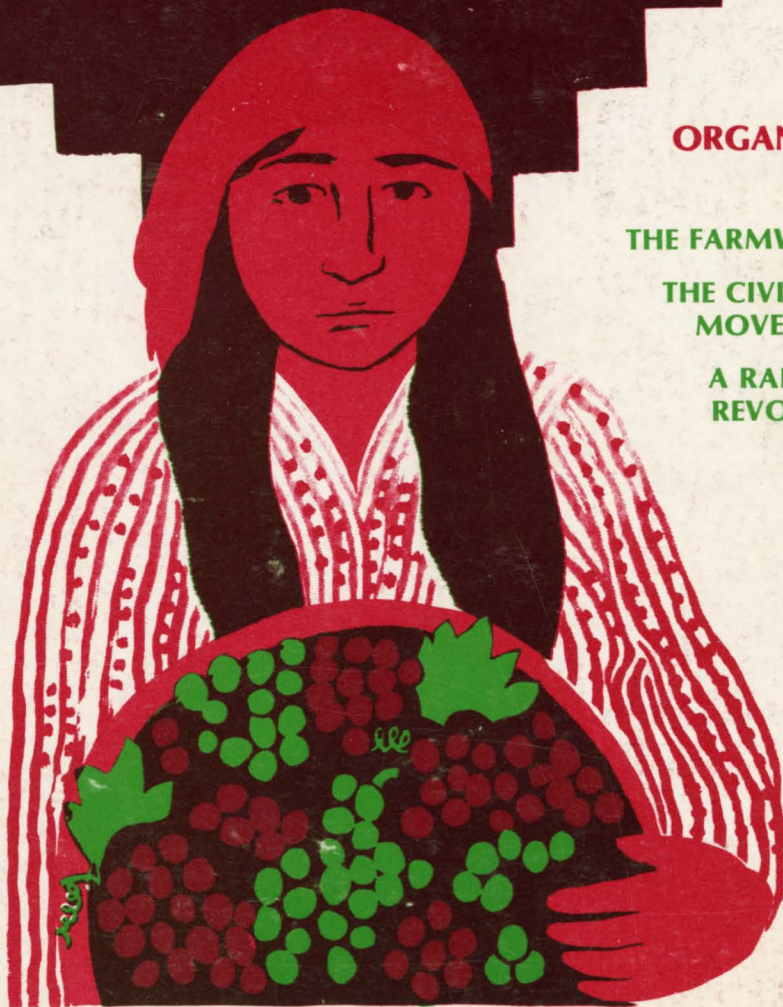


RADICAL AMERICA

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Vol.12, No.6



ORGANIZING...

THE FARMWORKERS

THE CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT

A RANK & FILE
REVOLT AT GE

nikki schumann 1973

Cover: Adapted by Nick Thorkelson from a grape boycott poster by Nikki Schuman.

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INTRODUCTION

The articles in this issue are personal accounts of the experience of political organizing. One describes the beginnings of the civil rights movement in Albany, Georgia, in 1961; a second traces how a migrant farmworker slowly developed into a leading organizer for the UFW; a third analyzes activities around a successful strike in the Lynn, Massachusetts, General Electric plant in 1975.

We are particularly happy to publish these articles because it is so rare that we have access to first-hand accounts by organizers. Organizing is not usually conducive to writing or leisurely speculation. Waiting to do "oral histories" of the old is not a good remedy because memories fade; and the written documents with which historians and other scholars might piece together accounts of political and social movements inevitably neglect much that is crucial — of day-to-day experience, of personal conflicts, of complexities and surprises and celebrations. These articles happened because articulate organizers with a sense of the importance of preserving their experiences collaborated with skilled interviewers.

Our first two interviews are part of soon-to-be-published books. Bernice Reagon's interview, by Dick Cluster, will appear in *They Should Have Served that Cup of Coffee: Seven Radicals Remember the 60s*, South End Press, 1979. Jessie de la Cruz' interview by Ellen Cantarow will appear in *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change* to be co-published by The Feminist Press and McGraw-Hill in late 1979. The article by Frank Kashner is based on an interview by our own editor Jim Green. Stimulated by Jon Lippert's account of a wildcat strike (in Vol. 11 #5), Frank telephoned to ask if we would

be interested in his story. We hope other readers will be stimulated by these articles to think about contacting us about their experiences. We are willing to help other interviewers and to offer assistance in helping people to write.

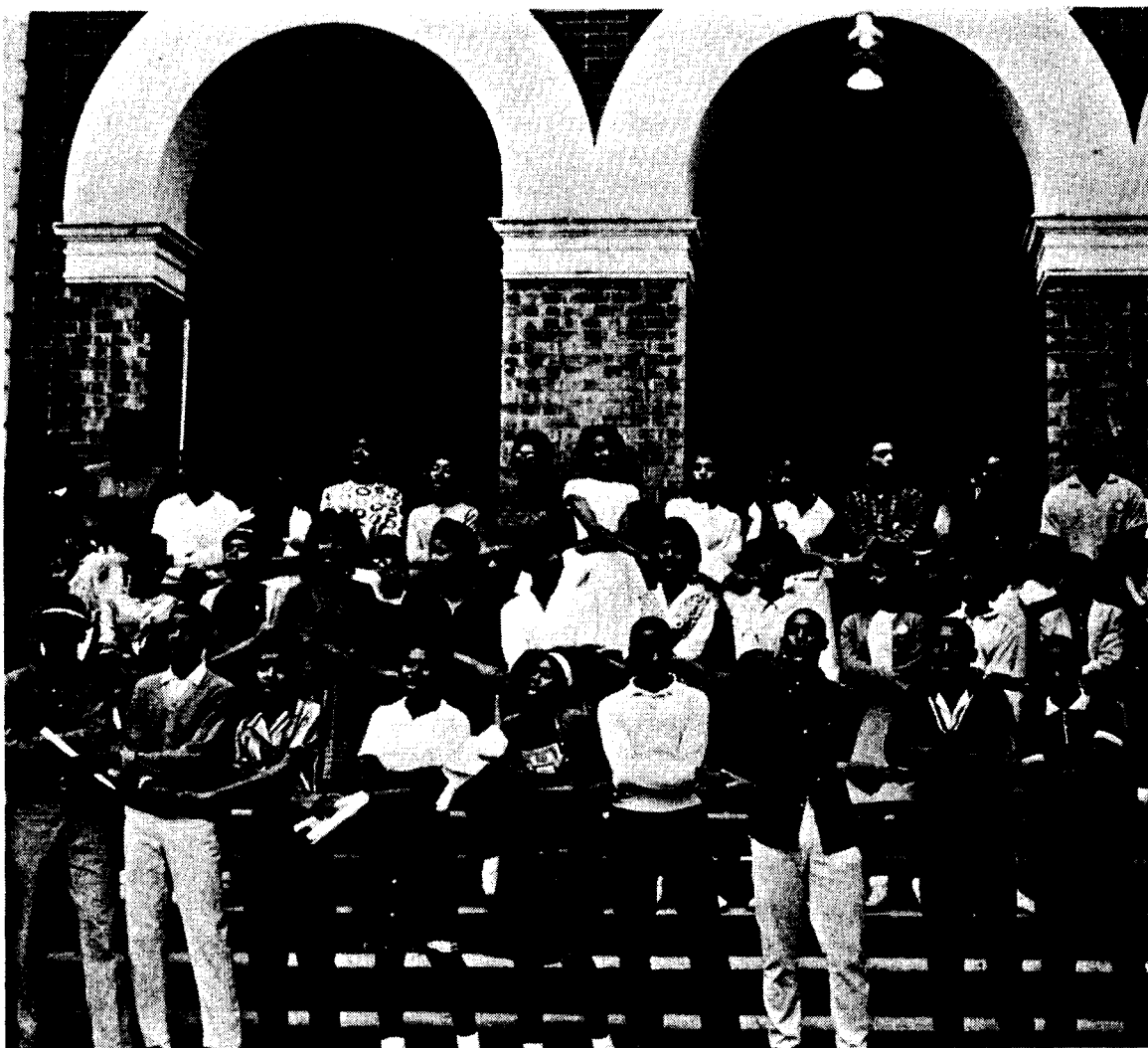
CIVIL RIGHTS

In our first interview, Bernice Johnson Reagon, a composer, singer, and cultural historian, recalls the early Georgia civil rights movement. Reagon now sings both as a soloist and with the black women's group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, from Washington, D.C. She began her musical work in the civil rights movement when a group of SNCC field secretaries began the Freedom Singers. Reagon also works as an historian at the Smithsonian Institute, and is now writing a book about the African diaspora as part of American folk culture. Her interview, while it focuses only on the early 1960s, reveals some of the germs of this later development. In 1961 she was a student at Albany State College and became active in the Albany Movement, a sustained, massive, city-wide mobilization against segregation that was a forerunner to similar movements in Birmingham (1963) and Selma (1965). While not as successful as the later movements at galvanizing national attention and response from the federal government, it was important in mobilizing the black population of Albany. Working with the newly organized Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), challenging the previous hegemony over black politics of the NAACP, Reagon was involved in a strategy that sought to unite radical students with poor, working-class and other militant blacks and a few radical whites, mainly from the north. This was a strategy altogether more complex than the earlier demonstrations, such as lunch counter sit-ins, which had involved students almost exclusively.

Several themes in the Reagon interview seem

to us worth emphasizing. The first is her insistence that the civil rights movement was the "borning experience of all that came after." Sharing the short historical sense that is so widespread in the U.S., many socialists today trace their own political roots back no further than the anti-war movement or the New Communist Movement. Reagon's insistence that the black movement is not just one of many equally contributing sources of U.S. radicalism seems to us right, both in a long historical view that stretches back to the anti-slavery movement, and in the shorter history of the Left since World War II. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was the immediate source of both women's and student movements, and contributed to the development of the anti-war movement into an anti-imperialist movement.

Second we are struck by Reagon's vivid and delicate sense of the connection between personal change and the development of potentially revolutionary consciousness and leadership. The connection between personal change and political leadership is also present in the account of Jessie de la Cruz. This has been neglected by almost all parts of the Left with the possible exception of feminists. Or it has been treated much too simplistically. In the New Left and particularly with its collapse, those who sought solutions in alternative lifestyles tended to exaggerate the importance of personal and cultural transformation and to neglect questions of economic structure and political power. Most of the new Marxism-Leninism does the opposite. The New Left tended to blur distinctions between leaders and rank-and-file in a way that hindered the development of good leadership. Contemporary Marxism-Leninism again does the opposite, raising "correct leadership" to the level of an historically defining force. Reagon's reflections, we think, point to a much better view of these questions: Her comments on personal change suggest a connection between raising people's sense of



Students singing on the steps of the Movement church, Selma, AL, 1965. Photo by Danny Lyon, from The Movement [Simon & Schuster, 1964].

personal empowerment and self-esteem and their capacity to envisage a really new social order and provide leadership to others. Third, Reagon's account touches on a particular strength of the black movement: its relation to cultural and social traditions not usually pro-

gressive or even political, such as the churches and gospel music. In Albany the very churches that often represented the respectability of conservative elements of the black community were won over to support of militance. The civil rights movement everywhere in the South was

rooted in, used, and, in the process, changed many black institutions. There were two contrary pressures: the use of cultural forms and symbols of black community solidarity; and a struggle, a class and generational struggle, within the black community for control of those resources. White as well as black socialists need to find what progressive cultural resources exist and struggle to control them and to change them.

FARM WORKER ORGANIZING

Migrant farm workers have tried to organize in the West since the late nineteenth century. Their success in the 1960s, with the UFW, demands analysis all the more because it followed after so many failures. While Jessie de la Cruz' career as an organizer is not yet very long, her life story affords us a longer view of migrant farm work than we usually get in articles on the UFW today.

For example, the roots of de la Cruz' activism seem to lie not merely in her Depression sufferings, but in her sharp downward mobility from the more prosperous working-class life she had led as a small child. Furthermore, her long, calm and controlled "personal" struggle against male domination is placed by this autobiographical excerpt in its right place: at the center of her political development. Like many working-class women of all cultures, she became politically active only in her forties, because the antecedent struggles to find free time and space took so long. Perhaps these struggles were the harder because of the particular sharpness of machismo among Chicanos; on the other hand her strengths were greater because of the cultural solidarity of the Chicano people.

Unlike many, perhaps most, women in the U.S., however, it is also evident in this excerpt that de la Cruz always considered herself as much a wage-worker as any man. The vividness

and detail of her descriptions of particular farm jobs are a much more revealing indicator of such consciousness than rhetorical declarations of it. That consciousness enabled her to become, apparently so suddenly in 1962, such a brave and effective organizer despite sexist obstacles.

FACTORY ORGANIZING

Frank Kashner came from a middle-class family, went to college and then for political reasons began to work in a factory. Unlike so many who tried that, he did not give it up. In many respects the strike Kashner talks about here was remarkable, in that it began the process of unseating a union leadership. In other respects, however, the story merely underscores some limitations of factory organizing. When work and struggles about work are experienced as separate from the rest of people's lives it is difficult for those struggles to be sustained or to move beyond reformism. Indeed, the insurgent group at G.E. found it difficult to broaden its appeal to other workers after the strike had ended. Kashner's story also illustrates the difficulties rank-and-file activists face when their efforts are used opportunistically by out-of-office bureaucrats.

Kashner's experience shows that it is possible for a leftist to work effectively with a diverse group of activists, and it shows that left ideas can be more appealing than bureaucratic and office-seeking tactics. But, like John Lippert's account, this narrative also reveals the limitations of traditional left tactics in shop-floor struggles. A member of Progressive Labor Party when he started working in the plant, Kashner left it in part because he found PL tactics harmed his political work, and PL positions prevented him from understanding his fellow workers. On the other hand, leaving PL did not in itself allow Kashner to find answers for the problems of organizing.

Kashner believes that Leftists can be effective in large strikes, but they must be followers as well as leaders, must be constantly searching for imaginative tactics which meet workers' needs in the present while addressing broader concerns such as safety and health care, environment, family and community issues. No organizing is easy. But factory organizing, in a society where the work place is severed from "personal life" and where workers want mainly to forget their working hours, may well pose some of the hardest problems for organizers interested in pushing beyond reformism.

All of these interviews are antidotes to both spontaneist explanations of social movements and those that focus only on the self-conscious activity of the leaders who claim to direct and give focus to the actions of the "masses."

Leaders who do not learn from the people they seek to organize — learn from them not only by studying them and their reactions to directives, orders but also by responding to what people are actually telling them — and become changed in that process, are not likely to be successful in creating socialist change. On the other hand, denying the importance of leadership — the capacity of some people to move first and to teach others, through their words and actions — prevents us from understanding how people change themselves and change their social situations. Without an understanding of interaction between people with different levels of consciousness and ability we are left with mechanistic explanations of historical change. The interviews in this issue of *Radical America* are testimony to the fact that better explanations are possible.

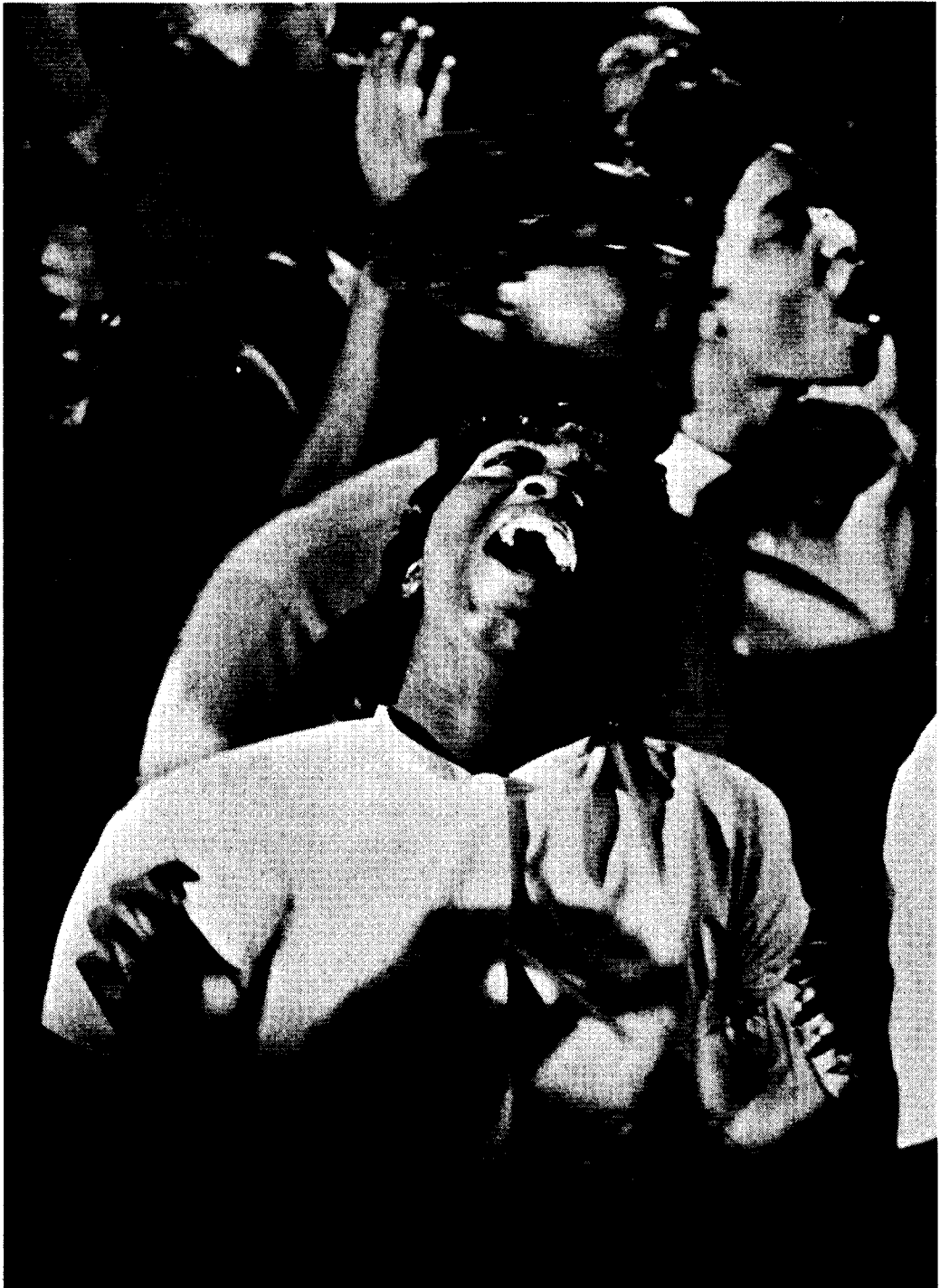


Photo by Kenneth Thompson

THE BORNING STRUGGLE

The Civil Rights Movement

*An Interview with
Bernice Johnson Reagon
by Dick Cluster*

INTRODUCTION*

When I look at the Civil Rights Movement, I see an activism that has parallels in periods past. Masses of people are re-evaluating who they are, where they are in society, and what society owes them — and challenging the structures that exist. One of the things that I feel is different about this particular period is that it did not seem to be controlled by the burning struggle, the Civil Rights Movement. Few movements have created as many ripples, and certainly not ripples that crossed racial and class and social lines as happened in the Sixties.

