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The history of the Southern Tenants Farmers Union, an interracial organization of sharecropper and tenant farmers which rose to national prominence in the Depression, illuminates with striking clarity both the potentialities and the limitations of the radical organizing drives in the '30's. Brought together in 1934 by Socialist Party workers in the Mississippi Delta, this union demonstrated the unique opportunities for radical organization which the depression had opened in the rural south, a section where class conflict had long been suppressed by racial divisions. Beginning as a critic of New Deal agricultural programs, the union grew into a mass movement which aimed at the reconstruction of southern agriculture along socialist lines and the elimination of the political and educational disabilities which made poor white and black passive observers of their own exploitation.

To many American radicals, the STFU symbolized the revival of the old populist dream of a black-white alliance which would convert the southern working class into a powerful force for radical change. But as the STFU reached out for aid from other radical groups to magnify its power, the dream turned into a nightmare. An alliance with the labor movement, which the union leaders hoped would provide a new energy and a new independence, imposed a bureaucratic burden upon the union's affairs which drained it of its revolutionary spirit. The most powerful mass organizations on a national sphere, the Communist Party and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, possessed a world view which made them unable to appreciate the union's contribution. Onto a movement which had developed a socialist consciousness with enormous popular appeal, they imposed an organizational

strategy which valued sound business practices above political appeal and financial stability above revolutionary militance. In the two years it fell under their influence, the STFU saw its ranks depleted by factional conflict, personality struggles, and racial strife.

GROWTH OF A MOVEMENT

To the eight million sharecropper and tenant farmers on southern cotton plantations, the depression signalled both unparalleled suffering and a first hope of liberation. The drastic decline in cotton prices which the crisis initiated drove the croppers' already depressed incomes far below subsistence. Starvation, evictions, and foreclosures were a common fate. But the same events dealt a heavy blow to the repressive, paternalistic system of labor control which had dominated the plantation system since the end of reconstruction. As bankruptcy overtook the planters, as farms reverted to the banks, the cohesiveness of the rural social order began to break. The merchant owners and their satellites, preoccupied with their own financial troubles, had little time to supervise the black and white tenants within their purview. Thousands of laborers roamed the highways of the south, seeking shelter, seeking work. For the first time since the 1890's, food riots became a common part of the southern scene.

The New Deal, strongly dependent upon southern support for its election, stepped in dramatically to restore order to the demoralized regional economy. By giving planter parity checks to remove acreage from production, it precipitated a rapid jump in cotton prices which restored the shaken confidence of the landowning class. But the crisis of the tenant was only intensified. The acreage reduction provisions offered a powerful incentive to rid the plantation of its excess labor supply. In the first two years of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, thousands of tenants were evicted from their homes, reduced in status to casual laborers, or forced to survive on intermittent and grudgingly administered relief grants. One

critic doubted if the Civil War had actually produced more suffering and pauperization in proportion to the population than the AAA had done in the few short years of its life.¹ Such was the meaning of New Deal liberalism to the southern sharecropper.

In the midst of this chaotic reorganization of the plantation economy, a movement arose to challenge both the old system of subordination and the rationalizing schemes of the New Deal reformers. In the cotton belt of Arkansas, two young socialists named H. L. Mitchell and Clay East, acting upon the advice of Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, decided to organize a union of sharecropper and tenant farmers who had been evicted or reduced in status during the opening year of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Their political work among the sharecroppers had convinced them that the discontent cut wide and deep, and that black and white tenants might be willing to cooperate in the crisis. Socialist Party leaders, anxious to develop a mass base for their critique of the New Deal, promised unlimited aid and support. In the spring of 1934, Mitchell and East organized meetings throughout eastern Arkansas urging sharecroppers to unite and organize. Within a few months, they had developed a solid following of two to three thousand members and had launched a propaganda attack on the New Deal's cotton program that made government officials very uncomfortable.

The early activities of the union, following Socialist Party traditions, emphasized legal and educational work above mass action. On the advice of their Socialist patrons, the union leaders directed almost all of their organization's energy into a nationwide campaign to expose the brutality of the plantation system and the inequities of the New Deal's agricultural policies. Suits were launched in state and federal courts to test the legality of the cotton contract, speaking tours arranged to mobilize liberal and radical groups behind the union's effort, books and pamphlets written to dramatize the hardships of the sharecropper's life. Socialist in theory, the campaign tended to assume a tone that was paternalistic and reformist in character. Its exposure of injustice, divorced from organization,

became an appeal to conscience. The end result of Norman Thomas' speeches, eloquent though they were, was the development of a "Sharecropper's Lobby" to prosecute the union's cause in Washington.

