1973


Thomas A. Becnel

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/2380

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This material was produced from a microfilm copy of the original document. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or patterns which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting thru an image and duplicating adjacent pages to insure you complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a large round black mark, it is an indication that the photographer suspected that the copy may have moved during exposure and thus cause a blurred image. You will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., was part of the material being photographed the photographer followed a definite method in "sectioning" the material. It is customary to begin photoing at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue photoing from left to right in equal sections with a small overlap. If necessary, sectioning is continued again — beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. The majority of users indicate that the textual content is of greatest value, however, a somewhat higher quality reproduction could be made from "photographs" if essential to the understanding of the dissertation. Silver prints of "photographs" may be ordered at additional charge by writing the Order Department, giving the catalog number, title, author and specific pages you wish reproduced.

5. PLEASE NOTE: Some pages may have indistinct print. Filmed as received.

Xerox University Microfilms
300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106
BECNEL, Thomas A., 1934-
WITH BENEFIT OF CLERGY: CATHOLIC CHURCH
SUPPORT FOR THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural
and Mechanical College, Ph.D., 1973
History, modern

University Microfilms, A XEROX Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan
WITH BENEFIT OF CLERGY:
CATHOLIC CHURCH SUPPORT FOR THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL
WORKERS UNION IN LOUISIANA, 1948-1958

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in
The Department of History

by
Thomas A. Becnel
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1962
May, 1973
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author owes his thanks to many people who contributed their time and energies to make this study possible. Professor Burl Noggle, whose lectures and seminars first aroused interest in the topic, directed and guided the work through the various stages of research and writing. Professors M. T. Carleton and James Bolner, who had seen portions of the work as seminar papers, and T. Harry Williams and John Loos added useful suggestions. The author's colleague at Nicholls State University, Professor Marie Fletcher, proofread portions of the manuscript.

Those especially helpful in locating and making available information for the study include the staff of the Southern Collection of the Wilson Library of the University of North Carolina, Allie Bayne Webb of the Louisiana State University Library, Clifton Johnson and his secretary Hattie M. Perry of the Amistad Research Center at Dillard University, Sister Marguerite Brou, Archivist of the Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Tom Butler and Henrietta Jeansonne of the Nicholls State University library, and E. J. Clement who supplied several obscure letters and American Sugar Cane League materials.

Among the clergymen who helped to supply information vital to the study are Archbishop Philip Hannan, Assistant Chancellor Lanaux Rareshide, Bishop Joseph Vath, Monsignor
Charles J. Plauche, and priests such as Vincent O'Connell, Roland Boudreaux, and Wilbur Todd.

H. L. Mitchell graciously allowed the author to subject him to several long interviews dealing with the agricultural labor movement. Henry Pelet, E. J. Clement, T. M. Barker, Thomas Scott, Warren Harang, Charles Breaux, Abdon Portier, and E. Becnel, Jr., provided much background knowledge about many phases of the sugar industry.

Sadie T. Comeaux typed the manuscript and displayed far more than a typist's interest in its progress. But of all the people who helped to make "With Benefit of Clergy" possible, most credit must go to the author's wife, Audrey, who, along with Jeanne Louise, Suzanne Alice, Annette Marie, Thomas Jr., and Emilie Lorraine, deprived herself in order to further his education.
ABSTRACT

Contrary to popular belief, the agricultural union movement in Louisiana during the 1950's was not an unprecedented phenomenon. It is reminiscent of similar union activity in the 1880's and compares to present-day attempts to secure for farm laborers higher wages and better working and living conditions.

Primarily because of the influence of the Catholic Church, H. L. Mitchell, co-founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, brought his National Agricultural Workers Union (an outgrowth of the STFU of the 1930's) to Louisiana around 1950 to organize agricultural laborers and small farmers. The union, which had turned its attention to migrant workers when tenant farming diminished during World War II, began in 1948 to concentrate on organizing farm laborers engaged in agribusiness operations, especially those in California. The NAWU soon reached a stalemate in its West Coast strike/against the gigantic DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation. At about the same time Catholic Church leaders in Louisiana were expressing concern over conditions in the sugar industry, whose workers, one priest said, were isolated behind a Cane Curtain. In 1952 Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel and his pro-labor
priests offered Mitchell's union more assistance than it had ever received from any other church group. The NAWU, which had considered coming to Louisiana to organize cane field workers in the 1930's, then made Louisiana the center of its operations until the union faded into oblivion in 1958.

The voluminous STFU papers and the extensive archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans provide, along with information from clergymen who advised Archbishop Rummel, the basic source of information for this study of the extent and significance of the NAWU's Louisiana movement. Because the most intimate records of the Louisiana Farm Bureau and the American Sugar Cane League are not open to researchers, the strategy and tactics of the two major sugar industry groups cannot be ascertained fully. However, sources such as the minutes of executive committee meetings of the Cane League, letters to the NAWU and to clergymen, interviews with industry spokesmen, and fragments of information disseminated by the lobby groups shed considerable light on management's view of the church-union movement.

The evidence indicates conclusively that continuity rather than change characterizes the Louisiana sugar industry, which maintains some pre-Civil War features even today. Despite Catholic Church support, sugar strikes in the 1950's, like those
in the 1880's, ended in failure. In the two decades since the early fifties, church and labor leaders have been unable to bring workers under National Labor Relations Board coverage, or provide them with minimum wage protection, unemployment compensation, or relief from a Louisiana right-to-work law that applies solely to agricultural workers. Even if recent criticisms of the sugar cane industry are only partly accurate, they reveal that much remains to be done about housing, education, and health care services for the predominantly black labor force that still remains in some respects behind a Cane Curtain.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>PROLOGUE: AGRICULTURAL LABOR IN LOUISIANA FROM RECONSTRUCTION TO 1938</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>CHAPTER 1: THE CHURCH AND THE CANE CURTAIN</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>CHAPTER 2: BUILDING A BASE FOR THE UNION</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>CHAPTER 3: STRAWBERRIES AND SUGAR</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>126</td>
<td>CHAPTER 4: COLLECTIVE BARGAINING OR CATHOLIC ACTION?</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>164</td>
<td>CHAPTER 5: CANE MUTINY</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>CHAPTER 6: CAUGHT BETWEEN THE AFL AND THE CIO--A BEAR BY THE TAIL AND CAN'T LET GO.</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>253</td>
<td>CHAPTER 7: WAITING FOR LEFTY AND HE ISN'T COMING</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>279</td>
<td>A SUMMARY VIEW</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301</td>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>312</td>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PROLOGUE: AGRICULTURAL LABOR IN LOUISIANA
FROM RECONSTRUCTION TO 1938

When the 1953 Louisiana sugar cane field workers' strike started in October, many people in the cane country felt that the rash of post-World War II strike activity was reaching out to affect agricultural operations for the first time. Both organized labor and management alike called the strike an unprecedented act that each side viewed in a different light. Sugar growers thought the strike an ominous indication of more complex farm problems. Agricultural union leaders predicted that the trade union tactic would bring real change in working conditions in the sugar industry.

Actually agricultural strikes had been quite common in most of the farm states of the United States since the Reconstruction period. Although workers struck hundreds of times in isolated rural areas prior to the 1930's, one expert on the subject doubts that these disconnected efforts constituted a labor movement as such.¹ Not until the 1930's when New Deal agricultural policies led land owners to evict tenant farmers rather than share benefit payments with them did agricultural unions and strikes become widespread.²

² Ibid., 8.
Despite its long history, the agricultural labor movement in the United States has traditionally been seen as contrary to the popular view of the idyllic small farmstead and the Jeffersonian symbol of independence and prosperity. But the movement's unorthodoxy is insignificant compared to the list one historian compiled of obstacles faced by agricultural unions: the temporary nature of farm employment, the anti-union sentiment of farmers, the ease of replacing unskilled workers, the small size of many farm operations, the heterogeneity of farm labor, the instability of farm employment, the difficulty of collecting dues, and the seasonal lack of demand for farm labor.

Even as the Civil War raged in other sections of the country, planters in the sugar cane-growing areas of Louisiana tried to cope with the problem of plantation labor in federally occupied sections of the state. A delegation of planters from Terrebonne Parish visited General Nathaniel Banks in New Orleans in January, 1863, hoping to establish working regulations for blacks who, according to grower complaints, came and went as they pleased and worked only sporadically. The planters considered the meeting a failure since Banks did not agree to their

---

3 Ibid., 1, 3-4.

demands. Later they received nearly everything they had requested when Banks, on February 3, 1864, issued General Order No. 23 that set the monthly rate of pay for blacks ($3.00 - $8.00), established the ten-hour work day, prohibited separating families or inflicting floggings, and stipulated that each worker had to sign a one-year work contract that withheld one-half of his pay until the end of the year and allowed the provost marshal of the parish to assign to public works projects without compensation all blacks who refused employment. These provisions, which prevented workers from joining unions and from moving about freely, denied freedom to the black agricultural laborer who forfeited his wages if he reneged on his contract. In 1865 the Louisiana legislature in an extra session added stipulations designed to prevent planters from enticing away workers already under contract or from harboring fugitives and contract-jumpers.

Roger Shugg, in his study of class factionalism in Louisiana, calls the Reconstruction period a "seedtime of the labor movement." At that time trade unions in New Orleans

6 Ibid., 222.
8 Sitterson, Sugar Country, 233.
momentarily overcame the ante-bellum problems of isolation from the northern union movement, racial factionalism, petty jealousy, competition between native and foreign elements, and a general lack of industry\textsuperscript{9} and pulled together a biracial movement that enjoyed limited success until the New Orleans general strike of 1892. But the largely urban movement had little effect on rural agricultural workers, for whom conditions remained little changed from those of the ante-bellum slave system.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite the codes and contracts, a labor shortage caused agricultural wages to rise sharply in the late 1860's. In 1869 first-class field hands earned from $15.00 to $20.00 a month, and in 1871 fear of further shortage caused some growers to offer as much as $1.25 per day without rations. The upward wage spiral ended after the Panic of 1873 drastically lowered sugar prices, and the movement of blacks into the area produced a labor surplus. Growers agreed to fix wages at $14.00 to $15.00 a month starting in January, 1874.\textsuperscript{11} Because growers in Terrebonne Parish proposed instead a maximum monthly rate of $13.00, black workers who planned to form a union and rent lands of their own called a strike. Planters, who refused to recognize the right of the freedmen to strike, called out a sheriff's

\textsuperscript{9} Shugg, \textit{Origins of Class Struggle}, 116-17.
\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ibid.}, 300-301.
\textsuperscript{11} Sitterson, \textit{Sugar Country}, 244-45.
posse to put down the Terrebonne "riot" of 1874. A gang of
two hundred blacks who had gathered in Houma disbanded peace-
fully when asked to do so; other Negroes who had seized the
land of a planter after he failed to pay his employees also
failed to achieve their objective.  

Planter strategy sessions for dealing with labor unrest
led to the formation of permanent grower organizations. In 1871
sugar cane farmers helped to found the Louisiana Immigration
and Homestead Company to encourage workers to settle in the
sugar country. Donelson Caffery, Sr., of St. Mary Parish
formed an organization in 1877 to end the cutthroat competition
for labor. Following the lead of Caffery, Duncan Kenner estab-
lished the Louisiana Sugar Planters' Association that same
year.

