

GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING WORK (GROW)

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## **ABSTRACT**

Grassroots Organizing Work (GROW)  
(Under the Direction of William Sturkey)

This paper examines an interracial labor organizing project in the Southern pulpwood processing industry. The project was organized by two white former members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in response to the organization's directive that white activists conduct antiracist organizing in white communities. It was ultimately funded by the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). GROW's strategy was to convince poor white Southerners of their common interests with black Southerners through labor organizing and, in turn, to transform their racial attitudes. Due to the successes of the classical civil rights movement, including the Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts, as well as the mobilization of white antiracist activists, the project succeeded in building interracial coalitions and winning modest gains for pulpwood haulers. This paper joins existing 1970s labor and New Left historiography while also interrogating the historiography of civil rights unionism and interracial coalition building in the Deep South.

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## INTRODUCTION

On a late September evening in 1971, over one hundred black and white Mississippians packed the Jones County courthouse in Laurel, Mississippi. This group, including alleged former Klansmen, came to hear the state's former field secretary for the NAACP, Charles Evers. Evers was running as an independent in the governor's race in November, and this audience was a potential bloc of voters.<sup>1</sup> Evenly divided among white and black, most in the audience belonged to a Mississippi contingent of the Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association (GPA), a four-year-old interracial organization of pulpwood cutters in the Deep South. "Our white brothers and black brothers realize that we've all got to run together," Evers solemnly stated, "or we're all going to sink together." The whole courtroom stood to applaud.<sup>2</sup>

The NAACP earned the GPA's enthusiastic support once it began to offer monetary aid to the Association, which had been on strike since the beginning of September.<sup>3</sup> After the strike

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Evers rose to fame in the South after the murder of his brother, Medgar Evers, who was field secretary for the Mississippi NAACP. As Emilye Crosby has argued, Charles Evers exploited his brother's civil rights notoriety to launch a career in Southern politics and consistently "used local movements as a platform for consolidating his personal power and influence." Evers' run for Mississippi governor in 1971 is certainly an extension of this opportunistic maneuvering. This does not, however, detract from the enthusiasm the white woodcutters had for his campaign and his calls for interracial unity. Emilye Crosby, "'God's Appointed Savior': Charles Evers's Use of Local Movements for National Stature," in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodward, and Charles M. Payne, 165-192 (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 167.

<sup>2</sup> Roy Reed, "Mississippi Whites Join Blacks to Listen to Evers at Labor Rally," *The New York Times*, September 24, 1971, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Denton L. Watson, "Miracle in Mississippi: NAACP Relief Fund," *The Crisis*, April 1972, 115; Sue DeLoach, "Woodcutters Get NAACP Aid Here," *Laurel Leader-Call*, October 19, 1971, 1; Mississippi Woodcutters Strike," *The Southern Patriot*, October 1971, 1, 8.

began, Evers joined Bob Zellner, a white former member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), James Simmons, a white woodcutter and then GPA President, and two other woodcutters (one black and one white) on a trip to Washington, D.C. to petition more food stamps for the strikers.<sup>4</sup> While the NAACP had only recently begun advocating for the striking pulpwood cutters, Zellner had been organizing workers in the paper and pulp industries for four years.

Between 1966 and 1980, Zellner and other activists of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) orchestrated Grass Roots Organizing Work (GROW).<sup>5</sup> GROW's purpose was to demonstrate to working-class white Southerners that their best interests lay not in a racial alliance with white bosses and factory owners, but in an interracial coalition of working people.<sup>6</sup> While the project's headquarters were in New Orleans, its goal was to work directly with local working-class white communities. The first step, according to the GROW proposal: "to show [these communities] that by unifying the particular segment of the white community some changes in their lives are possible. The next step will naturally be to show that if the black and white communities unite, more substantial changes can follow."<sup>7</sup> After hearing from another civil rights activist about a "crisis situation" facing the International Woodworkers of America

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<sup>4</sup> "Mississippi Woodcutters Strike," *The Southern Patriot*, October 1971, 1, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Reed, *Simple Decency and Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement 1938-1962* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). SCEF, founded in 1938 as the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), was dedicated to using interracial labor organizing to creating a coalition of black and white Southerners to fight poverty and racism.

<sup>6</sup> Bob and Dorothy Zellner, "A Proposal of the Southern Conference Education Fund," Box 1, Folder 1, Bob Zellner Papers 1960-2009, The Wisconsin Historical Society Archives (HSW).

<sup>7</sup> "GROW Proposal," n.d., Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers 1959-1972, (Sanford N.C: Microfilming Corp of America, 1981), Reel 21-231.

(IWA) Local 5-443 in Laurel, Mississippi, Zellner and GROW decided on the city for its pilot project.<sup>8</sup>

This thesis analyzes GROW's Mississippi-based labor organizing during the late-1960s and early-1970s. By doing so, it interrogates existing scholarly assumptions regarding the character and limitations of this "classical" civil rights movement.<sup>9</sup> Since the late 1980s, historians have focused on instances of interracial, working-class-oriented civil rights activism prior to the classical movement.<sup>10</sup> Studying the Communist Party, labor unions, and the working class orientation of groups such as the NAACP, these scholars have highlighted the ties between civil rights activism and economic and labor rights in this period. While some have covered this phenomenon in Deep South states such as Alabama and Georgia, many of these studies are centered on Northern cities or Upper South states, such as New York City, Chicago, Detroit, and North Carolina.<sup>11</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's 2005 historiographical article synthesized this

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<sup>8</sup> Bob and Dorothy Zellner, "Grass Roots Organizing Work: A Program for the White South," *The Southern Patriot*, September 1967, 2.

<sup>9</sup> This thesis employs Bayard Rustin's terming of the civil rights movement from 1954-1964 as the "classical" movement. Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary*, February, 1965, republished on [www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org).

<sup>10</sup> Historians who have covered working-class-oriented civil rights organizing in the 1930s and 1940s include, for example, Robert Korstad, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (December 1988); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary ed. (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Erik Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Risa Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2010); Nelson Lichtenstein, "Recasting the Movement and Reframing the Law in Risa Goluboff's *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*," *Law & Social Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (Winter, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Biondi's and Gellman's studies focus, respectively, on organizing New York City and Chicago, while Korstad focuses his work on unions in Detroit and North Carolina.

historiographical current as “The Long Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>12</sup> Writing in decades that witnessed the failures of school integration, racist policing, mass incarceration, and continuing educational and wealth inequalities, scholars have lamented the ultimate shape which the classical movement took. Disheartened by these trends, they have argued that, had it been able to continue, the working-class-oriented civil rights activism of the 1930s and 1940s would have offered a more comprehensive and ultimately meaningful change than the push for voting rights and desegregation of the 1950s and 1960s.

By highlighting how race relations in labor activism changed after the two decades of the classical movement, this study of coalition-based, working-class civil rights activism in 1970s Mississippi complicates this body of scholarship by examining interracial labor organizing in the years after the demise of formal Jim Crow laws. The success of labor organizing in this latter period was limited, as this study will show, by the uncertain nature of work in the wood processing industry, anti-union laws, and the 1973 global recession. However, the coalitional organizing done through GROW in the working-class Deep South—made possible by the classical movement of the 1950s and 1960s—was in many ways unprecedented in the period following Reconstruction. Before labor unions and public spaces were forcefully integrated and voting rights protected, convincing white and black workers to join forces was simply not a viable organizing strategy in the Deep South. Likewise, the relative social, economic, and political power that white workers had over their black counterparts during the reign of Jim Crow inherently made the internal power dynamics of any kind of interracial coalition building—if at all possible —drastically imbalanced.<sup>13</sup> Juxtaposed with existing studies of

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<sup>12</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005).

<sup>13</sup> William P. Jones has noted in his study of African American workers in the Southern lumber industry how organized labor believed that “unions could survive in the Jim Crow South only by remaining neutral on the



interracial organizing in the 1930s and 1940s, GROW's later context offers insight into the way that inter-working-class racial power dynamics shape labor-based coalitions.

Civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s achieved significant legislative and social changes in Mississippi and across the United States. By breaking through what historian John Dittmer calls Mississippi's "systemic and pervasive" fortress of white violence and intimidation and forcing the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, the classical movement dramatically shifted the racial power dynamics in Southern labor activism.<sup>14</sup> By the late 1960s, unions and factories were desegregating, black workers could vote, and white civil rights activists were dedicated to conducting antiracist organizing in poor white communities. After spending years working within the black community in Mississippi, these white activists were convinced that to end the devastating economic effects of Jim Crow across racial boundaries, they had to convert white working-class Southerners from their racist beliefs. In 1966, white members were expelled from SNCC after years of debate surrounding their role in the movement, propelling two of them to initiate GROW through SCEF. The interracial political and labor alliances they were able to facilitate through GROW were dependent on the shift in power towards the black community. It follows that these changes to the region's racial "fortress" were necessary for egalitarian working-class, interracial civil rights organizing to emerge in the South.

Taking into account the classical movement is also essential for appreciating the perspectives of white activists in this period. SCEF, under which the GROW project operated,

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question of racial inequality." Even though the demand for labor during WWII gave black lumber workers in the South more sway in their unions, white workers continued to push back against interracial unionization, black leadership in unions, and support for civil rights. William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 167.

<sup>14</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 423.

had been a part of the interracial Southern civil rights activism of the Depression years. Studies of the organization have focused almost exclusively on these decades before the classical movement, going only so far as 1963.<sup>15</sup> Silenced by the Red Scare during the height of the classical movement, by the late 1960s and 1970s the organization had not greatly altered its original mission. GROW, and many of its other projects, remained dedicated to establishing an interracial coalition of radical Southerners.

While SCEF was forced under the radar of Cold War anticommunist paranoia, though, future GROW organizers were being trained in the classical civil rights movement. Particularly through their time in SNCC, white activists learned strategies for connecting with, persuading, and organizing mostly working-class African-Americans in the racially hostile Deep South. Their awareness, however imperfect, of the relationship between race and class, their dedication to stimulating grassroots black leadership, and their newly honed organizing skills were products not of the 1930s and 1940s, but of the 1950s and 1960s.