The Civil Rights Movement, being Black and at the bottom, offered up the possibility of a thorough analysis of society. People who cared could help Black people challenge the structures of society. They could come to the south and march. When they left, not only was the south changed, but they, the people who came to give their support, were changed.

The exciting thing about the Civil Rights Movement is the extent to which it gave participants glaring analysis of who and where they were in society. You began to see all sorts of things from that. People who were Spanish speaking in the Civil Rights Movement, who had been white, when they got back turned brown. A few of those people who had worked with SNCC began to do political organizing around issues concerning the Spanish-speaking community. Some of the leaders of the anti-war movement were politicized by their work in the Civil Rights Movement; with the question of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, they found themselves in a movement that affected all sorts of Americans. Here was a mass struggle that took

**These introductory remarks were made during the following interview between Dick Cluster and Bernice Johnson Reagon. They focus on Reagon's thinking about the central role of Civil Rights in the movements of the 1960's. The interview and remarks will be included in a forthcoming book, They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee: Seven Radicals Remember the Sixties, to be published in February by the South End Press, Box 68, Astor Station, Boston, MA 02123. This interview was further edited by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Linn Shapiro.*

another cut across the society, across class and race. The movement for student's rights, the women's movement, the gay movement, all offer the same possibility. Nobody will rest because everybody will check out what their position is.

For many Civil Rights Movement organizers and supporters, leaving a specific project or struggle didn't mean the end of political activity. These people came away from their Civil Rights Movement experience with a greater facility for seeing a wide range of questions. For many, there was no end nor rest. The Civil Rights Movement was only a beginning. Its dispersion continues to be manifested in ever-widening circles of evaluation of civil and human rights afforded by this society.

The Movement continues. In fact, it is intensified. People are being threatened in almost every way. If it runs its course, no institutions or values will be unexamined or untested. I feel like the response to this is society trying to say, "Enough is enough. We cannot have all of this." In Wichita, Kansas, more people came out to vote against gay rights than had voted in any previous election. You really have to be coming from someplace, it's so clearly a civil rights issue, to vote against gay rights. What brand of McCarthyism will there be this time to cut across gay rights, Indian rights, Chicano rights, Black rights?

I don't know about the reactionary presence in this country, how strong it will be, but I feel like the work of the past period of struggle has strengthened the basic feeling that people *do* have the right to be. So we have a chance of not getting knocked down this time.

I also want to say that you cannot present an accurate picture of the movements of the 1960's and 1970's unless you show them resting on the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement. A

study that's done from some other point of view will be a myopic report on those other movements. I find, generally, that people who participated in any of the other movements, especially if those other movements were predominantly white, see whatever they participated in as central. It is too easy to make the one movement you worked in the center; from whatever position you stand, that's the beginning. The Civil Rights Movement gets equalized. There might be a sentence that says the Civil Rights Movement is the base but in space and analysis the other movements that are predominantly white rise in stature. I feel it is, again, a distortion of what Black people do to stimulate the salvation of this country.

Most people's images of the New Left are white. Black people who have participated in struggle are presented almost as an adjunct. I have problems with that perspective. My point is that the Civil Rights Movement borned not just the Black power and Black revolutionary movements but every progressive struggle that has occurred in this country since that time. In all organized struggles coming after the Civil Rights Movement, you will find among the leaders those who experienced, on more than a cursory level, the energy and transforming dynamics of the Civil Rights Movement. To that extent, they are children of the Civil Rights Movement.

I want to know whether or not your book is going to look that way, is going to give that analysis of the relationship between the movements. I bring it up because it's important to me and because all the studies that I've read about the New Left or the Sixties do this disservice to Black People's struggle which affected everyone in this country. I'm asking that the center of the piece not be anyplace but the Civil Rights Movement. The centering, boring essence of the Sixties, the New Left, is

the Civil Rights Movement. That should not be avoided. The Civil Rights Movement should not be segmented out but in fact made an integral part of everything that happened.

How did you first get involved in the movement?

In Albany, Georgia, there's a district called Harlem. It's about three blocks long, and it's a Black district — Harlem's Black wherever it is. There was a drugstore in Harlem. It was owned by whites and they wouldn't hire Blacks. Not anybody — to sweep — or nothing. So we had formed, in the summer of 1960, a junior chapter of the NAACP; I was the secretary. We'd go to the drug store in Harlem, to talk to the owners and try to get them to hire a Black person. And they'd run us out, and then we'd go and meet and talk about what to do next.

What I'd known before then about struggle and the civil rights movement would center around Autherine Lucy¹ who affected me deeply. I think I was in junior high school, so I was 11 or 12, pulling for this woman to get into this university. She had been admitted; she was suspended; she was readmitted; and then they kicked her out again. I thought we were just beginning to fight . . . and then she got married to this preacher. I was real upset, because for me it felt like when she got married she got tired, like she had been so battered on and this preacher was marrying her and taking her away so she wouldn't fight any more. I did not *want* her to be tired, and I didn't *want* her to be taken away, and I didn't *want* her to rest. I wanted her to go back.

Also I remember when the 1954 Supreme Court decision came, my father saying, "Now that's the supreme law of the land!" Like, the Supreme Court, that's it. I remember him reading from it in the house, and it being a

really high time.

When I entered Albany State College — the segregated state-run Black school in Albany — we were already watching the other colleges. It was the fall of 1960, and the sit-ins had begun. Students involved in civil rights demonstrations were calling all the Black colleges in the South and asking the student governments to protest and give sympathy demonstrations, and to try to get the administrations to come out with a position in support.

We got a call in the spring of 1961. There was a guy named Hogan, a veteran; there was Miss Albany State, Olivia Blalock, there were two or three other people. We wanted to get the Albany State College president, William H. Dennis, to take a stand. We went to the president's house one night, he said he wouldn't see us. So we called an assembly where we wanted him to answer some specific questions, so he would have to commit himself clearly. He said, "You ask all of your questions, and then I will answer." Afterwards we felt like we hadn't really had our confrontation. We had presented some issues, but also we had been outfoxed.

At the same time on the campus there were several things happening. One was that white men would go to the girls' dormitories to solicit women, and a few times women would find these men on the second or third floor. They would call the football team who would run down, catch the men, and hold them until the campus security guards showed up. On two occasions in that particular year, the guard held the gun on the Black male students and let the white ones get away. Also teenage white guys would drive on the campus and throw eggs on you as you walked. At the same time we found rats in the tubs and in the dining hall food. We combined all of these issues and had a rally. The response was that student government activities were suspended. And at the end of

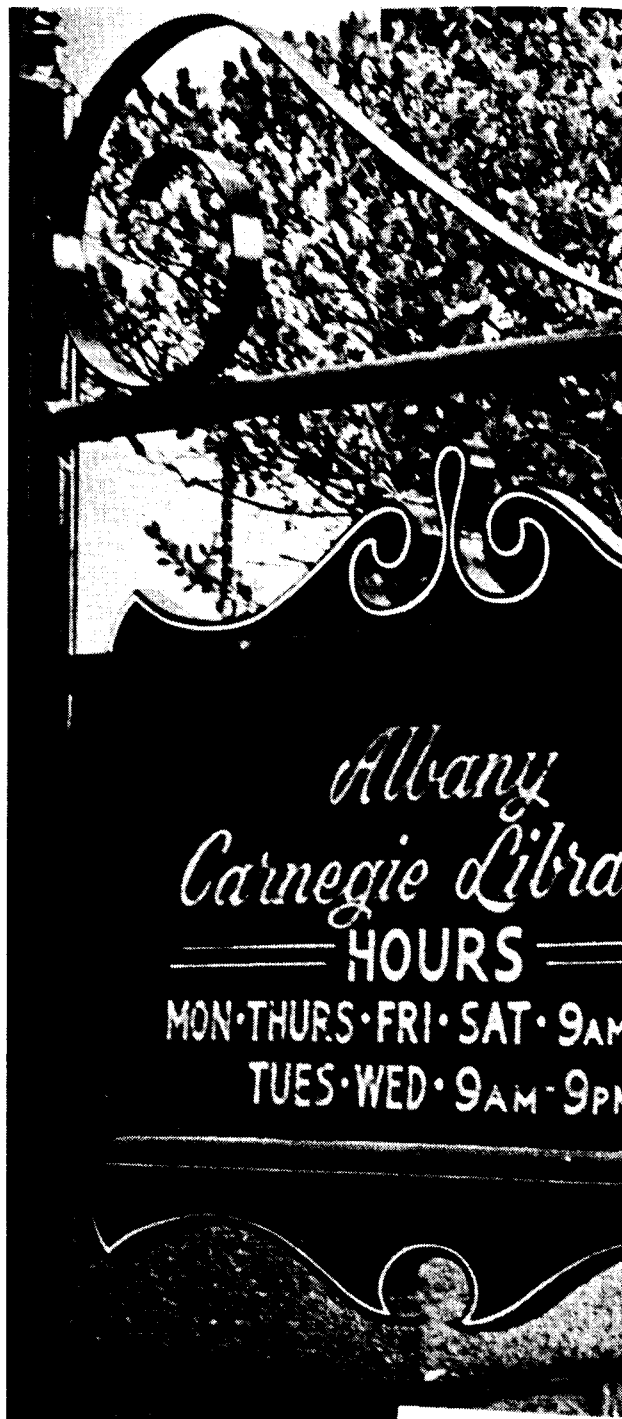
that year Irene Asbury, a dean who had been supporting the students, was fired.

Fall 1961 was when the Albany Movement got underway. There was one particular incident that clarified for me who and where I was in the society.

I was a freshman dorm counselor at the college. I picked up the phone one day and this white guy said, "Do you want twenty dollars." I said, "Yes" — thought it was a radio show. So he said, "There's twenty dollars on the seat of my car." And I thought, "Car?... Radio?..." until finally I figured out that he was soliciting and since I was a student dorm counselor, I was supposed to catch him! (Too much T.V.)

I made a date with this man, went to my faculty advisor, my music teacher, and he said, "My God, child." He went to the president, who was reluctant to deal with it. Then he went to the Albany, Georgia, police. Though I'd made the appointment off campus, the police said they couldn't deal with it because it was a campus issue. The police told the campus security guards not to use weapons in dealing with the case. I was not informed of this. My advisor just said, "It's going to be okay; you go ahead and we're going to have the police there." So I'm on this corner, waiting. I was saving the world, and saving all these freshmen. And here comes this man in this Volkswagen and he says, "Get in the car."

I didn't see the police, and I wouldn't get in. I said, "Where's the twenty dollars?" He said he had to go cash a check. I thought it was really good that I asked for the twenty dollars since he didn't have it. He told me, "I can't give you no money," so I told him, "Well, forget it, then." I still didn't see no police, so I decided I better start walking back to the campus. He was driving alongside trying to talk me into the car.





Finally, along comes Mr. Chadwell's (my music teacher's) car. That's all. No police, no sirens. I couldn't believe it. I had this crook right here; I thought everybody should come out and catch him. I mean, that's what happens on TV. That's the way the American system works. I felt like I was plugging right into the American system. The security police jumped out of Mr. Chadwell's car, put his hand on the white man's car, and said, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" The guy drove off.

I went down the next morning to the police station, and the police said, "We're glad you brought this to our attention because we want to stop this, but his wife says he wasn't home. He was out of town."

Two weeks later, I was involved in demonstrations. I was down at the police station, and the major part was getting on your knees and praying. I'm on my knees, picketing the station and praying. There was Chief Pritchett in front of me, asking, "Weren't you in my office, uh, just the other day?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well didn't we try to help you?" And I said, "No — you didn't catch him!"

That was my awareness, graphic awareness, of what side I was on. I'd always been afraid of police, knew you weren't supposed to run into them, but on some level I must have thought that you really could call on that system and it would respond to you. That experience drew some kind of line. It put me on one side, and a lot of other people, that I really didn't know a lot about, on the other side.

How did the demonstrations begin?

The Albany Movement came about as a result of two Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee field secretaries, Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon, who came down to work in the Black Belt area. SNCC had decided to do

voter registration campaigns and they located the areas of this country that had more Blacks than whites. Theoretically, if those people were voting they could run those areas. With that information Cordell and Charles came down.

I remember when Charles Sherrod came to me and said, "What do you think of Terrell County?" I said, "It's a little bitty town." Another man who was from Terrell said, "That's tombstone territory." After a few excursions into those surrounding communities they knew this — it was too tight, the fear was too great, they would be dead soon. So they thought they'd better center in Albany.

When the SNCC people first came to Albany, they began coming to our NAACP junior council meetings. This caused a clash with the NAACP. Because I was the secretary of our chapter, I went to the NAACP district meetings in Atlanta. They asked me, "What have you been doing in your community?" We had just picketed and done some other things. I thought things were about to happen and I thought I made a good report. They smashed into me and said I better be careful because these people come in and get you stirred up and leave you in jail and the NAACP has to pay the bills and blah blah blah blah.

I was real upset; I didn't know what was happening. At that point I didn't have the ability to deal with "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee." Those words had no meaning for me. I couldn't pronounce them; I couldn't even remember to say "Snick." The NAACP might have been a different group, but it should have been the same from where I stood.

I said, "We're working for the same thing, aren't we?" What an answer I got! The Regional NAACP came down to a meeting of our chapter — Vernon Jordan, Ruby Hurley, and the junior district director — and blasted

SNCC.² These people thought it was important enough to stop SNCC that they came down to Albany to tell us how SNCC would lead us wrong. We had to vote on whether we would go with SNCC or the NAACP. I just couldn't figure out why we were making that decision. I voted to stay with the NAACP because it was familiar, but I never went to another meeting.

In November, we decided to test whether the Interstate Commerce Commission would enforce its new ruling, that had come out of the summer Freedom Rides, that bus and train stations could not have segregated facilities. The NAACP chapter voted that one person would go into the lunchrooms, be arrested, and be bailed out; then they would have a court case to test the ruling. SNCC decided that they would test the ruling, but the people would stay in jail.

Bertha Gober and Blanton Hall, students at Albany State, tested the ruling. At this point people were going home for Thanksgiving from the college, and the dean of students was going down to the station, making sure that Albany State College students went in the colored side. So what I'm describing is not a black against white situation *per se*. I'm describing a system that was held intact by almost everybody in it, including major people in the Black community. Bertha was suspended from school right after she got arrested.

Bertha and Blanton were held in jail and when they came to trial we had the first marching and praying at City Hall. We announced the demonstration on campus and then we went through the halls trying to get people out. I remember one teacher we called "Ma Lat," Trois J. Latimer, told her students, "Get out of here and go on and march for your rights!" "Ma Lat" was *ancient*, you know, but I remember her yelling at people to go. I remember Bobby Birch taking Mr. Ford and

picking him up and moving him out of the way — just so we could get out of his class. We started from the campus and there were like just a few little people, and I said, "My god, I guess we failed." We had to cross a bridge to get to the jail, and by the time we got to the bridge we couldn't see the end of the line. It just kept growing. When we got to the City Hall, we weren't even sure what to do. We were saying, "Circle the block, keep moving..." We couldn't decide whether to sing or be silent. Nothing like this had ever happened before in Albany.

At the end of that march, we needed to meet someplace. The Union Baptist Church on the corner near the college campus allowed us to meet there. Students did not have any place to meet in that city except in the Black churches. NAACP meetings had been held in a church. When SNCC began to do nonviolence workshops, that was in Bethel AME Methodist Church.

Students had to go to other institutions in the community because we did not control the campus or the college buildings and we could not get access to them. I was in the student center when the dean saw Cordell and Charles Sherrod there and said, "Get off this campus!" It was like I was sitting with the bogeyman. They really said, "Get off or I'll call the police!" These men could not walk on campus. So the student movement could not exist except for the larger community.