This incipient paternalism, however, was rapidly destroyed by the enthusiastic, almost violent response to the unions organizing campaigns.



The earliest union meetings were organized quietly, often secretly, by the STFU's founder, who feared that a militant posture would bring down the repression of the planters and would divide the croppers by race. Legal, nonviolent methods were stressed. Croppers were advised to organize around existing federal programs, and to publicize their grievance through peaceful demonstrations. But at meeting after meeting, union leaders were surprised and stirred by the sight of long-humble croppers demanding the seizure of the plantations and the banishment of the owners who had so long oppressed them. Mitchell and East, southerners themselves

and the children of farmers, saw the potential for a revolutionary mass movement that could sweep through the south. In the summer and fall of 1934, they brought their organizing into the open and began to prepare the croppers for militant local action.

In this new organizing drive, a unique spirit began to emerge, one which had not been seen in the South since the days of the Populists. At mass meetings called throughout eastern Arkansas, white and black organizers, sharing the same platforms, told audiences of thousands of tenants to put aside racial animosities and unite against the plantation owners. Fundamentalist ministers and preachers, the "natural" leaders of the tenant population, became the most dedicated union organizers. When planters moved to arrest black organizers, mobs of white sharecroppers sometimes arrived to liberate them from jail. By the beginning of 1935, the union had a membership of more than 10,000 in 80 local units.

Faced with a range of problems staggering in variety, threatened with reprisals at every point, the union emerged as a "total institution" that absorbed the entire life process of its membership and commanded a loyalty that was passionate and unrestrained. To make an impact on the degradation of the sharecropper's life, the union had to organize against schoolboards, relief agencies, courts, health programs, and police forces as well as the planter. With all of these agencies in the control of the same class and administered with the single objective of keeping the sharecropper docile and ignorant, the struggle for public services seemed as fundamental as the battle for control of the plantation system.

STRIKE!

During the summer of 1935, the union leaders felt confident enough to launch their first mass campaign, a cotton picker's strike in the fields of Eastern Arkansas. Spreading the word by handbills, by articles in the union newspapers, and by that system of underground communication that poor people everywhere seem to develop, the union led tens of

thousands of sharecroppers out of their fields in an attempt to raise wages from 50¢ to \$1.25 per hundred pounds of cotton and to win written contracts. As a demonstration of worker solidarity and a stimulus to organizations, the strike was remarkably effective -- sharecroppers in a vast area of the Delta stayed away from work -- but negotiations with the planters did not ensue. For most of the croppers, staying out on strike meant hiding in the swamp or barricading themselves in houses, and the only bargaining that took place was non-verbal and indirect. After a month-long war of nerves, marked by considerable bloodshed, most of the sharecroppers returned to work at considerably higher wages, but without written contracts.

Although hardly a paragon of planned and disciplined action, this strike provided the union with an enormous injection of energy on several different fronts. First, it gave a powerful stimulus to the union's organizing drive. The strike brought the union into direct contact with tens of thousands of unorganized sharecroppers, many of whom joined the union when the strike was over. In addition, the economic success of the union's campaign, unprecedented in recent southern history, brought about the organization of union locals in sections of the country that the strike did not even touch. Sharecroppers spontaneously organized chapters in Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee and Mississippi. By the end of 1935 the union claimed a membership of 25,000. On a political level, the strike had an equally important impact. The dramatic quality of the sharecropper's protest and the brutality of the terror which greeted it focused a harsh beam of light on the New Deal's agricultural programs. Reporters eagerly catalogued the shootings, the burnings and the whippings which followed the course of the union's campaign, provoking a cathartic display of concern by liberals for the "plight of the sharecropper." The pressures became intense enough to extract at least a symbolic response from the New Deal: when the strike had ended, Roosevelt announced that he was initiating a comprehensive review of the problem of tenancy and appointed a federal commission to study it.

