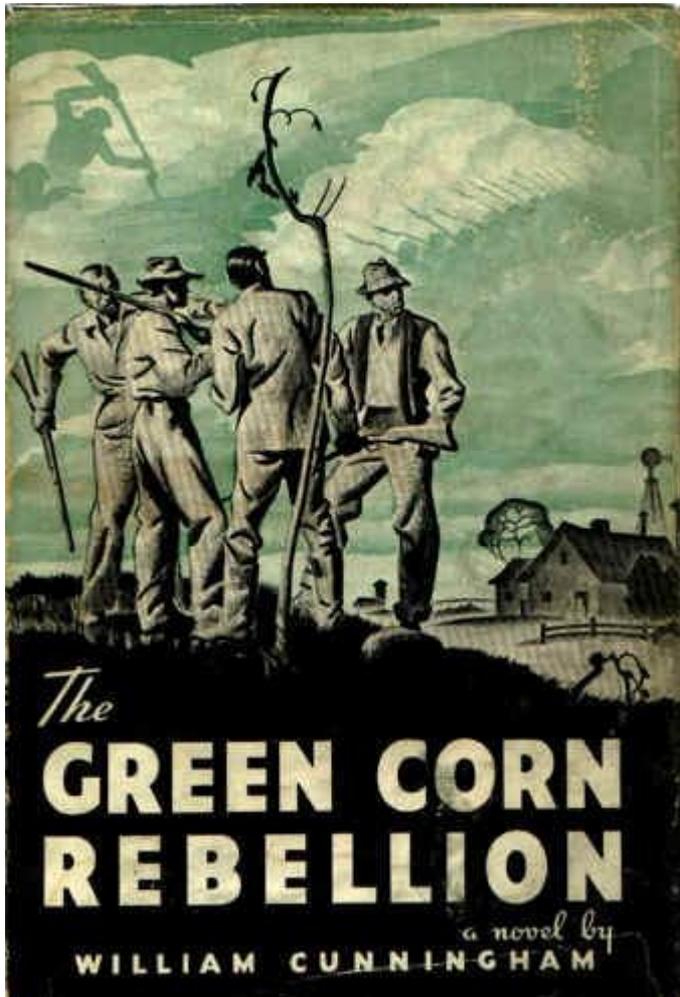


# US Green Corn rebellion, 1917



In 1917, the Working Class Union reacted to the imposition of military conscription with an ill-fated but heroic armed rebellion that stands with the [agitational campaigns](#) of working class anarchists as a revolutionary response to US entry into World War One.

It's still a matter of conjecture what convinced "Rube" Munson and the WCU there was going to be a national rebellion.

I'd like to thank the work of Oklahoma grass-roots historians and journalists for [finding and publishing period newspaper accounts](#)

Oklahoma's dispossessed rebel against poverty and a 'rich man's war' By Chris Mahin

There is a great deal of talk these days about "red states" and "blue states". Some people would like us to believe that the South, the West, and the rural areas of this country have always been conservative and anti-union. August contains the anniversary of an event which disproves all that.

On August 2, 1917, the Green Corn Rebellion began in rural Oklahoma. This little-known chapter in U.S. history was an armed rebellion led by impoverished tenant farmers and former railroad workers who had lost their jobs when the railroad strike led by Eugene V. Debs was defeated in the 1890s.

The rebellion took place just weeks after the federal government moved to institute military conscription. (The United States had declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, and joined

the British and French side in World War I, which had been raging since 1914.) While the Green Corn Rebellion included African-Americans and Native Americans, the overwhelming majority of the insurgents were white Southern rural people.

Times were hard in Oklahoma during the early 1900s. After the Civil War ended in 1865, the wealthiest capitalists – “robber barons” -- made huge fortunes. The expansion of the railroads drove many small farmers into poverty. Farming in Oklahoma was commercial. Tenant farmers were wage laborers and cotton was king. Cotton production doubled between 1909 and 1919, making Oklahoma the fourth-largest cotton producer among the states. The state’s other major industries were oil production and coal mining. These industries spawned boom towns and attracted many transient workers.

More than 60 percent of mortgaged farms were lost to foreclosure during the two years before the Green Corn Rebellion. More than half the farms were worked by tenants. The rates were even higher in the southeastern Oklahoma counties where the rebellion took place (Pottawatomie, Seminole, Hughes, and Pontotoc counties.) Only a fifth of the farms in that region were worked by their owners. Fifty percent of those were under heavy mortgages with interest rates of 20-200 percent.

Here was how the conditions in the area were described in an unpublished thesis submitted in 1932 to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Oklahoma by Charles D. Bush:

“A majority of these people were from the hill country of Arkansas, Tennessee, and other Southern states, migrating from the poorer sections of these older communities. These people were generally lacking in education. Actual illiteracy was common and even a grade-school education was very rare. A man was locally considered well-educated if he was able to write a little and read the columns of the weekly paper.”

“Their schools, for the most part, were poor and attended by the children only during the seasons when the crops were ‘laid by’ in July and for a brief period in winter. Frequently, they did not attend at all. Good schools could not be brought to these people because the districts were poor....

“Economically these people were generally very poor and chronically in debt. They were too restless to stay long in one location and consequently they accumulated little property. Practically all were tenant farmers. Farm improvements, provided by absentee owners, were of the very poorest kind. Untutored even in agriculture, they generally depended on one crop – cotton – and measured their prosperity or poverty by the price of cotton and the prevalence of the boll weevil.

“In many respects these men were little more than serfs or peons, slaves to a ‘cash crop’ demanded by their landlords.”

