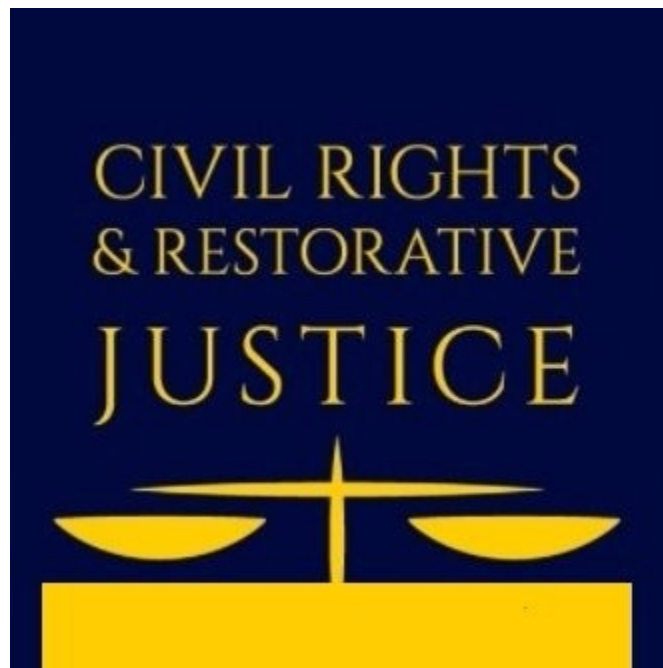


Radical Cooperation:

The Alabama Share Croppers Union's Challenge to White Supremacy



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*Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence.
Land is the basis of freedom, justice and equality.
Malcolm X, Message to the Grassroots*

I. Joe Spinner Johnson, Willie Foster and the Sharecropping System

On July 11, 1935, a black sharecropper in Greensboro, Hale County, Alabama, named Joe Spinner Johnson was called away from his home by his landlord and overseer.¹ He had a twelve acre plot, and he was having a good growing season.² Unlike so many sharecroppers, Johnson was not in debt to his landlord.³ Perhaps he didn't know what to expect as he followed his landlord and overseer into the woods. Maybe he looked back at his wife and eight children with a feeling of dread forming in his stomach. Perhaps he knew what waited for him in the woods, but to protect his family, he didn't protest. Johnson had become involved as a leader of the local chapter of the Share Croppers Union (SCU).⁴ In neighboring Black Belt counties only two months earlier, a successful cotton choppers strike led by local chapters of the SCU and the International Labor Defense, the Communist-affiliated legal advocacy organization, had extracted better wages and working conditions from landlords.⁵ Buoyed from that success, the ILD organizers and SCU locals were planning a second strike for August.⁶

1 Jackson, Albert (pseudonym for Clyde Johnson). "The Murder of Joe Spinner Johnson." *New Masses* Sept. 3, 1935: 21. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/new-masses/1935/v16n10-sep-03-1935-NM.pdf>. Last visited 11/15/2018.

2 Id.

3 Id.

4 Id.

5 Kelley, Robin D.G. *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1990. 160-163.

6 Johnson, Clyde. Rural Revolt in the Southeast: History of the Share Croppers Union. Prepared by Clyde Johnson, former Secretary-Treasurer of the Union, for a history Conference at The Citadel in Charleston, So. Carolina, April 1979 in the Clyde Johnson papers #4642, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See also Kelley 164-164.

What awaited Joe Spinner Johnson as he entered the woods? A gang of vigilantes tied him up, “hog-fashion,” and beat him.⁷ They transported him two counties over, to the Selma Jail in Dallas County.⁸ Dallas County had been particularly brutal in its crackdown during the earlier cotton choppers strike in May — law enforcement officials had jailed 16 SCU members for striking, and ILD organizers were not immune from retribution either.⁹

Willie Foster, a black ILD organizer, had come to Selma from Birmingham to inquire about the disappearance of one of his comrades, who had come to organize the striking tenants and sharecroppers.¹⁰ Foster was described as “sedate” in his appearance; he did not appear to be a fiery Communist agitator, and Birmingham police didn’t suspect him of being an organizer.¹¹ Upon arriving in Selma, where he had relatives, he was picked up by Selma police for “vagrancy” and jailed.¹² There he found his missing ILD comrade, Robert Washington. “We were questioned all day by the chief of police and his deputies, separately,” Washington affirmed in an affidavit. “But I refused to give any information as to who were the members of the International Labor Defense in Birmingham, which was the principal information which the police tried to obtain from me.”¹³ Washington was released from the Selma City Jail’s custody to “a gang of eight men ... waiting in two automobiles.”¹⁴ Washington identified some members of the gang: one was a Selma police officer; another was the proprietor of one of the main grocery stores in

7 Wood, Robert. *To Live and Die in Dixie*. New York, Southern Workers Defense Committee: New York, 1936, 27. *Hathi Trust Digital Library*. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015069762998>. Last visited 11/15/2018.

8 Jackson 21, Wood 27.

9 Kelley 162.

10 United States Senate. Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor. *A Resolution to Investigate Violations of the Right of Free Speech and Assembly and the Interference with the Right of Labor to Organize and Bargain Collectively*. Jan. 14, 1937. 74th Congress. 1st sess. Washington: GPO, 1937. (Affidavit of Robert Washington) *Hathi Trust Digital Library*. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32437122905504>. Last visited 11/15/2018.

