked along with the union. Dr. Johnson asked me, "Would you go to Laurel, Mississippi, and take Mrs. McGee (Willie McGee's mother) a bus ticket directly to her home?" A community meeting for Willie McGee's defense was being held in New Orleans and they wanted to bring his mother to the meeting.

Every precaution was being taken to keep Mrs. McGee from being followed and attacked by reactionary white people in Laurel. By taking a bus ticket directly to Mrs. McGee's home, we could prevent her from having to go to the bus station to buy a ticket.

Mississippi was dangerous for strangers to travel through, especially black strangers. Therefore, taking this under consideration, I discussed matters with Rose. She pleaded with me not to go to this small town in Mississippi. Despite all her pleading, I told her that this was extremely important, because it was a struggle for black people throughout the Deep South and I had to go contact Mrs. McGee and buy a bus ticket, so she could come to New Orleans to attend a meeting to be held that coming Friday night.



I bought a ticket for Laurel and took the train that Wednesday at eight a.m. Someone in New Orleans had notified Mrs. McGee in advance about the nature of my visit. Every possible precaution had been taken, so I wouldn't get hurt or draw suspicion from anyone in Laurel. When I arrived at the station in Laurel, quite a few poor black people were standing in the station. When I got off the train, all eyes seemed to be on me. I felt these people knew I was a stranger in town. Each one seemed frightened, like they wanted to tell me, "Go back where you came from, it's not safe here." But no one said one word to me in the station.

Outside a cab driver was standing, waiting. He asked if I was the fellow from New Orleans to see Mrs. McGee. I told him yes. I got in the cab and he drove me to Mrs. McGee's home. My plan was to catch the next train back to New Orleans. Dr. Johnson told me that if I wasn't back in New Orleans at ten p.m. that night, he would call to see if I had arrived safely; if not, he would call the FBI to investigate to find out what happened. I arrived at Mr. and Mrs. McGee's home. After an introduction, I didn't tell them I was from the Civil Rights Congress. Instead I told them I was from the union in New Orleans. The reason was that we had found out that Mr. McGee, Willie McGee's father, was giving out information about Willie McGee's case to the authorities in Mississippi. I was careful in discussing the case because he couldn't be trusted.

Mrs. McGee gave me a great deal of information about the case. Later, some friends of Mrs. McGee came to her house to talk with me. I didn't discuss the case with her friends, but I talked on other issues like the civil rights struggle. The main issue I spoke on was Jim Crowism in the South and how white oppressors were causing this Jim Crow system, which was keeping workers divided and preventing them from organizing into unions.

When my discussion with Mrs. McGee's friends ended, it was time to go back to New Orleans. I went to the bus station and bought Mrs. McGee a ticket to New Orleans. I wasn't under the suspicion of anyone in the station. I told Mrs. McGee that when she got on the bus, not to talk to anyone about where she was going. During that time the cab driver gave me his name and phone number, so he could come to the station and pick me up at a certain time. When I called the cab driver at that time, he told me we had to wait until the train whistle blew. Then he would take me to the station for security reasons and because I was a stranger in town. Everything went along as planned. I was back home in New Orleans at ten o'clock that night.

Mrs. McGee arrived in New Orleans on a Friday. Immediately Mrs. McGee was sent to a private home for security, where she stayed until the time for the meeting.

The Willie McGee Defense Fund meeting was held in the community center. At eight o'clock Mrs. McGee was brought to the meeting. A large number of people came to hear Mrs. McGee speak about her son. Before the meeting



started, I was seated with Mrs. McGee on the platform. My job that night was to be a bodyguard for Mrs. McGee.

Despite the tight security and secrecy in communication, two plainclothes detectives found out about the meeting and was sitting in the audience. Some white workers found out about the detectives' presence and passed the word down. Dr. Johnson, who was in charge of the meeting, advised Mrs. McGee not to speak too much about the case because the detectives was in the audience. Several other people spoke on Willie McGee's case. Some speakers came from the civil rights organization, some from labor, and I spoke on the case also. Before Mrs. McGee spoke, we collected donations for Willie McGee's defense fund.

My subject was the struggle of black workers in the South. I called for freedom and complete emancipation for the working class as a whole.

Mrs. McGee's message was brave and strong. She told everyone to keep up the good work and continue fighting for the rights of the poor people because the people would win.

Some news reporters was present at the meeting. They took pictures of Mrs. McGee and all the people on the platform and the audience. After the meeting Mrs. McGee was taken back to a secure place to spend the night. The next morning she went back home to Mississippi.

After this period, I was no longer able to be involved in the case. I was facing problems and had to take extreme precautions. They were getting after me too. So I didn't know the outcome of the Willie McGee case. *[Willie McGee's conviction was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court and two stays of execution were granted. But after a third trial and conviction all appeals were denied.]*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

# ON THE ROAD FOR THE UNION

In spring 1955, I was elected in the Local 207 membership meeting to travel with Brother Andrew Nelson as a delegate to the Eleventh Biennial Convention of the ILWU in Long Beach, California, from April 4 to April 8.

I went home to get prepared and threw a few clothes in my suitcase and some necessary union credentials in my briefcase; then I was ready to leave. Brother Andrew Nelson and his family came to my house to pick me up for the trip. Before we started toward Long Beach, Brother Nelson had to drop his family off at his father-in-law's house, located in a small town near New Orleans. Afterward, we started on our long journey in his old model Oldsmobile.

Sugarland, Texas, was our first stop. Unexpectedly, we were shocked when we saw hundreds and hundreds of black prisoners working on a farm. Those black men, wearing white prison clothes, were being guarded by white guards riding horses and carrying shotguns.

Brother Nelson and I discussed why so many black men was in prison. One of the main reasons was being black; another reason was that they didn't have proper representation in courts. We knew what life was like in this racist, Jim Crow, discriminating society; seeing all those black prisoners made us more determined to carry on our fight for freedom for the poor workers.

We didn't sit there too long in the car cause we knew the guards would get suspicious of us; they liable to say we trying to break somebody out.



One thing for sure, at the convention we knew we would meet all our brothers and sisters from different parts of the country who was facing similar problems as those prisoners: maybe not at that moment, but they might be victims tomorrow, particularly black workers who are more oppressed than any other sector of workers. Not because of God or sin but because of monopoly capitalism!

Another time we stopped to rest and get something to eat, a sandwich or something, in a small place in Arizona. When we left and had driven for a while, Brother Nelson noticed that a car was behind us. He said, "Looks like that car behind us is following us." This car followed us a long way; then Brother Nelson stepped on the gas and speeded up his old model Oldsmobile. Then the car behind started speeding, trying to overtake us. It seemed to me we were speeding for hours. Finally the car turned off the highway and went back in the other direction. There was white men in the car, but we never knew who they was or their intentions. We knew it was dangerous to travel in those small towns. And out there in the desert they could kill you and nobody would know nothing about it. However, Brother Nelson and I was prepared to defend our lives. I had a little .38 pistol given to me by a lady named Momee (I roomed with her when Rose and I separated for a while). Momee was old and she used to send me on errands, like paying her dues at the Eastern Star, and she gave me a piece for protection.

Finally, having traveled on the road three days and four nights, tired but determined, Brother Nelson and I arrived in Los Angeles early on a Sunday morning. Brother Nelson had a brother-in-law living in Los Angeles on 54th Street. So we went to his home early that morning. Leroy and his wife was asleep. When we finally woke them up, they came to the door. I was introduced by Brother Nelson. Leroy and his wife said, "Andrew's friend is truly our friend! You are welcome!"

Afterward, Leroy's wife fixed our breakfast. Leroy went out and brought in some drinks. Leroy's wife started playing music on a combination radio, phonograph, and TV. This was the first time I had seen all these various forms of entertainment combined into one. Now this was quite a treat; in fact, we enjoyed ourselves very much that Sunday morning!

Later that evening I went out to take in the sights. Los Angeles was my old stomping ground. I lived there during the war and knew my way around. I didn't return to Brother Nelson's brother-in-law's home that night. Instead I spent the night with one of my old friends, a lady named Pat, and some of her friends. We sat up laughing and drinking and talking about old times. Pat used to work at Ella's café, where they called me Kokomo.

The next morning I left Pat's house. I took the Long Beach car to the auditorium where the convention was being held. I called Brother Nelson at his brother-in-law's home and told him to bring my briefcase and meet me at the convention.



Before Brother Nelson and I went into the convention we had to go before the credentials committee to prove we was legal delegates and get approval from the committee. I was accepted as an official delegate from Local 207. The convention activities started at ten a.m.

At the convention, I was on an important committee—the committee on publicity and education. During the convention I stood up and nominated a candidate for the international executive board, Brother Bernard Lucas, from Local 208 in Chicago. I knew him from the time when he came to visit our local and I invited him to speak at a meeting on the docks.

Later on in the convention a black caucus meeting was called together to discuss issues concerning the welfare of our members within the international. We had black brothers and Hawaiian brothers at the caucus meeting. Some locals was denying work to black brothers who was traveling and needed jobs. We brought a resolution to the floor. I believe the resolution was for all traveling members to be able to work out of all locals within the international, regardless of race, color, or creed. After it was brought before the convention body, this resolution was approved, except for one or two votes.

I saw ILWU President Harry Bridges briefly at the convention, just to say hello and shake hands. I had met him before when he came to New Orleans and had a chance to talk with him. I liked Bridges; he was honest and he believed in the rank-and-file. He said he tried to represent the rank-and-file. He used to sit on the floor and talk with us about the labor movement. I know he also liked oysters!

A resolution for world peace was brought before the convention and spoken for by Harry Bridges. The resolution said A-bombs and H-bombs should be outlawed, and it called for independence for colonial countries. After Bridges spoke, I decided to hit the deck and go to the microphone to speak in favor of peace. Here is the speech I made at the convention:

I am from the city of New Orleans, in the state of Louisiana. I would like to say to the delegates here that we are facing a very important situation. It is very dangerous. That is why I stand here in this convention and speak for peace, because peace is very important to the American people and it is important to the peoples of the world.

As Brother Bridges stated, it is true that 1 billion, 500 million people are on the march. I am speaking of the colored people of the world, who are crying for peace. And I urge every delegate when he goes back to his union to fight for peace in his community, in his state, in his city, in his church, in his lodge; fight everywhere you can and cry out for peace and tell the representatives of your state and national governments that we want peace; that we don't want bombs, we want schools; that we don't want pain, we want hospitals; that we want education for our people and we don't want war and that we are not going to stand idly by as American citizens. As citizens, my friends, we must speak for peace, and now is the time that we must go back and the ILWU must stand up and fight for peace. Thank you, sisters and brothers.



When I finished speaking on peace, there was loud applause from the delegates. This was an exciting moment for me, to be able to speak before this convention and call for peace.

After I spoke, one brother named Maxey from Local 6 got up and spoke against the resolution. Maxey seemed to speak against everything that came to the floor. If we had brought in a resolution to give Maxey a raise, he would have spoken against it. I couldn't figure him out. Anyway, somebody made a motion and the peace resolution was approved by the delegates.

The convention continued with speeches about issues facing workers in this country. I learned a lot from various delegates from different parts of the country. I would be able to return to my own Local 207 equipped with knowledge to help members of my local and members in other locals in New Orleans.

I enjoyed the convention, where I met lots of trade unionist brothers and sisters. I met a lady who was a Russian immigrant and we discussed many issues about workers in the South. She was there with her husband, who was a lumber worker somewhere up north in Oregon. She belonged to the women's auxiliary of his union.

Lots of pictures was taken at the convention. I met some white delegates from Canada and they asked me if I would join their delegation and have pictures taken with them. Another black brother from Los Angeles was also asked. Both of us accepted this invitation. They explained that they wanted to take pictures with us to show unity and good relationships with black people. I put in an order for some of those pictures to be sent to our Local in New Orleans.

I had an opportunity to talk with a very militant lawyer named Vince Hallinan from San Francisco. He told somebody he wanted to talk with me. He must've heard me speak at the convention. He wanted to discuss issues that blacks and other workers was facing in the South. I discussed many issues with Vince Hallinan and gave him much information on how black workers was being exploited by the bosses and how black and white workers was divided in the South by Jim Crowism and segregation. I explained why the labor movement was weak in the South—because the unorganized have to be organized. When we can educate white and black workers and achieve unity, it will better for all issues that we are facing. I said this wasn't a race issue but a bread-and-butter issue. The strategy that was used against the workers was "divide and conquer." I preached unity to white workers and black workers as well. Vince Hallinan and I learned from each other. He was outspoken and seemed very militant and progressive. We had a good relationship when our discussion ended. (Years later when I moved to San Francisco, Vince Hallinan used to tell me that I should write my life story. He said there should be more black trade unionists writing their life stories.)



Later on, a dance was given for all convention delegates. The Russian lady and I went to this dance together. We didn't dance because the floor was waxed and slippery. Shit, I couldn't walk on it, let alone dance on it! But I enjoyed the dance and got a chance to meet a lot of brothers and union members. We exchanged ideas. At the end of the convention, they gave a dinner for all delegates.

Brother Nelson and I stayed eight days in California. We left on Sunday morning on our way back to New Orleans. As we traveled, we were very careful not to stop in any Jim Crow towns. We ate cold cuts and slept in the car.

But when we reached San Antonio, Texas, we had a flat tire and was short of money. Brother Nelson and I, at that time, were members of the Masonic Order. I said, "Let's see if we can get some help from the Masonic Order." We decided to look for the worship master and secretary of the Masonic Lodge in San Antonio.

Someone advised us to go to a particular black funeral home. When we arrived at the funeral home, we talked with the funeral director. We identified ourselves as trade unionists and members of the Masonic Order. Afterward, the funeral director called the secretary-treasurer of the lodge and told him he had two brother trade unionists and members of the order who were in distress and needed some assistance.

The funeral director gave me the secretary-treasurer's address. Then he gave me his name and telephone number in case we got lost. Brother Nelson and I went to the brother's home. We identified ourselves as trade unionists and the brother accepted us with a warm welcome. He said he was Brother Smith. Brother Smith asked for our lodge number and the name of our worship master in New Orleans. We told him, "We are members of Noah's Ark, number 2. Our grand lodge is King James. Our worship master's name is Robert Jones."

Brother Smith's wife fixed us dinner, and then he went out and brought in some refreshments. We didn't sleep that night; we sat up all night discussing many issues, particularly the labor movement. When we were ready to leave, Brother Smith said he was able to raise some money to help assist us on our way back home. He also got us a tire for the car.

That morning Brother Smith's wife fixed us breakfast and lunch to eat on the way. We then greeted each other in brotherly love and sisterly love. This was our philosophy. Brother Smith wished us farewell, "May peace go with you." Then once again we were on our way back home.

We arrived back in New Orleans safely. About six that evening Brother Nelson and I went to pick up his family. We stayed overnight with his father-in-law and sister. We sat up late talking about our trip and the problems facing black workers. Next morning, after breakfast, we all left.



After this trip, I didn't return to work right away. I rested for a few days. In the meantime I prepared my report about the convention to bring before our general membership. I said that our trip was very successful and we talked with brothers and sisters from Canada and Hawaii and other parts of the country and learned how they were doing. The general membership accepted my report and congratulated Brother Nelson and myself for a job well done.

It was also in 1955 that a conference was held in New York City. Numbers of representatives from different unions was present. The purpose of this conference was to discuss human welfare and rights for the people. The conference was known as the Unity Conference, with trade unions and other groups. It was held at the Capitol Hotel on 55th Street.

I was selected by my local to attend the conference. I went on the silver train that runs from New Orleans square into New York City. You could sit anywhere on that train, white and black together, even in the South. When I was coming back to New Orleans, I met a white lady who was going to Arizona. She must have been going to college in New York or somewhere and was coming to see her parents. She and I was sitting at the dining table together when the train stopped in Mississippi. White people outside was standing there looking at us. I told her, "If I was to get off the train here, you wouldn't see me any more!" She looked and said, "You're right!"

I was very proud to be one of the speakers at the conference, representing the most militant union in the South, Local 207, New Orleans, Louisiana. I spoke on Jim Crowism and things that we was confronted with, particularly black workers, who worked on the dirtiest and lowest-paying jobs in the South.

This is the message I left with the other delegates: Jim Crowism keeps workers divided by low wages and bad working conditions. The majority of workers throughout the South are unorganized because of Jim Crowism. All trade unionists, and all concerned people of other organizations, should struggle around particular issues—better schools for our children, better health institutions, and decent low-rent houses for poor people. I stressed the struggle against police brutality and that thousands of black people are being sent to jail because of the lack of justice for poor people. I said, "We should encourage all working people to register and vote. We can achieve lots of things through the ballot. We can vote for candidates who will fight for the rights of working people and poor people throughout the nation."

During my stay in New York, I lived with Mrs. Mallard, whose husband was killed by some Ku Klux Klansmen in Lyons, Georgia. Mrs. Mallard related this tragic event to me. . . . She had left her older daughter at home while she and her husband and baby went to a registration meeting. On their way home three cars loaded with white people dressed in Ku Klux Klan robes was following them. When they stopped at the church, the Klansmen caught up



with them. Mr. and Mrs. Mallard jumped out of their car and ran under the church house, leaving their baby behind in the car. The Klansmen started shooting inside the car. Fortunately they shot over the baby's head, but the car was shot up with bullet holes. Then they started shooting under the church. Mr. Mallard was killed. Mrs. Mallard stayed under the church too frightened to come out. When the Ku Klux Klan thought both of them was killed, they left. She overheard the Klansmen say, "We got both of the niggers. That will stop the niggers wanting to vote now."

When the shooting had stopped and the Klan left, Mrs. Mallard came out from under the church, went to the car, and got her baby. Then she ran to some friends' home. Her friends advised her not to go back to her home. They said they would send some friends to get her daughter. When this was done, her friends went out and made some contacts to get her out of town. They even had some white workers who came over and brought money to aid her in getting out of town.

Mrs. Mallard and her baby went to New York. She didn't take her daughter with her at that time because they didn't want to send them together. After the Ku Klux Klan found out Mrs. Mallard was still alive, they went looking for her. Someone put out a report that said Mrs. Mallard was on a bus with her baby. Another black woman was on the bus with her baby. The Klan took this woman and baby off the bus and they were never heard from again.

Mrs. Mallard's baby boy was about fourteen years old when I met him in New York. When I saw him, I hugged him and tears flowed out of my eyes.

Later Mrs. Mallard's daughter wanted to take me out and show me the town. One night we went to a club named Birdland. The star of the show was Dinah Washington. This was my first chance to see Dinah Washington in person.

The following night I was a guest at the Electrical Workers Union. A dance was going on. I enjoyed myself very much, dancing with the workers and talking about issues facing workers in the South.

The next night a white comrade from the Communist Party picked me up and took me to his home. There I met a group of people, including news reporters. They wanted to interview me about many problems in the South and what the workers was doing to better these conditions. I told them, "We are trying to organize the unorganized and build better relations between black and white workers in the South, so we can defeat the Jim Crow system that is causing major problems among the workers. I believe someday there will be a new South! Labor will have a voice helping to defeat the right-to-work bills throughout the South. Don't be confused by these so-called right-to-work bills. These bills should be called by their proper name: the right to destroy unions and lower your wages, no job security and no future for organized labor bills. We as trade unionists and working people in this country can change this whole picture by organizing ourselves for unity and doing away with the



Jim Crow system. We can build a strong rank-and-file union for action. I am very proud to be here with you and hope I will have the opportunity to come back and see all of you some more." Afterwards, some friends took me back to Mrs. Mallard's house.

The next day I went to another friend's who took me to his house to meet his family. They fixed me a southern dinner: mustard greens, cornbread, and lemonade. Then I was shown around New York and New Jersey. I enjoyed this very much. They wanted me to stay over in New York two more days. I could cash in my train ticket, and they would send me back on a plane. But I told them I didn't ride in planes because I didn't trust them, and I had to get back to the South—there was a lot of work to be done.

I was supposed to see Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois while I was in New York but I missed him. He invited me to his office, but the guy that was bringing me was late and by the time we got there Dr. Du Bois had gone. So I didn't get to meet him. I did go over to the office of the Civil Rights Congress, but William Patterson was out of town.

The following day I prepared to leave to go back to New Orleans. Mrs. Mallard and another lady who was Jewish came with me to the station to see me off. They both were sad and crying. When I left, I told them I would never forget my stay in New York and the things they told me. Also to Mrs. Mallard I said, "You gave me confidence in myself to go back to the South and continue on struggling, and my love will always be with you to the end of my struggle." I was kissed by both of them before I left.

When I returned to New Orleans, my first duty was to make my report to the president and the general membership of my union. I told them about my speech and the newspaper interview and the different people and trade unionists I met and talked with. President Nelson stood up and said, "Brother Brown's report was good. He brought us back some information helpful for us in this great struggle here in the South. I would like to thank Brother Brown for a job well done. He is one of our rank-and-file members who is always ready to do his duty as a trade unionist."

In November 1955, I was working with three hundred or more black and white workers on Galvez Street wharf at the Waterways Terminal Corporation (which used to be Inland Waterways). The company was trying to violate our working agreement. For the safety of the men, our working agreement called for the cranes to lift no more than 2,000 pounds at a time, which amounted to one pallet board. The pallet boards was lifted from the barge and swung over the men's heads to the dock. The company wanted to speed things up and hook up two pallet boards at one time, one on top of the other and weighing 4,000 pounds, to swing with the crane over the men's heads. This was extremely dangerous for the workers. It might break and fall and kill people.



Since I was union shop steward on the dock (as well as vice president of the local), I immediately took up this matter with the foreman and superintendent of the docks. That was step one, following our agreement procedure. We couldn't reach an agreement with the foreman and supervisor. So we had to take step two.

Step two meant calling in the president of the local and getting the general manager of the Waterways Terminals. A meeting was set. We discussed these issues like we had done in the past. The discussion went on over three days. But even then we couldn't reach an agreement. After this unsuccessful discussion, we came out of the meeting.

The following day, the local called a meeting with the workers on the docks concerning this matter. The double pallet boards was loaded up in St. Louis on the barges by workers who was in a different union. In the meantime, our local union members and officials discussed it among ourselves to see what action should be taken. The union members made a recommendation that I should go to St. Louis. I explained, "We should form a committee of three rank-and-file members to go along with me, so the committee would consist of four men."

Meanwhile the union members called for job action. Job action was one of our old weapons to get the demands for our union members from the bosses; job action was a slowdown—working in slow motion.