By the late 1960s, many civil rights organizations had shifted their attention towards economic inequality and poverty that still haunted the country. Scholars of the intersection between labor and civil rights activism after the classical movement have highlighted this trend. They have looked at such subjects as Martin Luther King Jr.'s role in the Memphis sanitation workers strike, the relationship between civil rights activism and War on Poverty programs, and

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<sup>15</sup> Scholars who have outlined SCEF's work include Linda Reed, *Simple Decency & Common Sense*; Irwin Klibaner, *Conscience of a Troubled South: The Southern Conference Educational Funder, 1946-1966* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989); Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); and Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014). In her biography of longtime SCEF field organizer and Executive Director Anne Braden, Fosl briefly touches on SCEF's organizing projects in the white community from the late 1960s onward.

civil rights work within grassroots labor unions.<sup>16</sup> While GROW organizers asserted in 1967 that “Agreement [was] widespread within the civil rights movement on the necessity of organizing in the white community, especially in the southern white community,” interracial labor organizing dedicated to converting white Southerners to civil rights causes has not been critically analyzed by historians.<sup>17</sup> These white activists were motivated by the period’s general redirection towards issues of poverty, as well as the insistence of their frustrated black co-activists that their role lie in organizing the white community against racism. Thus, GROW activists of the late 1960s and 1970s were singularly dedicated to organizing *white* rank and file working-class Southerners in their simultaneous fight against racial and class inequalities. I argue that, after the classical civil rights movement, they were able to facilitate interracial alliances by capitalizing on white working-class laborers’ new dependence on African-American votes, union support, and assertiveness.

Comparing the outcomes of the working-class orientation of 1930s and 1940s civil rights efforts to GROW in the 1970s is complicated, considering the difference between the economies of the 1940s and the 1970s. In the 1940s, laborers were essential to the industrial American economy, and the reinvigorated post-WWII Red Scare had not yet decimated union power and Communist influence. Likewise, this was a period before the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 spurred a slew of states, particularly in the South, to pass “Right to Work” legislation that deeply

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Stand* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007); Dittmer, *Local People*; Susan Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Crystal R. Sanders, *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi’s Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2016); Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and The Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Kieran Walsh Taylor, “Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement (1967-1981),” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> “GROW Proposal,” SNCC Papers 1959-1972.

hampered union power and membership. Labor unions during this period had a great deal of power in politics, and black workers had unprecedented leverage as wartime industrial laborers and untapped Communist Party recruits. New Deal and wartime rhetoric of equality and liberty armed activists in their push for civil rights and equal employment opportunities for African-Americans.

By contrast, scholars have established the 1970s as a period in which labor and civil rights groups struggled to cement their bases and identify their goals. Scholar of the Mississippi civil rights movement, Charles M. Payne, for example, has called this process the “the Demoralization of the Movement,” while labor scholar Jefferson Cowie described the 1970s as “the Last Days of the Working Class.”<sup>18</sup> As this thesis acknowledges, SCEF and its organizing projects were not immune to conflicts and uncertainty that plagued both labor and civil rights activism in this period. Moreover, in the Deep South specifically, as GROW activists explained, by the 1970s white workers such as those at Laurel’s Masonite hardboard factory “had been so long misled by racists and neglected by the whites working in the Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite these obstacles, the organizing in Laurel ultimately inspired white workers in one of the most racially violent regions of Mississippi to run a mayoral campaign on a racially integrated, anti-discrimination platform, motivated a series of impactful interracial woodcutter associations across the Deep South, and culminated in a working-class, interracial voting bloc for the first black gubernatorial candidate the state had seen since its founding.<sup>20</sup> While the GPA

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<sup>18</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 338.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Analavage, “Black and white Divided: Laurel Strike is Broken,” *The Southern Patriot*, January 1968, 4.

<sup>20</sup> James T. Wooten, “Mississippi ‘Loyalist’ Democrats Nominate Evers for Governor,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 1971, 1.

ultimately struggled to defend workers' rights in an evolving and historically exploitative industry, the political and labor coalitions which GROW facilitated should not be neglected because of that. Instead, it is more useful to identify what made this previously unthinkable interracial working-class coalition possible in states such as Mississippi and Alabama. Understanding this shift is necessary for a more precise understanding of the ultimate decline of organized labor in the late twentieth century and the endurance of racial and economic inequality.<sup>21</sup>

By the 1970s, pulp and paper products was one of Mississippi's—and the South's—largest industries, both in terms of manufacturing sector employment and economic value added to the state. After New Deal reforestation projects developed sustainable methods for growing Southern pine, then used to produce brown papers and newsprint, traditionally transient wood products companies moved to the South for the long term. Despite being one of the few industries in which black Southerners could work, these outside firms established themselves in the region by accommodating and exploiting Southern racial and class hierarchies on the factory floor and through their intricately hierarchical and exploitative wood procurement systems.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the Southern wood processing industry demonstrates how racial inequality among workers limited opportunities for interracial organizing. Historian Timothy Minchin and legal scholar William Boyd have produced intensive studies of unionism in the papermaking industry,

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<sup>21</sup> Lane Windham has similarly argued that labor scholars need to take more seriously how the influx of women and non-white people into unions as a result of the Civil Right Act “complicates common narratives for labor’s decline.” Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>22</sup> John C. Bliss and Warren A. Flick, “With a Saw and a Truck: Alabama Pulpwood Producers,” *Forest & Conservation History* 38, no. 2 (April 1994), 79-89; Warren A. Flick, “The Wood Dealer System in Mississippi: An Essay on Regional Economics and Culture,” *Journal of Forest History* 29, no. 3 (July 1985), 131-138; William Boyd, *The Slain Wood: Papermaking and Its Environmental Consequences in the American South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

offering valuable insights into the broader wood processing industry to which Masonite belonged. At first glance, the field seems progressive relative to its segregated, un-unionized peers. Employing nearly 700,000 workers by the 1960s, paper mills had since the 1930s allowed African-Americans to work in their shops, unlike most other industries in the region. Because the industry was based in remote, rural regions, paper companies were willing to pay unionized workers higher wages to fill their nascent factories and keep their capital-intensive plants running at full capacity.<sup>23</sup> This was true of the IWA Local in Laurel as well, which had existed since at least the late 1940s.<sup>24</sup> Unionization and pay was therefore relatively high.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as Minchin demonstrates, the concept of civil rights unionism collapses when studying this type of work.<sup>26</sup> In response to the high number of black workers in the field, unions like Local 5-443 and others in the paper industry began and remained strictly segregated.

The establishment of separate seniority systems, segregated unions, and management which benefited from a divided workforce, African-Americans in wood processing industries were left to the most labor intensive, lowest paying, and most dangerous positions. Managers and unions reserved the best jobs exclusively for white workers and upward mobility on the factory floor was virtually impossible for African-Americans.<sup>27</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave black workers the legal power to fight these inequalities, and they forcefully did so. Yet, the violent

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy J. Minchin, *The Color of Work: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Southern Paper Industry, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001), 13; William Boyd, *The Slain Wood: Papermaking and Its Environmental Consequences in the American South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Letter from J.D. Jolly to Mr. J. L. Baughman, 5 June, 1961, Box 9, Folder 5443 Laurel, MS, International Woodworkers of America, Southern States records, 1940s-1980s, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta (hereafter GSU).

<sup>25</sup> Minchin, *The Color of Work*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 19.

pushback they received from their fellow white employees—in the form of Klan violence and shop floor harassment—as well as noncompliance by companies themselves, stalled the integration process.<sup>28</sup> As historian Robert J. Norrell explains, Southern labor unions became “bastions of segregationist feeling” during the period of massive resistance against civil rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>29</sup> The increased mechanization of these industries in the 1960s and 1970s also meant that at precisely the moment black workers won access to better jobs, these jobs began to dwindle.

To supply Southern wood processing mills, around an additional 150,000 black and white Southerners in the 1960s and 1970s labored hauling pulpwood.<sup>30</sup> Unlike factory workers, woodcutters operated in small, independent teams of loggers, making unionization logistically difficult. Dominated by mills that contracted wood procurement out to “wood dealers,” the wood products industry left the harvesters of this wood, or “pulpwood producers,” at the bottom of a three-part hierarchy.<sup>31</sup> As Boyd explains, “By maintaining an ‘arm’s-length’ relationship between the company and the loggers, the contract-based system insulated the mills from many of the risks and liabilities associated with logging... For those at the bottom of the hierarchy, economic insecurity was a way of life.”<sup>32</sup> Because of the producers’ dependency on dealers, recruited from local white small business owners, as well as the geographical segmentation of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Robert J. Norrell, “Labor Trouble: George Wallace and Union Politics in Alabama,” in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, ed. Robert H. Ziegler, 250-272 (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 257.

<sup>30</sup> Wayne Greenhaw, “Woodcutter’s Organize: Echoes of Change in the South’s Backwoods,” *Southern Changes: The Journal of the Southern Regional Council* 3, No. 1, 1980, 16-19, 22; Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 54.

<sup>32</sup> Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 54, 55.

the labor market, the development of producer associations was intermittent and weak at best.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the pay of woodcutters was far lower than factory workers, averaging less than \$100 per week in the 1970s.<sup>34</sup> Woodcutters generally took home around \$3,000 per year for labor intensive work that posed a constant risk of injury or death from falling wood, shoddy equipment, and hiding rattlesnakes.<sup>35</sup> The job was also marked by consistent debt to wood dealers, inconsistent work, and what producers called the “short stick,” when dealers purposefully undervalued a haul of wood, or a “cord.”<sup>36</sup>

GROW activists had thus landed on an industry in which, since the 1930s, white workers were either vehemently dedicated to segregation or essentially powerless against their employers. Furthermore, despite the history of unionization at Masonite, in 1954 Mississippi joined Alabama and twelve other states, primarily Southern and Midwestern, that had already passed Right to Work laws after the 1947 passage of the Taft Hartley Act.<sup>37</sup> After its passage, employers could not require union membership or non-membership as the basis of employment. The law resulted in a significant decrease in labor union membership. “While the law has not destroyed organized labor in Mississippi as its sponsors has [sic] hoped,” Claude Ramsey, Mississippi AFL-CIO President, explained in 1970, “it has hampered our efforts in a number of ways.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Greenhaw, “Woodcutter’s Organize,” 19; Conner Bailey et al., “Segmented Labor Markets in Alabama’s Pulp and Paper Industry,” *Rural Sociology* 61, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 475-496.

<sup>34</sup> Roy Reed, “Violence and Bruising Labor Plague Cutters of Pulpwood,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 1974, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Mike Higson, “Politics of Paper,” *The Southern Patriot*, October 1969, 4; Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> Greenhaw, “Woodcutter’s Organize,” 19.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from J.D. Jolly to Mr. J. L. Baughman, 5 June, 1961, Box 9, Folder 5443 Laurel, MS, IWA Southern States Records, GSU.

<sup>38</sup> Speech by Claude Ramsey to Kentucky State AFL-CIO Convention, 7 October 1970, Box 2138, Folder 5, MS AFL-CIO Records, 1947-1986, GSU.



