

8-3-2006

Strike Fever: Labor Unrest, Civil Rights and the Left in Atlanta, 1972

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STRIKE FEVER: LABOR UNREST, CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE LEFT IN
ATLANTA, 1972

by

MONICA WAUGH-BENTON

Under the Direction of Clifford Kuhn

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to provide a history of African American working class and Leftist activism in Atlanta, Georgia during the early 1970s. It places a series of wildcat strikes within the context of political and social transition, and charges unequal economic conditions and a racially charged discriminatory environment as primary causes. The legacies of both the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left are identified as key contributing factors to this wave of labor unrest. One path taken by former Civil Right activists was to focus on poor peoples' movements, and one course taken by the 1960s-era New Left activists was to join forces with the working class in an attempt to build a New Communist movement. In Atlanta, these two forces converged and generated a notable force against some of city's most prominent employers.

INDEX WORDS: Civil Rights Movement, Labor, Labor Unrest, Communism, the New Communist Movement, wildcat strike, working class, Hosea Williams, October League, Marxism, Marxist-Leninist, Mao, Mead Corporation, Atlanta, the sixties, 1970s, Maynard Jackson, Andrew Young, Tyrone Brooks, Nan Orrock, social movements

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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ATLANTA, 1972

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August 2006

*To the workers and activists
who fought against discrimination and poor working conditions*

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the people who helped and supported me throughout this project. Dr. Cliff Kuhn challenged me, provided guidance, and maintained faith in my abilities even when I started to doubt myself. Dr. Ian Fletcher introduced me to this topic and offered helpful insight and constant encouragement. Dr. Jacquelyn Rouse imparted a greater appreciation for grassroots activism, and Dr. Christine Lutz provided critical information and assistance in the initial stages of this project. Gary Washington not only shared his story, but inspired me with his passion to bring it to light. John Fletcher and Nan Orrock trusted me with their memories when many others refused. Lauren Kata at the Southern Labor Archives was especially helpful and enthusiastic. I also appreciated the assistance of the staff at Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University, Emory University, and University of Georgia libraries, as well as the King Library and Archive at the MLK Center. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Kerry Taylor for sharing material he acquired from Jerry Harris. I am also very thankful to Damon Epperson for allowing me to work a flexible schedule throughout the pursuit of my degree and for his patience. Most importantly, I thank my family - Marcus Benton my husband and partner in life, my parents Pat and Charles Waugh III who have always believed in me, Charles IV and Charee, Violet Waugh, and the late Anna Lee Gaston Hall and Charles Waugh II, and friend Jennifer Graham.

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Introduction

I initially learned of the strike at Atlanta's Mead Packaging Plant in the book *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*, by Max Elbaum during a directed readings course on social movements of the 1960s and 70s. The brief mention of Atlanta intrigued me since I was not aware of any radical group activity in the city during this era. Considering that the strike took place within miles of campus and the age of the activists involved, I thought it would be an ideal topic for an oral history project the following semester, so I began researching.

Research

I was pleased to find that Georgia State University's Southern Labor Archives held a collection called the Joseph Nelson Papers, which included a great deal of information about the strike. In his book, Elbaum mentions that there was a film on the strike, produced by members of the communist organizers, the October League. Fortunately, I was able to locate and borrow a copy of the film. Next, I consulted the newspapers *The Great Speckled Bird*, *The Atlanta Journal*, *The Call*, *The Atlanta Daily World*, and *The Atlanta Voice*. Upon doing so, I noticed that a number of strikes occurred in Atlanta throughout 1972, in addition to the strike at Mead, and realized there must be a larger story than I expected to find.

The arbitration documents and correspondence held in the Joseph Nelson collection contained a long list of names of workers who had been dismissed in the Mead strike, as well as one worker who had killed his supervisor the previous year. I searched the phone book and, through trial and error, was able to locate some of the participants and the convicted worker. I talked to several of them on the telephone. After introducing myself, each person paused in a similar manner, and then very politely but firmly told me that they were not interested in speaking to me about the subject. I expected that I would meet some resistance at this level, but thought that it was simply reluctance to participate because they felt that they did not have much to contribute. After several attempts to convince each person of the story's importance, I made no progress.

Next, I consulted some of my professors for suggestions as to whom I should try to contact. The same names surfaced in each conversation; so I attempted to reach them next. After a few failed attempts Lauren Kata, the archivist at the Southern Labor Archives, introduced me to one person I had been trying to reach - Gary Washington, the current host of WRFG radio's labor forum. Washington turned out to be the former treasurer of the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers, the strike's organizing committee, and agreed to an interview. From him, I was able to gain useful insight into the strike, the mobilizing efforts, and the interactions among various community and organizational entities during that time period.

I continued to have trouble convincing other participants to talk. In one case I spoke to a former member of the October League, who was somewhat leery at first but warmed up during our conversations. He agreed to be interviewed and even said he would help me with the project by copying a disc of scanned strike documents he had. His participation seemed promising and we ended our conversation on an up-beat note. After many attempts to reach him again, he never responded. A similar situation occurred with another former OL member, one of the few African American women to join the group, who agreed to be interviewed, but then ignored my repeated calls. One participant, who is now a successful businessman, contacted a member of the History Department and asked that person to relay the message to me that he was not involved in any way. Another former OL member suggested that I change my topic because he thought nobody would admit their involvement with a communist organization in today's conservative political climate. While I was aware of changing political beliefs among former members of the Left, I did not expect to meet this much resistance. I thought participants would be willing to discuss their past activities, even if their memories were heavily colored by hindsight. Overall, I encountered tremendous difficulty locating people who were willing to agree to an interview.

Fortunately, one person Dr. Lutz suggested, John Fletcher, a former October League Member who worked in Atlanta during that time period and then moved on to organize in Birmingham happily agreed to an interview. I traveled to Leeds, Alabama, outside of Birmingham to meet with him in his home. Though

he did not work at Mead until after the strike, I was able to gain insight from him into how the OL operated. As an OL insider, he was able to confirm that the organization specifically targeted Atlanta as an organizing center for communist party building, that they intentionally got jobs at Mead and other companies in Atlanta for the express purpose of organizing the workers, and that they were, in fact, the outside agitators that the media's red baiting campaigns claimed.

Another interview I conducted was with Georgia State Representative, Nan Orrack. Because her secretary set up the meeting, she was not aware of the interview subject until I was already setting up my recording equipment. Upon hearing the topic of my interview, she politely told me that she did not want to go on record about any organizations from the time period, but was very forthcoming about what she remembered. Since she was "red baited" in a recent campaign, I want to make clear that her name was not mentioned in any of the October League material I obtained. She was an employee and union member at Nabisco, which held a wildcat strike directly prior to Mead, and provided valuable information about that strike.

Through a series of conversations, and after further research, I realized that I was dealing with an extremely sensitive subject. Undeterred, I used the material I gathered and began to piece together the story of what happened in 1972, and eventually decided to develop the project into my Master's thesis. Some of the missing pieces were filled by material I received from Kerry Taylor, a PhD student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who learned about

my thesis through my advisor, Dr. Cliff Kuhn. He had a box of old documents given to him by Jerry Harris, the last leader of the group that evolved from the October League, and copied a large amount of material for me. The thesis that follows is my analysis of what happened in Atlanta in 1972.

Significance

In 1972, Atlanta experienced an outbreak of labor unrest among many of its black workers. With racial discrimination at the center of each dispute, employees at more than a dozen companies throughout the city walked out to protest unequal pay and working conditions. Lacking the support of labor unions, workers banded together and joined forces with Civil Rights organizations and Leftist groups to fight for what they felt was just. Unusual to the south, this series of strikes warrants closer examination. This project explores why so many of Atlanta's workers risked their jobs to go out on strike that year.

I aim to prove that the flurry of labor unrest in Atlanta in 1972 was not spontaneous. The protests evolved out of a larger historical phenomenon, resulting from a combination of two dynamics. Holdover tension and lessons from the Civil Rights Movement combined with a behind-the-scenes network of communist activity born out of the New Left and culminated into what one participant described as "strike fever."

This work will contribute to several areas of scholarship. It will add to the literature about Atlanta history during this time period. Much of what has been

written about the city in this era covers earlier Civil Rights Movement activity and then moves directly into Maynard Jackson's first term as mayor, and mostly focuses on the middle class or black elite, including college students. The black working class contributions to combat discrimination in the city have been largely ignored. I aim to fill this void by peeling another layer off of the "city too busy to hate" myth and adding historical agency to Atlanta's African Americans other than the elite.

This work will also be significant in that it enters two dynamic discussions in 1960s era scholarship. It will add to emerging research on "the long civil rights movement," which expands recognition of the movement from the 1940s through the 1970s. While popular memory places the movement between the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death in 1968,¹ scholars are beginning to recognize both earlier and later activity that does not fit within these neat confines. I argue that the organizing efforts of Atlanta's workers belong within the story of the Civil Rights Movement. They challenged their employers to abide by the protection won under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, by using similar tactics as those which originally secured the act. The strikes involved some of the same leaders and veterans of major Civil Rights organizations, and are a direct continuation of their earlier work.

¹ Many historians consider the Voting Rights Act of 1965 a more accurate culminating point of the movement, since much movement activity and rhetoric took a more militant turn at that point; but King's death is generally considered the true death of the movement.

Additionally, I will challenge the “good sixties” versus “bad sixties” model by examining one largely ignored outgrowth of the New Left, the New Communist Movement.² I will explore one example of what happened when the liberal belief system of groups such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) evolved with the changing political atmosphere. Many consider the group’s split in 1969 the death of the New Left, and the violence and failure of the Weathermen a nail in its coffin. There was another side of the split, though – those who aimed to overthrow capitalism by entering factories and organizing workers into a revolutionary communist movement, rather than participating in guerilla warfare – which eludes popular memory. By considering their work, it becomes clear that “the sixties” did not end in the 1960s, but rather extended into the 1970s. This wave of organizing in Atlanta will serve as a detailed case study of American communist groups during this era, focusing on the work of The October League.

The first chapter examines Atlanta as the backdrop of the strikes. It identifies a racially charged atmosphere, changing demographics and political shifts, and unequal economic conditions as contributing factors. While I examine general contributing factors from the years leading up to 1972, my primary focus is on the period just prior to the outbreak of the flurry of labor unrest. In this chapter, I also introduce the individuals, groups, and headlines that prove to be significant to the overall story. Chapter two outlines the strike activity throughout the year. Starting in January, workers began to walk out all over the city. This

² The “good sixties” versus “bad sixties” viewpoint is often attributed to Todd Gitlin’s book, *The Sixties: years of hope, days of rage*, but it is a common perspective in popular memory as well.

chapter gives the details of the most significant strikes that occurred and omits more minor ones. This chapter illustrates that Atlanta was a hotbed of protest activity throughout the year. Chapter three examines what happened immediately after 1972's labor unrest, tracing the activity of the primary strike leaders and groups. It also examines changes that took place in Atlanta the following year, and suggests that the upheaval in 1972 was indicative of a transition period that ushered in a new era for the city. The epilogue and conclusion explores the legacies and follows the trajectory of some of the participants.

Chapter 1 Atlanta, a City in Transition

Atlanta, Georgia has long been considered the capital of the American South. Its relatively moderate race relations have earned it the designation, “the city too busy to hate.” Though many scholars over the years have taken issue with this description, the overwhelming popular history of the city is one of moderation and compromise. Atlanta’s elite and middle class, both white and black, tend to take center stage in literature written about the city’s Civil Rights era. Prominent black citizens – ministers, businessmen, politicians, and even students at local prestigious historically black colleges – have been celebrated as people who were able to triumph against all odds. Even Atlanta’s status as the national headquarters of major Civil Rights organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) placed its activists among the leadership of regional and national efforts, rather than in local grassroots struggles.³ Images of relative success among black Atlantans have survived in our memories in stark contrast to that of desperation around the rest of the American South.

In reality, however, the majority of blacks in Atlanta during the Civil Rights Movement were far from middle class. Over half of all black men in the city were laborers and seventy five percent of black women were domestics, service

workers, or laborers. At the beginning of the 1960s, the average black family earned less than half of the average white family.⁴ Lack of adequate affordable housing in rigidly segregated neighborhoods added to this economic gap. Additionally, the black working class in Atlanta endured blatant discrimination and racially hostile environments at work. Despite the major victories of the Civil Rights Movement, this disparity continued and even widened in the early 1970s. While many whites and a select few blacks enjoyed increased access to opportunities, most blacks remained relatively poor.

Atlanta's black workers grew increasingly disgruntled as they recognized that they were being denied the rights for which many fought so hard during the Civil Rights Movement. They began to employ lessons learned during the previous decade's struggles as models for organizing against Jim Crow in the workplace. By 1972, rising tension erupted into widespread labor unrest throughout the city. With the support of veteran civil rights leaders and white Leftist sympathizers, Atlanta's black workers built a movement in hopes of eliminating disparate treatment and unequal pay.

An examination of the period leading up to 1972 reveals that this phenomenon – a series of strikes among black workers with similar grievances – was not spontaneous. Evolving social and political climates clearly impacted the sentiment which led to these actions. Prevailing political dialogue centered on racial issues, particularly as race related to economic disparity. Before the series

⁴ Virginia H. Hein. "The Image of 'A City too Busy to Hate': Atlanta in the 1960s. *Phylon (1960-)*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1972) , pp. 217.

of strikes erupted, black workers collectively endured racism and unequal conditions, shared the experience of their grievances being ignored, and interacted with a network of supporters. While the city's business and civic elite remained confident their control would prevail, Atlanta's black workers grew tired of waiting and weary of compromise. All of these factors contributed to a charged, volatile atmosphere in which a diverse group of players came together in support of Atlanta's workers. I will argue that the holdover tensions of both the Civil Rights movement and New Left ideologies of the 1960s manifested among the workers and Atlanta's activist community, and led to this unusual flurry of labor unrest.

During the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement, Atlanta's leadership worked hard to maintain an image of moderation relative to that of other cities throughout the South. When violent struggles for school desegregation in cities such as Little Rock, Arkansas, captured national interest, Mayor William Hartsfield and his supporters sought to avoid negative attention through careful planning. When the media descended upon the Atlanta school district's integration on August 30, 1961, they witnessed a peaceful process. President John F. Kennedy announced to the nation, "I strongly urge all communities which face this difficult transition... to look closely at what Atlanta has done."⁵ The national press followed suit through wide positive coverage, and dubbed the city, "the leader of the New South." This image was upheld largely due to a nationally

⁵ Quoted in Hein 207.

syndicated column, in which *Atlanta Constitution* editor, Ralph McGill urged law and order and relatively progressive race relations. Additionally, Ivan Allen, Jr. was the only southern mayor to speak in favor of the Civil Rights Bill before Congress.⁶

Atlanta's image as "the city too busy to hate" became essential to the business elite's plans for growth. They recognized that investors would be deterred by racial violence and attracted to a positive image. A 1968 article in *Atlanta* magazine described the city as "ready to set aside the uglier aspects of a bad social system and move on to newer ways." Advertisements in publications such as the *New Yorker*, *Fortune*, and the *Wall Street Journal* in the 1960s portrayed Atlanta as a vibrant place for business. By mid-decade, Atlanta boasted the lowest unemployment rate in the country, a tremendous residential real estate boom, and eighty percent of the largest industrial corporations operated in some capacity there.⁷ *The Atlanta Voice*, a conservative black newspaper, was filled with articles about local blacks graduating from high school and area colleges, being hired into management positions, becoming doctors, getting appointed to political office, winning beauty pageants, and attending \$100-a-plate fundraising events. On the surface, Atlanta was a bustling town, full of progress and opportunity for both black and white residents.

⁶ Hein 207-9.

⁷ Ibid.

A shifting racial dynamic in Atlanta, however, threatened the white business elite's longstanding control over the metropolis. Blacks began to gain political clout, seeking and obtaining key offices in the city, while the political stronghold of whites began to slip. During the 1960s, sixty thousand whites moved out of the city into the suburbs, while seventy thousand blacks moved into the city limits.⁸ By 1972, the black population in Atlanta had reached 54 percent.⁹ Some felt threatened and some empowered by this development; and the ripple effects could be observed throughout the community.

Politics

The demographic shift immediately impacted the way politics worked in Atlanta, which was a dramatic change from the way the local elite had run the city for decades. Black and white business and political leaders maintained a steady relationship during the post-World War II era:

From the beginning there was little opposition to registration of Negro voters in Atlanta; blacks feared no reprisals from registering and voting as they did in other parts of the state and the South. Thus, Atlanta Negro voter registration showed the following growth: 3,000 (4.0 percent of total Atlanta registration) in 1946; 41,000 (27.6 percent) in 1961; 64,000 (35.8 percent) in 1966; and 93,000 (44.8 percent) in 1969.¹⁰

In the late 1940s, black leaders formed the Atlanta Negro Voters League to educate their community about local politics. Through this organization, white

⁸ Gary Pomeranz. *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: the saga of two families and the making of Atlanta*. New York: Scribner, 1996.

⁹ *Ibid*, 400.

¹⁰ Hein 212.

leaders solicited and maintained black support through compromise.¹¹ As former mayor Ivan Allen, Jr. noted, “For nearly two decades the black community had been a silent partner in the election of city officials in Atlanta, generally going along with whatever moderate candidate the white business and civic fathers endorsed.”¹² It was through this approach that Atlanta earned a reputation for moderation. By the late 1960s, however, some blacks had grown weary of this “silent partner” political status and began to break away from the long-established practice.

While the black vote had been vital in Atlanta’s elections since the 1940s, the growing percentage of black voters within the city limits increased their political muscle. By 1969, black leadership exercised this strength by choosing for the first time to endorse a different mayoral candidate than the white business moderates. Sam Massell, the reigning Vice Mayor, appealed directly to leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Sr., Leroy Johnson, and Jesse Hill, pledging to work on behalf of black Atlantans.¹³ Statistical analysis proved the power in numbers when reports revealed that Massell, in fact, had won the mayoral election because he received the majority of the black vote. As Ronald Bayor points out in his book, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta*, this “represents

¹¹ Clarence N. Stone. *Regime Politics: governing Atlanta, 1946-1988*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1989.

¹² Ronald H. Bayor. *Race and the shaping of twentieth century Atlanta*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

an election where blacks were more assertive, breaking with their junior partnership role and moving toward an era of black political dominance.”¹⁴ True to his campaign promises, Massell appointed blacks to some leadership roles within his administration, including the head of the personnel department and several aldermanic committees. In spite of this, Massell did not allow his time in office to be constrained by indebtedness to the black community at large.

When mostly black sanitation workers went on strike in 1970, he broke the strike, ignoring the fact that much of the black community’s leadership supported the workers.¹⁵ While city funds funneled into construction of a new airport, stadium, and civic center, the administration claimed that there was no room in the budget for a pay raise for its sanitation workers.¹⁶ Massell spoke out against the strikers and strongly resisted concessions. This foreshadowed later departures from his campaign positioning, including a disappointing hiring record and failure to expand city services to the black community.

Massell also appointed a police chief, John Inman, who was accused of discriminatory hiring practices and an uncooperative attitude towards police brutality charges.¹⁷ Police brutality continued to be a divisive issue, so much so that the Atlanta Community Relations Committee, headed by Andrew Young,

¹⁴ Ibid. 43.

¹⁵ Ibid. 44-45.

¹⁶ Winston A. Grady-Willis. “A changing tide: black politics and activism in Atlanta, Georgia, 1960-1977.” Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1998.

¹⁷ Bayor 45.

called for an in-depth study of how to handle complaints.¹⁸ A Fulton County Grand Jury Investigation in 1969, however, found that the incidents were isolated and did not represent a pattern of brutality. Citizens knew differently and continued organizing efforts against the police force over the next few years to little avail until Maynard Jackson took office. Atlanta's black citizens did not view the police force as protectors, but rather agents working in support of the white establishment.