Far from being right-wing conservatives, the tenant farmers and rural workers of Oklahoma of that time were often very radical. Between 1906 and 1917, the Industrial Workers of the World and the Socialist Party recruited many people in Oklahoma. In 1914, the Socialist Party had more dues-paying members in Oklahoma than in any other state (57,000 members organized in 1,500 locals). That year, Oklahoma elected more than 100 Socialists to office.

The Socialists even borrowed a tactic from evangelical Christians: The Socialists held week-long encampments with dynamic speakers, both male and female. In 1915, 205 such mass encampments were held.

The Socialist Party’s percentage of the Oklahoma vote increased from 6 percent in 1907 to 16 percent in 1916. In 1914, the Socialist Party candidate for governor of Oklahoma won 21 percent of the vote.

The Green Corn Rebellion was organized by the Working Class Union (WCU), which formed the militant wing of the working-class movement in Oklahoma and Arkansas. The constitution of the WCU said that all members of the working class over the age of 18, “regardless of race, sex, color, or occupation” could join, and that “any means necessary” would be used to better the conditions of the working people. Their first demand was for the “total abolition of the crime, disease, and death-producing practice of rent, interest, and profit-taking as iniquities that have been and are now being imposed upon the working class of the world.”

Even after two of its leaders – “Rube” Munson and Homer Spence – had been indicted for obstructing the draft, the Working Class Union continued to organize in eastern Oklahoma. By midsummer 1917, it had recruited a membership of between 18,000 to 35,000 people. On August 2, the Seminole County sheriff and some deputies set out from Wewoka to investigate alleged radical activities in an area known for its WCU sympathies. The lawmen were ambushed and forced to flee by five black men who were part of the WCU. That evening, the WCU called a secret meeting on a sandbar in the Canadian River and decided to act.

Munson and Spence – who were free on bail – urged resisters to arm themselves and prepare for a fight. Opposition to the war and the draft had been on the rise since the spring. The country folk had no intention of allowing President Woodrow Wilson and his agents in the county seats to send them to die in France.

On the morning of August 3, resisters gathered on a bluff near the farm of “old man” Spears. (He had hoisted the red flag of rebellion above his barn a few days before.) During the night, raiding parties went out to cut telegraph and telephone wires and burn railroad bridges in the area. They also blew up some oil pipelines. Other rebels moved into the poor cotton country south of the Canadian River, where they called for armed action against the draft.

The main group of militants on Spears’ Bluff assembled more supporters from the surrounding tenant country. This support included a group of black sharecroppers who were members of the WCU and several Native Americans, one of whom was a relative of the leader of the last armed Native American rebellion against white rule in the Indian Nations eight years earlier.

At Spears’ Bluff, “Rube” Munson told the group that other uprisings were taking place throughout the West. He said that a large army of Wobblies would march on Washington and put an end to the war and the draft. The Working Class Union should start its own march to Washington and link up with thousands of other farmers and workers who would be up in arms.

However, the rebels never started for Washington. After hearing about the insurgents’ violent activities, a posse of 70 men mobilized immediately and headed for the rebels’ encampment. When the insurgents saw the armed posse headed toward them, they dispersed. “The papers said we were cowards, but we weren’t,” one rebel explained. “Some of the men in the posse were neighbors of ours and we couldn’t shoot ’em down in cold blood. That’s the way we felt ’bout the Germans too. ... We didn’t have no quarrel with them at all.”

For the next week, huge posses hunted down and arrested hundreds of suspected insurgents. They fought several bloody engagements with hold-outs, but within seven days, the authorities had crushed the organized rebellion. Of the 450 men arrested for participating in it, 184 were indicted and 150 were convicted. Many Socialists who had not taken part in the rebellion were seized in the wave of arrests.

Once the rebellion was crushed, the backlash was brutal. The rebellion’s leaders were given stiff sentences in Leavenworth. Some of the leaders were not released until they received a

presidential pardon in 1921. The supporters of U.S. participation in World War I and the enemies of the labor movement seized on the defeat of the Green Corn Rebellion to blame the Socialist Party for the rebellion. There were cross-burnings all over the state, as the Ku Klux Klan grew.

The attacks on civil liberties in Oklahoma coincided with a nationwide assault on free speech and the labor movement. Ultimately, this attack destroyed the Socialist Party in Oklahoma and the Industrial Workers of the World throughout the entire country.

In the years since 1917, very little has been written about the Green Corn Rebellion. The proponents of the “red state/blue state” line of argument have a hard time explaining why thousands of Oklahoma-born tenant farmers and laborers – most of them white -- supported the Socialist Party and wanted to march to Washington to stop the draft. The few articles and books about the rebellion often mocked the rebels, frequently depicting them as country bumpkins because the insurgency was defeated. But despite its failure, the Green Corn Rebellion has much to teach us today. In a time of great turmoil, when the wealth of the country was concentrated in the hands of a tiny group of robber barons, the poor of the South took a stand against economic injustice and a war they felt this country had no business being involved in.

The wisdom of the Green Corn rebels can be seen in the words on one of their posters, found along the country roads in Marshall and Bryan counties: “Now is the time to rebel against the war with Germany, boys. Get together, boys, and don’t go. Rich man’s war. Poor man’s fight. If you don’t go, J.P. Morgan Co. is lost. Speculation is the only cause of war. Rebel now.” While the world is very different today than in 1917, one thing hasn’t changed: When this country fights wars, it is still the rich who benefit and the poor who do the fighting and dying. The fact that the Green Corn rebels failed does not relieve us of the responsibility of changing that situation. It’s up to us to learn the rebellion’s lessons and finish the job of creating the better world the Oklahoma rebels (and so many others) fought so hard for.