Though the phenomenon known as "Kansas Fever" did not
affect the sugar area as much as the cotton-growing region of
north Louisiana, sugar planters did not welcome the notion of
blacks leaving en masse to homestead in Kansas. T. T. Allain,
of Iberville Parish, a black elected to the Louisiana Legis-
lature, said concerning the exodus: "... I have urgently

12 Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle, 252, 246.
13 Sitterson, Sugar Country, 239.
14 William Ivy Hair, Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest:Louisiana Politics, 1877-1900 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State
15 Ibid., 87-88.
invited people who are leaving North Louisiana to come to our sugar region, where they will obtain excellent wages, and good opportunities for their children." When black settlers experienced hard times in Kansas in 1879, Louisiana planters, eager to regain their labor force, paid passage for their return trip to Louisiana.17

During the 1880's the Knights of Labor came to Louisiana determined to organize all workers regardless of skill, color, or sex. The union promised sugar workers higher wages paid in legal tender instead of script.18 Since 1885 many Negroes had flocked to the Knights that did more to combat racial prejudice among workingmen than any of its predecessors or its successor, the American Federation of Labor.19 The Knights successfully organized many black and white sugar plantation workers into labor unions.20 But the presence of large numbers of Cajuns and other poor whites in the sugar

17 Ibid., 135.
20 Hair, Bourbonism, 171-72.
country, all potential strike-breakers during the cane-grinding season, weakened the efforts of the predominantly black unions.

Richard Gooseberry, a black leader from St. Charles Parish, led his followers in a strike in March of 1880 because planters refused the blacks' demands for a pay increase from $.75 to one dollar per day. The strikers' slogan was "Dollar or Fight." Judge James D'Augustin charged them with trespassing, inciting work stoppage, and intimidating those who refused to join the movement. After the militia appeared, he had the leaders arrested; then he sentenced them to jail terms. Workers in St. John the Baptist Parish struck later in March at the time former President U. S. Grant visited New Orleans. Carrying banners proclaiming "A Dollar A Day or Kansas" and expecting support from the former President, the strikers dispersed when Governor Louis Wiltz sent in the militia. Negro State Senator Henri Demas submitted in behalf of the jailed strikers a petition to Governor Wiltz admitting trespassing on private property in order to organize workers and seeking a remission of their sentences. Wiltz granted clemency.

21 Shugg, Origins of Class Struggle, 264-65.
22 Hair, Bourbonism, 172-73.
23 Sitterson, Sugar Country, 248-49.
24 Hair, Bourbonism, 172-73.
25 "Louisiana," The American Cyclopaedia, 1880, 482.
Other strikes of the brushfire variety occurred in April of 1880 in Ascension, St. James, St. Bernard, Jefferson, and Plaquemine parishes. Authorities put these down without the usual militia call out by summarily arresting and jailing the leaders.  

In 1887 Governor Samuel McEnery felt that labor in Louisiana was sufficiently organized to warrant a call to farmers and planters to form the State Agricultural Society. That same year District Assembly 194 of the Knights of Labor, responding to a wage reduction to sixty-five cents a day following the poor sugar crop in 1886, requested talks with the Louisiana Sugar Planters' Association. Because members of Assembly 194 received no reply from the planters, the Knights addressed a circular letter on October 24, 1887, to growers in Iberia, Lafourche, St. Martin, St. Mary, and Terrebonne parishes, requesting bi-weekly payment of wages of $1.25 per day without rations or one dollar per day with rations. The union's 6,000 to 10,000 members went on strike when growers refused these terms.

Though planters claimed the market price of sugar precluded giving any wage increases and labeled the strikers Communists, union leaders J. R. H. Foote, D. Monnier, and P. O.

\[\text{26 Hair, Bourbonism, 175.}\]
\[\text{27 Ibid., 164.}\]
\[\text{28 Ibid., 177-78.}\]
Rousseau of Thibodaux, a former planter, and Henry Cox and his brother George, black leaders from the same area, and Jim Brown, Negro strike leader in Terrebonne, held fast. Fearing trouble when they evicted strikers from the plantations, growers, through the Sugar Planters' Association, asked Governor McEnery for militia. Armed with at least one gatling gun, the two batteries and ten companies he sent left following the evictions. A group of "organized citizens," reinforced by "Shreveport guerrillas," kept watch in Thibodaux, which soon resembled a refugee center, as many evicted blacks trudged into town. They occupied vacant houses in town rented for them by the Knights of Labor. On November 21, the first freeze of the year damaged the uncut cane, and Judge Taylor Beattie declared martial law. Shooting that resulted in the killing of at least thirty blacks and two whites started the following night. The Cox brothers, who had been jailed, disappeared shortly afterward without a trace. Perhaps they were among the unidentified dead later found in remote swamps. The Thibodaux massacre of 1887 broke the field workers' strike.29

The Knights of Labor conducted strikes in Ascension, Lafourche, and Terrebonne30 in 1888, but suffered from the


massacre of the previous year, the evictions from plantations, and the blacklisting of union activists. By 1891 they were influential only in the City of New Orleans. Though it was strong in some areas of the West and South, The Colored Farmers' Alliance, like the Grange, was never significant in the sugar-producing areas of Louisiana. Following the 1887 setback, no unions operated in sugar cane fields for over sixty-five years.

From the turn of the century to the 1930's, agricultural unions did not achieve the organizational levels of the largely unsuccessful campaigns waged in the 1870's and 1880's. Increasingly, tenant farming and sharecropping became for many rural blacks and whites the modus operandi for southern agriculture at the same time the rest of the United States was becoming industrial. In Louisiana the Populists posed a real political threat to the bourbon Democrats, many of whom were cotton or


32 Marshall, Labor in the South, 287.

33 The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940: Farmers in a Changing World (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), 888-93, cites land speculation, mechanization, credit, the plantation pattern, and shortage of good land as factors in the increase in farm tenancy from 25% of the total farms in 1880 to 42% in 1935. See George B. Tindall, The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 756, for an extensive list of studies on sharecropping.
sugar planters. When the Populists unified a biracial agrarian proletariat, planters accused them of inciting labor against capital and took steps that disfranchised the black man in the South by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1907 and 1908 sugar planters in Louisiana complained that railroads hired off "unfairly" their natural labor supply. The planters also called for stringent enforcement of New Orleans vagrancy laws, hoping that such action would remove idle men from the bars and streets and make them available for farm labor.

Some farm movements originated during the relatively tranquil period from the turn of the century to the 1930's. The Farmers' Education and Cooperative Union of America (the Farmers' Union), formed in Rain County, Texas in 1902, by 1908 boasted a membership of 1.2 million in nine southern states from North Carolina to Oklahoma. The group admitted white members only and worked closely with organized labor by observing union boycotts and setting up cooperative warehouses. The Industrial Workers of the World, founded in 1905 by Progressives and Socialists, believed in organizing the entire working class,


35 Sitterson, Sugar Country, 316-17.

regardless of skill, color, sex, or national origin and was the only national labor group that never established a single segregated local. Though not farm workers as such, the Wobblies had strength among agricultural workers where farm labor conflicts were common since IWW members often became casual or migratory workers and gathered in farming centers during harvest time. Created by IWW in 1915, the Agricultural Workers Organization 400, by the following year had become a powerful and dynamic force in the radical organization. The IWW declined after 1918 because of pressures generated against its opposition to World War I. In the 1920's when industrial unions lost strength, many agricultural unions disappeared completely, victims of economic setbacks and anti-union sentiment. The introduction of the automobile during the era made organizing farm workers more difficult. Family groups that did not join unions as readily as did single men now moved about seeking farm work.

38 Jamieson, Labor Unions in Agriculture, 11-22.
The charge of Communist influence in agricultural labor unions, something of a bugaboo in recent years, has a basis in fact and did cause problems periodically. After the formation of the Third International in 1919, the newly reorganized Communist Party of the United States of America took its orders from the Communist Party leaders in Russia. During the American party's conservative period, under the direction of William Z. Foster after 1921, it attempted to form farmer-labor unions. In 1928 the ultra-revolutionary "third period" began, and revolutionary labor unions were formed to challenge the AFL. One such attempt, the Trade Union Unity League, the first nationwide agricultural union since the demise of the IWW, adopted the "boring from within" policy of opposition to the status quo. Later the TUUL advocated "self-determination of the black belt" and used racial discrimination for propaganda purposes. But nearly all non-Communist Negro leaders rejected self-determination, and few black sharecroppers became Communists. The rise of Hitler caused the Comintern to seek collective security pacts with the Western democracies, to abolish revolutionary

Communist unions, and to support orthodox unions, such as the CIO, whose leader John L. Lewis mistakenly assumed he could control Communists who joined his organization. Not until after World War II was the CIO able to expel Communists from their entrenched position in the union.44

Studies of unrest and disorder show that protest movements, like revolutions, do not spring up in the most depressed areas. In regions of high land value where staple agricultural production is the norm, organized dissent is more likely than in places where small-unit subsistence farming is practiced on marginal land. In the delta of Arkansas and the black belt of Alabama, radical agricultural unions mobilized economic and political resistance in the 1930's when sudden changes occurred in the tenant-landlord arrangements.45 Other unions, such as the Catholic union of Crystal City, Texas, originated almost spontaneously.46 The most militant agricultural unions sprang up in Alabama, where industrial unionism had already made headway. The Farmers' Union in Alabama grew rapidly after Clyde

44 Seidman, *Communism*, ix-x.


Johnson, formerly with the Communist-influenced Sharecroppers' Union (SCU), and allegedly a Communist, took charge.47

To study the agricultural labor movement in America from the Great Depression to the 1950's is to trace the itinerary of the ubiquitous champion of farm labor, H. L. Mitchell, co-founder with sixteen other whites and blacks of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in 1934. In a career spanning the middle third of the twentieth century, he has missed hardly a phase of the agrarian protest over a wide geographic area. Sharecroppers in Arkansas, sugar cane plantation laborers in Louisiana, small farmers in various places, braceros in the West--Mitchell, with his colleagues, has worked among them all. His union, known neither for its orthodoxy nor its resounding success in the trade-union sense of the term, changed names several times. Rallying to the cause of those that no industrial union would have wanted, he has moved along lines that reflect the metamorphosis of agricultural problems. When tenancy declined, he turned to farm laborers, to migrant workers, and to those who had no spokesman. In the process he has had dealings with the famous and near-famous, including Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, Norman Thomas, Eleanor Roosevelt, Gardner Jackson, 

47 Ibid., 289, 292-93.
Aubrey William, Clarence Senior, Will Alexander, Ernesto Galarza, Cesar Chavez, Howard Kester, Frank Graham, and many others.

From his experiences while growing up in a sharecropper family and as a cropper himself, Mitchell gained first-hand knowledge of the difficulties tenant farmers encountered during the 1920's and early 1930's. Because the policies of the New Deal Agriculture Adjustment Act led to evictions of tenants by planters not willing to share benefit payments with them, Mitchell and his followers banded together in an attempt to stop evictions by petitioning the Department of Agriculture for corrective action. Grounded in the tradition of agrarian protest and aware of the widespread discontent among blacks and whites, he and his cohorts organized the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in a little one-room schoolhouse called Sunnyside on the Norcross plantation near Tyronza, Arkansas, on July 26, 1934. Of all the

---

48 A great many rapidly expanding studies on the STFU, its relationship to the New Deal, and its civil libertarian struggles are now available. See the STFU papers, housed in the Southern Collection at the University of North Carolina (also photoduplicated in sixty rolls by the Microfilm Corporation of America); H.L. Mitchell materials collected for the Columbia Oral History Collection, 1956 and 1957; Author's four tape-recorded interviews with Mitchell; Mitchell, "Workers in Our Fields: The Story of a Union That Would Not Die," (n.p.: National Agricultural Workers Union, 25th. Anniversary Publica-

---
farm labor unions that sprang up in the Thirties the STFU proved
to be the most durable and tenacious and to have the most
fascinating history. Socialists and socialistic ideology
played an important role in the formation and growth of the
union. Mitchell became a Socialist and, after meeting Norman
Thomas, organized in the Tyronza area Socialist locals, which
later became the nucleus for STFU locals.49

In 1935 and again in 1936, the STFU struck for higher
wages in the cotton fields. Some planters reacted violently,
intimidating union members at times even in the rural churches
where they met. Though the strikes for the most part failed,
the publicity generated by the planters' harsh anti-union methods
brought to the STFU new members and financial and political
support from many sections of the country. The Department of
Agriculture sent an investigator to Arkansas to evaluate

as a Socialist Recalls Them," in Rita Simon (ed.), As We Saw
The Thirties (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967),
102-22; Jerold Auerbach, "Southern Tenant Farmers; Socialist
Critics of the New Deal," Labor History, VII (Winter, 1966),
3-18; M. S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers
and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-1937," Mississippi
Valley Historical Review, XLVII (September, 1960), 225-46;
George B. Tindall, The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967); and
other more generalized accounts and texts too numerous to
mention here.