Fortunately, those interested in conducting anti-racist organizing and developing interracial class-consciousness were armed with a number of new skills, laws, and connections after the classical civil rights movement.

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By the late-1960s, the Laurel IWA Local was mired in what GROW activists called a “crisis situation.”<sup>39</sup> Officially beginning in April of 1967 when a union shop steward was fired, the strike commenced in response to the Masonite Corporation’s plans to reorganize and automate the hardboard factory. For at least two decades, the Local had successfully pushed the company to accept its terms through similar strikes.<sup>40</sup> So, in 1967, they again organized a strike, blocking the plant’s entrance with their picket lines and prompting the company to hire private guards. The Mississippi Supreme Court, at the behest of the corporation, granted an injunction against the Local. After this, it was illegal for the IWA International to recognize the strike. So, the Local workers continued to picket in their own wildcat strike. Tensions rose, and the combination of private security and militant strikers resulted in the shooting death of a security guard that August.<sup>41</sup>

The death of Masonite’s hired security guard did not temper the strike. Considering their history of victories against the company, the Local expected to be successful. Yet, “one fact had changed since 1964,” explained SCEF’s monthly newspaper *The Southern Patriot* to its roughly 17,500 readers. “This was the growing number and strength of black workers and the efforts of

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<sup>39</sup> Bob and Dorothy Zellner, “Grass Roots Organizing Work: A Program for the White South.”

<sup>40</sup> Notes for IWA regional meeting, 21 July, 1951, Box 9, Folder 5443 Laurel, MS, IWA Southern States records, 1940-1980, GSU.

<sup>41</sup> “Guard is Slain in Mississippi Labor Strife,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 15, 1967, A10.

the company to manipulate these employees.”<sup>42</sup> This newfound strength among black workers would prove fatal for Local 5-443’s 1967 strike.

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, civil rights organizations in Mississippi—as well as individual black workers—pushed for access to jobs from which they were previously excluded, as well as equal union membership. As Mississippi NAACP President Aaron Henry explained in a telegram to MS AFL-CIO President Claude Ramsey in April 1966 about an instance of discrimination, any form of employment segregation was deemed “intolerable in light of the present day trends in equal employment.”<sup>43</sup> Despite Henry’s incredulity at one worker’s difficulties after the CRA was passed, the transition towards workplace integration was not smooth.

White workers and community members violently pushed back against integration and equal employment policies. Workplace integration threatened not only white dominance in preferred jobs, but also the social and political hierarchies that permeated Southern communities, and a number of labor unions had strong ties to the Ku Klux Klan. White workers (insightfully) reasoned, explains Boyd, that “If blacks began to move up the occupational ladder, they would gain an economic base for new political assertiveness.”<sup>44</sup> While Local 5-443’s union leadership approved Masonite’s job placement non-discrimination policy relatively quickly, the Klan in Laurel made their position against integration violently apparent. In 1965, one union officer was

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<sup>42</sup> Analavage, “Black and white Divided,” 4.

<sup>43</sup> Aaron Henry to Claude Ramsey, 9 April 1966, Box 2206 Folder 11, MS AFL-CIO records, GSU. For more on how the Civil Rights Act transformed the legal infrastructure of the American workplace and allowed all Americans—including women, African-Americans, and Latino immigrants—to push for access to the level of United States citizenship available only to wage-earning bread-winners, see Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 139.

attacked and beaten by the Ku Klux Klan on his way home from a union meeting in which, newspaper reports explained, “His union and the management of a plant had just agreed on integration of the work force.”<sup>45</sup> The union did not expect this to be the last attack on its membership for the controversial policy. After the mugging, union leaders advised members to “arm themselves against a future occurrence (of violence).”<sup>46</sup>

Before 1964, black workers at Masonite’s Laurel plant had been organized as an all-black sub-local. Laurel, with a population of approximately 25,000, was 37 percent black.<sup>47</sup> Partly as a result of the predominantly white worker population and segregation in the paper industry, the black sub-local was smaller and had little say in union affairs. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act, pressure from the IWA international forced the union to integrate, leaving seventy-five percent of the newly integrated union white and only twenty-five percent black. During the first union elections post integration, none of the black candidates up for leadership in Local 5-443 were elected by the white majority. As a result, according the Local’s white president, J.D. Jolly, black members distanced themselves from the union and did not attempt to run again.<sup>48</sup> Jolly felt that the elections alienated black union members and ultimately weakened the Local’s power against the corporation. “If some of our colored members hadn’t broken this strike and gone back to work,” he suggested, “this strike would be over” with a union victory.<sup>49</sup> The power of the black workers had become apparent to both the corporation, which hoped to use them to

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<sup>45</sup> Dave Barnhart, “Unionist Lepers in Mississippi,” *Dayton Daily News*, April 20, 1965, 1.

<sup>46</sup> “Union Threatens Laurel KKK With Retaliation,” *Jackson Daily News*, November 19, 1964.

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of Population: 1970*, vol. 1, *Characteristics of the Population, Part 26, Mississippi*, (Washington, D.C., January 1973).

<sup>48</sup> Analavage, “Black and white Divided,” 4.

<sup>49</sup> Analavage, “Black and white Divided,” 4.

break the strike, and to their co-union members. After the bitter integration process, black employees had ample reason to side with their employer over their white co-workers. Nearing the end of an unsuccessful strike, white workers were ready for outside help, even if it meant foregoing their discrimination against black union members.

In the 1960s and 1970s, white workers across the South began to recognize that they could no longer rely on the favor of racial discrimination. The prospect of an alliance between employers and black workers was particularly threatening. As the *Southern Patriot* explained: “because of the new strength of black people and their movement for freedom, employers can no longer keep them down. So the employers now try to convince black workers that they will do better by going along with management rather than with the white workers”<sup>50</sup> The grassroots organizing capacity of the local black population was also impossible to miss. Historian Wesley C. Hogan has described the grassroots organizing by SNCC, CORE, and COFO that had defined the Mississippi civil rights movement as a “declaration of independence” for the African-American freedom struggle that “shattered” three-hundred-year-old “rituals of a racial caste system.”<sup>51</sup> So, even after the massive civil rights infrastructure of the Mississippi Freedom Summer was combating “battle fatigue” in the mid to late 1960s, local black citizens continued to mobilize.<sup>52</sup> When white supremacists in 1967 bombed the Laurel home of a local black civil rights leader for his voter registration organizing and for “working with white leaders to promote

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<sup>50</sup> Anavalage, “Black and white Divided,” 4.

<sup>51</sup> Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 3; Dittmer, *Local People*.

<sup>52</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 315.

harmony between the races,” two hundred people, “mostly Negroes,” marched onto city hall to protest.<sup>53</sup>

The racially divided Local 5-443 was not alone in its struggle against the Masonite Corporation. Civil rights organizing during the 1960s, and especially SNCC, had created a generation of young white activists who, by the late sixties and early seventies, were looking to find their place in a fractured movement.<sup>54</sup> Moved by both the insistence of their frustrated black co-activists and civil rights activism’s general turn towards economic and class issues, these stranded activists turned their attention to the white working-class in the South.<sup>55</sup> They were ready to capitalize on white workers’ new reliance on African-American support and dedicated to facilitating interracial alliances.

After years organizing with local Mississippians and national black leaders, these activists, however alienated by black separatism, were armed with connections that provided inroads into local working-class Southern communities like Laurel. Since 1964, civil rights and anti-poverty activists were also connected through the infrastructure of War on Poverty and Office of Economic Opportunities (OEO) programs.<sup>56</sup> So, when Zellner, now on SCEF staff, was looking for an opening into Southern white working-class communities, he reached out to other Mississippi activists. Veteran black civil rights worker Fannie Lou Hamer, then organizing in her home region of the Mississippi Delta, introduced Zellner to her new contacts. The working-class white people she had met through a local Head Start program, Zellner explained, “[cared] more

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<sup>53</sup> “Voter Registration Work Blamed for Bomb Explosion,” *Jackson Daily News*, November 16, 1967; “Lay Blamed For Home Bombing,” *The Biloxi-Gulfport Daily Herald*, November 16, 1967.

<sup>54</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*; Hogan, *Many Minds*.

<sup>55</sup> Hogan, *Many Minds*.

<sup>56</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 369.

about putting food on their table and getting their kids an education than segregation.”<sup>57</sup> After ingratiating themselves into the family and occupational networks of the white working-class community of Mississippi, GROW activists eventually learned of the union struggle in Laurel.

The desperation of the white members of Local 5-443 seemed a distinctive opportunity to demonstrate the “substantial changes” possible “if black and white communities unite.”<sup>58</sup> When Zellner met with them for the first time to propose they work with GROW, he made it clear that he was a veteran of the civil rights movement and SNCC.<sup>59</sup> This did not seem to matter to the newly disempowered workers, as they had already recognized the necessity of coalition building after their strike was weakened by disaffected black members. When asked by GROW staff what they saw as a solution to their union’s problems, Local president Jolly responded: “Only thing I can see is that we’ve got to form a coalition... White and colored in the local will have to get together and come up with some candidates from both races and everybody will have to back them. Otherwise this thing will continue to split us.”<sup>60</sup>

For the 1967 strike, this ultimately proved true. Black workers, visited by GROW staff, expressed their frustrations with the Local’s neglect of them. One black worker who had participated in the union’s successful 1964 strikes shared why he was not on board. Referring to the earlier 1964 strike, he asked: “What did it get us? Nothing changed; we were still treated like second-class citizens, like niggers. Ain’t no Negro union officials. There’s only four black shop stewards, and they don’t have authority over whites.” Others expressed similar sentiments,

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<sup>57</sup> Bob Zellner, interview with author, 27 May 2017.

<sup>58</sup> “GROW Proposal,” SNCC Papers 1959-1972.

<sup>59</sup> Analavage, “Black and white Divided,” 4.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

arguing that the union never consulted black members when making decisions, including their decision to strike this time. Moreover, a few members suggested that the union was “a den of Kluxers.” Jolly, the white union leader, did admit that a few of the members were Klansmen, though he alleged that they were not those who controlled the union. Nevertheless, black union members did not feel represented by a white union that not only ignored their voices, but also harbored members of a segregationist hate group that harassed and murdered African-Americans.<sup>61</sup>

While Jolly admitted only a few members were affiliated with the organization, the Klan was a powerful force in Laurel. The city was the home of Samuel Bowers, organizer and Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, which broke off from the original Klan in 1964. The Laurel-based group terrorized civil rights activists in Jones County and across the state in order to smother the civil rights momentum brought by SNCC and COFO that year. Among countless other acts of terror, the White Knights were responsible for the 1964 murders of Freedom Summer activists Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, and the 1966 murder of local Hattiesburg activist Vernon Dahmer, whose home was firebombed as retribution for his voter registration activism.<sup>62</sup> Thus, accusations against white union members of Klan affiliation were both serious and likely true.