11 Wood 26.

12 Wood, Robert. Letter to Gov. Bibb Graves. 24 May 1935. Governor Bibb Graves Papers (1935-1939), Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

13 Robert Washington affidavit.

14 *Id.*

Selma.¹⁵ They didn't even bother to cover their faces. They drove Washington to the outskirts of Dallas County, whipped his bare back, and continued trying to get him to name members of the ILD.¹⁶ They released him over the county line, and warned him that if he ever came back to Dallas County, they'd kill him.¹⁷

Willie Foster was never heard from again.¹⁸ Based on the pattern of law enforcement abuse that ILD organizers experienced, the ILD leaders believed that Selma police had released Foster to a mob which beat him until he died.¹⁹ Local SCU members commenced a search for his body. "Foster has not been seen since they put him in jail," a sharecropper wrote to ILD's southern headquarters in Birmingham. "I heard they found a man dead out on the Summerfield road. And the law went out there and put him in the ground and told the colored people that they better not tell no one about it. So I don't know if it were Foster or not."²⁰

It was to this county, to this jail, that the landlord's gang transported Joe Spinner Johnson.²¹ Inmates who were housed in the jail described hearing screaming and commotion coming out of his cell starting about 11 p.m.²² It became quiet an hour later.²³ The next morning, Johnson was not in the jail.²⁴ And a few days later, a badly beaten black man's body was

15 Id.

16 Id.

17 Id.

18 Wood 26.

19 Id.

20 Id.

21 Jackson 22.

22 Id.

23 Id., Wood 27.

24 Jackson 22, Wood 27.

discovered in a field in Greensboro.²⁵ Johnson's friends identified him.²⁶ There was no coroner's inquest.²⁷ The landlord evicted Johnson's widow and their eight children.²⁸

The only evidence of what befell Joe Spinner Johnson and Willie Foster exists because the ILD publicized their deaths and the conditions they were resisting.²⁹ There is very little information available about Joe Spinner Johnson's and Willie Foster's lives, or family members who may survive them. Their story, however, reveals a picture of the world in which they lived, and the world they imagined and tried to coax into existence through their struggles and their sacrifice.

The world Joe Spinner Johnson and Willie Foster lived in was a brutal one. In Alabama, a system of sharecropping and share tenancy, akin to peonage,³⁰ developed after the Civil War. Black sharecroppers were forced back into a form of bondage, upheld by a legal regime controlled by and benefiting powerful landlords with large holdings. Jim Crow laws organizing contractual employer/employee relations and the complicity of law enforcement to do the bidding of landlords — including murdering and brutalizing any person who dared to resist this economic order — worked in tandem to maintain a system of white supremacy through racialized economic control. This paper examines the operation of the sharecropping system and

25 Jackson 22

26 Id.

27 Id.

28 Id.

29 Letters from ILD organizers to Gov. Bibb Graves describe the brutality sharecroppers experienced and in some cases name the sharecropper who was killed, the name of the suspected murderers (including law enforcement officials) and a demand for their capture. Governor Bibb Graves Papers (1935-1939), SG012165, Folders 1 and 2, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery. See also the articles published in communist newspapers. The information about Willie Foster and Joe Spinner Johnson come primarily from Albert Jackson's (the pseudonym Clyde Johnson used) account in *New Masses*, Robert Wood's pamphlet *To Live and Die in Dixie*, and Robert Washington's affidavit at the Senate hearing into violations of labor (LaFollette Hearings, 1937).

30 For a definitive discussion on peonage in the South, including federal attempts to prosecute employers engaging in peonage under the Anti-Peonage Act, see Daniel, Pete. *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South 1901-1969*. Oxford University Press, 1973.

the legal mechanisms that upheld the inherent inequality between landlords and workers. It discusses the ILD's organizing strategies and the resistance they faced from landlords who deputized local law enforcement as their own private militia, to deal with "outside agitators" (a popular term for Communists) and resistant sharecroppers. Finally, it reviews lessons that the Share Croppers Union, whose practice of engaging in mutual aid and cooperation, can teach us about contemporary efforts to prevent black rural land loss and to support black self-determination.

II. Slavery by Another Name

As Risa Goluboff has observed, "For many southern whites, the abolition of slavery following the Civil War had spawned two related problems: a race problem and a labor problem."³¹ It was from this circumstance that sharecropping evolved as "a peculiarly southern free-labor system."³²

A sharecropper usually entered into a yearlong contract with the landlord, to grow and harvest cotton.³³ Often the contract was simply an oral agreement between the sharecropper and the landowner. For his work, the cropper was either paid a portion of the total price the cotton that he grew garnered, or paid with a portion of the harvest itself — a portion of the cotton — at the end of the contract.³⁴ It is important to note that under the sharecropping arrangement, the cropper was a wage laborer and not a tenant.³⁵ Legislatures developed and courts enforced laws that used this contractual employer/employee relationship as a tool to ensnare black workers in

³¹ Goluboff, Risa. *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*. Harvard University Press, 2007. Excerpted essay used in CRRJ course materials, 3.

³² Woodman, Harold. "Post-Civil War Southern Agriculture and the Law." *Agricultural History*, Vol. 53, No. 1, Southern Agriculture since the Civil War: A Symposium (Jan., 1973), 319-337, 321.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* 322.