During the next year, the union continued to grow in size, in militancy, and in political impact. Ten thousand new members were added, another cotton pickers' strike organized, a more sophisticated political program developed. As the union grew in size, it clarified its position as a "movement of emancipation." Union literature railed against the poll tax, the discriminatory administration of federal programs, the denial of unemployment relief; suits, petitions strikes and boycotts were employed to make the tenants' power felt. But as the New Deal responded with reforms to this attack on the southern social system, the union leaders began to perceive some of the limitations of their organization's power. Roosevelt's tenancy program was a beautiful example of symbolically gratifying palliatives. Increasing the tenants' share of parity payments from 15% to 25% and providing that their distribution be direct was an open recognition of the union's attacks on the AAA but had little meaning so long as planters controlled the administration of the program on a federal, state and county level. The appropriation of fifty million dollars per year to place impoverished tenants on subsistence farms was a nice gesture to the cropper's quest for self-determination but was only a quixotic diversion in a sector of the economy where large-scale units alone could be profitable. The plantation economy was mechanizing and reducing its need for labor; small scale gains in income and power won by programs of this kind would be wiped away like dust by the broad sweep of technological change. Roosevelt's "War on Rural Poverty" reaffirmed the union's need to make functional control of the plantation system and its political supports an immediate goal of the union's campaign -- not just as a philosophic or religious ideal, but as a precondition of any final and permanent improvement in the sharecropper's status.

However, the STFU leaders clearly observed that the continuation of the union's growth along current lines would not achieve that goal. No matter how large the union grew, no matter how

organized its constituency became, it would continue to be an interest group worthy only of temporary concession so long as its power remained regional. For the success of its program, the union needed to become part of a national radical movement capable of defeating the New Deal coalition and smashing the power of the planter in the national arena. The Socialist Party and the religious groups who had supported the union up to now could not supply such a force. For an alliance to transform American politics, the STFU began to turn to a newly vitalized wing of the labor movement -- the CIO.

THUNDER ON THE LEFT

For most Depression-era radicals, the growth of the CIO was an inspirational event that evoked great dreams of political success. Born of a power struggle in a collaborationist labor movement, led by a Republican and a disciple of Samuel Gompers, the movement became, in two short years, the self-conscious advocate of the unorganized and unemployed worker and a sometimes bitter critic of the policies of the New Deal. Fighting lockouts, Pinkerton's agents and federal troops, the CIO organized four million workers into industrial unions and seemed to radicalize everyone connected with it. By 1937 John L. Lewis, a man who had begun his effort with the hope of "winning the American worker from the isms and philosophies of foreign lands,"² had begun to espouse a program which seemed anticapitalist. Proclaiming that "it was the responsibility of the state to provide every able bodied worker with employment if the corporations which control American industry fail to provide it" Lewis called for the organization of 25 million workers in nationwide industrial union and the formation of a farmer-labor alliance to radicalize the Democrats or develop a third political party. This program, limited though it was, seemed to offer a hope of uniting the American working class into a conscious political force.

The STFU, with more optimism than the facts

would justify, saw itself playing an important role in the "CIO Crusade." If Lewis seriously intended to create a third party which could break through the New Deal stalemate on questions of unemployment and job security, the union leaders reasoned, the allegiance of southern workers to their conservative political leadership would have to be broken by intensive organization. The STFU began to see itself as an "advance guard for the labor movement in the south" supported by its more affluent and powerful brethren in return for the political appeal it would bring to their organizing drives. It was with such hopes in mind that the union leaders began to press Lewis for direct affiliation with the CIO, a relationship which they expected would provide much needed funds to expand and solidify the union organization.

However, although the political rhetoric of the CIO seemed to suggest an important place for the union, its organizational decisions reflected a different dynamic. The evident failure of capitalism to rationalize itself had impressed Lewis (who, if an opportunist, was an intelligent one) but his natural strategic response was to unionize everybody in centralized industrial units rather than to transform capitalism politically from above. When the STFU leaders met Lewis, they were surprised at the kind of questions he asked: What kind of dues could the union pay? How long would it take before it could become self-supporting? The political appeal of the union and the quality of its program seemed less important to Lewis than its potential financial stability. While praising the union's work, he carefully avoided committing the CIO to support it.

