

## Black and White Divided

# Laurel Strike Is Broken

(Editor's Note: A recent strike in Laurel, Miss., between Local 5-443 of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and the Masonite Corporation points up what trade-union experts in the South have been saying for some time:—that industries in the region plan to use divisions between white and black workers in a new way.

(For several generations the owners of land and industry have kept political and economic control by getting white workers to believe they had an identity of interest with the owners because of the color of their skin. At the same time, black workers were pushed to the lowest rung of the ladder.

(Today, because of the new strength of black people and their movement for freedom, employers can no longer keep them down. So the employers now try to convince black workers that they will do better by going along with management rather than with the white workers.

(The result is the same:—a division which benefits nobody but the employer. The Laurel strike is typical because it also involves the question of automatic machines' replacing people; it also involves the continued moving of more industries into the South.

(Robert Zellner, director of grass-roots organizing work (GROW) for the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), and Jack Minnis, SCEF research director, went to Laurel several times during the strike.

(Robert Analavage, assistant editor of *The Southern Patriot*, went with them. His article tells the story from the standpoint of both the black and white workers. It is hoped that this analysis will help all of us to understand the necessity for black-white unity in the struggle for economic and political democracy in America.)

By **ROBERT ANALAVAGE**  
(Assistant Editor)

LAUREL, Miss. — The strike formally began in April, 1967, when a shop steward was fired by a foreman. The steward was backing two workers in their re-

fusal to do work not included in their job descriptions.

But it began a long time before that. It began when Masonite brought in a team of efficiency experts to determine how to make the most profits with the fewest

workers at the lowest cost. The experts suggested that the plant be totally reorganized, with automation the eventual goal.

Masonite calls its operation here the largest hardboard plant in the world; it produces a

\$250,000 weekly payroll for the Laurel area. The company and the local, largest in Mississippi, have had bitter struggles over the years, but nothing to rival this one.

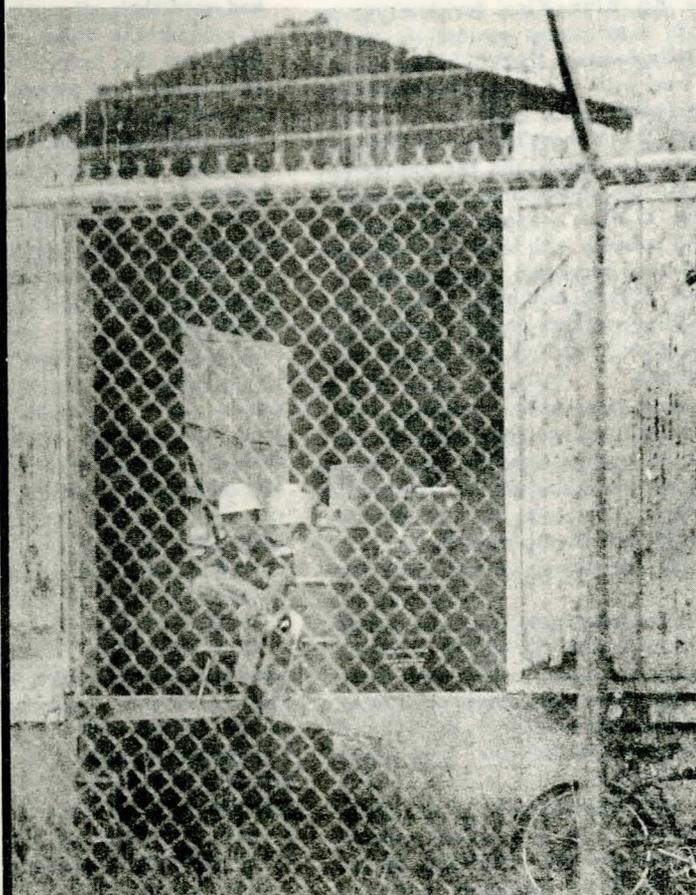
This time the local, considered the most militant in the state and possibly in the South, saw the actions of the company as the opening of an effort to destroy the local completely. It did not hesitate to strike once it felt its interest threatened.