In December, there was a further testing of the ruling by SNCC. A number of Freedom Riders came down on a train from Atlanta to support us. There was James Foreman, Tom Hayden, Sandra Hayden (they had just gotten married).³ Bertha Gober was arrested a second time. After her first arrest, there had been a meeting. She'd gotten up and talked about spending Thanksgiving in jail. This time, with

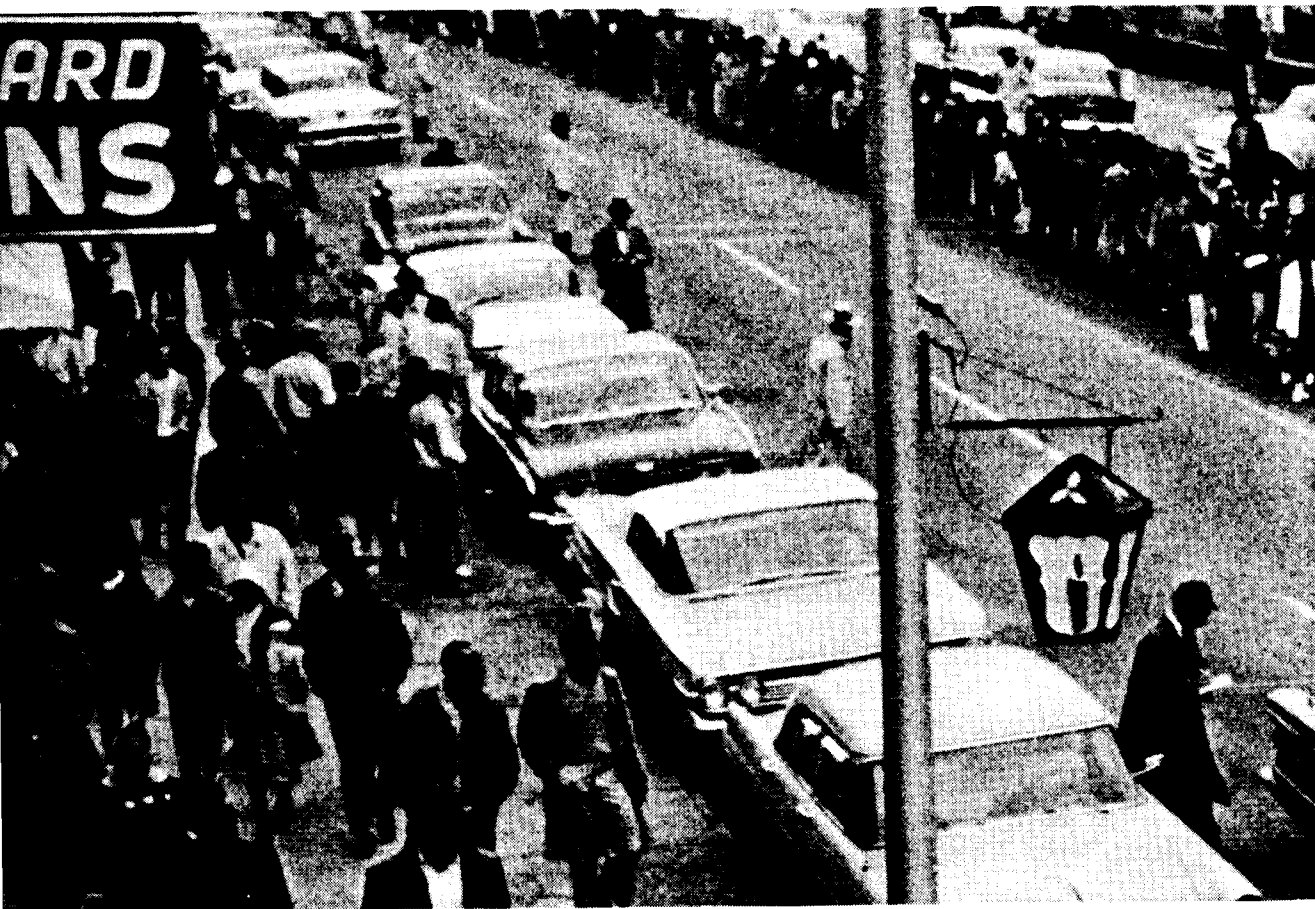
all the Freedom Riders present, I remember her standing up and saying, "Well. . . ." It was like — here she was again. Julian and Alice Bond were there. Irene Ashby, who later became Irene Wright, was there. The main speaker was Dr. Anderson who was president of the Albany Movement.

After the train riders were arrested, there were more demonstrations, and more arrests. I was arrested in the second group of demonstrations. Each time, as news of the demonstrations and arrests came out — newspapers and TV — Black people came to the mass meetings from

just everywhere. It seemed to break loose something basic.

The demonstrations didn't happen in a vacuum. The news, for over a year, had been full of these sit-ins. They had come behind things like Autherine Lucy and the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Little Rock, Arkansas.⁴ Everybody was praying for Dr. King when he got stabbed. It was like, "Oh, it's finally gotten here!"

So, Albany was not simply a student movement. There were just swarms of people who came out to demonstrate, from high school

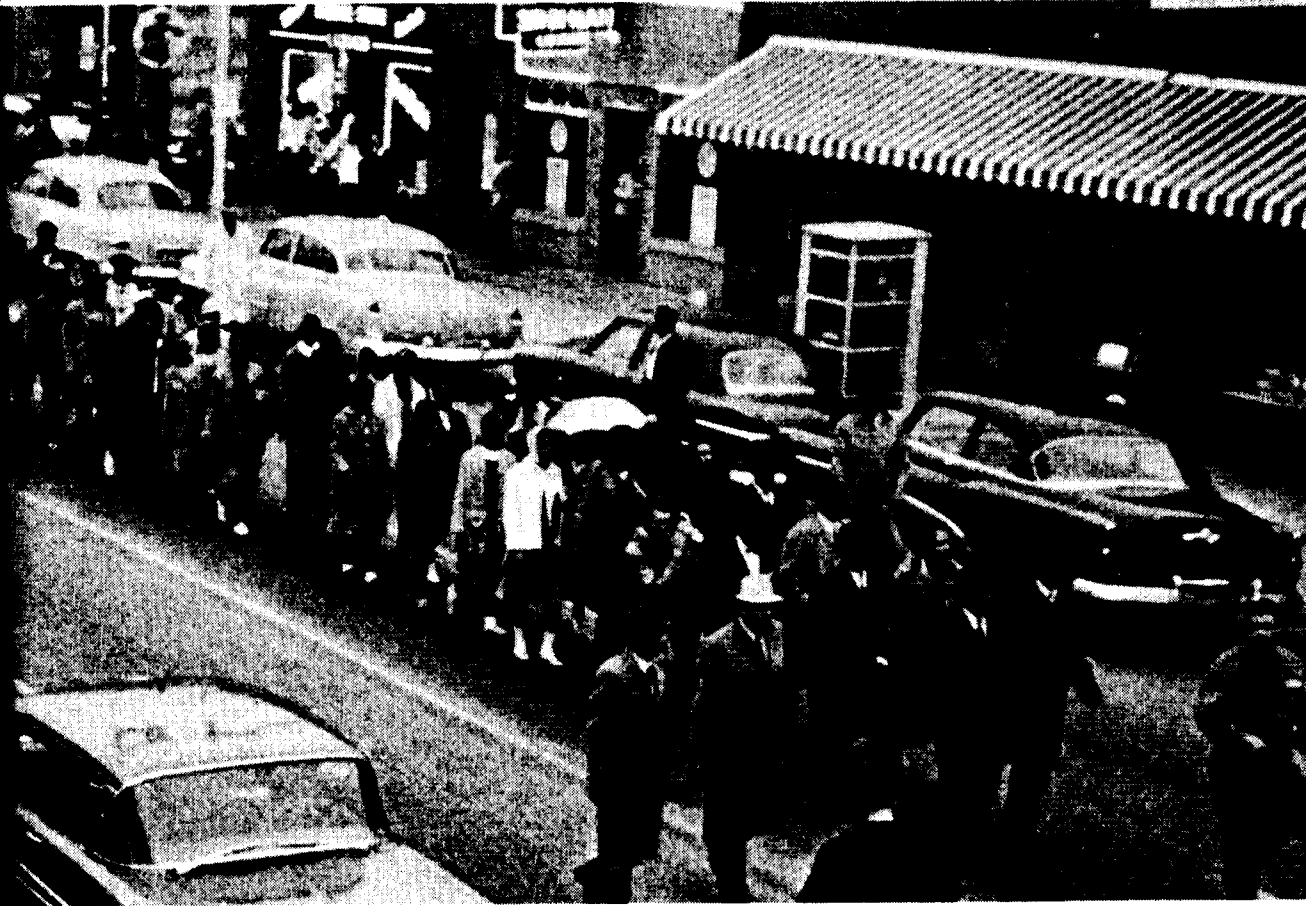


students to old people. And there was so much that you got from finding that some older people backed you and were willing to put up bail and things of that sort. That made the Movement much stronger. It was a mass movement.

A lot of the older people in the Albany Movement were entrenched in Black Cultural traditional and not as much into the Black culture you'll find in colleges — rhythm and blues and arranged spirituals. A lot of the sit-in songs were out of the rhythm and blues idiom or the arranged spiritual idiom. Those songs, as

they went through Albany, Georgia, got brought back to the root level of Black choral traditional music. Albany, Georgia, in addition to all that it did in terms of a mass movement, also became a place where the music was so powerful that people became conscious of it. People who came to write about the Movement began to write about the singing and not even understand why. They couldn't understand what the singing had to do with all the other but it was so powerful they knew it must have some connection.

Albany, Georgia UPI



What did the music have to do with the strength of the demonstrations?

That was not a question for people who were doing the singing. If you get together in a Black situation, you sing and, during that period, you would pray. If it's Black, that's what you were gonna do.

There is a kind of singing that happens in church that is really fervent, powerful singing. And when people get out they say, "Ooh, wasn't that a *good* meeting." Ordinarily, you go to church and you sing but sometimes the congregation takes the roof off the building. *Every* mass meeting was like that. So the mass meetings had a level of music that we could recognize from other times in our lives. And that level of expression, that level of cultural power present in an everyday situation, gave a more practical or functional meaning to the music than when it was sung in church on Sunday. The music actually was a group statement. If you look at the music and the words that came out of the Movement, you will find the analysis that the masses had about what they were doing.

One song that started to be sung in Albany was, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round."

Ain't gonna let Pritchett turn me round,
I'm on my way to freedom land.
If you don't go, don't hinder me.
Come and go with me to that land where
I'm bound.
There ain't nothing but peace in that land,
nothing but peace.

There was a lady who sang that song who had a voice like thunder. She would *sing* it for about 30 minutes. She would also sing the song in church meetings on Sunday. The song in either place said — where I am is not where I'm

staying. "Come and go with me to that land" had a kind of arrogance being in motion. A lot of Black songs are like that, especially group ones. If you read the lyrics strictly you may miss the centering element, the thing that makes people chime in and really make it a powerful song. Singing voiced the basic position of movement, of taking action on your life.

It was also in the Movement that I heard a woman pray and *heard* the prayer for the first time. It was a standard prayer:

Lord, here come me, your meek and
undone servant
Knee-bent and body-bowed to the
motherdust of the earth.
You know me and you know my
condition.
We're down here begging you to come and
help us.

We had just come back from a demonstration. The lines said, "We're down here — you know our condition. We need you." All those things became *graphic* for me. They were graphic in my everyday life but when I heard those prayers in a mass meeting, it was like a prayer of a whole *people*. Then I understood what in fact we (Black church) had been doing for a long time. The Movement released this material, songs and prayers, created by Black people, that made sense used in an everyday practical way and in a position of struggle.

How did the singing start?

I was a singer. We sang all the time. By the time of Albany, there was a tradition of singing in the Movement that came out of the sit-ins and the bus Freedom Rides. "We Shall Overcome" was already considered the theme song. Already there was a musical statement being made that paralleled all the other activities. As

that body of music came through Albany, it was changed. You had old ladies leading freedom songs, backed by old ladies and old men who really knew what the songs were like before they'd gotten to the college campus or wherever else. Like the song "Amen" which turned to "Freedom." That same song has been done for centuries in the Black church. You can put a harmony, 1-3-5, soprano-alto-tenor-bass, to that and get a tight choral sound. A SNCC worker would start to do "Amen" in Georgia and it would be taken over by the

congregation who would sing it the way they always sang it. They were singing "Freedom" but they sang it in the same way that they sang "Amen." That wouldn't be an arranged hymn. "Amen" is a Black traditional song and it's actually an upbeat song. Lots of songs changed like that.

When SNCC came to Albany, we were singing "We Shall Overcome" as "I'll Overcome," because in the church where we sang it on Sundays it was "I'll Overcome": We had seen it on TV and said, "Oh, we sing that song"; so at

Photo by Robert Yellin



the next meeting they said, "What shall we sing?" "Oh, there's a *new* song, that we heard on TV, and it goes...." And you do it the way you know it. As far as you're concerned, you are singing the same song they're singing, even though it's different. By the time "We Shall Overcome" got to Albany it had become ritualized as the symbol of the movement. They were doing it standing, holding hands. "*We*" was really important as a concern for the group. There were one or two other changes. We were doing it a little faster than they were doing it. We slowed it down a little — that's just the students in Albany, and the SNCC workers — and by the time it got to a mass meeting, something else happened to it in terms of improvisation and slowing it down more.

In jail, the songs kept us together. I was in jail with about sixty women, and there were teachers in there, and educated people, uneducated people, a few people who had drunk in Harlem and just ran. (One lady said she was with her husband and the march was going by and she says, "Look there goes my people!" and he says, "You better stay here" and she ran and caught up with us and up in jail and she says "What did I do that for? I ain't never gonna drink no more.")

So there were real class differences between the Black women in jail, and music had a lot to do with breaking down those things because there were several women in there could lead songs, of different ages, and everybody would back everybody up. It was the first time I led songs and felt totally backed up by a group of blacks. If you're growing up in a black church you can background, but I mean the leaders are so powerful, the real songleaders, the old ones, that you think of the day some day when you're gonna do "Let me ride Jesus" or something, but you don't strike out on it. Maybe when you join the church you're ecstatic, you might lead

a song if people will sing with you, but you know you really can't pull that weight.

There was something about the civil rights movement, where leaders were defined by their activism. Not by their age or their class, so within the black community people began to look up to students, to ask students what they should do about x, y, z, and follow the leadership of all sorts of different people based on what they perceived to be an integrity and commitment to struggle and stick with that particular struggle.

What would you say was the feeling of people who became involved in the demonstrations? What were they trying to accomplish? What was this movement that you had joined?

There was a sense of power, in a place where you didn't feel you had any power. There was a sense of confronting things that terrified you, like jail, police, walking in the street — you know, a whole lot of Black folks couldn't even walk in the street in those places in the South. So you were saying in some basic way, "I will never again stay inside of these boundaries." There were things asked for like Black police and firepeople and sitting where you wanted on the bus. There was a bus boycott and we closed the bus company down and brought it back with Black bus drivers. But in terms of what happened to me, and what happened to other people I know about, it was a change in my concept of myself and how I stood.

It was really experience that totally changed the lives of people who participated in it. There were people who did every march, every mass meeting, their whole lives became centered around the Movement. People who lost their jobs, who lost their homes.

A lot of studies of Albany have focused on evaluating the tactics of Pritchett, the police

chief. They have called him a “nonviolent police” because he locked people up. He just locked you up and when there was no more room in the city jail he sent us out to counties.

When I read about the Albany Movement, as people have written about it, I don't recognize it. They add up stuff that was not central to what happened. Discussion about Pritchett; discussion about specific achievements; discussion about whether it was a failure or success for King.³ For me, that was not central. I had grown up in a society where there were very clear lines. The older I got, the more I found what those lines were. The Civil Rights Movement gave me the power to challenge *any* line that limits me.

I got that power during that Albany Movement, and that is what it meant to me, just really gave me real chance to fight and to struggle and not respect boundaries that put me down. Before then, I struggled within a certain context but recognized lines. Across those lines were powers that could do you in, so you just respect them and don't cross them. The Civil Rights Movement just destroyed that and said that if something puts you down, you have to fight against it. And that's what the Albany Movement did for Albany, Georgia.

There were some established adult professionals in the leadership of the Albany Movement, but other successful Blacks, like the school administration, opposed it. Did this surprise you?

I've found it real surprising to people outside the South. I'd say I was suspended from school and they'd say, “Oh, it was a white school, a white principal?” If you grow up Black, you know that the manifestations of the system closest to you are Black. We had known Dean Minor (the dean at the bus station and at the

jail who made lists of students breaking the segregated barriers) and President Dennis for a while. It was really just behavior that we had always seen.

What we did not know, though, was the numbers of people on that same level who were fighting. I think that's always an unknown until there is a fight. You never know who will stank for you until the issues are really on the line.

You can always figure out the people who are executing the system. It appears that almost everybody's executing it, even you are executing it until you fight against it. The positive thing I experienced was the numbers of people who risked everything they had to work in that Movement. People of all classes. People who absolutely couldn't afford to take those stands, did. The most independent people were the ministers of those Black churches which supported Civil Rights Movement activities. But people who were working and were losing their jobs, that was another thing.

It's now been 17 years since SNCC went to work in Albany. What is Albany like today? How do you see the difference that the movement has made?

There are hundreds of specifics. Albany State College is integrated. Dennis died very shortly after he suspended us; I still think that's connected. You can ride in white taxicabs. There are Black policemen and white policemen (policemen are still policemen), Black firemen and white firemen, Black bus drivers. Schools are integrated. There are Black telephone operators. I wouldn't have to go all the way to Belk's Department Store to go the bathroom downtown; there used to be only two stores with restrooms for Blacks — Silver's Dime Store and Belk's. All those things have happened.

Albany, for Albany, as well as the Civil Rights Movement for whoever was affected by it, raised questions and answered some questions in ways that changed how people would be dealt with. So that, you know, I could get a job at the Marine base as a secretary. Those are things that you take for granted in Albany now, but I remember when my sister got a job at the Marine base and it was a first. They hired manual laborers at the base, but they didn't hire Black women.

Those are the specifics. Behind those specifics are people who have greater responsibility, for who and where they are — and slightly more chances to fight for difference in their lives. In some way the Civil Rights Movement exposed the basic structure of the country that, as it's set up, cannot sustain itself without oppressing someone. The change in the movement later toward riots, Black Power, Black nationalism, feels to me like it had to do with some learning about the Constitution.

We did a lot of stuff about upholding the Constitution; quoting the Constitution, saying "All we want is our rights in the Constitution." After Albany, I began to look in the Constitution, and to realize that every time they dealt with property they were dealing with the slave question. So in the Constitution I am primarily property. And our depending on that Constitution is like me waiting on the corner for the Albany police to save me from that man.

But that was where we were. So one thing the Civil Rights Movement did was give us a lesson in the structure of this country — the most graphic kind of civics lesson you can get — and we began to really see that there were some problems. If you watched TV and watched all them Black people getting beat for all of those years, you knew that yours was coming next week. And it became much more difficult to handle that nothing else was coming, and

especially that, in some real way, the economic order was not changed by the Civil Rights Movement.

When I say you can work in the Marine base and you can work at the telephone company, the implication is that something basic has changed in the economy. But if you look at where Blacks stand, economically, in the society, it continues to be a society that has maintained itself on the exploitation of groups of people. Though I get the feeling that the groups may be slightly breaking down; maybe now all workers are beginning to find themselves terrified for their jobs, which used to be the way Black people felt all the time — if you had a job you were scared any day something would happen so you wouldn't be working.