49 For an account of the founding and early background
of the STFU, see especially Conrad, Forgotten Farmers; Grubbs,
Cry from the Cotton; and Mitchell's oral history memoirs. For
a different opinion from Grubbs' of the Socialist influence in
the STFU, see Auerbach article cited in fn. 48.
conditions and then kept secret its own report of widespread violations of AAA policies and of a purge of liberals within the agricultural bureaucracy itself. Operating from Memphis, to which the STFU fled during the "reign of terror," the union by 1937 boasted a membership of 30,000 in seven states.  

The Jones-Costigan Act of 1934 was to the sugar industry what the cotton production contract of the AAA was to the cotton producer. Both involved acreage restrictions and benefit payments to growers who met minimum standards for wages, work conditions, and child labor. Because the United States Supreme Court in the Butler Case struck down the discriminatory processing tax used to finance the sugar program, Congress passed the Sugar Control Act of 1937 that relied on an excise tax instead. The act gave the secretary of agriculture control over setting the import quota and establishing a market price that would maintain the domestic industry and protect the consumer. Though agricultural labor unions leveled many charges at the Sugar Act through the years, astute labor leaders, such as Ernesto Galarza, acknowledged good points of

50 See Grubbs and Conrad (fn. 48) for the fullest coverage of how the STFU fared at the hands of the New Deal.

51 Jamieson, Labor Unions in Agriculture, 411.

the act and agreed that without it the sugar industry would face ruin. But Galarza knew from experience that unionized farm laborers received higher pay than non-union workers. Until the appearance of agricultural labor unions in the cane country, no one had adequately represented field laborers at the annual wage hearings conducted by the Department of Agriculture. Unions closely associated with the radical Alabama farm movements conducted much of the organizing activity in Louisiana agriculture during the 1930's. Socialists with strong ties to Mitchell's STFU wondered what stand they should take after the Alabama Sharecroppers' Union merged with the Louisiana Farmers' Union and the Alabama Farmers' Union to form the Sharecroppers' Union. Ranking Socialist Party members knew that the Communist Party used the SCU as a letter-head organization and wondered how the STFU felt about these developments. The SCU in 1935 took up the case of sharecroppers being displaced by mechanization and by the operation of the AAA's Cotton Section. Like the STFU, the SCU conducted a strike in 1935 that was not a

---


54 Clarence Senior to George A. Nelson, December 17, 1936, with a note to H. L. Mitchell penned on a carbon copy, asking what Mitchell thought about the affair, Southern Tenant Farmers Union Microfilm, Roll 3. Hereinafter cited as STFU, Roll 3.
spectacular success but brought in new members. In 1937 the Farmers' Union and the Sharecroppers' Union, by mutual consent, agreed that the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) would organize laborers and tenants and the Farmers' Union would enroll farm owners.

Radical agricultural union leaders, attempting to win political office by campaigning on their economic philosophies, failed generally to impress many voters during the New Deal years. In 1936, Alabama Farmers' Union Leader W. C. Irby, a lawyer, former Socialist, and writer for the Farmers' Weekly, solicited support from the STFU in his bid for a seat in the United States Congress. Irby, who toured Louisiana with Clyde Johnson in October, 1936, in search of new members, stated in a political advertisement his belief in government ownership of essential industries. Government conscription of railroads or steel mills, he said, was no worse than the drafting of men for military service.

At times the Farmers' Union of Louisiana embarrassed religious groups by its associations and statements. In 1936

---

55 Marshall, Labor in the South, 156-57.
56 Tindall, Emergence of New South, 428.
57 Tom /Burke/ to H. L. Mitchell, March 2, 1936, STFU, Roll 2.
58 Southern Farm Leader, October, 1936, STFU, Roll 58.
the FU publicized a statement by a black sharecropper from Washington, Louisiana, who said that the local Catholic priests had expelled Negro members who were too poor to contribute to the support of their church.\textsuperscript{59} In the Lafayette area anti-union forces used the Communist issue to undermine the efforts of Father Wilton Labbe, a Catholic priest, who formed a union that worked with the FU. Charges of collaborating with Communists helped destroy the fledgling union.\textsuperscript{60}

If its own publication is reasonably reliable, the Farmers' Union of Louisiana, too, faced anti-union opposition. In 1936 authorities arrested FU organizer John Moore in Simmesport, Louisiana, on charges of criminal libel brought by John Lackey, a Legonier, Louisiana, storekeeper whose establishment the FU was boycotting. Local sharecroppers had complained for some time about Lackey. Sheriff J. J. Jeansonne of Marksville told Mrs. Anne Johnson, whom the FU sent to investigate the case, that he could not guarantee Moore's safety. Simmesport Mayor Murphy Lecoure said the town allowed unions, but not whites and "niggers" together.\textsuperscript{61} FU member H. E. Ott wrote to Governor Richard Leche protesting the mistreatment of Moore and asking

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.}, July, 1936.


\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Southern Farm Leader}, June, 1936, STFU, Roll 58.
the FU publicized a statement by a black sharecropper from Washington, Louisiana, who said that the local Catholic priests had expelled Negro members who were too poor to contribute to the support of their church.\(^5^9\) In the Lafayette area anti-union forces used the Communist issue to undermine the efforts of Father Wilton Labbe, a Catholic priest, who formed a union that worked with the FU. Charges of collaborating with Communists helped destroy the fledgling union.\(^6^0\)

If its own publication is reasonably reliable, the Farmers' Union of Louisiana, too, faced anti-union opposition. In 1936 authorities arrested FU organizer John Moore in Simmesport, Louisiana, on charges of criminal libel brought by John Lackey, a Legonier, Louisiana, storekeeper whose establishment the FU was boycotting. Local sharecroppers had complained for some time about Lackey. Sheriff J. J. Jeansonne of Marksville told Mrs. Anne Johnson, whom the FU sent to investigate the case, that he could not guarantee Moore's safety. Simmesport Mayor Murphy Lecoure said the town allowed unions, but not whites and "niggers" together.\(^6^1\) FU member H. E. Ott wrote to Governor Richard Leche protesting the mistreatment of Moore and asking


\(^6^1\) *Southern Farm Leader*, June, 1936, STFU, Roll 58.
for his release and an end to the intimidation. The FU newspaper quoted Lackey as saying that he would run Moore out of the parish and smash the union. An editorial called for firm union resistance and the public election of county agents, who, according to the paper, catered to big growers.62

John Moore, whose only offense, the union said, was organizing farmers near Simmesport, was given the ultimatum: "Leave town on the next bus or else"! Then a mob of fifty men chased him out of town. The FU lamented that, although everyone in town knew that John Broulette, Eddie and Worthy Lemoine, Walte Dibble, and Lawrence Suguas were ringleaders of the mob, Mayor Lecoure and Town Marshal Seeling made no arrests. The FU sent telegrams of protest to President Franklin Roosevelt, Governor Leche, and Mayor Lecoure. Because the mayor owned a fish hatchery that paid low wages, the FU speculated, anti-union activity flourished.63

On numerous occasions the Sharecroppers' Union and the Farmers' Union made overtures to the STFU. Both groups became involved with the farm union movement in Louisiana and tried to get the STFU to come in as well. In 1935 the SCU suggested a strike in conjunction with the STFU if growers did not agree

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., August, 1936.
negotiate, pointed out what the NAWU had already painfully observed:

\[\ldots \text{We disagree with your statement that agricultural workers are guaranteed the right to form a union. Indeed the policy of the Federal Government as well as the State of Louisiana has been to exclude agricultural workers from any legislation granting the right of workers generally to organize and to act in concert.}^{90}\]

Another grower stated that an American Sugar Cane League advertisement summed up his views, namely, that the responsibility for any work stoppage which could bring economic ruin to the area "\ldots will be entirely upon your union and its leaders."^{91}

The NAWU had conducted a hasty strike vote in part because of the controversy over the use of foreign labor in sugar cane fields at the same time that growers were refusing to negotiate with the union. In order to counter the growers, whose approach was to ignore the union and ask for clearance to import labor from the British West Indies, the NAWU needed evidence that a labor dispute existed before requesting the Bureau of Employment Security of the Department of Labor to halt the importation of foreign laborers. The union also

\[\text{90 William McCollam to Henry Hasiwar, October 8, 1953, STFU, 69:1335.}\]

\[\text{91 J. J. Munson to Henry Hasiwar, October 10, 1953, ibid.}\]
attempted to refute the impression suggested by growers that the domestic labor market was incapable of handling the seasonal demand for workers.

In January, 1953, Mitchell informed the Bureau of Employment Security that 500 workers from the union's Mid-South division would be available for the harvesting season in Florida. He told Hasiwar that he had the BES on the run with the offer to supply workers, but he admitted that the NAWU did not have that many laborers. "They may have us on one if they agree to accept 500 men for the Florida job," Mitchell added. A few days later he asked the director of the Mid-South office to prepare a list of workers in case the BES did ask for information. Later Mitchell declared that the BES recruiter sent to the Memphis area actually discouraged hiring of American citizens in favor of the BWI's. Mitchell wanted the BES to cancel a certification for importing foreign labor that it had granted to the U. S. Sugar Corporation.

---

93 H. L. Mitchell to Henry Hasiwar, January 5, 1953, ibid.
After growers requested that the Louisiana Employment Service permit several hundred Jamaicans to enter Louisiana for the sugar cane harvest, Mitchell told the Mid-South director to write to Frank Lapeyrolerie, secretary-treasurer of Local 317, informing him that he had available 500 laborers willing to do cane field work at the rates paid members of Local 317. Mitchell did not think the NAWU would have to supply the 500 men, but he felt the step would keep out foreign strike-breakers. Galarza, who had seen Mexican laborers used as strike-breakers in California, was not surprised by this recent threat to the NAWU and agreed to join Hasiwar in Louisiana around September 1, 1953.

After conducting its strike vote among plantation laborers, the NAWU tried a different approach to the foreign labor problem. Appealing to the Secretary of Labor to curtail the importation of foreign labor in the cane fields, Mitchell sent him an affidavit from Henry Hasiwar attesting to the dispute between the NAWU and the sugar growers. Officials in the Labor Department forwarded to the Attorney General the NAWU

---


affidavit along with a statement from Governor Robert Kennon saying that he knew of no dispute between the NAWU and the sugar planters. When the Department of Labor authorized the use of Jamaicans for cane field work, Paul Chaisson, president of Local 317, said that the ruling had "opened the flood gates to the foreign labor in an attempt to submarine our union . . . ." Citing the 1,808-to-eight vote in favor of a strike as evidence of a dispute, Chaisson announced that the union was now forced to strike and hinted that bringing in foreign laborers could lead to trouble, possibly even violence.