The strikers set up mass picket lines and refused to allow anyone, including management personnel, inside the plant. Hulse Hayes, a lawyer from the firm of the late anti-union Senator Robert Taft, went to court for Masonite, seeking an injunction against the union's activities.

A lower-court judge upheld the strikers' right to picket peacefully, so Hayes appealed to the Mississippi Supreme Court.

During the court proceedings the local argued that it had been pushed into the strike and so was unable to give the required ten days' notice before striking. The local subpoenaed documents and exposed Masonite's reorganization plan. The documents also showed that the company had hired Wackenhut guards 10 days before the strike began.

These guards come from the same private detective agency used by Governor Claude Kirk to police the state of Florida.



**GUN-TOTING WACKENHUT GUARDS** patrolled Masonite's Laurel plant during the seven-month strike (photos by Bob Analavage).

# Masonite Splits Workers, Sets Pa

Still the Mississippi Supreme Court granted the injunction. The strike was ruled illegal, and it was made a crime for the international union or anyone else to support the strike. The workers carried on alone.

Wackenhut set up outposts all over the Masonite property, with shotgun-toting guards entrenched in sand-bagged bunkers. The plant looked more like a fortress than a factory.

The local had been through it all before. As recently as 1964 the men had conducted a bitter wildcat strike. They saw the 1967 walkout as just another in a series of battles between capital and labor, and described it in those terms.

As in the past, the workers felt that their union would stand firm. They had no doubt about the outcome. But one factor had changed since 1964. This was the growing number and strength of black workers and the efforts of the company to manipulate these employees.

In fact, some union officials said that Masonite had planted agents in the plant to discover ways to divide the workers. These agents seem to have decided that the long history of division between black and white people made it possible to pit them against each other.

In reality the Laurel local is two locals—one white, comprising 75 percent of the membership, the other 25 percent black. Until a few years ago the black workers were in a sub-local. Although more than 500 blacks were members of the local and felt that the 1500 white workers accepted them as fellow trade-unionists, they still did not feel they were really a part of the union.

No black people were elected to office in the local. Officials of the local now see this as a mistake. Some realize that a program of education might have brought about the unity they needed in this strike.

## The Union's Position

In order to assess the whole situation better, Bob Zellner, Jack Minnis and I met with seven or eight members of the local's leadership—all white. The strike had been going on for months and the local found it difficult to get its side of the story to the public. The Laurel newspaper had even refused to sell the union space to explain its position.

Meanwhile, Masonite was recruiting strikebreakers from Georgia, Texas, and other parts of Mississippi.

"They had the whole Ole Miss football team scabbing in there," said J. D. Jolly, president of the local.

**A Wackenhut guard had been slain**

the day we met with Jolly and other leaders of the union. The room was tense as we sat down with these men.

We were very frank about the fact that we were in the civil-rights movement. Minnis explained that at one time we had all worked for SNCC. He said we were now with SCEF and were interested in building unity between black and white working people in the South.

Minnis told the men that we wanted to help if we could, but we needed to understand the full nature of the strike. The men were silent for a moment.

Then Jolly spoke up: "We don't care who you are as long as you can help."

I think it is important to know Jolly. His life has been dedicated to the local and to the cause of trade-unionism. His name was in the headlines briefly in 1964 after a white union official was beaten

## Company's Position

**CHICAGO — Masonite Corporation was asked to comment on statements made in this article. Their public-relations manager replied that "the article is untruthful to the point of being ridiculous." He did not say what was untrue.**

by the Ku Klux Klan for backing a Negro in a grievance against the company. Jolly declared that the union would go to war with the Klan, if necessary, to stop further such acts.

He was frank about the local's history. "You have to understand the nature of the South to understand it," he said. "Because of this, we once had a sub-local. All colored, with their own officers. The different races did occasionally attend each other's meetings. There were three colored workers on the negotiating committee and they took part in contract deliberations.

"It wasn't integration; it wasn't segregation. Still . . . well, our international constitution prohibited segregation and, to be frank, we knew all the time what we had to do. Then came the Civil Rights Act (1964) and a suit was filed by six of our brothers—one white and five colored.