³⁵ *Id.* 324-325.

conditions that were reminiscent of slavery.³⁶ Even though tenants had a lease or a contract, they still occupied a precarious financial position.³⁷

Because a sharecropper's payment was withheld until the cotton was harvested, and because tenants couldn't pay until their harvest had been sold, both cropper and tenants relied on loans or credit in order to purchase necessary items, both for farming and for daily life, in the intervening months.³⁸ A merchant would be able to place a lien on the cropper's portion of the harvest, and they would settle up afterwards.³⁹ But Harold Woodman describes the development of a legal regime in which the landlord's lien supercedes other liens.⁴⁰ Merchants didn't have any incentive to extend credit to croppers because, in the event that the cropper owed the landlord and the merchant, the merchant wouldn't be guaranteed to recover.⁴¹ Landlords and merchants developed partnerships in which the merchant sold items to the landlord, and the cropper's only source of credit and necessary items became the landlord.⁴² When the cotton was harvested and sold, and it was time to settle up, the landlord deducted what the cropper or tenant owed throughout the year from the profit they wrought from their plot. As Robin Kelley observed, the math always kept the croppers and tenants in debt.⁴³ While the law in Alabama held that the lien was only for the particular crop on which it was made, the courts construed it to mean that the lien could roll over into subsequent years.⁴⁴ The result was that croppers were trapped in a cycle of debt to landlords who were happy to have consistent and free labor.⁴⁵

36 Id.

37 Id. 329, 331.

38 Id. 322, 326.

39 Id. 328.

40 Id.

41 Id. 328-329.

42 Id. 330.

43 Kelley 35.

44 Woodman 331.

45 Woodman 332. Woodman described the complete domination that landlords exerted not only over labor, but over social and civic life: "Merchant-landlords used the system of advances and the lien laws and their domination of the

Sharecropping and its resultant power imbalance could not have been maintained without laws that drastically reduced black worker's freedom to contract.⁴⁶ Most states in the Deep South passed a set of four criminal laws that worked in tandem to govern black labor and create a legal regime that scholars have described as "peonage" in the South. These were contract-enforcement laws, vagrancy laws, anti-enticement laws and criminal surety laws.⁴⁷

Contract-enforcement laws were first adopted during Reconstruction, but they were quickly declared unconstitutional.⁴⁸ This did not stop Southern legislatures from amending the language until a law making it a crime for a worker to exit or breach a contract was finally accepted by the courts. Alabama's 1911 contract-enforcement law made it a misdemeanor to fraudulently enter into a contract with an employer in which the worker received an advance.⁴⁹ The effect of this poorly drafted law essentially made it a crime for a sharecropper to try to exit a work relationship in which the cropper was indebted to the landlord. Vagrancy laws targeted black workers who didn't own property and appeared to be unemployed. It is telling that one of the attendant circumstances in the Alabama vagrancy statute included "loiter[ing]...upon a public highway, or about a steam boat landing or a railroad station" — places where a person might legitimately be inquiring about work or would stop before to travelling on to inquire about work elsewhere.⁵⁰ The practical effect of this aspect of the vagrancy statute limited black workers' mobility and efforts to find suitable work. The penalty for loitering was a \$500 fine or 12 months

local officials to control housing, consumption patterns, and schooling on the pattern of the most completely domineered company town imaginable." (Woodman 337).

⁴⁶ Woodman 333, Cohen, William. *At Freedom's Edge: Black mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1991. 229, 246.

⁴⁷ Cohen has a long-ranging discussion of this on pages 221-247.

⁴⁸ Cohen 28, 231.

⁴⁹ Alabama General Assembly, Regular Session, General Laws 93. 1911 HeinOnline <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.ssl/ssal0219&i=221>.

⁵⁰ Alabama General Assembly, Regular Session, General Laws 400. 1907 HeinOnline <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.ssl/ssal0214&i=400>.

“hard labor” for the county.⁵¹ Anti-enticement laws made it a crime for an employer to hire a worker who already had a contract with another employer. The effect of these laws, as during slavery, was to make a black laborer’s work the property of white employers, rather than a choice a black worker could make about where and under what terms to offer his labor.⁵² Finally, criminal surety laws effectuated the system of both debt peonage and convict labor. An employer could pay for an arrested black worker’s court costs and criminal fees.⁵³ The worker would then become an indentured servant.⁵⁴ Or, if the black worker remained in jail, he could be put on a chain gang for all kinds of back-breaking labor.⁵⁵

In addition to these conditions of labor, the Great Depression added another burden to sharecroppers’ already desperate condition. Cotton prices had experienced a crash after the 1929 market collapse, and in an attempt to boost cotton prices during the Depression, the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1933.⁵⁶ The federal government paid growers to reduce the acreage of cotton in production.⁵⁷ In 1934, the Cotton Control Act made the reductions mandatory.⁵⁸ The chief beneficiaries of these programs were the landlords who sat on and controlled the local AAA boards and allocated acreage and distributed subsidies.⁵⁹ While the landlords were supposed to share the subsidy payment with their croppers, they did not. And because less land was in production, landlords evicted croppers and tenants from their property. This created a pool of desperate day laborers who could be hired just for the chopping and picking periods of cotton production at uncompetitive wage rates set by the

51 Id.

52 Woodman 335, Cohen 230.

53 Cohen 244.

54 Id.

55 Id.

56 Kelley 53.

57 Id.

58 Id.

59 Johnson, “Rural Revolt in the Southeast: History of the Share Croppers Union.”

landlords.⁶⁰ During the upheaval that the federal cotton program caused for croppers and tenants, the ILD and SCU's membership grew, and the SCU staged its most effective sharecropper strikes. Sharecroppers and ILD organizers also faced brutal violence during these times.

III. The Share Croppers Union: Victories met with Resistance

The ILD turned its focus to Alabama and the Black Belt starting in 1931, after the International Communist Part directed American communists to incorporate black civil rights as an integral part of the struggle for economic democracy.⁶¹ When ILD organizers arrived in the Black Belt they discovered that "...more than three quarters of the nine and a half million Negroes in the South live in indescribable poverty, crushed by debts and starvation" and sharecroppers "toiling hopelessly in peonage, chained to the landlord by debts which no toil can wipe out."⁶² For the ILD, economic justice and racial justice were inextricably bound together.