That Friday we called another meeting in the parking lot, not far from the docks. This meeting was called to raise funds to send three committeemen, besides myself, to St. Louis. I helped select the three other brother members who was to go along with me. The selected committeemen was all black brothers and rank-and-file members; one brother was a dock steward.

Since one of the committee brothers had an automobile, we made preparation to travel in it. When we reached St. Louis, I had a contact there who got us a place to stay.

Despite being strangers in St. Louis, we quickly made new friends. We were invited over to East St. Louis to a night club that had a floor show. A man was singing on stage and his voice sounded like a friend I had heard sing in New Orleans. When he finished singing, I went backstage and introduced myself and told him his voice sounded like a friend's in New Orleans. I told him my friend's name, Roy Brown. He said, "I know Roy Brown. He's a good friend of mine." I also told the singer that three brothers who came with me was sitting in the audience, but I didn't explain the nature of my business in St. Louis.

The singer came to the table and got the names of the three brothers. He introduced us to the audience by announcing, "These men are trade unionists and they are my guests." When the floor show finished, the singer invited us over to his mother's home for dinner the next day. We accepted his invitation. The singer said that when he was in New Orleans he was treated with such



good hospitality, he couldn't let anyone from New Orleans leave without inviting them over for dinner. The brothers and I made new friends in such a short while because we knew how to relate with others very well.

The following day I contacted the dockworkers local. I think they were affiliated with the Teamsters. I asked the president of the local to set a meeting with the committeemen and myself. The president agreed and set a meeting the next day at ten a.m.

Later that day, the committee and I got ready for our seven o'clock engagement at our friend's mother's home for dinner. When the four of us arrived at her home, he introduced us to her. His mother was a very friendly lady. She told us to make ourselves at home while she finished preparing dinner. Once seated in the living room, we started discussing political issues and problems facing labor in this country.

During our discussion, we were called into the dining room for dinner by our friend's mother. This was the first time I had ever seen a table set up like this! His mother served us a southern dinner that included southern fried chicken, rice, cornbread, candied yams, and mustard greens; a quart of beer was placed at each plate. The food was excellent.

After dinner, we laughed and talked at the table. Then we went back into the living room and picked up our conversation where we left off. We spoke about why we must encourage black workers to join unions. The unions have played an important role in getting things we need and want: education, health, and decent homes. It was getting late, so the brothers and I decided to go back to the place where we was staying.

The next morning the three brothers and I went to a cafeteria and ate breakfast. Then we started getting ready to meet with the official in St. Louis at ten o'clock. We arrived and met with the president and his committee. We discussed the pallet board issue. I was the spokesman for our committee. The president of the St. Louis local was named Brother Hook.

We decided to have a look at their contract; all of us, committeemen and president, scrutinized their contract. They ain't had shit in there! There wasn't nothing in their contract to prevent them from loading double pallet boards on the barge. They had to load whatever the company told them to. Their hands was tied!

After we finished looking over their contract, I said, "If you send the freight on double pallet boards, we will not unload it in New Orleans. We can work this out so it won't jeopardize your contract with your company." Because we was more militant and had struggled we had a good working agreement that protected our workers. The brothers in St. Louis was not experienced and did not have this kind of agreement. But we didn't want to jeopardize the jobs of the workers in St. Louis so we said, "Send it, but we're not going to unload it."

The committeemen and president received us very well. All of them, black officials and rank-and-file members of their locals, was glad to meet us. They



told us, "We are glad you came. We rank-and-file members here in St. Louis can work together with your rank-and-file dock workers in New Orleans. We can have unity and solve our problems."

I gave the officials and the members an invitation. If they was ever in New Orleans, they should look up our Local 207, and they would be welcomed.

When I returned to New Orleans, at our first general membership meeting, I made a report on the St. Louis meeting. I told the sisters and brothers I felt that this meeting was a success because we made friends and advanced unity with the St. Louis workers, although there was nothing they could do to help our situation because they didn't have a good working agreement. The members accepted my report and was happy that our committee had made contact with the St Louis workers.

When the committeemen and I came back to New Orleans, the dockworkers was still on job action. So we called another meeting on the dock and worked out some plans and ended the job action because we had something else in mind.

Finally the brothers in St. Louis sent another barge from St. Louis, loaded top to bottom with doubled-up pallet boards. We hadn't asked the brothers in St. Louis not to load the barge up, since their contract stated that their local had to perform the work that the company had for them to do. But we also knew that no matter how they loaded the pallet boards, we didn't have to unload them when they was swinging over 2,000 pounds.

The company was persistent in violating our contract. The company tried to feel out our strength. We started to unload the barge that came from St. Louis. Our two men who worked with the crane down in the barge hooked on the pallet boards. The men hooked on one pallet board, living up to the working agreement.

The foreman shouted at the men, "Don't send up one pallet board, send up two!" So the men hooked on two pallet boards, following the instructions of the foreman. Then the crane operator, who was a shop steward, said, "I am not going to move my crane as long as the company is violating the contract!"

The men sent for me. The foreman told me, "The men have stopped working." I told the foreman the reason the men had stopped working was that the company had violated the contract and the men wouldn't work on this particular barge lifting two pallet boards. The men would carry one but not two.

Naturally, the foreman tried to put me on the spot by saying I was trying to stop the work. I told the foreman, "It's not me who's stopping the men from working. It's you stopping the men from working because you are trying to get us to violate our contract!"

The foreman called the supervisor. When the supervisor came, he asked me what the trouble was. I told him, "The only trouble is that the company is trying to get us to violate our working conditions." The supervisor called down



the head superintendent from his office. He asked me the same question; I gave him the same answer. I wasn't going to encourage my union brothers to break the contract. So the head superintendent told the supervisor, "Fire all the men involved in working on that barge."

Finally, and most significantly, I spoke and asked the superintendent, "Are you firing these men on the barge?"

He replied, "Yes."

I told the superintendent, "You just fired over three hundred men."

The head superintendent asked me, "What do you mean?"

I said, "When you fired these brothers for refusing to violate the contract, then you fired all of the men working on the dock."

Immediately I went into action. I told each shop steward on the job to go to each gang and order the men to quit working and come in. I told them to tell the men, "We are having a work stoppage meeting. Come in under the shade on the dock."

I went on the docks to all the gangs working boxcars and told the gangs to throw in all their runs ("runs" was wooden planks placed in the barges or boxcars for tractors to run on), put them on the dock, and leave their equipment in good shape. Then we went under the shade where the other brothers was waiting. We had some brothers working at the Lower Fleet, but we wasn't able to reach them.

I started off the meeting by explaining why the work stoppage was being called. We had three or four workers on the company side. One of these men used to be a shop steward but he was removed. This particular man was trying to get the brothers to go back to work and wait to see what the president of our local would say about this work stoppage.

The majority of the union brothers replied, "We don't need to wait on President Nelson because Lee Brown, the vice president, is here and we are taking orders from him now!" All the shop stewards was with me 100 percent. When I finished telling the men about the work stoppage, they decided not to go back to work.

The company called in our president to set a meeting the next day at ten o'clock. At that time, our union shop stewards, the president, and I met with the company officials. The company officials insisted they wasn't breaking the contract. The company tried to convince us that they had a right to put in new equipment. Our union president told the company official that what they was using wasn't new equipment and that they was trying to change our working agreement.

So the argument went, pro and con, and lasted two hours. Afterward the meeting was adjourned. Then the general president of the company spoke and said, "I am going to call some other head officials in St. Louis and ask our president his answer on what position he would take on this matter."



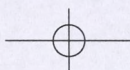
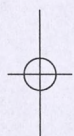
*On the Road for the Union*

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Next day the company general president called on the telephone for a meeting with our union president, shop stewards, and me. In the meeting the company general president asked us to return to work and wait until the time came to negotiate a new contract; the workers would handle only one pallet board at a time until the contract expired.

The president and I and the shop stewards agreed to this because we was living up to the union contract. All the workers went back to work. This was another victory for the rank-and-file.







## CHAPTER EIGHT

ANDREW STEVE  
NELSON'S TRIAL

In the spring of 1956 the employers and the government got after us again to try to bust the union. This time the Waterways Terminal Company wanted to use outside men to bust the union. We had an inside gang and an outside gang. The inside gang was working at the Galvez Street wharf and the outside gang worked at other places where the company had work. The outside gang wasn't regular work; it was part-time. We had union men doing the inside work. But these outside men wasn't in the union and the company tried to use them against us. These men wanted to come back to the Galvez Street wharf and go ahead of regular union men with more seniority; they wanted their outside work to count toward seniority and the union said no. We said, "If you gonna work on the Galvez Street wharf while we got a contract, you got to be in the union." It was a union job but it wasn't a closed shop.

The company got one of these men to bring charges against Local 207 at the National Labor Relations Board. Matter of fact, the company spearheaded it, since he didn't know anything about the Labor Relations Board. The company was doing this to break the union so that it could use nonunion workers. The company told those guys to say that the union threatened them because they wouldn't join the work stoppage back in 1955, which was a lie. We tried to explain to them that if you work inside, you was supposed to be in the union like everybody else. Outside we gave them a break; if there was work on the outside we sent them there to work. We did not threaten a slowdown or strike against brothers; that was common sense.



In May the union wrote a response to the charges. We said we did not demand that the company stop hiring these men but that the company should live up to the seniority provisions of our contract.

The National Labor Relations Board subpoenaed me and the other unions officers in July, and I testified about our case. I told them that we did not threaten or harass those men. We was trying to win them over to our side. They was still our brothers working on the job and we wanted to try to get them to join the union to benefit their own selves.

Even so, the union lost the battle. The National Labor Relations Board ruled in favor of the outside men, that they could work at the Galvez Street wharf.

We lost that battle but we didn't stop there. Certainly the union wasn't going to take this decision lying down. We had a union agreement, a contract, but we needed to make it stronger. The president of the union and I got together and asked the National Labor Relations Board for an election so we could have a closed union shop. The NLRB set a date for the election and came down to the dock and handled the election for the union.

Members voted by secret ballot. Two hundred men voted on the dock in favor of the closed shop, except two antiunion workers, one black and one white. The company and the government wanted the workers fighting against each other, and they wanted to use those two to weaken the union. After that the men refused to work with the two. Struggling to keep the union in the South active, we wasn't going to let two men split the union. Still, the company didn't want to get rid of the them. (For a time the company made the black worker some kind of watchman, a stool pigeon. Once he caught me drinking a beer and tried to get me fired.)

After the election the National Labor Relations Board gave the union permission to display a bulletin board informing the men that they had thirty days to become union members. All the nonunion members joined except the two antiunion men. Even a supervisor asked the two men to join the union, but they still refused. According to the union agreement, the company was forced to take the two antiunion workers off the job. The rank-and-file finally won this struggle against the company. It was another victory for the union!

But at the same time it was becoming much harder for the union. A federal grand jury was investigating Andrew Steve Nelson under the Taft-Hartley law. I was very concerned about Brother Nelson. Not only was he president of Local 207, but he was also a very good friend, including his family. Susie, his wife, and their five children treated me as one of the family. Every Sunday I went to his home and had dinner. He was a good cook and would prepare different salads for me to eat. I ate dinner with him and his children. Susie never had time to sit down and eat with us, but she would always be present and willing to help. After dinner, over a fifth of whisky, we discussed politics and important issues that confronted black people here in America and abroad.



Brother Nelson had wisdom and knowledge and a reputation for being fair-minded to both black and white workers. He often said, "We are the most oppressed people, more than any other people in the world, not because of any sin we have committed but because of monopoly capitalism."

I sincerely trusted and had confidence in his ability to work for the good and welfare of his fellow workers at all times when it should be done. I learned a great deal about labor from him; he taught me like a teacher teaching his pupil.

In May 1956 we learned that Brother Nelson was being indicted. We read it in a newspaper report. The Federal Grand Jury indicted Brother Nelson and charged him with violating the Taft-Hartley law. They claimed he was a member of the Communist Party. He was charged on four counts of making a false affidavit of non-Communist membership and affiliation. Nelson was shocked and angry about this charge because at the time they was talking about, 1952 and 1953, he was not a member of the party. We had withdrawn our membership under the Taft-Hartley law.

Nelson's bail was \$10,000. Members of Local 207 and friends of different unions helped put up his bail money. Brother Nelson pleaded not guilty. He was released on bail and was brought to trial in September. Brother Nelson got our union lawyer, James McCain, to represent him in the federal Court. I was with him every day of his trial.

Brother Nelson suffered with asthma, and during his trial he had a serious attack. In court I sat close by and watched him suffer, and it hurt me to my heart that I wasn't able to do anything to ease his pain. The lawyer asked Judge Christenberry to give him permission to see a doctor for medicine and treatment. This racist judge refused. So I had to take him outside in the hall because he was gasping for air. I laid him on a long bench in the hallway of the court until he felt a little better.

I was Brother Nelson's security, seeing him back and forth to court and to his home. During the trial seeing my president, a good friend, being mistreated brought uncontrollable tears to my eyes and they ran down my cheeks.

Then, all of a sudden, I got angry with this whole evil capitalist system that preys on the black and poor people. I had seen Jim Crowism, segregation, and discrimination in action as well as hate. Then and there I made a pledge to myself that I would carry on if President Nelson was defeated in this long and hard struggle. I would become a dedicated trade unionist by further sacrifice and putting my life on the line. During this trial I was being educated. I took a solemn oath: it was my responsibility and duty to help educate the workers in the trade union and labor movement for complete freedom and a better way of life.

The majority of Local 207 members supported our president through his defense fund. We wasn't given too much time to set up a defense fund because the court speeded up his trial, which lasted over September 4, 5, and 6. Numbers of unions and friends came to his defense, including the international.



During the trial one of the witnesses for the government was a black man named Arthur Eugene. He said that Nelson was a member of the Communist Party. Anything they would ask him he would agree. He was an agent for them, a stool pigeon, just like he was when he later testified against me at the Un-American Activities Committee. He used to be on a ship in the marine cooks and stewards union but they kicked him out. I reckon that's when he first turned out to be a stool pigeon. I met him back in the 1940s at the union hall after they kicked him off the ship. He didn't have nowhere to go. He told me about his children, and I asked Lawrence Blanchard, the foreman at the docks, could he give him two or three days work to try to help him. I used to tell Mrs. Sims to give him a few dollars out of petty cash to buy some cigarettes. I tried to help him. He came to some of the party meetings but I didn't see him too regular. He was probably snitching on Nelson and me back then.

After he testified against Nelson and me, I heard that his mother refused to let him come to her house and his wife said she didn't want to see him no more. They knew I tried to help him.

Maybe it should not be a shock when a person ain't got knowledge and understanding living in this goddamn system, but you got to be cautious, cautious.

Brother Nelson did not testify at the trial. James McCain, the lawyer, decided he was too sick to testify. McCain tried to get the judge to issue a directed verdict of not guilty. He said there was no clear criteria for membership in the Communist Party and that Andrew Nelson did not believe he was in the party when he signed the affidavits. The lawyer also had documents showing that at least one of the government witnesses was a paid informer.

Of course, Brother Nelson continued struggling to survive to tell his side of the story, clinging to life but getting weaker and weaker with each passing day. He was an extraordinary man, with so much confidence in people. This was another reason I loved and respected him.

Finally the trial came to an end. The all-white jury went into the jury room, stayed a few minutes, and returned with a verdict of guilty on all counts. Brother Nelson was released on \$7,500 bail but had to appear in court in a few weeks for sentencing.

When he came back for sentencing, he was given five years on each count running concurrently, which meant he would have to serve five years in a federal penitentiary. James McCain said he would appeal the case.

Shortly after the trial, due to his illness Brother Nelson collapsed and was rushed to the hospital in grave condition. Brother Peter Sheppard, second vice president, and I, first vice president of Local 207, kept in close contact with Brother Nelson's doctors so we could be well informed about our president's condition.



From his sick bed Brother Nelson issued an open letter to the members of the union:

I am not guilty of violating the Taft-Hartley Act; this is just another reactionary, antiunion attack against Local 207 and the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union as a whole, a part of the continuous attack against our International Union and me as an individual. [I] have been chosen as a victim only for the following reasons or causes: (1) because I am a Negro; (2) because I live in the Deep South, where the prejudices against rank-and-file unionism and the Negro people will lay the full basis for an easy frame-up in the district courts against the ILWU by an all-white jury regardless of the circumstances. A jury that would be prejudiced against me or any member of the Negro race, or the ILWU, a jury not interested in the facts but a fifteen (15) minute verdict of guilty, regardless of the nature of the witnesses, stool-pigeons, paid informers, etc., and (3) a conviction, so long as the conviction was there to be used in furthering the attack against the International Union in its democratic rank-and-file policies.

I am not a member of the Communist Party now, nor have I been a member of the Communist Party or affiliated with the Communist Party at any time since signing the Taft-Hartley non-Communist affidavit as President of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, Local 207, nor have I been at any time since the early part of 1948. Neither have I been active in any of the affairs, and further have made no contribution to its activities, and the frame-up organized against me by the Justice Department thru paid Federal Bureau of Investigation stool-pigeons is in its entirety a pack of ungodly lies and to let them go unchallenged would be a crime against everything honest and decent. And therefore I appeal to you the members of my union, both Local and International, to assist me to the height of your ability in my appeal to prove this frame-up for what it really is, and as I have aforesated it to be a continuance of the false attacks and charges against our International Union as a whole, its locals and their membership. Thanking you in advance for your cooperation, I remain Fraternally Yours, Andrew Nelson, President Local 207-ILWU.

In the meantime, I went before the executive board of our union and asked if Brother Nelson's salary as president could be continued so that his family could have money to survive and pay the note on his home. The executive board approved continuing his salary. Brother Nelson's daughter, Elaine, came every Friday and picked up his check.

I knew I was next in line to be investigated and put on trial, so Brother Peter Sheppard stepped up and took over as first vice president and I became second vice president of Local 207. With this method we kept the union functioning.

Brother Andrew Nelson lived about four months after his trial. He came home from the hospital but he had to go back. He died on Saturday, January 12, 1957, about eight o'clock.



After I got over the shock, I started calling up our key members of the union and rank-and-file members, as well as many of his friends, and told them that Brother Andrew Nelson had passed on. Everyone I contacted was very sad and shocked to hear of his death, knowing so well how he fought for the rights of his people.

Brother Andrew Nelson was a true Marxist and Communist, informed and dedicated to changing this system and transforming it to socialism. At Brother Nelson's wake many union members and lots of friends and workers came to show their last respects. Each and every one of them was dedicated to the cause, both black and white, throughout the city of New Orleans.

Many different union members was present at his funeral. Brother Andrew Nelson was buried with honor and dignity. His denomination was Methodist. I spoke the last words over his body; that's the way he would have wanted it to be. "Brother Nelson was a citizen, fighter, husband, and teacher. He fought with his life in his hands."

Finally, his body was laid to rest in a grave site outside of New Orleans. In addition to all his friends who came for the services many telegrams came from as far as New York, Chicago and San Francisco, California. All the telegrams was given to me to deliver to his wife, Susie.

After the funeral, Susie asked if I would stay at the house with her and the children. I agreed. They didn't want to be left alone that night.

The next morning the union secretary-treasurer, Mrs. Sims, came over to the house and also Brother Chester Langer, who was Brother Andrew's worship master from his lodge. We gathered around the family and discussed their economic situation with them and how to work it out for the best. We stayed with our late president's family all the way.

Now I will close on the activities of the late Brother Andrew Nelson. He will live forever in my mind and in my heart as a true brother in the struggle.



## CHAPTER NINE

# THE GOVERNMENT COMES AFTER ME

Brother Nelson passed, and the next thing I was subpoenaed. The government had decided to concentrate on the ILWU in the South. They didn't want that union there. That's the whole thing. After Nelson's conviction they thought about bringing me up on state charges (Louisiana had a law requiring members of the Communist Party to register with the Department of Safety), but they would have had to charge the stool pigeons that testified against Nelson too. So instead the House Un-American Activity ~~sub~~ Committee came after me. I'd gotten word that they was gonna investigate me. I was working at a cotton compress, and the U.S. Marshal, served me one day with a letter, a subpoena, to appear before the Un-American Activity Committee, which was Friday, February 15, 1957.

An old doctor from the Charity Hospital, who was a member of the party, was called before the committee the same day. He said to me, "Let's go along with them, cooperate with them."

I said, "Man, cooperate with 'em for what? I ain't done nothing."

"I'm gonna cooperate with them," he said.

I say, "That's you. Don't come tell me what to do. I ain't gonna hand nothing over to them." See, they was trying to kill two birds with one stone. They was gonna try to get the international through me. But I didn't cooperate. They thought I was a troublemaker, but they didn't know I was a troubleshooter!

I ain't had a damn thing to tell them! Tell them what? I wasn't going to admit to nothing. Hell, I wanted to make a statement! That was the tactic I used.



I said I wanted to make a statement first. They wouldn't let me make a statement so I wasn't gonna cooperate with them. I wanted to know was Senator Eastland a member of the Klan. Hell, they wanted to ask me what I belonged to, but I wanted to know what Eastland belonged to! That was the statement I wanted to make. I wanted to throw that monkey wrench in there. I don't remember where I got that idea from, but I came up with something for them! I blocked them—they wouldn't let me make my statement, so that gave me reason not to answer their questions. I got as much right to know about Eastland as he got to know about me. Shit, I don't care who he represents! That's the reason I refused to answer, to let them know all black folks wasn't afraid of their bullshit. They asked me over fifty questions, and I refused to answer them. I told them, "Until I am able to make a statement."

The man what supposed to be the chairman jumped down and ran all around the damn chair. Shit, I just rolled back in my chair like I wasn't thinking about him. He was talking about, "You don't scare me!" I said, "You don't scare me either!" They figured they'd come down South and try to make a fool out of a black man. Try to make me act like an Uncle Tom, scratching my head. They didn't know I was ready for their asses! I'd had me a half pint of Granddad that morning and I was ready. I was looking good too. Even the guy on the TV, Bill Monroe, said I was well groomed. I had this *Quo Vadis* haircut and I had on a steel gray suit, white shirt, tie, and black shoes. I didn't come there with one pants leg rolled up like I just came in off the farm.

They brought that stool pigeon Arthur Eugene to testify against me. He said I was a member of the party. Arthur Eugene was sitting in front of me, and I was sitting behind him in a big chair, like a king. (And with that half pint in me I felt like a king!) They told him to point me out, and he turned around and pointed his finger at me and said, "That's him." That picture was in the papers the next day. First time I ever see a black man on the front page of the paper.

I don't know if they paid Arthur Eugene for his spying or what. I know they did pay him for testifying at the hearing. In fact, to my surprise, they sent me a check for being at the hearing that Friday. They sent me \$25. I thought, What kind of shit is this! They probably had that check made out already, thought I was gonna collaborate with them.