"When we integrated, the whites had the numerical strength. They were 75 per cent of the union. Candidates were put up for office and everybody voted along racial lines. None of the colored candidates were elected and they never ran again."

Jolly calls that election a mistake. He says: "I, from a practical standpoint, thinking of the union first, don't want to freeze the colored out, because we need them. If some of our colored members hadn't broken this strike and

gone back to work this strike would be over."

We asked what could be done to avoid similar splits in the future. "Only thing I can see is that we've got to form a coalition," Jolly went on. "White and colored in the local will have to get together and come up with some candidates from both races and everybody will have to back them. Otherwise this thing will continue to split us."

## The Need for Coalition

Coalition. A magic word these days. Quite simply it means the coming together of people with similar problems to fight a common enemy. It does not mean love or brotherhood or integration, although it could mean or lead to all of these things.

But coalition does require two ingredients, and one of these is strength. The mostly white local did have strength and had shown it many times in previous strikes. The question is: Did the black minority in the union have any strength?

I believe Jolly answered that when he said, "If colored members had not gone back to work the strike would be over."

The majority of the black workers had used their strength, but they used it against the union. They gave reasons for this, which I will go into shortly, but first we need to stress that the black unionists did not act as a unit. Although about 300 blacks helped to break the strike, about 200 supported it.

The other ingredient needed for a coalition is trust. And the black people who refused to take part in the strike simply did not trust the white members of the union.

When we talked with the black men who went back to work, they said there was a slight possibility that they and other non-striking blacks would meet with the white union leaders to discuss an arrangement whereby the black workers would honor the strike. But, said the black workers, any such meeting would have to be on the initiative of the whites. They would make no effort to set up the meeting.

We reported this conversation to Jolly and other union leaders. We pointed out that we were not in any sense representing the black workers; that they were not our clients and we had absolutely no influence in the black community. We stressed to them that they would have to gain the trust and confidence of the black workers themselves.

Jolly and the others asked us what we thought they should do. We told them they should contact the leaders of the

# Pattern to Destroy Southern Unions

black strikebreakers. They asked us whom they should talk with. We told them they should know who the leaders of the black strikebreakers were, and added that we could not act as go-betweens.

When they mentioned "good friends" they had in the black community, we suggested that these "good friends" were probably not the leaders of the militant workers. We said that a new spirit was abroad in the black community, and it would be up to them to figure out how to deal with that spirit in the interest of unity.

Jolly and the other said they would consider what we had told them and that they would try to work out something. However, Jolly said that it wasn't just a simple matter of the union leadership going to the black strikebreakers and bargaining over concessions.

The union members honoring the strike had already taken the necessary steps to impose sanctions, if they chose to do so, against those who had abandoned the strike. Jolly emphasized that the black strikers had also voted for these steps.

"Our local is a democracy and we have to abide by the majority will," he said.

## The Strikebreakers' View

The meeting we had had with the black strikebreakers revealed how they felt about the whole business. One of their supporters was Mrs. Susie Ruffin, a veteran in the freedom movement and now a member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

She is very militant but was opposed to the strike. She arranged for us to meet some of the black strikebreakers in her home. They agreed to talk but only on condition that their names be withheld. Their names are not important; their views are.

They had supported strikes before, including wildcats. One man who had walked the picket line for six months in 1964 said:

"What did it get us? Nothing changed; we were still treated like second-class citizens, like niggers. Ain't no Negro union officials. There's only four black shop stewards, and they don't have authority over whites.

"The union never asks us for help until something like this comes up. To put it right down, Negroes are just sick and tired of being fooled by whites. But no more. I'm so tired of my people being walked on."

We asked another man what he thought about the union. Mrs. Ruffin broke in: "It's a den of Kluxers." The man agreed with her. Yet, when we ran

down a list of union officials, he and the others referred to only one of them as a Klansman. They called all the local officers "good union men."

Bob Zellner, a native of Alabama who still has relatives in the Klan, had raised the question of the Klan with the union leadership. They admitted that there were Klan members in the local.

Herbert Ishee, the financial secretary, added: "There are some Klan on the negotiating committee. They're good unionists, pretty good boys, but I don't believe in their politics."