The city’s history of Klan activity was not the only source of racial division within the union. According to white union members, Masonite had intentionally exacerbated racial tensions by integrating facilities and promoting black workers to preferred jobs. Black union

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Patricia Michelle Buzard-Boyett, “Race and Justice in Mississippi’s Central Piney Woods, 1940-2010,” (PhD diss., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2011).

members were indeed disproportionately represented among strikebreakers.<sup>63</sup> In the end, without the support of black members, the 1967 strike was broken once a deal was struck between the International and Masonite. The strike officially ended after the Local was placed under trusteeship, rendering all of its property, assets, and finances under the control of the International. The International president allegedly intended to “save as many jobs and as many benefits as possible under the circumstances.”<sup>64</sup> However, the prospects were tenuous for the over 600 men still on strike when the agreement was made. Ultimately, many of the most militant laborers were not rehired.

Yet, what the union members described as a “sweetheart deal” laid the ground for the Local to respond to both the corporation and their International.<sup>65</sup> This time, realizing that racial discord had spelt the end of this strike, they would put more effort into an inclusive, interracial strategy.

Once the strike was broken, white members of Local 5-443 were forced by the strike’s failure to confront the fact that it was their discrimination and unwillingness to incorporate black leadership that had lost them black workers’ loyalty and, ultimately, the strike. This was crucial because, as GROW staff explained to white union members, they would have to be the ones to forge a coalition. “Blacks have said they will not initiate any reconciliation because they feel they have been betrayed too many times in the past,” GROW staffers explained. “Therefore, whites will have to make the first move. Unity remains the working men’s only protection;

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<sup>63</sup> According to *Southern Patriot* reports, “soon there were 900 men working in the plant, which was reporting working at 45 per cent of capacity. The 900 men were equally divided among white unionists who had returned to work, strikebreakers (white) brought in from other areas, and black unionists who had refused to join the strike.” Analavage, “Black and white Divided,” 5.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Analavage, “Workers Strike Back: Laurel Struggle Continues” *The Southern Patriot*, October 1968, 1.



otherwise they will continue to be the victims.”<sup>66</sup> If race relations were going to change within the Local, it had become clear to everyone involved that they must be changed by the white union members.

The 1967 strike was also a significant step in building trust between white activists and white workers. Zellner, who had been beaten and jailed numerous times by white Southerners during his work with SNCC, explained:

I’ve been a stereotype to them—one of those vicious civil-rights workers who the people who were running the South had convinced them were upsetting their ‘way of life.’ I certainly had a stereotype of them—that they were people waiting on dark roads to kill me, and many of them were.<sup>67</sup>

Despite this, Zellner and others had committed themselves to the Local’s battle against Masonite and, more importantly, to convincing these white workers that their discriminatory practices against black union members hurt them too.

In September of 1968, nine months after the union had been put into a trusteeship, a group of black and white members of Local 5-443 clustered together in a field just outside of the Jones County line. As a result of the trusteeship, the local had been thrown out of their union hall and the field became the site of their weekly meetings. Despite preexisting racial tensions, union members countered with a determinedly unified front. After consultation with attorney and SCEF vice-president, Jack Peebles, the group voted unanimously to take legal action against both Masonite and the IWA International. They filed respective National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) charges of discriminatory rehiring and interference in the Local’s internal affairs.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Analavage, “Black and white Divided,” 5.

<sup>67</sup> Bob Zellner, “Notes of a Native Son: The South Revisited,” *The Southern Patriot*, September 1967, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Analavage, “Workers Strike Back,” 8.

Since its defeat the previous winter, the Local had undergone structural changes to avoid a repeat of the company's successful recruitment of black strikebreakers from within the union. Recognizing the role of African Americans in breaking the strike against Masonite, the Local finally incorporated their black coworkers into union leadership. To start, members established an interracial committee of two black and three white leaders for the purpose of "[including] all workers in deliberations."<sup>69</sup> Per GROW's suggestion, white members initiated the reconciliation.

In response to rumors that Masonite was planning a "smear campaign" against GROW, the union defended not only individual GROW activists but their civil rights work as well. "Bob Zellner, Jack Minnis, Mike Higson and Bob Analavage and the rest of them," read a union leaflet defending the strike and GROW organizers assisting it, "have been working for years to try to help black men in the South gather the strength to stand shoulder to shoulder with their white brothers in the general struggle of working men against companies like Masonite."<sup>70</sup> Two years before, the Local had been successfully aggravated by the integration of facilities and the promotion of black workers. Now, the union's stance—at least its public one—was supportive of civil rights workers and their efforts. As members carried on their legal battle against the corporation and the IWA, both of which denied the Local's charges and filed actions against it, they were determined that the company would not again "set white workers against blacks."<sup>71</sup>

The legal battle against Masonite also incorporated efforts to build racial unity. In 1970, as they awaited a response from the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, the Local petitioned the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> "Suits and Counter-Suits: Laurel Battle Continues," *The Southern Patriot*, November 1968, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Department of Justice to respond to their grievances.<sup>72</sup> They charged local, county, and state officials with “harassing Masonite workers by black-listing, arrests, and beatings, and by falsely accusing white union members of affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan.”<sup>73</sup> In a show of solidarity, the Local also protested racial and gender bias, charging the company with “discrimination against black and women workers, pollution of air and water, hazardous working conditions, and falsifying safety records.”<sup>74</sup> Discontented current and former Masonite employees also established the “Committee for Better Union Leadership.”<sup>75</sup> The interracial group was dedicated to supporting the over 200 fired Masonite employees who struggled to find other work and publicizing the increasingly dangerous working conditions at Masonite.

The Local’s commitment to interracial coalition building carried over into local politics. In 1969, members established a “Committee for Working People’s Government,” dedicated to putting up both white and black candidates to “gain control over the machinery of the government” in Laurel.<sup>76</sup> Specifically, the Committee established a local political campaign to elect members of “their own ranks” to mayor and two city commissioner roles.<sup>77</sup> In addition to vying for the reluctant yet critical support of black union members, the white members of Local 5-443 also made significant efforts to include them in their political endeavors to enter the

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<sup>72</sup> Jan Hillegas, “Laurel Workers Attack Masonite,” *The Southern Patriot*, December 1970, 1; D. Jolly, *Granville Sellers and Herbert Ishee v. Walter Gorman, Individually and as Trustee Of, and International Woodworkers of America, Afl-Cio, and Masonite Corporation*, 428 F.2d 960 (5th Cir. 1970). In 1970, the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled in favor of the International, its decision to place the Local in a trusteeship, and the bargaining agreement that it.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Robert Analavage, “Workers Challenge Laurel Power Structure,” *The Southern Patriot*, May 1969, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Analavage, “Workers Challenge,” 1, 8.

Mississippi power structure. This was both symbolically and strategically significant for the Laurel campaign.

The union's foray into Laurel politics also exemplified a broader appreciation for the emergent power of newly enfranchised black voters across the South. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the number of registered black voters in Mississippi rose from 28,500 (6.7% of the voting age population) in 1960 to over 181,000 (59.8%) by September of 1967. By 1972, there were nearly 240,000 new black registrants.<sup>78</sup> Newspapers broadcast the surge in registered black voters, and partisan organizations immediately took note. "In Mississippi," announced one Memphis paper in April 1966, "122,000 Negroes are reported on the voting rolls compared with 35,000 last August."<sup>79</sup> Organizations like the Mississippi NAACP were dedicated to maintaining the increase in black voters. Aaron Henry lauded at the organization's state conference in November 1966 that "We have gone from 20,000 Negroes, registered in 1965 to 170,000 in 1966. As good as this advancement appears we must hurriedly [sic] understand that there are still more than 280,000 Negroes still unregistered."<sup>80</sup> In Jackson, black Mississippi political leaders established a political action committee to "channel the growing Negro vote for the 1967 elections."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Political Participation: A Study of the Participation by Negroes in the Electoral and Political Processes in 10 Southern States Since Passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (Washington, D.C., May, 1968). By September of 1967, 45.1% of the Jones County black voting age population of 7,427 were registered to vote, compared to the 48.9% of the white voting age population of 25, 943; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Voting Rights Act, Ten Years After* (Washington, D.C., 1975), courtesy of HathiTrust.

<sup>79</sup> "Negro Numbers on Voting Lists Show Big Rise," *The Commercial Appeal*, April 11, 1966.

<sup>80</sup> Aaron Henry keynote address to Mississippi NAACP state convention, November 4, 1966, Box 2206, Folder 11, MS AFL-CIO records, GSU.

<sup>81</sup> "Evers Predicts Coalition to Put Negroes in Office," *The Commercial Appeal*, March 11, 1967.

Charles Evers, the gubernatorial candidate who spoke at the Jones County courthouse in 1970, was enmeshed in this discussion of black voting power and a leader in the effort to corral black voters.<sup>82</sup> More interested in mobilizing support for those he considered “electable” candidates, though, Evers was not necessarily dedicated to getting black candidates in office.<sup>83</sup> One of his triumphs, according to infamous syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, was successfully building black majorities in three Mississippi counties in 1966 for “hard line racist” Prentiss Walker running against “national symbol of Jim Crow”—and ultimate electee—James Eastland.<sup>84</sup>

Meanwhile, SNCC established an independent black political party in Alabama in the same year, mobilizing black voters to place black people into elected office.<sup>85</sup> Fierce critics of SNCC, Evans and Novak suggested that, unlike with Evers’ efforts, “the plurality of Negro voters was squandered as white segregationist candidates on the Democratic ticket defeated the all-Negro slate of SNICKS Black Panther Party.”<sup>86</sup> However, local and legislative white backlash against the Voting Rights Act and black political organizing demonstrate that white people in the Deep South did not see black candidates as a naïve, elusive threat to their hold on local politics. SNCC and the all-black political organizing of the Lowndes County Freedom Party in Alabama deeply

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<sup>82</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Evers Shows Power in State Election,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, 18 November, 1966; “Negroes Plan ‘Bloc Voting’ Evers Says,” *Jackson Daily News*, March 13, 1967; “Consolidate Negro Vote, Is Goal Set” *The Clarion Ledger*, March 11, 1967.