Many local blacks felt most deceived when Massell took up the issue of annexation, proposing an increase in Atlanta's geographic boundary as a remedy to the declining percentage of whites living within the city limits. He told a black audience at the Butler Street YMCA, "the word around town is that you and I... the black and white liberal leadership of Atlanta, are committed to Atlanta becoming an all black city... what a terribly confined and costly ambition that would represent."¹⁹ Then, when he spoke to white Rotary Club members later, he stated, "I spoke to the black community about the economic damage we could all suffer from our city going all black," and explained that development in the proposed annex would secure, "predominately white growth to maintain a competitive pace with the inner-city growth which is mostly black."²⁰ The mayor and his supporters worried about Atlanta's possible decline should blacks gain

¹⁸ "ACLU orders a study of police brutality," *Atlanta Daily World* [hereafter cited as *ADW*], 28 May 1972.

¹⁹ Pomerantz 394.

²⁰ "Sam Massel," *The Great Speckled Bird* [hereafter cited as *GSB*], 10 January 1972.

majority political power, citing problematic situations in Newark and Los Angeles, where black mayors had been elected. Overall, the way Massell approached race relations during his term in office disappointed the black leadership who initially backed him. Consequently, many concluded that it was time to support a black candidate in the next mayoral election.

This made room for the rise of Maynard Jackson, who entered Atlanta's political scene in 1969 by winning the elected office of Vice Mayor. Though he hailed from a reputable local black family, he had not lived in Atlanta long enough to cultivate relationships with the established black leadership. Positioning himself as an advocate for the people, Jackson sided against Massell for the city's sanitation workers when they went on strike. Formerly an attorney with the National Labor Relations Board, Jackson called a press conference, stating "I can no longer hold my peace...I am firmly convinced that this dispute can be settled and could and should have been settled, several weeks ago."²¹ This helped to seal his support among the black community at large, the majority of whom identified with the striking garbage men. Many Atlantans viewed him as a politician "for the people." Confident of support among the majority of the black population and progressive whites, Jackson decided to run for mayor in 1973.

Not surprisingly, race was central to the campaign, which ran simultaneously to the labor unrest in 1972. Massell responded to Jackson's candidacy with the campaign slogan, "Atlanta's Too Young to Die," implying that

²¹ Pomerantz 393.

a black mayor would prove fatal to the city's progress.²² Jackson, conversely, emphasized the need for biracial unity and inclusion in his campaign strategy, aspiring for "a situation whereby grass-roots leaders, white and black, will be sitting alongside of persons who are quite wealthy, quite influential, and sometimes not as attuned as they need to be to what it is really like to be living close to disaster."²³ Statements like this resonated with much of the electoral base. His strategy proved effective, as he won 95 percent of the black vote and 17.5 percent of the white vote, securing victory as the first black mayor of Atlanta or any other Southern city.²⁴

In addition to city politics, Atlanta's African Americans sought political representation in Washington as well. With the support of prominent black leaders, veteran civil rights activist and long time SCLC member Andrew Young ran for Congress in 1970. Though he lost the election, Young immediately planned to run again in the next campaign. Following his defeat, his district was redrawn to his disadvantage; but the district modification was challenged and eventually rectified under protection of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The revised district included a much more favorable demographic, with an increased black population and politically moderate white neighborhoods.

²² Bayor 43.

²³ Stone 81.

²⁴ Bayor 48.

Mayor Sam Massell appointed Young as the chair of the Community Relations Commission. Through this appointment, Young gained exposure throughout the city. His responsibilities brought him in close contact with civic organizations and citizens groups, handling discrimination complaints against various institutions. In his role on the Commission, Young stepped in to negotiate settlements for striking workers, further exposing him as a representative for black Atlantans. In this capacity, Young played a critical role in the events that unfolded throughout 1972. In his autobiography, he specifically credited this experience as crucial to gaining understanding issues that would eventually help him win his next campaign. "It was very good preparation for a congressional race," he recalled. "When I ran again, I knew a lot more about the politics of the collection of neighborhoods that were the city."²⁵ On November 7, 1972, Andrew Young became the first black representative elected to Congress since Reconstruction.²⁶

Economics

Many blacks in Atlanta faced daily battles against discrimination. The problem of economic disparity was at the forefront of their agendas. Little overall economic progress had been made since the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. By the late 1960s, a study reported that the majority of blacks dealt with, "inadequate housing, poor municipal services, idleness, dirt, decay,

²⁵ Andrew Young. *Easy Burden: The civil rights movement and the transformation of America*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996. pp. 512-513.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 519.

overcrowding, poor playground facilities or none at all, and poverty – always, endlessly, too little money.”²⁷

Lack of access to affordable housing was another issue indicative of Atlanta’s racial tensions. In the previous decade, Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr.’s administration attempted a major urban renewal endeavor. The plan included destruction of more than twenty thousand dilapidating housing units; however, over the next few years, less than a quarter were rebuilt. This caused an extreme shortage of affordable housing in the city, and created conflict between its poor citizens and the political power structure.²⁸ Black neighborhoods such as Peoplestown, Dixie Hills, Vine City, and Summerhill contained a disproportionate number of citizens living below the poverty line.²⁹ Interrelated battles for equal education, safe and affordable housing, and fair employment erupted into intense struggles throughout Atlanta. The protests that ensued illuminated the profound inequality suffered by black Atlantans.

In the summers of 1966 and 1967, conditions in the Summer Hill and Dixie Hills neighborhoods exploded into large-scale protests. Hundreds of residents took to the streets, calling for “freedom” and “black power.” While local SNCC leadership, including Stokely Carmichael, participated in rallying the crowd, the uprising was an organic result of slum conditions. As historian Winston A.

²⁷ Hein 215.

²⁸ Pomerantz 393.

²⁹ Grady-Willis 175.

Grady-Willis noted, the fear that it struck “forced the moderate Black leadership and its liberal White allies to confront finally the city’s poor Black majority.”³⁰ Many of the city’s poor were inspired by the actions that took place. One participant, Columbus Ward, stated, “It was the beginning of my awakening in terms of protesting. I’ve been liking protests ever since then. If there was some injustice going on, I’ve had no problem protesting that injustice.”³¹ While the “riots” caused leadership to recognize some concerns, it also prompted them to be on guard and suspicious of so-called outside agitators.

Residents of Bolton Garden Apartments began a movement to improve their housing conditions in 1969. Led by Cora Towns, the tenants refused to pay rent until their demands were met. Despite support by the Atlanta Legal Aid Society and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), however, a judge ruled against the tenants and ordered them to pay all back rent.³²

The East Lake Meadows housing project was supposed to be part of the urban renewal solution. The plan, which housed an average of 85 residents per square acre, instead became the center of turmoil. The construction company assigned to the project, March Co., went bankrupt and left the complex incomplete and in disarray. Despite this, the housing shortage made moving

³⁰ Ibid. 202.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

tenants into the units unavoidable; however, the units were in terrible condition. An inadequate drainage system and leaky roofs flooded apartments, defective heaters caused fires, gas pipes were dangerously exposed, electric meters were broken, and street lights did not work. Additionally, rampant crime and dangerous conditions earned the neighborhood the nickname, "Little Vietnam."

In late 1971 residents formed groups, such as the Georgia Tenants Association (GTA), to address their concerns. Some residents took a moderate approach, while others were more militant. The GTA took over the rental office and went on a rent strike, hoping to force recognition of some of the problems they were having.³³ Activists were still protesting at East Lake Meadows, Perry Homes, and elsewhere the following summer when the Atlanta Police Department promised protection for the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) workers in the rent office, who felt threatened. The AHA issued a statement that read:

In order to maintain our services, our staff must have access to our offices and shops and we request that you cease participating in illegal activities such as padlocking doors or other methods of preventing the staff from performing their duties. The health and welfare of many people depend on their receiving necessary services...³⁴

The authorities claimed the protesters were uncooperative in trying to meet with them, while the protesters claimed the contrary.³⁵ On July 15, 1972, a Fulton

³³ John H. Davis. "Hot Housing Unit Tenants Close Six Offices in Protest of Grievances," *GSB*, 28 May 1972.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Linda, "Walk on By, " *GSB*, 22 May 1972.

County court placed a restraining order on the protesters³⁶; but within a week, the local NAACP announced support for the tenants.³⁷ By early August, negotiations resulted in some concessions, such as cosmetic improvements and the removal of abandoned vehicles from properties.³⁸

Affordable housing continued to be a race-based problem. City officials faced difficulty finding solutions to the housing problem. Many of the city's more affluent residents vehemently opposed less-dense housing options in their neighborhoods. A resident at one community meeting stated, "We'll all have to buy guns and dogs and we won't be able to go to work and leave our wives and daughters home alone." Another worried, "You know how many children these people have, well that's how many will be running the streets looking for trouble." Conflicting sentiment among different groups illustrates the ubiquitous problem of race and class tensions in Atlanta during this era.³⁹

Education

Despite the relatively peaceful symbolic integration a decade earlier, school desegregation remained a heated issue in the 1970s. Debates illustrated a racially polarized community. For Atlanta's black citizens, access to equal education was an important concern. Many placed hope in the young

³⁶ "Housing Authority Asks For Protest Grievances," *ADW*, 16 July 1972.

³⁷ George M. Coleman and Douglas Wells, "NAACP Votes to Support Tenants Dispute With Housing Authority," *ADW*, 23 July 1972.

³⁸ "45,000 Residents Affected: Public Housing Tenants, Housing Authority Agree," *ADW*, 15 August 1972.

³⁹ "Public Housing Zoned and Unzoned," *GSB*, 15 August 1972.

generation's potential to reap the benefits of the Civil Right Movement's gains; and a good education was essential to achieve this. Though legally integrated, schools in Atlanta remained segregated due to the demographic shift and forced residential concentrations. By 1972, Atlanta's city schools were 72 percent black, while the suburban counties enrolled no less than 90 percent white students. Claiming that this undermined any attempt at true integration, Georgia's chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed suit in a federal court. The ACLU proposed a cross-county Metro-Atlanta school system, which would require extensive busing, to rectify the disparity.⁴⁰ In October 1972, however, the local branch of the NAACP negotiated a unique compromise. Clearly facing a losing battle for integration, the agreement instead secured appointment of a black superintendent, and fifty percent of the top administration positions were reserved for blacks.⁴¹

In accordance with movements around the country, Atlanta's college campuses became sites for political action as well. In addition to supporting the community at large, students at Emory, Georgia State, the Interdenominational Theological Seminary, Georgia Tech, and the Atlanta University Center, pushed for black studies programs in the late 1960s. As part of the development of black studies programs, scholars at the Atlanta University Center founded a think tank

⁴⁰ "ACLU," *ADW*, 9 June 1972.

⁴¹ Frederick Allen. *Atlanta Rising: the invention of an international city, 1946-1996*. Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1996. pp. 176.

called the Institute of the Black World (IBW), comprised of “Black intellectuals who are convinced that the gifts of their minds are meant to be fully used in the service of the Black community.” The group’s Statement of Purpose and Program goes on to explain “it is, therefore, an experiment with scholarship in the context of struggle.”⁴² Focused on intellectual pursuits, the scholars grappled with the notion that they “had to constantly live with the tension that we were trying to be a national and international organization at the same moment people in Atlanta, understandably and justifiably, were always asking us, ‘What are you doing in Atlanta? What’s your program here?’”⁴³

The Activist Community

Atlanta’s diverse activist community recognized that the political, economic, and social upheaval in the city called for widespread organizing. By the early 1970s, civil rights activists and leftists had over a decade of experience mobilizing against injustice. Members of both groups acquainted themselves with mounting discontent among Atlanta’s black workers as it brewed against the backdrop of the racially charged city. Ranging from Hosea Williams’ no-nonsense provocation to theoretical appeals to join a global anti-imperialist struggle, local activists inspired workers to join forces and take action. While the fight belonged to the workers themselves, activist involvement proved integral to their ability to successfully confront their employers.

⁴² Grady-Willis 227.

⁴³ Ibid 243.

Veteran civil rights leader Hosea Williams stood at the forefront of the black community's upheaval against inequitable economic conditions. He had a long history of working on labor issues, which could be traced back to his youth in Savannah. In 1964, he urged Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to become involved in the Scripto strike in Atlanta, and appealed to black leadership to focus on labor issues at local companies. He explained:

When the [Scripto] strike started, my job was to go into a situation and analyze that situation, and I would make recommendations with SCLC, how involved the SCLC would get. But if the SCLC was going to get involved, it was my job as the field organizer, my chief talent was organizing, and my job [was] to really organize the maximum of this effort, and that's exactly what I did.⁴⁴

Williams considered it his duty to continue King's legacy by agitating for economic equality; and after King's death, he used his organizing talents to attempt to build a poor people's movement, starting in Atlanta.

As Williams marched alongside Atlanta's sanitation workers in 1970, he recognized both the symbolic and literal significance of this strike to Martin Luther King Jr.'s final work and legacy. He was vocal in his dissatisfaction with Massell as well as black officials within his administration for selling the workers short. National representatives from their union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), an AFL-CIO affiliate, negotiated with city officials for improved working conditions, a pay increase, and better benefits. Led by Jesse Epps, the same union officer who had headed the 1968

⁴⁴ Gary Washington, interview by author, 23 October 2004, Atlanta, GA, video recording.

Memphis sanitation strike, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the workers threatened to strike if their demands were not met. Following failed negotiations, employees walked out on March 17, 1970, and remained on strike for thirty-six days.⁴⁵ After the public endured rotten garbage and foul-smelling sewers for over a month, city officials finally conceded a lower raise, reinstatement of fired workers, and required residents to begin hauling their garbage to the streets rather than have workers retrieve it from their backyards.⁴⁶ In keeping with his interpretation of King's perspective, Williams purported that episode illustrated the rift between "the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots."⁴⁷ Elimination of this rift became the focus of his work for the next few years.

In an effort to address some of the discriminatory economic issues black Atlantans faced, Williams called upon local activists to form an organization called the Black United Front in May 1972. The group aimed to develop, organize, and implement ideas to improve conditions in the black community. They focused on economic development, arguing that "black Americans must understand that their major problem is not basically racial, it's economic." Of the group, Williams stated that:

⁴⁵ Grady-Willis 228.

⁴⁶ Peter McDade. "Subverting the sixties: Atlanta's changing boundaries, 1968-1973." Masters thesis, Georgia State University, 2003. pp. 99.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Grady-Willis 259.

[T]he ones in attendance were young and militant. Our greatest conflict was ideological, but they were willing and ready for action. In no way do we represent the majority of Black Atlanta but we sure represent what part is unwilling to get bogged down in the analysis of the paralysis...We still feel if Black people are to ever be free, there must first be unity in the Black community.⁴⁸

Williams stood apart from Atlanta's conventional black leadership in that he was willing to work with any organization or individual who shared his goals for improving the conditions of blacks in the city, and he did not allow his political affiliations or aspirations to subdue his words or actions.

Having endured criticism from Atlanta's more moderate black leaders for his brash, confrontational style, Williams was forced out of the national Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC rejected any affiliation with the Black United Front, which had been meeting at Dr. Ralph David Abernathy's West Hunter Street Baptist Church. They were hesitant to support Williams' participation in labor protests around the city, especially actions against black-run Citizens Trust Bank. Williams' branch broke off from the national organization in July 1972, and continued to operate independently as the Dekalb-Metro Atlanta SCLC.⁴⁹ Abernathy continued to lead the national organization, while Williams and his chief supporter, Tyrone Brooks, resolved to address local issues.

⁴⁸ "Black United Front Organized Saturday at West Hunter Baptist," *Atlanta Voice* [hereafter cited as *Voice*], 29 May 1972. pp. 10

⁴⁹ "Hosea Williams Unsure of Status with SCLC," *Voice*, 1 July 1972.

Of the split, Williams later recalled, “that’s when I said I’m going to start a movement in Atlanta, and I started one.”⁵⁰ He viewed the historical moment to be ripe for economic justice. Operating out of donated office space at Reverend William Holmes Borders’ church, Williams began a concerted effort to target economic problems in the community. He had a long history working with labor issues, and saw to it that he was involved in all of the action. His experience proved crucial during the strikes of 1972, as he played a key role in mobilizing and organizing workers throughout the city. He kept the momentum going with a weekly “People’s Rally” every Saturday, which aimed to bring the black community together to “challenge and convert the power structure in Atlanta.”⁵¹ At these rallies, workers discussed unfair treatment in the workplace and spoke out against their employers, an attitude which revealed similar grievances and fostered a sense of common struggle.⁵² The workers respected Williams, which they displayed through a popular chant, “Hose, what do you say? Hose, what do you say? Ho- Ho- Ho- Hose!”⁵³

In addition to the civil rights community, a diverse array of progressive activists participated in organizing efforts. While many were not politically active, it is worth noting that Atlanta hosted a lively hippie community in the late 1960s

⁵⁰ Microcassette of Hosea Williams interview, 1996, Scripto Strike Records, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

⁵¹ “People’s Rally brings Community closer together,” *Voice*, 12 August 1972.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Washington interview.

and early 70s. In an area downtown, adjacent to the corner of Peachtree and 10th streets, lived youth described by *New York Times* writer James Wooten as “gay, gaudy carnival, noisy and naughty and with all the makings of a Greenwich Village South.” The section of town referred to as “the Neighborhood,” “The Tight Squeeze,” “The Hip Strip” or a number of other names, was attractive because of cheap rent and a convenient location. “The youth revolution was rolling full steam,” Wooten noted; “and the word spread that Atlanta was a free city, that their thing could be done there, and the disciples of the new lifestyle began pouring in...” By 1970, five thousand hippies called this area home. Their alternative lifestyle provoked police harassment. Over time, tension mounted until a routine arrest ruptured into a riot in Piedmont Park. Eventually the hippies dispersed into other areas of town, especially Little Five Points, the blocks surrounding the intersection of Moreland and Euclid Avenues.⁵⁴ Within this group of free-spirited young people lived a significant portion of Atlanta’s young progressive white activist community.

Some of these local progressives founded an underground newspaper, *The The Great Speckled Bird* in 1968. *The Bird* served the hippie community by advertising concerts and events, and by printing other useful information such as cheap recipes and classifieds. More significantly, the paper reported material from an unapologetically leftist perspective. It covered protests, rallies, meetings, and strikes, which other local media often avoided. Its all volunteer staff

⁵⁴ Wooten, James T. “The Life and Death of Atlanta’s Hip Strip,” *New York Times*, New York, N.Y.: 14 March 1971, p. SM34.

published weekly issues which critiqued local, national, and international events. The paper was sold in locations throughout the city and country and served as an outlet and communication tool for activist organizations in Atlanta. During the labor unrest of 1972, *The The Great Speckled Bird* provided the broadest coverage.

Some leftists in Atlanta traveled internationally to see the Marxist theories they admired at work. In May 1972, a delegation, including Atlanta-based black leftists Rick Reed of the Atlanta Black Workers Congress and Candy Watson of the International Institute for Labor Studies, traveled to China to view Communism in practice and express solidarity with the people of China. Watson stated:

As a black person who is about struggle and committed to struggle in this country, the experience reaffirmed my commitment to return to the U.S. and struggle harder and more realistically. The abstract of socialism has become real. I have experienced it. My enthusiasm and confidence confirmed, I am certain of a people's victory in this country. It can and will be a reality.

She went on to explain, "as the struggle progresses the racism of poor whites will die, as they realize their own humanity, and the fact that they are being dehumanized just like blacks." Reed expressed the view that "since the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. American blacks and other minorities had lost their direction in the struggle for liberation." He felt that it was important for those who had traveled to China to report back to the black community about the Chinese

people's way of life to spread hope for the future.⁵⁵ The group returned invigorated, and hoped to spread their enthusiasm for what they considered a better way of life than that endured by Atlanta's working class.