The ILD advocated for "full social and political equality" for African-Americans.⁶³ Uniting black workers and white workers to overthrow capitalism was a key aim of the organizing activity in Alabama. In its election platform, the Communist Party included overturning anti-labor laws as a key goal, and described "anti-Negro" laws as "the most vicious anti-labor laws":

60 Kelley 53-54.

61 Uhlmann, Jennifer Ruthanne. "The Communist Civil Rights Movement: Legal Activism in the United States, 1919–1946." Order No. 3257190 University of California, Los Angeles, 2006. Ann Arbor: ProQuest. Web. 15 Nov. 2018. 177-180.

62 Haywood, Harry and Milton Howard. *Lynching: A Weapon of National Oppression*. New York, International Pamphlets, 1932, 6.

63 United States. Cong. Hearing. Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States. Nov. 14, 1930. 71st Congress. 2nd Sess. Washington: GPO, 1930. McDuff Exhibit No. 1 F "Election Platform of the Communist Party of the United States." 117. Hathi Trust Digital Library.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112104453755?urlappend=%3Bseq=125> (Fish Committee Hearings).

“The antinegro laws through are an attempt, on the one hand, to make possible an even more merciless exploitation of the negro section of the working class...on the other hand, these laws aim to maintain in the minds of the workers themselves antiworking class ideology of a colorline.”⁶⁴

The Communist Party saw racism as “antilabor and support of capitalism itself.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, as Robin Kelley writes, the ILD gave poor blacks a voice when other civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, were less concerned with economic inequality and the way racism perpetuated it: “The ILD was not just one additional voice speaking out on behalf of poor blacks; it was a movement composed of poor blacks. It not only provided free legal defense and sought to expose the “class basis” of racism in the South, it gave black working people what traditional middle-class organizations would not — a political voice.”⁶⁶

During the period of ILD and SCU activity in the Black Belt, sharecroppers faced constant violence and opposition from law enforcement and landlords. Law enforcement officials and what the ILD describes as “landlord mobs” raided SCU meetings. Police with assistance from private citizens arrested and tortured ILD organizers and known SCU members to extract information from them about other ILD and SCU members and organization activities. Police arrested and harassed striking sharecroppers, and mobs of police and private citizens murdered local SCU leaders.⁶⁷ It is a reasonable deduction that a number of law enforcement agencies across counties were coordinating with each other to halt ILD and SCU activities, because law

⁶⁴ Fish Hearings, 119.

⁶⁵ Id.

⁶⁶ Kelley 91.

⁶⁷ A picture emerges from the Robert Washington affidavit, Wood “To Live and Die in Dixie,” Jackson writing in *New Masses*, ILD letters to Gov. Bibb Graves in the Governor’s papers, and articles in *The Southern Worker* and *The Labor Defender*. See “Landlord Mobs of Ala. Attack Croppers, Fighting Starvation” *Southern Worker* Vol. 1 No. 49 July 25, 1931 and Jackson, Albert “You Can Kill Me — but You Can Never Scare Me,” *Labor Defender*, Oct. 1935.

enforcement tactics were uniform across counties. In addition, cross-county abductions, as in the case of Joe Spinner Johnson, would occur, and law enforcement officials in one county would ask about ILD members in a different county.

The following section of this paper focuses on two highly publicized incidents of sharecroppers engaging in armed self-defense to demonstrate what sharecroppers risked by organizing, and the violence that the entire community faced as a result of the organizing. The next section examines the two strikes in 1935, during which Joe Spinner Johnson and Willie Foster were killed.

A. Sharecropper Resistance at Camp Hill and Reeltown

The “Camp Hill” incident which occurred in Tallapoosa County on July 15, 1931, was an early moment of mobilizing for the SCU. Sharecroppers who were already organizing under the leadership of two brothers — Ralph and Tom Gray — approached the ILD for assistance.⁶⁸ As Kelley describes the Gray family, they had a history of being politically active and proud,⁶⁹ as exemplified by their ancestor who was a state legislator during Reconstruction.⁷⁰ At the time that the Gray brothers approached the ILD, landlords had begun withholding food and cash advances for tenants and sharecroppers, in an effort to create a labor pool for the sawmills.⁷¹ The farmers and their ILD organizer came up with the following list of demands:

- “1. Food advances continued until settlement time;
2. The right to sell their own crops
3. Small gardens for their own use;
4. Cotton picking wages paid in full in cash

68 Kelley 39.

69 Id.

70 Id.

71 Id. See also Clyde Johnson “Rural Revolt in the Southeast: History of the Share Croppers Union.”

5. A three hour mid day rest

6. A nine-month school year for negro children, and a free school bus.”⁷²

County and city law enforcement raided a Share Croppers Union meeting, and followed attendees as they sought to escape.⁷³ The fleeing sharecroppers barricaded themselves in Ralph Gray’s house, held off a the law enforcement posse, and then escaped.⁷⁴ Ralph Gray stayed behind, and when the posse returned with reinforcements, they murdered him. They burned his home and left his body on the Dadeville courthouse steps.⁷⁵ The violence spread. White mobs fired into sharecroppers’ homes, and croppers and white vigilantes had skirmishes on the roads.⁷⁶ Thirty five croppers were jailed, and the ILD sent attorneys down to represent them.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the ILD and sharecroppers continued organizing, and in 1932 after the SCU threatened a strike, landlords capitulated.⁷⁸ They agreed to let sharecroppers sell their own share of the cotton that they grew.⁷⁹

Other core goals of the SCU in Tallapoosa County included debt relief and abolishing the practice of charging interest on necessary items, such as food and seed.⁸⁰ In this context, an indebted black farmer name Clifford James, from Reeltown, Tallapoosa County, became involved in the SCU, and even became the leader of his local.⁸¹ When his landlord sent a sheriff to seize James’ livestock after failing to reach an agreement about his debts, James and his friends were ready and armed to prevent the seizure.⁸² The sheriff left and returned with

72Johnson, “Rural Revolt in the Southeast: History of the Share Croppers Union.” (Clyde Johnson Papers).