<sup>83</sup> Evans and Novak, “Evers Shows Power.”

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Evers Scored Major Breakthrough While Black Power Tries Failed,” *The Delta Democrat-Times*, November 18, 1966.

threatened white locals, who responded with violent reprisals and voter fraud.<sup>87</sup> In Mississippi, the 1966 state legislature passed a slew of laws in a fervent effort to effectively dilute the mounting black vote and impede black political candidacy.<sup>88</sup>

As white politicians were working to re-disenfranchise black voters, the Mississippi AFL-CIO desperately worked to sway the new black votes to their causes. Particularly in the decade after the state's Right to Work legislation made unionization far more difficult, the AFL-CIO was trying hard to wrangle as much political power as possible.<sup>89</sup> Mississippi AFL-CIO president Claude Ramsey made sure the organization was associated with civil and voting rights. In a letter sent to Mississippi leaders invited to participate in a black voter registration drive, MS NAACP president Aaron Henry acknowledged the AFL-CIO's contributions to the NAACP's voter registration efforts. "I want, here and now," he wrote, "to acknowledge the support and assistance of Mr. Claude Ramsey and Mr. Tom Knight of the Mississippi State AFL-CIO who have been most helpful in getting the National Labor Leadership assistance in this brave and vital undertaking" of financing a 1966 NAACP voter registration campaign.<sup>90</sup> Henry sent one of these letters to Ramsey himself, with a handwritten note assuring him that the meeting and

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<sup>87</sup> Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*.

<sup>88</sup> Frank R. Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi After 1965* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990). Some of the laws, such as those establishing restrictive qualifying procedures for candidates, were overturned by the United States Supreme Court a couple of years later. However, it took twenty years for the Court to rule the racial gerrymandering unconstitutional.

<sup>89</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's 70-Year Question for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Cobb, *The Selling of the South*; The state's AFL-CIO chapter's official letterhead read, "Register and Vote – Every Vote Counts." Letter to All AFL-CIO Affiliates, 6 October 1964, Box 2162 Folder 3, MS ALF-CIO Records, 1947-1986, GSU.

<sup>90</sup> Aaron Henry to Claude Ramsey, 18 April 1966, Box 2206, Folder 11, Mississippi State AFL-CIO Records, 1947-1986, GSU; Charles Evers and Aaron Henry to Claude Ramsey, 11 November 1965, Box 2206, Folder 10, MS AFL-CIO records, GSU.

invitation would serve as “evidence of [his] involvement.”<sup>91</sup> Ramsey made sure he was seen and heard by the African-American community as an advocate for voter education and civil rights by speaking at local NAACP branch meetings, organizing AFL-CIO voter registration programs, and notifying the Department of Justice of voting rights infringements.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, the Laurel Local’s “Committee for Working People’s Government” was representative of a regional effort to attract (or, alternatively, disfranchise) previously neglected black voters. While predominantly made up of white union members, the group was nonetheless interested in building an interracial coalition of candidates and voters.<sup>93</sup> This was not easy, considering the history of Laurel and union politics. Some of the black candidates were intimidated by their employers into backing out of their candidacy, such as one ex-Masonite worker whose new janitorial position at a white church was threatened. Moreover, despite running on a platform demanding the equal treatment of black and white citizens of Laurel, the mayoral candidate, Herbert Ishee, had “a reputation there of being a former Klansmen.”<sup>94</sup> In an attempt to convince voters of his commitment to antidiscrimination, Ishee and his campaign canvassed the black community.<sup>95</sup> Regardless of how black voters responded—not strongly

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<sup>91</sup> Aaron Henry to Claude Ramsey, 18 April 1966, MS AFL-CIO Records.

<sup>92</sup> Gilbert R. Mason to Claude Ramsey, 24 November 1967, Box 2206, Folder 13, MS AFL-CIO records, GSU; Speech by Claude Ramsey to Kentucky state AFL-CIO convention, 7 October 1970, Box 2138, Folder 5, MS AFL-CIO records, GSU; Henry M. Aronson to Robert Owen, 1 April 1966, Box 2206., Folder 11, MS AFL-CIO records, GSU.

<sup>93</sup> Analavage, “Power Structure,” 8.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

enough to win—white workers were striving to gain their support and demonstrate their solidarity with Laurel’s black community.<sup>96</sup>

The Committee for Working People’s Government’s determined effort to include the black Laurel community reflects the dramatic changes that had taken place since the dissolution of Jim Crow. It was the integration of the Local 5-443 that made white workers far more susceptible—and in turn responsive—to black workers. GROW activists’ experience organizing the black community with SNCC in the 1960s prepared them to catalyze this self-help electoral campaign. And finally, the enfranchisement of over one hundred thousand black voters in Mississippi is what made it at all sensible for a white mayoral candidate to run on an anti-discrimination platform. GROW’s efforts to capitalize on these changes, though, would soon expand beyond Local 5-443 and Laurel, Mississippi.

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While working in Laurel with Local 5-443, GROW organizers also connected with independently striking pulpwood cutters. Pulpwood cutters (also referred to as pulpwood haulers or producers) worked in small teams to cut, fell, and haul pulpwood to be delivered to a “dealer,” who worked as a liaison between mill and producers. While company crews and independent producers also supplied wood to mills, the majority of it was collected through a tiered dealer system. Forestry scholars John C. Bliss and Warren A. Flick explained:

Each week, [the dealer] receives a wood order from the mill and maintains contact with the mill representatives concerning the kind of wood needed, expected delivery times, price computations, problems with producers, and so on. To fill the wood order, he meets with landowners and persuades them to sell him the right to cut timber from their land. Finally, he contracts with independent wood producers who then recruit laborers to cut the trees and haul them to railroad landings or to the mill.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “Laurel Election Creates Flux,” *The Southern Patriot*, June 1969, 1.

<sup>97</sup> Bliss and Flick, “With a Saw and a Truck,” 81.



The teams of laborers—usually family members, “informal partners or joint relatives, part-time helpers”—most often worked with “nothing more than a chain saw and a truck.” The work done by pulpwood haulers was seen as socially inferior to that of loggers, who often used heavy equipment and engineering systems. Most woodcutters descended from long lines of parents and grandparents who also labored in the same forests, hauling wood for mills or tapping trees for turpentine.<sup>98</sup>

In 1968, a group of cutters in southern Alabama organically came together to protest price disparities between the Deep South state and Georgia. They formed the Alabama Pulpwood Producers’ Association, which spread and became the GPA.<sup>99</sup> This producer association yielded GROW’s most successful interracial organizing effort, ultimately winning major concessions from paper and wood processing companies, as well as fomenting an exceptional amount of interracial unity and black leadership. In a 1971 staff memo, SCEF Executive Director Anne Braden lauded the accomplishments as monumental. “I think it can be considered the most important thing that has happened in the South in a long time,” she suggested. “Material support is crucial, because probably the only way [the strikers] can be beaten is to be starved out.”<sup>100</sup>

As the organization grew, Simmons was determined that the precarious alliance between white and black pulpwood cutters would not be defeated.<sup>101</sup> Like the white leaders of the Local 5-443 strike in 1967, Simmons recognized the growing strength of the black community, explaining that “If you get a good bunch of colored people and they have a good leader, you got

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Steve Martin, “Pulpwood Workers Organize,” *The Southern Patriot*, June, 1971, 5.

<sup>100</sup> Anne Braden, “Report to Staff for Fall Meetings,” 28 October 1971, Box 3385, Folder 1, Southern Conference Educational Fund Records, Special Collections and Archives, GSU.

<sup>101</sup> Martin, “Pulpwood Workers Organize,” 5.

yourself a pretty strong bunch.”<sup>102</sup> The association’s recruitment efforts capitalized on the exclusion of black pulpwood producers from small increases in wood prices conceded over the previous few years. While some white workers left meetings upon realizing that it was an interracial group, the GPA maintained its commitment to racial unity. By 1970, half of its elected board of representatives were black, as was 60 percent of its membership.<sup>103</sup>

Now intimately engaged in the Southern wood processing world, GROW activists had ample ways to connect with the woodcutters’ struggle. News of the GROW activists in Laurel had spread to other white workers in the South, prompting GPA founder James Simmons to reach out for their assistance.<sup>104</sup> It is likely too, that GROW’s connection with SNCC gave the group an appreciation of the workers’ struggle in Alabama. In 1965, in response to plans by the Hammerhill Paper Company to build a plant outside of Selma after the violence against civil rights protesters, SNCC orchestrated an extensive, nationwide boycott of the company.<sup>105</sup> It is possible that their familiarity with the paper industry in Alabama made it easier for GROW to quickly involve themselves when the independent group of woodcutters in the state decided to strike.

With the help of GROW activists, the GPA expanded quickly in the early 1970s. After realizing that Georgia cutters earned over \$3 more than he was getting for a “cord,” or approximately 5,500 pounds of wood, Simmons connected with cutters in Mobile to organize a statewide strike, which for the haulers meant “refusing to cut, load, or haul pulpwood for any

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Zellner, interview.

<sup>105</sup> John Lewis to John H. DeVitt, March 12, 1965, SNCC Papers, 1959-1972.

dealer or company.”<sup>106</sup> By the autumn of 1971, the GPA had expanded across Alabama and into Mississippi, and including approximately 6,000 producers. GPA members and GROW activists had organized “at least” thirty-five chapters in Mississippi, including one in Laurel, and more in Eastern Alabama. In October of 1971, Braden shared that, according to her reports from the “Deep South” staff (another term used to refer to the GROW project), the GPA and their strike against a drop in unit prices for pulpwood now involved “thousands of cutters, at least five big paper companies, and lumber yards throughout Southern Mississippi.”<sup>107</sup> This 1971 interracial woodcutters strike eventually drew the attention of the rest of the nation.<sup>108</sup>

As in the rest of Mississippi and Alabama, Laurel-area pulpwood cutters faced deep price cuts. In late Spring of 1971, Masonite lowered piece rates by changing their method of weighing wood. One unit, formerly around 5,500 pounds, was now up to 7,100.<sup>109</sup> In response, the Laurel chapter of the GPA, with support from GROW and in solidarity with the Alabama strikers, organized a strike against the Corporation on September 1 and refused to deliver their wood.<sup>110</sup> By November, the strike in Mississippi had spread from 200 to 3,500 men, evenly divided between black and white workers.”<sup>111</sup> The company, which used to receive about 250 loads of

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<sup>106</sup> Martin, “Pulpwood Workers Organize,” 5; Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 100.