Lewis' evasion reflected a quality of the CIO movement which the union leaders, in their enthusiasm, had totally failed to see: its dependence upon collective bargaining as both an economic and political technique. The CIO built its organizing drive around the recognition of vast industrial unions as the sole bargaining agents of workers in American industries; the great majority of its strikes were fought around issues of union recognition rather than wages or working conditions. These highly centralized units

did not only aim at improving the conditions of life for workers--they also sought to maintain the stability of industries by keeping wage levels uniform in different sectors and by assuring a disciplined response by the work force to adjustments which industries had to make to maintain a competitive position. The political ideals which the CIO articulated -- a commitment to full employment, the defense of the workers' right to organize, the encouragement of political action by organized labor--were important motivating principles, but they were not what the CIO organized people around. In every instance in which the CIO had extended funds for organization, its goal was to win signed contracts and to institutionalize bargaining on an industry wide level, a basis upon which the CIO could 1) extend its control of wage levels and productive conditions in the American economy and 2) extract a steady income for new organizing.

The STFU leadership, mistakenly viewing the political rhetoric of the CIO as an indication of a carefully worked out third party program, did not see the contradictions that affiliation would bring. There was no way the standard CIO organizing dynamic could operate in an industry as marginal as cotton agriculture, where an investment in organization would not necessarily yield a return in dues. With the cotton plantation mechanizing, and with fluctuations in the international market making for vast variations in plantation income, collective bargaining or any kind of institutionalized relationship between labor and management was impossible to achieve. Any stable improvement in the income of the sharecropper could only come about through political changes that would produce a total reorganization of the plantation system. The STFU could only give a "return" to the CIO if the latter engineered a mass political reorientation which evoked, as one of its goals, a socialist transformation of cotton agriculture.

But unhappily, radicals within the CIO did not themselves characteristically take an advanced position publicly, and this was at least partially

because of the influence of the Communist Party, the most powerful and disciplined radical grouping in the movement. During the Popular Front period, and in its work in the CIO, the C.P. functioned with a split personality, each side of which was excessively stilted and false. In their public roles, Communists took the position of brutal pragmatists, comfortable with the most narrow and pro-capitalist definition of organizing if it succeeded in building unions. In their private roles, on the other hand, party members struggled to attain the maximum orthodoxy in what they conceived to be Marxist theory, an enterprise which, if nothing else, could maintain the notion that its participants were revolutionaries. This duality, exceedingly sharp in many CIO communists, worked against the development of a popular socialist ideology in the great industrial unions. In the case of the southern tenant farmers' union, for whom the struggle for socialism was a matter of survival, it worked toward the destruction of a movement.

A DISASTROUS AFFILIATION

In March of 1937, when the CIO finally entered the field of agricultural organization, it was the CP rather than the STFU which took the initiative, and it did so in a manner which would be acceptable to the most conservative business unionist. Rather than the CIO granting direct affiliation to the STFU or forming a national farm workers' federation, CP strategists proposed an international union to organize farm workers and cannery workers simultaneously, arguing that the presence of the latter would give the organization a better chance of becoming self-supporting. Lewis approved the plan and appointed Donald Henderson, a prominent communist theoretician and the head of the National Rural Workers' Committee, as the international's first president. The STFU, invited to participate in the new organization (called the United Cannery, Agricultural Processing and Allied Workers of America, UCAAWA for short), were told that this was the only way that they could be assured of a connection with the CIO.

To the STFU leaders, frustrated by the (to them) inexplicable reluctance of the CIO to support their organization and its program, the formation of the UCAPAWA was a nightmare whose reality they could never quite accept. Donald Henderson, whose thinking the structure of the International reflected, was a bitter and open critic of methods and style by which the STFU operated, who had openly declared his desire to see the union broken up. In Henderson's viewpoint, the STFU's greatest achievement-- its development of an independent socialist consciousness based on agrarian and religious symbolism--was a dangerous political deviation. Like many communists of his time, Henderson believed that a true revolutionary consciousness could only stem from an industrial proletariat, and that movements which drew their base from groups other than a strict working class had to be subjected to rigid ideological and organizational control. His 1935 article in Communist, the "Rural Masses and the Work of Our Party" had warned of the need to tie agrarian movements to a proletarian base in order to prevent "political vacillations and organizational collapse," and the structure of the International seemed designed to meet precisely that objective.³ The STFU leaders knew that if they linked up with the International, their organization would be under constant pressure to adjust its program and tactics to C. P. directives. But in spite of these doubts, the STFU prepared to affiliate. It really had no choice. By joining the International, and working to persuade the CIO of the importance of the union's work, the STFU could at least keep alive the possibility of a political reorientation which could give meaning to its local struggles.