73 Kelley 41.

74 Id.

75 Id.

76 “Landlord Mobs of Ala. Attack Croppers, Fighting Starvation” *Southern Worker* Vol. 1 No. 49 July 25, 1931.

77 Johnson puts the number 35, although Robin Kelley puts it between 34 - 55 sharecroppers. (Kelley 41).

78 Kelley 48.

79 Id.

80 Kelley 49.

81 Id.

82 Id.

reinforcements and a gun battle ensued.⁸³ In addition to targeting James and his friends, the mob unleashed a reign of terror on black people in the vicinity. Kelley writes, “Entire [black] families were forced to take refuge in the woods [as] white vigilante groups broke into black homes and seized guns, ammunition and other property; and blacks were warned if they appeared in the Liberty Hill section of Reeltown, they would be shot on sight.”⁸⁴ Twenty one black farmers were arrested in relation to the Reeltown incident, and the ILD sent lawyers to defend them.⁸⁵

The events at Camp Hill and Reeltown brought greater attention and interest to the Share Croppers Union and the ILD, and increased the ranks of sharecroppers joining the union. By June 1933, the ILD was reporting 2,000 members in the SCU, with 73 locals.⁸⁶ Robert Wood, the ILD secretary for its Southern Headquarters reported a membership of over 11,000 sharecroppers in a 1936 pamphlet.⁸⁷

In addition, the New Deal cotton reduction program, which took effect in 1933, spurred membership.⁸⁸ As Clyde Johnson, the SCU secretary from 1934-1936, recalled, “While four union members were murdered in the Battle of Reeltown, and six went to prison, interest in the SCU grew. Al Murphy, [a Black communist from Birmingham and the SCU secretary from 1932-1934,] reported union members were angry at the New Deal crop reduction program. Reduced acreage reduced possible income. Worst of all, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) gave big landlords control of the acreage allotment program. Small farm owners and renters got small allotments....croppers and tenants were tricked or forced to sign

83 Kelley 50.

84 Id.

85 Johnson, “Rural Revolt in the Southeast: History of the Share Croppers Union.”

86 Kelley 52.

87 Wood, 25. It might be wise to take Wood’s numbers with a grain of salt, as he might have had an incentive to exaggerate the number for purposes of publicity and growing membership.

88 Kelley 54.

over their share of AAA payments.”⁸⁹ Because fewer acres were in production, landlords weren’t letting sharecroppers work on their land for a portion of the total harvest, and they began mass evictions of tenants after they had done the cotton planting in the spring. Landlords would invite these farmers back as day laborers to chop the cotton — cultivating and tending to it — for a little as 30 cents a day.⁹⁰

B. SCU Strikes

As the membership and geography grew, the SCU was able to coordinate regional strikes at critical periods of the cotton growing season. But the SCU successes, their ambitious approach, and increasing visibility of the ILD (both in rural Alabama and in Birmingham) exposed ILD organizers and black sharecroppers to more violence. The organizers and strikers in the 1935 cotton choppers’ strike and the subsequent cotton pickers’ strike faced unprecedented levels of violence. White organizers weren’t immune from law enforcement violence, but only the black sharecroppers and organizers were killed.

The cotton choppers strike was scheduled to commence on May 1, 1935.⁹¹ The strike encompassed plantations in Lowndes, Tallapoosa, Montgomery, Lee, Randolph, Dallas and Chambers County.⁹² The workers demands included a rate of one dollar per day of work, a ten hour work day, equal wages for women and children, and broadly, the end of discrimination against African-Americans.⁹³ The strike was successful in all but Lowndes and Dallas counties, where organizers faced brutal resistance. Robert Wood, the ILD secretary in the South, lists the following incidents of violence in connection with the cotton choppers strike:

⁸⁹ Johnson, “Rural Revolt in the Southeast: History of the Share Croppers Union.”

⁹⁰ Kelley 161.

⁹¹ Id.

⁹² Kelley 161-162.

⁹³ Kelley 161.

1. Two white ILD organizers, Blaine Owen and Henry Johnson (pseudonyms) went down to Selma, Dallas County, to organize ahead of the cotton choppers strike. Their SCU meeting was raided by “police and landlord deputies.” The police mob took the organizers to the outskirts of Selma, beat them with “horsewhips and heavy knotted ropes” and burned them with open flames.
2. One of the striking cotton choppers, named Carter, was jailed for 12 weeks, and police tried to get him to name names.
3. Willie Foster was picked up by Selma police, jailed and presumably murdered.⁹⁴

Kelley reported that 16 SCU members were arrested in Dallas County, and several were beaten; two white ILD organizers (Johnson and Owen), were arrested and beaten; two black ILD organizers (Sol Davis and Robert Washington) were arrested and beaten; and Willie Foster, a third black ILD organizer, was arrested and killed.⁹⁵ Despite this violent resistance by landlords and their police force, the SCU did get their demands through strikes in the other counties: some plantations agreed to pay one dollar a day, while others settled for 75 cents a day, plus transportation and food for workers.⁹⁶ The union didn’t rest for long. In June and July, the SCU started organizing the locals for the cotton pickers strike which commenced in August.⁹⁷ During the organizing for the August strike, Joe Spinner Johnson was picked up and killed.

The cotton pickers strike began on the plantation of J.R. Bell in Lowndes County, on August 19, 1935.⁹⁸ The main demand was for pay of one dollar a day per one hundred pounds of

94 Wood 25-27.

95 Kelley 162-163.

96 Kelley 163.

97 Johnson, “Rural Revolt in the Southeast: History of the Share Croppers Union.”

98 “You Can Kill Me — but You Can Never Scare Me,” *Labor Defender*, Oct. 1935.

cotton picked.⁹⁹ Landlords were paying forty cents per one hundred pounds. Here too, law enforcement authorities and landlords unleashed a reign of terror.

