



“Theory and Practice:” Analyzing The Militancy of the Share Croppers’ Union at Camp Hill, AL in 1931



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Political Science and History Departments: 1 Senior Thesis

Introduction

Camp Hill, of Tallapoosa County, Alabama was a small settlement, bordering the edges of the Black Belt.

By the summer of 1931, 800 of Tallapoosa’s 1600 Black sharecroppers were members of the Share Croppers Union (SCU), a Communist (CP)-affiliated organization which sought to defend sharecroppers’ rights to crops and to land against the incursions of Jim Crow capitalism.

How did the Communist Party, the SCU and its rank-and-file members theorize race and class?

How did these theorizations impact their tactics and organizing?

Literature Review

Racecraft, Fields and Fields:

- explain that race is a human-constructed category deriving from the false “conception” that humans are organized in natural, unchangeable “unequal” groups.
- define racism as both “the theory and the practice of applying a... double standard based on ancestry, and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard.”
- theorize racecraft as “mental terrain” that emerges from “human action and imagination” in race and racism

Black Reconstruction, Du Bois:

- analyzes the intersection of racial and labor subjugation to argue that the Black workers were “the ultimate exploited” by “white capital” and white supremacy
- asserts that Abolition should have shaped true democracy by building a coalition of “the champions of universal suffrage [immigrants] and the rights of the freedmen, together with the leaders of labor [white working class], the small landholders of the West, and logically, the poor whites of the South”

Hammer and Hoe, Kelley:

- Shows that the CP combined European Marxism with the Black tradition of “evasive and cunning” methods of resistance that made possible the illegal organizing work
- argues that for Black radicals “the Russians were the ‘new Yankees,’ ‘Stalin was the ‘new Lincoln,’ and ‘the Soviet Union was the new Ethiopia”
- demonstrates that the Marxism tradition, when combined with their own language, linked the struggles of poor Southerners to “world politics,” challenged race and class hegemonic ideologies and “created an atmosphere in which ordinary people could... criticize society

Black Marxism, Robinson:

- observes that Marxism is inherently implicated in Western thought and in capitalism, and therefore had the same “theoretical and ideological weaknesses”
- argues that European radicalism is inherently limited and therefore, points to Black leftism as a more radical form political thought and more genuine criticism of the West because of its theoretical protest origins in slavery

Methods

My senior thesis combines final projects for political science and history. I wrote the literature review and political theoretical foundations for my senior thesis in history last fall, in Professor Michelle Smith’s Colloquium, *Race and Modern Political Thought*. This poster combines findings from that paper with the findings for my first thesis chapter: “Beginnings: Camp Hill, July 15, 1931.”

I use Marxist theory, critical race theory and social movement theory for my analysis of the SCU’s theory and practice. Archival analysis is the main method in my senior thesis. I utilize archives from NYU’s CPUSA collection, UNC-Chapel Hill’s Southern Historical Collection and GSU’s Southern Labor Archives.

Evidence: Camp Hill

- **Content Warning: Violence, Anti-Black Racism, Anti-Labor Violence**
- Around 80 union members were present for a general meeting in Camp Hill, AL. However, the sheriff raided the meeting with “vigilantes” who beat those present.
- The “mob” then broke into organizer Tommy Gray’s home, and beat his wife with the intention of gathering information about the SCU.
- They only stopped assaulting the family when organizer Ralph Gray arrived and pointed his gun at the Sheriff.
- The next day, 150 sharecroppers held a and subsequently, the sheriff arrived with Camp Hill police.
- Ralph Gray was armed and guarding the meeting. The group of police, in a car, opened fire on Ralph Gray, shooting at his legs. Subsequently, Gray fired back at the car, shooting Sheriff Young in the stomach.
- The meeting broke up; other share croppers found Gray lying on the road and carried him into his house.
- Union members barricaded themselves in Gray’s house and held off a white mob long enough to escape. At the end of the shootout, two deputies and eight sharecroppers were wounded.
- Returning with reinforcements, Wilson enters the Gray house and kills Ralph Gray in cold blood - Tommy Gray reported that one of the reinforcements “shoved a pistol in his mouth and blew his brains out.”
- They arrested everyone in the house and burned it to the ground. By July 19, sixty share croppers were arrested and twenty were charged with felonies.
- Other members of the union were being “hunted down” by over 400 vigilantes. These vigilantes carried out “genocidal attacks” on Camp Hill’s Black community. Chief Wilson promised to “kill every member found of the Reds there and throw them into the creek” and openly admitted to lynching some men.
- The International Labor Defense ended up defending all 35 sharecroppers who were arrested and held in jail. Ultimately, Alabama dropped all charges against these sharecroppers.



Figure 1: “Carry On!” from *Daily Worker*, July 22, 1931

Argument

- The rank and file of the SCU theorized the union as an organization designed and able to defend their land and crops against anti-Black racism and capitalism.
- This ideology of defending the poor, specifically the Black rural poor, to their right to safety and independence gave the union a form of collective power and militancy heretofore unseen.
- When this ethos was combined with the Depression deteriorating conditions and the increased predatory behavior from white landlords, the concept of property defense was literally maintained with arms, barricades and shootouts, against Communist tactical preferences.
- The ethos of self-defense and its formation into violent and confrontational organizing tactics that the SCU maintained derived not from the CP, but from the early grassroots actions of Black sharecroppers in Camp Hill, Tallapoosa County, Alabama.
- The events at Camp Hill shaped the base theorizations of the SCU by shaping how the CP would think of Black rural labor organizing: as the result of desperation and “bare life” conditions, as part of the creation of Black martyrs, and as evidence for the Black Belt Thesis.



Figure 2: Black and White Workers – Unite!, *Southern Worker*, August 16, 1930

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