As for the widely held belief in the black community that the Klan controls the local, Jolly said: "Sure, we have Klansmen in the local but they don't control it. I'll fight anyone—any outside group—that tries to take over this local."

We asked one of the black workers why he refused to take part in the strike. He said: "You know, after the Civil Rights Act the company integrated the facilities at the plant. Washrooms and showers. The whites kicked up a fuss.

"I don't appreciate a man using me . . . saying we're together when there's a strike and then kicking up a fuss because we're using the same facilities. Another thing, the whites didn't even consult us when this strike began. Not one word, like they figured we'd support it anyway. I didn't desert the union; the union deserted me."

None of the black workers considered themselves anti-union. They said: "A worker has to be in a union for his own security. We have good wages and job security only because of the union's work."

However, all of them were highly critical of Local 5-44 for allowing segregated job classifications. They all said they wanted to stay in the union, "if only it would change."

We asked them if they would be willing to meet with the white unionists to try to work out such differences. With the balance of power they held in this strike, there was a possibility they could win concessions they wanted from the local, since the whites had now seen the need for unity.

If an understanding was reached between the two groups, it could be guaranteed by the strength of the blacks; the white workers would know that only united action would bring gains from the company in future disputes.

Here was shown the need for a black caucus within the union. Blacks have usually mistrusted white people in similar situations because so many promises have been made and then broken when the black people were no longer considered necessary. A

caucus within the union would make sure that there would be no backsliding on promises made and agreements reached between the black and white workers.

However, this did not appear to be in the minds of the black people, as reflected by these comments:

Mrs. Ruffin—"If only those white people would come to us equal and bargain. . . ."

A worker—"I've seen something of these whites for years. They can't be trusted. I see no reason to talk with them."

Another worker—"If they would come to us and ask us like men."

## Setting a Pattern

In Jackson, where we talked with Claude Ramsey, head of the Mississippi AFL-CIO, he gave us a larger perspective on the Laurel strike. He saw the Masonite strike as part of a plan to destroy trade-unions in the state. He believed the Mississippi Manufacturers' Association was involved.

"Masonite is the beginning of a pattern," he declared. "This local has always been radical and a thorn in the company's side. They've had some bad strikes down there. If they destroy this local, unionism in Mississippi will be set back decades. Masonite laid a trap for them and they walked right into it."

What the company had done was to win many allies in the black community by upgrading a few blacks in the plant and ending segregation in the washrooms.

Minnis described how it worked in the *Patriot* last month: "Thus when management was confident that it had the loyalty of enough black workers it began upgrading black workers in a way that was certain to drive the white workers into a wildcat."

Jolly had told us that this very upgrading of blacks had caused friction with the whites, but he also admitted that the black men had previously "had the dirtiest, the filthiest, the roughest jobs."

However, Masonite is no crusader for the rights of black people. It has a plant in the Union of South Africa where its black workers are the most exploited in the world. It also needs to be pointed out that the company was simply complying with a U. S. Government order when it ended segregation in the washrooms.

Claude Ramsey arranged for us to talk with E. K. Collins, attorney for Local 5-443. Collins is also state senator from Jones County. He is most widely known to the civil-rights movement as

attorney for the regular Democratic Party in Mississippi, which fought off the challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964. He has a reputation for being a strong trade-union supporter.

"I signed the first union card in this state," he told us proudly. "I once worked for John L. Lewis (of the United Mine Workers)." He said that as a boy "I had a job carrying water for the workers—white and colored."

Senator Collins said he had been one of the original organizers of the Laurel local and obtained its charter. "It was the first union charter in the state," he added.

The attorney said he agreed with Ramsey's charge of a conspiracy to bust all unions in Mississippi. "No doubt about it," he declared. "If they break this union, the shipbuilders in Pascagoula are next and after that the paper mills in Natchez and Moss Point."

"You see, there are all kinds of companies up North that want to bring plants down South because of cheap labor. And every Chamber of Commerce is backing them."

(We were also told that all elements of the local power structure, including the Laurel Chamber of Commerce, backed Masonite in the strike; indeed, "the city attorney represents the company in disputes with the workers.")