The clearest example of law enforcement collusion with private landlords comes from an oft-repeated story from the pickers strike. When J.R. Bell learned that no workers were coming to pick his cotton, he called the Lowndes County Sheriff, R.E. Woodruff, to enlist law enforcement help to force the strikers back to work.¹⁰⁰ One of the strike leaders, Willie Witcher, said he wouldn't hear any strike-breaking talk, and the Sheriff shot him. (Witcher survived).¹⁰¹ The sheriff then rounded up a mob and went to sharecroppers' houses, harassing and beating them.¹⁰² A few days later, another SCU leader, Jim Press Merriweather and his wife, Anna, were targeted by a mob of "about 25 landlords and deputies."¹⁰³ Anna was hanged from the rafters of her house but survived after SCU members came and cut her down. Her husband was murdered.¹⁰⁴ Ed Bracey, another SCU leader, was also murdered.¹⁰⁵ Croppers took to the woods to hide out, lest they get attacked in their own homes.¹⁰⁶ Another union leader, Smith Watkins, was stabbed and shot multiple times by the mob, and his body was dumped in a swamp.¹⁰⁷ Robin Kelley described a concerted effort by law enforcement to assassinate SCU leaders.¹⁰⁸ It is instructive to think of powerful landlords in the Black Belt counties as essentially warlords. They were private

⁹⁹ Jackson, Albert (pseudonym for Clyde Johnson). Letter to Gov. Bibb Graves. 25 August 1935. Other demands stated in the letter included payment of one dollar a day plus two meals and transportation or room and board for day laborers, 20 cents per hour and a forty-hour work week for all relief jobs. Kelley noted other demands, including equal pay regardless of race, age or gender, and an end to evictions. (165).

¹⁰⁰ Clyde Johnson recalls this both in an article he wrote for the *Labor Defender's* Oct. 1935 issue and in his remarks about the SCU to *The Citadel* in 1979. Robert Wood, who likely got his information from Johnson, also recounts this story in "To Live and Die in Dixie."

¹⁰¹ *Id.*

¹⁰² Johnson, "Rural Revolt in the Southeast: History of the Share Croppers Union."

¹⁰³ *Id.* Robert Wood also includes this account of Jim and Anna Merriweather.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ *Id.*

¹⁰⁶ *Id.*

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ Kelley 166.

individuals who manipulated the levers of government and law enforcement. Police operated basically as a private militia to protect the landlords' interests.

Despite the loss of life, the August strike was a success. In reporting on the significant victories of the SCU, *The Crisis*, the NAACP magazine, noted that the Lowndes County piece-rate increased from 35 cents to 65 cents after the strike, and in surrounding counties where the SCU met less resistance, the union got the one dollar piece rate it was seeking.¹⁰⁹ Further, the article noted the social change that the Tallapoosa County SCU, the original SCU local, had been able to achieve through organizing: "Strange to say, Tallapoosa County, the very heart of the union, experienced a minimum of violence. There the organization is so strong that mere letters of protest have often been sufficient to stop the joint depredations of deputies and ku kluxers. The Tallapoosa County branches have also been able to secure school buses for the transportation of Negro pupils."¹¹⁰ After the first pitched battle in 1931, the Tallapoosa County locals were sufficiently well-organized that they could dictate demands related not only to conditions of labor, but also demands related to political life.

C. The Backlash Against Union Organizing

Joining the union awakened and articulated feelings sharecroppers must have held all along, but they had been prevented from actualizing their constitutional rights and their rights of self-determination with respect to their own lives and their labor. In a letter to Governor Bibb Graves, decrying the violence, the Dadeville local of the SCU wrote,

¹⁰⁹ Preece, Harold. "Epic of the Black Belt" *The Crisis*, March 1936. 75, 92. Robin Kelley paints a more sobering picture, describing victories in Lee and Tallapoosa county, but describing the union in Lowndes County as emerging with little if no material gains and a number of murdered sharecropper leaders: "the union emerged from the debacle quite shaken. Opposition was so overwhelming that by early September strikers were returning to work at the rate of forty cents per one hundred pounds." (167).

¹¹⁰ Preece 92.

“We condemn the landlord for howling about this strike being a revolution. We are waking up to the facts that we have some rights and that the right to fight against starvation is one of them. There is nothing that can stop us from striking for higher wages no matter what the landlords and their gun thugs and sheriffs think about it. For years we have been held under bondage. Now because we use a few of the rights that are really ours, the landlords want to murder and kill us and drive us deeper into starvation.”¹¹¹

Despite the victories the SCU gained and the awakening empowerment its members may have felt in the face of violent resistance, the SCU was not long-lived. Clyde Johnson facilitated the SCU merger with other farmer unions. But the other unions were comprised of independent farmers, not wage laborers and sharecroppers, the main constituency of the SCU.¹¹² On top of this, the mass evictions, the mechanization of cotton production, and population loss as rural African-Americans headed to cities in the hope of finding better work, made the continued existence of a robust union impossible.¹¹³

The National Labor Relations Act, which was passed in 1935, to protect workers’ rights to unionize and engage in mutual aid for the purposes of bettering their working conditions, explicitly exempted agricultural workers from its protections.¹¹⁴ In effect, the political and legal terrain in which the SCU was operating proved insurmountable. We might speculate on how history might have been different if the political terrain had been more favorable.