What about the effects of voter registration work on the power relations?

I think we're still seeing it and I'm not sure what the result will be. There have been some differences in power-relations with so many Black elected officials, but the changes are limited. In Charleston, South Carolina, Septima Clark sits on the school board that around 1919 refused to let her work as a teacher in that city. Mayor Daley's little clique was unseated by a Jesse Jackson-led group at a Democratic National Convention. That was 1972, when McGovern was nominated for President, and that was the year of "This is really gonna make a difference; we're gonna turn this party around and make it a people's party." there were all those fights, and then, next time around, 1976, Mayor Daley's back, they didn't know what to do.⁶

So you can talk about power changes that occurred — that put Fannie Lou Hamer in the Democratic National Convention — that kicked Mayor Daley out, for a little while.⁷ *It*

means something; it is more helpful to have more Black people in those positions. But also it means that we're in a system that's very flexible and can absorb some demands based on how much you hammer for them; if you are ever-visible hammering, you will not totally be ignored. You will either be let in or be destroyed. And then sometimes the system lets in a certain number and then destroys the radical fringes of it. But the structure has not changed, and human beings are still terribly exploited in this country. This is not a country that's focused on human beings.

The other thing that the Civil Rights Movement has done is make Black people see beyond themselves, to see some parallels in the experiences of other people and other groups. If you're Black and oppressed, you're also isolated. When I joined the Civil Rights Movement, everything was Black and white. There were Black people and there were white people and that was it. The Civil Rights Movement has taught at least some activist part of the Black community internationalism, something about the world, and has made the world not so distant and not so irrelevant to our own position. It is like beginning to analyze society and understand where you are in it.

How have you personally been affected since then by your participation in the Albany Movement?

Well, the first thing that happened was I lost the job I had at that time. I would get up at five in the morning to clean this beautician's shop. The woman said, "She's a good girl, but . . ." She thought her windows would get broken because my name was in the paper and I got arrested.

I was expelled from school in December 1961, not to return. It was for something like

"behavior unbecoming a student." My parents were pretty worried about me being out of school, and also about not being able to tell me what to do. I was clearly making my own decisions. I was scared but I was really caught up in the activities of the Civil Rights Movement.

The forty-nine students who were suspended got an offer to go to Black schools in Atlanta to complete the year. In February I went back to school in Atlanta, to Spelman College. The most important thing happening was the Movement. I felt like it was my Movement as much



Fanny Lou Hamer at the Forest County Courthouse in Hattiesburg, Miss. Photo by Matt Herron

as it was anybody else's, so being in school during that time was difficult. I tried to get involved in what was happening in Atlanta, but it did not have the community base. The Atlanta movement was student-based, and something that I had gotten from the Albany situation was missing. I worked at the SNCC national office; I went to rallies and demonstrations in Atlanta; and I went back to Albany as much as possible. The next year I returned to Spelman but left in November and didn't go back for several years.

I think everything I've done since has to do with the Movement. I'm still an activist, still as singer, a song leader, as I was then. I have moved since that time through being very much in the middle of the pan-Africanist and Black nationalist movement. During the Civil Rights Movement I was in a group called the Freedom Singers. With Black nationalism, I sang with a group of women called the Harambee Singers; we almost only sang to Black people. Now I'm with a group called Sweet Honey in the Rock. We are Black women singing about our lives and our commitment to our community and our commitment to struggle for change.

What I've had since the Civil Rights Movement is better knowledge of who I am in this society, an understanding of my power as a person to stand and speak and act on any issue that I feel applies to me in some way and therefore to other people. That has included the war in Vietnam, Black nationalism, liberation movements around the world, and other movements I've come to with some support because of what I learned in the Civil Rights Movement. And music is just the way I talk about that commitment and that understanding.

I learned was that I did have a life to give for what I believed. Lots of people don't know that; they feel they don't have anything. When

you understand that you do have a life, you do have a body, and you can put that on the line, it gives you a sense of power. So I was empowered by the Civil Rights Movement.

There have been many times since then that I've felt other levels of oppression, for instance, doors that open for me as a Black person but have another slant on them for me as a woman. I now move through a different level of the society than I did then. I'm seeing what happens when you're Black, when you're a woman, when you are outside of categories that are comfortable. Like I have a doctorate in history, but doctorates are not supposed to sing and if they sing they're not supposed to sound the way I do, using Black traditional vocal techniques. There are just a hundred different ways of clashing. Yet I sometimes know that I have a right, almost a responsibility, to struggle to be all of those things. If I don't work out in my lifetime who I am, and fight for that space, then I will never *be*. I will be somebody else's representation or the society's representation of what it will tolerate me to be.

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NOTES

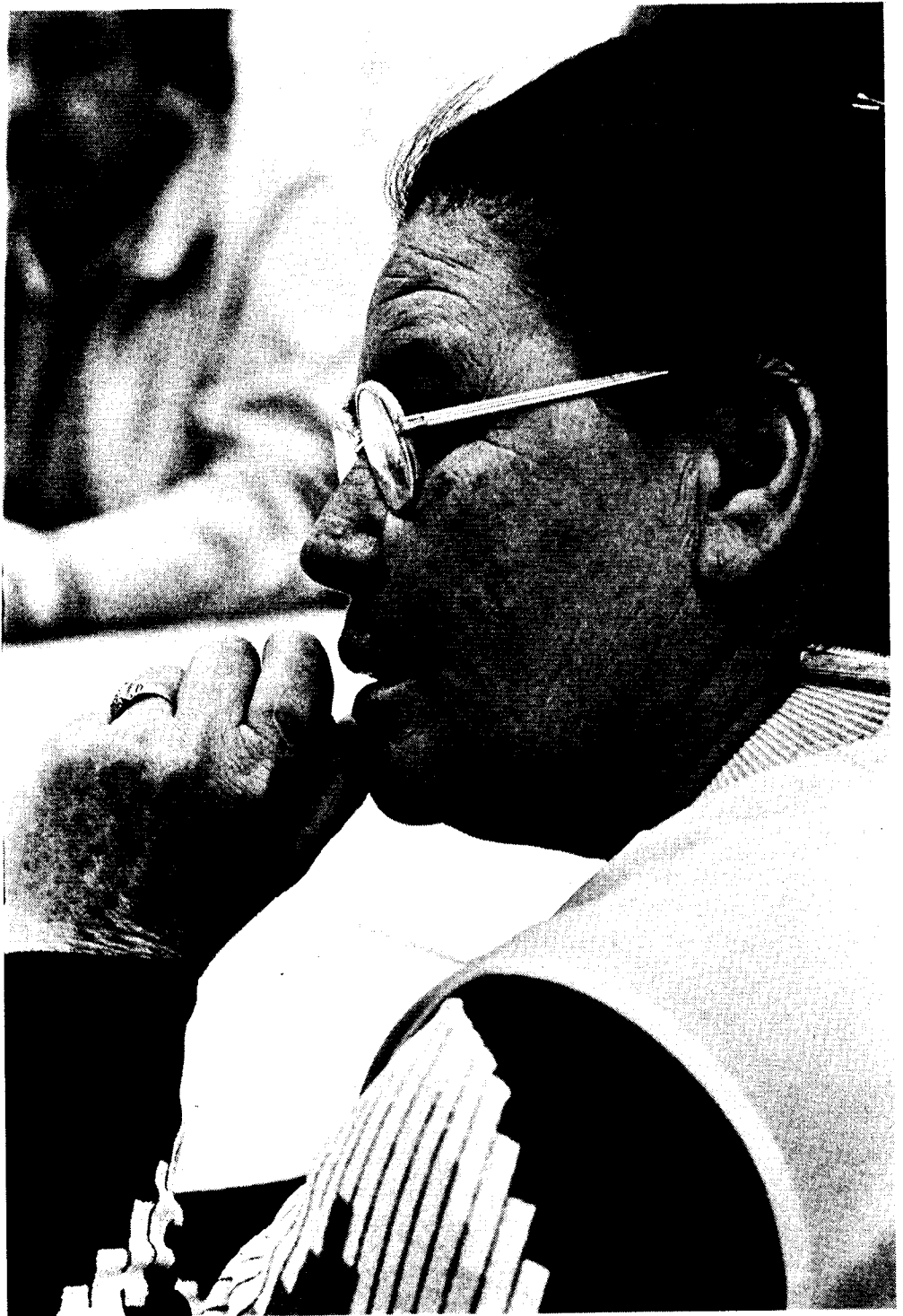
1. Autherine Lucy, in 1956, became the first Black student to enroll in the University of Alabama but was eventually expelled.
2. Vernon Jordan, then Georgia field secretary for the NAACP, is now executive director of the National Urban League. Ruby Hurley was southeastern regional director of the NAACP.
3. James Forman was Executive Secretary of SNCC from 1961 to 1966. Tom Hayden was participating in and reporting on the civil rights movement as field secretary of Students for a Democratic Society. Sandra "Casey" Hayden was a white SNCC staff member from Texas.
4. In 1957, nine Black schoolchildren attempted to attend the all-white Central High School of Little Rock, Arkansas, in accordance with a court-ordered desegregation plan. Blocked by national guard troops acting under the orders of Arkansas governor Orville Faubus and then by white mobs, they succeeded in entering the school only after federal troops were sent to protect them. The following year, Governor Faubus closed the school entirely in order to delay integration.
5. Martin Luther King, invited to Albany by the executive committee of the Albany Movement, led a large demonstration in December 1961 and was jailed. He also attempted to negotiate with the City Commission on behalf of the Movement.
6. At the 1972 Democratic National Convention which nominated George McGovern for president, the Illinois delegation headed by Chicago mayor and political boss Richard Daley was disqualified because

it did not give sufficient representation to minorities and women. It was replaced by a delegation headed by community activist Rev. Jesse Jackson. Daley and other Party bigwigs and fundraisers refused to work on McGovern's presidential campaign against Richard Nixon, which was one reason for McGovern's devastating defeat in November. Afterwards, all but the most left-leaning of the Democratic liberals quickly made peace with the old-line conservative forces in the Party, and relaxed the rules about minority and female participation.

7. Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville, Mississippi, became a leader in SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party after she was evicted from the B.D. Marlowe plantation (where she had lived and worked as a sharecropper for 18 years) for registering to vote.

In 1964, the Democratic National Convention refused to seat her and other members of the MFDP in place of the segregationist Mississippi delegation led by Senator James Eastland. In 1965, the MFDP demanded that Congress seat her in place of Mississippi Representative Jamie Whitten on the grounds that more than half of the residents of his district were Black but less than 3% of these had been allowed to register; this challenge lost by a vote of 276 to 149. Eventually, in 1968 and 1972, mostly-Black delegations were seated in the Convention in place of the segregationists; in 1976, the Democratic Party in Mississippi was "reunited" and sent a delegation including both the Eastland forces and Black and white liberals.

In June 1963, Fannie Lou Hamer was taken off a bus in Winona, Mississippi, while returning from a conference. She was jailed and, on the orders of a state trooper, two Black prisoners were made to beat her all over her body with a blackjack.



Jessie Lopez de la Cruz. Photo by George Ballis.

MY LIFE*

*Jessie Lopez de la Cruz
as told to Ellen Cantarow*

CHILDHOOD

My grandmother was born in Mexico in Aguas Calientes, near Guadalajara. She was raised by a very strict father and she married at thirteen. That was the custom. The girls, as soon as they were old enough to learn cooking and sewing, would get married. She had my mother and my oldest brother¹ when she and my grandfather came across. My grandfather worked for the railroad laying the ties and tracks. Then he worked for a mining company. And after that we moved to Anaheim. We lived in a big four-bedroom house my grandfather built. With my grandparents and their children, three children of my mother's sister who had died, and the three of us, that made a big crowd.

My grandfather would get up Sunday mornings and start the fire in a great big wood-burning stove. He would wrap us up in blankets and seat us around that stove on chairs and say, "Now, don't get too close to the stove. Take care of the younger children." Then he would go out to the store and get bananas and oranges and cereal that he'd cook for us to eat, and milk, and he would feed us Sunday mornings.

My grandmother had a beautiful garden — carnations and pansies and roses, and a big bush of bleeding heart. She was very proud of that. My grandfather used to grow a vegetable garden in back of our house; we had a large yard. And I remember that while he was working for the company he got us one of those big cement pipes with a hole in the bottom. He would plug that up with a piece of wood he carved to fit the hole, and then he would fill this up with water. My brothers and I would get into it. We had a grand time with that!

*©1978 by the Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, NY 11568. Excerpted from a longer interview with Jessie de la Cruz that appears in *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change* by Ellen Cantarow, to be co-published by the Feminist Press and the McGraw-Hill Company in 1979.

Then my grandfather had an accident. The middle fingers of his right hand was crushed and he couldn't work for about two weeks. When he went back he was told that he'd already been replaced by another worker. So he was out of a job. He decided we'd better go on and pick the crops. We had done that before, during the summer. But this time we went for good.

We came North. The families got together; the women would start cooking at night, boiling eggs and potatoes and making piles of tortillas and tacos, and these lunches would be packed in pails and boxes. There was as much fruit as they could get together, and roasted pumpkin seeds. My uncle had a factory where he made Mexican candy in East Los Angeles. And he used to give us a lot of pumpkin seeds. So my mother dried these, and she roasted and salted them for the trip to keep the drivers awake. We'd start in a car caravan, six or seven families together, one car watching for the other, and when it got a little dark they'd pull onto the roadside and build a fire and start some cooking to feed us. Then they'd spread blankets and quilts on the ground and we would sleep there that night. The next morning the women and older children would get up first and start the breakfast. And we smaller children, it was our job to fold the blankets and put them back in the cars and trucks. Then my brothers and the men would check the cars over again, and after breakfast all the women would wash the dishes and pack them, get 'em in the cars, and we'd start again.

We'd finally get to Delano² and we would work there a little. If work was scarce we would keep on going till San Jose. I did the same thing my mother and my grandfather and my uncles did, picking prunes on our hands and knees off the ground, and putting them in the buckets. We were paid four dollars a ton and we had to fill forty boxes to make it a ton. They made us

sign a contract that we would stay there until all the prunes were picked. When we would finish the prunes, in early September, we would start back. And stop on the way to Mendota to pick cotton.

When I was about 13, I used to lift a 12-foot sack of cotton with 104 or 112 pounds. When you're doing this work, you get to be an expert. I could get that sack and put it on my shoulder, and walk with that sack for about a city block or maybe a little less, to where the scale was. I could hook this sack up on the scale, have it weighed, take it off the hook and put it back on my shoulder and walk up a ladder about eight feet high and dump all that cotton in the trailer.

My brothers taught me how to do it. When I first started picking cotton, they had to untie their sack and go on my side of the row and help me put this sack on my shoulder, so they taught me how to do it when it was full. It's stiff. My brother said, "Just walk over it, pick up one end, and sort of pull it up, up, and then bend down, and when the middle of the sack hits your shoulder, you just stand up slowly. Then put your arm on your waist and the sack will sit on your shoulder and you can just walk with it." At 13, 14 I was lifting 104 and 112 pounds. I weighed 97, I guess!

As a child I remember we had tents without any floors. I think it was Giffen's Camp Number Nine.³ I remember the water coming from under the tent at night to where we were sleeping. My brothers would get up with shovels and put mud around the tent to keep the water out. But our blankets and our clothes were always damp during the winter.

In 1930 a friend of my grandmother gave her some money. She got some *menudos* [tripe] and hominy. She said, "Take out those pots and soak this." She soaked the tripe, added garlic. The next day she got my brother to go with her with a little cart. She went from house to house

selling *menudo*. The money she raised from that, she'd buy more. She'd use what was left over to feed us. There was no wood for heating. And one time, to top it off, we all got scarlet fever: they put a sign on our door: Nobody was to go in or out.

We used to sleep on the floor. It was cold. My brothers would go out and get anything they could find and we burned it in this oil drum we had, this big fifty-gallon can.

We'd go out on the hilltop and pick mushrooms, mustard greens. My brothers would kill wild rabbits. And this we would eat during the winter.

In thirty-three we came up North to follow the crops because my brothers couldn't find any work in Los Angeles during the Depression. I remember going hungry to school. I didn't have a sweater. I had nothing. I'd come to school and they'd want to know, "What did you have for breakfast?" They gave us a paper, to write down what we had! I *invented* things! We had eggs and milk, I'd say, and the same things the other kids would write, I'd write. There weren't many Mexican people at school, mostly whites, and I'd watch to see what they were writing or the pictures that they'd show. You know: glasses of milk, and toast, and oranges and bananas and cereal. I'd never had *anything*.

I remember vividly one day all the children were lined up and we had to stand before this lady all dressed in white, a health nurse. She told me to open my mouth and I just stared at her. She stuck a stick to push my tongue down, and I couldn't help it: I vomited all over her dress. Oh! I started crying and the teacher came up and shook me and kept saying something — "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Those words stuck to me; I even dreamed them.

Another time something else happened when I ran out of underwear! See, we were very poor,

and when I ran out of underwear grandmother tore open a pillow and used the red satin to make some drawers for me. I was ashamed; I didn't want nobody to see me. I was dressed very different from all the other children in the first place. My dresses were almost down to my ankles and they were gathered in the waist with a drawstring that my grandmother made me, and high boy's shoes and heavy black stockings.

When I got the red underwear I was out there after school like a little monkey up on the swings and two Anglo girls about my age started teasing me: "Oh, she's got red panties! red panties!" and they tried to lift my dress up. By this time I was off the swings and standing against the wall. When one of the older girls leaned over to pull my dress up I lifted my knee and hit her nose and she started bleeding and crying. The teacher came over and she slapped me. But since I didn't know English I couldn't tell her, I couldn't explain what had happened.

COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

When I was a girl, boys were allowed to go out and have friends and visit there in camp, and even go to town. But the girls — my mother was always watching them. We couldn't talk to nobody. If I had a boyfriend he had to send me letters, drop notes on his way or send them along with somebody. We did no dating. If girls came to visit at my house, my grandmother sat right there to listen to what we were talking about. We weren't allowed to speak English because she couldn't understand. . . . We were allowed nowhere except out to the field, and then we always worked between my two older brothers. The only one they trusted was Arnold. He's the one I married! I was fourteen when I met Arnold, in 1933. We lived next door to his family, which was a big one. I'd go



Photo by Paul Fusco

there and help Arnold's mother make stacks of tortillas. She didn't have time enough to do all the work for the little children. I'd go and help her. When she went to the hospital in 1935 when Arnold's younger brother was born, I cared for the whole family. I'd make tortillas and cook. The little ones we kept in our house, and the rest of them stayed in their cabin.

Arnold and I got married in 1938 in Firebaugh, where we'd all moved. We had a big party with an orchestra: some of Arnold's friends played the violin and guitar. But we had no honeymoon. On the second day after our wedding he went back to his job — irrigating. I'd get up at four o'clock in the morning to fix his breakfast and his lunch. He'd start the fire for me. I did the cooking in his mother's kitchen. In the morning I'd get up and run across and I'd fix his breakfast and his lunch and he'd go off and I'd go back to bed. There was no women's liberation at the time! I felt I was overworked in

the house. . . . But I felt, "What can she (her mother-in-law) do without the help I'm giving her?" I felt sorry for her. She'd worked very hard and she had so many children, and had to wash her clothes in a tub with a rock board and do the ironing by heating the irons on top of the stove. All of us had to do this, but not many families had eight or nine little children.

I cooked with her until May. But I kept after Arnold: "I want my own kitchen!" So in May we drove all the way into Fresno. We got a few spoons and plates and pots and skillets and I started my own housekeeping. I still went to his mother's to help her during the day when Arnold was working. But I cooked in my own stove.

After I was married, sometime in May, my husband was chopping cotton and I said, "I want to go with you."

"You can't! You have to stay at home!"

"I just feel like going outside somewhere. I haven't gone anyplace. I want to at least go out to the fields. Take another hoe and I'll help you." I went, but only for one or two days. Then he refused to take me. He said, "You have to stay home and raise children." I was pregnant with my first one. "I want you to rest," he said. "You're not supposed to work. You worked ever since I can remember. Now that you're married, you are going to rest." So I stayed home but I didn't call it rest doing all the cooking for his mother.

Arnold was raised in the old Mexican custom — men on the one side, women on the other. Women couldn't do anything. Your husband would say, "Go here," you'd do it. You didn't dare go out without your husband saying you could.

Arnold never beat me, or anything like that. But every time I used to talk to him he didn't answer, even if I asked a question. He'd say, "Well, you don't have to know about it." If I

asked, "Arnold, has the truck been paid for?" he wouldn't answer. Or I would ask him, "Did you pay the loan company?" he wouldn't answer. Then I'd get kind of mad and say, "Why can't you tell me?" and he'd say, "What do you want to know about it, are you going to pay for it, or what? Let me do the worrying." Now that's all changed; we talk things over. but in the beginning it was different.

The first year we were married, he was home every day. After the first year was up I guess that was the end of the honeymoon. He would just take off and I wouldn't see him for three or four days, even more. I didn't even ask, "Where were you?" I accepted it. I wasn't supposed to question him. He would come in and take his dirty clothes off, pile them up, and when I did the wash the next day I'd look through his pockets and find bus ticket stubs of where he'd been to — Santa Maria, miles and miles away from home. He would be home for about two days and then take off again with his friends, his pals who were gambling. I really couldn't blame him that much, because when he was young, before we were married, he was never even allowed to go to a dance. So he was trying out his wings.

After a time I said, "I have really had it. Why do you have to go with your friends all the time when I'm being left alone?"

"Well, what's wrong with that? You can go visit my mother." I said, "Big deal, you want me to visit your mother and help make some tortillas." So he finally started giving me money, five or six dollars. He'd say, "My mother's going to Fresno. If you want to go with them you can go." Or he would say, "Donna Genoveva," a friend of ours, "is going to Fresno and she said you can come along." I'd get my two kids ready early in the morning and we'd go to Fresno or to visit her husband, who was up in the mountains in the

hospital for TB. One day I just said, "Why do I have to depend on other people to take me out somewhere? I'm married, I have a husband — who should be taking me out." The next time he was home and said, "Here's the money," I said, "I don't want to go." He let it go at that and I did too, I didn't say another word. The following weekend he said, "Do you want to go to a show? My mother's going. They're going to Fresno." I said, "No." Then about the third time this happened he said, "Why don't you want to go anymore?"

"I do, I do want to go. I want to go somewhere, but not with anyone else. I want to go with you." So then he started staying home and he'd say, "Get ready, we're going into Fresno." And both of us would come in, bring the children, go to a show and eat, or just go to the park.

Arnold would never teach me how to drive. One day I asked him to. We were on a ditch bank about eight feet wide. He says, "Get on the driver's side. Now, turn around and go back." I got out. I said, "You do it! Just tell me you don't want me to learn if that's what you want." Then in 1947 I asked my sister, Margaret, and she showed me. We practiced in a field. After a few times she said, "Hey! You know how to drive! Let's go into town so you can buy your groceries."

So one day I said to Arnold, "I'm going out to get the groceries."

"Who's going to take you?"

"Me. I'm going to do the buying from now on."

I stopped working toward the last months of my pregnancies, but I would start again after they were born. When I was working and I couldn't find somebody I would take them with me. I started taking Ray with me when he wasn't a year old yet. I'd carry one of those big washtubs and put it under the vine and sit him

there. I knew he was safe; he couldn't climb out. Arnold and I would move the tub along with us as we worked. I hated to leave him with somebody that probably wouldn't take care of him the way I could.

In 1944 we moved to a labor camp in Huron and we stayed there til 1956. But before that we had a single-room cabin. I used to separate the bed section from the kitchen by nailing blankets or pieces of canvas to divide. We had our bed and another bed for the children. All the boys slept in the bed and the girl slept with us in our bed. During the night Bobby being the youngest of the boys would wake up and be scared and he always ended up in our bed! It was pretty crowded, but what could you do? I was always nailing orange crates on the walls to use as cupboards for dishes. Then I had a man build a

Photo by Paul Fusco



cupboard for me. It had four shelves and a screen door to keep the flies out. The dishes I didn't use everyday I kept there. Like if I happened to buy a cake plate, you know, those big ones with the long stem, I'd put it in there. I never had a set of dishes. I'd get pretty teacups I didn't want to use everyday and put them in that cupboard. . . .

There was a lot of sickness. I remember when my kids got whooping cough. Arnold was sick, too, he was burning hot. During this time instead of staying in my own cabin at night I'd go to my mother-in-law's. The children would wake up at night coughing and there was blood coming out of their noses. I cried and cried, I was afraid they'd choke. I went to the clinic and they told me the children had whooping cough. That cough lasted six months.

It was like that for all of us. I would see babies who died. It was claimed if you lifted a young baby up fast, the soft spot would cave in and it would get diarrhea and dehydrate and die. After all these years, I know it wasn't that that killed them. It was hunger, malnutrition, no money to pay the doctors. When the union came, this was one of the things we fought against.

FIELD WORK

From 1939 until 1944 we stayed at Giffen's camp number three. We were still following the crops. We would go out to pick cotton or apricots or grapes here near Fresno or we would go farther north to Tracey to pick peas. When there was no work chopping or picking cotton we'd go to Patterson or San Jose to pick apricots. Arnold did the picking and I did cutting for the drying-out in the sheds. The apricots would be picked out in the field or in the orchard. They'd bring 'em in in trucks and they'd just set them beside us. They always had a boy or two that would dump these apricots on

a table. We would have a knife and we'd cut around it and take out the pit and just spread them out on top of big trays. After we filled all these trays they would come and take these out where they were dried. And they'd put some more on the table on the trays for us to cut.

We always went where we wanted to make sure the women and men were going to work because if it were just the men working it wasn't worth going out there because we wouldn't earn enough, to support a family. We would start early, around 6:30 a.m. and work for four or five hours, then walk home and eat and rest until about three-thirty in the afternoon when it cooled off. We would go back and work until we couldn't see. Then we'd get home and rest, visit, talk, then I'd clean up the kitchen. I was doing the housework and working out in the fields, and taking care of the kids. I had two children by this time.

Other times we would pick grapes. The sand is very hot. It gets up to about a hundred eight, a hundred ten degrees during the summer out in the fields. We wore tennis shoes to protect our feet from the hot sand. I'd get a pan and put it under the vine and cut the grapes. The grower wanted us to cut them, not pull them. You had to hold the grape bunches gently, not to crush the grapes, in your hand, and you'd have to use your knife to cut off from the stem and place it in the pan. After that pan was full you would spread these grapes in a paper tray where the sun was shining. That was my first experience working out in the field after I married.

The hardest work we did was thinning beets. You were required to use a short-handled hoe. The cutting edge is about seven to eight inches wide and the handle is about a foot long. Then you have to be bent over with the hoe in one hand. You walk down the rows stooped over. You have to work hard, fast, as fast as you can because you were paid by the row, not by the

hour. I learned how to do it without straining my back too much. I put my hand on my left knee and I got so good at it that I'd leave one beet on each stroke. (You're supposed to pull one off with your hand if you leave two.)

I used a short-handled hoe in the lettuce fields. The lettuce grows in a bed. You work in little furrows between two rows. First you thin them with the hoe, then you pick off the tops. My brothers-in-law and Arnold and I and some other friends worked there picking the tops off the lettuce. By the time they had taken up one row I had taken up two. The men would go between the two beds and take one row and break the little balls off. But I took two rows at a time, one with each hand. By the time I finished my two rows at the other end, it was close to a mile long, and my brother-in-law had only taken one row part-way. He said, "I'm quitting! If Jessie can beat me at this kind of work, I'm no good at it." So he never came back. About three or four other men wouldn't go back to work because they were beaten by a woman. They said, "I'm ashamed to have a woman even older than I am work faster than I can. This is women's job." I said, "Hey! What do you mean? You mean the men's job is washing dishes and baking tortillas?" They said working out in the fields was women's work because we were faster at it!

Out in the fields there were never any restrooms. We had to go eight or ten hours without relief. If there wasn't brush or a little ditch we were forced to wait until we got home! Just the women. The men didn't need to pull their clothes down. Later, when I worked for the Farmworkers, in a hearing I said, "I was working for Russell Giffen, the biggest grower in Huron. These big growers have a lot of money because we earned all that money for them. Because of our sweat and our labor that we put on the land. What they do instead of



Protesting recruitment by local growers of undocumented as strike breakers, 1972. Photo by George Ballis.

supplying restrooms and clean water where we can wash our hands, is put posts on the ground with a piece of gunny sack wound around them." That's where we went. And that thing was moved along with us. It was just four stakes stuck in the ground, and then there was canvas or a piece of gunny sack around it. You would be working and this restroom would be right there. The canvas didn't come up high enough in front for privacy. We made it a practice to go two at a time. One would stand outdoors and watch outside that nobody came along. And then the other would do the same for the one inside.

LA CAUSA

One night in 1962 there was a knock at the door and there were three men. One of them was Cesar Chavez. And the next thing I knew, they were sitting around our table talking about a union. I made coffee. Arnold had already told me about a union for the farmworkers. He was attending their meetings in Fresno, but I didn't. I'd either stay home or stay outside in the car. But then Cesar said, "The women have to be involved. They're the ones working out in the fields with their husbands. If you can take the women out to the fields, you can certainly take them to meetings." So I sat up straight and

said to myself, “*That’s* what I want!”

When I became involved with the union, I felt I had to get other women involved. Women have been behind men all the time, always. In my sister-in-law and brother-in-law’s families the women do a lot of shouting and cussing and they get slapped around. But that’s not standing up for what you believe in. It’s just trying to boss and not knowing how. I’d hear them scolding their kids and fighting their husbands and I’d say, “Gosh! Why don’t you go after the people that have you living like this? Why don’t you go after the growers that have you tired from working out in the fields at low wages and keep us poor all the time? . . . Then I would say we had to take a part in the things going on around us. “Women can no longer be taken for granted — that we’re just going to stay home and do the cooking and cleaning. It’s way past the time when our husbands could say, ‘You stay home! You have to take care of the children. You have to do as I say.’”

Then some women I spoke to started attending the union meetings, and later they were out on the picket lines.

I was well-known in the small towns around Fresno. Wherever I went to speak to them, they listened. I told them about how we were excluded from the NLRB in 1935, how we had no benefits, no minimum wage, nothing out in the fields — no restrooms, nothing. I’d ask people how they felt about all these many years they had been working out in the fields, how they had been treated. And then we’d all talk about it. They would say, “I was working for so-and-so, and when I complained about something that happened there, I was fired.” I said, “Well! Do you think we should be putting up with this in this modern age? You know, we’re not back in the 20s. We can stand up! We can talk back! It’s not like when I was a little kid

and my grandmother used to say, ‘You have to especially respect the Anglos, “Yessir,” “Yes, Ma’am!”’ That’s over. This country is very rich, and we want a share of the money these growers make of our sweat and our work by exploiting us and our children!’ I’d have my sign-up book and I’d say, “If anyone wants to become a member of the union, I can make you a member right now.” And they’d agree!

So I found out that I could organize them and make members of them. Then I offered to help them, like taking them to the doctor’s and translating for them, filling out papers that they needed to fill out, writing their letters for those that couldn’t write. A lot of people confided in me. Through the letter-writing, I knew a lot of the problems they were having back home, and they knew they could trust me, that I wouldn’t tell anyone else about what I had written or read. So that’s why they came to me.

I guess when the union found out how I was able to talk to people, I was called into Delano to one of the meetings, and they gave me my card as an organizer. I am very proud to say I was the first woman organizer out in the fields organizing the people. There have been Dolores Huerta and others, but they were in cities organizing the people, and I was the first woman farmworker organizer out in the fields.

There was a migrant camp in Parlier.⁴ And these people, the migrants, were being used as strikebreakers. I had something to do with building that camp. By that time [around 1968] I had been put on the board of the Fresno County Economic Opportunity Commission and I was supporting migrant housing for farmworkers. But I had no idea it was going to be turned almost into a concentration camp or prison. The houses were just like matchboxes — square, a room for living, a room for cooking, a bathroom that didn’t have a door, just a curtain. The houses are so close together

that if one catches fire, the next one does, too, and children have burned in them. It happened in Parlier.

It was very hard being a woman organizer. Many of our people my age and older were raised with the old customs in Mexico: where the husband rules, he is the king of his house. The wife obeys, and the children, too. So when we first started it was very, very hard. Men gave us the most trouble — neighbors there in Parlier! They were for the union, but they were not taking orders from women, they said. When they formed the ranch committee⁵ at Christian Brothers — that's a big wine company, part of it is in Parlier — the ranch committee was all men. We were working under our first contract in Fresno County. The ranch committee had to enforce the contract. If there are any grievances they meet with us and the supervisors. But there were no women on that first committee.

That year, we'd have a union meeting every week. Men, women, and children would come. Women would ask questions and the men would just stand back. I guess they'd say to themselves, "I'll wait for someone to say something before I do." The women were more aggressive than the men.

When the first contract was up, we talked about there being no women on the ranch committee. I suggested they be on it, and the men went along with this. And so women were elected.

The women took the lead in calling for picketing and we would talk to the people. It got to the point that we would have to find them, because the men just wouldn't go and they wouldn't take their wives. So we would say, "We're having our picket line at the Safeway in Fresno, and those that don't show up are going to have to pay a five dollar fine." We couldn't have four or five come to a picket

line and have the rest stay home and watch T.V. In the end, we had everybody out there.

One time we were picketing — I think it was in the early part of '72 — White River Farms in Delano, for a new contract.⁶ To go picket we had to get up early. See, a lot of these growers were chartering busses and at four or five o'clock in the morning they'd pick up the scabs. So we would follow these labor bosses who chartered the busses.

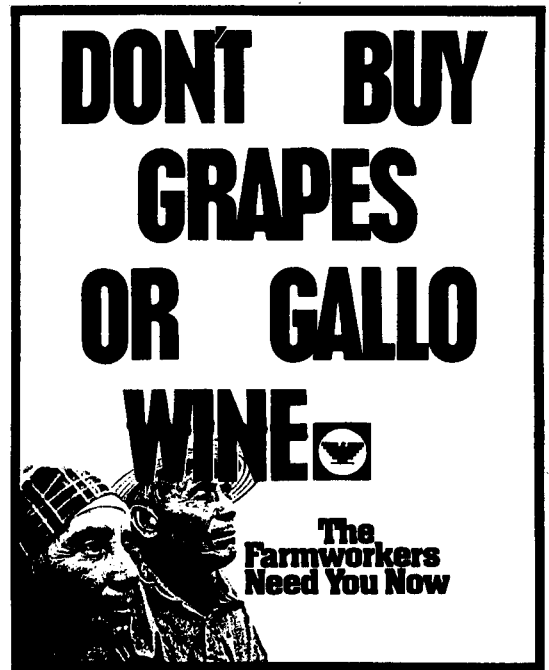
At White River Farms one morning very early, we were out there by the hundreds by the road, and these people got down and started working out there in the grapes. We were asking them not to work, telling them that there was a strike going on. The grower had two guards at the entrance and there was a helicopter above us. At other White River Farm ranches they had the sheriff, the county police, *everybody*. But there were pickets at three different ranches and where we were picketing there wasn't anybody except these two guards. So I said, "Hey! What about the women getting together and let's rush 'em!" And they said, "Do you think we could do that?" And I said, "Of course we can! Let's go in there. Let's get 'em out of there any way we can." So about fifty of us rushed. We went under the vines. We had our banners and you could see them bobbing up and down, up and down, and we'd go under those rows on our knees and roll over. When the scabs saw us coming they took off. All of them went and they got on the bus. The guards had guns that they would shoot, and something black like smoke or teargas would come out. That scared us, but we still kept on. After we saw all those workers get back on the busses, we went back. Instead of running this time, we rolled over and over all the way out. The vines are about four feet tall, and they have wire where you string up the vines. So you can't walk or run across one of

these fences. You have to keep going under these wires. When I got out there on the road they were getting these big, hard dirty clods and throwing them at us. And then the pickets started doing the same thing. When the first police car came, somebody broke the windshield. We don't know if it was the scabs or someone on the picket lines, but the picketers were blamed.