In late September Charles Logan conferred with Archbishop Rummel again and explained to him that Joe Guidry's story about conducting the strike vote "under the auspices of clergymen" had caused some resentment among parishioners. Logan said that no strike date had been set, but the union was considering October 12-15. Hasiwar was committed to the strike program, and, according to Logan, "... unless some unforeseen situation or influence is brought to bear, the strike is certain."

---

99 Acting Secretary of Labor to Herbert Brownell, Jr., October 6, 1953, STFU, 69:1335.

100 The Morning Advocate, October 9, 1953; the New Orleans Item, October 9, 1953.

101 Charles H. Logan to Joseph Francis Rummel, September 28, 1953, JFR Papers, "Farmers Union."
This news prompted the Archbishop to schedule another meeting with a large number of sugar growers for October 3, 1953. He had cancelled his meeting with cane farmers scheduled for the prior week after he learned that sugar growers planned to meet the same day in Thibodaux. Once again the growers begged off, perhaps after a strategy meeting of their own. Southdown representatives said they would not meet with the prelate because doing so violated the public policy of the state. A number of others, including several not contacted earlier, sent telegrams saying they could not attend.

Prevented from meeting the growers face to face, Archbishop Rummel wrote letters to those the NAWU had contacted, stating that he had read Hasiwars letter in behalf of the union and found his proposal reasonable for avoiding a strike. "It is my conscientious opinion," the prelate wrote, "that the proposal should be seriously considered and accepted." He ended with a hope that the growers would receive his letter in the spirit in which it was sent; as he had said earlier: "The issue

102 Ibid.
103 W. C. Kemper to Joseph Francis Rummel, September 29, 1953, ibid.
of a strike is too grave to be faced with indifference, while a conference is possible."

Soon letters explaining why various growers would not meet with the National Agricultural Workers Union poured into the Archbishop's office. Southdown repeated its earlier statement that it would violate public policy by meeting with an agricultural union. Charles Farwell told the Archbishop that if his workers went on strike, his company could not feed, clothe, and house them during the winter. He suggested also that if labor problems persisted, his company might discontinue its sugar operation and go into the cattle business, which required a small labor force. Another grower disagreed that a meeting with Hasiwar would end the possibility of a strike and thought instead that meeting with the union would be a dangerous precedent that violated public policy. Even more bluntly one sugar farmer wrote: "Please tell me what

105 Joseph Francis Rummel to twenty-nine growers, October 7, 1953, ibid.; Joseph Francis Rummel to E. J. Clement, October 7, 1953, in possession of Mr. Clement; The Lafourche Comet, October 15, 1953.

106 W. C. Kemper to Joseph Francis Rummel, October 9, 1953, JFR Papers, "Farmers Union."

107 Charles A. Farwell to Joseph Francis Rummel, October 8, 1953, ibid.

108 J. J. Munson to Joseph Francis Rummel, October 10, 1953, ibid.
business is it of yours that you should side with the union leaders and non-Catholic people." The grower, a contributor to the Catholic Church and to Catholic education, suggested further than "bad preaching" in church had contributed to labor problems in the sugar industry.109

When spokesmen for the sugar interest mentioned violating public policy of the State of Louisiana and of the United States, they meant simply that agricultural workers had been excluded by definition from the provisions of most labor laws. By negotiating with the NAWU or agreeing to State Department of Labor conciliation service, growers would in effect have granted de facto recognition of the NAWU. The tactic of assuming that agricultural workers were not entitled to the rights enjoyed by organized labor did not surprise the NAWU. In California earlier Congressman Richard Nixon had insisted that because agricultural workers had been excluded from certain labor laws, they did not have the right to bargain collectively. With the exception of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act of 1937, every major farm and labor bill excluded agricultural workers. The Agricultural Adjustment Act did not specifically grant them benefit payments, the National Recovery Act's section 7 (a) did not guarantee them collective

bargaining rights, Social Security did not cover them at first, the Wagner Act's National Labor Relations Board did not assure them arbitration, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 specifically exempted them from its minimum wage provisions, and 14 (b) of Taft-Hartley allowing states to pass "right-to-work" laws operated to their detriment.

The NAWU felt it had a valid raison d'être despite being left out of most labor legislation. The union said that its right to organize was fundamental and protected by the Constitution of the United States and reinforced by Catholic doctrine which said that man had a God-given right to organize for his own protection.110

Some sugar growers were surprisingly amenable to Archbishop Rummel's labor policies. The Levet brothers, who were part owners and managers of San Francisco Planting and Manufacturing Company in St. John Parish near Reserve, did not share the attitude toward organized labor of most sugar farmers. More liberal than most growers, the brothers and a neighbor went to the union office in Reserve and offered to sign a contract with Local 317 if other cane producers did likewise. Following closely the admonition of Archbishop Rummel, they even offered to open their account ledgers to union officers to

demonstrate their sincerity in trying to establish an equitable wage rate for plantation workers. The Levets alone made such gestures, and Local 317 signed no contracts with them or any other growers.\textsuperscript{111}

Perhaps sugar growers who had come to see Archbishop Rummel on labor matters knew of the prelate's toughness and preferred not to confront him directly. When irate parishioners called on him to protest over labor disputes, the Archbishop greeted them cordially at the door of his study, led them to comfortable chairs, and introduced Father O'Connell whom he seated at his side. He attempted to keep the discussion within the broad perspective of the church's economic and social doctrines but allowed Father O'Connell to field the more technical and detailed questions concerning labor problems. At the conclusion of the discussion the Archbishop always accompanied his callers to the door and thanked them for coming, no matter how fiery the exchanges had become. He then suggested privately to Father O'Connell alternatives to unlikely proposals or hints on how certain points might have been made more diplomatically.\textsuperscript{112}

Sugar growers from the Bayou Lafourche area came in to see Archbishop Rummel about removing Father Jerome Drolet from

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{112} Vincent O'Connell, VPO interview, April 4, 1972.
St. Charles Parish. The Archbishop seated Father Drolet at his side and forced his accusers to make their charges directly before the outspoken priest.\footnote{113} Drolet's statements on the rights of labor and his testimony before the Kefauver crime-investigating committee had stirred up controversy;\footnote{114} and as executive secretary of the Lafourche Social Action Committee, a social action and anti-vice citizens' group, he had shocked the sensibilities of many in Lafourche Parish with his campaign against a rather infamous brothel in Thibodaux known locally as "Jeanette's." The Archbishop, who frequently interrupted loud criticisms against Father Drolet to point out that the priest's objective was social justice, did not remove Father Drolet from St. Charles Parish despite complaints from influential parishioners.\footnote{115}

In September, 1953, the Lafourche Comet ran Drolet's "two-arm bandit" comment on page one:

> Fortunately Louisiana is at long last free of the one-arm bandits called slot machines; it will be a happy day when our state will enact and enforce laws strong enough to repress and restrain the small but dangerous minority of business leaders who are white-collar, two-arm bandits in their inhuman treatment of their laborers.

\footnote{113} Joseph Vath, \textit{ibid}.  
\footnote{115} Joseph Vath, VPO interview, April 4, 1972.
Labor unions are good and necessary. This is recognized by God's word. This is recognized by the public policy of the United States government. This is recognized by the public policy of Louisiana. The minority of business men today who refuse to recognize this right of their workers are guilty of a criminal immoral act. They are responsible for strikes. It is the duty of governments, State and Federal, to restrain such employers effectively for the sake of the public good.

It is the duty of government to remove the causes which force labor to strike in an attempt at self-preservation against unjust aggression by anti-union management. It is shameful abuse to force police to take management's side in such strikes, and such unnatural collaboration to smash unions and break just strikes itself constitutes the worst kind of violence, which causes and is responsible for other kinds of violence, which flow from the original violence--the refusal to recognize God's law and accord genuine union recognition.

Denied the normal collective bargaining guarantees afforded to industrial unions, the NAWU resorted to unorthodox methods after the trade union approach failed. Nonetheless it threatened to use the ultimate weapon of the trade union--the strike--when the atypical methods attempted by the Catholic Church failed to achieve results. Expecting this drastic measure to succeed, even though getting the usual union machinery in motion failed, seemed like a longshot gamble. But Mitchell's agrarians usually went into action with the odds against their succeeding. If the union carried through on its threats, the opposition in Louisiana would be no different.

---

116 The Lafourche Comet, September 10, 1953.
From what the NAWU usually faced—that is, unless the Catholic Church could work some miracle.
CHAPTER V

CA NE MUTINY

The 1953 Louisiana cane field strike, the first clash between planters and laborers since the forcefully suppressed efforts of the 1880's, surprised many growers who had been alerted to its possibilities. Although the vitality and vigor of the strike astonished sugar planters, the general public remained largely uninformed of or apathetic to the extensive effort mounted by the union and the Catholic Church in behalf of agricultural workers. Union leaders undoubtedly overestimated the extent of secular influence exerted by the church over the economic lives of parishioners and underestimated the resolve of the sugar industry to prevent any encroachment by organized labor in agriculture.

Sugar cane planters worried about the National Agricultural Workers Union's threat to call a strike, but they did not respond publicly at first. Gilbert Durbin, general manager of the American Sugar Cane League, spoke to Thibodaux Rotarians about problems of the sugar industry in September, 1953, without mentioning the union.¹ Later in the month L. A.

¹ The Lafourche (Thibodaux) Comet, September 10, 1953.

-164-
Borne of Raceland, Louisiana, out-going president of the Cane League, said his organization did not plan to recognize the union, but he concluded before surrendering leadership to J. P. Duhe of New Iberia, the new president: "It looks like a strike is imminent."^2

The American Sugar Cane League felt deep concern about the possibilities of a strike and took steps to prepare for the eventuality. Its mimeographed guide that circulated among members included carefully detailed instructions to cane growers facing a strike. The guide, containing twenty-three questions in four sections, dealt with the general status of labor, the union's organizational drive, proposed ways to combat the strike, and specific steps to take if a strike occurred. A typical question and answer illustrate the League approach:

"Am I actually 'unfair' or 'anti-labor' if I refuse to deal with such a Union? No. Both the Wagner Act and the State Mediation Law expressly exclude agricultural laborers from coverage." On responding to union overtures the guide stated: "Either ignore the demand or reply that you do not recognize the Union . . . ." It stated further that workers "... can be discharged at any time for any reason or without reason."

---

^2 The Baton Rouge Morning Advocate, September 25, 1953; The New Orleans Times Picayune, September 25, 1953, does not mention Borne's statement about the likelihood of a strike.
The syllabus, in response to the question of what to do if a strike came, expressed concern for workers: "Call upon your lawyer. Also immediately call upon your Sheriff, inform him of the situation, and request your Sheriff to assign a deputy to your farm to afford protection to your laborers." And on the possibilities of violence: "Yes . . . 'goons' are imported by a Union from other areas to do violence to non striking employees and to sabotage equipment." The Cane League, which recommended that growers destroy all correspondence from the NAWU, distributed leaflets encouraging the field laborers to return to work and pointing out ways in which the NAWU allegedly deceived plantation workers. Another leaflet proclaimed: "Don't give up your liberty. Be a free man. Don't join the union."