After the Un-American Activity hearing I thought it was all over with. I happened to go to James McCain, the lawyer's office one morning. I was in that area, and I stopped. He said, "Brown, you walking around here? You have been indicted." I thought he was kidding because he used to kid with me a lot. I said, "Been indicted, Brother?" He said, "Yeah, you was indicted by the grand jury. They gonna bring you before court and try you for being a member of the party, the Communist Party of the United States, as a trade union officer." He said, "They claim that when you signed that non-Communist affidavit, you was a member of the Communist Party." I said, "I was not."



I was indicted March 7, 1957, and served with a subpoena, but it was mailed to the wrong address. Then on March 29 I reported to sign up for my unemployment insurance. I was served with the subpoena there at the office to appear before the judge the same afternoon to post bond. I was unable to obtain \$5,000 bond and I was held until Monday, April 1, when Dr. Oakley Johnson posted the bond. I heard the bond money came from the ILWU in San Francisco. In the meantime the Division of Unemployment rejected my claim because they said that I was not available for work March 29. I told them what happened, that I was picked up at the unemployment office that morning, March 29. I was arrested later that same day. But it didn't make no difference to them.

I fought to the best of my ability, with support from unions, individuals, church members, and some other trade unions; even some Catholic priests helped me. Some black Catholics helped me. Some visited where I was in jail before I went to trial. I was proud to be a member of the ILWU, one of the few unions where Negroes had full emancipation and shared leadership responsibility with white workers. Anti-Communists like Eastland did everything they could to destroy the union. What they were doing was unfair. I figured there was no reason for me to be going to trial. For what? Because I was a trade union man, and when they brought me before the Un-American Activity Committee I refused to answer their questions? I wasn't in the party anymore. We'd gotten orders not to pay dues; we was out of the party.

After Andrew Steve Nelson died, I had a dream one night about him. He was sitting in the chair in my room. He told me to get away 'cause they'd come and get me. It wasn't two weeks after that and they had me before the Un-American Activity Committee. The next thing I was indicted.

When I was out on bail before I went on trial, I met this guy from Cuba, a brother. We talked about my case and I told him that if I went to jail I couldn't get no more than five years. He told me, "Hell, I wouldn't give up five minutes for these people!" He made me feel kinda bad. He said he could get me on the sea train going over to Cuba. Maybe he was right. I thought about all the work I had done in the trade union movement and civil rights and now this was what they was trying to do to me. Make me sacrifice five years! It made me mad, but I decided to stay here. The Cuban brother stayed a few days and helped me put together some flyers and things about my case, and then he left. I thought a lot about what the Cuban brother said, and I thought about that dream where Nelson told me to get to stepping.

When they was going to arraign me in October, I decided to jump bail. I had this lawyer who had been appointed by the judge until I could get my own lawyer. I told the lawyer what I planned to do. He didn't say nothing much. They kept postponing the thing and I thought maybe they wouldn't even look for me. Some people said they just wanted me out of New Orleans.

So I went to Hitchcock, Texas, and stayed with my cousin Celie and her husband. I got a job at the cotton compress loading bails of cotton onto a truck.



After about a month the FBI caught up with me one night at my cousin's house. They knocked on the door, and when I opened it a black deputy asked me was I Lee Brown. When I said yes, he told me I was under arrest. They let me go back in the house to put on some clothes. For a minute I thought about going out the backdoor, but something told me not to do it. The day after they put me in Galveston jail, the newspaper said they had the house surrounded by FBI agents. Good thing I didn't go out the back; they would have killed me.

They took me to the jail in Houston where they kept me four or five days. I started talking to the brothers in the jail and made friends. I found out that the black folks, the young black folks, was not scared of the word "Communist." They'd read it in the paper. Some of them asked me what it meant. I'd say to them I was fighting for the rights of my people, fighting for the rights of working people, for trade unions, decent homes, decent education, and decent jobs. And definitely to get rid of race discrimination.

So I made friends, and they hated to see me go the morning when the marshals come to get me. It made me feel good. The brothers was clapping, saying, "Good luck, Brother. Good luck." I liked talking to them. They would come in and talk and one by one ask me questions. I met all kinds. Some in there for murder, all kinds of crimes. I talked with them and they accepted my advice. It gave me strength, gave me courage. It was bit of love and respect from my people.

They took me back to New Orleans and put me in the parish prison until the time for my trial.

They finally brought me to trial on March 24, 1958, in front of Judge Skelly Wright. I was charged on two counts of filing a false affidavit saying that I was not a member of the Communist Party in July 1952. The Taft-Hartley law said that you could not be a member of the Communist Party and an officer of a labor union at the same time. If they convicted me on both counts, I could get ten years in prison and a \$20,000 fine.

At first there was one black person on the jury, a female. The district attorney got her off, so it was an all-white jury. I was in court a whole week for the trial testimony. By then I had new attorneys appointed by the court, Edward Koch, James McGovern, and Earl Amedee, a brother. My attorneys decided that I should not testify. They thought they could make the case without having me testify.

During the trial I noticed that Mr. Mooney from the barge line was there every day. I guess he was watching to see what would happen to me 'cause I gave him so much hell!

They brought in a black woman by the name of Gladys Williams. She said I was a member of the Communist Party. Now I used to go to her house and sit down and we talked and had a few drinks, but we never did discuss political affairs. She was asking me about the Nation of Islam. We talked about Elijah Muhammad and black history, but we never did bring up the political



*The Government Comes After Me*

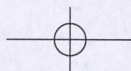
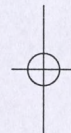
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issue or discuss the Communist Party. Still, she said that I was a member of the party. I knew her husband a long time ago. He belonged to the Progressive Party in 1948 and during the Henry A. Wallace campaign, which I worked on. I heard they later separated. Maybe she was snitching on him.

Then they brought in a Chinese guy to testify against me. I never had seen but one Chinese in New Orleans, and that was on the dock where he was running a restaurant. But they found some young Chinese to come to testify and say that I tried to get him to join the youth Communist Party. I'd never seen him before.

Finally they brought in Arthur Eugene to testify against me. He said I was in the Communist Party. They asked him how he knew I was a member of the party, and he said he used to attend meetings with me. He said we used to have meetings standing in the street. "You don't know those Communists," he said. "They meet standing in the street!" Hell, he was lying so bad! They was fools to listen to his lies. To tell the truth, Arthur Eugene surprised me. I thought about how I had tried to help him years before when he got kicked out of the Maritime Union and needed work. I used to tell Mrs. Sims to give him a few dollars so he could buy cigarettes. I got the superintendent at the barge line to give him work 'cause I knew Eugene had a family. I didn't think he would do what he did to me.









# THE TRIAL OF LEE BROWN

ROBERT L. ALLEN

Lee Brown's trial opened at 10:00 A.M. on Monday, March 24, 1958, in the federal district courtroom of Judge J. Skelly Wright. The government was represented by U.S. Attorney M. Hepburn Many. He was assisted by two trial attorneys, Donald Salisbury and Robert Crandall, from the Internal Security Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. Brown's attorneys were James D. McGovern and Earl J. Amedee.

Brown was charged with one count of making, using, and filing a false affidavit in July 1952 with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) stating that he was not a member of the Communist Party, and a second count of making, using, and filing a false affidavit claiming he was not affiliated with the Communist Party. A provision in the Labor-Management Relations Act (Taft-Hartley Act) of 1947 stipulated that to be in compliance with the law officers of unions had to file affidavits affirming that they were not members of or affiliated with the Communist Party. Hence, the government, to make its case, had to prove that Brown had actually filed such an affidavit and that he was a member of the Communist Party at the time of filing.

A jury of twelve white people was sworn in to hear the case. If convicted Brown could face a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment on each count and a \$10,000 fine.

Prosecutor Many in his opening statement declared that "the Government will show that at the time Brown signed this affidavit . . . stating in that affidavit that he was not a member of nor affiliated with the communist party, that



he was, in fact, a member of that party and affiliated with it." Defense attorney McGovern asked the court to require the government to outline the overt acts that they were going to introduce to prove the charge against Brown. When this motion was denied by Judge Wright, McGovern said that the defense declined to make an opening statement, reserving the right to do so later.

The prosecution then called its first witness, Juanita F. Bunch, a compliance supervisor for the NLRB in New Orleans. She testified that her job was to check that unions filed the required compliance documents with the NLRB. She said her office received such documents, including affidavits, from Local 207 in 1952 and 1953, and she sent out a notice of compliance. The documents in question were presented for identification to the witness and offered for admission as evidence. On cross-examination McGovern sought to establish that the witness could not affirm that the documents presented by the government had in fact been transmitted to her office by Local 207—there was no letter of transmittal—and therefore they should not be admitted into evidence. "I believe the testimony of the witness that she received it back from the local union but there is no letter of transmittal or anything whatsoever to negative the possibility that this might be illegally secured evidence," McGovern contended. Judge Wright, however, ruled that since the documents had official stamps of receipt and came from official custody, that was sufficient basis to admit them into evidence.

The prosecution next sought to prove that the signature on the non-Communist affidavit was indeed the signature of Lee Brown. First Israel Augustine, a notary public, was called and testified that the non-Communist affidavit was signed in his presence, but he admitted that he could not identify Brown sitting in court as the person who had signed the affidavit. Consequently, the prosecution brought in another witness, Leonard Thomen, a loan officer for a local finance company, who said that in 1955 Lee Brown filled out and signed a loan application in his presence. Thomen said he "vaguely" remembered the person who signed the form: "I believe it is Mr. Brown, sitting right over here." On cross-examination Thomen admitted that he didn't have personal recollection of the person who signed the loan application. Another loan agent, J. R. Smith, with another loan company testified as to a "Lee Brown" signature on a loan application in 1955 that he handled, and he identified the signer as "the defendant in the brown suit" sitting in court. To further buttress its linking of "Lee Brown" signatures with Lee Brown in court, the prosecution brought in Frank P. Mooney, manager at Waterways Terminal Corporation and Brown's old adversary in waterfront struggles. Mooney produced a copy of a labor contract with Lee Brown's signature on it. He identified Brown as the signer.

The government now had signatures on documents that had been linked to Lee Brown, but were these the same signature as the one on the non-Communist affidavit? George F. Mesnig, an FBI handwriting expert, was



called to the stand and testified that the signatures were indeed made by the same person. Defense attorney McGovern raised questions about how the documents were handled when processed at the FBI handwriting analysis lab and how the copies brought to court were verified, but his objection to use of the documents on the grounds that there was a failure to establish the chain of evidence was denied by the court.

Feeling that it had established that Lee Brown signed the non-Communist affidavit, the prosecution then turned to the second part of its case, to establish that Lee Brown was in the Communist Party at the time he signed the affidavit and therefore had made a false affidavit. Four witnesses would be called to offer evidence about the party connection: Gladys Williams, Robert J. Chan, Irwin S. Knight, and the peripatetic Arthur Eugene.

Gladys Williams was the most curious of the lot. Williams testified that she joined the Communist Party in 1944 and that she met Lee Brown at the beginning of 1946 at the Godchaux Building on Canal Street, where the party held meetings. During the course of that year she attended various meetings of the French Quarter club and classes that were also attended by Brown, she testified. The prosecution went into great detail about these 1946 meetings, inquiring about who attended and what was said. Even the judge grew impatient. "Well, sir," Judge Wright interjected at one point, "we've gone into 1946 pretty thoroughly. Can we get closer to 1952?" The government replied that other witnesses would augment Williams's testimony and go further.

On cross-examination by Earl Amedee, Williams admitted that she had joined the Communist Party at the behest of the FBI. "I was contacted by government representatives in 1943, and I was also schooled first about one year before I joined, actually joined the Communist Party."

"You were schooled by the FBI?" asked Amedee.

"I was taking studies to learn how to maneuver in the Communist Party."

Upon completing her training as a government spy, Williams was dispatched to join the Communist Party and inform on its meetings. Asked if she discussed this with her husband, she replied, "Well, no. He had his—he had what he liked as a hobby and he liked certain things and I didn't discuss his affairs and I didn't discuss mine's with him." Asked if attending Communist Party meetings was her hobby, she replied, "I said that he had his hobby and I had what I wanted to do. I mean those were secret things that we were entitled to. I was entitled to what I said was secret, or whatever secrets I wanted to have, and he was entitled to have whatever secrets he wants, and that was what I said."

While the party meetings may have been her "secret thing" as far as her husband was concerned, Williams kept the government well informed providing copious written reports of each meeting. Amedee elicited that her efforts as an informer netted \$100 a month. The defense requested an accounting of these payments from the government, and the documents provided



revealed that as of February 14, 1958, Gladys Williams had been paid a total of \$13,238.32 as a government informer.

Williams's written reports were also requested. These proved to be chatty and opinionated, though hardly revelatory of any violent antigovernment conspiracy. She reported that in party meetings much time was devoted to discussions of recruitment and fund-raising, "the same old story," as Williams complained more than once in her reports. Other topics of meetings included the unemployment situation, voter registration, the KKK and racism, the colonial situation, and current labor struggles. "The C.P. is moving towards a revolution[ary] period," Williams wrote of one meeting in which there was a discussion of repression against the working class. "There will be a set time but I think it is afar off yet," she opined. The greatest excitement, at least for Williams, was generated when the party's district organizer, Emanuel Levin (whom Williams referred to in her reports as "Big Shot" or "Big Chief"), ran for mayor of New Orleans. She thought that a "well-packed" meeting to discuss his campaign was "terrific."

In her last report made available to the defense Williams complained that "sitting there in the meeting having to listen to the same old story was just another hard day's work. . . ."

The only significant reference to Lee Brown in her reports concerned an incident "told by a young Negro upstart Lee Brown" at the February 12, 1946, meeting in which Brown recounted attempting to solicit funds from a white man who responded by threatening to run him in to jail. Williams mused in the report that "the kid" seemed frightened by the encounter.

Nevertheless, for all this Williams admitted that she did not know for a fact whether Brown was a member of the party. Furthermore, she had not seen him since 1946; that is, not until, ironically enough, Lee Brown, unaware of the role she would play at his forthcoming trial, came to her home in the summer of 1957 soliciting funds for his defense. She gave him a donation.

Robert Chan and Irwin Knight were equally unhelpful with regard to establishing whether Lee Brown was a member of the party in 1952. Chan, employed by the Civil Aeronautics Administration as a traffic controller, said that Lee Brown was a customer at a restaurant operated by Chan's mother. Chan claimed that his one and only personal contact with Brown occurred in the spring of 1946, when Brown approached him in the restaurant. "I was watching, tending the business for my mother, and other than Lee Brown there was nobody else in the place, and he approached me, motioned me to come over, and he asked me if I would be interested in joining, and then he indicated with a yellow slip of paper which had written across at the top of it, 'The Communist Youth Organization of the U.S.,' and to which I replied, 'No, I am a Catholic.' And then I walked away. And then I reported the incident to the FBI. That is the only—since then I have had nothing else personally to do with him." Earl Amedee objected that Chan's testimony was not relevant to events



of 1952 since he had had no personal contact with Brown since 1946. The court overruled the objection. On cross-examination Chan said that he was not an FBI agent and that he volunteered to testify at Brown's trial.

Irwin Knight, a clerk at Waterways Terminal Corporation, reported significant encounters with Lee Brown in 1945 and 1946. Knight claimed Brown approached him after lunch one day in December 1945 and asked if he would join the Communist Party. "I told him that I did not know enough about it to even consider it." Knight continued that in early 1946 Lee Brown asked if he would support the Communist Party candidate for mayor, Emanuel Levin. Knight professed ignorance of Levin but agreed that Levin could give him a call. After talking with Levin, Knight told Brown that because of his religious beliefs—he was a Catholic—he couldn't join the Communist Party. Brown's parting comment, according to Knight: "He said that I could have made the party a good man." Under cross-examination Knight said he reported these conversations to his immediate supervisor. Two years later in 1948 the FBI took a written statement from Knight about these encounters. (This was when Brown's political affiliation was under investigation by the Department of Commerce.) Knight admitted that he had had no discussions with Brown about politics since 1946.

The government's star witness was Arthur Eugene, the man who at the HUAC hearing the year before had dramatically pointed out Lee Brown as a Communist Party member. Eugene had also played a key role in helping to convict Andrew Steve Nelson. Given that no other witness had connected Lee Brown with the Communist Party since 1946, if the government had a case against Brown for lying about party membership in 1952, Arthur Eugene would have to make it.

Eugene's testimony began on the afternoon of Tuesday, March 25. Eugene, who said he was presently employed as a warehouseman, testified that he joined the Communist Party in 1948, when he was a seaman. He said he was a member of the National Maritime Union but had been expelled for Communist activities. Eugene said he remained in the party until 1956. Eugene said that he was introduced to Lee Brown as "Comrade Brown" shortly after joining the party. He claimed to have attended twenty-five to thirty party meetings with Lee Brown from 1948 to 1949. He remembered collecting dues from Lee Brown and doing party work together. "We worked together on a number of assignments, such as selling the *Daily Worker*, running off leaflets for the Communist Party."

In May 1949 Eugene said he and Brown were present at a party meeting during which the new Taft-Hartley law was discussed. At the meeting labor leaders affected by the law were instructed to comply with the law: to go ahead and sign affidavits. "They were not told to give up their party membership," he said. "But they were told to cease being an open Communist, such as making outright speeches and trying to recruit or sell the *Daily Worker* and so forth



and so on." Eugene said he left New Orleans and went to San Francisco for a time but returned in 1951. He claimed the party's membership had declined, but he said he attended six or eight party meetings in 1951 at which Lee Brown was present, as well as meetings in May, June, and September 1952. The latter meeting was chaired by Andrew Steve Nelson, Eugene testified. The subject of discussion was the Cagle Act, a recently passed Louisiana state law requiring all Communists to register with the State Police. The party had decided not to comply, Eugene claimed, and Andrew Steve Nelson, who chaired the meeting, "told us that he would be in contact with a lawyer and for us to get rid of any Communist leaflets or literature or books that we had hanging around in case the State Police was to pick us up." Eugene said that he and Lee Brown burned some copies of the *Daily Worker* and other leaflets and literature in a trash can at the union hall. He said that Brown told him he had made arrangements to leave town if things got too hot.

Eugene recalled attending additional party meetings in 1952 and 1953. At one meeting he said Steve Nelson told everyone to "lay low" while things were hot. He said he ran into Lee Brown on the street in 1954 and they had a discussion about trying to rebuild the party.

Since Eugene was already known to be an informer from the Nelson trial and the HUAC hearing, the prosecution asked during what period was he "furnishing information" to the FBI. Eugene replied he started on Good Friday 1952 and that he continued "clean up to the Steve Nelson trial." He said he was paid for information by the FBI and had received a total of \$1,500 or \$1,600 since 1952.

In March 1952 the FBI launched an investigation of Lee Brown on suspicion of having violated the Taft-Hartley Act by filing false non-Communist affidavits. (Even earlier, as we know from Gladys Williams's testimony, the FBI had established a network of paid informers, including Williams, to spy on party meetings in New Orleans.) Over the next six years the Bureau accumulated a nine-hundred-page dossier on Brown. In a memo dated May 19, 1953, the FBI admitted that "there is no known evidence to establish" that Nelson and Brown were members of the CP subsequent to the dates they executed non-Communist affidavits. Another memorandum on the same date claimed to have identified unnamed paid informers who could testify that Brown was in the party after signing the affidavits. (One of these unnamed informers was probably Arthur Eugene.) However, the memo concluded that these informers were "precluded from testifying at the present time due to their paid informant status." The informers themselves, according to another memo, expressed "great reluctance to testify," contending that their exposure would diminish their usefulness as informants. (Left unsaid was their concern that their exposure would also terminate their enlistment on the FBI payroll. Noncooperation also carried its risks: in a fit of annoyance the FBI cut off payments to one uncooperative informant.)



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The Bureau made great efforts to identify other informants who might be able to testify about Brown's post-1952 membership in the party, but with no success. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover followed the investigation closely and occasionally sent memoranda to the New Orleans office expressing his concern about efforts to produce informants to testify against Brown. In the end the Bureau decided to use paid informers to make the case against Lee Brown, although some hesitation was expressed about the quantity of "extraneous information" in Gladys Williams's reports and her "tendency to include in the reports her personal opinions and comments of persons in attendance at various meetings and activities." Apparently the Bureau found ways to obtain the cooperation of reluctant informers.

Defense attorney McGovern began his cross-examination by asking about the alleged street meeting with Lee Brown in 1954. McGovern clearly found this scenario highly unlikely, but Eugene blithely replied, "You don't know the Communist Party."

McGovern also pressed Eugene about the meetings he claimed to have attended in 1948-1949 at which Brown was present. McGovern was trying to impeach Eugene's testimony because the original written report he gave to the FBI made no mention of the twenty-five or thirty meetings he said he attended in 1948-1949 with Lee Brown.

Seeking to undermine Eugene's credibility as a witness, the next day, March 26, McGovern hammered away at Eugene's testimony, especially inconsistencies between his written statement and his testimony in court. McGovern elicited that Eugene's first contact with the FBI was in 1952; Eugene was contacted by the FBI and called in for a meeting on April 11, 1952. After being questioned by FBI agents, Eugene signed a written statement describing his involvement with the Communist Party. The statement was later read into the record by Judge Wright. In it Eugene said that during the 1948 National Maritime Union elections in New Orleans he backed two candidates who were identified as Communists. After the election he was kicked out of the union. He said he started attending Communist Party meetings in New Orleans in 1948. He claimed that the "real reason" he went to the meetings was to get a union book and a job through the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union. Eugene's statement described party meetings and activities he attended in New Orleans and San Francisco and on ships on which he worked. The statement said that "in February of 1951, I was screened at Providence, Rhode Island, and came back to New Orleans. *[In earlier testimony it had come out that at this time Eugene could not get work as a seaman, having been "screened" from ship work. During the Korean War any known Communists were "screened" by the U.S. Coast Guard and prevented from working on American ships as seamen.]* I haven't gone to any Communist meeting or attended any Communist function since that



time." A few lines later the statement has Eugene claiming, "I have not been a member since about September 1950 and have had no contact with the Party itself since I left San Francisco. I do come into contact with the Communist party members occasionally, but none of them have attempted to get me to rejoin the Communist movement." Although Eugene named many individuals in this 1952 statement, Lee Brown was not one of them.

In his cross-examination McGovern pressed Eugene on the contradictions between his written statement and his court testimony:

McGovern: So you state, "I have not been a member since about September, 1950" and this statement is dated . . . April 11th, 1952. Is that right?

