WHEN SOUTHERN LABOR STIRS

PART II

THE STRIKE AT ELIZABETHTON

BY
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In the preface to When Southern Labor Stirs, Tippett says about himself and the book:

The material for the book was collected over a period of three years during which the writer traveled through the South as a lecturer of Brookwood Labor College. Contact was made both with the labor leaders and with intellectuals in the leading colleges and universities of the South.

During the year of 1929 the Elizabethton, Gastonia, Greenville and Marion strikes were visited and the same ground covered again the following year after the strikes had been settled. Several visits were made to Danville too during the strike there. Much of the material was gained from first hand observation gathered during the period by the writer and a staff of research workers.

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THE ELIZABETHTON STRIKE

THE largest of the 1929 strikes occurred in Elizabethton, Tennessee, in the twin rayon plants of the Bemberg-Glanzstoff companies. It differed from the Gastonia and Marion strikes in a number of respects, but the fundamental causes were the same—long hours, low wages, and the stretch-out.

The fact that in Elizabethton the mills produced rayon rather than cotton goods meant an important difference in the Elizabethton situation. The rayon section of the textile industry was comparatively new. It was not, at least in 1929, overdeveloped to the same extent that textiles in general are, and it was much more profitable.

The two magnificent mills in Elizabethton had been erected only a few years before by the American Bemberg Company and the American Glanzstoff Company, both of which, like most American rayon mills, were controlled by European interests, in this case by a German group.

The business men of Elizabethton had gone out of

their way to attract such a profitable enterprise. The $14,500,000 investment, which by 1934 was to total $54,000,000, was exempt from taxation for ten years. A huge strip of land had been donated to the companies. Furthermore, the customary right to exploit the working population was extended, since mill folk in Elizabethton are little protected by social legislation. Five thousand men and women were recruited from the advertised backward labor supply of the state.

A publicity stunt designed by local business men to lure other industries to Tennessee, accidentally contributed largely to the revolt of these workers. When Herbert Hoover was campaigning for the presidency, he agreed to make his only southern speech at Elizabethton, which was then comparatively unknown. Its population consisted of a few hundred people besides those connected with the rayon plant then under construction. A huge tabernacle was built to accommodate the crowd which journeyed from far and near to hear the Republican candidate. The vast rayon plant skeleton was there to remind Mr. Hoover of the new South, and he accepted his cue.

He chose as his theme all the blessings of industry to this "great and glorious nation of ours," and bent every effort to present an alluring picture of what industrial development meant to the new South. He succeeded in winning the electoral vote of Tennessee.

Hoover was elected in November. Five months later all the rayon workers walked out of the Elizabethton mills, demanding some of the prosperity which they had heard pictured in such attractive colors by Mr. Hoover.

Unrest among the workers was not new. During the two years of operation there had been sporadic labor trouble, culminating in several brief strikes, and grievances had accumulated. The southern mountaineers were broken into the new factory methods by German operatives. Gradually the stretch-out was introduced to increase the speed of the learners and augment the output. Wages were extremely low for beginners and did not increase in the same proportion as the output quotas.

In the department where the strike began 550 girls were employed who earned an average weekly wage of $8.96. The work week consisted of 56 hours. The corporation itself reported its wages to the Department of Labor for 1929 as $10 and $11 per week for females and $15 for males. The figures represent average wages for the 56-hour week.

There was no mill village in Elizabethton. The town itself could not house the influx of factory workers when the big rayon plant opened, but a separate corporation interlocked with the rayon company built new houses in Elizabethton proper and charged rent all out of proportion to that paid in general by textile

operatives living in cotton mill villages. The rent ranged from $27.50 to $37.50 per month for four and five room cottages which had little in their construction to justify such rentals except a false and gaudy exterior fashioned, comically enough, to resemble Italian villas.

One man in the strike, a typical case, earned $12 a week, out of which he paid each month $25 for rent, $1.50 for water, and $2.25 for light. Fuel and everything else had to be purchased in the independent market, so that the rayon worker in Elizabethton, although he did not have the disadvantages of life in a company-owned village, did not receive the benefits thereof either, and his wages were on the same level as the mill village worker's. A private grocer said that many of the rayon workers had been unable to pay their food bills, even when they had been working regularly. He cited outstanding bills amounting to $12,000 owed him by the Bemberg-Glanzstoff employees. He affirmed that these debts were due to short wages rather than to any desire on the part of the operatives to shirk credit obligations.