Travelers to Cuba also brought back experiences they hoped would inspire workers to adopt a positive opinion of Marxist ideas. An article in the *The Great Speckled Bird* entitled, "Cuba, Work Here & There: the difference in FACTORY WORK," focused on the cleanliness, efficiency, pride, and safety witnessed on a tour of a tin can plant in Havana. The article outlined what the author viewed as benefits Cuban workers had that the American working class was lacking - safety, security, and dignity on the job - and attempted to paint socialism in a way that would appeal to workers. The piece quotes a Cuban factory employee as stating, "The best thing is being given consideration and respect, no longer being considered a part of the machine, but as a living being." Other perceived benefits to socialist societies mentioned in the article included free health care and childcare, the rent cap at ten percent of wages earned, and paid retirement and disability.⁵⁶ The author hoped this depiction of the Cuban way of life after the peoples' revolution would spark workers in America, and more specifically Atlanta, to be persuaded to organize.

Many activists viewed the black working class struggle as part of a global anti-imperialist fight. Atlanta's labor unrest in 1972 occurred against the

⁵⁵ "Chinese not surprised: The peoples victory is inevitable," *Voice*, 24 June 1972.

⁵⁶ "Cuba, Work Here & There: the difference in factory work," *GSB*, 11 September 1972.

backdrop of continuous US involvement in Vietnam. As President Richard Nixon escalated the war in May 1972, Atlanta's anti-war movement, which had been dormant for three years, was reborn. Some of the same people who were involved in the strikes marched against the war. Echoing sentiments of some of the early Civil Rights Movement's World War II veterans, black Vietnam veterans spoke out at a rally at the state capitol about "the plight of the returning Black GI who expects to find work at home, but instead finds only the same prejudice, unemployment, poor housing and wages which he left."⁵⁷

A diverse group of students, workers, leftists, and independent activists who shared anti-war sentiments formed groups called the Atlanta Peace Action Coalition and the Atlanta Coordinating Committee to unite efforts against the war.⁵⁸ They saw the war as "a logical extension of past politics and present nature of American society... intimately related to other wrongs and injustices in our society – racism sexism, poverty, oppression and exploitation."⁵⁹ The rhetoric had evolved from that of marches in previous years. An article in *The The Great Speckled Bird* reported that "one woman kept trying to get people singing 'Give Peace a Chance' but others would immediately drown her out with much more militant slogans." Among other sayings, they chanted, "Poor Man's Fight; Rich Man's War!" "1-2-3-4 We Don't Want Your Racist War!" "5-6-7-8 Organize to

⁵⁷ Jenkins, Anne. "Saturday's Rain Didn't Discourage Angry Marchers." *GSB*, 22 May 1972. pp. 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Smash the State!”⁶⁰ Leftist organizations were highly visible in the new coalition, the same groups who were participating in Atlanta’s labor unrest. Leftists emphasized what they considered a link between corporate interests in Vietnam and corporate opposition to workers’ struggles in America at meetings, and urged contingents of workers to participate in anti-war rallies. “[Black] workers were definitely involved in the anti-war thing,” strike participant Gary Washington recalled. He echoed the sentiment of many by stating, “I had no problem with the people in Vietnam. I had a problem with the management at [my job].”⁶¹

Having witnessed some of the activity in Atlanta, radical Leftists sought to seize an opportunity for organizing in the South. The mass movements for civil rights, workers’ rights, and against war and imperialism sparked hope among Marxists that the time was right to recruit workers for a genuinely revolutionary communist party. As detailed in Max Elbaum’s *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*, a New Communist Movement was underway. Tracing its roots to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the New Left, the New Communist Movement held the labor organizing and party building efforts of the Old Left in high regard. The local efforts of New Communist groups such as the Progressive Labor Party (PL) and the Georgia Communist League (Marxist-Leninist) attracted white Marxists from surrounding states.⁶² Leftist organizers all over the South set their sights on Atlanta. They

⁶¹ Washington interview.

abandoned labor organizing efforts in locations such as Greensboro, North Carolina, to join forces with like-minded Atlanta-based activists.⁶³ “We went to Atlanta because that’s really where the action was in the South in the movement,” recalled former participant John Fletcher.

The October League (Marxist-Leninist) was one such organization heavily involved in the strike activity. It was comprised of mostly white members of the Los Angeles-based Revolutionary Youth Movement II and the Georgia Communist League.⁶⁴ The groups united in May 1972 around a shared belief in the principles of Marxism-Leninism- Mao Tsetung Thought, and aspired to revolution through party building. According to their literature, members strongly believed that the world was ripe for revolution at this point in history, and they sought to ride the wave of struggle sweeping the globe.

The Statement of Political Unity of the Georgia Communist League (M-L) and the October League (M-L) revealed that the members possessed a keen understanding of the enormity of the task ahead. The OL considered it critical to take advantage of rising activity among the masses, and educate people about the larger context of global workers’ struggles. They sought to partner with Atlanta’s workers to implement their theories and build their party, but also with an earnest interest in improving the workers’ conditions:

⁶³ John Fletcher, interview by author, 31 October 2004, Leeds, AL, video recording.

⁶⁴ Max Elbaum. *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*. New York: Verso, 2002.

It is necessary for us at this time to go deep among the masses at the factories and in the communities in order to unite with the advanced workers and to keep clear of idealism and all types of thinking which do not coincide with objective reality.

They feared that if they missed the opportunity to educate the masses in their ideology, they would win only isolated victories. The key was to capture the energy directed against particular grievances or towards particular freedoms and expand the consciousness of those affected. The OL realized that they had to make their ideology fit each situation.

Members believed it was important to form a new communist party in the tradition of the old Communist Party USA and felt that revisionists were reformists and opportunists. They were able to garner the support of notable members of the "Old Left" such as Harry Haywood and Otis Hyde. They also successfully recruited a local communist Nanny Washburn. Born into a family of poor white sharecroppers in Douglasville, Georgia, at the turn of the century, Washburn became a communist during the early days of The Great Depression, inspired by a Communist-led textile strike. She worked as an organizer during the Angelo Herndon trial in Atlanta in the 1930s and for the campaign to defend the Scottsboro Boys. From the beginning, she believed, "I knew that by supporting the Black people's struggle I was helping myself. I won't be free until all of us are free." Washburn organized all throughout the Cold War years, despite the thread of McCarthyism, and never wavered in her support for communism and for civil rights. Aware that she was in Atlanta, the October

League approached her. Of them, she stated, “A lot of people can say they’re communist, but I watched all the time to see if they meant it. And these young people seemed to mean it. I went to pickets and strikes with them. I went to a study group, and joined the October League.”⁶⁵ An elderly Washburn could be found at factory gates handing out newspapers and on the picket lines throughout the labor unrest in 1972.

One rallying point around which a diverse array of leftist and civil rights activists organized was the trial of Henry Whitlock. Whitlock, a Ford factory employee, was convicted of killing a white police officer in January 1971. The defense claimed that Whitlock had been harassed by the police for driving a shiny sports car and dating a white woman. He was severely beaten and shot during his arrest. Despite contradictory evidence, an all white jury convicted the twenty-four year-old and he was sentenced to death.

Concerned citizens, including members of the Black Panther Party’s local chapter, formed an organization called the People’s Committee to Insure Justice (PCIJ), which called for an investigation into the case, backed up by a petition with more than eighteen thousand signatures. The group’s newsletter, “People’s Message” stated, “[a]n anti-repression organization is necessary because of the increasing repression and move toward facism [sic] that is existing in this country.” The group also urged, “[m]ass mobilizations are the most effective

⁶⁵ Nanny L. Washburn. *75 Years of Struggle! The Life of Nanny Washburn*. Bell Gardens, Calif.: October League, 1975.

means of impeding or stopping the moves of the state.”⁶⁶ During a rally held at East Lake United Methodist Church, Jim Forman, representing the Black Workers Congress stated:

We must organize and struggle against injustice and oppression. The profit motive makes people think they must exploit others and provides no real upward mobility for blacks. We must organize and work together, not individually. The system of capitalism depends on wars, exploitation, hunger, and injustice... We can look forward to a new world where Whitlock does not work at GM, but controls GM along with his fellow workers, a world that is not a world of napalm and Rockefeller.⁶⁷

Reminiscent of lynching cases of the Jim Crow south – a black man targeted due to real or alleged interaction with a white woman – the Whitlock case struck a chord with some Atlantans, and gained many sympathizers. The fact that he was a GM worker involved in plant organizing allowed activists to connect community and workplace issues. Thus the Whitlock case galvanized blacks and progressive whites.⁶⁸ Seizing upon this, early October League literature references the Whitlock case as an urgent reason to mobilize. “Thousands of people have already signed petitions and attended rallies and benefits for Henry Whitlock,” a OL newspaper stated in June. “People are beginning to see that the

⁶⁶ Grady-Willis 276.

⁶⁷ Candy. “Henry Whitlock,” *GSB*, 1 May 1972.

⁶⁸ The black and progressive communities also rallied around the Emily Butler case. Butler was an IRS employee who was sentenced to death for shooting her supervisor. She reportedly filed grievances against the supervisor for discriminatory treatment, which had been ignored, and claimed that constant harassment and a hostile environment led her to violence.

capitalist system, which produces injustices like the Whitlock case, must be overthrown.”⁶⁹

It was within this complex political climate and with the help of a diverse assortment of activists that labor unrest developed in Atlanta in 1972. While Atlanta’s working class obviously never fully embraced the idea of overthrowing the capitalist system, many wanted to end unfair conditions. With memories and many of the actors of the 1960s alive and well, workers possessed the spirit, the tools, and the network of support needed to take action. As former SNCC activist and strike participant Nan Grogan Orrock explained, the strikes were a “natural outgrowth of over a decade of Civil Rights activism.”⁷⁰ She recalled that because of the decade of movement, an increasing number of people became more inclined to stand up against discrimination. Reflecting back, Orrock considered the strikes that occurred in Atlanta during 1972 “emblematic of... the sweep of history of that period.” Absent of union support, it was recent history that gave birth to the courage necessary to put their jobs and security on the line. “You could see how the Civil Rights Movement – that dynamic – informed the consciousness of the ordinary people who were working in shops, and were up against yet another manifestation of racism...”

⁶⁹ “Melvin Crawford, Worker at Mead, Class Justice.” *The Red Worker: The Political Newspaper of the Georgia Communist League*. January, 1972.

⁷⁰ Nan Grogan Orrock, interview by author, 9 November 2004, Atlanta, GA, video recording.

Workers were community members who experienced discrimination on many levels. They were also political actors who elected officials and interacted with those working to make progress. Influenced by rapid changes in their community, while facing stagnant conditions at work, restlessness was inevitable. Participants in history, it was time for workers to benefit from the gains won by the Civil Rights Movement and become a part of the change that was going on all around them. A careful examination of the events of 1972 reveals how the interplay between various characters in this forgotten period of Atlanta's history adds to our understanding of the long Civil Rights Movement and answers the question of what happened to at least one sector of the New Left.

Chapter 2 Strike Fever

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 granted equal employment opportunity, outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to administer the guidelines.⁷¹ As was the pattern throughout the civil rights movement, however, the realization of rights was not achieved simply through legal victory. In reality, discriminatory employment practices were still rampant in the early 1970s. As companies were forced to integrate, management was often resistant and black workers bore the brunt of their resentment. Even after gaining the legal right to equal employment, black workers had to continue to agitate in order to make fair and gainful working rights a reality.

In 1972, Atlanta was still adjusting to the changes that had come about as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. Some of the area's major employers had just begun to employ more black workers, and management, often reluctantly, was forced to deal with this change. For many white supervisors and workers, this was their first job off of their family's rural farms, and they were not accustomed to intermingling with blacks. Opposition to an integrated workforce sometimes manifested into discriminatory practices – blacks men and women

⁷¹ Civil Rights Act of 1964. Document Number: PL-88352. 02 July 1964. 88th Congress, H.R. 7152. <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/laws/majorlaw/civilr19.htm>

Were called “boy” or “girl,” they were concentrated in dangerous or menial jobs, typically forced to work on the night shift, did not receive promotions, and were commonly fired for little or no reason.⁷² Inspired by gains of the prior decade, however, many blacks were no longer willing to accept this kind of treatment.

The flurry of strikes that occurred in 1972 cannot be attributed to a single catalyst. The events developed within a politically volatile, racially charged climate, and evolved from ongoing frustration with discriminatory practices, unsafe working conditions, and an allegedly corrupt power structure in the city and at the companies. The workers were fed up with management’s inequitable conduct, and they were no longer willing to accept substandard treatment.⁷³

From the outset, racial discrimination was the central issue at hand. While all involved continuously called for a unification of the working class and urged white participation, white and black workers remained largely polarized throughout the struggles. One of the few white organizers recalled, “A lot of the white workers were reluctant to go out on strike to support demands that they saw as being black in nature.... The white workers who might have been pro-union, who might have gone out on strike under different circumstances, did not support it... I think it was seen as a black thing.”⁷⁴

⁷² Joseph Nelson Papers, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections Department, Georgia State University, Atlanta [hereafter cited as JNP]. Mead Corporation file, Correspondence, “Mead Worker’s Manifesto.”

⁷³ Washington interview.

⁷⁴ John Fletcher interview.

In addition to the workers themselves, several political actors discussed in the previous chapter played an integral role throughout the year's activities. Hosea Williams and what became known as the Metro-Atlanta/Dekalb branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) could be seen on the picket lines in each of the strikes. He often served as a representative for the workers. He used his organizing skills to mobilize workers and his celebrity and brash style to attract media attention. Williams's involvement represented a tangible connection to the Civil Rights Movement, as he aimed to carry out what he interpreted as Martin Luther King's legacy. Members of the October League and other Leftist groups, in many cases, contributed to the strike efforts as well. Through giving financial support, joining picket lines, and disseminating information in pamphlets and newspapers, their contributions played an important role in furthering the workers' cause. Their participation links Atlanta's strikes added to a long continuum of leftist organizing in America, serving as a rare example of open and admitted communist involvement in civil rights-related efforts. In his role as the Chairman of the Community Relations Commission, Andrew Young often served as mediator in strike negotiations. As he recalled in his autobiography,

It so happened that during [1972] there were a series of unusual wildcat strikes in Atlanta at the Mead Packaging Company, Sears Roebuck, and Nabisco plants. In each of these strikes racial discrimination was a key factor. A group of young white socialists had obtained jobs at these factories and were instrumental in raising issues of long-standing racism that were as critical of the unions as the employers.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Young 512.

When management refused to recognize Williams or ad-hoc employee organizations, Young stepped in as the moderate liaison between strikers and the company. He did not side with the workers, but rather endeavored to operate as a conciliator on a non-partisan basis. His input demonstrated a changing of the guard, for some former civil rights movement participants were shedding their roles as so-called outside agitators and beginning to operate within the system. The interesting dynamic of all of their contributions can be seen throughout the year's events.

The year opened with a strike at the Fulton Cotton Mills in downtown Atlanta. On January 3, 1972, more than twenty machine operators walked out in support of two co-workers who had been dismissed for requesting a salary increase. Others joined them as they stayed out of work in protest for over a week. Black and white workers maintained the picket lines, carrying signs that displayed messages such as "Fired For Trying To Make Our Children A Decent Living." On January 10, as many as one fourth of the workers joined them on the picket line in a one-day sympathy strike.⁷⁶ In addition to low wages, the workers cited safety concerns and problems with supervision. They received support from Operation Breadbasket, a division of the Southern Christian Leadership

⁷⁶ "Fulton Cotton Mill Strike," *The Red Worker*, February, 1972.

Conference (SCLC) and the Georgia Communist League; however, the workers, who were not unionized, represented themselves in negotiations.

The company's president, Meno Schoenbach, claimed that a wage increase was "simply not feasible" economically, despite the fact that the company's newsletter reported that profit had quadrupled in the last half of the 1960s. Schoenbach defend his stance by claiming, "My track record speaks for itself... I am not against unions and union organizing. I am ready to meet with any individual. Our policy has always been to talk to anyone." Yet he went on to vehemently oppose the legitimacy of SCLC's involvement and firmly stated, "I am perfectly capable of running the FCM; I don't tell the SCLC how to run their organization and I do not expect to be told how to run mine."⁷⁷ After continued pressure, management finally met with leaders and negotiated some improvements for the workers.

In mid-February, workers began demonstrating at Holy Family Hospital in downtown Atlanta. Employees accused the hospital of racist employment practices. Though approximately ninety percent of the patients and doctors at the hospital were black, the majority of management, clerical employees and trustees were white.⁷⁸ After trying to organize a union to address race-related grievances, twelve black employees were laid off for their actions on March 13.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Hammer and Gene. "Fulton Cotton Mills." *GSB*. January 17, 1972. pp. 12-13.

⁷⁸ "Explosive Dispute at Holy Family Defused." *Voice*. May 6, 1972. pp. 1-2.

⁷⁹ Roger. "Holy Family." *GSB*. 3 April 1972. pp. 7.

On March 23, when four of the fired women attempted to approach hospital administration, the administrator immediately called the police, and though they agreed to leave, they were arrested. The demands were minimal – reinstatement of their jobs with back pay, a meeting with hospital administrator Nichols, and a new fair election be held for the employee representative committee. Management, however, refused to negotiate or even acknowledge any of the strike participants or representatives.⁸⁰ On 20 April, Nichols had some of the strikers arrested again. The following day, they began to picket in front of C&S Bank, whose vice-president Paul F. Brown was also Holy Family's board chairman.⁸¹

Local activists organized strike support, enlisting the participation of local civil rights leaders. Seven weeks into the strike, Williams, Rev. Joe Boone of the Metro Atlanta Leadership Conference, Al McClure of the NAACP, and Rev. Arthur Langford of the Free For All Baptist Church began a public fast and prayer vigil in support of the striking nurse-staff. "We don't consider this a drastic measure," Boone proclaimed. "We are following in the footsteps of Rev. Martin Luther King. We are taking the necessary step to drive the devil out of Holy Family Hospital."⁸² The civil rights leaders raised a tent on the hospital grounds, in which they led prayers, read the Bible, and consumed only salt water. Their

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Roger. "Holy Family." *The Great Speckled Bird*. 1 May 1973. pp. 5.

⁸² "4 Rights Leaders Begin Fast at Holy Family," *Voice*, 29 April 1972. pp. 1-2.

actions and rhetoric were intended to resonate with the black community by evoking a common set of beliefs and reminding them that the vision of the civil rights movement had not yet been realized.

An eruption of violence brought about action that eight weeks of picketing at Holy Family Hospital could not deliver. Opposition to the demonstration exploded on April 27, when Rev. Langford and long-time SNCC organizer Willie Ricks were shot and wounded during an evening demonstration.⁸³ An anonymous caller to police incorrectly reported, “two dead niggers down there.” While their injuries were not life-threatening, the incident understandably caused great alarm in the community. As a result of the shooting, the news media, local politicians, and mainstream black leadership suddenly acknowledged the strike’s significance.