DECLINE AND FALL

The relationship with the International, chosen in the interest of long-term strategy, proved to be even more repressive than the STFU leaders imagined.



UNION ORGANIZER

The centralized framework of the UCAPAWA, modeled on that of CIO unions in the basic industries, left the STFU leadership with very little control of organizing policies. From the moment the union affiliated (September, 1937) its organization was subjected to a discipline which provoked tensions and conflicts it had struggled mightily to repress.

The first serious tensions emerged over the question of dues and accounting procedures--an ideologically neutral question one would think. The International sent every local of the STFU a charter, an accounting book and a list of requirements for participation in the International. Members were to pay dues of 25¢ per month plus a 5¢ per capita tax to CIO headquarters. Local secretaries were to fill out balance sheets in quadruplicate, keep one, send one to district headquarters, (STFU office in Memphis) one to International headquarters (in California) and one to CIO headquarters (in Washington). These procedures were the basic organization cement of the CIO movement, and Henderson applied them without expecting a protest. But the union's organizers rebelled as a unit against those requirements. The southern sharecropper, deprived of education, burdened by debt, was in no position to pay the dues or do the paperwork which the CIO

demanding of an industrial worker. After seeing the charter materials, Mitchell wrote Henderson he was convinced that the STFU did not have ten local secretaries who could handle them. One organizer's suggestion was that they be kept for the next 50 years, during which time the croppers might be sufficiently educated to handle them.⁴

Henderson's response to the union's complaint was that both the dues and the accounting procedures had to be rigorously applied.⁵ When the union leaders went to Lewis to protest this decision, they were told that compliance was a precondition of their participation in the CIO. Helpless, the union leaders instructed their organizers to restructure the local units in line with international directives. At the same time, they revived their campaign to win a separate affiliation from the CIO.

The attempt to apply the international's guidelines, as the union leaders feared, began to undermine the basis of solidarity which the movement had developed. On a local level the STFU held and expanded its membership by two basic techniques: organized action to increase the sharecropper's standard of living and protection in times of crisis; and the cultivation, through rituals, mass gatherings and demonstrations, of an almost religious belief in the justice of the union's cause and the ultimate success of its program. To force the union members to pay high dues would hinder its efforts in the first dimension, for it would siphon off a major portion of the economic gains that the union was able to win, but to bureaucratize the union's structure would be more deadly yet, for it would draw energy away from the emotional bonds which held the union members together and which were, in the long run, the basis of the union's strength.

By the summer of 1938, nine months after the affiliation had occurred, the STFU was in serious difficulty. A recession of considerable magnitude had complicated the dues' collecting drive by dramatically reducing the effectiveness of the union's economic program. For the first time in its five-year history, the STFU was experienced as a burden by the sharecropper which drew upon, rather than

added to, his tiny cash income. In addition the remoteness of the union's leadership from activities in the field, imposed by long and fruitless negotiations with the CIO and the international, brought suspicions of misconduct to a dangerous level. Almost half the union locals went inactive, waiting for the old personalized style of leadership to revive, and serious racial tensions began to develop. In one section of Arkansas, E. B. McKinney, a Garveyite minister who was one of the union's organizers, had become so incensed by the declining effectiveness of the union's program and the increasing distance of the union's (mostly white) executive board that he began to advocate the formation of an all-black union, McKinney's proposal did little more than get members demoralized, but it warned union leaders that their movement would be destroyed unless they restored the program and the spirit which had been its original basis. It was clear to them the STFU was in no position to rationalize itself along industrial union lines. In August of 1938, the union halted its campaign to collect dues and membership reports for the UCAFAWA office.

Henderson, a former Columbia instructor who had never organized in the South, was infuriated by this action. He found it inexplicable that a mass movement could be mobilized around ideology, and he interpreted the union's difficulties as a sign of incompetent leadership. After going to the CIO directors for confirmation, he informed the union leader that a separate affiliation for the STFU was unthinkable, and that its relationship with the CIO was contingent upon its conformity to the rules of the International. At the same time, he mobilized the C.P. apparatus for a takeover of the union from within.