The rayon corporation did not operate a company store or a mill-village system; neither did it pay its employees enough to enable them to trade through independent channels. Therefore, it passed the burden of the proper upkeep of its workers on to the community.

There were no union agitators in Elizabethton be-

fore the strike. The young woman who led the workers from the factory had had no union experience, nor had any of the others who followed her out. After the strike was several days old and after the company had flatly refused to discuss with the strikers the issues involved, they called on a one-time organizer to help them unionize. So remote was he from the labor world that at the particular hour he happened to be at work in a nearby field building a fence. The next step was an appeal from a mass meeting of strikers to the American Federation of Labor to send organizers to Elizabethton.

The strike began on March 12, 1929. It started in one section of the Glanzstoff plant and spread throughout both magnificent factories until they were completely closed down on March 18. Thus in six days the revolt of one small section became the strike of all the 5,000 employees.

The strike was an entirely new experience for the workers and for the community as a whole, and in their confusion and bewilderment they at first directed their opposition against the nationality of the corporation. The local executive officers of the company had come from Germany to establish the American enterprise. Of course they spoke German and kept a distinctly German atmosphere alive about the plants. Our war with Germany had been officially over for nine years, but terrific hatred for everything German, generated

as a national policy during the war, did not cease automatically with the treaty of Versailles.

Many of the Elizabethton strikers had been in the conflict, and the far hills of Tennessee, as well as the rest of the Allied world, had been stirred with the hymn of hate against the Germans; but the war for democracy had been won. Sacred motherhood, the American home, and God knows what else had been saved from the German menace. There are monuments in Tennessee to the men who died in the trenches to defeat Germany. It was, therefore, a simple psychological process for the Elizabethton strikers in 1929 to recall the unanimity with which a few years back America despised the very men who now sat in the factory office. Although they had gone off to war to fight an imaginary German menace, there was nothing imaginary about their strike grievances. A fifty-six hour week and ten dollar pay envelopes need no emotional hokum to muster up an antagonism.

Then came staggering knowledge to the Elizabethton strikers, educating them in the ways of modern industrial society to a degree that no other training process could possibly have done. The big business element of Tennessee stood firmly with the foreign rayon mills against the native workers. A rumor, started in the strike and still persisting, said that other manufacturers urged the German firm to hold out against the strikers in order not to endanger the low wage standard

of the state. Tennessee courts issued sweeping injunctions to the rayon firm against the strikers, denying every right guaranteed them by the United States Constitution, to safeguard which they had fought a war with Germany. A circuit judge and a chancellor of the division joined in an appeal for soldiers and the governor of Tennessee willingly sent 800 militiamen, unlawfully clothed in the uniforms of the United States army, into Happy Valley to "protect" the rayon plant; and he just as illegally turned over to them the war paraphernalia of the federal army.

Before the strike was a week old the United States flag was flying in the yard of the rayon factories, machine-guns were set up on top of the plant, army searchlights played down upon the thousands of native sons who were contesting the right of the rayon corporation to work them twelve hours a day for two dollars. Pickets were carried off to jail by the carload. Elizabethton streets and all roads into the mountains were bristling with soldiers, armed and fighting on the side of the Germans against the native sons of Tennessee. Thus does modern industry enlighten an agricultural community.

There was a premature settlement of the strike on March 22, brought about through the efforts of Charles G. Wood, conciliator of the United States Department of Labor. A conference was held on March 20, the participants in which were President Dr. A.

Mothwurf and Dr. Marthaus representing the corporation; Charles G. Wood, conciliator of the United States Department of Labor; Captain Frank Broyles of the Tennessee National Guard; J. Moreland, sheriff of Carter county; Alfred Hoffmann, representing the United Textile Workers, and Paul J. Aymon, president of the Tennessee Federation of Labor.