Even anti-imperialist activists from the World Conference of Churches Commission on Racism, in town for a Methodist convention, stopped by to “express solidarity from a similar situation” that they were facing in African liberation struggles. The representative informed the crowd about what was going on in Africa, particularly racial oppression and violence under the white

⁸³ “Explosive Dispute at Holy Family Defused,” *Voice*, 6 May 1972. pp. 1-2. As described in Clayborne Carson’s *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Willie Ricks was a well-known militant SNCC organizer who later became involved in the All African People’s Revolutionary Party with H. Rap Brown. He was one of the early proponents of using the term, “Black Power” and supported the effort to make SNCC into a black rather than a mixed organization. In response to police brutality in 1967, he stated that SNCC activists in Atlanta would “make Vietnam look like a holiday.” Ironically, his militancy was sparked years earlier when violence erupted during a demonstration that resulted in a close friend’s death.

minority regime in Rhodesia. “Our enemy is organized internationally, and we have to organize internationally too,” he insisted. Williams agreed, recounting his recent travels. “They don’t want us to go to Cuba, to China. They’re afraid of what we might find out. In China I saw it was possible for everyone to have work.” Williams also “explored the sophistication of white America in getting the best educated blacks working *for* Gulf Oil, the major exploiter in Angola.” A *Bird* journalist reported that audience members felt “that their support of twelve women striking at Holy Family Hospital was supporting a worldwide liberation movement, and that’s the kind of thing we don’t often have in Atlanta.” Emotions ran high that day, cementing widespread support for the strikers and increased opposition to the Holy Family administration.⁸⁴

Within a week of the shooting, mounting pressure finally resulted in a settlement, negotiated by Rev. Andrew Young’s Community Relations Commission. On Tuesday, May 3, the hospital’s board of trustees met with the representative organization to deliberate over employee grievances. They agreed to rehire six of the laid off workers, denying the others based on alleged misdemeanors committed during the strike. They would receive back pay from a donation fund rather than the hospital. The board also considered testimony by the Atlanta Police Department, alleging that hospital administrator Lee Nichols, comptroller Homer Bresendine, and Mrs. G. Yarian, their executive secretary, had prior knowledge of the shooting, and therefore suspended them, pending

⁸⁴ Roger. “Holy Family Workers Win!” *GSB*. 8 May 1972. pp. 7.

further investigation. Additionally, trustees consented to hold a vote in which employees could choose between forming a grievance committee and joining a labor union. Leaders considered these concessions a victory for the workers. Williams stated, "The Holy Family victory should say to the power structure of Atlanta that poor people won't take it anymore."⁸⁵

When Church's Fried Chicken in East Lake Meadows, a black neighborhood in Atlanta, replaced a black manager with a white man in May, all of the employees walked out on their own accord and began picketing.⁸⁶ Led by community activist Eva Davis, they took their grievances to other area locations and solicited the cooperation of their workers as well. With SCLC's support and financial pressure resulting from the black community's boycott, all ten local stores were eventually closed. Students at the Atlanta University Center picketed in solidarity with the workers at the location nearest campus. At least one demonstration erupted in violence as white policemen beat up Donald Denson, a black Morris Brown student, and Andrew Mackey, a Morris Brown graduate and former policeman. When Denson was refused bail, 200 students, led by Williams, marched from campus to the Fulton County Jail, and he was released on bond. Since much of Church's profit relied on the patronage of the

⁸⁵ "Explosive Dispute at Holy Family Defused." *Voice*, 6 May 1972. pp. 1-2. GSB used different spellings: "Bressendine" and "Yaring."

⁸⁶ Candy. "Chickenshit." *GSB*. 8 May 1972. pp. 7.

black community, they agreed to negotiations quickly.⁸⁷ Because of the community's financial power and support, the workers were able to win significant improvements in employment conditions according to the settlement announced on May 16.⁸⁸

On April 10, five black women at black-owned Citizens Trust Bank requested a moderate pay raise, were refused an increase, and fired on May 19. Civil rights leaders immediately sought to negotiate with management, but were refused.⁸⁹ Though some black leadership hesitated to support action against a black-owned business, strike participants and supporters viewed the strike as a class issue. One strike leader claimed that "black business men who have made it don't identify or associate with us."⁹⁰ Once the civil rights organizations made their decision to back the workers, they had the support of the Metro Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference (MASLC) and the SCLC's Operation Breadbasket. They made picket signs, accusing the bank of racism, in the hallway of the Tabernacle Baptist Church, and enjoyed support by the community.⁹¹ By the end of July, picketers began targeting board member's

⁸⁷ Candy. "Churches Chicken Strikes Again." *GSB*, 15 May 1972. pp. 6.

⁸⁸ Anne Jenkins. "Church's Chicken Strike Ends." *GSB*, 29 May 1972.

⁸⁹ Candy. "Bank Fires Blacks." *GSB*, 29 May 1972. pp. 5.

⁹⁰ Candy. "No More." *GSB*, 5 June 1972. pp. 6.

⁹¹ "Pickets Again Seen Over CTB Firings." *Voice*, 3 June 1973.

businesses and homes, and arrests escalated.⁹² With this added pressure, an agreement was finally negotiated by the MASLC after sixteen weeks.⁹³

On June 18, workers at the Regency Hyatt House hotel went out on strike to protest discrimination against blacks, Latin Americans, and women. The workers had been organizing for three months to contest what they considered an unfair union contract. The union announced that they were not associated with the group, which called themselves Regency Workers United. Since the actions were considered a wildcat strike, the hotel filed for an injunction with the National Labor Relations Board, and four strikers were fired.⁹⁴ Though many of the workers walked out in support of the strike, few joined the demonstrations. Support was solicited from a nearby anti-war demonstration, which tipped off police to possible leftist support.⁹⁵ Though minor, this strike was the first in which the October League claimed direct involvement.

In mid-July, striking workers targeted all local area Sears department stores and distribution centers to protest discriminatory practices against blacks. On July 17, Nathaniel Dunn, who had four years of tenure with the company, led his fellow co-workers at a Sears warehouse in the north Atlanta suburb of Chamblee on a walk-out. The employees presented their manager, Allen Creer,

⁹² Marjorie Jordan. "Citizens Trust." *GSB*, 4 August 1972. pp. 3.

⁹³ Nawanna L. Miller. "Agreement Reached in Strike at Citizens Trust Bank," *Voice*, 26 August 1972.

⁹⁴ Rosa. "Regency Wildcat Strike," *GSB*, 26 June 1972. pp. 7.

⁹⁵ Rosa. "Regency Demonstration," *GSB*, 3 July 1972. pp. 2-3.

with a list of demands. Within a week, the majority of black Sears workers in Atlanta walked off in support of their grievances. Since they were geographically dispersed throughout the city, organizers held regular meetings at Wheat Street Baptist Church to keep all participants abreast of progress.⁹⁶ On Sunday, July 23, a group of demonstrators marched from Martin Luther King's burial site to the Sears store in the West End area of Atlanta, near the Atlanta University Center. The following day, demonstrators held a rally in front of the West End store, where they read and distributed a document entitled "Black Manifesto," in which workers outlined a call to end historically discriminatory practices at Sears.⁹⁷

Workers threatened nationwide action if their local grievances were not resolved.⁹⁸ Beginning the following day, all of the Sears locations around the city were picketed during all three shifts. As many as thirteen participants were arrested during the demonstrations, most of whom were charged with the "Safe Streets and Sidewalks" ordinance. In a well-coordinated effort, employees were able to put enough pressure on management to win a settlement within eleven days. Sears' Southeastern Regional Vice President, A.D. Swift, agreed to meet with the strikers and their representatives. After fourteen hours of negotiation, all

⁹⁶ "Black Workers Protest, Sears Boycott Threaten to Escalate Nationwide," *Voice*, 29 July 1972.

⁹⁷ Jordan. "Sears Strike," *GSB*, 4 August 1972. pp 8.

⁹⁸ "Black Workers Protest, Sears Boycott Threaten to Escalate Nationwide." *Voice*, 29 July 1972.

parties reached an agreement.⁹⁹ Having won significant improvements, the Atlanta SCLC considered the Sears strike to be the “largest and most significant human rights movement in Atlanta since the death of our late beloved leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”¹⁰⁰ Finally, Williams was able to see what he considered King’s legacy gathering momentum.

Newspapers reported that settlement of this racial labor dispute was the greatest victory for Black people in Atlanta since the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.¹⁰¹ By all accounts, the Sears, Roebuck & Company strike resulted in a victory. Company officials signed a covenant with the SCLC that confirmed the protection of over thirty benefits. According to this agreement, not only were employees protected from blatant discrimination, but they also received other important well-deserved employment privileges. For example, the company agreed to recognize Martin Luther King’s birthday as a holiday. Even more beneficial to the workers, the overall racial distribution was to be systematically corrected through adherence to Affirmative Action guidelines.¹⁰² Tyrone Brooks reported that the Atlanta SCLC would work directly with Sears’ management to ensure that the agreement was executed.¹⁰³ Williams clearly expected that this

⁹⁹ Edgar Smith. “Sears Strike Over – Black Workers Win Significant Concessions to Their Demands,” *Voice*, 5 August 1972.

¹⁰⁰ “SCLC & Sears Sign Revolutionary Covenant,” *Voice*, 4 November 1972.

¹⁰¹ Jordan. “Sears Strike,” *GSB*, 4 August 1972. pp 8.

¹⁰² “SCLC & Sears Sign Revolutionary Covenant,” *Voice*, 4 November 1972.

¹⁰³ Smith. “Sears Strike Over – Black Workers Win Significant Concessions to Their Demands,” *Voice*, 5 August 1972.

strike would set a precedent for further gains in Atlanta workers' struggle. "It would be a shame to convert Sears," he said, " and let the others get away."¹⁰⁴

Racist practices at the Nabisco plant in the West End neighborhood of Atlanta also sparked a wildcat strike. Unlike most factories in the South, the plant had been organized by the national Bakers and Confectioners Local #42 since the Great Depression, and many workers enjoyed relatively high wages compared to other employers around the city. However, Nabisco was also guilty of historic discrimination against black workers, and the long-established union was resistant to changing with the times. In August, employee Fred White was fired for insubordination for taking an unauthorized bathroom break. White had earned seniority and gained the respect and loyalty of his coworkers through years of service, and Joe Gallagher, the supervisor who fired him, had a reputation for racist attitudes toward black people. The second unfair dismissal of a black employee in a month, this event instigated action by frustrated workers. When the night shift was over, a handful of workers gathered in a back room at Paschal's restaurant, a black owned establishment that had been the location of countless civil rights meetings over the previous decade, to decide upon a course of action. Encouraged by shop steward Doug Gray, the group immediately committed to taking a stand. The dismissals had been the final

¹⁰⁴ "People's Rally Brings Community Closer Together," *Voice*, 12 August 1972.

straw. They appointed a steering committee, including long-time SNCC activist Nan Grogan Orrock.¹⁰⁵

Under the name Coalition for Constructive Change, leaders approached management with a list of demands. Their grievances ranged from the indignity of being called “boy” or “girl” by their supervisors and charges of unfair promotion practices to being served food left over from the day shift during the evening, when most of the black employees were scheduled to work.¹⁰⁶ When both management and the union refused to negotiate, two hundred fifty employees - nearly all of the black workers and a few whites - walked out.¹⁰⁷ An information sheet distributed by the strike committee the following week announced that “We are dues paying members of Local #42 of Bakery and Confectionary Workers, AFL-CIO. So far the union officials refuse to support the strike in any way. They stood by and watched Nabisco fire Fred White, just as they have stood by in the past.” Organizers told workers that the union had abandoned them and that they should stick together and provide support to each other. This language sought to reassure strikers and supporters that their actions, although illegal according to their union contract, were, indeed, legitimate.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Orrock interview.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Jordan. “Nabisco Churning Out Cookies and Profits,” *GSB*, 4 September 1972. pp. 2.

¹⁰⁸ JNP, Nabisco, Inc. file, “Nabisco on Strike.”

Since locally produced Nabisco products, such as Oreos, Cheese Nips, and Vanilla Wafers sold in area grocery stores, organizers recognized the potential economic impact community support could make. They distributed information to shoppers and called for a citywide boycott. One information sheet read, “Black Nabisco workers need your support... DON’T BUY NABISCO PRODUCTS!!!”¹⁰⁹ They also asked stores throughout the city not to stock the merchandise. During this era of volatility, the black community at large was generally supportive of activism; and as Nan Grogan Orrock recalled, reaction to this call “in black neighborhoods with mainly black shoppers was massively responsive.”

Reverend Joseph Boone of the Metro Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference (MASLC), Reverend W.J. Stafford of the Free For All Baptist Church, and the community at large showed support for the workers. Marjorie Jordan reported in *The Bird* that groups of picketers were “taking turns carrying signs and walking, dancing, singing, laughing, and making their presence felt in front of Nabisco.”¹¹⁰ Workers fully recognized that their actions were part of a larger phenomenon taking place in the city.

We know workers all over Atlanta are fighting to better their conditions. The strikes at Mead, Citizens Trust, Sears, Pix Shoes, The Regency and elsewhere show that Black and working people are ready to stand up and fight back. We must walk hand-in-hand and support each other.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ JNP, Nabisco, Inc. file, “Black Nabisco Workers on Strike.”

¹¹⁰ Jordan. “Nabisco Churning Out Cookies and Profits,” *GSB*, 4 September 1972. pp. 2.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

This acknowledgment invigorated workers, helped to validate what they were doing, and placed them within a dynamic movement. State legislator and veteran SNCC activist Julian Bond held a press conference in support of workers at Nabisco, pointing to unequal treatment at the plant. In response to this publicity, Nabisco brought in their top negotiators from corporate headquarters to address the issue. They met with Andrew Young in his role as director of the Atlanta's Community Relations Commission. Young maintained a neutral position in mediating the dispute.¹¹²

After three weeks of demonstrations, the strikers returned to work with some of their grievances addressed. Among the concessions, Fred White was rehired and the strikers' jobs were reinstated; Nabisco agreed to make improvements to hiring and promotion practices; and management pledged to enforce rules against discriminatory practices by supervisors. Some of the demands the company refused were improved medical benefits, equal pay for women, and the reinstatement of another unfairly dismissed employee Joe Ponder.¹¹³ While the victory was not as clear as the Sears battle, the workers felt that some tangible progress was made.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Orrock interview.

¹¹³ JNP. Nabisco, Inc. file, pamphlet, "Wildcat Strike: A Victory for One is a Victory for All," 1972.

¹¹⁴ Jordan. "Eat your Cookies, Nabisco," *GSB*, 11 September 1972. pp. 2.

Following the strike, however, participants, particularly whites, met hostility from their white co-workers. They endured threats, name calling, and assaults. The environment grew so tense that Nan Grogan Orrock purchased a gun for protection. A pamphlet published by organizers following the strike stated that “Nabisco knows as long as we are busy hating each other, fearing each other and attacking each other, then Nabisco comes out on top because we’ll be too divided to defend ourselves and win a decent contract.”¹¹⁵ The aggression eventually subsided, and after many more years of struggle black and white workers gradually began to work together within the union.

On August 18, 1972, over 700 hourly employees at the Mead Corporation, the vast majority of whom were black, walked out and began a seven-week protest. This strike is largely held as the most significant of the year. Headquartered in Dayton, Ohio, Mead’s main Atlanta site was located on West Marietta Street, near downtown Atlanta. In 1972 there were approximately 1,200 personnel. Their principal business was the assembly and sale of packaging materials and products, such as cardboard Coca Cola and Budweiser containers. The site housed branch administrative offices, a manufacturing plant, and a warehouse facility.¹¹⁶ The site had been unionized since 1959.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ “Wildcat Strike: A Victory for One is a Victory for All”

¹¹⁶ JNP, Mead Corporation file, legal document, “Complaint, Civil Action, File No. B77613.”

¹¹⁷ Washington interview.

Many of the white workers hailed from rural areas and were not accustomed to working around black people. The result was a charged and often oppressive atmosphere. Adding to tensions in the workplace, the plant was riddled with safety hazards, with blacks concentrated in the most dangerous areas. One story that depicts working conditions was told to Gary Washington, not long after he started in 1970:

The year before I came to work at Mead, there was an area that dealt with inks, and there was a vat that had acid in it, 'cause there was this solvent type ink... and they didn't hire any blacks in this area... Two white guys who worked in this area, they slipped and fell into the vat; and when they came back up, all you saw were their skeletons... Those were the kinds of stories that I heard when I started working there. And after that they hired about five blacks and put them in that area.

This lore sent a chilling message to the new hire about the overall atmosphere at the plant, and illustrates the sense of injustice felt by many of the black workers.

A number of events occurred in the months leading up to the strike that precipitated the decision to take action. A January 1972 edition of *The Red Worker, The Political Newspaper of the Georgia Communist League (M-L)*, which was distributed at factory gates throughout the city, announced that Mead employee Melvin Crawford had just been sentenced to fourteen years in prison for shooting a floor superintendent.¹¹⁸ The article claimed that the Mead workers sympathized with Crawford, and quoted an employee who said, "People don't just shoot people for no reason. They must have been messing with him too much. If bosses don't want to get shot they've got to learn not to mess with their

¹¹⁸ I spoke to Melvin Crawford in October 2004. He politely declined to comment, stating "I put all that behind me."

workers.” While the authors did not condone individual acts of violence, Crawford’s actions were labeled “revolutionary.” They claimed that the shooting was “an act of political struggle against the robbery and oppression that all workers experience under capitalism,” and touted Crawford as a “hero to all workers.”

The Red Worker sought to use the circumstances surrounding this event to influence readers to join the party-building effort, intensify working class struggle, and overthrow the capitalist class.¹¹⁹ Most likely Crawford, like the majority of Mead workers, did not subscribe to a radical political ideology. He had filed “grievance after grievance” against his supervisor and his frustration erupted in violence. When he was being arrested, Crawford said, “I’m not sorry for what I’ve done. Even if I have to go to jail, this will help keep the bosses off the backs of other workers.”¹²⁰ While his situation was an extreme case, other workers had also reached the end of their rope in working through established channels and methods for resolving conflict.

Around the city, workers were standing up to management and insisting that they would no longer accept unjust treatment. In recent months and weeks, unhappy Mead employees had observed their fellow Atlanta workers at the Fulton Cotton Mill, Holy Family Hospital, Citizens Trust Bank, Church’s Fried

¹¹⁹ “Melvin Crawford, Worker at Mead, Class Justice,” *The Red Worker: The Political Newspaper of the Georgia Communist League*. January, 1972.

¹²⁰ JNP, Mead Corporation file, “Advance Through Struggle,” *Take Off: Voice of the Mead Workers*, 1972.

Chicken, Regency Hyatt House hotel, Sears, Nabisco, and other companies take to the streets in protest. This labor unrest set the stage for the Mead strike. All of these strikes shared similar grievances – unfair pay, unsafe working conditions, discriminatory practices, problems with supervision, lack of benefits, and more. They each employed comparable tactics, and received the support of civil rights groups, other sympathetic organizations, and a large section of the black community.

The workers at Mead witnessed these actions while continuing to face unbearable treatment in their own place of employment. October League members, who had been working in the plant since January, observed growing discontent and protest activities among their coworkers.¹²¹ At least four black workers were unfairly fired within a matter of weeks. As the sweltering summer persisted, several black women in the plant fainted from heat exhaustion during forced overtime shifts. In a memo dated June 30, 1972, plant manager, Jim Pasquarette responded to a grievance filed concerning the cooling and ventilation. He described some recent and planned improvements, and wrote that “We are gradually coming to a better understanding of our mutual problems and have made real progress toward resolving them.”¹²² By that point, token gestures and polite promises of gradual progress could not assuage the workers’

¹²¹ Jerry Harris personal files provided to author by Kerry Taylor [hereafter cited as JH files]. “Building the Solidarity Committee at Mead,” *Spark*, November 1972. pp. 9.

¹²² JNP, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, “Second Step Answer to Grievance 72-2-30.” June 30, 1972.

discontent. They were approaching a boiling point. These events served as the impetus for workers to finally take action at Mead.

The disgruntled employees initially attempted to work through the legal union channels to address their grievances.¹²³ A collective bargaining agreement with the Atlanta Printing Specialties and Paper Products Union Local 527 bound employees until November 1973.¹²⁴ Initially, workers aspired to develop a relationship with the union, and guide union leaders in a more inclusive representation of all of their members.¹²⁵ At the outset, Local 527 attempted to mitigate the upheaval and urged them to negotiate; however, former interactions led workers to believe that they “needed something extreme to really get the attention of the company.”¹²⁶ They recalled that “past experiences with the union leadership showed them to be unreliable in handling... grievances, especially those of the Black employees,”¹²⁷ Angry workers quickly found that the union had no intention of cooperating and came to believe that the leadership was collaborating with company management.¹²⁸

¹²³ Washington interview.