Eugene: Right.

McGovern: So, you haven't been a member during 1951?

Eugene: Yes, I was a member.

McGovern: Well, which is accurate, Mr. Eugene, the statement you gave the F.B.I. right after you wanted them to hire you, . . . or what you are going to tell the Court and Jury now?

Eugene: Well, this statement here, (indicating) this was the first statement I made to the F.B.I. They asked me to come up there to the office to give a statement, and I gave this statement. This statement here (indicating) is not accurate.

McGovern: It sure messes you up, doesn't it?

Eugene: No, it doesn't. I mean I wasn't going to give the F.B.I., at that time, when I made this statement (indicating) something to chop my own neck off with.

McGovern: You wanted the money?

Eugene: I didn't get any money.

McGovern: I mean right after they hired you?

Eugene: Right after that is when they convinced me that they weren't going to do me anything for any Communist activities.

In his cross-examination and summation defense attorney McGovern accused Arthur Eugene of being a liar. McGovern pointed out that in his court testimony Eugene claimed he attended several Communist Party meetings with Lee Brown in 1951, but in his FBI statement he said he attended no party meetings in that period. "Arthur Eugene, out of his own mouth, under oath, is a liar," McGovern concluded. "He is a liar for pay."

McGovern moved for a verdict of acquittal on grounds that the government had not proven its case. His motion was denied.

McGovern then stated that he had recommended to his client not to testify. "We have recommended to the accused that he do not take the stand. The Government has not proved its case." Instead, he asked the judge to



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instruct the jury that the failure of the defendant to take the stand creates no presumption of guilt.

Realizing that his whole case rested on the credibility of Arthur Eugene, prosecutor Many in his closing statement argued that it was understandable that Arthur Eugene gave a "very guarded statement" to the FBI when he was first questioned in 1952. "As he said," Many added, "he did not want to put a hatchet in the hands of the F.B.I." "I say again," Many told the jury, "put yourselves in his place. I assure you that it would not be easy for anyone, for Arthur Eugene, or for anyone else, and to get up and say, 'Yes, I did not tell the truth. Although I made the statement to an official body, I did not tell the truth,' but yet he did tell you that. So, you have which to believe? His testimony under oath here over a period of days, or the statement made in the first interview he ever made?"

"There, in essence, you have it, ladies and gentlemen," Many concluded. "The only witness that has been brought before you whose testimony is in any way impeached or contradicted, is that of Arthur Eugene, and that by the one statement given when he was afraid, when he didn't know where he was headed, and when first interviewed by the F.B.I. at a time that he had reason to fear. The Government submits to you that the evidence is clear and convincing beyond any reasonable doubt whatsoever."

After reminding the jury of the presumption of innocence, that the burden of proof was on the government, defense attorney McGovern, in his closing argument, attacked weak points in the government's case. He first argued that it had not been proved that Lee Brown filed the non-Communist affidavit in question. Juanita Bunch, the government clerk, McGovern argued, could not state who brought or delivered the affidavits to her office; she assumed they came in from the union. As to the signature, McGovern reminded the jury that the notary public, Israel Augustine, could not identify Lee Brown as the person who signed the affidavit. McGovern also argued that the government's effort to link Lee Brown to signatures on other documents and then link these signatures to the signature on the affidavit was not convincing.

With regard to the Brown's membership in the Communist Party, McGovern argued that even if Lee Brown was a party member in 1946, as alleged by Gladys Williams, Robert Chan, and Irwin Knight, that did not establish that he was in the party in 1952, as alleged in the charge against him. As for Arthur Eugene, McGovern said he was "an admitted paid informer, who is also an admitted paid liar. He is either lying about this man in Court today, under oath, or he is lying to the F.B.I., or to you as members of the Jury and the Court. But he has got to be lying one place or the other, because he has admitted he is a liar, and he can't reconstruct his testimony."

After the closing arguments finished on March 26, the trial judge issued instructions to the jury on Thursday morning, March 27. Judge Wright in



his instructions offered his own interpretation of the charges. In the actual indictment the first count read: "On or about the 21st day of July, 1952, Lee Brown, in a matter within the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Board, an agency of the United States, and in accordance with the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, did unlawfully, willfully and knowingly make, use and file and cause to be made, used and filed with the said National Labor Relations Board . . . a false writing and document, namely an 'Affidavit of Non-communist Union Officer,' knowing the same to contain false, fictitious and fraudulent statement and representation as to material fact, to wit, that he, Lee Brown, was not then and there a member of the Communist Party. . . ." Count two contained similar language with regard to affiliation with the Communist Party.

However, Judge Wright instructed the jury that "it must be shown to your satisfaction beyond a reasonable doubt that this Defendant made, used, or filed or caused to be made, used, and filed, this document. Now, the indictment charges by using the word 'and,' and the Court uses the word 'or,' but under the law if it is shown to your satisfaction beyond a reasonable doubt that this Defendant made, or if he used, or if he filed this document, or if he caused the document to be made, used, or filed, then this particular element of the offense would be satisfied." In effect, the judge instructed the jurors that if they concluded that Lee Brown made a false affidavit by affixing his signature to it, then this was sufficient to find him guilty. However, the indictment itself required that it be proved that Lee Brown made, used, and filed a false affidavit, and the question of whether he filed it was the stickler, since there was no letter of transmittal. McGovern took exception to the judge's interpretation, pointing out that it "gives the Jury an alternative to base the conviction on the making of the affidavit alone." This is the issue on which the final outcome of the case would hinge.

The case went to the all-white jury at 10:10 A.M. At 12:30 the jury asked for additional instructions from the judge as to what constituted membership or affiliation. The judge listed a series of activities that could be construed as constituting membership in the Communist Party, including paying dues or making financial contributions, possessing a membership card, attending meetings, classes, conferences or other party gatherings, recruiting new members, distributing literature, or participating in any other way in the activities, planning, or actions of the Communist Party. Affiliation, the judge said, meant a close working alliance or association between an individual and the party. At 12:40 the jury returned to its deliberations, and at 1:04 P.M. the jury came back with a verdict.

The clerk read the verdict: "We, the Jury, find the accused Lee Brown guilty as charged under Count Number 1. We, the Jury, find the accused Lee Brown guilty as charged under Count Number 2."



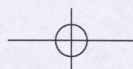
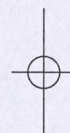
On Wednesday, April 2, Judge Wright sentenced Lee Brown to three years imprisonment in a federal penitentiary. The judge said he considered the two counts as one since they were in effect the same. Lee Brown signed a statement saying he did not plan to appeal and on April 16 he was delivered to begin serving his prison sentence at the Texarkana Federal Penitentiary. Subsequently, Brown's attorneys filed a motion for acquittal and an alternate motion for a new trial. Both were denied in early June, but the court granted the taking of an appeal.

Brown's attorneys filed a notice of appeal on June 14, and after several delays the appeal was filed in the spring of 1959. A year later, on April 21, 1960, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth District announced its decision. The court decided that the appeal "raises only one serious issue: was there reversible error in the Trial Court's charge that the making, using or filing element of the offense would be satisfied if the jury found that Appellant 'made, or if he used, or if he filed the document. . . .'"

The court noted that in a prior case (*Jencks v. United States* [5 Cir.], 226 F. 2d 540, 545) "the essence of the offense charged by the government is the filing of the affidavit and the burden rested on it to prove that the Appellant filed the affidavit or caused it to be filed." The court continued that "the jurisdiction of the NLRB is not invoked until the affidavit is filed and therefore the act of filing is as essential to the commission of the offense as is the act of making the false affidavit. It seems, therefore, too clear for argument that, standing alone, the charge here complained of left open to the jury the right to convict Brown without the proof of one of the elements which we and other Courts of Appeal have found a necessary ingredient, even the gist, of the offense."

One short sentence concluded the appeals court's legal analysis: "The judgment is reversed." With the growing civil rights movement changing the political climate and with HUAC and the anti-Communist provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act being openly challenged by college students, progressive activists, and labor leaders (the non-Communist oath would be declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1964), the government decided not to initiate any further legal action against Lee Brown. In May 1960 U.S. Attorney M. Hepburn Many signed an order dismissing the indictment against Brown. Lee Brown would be released from Texarkana, where he had been unjustly imprisoned for more than two years.







## CHAPTER TEN

## PRISON AND RELEASE

They found me guilty at the end of the trial. Judge Skelly Wright said, "I'm going to give you three years on each count but I'm going to run them concurrently. You only have to serve three." They sent me back to the parish prison there in New Orleans, and I stayed there until they came and got me. I was speaking through the bars there to the rest of the inmates. In the night, the word got around that I was going to leave that morning. I was in a cell all alone.

During the trial while I was at the parish jail they didn't allow me to see no one, even when I went to the shower. They would clear the dayroom to put fright into the people that I was some dangerous character. By being a Communist you are dangerous! Especially if you're black, you're dangerous! But I spoke that night to a lot of the inmates. I had made quite a few friends cause during the time when I was going to trial; it would come on the radio inside the jail. And all the inmates there would clap for it and wish me good luck because I was standing up fighting for the rights of my people and working people as a true trade unionist. They knew I wanted to see better conditions. I wanted to see better health conditions. I wanted to see better houses, better hospitals, better schools, better education for our people, in particular to study our history, black history. As a matter of fact, I'd like to see all nationalities have knowledge of their history. That's what I was fighting for.

After I talked that night there was one little guy who couldn't understand too much. He didn't know what he wanted to say. Sometimes he'd start off



right, and then he'd forget. I said, "Let him talk. Let him bring it out." He clapped his hands after he couldn't get out what he wanted to say, he just, he clapped. Other brothers in there clapped with him. I learned that they was not afraid, like I had learned in Houston.

After that they taken me to Galveston. We laid over a night and a day in Galveston and then went on to Texarkana prison.

When I arrived at Texarkana, one of the officers talked with me. He was very friendly. He was telling me that he had been to all the institutions. He was kind of old. He said, "I'm fixin' to retire." I was talking to him about a new trial. My attorneys, James McGovern and Earl Amedee, had filed for a new trial. The motion for a new trial was rejected, but my lawyers filed an appeal. The officer advised me, he said, "If I was you, I would serve my time. I would not accept a new trial because you may go and come back with more time than you got." He said, "You don't have too much time left, all but three years. Do these three years. I would just advise you cause I've been around these institutions, and I have some knowledge."

When I first arrived at Texarkana, they put me in solitary confinement for thirty days. They gave a book of rules and regulations to study.

When they released me from solitary, I didn't have any real problems. In fact, that prison was like a school. I started going to the library and reading. I enrolled in some classes and eventually got my school diploma.

I did a lot of reading, going into different subjects—the labor movement, the religious movement, the political movement. I had taken up reading a large book they called *Social Science Encyclopedia*. That covered everything dealing with human beings—psychology, sociology, archaeology, biology, socialism, communism, colonialism—every subject that human beings was connected with. I was learning it from this book, studying it, studying many things. I would study history, some black history that I would find in the institution. Not very much. But I studied labor history there. Not the kind that I was able to get on the outside. Political history. I studied about communism, socialism. And it was very interesting. I learned a lot and studied hard. I went to school. Some of the inmates was teachers, and some of them was very good. They would take their time with you and help you, and I was concerned in that institution that I learned. I talked to people there. I learned from people. We sat down and had discussion with each other. And it was very good that I learned many things.

I studied and I put down notes. They had a young fellow there from New Orleans. He worked also in the education department. He knew how to use the typewriter. I asked him would he type these notes up for me, what I marked off and what I printed. I wasn't a good writer, but I could print a lot of stuff. I put it together. And he took it and typed it up for me. In some ways that prison was the best school I ever went to.



One time they threw me in segregation, solitary. They said I was causing some kind of conflict, trouble. I was talking, discussing with some of the other inmates. We were discussing different issues when a guard walked up. About six of us was sitting on the grass. Some other men was playing baseball. The six of us was discussing issues that was confronting us when one of the guards walked up. We were discussing our own opinions about our living conditions, the conditions that we were confronted with outside, and why so many of us black people was in the city jails, and the state prisons and the federal institutions.

Then this guard walked up and broke in and said, "How's the weather? How you all fellows doing today?" One of the young men said, "It's cloudy." He didn't know I had some Masonic knowledge and I understood that symbolic talk. His saying it's cloudy meant that somebody in there was bad news, that they was talking against the system. I realized then that he was an informer. He just pretended to be interested in what we was saying so that he could inform on us.

The next morning, one of the guards came to my cell and blew his whistle and said, "Brown, now, all the way out." They were going to take me out. He said, "You going this morning. We're going to put you in the segregation." I guess they decided I was stirring up trouble. They locked me in a cell by myself.

While I was in segregation, one of the inmates came by who was a trustee. He said, "You need any books or whatever you need, commissary, just let me know, I got the slips. I'll put it down, you sign the slip and I'll bring it to you, your books and anything you need from the commissary." So the segregation was not so bad. The worst thing about segregation was that I couldn't go out on the yard.

After a while they let me work in the garden. There was a little garden that they had on the outside. I had taken up vegetable growing. I got some books on that. I wanted to study vegetables because in my studies and research I began to learn that vegetables was similar to humans. They had to have food, water, and oxygen, same as the human being. I said if I studied vegetable life, I can have greater knowledge of human life. So I took it up and completed it, and I received a certificate for vegetable growing. I also took up general education, and I got my diploma. *[Lee Brown earned two certificates of achievement at Texarkana, a certificate for having "satisfactorily completed the course in elementary classes" awarded by the Education Department on May 20, 1960, and a certificate for having "successfully completed the prescribed course in vegetable crops" awarded by the vocational school on July 5, 1960.]*

I was imprisoned at Texarkana over two years, from spring of 1958 to July 1960. (And I was in prison from the time I was brought back from Texas in November 1957 through the time of my trial.) Finally came the day when I



was released. My attorneys had won the appeal. The appeals court ruled that Judge Skelly Wright had made a mistake in his charge to the jury and my conviction was reversed. About five days before I was to be released, they called me in and measured me for a suit, gave me some shoes (new shoes), new hat, and gave me, I think it was either \$75 or \$100. The chief classification and parole officer, I think his name was Mr. Anderson, he said, "We'll take you to the bus station in Texarkana and put you on the bus for Hitchcock, Texas." They gave me my ticket and a change of clothes.

One thing they did not give me was my notes from my reading. Now it tells you right in the little booklet they give you when you arrive that you can bring out notes or even your life story when you are released from prison. But when I went back before the warden, he looked at my notes and said, "You can't take this with you." He said it would cause trouble if I took my notes, so he kept them. That made me mad, but there wasn't anything I could do about it.

They released me on July 12, 1960. They asked if I had any relations who would take me in while I did some parole time. I told them about my cousins in Hitchcock. They wrote my cousin Celie's husband—we called him Boss—and asked him if they would take me in for a while. He wrote back and said yes.

When I got to Hitchcock, Texas, I went over to my cousin Celie's house, and I knocked on the door. They was so glad to see me. But my cousin Celie had had a stroke. They was supposed to come up to the institution on that Saturday to get me, but that Friday another cousin had an automobile accident and was killed. They were very close, and when Cousin Celie was told about the accident she had a stroke and never said another word. When I went to the house they asked her, "Do you know who this is?" She began to laugh and smile. She knew who I was because our family was very close.

So I stayed at Celie's house. They prepared a dinner for me that evening, and we sat down and talked. The next morning I went around to see other relatives who was living close by. I had some in Galveston, some in Hitchcock, some in Lamar, and some in Texarkana. I went around and visited those I had scattered all over Texas—Port Arthur, Houston, Beaumont. I let them know that I was back, and all of them was glad to see me.

I stayed there a while, about a month or so. I worked and helped cousin Boss and cousin Celie 'cause they needed help. I prepared her food. She had to eat liquid food. While Boss was gone to work, he was glad for me to be there to help her. I was glad to do it because they had helped me. Sometimes I would go and stay with one of my other cousins like Aunt Bernice. I could do that 'cause cousin Celie had quite a few friends and relatives who would be there all the time. Her daughter would stay there at night. So I could help take care of her and go back and forth to see other folks as well. I was trying to do the best I could with what I had.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## STARTING A NEW LIFE

I stayed in Texas two, three months and finished out my parole. Then I decided I would go down to New Orleans, see my son, Brownie, and his mother, Rose, who was my former common-law wife. Brownie must've been about eight or ten years old then. I went down to New Orleans, and I went over to some friends' house there, and I said, "Well, I'm going over and see Rose." I went to my brother's house and called Rose. She had a telephone, and I called her, asked her could I come over and see Brownie. She said, "Sure."

My nephew Skeet happened to be at my brother's house that day. Skeet was a musician and he played with Fats Domino's brother, Freddie, in a small band. Skeet said, "I'll take you over Uncle Lee." So him and I got in the automobile. One thing about Skeet—he happened to have in his glove compartment a little paper bag, a small bag of quarters. He said, "Here, Uncle Lee. This will help you some." I said, "Thank you, Skeet, for being so nice to your uncle."

This is hard, too hard to talk about. It's emotional, 'cause of the struggle I went through and the struggle I experienced from the depth of my heart when I went through it. I went there and I met Rose, and she was glad to see me. When I was there talking to her, I could look outside and see Brownie sitting all alone. He reminded me of myself when I was young working on the dry docks in Texas, how I used to sit by myself at lunch time. Rose called him, "Brownie, come here." He come and he saw who I was. He was young when I left, but he was growing up. Brownie may have been around ten years of age or a little older. He called me Lee. He ran to me, embraced me, hugged me. He was glad, very glad to see me.



I was emotional. Sometimes I get very emotional because it come from the depths of my heart. We sat there and talked. So Skeet say, "Uncle Lee, I'm going." And I thanked him for the gift of quarters, thanked him for bringing me over, and he says, Skeet say, "You in good hands now, Uncle." And I say, "So long, Skeet, take care of yourself."

Rose fixed me a dinner for that evening and we sat up and talked. I was so glad to see Rose and Brownie. I wanted to help Brownie, so I decided to stay around a while and try to get a job.

I bought Brownie a few books—there wasn't too many books in New Orleans on black history. I don't even think they had a black bookstore in New Orleans, not to my knowing. I bought him a set of *World Book* encyclopedias—a set of red books. I told him to study, to read. I picked out a subject dealing with Islam, and I told him, "You study that. Learn about and study your history." I told him that because before I left New Orleans to go to prison I was trying to learn more about black history and getting involved with the Nation of Islam.

Before my trial sometimes I used to buy the *Pittsburgh Courier*, an Afro-American newspaper, and I began to read it. And I kept seeing a picture of a bald-headed man talking about freedom, justice, equality, and black history. To me he looked Chinese. And I kept wondering, I said, "What Chinese is so concerned about black folks?" This was Elijah Muhammad. And what he was saying—he was talking about my history, talking about my freedom. I was very much concerned, and finally one day I had my "play sister" (we resembled each other so much that people thought we was sister and brother) and I said to her, "Levoya, I want you to write to this place in Chicago: 5335 South Greenwood Avenue, Chicago 15, Illinois." I wanted to know about him and his organization, the Nation of Islam. Finally I got back an answer. During that time I was living at 2017 Jackson Avenue in New Orleans. His secretary wrote to me as Mr. Lee Brown at that address. The letter, which she wrote on July 31, 1957, said,

As-Salaam-Alaikum:

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the most Merciful, the Lord of the Worlds; and in the name of His Divine Messenger, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

Dear brother:

Your letter has passed the Laborers' inspection. I hope it will be approved by Allah.

Enclosed are two forms and a small Muslim prayer book. Fill out the forms and mail. If married have wife sign her own name, or if under 18 have parents sign form.

May Allah bless you.

As-Salaam-Alaikum

Your Sister,

Susie Hussein



I was interested so I filled out the application form and sent it in. The prayer book was compiled by Elijah Muhammad and published by the University of Islam in Chicago. I still have it. I wasn't so much interested in the religion but what they had to say about history. Sometimes when you want to be free you'll catch hold of anything talking about freedom.

It wasn't until I got out of prison in 1960 that I was in contact with Elijah Muhammad again. I had written to him telling about getting out of prison and trying to find work. I received a letter addressed to "Mr. Lee X Brown." He told me, "I received your letter of October the 26th, 1960, and it is my hope by this time you have found a job. I am very sorry to learn of your difficulty in finding a job, continue to strive hard and pray to Allah, and you will be successful. I am returning the clippings and notices of your trial, which I think you would like to keep. I pray to Allah for your success and blessings. As-Salaam-Alaikum. Your brother, Elijah Muhammad, Messenger of Allah."

When I got to California, Elijah Muhammad wrote to me again to confirm my registration in the Nation of Islam. He said I could take this letter to any mosque. I went to the mosque here in San Francisco off and on, but mainly I was interested in history. I joined the Nation of Islam because of my interest in black history. In the party I learned about the class struggle but I wanted to get some black history, and that's what Elijah Muhammad talked about, Africa and black history. I didn't see no contradiction between being a party member and being a Muslim. True Muslims (and I wouldn't call myself a true Muslim), true Muslims could also be revolutionaries. The prophets was revolutionaries.

I wasn't interested in prayers and all that 'cause like my grandfather taught me, you got to do something for yourself. "Wasn't no pie in the sky": that's what I believed. You can use religion to get some of the things you want, like certain kinds of knowledge. But you can't use religion to get to Los Angeles. If I want to go to Los Angeles I can sit down here and pray 'til I fall out, and I ain't gonna get to Los Angeles. I'm gonna need to get a ticket and bus to get there. Praying won't do it. Like my grandfather said, the Lord helps those who help themselves. But I did learn more about black people's history from talking with people in the Nation and reading their books.

In New Orleans our union, Local 207, had merged with the United Packinghouse Workers Union. I needed a job so I went there and talked to the president of the packinghouse union, Thomas West. He said "Brown, we don't have anything here. Maybe you ought to think about going to San Francisco, California. I will give you a letter, give you a traveling card, to go to other places." He wrote a letter praising me as a fine union brother. By then I knew I couldn't get a job in New Orleans. During the trial my picture had been plastered in all the newspapers; they made a lot of propaganda about me. Now when I went to the unemployment office, they waited on everybody but me. I thought I might have a better chance of getting a job in San Francisco, since that's where the ILWU was based. In August, when I was still in Texas, I had



written to the ILWU in San Francisco asking for help. In November I wrote another letter to Harry Bridges about my situation. I told him about the Un-American Activity Committee and getting convicted and sent to prison under the Taft-Hartley Act. I told him, "It is extremely hard for me to find work because of the trouble I was in. In the meantime, I am asking for some financial aid to help me until I find employment, which assistance of course will be returned. I would appreciate it very much if you would state my case to Local 10 because I am very much in need of help. My ten-year-old son is in school and I really need assistance."