They drew up an agreement on these terms. There was to be no discrimination against workers who had joined the union. Department committees were to be set up to deal collectively with the management. All court injunctions obtained by the company were to be withdrawn. The union was not to be recognized. Before the strike one of the two rayon plants maintained a wage scale that was from five to ten per cent lower than that paid in the other, because its workers were newer and less experienced. According to the agreement there was to be a uniform scale in the two factories and that scale the higher one.

There was no written statement of the settlement, just a gentlemen's agreement. The workers met and accepted its terms. A local press correspondent wrote the story, accurately reporting that the union had been instrumental in bringing the settlement about. The president of the company immediately repudiated this story, and gave a statement for publication to the effect that the company knew of no conference and that it had not been a party to any agreement.

This public repudiation automatically assembled the strikers in a huge mass meeting. Another militiaman, this time General Boyd of the Tennessee National Guard, came to the meeting to explain President Mothwurf's repudiation of the agreement. "He is a German and does not have a clear and complete understanding of the English language," was the tenor of the soldier's address to the mass of excited workers. Conciliator Wood favored the settlement and thought "principles of great importance had been established." The union officials naïvely acquiesced in the settlement.

The struggle did not end with this settlement. In a few weeks wholesale discharges of active unionists were to send the workers out on a second and more prolonged strike. Meanwhile, while the truce lasted, both the union and the company were trying to strengthen themselves for a future showdown that both felt was sure to come. Neither the soldiers nor the injunction were withdrawn.

With the strike off its hands, the union could commence the slower process of acquainting its recruits with trade union practice and discipline. On the other hand, the rayon company had no intention of permitting the union to establish itself and was anxious to get the workers back in its plants to wean them from unionism. All key union men were refused reinstatement and a systematic policy was pursued to rid the mills of

any union sympathy. To accomplish this a "Loyal Workers' Organization" was set up. The first manifestation of it appeared in a statement addressed to Dr. Mothwurf. It affirmed that "at this trying hour for the management we take this opportunity of pledging continued support, loyalty, coöperation, unqualified and unreservedly," and stood squarely against any outside interference between worker and management.

The statement was circulated among the Bemberg-Glanzstoff employees for their signatures. The company claimed that 2,764 out of 3,223 of its steady employees signed this "Loyal Workers' Pledge" of fidelity to Dr. Mothwurf against their own strike activity, and the company greatly featured the overwhelming majority of workers on its side of the controversy. The strikers, on the other hand, laughed at the way in which the signatures had been obtained. They said that foremen from the mills, together with local politicians and some Elizabethton ministers, circulated the petition on a commission basis. The company was supposed to have paid one dollar per name to those persons circulating the petition who often split the fee with the striker who signed it. Whoever solicited a signature would offer fifty cents for the autograph, so he naturally obtained plenty of them.

I saw a number of strikers sign the petition and receive fees in Elizabethton, and I heard them make merry over the whole business at their meetings. It was

plain that the "Loyal Workers'" stunt failed of its mark.

Two weeks after the false settlement the labor "agitators," who were still building the union, were kidnapped. During the night of April 3, Alfred Hoffmann, organizer for the United Textile Workers of America, and Edward F. McGrady, chief representative of William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, were driven out of Happy Valley by a mob, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to expel J. B. Penix, a striker who is an ex-mountaineer and a native of the community.

The kidnapping episode served to give wide publicity to the situation in Elizabethton and renewed the interest which had waned when the strike was thought to be settled. President Green telegraphed Governor Horton as follows: [1]

Authentic information has just reached me that Edward F. McGrady, my official representative, and Alfred Hoffmann, representing the United Textile Workers, were the victims of an outrage perpetrated upon them by committees alleged to be representatives of business men in Elizabethton, Tenn. The facts of this outrage are as follows: About two o'clock on the morning of April 4, Mr. McGrady, who was a guest at the hotel, was rudely visited by a committee and under threats of violence was compelled to dress, to leave the hotel, and enter an automobile

[1] Hearings before the Committee on Manufactures, U. S. Senate S. Res. 49—U. S. Congress—May 8, 9, and 20, 1929.

which carried him to the outskirts of the town. Arriving there, the committee engaged in abusive and violent language, ordering him at the point of a gun to leave the city and advising him he would be killed if he returned. The automobile took him to Bristol, Tenn. During the night Mr. Hoffmann was placed in an automobile, blindfolded and accompanied by a number of other cars, was conveyed to the North Carolina state line where he was forcibly ejected and his life was threatened, and where he was compelled to suffer mental and physical torture. He was ordered to leave and never return, upon pain of death. Local workers at Elizabethton were visited by this so-called committee and terrorized, their lives threatened, and shots were fired.