¹²⁴ JNP, Mead Corporation file, legal document, “Complaint, Civil Action, File No. B77613.”

¹²⁵ “Advance Through Struggle.”

¹²⁶ Washington interview.

¹²⁷ “Advance Through Struggle.”

¹²⁸ “In Atlanta: Workers Fight Back.” *The Call*, October 1972.

To harness this increased sentiment, October League members “set about organizing the spontaneous anger and will to act into a conscious, planned struggle.”¹²⁹ As former OL member John Fletcher recalled, “We really instigated that strike, our people. We had some black cadre in there... who really had a lot of respect.”¹³⁰ They called the first strategy meeting, which was attended by twenty-five Mead employees.¹³¹ They met at a place called the Mass House near the Fulton County Stadium.¹³² In this meeting, held on August 6, 1972,¹³³ attendees formed a steering committee and began planning a wildcat strike.¹³⁴ Blacks comprised the majority of the Caucus, which had just a few white members. The organizing committee included the most militant of the workers, only a few of whom were members of the October League. They immediately began organizing and mobilizing workers in the plant.¹³⁵ As OL literature reported,

For three weeks we organized the plant. The committee met almost daily. We assigned people to organize areas of the plant which hadn't been represented. We developed a list of 30 demands, circulated them, started

¹²⁹ JH Files. “General Report of the Mead Strike,” *Spark*, November 1972. pp. 3.

¹³⁰ Fletcher interview.

¹³¹ “General Report of the Mead Strike.”

¹³² Washington interview.

¹³³ “Advance Through Struggle.”

¹³⁴ “General Report of the Mead Strike.”

¹³⁵ “In Atlanta: Workers Fight Back.”

mass discussions. At a mass meeting they were debated, developed, increased to near 50. At this mass meeting of over 200 Mead workers, the demands were formalized in to the Mead Workers' Manifesto, we officially became the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers, and we delivered an ultimatum to the company.¹³⁶

On August 16, the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers submitted the "Mead Workers Manifesto" to management. Hosea Williams presented the document to Mead President R. N. O'Hara in a meeting. The cover memo stated that the workers' intentions focused on "ending present racial and unAmerican-like hiring and promotional practices toward minorities."¹³⁷

The "Mead Worker's Manifesto" proposed remedies to workers' ongoing grievances against the company in the form of forty-two numerated and eight additional demands. Opposition to blatant discrimination was the Manifesto's unifying theme. Special emphasis was placed on equal treatment of blacks, particularly black women; however, the Mead Caucus insisted that its interests aligned with white workers as well. They wished to make it:

unequivocally clear that this is not a fight between Black employees and White employees of Mead Corporation, but this is a labor dispute, a confrontation between the hourly employees of Mead Corporation and management of Mead Corporation.¹³⁸

Some of demands, however, clearly called for preferential policies toward black workers to overcome discriminatory practices.

¹³⁶ General Report of the Mead Strike."

¹³⁷ "Mead Worker's Manifesto."

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Several demands addressed health and safety concerns. The workers urged Mead to adhere to the Federal Government's Environmental and Ecological Services guidelines. They asked for improved ventilation and temperature controls as well as appropriate protective gear and an on-site Registered Nurse. Additionally, the employees expected that the company provide full health and life insurance coverage.

Many of the demands addressed hiring, training, promotion, and job stability. The Manifesto demanded that Mead remedy past discrimination in management, supervisory, clerical, and skilled positions by giving preference to black applicants. The strikers complained that hourly employees did not have adequate training or development opportunities, and therefore were not given equal consideration for promotions. They charged that the company was not making use of the workers' potential, and insisted that policies be enacted to facilitate career growth. Immediate fifty-cent raises and ongoing quarterly adjustments were demanded for all hourly employees. Job protection in cases of injury, bereavement, and arrest was demanded as well.

Another category of demand focused upon increased worker sovereignty and autonomy. Workers wanted elected grievance and safety committees. They wanted the authority to vote on policies, benefits, job descriptions, and the continued employment of supervisory staff. The Manifesto also contained a provision that the company must enter into a covenant with the Metro Atlanta Dekalb SCLC, requiring ongoing review.

In addition to policy changes, the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers included pleas to rectify specific cases of discrimination. They asked that four employees receive back pay for time away from work because of harassment. They also requested jobs be reinstated with back pay for the “three brothers in plant 2” and an employee named Monroe Walker, who they felt were fired due to racism. Other miscellaneous demands included recognition of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, the right to receive emergency phone calls, requests for company personnel information, and various types of contributions to the black community at large.¹³⁹

Management’s response to the Manifesto was firm. On the following day, a letter was distributed to the employees acknowledging receipt of the demands, and declaring that the company would not bargain with the group. Instead, Mead management declared that they would be meeting with the very union that refused to represent the workers’ complaints in the first place.¹⁴⁰ In a letter from Mead President Robert M. O’Hara to Williams on August 17, 1972, he stated:

While we believe that our efforts through our managers, as well as through union and government channels, provide ample evidence that we are conscientiously pursuing those goals that would make our facilities a most desirable place to work, we are also realistic enough to recognize that we are either not communicating our own beliefs and efforts effectively, or perhaps are not hearing clearly the concerns and wishes of our employees.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ JNP, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, “To All Employees”, August 17, 1972.

He went on to say, “We intend to resolve our real problems with our employees, their legally elected labor officials and government agencies.”¹⁴¹ Another letter issued later that day promised action, rather than just sentiment.¹⁴² While O’Hara “pledge[d] to all employees that there shall be no discrimination against male or female black or white,” the measures the company took next made it clear that they would not be moved by the workers’ actions.¹⁴³ According to the legal complaint filed by Mead Corporation against the striking workers, all of the Manifesto’s demands fell under the authority of the collective bargaining agreement with Local 527. This agreement specifically stated that, “there shall be no strikes, picketing, walkouts, slowdowns, or other interferences with plant operations, at any time by reason of any dispute or disagreement between the parties.”¹⁴⁴ The company claimed it could not legally recognize any representative group other than the union.¹⁴⁵

Upon the Mead Corporation’s refusal to discuss the proposed demands with the Caucus, seventy-five percent of the workers joined strike efforts.¹⁴⁶ The picket lines closely resembled those of the civil rights movement, still fresh in the memory of most. People stood in lines and marched, carrying white posters

¹⁴¹ JNP, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, “Letter to Reverend Hosea Williams”, August 17, 1972.

¹⁴² JNP, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, “To Our Employees”, August 17, 1972.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ JNP, Mead Corporation file, legal document, “Complaint, Civil Action, File No. B77613.”

¹⁴⁶ “In Atlanta: Workers Fight Back.”

scrawled with statements such as “United We Stand Divided We Fall.” Renditions of “freedom songs” such as “We Shall Overcome” and labor songs such as “Which Side Are You On?” could be heard at the gates. The chants had been updated with the more contemporary lingo of the black power movement. “Soul Power!” leader Sherman Miller shouted. “Workers’ Power!” was the crowd’s response.¹⁴⁷ While the situation they were facing was serious, at times the atmosphere could be described as festive. They danced to the Staples Singers’ hit “Respect Yourself” and enjoyed the camaraderie of their fellow workers and their families.

“We must also take our struggle to others in the Atlanta community – especially to our fellow workers in other plants – and encourage them to join us on the picket line and support our struggle,”¹⁴⁸ a flyer distributed by the October League stated. Workers recognized the need for support beyond Mead’s gates and set to work earning the community’s empathy and respect. For the most part, the workers received great support from other local blacks. Gary Washington recalled that “We tried to talk to workers at other businesses that were in the vicinity of the Mead Corporation to let them know what we were all about...we talked to people in the community; we talked to students; because we felt we needed a very broad coalition...” In order to build popular support, workers employed grassroots organizing methods:

¹⁴⁷ *Wildcat at Mead*. Produced by The October League (Marxist-Leninist), 1972.

¹⁴⁸ JNP, Mead Corporation file, flyer, “Unity is Our Strength,” 1972.

We had what we called mass meetings, and in these mass meetings students and people from other companies, they would come find out what was going on. We would set up a phone tree with these people, and call them, get them to bring friends... to really build a movement that was wider and greater than just the workers that worked at Mead, 'cause this was a struggle of all the people.... We wanted the community to be educated... and the reason we wanted the community to be educated was because we knew we were building to a point where we were going to have mass marches, and we really needed their participation... If you're going to have a mass march, you've got to have the community; and students and universities are a part of the community.... It was important to set up committees to talk to them, to go into the community... so that when we had these marches they would join us. And they did. And that kind of strategy worked. It really paid off.

In general, black community members welcomed information and pledged support. Enough food and relief money was donated to sustain the workers during their unpaid strike. Supporters stood outside of gates at companies throughout the city, collecting as much as fifty dollars a day.¹⁴⁹ One rally secured six hundred dollars, four hundred of which was given by individual generous donors, probably local business people.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, striking workers from Sears and Nabisco came out to help maintain the picket lines and show their support.¹⁵¹

Without union authorization, participation in organized activity against the company constituted an illegal, or "wildcat," strike. In response, the Mead Corporation brought suit against striking employees for their actions. Allegations against the workers included blocking the entrance, business interference,

¹⁴⁹ "In Atlanta: Workers Fight Back."

¹⁵⁰ Chris Byrne. "The Atlanta Mead Corporation," *GSB*, 2 October 1972.

¹⁵¹ Washington interview.

coercion, intimidating behavior, and even violence.¹⁵² As a result of the disruption, Mead was temporarily forced to shut down operations. The company claimed a financial loss of more than \$200,000, and alleged that further interference with their business would result in loss of customers as well as ongoing, immeasurable, and possibly irrevocable damage.¹⁵³

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Jack Etheridge promptly placated Mead management by granting a restraining order against the strikers, effective Saturday, August 19, 1972. By order of the decree, protestors were prohibited from interfering with entrance and exit through the gate, using any inappropriate language on the premises, initiating any kind of physical contact with employees or business associates of Mead, making intimidating phone calls, assembling in large groups on or near company property, influencing others to organize against the company, or any interference with business practices.¹⁵⁴ Management issued a letter the following Monday to notify all employees of this measure, as well as make them aware that Atlanta police officers would be stationed at each entrance.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² JNP, Mead Corporation file, legal document, "Complaint, Civil Action, File No. B77613."

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ JNP, Mead Corporation file, legal document, "Temporary Restraining Order." August 19, 1972.

¹⁵⁵ JNP, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, "To All Employees", August 21, 1972.

The company asked all three shifts to return to work at 7:00 am on Monday, August 21. The striking workers alleged that the reason management selected a morning start, rather than an evening, was because most white employees were assigned to the day shift. Mead wanted to assure that operations would resume as scheduled; however, a flyer distributed by the striking workers claimed that only twenty percent of the workers “scabbed.”¹⁵⁶ While the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that the demonstrators blocked the entrance to the gates, physically intimidating people from crossing the line,¹⁵⁷ the workers asserted that this was a lie that management fed to the media. They even claimed that a worker crossing the line hit a female picketer.

Despite the company’s uncooperative attitude, the strikers were confident that they would be victorious. “We as workers are ready to be jailed or driven from this earth,” said participant Willie Frank Lane, “but we are going to win our rights in this strike.”¹⁵⁸ In his usual style, Hosea Williams proclaimed, “We will stay out till Mead has to sell watermelons to pay the light bill.” In order to solicit further support, they called a mass meeting for the workers and the surrounding community on Tuesday, August 22 at 8:00 P.M at Wheat Street Baptist Church’s Educational building.¹⁵⁹ These mass meetings, attended by 50 to 300 workers,

¹⁵⁶ JNP, Mead Corporation file, flyer, “All Mead Workers & Concerned Citizens are Invited to a Mass Meeting.” August 22, 1972.

¹⁵⁷ Ken Willis. “Pickets Blocked at Mead,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 22 August 1972.

¹⁵⁸ Byrne. “The Atlanta Mead Corporation.”

¹⁵⁹ “All Mead Workers & Concerned Citizens are Invited to a Mass Meeting.”

were held several times a week throughout the strike to disseminate information and sustain the workers' enthusiasm.¹⁶⁰

After over a week of demonstrations with no cooperation from the company, Fulton County Judge Claude Shaw ruled that only two picketers could demonstrate outside of Mead's gates at a time. The strikers, however, were not discouraged.¹⁶¹ Williams petitioned for the U.S. district court to take over jurisdiction in the lawsuit against the workers.¹⁶² He felt that the order was unconstitutional and stated that, "if necessary, I will go to jail. We will continue to picket."¹⁶³ He argued that the charge that the strike violated the existing union contract made the suit a federal issue. Mead general manager Pat Benatar claimed that many workers wanted to return to work, but were afraid of crossing the picket line. The court ruled in the company's favor and stated that the hearing would remain under the state's jurisdiction. An attorney for the Mead strikers worried that, "I've never known a state court to rule against the company in a labor dispute."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ "General Report of the Mead Strike."

¹⁶¹ Smith. "Workers Defy Court, 'Will Go To Jail' Rev Williams says," *Voice*, 2 September 1972.

¹⁶² "Strikers Ask Court Shift in Mead Suit," *The Atlanta Constitution*. 29 August 1972.

¹⁶³ "Workers Defy Court, 'Will Go To Jail' Rev Williams says."

¹⁶⁴ Willis. "Mead Strike Hearings Ordered in State Courts." *The Atlanta Constitution*. 31 August 1972.

A reporter from *The Atlanta Voice* attempted to interview Mead management regarding the strike that afternoon. He spoke to a member of management named Mr. Zammataro who claimed that he was not authorized to give official statements to the press. Through their conversation, the reporter was able to elicit some of the manager's personal views about the worker's actions. Zammataro stated that he believed social change was occurring too fast, that he was leery of efforts to educate the masses, and feared too many people attempting to gain wealth at once was detrimental to society. The company official said:

Maybe I might be old fashion but I just don't think anything can be solved in this way. I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks...it might have been harder at that time for a Black person but the Black people can make it if they work, hard. I had some Black classmates from the ghetto in school with me. Sure they had to work harder than others but they made it.¹⁶⁵

Though he did not make an official company statement about the strike, his beliefs were more revealing than he was likely aware. The black readers of *The Atlanta Voice* clearly would have recognized this type of attitude as the underlying cause for the discriminatory treatment in the workplace. In spite of this, the article did not serve as an endorsement by *The Voice*. The reporter was careful to point out that a white male picketer threatened his life if he reported anything negative about the strike.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ "White Mead Worker Threaten Voice Reporter," *Voice*, 29 August 1972.

On August 31, management created a “new mechanism” to address employee concerns, which they called the “President’s Atlanta Employee Council.” This committee consisted of group of company-appointed employees, none of whom were involved in the strike. They were to serve as liaisons between hourly employees and management. Management ran an ad in the *Atlanta Daily World*, the city’s conservative Black newspaper, which read:

Mead wants to solve the problem and the company is moving in the right direction... its *employees* will solve it. Communication lines have been opened. Management and labor are talking. Don’t lose your seniority while you are being heard. Earn a living and be heard.¹⁶⁷

The problem with this appeal was that it completely disregarded all of the strikers’ demands. The workers had not put their jobs on the line for such a meager response. They were not going to budge until their demands were met.

During the course of the strike, demonstrators clashed with the Atlanta Police Department several times. The film *Wildcat at Mead* shows picketers being pushed and beaten with nightsticks and dragged into paddy wagons.¹⁶⁸

Becky Hamilton reported in an article in the *The Great Speckled Bird*:

People all over the country are reacting with outrage to the brutal beatings broadcast over NBC national news – from the city ‘too busy to hate.’ Mead was getting terrible publicity. Support was building for the strike. And no one was working! (which was bad for Atlanta’s image as a southern city where industry comes for cheap, apathetic, unorganized labor).¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ “Earn a living and be heard,” *ADW*, 21 August 1972.

¹⁶⁸ *Wildcat at Mead*

¹⁶⁹ Byrne

Towards the end, tensions worsened. Seventy-five Mead strikers were arrested for criminal trespass¹⁷⁰ and held on an exorbitant \$1,000 bail each. Several members of the black business community answered Williams's call to cover the cost of bailing the organizers out of jail. Mortuary owner Herachel Thornton, storeowner Charles Allen, and pastor Dr. Joseph Lowery were among those who bonded out the strikers.¹⁷¹ A front-page article in *The Atlanta Voice* noted that "Aides close to Williams claimed that the mass arrests and the brutality on the part of the police, along with other actions, is an effort by the white power structure to stop Williams' drive to organize poor people."¹⁷²

The Atlanta Police Department and the Fulton County District Attorney's office were on special alert because of the communist involvement in the strike. *The Atlanta Constitution* reported that both organizations were investigating the connection between Williams and the October League (M-L). They were aware that several key October League leaders were involved in the demonstrations and they also believed the organization was funding the strikers. Mead GM Benetar explained that he knew that six to eight of the striking employees were OL members, and that they passed out copies of *The Red Worker* at the gate.¹⁷³ They believed that activists had infiltrated companies throughout the city, and

¹⁷⁰ "Mead Employees Reject Company Offer," *Voice*. 30 September 1972.

¹⁷¹ "\$75,000 Given to Bail Out Mead Strikers," *Voice*. 7 October 1972.

¹⁷² "Mead Employees Reject Company Offer," *Voice*, 30 September 1972.

¹⁷³ At the time this article was printed, they were more likely passing out *The Call*.

were suspected culprits in recent bomb threats. In addition to Mead, he believed that that OL members were organizing at General Motors and Atlantic Steel. H.G. Bailey of the Fulton County District Attorney's office claimed that, "They are a well-educated and well-financed militant group that has just filtered into Atlanta over the past year... We've been equating them to the Weathermen version of the new Communist Party." He went on to explain that they did not carry cards and tended to deny their membership. They preferred not to call attention to themselves. Atlanta Police Lieutenant W.W. Holley corroborated Bailey's report, also confirming that his investigation showed evidence of links between the SCLC and the OL.¹⁷⁴

In an effort to "red bait" the organization, *The Atlanta Constitution* charged that OL members were intermingling with the SCLC. While Rev. Williams admitted that he was aware of the organization and knew that members were participating, he insisted that they did not help organize or finance the strike. He claimed, "Not too long ago, somebody offered \$1,000 in contributions from an anonymous source, but I told them that I had to know where any money came from that I touch. I suspect it was the League's money."¹⁷⁵ Williams went on to state:

About the only thing that we ever had to do with these folks was the Mead deal... They almost ruined it by trying to take over the show themselves..."They never do any work. All they do is sit around and

philosophize. I don't think these folks could raise 10 people this afternoon if their lives depended on it."¹⁷⁶

Williams was concerned that media focus on the communist involvement in the strike was going to undermine his leadership and call attention away from the workers' demands.¹⁷⁷ Gary Washington recalled that, "the agenda of groups like the October League [did not] supersede the agenda of the people that [were] there... The black workers had determined they were going on strike." A newsletter called *Take Off: Voice of the Mead Workers*, produced by the workers themselves said of the October League, "[they] were hired by Mead, that's Mead's problem. The October League is no problem to the people."¹⁷⁸

In examining the surviving sources, it is clear that Williams and the October League leaders were not strategic allies. OL literature and commentary on the "Wildcat at Mead" film criticize William's leadership style and philosophy. They both wanted a victory for the workers, but that is where their similarities ended. In a document entitled "October League Reply to the Atlanta Constitution," the group attempted to set the record straight concerning their relationship with the SCLC:

¹⁷⁶ Jim Stewart, "Red Activist Cell Under Probe Here." *The Atlanta Constitution*. September 29, 1972. During an interview with Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers treasurer, Gary Washington, he mentioned an anonymous contribution made by a local lesbian couple who were gay rights activists and labor sympathizers. According to Washington, the women did not want Williams to know who made the donation. If Williams truthfully was not aware of the source the money he mentions in this article, it could have possibly been the sum donated by the couple.