During the first week of October, 1953, the Sugar Cane League prepared an extensive news release on the particulars of the pending strike in the sugar cane fields where harvesting was to begin the following week. Referring to the "fallacious

---

3 American Sugar Cane League, mimeographed "Questions and Answers," October 5, 1953, in possession of E. J. Clement.


6 Ibid., "Stop, Look, Read."
and misleading" views of the NAWU, the Cane League said that a strike in a perishable agricultural crop would be an "unprecedented calamity" and encouraged the public to join together in opposition to a strike by plantation workers. The story repeated arguments made earlier to Archbishop Rummel and to the NAWU and added a few new wrinkles about hurting small farmers, interfering with interstate commerce, and cutting off necessary foodstuffs. The League complained of restrictions imposed on sugar cane operations without pointing out the sizeable benefits enjoyed by the industry.\(^7\)

Prospects for a bountiful yield of sugar cane in 1953 seemed good during the warm growing season prior to harvesting in October. The county agent of Assumption Parish reported that the crop was doing well,\(^8\) and a Houma farmer claimed that with the recent rains and warm weather the cane grew an inch a day.\(^9\) From Donaldsonville, on the Mississippi River, too, came pleasant news about conditions in the cane fields.\(^10\) On

\(^7\) *Times Picayune*, October 5, 1953; *The Lafayette Daily Advertiser*, October 4, 1953; *The Lafourche Comet*, October 8, 1953; *The Assumption (Napoleonville) Pioneer*, October 9, 1953; *The Donaldsonville Chief*, October 9, 1953; *The St. Charles (Hahnville) Herald*, October 10, 1953; *The Morning Advocate*, October 4, 1953.

\(^8\) *The Assumption Pioneer*, April 10, 1953.

\(^9\) *The Houma Courier*, August 28, 1953.

\(^10\) *The Donaldsonville Chief*, September 4, 1953.
October 2 the sugar cane grinding season (the crushing of the stalks between huge mills to extract the juice which is processed into sugar) started at the South Coast Mill at Montegut in Terrebonne Parish, and in Lafourche Parish on October 8.

Just prior to the cane-harvesting season the Louisiana Board of Public Welfare announced adjustments to its policies that suggested possible complications for the NAWU. In August the Board said that benefits would be suspended during the harvest season for Aid to Dependent Children and General Assistance Grants. Plantation workers could earn as much as they wanted without any reduction in the grant that would be restored at the end of the harvest season. In previous years, workers taking seasonal employment were dropped from the welfare rolls. In October, while the cane strike was in progress, a cane country newspaper ran a headline stating: "Able Welfare Recipients Are Urged to Work." The front-page announcement called for cutting welfare payments of those who refused to work:

*It is felt that this policy should help alleviate the labor shortage and should help both the public at large and welfare clients themselves.*

---

11 The Houma Courier, October 6, 1953.
12 The Lafourche Comet, October 8, 1953.
The Welfare Department appreciates being contacted if any welfare recipient refused employment simply because he is receiving public assistance.\footnote{14}

refused employment simply expressed a decidedly anti-union bias in its editorial policy. The Assumption Pioneer complained that union leaders "hold the money bags of members," and that in matters of double-dealing "these birds are past masters." The editor closed with a reminder that peace and harmony in the cane country had been the order for so long that the current problem was a strange one.\footnote{15} A Lafourche Parish editorial entitled "Which Way Do we Head?" and an announcement by the sheriff seemed to offer warnings to Local 317. The editor stated that unions had been helpful in the past, but sugar cane growers faced big problems and had constitutional guarantees, too. "Our Parish," he said, "can not and will not stand for cane burnings or similar malicious action . . . ." Sheriff Frank Ducos said that despite rumors of violence against those who did not join the union, his office would protect the rights of all who wanted to work.\footnote{16}

Prior to the start of the cane field strike, Father Drolet went to the union office in Reserve and offered to lead

\footnote{14} The St. Charles Herald, October 31, 1953.
\footnote{15} The Assumption Pioneer, October 2, 1953.
\footnote{16} The Lafourche Comet, October 8, 1953.
the picketing when the walkout began. Fearful that the fiery labor priest's presence would provoke violent anti-union responses or that his strong words would cause union members to become overly rambunctious, Henry Hasiwar and his colleagues convinced Drolet that he would be far more effective as a fund-raiser instead.17 When Father Drolet agreed to use his vacation time to embark on a fund-raising tour, Mitchell and the chief NAWU benefactor, the National Sharecropper Fund, carefully planned his itinerary. One professional fund-raiser listed various union leaders he should see and suggested that Drolet sign all telegrams with his "Father title." While in Washington he should see Father George Higgins of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, who has "the best contacts with Catholics who have money."18 Later H. L. Mitchell's wife reported that Drolet had arrived in Washington after successful stops in Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, and that he was to go to New York next. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could really win a victory," she mused optimistically, "in the South


18 Fay Bennett to H. L. Mitchell, October 7, 1953, Box 69, Folder 1335 of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, in the Southern Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Hereinafter cited as STFU, 69:1335.
of all places?” From the Meat Cutters, Packinghouse Workers, United Auto Workers, and the Machinists Drolet received pledges for contributions ranging from $1,000 to $5,000, but George Meany, the new head of the AFL, did not make a contribution.

The sugar cane field strike started on Monday, October 12, 1953, when laborers failed to show up for work on the plantations of the four biggest sugar corporations. Sugar Workers Union Local 317 of the NAWU struck at Godchaux Sugars Co. with holdings in Reserve, Raceland, and Napoleonville; Southdown Sugar Co., Inc. with sugar plants in Houma, Thibodaux, and Vacherie; South Coast Corporation with properties in Houma and Mathews; and Milliken-Farwell Corporation operating in Napoleonville, Donaldsonville, and West Baton Rouge Parish. Officials of the big companies reported that the strike did no affect operation of the factories, but they acknowledged that most harvesting crews in the fields operated with skeleton work forces. George Stith and Henry Hasiwar said the walkout by 1,200 men was almost completely successful against the big-four producers.


After about the second or third day both labor and management made so many charges, denials, and counter charges that the strike became a propaganda war of sizeable proportions. It featured conflicting versions of the extent of the strike, the propriety and frequency of evicting strikers from plantation homes, the likelihood of violence, the effect of the strike on small sugar farmers, the use of non-union labor, and the picketing of mills and refineries.

Even as the strike progressed the NAWU stated its willingness to negotiate with sugar growers. "It is not our intention to paralyze the harvest," Hasiwar said. The day the strike started, Local 317 sent letters to growers offering to negotiate collective bargaining agreements. Meanwhile, in Washington, H. L. Mitchell solicited support from union members in Puerto Rico who he hoped would help end the strike in Louisiana by curtailing the shipment of raw sugar to Louisiana. Not surprisingly Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of New Orleans assisted the sugar workers union. "You have begun a movement of tremendous importance not only

---

22 Henry Hasiwar, mimeographed news release, October 12, 1953, STFU, 69:1336.

23 Frank Lapeyrollerie to various growers, October 12, 1953, ibid.

24 H. L. Mitchell to E. G. Moreno, October 12, 1953, ibid.
to Louisiana," Father Louis Twomey told union members, "but to fellow men in the Texas and Florida cane fields."\(^{25}\) Father Drolet, who had conducted a successful fund-raising tour for the sugar workers, loaned his automobile to union organizers during the strike and aided strikers who had personal problems.\(^{26}\)

During the strike the NAWU called union members out to several central locations in the cane country early in the morning and kept them occupied all day long in various activities where planters could not coax or intimidate them into returning to work.\(^{27}\) A Cane League news release referred to the all-day meetings as "indoctrination" and "brain-washing" for the purpose of preventing members from returning to the cane fields.\(^{28}\) The day-long ordeal taxed the stamina of Ernesto Galarza, who managed the union office during the strike, and Henry Hasiwar, who supervised matters in the field. "Both are almost at the breaking point and more help

---

\(^{25}\) Unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d. \(\langle 1953 \rangle\), in Reverend Jerome Drolet's scrapbook.


\(^{28}\) The Times Picayune, October 22, 1953.
would be a Godsend to them," H. L. Mitchell told Arthur Churchill of the NAWU's Memphis office. He asked Churchill to go to
Louisiana with his movie projector and as many films as he could locate to help at the long sessions that started at five o'clock in the morning and were "a combination of union meeting, preaching, singing, etc."29 Henry Pelet got little sleep during the strike,30 and in Washington daily press releases and appeals for money occupied Mitchell's days, while telephone calls at night made matters hectic as well. "He has not had a chance to take his usual after lunch siesta . . .," his wife wrote later.31

In typical fashion Mitchell, who had come to appreciate the value of public relations, especially in obtaining funds to operate the NAWU, decided to wage a significant part of the encounter with the sugar growers in the press. "We believe that the only way the agricultural workers can win a decent life," Mitchell said, "is by putting their case before the bar of public opinion."32 A common tactic of Mitchell's was to send somewhat exaggerated telegrams to public officials

32 The Morning Advocate, October 25, 1953.
complaining about certain conditions affecting union members, and then use the telegrams as the basis for a widely distributed news release. The mimeographed articles he prepared and marked "for release" usually stated the background causes for a strike, explained the role and position of the NAWU, and quoted the forcefully-worded telegram by the union as evidence of determination by the outraged union leaders to correct the abuse whatever the odds.33 The NAWU also prepared handbills, one of which contained four pictures of dilapidated housing on a sugar plantation and a promise by the NAWU to correct such conditions.34 Mitchell's friend and political mentor Norman Thomas suggested that the NAWU utilize the radio networks and newspapers in order to publicize their plight to a larger audience.35

Mitchell's telegram to the Secretary of Labor announcing the beginning of the sugar strike emphasized two areas of great concern to the NAWU: the right of agricultural workers to

33 See, for instance, H. L. Mitchell, telegram to James P. Mitchell, October 12, 1953, STFU, 69:1336; H. L. Mitchell, telegram to Herbert Brownell, October 14, 1953, ibid.; H. L. Mitchell, mimeographed NAWU news release, October 15, 1953, ibid.; Ibid., mimeographed "Why the Strike," October, 1953, STFU, 69:1337b; and in newspaper accounts in the cane country during October which ran parts of the news releases or denials prepared by the American Sugar Cane League.


organize and bargain collectively and fear that cane growers would bring in foreign strike-breakers.\(^36\) To the attorney general, Mitchell complained of pressure against union members especially in Assumption Parish.\(^37\) Generally the NAWU publicity and propaganda suggested that the union had attempted to prevent a strike, that the growers were undemocratic, that a major objective of the strike was recognition, that the strike was successful and spreading, that outside help was pouring in, that the union wanted to assist small farmers and raw sugar mills harvest their crops and remain in operation, that growers encouraged scabs and pressure tactics, and that local merchants who suffered financial loss were circulating a petition demanding that the big corporations meet with the union to settle the strike.\(^38\)

Only in an academic and rather negative sense did the NAWU ever win the point that agricultural workers had the right to organize and bargain collectively like other American workers. "The central issue in this dispute is not wages,"


\(^37\) H. L. Mitchell, telegram to Herbert Brownell, October 14, 1953, ibid.

\(^38\) Many of the above themes are mentioned in Ernesto Galarza's telephone report from Reserve to H. L. Mitchell which became the basis for union news releases, October 15, 1953, ibid.
Hasiwar stated on the day the strike started. "The issue is the right, guaranteed under our constitution, of agricultural workers to have an organization that will represent their interests." After Mitchell announced the beginning of the strike in a telegram to the secretary of labor, he asked the secretary to specify that agricultural workers had the right to organize like other workers and to ask the United States Employment Service not to refer foreign strike breakers to jobs on sugar plantations. Mitchell also asked AFL President George Meany to help the NAWU refute the idea that because certain state and federal laws exempted agricultural workers, they were forbidden to join a union or to engage in strikes.