Mr. McGrady was on a peaceful mission, was acting under my official orders and instructions, and there was no reason why he should be subjected to this terrifying experience and humiliation. Mr. Hoffmann likewise is a representative of a large labor organization and has not at any time committed any breach of the peace. These alleged reputable citizens who acted as gunmen, proceeding to act in a riotous and unlawful manner, should be called to account and punished.

In the name of the Federation of Labor I protest this outrage, and I call upon you as the Governor of the state of Tennessee to bring these criminals to justice and to extend protection to the lives and persons of Mr. McGrady and Mr. Hoffmann. I cannot believe you will permit such an outrage as this to which I am referring to go unnoticed, and the perpetrators of it to go unpunished.

I am planning to instruct Mr. McGrady to return to Elizabethton for the purpose of completing the peaceful mission upon which I sent him, and I ask you to advise

me if you will guarantee him protection to his life and person.

For the information of the millions of working men and women identified with the American Federation of Labor and for millions of others who are loyal friends, I ask, will you exercise all power vested in you by the state of Tennessee in bringing the guilty who perpetrated this outrage upon Mr. McGrady and Mr. Hoffmann to account, and will you guarantee protection to the lives and persons of Mr. McGrady and Mr. Hoffmann if they return to Elizabethton?

Both Hoffmann and McGrady returned to Elizabethton. Southern labor leaders came to the troubled zone and spoke against the strike-baiting mob.

The company wanted to get rid of its most rebellious workers as well as of the "agitators." By the time of the kidnapping 300 active union men and women had been discharged. On April 15, three weeks after the "gentlemen" had settled the strike, ninety additional unionists were discharged *en masse*. The rayon workers answered by a second strike which closed both plants.

Again Elizabethton was filled with marching workers who were arrested, clubbed, and blinded with tear gas. Court injunctions were broadened, deputy sheriffs increased. The Salvation Army arrived on the scene and set up a counter-emotional drive to save the strikers' souls. Soldiers and machine-guns spread all over Happy Valley.

Pressure was brought on the state of Tennessee to withdraw its open coöperation with the rayon company in its drive against unionism. John R. Neal, a distinguished lawyer of the state, defended the strikers in the court and in the press. He protested the use of soldiers in the strike and pointed out a peculiar provision in the state constitution, aimed at carpet-baggers in the post Civil War period, which requires the governor to secure the consent of the legislature before calling out the state national guard. Some nineteen years ago, after the menace of the carpet-bagger was past, the legislature voted that the governor might allow units of the guard to be sworn into special service as state police. It provided, however, no fund for arming and uniforming state police so deputized. The state national guard at Elizabethton wore federal uniforms and used a full war equipment—bayonets, rifles, bombs, machine-guns, searchlights, and all the rest. Neal protested this, citing the illegality thereof and asked who was paying the bill. He finally entered an official protest to Secretary of War Good.

Governor Horton was under fire. He came to Elizabethton to look the situation over during the last week in April. He had been urged by citizens of his state to negotiate a lasting settlement and, especially, to withdraw the troops because the strikers had never been accused of any overt acts of violence.

After having conferred with the Bemberg-Glanz-

stoff officials, but not with the workers or their representatives, Horton drove over to Johnson City, ten miles from the rayon mills, and considered his problem. With a frankness seldom equaled in similar situations, the Governor of Tennessee, according to the Johnson City press, stated his case as follows:

> The state of Tennessee will take no part in securing a strike settlement unless state aid is requested by parties involved. However, the state forces will be utilized to protect the property of the corporation.