¹⁷⁷ Washington interview.

¹⁷⁸ "Advance Through Struggle"

Ideological differences do exist between the October League and the S.C.L.C. on the question of achieving the final solution to the problems of the masses of poor and oppressed of all nationalities. However, a working relationship has been built on the basis of common support for the Mead workers' struggle¹⁷⁹

Additionally, William's charismatic leadership style conflicted with the October League's philosophy of a democratic movement headed by the workers themselves.

In response to the media's efforts to undermine the workers' claims, the OL vehemently denied the charges made by the newspaper that "outside agitators" coerced the workers into action. They proclaimed that "to charge as they have, that the October League is to blame for the labor unrest in Atlanta is a lie...The truth is that Mead and the companies like them are to blame for the unrest." The document then listed the complaints of racism, exploitation, and unfair treatment that influenced the workers' decision to take action. They also pointed out the violence used against the workers during their peaceful demonstrations. They summed up their argument by stating that they openly declare their support of socialism and disdain for "greedy" capitalism.¹⁸⁰

The negative media attention required a response from Michael Klonsky, the October League national chairman,. He traveled to Atlanta from California to

¹⁷⁹ JNP, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, "October League Reply to the Atlanta Constitution," 1972.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

address the local news media at a televised press conference, where he read a longer statement, which included the following:

Instead of accepting the workers' demands and ending these conditions, Mead has directed an all-out campaign of racism and anti-communism in the press, designed to make the October League their scapegoat. Their cries of 'outside agitators' and a 'communist-inspired' strike have served only to expose their vicious character and their commitment to anti-worker policies within their factory. The charges they have that the October League is to blame for the labor unrest in Atlanta is a lie, which all of the Mead workers are able to see through. The truth is that Mead and companies like them are to blame for the unrest, unrest that will never cease until the real causes are changed. It's not the October League which has been forcing workers to work in air that has been so filthy and polluted with dust that several women have passed out, only to be immediately sent back on line when they were revived. This crime has been done by Mead Corporation. It is not the October League which has practiced racial discrimination in their policies of hiring and promotions, reserving all or most of the better paying jobs, the skilled jobs, for the white workers, while the blacks are kept in the dirtiest and lowest paying jobs.... It was Mead, not the October League, who directed the Atlanta Police Department, to attack the Mead workers on September 21st, jailing more than a hundred workers, and brutally clubbing the arrested workers to the ground. To the charges of fighting to put an end to these conditions and to this oppressive system, we the October League plead guilty.¹⁸¹

Klonsky asserted Mead and its collaborators had devised the red baiting campaign to counter the challenge the strike's allegations made to the company's legitimacy. Their intention was to discredit participants' grievances. Klonsky used this opportunity to exploit media access he otherwise would not have had and used it as a platform to promote the October League.

On October 3, the company proposed a settlement, addressed to Rev. Andrew. J. Young in his capacity as chairman of the Community Relations Commission. Towards the end of the strike, Young stepped in as a mediator as

¹⁸¹ *Wildcat at Mead*

he had in previous strikes. The settlement called for an immediate halt to all protest activity, and promised in return adherence to a list of concessions. It outlined plans for significantly improved relationship structures between management, supervisory personnel, and hourly workers.

Mead would establish a human relations council to hear grievances, a new protocol for handling disputes, and a mechanism – the President’s Atlanta Employee Council - for workers to communicate with senior executives to call attention to issues before they escalated to the level the “wildcat” strike had. Provisions for improved safety conditions were also included. The company approved a budget of \$20,000 to install equipment that would reduce the amount of air-born dust, and announced that they would install additional safety equipment in the ink vat area as well as provide employees assigned to that area rubber boots to prevent slipping. Management claimed they would investigate all accusations of discrimination and enforce federal law protecting against discrimination based on “race, sex, age or national origin,” and specifically banned use of the racial slurs Nigger, Whitey, Honky, Cracker, Spade, and Boy. It refused back pay for time missed during the strike, but allowed for non-interest bearing loans so that employees could catch up on their bills. Additionally, it contained mechanisms for ongoing auditing and progress reports.¹⁸² In a document titled, “Statement of Company Position,” management admitted that

¹⁸² JNA, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, “In re: Arbitration – FMCS 73K/3004”, February 7, 1973.

that meetings with various representatives and workers had, “brought to light matters of legitimate concern to all employees.” However, it also asserted that “the company has a right by law to operate its business, those individuals who go outside the law [will] be held accountable for their actions, and people who withhold their labor cannot be paid for time not worked.”¹⁸³ Besides those individuals specifically banned, the majority of the strikers returned to work on October 8.¹⁸⁴

At a press conference, Williams declared that “We did not gain everything sought, but we gained a whole lot more than we had when we began.” He dismissed questions about who was responsible for reaching an agreement as unimportant. In his typical style, Williams closed with the comment that, “The rich live well but poor people catch hell.” He reminded the crowd that the workers retained the right to continue to push for the demands listed in their Manifesto. He also did not shy away from saying that he was prepared to launch a nationwide work stoppage at all Mead locations should they not live up to their promises.¹⁸⁵

Gary Washington confirmed that overall conditions improved significantly after the strike. While instances of racism and problems with supervision

¹⁸³ JNA, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, “Official Statement of Company Position,” 7 February 1973.

¹⁸⁴ “Mead Settlement,” *GSB*, 16 October 1972.

¹⁸⁵ Chuck Bell, “Signing of Pact Ends 7-Week Mead Dispute,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 October 1972.

persisted, incidents were isolated rather than pervasive. Management understood that the workers were willing to take action if necessary. Even more importantly, according to Washington, the strike exposed workers to the fact that the company could join forces with the government and media to protect their own elite interests, but the workers could also achieve power by banding together. “People really learned a lesson that they never forgot; and then they went back in with their heads up, so they had respect.”¹⁸⁶

The Mead Packaging Plant wildcat strike resulted in a moderate victory for the workers in that some, but not all, of their grievances were resolved. More importantly, they learned that they had the power to stand up to inequitable treatment in the workplace, just as those in the civil rights movement had fought against unjust laws and treatment in the previous decade.

An unsigned editorial in *The Atlanta Voice* took note of the year’s strike trend. “Atlantans seem to have been rather shaken up in recent months over what they feel is a continuing pattern of protest around this growing city, which disturb their peace and plans from day to day.” The editorial goes on to explain that some in the community were paranoid that “every business, every store will get the pickets sooner or later.” In response to this, it reminds readers of the city’s recent past, of the fact that black moderates initially opposed lunch counter sit-ins, just as they were leery of the labor unrest. “Common sense should tell us that it would be impossible, in this short span of years that has followed to wipe

¹⁸⁶ Washington interview.

out the prejudice, to wipe out the unfairness, and the problems to create a city that has no racism from the spirit of ex slavers and ex slaves.” The editorial then proposes that critics of the strike “should look around and see what other means have won changes in the city.”¹⁸⁷

Workers in Atlanta in 1972 recognized the power of protest. They sought to be treated fairly, and made significant strides against the widespread practice of overt discrimination. Institutional and subtler forms of racism, however, are something they continue to struggle against to this day. The legacies of their battle could be seen in the Atlanta activist community for years to come; and some supporters have remained active in their communities over thirty years later.

¹⁸⁷ “Editorial,” *Voice*, 26 August 1972.

Chapter 3 Beginning a New Era

The labor unrest that swept in Atlanta in 1972 ignited hope for activists interested in improving the potential as well as the plight of the working class. Victories at Holy Family, Sears, Nabisco, Mead and other companies raised expectations for struggle in workplaces throughout the city. Both civil rights leaders and leftist organizers attempted to harness this momentum for additional gain. Invigorated by workers' willingness to take action against their employers, October League members and other like-minded leftists sought to advance their anti-imperialist agenda. Civil Rights activists enjoyed increased community support, even across racial lines, as moderate Atlantans worried about more popular upheaval and wearied of the political stranglehold of the business elite. With a racially charged mayoral campaign and the potential impending shift in political power from white to black, most Atlantans were paying close attention to local events. The working class protests continued in the following months, but as Atlanta's political landscape evolved, confrontational tactics largely gave way to more moderate approaches and political compromise. The city's tumultuous transition period continued into 1973, but by the end of that year 1960s style activism began to decrease.

After the majority of the strikers returned to work at Mead, the forty fired workers remained out of a job for more than four months. In the meantime, those who did return began to realize some of the concessions won in the strike. Management met one of the Manifesto's demands by establishing a committee, the Presidents Council Against Discrimination, to facilitate communication with black workers, review the implementation of promised improvements, and provide a platform for airing grievances. The company also agreed to recognize the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday for the first time in January 1973, by allowing workers to enjoy the day off as long as they submitted a request a week in advance. In February, Mead employees and supporters formed the Committee to Support the Mead Workers in an effort to increase community backing of the forty who had not yet been rehired. This committee passed out flyers, recruited volunteers, and raised funds to ease the financial burden. Worker-activists in the plant continued to show support by staging work slow downs, circulating petitions, and holding fundraisers.¹⁸⁸

After extended arbitration in Fulton County courts, the Board of Arbitrators convened at the local Federal Mediation and Conciliation Offices on February 6, 1973, and placed votes for or against reinstatement for each defendant in the lawsuit against key strike participants.¹⁸⁹ Among the charges of misconduct

¹⁸⁸ "Mead," *GSB*, 7 February 1973.

¹⁸⁹ JNA, Mead Corporation file, correspondence, "Special Arbitration Provision", February 7, 1973.

under consideration by the board were “encouraging others not to cross the picket line during the strike or giving the clenched fist salute, which the Mead plant manager described as ‘just not acceptable in our society.’”¹⁹⁰ In a letter addressed to Leo Benatar, president of Mead Packaging, and Ralph Meers, president of Atlanta Printing Specialists Union, Local 527, arbitrator Robert T. Aimes identified those considered strike instigators – Wayne Dranznin, Sherman Miller, Betty Bryant, Johnnie Berry, James and Suzanne Branson, Kay Nelson, and Joseph Goodman - by denying their petition for reinstatement.¹⁹¹ A total of thirty-two of the forty workers fired during the Mead strike were finally reinstated in March.¹⁹²

After the strike, the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers operated legitimately as a representative group within the union, in that leadership and management agreed to recognize the organization in meetings and negotiations. The black caucus members began to meet regularly with white workers, some of whom were starting to recognize that management used racism to divide them and thwart the power of the workers and progress of the union.¹⁹³ According to Gary Washington:

The white workers didn’t understand what was going on, and they went in to support the company, and later learned from that, the company didn’t

¹⁹⁰ “Mead,” *The Guardian*, 24 January 1973.

¹⁹¹ “Special Arbitration Provision.”

¹⁹² “Mead Workers,” *The Call*, March 1973.

¹⁹³ “Mead Workers Fight On.” *GSB*, January 1973.

have their best interests at heart. So it was a learning ground for the white workers that scabbed and went to work.. They learned what the company was all about.

“At a recent union meeting,” a February article in *The Call* noted, “the growing unity was expressed as both black and white workers spoke of the need for a united struggle.”¹⁹⁴ Some of the hostility subsided and dialogue broke down longstanding barriers. Additionally, blacks started to gain leadership roles within the union. For example, Gary Washington remembered white co-workers encouraging him to run for shop steward after recognizing his contributions during the strike. In 1981, lessons from the 1972 strike were remembered and put into practice when black and white employees joined the picket lines against Mead together.¹⁹⁵

Mead strategically confronted this growing sense of power and unity among their employees, but their efforts were countered by a raised awareness within the rank and file. Workers recognized that management attempted to intimidate them through layoffs, a tactic often used to create an atmosphere of insecurity. To offset such suspicion, the corporate office announced that they were committed to “social responsibility,” a new term being used among the business community in response to the era’s prevalent progressive activism:

Critics of American capitalism contend that corporate management is aligned with its stockholders against the interests of the working man. In this climate, which in a broader sense is anti-establishment in many forms,

¹⁹⁴ “Mead Committee of Support.” *GSB*, February 1973.

¹⁹⁵ Washington interview.

American business has witnessed the growth of proxy fights at annual share holder meetings in the interest of one cause or another.¹⁹⁶

Because Mead understood that its standing on Wall Street might be affected by the negative image caused by worker unrest, management formed a Corporate Responsibility Committee. Former Atlanta mayor and member of Mead's board of directors Ivan Allen Jr. participated in this organization, whose stated purpose was to research reasons for discontent and open lines of communication. Their findings were released in the 1972 annual report. Concerning the wildcat strike, the company admitted, "though illegal, it did focus attention on some real problems: minority promotional opportunities, a dust condition, [and] blocked communications."¹⁹⁷ Additionally, a corporate officer, Paul Allemang, traveled from headquarters in Ohio to Atlanta in hopes of improving management's image in the eyes of the workers – he sought to quell suspicion about further layoffs, congratulated employees on their safety record, and shook many hands.¹⁹⁸ An article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* business section on May 23, 1973, reported Mead management's actions as part of what leftist activists considered primarily a public relations campaign. "The workers at Mead," asserted Mike

¹⁹⁶ Tom Walker. "Mead, Employes Bolster Ties." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 23 May 1973. Walker's reference to "the working man" reminds us of the way women workers as well as workers of color were rendered invisible in discourse.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

Raffauf in the *The Great Speckled Bird*, “[were] tightly organized to fight these tactics and politically aware enough to see through them.”¹⁹⁹

Immediately following the strike at Mead, October League leadership began sharing lessons learned during Atlanta’s 1972 “wildcat” strikes. In October, they launched a substantial newspaper called *The Call*, printed in its entirety in both English and Spanish (*El Claròn*). In the introductory issue, the editors proclaimed:

The task of party building, uniting the broad masses and preparing them for the struggle ahead, requires a newspaper through which the revolutionary organization can bring its views to the people. It is with this in mind that we have begun to publish THE CALL.²⁰⁰

Published out of Bell Gardens, California and distributed throughout the country, the newspaper reported on the workers’ and communist movements and gave significant coverage to the recent and ongoing unrest in Atlanta. Both members and non-members served on a committee to write articles. OL members and supporters sold issues outside of gates throughout the city.

The November 1972 issue of the New Communist newsletter *Spark* contained a “General Report of the Mead Strike” and an article on “Building the Solidarity Committee at Mead,” which detailed early reflections on the preceding months’ events, including perceived successes, failures, and implications. The articles were published to prepare “comrades” for an upcoming labor conference, where OL leaders hoped “the entire organization will get the benefit of the most

¹⁹⁹ Raffauf, Mike. “Mead in Trouble,” *GSB*, 26 May 1973.

²⁰⁰ “Introducing The Call,” *The Call*, October 1972.

advanced experience we have had in any one particular locality; it will raise our understanding of our tasks in the shops and is bound to give the work everywhere a big push forward.”²⁰¹ New Communist activists around the country considered the Mead “wildcat” strike a momentous accomplishment for the movement, and viewed it as an indication that their agenda would make great strides in the coming period.

In December 1972, October League members who worked at Nabisco began publishing a newsletter called *The Scoop*. The OL used this publication to introduce themselves to the employees:

Maybe you heard about the October League during the Mead Strike when the newspapers started attacking us to try to break up the strike. Or maybe you’ve heard about the Nabisco bosses and their buddies ranting and raving about us. They say, “Communists want to break up the union, communists want to keep trouble stirred up, communists hate white people, communists bomb factories.” All of these are bosses lies to try to scare people and divide the workers...

The editors advocated solidarity between white and black workers and called for further organizing among plant workers to address unresolved grievances.

Beyond concrete problems within the plant, *The Scoop* attempted to convince readers to view the capitalist system as the source of not only their problems at work, but also the culprit behind war, racism, crime, drugs, and other social ills.

²⁰¹ “General Report of the Mead Strike.”

The OL insisted that workers must organize against the ruling class and build a socialist society.²⁰²

The January issue of *The Scoop* documented mixed reactions to the first issue and addressed some of the concerns raised. They clarified their stance as pro-union and reasserted their position against racial polarization.

The rich businessmen and factory owners are glad to see Black and white workers split apart and fighting each other. They try to convince white workers that they have more in common with their bosses than they do with their black co-workers. And they try to convince Black workers that white workers (instead of rich people) are their main enemy. All this takes heat off the bosses, so they can make higher profits.²⁰³

Having witnessed the stark rift between black and white workers at Nabisco, while also recognizing the black workers' willingness to stand up against management, the October League leadership saw great potential for party building at the plant. In an effort to do this, the OL endeavored to raise the workers' consciousness by communicating through *The Scoop*.

With the "wildcat" strikes having captured the national spotlight among communist organizers, New Communist Movement leaders convened in Atlanta on Thanksgiving weekend in 1972. The agenda of this conference, entitled "Communist Work in Factories," was to prepare for labor actions in the near future. Announced participants were October League members Lynn Wells and Sherman Miller, Black Workers Congress leader Don Williams, and veteran black labor activist Otis Hyde. Don Williams gave a talk on how to organize within

²⁰² JNP, Nabisco, Inc. file, *The Scoop*, December 1972.

²⁰³ JNP Nabisco, Inc. file, *The Scoop*, January 1973.

factories, emphasized the importance of basing action on concrete conditions in each location, and suggested the need for development of rank and file organizations patterned on the model of Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), a group that had successfully organized black workers in Detroit in the late 1960s.²⁰⁴ Hyde focused on the black liberation movement and explained that while it was important for blacks and whites to unite in struggle, it was also crucial for blacks to remain at the forefront of their own fight for liberation.²⁰⁵ Additional attendees included members of the Cambridge, Massachusetts based Boston Workers' Congress, Baltimore's Communist Workers' League, New York-based Red Flag League, Chicago's Red Star League, People's College in Nashville, Tennessee, Association of Communist Workers from Louisville, Kentucky, and activists from Chinatown in New York, Chicago's ethnic communities, and North Carolina.²⁰⁶ The group was tasked with creating literature that could inform an action plan targeting US industry, particularly automakers.²⁰⁷

During the time this meeting took place, a major union-sanctioned strike was underway at the General Motors plant in Norwood, Ohio. As the national news media covered the strike, New Communist activists recognized the

²⁰⁴ "Atlanta," *The Guardian*, 13 December 1972.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ "Every Factory a Fortress," *The Call*, January 1973.

²⁰⁷ "Communists Call Conference," *The Call*, December 1972.

potential impact their involvement could have. After twenty-five weeks on strike, some of the 4,000 GM workers were growing increasingly disillusioned with their union leadership.²⁰⁸ At the meeting in Atlanta, communist organizers set out to determine how to harness the growing militancy among GM employees and other US workers. Workshop topics included, “Building Solidarity Committees and Rank and File Organizations,” “Question in the Plants,” “Agitation and Propaganda,” “Strike Strategy,” and “The Upcoming Struggle in the Auto Industry.” The OL published reports on each workshop over the following months in *The Call* and produced a report that outlined their plans.

At the conference, Sherman Miller explained some of the successes and failures the October League had experienced at Mead. The group immediately recognized that one of the biggest weaknesses was failing to connect with white workers. He stressed the importance of working across race lines and educating all workers about class struggle. Miller also underscored the need to move beyond the “advanced worker” to organize among the broad masses.²⁰⁹ Additionally, he advised that organizers should thoroughly research conditions in each plant, identify key issues with which workers strongly identified, and develop tailored campaigns based on actual grievances. Another key point of advice was to form an organization at each plant, comprised of rank and file workers, with democratically elected leadership. Within those organizations,

²⁰⁸ “GM Workers Fight Speed Up,” *The Call*, November 1972.