The United States Employment Service agreed to send no foreigners to replace workers on strike, and Meany went along with Mitchell's request for help. The Director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service suggested, perhaps

---

39 Henry Hasiwar, mimeographed news release, October 12, 1953, ibid.
40 H. L. Mitchell to James P. Mitchell, telegram on October 12, 1953, ibid.
41 H. L. Mitchell to George Meany, October 13, 1953, ibid.
42 Rocco Siciliano to H. L. Mitchell, October 14, 1953, ibid.
43 George Meany to H. L. Mitchell, October 15, 1953, ibid.
facetiously, that the NAWU turn to the National Labor Relations Board to settle its dispute with cane growers. Mitchell replied sharply: "We would gladly follow your suggestion of taking the matter of representation up with the National Labor Relations Board, however, you no doubt know that the NLRB is not permitted to handle matters involving agricultural workers." He closed by asking that the Mediation and Conciliation Service look into the matter as the Assistant Secretary of Labor suggested. Cane growers did not budge from their position regarding the NAWU. One exhorted: "Recognizing the union would be like putting our heads on the chopping block." To Cane League officials, discussing the pros and cons of sugar wages and work conditions was as close as they would come to negotiating with the NAWU. The union felt that big growers who refused to recognize the rights of agricultural workers to organize peacefully were trying to rewrite the United States Constitution.

45 H. L. Mitchell to Whitley McCoy, October 20, 1953, ibid.
46 The Morning Advocate, October 17, 1953.
47 The Times Picayune, October 20, 1953.
conceded that growers erred in saying that agricultural workers could not organize, for no federal statute should prevent their organizing "for the purpose of dealing with their employers."  

The executive committee of the American Sugar Cane League called a special meeting at the Agricultural Building in Thibodaux on October 13, the second day of the strike. Many Cane League members who were not on the executive committee attended the session devoted to the strike emergency. T. M. Barker, chairman of the League's labor committee, asked the support of all members to defeat the strike. The executive committee approved several proposals by leaders: to form a publicity committee directed by Gilbert Durbin, to publicize the union oath, to seek the assistance of clergymen sympathetic with Cane League views, to evict from plantation houses union leaders only and not the laborers en masse, and to form a committee to assist growers in need of workers. T. M. Barker read an appeal from Archbishop Rummel for settlement of the strike, but the committee postponed acting on his request.  

After the strike by the plantation workers began, Roman Catholic cane planters responded even more vehemently to pleas

49 Lawrence Myers to Frank Graham, November 2, 1953, STFU, 69:1338.  
50 American Sugar Cane League, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, October 13, 1953, 2-3, the Sugar Archives, microfilm reel 11.
by Archbishop Rummel to consider the appeals of the NAWU.
"Tend to your own knitting," one grower told the prelate.
Claiming that recognizing the union would lead to the destruction
of the sugar industry and great suffering by innocent people,
he added: "I do not want that blot on my conscience."

Another called the union methods organized gangsterism and
supplied the Archbishop facts that, he said, the union had
ignored. 
"The Church as I understand, is to bring to the
people the teachings of Christ and not be envolved [sic] in
a labor dispute . . . ," an anonymous Napoleonville Catholic
farmer wrote. "I also know that the morals of these negro
Laborers [sic] are rock bottom and again not worthy of being
represented by our Church." 

Although Archbishop Rummel reproved Henry Hasiwar for
the timing of the cane field strike that brought considerable
hardship to workers, he nonetheless provided the NAWU vice-
president money to wage the maximum effort the union could

51 B. Thibaut to Joseph Francis Rummel, October 13,
1953, in Joseph Francis Rummel Papers, "Farmers Union" folder,
Archives of Archdiocese of New Orleans, 7887 Walmsley Avenue,
New Orleans. Hereinafter cited as JFR Papers.

52 Warren Harang to Joseph Francis Rummel, October
17, 1953, ibid.

53 "Cane Farmer" to Joseph Francis Rummel, n.d.,
postmarked October 19, 1953, ibid.
muster. 54 Surrereditiously Hasiwar visited a priest in the Archdiocese who actually handed over money to the union leader. 55 The Archbishop's personal secretary vaguely recalls that some union official came by for money periodically. 56 On returning to the union office after picking up the church stipend on one occasion, Hasiwar stopped off at a bar frequented by union men and remembered some time later that he had left a large sum of money on the back seat of his car which was not locked. He rushed out to the car and, finding the precious cargo intact, quickly delivered the prize to union headquarters in Reserve. 57

Archbishop Rummel also provided a more orthodox form of aid to people in the strike area. To each dean of the five deaneries located in the sugar-growing regions of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, he sent a check for $2,000 for food for needy families with the directive: "Catholic families will naturally receive first consideration but charity prompts us


56 Joseph Vath, VPO interview, April 4, 1972.

57 Both H. L. Mitchell, interview, June 23, 1970; and O'Connell, VPO interview, April 4, 1972, agree that Hasiwar had several thousand dollars in the car but differ on the exact amount.
to aid deserving non-Catholics -- and there should be no color line."\(^58\) The Baton Rouge Deanery returned the grant since no parishioners applied for aid.\(^59\) Monsignor Joseph Wester of the Houma Deanery reported on conditions in areas such as St. Lucy, a black parish in the city that needed assistance. He said that back pay, credit at company stores, and aid from the big unions tended to minimize the suffering. The Monsignor, after conferring with Senator Allen Ellender of Houma concluded only that the whole matter was complicated and that great hardship would come if the strike lasted longer.\(^60\) The Thibodaux Deanery reported the cutting of credit at plantation stores and some evictions from plantation houses.\(^61\) Monsignor Jean Eyraud in Reserve gave $500 to Our Lady of Grace Parish, and in supplying information favorable to sugar planters, added curiously: "Even our Catholic Planters are siding with the Jews."\(^62\)

\(^58\) Joseph Francis Rummel, identical letters to the following deans: Eyraud in Reserve, Gubler in Donaldsonville, Labit in Thibodaux, Lohmann in Baton Rouge, and Wester in Houma, October 23, 1953, JFR Papers, "Farmers Union."

\(^59\) H. P. Lohmann to Joseph Francis Rummel, October 27, 1953, ibid.

\(^60\) Joseph A. Wester to Joseph Francis Rummel, October 27, 1953, ibid.

\(^61\) Raphael Labit to Joseph Francis Rummel, October 27, 1953, ibid.

\(^62\) Jean Eyraud to Joseph Francis Rummel, October 27, 1953, ibid.
The Catholic Committee of the South also supported the NAWU strike effort against the sugar planters. Calling the strike a struggle over "the basic, moral right of any workers, industrial or agricultural, to organize," the Catholic social action group labeled the sugar industry non-economic and said that "... without tariffs and price support subsidies, it could not meet competition of a foreign market." By refusing to bargain collectively, the Committee said, growers denied workers a basic human right.63

A few days after the cane field strike began, the union reported that sugar plantations were cutting off utilities of striking workers and issuing eviction notices to union leaders, including Paul Chaisson,64 president of Local 317.65 On October 15, H. L. Mitchell sent a telegram to Attorney General Brownell protesting that planters evicted strikers in an attempt to drive them back to the fields.66 The following day the American Sugar Cane League stated that "ring-leaders" of the strike who did not return to work would have to vacate

63 The Morning Advocate, October 17, 1953.

64 Local newspapers usually spelled his name C-h-i-a-s-s-o-n, but union records and most legal documents had it C-h-a-i-s-s-o-n.

65 The Daily Advertiser, October 14, 1953; The Item, ibid.

66 The Morning Advocate, October 15, 1953.
plantation houses.\textsuperscript{67} The NAWU publicized the large number of evictions, but Gilbert Durbin of the League denied that growers had resorted to mass evictions.\textsuperscript{68} Sheriff A. P. Prejean said that no eviction notices had been issued in Terrebonne Parish prior to October 20, 1953.\textsuperscript{69} Later Durbin admitted that cane growers were evicting strikers en masse. "We have no choice in the matter," he said. "If the workers living in the houses don't want to work then we have to get someone who will, and they need a place to live."\textsuperscript{70} Sheriff Fernand Richard of Assumption Parish said that eviction proceedings would be heard in the Napoleonville Courthouse on October 23, 1953.\textsuperscript{71}

C. Paul Barker and Fred Cassibry, attorneys for the NAWU and the CIO, respectively, assisted striking plantation workers in efforts to combat the threat to evictions from their houses on sugar plantations.\textsuperscript{72} Paul Chaisson and other strikers, claiming to be "... temporarily withholding their labor from the defendants to persuade them to recognize, meet and bargain

\textsuperscript{67} The Houma \textit{Courier}, October 16, 1953.
\textsuperscript{68} The \textit{Morning Advocate}, October 18, 1953.
\textsuperscript{69} The Houma \textit{Courier}, October 20, 1953.
\textsuperscript{70} The \textit{Morning Advocate}, October 20, 1953.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, October 21, 1953.
collectively . . . ," sought an injunction in the 17th Judicial District of Louisiana to prevent their being evicted from plantation houses. Judge P. David Martinez found in favor of Godchaux Sugars, Inc. and Southdown against fifteen striking workers, who claimed growers had evicted them in violation of the Sugar Act. The plaintiffs, who appealed to the federal district court, received a hearing of their case on October 28, 1953. Federal District Judge Herbert Christenberry, in denying the petition, ruled that: "The Court is of the view that a federal question has not been sufficiently alleged to warrant this court's taking jurisdiction." He pointed out that "the complaint does not state a claim on which the court can grant relief." H. L. Mitchell did not feel the court action, which had delayed the evictions for a time, was a complete loss, but one cane country newspaper ran the headline: "Planters Can Evict Strikers Says Judge." Sheriffs in

73 The Morning Advocate, October 21, 1953.
74 The Lafourche Comet, October 29, 1953.
75 The Times Picayune, October 21, 1953; The Item, October 20, 1953; The Morning Advocate, October 21, 1953.
76 The Times Picayune, October 29, 1953; The Daily Advertiser, ibid.; The Lafourche Comet, ibid.
78 The St. Charles Herald, October 31, 1953.
Lafourche and Assumption parishes attributed a back-to-work feeling in the cane fields to the decision.\(^79\)

In the propaganda contest that accompanied the plantation workers' strike, both labor and management undoubtedly slanted their version of events, for the accounts are not compatible. The NAWU claimed the strike was a tightly organized movement that was picking up momentum and new adherents daily and that eventually the planters would be forced to recognize the influence of Local 317 among sugar workers. Reports from the planters, channeled through releases by the American Sugar Cane League, played down the extent of the strike with reports of uninterrupted operation and a growing back-to-work movement by laborers on the various plantations. During the first week of the strike, growers admitted that the strike slowed down cane harvesting but that grinding in the mills continued uninterrupted because of returning strikers, hired replacements, and assistance from farmers not affected by the strike. Gilbert Durbin of the Sugar Cane League reported strikers returning "in droves" and added: "Even if all the union's members went on strike they still couldn't stop us from harvesting this crop."\(^80\)

\(^79\) The *Morning Advocate*, November 6, 1953.