About that time I got a letter back from Bill Chester, answering my first letter to the ILWU. Bill Chester was the ILWU regional director for Northern California at the national office on Golden Gate Avenue in San Francisco. He said he couldn't promise me a job but he'd do everything possible to help me. He also sent a check for \$100.

I knew the lady that I was living with from before my trial. She had a house and rented rooms. Her name was Mrs. Matilda Poplar; we used to call her "Mommee." She had about eight people living in her house. Each of them had a room. And I had mine. When I came back to New Orleans, she told me, "You always, Brother Lee, have a place to live here. Money or no money." That's the same sister, Mrs. Poplar, who wanted to put up her house for bond for me during the trial, but the lawyer told her it wasn't necessary; they already had the bond. I stayed with Mrs. Poplar while I was looking for work. She said, "I have a friend named Mr. Preston Holmes. He has a son in San Francisco. I'm going to talk with him when he comes."

Preston Holmes came in that evening. He was an old longshoreman with the ILA there in New Orleans. Mrs. Poplar started talking. She says, "Mr. Holmes, don't you have a son in San Francisco?"

And Mr. Holmes says, "Yes, I do."

She says, "Brother Brown is planning on going there pretty soon to find work. He can't get any here. It's very hard for him, and he said he'd rather go there and maybe be more successful."

And he says, "My son is named Joe Holmes. I will give you his phone number and his address, and you tell him so he can know you talked to me that he sent me two shirts, and the shirts had the initials J.H., meaning Joe Holmes. Soon as you get to San Francisco, you call him, and he will take care of you."

So I left New Orleans. Rose and Brownie stayed there. Rose and I had been separated since before I went to prison. I told Rose I might send for her and Brownie when I got to San Francisco, but I didn't know what would happen. I had my few clothes that I took and I left some of my books in a trunk with Mommee on Drive Street. I told Mrs. Poplar to take care of my books and some of the newspapers from the trial. All the people in the house who knew me greeted me and wished me good luck. They prepared me some fried



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chicken to take on the bus. All of them got together and gave me a little money. It made me very proud. I felt like I was going on to continue, coming into San Francisco to continue my struggle, continue to fight.

I came to San Francisco on the Greyhound bus. When I got here, I called Joe Holmes on the telephone. I spoke to him and explained myself and told him about the shirts, and he told me to wait at the bus station. "I will come right away," he said. And I waited there in the station on 7th Street between Market and Mission Streets.

About twenty minutes later Joe drove up. He took me to his home on Neptune Street. When we got there, he introduced me to his wife, Florence. He showed me a room and said, "This is your room; you can live there as long as you want." He put my luggage in the room. I was tired and I just went to bed.

The next day was a holiday. I think it was Thanksgiving. The Holmeses took me with them to the house of a friend called Della. She was a member of the ILWU Local 6, the warehouse workers. She worked in a coffee factory here in San Francisco. They had something like a party, Thanksgiving dinner. Lots of her friends and neighbors was there. It was very nice. When I got there, they started introducing me to their friends and telling them why I came. Most of the people there was from the South and New Orleans. They started talking to me and asking me questions, and I was very happy. They even passed the hat and said, "We heard about your case."

That made me very proud to be with working people and the struggles of working people. I feel that the world I live in is the university of learning. The people are teachers and the best teachers are at the grassroots level. I've learned many things in the labor movement, learned a lot in the struggle.

The next morning I got up and went over to the ILWU hall at 150 Golden Gate to seek assistance in finding a job. I talked to one of the ILWU representatives there. He sent me over to the Warehouse Union Local 6 to talk to one of the union representatives to get work. I met some of the union brothers in the hall, and we started talking. The brothers took up a collection and gave me some money to help me out until I could find work. I came around for a few days, and I went over to the hall several times during the period. One of those workers sent me to his good friend to ask him for some financial assistance. When I got there, they gave me one hundred dollars. Another friend gave me ten dollars, another one gave me twenty-five. I was treated very well by the brothers, and I appreciated it.

One day I went to the culinary workers union on Sixth Street, which was Local 110. I had a letter and my card from the packinghouse workers local in New Orleans. The secretary told me, "You wait. The business agent will be in here, and his name is Sam Daniels." She said, "You sit down in the union hall and get you some coffee. If you care for any, you're welcome to it. You're amongst friends." That made me feel very good.



When Brother Daniels came in, a very short, dark-skinned fellow, she pointed me out. He walked over to me and said, "My name is Sam Daniels, the business agent here, and I learned that you was looking for me. Would you please step into my office?"

I said, "Thank you, sir." So I went into his office, and he looked at papers I had and he looked at my traveling card. He said, "You're a union man."

"Yes, sir, I am. I have been in the union for a number of years. Local 12, the Los Angeles Packinghouse workers, and from there I went down to New Orleans, Local 207, where we had some problems."

"I heard about it," he said, "and I read about some of the problems you had under the Taft-Hartley law. Fortunately, we ain't never been attacked so far. I'm going to see what I can do for you." And he asked what kind of work I wanted.

I said, "Any kind. I can do anything 'cause I need work." He said, "What about working in a hotel? Have you ever washed dishes?"

I said, "Yes, I washed dishes. When I was in L.A., I used to ride the Union Pacific, Los Angeles to Nebraska, washing dishes and whatnot."

Then he said, "Maybe I can put you on at the Fairmont Hotel at night until we see what we can do."

There was another brother there. His name was Willie Bible. Sam Daniels said, "I want you to come back here tomorrow evening. Be sure to be here before five o'clock and go over to the union hall. I'm going to write out a work slip, and Brother Bible is gonna take you to the Fairmont Hotel and to see the kitchen steward there, and I'm gonna call him and talk with him."

When I got to the Fairmont Hotel, which was one of San Francisco's grand hotels, Willie Bible took me into the office of Mr. Johnny Ward, the kitchen steward who did the hiring. Mr. Ward said to me, "I heard some about you, Brother. I once was in the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union. I heard you been in the union quite a while."

I said, "Yes, sir."

Mr. Ward was a tall, brown-skinned fellow, very friendly. He said, "I can put you to work around here washing dishes. You go to work tonight." He told me I had to get a uniform to put on. I started washing dishes that night. And I stayed washing dishes maybe a month or two.

One day Ward said, "You a good worker, Brother Brown." (He called me Brother Brown.) "I'm going to put you to work in janitorial, a regular job, working at night. You're a night porter now."

I said, "Thank you kindly, sir." That made me feel much better. I felt good that I had success enough to get a regular job. And I had two off days each week.

After I had been in San Francisco a while, I was thinking about the party. I heard from someone that there was a party bookstore on Market Street. I went there and I happened to talk to the fellow who ran the bookstore. I introduced myself to him, and we started discussing political conditions. I



bought some party literature, but I told him I was not in the party at that time on account of the Taft-Hartley. I told him that they had brought me up before the Un-American Activity Committee and I refused to cooperate with them. They brought me to trial under circumstantial evidence and found me guilty as charged of being a member or an affiliate with the Communist Party.

So we talked and he told me some people there to contact. I started going to the bookstore, and I started going to party meetings. I met some people who was from the culinary union—about five or six party members who used to meet and discuss the issues in the culinary industry.

Then I started to going to other meetings, different meetings concerning jobs or fighting racism or issues around housing—issues that benefit the people. Later at one of these meetings I happened to meet Kendra Alexander, a sister who was a leader in the party. She seemed very nice. I would go to meetings where I would hear her talk, and I was very much impressed with what she said. I liked the way she talked. I learned a whole lot from her. She inspired me very much.

When the bookstore moved to Valencia Street a couple of years later, I happened to meet another person, Sam Gold. Sam and his wife, Molly, came from Chicago. He had been in the party a long time and ran the bookstore. We became good friends. I remember one time him and Molly brought me some chicken soup when I was living on Third Street. I told Sam I had doubts about getting back into the party. He begin to argue with me. I said, "I will support the issues. I have faith in the program. I have faith in the party—in the principles—but some of the people, some of the leadership, I cannot understand." I read party literature. They would have conventions and they would pass resolutions, resolution on top of resolution concerned with Afro-Americans, and I still couldn't get the understanding of what was going on. It created doubt in my mind. I felt that the party leadership didn't follow through. They'd pass resolutions on racism and jobs but then they wouldn't follow through on the program. They didn't do what they said they would. The program was good but some of the leadership was bad; it didn't carry out the program. That caused me to have doubts.

There was also a problem with white racism. Some white party members would not speak to you on the street. There was a white woman who attended party meetings, and one day I saw her on Seventh Street. I spoke to her but she wouldn't even speak. She completely ignored me. I wanted to make sure, so I ran back and caught up with her and I spoke to her again. She acted like she didn't know me. So I brought it up at the next meeting, but they wasn't too much concerned about it. Hell, they did better than that in the South! We used to bring party members on the carpet so we could solve the problem. I told Sam Gold about it. He said he didn't like it either, but he begged me to keep coming to the meetings. I said I still supported the program but the leadership seemed weak. I stopped going to the meetings.



Fifteen of us was night porters at the Fairmont Hotel, and all the brothers, was very friendly. We talked. We had lunch together. The lunch that was given to us was precooked food, and not very good. We started talking about how we would like to stop, have time to cook, to fix our own food, because the men didn't want the precooked food that the cook left there for us. The cook had leftovers made from other food, and he gave it to the help. I began to look in the union books, and I saw that you had the right to have job stewards—I call them shop stewards—shop stewards to see that the company carries out the working agreement and that the workers get fair treatment. I said, "We need a shop steward. We have some problems that we need to solve." One of the brothers said, "What about you, Brother Brown? Would you take it? Seems like you have some experience." I said, "I had a little experience working in New Orleans on the docks and working in the union. I had a little experience, and I'll be willing to try to work so we can solve some of these problems. We'll talk to Mr. Ward, bring him our problems, our grievances, and ask him to work with us."

So we did. Ward told us, "You have to sign your names on a sheet saying you want a shop steward, and then I'll call the business agent, Mr. Daniels."

Daniels said, "You all want a shop steward?"

I said, "The men have signed."

He said, "Yeah? Bring in all the men, and we will elect a shop steward, and we will notify the company, notify Mr. Ward. I'll be there early, so you all can have the meeting." So we went to the union hall on 6th Street the next morning when we got off work. Daniels came about eight o'clock and we had the meeting. We proposed things that we wanted to discuss with Mr. Ward. Brother Daniels asked, "Now who you all elect for your steward?"

The men said, "We elect Brother Lee Brown."

"Now, Brother Lee Brown," Daniels said, "you're a shop steward at the Fairmont Hotel to take care of the grievances and see that the company carries out the contract and that none of the brothers will violate the contract." He said, "This will work both ways."

I said, "All right, Brother Daniels. I will do the best I can to work with the brothers, and I hope the brothers will work with me."

I was elected shop steward on April 17, 1963. I was the first shop steward among the culinary union workers at the Fairmont Hotel. In fact, I became the first shop steward in any hotel in San Francisco. This was the beginning of my involvement in the trade union movement in San Francisco.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

# STRUGGLES IN SAN FRANCISCO

While working at the Fairmont, I became aware of some very poor working conditions. It was similar to a nonunion house. Personally I felt compelled to attempt to straighten up some of the discrepancies and conditions at the hotel.

I noticed that it was mainly Afro-American women working as housekeepers cleaning the rooms. They were often mistreated and abused and discharged from the job, with no follow-up to reinstate them from their union, Local 283 of the room cleaners union. I raised that question at a meeting of the joint board of the hotel workers unions. One of the representatives, Charlie Gricus, got angry with me, telling me, "You don't have anything to do with it."

I said, "I'm a member of the union and I'm going to speak out when I see anyone abused." So I took up the fight for the room cleaners. I was concerned about them and I wasn't afraid to speak up. I had knowledge of being a shop steward from working down South, and I was able to give support with the experience and knowledge that I had to struggle for better working conditions on the job.

As a result of my opinions and oppositions that I submitted to my superiors, the hotel representatives began to harass and make trouble for me. They made false accusations against me and said I was drinking on the job. Consequently I was discharged from my job in 1967, but the real reason was because of my union activities and my efforts to rectify the working conditions.

After being discharged, I went to Sam Daniels, the business agent of Local 110. I explained the situation and he went to talk with representatives



of the Fairmont Hotel to question my dismissal. I was not present at the confrontation between Daniels and the Fairmont. The problem wasn't solved at the meeting, and after the meeting I asked Daniels to file an action with the adjustment board, which was made up of representatives from the unions and the employers. But my request to be reinstated was denied. I felt that Daniels was more or less collaborating with the hotel; he was very close to the bosses.

During the time I was working at the Fairmont Hotel I met and got married to Moselle Mayfield. Moselle belonged to the union too, but I didn't meet her on the job. She was working at the Holiday Inn. I met her on Third Street at her former husband's place. Her husband had married again. He had a cafe close to the shipyard where he sold barbecue. She was there one day with a lady friend, her roommate, and we got to talking. Moselle was active in a church on Newhall Street. She tried to get me to donate to the church but I wasn't too interested in that. After a while we decided to get married, but her roommate, whose name was Candy, decided to stay there with us in the house on LaSalle Street. I didn't like that too much. When we was shopping in the supermarket, Moselle would ask Candy what she wanted before she asked me what I wanted. I didn't like that either. Sam Daniels used to come around and visit and said he didn't think it was right for Candy to be living there and causing conflict. So he came and talked to Candy. But Moselle got angry and said, "If Candy is going, I'm going."

"Well," I said, "there's the door, sister. Get to stepping."

We didn't get along too well, and we decided to get divorced after two or three years.

Around the time I was discharged from the Fairmont, they had just opened up the Jack Tar Hotel on Cathedral Hill. I knew the kitchen steward, an old fellow in his seventies by the name of Mr. Smith. He was a nice fellow, brown-skinned fellow. He and I talked. I asked, "Do you have any work you can give me?"

He said, "Where you worked?" I told him I came from the Fairmont and what had happened. He was an understanding man. We was Masonic brothers. He said, "Brother Brown, I can put you to work around here cleaning walls until something opens up and you can get a regular job." That's how I started at the Jack Tar.

I got a regular job first washing dishes and then as a night porter. The working conditions at the Jack Tar was very bad, and I began to voice my opposition to such conditions. I organized a group of the night porters. We had a racially mixed crew, including some Spanish people, working there, and they said, "We want you to be shop steward." They had never had a shop steward on the job, but it was in the contract. Nobody had the experience or the guts to be shop steward. I said, "I accept," and they elected me shop steward on January 16, 1968.



The porters and the bar boys and vegetable cleaners was being overworked and I spoke up about it. The chef didn't like what I was doing, and that's when they made me assistant steward to Mr. Mitchell—figured I would sell the men out. Mr. Mitchell was the executive steward of the Jack Tar; he was really just the head dishwasher. He was over the store department. He was also in the union. On Sunday when Mitchell went to church, I took his place on the job, helping get the plates to the waiters.

One time when we had a union meeting of the men in the store department, the chef and the personnel manager showed up. I said, "Y'all can't come in here. This is a union meeting." They said they had come to meetings before. I guess Mitchell used to let them come in, but I wouldn't. They saw that I was shop steward and we had rules, and they got mad. I also told all the brothers to wear their union buttons to let them know we was organized.

Once again I was told to mind my own business or I would be dismissed. Mitchell told me that the kitchen chef and the manager, plus others, wanted me fired because of my union activities. But they couldn't directly fire me for my union work and they couldn't fire me for incompetence, so they accused me of being drunk on the job and discharged me on January 26, 1969. They wanted me off the job; I was too hot. They never had a militant person who would speak out, particularly for the black room cleaners. I wouldn't let them get away with abusing and discharging the room cleaners with no follow-up. They never had anybody who would stand up and tell them that they was doing wrong. The black room cleaners was not getting meals. All the rest of them, even the doormen and the bar boys, got meals. They was after me, and they also wanted to get rid of all shop stewards in hotels, which they hadn't had before I came along even though it was in the contract.

My case went to an arbitration hearing on June 2, 1969. Mitchell testified against me to save his job. When they had the hearing, he was sitting up there crying. He really hated to do it, but he did. He got caught in a trap. He said that I had to relieve him on a Sunday while he went to church. He claimed that he came back and I was drunk, said he smelled alcohol on my breath. What actually happened was that Mitchell wanted to fire a brother named Jefferson because he said he was drunk. I told Mitchell he didn't have the right to fire Jefferson. Mitchell said, "I'm going to fire you too; I'm going to fire both of you." That's how it started. Then at the hearing Mitchell said I was drunk too. That was a front to keep from saying that they was discharging me for my union activities as shop steward. I told them I hadn't had anything to drink. They wasn't bringing me anything I didn't know. I knew all about their "trick-nology." I give them all hell up there, told them that I was discharged because I had made complaints about the conditions. I gave them a list of the demands I had raised: stop mistreatment and unfair discharges of maids, provide free meal tickets to maids in all hotels, organize hotel and restaurant workers



throughout the nation into unions, and end all discrimination against black people in the hotel and restaurant industries.

The room cleaners went on strike in the fall of 1969. Since I was out of work, the business agent of Local 110 called me down to Commercial Street to be picket captain. I was picket captain for three years. I worked for the four locals—Local 44, the cooks, Local 48, the waitresses, Local 30, the waiters, and Local 110, my local. The room cleaners Local 283 was on strike over working conditions, and the other locals supported them by sending pickets.

My job was to sign the picket slips. They was supposed to picket for four hours, and then I signed the slip. I had my little book with the names and made them sign. Each week I worked for a different local. Each local paid me to be picket captain, and the one that paid me the most was Local 30. The whole three years we had no fights, no arguments, and no drinking on the picket line. I knew how to handle it.

The room cleaners finally won the strike after three years. One of the bosses who was at Harpoon Louie's diner on Commercial Street came out at noon one day and told me, "We're folding up. You got us."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "We're gonna sign the contract." He shook hands with me, and I told the rest of the pickets that we had won a victory.

I got a job with the Western Addition Black Security Guards. Black Security Guards had been set up by the African Descendant Nationalist Independence Partition Party, the ADNIP Party, of which I was a member. I had got involved with the ADNIP Party during the time I was angry with the Communist Party because of racism in the party. I read Wilson Record's book, *The Negro and the Communist Party*. I felt that the party leadership, not all leadership but the national leadership, was not carrying out the program to fight racism and discrimination. The party wasn't fighting to build a left center in the trade union movement. The party should have been more effective against these right-wing unions and racist union leadership. The party was only serving the intellectuals, not helping the grass roots. I didn't feel like the party was serving the interests of the masses, of the black workers.

The ADNIP Party had an office on the corner of Fulton and Fillmore in the Western Addition. I joined them because I liked their program of building up the economic program of black people, and I figured that was one of the solutions to the problem. I think we should have our own community with our own stores, hotels, and whatever.

When I was working at the Fairmont, I tried to start a business of my own, Brown's Foot Formula. The idea had come up in New Orleans when I was staying at Mrs. Poplar's. She had trouble with her feet and had come up with a formula to help soothe them. Years ago I heard from her adopted daughter, Levoya, that Mrs. Poplar got run over in a car wreck and eventually passed. After I got out to California, I worked on the formula that she had told me.



Another fellow named Buddy McNeil worked at the Fairmont and helped me. It would help if you had bad feet, aching feet, corns, athlete's foot. You put it on and rubbed it in and it soothed your feet. A pharmacist named Mr. Reid helped us get it past the Food and Drug Administration. We took it to a company to put it on the market. It cost us a thousand dollars apiece. But I made a big mistake because I didn't get a lawyer to follow up on it, and I didn't keep a copy of the formula. Somebody probably got it out there on the market now under a different name. I learned from that to never do nothing in business without somebody to represent you and to keep copies of everything. It cost me \$1,000 to learn that.

Al Sultan Shabazz was head of the ADNIP Party, which was founded in 1962. I met him at a community meeting when I was working at the Jack Tar. He was from New Orleans and had been in the army. He was very intelligent and well informed. He read a lot and he wanted to teach ancient African history. We discussed black nationalism and Africa and how we should have something in our community. I believe they did that in the Soviet Union—had different communities. I believe we would be better off if we had a community, something we could identify with, that would give us the right to teach our history. I don't believe that we are getting our complete history, particularly our ancient history, in the educational institutions. We talked about racism and white supremacy and how we wasn't getting a fair shake. So I got interested. I knew a little bit of my history and I knew we was a long way from getting a fair deal. People in church say to "forgive them, for they know not what they're doing." I say any time a son of a bitch is mistreating people, he knows he is doing wrong.

The ADNIP Party said they wanted separation, two separate republics—one for blacks and one for whites. They had a list of nineteen states they wanted. They had set up a provisional government with Al Sultan as prime minister. I was more interested in the trade union movement and was struggling to get the unions to deal with racism. I told Al Sultan I was in the union, so he appointed me minister of labor. I wrote articles for their newspaper and gave speeches at meetings.

The ADNIP Party had different businesses. They had a moving business and the black security guards. Al Sultan Shabazz had contracts for security guards at a building on Geary Street and in the Martin Luther King housing projects and other places. He had about twenty people working as security guards. Not all of them were members of the party. I was put in charge of the guards. I was the supervisor and I had to check on them. I would go around to the guards at night and check to see if they were at their posts. If they had problems, they would come to me. If they had a problem on the job or wasn't doing the job, I could suspend them or give them a few days off; but I had to know both sides. We also had families that would come over to the office with their problems. People didn't want to take their problems to the police. Black



people have enough intelligence to solve their own problems, but they need help. I know I worked with about three or four families that came there. We helped solve their problems and they got back together.

We tried to stop people from being violent 'cause that wouldn't solve the problem. We talked to people. I learned that from my grandfather. I remember him saying, "When you get into violence, you ain't gonna solve the problem. You gonna make it worse." He taught me that if you get in an argument, before it gets violent, say, "Let's have a recess; let's table this and cool off." Then you come back and solve the problem. We were building the black community, showing what black folks can do. We advocated for the community and tried to clean up the community. The police didn't give us any trouble. Chief Cahill said, "I don't have anything against the Black Security Guards. Everywhere my police go, they see them."

We had general membership meetings and served dinners. We passed out flyers in the community. We had education meetings. One time we sponsored a meeting to commemorate the birthday of Marcus Garvey.