Based on the reaction of landlords and law enforcement to the ILD position and its organizing activities, it becomes clear that landlords, law enforcement and the ILD were in agreement about one thing: capitalism maintains white supremacy. All parties understood that

111 Dadeville Local Share Croppers Union. Letter to Gov. Bibb Graves. Undated 1935. Governor Bibb Graves Papers (1935-1939), Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

112 Kelley 170-175.

113 Id.

114 29 U.S.C § 152(3).

racism was necessary for maintaining the current economic system, along with its attendant political and social consequences. **Because the SCU and ILD's actions challenged this whole system, law enforcement authorities and landlords went to great lengths to destroy them.-**

Keeping African-Americans in economic subjugation meant keeping them politically subjugated, too.

The Ku Klux Klan was involved in repressing Communist organizing.¹¹⁵ Klan publications openly appealed to fear over the kind of economic and racial restructuring that Communists were calling for and working to effectuate, by focusing on the possibility of interracial marriages and potential demands by African-Americans for equality in employment and education.¹¹⁶ When two ILD organizers were arrested and released to a vigilante gang in Selma, they reported one of the men in the mob screamed at them, "You all done all the talkin' you're agoin' to in Dallas County — stirrin' up your niggers. A dollar a day for cotton choppin';?...They ain't a nigger in this county whose life is worth a goddamn nickel when we git through cleanin' up this here union."¹¹⁷

While the Klan is the most obvious expression of white supremacy and racial terrorism, the commitment to maintaining white supremacy spread beyond Klan members. People who weren't members of the Klan were involved in beating and killing organizers and union members, whether they were the ones holding the whips or if they were thousands of miles away from the violence, but involved in creating a political and legal climate that prevented the cause of labor and civil rights from flourishing.¹¹⁸

115 Feldman, Glenn Alan. "The Ku Klux Klan in Alabama, 1915-1954." Order No. 9700731 Auburn University, 1996. Ann Arbor: ProQuest. Web. 15 Nov. 2018.

116 Id. 408.

117 Id. 420.

118 It is interesting to read through the testimony of the Birmingham Chief of Police during the Fish Committee Hearings investigating Communist activity. In that exchange, there is clearly a great deal of consternation and interest that African-Americans were the primary attendees of Communist meetings, and that they even ate together

IV. Black Cooperation and Mutual Aid

The tradition of black cooperation and collective action was carried over from Africa and reorganized in the context of enslavement.¹¹⁹ W.E.B. DuBois argues that the black church was the first cite of black cooperation and collective action during slavery, where meetings were held and plans for slave rebellions were laid.¹²⁰ During emancipation, DuBois cites reports from the Freedmen’s Bureau, noting African-Americans pooling their resources to purchase land: “They have everywhere manifested a great desire to become landowners,” the Freedmen’s Bureau official noted.¹²¹

Veronica Womack argues that the Share Croppers Union represents a different approach to concurrent attempts by African-Americans to buy land and prosper within the capitalist system. “[The SCU was] local, black-led and promoted black advancement for the rural landless. They did not, however, further capitalist or private ownership of the means of production.”¹²² Rather, self-determination, the exercise of their legal rights, and the right to economic security for the group — not premised on private property ownership — was the SCU’s goal. This is a key insight about how future generations of black farmers and black rural residents have thought about land ownership and larger goals for self-determination. In the decades after the Share Croppers Union, black farm cooperatives emerged as a model for black farmers to band together and overcome the racist market system.

with white communists. See pp 91-105.

119 DuBois, W.E.B. *Economic Co-operation among Negro Americans* Atlanta, Atlanta University Press, 1907, 12-24.

120 Id. 24-26.

121 Id. 42. Veronica Womack managed to create a record of the amount of land owned by black farmers in Alabama. Black farm ownership peaked in 1920 with 1.3 million acres. Womack, Veronica. “Black Power in the Alabama Black Belt to the 1970s.” *Beyond Forty Acres and a Mule : African American Landowning Families since Reconstruction*, edited by Debra A. Reid, and Evan P. Bennett, University Press of Florida, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northeastern-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1026587>.

122 Womack 244.

One of the most famous, though short-lived, black farm cooperatives was founded by Fannie Lou Hamer, the Freedom Farms Cooperative (FFC) in Sunflower County, Mississippi, and operated from 1968-1976.¹²³ The cooperative was designed to provide basic necessities and opportunities for economic development that the political system denied to black tenant farmers: food, shelter and a small business incubator.¹²⁴ Hamer recognized that having ownership over land meant being able to exercise political rights without fear of reprisal. In Mississippi at the time, many black tenants and sharecroppers who had registered to vote were evicted by their white landlords.¹²⁵ The FFC grew cash crops and produce for families who were members of the cooperative, and for their neighbors who were in need.¹²⁶ Beyond the farm, the cooperative helped its members purchase homes, and even operated one of the first Head Start programs in Mississippi.¹²⁷ While the FFC depended upon donations and was forced to shut down when it wasn't able to become financially independent, the lesson is an important one: "Hamer's efforts to develop a cooperative intentional community, with housing, employment, educational opportunities, health care and access to healthy food, reflected a vision of [a] self-determined, politically engaged, liberated community."¹²⁸

In Alabama the Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative Association (SWAFCA) emerged in 1967 because the conditions for black tenant farmers hadn't changed much since the 1930s when SCU was organizing.¹²⁹ SWAFCA coordinated farmers in growing certain crops at the same time, so that they had a sufficient yield to sell to large supermarkets outside of the

123 White, Monica M. "A pig and a garden:" Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farms Cooperative. *Food and Foodways*, Vol. 25, no. 1. 20-39, 26, 33.

124 *Id.* 24.

125 *Id.* 26.

126 *Id.* 27.

127 *Id.* 28-29.

128 *Id.* 34.