We asked Collins about the Klan elements in Local 5-443. He said he had evidence that there were 65 Klan members in the union, but he also pointed out that the local had published a manifesto against the Klan in the Laurel newspaper.

## The Strike Continues

As the strike continued, there were bombings and at least five killings which authorities blamed on some of the strikers. However, the black workers told us that none of this was aimed at them. The violence seemed directed at whites breaking the strike.

At the height of the violence, the Mississippi Highway Patrol sent extra men to Laurel and the National Guard was placed on alert.

Soon there were 900 men working in the plant, which was reported working

at 45 per cent of capacity. The 900 men were about equally divided among white unionists who had returned to work, strikebreakers (white) brought in from other areas, and black unionists who had refused to join the strike.

But Masonite was being hurt. A *Standard & Poor's* bulletin reported at the end of the summer that there had been a substantial decrease in Masonite earnings due in part to strikes in Ohio and in Laurel. *Standard & Poor's* also stated that Masonite had sold more than 210,000 acres of prime Mississippi timber to St. Regis Paper Co. for \$35 million.

"The colored workers (who went back to work) make up the numerical difference and give the company hope of winning the strike," Jolly said several weeks before the end of the strike.

We talked with people in SNCC, the MFDP and the Delta Ministry about the possibility of working together to build a black-white coalition to aid the local. They all saw possibilities in the situation, but were busy with other things they felt were more important.

Two weeks before the strike ended, a statement did come from the MFDP, which is made up almost wholly of black people. The full text is printed elsewhere on this page, but the following portion is worth quoting here:

"It is to Masonite's advantage to emphasize the KKK element in the union. This keeps the black and white workers apart. We refuse to swallow Masonite's claim of complete KKK control of the union.

"We have found that labels, whether Communist or KKK, prevent people from thinking and cover up the real issues . . . If Masonite can kill the union in Laurel, this will set back both Negro and white workers 30 years."

## The Strike is Broken

On December 12, 1967, after seven and a half months, the Laurel strike came to an end. In San Francisco, an agreement was reached between the international union, the Masonite Corp., and the federal mediation service.

We happened to be in the Union hall the day the agreement was announced.

"Ain't it a shame," one rank-and-file member told us, "we don't even get to vote on it."

J. D. Jolly and the rest of local

5-443's officials were removed from office and the local was placed in trusteeship, which meant that all property, finances and other assets of the local came under the complete control of the international.

A man of about 50 said, "one of these days it's all coming to a head and it's going to be settled with guns. There's going to be one final battle between capital and labor."

The agreement was explained to the *Patriot* by Ronald F. Roley, Portland, Ore., international president of the union, on the ground that "our aim was to save as many jobs and as many benefits as possible under the circumstances. A preferential hiring list was set up for those men still out at the time of the settlement." (There were over 1,200 men, more than half of the local, still on strike when the agreement was signed.)

As for the company's reorganization plan, Roley said, "we'll try to resolve whatever we can."

Members of the local scoff at this. They described the agreement to me as "a sellout, a sweetheart contract." Sources within the local also say they have learned that the militants who led the strike will not be rehired—ever. Additionally, all strikebreakers will keep their jobs.

What is clear is that Masonite exploited the social divisions between the unionists masterfully, like pawns in a giant chess game. Whether the same tactics will be used in other areas, as Claude Ramsey and E. K. Collins predicted, seems hardly open to question.

The burning resentments of black workers exist everywhere; the failure, even the refusal, of some white workers to cope with this also exists everywhere. If the tragedy of Laurel is not to be repeated, this situation must be corrected.

Blacks have said they will not initiate any reconciliation because they feel they have been betrayed too many times in the past. Therefore, whites will have to make the first move. Unity remains the working men's only protection; otherwise they will continue to be the victims.

Masonite can now dictate conditions and wages and, as the directors of that company can tell you, it will be a long time before the workers of Laurel will again have the strength to challenge them.

This article describes some of the work of Grass Roots Organizing Work (GROW), a SCEF project which is helping poor white people in the Deep South organize for political and economic power, in coalition with the black movement. The article is reprinted from *The Southern Patriot*, SCEF's monthly newspaper. For subscriptions (\$3) or a sample copy, write:

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