

Mississippi's First Labor Union

by Ken Lawrence

The first labor union in Mississippi was formed by black women on June 20, 1866. On that day their organization, called The Washerwomen of Jackson, sent a resolution to Jackson's Mayor Barrows which said in Part:

That on and after the foregoing date, we join in charging a uniform rate for our labor...the statement of said price to be made public by printing the same, and any one, belonging to the class of washerwomen, violating this, shall be liable to a fine *regulated by the class*. 1

We don't know what became of this organization or its demands, but their example did inspire others to organize. A few days after the women met and passed their resolution, the Jackson *Daily Clarion and Standard* reported that

a number of freedmen of Jackson held a meeting the other day in the Baptist Church for the purpose of regulating the price of wages, and if possible, to get up a strike on the part of those employed for higher wages. 2

According to the same article, the meeting was chaired by a black ice cream vender. Just as we see so often today, the editor reports this "agitation" as the work of "one or two Northern adventurers." 3 An Alabama paper called the washerwomen's demands "exorbitant." 4

In reality these forms of struggle were not the creations of outside agitators. They were a new development in a long tradition of struggle waged by black people as plantation slaves.

The racist historian Ulrich B. Phillips wrote that occasionally a squad of slaves

would strike in a body as a protest against severities... Such a case is analogous to that of wage-earning laborers on strike for better conditions of work. The slaves could not negotiate directly at such a time, but while 'they lay in the woods they might make overtures to the overseer through slaves on a neighboring plantation as to terms upon which they would return to work, or they might await their master's post-haste arrival and appeal to him for a redress of grievances. Humble as their demeanor might be, their power of renewing the pressure by repeating their flight could not be ignored. 5

Mark Oliver told how the slaves would strike on the plantation where he had been a slave in Washington Mississippi:

Some of the slaves had a way of running off to the woods when Master left, 'cause the overseer, who wasn't nothing nohow, but poor white trash, would get a little hard on them. When Master got back, they always got back. When the overseer tell on the ones that been gone, Master say "Well, well, I have to see about that." He ain't going to see 'bout nothing of that kind, so it drops right there.6

Oliver's father later ran off and joined the Union army, 7 "freeing himself," as W.E.B. DuBois would say. 8

Phillips noted that plantation owners often found that the slave women were "all harder to manage than the men." 9 Annie Coley, another ex-slave, described a plantation struggle fought entirely by the slave women.

But ole Boss Jones had a mean overseer who tuk 'vantage of the womens in the fiel's. One time he slammed a niggah woman down that was heavy, and cause her to hav her baby dead. The niggah womens in the quarters jumped on 'im and say they gwine take him to a brush pile and burn him up. But their mens hollered for 'em to turn him loose. The big Boss Jones came en made the womens go back to the Quarters. He said, "I ain' whipped these wretches for a long time, en I low to whip 'em dis evenin'." But all the womens hid in the woods dat evenin', en Boss never say no more about it. He sent the overseer away en never did hev no more overseers. 10

With traditions like these to draw on, it is not surprising that black women organized Mississippi's first labor union, even at the time when white planters and politicians were trying to re-enslave them with the notorious Black Codes.

It was another three years before white workers organized their first local union in Mississippi, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers in Water Valley.11 And twenty years later the first interracial labor movement was organized in the state, 12 with some (perhaps most) of the local unions under black leadership. 13

The labor movement in Mississippi has had many ups and downs in the past century. During that time, many organizations have come and gone; many great workers' struggles have been waged, some ending in victory, others in defeat; and many lessons have been learned. But the tradition of organizing begun by the Washerwomen of Jackson is very much alive today.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jackson, Mississippi, *Daily Clarion and Standard*, Sunday, June 24, 1866. Emphasis in original.
2. *ibid*. This event is placed into its historical context in Herbert Aptheker, *To Be Free, Studies in American Negro History* (New York, 1948; second edition, p. 168. Aptheker's source is John H. Moore, "Social and Economic Conditions in Mississippi during Reconstruction" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1937), p. 357. The strike threat is incorrectly attributed to the meeting of washerwomen.
3. *ibid*.
4. *Athens Post*, Saturday, July 7, 1866. The event and the citation are incorrectly given as 1865 in James S. Allen, *Reconstruction, The Battle for Democracy (1865-*

1876) (New York, 1937), pp. 166 and 221.

5. Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery, A survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York, 1918)pp. 303-304. See also John S. Bassett, *The Southern Plantation Overseer As Revealed in His Letters* (Northampton, Massachusetts, 1925), pp. 63-4. For a discussion of the significance of slave strikes see George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup, The flaking of the Black Community* (Westport, Connecticut, 1972), pp. 105-7.
6. Narrative of Mark Oliver, ex-slave, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Projects Administration in 1937, deposited in the WPA collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Box 227Z. For a discussion of the importance of this collection see Ken Lawrence, "Oral History of Slavery" in *Southern Exposure*, Volume I, Number 3/4, Winter 1974, pp. 84-86. This article discusses how, in some narratives, dialect was imposed and text altered by WPA interviewers and editors.
7. *ibid.*
8. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York, 1935), chapters I and IV.
9. Phillips, *op. cit.*, pages ,276, 280-1, and 285. See also Bassett, *op. cit.*, pages 19-20.
10. Narrative of Annie Coley, ex-slave, WPA collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Box 226Z.
11. Donald C. Mosley, "A History of Labor Unions in Mississippi" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Alabama, 1965), p. 58, and "The Labor Union Movement" in R.A. McLemore (ed.), *A History of Mississippi* (Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 1973), Volume II, pp. 251, 253. Mosley refers to this as "apparently the first local union established in Mississippi."
12. Federick Meyers, "The Knights of Labor in the South" in *Southiarn Economic Journal*, Volume VI, Number 4, April 1940, pp. 479-87; Nollie Hickman, *Mississippi Harvest, Lumbering in the Longleaf Pine Belt 1840-1915* (University of Mississippi, 1962), pp. 235-8.
13. For a discussion of sources concerning black leadership of interracial unions, see Ken Lawrence, *The Roots of Class Struggle in the South* (Jackson, Mississippi, pp.3, 7-8.

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