I was in the ADNIP Party four or five years, until it broke up. Al Sultan left the country and went to Guyana. There was a stool pigeon in the party and Al Sultan was accused of hiding some guns somewhere. I never did see anything like that. He didn't want to go to court, so he left the country. I never did see him again. I heard that he wrote two books and opened up a bookstore over there. Then I heard he was going to come back to the United States but he was assassinated. I think the snitch was working for the CIA. After that the ADNIP Party just fell apart. My work for the Black Security Guards was the last job I had before retiring.

While I was working at the Jack Tar, Dr. Mitchell at UC told me I had to stop working in the kitchen, that the heat was too much and I was getting high blood pressure. I took some high blood pressure pills for a while and later I got partial disability.

From the time I first arrived San Francisco, I was meeting people and going to meetings and getting involved. When I first came here, somebody told me to go see Dr. Carlton Goodlett for help in finding a job. He had an office on Fillmore between Sutter and Bush. Dr. Goodlett was also the publisher of the San Francisco *Sun-Reporter*, a black community newspaper. He gave me \$25 to help me. I saw him again at the Cow Palace at a big civil rights rally where Martin Luther King was speaking. There was thousands of people there and I was sitting way in the back. Dr. Goodlett was passing out copies of his newspaper, and we talked for a while. A few years later while I was working at the Fairmont Hotel I met Dr. Goodlett again. I was at a meeting on Van Ness Street and I run up on him. They had a lunch break at the meeting and he said, "Brown let's go get some buffalo meat." I was surprised. I said, "Doctor, don't be pulling my leg." I never heard of eating buffalo meat. We come on up to Tommy's Joynt at



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Geary and Van Ness. We sat upstairs and he ordered buffalo stew. I ordered the same thing. It was good. We talked about different things and got to know each other. After that I used to go by his office sometimes and talk.

In 1966 Dr. Goodlett decided to run for governor. He asked me to support his campaign. I said I would and he gave me a letter authorizing me to collect funds for his campaign. I used to go around to meetings to talk about his campaign, raise funds, shake the bushes, and talk to people one-on-one. I didn't do a hell of a lot, but I helped out because I thought he was a good man, very progressive.

He and I stayed friends. I used to go to his office to talk about issues. When I got my medications from the Kaiser health clinic, I would take them to him to look at and tell me if they was any good.

I was sorry when Dr. Goodlett passed in 1997.

I also was involved with the Auto Row protest. All the car dealers was located on Van Ness Street, and they decided to protest against the racism of the car dealers. I marched down there with Dr. Bourbon, who organized the demonstrations. They wanted the dealers to hire black salesmen to work there on Auto Row. I think they got two, three jobs for some black salesmen. That wasn't a grassroots issue; it was about upgrading the professionals, just like fighting for better parts in the motion picture industry years before.

Another time we picketed the hotel there on Market Street, the Sheraton Palace, to try to get them to hire more black workers. Like all those damn hotels, it was very racist about hiring black folks. I remember one night a busload of Africans pulled up while we was picketing. We started talking. They wanted to know what we were doing. We asked them not to go in there, and they didn't. We did get the hotels to hire more black people and improve conditions for the room cleaners, but only a few people went down there to the union to apply for the jobs. I don't know why more people didn't go for those jobs.

In 1968 I worked with the Peace and Freedom Party in Eldridge Cleaver's presidential campaign. Kathleen Cleaver asked me to work on the campaign. Kathleen had heard about me from a girl named Tracy Sims. We used to march in demonstrations down at City Hall. One time we marched down there when Cahill was chief of police. This was when Sam Jordan was running for mayor. Sam was a retired longshoreman who had a bar on Third Street, and he was very active in the community. I spoke at the rally. Chief Cahill had brought out police dogs to scare the people. I said, "Turn those dogs loose! Goddamit, we'll eat 'em up!" I would probably have been the first one to run, but it worked. I scared the chief and he didn't let those dogs loose. Maybe Tracy told Kathleen about that.

Kathleen and I had a long conversation. She wanted me to join the Peace and Freedom Party and help them out. So I went around talking to people, handing out literature. I stayed involved with the Peace and Freedom Party right into the 1980s, when I was on the central committee.



I also worked some with the Black Panther Party chapter in San Francisco. I met some of the members, a guy they called "D.C." and some others. This was a young group, and I used to give them advice on handling security. This was when I was working with the Black Security Guards. We used to meet upstairs at the Panther office on O'Farrell Street. Some of them acted like big shots in the community. But I remember one time the Panthers from Oakland came and took their money. Showed they was just selling wolf tickets.

I worked with the Panthers until they broke up. I was there when Betty Shabazz came to San Francisco. I was in charge of her security. I told the security guards how to search people, pat 'em and check for weapons. I was her personal body guard.

So I was involved with the Communist Party, the ADNIP Party, the Peace and Freedom Party, the Black Panther Party, and sometimes the Muslims and some other groups. I kept up my membership in the NAACP and went to their meetings on Divisadero Street. I was busy in those days, brother. That was my trouble; I was trying to do too much. It was crazy. On Sundays I would leave one meeting and go to another. And I didn't stop when I retired. I worked more, with the NAACP and with the Senior Action Network and housing groups. That's how come I started to have high blood pressure and heart problems. I'm lucky not to be dead.

Through it all I was working to get freedom. I wanted people to be free. I thought it would come through socialism. I thought socialism was coming right away. We still need socialism, but we also need strong unions, low-income housing, health care for the people, social security, day care centers, and rest homes for the old people. We need all of this.

What disappointed me about the Communist Party was that the leadership didn't follow through on the struggle against racism, white chauvinism. I think there was some truth in that book by Wilson Record. The party was mainly using intellectuals and didn't go to the grass roots in the trade union movement. The intellectuals and professionals messed up the party and they divided the people. To me the party members in the South was more dedicated, and there was more trade unionists in the party. What we need is a strong party and a left-wing movement in the unions. The biggest mistake they made was not building the left wing of the unions, not moving the unions to the left center. That's why I liked V. I. Lenin and William Foster. Build the unions. That's the key. That's where the masses are.

The other organizations I worked with over the years, I wanted to get in there and bring up issues. Raise issues and let the people know what's going on. A good left-wing trade unionist will get in there and bring issues to the floor, like I used to do in the NAACP and the other mass organizations. Be a sparkplug, and at least some of the people will go along with you.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## GRACE IN MY LIFE

In 1967 I met the person who would mean the most to me for many years. I first met Grace Oliver at the Fairmont Hotel. She was working there as a room cleaner.

Every Christmas Ben Swig, the old man himself, the owner of the Fairmont Hotel, would give a big party at the Fairmont, and all the staff went to it. Grace liked to dance. Not me. She was doing a dance called the Jerk or something. Even Mr. Swig was clapping. She had on a black dress and she looked sharp, brother! I went up to her and told her how good she looked. That's when we met.

Grace and I used to meet in the cafeteria and talk. We talked about the work at the hotel and the labor movement. I liked her looks and she seemed to be very intelligent. She was very concerned about trade union activity. She was a member of Local 283, the room cleaners union. I didn't know if she ever carried the ball for the union, but she understood what it was about. We talked a few times and she invited me to come over to her house. Grace used to live on Sharon Street. I was living at 2502 Third Street. She seemed to be a very good woman, and we got into a relationship.

Grace was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, but her family came to San Francisco and she grew up here. She had six children—two girls, Ruby and Gloria, and four boys: Larry, Jerry, Alfred, and Luke Jr. The youngest was still in school. She was separated from her husband, Luke, and later she got divorced. I saw him a couple of times when he came by the house. I helped her with the



children. They wasn't angels, but they respected the way I treated them and the way I carried myself. She was honest and made them respect me. I was buying food and helping to pay the rent.

When we got married on January 21, 1976, Grace moved in with me on Third Street. By then the children was on their own. They would come visit on holidays and Grace would prepare a big dinner. Larry was married and he would come and bring his children. Ruby had got married and Gloria was living with her aunt. Luke wasn't there and Alfred was locked up. Him and Luke was in trouble a lot.

Grace and I met when Terry Francois was the president of the chapter here of the NAACP. She told me that one time he and Dick Swig, Ben Swig's son, was going around asking the room cleaners how they liked the job. That's when Francois call himself fighting discrimination in the hotels. Quite naturally, she wasn't gonna bad-mouth the job in front of Dick Swig. She said, yeah, she liked the job. But they did have some trouble with racism, and I was telling her that they could do better.

Before I got to know Grace well, I remembered there was a lady named Mrs. Brown who worked there in the linen room. She was a room cleaner, and I was telling her they should have black inspectors. At that time I was on the local joint board for the hotel workers unions up on Market Street. At that time there was separate locals for different hotel workers. The room cleaners, cooks, waiters, waitresses, and bartenders was in different locals. I had raised the question in the joint board about how if they discharged a room cleaner they had no follow-up. The business agent wouldn't take up the case to get them reinstated. I was telling them that there should be a change. To get back to Mrs. Brown and the black inspectors, she called Bert, the head of Local 283. We wanted the black room cleaners to be able to advance to inspector. This was like the same thing I had fought for in the South, to upgrade the workers on the docks. When you have an opening, it should be open to anyone to apply and upgrade. I told Mrs. Brown to threaten to march on the local if they didn't demand that they put on black inspectors. Bert called Mrs. Bennett, the head housekeeper at the Fairmont, and got them to hire black inspectors 'cause he didn't want the room cleaners marching on the local. Mrs. Brown and I was talking about the march sitting in the cafeteria. They thought we was drinking coffee but we were organizing!

Grace got involved in union activities after she left the Fairmont and went to work at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. In the cafeteria the room cleaners were being served precooked food that was left over from the restaurant, and they had to pay for it. I told her that wasn't right. The workers should get the food for free or bring their own. Grace discussed this with her fellow workers and they decided to boycott the cafeteria to protest. She organized them to bring their own lunch from home in a brown bag. The negotiations took a while but finally all the hotels agreed that the room



cleaners could eat free in the cafeteria after they had worked so many hours. I gave Grace the ball and she ran with it. She had the consciousness to become an activist; all she needed was a little guidance in the right direction. If somebody has a little spark and you develop it, it will grow. I learned that through the struggle in the trade union movement.

While this struggle was going on, the manager of the hotel tried to discharge Grace two, three times, said she was drunk on the job and falling out. The bosses will try to pull anything, and they'll get away with it if you don't have the strength to fight back. Grace went to the union. The union had a meeting of the grievance committee and Joe Belardi, who was head of the local joint board, went and fought for her. I knew Joe Belardi. He was born in the same town as my mother—Bolton, Mississippi. He got Grace's job reinstated.

They kept on harassing her at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. One day they discharged her again. Grace did drink but not enough to be falling out on her job. Grace got a statement from her doctor saying that she wasn't drunk. She was suffering from seizures and taking a medication called Dilantin. [*Dilantin is a drug commonly used for management of seizures in patients with brain cancer.*] They called her at home and told her she was reinstated and to come back to work. But they continued harassing her. She finally decided that she would quit because she was tired of being harassed.

For a time Grace worked with other women in an organization called the Committee For Jobs. The Committee initiated a struggle for jobs for women on the waterfront. They faced a barrier of male supremacist harassment without much support, but they continued to sit in the hiring hall and to speak out. The committee didn't really get off the ground, and only later did this struggle gain the visibility and support to break through.

Later she got a job at a small hotel on Turk Street. She worked there close to five or six months. The hotel owner sold out. He had only two black room cleaners there, one of whom was Grace. He called the two into the office to give them two weeks' notice and a recommendation and two weeks' pay.

I suggested to Grace that she should get on disability because she was ill. She was still having seizures. She would never tell me what exactly was the problem because she said she didn't want to worry me. But it worried me more that she wouldn't tell me. She stopped drinking but she didn't get any better. I took her to the social security office on Mission Street to apply for disability and social security. When we went down there I told Grace don't go there like some people, who dress in one shoe or a blue sock and a green one or a red one. Go there looking neat. Dress well. I had learned that when I was negotiating in the South and meeting people. If you want to be successful, look successful. When we went to the office the lady told Grace, "Don't worry. I'm going to put you on right away." I was there observing, and I had on so damned many union buttons that maybe the



lady was thinking, "We don't want no trouble!" Grace started receiving social security on September 13, 1982, and I was named payee so she wouldn't have to go out to cash the checks.

During the time Grace and I was together I was involved with the Communist Party and the ADNIP Party. I was interested in any organization I thought could help black folks. Grace wasn't too interested in the ADNIP Party. I think she attended a couple of meetings with me, but that was about all. She didn't have any connection with the Communist Party except what she knew about it from me. She wasn't against the party and she didn't oppose me being involved with it. Grace would go along with some of the issues, like fighting racism and working on the job situation. We used to go to the *People's World* fund-raising event every year. But I think her attitude to the party came out one day when I told her the FBI did not seem to be bothering the party anymore. She said, "Well, that's because you all ain't doing nothing!"

Although she wasn't well, Grace did some work in the community. I had to raise hell to get a polling place put in Dog Patch at the bottom of Potrero Hill so old people wouldn't have to climb up the hill to vote. We worked together on that. Grace worked on registering people to vote, and she worked at the polls. Meantime I was learning and she was learning; we were learning to work together around issues.

Grace wasn't no Harriet Tubman but she did the best she could, and I respected and loved her for that. We could work together and she gave me inspiration to move forward. She encouraged me to write, and she helped me. I had faith in her, I had confidence in her, I could trust her. If she was living today, she would still be out there.

Her drinking was pretty bad sometimes, but we worked on that, and she finally stopped two years or so before she died. But she couldn't stop smoking. I used to buy her three, four cartons of cigarettes a month. She said she just couldn't quit.

Toward the end we had a fire at the apartment building where we were living on Third Street. The fire broke out early one morning. Grace was sleeping in her son's apartment, number 3, because I had a big Belgian shepherd that she was allergic to. A lady passing by saw the fire and warned people. Grace was sick, but she got up out of bed and went into the hallway, which was in total darkness. Two other tenants saw her going the wrong way—toward the fire—and they took her outside of the building. The firemen came and put the fire out before it did too much damage.

The fire started on the back porch. That made me suspicious because a fire had started there once before. We believed maybe the landlord had started the fire. So I started staying up and watching, and I got a couple of the tenants to act as security at night.



On Monday, January 13, 1986, I had to attend two meetings. When I got home, the lady at the store told me that Grace had passed. The ambulance came and got her that morning and took her to General Hospital. She had gone there once before to get operated on. I didn't have too much faith in General Hospital, but a lot of people said it was a good hospital. I didn't trust those white doctors. Maybe they gave her too much medication. Grace wouldn't tell me what the operation was for; I believed it was cancer.

Grace had started going to the Metropolitan Baptist Church and that's where the funeral service was held. A lot of people attended the service, and I got hundreds of cards and telegrams.

I loved Grace. We had a good relationship, and I had a good sister I could trust. I had a lot of faith in her and she had faith in me. I'm sorry that I couldn't save her.

Grace was very much loved and highly respected in the community. Perhaps one of the finest tributes showing this is demonstrated in this letter from the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, dated January 23, 1986:

Dear Mr. Brown:

This is to inform you that, upon motion made by Supervisor Doris M. Ward, the Board of Supervisors adjourned its regular meeting of January 21, 1986 out of respect to the memory of the late Grace Oliver Brown.

The members of the Board, with a profound sense of civic and personal loss, are conscious of the many fine qualities of heart and mind which distinguished and brought justifiable appreciation to Mrs. Brown in the community.

The Supervisors realize that mere words can mean so little to you at a time such as this, but they do want you and the members of your family to know of their deep sympathy and heartfelt condolence.

Sincerely,

John L. Taylor

Clerk of the Board

Over the years I have faced other deaths among my loved ones. My mother passed years before I left New Orleans to come to San Francisco. She died before I went to the penitentiary. She was sick. I remember the doctor called me and my brother and sister into her room. He said, "I can't save her, but I can keep her alive a little longer." She had a slow leak in her heart. He wanted to do something that would keep her alive. She lived a while longer but then she passed. This was when I was working on the barge lines, around 1951, when she passed.

After I got to San Francisco, I used to call and talk to Rose and the children—my son, Brownie, and Rose's other children, Yvonne and Theodore. I went back to New Orleans on the bus one year before Brownie passed, and I



spent about five days with him. He drove me around in the car and we talked a lot. Instead of sitting in the front of the car I always sat in the back because I didn't believe in using those buckles, putting on the seat belts. He always wanted me to talk and said, "Talk to me, tell me something." He wanted to know about different things I was doing.

I was staying with my cousin from my father's side, Sugar Duck, who I stayed with before when I was living in Los Angeles and went to visit New Orleans. She was the daughter of Joe Reece. She was sixty, seventy years old and used to strut all over. We went to the store and she wanted to buy three Irish potatoes. I said, "Cuz, put that back." I got the basket and started to dropping chicken, meat, and other things in there. I was gonna stay there a week or longer and I wanted to help out. The lady at the counter looked at me when I pulled out a hundred-dollar bill. She acted like she ain't never seen a black man with a hundred-dollar bill.

Brownie had a job driving a water truck, delivering bottled water. He said he liked the job. That was the first time I had seen him since he was small, after I got out the joint. I was glad to see him. He was married and had three children: Donald, Derrick, and Darwin. His wife was named Bobbie. I think he was doing good. That was one year before he drowned. He was twenty-six years old, I believe.

Brownie drowned in the swimming pool at the place where he lived. Yvonne's son found him in the pool late one night. I don't know how it happened, but I thought something was wrong. I asked Rose's brother-in-law to investigate, but he never found out anything.

When Brownie passed, Rose called me and I returned to New Orleans to go to the wake. Cousin Sugar Duck left the key with a neighbor. I got there and took a bath and went to the quiet hour. Sugar Duck was there, and as long as I could look back and see her I felt strong. I knew I wouldn't have no break down. I knew she was there to protect the family if anybody fell out. My sister and my brother was rubbing me on the head and all that. Brownie's wife was whooping and hollering. Sugar Duck carried a bottle of camphor oil. She needed it the next day at the cemetery. Rose's daughter, Yvonne, fell out when they was lowering Brownie down into the ground. Cuz stuck the camphor bottle under her nose and she came back.

Rose and Moselle have passed too. Rose died a few years ago. I didn't know nothing about it until my sister sent me the news. Rose had been sick in the hospital. She used to smoke a lot. I think that's what killed her.

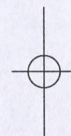
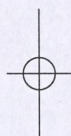
Moselle got killed in an automobile wreck. Last time I was passing her cousin's beauty shop on Third Street four or five years ago, she called me and told me. I couldn't believe it. That was the second time Moselle was in a car wreck. She and her Uncle Doc was in another car wreck when they was on their way to Florida.



Brownie's wife got married again, but her and her husband separated. She raised the children and kept me in touch with the them. One of the boys came out here and stayed, but he was bad news. He was living in Union City and always getting in trouble. That was Derrick. Brownie's youngest son, Darwin, got married, and now he has a daughter named Calisha ~~Kenya~~ Brown, my great-granddaughter. They sent me a picture of her. She's five years old now. They say she's a "real Brown." I don't know exactly what they mean by that, but it sounds good.

Keyanté







## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# RETIREMENT: ACTIVISM AND WRITING ~~START TITLE HERE~~

I retired on disability when I left the Jack Tar, but I worked some for the Black Security Guards, as I said. When Grace and I lived on Third Street shortly after we got married, that's when I got my first social security check. I got it first and then she got social security.

### Trade Union Activism

After I retired, I remained active in the trade union movement. I worked with my union and supported progressive labor organizations like the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. In 1975 all of the hotel workers locals had merged into one local, Local 2, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union. I was active in the Local 2 Retirees Association, and in 1979 I ran for the executive board of Local 2. We had a progressive slate called Action Thru Unity. It was headed up by Charles Lamb for president, Larry Tom for vice president, and Sherri Chiesa for secretary-treasurer. The union had been losing membership and we wanted to organize the unorganized workers. Membership had dropped from 24,000 when the locals merged to only 17,000 in 1979. Our ticket won that election, and I got the most votes of any executive board member.

I was on the affirmative action committee of the executive board. I wanted to get more black people working in the hotels, and as members in the union.



By 1982 we only had 1,379 black members out of a total of 16,000. I was very concerned. I said there was a great need for the affirmative action committee. I tried to encourage young people in the black community, as well as all unemployed workers, to seek employment in the culinary industry.

I ran for the executive board again in 1981, along with Jean Damu, a young, progressive brother that I knew in the union. In our campaign for the executive board Damu and I pointed out that we had fought for unity and democracy in Local 2. We had kept the rank-and-file affirmative action committee alive. During the hotel strike in 1980 we called on the union leadership to democratize the conduct of the strike and get support from other unions. We urged the local to support freedom struggles in South America and South Africa. We called on the international to organize workers in fast food restaurants like McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken and to push for the thirty-five-hour week. We opposed the firings of many minority business agents by the current administration of the union. We wanted a strong executive board, but our opponents was doing everything to split the progressive vote in that election and kept us from winning.

Even though I wasn't on the executive board any more, we kept the unity and democracy caucus going and I continued on the affirmative action committee. I was also second vice president of the Retirees' Association. When time came to negotiate a new contract for hotel workers, I issued the following press release:

Trade Unionist Lee Brown's views and report on Local 2 Hotel Workers sent a loud and clear message to the hotel owners in San Francisco. No sweetheart contract. For a good contract, we vote 'yes.' They voted 94% for a good contract. Some workers voted 'no', but the majority voted 'yes.' No takeaways. We will strike again, if necessary. We will not go backwards. They say that we will support the rank and file negotiating committee; we will support the staff of Local 2, for we all learned a lesson in the first struggle for a decent contract.

They also threatened to take away some holidays: July 4th and Thanksgiving Day. They threatened also to take away the union hiring hall and that made the workers angry. And I repeat they will not go backward, they will go forward. These threatening issues united and made the rank and file much stronger. And these are the issues: We demand a decent working contract around wages, vacation, holidays, meals for all employees including roomcleaners. . . . From my point of view, the hotel workers are much stronger than they were in the first strike, when they [employers] threatened to take away the hiring hall which is the backbone of the hotel workers. The real source of the union's power is its rank and file membership. We are united behind the negotiating committee and the staff of Local 2 struggling for a better and a fairer contract in the culinary industries. Struggles will teach us a lesson. Labor must get involved in American politics. The bosses are scheduled to present before the statewide elections December 13th a bill by Assemblyman Don Sebastiani (R-Sonoma)—author of the scheme. This scheme is designed to make California become an open-union-shop



and a right-to-work state. So, we must fight back and organize a united front. All community members should be encouraged to seek work in the culinary industries. There are many job classifications, briefly, from cooks, food servers, buspersons, bartenders, including dishwashers, roomcleaners, and telephone operators. Now I want to encourage the Black community, in particular, and all unemployed workers to seek employment in the culinary industry. . . . As a former member of the Executive Board and appointee of the Affirmative Action Committee and second vice-president of the Retirees' Assoc. (Local 2), I will continue fighting for a progressive, democratic Local 2 and a strong, fighting, militant union in the culinary industry, for a training program to upgrade and/or promote the workers, [and to support] the rank and file negotiating committee and chief negotiator, Charles Lamb. The rank and file membership has been well-informed through bulletins, leaflets, speeches, newsletters, etc.