On May 7, President Green again wrote Governor Horton: [2]

> In behalf of the large membership of the American Federation of Labor in Tennessee and of millions of others whom I have authority to represent I protest against your assignment of a large number of troops to the peaceful community of Elizabethton, Tenn. The presence of 800 troops equipped with machine guns is irritating and constitutes a menace to the peace of any community. There is no warrant for this action because no overt act had been committed that would justify such a display of military force. The only act of violence which occurred at Elizabethton was committed by so-called responsible business men when they kidnapped law-abiding citizens and deported them.
>
> You did not take any official action when this violent act occurred.
>
> The dispute which caused the peaceful strike at Eliza-

[2] Hearings before the Committee on Manufactures, U. S. Senate S. Res. 49—U. S. Congress—May 8, 9, and 20, 1929.

bethton could be settled in five minutes by reasonable-minded men. As Governor of the state of Tennessee you should have directed the officers of the corporations owning the mills at Elizabethton, Tenn., when they applied for troops, to settle the industrial dispute along lines of reason, fair play and justice. Such action would have been a real contribution to the cause of industrial peace. Besides the plain people of eastern Tennessee, your constituents who work in the mills, would have understood that their rights were respected.

Your unwarranted action in sending troops to Elizabethton means only force, military power, and machine-guns are used in the settlement of industrial controversies. Through your action you have abused the power conferred upon you by the people of Tennessee and have imposed upon the taxpayers an unjustifiable expense of many thousands of dollars.

In a very large way you will be held responsible for this indefensible expenditure of public funds, for any violence which may follow the assignment of troops and death-dealing guns into the community of Elizabethton and the nullification of constructive efforts which are being put forth by broad-minded, tolerant men to settle the industrial dispute at Elizabethton.

With 5,000 workers on the streets, all undisciplined to the ways of unionism, the United Textile Workers had from the start a very difficult problem on its hands. Before the union came in, the strike was boiling all over the place, and its organization into a coherent whole was retarded by the constantly changing personnel of the leadership. One man after another came

and went. And no one leader at any time seemed to have a complete understanding of what had gone before.

Then too the union was faced with a huge financial problem already pressing when it got into the strike. Relief for 5,000 workers and their families is no small burden for a union and especially for such a small organization as the United Textile Workers.

Moreover, the American Federation of Labor was indifferent to the urgent financial requirements of Elizabethton. The Federation did send out appeals to its unions but not until the second strike was well under way and the Elizabethton organization was already in debt. For every hundred dollars collected by the labor movement for the strike one thousand was necessary in order properly to handle the Elizabethton situation. So the strike executives were constantly in need of funds.

The Emergency Committee for Strikers' Relief [3] collected thousands of dollars to assist the union and sent its own field men to work in the strike. Other groups and individuals coöperated too in raising relief funds, and the United Textile Workers itself spent large sums from its own treasury. But organized labor as a whole did not come to the financial assistance of this new and significant revolt of southern workers.

The strike persisted in spite of difficulties and the

[3] A New York organization headed by Norman Thomas.

news from Elizabethton agitated the whole community. It inflamed the Piedmont section until North and South Carolina were embroiled in textile strikes. It seemed to bear promise of a trade union revival not equaled since the Great Steel Strike of 1919.

But the Elizabethton strikers themselves were going hungry and the union was worried about the huge debts that were piling up. So on May 25, when the opportunity for a settlement arose, the union accepted it even though it had to do so on the company's own terms.

This settlement was negotiated by Miss Anna Weinstock of the United States Department of Labor. She took the place of Charles G. Wood, who had already failed miserably in the Elizabethton situation. The agreement was a sweeping victory for the mills. The union was not mentioned in the terms of the settlement except in one paragraph, which said:

> The companies agree not to discriminate against any former employee because of his or her affiliations with the union provided the employee's activities were legitimate and were not carried on at the plants.

The only reference to collective bargaining was contained in another clause which provided that "the management agrees to meet a committee of employees for the purpose of adjusting any grievances." Simultaneously with the strike settlement negotiations, the

company employed E. T. Willson as personnel manager of the rayon mills. The terms of the settlement permitted all the strikers to register for employment, and then these words followed:

> If an employee is not reinstated he or she will be given the reasons for the company's failing to do so. If the employee is not satisfied with the reasons so advanced, the case may be taken up with E. T. Willson, the mill's new personnel officer, presiding as an impartial person. Mr. Willson is to be the sole judge of the merits of the case and is to decide it.