When we women ran into the fields we knew we'd be arrested if they caught us. But we went in and we told the scabs, "If you're not coming out we're gonna pull you out!"

In Kern County we were sprayed with pesticides. They would come out there with their sprayers and spray us on the picket lines. They have these big tanks that are pulled by a tractor with hoses attached and they spray the trees with this. They are strong like a water hose, but wider. When we were picketing they came out there to spray the pickets. They had goons with these big police dogs on leashes.

One of the things the growers did to break our strikes was to bring in "illegal aliens." I would get a list of names of the scabs and give them to the border patrol. At that time, you see, we were pitted against each other, us and the people from Mexico, so it was either us or them. When I went to the border patrol office I'd go in and say, "Can I come in?" They'd say, "You can't come in. This is a very small office." They kept telling us they were short of men. But every time I went there, there were all of them with their feet up on the desks in their air-conditioned office. They told me they were under orders not to interfere with labor disputes. So I called Bernie Sisk's office⁷ and talked to them about it. Then I came home and called a lot of students who'd been helping us, and other people, and the next morning there we were at the border patrol. I said, "We're paying our tax money, but not for you to sit



here while the illegal aliens are being used to break our strike."

While we were in Parlier, I was put in charge of the hiring hall. My house was right next to the office, and I had an extension to the office phone in my house. I could do the housework and take care of the children, but I could take care of the office, too. Before the contract, the hiring hall was just a union office where people came to learn about the union. When they got the first contracts we began dispatching people out to work. The hiring hall was also a place where people could meet and talk. A lot of people were migrants who needed to get to know each other. The people who were there all the time were against the migrants. I said, "We have to get these people together. We can't be divided." I was at the hall all day. People would drop by and I'd introduce them.

The second year we had a contract I started working for Christian Brothers. The men were doing the pruning on the grape vines. After they did the pruning the women's crew would come and tie the vines. (That was something we got changed; we made them give pruning jobs to women.) I was made a steward on the women's crew . . . the first time we were paid when I started working, during the break the supervisor would come out there with our checks. It was our fifteen minute break, which the contract gave us the right to. We had to walk to the other end of the row; it took us about five minutes to get there, the rest of the fifteen to get our checks, and walk back, and we'd start working. This happened twice. The third time I said, "We're not going to go after our check this time. They always come during our break and we don't get to rest." So when we saw the pickup coming with the men who had the checks I said, "Nobody move. You just sit here." I walked over to the pickup. I said to the man inside, "Mr. Rager, these women refuse to come out here on their break time. It's their time to rest. So we're asking you, if you must come during our rest period, you take the checks to these ladies." From that day on, every payday he would come to us. That was the sort of thing you had to do to enforce the contract.

I became involved in many of the activities in the community — school board meetings, city council meetings, everything that I could get into. For example I went to fighting for bilingual education at Parlier, went to a lot of meetings about it and spoke about it. Parlier is over 85% Chicano, yet during that time there were no Chicanos on the school board, on the police force, nowhere. Now it's changed; we fought to get a Chicano mayor and officials. But then I was asking people, "Why are we always asked to go to the public school

for our meetings? Why can't they come over to our side of town in Parlier?" So we began having meetings in *la colonia*⁸ at the Headstart Center, and there we pushed for bilingual education.

Fresno County didn't give good stamps to the people — only surplus food. There were no vegetables, no meat, just staples like whole powdered milk, cheese, butter. At the migrant camp in Parlier the people were there a month and a half before work started, and since they'd borrowed money to get to California they didn't have any food. I'd drive them into Fresno to the welfare department and translate for them and they'd get food, but half of it they didn't eat. We heard about other counties where they had food stamps to go to the store and buy meat and milk and fresh vegetables for the children. So we began talking about getting that in Fresno. Finally we had Senate hearings at the Convention Center in Fresno. There were hundreds of people listening. I started in Spanish, and the Senators were looking at each other, you know, saying, "What's going on?" So then I said, "Now, for the benefit of those who can't speak Spanish, I'll translate. If there is money enough to fight a war in Vietnam, and if there is money enough for Governor Reagan's wife to buy a \$3000 dress for the Inauguration Ball, there should be money enough to feed these people. The nutrition experts say surplus food is full of vitamins. I've taken a look at that food, this corn meal, and I've seen them come up and down, but you know, we don't call them vitamins, we call them weevils!" Everybody began laughing and whistling and shouting. In the end, we finally got food stamps.

We really are the farmers. I know how to plant the grapes. After they grow I know how to prune them. After I prune them I

know how to pick them. Millionaires get someone like me doing the work, they don't know what they got.

—Arnold de la Cruz

Organizing for the Farmworkers, Jessie came to see that improving working conditions and raising wages wasn't enough. So she began talking with farmworkers about a common dream — buying their own land. They formed a committee and went to Jessie's old boss, Russell Giffen, who was selling his land on the West side of the valley — rumor had it, to avoid stiff inheritance taxes for his family. Giffen asked for a half-million dollars, and most of the families dropped out of the land struggle, discouraged. But a sympathizer, Roger McAfee, leased Jessie and her friends six acres of land near Fresno. The cherry tomato crop they planted brought the families \$64,000 — enough to buy and improve land several miles

away. Four families, the de la Cruzes and three others, bought forty acres and named the land the Rancho El Bracero. For four years they have worked the land cooperatively, using no pesticides, growing their crops organically, with only a pump and tractors for equipment.

Seasonal harvests at El Bracero have been remarkably successful. The families' ten-acre plots of land have continued reaping enormous harvests that have grossed as much as the first harvest on the little six-acre plot of ground. Which shows, contend Jessie and the other farmworker families, that small-family farming is not only efficient: it can produce as much as agribusiness does, and with less waste. Corporate, county-sized farms are paid by the government to waste food: to keep food prices high they plow under crops.

The big problem in the San Joaquin Valley is water. Without the elaborate irrigation system that makes it some of the richest farmland in

Photo by Paul Fusco



the world, the Valley would be desert. An act passed in 1902 has put the government in charge of paying for irrigation on the rich, west side of the San Joaquin. The act stipulates that individuals and companies can't own more than 160 acres of that land. But for the past 75 years, growers like Giffen and giant corporations like Southern Pacific Railroad and Standard Oil of California have evaded the law.

In 1974 Jessie helped found National Land for People, an organization that has been fighting to get the 1902 law enforced, and so, break up the corporate lands. The past four years of Jessie's life have been devoted to work on the co-op and to the battle for land ownership.

JESSIE DE LA CRUZ lives in Fresno, California where she works cooperatively on the Rancho El Bracero with her husband and three other families. She travels nationally, speaking about land redistribution and ownership for farmworkers and others. She is on the boards of National Land for People and California Commission on the Status of Women.

ELLEN CANTAROW is a Cambridge-based journalist who writes for The Real Paper and other publications.

NOTES

1. Jessie calls her uncles "brothers." After the age of ten she was raised by her grandmother, and some of her mother's brothers weren't much older than she was.

2. Northeast of Los Angeles near the bottom of the San Joaquin Valley. It was in Delano that the great grape strike called by Cesar Chavez' National Farmworkers' Association, together with Larry Itliong's United Farmworkers' Organizing Committee, began in 1965.

3. Russell Giffen was a cotton baron in the San Joaquin Valley. Jessie and her family, before and after she married, worked for Giffen. Years later she would go with several other farmworker families to Giffen and try to get him to sell them a plot of land.

4. A town Southeast of Fresno, Jessie's home base from 1956 to 1969.

5. On every farm the union creates a ranch committee elected by the workers. The committee is the grass-roots base of the union. If you have an on-the-job complaint, you bring it to the ranch committee, which then discusses the complaint with the supervisor. Before the ranch committee was introduced by the union, individual workers had to get up nerve to complain about abuses on their own — and often they were fired on the spot when they dared speak up. The ranch committee put the union behind them and gave them a democratically elected group for support.

6. White River Farms was a new name given to properties formerly owned by Schenley Industries, properties Schenley sold to Buttes Gas and Oil, an expanding conglomerate in agribusiness. The union contract with Schenley was its first victory: the contract, signed in 1966 and renegotiated in 1969, was due to expire in June, 1972. The Schenley Ranch — which became White River Farms — had become a model of the UFWA's democratic unionism. Through the ranch committee, workers enforced the contract's safety provisions, especially those regarding the use of pesticides. The workers also supervised the union hiring hall system in stellar fashion.

But while the struggle at White River Farms was important, it simply illustrates one aspect of union activities in all the UFW's strikes — the picket line militancy in the fields; the spirit of the women; the violence visited on the picketers by the growers.

7. Sisk was a Democratic congressman with a reputation of sympathy for farmworkers and small farmers. Later, when Jessie and National Land for People began struggling to get land for farmworkers, Sisk turned out far more sympathetic to the big growers.

8. The Chicano side of town.

LOT'S WIFE

While Lot, the conscience of a nation,
struggles with the lord,
she struggles with the housework.
The City of Sin is where
she raises the children.
Ba'al or Adonai —
Whoever is God —
the bread must still be made
and the doorsill swept.

The Lord may kill the children tomorrow,
but today they must be bathed and fed.
Well and good to condemn your neighbors' religion;
but weren't they there
when the baby was born,
and when the well collapsed?
While her husband communes with God
she tucks the children into bed.
In the morning, when he tells her of judgement,
she puts down the lamp she is cleaning
and calmly begins to pack.
In between bundling up the children
and deciding what will go,
she runs for a moment
to say goodbye to the herd,
gently patting each soft head
with tears in her eyes for the animals that will not understand.
She smiles blindly to the woman
who held her hand at childbed.
It is easy for eyes that have always turned to heaven
not to look back;
those that have been — by necessity — drawn to earth
cannot forget that life is lived from day to day.
Good, to a God, and good in human terms
are two different things.
On the breast of the hill, she chooses to be human,
and turns, in farewell —
and never regrets
the sacrifice.

Kristine Batey



IT DOESN'T HURT
TO BE SAFE

CRANE
AND GRANT

STEEL
WORLD

A RANK & FILE STRIKE AT GE

Frank Kashner

In the summer of 1975 I became actively involved in a rank-and-file strike at General Electric's River Works plant in Lynn, Massachusetts. I participated in the informal group that shared control of the strike with the unwilling leadership of the Local (International Union of Electrical Workers Local 201 — one of the largest in New England). Later I was actively involved with a smaller group that brought the local president up on charges of depriving the rank and file of their legal rights.

The strike, which attracted a lot of attention in the regional press, was typical of many recent struggles in which the rank and file has had to go to the wall on safety and speed up issues, while fighting its own union leadership at the same time. The way the strike developed taught me a lot about the sources of militancy among the workers at GE. The conduct of the trial also taught me a good deal about how the rank and file can make use of legal tactics to fight a sell out leadership. The main reason for telling the story is to show that it is possible to fight both a giant corporation and an uncooperative union leadership. I also want to describe our group of strike activists, to explain how the group formed and what tactics it used.

BEING A COMMUNIST AT GE

I came to Boston in 1967 from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. At the time I was a liberal. The Vietnam war was raging. I had been active in a draft resistance union and I opposed the war. When I met the Progressive Labor Party (PL) they explained to me the

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Opposite: Lynn, Massachusetts G.E. Plant. Photo by Jim Green

interests of big business in the war. Through them I became active in the SDS, the Cambridge Peace and Freedom Party and in their rent control campaign. The more I learned about the relationships of the landlords and the banks in the city of Cambridge, the more I saw society as a whole. Those who led the PLP were saying that the working class could quickly make large-scale changes in society. It was an appealing idea. I went to the Everett, Mass., GE plant and got hired there as a move-man in April, 1970.

The Everett is the highest paid GE plant in the world. It is one of the few remaining piece work plants and workers make decent pay by industry standards. I had PL's disdain of rules and regulations and pockets full of *Challenges*. It's great testimony to their tolerance that workers put up with me. I don't think any other group in society would have tolerated someone with whom they disagreed so fundamentally. They not only put up with me; many people befriended me and argued with me for what they considered to be my best interests. My job was to move parts and I got around the plant quite a bit. I quickly found out that people didn't like *Challenge*. PL assumed agreement and never explained the basic issues that people cared about. For example, though there were many stories and headlines about racism, *Challenge* never explained what racism is and why the average person should be against it. The same thing was true about the war in Vietnam and even strike issues. After a short period of time, I didn't bring *Challenge* into the plant any more.

I was laid off in 1971 and bumped over to the River Works plant in Lynn, Mass. It is one of GE's original plants and it goes back to the beginnings of the industry; it was designed to be a giant facility, like the plants in Schenectady and Louisville, Kentucky. During World War

II the Lynn Works employed some 20,000 workers, but since then it declined as GE spread out production to smaller factories in non-union areas like New Hampshire, North Carolina and Puerto Rico. The River Works has two divisions. One division, the Aircraft Engine Division (AEG) makes jet engines. And the other, the Turbine Division, makes turbines for electrical generation, and gear systems for everything from submarines to oil tankers. At the time of the strike AEG had about 3,000 union members and the Turbine Division about 3,500.

The question of minority workers became a big issue in the early 70's when GE was forced to hire more blacks, but as of 1975 minorities held no more than 4 percent of the jobs. Most were older blacks from Lynn or younger guys from Roxbury or Dorchester hired because federal contracts required it. There were even fewer women in our plant at the time of the strike; they were concentrated in hard, low-paying "women's jobs" like the "black job" where women wind black tape around rotors.

At the time of the strike the River Works had many older guys with 30 years service who started working during or after the War. They had a lot of experience, including a lot of battles with reticent union leaders. Since GE still hires mainly from the North Shore, people often know each other from high school. There is a lot of commuting from towns farther out, but many of these people grew up in and around Lynn and still have ties there. Of course many workers have relatives in the plant and some families are so extended that there is a standing joke: "If that family ever walked out, the plant would have to close down!"

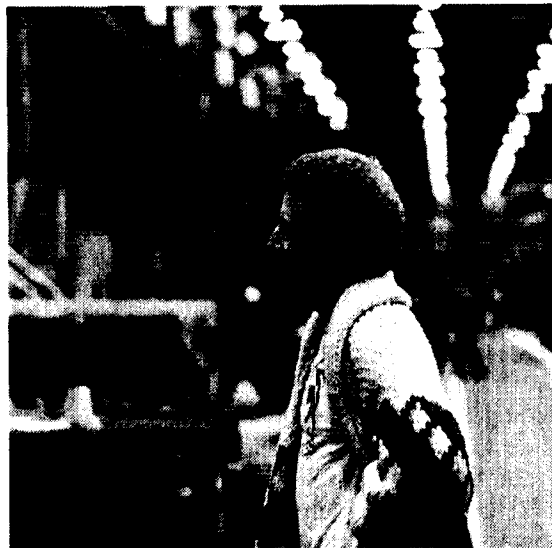
Family connections are important when it comes to getting jobs and when it comes to striking. Certain families are known as strong union people. Some of them of course go back

to the UE war-time period when the CIO was doing radical things. During the War, a foreman in Building 74 hit a worker and 5,000 people stopped working. They wouldn't go back until the Company agreed to fire the foreman.

Looking back on the UE-IUE fight, when the Communists were purged from the CIO, most of the old timers will say that the UE was a better union, even those who voted for the IUE. While these older workers seem conservative on certain political issues, they are part of a militant tradition, a rank-and-file tradition that continued after the IUE took over. In 1975 many workers were still mad at having been sold out after the long strike in 1969.

When I came to River Works I started as an oiler which again enabled me to move far and wide, and I learned a lot this way. I was still open about my political views and so I also learned a lot about the areas in which people disagreed with me and the areas in which I couldn't defend my views. I found a lot of people who were glad to see left-wing ideas out in the open. Some of these people are friends to this day. Among them are old U.E.'ers, political progressives, union reformers, etc. There were occasions in which these people enabled me to stay in the plant when I was so demoralized that I might have quit. For example, when I started handing out flyers at the Everett plant gate, no one would stop because company guards were photographing everyone. Phil, who became our life-long friend, stopped his car and in full view of the guards handed me a five dollar bill. He was saying to the company 'you will not interfere with my right to take this man's flyer and support what he believes in.'

In the River Works plant, I learned not to let PL know what I was doing. Whenever I began to work with people around any given issue, PL



Frank Kashner. Photo by Jim Green

would leap in and exaggerate or distort the situation to conform to their views. When I questioned their approach, they refused to accept any criticism. Indeed, there was no democracy at all within the organization. I realized that they were even willing to sacrifice their own stated principles to get the party into the limelight. They tried to exploit my work at GE several times with destructive effects.

By mid-1973 I had quit PL completely and at the time of the strike I was a radical but not a communist. As this article is published, I've been at GE almost nine years. Many of my ideas have been changed and I have changed other people's ideas. (We recently did a well-received flyer on nuclear power.) I hope that this story will contribute to a continuing process of political change among my fellow workers and readers around the country.

THE SAFETY STRIKE IN THE GEAR PLANT

In the summer of 1975 I had been working at GE for about five years. I worked in the gear plant at the River Works with about 600 other

people of the Turbine Division. I was in a small area at the center of the building where I was a tool grinder. I had been a steward for a while.

The cranemen and riggers were the most militant group in the gear plant. They operated mammoth cranes capable of picking up gears weighing 60 tons. The cranes rumbled across the top of the three-story bays where the machinists work. The cranes are crucial to production, because they bring steel plate in to be fabricated and then moved to the housing and gears in to be machined and assembled in one of the machine bays. Nothing moves without these cranes.

The crane operators worked with riggers who put the hooks, chains and slings on the parts so that they could be picked up. The job is hard and dangerous. If a lift isn't balanced right, a piece can fall, and people get hurt. If company property is damaged these workers' jobs are in jeopardy. Both the riggers and the crane operators get a bit better than average pay, but they are in deadend jobs. Unlike the machinists they have few ways of increasing their earnings or moving on to better jobs.