²⁰⁹ “Every Factory a Fortress.”

communist members could introduce political issues and work to expand the consciousness of the workers. Lastly, Miller urged patience and stressed the need for a long-term vision.²¹⁰

Because of his role as chairman of the Mead Caucus of Rank and File workers and communist affiliation, Sherman Miller was among the few denied his job; so instead of returning to the factory, he became a spokesman for the October League.²¹¹ After the conference, Miller toured the country, touting the October League's doctrine, giving lectures, and showing the documentary film, *Wildcat at Mead*.²¹² The fifty-minute film, produced by the October League immediately following the strike as a recruiting tool, is a black and white documentary account of actions that took place during the Mead wildcat strike. The film depicted how the participants constructed and conveyed their grievances, their protest methods, the communication style of their leaders, and the role the media played in the strike. The opening scene captures the lively energy of a general meeting, in which the participants chant loudly, clap, and sing. Next, a female narrator gives an overview of what the film will be about against the backdrop of soul music and images of the plant. Spoken over

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² An advertisement in the January 1973 issue of *The Call* announced lectures by Sherman Miller and film viewing of *Strike at Mead* in Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Berkeley, California over a week-long period in January, 1973. An ad in the February issue of *The Call* referred to it as *Wildcat at Mead* and offered showings accompanied by speakers for fees of \$100 for schools and \$50 for Political Organizations. An article in the March issue of *The Call* mentioned that proceeds for viewings of the film were "shown around the country and thousands of dollars were raised to help support the families of the fired workers."

footage of the workers' children, young black boys and girls with raised fists wearing handmade posters bearing the slogan "This is Your Fight Too," the narrator explains:

[I]t was the workers themselves that were the strength of the strike. Throughout the day to day struggles, they did the work, they took the risks, they bore the brunt of the oppression that came down on them. Their spirit and unity is an example for all working and oppressed people in their struggle for dignity, human rights, and final control of their own destiny. This film is one part of that great struggle. ("Wildcat" 1972)

The film goes on to show strike participants in mule marches, rallies, and confrontations with police. The filmmakers include interviews with individual workers and clips of OL members meeting with workers to provide them an opportunity to express why they thought a "wildcat" strike was necessary. Repeatedly, workers emphasized the fact that the union ignored their calls for help. The film's narrative leaves agency in the hands of the workers, something the OL stressed as crucial to maintaining the New Communist movement's integrity.

According to Sherman Miller's observation at the end of *Wildcat at Mead*, many of the workers involved were exposed to ideas that allowed them to begin to shape the notion of "one struggle against the same oppressor." By working towards the personal goal of improving working conditions, formerly apolitical workers started to connect the strike with the Vietnam war and other global struggles. "A lot of the people in this strike have come to realize what it means to fight for 'power to the people.'" It's not a slogan anymore. They're beginning to

understand what it really means, what working class means,” expressed Miller.

The narrator concludes *Wildcat at Mead* by stating:

The struggle at Mead is not over. The oppression and exploitation of the Afro-American people and all working people is being met with continued resistance. The strike at Mead is an example of that resistance. The great revolutionary leader, Lenin, has said that strikes are a school for war. This school daily teaches the masses of people that their final emancipation can only be achieved through the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system. The lessons learned at Mead are ammunition, ammunition for peoples’ struggles all around the country. The actions of the Mead workers is a call, a call for their brothers and sisters to join in common struggles for liberation.²¹³

The October League viewed the Mead strike as an opportunity for party building, so they used the film to present information and ideas in such a way that it would persuade the audience to sympathize with their cause. The film made the story of the strike duplicable and portable so that it could be used as a mobilizing tool. Through images and sound, it portrays the spirit of the strike and seeks to convey the October League’s larger agenda. Sherman Miller was able to reach a wide audience of leftist activists around the country when he showed the film and lectured in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Baltimore, New York, and Boston. Moreover, he raised significant funds in the process to support the workers’ continued struggle.²¹⁴

In addition to their connection to the national arena, Atlanta activists were also associated with what they considered an international communist

²¹³ *Wildcat at Mead*

²¹⁴ “Wildcat at Mead,” *The Great Speckled Bird*, February 1973.

movement. They looked towards peoples' struggles in China and Cuba as models. When a group of eleven progressive women from all over the country visited the Peoples' Republic of China in November 1972, at least two women who were active in Atlanta's strikes attended. One Mead strike participant stated that she "wanted to find out how workers in China make decisions and run their own society." Nanny Washburn, who also traveled as part of the delegation, said that she went to "express solidarity with all my brothers and sisters over there."²¹⁵

With more exposure to international issues, progressive activists increasingly urged workers to view their struggle as part of a global system of oppression. Miller expressed that "workers now talk in terms of struggle against the 'system' and the 'power structure' rather than just a strike against Mead. We have begun to show the connections between corporate power and how imperialism is a world front of monopoly."²¹⁶ The Atlanta Coordinating Committee, formed by local activists as an umbrella organization of leftist groups the previous May to reignite the city's anti-war movement, urged unified struggle against imperialism. Calling for participation at an anti-war rally on November 18, 1972, the ACC proclaimed:

the war in Vietnam is no accident, but an example of the inevitable aggression that imperialism relies on to secure and increase its control over countries for the purpose of making ever-increasing profits. At the same time, these corporations – General Motors, Mead, Sears, Chase

²¹⁵ "China," *The Call*, December 1972.

²¹⁶ "General Report of the Mead Strike."

Manhattan Bank, Gulf Oil, etc. – also exploit and oppress the people of the US. We therefore stand in opposition to US imperialism and oppose the war, not simply as an isolated phenomenon, but as part and parcel of the system of imperialism.²¹⁷

In keeping with this focus, the organization soon changed its name to the Atlanta Anti-Imperialist Coalition. In a demonstration held on Inauguration Day in 1973, various local activists and supporters rallied at the state capitol. Nanny Washburn spoke about her recent trip to the Peoples' Republic of China, death-row inmate and former GM worker Henry Whitlock's sister told the crowd about her brother's unfair trial, and Gary Washington of the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers filled in for a member who could not be there. A reporter for the *The Great Speckled Bird* noted that Washington's "speech calling for unity among black and white workers in overcoming imperialism at home and abroad was impromptu but couldn't have been better if it had been prepared." The article further explained that, "the overall message of the day was of workers, black and white, and all other laboring classes coming together to win the fight against imperialism in our daily lives and in the lives of our comrades in other countries."²¹⁸

Hosea Williams shared the ideal of opposing imperialism and the exploitative nature of capitalism. Like the October League, he actually quoted

²¹⁷ "People of the world unite! Defeat US Imperialism!" *The Great Speckled Bird*, November 1972.

²¹⁸ "AAIC Meet," *The Great Speckled Bird*, January 1973.

Mao Tse Tung in several articles in *The Atlanta Voice*.²¹⁹ “Black Americans must understand that their major problem is not basically racial, it is economic; it is part of the overall world class struggle,” he explained.²²⁰ However, Williams also understood the importance of practical tactics and tangible efforts, for the problems at hand were urgent, not just theoretical and abstract. “Although capitalism is wrong – it is exploitive – we are caught in it. Therefore we must exploit it for all the benefits poor people can possibly receive, until such time we can come up with an accept[able] alternative,” he urged. With this mindset, Williams and his supporters continued doing what they did best – organizing, marching, confronting, and exposing oppression and exploitation.

After Mead, Williams’ Dekalb/Metro-Atlanta branch of the SCLC took a stand against South Fulton Hospital in East Point for discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, and turning away black patients.²²¹ At a rally, he shouted, “when the poor white man wakes up – I know he’s asleep but if he ever wakes up – together we can turn this country around.”²²² Next, his organization stood against the Atlanta Greyhound Bus Company for refusing to recognize the national Amalgamated Transit Union and hiring part time workers to avoid paying

²¹⁹ On more than one occasion, he reminds readers, “as Mao Tse Tung, Leader of the Chinese people once said, ‘To forget the past is betrayal and to remember the past is revolutionary.’”

²²⁰ “Hosea Williams,” *The Atlanta Voice*, May 1972.

²²¹ “Tell ‘em we hell on wheels,” *The Great Speckled Bird*, 11 December 1972.

²²² *Ibid.*

benefits.²²³ By December, mobilization had intensified to the point where the Metro-Atlanta SCLC announced that it was founding a “Poor People’s Union.” Inspired by an organization called the Distributive Workers of America (DWA) that claimed a 30,000 member base in New York, Williams partnered with the DWA in hopes to organize the working poor in Atlanta. The group targeted unrepresented and under-represented workers to secure health benefits, pensions, job security, and help negotiate grievances. With an organizational structure that mirrored a typical labor union, DWA hoped to grow to 10,000 members strong in Atlanta within a year and then move throughout the Southeast.²²⁴ Though they never reached the intended level of success, this ambitious goal fueled organizing attempts over the following year.

By the spring of 1973, Hosea Williams’ reputation as a strong supporter of Atlanta’s working class was firmly established. On April 3, Rich’s Department Store, one of Atlanta’s top corporations, became the target of protest when two hundred fifty employees walked out to dispute racist employment practices.²²⁵ In the days immediately preceding this action two black employees had been fired – a foreman and the personnel manager, Ernie Brown. Brown was dismissed for refusing to adhere to the informal quota system that limited the number of black hires.²²⁶ Workers noted inequitable hiring and promotion policies as the main reason for the strike. Blacks held only four out of about three hundred

²²⁵ *The Call*, April 1973 and *The Great Speckled Bird*, April 1973.

management positions throughout the Atlanta area, while the overall workforce at Rich's was approximately thirty percent black.²²⁷ Because Atlanta's workers had been organizing over the previous year, networks and support groups were already in place.

Rich's management relied on its prominent standing in the Atlanta community, among both whites and blacks, to counter the strike's affects. On April 27, 1973, Rich's took out a full page ad in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. In response to the strike and boycott, management felt the need to communicate publicly with their supporters:

A note of thanks to our loyal friends: We want to thank all of our employees who have made it 'business as usual' at Rich's and also thank out loyal customers who have continued to give us their patronage, despite current inconveniences. If our service in any instance has not been up to its usual standards lately, it is not because of any lack of dedication or effort on the part of our working employees."²²⁸

Another full page Rich's advertisement in the *Journal and Constitution* two days later proclaimed that it was the company's "Best Easter Ever" in hopes of drawing shoppers back into the store and showing that the company was unaffected by the strike.²²⁹ To the contrary, *The Guardian* reported that the

²²⁷ "Rich's Strike," *The Call*, April 1973.

²²⁸ *The Atlanta Journal*, 27 April 1973.

²²⁹ *The Atlanta Journal*, 29 April 1973.

activists call for “a black Easter” resulted in a fifty percent decrease in sales.²³⁰ On May 16, Rich’s appointed businessman Jesse Hill as the first black member of its board of directors. Equally important, in a move that illustrated the black elite’s close relationship with the company, members of the Martin Luther King Center for Social Change named Rich’s board chairman Arthur J. Goldberg to their board.²³¹

Pickers first convened on the flagship store downtown, but after an injunction limited assembly to three persons, they spread out to stores throughout the city. A month into the strike, on May 5, workers organized a mule train march from the downtown store to the home of Harold Brockey, the Chairman of Rich’s Board of Directors. Police stopped the procession and arrested fifty-one people, including Hosea Williams. They booked Williams on a charge dating back to 1967, and jailed him with a set release date of June 11, 1973. Frustrated by Williams’ involvement, Rich’s president, Richard Rich, referred to him as “a charlatan, a drunkard, and an extortionist,” at a lecture at Emory University, which was reported in local newspapers. Williams filed a slander lawsuit against Rich’s for \$6 million, prompting Rich to issue a public apology.²³² The following week, on May 12, Ralph David Abernathy led another march. This time, they arranged for buses to drive them through the police

²³⁰ “Atlanta,” *The Guardian*. 2 May 1973.

²³¹ “Rich’s chairman named to board,” *GSB* May 1973.

²³² “More Arrests Hit Rich’s Strike,” *The Call*, May 1973.

barricades so they could not be arrested and held a rally in front of Brockey's home.²³³

Unlike the unrest the previous year, some whites supported the strike. When the first group of strikers was arrested, an estimated one-third of those present at the candlelight vigil were white.²³⁴ Many white truck drivers, who recognized the unequal opportunities in their department, refused to cross the picket lines. While some blacks held positions as delivery truck drivers with top pay at \$3.75 per hour, there were no black semi-trailer drivers, a position with a starting pay of \$5.00 per hour. Even after Rich's management sent letters threatening that they would be replaced by black drivers, many white drivers did not return to work.²³⁵ Though the white truck drivers held out as long as they could, pressure from the company eventually caused them to return for fear of permanently losing their jobs.²³⁶ When demonstrators rallied in front of Chairman Brockey's home, sympathetic white neighbors offered their lawns so that they could avoid arrest and a rabbi offered his nearby synagogue as a place of refuge.²³⁷ While the majority of the black and white workers at Rich's remained

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ "Rich's," *The Great Speckled Bird*, 23 April 1973.

²³⁵ "Racism Target of Rich's Strike in Atlanta," *The Call*, April 1973.

²³⁶ "Atlanta," *The Guardian*, 2 May 1973.

²³⁷ "More Arrests Hit Rich's Strike."

polarized during the strike, the instances of solidarity and collaboration showed marked improvement over actions the previous year.²³⁸

After holding out for seven weeks, strikers agreed via secret ballot that they would return to work. The result was a moderate success, as Rich's agreed to only a few of their demands. All strikers were rehired, though not necessarily in their previous positions and with no back pay. One of the most significant victories addressed a major concern and cause of the strike: Rich's management agreed to make improvements in their promotion practices. New job openings had to be posted before filled, and the promotion had to be based on seniority, experience, training, and productivity. Management agreed to meet regularly with employees to review these practices and also set up a special grievance committee. More notable than any specific concession, the strikers believed they had won by exposing racist practices at Rich's.²³⁹

In addition to employment issues, continued police brutality complaints marred Atlanta's "city too busy to hate" image. By the spring of 1973, mounting police brutality in Atlanta prompted a group of concerned community members to form the Black Citizens Committee Against Police Repression. The group aimed to "expose the nature of the police force in Atlanta as it relates to the black community...and expose the repressive conditions which black people are forced to live under which generates so-called criminal acts by Black people." The

²³⁸ "Rich's Strike Ends," *GSB*, 23 May 1973.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

previous summer, two black men were shot 29 times during a robbery.²⁴⁰ In February, white Atlanta police officers killed John Percy Boyd and Darnell Winfield, and they were suspected of killing Mark Bethune, who was found dead after a manhunt.²⁴¹ In March, a 25-year old unarmed black man, Herbert Comer, was shot and killed by an Atlanta policeman. In April, detective H.F. Pharr shot Charles Oliver in the head.²⁴² On June 4, Officer J.D. Roberts shot a 14-old girl in Capital Homes housing projects when responding to her mother's complaint about her erratic behavior. Fortunately, the girl survived her wounds.²⁴³ By September, the Atlanta police had killed thirteen black people. In response, local activist groups formed an organization called the Atlanta Anti-Repression Commission. Sue Thrasher, a long time local civil rights activist and one of the earliest white members of SNCC, spoke at their September meeting, where she explained that a white officer named Bowen "has shot and killed five Black men in the past thirty months. Four of the five were shot at least seven times."²⁴⁴ In 1973, more blacks were killed by Atlanta policemen than any other comparable city in the nation. Atlanta's black and progressive activist community focused

²⁴⁰ "Black Citizens vs. Police," *GSB*, April 1973.

²⁴¹ "Police Shooting," *GSB*, 7 June 1973.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² "Atlanta Police," *GSB*, 24 September 1973.

outrage on Police Chief John Inman.²⁴⁵ Traditional marches and protests could not bring about the change necessary to remedy police brutality in Atlanta. This would require a change from the top down. The coming mayoral election presented a timely opportunity for black Atlantans to exercise their increased power in local electoral politics.

Atlanta's power structure changed significantly during this time period. A racially charged mayoral campaign captured the public's attention in 1973. Incumbent mayor Sam Massell's campaign slogan, "Atlanta's Too Young to Die," implied that a black mayor would prove fatal to the city's progress.²⁴⁶ Massell's platform focused on the potential economic consequences of white flight, and supported annexation of northern suburbs for the purpose of increasing the percentage of white citizens within city limits. He told a black audience at Butler Street YMCA to "think white" when considering the economic future of the city, and warned whites that their property value would decline should blacks gain control – "It's Cheaper to Vote Than to Move" one ad claimed.²⁴⁷ Additionally, Massell sought to mar Jackson's image by associating him with Hosea Williams' black radical persona. An ad that ran in the October 10, 1973, *Atlanta Journal* read, "The thought of a Maynard Jackson – Hosea Williams administration is

²⁴⁵ Pomerantz 432.

²⁴⁶ Bayor 43.

²⁴⁷ Stone 80.

scaring some Atlantans to death.”²⁴⁸ Massell unabashedly centered his language on the race of his opponent in an attempt to appeal to conservative whites. “One can almost see them dancing in the streets in anticipation of a black takeover,” he said.²⁴⁹

Conversely, Maynard Jackson emphasized the need for biracial unity and inclusion in his campaign strategy, aspiring to “a situation whereby grass-roots leaders, white and black, will be sitting alongside of persons who are quite wealthy, quite influential, and sometimes not as attuned as they need to be to what it is really like to be living close to disaster.”²⁵⁰ Statements like this resonated with much of the electoral base. Gary M. Pomerantz captured the electorate’s feeling best in his book, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: A Saga of Race and Family*. “To many blacks in Atlanta in 1973, Maynard Jackson became more than just a mere candidate. He was a cause, a symbol, a spiritual manifestation of black hopes and dreams a century old.”²⁵¹ Maynard’s strategy proved most effective, as he won 95 percent of the black vote and 17.5 percent of the white vote, securing victory as the first black mayor of Atlanta or any other city in the South.²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Quoted in Pomerantz 432.

²⁴⁹ Pomerantz 414.

²⁵⁰ Stone 81.

²⁵¹ Pomerantz 406.

²⁵² Bayor 48.

Jackson's victory signified the beginning of a new era in Atlanta. In his inaugural address, Jackson declared, "We stand, not so much as a gateway to the South, but as a gateway to a new time, a new era, a new beginning for the cities of our land [...] It is awesome to consider, but true: we stand at a decisive point in history. Everyone knows that the Old South is dead forever."²⁵³ He went on to assert that it was up to Atlantans to forge a new South. While in office, Mayor Jackson helped to open opportunities that blacks had been previously denied and changed the racial, gender and class composition of long-standing institutions. As Ronald Bayor pointed out in his book *Race and the Shaping ...* "The 1973 election was a stark reversal of the political past. *Electoral*ly, the white business elite was reduced to junior partner in the biracial coalition."²⁵⁴ Both the new city council and the school board contained a balanced number of black and white members. Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, president of Morehouse College, won the office of school board president. Additionally, Jackson strongly supported Affirmative Action programs. He publicly threatened that he would deposit city funds elsewhere if local banks did not appoint women and people of color to their boards and implement programs that would provide them access to executive level positions. He also ensured black businesses access to construction contracts, particularly at the new airport, by threatening that he

²⁵³ Pomerantz 424.

²⁵⁴ Stone, 81.

would “let grass grow on runways” if they continued to be denied a share of business.²⁵⁵

One of the biggest controversies Jackson encountered during his first term in office was his public conflict with Police Chief John Inman. Jackson considered the black community’s uproar over incidents of police brutality and Inman’s refusal to adhere to affirmative action guidelines as grounds for dismissal, battling him in court twice to force him from office.²⁵⁶ Another significant change was the support that Jackson’s administration gave to the growing Neighborhood Movement, which was comprised mostly of young relatively progressive gentrification pioneers in Atlanta’s in-town neighborhoods. Largely in response to these activists’ efforts, a Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) system was implemented as a way to give individual neighborhoods more political clout, weakening the influence of the business elite’s former stronghold on the way the city was run. “I will not cater exclusively to the old-line establishment leaders of Atlanta commerce, whose wishes were often granted by past administrations,”²⁵⁷ Jackson proclaimed.