During the succeeding three months, violent factional conflicts entered the STFU's ranks, paralyzing the union's effort to revive its local program. A popular union organizer, the Rev. Claude Williams, allowed a paper describing alleged CP plans to take over the union to fall into the hands of J. R. Butler, the STFU's president. When Williams was

suspended from the organization by the STFU executive board, he appealed to local chapter their support to Henderson, further confusing the demoralized membership. Then in December the International provoked additional tensions by cutting union representation on the UCAPOWA Executive Board to half of its previous level, a "punishment" for its failure to collect dues and membership reports. The STFU retaliated by filing a protest with the CIO and by issuing press releases denouncing Henderson.

The final break came in the early months of 1939, during a severe and unexpected economic crisis. Planters in the "boothel" region of Missouri, spurred by "reforms" in the AAA which increased tenants' share of parity payments, shifted their labor system from sharecropping to wage labor, evicting 2000 tenants in the process. When union organizers spontaneously led the evicted families into a "camp in" on the highway between St. Louis and Memphis, a bitter struggle emerged for the loyalty of the demonstrators. UCAPOWA officials organized a separate relief drive from that of the STFU, and began to openly seek support for its "strict trade union" position. Owen Whitfield, the leader of the Missouri group, bounced like a shuttlecock between St. Louis and Memphis, alternately wooed by union and C. P. officials. In February, the STFU leaders lost their patience. They wrote letters to the CIO executive board declaring that the International had sustained a systematic campaign to destroy its effectiveness and warned that the union would be forced to leave the CIO unless it cleaned up the situation in the International.⁶ Soon afterward, Henderson announced that he was calling a special convention to reorganize the STFU and expel its leadership.

The CIO directors at this point entered the dispute and the position they took indicated their preoccupation with the bureaucratic side of union organization and their distance from the problems which the sharecropper faced. Although they disapproved of Henderson's plan to call for a dual convention, they would not stop him unless the union

leaders agreed to abide by the UCAPAWA constitution and meet outstanding dues and obligations. The union leaders' complaints that their movement could not survive within such a framework were deemed irrelevant; Henderson's action all fell within the bounds of standard trade-union practice and had been cleared in advance by CIO headquarters. After ten days of negotiation, it became clear that the CIO's approach to organizing was all too similar to that of Henderson, and that neither would allow the union to operate on suitable terms. On March 11, Mitchell announced that the union was breaking its ties with the CIO.

During the next few months, Mitchell chose to challenge Henderson's drive to reorganize the union. Rounding up whatever loyal members he could find, Mitchell crashed the dual convention, took it over, and led his supporters out.⁷ Henderson was left with a handful of croppers, most of them followers of Whitfield and McKinney. With no basis for an inter-racial movement, he was never to make a serious effort to reorganize in cotton.

But the STFU had been almost equally devastated by the dispute. In a survey of the field, Mitchell found only forty active locals out of a total of 200 which the union had at the peak of its strength.⁸ The faction fight had been so confusing to the people that they had simply shut down and quit for the time being, disgusted with all unions. The racial solidarity upon which the union had based its program, moreover, had been badly shattered by the fight. The best black organizers had left the movement, disillusioned with its declining level of performance, and the whites had gone inactive. But finally, and most important, the almost religious sense of mission from which the union had drawn its strength had been utterly destroyed by the crisis. From the union's earliest days, its members had been sustained by the hope that there were forces within America which could shatter the old plantation system and win a decent life for the sharecropper on its ruins. Now, no such hope could be maintained. The most radical mass forces for change in the society, the CIO and the Communist Party, had stood apart from the union's strivings, had smothered it with forms, had crushed

it with obligations. Not even on the distant horizon were there forces of sufficient strength to transform the cotton economy into a free and ordered system of production. From 1939, the STFU confined its work to education and lobbying, serving as a liaison between sharecroppers and federal tenancy programs it had regarded as hopelessly inadequate two years before.