In 1973 GE introduced cranes operated by remote control radios. A worker on the floor would wear the electronic controls around his neck, like a bib. The Company decided to eliminate jobs and speed up the lifting operation by having this one worker do the work of *both* the crane operator *and* the rigger. When the Company started installing radio-operated cranes, the Union questioned their safety and resisted the loss of jobs. The early radio-operated cranes in the River Works did some scary things. They would pick up stray radio signals and run away. So you would have a 135 ton crane moving completely out of control over a bay full of workers. It was sheer luck that no one was ever killed by these runaways. There were some very serious accidents though.

From 1973 to 1975 the Union was investigating the crane problem, but in that time the new remote control machinery had been introduced throughout the gear plant. If we had struck around the issue in 1973, the demand would have been: no radio controlled cranes. But by 1975 the demand was that two people operate every radio-controlled crane to make them safe and protect jobs.

Even before this issue developed the cranemen and riggers developed a strong group sense. Many of them worked together for a fairly long time. They knew each other well; they were part of a network that extended through the various buildings. Many were friends off the job. And over the years their unity had helped them win certain things, like coverage for a person who was out sick, or more fair distribution of overtime work.

The Union had been slow to act on the crane group's grievances around the new cranes. The group had had their meetings down the union hall, and nothing had happened except that the Company was introducing more radios into the cranes. The group had a feeling they were getting screwed by both the Union and the Company.

In January 1975 the Union Executive Board accepted an offer from the Company concerning the radio controls. It involved a payoff for 16 members of the group who would get a one-step increase in their pay rates, but the offer was divisive and said nothing about safety, so the crane group circulated a petition rejecting the offer.

Other gear plant workers were also angry at the Executive Board, because their grievances had been stalled and mishandled. Grievances about pay rate, working hours, harassment, etc. all fueled the fire. Also, some people in the gear plant were active in the Union and had experience fighting to protect and extend the

rights of the membership.

The operator of the radio-controlled crane could rig a small piece by himself. But most lifts required two or more people. Without a rigger, who would help? Machinists were pressed by foremen in their bays to do the riggers' work, under threat of suspension. The union leadership told them to do the rigging work under protest while they convened a sub-committee to negotiate, but management had no interest in negotiating since they were getting the machinists to do the extra work.

This was dangerous work, especially for people with no rigging experience, but in order to get a lift to their machine and make their production, the machinists were forced to do the rigging. They were being put into a squeeze.

On the night shift of July 15, 1975, a foreman told a drill operator named Peter Terabassi to rig up a piece in order to get it out of his drill. Terabassi had injured his elbow earlier during the same job, so he refused. He was suspended. Next, two other crane operators who had at first been ordered not to help Terabassi were now ordered to do the lift. They both refused. When these two were suspended, the entire bay walked out.

Now at this point the workers were not on an illegal wildcat strike; this was very important for what followed. Under the GE-IUE contract we have the right to strike around some grievances *during the term of the contract*. If a grievance doesn't go through arbitration (and many don't under our contract), then a strike notice is served on the company until the grievance is resolved. That strike notice says that the "union is liable to go out on strike around this case at any time during the next year" if it's not resolved. Now in this case of other people being ordered to do the riggers' work, a strike notice had been served some months before. So you see the workers in bay 9

were really involved in what you might call a "legal wildcat" strike; it was a rank-and-file strike the leadership hadn't approved but really couldn't oppose.

When I came to work on the morning shift the next day, our building was in turmoil. The most militant union members in other machine bays wanted to go out in support, but others weren't sure. The day shift workers in Bay 9 did strike, because they were closely connected to the night shift guys in their work site already on strike, but others were looking for leadership.

The crane operators and riggers in other bays called a meeting and the foremen ordered them to disband. They said: We will either meet here or down the union hall. It's up to you." When the foremen again ordered them back to work, they headed for the time clocks.

I stayed in the plant to discuss the issues with the majority still in the shop to try to come up with a strategy and act on it. I had a lot of contact with people in the various bays, because I was a steward at large and could handle grievances throughout the gear plant. I walked around and talked to workers having small group meetings. The news of the bay 9 walkout was spreading fast so people would gather around me as I walked through the bays. There was a lot of excitement with small group meetings taking place all over. Nobody was working. Since the cranemen and riggers had all walked out, the foremen went to run the cranes. Everybody was talking about what they would do if they were asked to accept a lift from a foreman. (It is a contract violation for foremen to do union work.)

The gear hobbers in Bay 10 were the first to refuse lifts. They were one of the oldest groups of workers, and were generally considered one of the most conservative. They were also highly skilled workers who cut gears to watchmaker dimensions. Like the crane group, they had

worked together for a long time. The first gear hobber to refuse a lift was one of the most conservative members of a very conservative group.

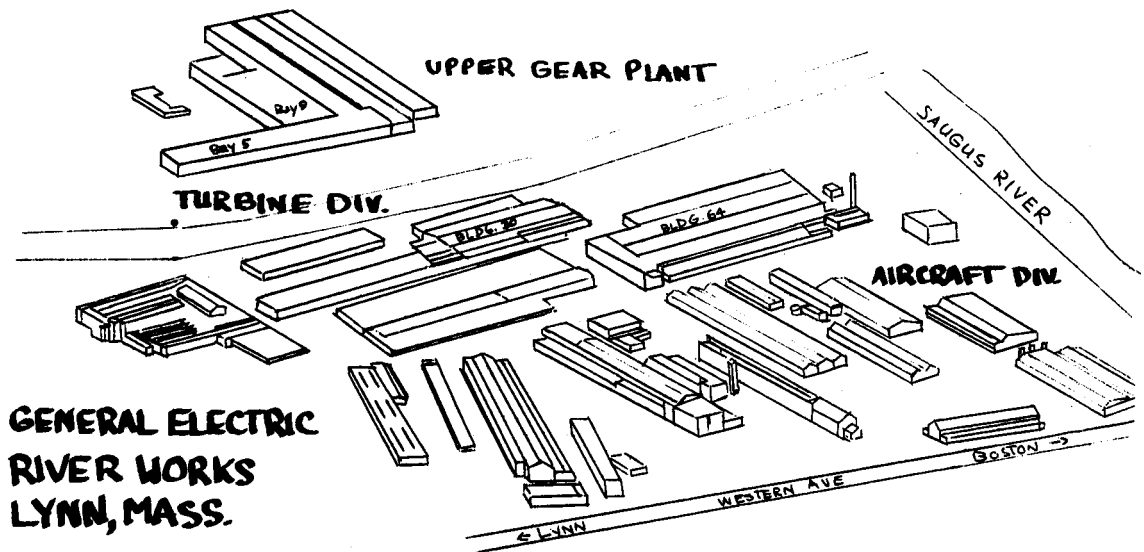
While all this was going on, the crane men and riggers were meeting down the union hall, demanding that the leadership pull the whole gear plant. This meeting got larger and noisier as more people joined the strike. Eventually the leadership, including Local 201 President Bertram Farnham, did come into the plant to announce the strike. I walked around with them from bay to bay. Most people were just waiting for the officers to appear and were glad to leave.

The leaders faced a problem when they came to Bay 5 which is a fabrication area separate from the rest of the gear plant. The cranes there were not radio operated, and the type of work done there is different from that done in the rest of the gear plant. So when the union leadership announced the strike in Bay 5, they were met by jeering; many of the workers there

did not want to be drawn into the problems of the upper gear plant. Some people did go on strike, but the most outspoken people in Bay 5 opposed it. Some of them were "scabby" individuals, but they were also reacting to the fact that they had been sold out many times by the union leadership. Instead of trying to reason with people in Bay 5 the leadership withdrew and wrote the bay off as anti-union. So by July 16, the entire upper gear plant was on strike (that is, about 500 workers) while Bay 5 and other Turbine buildings remained at work, along with the whole Aircraft Division.

AN ACTIVE STRIKE GROUP FORMS

Local President Bert Farnham and the leadership had called the strike reluctantly. At the time Farnham was the undisputed ruler of Local 201. He was also vice-president of the state AFL-CIO, president of the North Shore Labor Council, an officer of the United Way and of OSHA, a friend of Governor Michael Dukakis, and a contender for the District 2



presidency of IUE. Many of us who had contended with the Farnham leadership before knew that we would have to take an active part in the strike if we were to get anywhere versus the Company.

I had worked in the past with two other stewards named Charlie and Peter in writing leaflets about grievances and in calling for more rank-and-file participation in union affairs. Charlie was an experienced steward and had a reputation of persisting until he got a grievance resolved. He worked in Bay 9 where the strike started and was very familiar with the crane groups' issue. Charlie and I differed mainly on how much to work through the union leadership. He was more willing to work through channels than I was. Peter was tied to the faction that preceded Farnham in office, a group headed by former Local 201 business agent Peter diCicco who is now president of District 2. Peter was also a steward like Charlie and I but I think he was being coached by the District who saw Farnham as a threat to diCicco's presidency. Peter was quite conservative in discussions of women and minorities but he was strongly in agreement with the issues of the strike.

Although we were all stewards, other militant workers who were not stewards often started the actions in this struggle. Some of the activists were ex-stewards who quit out of frustration. Others were natural group leaders, especially older workers, who had never been stewards.

When we gathered down at the union hall on the first day of the strike the three of us and our friends gathered in front of the podium ready to deal with the union leaders if they got out of line. I guess the activist group started forming here among a variety of people who knew this would be a rank and file strike that would involve a hard struggle with the leadership.

At that meeting the leadership said, "the

whole upper gear plant is on strike, so go home and we'll take care of it." Most people did go home, but a group of 20 or 30 of us stayed. We decided to set up an informational picket at the gates, because, except for the upper gear plant, the rest of the River Works was still operating. We also wanted to picket the gear plant gate and talk to the people in Bay 5 about supporting us.

It was a mixed bag who went down to the gates. I was the only left winger. There was a range of other people from real conservatives to populists like Sully who was an Irish nationalist, a steward in Bay 5 and big socializer who helped build camaraderie in the group. We were very high spirited. We had started down at the union hall as just a group of concerned individuals aware of the need to become active. At the gates, we became more organized. The political differences among us were enormous, but with people working together and sharing beer, we were able to joke about our differences and get serious about our unity.

The next day, July 17th, we returned to the gates to maintain the picketing because many people still didn't know what was going on. That was pay day and about noon people who were on strike started gathering to look for their pay checks even though the union leaders said the company would not pay those on strike. The crowd got very large, and suddenly a couple of people decided to lead a charge into the plant to get the checks. One was black and the other white, but neither was involved in our group. They just wanted to get their pay, and were very sure about what to do. People were up for action and so everyone followed. We walked through and told them: "We don't trust the leadership either, but it's the membership that's on strike. So join us." They didn't join us, but we made an impact.

Once we got into the plant, we decided to

march as a group from one manager's office to another and stick together until everyone was paid. It was a very hot day and we all jammed into the manager's air conditioned office. We all got paid that day, agreeing to stick around until we all got what was coming to us. It was an immediate and obvious victory and it generated a great spirit, a very independent spirit too, since there wasn't a single union officer present.

The next day, July 18th, Friday, was the day before the entire works was to shut down for vacation. The union leadership said that this was not a good time to conduct a strike. They wanted to go on vacation. The company wanted to go on vacation. There was a meeting of 200 strikers. The union executive board recommended that we return to work. They wanted us to terminate the strike so they could have a sub-committee after the vacation ended. We voted 199-1 — to not go along with the executive board's recommendation.

That same day the company turned around and laid off 482 people in the Turbine Division, saying that the upper gear plant strike was affecting production. We later found out that the company hoped these workers would vote against the strike and send us back to work.

At that point the vacation shut down started and most of the union and company officials went off on vacation, but we kept meeting down the union hall or at one of the local clubs. So while the leaders were on vacation — during a strike — we discussed what it would take to win the strike. The group that had gone to picket the gates had now grown a bit. We had exchanged phone numbers, and set up meetings. Leadership was assumed by those who were willing to take responsibility. It was a lot of hard work; and it was hard on family life. The people who stayed around during those weeks were sacrificing their vacation.

The press, the local *Lynn Item* was doing a terrible job on us. They were getting stories from the then-assistant business agent, Peter Teel, and from Farnham, stories that were basically threats to the strikers. They said that the strike involved terrible timing; that the strikers ignored the recommendation of their executive board; that it looked like the strike would last for weeks; that the insurance benefits of the strikers were now in question; and that the vacation pay of the strikers was now in question. Even though we knew that the leadership was against the strike, we felt that we could force them to publicly support us. They were on record as being for us. Our case was legal. We confronted the union leadership — especially Peter Teel — over the terrible press we were getting. He was quick to tell us how anti-union the *Lynn Item* was and how you can always count on them to give the company's side. Yet they were running direct quotes from him.

On the 25th of July we decided to go to the *Item*. Of the about 20 people who went down, most had lived in this area for years and represented *Item* subscribers in Lynn, Peabody, Danvers, Revere, etc. We represented a significant number of people to the *Lynn Item*. The editor told us that they were simply printing what they were getting from the union leadership. He offered to sit us down with one of his reporters and take a story from us on the spot, which he did. The resulting front page story the very next day was some of the best publicity we got during the strike. We did not attack the union leadership in that article, but they attacked us for doing it; they knew we were taking leadership of the strike: we were being the union.

It had been a week and a half since the strike began and there was still no official communication from the leadership to the strikers. Our next move was to collect some money to

take out an ad in the *Item* calling for an unofficial meeting at the Union hall. About 150 people came to discuss the strike, but we weren't well organized and little was accomplished.

We continued our informational picketing at the gates, and, two weeks into the strike we got our first break: we received a tip from a member of management who was sympathetic to our cause. He had just been at a meeting with one of the company officials, Sid Cushing, who told the meeting about a strike settlement offer he'd made to the union leaders. Cushing also bragged that he had laid off almost 500 people who would vote for the phoney offer just to get back to work. The union leadership would not tell us what was in the offer. They said we would find out at a meeting on August 4 like everyone else... as if it would be an act of democracy not to tell us. They wanted to prevent us from formulating our arguments. We didn't tell them we already knew about the offer. The offer was a very tricky document that left us exactly where we were. The most interesting part said the machine operator would have to help rig in lifts pertaining to his machine. Of course, this is what we were fighting against!

We knew pretty much what to expect at the mass meeting called by the union for August 4 at Lynn City Hall. We organized speakers and rehearsed what they would say on all topics. We were going to try to convince those at the meeting that our issue was just, that they should support us. The day of the City Hall meeting came around. The executive board came forward with this company offer and a unanimous recommendation — to accept it. The business agent presented the offer. There were about four hundred people in the City Hall. The business agent had a very slow and tortured manner which made it hard to follow

him. As he read the offer, he left out the worst part. Our speakers lined up at the microphone and exposed the offer. Other people from the audience spoke and supported us. People in the meeting got madder as the attempt to sell us out became obvious. We appealed to those people who were laid off because of our strike: If they allowed the company to use them as pawns against us, the company would continue that tactic whenever the opportunity arose. In any strike, the company could lay some people off to vote the strikers back to work. Our appeal worked. The vote at City Hall was 208 to 95 to reject the executive board recommendation and the company offer. This was better than a 2 to 1 vote and it was a tremendous boost to us. The strike was on. We found a certain strength among ourselves in our ability to meet, discuss, work out a strategy, make plans, and proceed with them.

GROUP DYNAMICS

After the vacation ended the group became more politicized because Al Hamilton joined it. He was the only person in the group who had been a union officer and he was already recognized as the leader of the anti-Farnham faction. It was pretty clear to us that Hamilton wanted to be the next union president. He saw the strike as a vehicle to discredit Farnham and he hoped to make the group his future campaign organization. Hamilton had a lot of influence. He and his close followers had ties to Peter diCicco and the District office. Hamilton favored a more secretive approach for the group — working behind the scenes, etc. Others favored a mass approach of going to the rank and file with the issues. So we became adversaries on many issues. If you divided our group politically the most interesting division would not be radical-conservative, but between those who had ties to the district and opportunist

political motives and those who didn't.

Hamilton opposed my role in the group. He said I should keep a "low profile" so we wouldn't get red-baited. I was known as a radical, but also as a gear plant steward who could deal with the issues on their own merits. When I proposed to the group the idea of putting an article in a left newspaper called *Spark*, we discussed the issue in terms of whether or not it would help the strike. The group decided that it was a good idea to spread the story of the strike. It also decided that anything published by anyone concerning the strike had to be approved by the group as a whole. So I submitted anything I wrote, including *Spark* articles, to the group before they were published, and they were approved.

I don't think a leftist has to abandon socialist politics to function in a group of non-leftists. Workers are capable of recognizing good ideas when they hear them. And if we can put forth ideas that help people understand their own collective strength, ideas that give them a stronger sense of class, then we are talking about ideas consistent with socialism. But it is hard to get support for progressive ideas about women, minorities, nuclear power, etc. that don't emerge directly from the situation.

The left people in the group had just as good a chance of winning people over as Hamilton did, even though he was a union influential with lots of contacts, and potential patronage.

For example, Charlie, a Vietnam vet, had had dreams of strangling PLers with his bare hands when he had first been exposed to PL, but as the strike progressed we voted together in the group more often than not. Charlie was active in the group because he had learned about the union leadership after seeing them murder case after case as he tried to fight through the grievance procedure. In the group he took the mass approach I advocated instead of taking

Hamilton's more secretive approach. Ronnie was another steward who started out more sympathetic to the union leadership than many of us were. But like Peter he came to back our mass approach.

I can't begin to do justice in describing the qualities of group members, but here are a few sketches. Danny was a rigger and the great socializer in the group. He could turn any situation into a party and usually did. He had been involved in the crane group's struggle for a long time. And there was Paul who was a rigger and crane operator, but not a steward. He was working in Bay 5 where the radios had not yet been installed. But he still saw the strike as his issue, and worked hard to spread it to the anti-strike workers in his Bay. Al was a rigger in Building 64 who helped bring the strike to that key area. In short the crane group was well represented in our group as were the machinists in Bay 9 who had originally supported them.