\(^80\) The *Times Picayune*, October 13, 14, 21, 24, 1953; The *Houma Courier*, October 13, 1953; The *Item*, October 20, 22, 1953; The *Morning Advocate*, October 14, 17, 1953.
The propaganda aspects of the strike increased in tempo after the appearance of an article in *Time* called "Cane Mutiny." The nationally distributed news weekly not only quoted growers' protestations of the necessity of subsidies for their existence, but also their advertisements predicting victory in the encounter with the union. *Time* pointed out that four-fifths of the strikers were black, two-thirds were illiterate, several spoke no English, and most lived in company houses ("some of them hovels, some adequate") and traded at the company store. They gathered at Masonic lodges and burial society halls waiting for recognition and an end to the strike. The article continued: "After generations of precarious existence on the big plantations, the cane workers were out on an organized strike." Indicating widespread support for the union from the Catholic Church and organized labor, the article quoted Father Twomey: "The workers are apparently willing to take whatever risks are involved to free, if not themselves, at least their children from this environment."81

The Cane League executive committee, which voted unanimously not to respond to the attack in *Time*,82 instead pushed

82 American Sugar Cane League, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, November 6, 1953, 3, the Sugar Archives, Microfilm reel 11.
its own vituperative attack on the NAWU. Entitled "The Issue," this attack first appeared in the press on October 22, 1953. Treated in the smaller papers as a paid advertisement, the strongly-worded release listed the usual arguments of the Cane League but with considerably more invective. The author used expressions such as "manufactured in Moscow . . . Alias Hank Hasiwar . . . so-called labor union . . . union dictatorship . . . and convicted bank robber and ex-convict," to describe Hasiwar, Felix Dugas, and the ideology of the NAWU.

Besides having to contend with a Cane League publicity campaign that H. L. Mitchell readily admits was successful, the union received a dressing down in the editorial columns of the local press that was often less than friendly. For three consecutive issues a Bayou Lafourche weekly criticized the union for, among other things, a lack of success. "The sugar cane crop here will be harvested--strike or not!" the editor said. "So far things here are not even bad enough to declare an emergency and call for volunteers to aid the farmers . . . ." On the question of recognizing the union, he declared:

83 Assumption Pioneer, November 6, 1953, summarized the article on page 1 and ran a five-column box containing the complete release in another section; Houma Courier, October 27, 1953.

84 H. L. Mitchell, interview June 23, 1970, thinks that a publicity man who had worked for the Associated Farmers in California assisted Gilbert Durbin in Louisiana during the strike.
"THAT WILL NEVER BE. With the continued help of the Lord, the crop will be harvested on schedule." And, adding a parting word about the workers, he proclaimed: "They . . . have missed . . . getting some of the highest harvesting wages ever paid . . . ." The following week the editor said that " . . . no outside or inside goons will ever make us stop working when we so desire or scare us with threats or reprisals."

Keeping track of the cane field strike in the press after the end of the second week became increasingly difficult because of the large number of contradictory reports. Sometimes what was not said offered a better clue to what actually happened than what was mentioned. But Cane League releases during the last week of October contained much that must have been discouraging to labor leaders. Durbin reported that returning strikers, laborers from outside the strike area, and strike breakers maintained the harvest and kept mills running near full capacity. At the end of the month the union claimed that 2,000 men were still on strike; the Cane League said only 1,000 remained away from work. Pointing out that

---

85 The Assumption Pioneer, October 23, 1953.
86 Ibid., October 30, 1953.
87 The Times Picayune, October 22, 1953; Item, October 22, 1953.
88 Ibid., October 30, 1953.
the entire labor force in the sugar industry totaled 45,000, Durbin doubted that all 3,000 union members on strike would halt the harvesting. Union figures show an increase in the number of strikers from 1,200 the first day, to 1,600 by the middle of the first week, and to 2,000 after 400 workers from the Labadieville area joined in on October 20, 1953. NAWU President Mitchell flew to Louisiana from Washington for a two-day tour of the strike area at about this time and reported that ninety per cent of the regular employees at the big-four plantations remained on strike. Strike breakers from Mississippi and Alabama alone remained in the fields cutting what little cane was being cut, he said, contradicting Hasiwar's statement that the newly arrived laborers refused to work after they learned of the strike.

The NAWU attempted to counter the damning charges of the Cane League's "The Issue" with its own "A Reply from the Cane Field Workers." The union refuted the charges point by point. It traced the futile attempts to negotiate with the cane growers who assumed that agricultural workers had been denied the right to organize and bargain collectively. The

---

89 Morning Advocate, October 28, 1953; Times Picayune, October 28, 1953.
90 Times Picayune, October 21, 1953; Item, October 21, 1953.
91 Morning Advocate, October 25, 1953.
union claimed that Hank Hasiwar's indictment for alleged anti-trust violations with the strawberry local did not indicate guilt. It also noted that calling Felix Dugas a convicted bank robber and a hardened criminal created an incorrect impression. Authorities convicted NAWU member Felix Dugas as "an immature youth" for implication in a robbery, but his parents restored all the money, the union said. Denying that it had "brain-washed" union members, the NAWU claimed that its all-day union meetings kept members from becoming involved in any violent acts.92

Associating one's opponent with Communism during the McCarthy Era often brought forceful reprisals, and the American Sugar Cane League used the tactic in its assault against the NAWU during the 1953 sugar strike. Of all the contradictory statements made during the strike none produced more controversy or heated rejoinder than the charge by the League that Local 317 received aid from a Communist-front organization. Gilbert Durbin said that the National Sharecroppers' Fund, Inc., long time supporter of the union, had been cited as a Communist front by the California state senate's fact-finding committee on un-American activities. Although H. L. Mitchell, in reply, effectively denied most of Durbin's charges, he

92 The Times Picayune, October 29, 1953; The New Orleans States, October 28, 1953.
could not eradicate its initial impact. "Some unmitigated liar may have made the statement to the California legislative committee that this charitable fund was operated by the Communists," Mitchell stated. "But Mr. Durbin has no right to repeat . . . these statements." Pointing out that the chairman of the fund, Frank Graham, was a former United States senator from North Carolina, Mitchell added that Durbin " . . . shall be called to account in a court of law as soon as it is physically possible for attorneys to prepare and file the necessary papers." 93

Graham, who demanded an apology from the Cane League, disavowed any association with Communists and said the attorney general's office had never listed the National Sharecroppers' Fund as a subversive group.94 At first refusing to comment on the issue, Durbin later replied to Graham's telegram but did not apologize on the basis of the California committee's findings.95 In repeating his charges against the fund, Durbin later said: "Frankly we do not know the real objective behind

---

93 The New Orleans Item, October 25, 1953; Times Picayune, October 24, 1953; Daily Advertiser, October 24, 1953; Morning Advocate, October 24, 1953; Donaldsonville Chief, October 30, 1953; H. L. Mitchell, news release, October 25, 1953, STFU, 69:1337b.

94 The Times Picayune, October 28, 1953; Item, October 26, 1953.

95 The Times Picayune, October 26, 27, 1953; Donaldsonville Chief, October 30, 1953.
the strike," and he speculated that a strike wrecking the sugar economy would "undoubtedly cause much delight behind the iron curtain." 96

Little violence or forceful intimidation occurred during the 1953 plantation workers' strike, but several physical clashes made it more than a mere contest of economic and legal matters. H. L. Mitchell's somewhat exaggerated telegram to the attorney general two days after the strike began stated that armed strike-breakers, deputized plantation foremen, and sheriff's deputies in Assumption Parish invaded workers' home and used force and violence to drive laborers to the fields. 97 Mitchell asked the Justice Department to inquire whether the state police had assisted local authorities in serving eviction notices. State Police Superintendent Francis Grevemberg reported that his men were merely enforcing the law and patrolling, "in case of violence." 98 Sugar grower Charles Farwell labeled the union charges "false and libelous." 99 Joseph Nelson, a laborer from Labadieville who was fired and evicted for his union activity, found a job on a small farm owned by Angelo Russo, and

96 Assumption Pioneer, October 30, 1953.
97 H. L. Mitchell telegram to Herbert Brownell, October 14, 1953, STFU, 69:1336; The Morning Advocate, October 15, 1953.
98 The Morning Advocate, October 15, 1953; The Daily Advertiser, October 15, 1953.
99 The Morning Advocate, October 16, 1953.
the NAWU helped him move his belongings to his new home. According to union accounts, Clarence Savoie and a deputy sheriff followed the truck carrying Nelson's household belongings, and several days later Russo fired Nelson at the insistence of John Thibaut, son of the Glenwood Mill manager, who said he would not grind Russo's cane unless he fired Nelson.100

Clarence Savoie expressed surprise at the extent of union influence early in the strike. "We've never seen anything like it," he said. He admitted restricting credit of strikers at the plantation store, but he denied cutting off water, gas, and electricity. "They don't want to strike," Savoie said, "but they are scared of what might happen to them. I'm against all unions," he added before discussing Felix Dugas, his nephew by marriage, who had joined the NAWU.101 "A boy caused all this trouble. Felix Dugas is the cause of it all, born on the plantation, played ball with the others. He led the poor people wrong," Savoie went on. "I couldn't recognize him. If his union should win, I'd go out of business." A family outcast, Felix served two years in prison for a bank robbery in 1947 following his discharge from military service. He later had difficulty in finding and holding

100 Oliver Pilat, New York Post, November 10, 1953, Drolet Scrapbook.

101 The Morning Advocate, October 17, 1953.
a job, and in July, 1953, came to a union meeting in Labadieville and asked to become a member. Because he was Savoie's nephew, Local 317 officials suspected that he was a spy and hesitated about giving him a membership button until Father Harry Maloney suggested he be allowed to join.102

As if to exonerate cane growers from any blame for violence or intimidation during the strike, one planter stated: "We are not going to participate in any violence, so if any occurs it will be on the part of the union."103 Gilbert Durbin of the Cane League claimed that the NAWU oath itself encouraged a propensity for violence.104 During the first week of the strike Sheriff Fernand Richard of Assumption Parish arrested Ernest Brown and Ernest Robinson for threatening the life of Lloyd Carter, Brown's nephew, if he went to work.105 Several days later Sheriff Richard admitted some doubt whether an actual threat was intended, and released the men who went back to work.106 Assumption authorities arrested Johnny Tillman, a black who had worked for five years at Cedar

102 Unidentified clipping, n.d. [1953], in Drolet Scrapbook.
103 The Morning Advocate, October 17, 1953.
104 The Houma Courier, October 16, 1953.
105 The Morning Advocate, October 17, 1953.
106 Ibid., October 21, 1953; The Times Picayune, October 21, 1953.
Grove Plantation near Labadieville, and kept him in jail in Napoleonville for "... lyin' in wait and threatenin'" strike-breakers from Mississippi. Even bail money sent by the NAWU did not secure Tillman's immediate release because of confusion about his true identity. Promising to return to work in exchange for his release, Tillman instead exposed the pressure tactic, the NAWU said.\textsuperscript{107} Two families at nearby Belle Rose reported that union members told them to go on strike by a certain day "... or watch out for your children in the future." An old man who had worked forty years on the same Assumption Parish plantation refused to go to work during the strike even with a police guard. "Huey Long had protection too," he said, "but he got killed just the same." Others said that union members made threatening phone calls early in the morning. News reporters who toured the area reported no visible intimidation of strikers or denial of civil rights,\textsuperscript{108} but perhaps sugar growers had conducted them on a Potemkin tour.