THE MEANING FOR THE LEFT

The destruction of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union epitomized the basic limitation of the most dynamic organizing drive staged by radicals in the thirties -- the campaign of the CIO. With few exceptions, radicals within the CIO were willing to live with a definition of union organizing that made it impossible either to organize workers who were outside of an industrial system, or to concentrate on political organization that challenged capitalist institutions. In particular, CIO Communists, who should have known better, were so concerned with developing a working class base that they supported a strategy of unionization which had been consciously designed to rationalize a capitalist economy. And when they came in contact with a movement which could not apply such a strategy, whose economic problems were so severe that not even a temporary solution could be found within capitalism, they allowed and even encouraged its destruction because its supporters were not classic proletarians.

The consequences of these failures have been very serious and very lasting. First of all, they worked against the development of a broadly based radical party and the growth of a popular socialist consciousness. The obsession of many radicals with activities which created powerful financially stable organizations led them to neglect the very real opportunities to disseminate a cooperative, anti-capitalist ideology among the American laboring population. As the growth of the STFU indicates, workers in the most conservative, traditionalistic sections of the society were often receptive to a

radical outlook if it was phrased in terms relevant to their experience and combined with effective organization.

But equally important, the strategic orientation of CIO radicals reinforced the isolation of the black population from the rest of the American working class, helping to set the stage for ghettoization and the social crisis of our time. The narrow definition of industrial unionism embodied in the CIO implicitly excluded most of the black working force, who operated within marginal sectors of the economy which could not be rationalized within capitalism. The colonized sharecropper on the southern plantation, living under conditions of dependence radically different from those of a factory worker, could not be organized in a centralized bureaucratic union. When old left strategists chose to avoid a campaign to reorganize the American economy, when they chose to neglect the program that the union had advocated, they were postponing the organization of rural black people to some vague and later date. The mistrust of white radicals by insurgents in the ghetto is one painful and indirect consequence of the failure of the union's program.

- Giant Step (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1964);
Ronald Radosh, "The corporate Ideology of American
Labor," Studies On the Left, VI (1966).
3. "The Rural Masses and the Work of Our Party,"
Communist, March 18, 1935.
 4. See H. D. Mitchell to Donald Henderson, October
11, 1937; and Mitchell to Gardner Jackson,
October 23, 1937, in Southern Tenant Farmers
Union Papers, Southern Historical Collection, The
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.
 5. Henderson to Mitchell, October 27, 1937. STFU
Papers.
 6. J. R. Butler, "To Members Executive Board,
Congress of Industrial Organizations,"
February 14, 1939. STFU Papers.
 7. For a more detailed discussion of radical con-
flicts within the union see Mark D. Naison, "The
Decline of the Southern Tenants Farmer's Union,
1937-39," (unpublished Master's essay, Columbia
University, 1967).
 8. H. L. Mitchell to Norman Thomas, April 3, 1939,
STFU Papers.

FOOTNOTES

1. Howard Kester, Revolt Among the Sharecroppers (New York: Covici-Friede, 1936), p. 27. The majority of the material in this article has been derived from manuscript sources--particularly the very excellent and complete collection at the Southern Historical Collection in Chapel Hill, N.C. However, the considerable body of secondary literature on the union has been very helpful in guiding the directions of my analysis. Students looking for a more detailed discussion of these events from a different political perspective should refer to the following books and articles. Jerold Auerbach, "The Southern Tenants Farmers Union: Socialist Critics of the New Deal," Labor History (Winter, 1966); David Eugene Conrad, The Forgotten Farmers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); Stuart Jamison, Labor Unionism in American Agriculture, U. S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin #836; Vera Rony, "Sorrow Song in Black and White," New South (Summer, 1967); M. S. Ventakaramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-1937," Mississippi Valley Historical Review (September, 1960); also, H. L. Mitchell's interview in the Columbia Oral History Project and an unpublished PhD Dissertation, Donald H. Grubbs, "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the New Deal," (University of Florida, 1963).
2. CIO Publication, #10; the literature on the growth and evolution of the CIO is neither very good nor very extensive. However, the following works should be studied before beginning to develop a picture of these complex events: Saul Alinsky, John L. Lewis, an Unauthorized Biography (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1949); Walter Galenson, The CIO Challenge to the AFL (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960); Sidney Lens, Left, Right and Center (Hinsdale: Henry Regnery Company, 1949); Edward Levinson, Labor on the March (New York: University Books, 1936); Art Preis, Labor's