I will repeat: we will not go backwards. We will continue going forward. Local 2 members speak with one voice for trade union unity and democracy. I, Lee Brown, will remain your brother in struggle until the emancipation of the workers in the United States of America.

### Senior Activism

After I retired, I had gotten back into the Communist Party. Sam Gold had first asked me to come back into the party. I did go to some party activities. I was a fellow-traveler, and that's how I met Kendra Alexander, a sister who became chair of the party in California. Kendra impressed me as a sincere person and I had respect for her. We used to discuss trade unions. She also encouraged me to get back into the party. To me Kendra was a Harriet Tubman and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. It was a great loss when she died in a fire in her home in 1993.

Although I had my criticisms of racism in the party, I started going to meetings again. By 1979 I was a member and was paying dues again. I paid dues through 1991.

Kendra Alexander put me on the party's senior commission because they didn't have any blacks on it. One of the people I met on the commission was Billy Allan. I think Billy was the chairman of the commission. I liked Billy. He was honest, he wasn't racist, and I respected him. A tribute was held for me in 1982. Billy was out of town, but he sent a statement that Lee Brown "brings to the organized working class movement a dedication, militancy, and clarity needed so much in these complex times, when the class is under such fierce attack by the Reaganites and Reaganomics. He speaks loudly, valiantly and with passion against the twin sources of disunity, red-baiting and racism. No red-baiter or racist will get away with their divisiveness while Lee Brown is able to get to the floor and rebut that splitting tactic of the bosses. In the senior movement he has made his mark. A vice president



of the retirees organization in Local 2, he sends out the call to all seniors to unite and get with it, to beat back the attacks on their rights and needs by Reagan. Onward and upward I say to Lee Brown."

Billy died in 1988. I wrote to Billy's wife, Stephanie, and his family to express my wholehearted sympathy. Billy was very knowledgeable of the trade union movement. He tried to connect the party with seniors and the trade union movement. I learned a lot from him.

I was a member of many different senior organizations, including the Senior Action Network, the National Council of Senior Citizens, the National Caucus and Center for the Black Aged in Washington, and Legal Assistance to the Elderly. I was a member of different committees and boards that studied issues and policies and whatnot and made recommendations and reports. Starting in 1986 I worked on the senior advisory committee of the Legal Assistance to the Elderly, and in 1990 their newsletter published an article profiling my life and my work in the trade union movement.

I was a member of the board of directors of the Senior Action Network but because of health reasons I had to resign. But I continued on the crime committee that met once a month. In 1992 I was nominated for an S.A.N. Senior of the Year Award. They gave a trophy. They also gave me a certificate of honor for volunteer service to the San Francisco community.

In addition to serving on committees, for many years I went to the annual senior rally in Sacramento where we would raise issues concerning the needs of seniors. I was a monitor at the demonstrations and I was on the board of the California Legislative Council for Older Americans that sponsored the marches. I would still be going now except that in 1997 I had a heart attack and my doctor, Dr. Arthur Coleman, told me I had to slow down.

I also wrote many articles and letters to editors about issues affecting seniors, including an article that was published in the *People's World* newspaper on May 19, 1984.

#### BLACK SENIORS—DOUBLE WHAMMY

As a Black Trade Unionist, I call for an end to the discrimination against Black seniors on a national level. This means all those in senior organizations, retiree groups, community groups, churches, etc.—minority and white senior elders—should fight for equality of all seniors.

Black seniors are also suffering as part of the working class for being Black, so that means they are doubly oppressed. Therefore, all of us—seniors and non-seniors—must work together to bring about equality for all minorities, seniors and especially Black seniors in this country.

Poverty continues to increase for older Blacks. There are nearly 800,000 older Blacks among the poor in the U.S., according to the Census Bureau statistics for



the '80s, which are some two of every five Blacks who are 65 years or older. This includes a high number of elderly Blacks who are living below the poverty level.

Black Americans are living in health hazard housing, fire hazard housing and overcrowded housing. Some older Black couples are living on an income of \$4,954. Among older Black women, three out of seven are poor.

Cutbacks in programs such as Social Security, food stamps, Medicare, and escort services mean older Blacks will be hit hardest and suffer worse than they already do.

It is the great fear of race in the minds of Americans which is causing crisis and conflicts among citizens in this country, where they suffer from this great fear of racism and people have to suffer. For example . . . Black senior women suffer doubly from being exploited on account of being part of the working class and Black. So, Black seniors are second-class citizens, definitely; because of this, it must be on our agenda to fight for all minority seniors, particularly Black seniors.

As a trade unionist speaking for the grassroots seniors in this country, I know it is Black senior organizations who are representing (and not very well) the masses at the grassroots level. And I'm speaking from the experience of collecting information and personal investigation and scientific research and talking to people well-informed. And I am a member of national senior groups as well as local.

Now is the time for seniors to demand their rights: food, shelter, health care, energy, transportation and decent homes that we can afford. We must demand that no more cuts are enacted in social programs. And this means that seniors must also fight for peace and jobs for all.

—Lee Brown

My wife, Grace, helped me start off writing after I retired. She encouraged me and assisted me. She would type up my articles and letters and help me with the writing. My friend Tom Dunphy also helped me. He would interview me and write it down. Both of them also helped me with starting to write my life story. I wasn't no fancy writer, but I tried to express my ideas, what I think needs to be told, because other writers and editors weren't getting down to the grass roots. I wrote many articles for the *Peoples World* and I wrote a regular column called "Diary of a Black Trade Unionist" that was printed in the *New Bayview News*. My articles and letters were sometimes printed in other publications like the *Sun-Reporter* newspaper and the *Black Scholar*.

### Housing Issues

Another issue I worked on was trying to get decent housing for all people. When Grace and I lived on Third Street, I worked with the Tenants Union and I was chairperson of the Committee for Fair Rent.



I also wrote about the housing crisis and possible solutions. Here are some excerpts from an article I wrote that was published in the *New Bayview News*, May 28, 1981.

#### HOUSING CRISIS

By Lee Brown

As a Trade Unionist I fight for the right of housing for working people in this country. I would also include the seniors, retirees, the disabled or handicapped, and housing especially for the poor and working class youth. Because the young who want to have their own decent place to live cannot find anyplace to live, they are forced to live in overcrowded homes. Mostly these "homes" are a health hazard and a fire hazard. These traps are indecent and immoral. WE NEED HOUSES FOR PEOPLE, NOT FOR PROFIT. It is a human right. Houses for people is a basic human right.

In California we are 210,000 housing units short, and that is not including the unlivable housing. By not having adequate houses for the people we have lost over 175,000 jobs in California. . . .

Those who can well afford to get housing get more help, and the poor, working class and low income continue to cry out for a decent place to live. The only thing they ask for is a decent place to live. A place that we can afford. And especially hard hit are our single women with children. . . .

I now would like to present a solution to the housing crisis in the USA as follows: A battle for rent control. Because we have a serious fight ahead. (Rent control law is in serious jeopardy in Calif., if not the whole country.) We need a national rent control law. The poor people are living in worse houses in the central city areas. The landlords only use a small sum of their profits, which they receive from the pockets of their tenants, to patch up the falling down housing, and then use any repair as an excuse to raise the peoples rent. This then forces the seniors and us poor out. The hardest hit are on fixed incomes. Those of us on fixed and slipping incomes have to give up food for higher rents and utilities. . . .

We must act, we must turn talk into action, and form housing committees for immediate action. We can then form community organizations on a block by block basis to do something other than just talk about this problem. Go after your churches, your labor organizations, and your neighbors to form committees. . . .

#### The NAACP

I have a lifetime membership in the NAACP. Since my days in Houston I have always been a supporter of the NAACP, and after retiring I continued to be active. I was very concerned about senior issues, housing, and health care. For a while I was the chair of the NAACP's senior citizen committee. Sometimes I



had problems with the leadership of the San Francisco chapter of the NAACP, but I always thought it was an important organization and I worked along with other progressive members like Julianne Malveaux and Harold Treskunoff to do what I could to support it.

I feel that the local leadership hasn't been democratic about choosing delegates for national conventions. They pick delegates they want, but the delegates should be elected by the general membership, as we do in unions. The chapter I attended in New Orleans was more democratic. And the leadership here doesn't follow through on issues we need to be fighting on—that's housing, health needs, jobs. You could build the NAACP if they worked on these issues. That's the way you build an organization—around issues.

I tried to sum up my views on the NAACP in an article that was published in 1984 in the *Sun-Reporter* newspaper.

#### IN SUPPORT OF THE NAACP

By Lee Brown

I would like to express my concern regarding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and my involvement in the association. In 1939 I became aware of the NAACP in Houston, Texas, and later became a member of the NAACP Youth Movement in Los Angeles. I was involved in fighting for better roles for black Americans in the motion picture industry. Mrs. Charlotta Bass, editor and publisher of the *California Eagle*, the major black newspaper in Los Angeles during the Depression, was the Executive Director of the Youth League of the NAACP.

We must continue the fight for better roles in the motion picture industry, television, and other entertainment fields. We must not treat the subject lightly. We have made some gains in the Negro and Hollywood films, but not enough. Hollywood must take a new look at the black American and continue the fight to eliminate the roots of racism in the industry. In the past a number of black films were made which told about the struggle for a better life in the U.S. Several films such as "Home of the Brave," "Lost Boundaries," "Intruder in the Dust," and a number of other films were made but they did not tell the complete story of black people in helping to build America—that's one reason why we should encourage more people to join the NAACP because the NAACP is the oldest civil rights organization in America.

We should help build the NAACP, help build the people's movement. I acted in the labor movement for over 46 years and sold a number of memberships in our Local 207 in New Orleans. Our union staff and executive board worked very closely with the national organizational branch of the NAACP to maintain rights of organized labor and the field of health, housing, education and jobs for youth and adults and in other areas as well. . . .

The NAACP must change in order to grow. Some must come down off their high horses and be human!—respect the rights of the people, regardless of what



level they've attained. Those of us concerned with the NAACP and conscious of the struggle in America must learn to relate and listen to each other, because no matter what level, we're all victims of racism in America.

I would like to say to the leadership of the NAACP that we must call upon our friends in labor, religion, and other areas to help secure freedom. The struggle for freedom of black Americans is the struggle for freedom for all America.

Join the NAACP today, not tomorrow, for tomorrow may be too late. First recruit your family into the NAACP, then your neighbors. I feel that this is our duty and our responsibility that we must sacrifice in the cause of freedom. So let it be on our agenda, for time is running out.

We're going into 1985 and I propose that we study the history of black workers in America and black history in general. We must have knowledge of where we came from in order to know where we're going. I propose also that you become a nation of readers! We have been in a storm in the struggle for liberation of oppressed people in the U.S. And we must become allies with all organizations that fight for freedom for all oppressed peoples in the U.S.

We must also study the history of the NAACP, from the beginning of the Niagara Movement in 1905 to the present. . . .

I remain with you in the struggle, and continue the unfinished march for justice.

### Peace and Solidarity Work

When the movement against apartheid in South Africa started I got involved in it. I participated in marches and demonstrations and I spoke at rallies. I went in 1981 to New York City to the Conference in Solidarity with the Liberation Struggle of the People of Southern Africa. I was the representative of Local 2, sent by the president and the executive board. Thousands of people came to this conference.

When I returned from the conference, I wrote an article reporting on it. Here is an excerpt from the article, which was published in the *People's World*, November 7, 1981, and reprinted in the *New Bayview News*, December 1, 1981.

#### SOLIDARITY CONFERENCE

By Lee Brown

The purpose of the conference was to establish a plan of action to educate and organize the U.S. masses against the racist apartheid regime of South Africa. Apartheid is the racist system of government whereby the white minority (17 percent of the total population) owns and controls over 85 percent of the wealth. The 70 percent Black majority suffer atrocities most North Americans find difficult to comprehend.



The distribution of wealth in South Africa is itself a reflection of how these atrocities are possible. Blacks in South Africa are among the world's most poverty-stricken people.

The declaration submitted by the New York delegation was adopted by the conference delegates; it included the following:

- To organize mass support in the U.S. for the liberation movement of South Africa;
- To expose the U.S. government and corporations' leading role in the South African apartheid system;
- To mobilize the people in the U.S. from the grass roots in the anti-apartheid struggle.

I will report back to Local 2, demanding ongoing assistance to the liberation struggle in South Africa. I urge everyone to fight this system of genocide against South African Blacks.

"An Injury To One Is An Injury To All."

I continued to be active in the antiapartheid movement, and in 1985 I marched in a demonstration with Alameda County supervisor John George. A photograph of us marching together was published in the *California Voice* newspaper. I'm proud that I marched in demonstrations. I'm also proud that I helped provide security when Alfred Nzo and Nelson Mandela came to the Bay Area. I got to meet Nzo but not Mandela.

In an article that *The Black Scholar* published in the May-June 1981 issue I discussed the different social issues and connected them to the trade union movement, peace, the military budget, and political involvement.

#### VIEWS ON THE MILITARY BUDGET

By Lee Brown

I am writing on behalf of the lower and moderate income workers, on how Reagan's military budget affects us as working people. Reagan's interest is not the worker's interest. Escalating the already bloated military budget only robs the people of services necessary for their survival. Senior citizens, retirees, the disabled, handicapped: all standards of living are reduced when money is taken from social programs and used instead for MX missiles. Poor people, youth, single mothers are all victims of a needlessly inflated military budget.

The workers cannot afford to rent decent housing, let alone buying a home; food and utility prices are far more than many people can pay; schools are being closed, denying young people any kind of education. Poor people face overcrowded living conditions with severe health and fire hazards.



Do U.S. workers really know what's happening? I say that Reagan is anti-people. He represents pro-monopoly and pro-military spending, serving the interests of big business and putting profits before the people's well-being. We face tough years ahead. Reagan has given the green light to bust unions in the U.S.A. The resurgence of racism is being used to divide the ranks of labor. The threat of a sub-minimum wage for youth is an attempt to separate young people from organized labor. Unemployment continues to rise as workers are repeatedly bombarded with plant closures and runaway shops; hospitals, clinics and schools are being closed, which not only denies communities of needed services, it also adds to unemployment. The U.S. is in an economic crisis and the people must act now.

Organized labor has the ability to lead in the struggle for the rights of all workers. Trade unionists must participate in coalitions with representatives from religious groups, senior citizens, youth, community and political organizations. We must build a united front which serves the interests of working people in this country. An enormous military budget and constant threats of nuclear war do not serve our interests.

Trade unions must become the vehicle for workers to struggle in their own interests. Labor's goal must be to organize the unorganized. Unions need study circles and union classes to educate workers on trade unionism and practice unionism, teaching workers trade union consciousness, with a knowledge of trade union democracy.

Free education and health services and decent housing for all people in this country must be struggled for. We must fight for rent control and lowering of utility prices. We must close tax loopholes of the monopolies. We must fight against unemployment, inflation, runaway shops; we must demand jobs for all with effective affirmative action for nationally and racially oppressed people. I feel this is a people's program. And we must not forget those on Social Security and S.S.I.

There is a solution to high unemployment that trade unions can become involved with: workers' fightback is the answer. We can demand more houses for poor and elderly people. Housing increases will create jobs for construction workers throughout the country. Keeping schools open will employ vast numbers of people from janitorial and food service workers to clerical workers and teachers, as well as educating the nation's youth. Keeping hospitals and clinics open also offers an abundance of jobs. Trade unions can fight the devastating effects of plant closures by supporting and participating in public and government joint takeover of closed plants. The time has also come to demand a shorter workweek with no cut in pay. Railroads can be re-opened in large cities, putting Americans back to work at union wages and working conditions. The possibilities are endless if we organize to stop Reagan's war economy and demand that our needs be met.

It is time to put talk into action. I call upon today's youth to turn out in masses to register and vote for candidates who work for peace and the people's needs. We must become politically conscious by building relationships with one another in all working-class communities. We must have faith and confidence in one another and strive for peace throughout the world.

I say that labor must be in the forefront of this struggle and call for unity for all organized labor in the U.S.A!

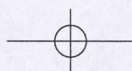
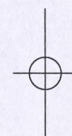


### "Doctor of the Working Class"

I have worked in many organizations and have learned many lessons. As a worker and a trade unionist I'm struggling, I'm trying to do the best I can to call up the needs of the people. I have worked and lived in the midst of the workers. I must know everything that I can about working people, the union people, that I work with at the grassroots level. I must try to understand the poor and the masses of the people. I must find the correct approach so that I will be able to work with them and they will help and work together and help themselves and help me. I must win the confidence of working people as I struggle in community service.

It was in July 1981 that I became a "doctor of the working class." I gave myself the Doctor of the Working Class degree. My university is the university of the world, and the people are the best teachers. I feel that through my experience in the struggle I earned that degree. I'm proud to be Lee Brown, D.W.C. *[Lee Brown obtained a Certificate of Registration for an unincorporated nonprofit association from the state of California. The association name is Doctor of the Working Class with Lee Brown listed as founder and director. The registration certificate was issued on July 21, 1981, and is signed by March Fong Eu, Secretary of State.]*







## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# LOOKING BACK, FACING FORWARD

My grandfather always told me that God helps those who help themselves. That told me something—that you had to help yourself, that you didn't have to look up, since there wasn't no god up there; god was down here within you. You got to move the situation, struggle to change things, and have faith in the people.

Sometimes people at the grass roots get to fighting each other. The problem is shaky leadership, even in the labor movement. They collaborate with the bosses. They mislead the workers. That has got to change. We need to have a new labor movement, a new struggle.

When I look back, I see that the trade union movement gave me inspiration and knowledge and the experience of fighting for freedom. I learned that the workers wasn't getting complete freedom and justice. We had to combat racism and fight for better working conditions, jobs, upgrading, health needs, and housing.

I learned that to build any organization you have to fight for issues. If you want a strong organization, you pick out issues to organize around. We fought Jim Crow as one issue to build the union. The union did an extraordinary job in the South on this and other issues. We dealt with social issues like voter registration, as well as job issues. In 1948 we was fighting like hell to get people registered in the campaign for Henry Wallace.

Racism is still a problem, and it's a problem in the unions. I remember when they was talking about merging the hotel and restaurant workers unions



in San Francisco back in the 1970s; Charlie Gricus came to my house one day. He was telling me that we would have a better chance of fighting Jim Crow. He wanted me to work with him in bringing together the unions so we could merge. I thought it was good. But after they merged into Local 2 they still had problems with racism, not getting more black people into hotel work and into the union. They also didn't have many black people working on the staff of Local 2, only one brother on the staff. I talked to the president about that but they didn't follow through. So racism is still a problem in the labor movement. It was better when we had Charles Lamb and Sherri Chiesa as the union leaders. We had more blacks in the union then. Now it seems like the leadership of the union is working with the company to keep blacks out. So you got to fight the union and the company both.

I also think that the CIO merging with the AFL in 1955 was a deadly mistake. We had bad leadership. We could have had strong unions throughout America. But the bosses wanted to block the organizing of a lot of businesses. There are a lot of places that are not organized. When the CIO was around, it organized the textile, automobile, fur and leather workers, dockworkers, packinghouse workers, and many other workers. But when it merged with the AFL, the organizing drive stopped. I blame the party for that. The party should have built a left-wing movement in the trade unions to keep the unions from going to the right. We needed a left-center movement to hold the unions and fight around issues like racism, health needs, and housing. That could have moved the masses of the people. So that was a mistake.

I know some people look to [AFL-CIO president] John Sweeney to make things different, but I say the power comes from the rank-and-file. The people themselves got to speak out. I don't give a damn how good your leader is if you ain't got a strong rank-and-file to fight around issues and build the organization.

We got to build a new, strong labor movement around issues. We need to be very militant and fight for issues. Blacks should study the history of progressive movements. We need to study how to mobilize the people. Reparations is one issue that we can use to mobilize black people of different classes. We need to talk about redistributing the wealth. We can get brown people and some white people to unite with black people around that kind of issue.

We need an international labor movement. They need to make international contacts in other countries like South Africa, where there is a strong union movement. We need to start here first, but we also need to make contacts and have dialog with workers about issues we can use to build the labor movement. You got to have a new labor movement. That means talking with progressive-minded workers, black, white, brown, all kinds of workers, to support a new labor movement. Women need to be involved, like in the room cleaners' struggle. It's like taking a ball and rolling it. You got to start it off. People need to know the truth. As long as you got the capitalist system you ain't go-



ing to make it here, not the poor. They may get a few crumbs, the middle class may, but not the poor. We need a big movement here around issues. We need to get out there and hit the streets. When you start an organization, you need organizers and you need to be able to protect them when they get thrown in jail, like we did in the South. If you get arrested, you have somebody to get the people out before things get vicious in the jails.

In New Orleans I worked with the NAACP and civil rights. I met Martin Luther King when he came to New Orleans. I was introduced to him by Rev. L. Davis. I talked with him a little bit around issues. He was down-to-earth. When I told him I was for peace, freedom, and socialism, he didn't flinch. You know he went to a socialist school, quiet as it's kept, the Highlander School. I think Dr. King was correct in fighting for civil rights, and I think we made a lot of progress, but I think we should have been working to educate the working white about racism and how he is hurting himself by trying to maintain white supremacy.

I think Julian Bond and Kwesi Mfume are good top leaders of the NAACP, but you still got to wake up the membership. They need to mobilize the young people to build the NAACP. They can't let it just get conservative, middle-class, petty bourgeois. They'll be satisfied as long as they get a dollar but that won't solve any problems. You need the masses, poor people, in the membership. That's where the power is. As I told them in the labor movement, the source of power is the rank-and-file membership. Listen to them and you can't go wrong. I have faith in the masses.

I believe the Muslims helped to enlighten people too, especially the brothers, to get them to come out and stand up like a man. They taught them how to treat one another right, to get off dope and alcohol, to respect women, and to treat everybody right. They said the Muslims was antiwhite, but I never read anything by Elijah Muhammad where he said to hate anyone.