<sup>107</sup> Anne Braden, SCEF Report to Staff for Fall Meetings, 28 October 1971, Box 3385, Folder 1, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>108</sup> Report from Bob Zellner, November 1971, Box 3385, Folder 4, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>109</sup> “Woodmen strike in pay dispute,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, September 25, 1971, 3.

<sup>110</sup> “Mississippi Woodcutters Strike,” *The Southern Patriot*, October 1971, 1, 8; “Mississippi Woodcutters Win,” *The Southern Patriot*, December 1971, 1.

<sup>111</sup> “Woodcutters’ Strike Widens,” *The Southern Patriot*, November 1971, 1.

wood per day, was getting only about fifty after the strike began. By December, the group reached a settlement with Masonite that raised their pay to the original level.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to the “unprecedented degree of racial unity” that characterized the strike, GROW organizers also reported a change in strikers’ racial attitudes. “The issue of racism has not been clearly resolved,” one GROW staffer explained, but “throughout consistent class struggle and contact with the mass of people in the rural South, racism has been somewhat neutralized.”<sup>113</sup> Braden was even more enthusiastic, pointing out the historical context of the region in which they were organizing an interracial group of workers:

I think everybody should be aware of the significant breakthroughs that are being made in this work. The place where I went with Bob [Zellner] to a meeting the other night was Popularville, Miss. That’s where Charles Mack Parker was dragged out of the jail a lynched in the 1950s -one of the worst things of this kind in recent decades—and it’s been one of the real hell-holes of Mississippi. All of the woodcutters there the night I went were black—but both black and white have been at previous meetings and they will be again. This, to me, is a miracle in itself—in Popularville, Miss. This same thing can be said about many of the other places where these groups are being organized. Next week there will be a meeting at the courthouse in Philadelphia, Miss.—in Neshoba County. I think that speaks for itself.<sup>114</sup>

This change in attitudes materialized into a change in voting patterns. Black gubernatorial candidate Charles Evers claimed ten percent of the white vote in the strike’s strongest counties.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> “Mississippi Woodcutters Win,” 1.

<sup>113</sup> Report from Lionel McIntyre on the SCEF Deep South project, November 1971, Box 3385, Folder 4, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>114</sup> Anne Braden staff report, 26 March 1971, Box 3386, Folder 2, SCEF Records, GSU. Neshoba County is where the three murdered Freedom Summer workers were discovered in 1964.

<sup>115</sup> “Woodcutters’ Strike Widens,” 1.

Once Evers became involved, the GPA's interracial unity drew local and national media attention. The *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times* published articles about the white GPA members' support of Charles Evers' campaign.<sup>116</sup> The two hundred "whites and blacks who gathered here in the Jones County Courthouse the other night should be mortal enemies," wrote one *Washington Post* reporter. "But this year they are allies, and at least for the moment the old Southern dream of 'black and white together' is thriving..."<sup>117</sup> Black newspapers such as the *Baltimore Afro-American* and the *Chicago Defender* reported similar sentiments.<sup>118</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* published an article with the subtitle "NAACP AIDS 'REDNECKS,'" noting "the cooperation of poor whites and poor blacks in a strike led by whites and their willingness to accept openly the help of black Civil Rights organizations and the radical Southern Conference Education Fund."<sup>119</sup>

Meanwhile, local newspapers highlighted the alleged Communist ties of the SCEF workers. "Charges of communist affiliation—which have not been publicly denied by those involved—have been levied against at least one worker of an organization working with the Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association," reported the *Laurel Leader-Call*, a local daily newspaper publishing a series of articles on the strike.<sup>120</sup> The interracial organizing that had characterized the GPA's strike not only succeeded in forcing the Masonite Corporation to raise its prices for

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<sup>116</sup> Philip Carter, "Evers Aligns Poor of 2 Races," *The Washington Post*, September 25, 1971, A6; Reed, "Mississippi Whites Join Blacks"; Tom Herman, "White Woodcutters in South Mississippi Turn to...NAACP?" *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 1971.

<sup>117</sup> Carter, "Evers Aligns."

<sup>118</sup> "New woodcutters president vows democracy for group," *Afro-American*, August 19, 1972, 11; "Interracial labor leaders settling strike in Southern paper industry," *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 19, 1972, 10.

<sup>119</sup> Kenneth Reich, "Labor Feud in South Forges Racial Unity," *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1971, A12.

<sup>120</sup> Sue DeLoach and Cynthia Jones, "3<sup>rd</sup> Background Article on Gulfcoast Pulpwood," *Laurel Leader-Call*, October 4, 1971, 7.

wood. It also shocked the nation, disturbed local white Southern communities, and, as will later be shown, inspired other workers throughout the South. In Laurel and around the country, the strike and its civil rights ties had not gone unnoticed.

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SCEF's institutional support of the GPA's efforts was critical to the strike's effectiveness. "You should all know that we have made certain commitments to this movement," Braden advised in a SCEF staff report from March of 1971.<sup>121</sup> In addition to providing full-time organizers to assist the strikers' expansion across the state and into Mississippi, SCEF found and paid for the lawyer who represented the strikers. Moreover, SCEF allowed the GPA to use its printer to develop a monthly newsletter to unify the geographically disparate workers.

Much of the support SCEF was able to offer came from connections made and resources gathered during the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement. For example, SCEF orchestrated a national fundraising campaign for the GPA in 1971, channeling essential money to strikers' families while they remained out of work for over six months. The fundraiser mailing list that SCEF offered to the GPA was largely from SNCC contacts developed in the 1960s.<sup>122</sup> Thanks to this shared resource developed during the classical civil rights movement, by October 1971, SCEF's fundraising infrastructure had raised "over \$5,000 for them in big hunks—plus" smaller donations from individuals who had been contacted through direct mail campaigns.<sup>123</sup> Organizing fundraisers and pledging groups to consistently donate to the strikers, SCEF

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<sup>121</sup> Anne Braden staff report, 26 March 1971.

<sup>122</sup> SCEF staff newsletter, April 1971, box 3386, Folder 2, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>123</sup> Anne Braden, SCEF Report to Staff for Fall Meetings, 28 October 1971.

committed donors from as far away as Chicago.<sup>124</sup> Combining SCEF's funds with the nearly \$10,000 from Charles Evers' NAACP Emergency Relief Fund kept the strike alive.<sup>125</sup>

Many of SCEF's personnel also brought invaluable organizing experience from the classical movement. In addition to recruiting former white SNCC members, SCEF's board sat prominent civil rights activists such as Fred Shuttlesworth and Mojeska Simpkins, respective representatives of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the NAACP. Each provided Southern organizing knowledge and resources to SCEF's projects.<sup>126</sup>

The relationship between the GPA and SCEF, though, was mutually beneficial. Both before and after the triumph of the 1971 strike, SCEF's claim to the GPA was one of its biggest causes for attracting support to the organization. Its 1970 "Report to Stockholders" summarized the GROW project in Laurel and the GPA as highlights of its work. "Meantime," the report wrote to those they hoped would continue providing financial support, "our Deep South staff is continuing to help working white and black people build toward coalitions in Laurel, Miss.—the heart of Klan country—while at the same time holding workshops for people doing similar grass-roots organizing in Alabama and Jackson, Miss."<sup>127</sup> In a 1971 fundraising tour of SCEF organizers, GPA President James Simmons was on the agenda as a "surprise" for donors.<sup>128</sup> Two years later, Braden reported to her board that the woodcutters strike of the GPA was SCEF's "the

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<sup>124</sup> Staff report from Ken Lawrence, 18 November 1971, Box 3385, Folder 4, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>125</sup> Denton L. Watson, "Miracle in Mississippi: NAACP Relief Fund," *The Crisis*, April 1972, 115; Sue DeLoach, "Woodcutters Get NAACP Aid Here," *Laurel Leader-Call*, October 19, 1971, 1.

<sup>126</sup> SCEF Interim Committee Meeting Minutes, 7-8 July 1973, Box 3385, Folder 1, SCEF Records, GSU; SCEF Interim Committee Meeting Minutes, Fall 1971, Folder 1, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>127</sup> SCEF "Report to our stockholders," Summer 1970, Box 3386, Folder 2, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>128</sup> Report to Board of Directors from Lenore Hogan, May 1971, Box 3385, Folder 4, SCEF Records, GSU.

most successful labor support organizationally....On the whole, we have moved faster and better on this strike than on any other labor issue.”<sup>129</sup> The GPA had generated a national donor base for SCEF that was invested in coalition building between white and black working-class communities.

Finally, the interracial unity generated impressive publicity. Roy Reed, the reporter who covered the Evers campaign meeting at the 1971 Jones County courtroom, consistently reported on the actions and plight of the pulpwood producers in Mississippi. Though he didn’t name SCEF as the group providing the most organizational support to the Association, the attention the GPA received undoubtedly bolstered SCEF’s own outreach.<sup>130</sup>

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After the successful 1971 strike against wood price reductions, the GPA underwent another battle beginning in 1973. This time, their very existence was under legal threat. Beginning in September of that year, the woodcutters went on strike yet again, demanding higher prices for the wood they produced for Alabama and Mississippi paper plants. Five days into the strike, they started picketing the Scott Paper and International Paper plants.<sup>131</sup> Before, companies silenced these uprisings by offering white cutters increased wood prices.<sup>132</sup> But times had changed. No longer able to quietly suppress the producers through racial division, the companies sued them instead. Woodcutters, the companies argued, were violating antitrust laws by joining together to

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<sup>129</sup> “Executive Director’s Report to the Board of SCEF,” October 1973, Box 3385, Folder 4, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>130</sup> Reed, “Violence and Bruising Labor”; Reed, “Mississippi Whites Join Blacks”; Roy Reed, “South’s Poultry Workers’ Lot: Minimal Pay for Work,” *The New York Times*, July 16, 1974, 12.

<sup>131</sup> Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 101.