Although we were a young group, there were some older guys, reflecting the age composition and experience of the plant. Besides Hamilton, who was no spring chicken, there was Hutch who is from New Hampshire and is very conservative. He is a member of the National Rifle Association and favors nuclear power, so we disagreed about a lot of things. But we found it very easy to work together during the strike; he was very honest and straightforward. He was more trustworthy than some of the local opportunists who sought union office. Bill was another older guy in the group. He had started with a procompany view. He had just received the Company's highest awards for community service, and he thought that if he could get the issue to management, he could get it resolved. But as doors were slammed in his face, he became more active in the group.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

The 2 to 1 vote against the Union's offer at the Lynn City Hall showed that we were capable of winning support, so the group gained confidence. The information to the plant had been terrible. We asked the union leadership to write flyers, and they stalled, so we got together and wrote our own.

We also decided that if the Union was going to meet with the Company again, we wanted our people there. So when we heard that the Union officials were going down to meet with the company, we called Labor Relations and demanded that our witnesses be present. They said there would be no need for witnesses that day because they were just setting ground rules, etc. but Charley told them that if we didn't have some witnesses present, all 30 of us would show up. They then agreed to let four witnesses attend. We picked people we thought would stick to their guns and we didn't just send them on their merry way. We talked with them continually and kept track of what was going on, what was being said, what the offers were, what the company position was, what the union position was. Until the very last minute, when they kicked our people out, our group maintained witnesses at the negotiations because we knew that otherwise the union officials would agree to things unacceptable to us.

On Saturday night, August 9, Paul organized a party at his house. The strike had generated a lot of enthusiasm. Most of the women there had never met each other. They had been isolated and now they had a chance to meet other people who were going through the same thing. The strike meant trouble for the families of course, but the women supported the strike and when they started talking, they decided to do something. They were especially angry at GE's policy of appealing to wives through the mail to turn them against the strike.

Since the strikers' picketing was limited by the fact that the Aircraft Division was still working, the women decided to have a demonstration and mass picket. They organized very quickly and effectively raising money for ads announcing a demonstration around the safety issue. Then they made up a list of shop stewards so that they could contact their wives. One woman became a "media seeker" who traveled by bus all over the Boston area to get TV and radio coverage.

They organized a very good demonstration at 6 a.m. one morning on Western Avenue at GE's main gate where they leafletted the Boston bound traffic. An off-duty nurse stood between the lines of traffic in full uniform and got many cars to slow down so that they could be leafletted. They hung a huge banner over the street between the light poles; it said "rigging this high kills" and it effectively dramatized the safety issue of the radio controlled cranes. They brought out more than 100 pickets that day and got good media coverage. Up to that point our group had been all male; it made a big difference to us to have women involved, because the strike had become a family issue.

On August 10 the strike spread. We were continually on the phones into the plant. The cranemen and riggers in Building 64 came out. The Executive Board met the next day and was asked to pull the rest of Building 64, so that they weren't in a half and half situation, but the board voted to do nothing. The next day, Bay 5 cranemen and riggers came out, paralyzing the Bay. Some from both Bay 5 and Building 64 became stalwarts in our group. On the 13th crane crews in two other buildings came out in support of us. This was a tremendous boost to our morale and our strike, because now the crane crews had spread the strike to the largest Turbine buildings and no production could





move.

Our group decided to have a demonstration. Since the new union hall was in a prominent position near the most widely-traveled gate to the River Works, we marched there with the banner that said, "Rigging this high kills." We marched from the old union hall to the new union hall, up onto the roof and hung the banners. A lot of people who were still working at this time saw the gathering, saw the banner. We then went to the gate and encouraged more people from Turbine to join us.

While we were at the gate, a company ambulance came through, and Charlie looked in the back window and saw heart massage being given to someone lying down on the table. Later, we found out it was a man named Theodore Phillips. The Company had sent him into a pit with a dangerous solvent. This was normally a job done by two higher-rated people, one stayed out of the pit, and they relieved each other and watched over each other. But the company sent Phillips into the pit by himself. He died as a result of being asphyxiated. This became an issue in the strike, insofar as it illustrated what the Company would do without a Union in the shop. They had absolutely no care for the safety of the workforce.

THE TURBINE DIVISION CLOSES DOWN

On August 14 the executive board had an emergency meeting and voted to do what we had demanded: call a meeting of stewards from all of Local 201 to consider the strike issue. Some were from other plants, West Lynn, Everett, Wilmington, but all of the stewards were behind us. They asked what we wanted them to do. We asked them to pull the rest of the Turbine Division, but not Aircraft. We needed time to leaflet AEG and get support for our strike over there. The stewards supported

us with a unanimous vote. The entire Turbine Division was out — 4,000 people, everyone whose work was connected to the crane group.

The Turbine strike was strong. We had dozens of people anxious to help with the day-to-day strike work. People were in high spirits. We put out flyers to the Aircraft Division, got some good press coverage, and ran daily information meetings at the union hall. There was no back-to-work movement.

This was too much for GE. That Sunday night Executive board member Richie Gallo, Farnham's good friend, pulled part of the Aircraft Division out on strike. He claimed that "scab" work was being done. We saw it as the same move Sid Cushing had tried earlier — pull out enough people in Aircraft to vote the gear plant back to work.

When the Executive board announced a plant-wide strike vote (i.e. of both divisions), we demanded a membership meeting to discuss the vote. This was our constitutional right, but the leadership denied it to us. It was the first time in the history of the local that a strike vote was called without a prior meeting, and this later proved to be Farnham's undoing. It was clear to us that the Leadership didn't want a meeting because of our previous success in convincing people to support us.

The Company and the Union were playing the same game. A GE spokesman said that the union leadership was being responsible and cooperative but that "dissidents" had seized control of the strike and had pulled Aircraft for their own interests. Farnham was quoted as saying that he had tried to contain the strike but that it was escalating.

At this point we were in a crunch. There were 7,000 people out on strike, many of them angry and confused. We were unable to reach most of the new strikers from Aircraft in the time before the vote took place. We continued to

demand an open meeting to discuss the issues to the new strikers, but we didn't get it, and the vote went against us — 2,800 to 1,661. After a period of great confusion the Company and the union met at the Holiday Inn. Our witnesses felt that an agreement had already been reached because everything was done so fast. They ordered our witnesses from the room, reached an agreement, and then had a party. The Company bought the dinners and the local officers bought the drinks.

After the Executive Board ordered everybody back to work, hundreds of us met down the union hall and there was some sentiment for continuing the strike anyway. But at this point it would have been an illegal strike and we would have been threatened with disciplinary action. There was a heart-breaking scene. Some people were crying openly. People were furious. There was some violence. But we decided that there was no way to maintain the strike, and the thing to do was to return to work and try to maintain the struggle as best we could from within the shop. Wednesday we returned to work.

Everything was supposedly back to normal, but the atmosphere in the gear plant was incredible. Rather than a building full of workers who were beaten, we had a building full of workers who were as militant as I have ever seen. For the next weeks, they were waiting for management to sneeze so they could walk out on strike again. Most people felt that they had been betrayed and not defeated. Management sensed this and in those following weeks, we won major concessions on questions of safety. As far as the physical plant goes, any staging, apparatus, ladders, railings, staircases, anything we asked for in those coming weeks, we got, perhaps things that saved people's lives. The company walked on egg shells. Those of us who were active got quite a sense of our own

strength even in this situation, even having been sold out, and losing on the jobs issue. We were able to get immediate inspection of rigging equipment; we were able to get new hooks, and these are very large hooks for the main hoists and the secondary hoists in Bay 5. We were able to get systematic inspections, checking for cracks in the hooks. We were able to get new slings. A procedure was set up where these things were done regularly. Many things we had often fought for and failed to win, we won following the strike.

During this time, the group of strike activists changed, most people had only been committed to seeing the strike through. As they left others joined who were more interested in political changes. The new group was weaker and less united.

Months later our people realized that the Schenectady workers had actually won an earlier fight to keep two people on the cranes in their Turbine Division. When the radios were first introduced in Lynn, the Union sent a subcommittee to Schenectady to investigate the situation out there. The subcommittee *did not* report that at the Schenectady plant every crane still had a crane operator and rigger. Throughout the strike our Executive Board contended that we couldn't win what had already been lost at Schenectady. It was only after the strike that we learned that through their militance the Turbine Division at Schenectady had maintained two people on the cranes after several strikes on the issue.

THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF THE STRIKE

On September 5 people in our group wrote up charges against Farnham for having violated our constitutional rights by not allowing a meeting to discuss the vote on the Company's offer. The Executive Board met and found no

probable cause to try him. We then appealed this decision to the membership, another point at which the democratic rights won by our local helped the rank and file.

The membership met on October 16. It was a larger meeting than usual. Farnham organized people to come and we organized people. We put out leaflets explaining that our right to strike was at stake. If people went out on strike on an issue and then could not vote on whether or not that issue had been settled to their satisfaction, they would be reluctant ever to take on a fight because they would feel that they would always be sold out. The membership voted 54 to 21 to send Farnham to trial, to overturn the recommendation of the Executive Board. This vote should have sent Farnham right to trial, but he pulled a parliamentary maneuver to reconsider the question at the next monthly membership meeting. November 16th was the next membership meeting. This was to be a tremendous showdown. Farnham called in all his political debts. We put out leaflets again explaining the importance of the vote.

November 16th was one of the largest membership meetings in the recent history of the union. The membership again voted to send farnham to trial. People voted not just to protect their right to strike, but they were voting for revenge for having been sold out. The jury was picked at random. We took a day and a half to present our case against Farnham. Farnham stalled. He took from January all through May of 1976 to present his defense; he dragged in everybody he could to testify that he was wonderful and that we were horrible, that the strike was a conspiracy of communists to discredit him. But he vacillated and at times he told the jury the strike was important, and that he supported it. It was during this time that the jury really came to understand the strike issues and the constitution because they had these

months to think about it and to hear discussion during the trial: What'd the constitution say and mean? What was the past practice?

Although the group of strike activists no longer existed, we had mass support for our work. Farnham's defense was paid for while we worked without pay. We took up collections at the plant gates to pay for the days we lost from work. Our efforts got results. Farnham was found guilty as charged!

It would take a 2/3 vote of the membership to uphold the conviction, however, so there was further stalling. Farnham waited until June when the IUE contract with GE expired. He thought a big membership meeting to consider the contract would defuse the issue of his trial and open up the "Turbine radicals" to red-baiting. The Union even advertised to get people to the June meeting-which is unusual.

On June 27, 1976 the membership of Local 201 met; it was a large meeting. The room was packed. I had never seen most of the people before. Our strategy was to discuss the contract first, because that affected everyone, and leave the business of Farnham's trial until later. The leadership blew it. Once the discussion of the contract started, it was clear that the union didn't have an offer from GE. They also revealed that secret negotiations had taken place, despite the fact that our Local officially opposed secret negotiations.

The membership meeting turned against the officers very quickly. People were mad that they had been brought there on false pretenses. They were also mad that the leadership knew so little about what was going on between the negotiating committee and the company. The tone of the meeting was rebellious. Several motions were passed concerning the contract and how we wanted the officers to conduct it. And then the vice-president — Flash Gordon — stood up and said, "Mr. Chairman, there's



Photo by Jim Green

been this terrible charge hanging over this local for months now, and it's about time we got rid of it, and the people who've been putting it forward." And he moved the agenda to a discussion of Farnham's jury trial.

The room was full of electricity. The tension was incredible. We were worried that we would lose, but we spoke as best we could. Richie Gallo, the Aircraft Division Executive Board member got up and charged that PLP had led the strike, that these "commies" should not be allowed to run this Local. The meeting broke up. People shouted him down in almost one voice. They didn't want to hear it. They knew that he was lying. They held the officers responsible for screwing up the strike. Even those who didn't want to strike understood that the officers had done the Local great disservice in the way they had conducted the strike. They voted to support the trial committee's recommendation. Farnham was found guilty by an overwhelming margin.

As the union elections approached in 1977 Al Hamilton forced a split in what remained of our group. He knew most of us would oppose the deals he was making with the Executive Board in order to get himself elected Local president.

Four of the people from our group ran together on a slogan that we stood for the membership's rights. Hamilton campaigned for president on financial issues, and this enabled him to ignore the issues raised by the strike: union democracy. We put out flyers on the issue of democracy, on how the Local had lost so many jobs, and on how the membership had asserted its rights during and after the 1975 strike. But our flyers were lost in the glut of publicity. Hamilton and Farnham both red-baited us. Hamilton wrote: "The members are being tantilized by radicals whose prophets promise a blue-collar garden of eden provided they have exclusive rights to the apple concession." His flyer said: "Al Hamilton is a veteran of World War II and Korea, serving in the elite U.S. Paratroopers, where he learned to recognize a red." Hamilton, when faced with the opportunity to hold union office, was willing to throw to the wind any principle he ever supposedly had. Anyway, Hamilton easily defeated Farnham for the Local 201 presidency. Charlie ran for assistant business agent and did very well, winning almost 2,000 votes in a head-to-head contest with an opponent who got elected with 3,000 votes. I ran for Executive Board from the Turbine Division and came in fourth (3 get elected) in a field of nine with 573 votes, about 100 less than the second and third finishers. At the time I was demoralized, but looking back on it, I think it was an excellent vote. The Turbine Division had been devastated with layoffs after the strike, and many of our strongest supporters among the younger workers were gone. I was the only candidate opposed by both slates. Farnham ran a cartoon showing "Red" Kashner of the PLP as the puppetmaster pulling the strings of *Hamilton's campaign!* Farnham waited until the 11th hour with his red-baiting to make sure we didn't have a chance to respond. We should have anticipated

it.

We failed to deal with some other key issues in our campaign: we didn't put together a view of what the whole gear plant strike meant to show that both Hamilton and Farnham side-stepped the issues raised by the strike. One reason I wanted to write this article, was to show how the mass approach taken by the strike group was the right one, the one we should still be fighting for in the Local. At the time of the election GE workers did not realize what we accomplished in the gear plant strike. There had been a leadership betrayal but the rank and file's efforts prevented a complete sell out. The victories around safety, the increase in the members' rights — those were rank and file achievements. But it was difficult to translate the strike issues into the issues of a union election.

Some members of our group joined Hamilton's campaign, people like Peter who was elected to the Executive Board, but most group members were not active in the election. They had become active around a particular issue in the gear plant, an issue that led to a strike. They saw this through and some of them extended that commitment to overthrowing Farnham, but most did not have a permanent commitment to activism. Many of the strike activists have been upgraded or bumped to other GE buildings, but even those who stayed put are not committed to continuous activism, because the Union does not occupy a central place in their lives. They go to work and then try to forget about work and work issues at the end of the shift. If the Union addressed more issues in their lives perhaps it might be different.

The limitations of the unions are linked to the lack of a broad left movement. Most union leaders I know agree with the 'new right' on various issues like nuclear power and affirma-

tive action; they disagree of course on those issues related to unions, right to work laws, labor law reform, OSHA, etc. People of all political beliefs can unite around shop issues, as we did in 1975, but this unity does not necessarily extend to broader social issues. A left movement that reached into the shops could help a great deal in raising these broader issues that affect people's world view beyond the workplace. The labor movement needs a left view on energy, foreign policy, the environment etc. just as much as the left needs to see labor as the heart of any new society. The left should broaden the discussion of what a union could be because that's the only way people will see a union as important in their lives — that is, if they see the union as the CIO was seen in the 1930's, as an agency that could not only affect wages and working conditions, but also their environment, their children's education, and health care, and their prospects for racial justice.

FRANK KASHNER welcomes comments and correspondence about his article. People can write to him c/o Radical America.

LETTERS

To the Editors:

Jim Green's article "Holding the Line: Miners' Militancy and the Strike of 1978" (RA, vol. 12, no. 3), while seeming to narrate rank-and-file militancy, leaves much unsaid.

What of the unmentioned activity around the country, notably in and around Pittsburgh (District #5)? The District sponsored a large rally with music by Johnny Paycheck and a speech by Arnold Miller (before he blew it). A rank and file rally was aimed at U.S. Steel, a hardliner in the Operators' Association. From there we marched to Duquesne Light, a utility company which owns mines in western Pennsylvania and then on to KDKA radio (Westinghouse Broadcasting) to show our disgust at their coverage of the strike.

Two other rallies focussed on the Taft-Hartley law ("Taft can mine it, Hartley can haul it") at the Federal Building in Pittsburgh. The other demonstration and speakout was at the Pa. Public Utilities Commission hearing where many miners, consumers and other workers spoke out against strike-related rate hikes.

Initially in District 5 a Labor Committee and a Community and Clergy Committee was set up to offer broad support to the miners. Dist. 5 officers were at first hesitant to get behind this but later went along. Many local and district officials of other unions spoke at press conferences and at rallies sponsored by various organizations, Steelworkers, Electrical, Postal, Hospital, Railroad, Teachers, etc.

I think that for most leftists involved, the feeling was; Let the miners decide. RCP was an exception. But they did little concrete work. Ninety-nine percent of their time was spent attacking the union leaders. My feeling and that of most miners was a belief in the need for unity. Unity with principle was a necessity.

John Gillie
UMW Local -1197
Cokesburg, Pa.

To the Editors: We would appreciate it if you would let your readers know about The Feminist Writers' Guild. The Guild is a national service and political organization with active local chapters across the country, as well as a periodic national newsletter of great help to writers. Unity is strength! We invite your membership and inquiries. \$10/year, \$5/unemployed, \$20/institutions. The Feminist Writers' Guild, P.O. Box 9396, Berkeley, CA 94709. Thanks very much.

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FLOYD COLEMAN, MY GRANDFATHER

He was rocking

the thump of the homemade poplar rocker
shook the Tug River shack
which waded water on stilts

He was rocking

his right side dangled like a slack scarecrow
where the kettlebottom caught him
in the roof fall at the Lex mine

his voice was like the rush of raw water

down the Floyd County Kentucky hillsides
where he picked the banjo when he was young
and sang sassafrass ballads and alum blues

Night and day he screamed out wild poems
which grew inside him like tangled thickets

of bitter rooted mountain laurel

Shut up in Spencer State Asylum in 1925

they never sent the body home
said he died of natural causes

He was rocking

the thump of that rocker is still shaking
the foundations of my deep shafted heritage

And I say it is unnatural

for a man to die

from wanting so much to sing again.

Mary Joan Coleman

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