The irony in the clause which set Mr. Willson up as an "impartial person" with full power to decide the merits of the union's case is that the Bemberg-Glanzstoff company imported him to Elizabethton from the Passaic, New Jersey, textile industry where he had won a notoriously anti-union reputation.

When Miss Weinstock presented the terms of the agreement to the Elizabethton strikers, they were naturally suspicious. She was twenty-eight years old, pretty, and clever, but nevertheless had to do some talking to get the sullen workers to accept the agreement. Much was made of the "impartial person" who was to decide the workers' right to a job. The union executives advised acceptance of the agreement and the mass meeting finally voted, after two hours' hesitation, to accept it and end the strike.

The newspapers reported the settlement and hailed it as a victory for the strikers. An intelligent reporter for the *New York Times*, however, telegraphed this ominous paragraph at the end of his story:

> Adjutant General W. C. Boyd of the Tennessee National Guard, who is personally in charge of the state troops here, had received no orders to-night to call off the watch that has been maintained at the plants, and sentries remained as usual on duty with fixed bayonets on loaded rifles.

The union was completely defeated by the terms of the agreement. It pretended not to interpret the settlement as a loss, and made a vain attempt to intrench itself in Happy Valley. The United Textile Workers maintained an office for a while and tried to believe Mr. Willson, who simulated friendliness to a conservative labor organization. Mr. Paul Fuller, field representative of the Workers Education Bureau of the American Federation of Labor, came to Elizabethton to do post-strike educational work for the United Textile Workers. After a long conference with Mr. Willson he said to the newspapers: "I can work with Mr. Willson."

Inside the rayon mills, however, Mr. Willson started his own company union, began publishing an "employees' " shop organ, developed welfare work, organized sports, put on shows, and in the end took over

completely all the functions of the Union Textile Workers. He consistently discriminated against union members and carried out for the foreign managers, in an American fashion, a perfect program to crush all unionism in Elizabethton. After establishing the personnel department, Willson was succeeded by R. J. Worcester, who continued his policies.

There were perhaps 1,000 workers black-listed by the company and left stranded by the strike. Gradually they began to move away, as final defeat became certain. In March, 1930, a vain attempt at another strike for reinstatement was made by the remaining black-listed rayon workers. The company called it an unemployment demonstration, and paid no attention to it. Mr. Worcester proceeded to elaborate the welfare scheme initiated by Mr. Willson. Mr. Fuller attempted to rehabilitate the union by counter-activity. In the middle of the March "unemployment" strike, Fuller left Elizabethton without any explanation to the workers for his going.

On July 4, 1930, a little more than a year after Miss Weinstock had settled the big strike, the Bemberg-Glanzstoff company sponsored a celebration at Elizabethton. This occasion was selected to dedicate the recreational park of the rayon corporation. Mr. Worcester made the dedicatory address. In addition there were ball-games, bicycle races, horse racing, airplane stunts, prize fights, a barbecue supper, and fire-works

—all under the direction of the personnel department. The celebration in the park was preceded by a huge parade in which thousands of workers marched behind the floats of the rayon mills. All of Happy Valley was there celebrating the birthday of American Independence under the Bemberg-Glanzstoff company-union banner.

I stood in the streets and watched the parade go by. I had once before stood in those same streets and seen the same workers march in a very different kind of parade, to the tempo of their strike.

The union office was still in Elizabethton, but it did little business. No union activity of any kind was being carried on. All that remained of the huge rayon strike was the few hundred unemployed ex-strikers, half-starved and disillusioned, cynical and justly bitter.

The strike and the union had been completely crushed. Deception and brute force on the part of the foreign corporation had been reinforced by the armed soldiers of the state of Tennessee and by the "neutrality" of the conciliators of the United States Department of Labor. But underlying the defeat was a still more important factor—the indifference and tragic impotence of the American labor movement.

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