Though more radical currents in Atlanta’s activist community continued to push for more fundamental change, the majority of blacks and progressive whites found hope in the city’s political transformation. However, while opportunities

²⁵⁵ Stone 87-88.

²⁵⁶ Stone 88.

²⁵⁷ Ibid 87.

expanded for middle class blacks, poor blacks continued to face problems with employment, housing, and city services. Those blacks who did gain power encountered conflicting agendas among their constituencies. As Stone noted “Black business leaders were motivated to pursue cooperation with the white business elite. Black community activists, practiced in confrontation politics, had no such incentives.”²⁵⁸ For example, while Hosea Williams thrived on confrontation, his adversary Andrew Young, who just won the 5th district seat in the United States House of Representatives, tended to take a more moderate stance. Williams tolerated anyone who supported working-class rights while Young, in the words of *The Call* “vowed to ‘run the communists out.’”²⁵⁹ Often, class overshadowed race in political compromise. Throughout Maynard Jackson’s time in office, he wavered on issues concerning working class blacks. Much of his efforts turned out to benefit a middle class agenda. By 1977, Jackson sided with Atlanta’s black middle class in opposition to a sanitation workers’ strike, despite the fact that he had fervently supported their strike during his term as vice mayor seven years earlier.²⁶⁰

During this transition period, currents of radicalism continued to flow in Atlanta. Due to the recognition gained through their efforts in organizing the city’s working class, the October League had become a key player in the New

²⁵⁸ Stone 91.

²⁵⁹ “Andrew Young,” *The Call*, March 1973.

²⁶⁰ Bayor 52.

Communist Movement. As the Movement expanded, however, various factions began to compete along sectarian lines. In a speech given at a *Guardian*-organized forum on party building in New York City on March 23, 1973, OL chairman Michael Klonsky stated, “We’ve got to expose opportunism! We’ve got to expose the revisionists! If we don’t fight revisionism, we’ll never be able to defeat imperialism.”²⁶¹ One example of this ultra-leftism, which directly affected Atlanta’s progressive activist community, was OL’s takeover of the Southern Christian Education Fund (SCEF) in 1975-7. SCEF and its predecessor organizations had been organizing in the South for many years, and was committed to a united front against racism regardless of ideological affiliation. Bob Zellner,²⁶² one of the first white members of SNCC, had joined the October League and, along with other members, used his relationships within SCEF to incorporate New Communist ideologies into the group’s agenda.²⁶³ Rather than continue their tradition of maintaining a united front in fighting racism in the

²⁶¹ Mike Klonsky. “What Road to Building a New Communist Party?” *The Guardian*. 23 March 1973.

²⁶² Elbaum198. As noted in Howard Zinn’s book, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, Bob Zellner, raised in South Alabama and son of a reformed Ku Klux Klansman and Methodist minister, entered the movement soon after graduating from college and was quickly oriented by violence. During his first field assignment with SNCC in the fall of 1961, he was the only white person to participate in a march in McComb, Mississippi, for which he paid dearly. For supposedly betraying his race, Zellner was pulled from the crowd and brutally beaten unconscious. Instead of packing his bags and returning home, abandoning the cause for safer pursuits, he considered the beating a “religious experience” through which he became married to the movement. Zellner later became the first white staff member for SNCC (salary paid by SCEF funds) as a field secretary, and, among other responsibilities, was assigned to work with white Southern college students.

community, OL leadership within SCEF adopted the Chinese Communist Party's "no united front with revisionism" policy. They drove the members and sympathizers of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), a group considered revisionist, out of the organization and forced resolutions touting anti-revisionist dogma in its literature. This resulted in an eighty percent decrease in the circulation of their newspaper, the *Southern Patriot*, and eventually contributed to major conflicts within the organization and ultimately its disbanding.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ Elbaum 198.

Epilogue and Conclusion

Though the labor unrest in 1972 is a largely forgotten chapter in Atlanta's past, legacies of that year's activities are still visible today. Strike participants and supporters chose widely diverse paths, ranging from continued activism to climbing the corporate ladder. Some have elected to keep their past participation in such activities a closely guarded secret, while others continue to work in their communities and carry on some version of the struggle that they began many years ago.

Hosea Williams continued to agitate for black rights and work for the poor up until his death in 2000. As he had done since returning from World War II in Savannah and during the Civil Rights Movement alongside Martin Luther King, Jr, Williams could be found on the front lines of marches for equal rights throughout the metro-Atlanta area for the next thirty years. In 1987, he faced the Ku Klux Klan, leading a large group of demonstrators in Forsyth County, an area north of Atlanta, to protest segregated conditions. Months prior to his death from prostate cancer, he managed to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary of his participation in "Bloody Sunday" by marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. His most lasting legacy is undoubtedly the Hosea Williams Feed the Hungry organization, now run by his daughter, which provides meals, showers, haircuts, clothing, and other services and resources for thousands of

Atlanta's poor and homeless on Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday each year. Thousands of volunteers convene in large sports arenas on these holidays to carry out what Williams began. Despite criticisms Williams may have faced during his lifetime for his brash style and confrontational tactics, his spirit lives on in that Atlantans from all walks of life equate his name with helping the poor.

Williams' right hand man in the Dekalb/Metro-Atlanta branch of the SCLC during this tumultuous period in the early 1970s was fellow civil rights veteran Tyrone Brooks. Building upon his experience organizing for the working poor in Atlanta, he went on to join the anti-apartheid struggle. He was arrested in 1976 for protesting the Soweto massacre in Washington, DC. Brooks was first elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1980 and has served in this role ever since. During the 1980s he called for all Georgia controlled funds to be pulled from South Africa's white minority regime. In 2001, the House Bill 16 he proposed to remove the confederate battle symbol (incorporated to protest school desegregation in 1956) from the Georgia flag finally passed after a twenty-year struggle.²⁶⁵

Another notable political figure in Atlanta politics was also an active participant in the strikes in 1972. As a Nabisco employee at the time, current Georgia State Representative Nan Orrock supported the efforts of black workers during the strike. With a background as one of the earliest white participants in

²⁶⁵ Georgia State Representative Tyrone Brooks. "Bio." www.legis.state.ga.us/legis/2005_06/house/bios/Brooks (accessed 19 May 2006)

the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Orrock empathized with her fellow workers as they faced discriminatory employment conditions. Following the strike, management attempted to fire her for her participation, labeling her as a “trouble maker;” but as she contends, “if you’re of the opinion that black people are inferior and can’t lead themselves, you’re obviously going to believe the white person that’s there is the one leading.” She fondly remembers the way the Nabisco workers and the local black community banded together to fight for equal treatment, and notes that some of the specific concessions realized from their efforts, such as an open-door policy with management, representative grievance committees, and the Martin Luther King birthday holiday are practiced to this day. She sometimes joins workers at an annual reunion where they reminisce about and celebrate their 1972 victory, which holds somewhat of a legendary status. Orrock moved from union and neighborhood organizing into state politics in 1987. She has maintained a progressive agenda throughout her political career, championing neighborhood issues, serving as a peoples’ advocate across class lines, and holding leadership roles in organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Because of her affiliation with labor activists at Nabisco during that time period, despite her respected role in the community for over forty years of service, her political opponents stooped to a red-baiting attack during her 2002 Georgia state legislative campaign, a price she paid for simply supporting her colleagues in their struggle for equal treatment. Despite this, Orrock won that

election and is currently running for state senate. Her 2006 campaign web site, www.nanforsenate.info, proudly boasts her past as a SNCC organizer and member of the Bakery, Confectionary, and Tobacco union at Nabisco, as well as the fact that she helped to found an alternative newspaper (Atlanta's nationally acclaimed progressive underground newspaper, *The The Great Speckled Bird*, published from 1968 -1976).²⁶⁶

Gary Washington, who served as the treasurer of the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers during the strike in 1972, has remained active in Atlanta's progressive community since his participation in the strike. Washington had worked in New York City's garment industry in his late teens and took for granted its labor tradition. When he arrived in Atlanta to attend college at Morehouse and took a job at Mead, he was surprised at the weak status of the union. Though he never joined the October League, he identified with what they aimed to do at Mead and immediately became active in the organizing efforts. Because of his dedication, Washington's colleagues encouraged him to become shop steward following the strike. He continued to work at Mead for over thirty years, and noted that conditions never reverted to the level they had been prior to the strike. Going forward, management understood that workers would no longer tolerate blatantly discriminatory practices. In his leadership role, Washington never stopped challenging management when workers were treated unfairly. He was dismissed several times over the years for his actions, only to regain his position

²⁶⁶ Georgia State Representative Nan Orrock. "Meet Nan." Nanforsenate.info. (accessed 19 May 2006).

under union protection. As a union representative, he currently spends long hours in meetings with co-workers to discuss grievances and resolve conflicts, a mechanism which mirrors one of the strike's concessions. In addition to his union service, Washington is a widely recognized voice for labor throughout Atlanta. As host of "Labor Forum," progressive radio WRFG's weekly show, he keeps Atlantans abreast of current labor and community issues and welcomes various guests for informative discussions. He is also a familiar face at community meetings and rallies in support of a diverse array of progressive agendas.

John Fletcher was active in OL's efforts in Atlanta in 1972. Originally from a household where both parents were educators in a racially diverse inner-city neighborhood in Washington D.C., Fletcher attended Duke University. While at Duke, he took classes on Marxism and labor history, his interest having been peaked by hearing stories about his grandfather's work as a railroad unionist. As a student, Fletcher became involved in the Civil Rights Movement and liberal Democratic political campaigns. During the late 1960s, he became increasingly disillusioned with "the system" and began to identify with the New Left. A contributing factor in this sentiment was his former roommate's death in the Vietnam War – he failed out of classes, was immediately drafted, and was killed within months. During the tumultuous days of 1968, Fletcher's activism took precedence over education, and he dropped out of Duke just prior to graduation to take a factory job in Greensboro, North Carolina, to help organize the workers.

The network of organizations in which he was involved assigned him to Atlanta to enter the factories and organize the workers there. Shortly thereafter, he was present at the meeting where the October League and Georgia Communist League unified.

Over the next few months, Fletcher worked diligently attempting to organize workers at a local railroad company, handing out newspapers and flyers at factory gates around the city and participating in weekly Marxist study groups. He was assigned to work at Mead after the strike to pick up on the momentum to organize the white workers, though he admits only moderate success. His next assignment, along with several other organizers from Atlanta, was to move to Birmingham, Alabama to organize steel workers. He worked in the factories in Birmingham for several more years, was blacklisted from the steel industry, and later fired from two other plants for his organizing activity. Today he admits only limited success in mobilizing the workers.

By the late 1970s, the October League and New Communist Movement had begun to unravel. During this time, he and his wife became active in the US-China Peoples' Friendship Organization, and his wife traveled to China in 1978 as a representative of the CP (ML). Fletcher returned to school, received his degree from Duke in 1981, and has been teaching high school social studies outside of Birmingham for more than twenty years. Today, he serves his community through his role as a respected teacher, remains informed on progressive issues and scholarship, and maintains the same general belief

system that prompted him into political action in his youth. While he has some regrets for postponing his career, he is proud to have been on what he considers “the right side of history.”

Wayne Draznin, one of the few white members of the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers and who is featured throughout the film *Wildcat at Mead*, died of cancer in 2001. As an artist, professor, and filmmaker, Draznin remained involved in progressive political activism throughout his remaining years. His most enduring work was as a film maker. He produced several controversial documentaries. His film “Shell Game” investigates Shell Oil’s responsibility for environmental destruction in Nigeria, and his final film “Mark as Another” chronicles his cancer-ravaged body shortly before his death. (The camera “slowly pans up his body, sparing neither scars nor genitals. A final scene shows an eye moving closer and closer to the camera lens, until the watcher feels watched. It is creepy – and chillingly effective – art that creates an uncomfortable intimacy.”²⁶⁷) Right up until his death, Draznin did not shy from making others uncomfortable with the truth of a subject. At his memorial service, a colleague read a passage written by Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian writer, activist, and martyr to whom Draznin had dedicated “Shell Games”: “Whether I live or die is immaterial. It is enough to know that there are people who commit time, money and energy to fight this one evil among so many others

²⁶⁷ Laura Kennelly. “Practical Matters: Four artists transformed factory materials into fine art.” [<http://www.Clevescene.com/Issues/2002-06-27/culture/art.html>] 27 June 2002 (accessed 24 April 2006).

predominating worldwide. If they do not succeed today, they will succeed tomorrow.” Friends agreed that this passage captured Draznin’s unwavering commitment to noble causes.²⁶⁸

Michael Klonsky is a red-diaper baby who first became active in Students for a Democratic Society. In 1969, he joined the Revolutionary Youth Movement, which evolved into the October League under his leadership and eventually became the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist). He resigned as the CP(ML) chairman in 1981. Klonsky went on to teach in the Chicago area, obtained a PhD in education, and now works as an advocate for public school reform. He proposes small schools to remedy the ills of the existing education system, and has written several books and teaches workshops on the subject.

Sherman Miller continued organizing with the OL/CP (M-L) for the next several years, serving as a spokesman and key organizer. By 1978, the psychological stress endured through prolonged organizing efforts led to drug and alcohol abuse and what Miller described as a “breakdown.” In a “Self-Criticism” written in January 1979, he attributed this breakdown to individualism as opposed to party alignment, living in contradiction to his work (i.e. spending 90% of his time with whites, including his wife, while “leading the party’s Afro-American work”), guilt, and isolationism.²⁶⁹ Because of his behavior, the CP(ML)

²⁶⁸ *Link: News for Alumni and Friends of the Cleveland Institute of Art*, “In Memory of Wayne Drazin, www.cia.edu/about/link/link102.pdf. January 2002. (accessed 19 April 2006).

²⁶⁹ JH Files. Sherman Miller. “Self-Criticism,” January 1979. Jerry Harris personal files provided to author by Kerry Taylor.

placed him on probation for several months and ultimately expelled him from the organization on March 22, 1979.²⁷⁰

Neither the October League nor any other New Communist organization ever gained massive or nationwide support. When asked why the October League had such difficulty attracting black supporters, John Fletcher recalled a telling encounter. He was having a discussion with one of his black coworkers about the corrupt capitalist political system, espousing his Marxist views, and the coworker nodded and agreed throughout his tirade. Fletcher ended by saying that he was not going to vote in the upcoming election, and urged his friend to abstain as well. When his friend responded by saying he was going to vote anyway, he started to counter with all of the reasons he should not, when it suddenly dawned on him what he was doing:

Here I'm trying to talk this black guy out of voting in 1972 when he just got the right to vote [a few] years earlier, and had been fighting for it for two generations, and I'm talking him out of voting, which was idiotic. I think maybe things like that were why we didn't make the progress we thought we were going to.

In his opinion, they were out of touch with reality, too caught up in ultra-left dogmatism to attract widespread support or produce significant change.

Additionally, he explained that had they had read Lenin closely enough, they would have realized that the conditions were not rife for revolution. Employers had not reached a point where they had run out of options rather than negotiate,

²⁷⁰ JH Files. "The Standing Committee Announcement," 22 March 1979. Jerry Harris personal files provided to author by Kerry Taylor.

while employees had not reached a level of dissatisfaction that would have fueled the desire to overthrow the whole system.²⁷¹

Throughout the mid-1970s New Communist organizations continued to vie for dominance over the Movement. Having ascended to the position as the most widely respected vanguardist group in the Maoist vein, the October League announced their transformation into the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) in 1977 and elected Michael Klonsky to serve as its Chairman and Eileen Klehr as Vice Chairman. Both Klonsky and Klehr had been affiliated with OL's activities in Atlanta.²⁷² Klonsky, Klehr and a US Maoist delegation traveled to China and received recognition from Chinese Communist Party Chairman Hua Guofeng. After returning, the CP (ML) took advantage of its mounting reputation to increase its membership by twelve percent.

Carl Davidson summed up the fall of the New Communist Movement by outlining the final period of the Communist Party (M-L) in a January 1985 issue of *Forward: Journal of Socialist Thought*. His analysis pointed out some of the successes, but focuses on the ultimate pitfalls. He felt that the organization, and thus the movement, was destroyed by infighting and revisionism. Without strong organizations, many sympathizers faltered in their support. According to the article:

Thousands who were members of Marxist-Leninist organizations in the 1970s and early 1980s no longer consider themselves part of the

²⁷¹ Fletcher interview.

²⁷² Elbaum 228.

communist movement. And growing numbers of these are no longer active even in the mass movements – they have simply ‘burned out’ and retreated into private life.²⁷³

He called upon remaining communist sympathizers to engage former activists in current struggles by taking advantage of the skills and experienced they gained. Davidson ended by noting that, “The history of revolution shows that successful parties are mainly comprised of young people, the new and dynamic element in their class and society...They are our first priority for the future.”²⁷⁴

Today’s young leftists, however, have not learned the lessons of the New Communist Movement. Indeed, most of them are not even aware that the movement occurred. In popular memory, “the sixties” ended in 1968. New Left activists blew the way of the Weathermen, became absorbed by mainstream liberalism, or were seduced to the other end of the political spectrum with the rise of neo-conservatism. Many young progressives would be shocked to learn that some of their professors, teachers, or neighbors, whom they might suspect of having been hippies in their youth, actually had worked in factories organizing for the same issues of social and economic justice that are important today. John Fletcher expressed a sentiment likely shared by many former activists. With a touch of humor, but sincerity, he said:

I look at guys like Harry Haywood... who were still around in the sixties and seventies... I’m thinking maybe ten years from now as our economy collapses under this weight of debt, and the world economy goes into a

²⁷³ JH Files. Davidson, Carl. “Lessons from the Collapse of the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist),” *Forward: Journal of Socialist Thought*, January 1985. pp. 85

²⁷⁴ Davidson 81.

tailspin and the situation really does get bad, then maybe I'll play that role. I'll crawl back out of the woodwork [and say] 'Hey guys, I was around in the sixties... I can help.'

Those from the New Left, no matter the path they subsequently chose in life, carry with them the wisdom of experience. Today's activists could potentially benefit from dialogue with these movement veterans.

Popular memory often equates Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination with the death of the Civil Rights Movement. King's final work – the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis – could have been seen as a directive or a suggestion for the next steps for activists to take. Either by realizing this or through natural progression, some organizers believed the most pressing issues black Americans faced centered on poverty and class. Accounts of minority workers organizing, agitating, and rising up against corporations in order to enjoy of the legal rights earned in the previous decade are largely lost. Films like *Finally Got the News* document the perspective militant blacks had on labor in this period, yet this element is typically missing from black history lessons. Michael K. Honey's *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* contributed significantly to our understanding of the role black workers played in advancing both the black community and the working class. As one of the book's reviewers realizes, "Black workers were not

just part of the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis – they *were* the movement.”²⁷⁵

Direct extensions of the Civil Rights Movement agenda, these stories expand the commonly held narrative and add to the understanding of the long Civil Rights Movement, the wide scope of time from the 1940s to the 1970s during which blacks struggled for equal treatment.

“Strike Fever” in Atlanta in 1972 was symptomatic of a larger phenomenon. The confidence and experience gained through the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left in the 1960s merged to create a dynamic force. This energy produced a spreading wave of optimism that carried the activists well into the 1970s. Atlanta’s political atmosphere during this period served as both a catalyst and incubator for movement struggles.

²⁷⁵ Ortiz, Paul Rev. of *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle*, by Michael K. Honey. *Alabama Review* 2002 55 (3): 211-212.

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