129 "A New Life Stirs in Alabama Soil" *Black Enterprise* October 1970, 36-37.

state.¹³⁰ Bill Harrison, the SWAFCA president, wanted a way to enable black farmers to stay in the South by providing an avenue for economic self-determination. He imagined, that in a couple of years SWAFCA could build its own processing facilities, providing even more jobs. “I can envision one of these days maybe we’ll own a pickle plant of our own. We could get a lot of people jobs around here, give people security. And if he gets security, a man thinks politically about other things.”¹³¹ For SWAFCA and its members, like the SCU, economic self-sufficiency was a pathway to political power, and self-sufficiency didn’t have to come through private land ownership. SWAFCA members were share tenants, too.

Because SWAFCA imagined economic self-sufficiency for black farmers, it was subject to political harassment from white ruling elites.¹³² Three Alabama congressmen forced an audit of the organization, and because SWAFCA’s funding exclusively came from the federal government, state officials and Alabama members of Congress often tried to block federal government grants to the organization using the same old red-baiting tactics, claiming that the co-op was associated with “subversive” groups.¹³³ This institutional opposition, in addition to other external and internal factors, led to SWAFCA’s demise in the 1980s.¹³⁴ SWAFCA supporter Francis X. Walter said whites opposed the organization because it thwarted their “efforts to turn Alabama into ‘a land rolling in pasture, forested with pulp wood, empty of Negroes.’”¹³⁵

Nonetheless, black farm cooperatives and other forms of black cooperative ownership for self-determination and empowerment still exist now. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives,

130 Id. 37.

131 Id. 40.

132 de Jong, Greta. *You Can't Eat Freedom: Southerners and Social Justice after the Civil Rights Movement*, University of North Carolina Press, 2016, 105 -106. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northeastern-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4525805>.

133 “A New Life Stirs in Alabama Soil,” 39-40.

134 de Jong 186.

135 Id. 106.

founded in 1967, continues to provide legal assistance to prevent black land loss and technical assistance to black farmers to grow and market their crops.¹³⁶ In the Northeast, an informal coalition of farmers of color are working to develop a land trust.¹³⁷ In the South, a number of radical black cooperatives in the Black Belt continue the work of promoting community self-help and self-determination — with cooperative land ownership and cooperative living at the core . Examples of these efforts include Cooperation Jackson¹³⁸ and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement.¹³⁹ The latter is a separatist organization seeking to create intentional communities and a mode of organizing Black life that isn't premised on the American political or economic system.

V. Conclusion and Reflections

The Share Croppers Union engaged in a political project that demanded a leap of imagination and indescribable bravery from its members and collaborators. The organization had a golden moment of organizing and collective action that lasted from 1931-1936. That they were able to exist at all under a system of legal and physical violence is a victory. Beyond that, they were able to build strength in their numbers, extract better working conditions, and even transformed their economic power into social power in at least one county.

However, dominant landlords in the counties were able to exert political and economic control, not just over the sharecroppers and tenants, but over the apparatus of the local government. Landlords controlled the distribution of cotton reduction subsidies, they wielded the

136 Federation of Southern Cooperatives: <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/files%20home%20page/mission.htm>.

137 Northeast Farmers of Color: <http://www.soulfirefarm.org/meet-the-farmers/coalitions/northeast-farmers-of-color/>.

138 Cooperation Jackson: <https://cooperationjackson.org/principles/>.

139 Malcom X Grassroots: <https://www.mxgm.org/ourwork/>.

local police like their own personal militia, and they utilized the legal system to keep black people in a form of legally sanctioned peonage. The goal was to maintain white supremacy, both as a political and economic system. Economic democracy was the first step to recognizing political democracy. That the ILD was advocating a position of economic and social equality for African-Americans and that African-Americans were the dominant membership of the ILD in Alabama was a terrifying challenge to white supremacy. It is apparent that the Black Belt counties' law enforcement agents coordinated with each other to harass, torture and kill sharecroppers and ILD organizers, and that landlords were able to call on law enforcement to quell the strikes that threatened their economic dominance over the sharecroppers.

It is easy to want to write of the Share Croppers Union in a heroic way. Accounts of the Gray brothers compared them to Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, the leaders of the slave rebellions. But I don't mind this narrative gloss. The sharecroppers I learned about in high school and that I saw represented in movies before undertaking this research couldn't meet their landlord's eyes. This representation is a pernicious lie that strips African-Americans of their agency and their ingenuity to exist in a system that refused to recognize their existence as humans.

I fear that the ILD contributions to the sharecroppers, which is documented because of the ILD's privilege compared to the black sharecroppers, sometimes overshadows the role black sharecroppers played in their own destinies. The ILD was an organization of mostly white people who left a historical record in the form of meeting minutes and publications, but it was the sharecroppers who were already organizing and reached out to the ILD for more support and assistance. It was the sharecroppers who were willing to endure incredible personal risk — economically and physically — **and unite to improve their work and living conditions.** The

corollary to this, of course, is that we would never have known Joe Spinner Johnson's or Willie Foster's names, except for the ILD. They exist in the historical record because the ILD memorialized them in letters and telegrams, in their publications. They left a paper trail for future co-strugglers to piece together and learn from.

The great legacy of the sharecroppers was their example of collective action and mutual aid that was not premised on private property ownership. They created a black-led movement with white collaborators who willingly took a sidelined position and used their privilege as white people to aid their black brothers and sisters. The sharecroppers show us that even in the most adverse conditions, the most marginalized group — one that doesn't possess capital or land — can harness its collective power through cooperation, mutual aid and daring to imagine that a better world can exist. Imagine if they were able to exist in a legal and political system, where such mutual support and cooperation was encouraged. Imagine what they could have done.