<sup>132</sup> Mike Higson, “Politics of Paper,” *The Southern Patriot*, October 1969, 4; Martin, “Pulpwood Workers Organize,” 5.



argue for higher wages. Instead of company employees, they should be viewed as independent contractors and, therefore, kept from legally unionizing. This battle played out in the federal, state, and circuit courts, culminating on March 18, 1974 in the United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals case, *Scott Paper Company v. Gulf Coast Pulpwood Association*.<sup>133</sup>

SCEF hastened to protect its most successful program. A letter from SCEF staff member Fred Ansley to the organization's supporters reported the crisis and SCEF's efforts to "defend the legal fight for woodhaulers to organize and strike."<sup>134</sup> As part of these efforts, SCEF organized benefit dinners, concerts, and even Christmas parties. A benefit concert in Tallahassee, for example, raised \$300. A Louisville viewing party of the documentary film on Mexican-American strikers in a New Mexico zinc mine, "Salt of the Earth," raised \$375. A Christmas party in the same city collected wrapped Christmas gifts for the woodcutters' children. Moreover, Ansley explained, since "winter is the slack season for wood hauling," the woodcutters were organizing a travelling speaker bureau to inform interested parties of their situation.<sup>135</sup> The new President and Vice President of the GPA, Delbert Carney, a whiter worker from Chatom Alabama, and C.D. Kimbrough, a black reverend from Mobile, were trying to generate support within Alabama. All along, "the SCEF Office in Louisville [was] also continuing to aid the GPA in what ways [it] can, and to help supporters keep in touch with each other and with the GPA."<sup>136</sup>

After the woodcutters had faced five legal battles against multiple paper and timber companies, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans ruled in their

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<sup>133</sup> *Scott Paper Co. v. GulfCoast Pulpwood Assoc'n*, 491 F.2d 119 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1974).

<sup>134</sup> Report from Fred Ansley, n.d., Box 3385, Folder 6, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

favor for their right to unionize. “The economic relationship between the wood producers and the wood dealers,” explained the judge, “is more like that between a piece-work employee and his employer than that of an independent contractor.”<sup>137</sup> This was a decisive win for producers. As Boyd explains, this ruling “exploded the myth of the ‘independent’ pulpwood producer, pointing to the massive asymmetries of power that existed in the southern wood procurement system.” According to a Yale Industrial Forestry Seminar in 1974, this ruling had the potential to set the stage for collective bargaining in the pulpwood industry.<sup>138</sup>

The 1973 strike also renewed the GPA’s national media spotlight. In a highly sympathetic piece, Roy Reed, the apparent beat reporter for the GPA and Southern pulpwood industry, narrated the struggles of pulpwood cutters across the Deep South. “Assaults on the body and the mind are far from rare in the Southern pulpwood country,” he explained in a description of a day on the job for a set of father and son woodcutters. “They go hand in hand with the straining, bruising labor —labor that a few like Mr. Brown have decided is sold too cheap.”<sup>139</sup>

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The interracial nature of the GPA did not come without conflict. For decades, these pulpwood cutters had been racially divided by their industry and the social and legal apparatus of Jim Crow, and this dark history re-emerged after the 1971 strike.<sup>140</sup> Simmons, members claimed, “repeatedly stated that blacks could not play a leadership role, that they were not smart enough,

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<sup>137</sup> Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 101.

<sup>138</sup> Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 101.

<sup>139</sup> Reed, “Violence and Bruising Labor.”

<sup>140</sup> Minchin, *The Color of Work*.

and they would scare off whites.”<sup>141</sup> He also tried to make himself lifelong chairman. In response, members collectively repudiated his leadership, culminating in a 1972 vote at the GPA’s Mississippi state convention. The outcome was a wholehearted “rejection of the leadership of James Simmons.”<sup>142</sup> In his place, they elected “an interracial group of new officers including three blacks and three whites,” with Fred Walters, a black woodcutter, as the new GPA president.<sup>143</sup>

Nationwide supporters of the GPA—both white and black—remained enthusiastic. Despite the racism which in part prompted the election, the *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Chicago Defender* reminded readers that “it was the high degree of unity among black and white woodcutters that many people believe was the key to the historic victory in the strike last fall.”<sup>144</sup> Moreover, the GPA stayed active for at least another seven years, even while the disgruntled Simmons continued to “actively red-bait, race-bait, [and] intimidate” the organization.<sup>145</sup> Walters, voted in with a “unanimous vote of confidence,” remained president for the remainder of the decade.<sup>146</sup>

According to one woodcutter in 1980, the GPA was the first association that really got woodcutters to believe in the possibility of organization. “It has helped a great deal,” said black woodcutter Ralph Lee Johnson in 1980 of the GPA, while acknowledging that the economic

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<sup>141</sup> “New woodcutters president,” 11.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid; “Interracial labor leaders settling strike in Southern paper industry,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 19, 1972, 10.

<sup>145</sup> “New woodcutters president,” 11.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

situation for the woodcutter was still grim. “The leadership has continued to function, we have won several big lawsuits.”<sup>147</sup> Eventually, other woodcutter associations, inspired by the GPA, arose across the Deep South. They made sure to not infringe on the GPA’s jurisdiction. In 1978, woodcutters north of Jackson, Mississippi formed the Southern Woodcutters Assistance Project (SWAP). Beginning as a supply cooperative called the United Woodcutters Association, the group would go on to establish a credit union, successfully push for a “Fair Pulpwood Scaling Practices Board,” and form a legal non-profit organization to support members.<sup>148</sup>

Outside the pulpwood industry, GROW activists used their connection with the woodcutters, many of whom had wives in the Laurel poultry industry, to begin organizing mostly women poultry plant workers.<sup>149</sup> This organizing also proved successful, as one GROW staff report from 1973 detailed:

One of the poultry plants where the MPWU [Mississippi Poultry Workers Union] is organized had just held a 100 per cent work stoppage. The stoppage was supposed to be for three minutes, but the workers left for the day and the plant did not reopen. [SCEF organizer] Bates feels that the MPWU will get their best contract with that plant.<sup>150</sup>

Another SCEF staff member, Michael Honey, suggested that the “poultry workers are an embarrassment to established unions because they have gone ahead and organized the unorganized as many established unions have not.”<sup>151</sup> Because of the MPWU’s success, other unions, such as the Amalgamated Meatcutters, conducted what SCEF called “raids” of the

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<sup>147</sup> Greenhaw, “Woodcutter’s Organize,” 16.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>149</sup> Media Burn Archive, “Gulf Coast Pulpwood Association Meeting,” Media Burn, mediaburn.org (20 November 2017).

<sup>150</sup> SCEF Interim Committee meeting minutes, 7-8 July 1973, Box 3385, Folder 1, SCEF Records, GSU

<sup>151</sup> Report on meeting on SCEF Propaganda, 16 February 1970, Box 3385, Folder 1, SCEF Records, GSU.

poultry workers union to organize their own plants.<sup>152</sup> The interracial organizing that the black and white working class of Laurel initiated, with GROW, had been successful, and others were inspired.<sup>153</sup>

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While SCEF's Deep South labor organizing project lasted until approximately 1980, most of the momentum surrounding its work in the Southern wood processing industry lasted between 1967 and 1973.<sup>154</sup> Conflict within SCEF, economic fluctuations, and the mechanization of the industry made labor organizing in Southern woods processing increasingly more challenging.

After 1973, the GPA no longer dominated SCEF's meeting minutes and the GPA all but disappeared from national news outlets. "The slots of labor coordinator, etc.," read one SCEF interim committee meeting report from 1974, "were voted in at the same time that the board voted to set aside 20% of its budget to be spent for grass roots organizing in the wake of the dissolving of the GROW project."<sup>155</sup> As early as 1971, some staff members took their activism to other organizations. For example, GROW staffer Steve Martin explained in his letter of resignation from SCEF that his "discontent" with his work was not due to disagreement about the project and its goals themselves, but of diverging politics and strategy within SCEF.<sup>156</sup> Instead of staying with SCEF, Martin decided to move his work with the GPA to the Selma Inter-

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Yet again, GROW decided to organize in a particularly exploitative industry, as LaGuana Gray has explicated in her 2014 book on the Arkansas poultry processing industry, *We Just Keep Running the Line: Black Southern Women and the Poultry Processing Industry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

<sup>154</sup> Zellner, interview.

<sup>155</sup> Letter to Interim Committee from Louisville staff, May 1974, Box 3385, Folder 4, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>156</sup> Letter of resignation from SCEF from Steve Martin, 2 September 1971, Box 3386, Folder 2, SCEF Records, GSU.

religious Project. The Project, which was started by a white Episcopalian Bishop in 1965, was formed in the aftermath of the Selma to Montgomery March to maintain the presence of “church-related agencies” in Alabama’s black communities and, similar to SCEF, to “serve in whatever bridge capacities may be opening up between Whites and Negroes.”<sup>157</sup> According to Martin, it also apparently had “access to funds that SCEF [would] never have.”<sup>158</sup> Whatever his reasons for leaving, Martin’s resignation seems to have precipitated what some members’ of SCEF’s board designated “The 1973 Crisis.”<sup>159</sup>

That year, SCEF staff went through a majorly divisive conflict after members of an affiliated branch of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in Louisville kidnapped SCEF’s then Executive Director, Helen Greever, and her husband. SCEF had been working with the group for months, and the two groups regularly clashed over plans (or lack thereof) for local projects and the distribution of SCEF’s resources. While the two escaped and no one was hurt, they planned to press charges with the police. A couple of months before, Louisville SCEF staff had also made a mental inquest warrant against local BPP leader Ben Simmons, after he threatened to kill members of SCEF staff, one of whom was his wife. The use of police and the mental institution, seen by many members as inherently and violently oppressive of the black community, to resolve the issues was extremely controversial.

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<sup>157</sup> Reverend Francis X. Walters, Selma Inter-religious Project newsletter, December 6, 1965, courtesy of HathiTrust.

<sup>158</sup> Letter of resignation from SCEF from Steve Martin, 2 September 1971, Box 3386, Folder 2, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>159</sup> Policy position paper of the SCEF minority caucus, July 1974, Box 3385 Folder 6, SCEF Records, GSU.

The fallout greatly divided SCEF staff.<sup>160</sup> Members of the Louisville staff were pressured out or fired by others in the organization, leading to a number of other resignations from their supporters.<sup>161</sup> Those who supported the kidnappers called the firings anti-Communist, based on the political leanings of Greever and those who supported her. Others in SCEF were highly critical of the Louisville SCEF staff, arguing that they were perpetuating the system of white supremacy that they claimed to fight. Questions of the racial makeup of the SCEF board and staff, Red-baiting, and the direction of leadership dominated meetings for the remainder of 1973. Instead of a freak event, the kidnappings seemed to bring to a fore sectarian political and personal tensions that had been brewing within the group for a number of years. While SCEF remained active until 1985, its programs and membership were in a consistent state of flux since at least 1973.<sup>162</sup> The GPA, strewn across an intentionally segmented and geographically expansive wood region, would have been severely impaired without the full-time support of SCEF organizers to help coordinate its efforts.