I worked with the NAACP and the Muslims because they can bring out issues and help the people, and you need to reach all people to educate and motivate them.

Issues and conditions will move the people, but they need somebody to carry the ball. You got issues here—you got people hungry, people sleeping in the streets. You need somebody to get out there and mobilize them, wake them up, shake the bushes. Conditions will move anybody, but you got to have some leadership.

You need good leaders—people who are militant, have some experience, and are willing to fight back. You don't want leaders who gonna go along with the bosses and collaborate like some of these preachers. At the same time you have to be careful when you make criticisms because you can divide the people. You have to lead by bringing out issues. That was how I tried to lead, throwing out issues and getting people to support the issues.



In the Communist Party I learned to be more militant. The party gave me a militant consciousness. I learned the issues we need to fight for and how we need to organize to fight for jobs, housing, and health needs, and to fight against discrimination, particularly white chauvinism. But I also came to see there was racism within the party, like in the trade union movement, and I read books—Wilson Record's book and Bill Gould's book, *Black Workers in White Unions*—that opened my eyes.

I felt the leadership of the party in the South was more militant, more struggling. We had some militant white leaders here in San Francisco, like Archie Brown, Billy Allan, and Mickey Lima. But in the South we had to stick together, and some went to jail like the sixty-four. We never did have that kind of problem with white chauvinism.

The party gave me experience and knowledge, but we had some bad apples, some bad leadership. I studied Marx and Lenin, historical materialism, dialectical materialism, and bringing the workers together. I read books by William Z. Foster, Herbert Aptheker, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. I learned to see errors in how we was fighting and how to fight to move stones out of the way in our everyday struggles. We studied and had classes on the labor movement and all kinds of issues. I also used to meet with the black party members from other unions to talk about job issues, racism on the job, and other issues. If you know and know that you know about issues, and if you observe and learn from the struggle, from books, and from people, then you can help find a solution to the people's problems. I learned a helluva lot about the capitalist system from studying in the party.

When they called me before the Un-American Activity ~~act~~ Committee, I think they was trying to use me against the ILWU. Maybe they figured I was a weak man who didn't know nothing. They didn't know I was studying at night, my head in the books, reading Karl Marx and V. I. Lenin.

So they put me in prison. But that was like throwing the rabbit into the briar patch. I was at home. You'd be surprised at the people you meet in prison from the left. We were discussing Marxism and socialism. Hell, I think I read more about communism in prison than I did outside.

I supported the program of the Communist Party, but over time I thought the national leadership became weak. You could have built a left center in the labor movement. You could have built a strong trade union movement. When they passed that damn Taft-Hartley law, that should have been stopped by the labor left-center movement. The Communists could have played a very important role. Then when the AFL and CIO merged, that should have been stopped. That's why they stopped organizing the rank-and-file. The leadership sold out to big business.

In February 1992 the Northern California party members split off from the party. I wasn't at the national party convention a few months before the split, but I understand the national party leaders wouldn't let Angela Davis,



Charlene Mitchell, Carl Bloice, or Herbert Aptheker and other people, speak and raise issues about democracy in the party and the fight against racism. I supported Angela Davis and the others, but Gus Hall, the national party chairman, kicked them all out of the convention. That's when I stopped paying dues and quit the party.

I also thought that Gus Hall was against the senior movement. That's another reason I didn't care too much for him. Henry Winston, an Afro-American who was national chairman of the party before he died in 1986, was a strong supporter of the senior movement. We used to talk about issues whenever him and his wife came to California. When Henry Winston died and Gus Hall, who used to be general secretary, took over the chairmanship, that ended black-white collective leadership at the top level of the party. A lot of the black party members didn't like that.

Kendra Alexander and the Northern California party members formed a new organization called the Committees of Correspondence. But the Committees of Correspondence had their own problems. They set up a steering committee to put together the program. But a few individuals came up with the program without discussing it with the whole steering committee. We didn't know a damn thing about it. We should have had a chance to discuss it before it was brought to the general membership. That's democracy! I talked to Kendra about that and she agreed with me that it was wrong. After that I still supported the Committees of Correspondence, but I wasn't so actively involved anymore.

If we don't get ourselves together, we gonna move back. I remember one time I made a speech and I said we gonna have creeping fascism in this country. One guy got up and said, "No, you ain't got creeping fascism, you got running fascism in this country." That's what we gonna get if people don't wake up.

I still believe that socialism is the only solution to the problems of working people. They say that socialism failed in Russia, but the people in Russia still want socialism. That's a lot of propaganda coming out there. The people ain't finished yet. They're gonna rebuild the party. The party fell apart but the people still want socialism.

Same thing here. The people need to get some knowledge about issues and we need good leadership. That's what it's gonna take to build the movement for socialism. You got to get some people who will stand up and build an organization around issues. You got to bring in people from the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, anywhere you can find people willing to stand up and mobilize. I know some middle-class people may think everything is all right, but you got to fight that. Raise issues! Education, health care, housing.

Some young people today only think about making money. I say to young people, try to get an education. Not just to get a good job, but you need to also



know how to help your people. You can work for business or the government, but you should put something in the community too—a community health center or community schools to teach our history and teach the history of the struggle. Build something for the people.

Today big business controls everything. Big business controls the educational institutions, controls the churches, controls the penitentiaries, controls the government, and controls the laws. There's got to be a change. It's gonna be hard, but the workers got to do it. No child should go to bed hungry at night. That's wrong. People are not gonna stand around and starve. People need to wake up and fight to survive. They have to fight for bread-and-butter issues, and when they see they can't get that under capitalism then they gonna move toward socialism. You just got to educate 'em, motivate 'em, and agitate 'em.

That's my opinion, brother. You can tell 'em Lee Brown said it.



# AFTERWORD

ROBERT L. ALLEN

In recounting his life and struggles as a militant trade unionist, Lee Brown contends that issues and leadership are keys to building any organization. Although issues arise as a consequence of the circumstances in which people find themselves, how does leadership emerge? In the following pages I want to examine this question by looking at the formation of Lee Brown's character in relation to his self-described emergence as a leader in the trade union movement. I would suggest that the interplay between Lee Brown's personal qualities and his development as a grassroots leader was characterized by (1) an openness to learning from role models, mentors, colleagues, and his own experiences, (2) a willingness to act on the basis of this new knowledge, and (3) a bedrock belief, growing out of his experiences, in the capacity of ordinary people to change their circumstances through struggle.

## Early Years

Several factors appear to have been formative in Brown's development as a leader. One of these was the example of his grandfather. Brown makes it clear in his remarks that his grandfather had a great impact on the formation of his character. His experience with his grandfather gave him the beginnings of a social consciousness and a set of values and principles that would stay with him for life.



The elder Brown, for whom young Lee was named, is remembered as a kindhearted, generous, gentle man who tried to help poor people. His home was a gathering place for local people who came to talk and get advice on issues of farming, church business, money matters, and health. The elder Brown also taught young Lee to share his toys with other children and to be concerned for others generally. "He taught me how to get along with people," Brown remembers.

Grandfather Brown was an industrious man who owned a small farm and had a small drayage business. His hauling service brought him into contact with whites. Brown always maintained his dignity and bowed to no man. To young Lee, Grandfather Brown was a role model and teacher whose influence was made all the greater by the evident love that young Lee felt for and from the older man. The two were constant companions for the few years that young Lee lived with him.

While life on his grandfather's farm may have been pleasant, young Lee was soon introduced to the realities of racial segregation in the South. He realized that his grandfather ~~might have~~ died because in segregated Louisiana a hospital that would treat black people was many miles away. He also saw that many black families, unlike his grandfather who owned a plot of land, were poor, struggling sharecroppers, subject to exploitation and mistreatment. When he started school after his grandfather's death, he discovered that black children were not allowed to ride on the school buses but had to walk six miles to school. Although black farm children attended school only three months out of the year, Brown gained an early love of reading that would continue through his life.

Living with his Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe, he learned of another racial reality of southern life: the sexual harassment of black women by white men and the precarious situation of black men. When Uncle Tot's sister, Bernice, was harassed by a white man in a bar, Tot was forced to flee after someone shot the white man. Later Brown would reunite with Tot in Galveston and be introduced to the labor movement.

With his grandfather dead, his mother and uncle Tot out of the picture, Brown remained with his Aunt T-Babe. At age fifteen he decided to strike out on his own, evidencing an independent streak and a desire for new experience that would keep him periodically moving for the next eight years. Like many young men during the Great Depression, Brown hopped a freight train and rode the rails in search of a better life.

Working as a live-in servant for a white family in a small town in Louisiana, Brown saw that white racial attitudes were not monolithic but might vary even in a single family. When the mother in the family forced Lee to take his meals outside in the backyard, the daughter objected that this was wrong and got permission for him to eat at a table in the kitchen.

His housing was a small shack out back. He was allowed to plant a small garden and sell anything he grew to supplement his small salary. He shared

*penalty*



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part of his harvest with the family and industriously sold the rest from a red wagon he pulled through the streets, an enterprising spirit that, no doubt, would have made his grandfather proud.

After two years Brown decided to move on to Galveston, Texas, where Uncle Tot and Aunt T-Babe had settled. While looking for work in Galveston, Brown visited the local courthouse to listen to trials. He noticed that more black people than white seemed to be brought to trial and sent to jail. He concluded that equal justice was not being dispensed.

Uncle Tot worked at Todd Dry Dock, and after a while Brown managed to get a job there doing common labor. There was a union of the black common laborers at the dry dock. A strike was called in 1938 that lasted three months. Uncle Tot was a strong union man, and he and young Lee both walked the picket lines. White workers honored the picket lines. The strike lasted three months and resulted in a wage increases of thirty-five to fifty cents per hour. Brown was elated and inspired by this union experience. For the first time he saw the possibility of change through organizing. "The union made me feel that I could do something for poor people like myself and my cousins. The union gave me a way to go forward, to help change things."

Work was slack in Galveston and Brown could find only a poorly paid job at a brickyard in Green Bayou. Here he encountered Old Man Henderson, who introduced him to the NAACP and the idea of an organization fighting for freedom. It had immediate appeal to Brown. "We was searching for freedom," he said of himself and a friend, "young men who wanted to be free. I know I wanted to be free and wanted to join something to get freedom." The youthful search for freedom emerges here as an early theme in his life. The meaning of freedom—and unfreedom—would become more clear with time and experience.

As a railroad worker in Arizona, Brown faced his first challenge as an organizer. When a foreman tried to fire a worker named San Antonio over a minor incident, Brown intervened. He called a meeting of the workers and organized a strike. "At the meeting I said that we shouldn't go back to work until the foreman put San Antonio back to work. All of them agreed." The next morning the workers refused to ~~get~~ to work and Brown, acting as spokesman, told the foreman the men would not go back until San Antonio was put back to work. The foreman said he couldn't do it. Brown threatened to go to the road master in Yuma. The foreman caved in and agreed to San Antonio's return.

Reflecting on the experience, Brown said, "After this experience was over, I realized that unity with other employees was what made the foreman act. If all employees united together on jobs, there would be less trouble and less firings would come from the employer." There is more evident in this incident in that it anticipates and is characteristic of his emerging leadership style. Drawing on his experience in the Galveston strike and improvising



when needed, in this confrontation Brown used four tactics: (1) mobilize and unify the workers, (2) seize the initiative from the boss, (3) refuse to accede to the boss's definition of the situation, and (4) if necessary, raise the stakes. These organizing tactics would serve him well as an organizer and union shop steward in years to come.

Brown was also able to listen and respond positively to criticism that challenged him when he failed to manifest his values and principles. His would-be acting career provides a ready example. He enjoyed taking bit parts in movies and being a player, acting as though he were a rising star. The parts he took, however, were the same demeaning roles to which most other black actors were confined. Brown did not hesitate to berate these roles and the actors who took them as Uncle Toms. When he took his girlfriend Mildred to see a film in which he had a bit part—in a cotton picking scene—she was appalled. She let him know in forceful terms: "You should be ashamed to play in scenes that are so degrading to black people because you fight in the NAACP for better parts for black actors." Surprised at having this contradiction revealed, Brown felt ashamed. A person with less integrity might have dissimulated or attacked the bearer of the message. But Brown took Mildred's criticism to heart and he refused any more parts in movies.

In other ways Brown's relationships with women partly reflected and partly shaped his political maturation. His youthful relationships with girlfriends were casual and opportunistic. As he grew older, his relationships matured into thoughtful and productive partnering with women who were fellow trade union activists. A deep commitment to mutual encouragement and support in the struggle was most evident during his marriage to Grace Oliver.

### Adulthood

Brown's life in New Orleans from 1944 to 1958 witnessed the maturation of his character, the growth of his leadership skills, and the enrichment of his social consciousness and political vision. His work with Local 207, his involvement with the Communist Party, and his relationship with Andrew Steve Nelson, who bridged the two organizations, would dramatically change his life.

In Andrew Nelson he met a black man, a Communist, and a militant labor organizer who would become his closest friend and mentor. Brown started attending executive board meetings and speaking up about conditions on the waterfront, especially the issue of upgrading black workers who mainly worked as common laborers, whereas whites had access to more desirable, better-paying jobs. Soon he was elected shop steward. Nelson, older by several years, began grooming Brown for a leadership position. Their Friday lunch meetings and Sunday dinners became occasions for political discussions, informal instruction, and union strategizing as well as enjoyment of delightful New Orleans



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cuisine, which Brown clearly relished. Nelson was like an older brother, a man whom Brown admired much as he had admired his grandfather. In time Brown would become vice president of Local 207 and coleader with Nelson.

His work with Local 207 gave him rich experience with a militant union dedicated to improving the lives of working people, especially black workers. Along with Nelson's mentorship, it gave him the opportunity to learn new skills and rise to a leadership position based on his skills, militancy, and courage. As an interracial union with black leadership, Local 207, struggling in the midst of a society based on white supremacy and black subjugation, also gave Brown an inkling of a different kind of society that might be created through struggle.

Nelson also introduced Brown to the Communist Party. Brown had been favorably impressed by a Communist organizer he met in Los Angeles, but he had not attended a party meeting until invited by Nelson. Nelson said the party could train him to work with and organize people.

What impressed Brown about the Communist Party in New Orleans was its commitment to building a militant trade union movement, its advocacy and practice of racial equality (including black leadership), and its anticapitalist stance.

Brown was not particularly interested in the intricacies of party politics or doctrinaire debates over party line. What drew him was the party's active involvement in working to improve the lives of working people, especially black people. But the party offered more than the union because it also gave him a vision of a new society based on socialism and racial equality. Brown already understood, based on his own experience, that the interests of the bosses and workers were antithetical. The party gave him an analysis of capitalism that deepened his innate understanding of boss-worker conflict. The analysis further gave him an appreciation of racial segregation (Jim Crow) as a deliberate ruling-class strategy to divide and weaken the working class by fostering racial hatred. For Brown the party gave him another militant, fighting organization with a program (as Brown saw it, fighting Jim Crow, building strong trade unions, supporting voting rights and progressive candidates) and a vision (racial equality, socialism) that coincided with his developing social consciousness and working-class values.

As with his experience in Local 207, the party gave him new skills. "I learned how to run meetings, set up committees. Sometimes we had all-day meetings on how to organize people, how to get them to register to vote by educating them, how to work with politicians, and how to fight Jim Crow."

The party also introduced Brown to individuals who strongly influenced his outlook. He found himself in an organization with whites who shared his commitment to racial equality and treated him as an equal. He was impressed by the party's district organizer, Emanuel Levin, and he became friends with C. J. Meske, the international representative who was also a



party member. Brown and Meske enjoyed talking about conditions facing black and white workers in the South, and what could be done. The Communist Party encouraged and gave direction to Brown's intellectual development. He loved to read. The party introduced him to socialist literature and comrades with whom he could discuss and debate political ideas. The values he learned from his grandfather and uncle Tot and from his experiences in workers' struggles were shaped by his reading and discussions into a coherent socialist worldview. His intellectual development was motivated fundamentally by his desire to change the world. A self-educated ~~working-class~~ activist/thinker, Brown is an example of what Antonio Gramsci called an "organic intellectual." *largely an authentic working class intellectual.*

During these years, Brown came to see in the trade union movement and the Communist Party the keys for improving the lives of black people and combating racism. His faith was reinforced by his own experience. The eight months he worked with black and white striking sugar refinery workers in the towns of Reserve and Gramercy was a powerful experience. Drawing on his union and party training, Brown managed to break down racial divisions among the workers and unify them, with the result that the strike was won. Clearly, in his mind, a program of actively fighting Jim Crow could succeed. This was the way to unite the working class and win victories, but it demanded commitment and action.

Brown was impressed by the ~~personal~~ commitment of white party members to practice racial equality in their personal lives. To Brown, personal integrity is a measure and indicator of political integrity. That is why the case of the sixty-four—black and white people, many of them party members, arrested for having an interracial party in New Orleans—was so important to him, especially the fact that the group successfully fought the original convictions and got them overturned. "We helped establish the right to associate and visit each other's homes and attend meetings or demonstrate together regardless of race, color, or creed. To me this was a victory for the working class 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!"

Brown's biggest disappointment came years later, when he was living San Francisco (he had moved there to find work following his release from prison): he felt that the party and the trade unions were capitulating to racism. A significant incident for him was being snubbed on the streets by a white party member and his feeling that the party failed to deal with this instance of "white chauvinism." This may appear to be a minor event, but to Brown it was symptomatic of a deterioration of political consciousness and militancy in the party. That deterioration was reflected, in Brown's view, in the party's failure to stop the AFL-CIO merger and in the failure of newly created Local 2 to stop the growing discrimination against black



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workers in the hotel and restaurant industry in San Francisco. Brown concluded that the party's leadership had retreated from the struggle to build a strong antiracist left center in the labor movement.

His attraction to forms of black nationalism reflected both his continuing interest in the problem of black unity and freedom and his sometimes doubt about the Communist Party. He made it clear that his attraction to the Black Muslims owed less to their religious doctrine and more to the fact that the Muslims taught that African Americans had a unifying history linked to past civilizations and cultures, a history not limited to slavery and savagery. His involvement with the African Descendant Nationalist Independence Partition Party came during a period when he was disillusioned with the Communist Party and had been fired from his job at the Jack Tar. The ADNIP Party, through the Black Security Guards, provided him with work and a sense of organizational activism on behalf of the black community.

Lee Brown saw no fundamental contradiction between being involved in black nationalist groups, trade unions, the Communist Party, and the NAACP. He asserted that he was always interested in anything that would help working-class black people and, in his mind, all of these organizations offered possibilities for improving the lives of black people. For example, his involvement with the NAACP—an affiliation that continued throughout his life—grew from a powerfully felt commitment to being part of a struggle specifically aimed at gaining civil rights in the present society. At the same time he brought to the NAACP a militancy and concern for working-class issues that had informed his trade union and party activism. These interventions were not always welcome, leading to a sometimes fractious relationship with the more bourgeois NAACP leadership. Nevertheless, he never abandoned his commitment to the NAACP and his hope that it might emerge as a militant, progressive organization.

Finally, it is worth noting that Brown's affirmation of his support of the Communist Party program, despite what he sees as the failures of its leadership, reveals his fundamental faith. It suggests a basis for his continuing optimism and activism in the face of setbacks. The failures of leadership may be all too common, but this does not negate his commitment to the struggle for racial equality and socialism.

For Lee Brown it is his sense of "the people" that grounds his commitment. "I have dedicated my life in the service of poor people," says Lee Brown. "I got faith in the masses."

Whatever one makes of Lee Brown's character and the qualities of his leadership, he stands squarely within a long and rich tradition of black radicalism, a tradition that insists that issues of race and class must be simultaneously confronted if there is to be any hope of fundamental change in American society.

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This radicalism is premised on the deep interweaving of racial inequality and class exploitation in the history of this country, from the establishment of slavery in the colonial period to the dismantling of affirmative action in the present. The construction of race has been fundamental to the structuring of class divisions, and without class divisions, race would be meaningless. Generations of black radicals have sensed this peculiarly American nexus. They have insisted that without a determined struggle against racism the class struggle will fail, and without a struggle for economic justice the fight for racial equality will be subverted.

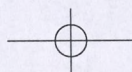
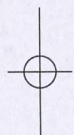
I honor Lee Brown for keeping the faith and for his courageous and enduring commitment to the tradition of black radical struggle.



## AWARDS AND HONORS

Tribute Meeting, Women's Building, San Francisco, July 17, 1982  
Letter of appreciation from Congressman Phillip Burton, July 7, 1982  
Certificate of Appreciation, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, San Francisco, June 26, 1985  
New Bayview Newspaper Publishers Award, 1985  
Commendation, San Francisco Board of Supervisors, July 28, 1990  
Certificate of Life Membership, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, September 1992  
Certificate of Honor, Senior Action Network, San Francisco, November 19, 1992  
Certificates of Appreciation, San Francisco Coalition for Low Income Housing, February 21, 1992, and December 7, 1996  
Tribute of a Lifetime—event sponsored by Committees of Correspondence to honor senior activists, June 26, 1994







## A NOTE ON SOURCES

The primary sources for this autobiography were a series of interviews that Robert L. Allen conducted with Lee Brown between 1994 and 1999, as well as earlier texts prepared by Grace Oliver Brown and Tom Dunphy. The personal files of Lee Brown contain a wealth of source materials, including letters, articles, leaflets, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, books, copies of speeches, and official documents of various kinds.

The prologue is excerpted from the published transcript of the hearing by the Committee on Un-American Activities of the House of Representatives, February 15, 1957 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1957).

The chapter entitled "Black Workers on the New Orleans Waterfront," is based on material in John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism, 1892-1923* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); and Philip S. Foner, ed., *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973* (New York: International Publishers, 1974). The history of Local 207 is drawn from a master's thesis by David Lee Wells, "The ILWU in New Orleans: CIO Radicalism in the Crescent City, 1937-1957" (Baylor University, 1979).

Materials on the trial of Andrew Steve Nelson and the transcript of the trial of Lee Brown were obtained from the National Archives, Southwest Region, Fort Worth, Texas.



Other published sources that were helpful in understanding the background of the story were Ann Fagan Ginger and David Christiano, eds., *The Cold War against Labor*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, Calif.: Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, 1987); Jean Damu, "Economic Repression: The San Francisco Hotel Workers Strike," *The Black Scholar*, January–February 1981; and various articles in the *New Orleans States*, the *New Orleans Item*, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Sun-Reporter*, the *California Voice*, the *New Bayview News*, the *Peoples World*, the *ILWU Dispatcher*, and newsletters of organizations with which Lee Brown was associated.