Changes to both the relevant industries also likely slowed unionization of both factory workers and pulpwood cutters. In 1975, demand for wood products and, in turn, pulpwood decreased significantly in conjunction with the national housing economy and the “slowed condition of the worldwide economy, to which paper and paper demand are directly related.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Helen Greever, “Chronology January 1, 1972-August, 1973,” Box 3385, Folder 3, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>161</sup> “Notes of Oct. ’73 Board Meeting,” October 1973, Box 3385, Folder 1, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>162</sup> Interim Committee Meeting Minutes for January 29, 1977; February 3, 1979; June 21, 1975, Box 3385, Folder 2, SCEF Records, GSU.

<sup>163</sup> U.S. Bureau of Domestic Commerce, *Pulp, Paper, and Board Quarterly Industry Reports: Spring 1976* (Washington, D.C., 1976), 3.

As a result, thousands of loggers were put out of work.<sup>164</sup> “Thus,” suggested an industry report, “total pulpwood production activities in the woods worsened, with the economic impact upon woods workers and local communities and service industries a certain but unmeasured reality.”<sup>165</sup> Even when the industry recovered the next year, “pulpwood producers did not enjoy the same high level of recovery. Pulpwood deliveries...did not attain the pulpwood receipts level reached in 1974.” According to one international economic report on the forestry and wood industries, wood products industry employment in North America in the 1980s dropped again as a result of economic recession and industrial restructuring. These changes, concluded the report, “took their toll of economic activity and jobs. In Canada and the United States, in particular, employment decreased during these years but started to rise again by the mid-1980s.”<sup>166</sup> While the industry—and even pulpwood receipts—may have recovered within a couple of years of cyclical market lulls, the inconsistency in demand for pulpwood and, in turn, for pulpwood haulers, would have severely disrupted organizing efforts as well.

As producers adjusted to these fluctuations, the industry’s push towards mechanization also compelled them to independently invest in expensive mechanized logging equipment that was becoming a requirement of the job by the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>167</sup> New machines such as the “Busch combine” and the “Beloit harvest” combined the work of cutting, felling, harvesting, and bunching the wood.<sup>168</sup> However much these machines increased productivity, the variability in

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<sup>164</sup> U.S. Bureau of Domestic Commerce, *Forest Products Review: Spring 1981* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 33.

<sup>165</sup> U.S. Bureau of Domestic Commerce, *Pulp, Paper, and Board Quarterly Industry Reports: October 1975* (Washington, D.C., 1976), 8

<sup>166</sup> Forestry and Wood Industries Committee, *Technological changes in the wood industry with special emphasis on training needs and employment opportunities* (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1991), 17.

<sup>167</sup> Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 103.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 91-92.



weather and mills' demand for wood made it difficult for loggers to recover the cost of them. And the more pulpwood haulers were forced out due to the costs of these machines, the faster pulpwood procurement mechanized to make up for the loss of manpower.<sup>169</sup> While in reality mechanization trapped producers further into debt and dependency, these capital-heavy investments made it more difficult to argue that they were sawmill employees deserving of the protection of labor laws and unions. Meanwhile, to the chagrin of producer association organizers, beginning in the mid-1980s, paper companies expanded their procurement areas by building satellite chip mills in less-competitive (and un-unionized) forest in other parts of Mississippi and Alabama, as well as in Texas, Tennessee, and Kentucky.<sup>170</sup> The combination of these conditions posed real logistical challenges to labor organizing.

Yet, SCEF maintained ties with the GPA through the late 1970s. In 1976, the SCEF interim committee revisited their relationship with the woodcutters association, ultimately deciding that it would continue to “build a solidarity between the GPA and SCEF, and that this solidarity should be built on a firm political basis” based on their common goal of improving conditions for “working people in this country.”<sup>171</sup> While they would not support the organization monetarily, they agreed to give them their fundraising list, help them develop a fundraising letter, and assist in the production of another newsletter to help the organization educate and collect dues from its widespread membership. SCEF even decided it would organize training workshops for GPA

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<sup>169</sup> An industry report explained that “If labor continues to turn from woods employment, it can be expected that mechanization of logging will accelerate with more sophisticated cutting, skidding and hauling equipment being acquired by logging operators.” U.S. Bureau of Domestic Commerce, *Pulp, Paper, and Board Quarterly Industry Reports, January 1974* (Washington, D.C., 1974), 4.

<sup>170</sup> Boyd, *The Slain Wood*, 97-98; Greenhaw, “Woodcutters Organize,” 18.

<sup>171</sup> Summary of SCEF Interim Committee Meeting, 31 January 1976- 1 February 1976, Box 3385, Folder 2, SCEF Records, GSU.

leaders, so that they themselves could develop the grassroots organizing skills which were used to organize them.<sup>172</sup>

Both the GPA and offshoots of the group, such as SWAP, continued to fight on behalf of pulpwood cutters. In 1982, the United Woodcutters Association successfully pushed the Mississippi Farm Bureau to change its standards for measuring pulpwood. According to one organizer and producer, the original method, during which the woodcutter himself was unable to see the scale, cost them around \$1,500 per year.<sup>173</sup> The association had begun pushing for a change three years earlier, but it was not until they convinced pulpwood land owners that they were losing out in the deal as well that their efforts gained traction. After an endorsement from the Mississippi Farm Bureau, on March 8, the Mississippi Fair Pulpwood Scaling and Practices Act was passed.<sup>174</sup> The next step, according to one of the organizers, was to “organize strikes at some wood yards,” as ultimately “the fundamental poverty of the woodcutters is not going to change until they are paid more.”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Tom Israel and Randall Williams, “Ending the Short Stick in Mississippi’s Woods,” *Southern Changes* 4, No. 3 (1982), 17.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 18.

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of ten plus years, the GROW project harnessed the destruction of Jim Crow to initiate interracial labor coalitions across the Deep South. The project was established with the purpose of convincing white workers that their racism hurt them too—a focus that kept racial cooperation, education, and black leadership at the center of the process. Using these strategies, GROW’s most successful undertaking, the GPA, forced powerful paper companies to raise their payments to pulpwood producers for wood, legally established the right of producers to unionize through the federal courts, and inspired an expansion of producer associations in Mississippi that eventually forced the passage of a statewide Fair Pulpwood Scaling and Practices Act. Though votes from the interracial producer association did not carry Charles Evers to the Mississippi governor’s office in 1971, he won nearly twenty-two percent of the vote across the state amidst white intimidation and violence at the polls.<sup>176</sup> These successes in interracial coalition building offer a complication to the leading historiography on Southern white people’s “massive resistance” after the classical movement.<sup>177</sup>

One of the primary reasons this moment of interracial coalition-building in the late 1960s and 1970s deserves exploration is because its success and longevity were limited. Working-class, interracial coalition building through labor unions is nowhere near the norm in the South (or anywhere around the country). Many of the challenges that confronted the GPA represent

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<sup>176</sup> Roy Reed, “Evers Is Defeated In Large Turnout In Mississippi Vote,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 1971, 1; Parker, *Black Votes Count*.

<sup>177</sup> George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006).

challenges which confronted Southern labor organizing more generally in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Changes to the type of jobs available to U.S. workers, optimization of labor costs through mechanization, and the progression of labor law in favor of employers have been widespread obstacles to union organizing.<sup>178</sup> When opportunities for labor organizing decreased, so did opportunities for interracial coalition building. In the same way that the post-WWII Red Scare disempowered black laborers' impact on civil rights, the decrease of labor organizing in the last half-century has also taken away a demonstrated venue for anti-racist organizing and interracial coalition building.

As this study of GROW has also attempted to show, though, the framework used to understand the “opportunities found and lost” in 1930s and 1940s civil rights unionism does not fully answer why the New Right emerged with such gusto, why interracial coalitions do not define working-class politics today, and why economic and racial disparities continue to grow. Even with its shift in focus towards voter registration and civil rights legislation, the classical civil rights movement greatly empowered black workers in the Deep South, especially in their relationship to white workers. Black workers were seen as critical to grassroots union organizing, were empowered to reject racial discrimination and violence, and mobilized to register and use their newly earned voting power. As a result, race relations in working-class organizing changed. When one white woman involved in a 1971 interracial labor strike in Durham, North Carolina stated, “we’ll have to get together sooner or later. If we can work with [black people], we can strike with ‘em. They stick together better than white people. That’s why they’ve been getting

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<sup>178</sup> Michael Goldfield, *The Decline of Organization Labor in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Bruce Nissen ed., *Which Direction for Organized Labor?: Essays on Organizing, Outreach, and Internal Transformations* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999); Minchin, *The Color of Work*.

ahead,” she was expressing a widespread recognition among white workers that it no longer benefited them to distance themselves from their black counterparts.<sup>179</sup>

Acknowledging the new power of black workers after the classical civil rights movement also highlights how interracial dynamics shape the outcomes of coalition building, whether in the 1930s, the 1970s, or today. The attempts by Masonite to divide its workforce by deliberately promoting black workers and “klan-baiting” white unionists demonstrate that employers were also very aware of the shift in racial power dynamics in this period.<sup>180</sup> By the late 1960s, interracial labor coalitions were emerging across the South, in poultry processing, farm equipment manufacturing, and textile mills, posing a widespread threat to Southern labor norms that extended beyond the wood processing industry.<sup>181</sup>

Historians should take these changes into consideration when contemplating the course of 20<sup>th</sup> century working-class and labor-oriented civil rights activism. Interracial union organizing functioned very differently in the 1960s compared to the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, backlash against interracial organizing and anti-union efforts had to be adjusted as well. How exactly did not only companies, but also politicians and policy makers, then, respond to new working-class race relations after the civil rights movement of the 1960s? In other words, without Jim Crow to racially divide the Southern labor force, how did they ensure that the potential power of united labor was kept at bay? Looking more broadly, is there a relationship between United States deindustrialization, the development of the sunbelt, and labor mechanization and the elimination

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<sup>179</sup> “Workers’ Unity Baffles S.C. Community,” *The Southern Patriot*, December, 1968, 8.

<sup>180</sup> According to white union members, Masonite initiated rumors that the union was run by the Klan in an effort to disillusion black workers. Analavage, “Workers Strike Back,” 1; Analavage, “Black and White Divided,” 4.

<sup>181</sup> Reed, “South’s Poultry Workers,” 12; Robert Analavage, “Alabama Strikers Battle Wallace Aide,” *The Southern Patriot*, December 1968, 3; “Workers’ Unity,” 8.

of Jim Crow? If so, what is it? How did black and white worker coalitions ultimately renegotiate social and workplace relationships? It is my hope that in taking into consideration the way that the classical movement impacted interracial working-class dynamics, these types of questions will lead to more precise explanations for existing racial and class inequality in the United States, and the complex, intimate, and often fraught relationship between the two.

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