The only shooting incident during the strike occurred in Houma on October 22 when men lying in ambush fired two shotgun blasts at a truck transporting workers to the Southdown refinery. A. P. Prejean, sheriff of Terrebonne Parish, reported

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{107} Oliver Pilat, "Terror in the Bayous," The New York Post, November 9, 1953, in Drolet Scrapbook.
\textsuperscript{108} The Morning Advocate, October 17, 1953.
\end{flushright}
that August Celestin, Dyis Castle, and Julius Moore, all of Mechanicsville, when they were fired upon at 11:45 p.m., suffered minor flesh wounds as they were riding along Highway 70 in a truck driven by C. McPherson. Southdown offered $500 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible, and Prejean added: "Up to this time we have had no trouble. But if that's the way they want it, that's the way they'll get it." Governor Robert Kennon issued a statement promising protection of life and property to all, regardless of which side of the controversy they were on. Later Prejean arrested and charged with attempted murder Lester Gilmore (Talmore or Galmore), Webster Robertson, Herman Stewart, and Joseph Johnson, all Negro strikers; and Judge Robert Lottinger set bail at $5,000 each. Johnson was actually charged with firing birdshot at the truck from a car parked beside the road. One newspaper said eyewitnesses saw Johnson fire the shots, and a Houma paper stated that the arrested men admitted participating in the incident. A New York bail bond concern posted bail for the four men.109

109 Times Picayune, October 24, 25, 1953; Item, October 25, 1953; Houma Courier, October 27, 30, 1953; Morning Advocate, October 25, 1953.
WBOK, calling on NAWU members to return to work since the union had made false promises.\textsuperscript{110} The fifty-year-old minister of Greater Pleasant Green Baptist Church, when confronted by union men who threatened him with ridicule if he did not stop his broadcasts, stated: "I'm not a union buster . . . . I'm simply trying to help my people."\textsuperscript{111} The NAWU reported that a union delegation had given the preacher " . . . his baptism in Christian ethics and social problems."\textsuperscript{112} Later when Mitchell sought assistance from Norman Thomas in getting American Civil Liberties Union funds to fight legal battles, he said: "Our fellows had nothing to do with the proceedings . . . . Negro leaders of the ILA and Teamsters Union were responsible."\textsuperscript{113}

Father Drolet returned to Louisiana from his fund-raising tour in time to become embroiled in a heated incident late in the strike. When Welton Lestrick, a union worker who had been pistol-whipped in the Lafourche Parish Courthouse, came to him for aid, Drolet decided to speak up in his usual

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{110} Ernesto Galarza, telephone report to NAWU, October 17, 1953, STFU, 69:1337a.
  \item \textsuperscript{111} The \textit{Morning Advocate}, October 20, 1953.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} NAWU news release, October 19, 1953, STFU, 69:1337a.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} H. L. Mitchell to Norman Thomas, November 12, 1953, STFU, 69:1339.
\end{itemize}
blunt style. According to Drolet, Lestrick had come to Thibodaux to pay a judgment against his brother who had been jailed following an automobile accident. Chief Deputy Eddie J. Ste. Marie recognized the union man and approached him saying, "I'm tired of you and the union." Drawing his pistol, Ste. Marie allegedly struck Lestrick on the head several times, causing severe cuts and bleeding. He then ordered the black man to clean up in the washroom and to leave Lafourche Parish.114

The following day, November 8, a Sunday, Father Drolet's sermon at nearby St. Charles Parish described the beating of Lestrick. He quoted Ste. Marie as saying that he would show who was "... king of the niggers around here." Stating his reaction to the incident in the second person so his parishioners could better place themselves in the position of Lestrick, Drolet closed with a facetious yet forceful comment on American Life:

You are thankful that God has placed you in the land of the free, where the poor enjoy equal justice under the law. It's so different here from the communist countries behind the Iron Curtain, where human dignity is outraged, and human freedoms are ruthlessly trampled upon by godless dictators... 115

The priest secured medical attention for Lestrick's cut eye and head and found a safe place for him to hide until he could

114 Oliver Pilat, New York Post, November 10, 1953, in Drolet Scrapbook.

could move his family. Later Drolet corrected the impression that a plantation deputy had beaten the union man. The man responsible, he said, was "the high sheriff of the county. His name, and I am sorry to say it, is Eddie Ste. Marie, a big and important man."  

In reply to talk that the strike was hurting small farmers, the NAWU claimed it was directing the strike primarily against the four largest sugar producers in the state. "The Union," the NAWU stated, "is encouraging workers who are employed in the grinding mills to remain on the job, so that small farmers' crops may be saved." The union said that when the Big-Four borrowed union workers from plantations not affected by the strike, they enlarged the scope of the strike. This was not the complete truth, for Mitchell's wife, writing to a NAWU colleague at that time, stated: "In case you give out any of this information - do not indicate the part about all these plantations. For publicity purpose, we are sticking to the fact that workers are striking on the 4 big plantations."
Meanwhile Hasiwar in Louisiana promised that Local 317 would assist any small farmer adversely affected by the strike.\textsuperscript{120} Sheriff Richard of Assumption Parish said that the strike hurt small farmers,\textsuperscript{121} and Gilbert Durbin supplied the names of several so affected in the Napoleonville area.\textsuperscript{122} Hasiwar stuck to his story that the NAWU called out only their members working for small farmers who had gone to the aid of the Big-Four.\textsuperscript{123}

On October 16, 1953, the NAWU expanded the scope of the plantation workers' strike by placing ten pickets at the Godchaux refinery at Raceland in Lafourche Parish\textsuperscript{124} to inform factory workers of field workers' demands.\textsuperscript{125} Pickets handed out leaflets encouraging factory workers to join the NAWU in order to strengthen their own position. "If any unionized sugar factory workers take their stand with us," the leaflet stated, "we will stand with them until they get recognition, too." Hasiwar estimated that three hundred mill workers had

\textsuperscript{120} The Houma Courier, October 16, 1953.
\textsuperscript{121} The Morning Advocate, October 21, 1953.
\textsuperscript{122} The Times Picayune, October 19, 1953.
\textsuperscript{123} The Morning Advocate, October 20, 1953; The Times Picayune, October 20, 1953; The Daily Advertiser, October 19, 1953.
\textsuperscript{124} Ernesto Galarza, telephone report to NAWU, October 17, 1953, STFU, 69:1337a.
\textsuperscript{125} The Morning Advocate, October 18, 1953.
left their jobs in support of Local 317. Some observers thought the move indicated a shift of the strike from the fields to the sugar mills in the cane country.126

Four days after the picketing began, Judge J. Louis Watkins of the 17th. Judicial District Court of Louisiana signed a temporary order restraining members of the United Packing House Workers of America (CIO) from walking off their jobs at the Southdown Sugars plant in Terrebonne in sympathy with the field workers strike.127 The following day he restrained Local 317 from picketing the Southdown plant that, the company said, suffered "irreparable damage." The latter order named important union leaders such as Hasiwar, Frank Lapeyrolerie, Joe Guidry, Felix Dugas, Paul Chaisson, and Irving Picou.128 On October 30, Judge Watkins heard evidence to decide whether the injunction against picketing should be made permanent. Southdown brought in witnesses to show intimidation of non-union members, and Local 317 claimed that the right to picket was as basic as the right to strike.129 Watkins granted an

126 Ibid., October 17, 1953; The Times Picayune, October 18, 1953.
127 The Houma Courier, October 20, 1953.
128 Ibid., October 23, 1953.
129 The Morning Advocate, October 31, 1953.
indefinite restraining order against Local 317.\textsuperscript{130} Mitchell complained that his injunction was based on the idea that picketing was an illegal conspiracy since agricultural workers did not qualify for National Labor Relations Board jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{131}

Judge Watkins revealed that he had more than a passing knowledge of and association with the sugar industry. He had lived twenty-five years (most of them on Southdown Plantation) "as the son of an employee and as an actual employee for brief periods." He acknowledged difficulty in being objective: "we are placed in the awkward, unhappy and extremely difficult position of attempting to draw a line of demarkation between the testimony in the record and our own personal knowledge . . . . Harvesting without processing is as unthinkable as liberty without law."\textsuperscript{132}

In St. John Parish the state district court rendered a similar ruling two days later against picketing by Local 317 at the Godchaux Sugars refinery,\textsuperscript{133} and on November 5, a ruling

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{130} The Lafourche Comet, November 5, 1953.
\textsuperscript{131} H. L. Mitchell to Patrick E. Gorman, October 28, 1953, STFU, 69:1337b.
\textsuperscript{133} Godchaux Sugars, Inc. Vs. No. 304, Frank Lapeyrolerie et al., 29th. Judicial District Court, State of Louisiana, Parish of St. John the Baptist, November 4, 1953, \textit{ibid}. \end{flushright}
in Lafourche Parish halted picketing at Godchaux's Raceland refinery. In the Lafourche Parish proceedings, Judge Paul D. Martinez heard evidence from Henry Hasiwar and from Roland Toups who testified that South Coast had lost from $7,500 to $8,000 since the strike started and that his company had lost business to plants not affected by the strike. The Louisiana Supreme Court, on November 6, refused to hear the appeals brought by the union; the court would not "exercise its supervisory jurisdiction to disturb the orderly procedure in trial below except in cases of irreparable injury." Union attorneys argued that the Louisiana high court should have heard the case because the injunction violated the constitutional rights of union members, appellate procedures were inadequate, and appeals would take months before reaching a higher court.

Archbishop Rummel, who had so actively attempted to prevent the plantation workers' strike from becoming necessary, worked to settle the strike as well. In late October he wrote to clergymen in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, requesting


\[135\] The Morning Advocate, November 6, 1953.

\[136\] The Houma Courier, November 6, 1953.

\[137\] C. Paul Barker to Fred Piper /Pieper/, November 8, 1953, STFU, 69:1338.
that Sunday, November 1, 1953, be a day of special prayer for settlement of the strike.\textsuperscript{138} In a letter read in all Catholic Churches on the day designated for prayer to end the strike, he told parishioners: "Divine guidance and aid will bring about the material recognition of the principles of justice and charity, which alone can guarantee enduring peace in the social order."\textsuperscript{139}

Meanwhile other Catholic groups such as the Catholic Committee of the South, Holy Name Society, and the Christian Family Movement all provided food packages or services for the families of men on strike.\textsuperscript{140} Reverend Robert Guste, Assistant Pastor of St. Cecelia Parish in New Orleans, organized a motorcade to deliver food and clothing to needy families on strike.\textsuperscript{141} The New York \textit{Post} in November ran a feature article, based on material supplied by Local 317, detailing the hardships endured by union members.\textsuperscript{142} Cash grants such as the $5,000 check from the United Auto Workers,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{138} Joseph Francis Rummel to all clergymen in Archdiocese of New Orleans, October 28, 1953, JFR Papers, "Farmers' Union."
\item \textsuperscript{139} The Houma \textit{Courier}, November 10, 1953; The Lafourche \textit{Comet}, November 5, 1953.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Unidentified clipping, n.d., Drolet Scrapbook.
\item \textsuperscript{141} The \textit{Item}, October 28, 1953.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Oliver Pilat, "Brother, Can You Spare a Drink of Water?" The New York \textit{Post}, November 11, 1953, Drolet Scrapbook.
\end{itemize}
combined with the local aid, made life more tolerable for those on strike. \footnote{143}

Injunctions posed a major problem for the NAWU. H. L. Mitchell suggested that E. H. Williams of the State Federation of Labor urge George Meany to help finance the legal struggle to clear away the injunctions and to continue organizing work in the sugar industry. \footnote{144} Mitchell made similar demands of the Civil Liberties Union. \footnote{145} An NAWU attorney who discussed the possibility of success in overturning lower court rulings in the United States Supreme Court submitted a bill for $3,200 that he knew the union could not pay in full. "If you were well heeled we would charge more," he said in a letter asking the NAWU to pay what it could afford. \footnote{146}

Enjoined by court order from picketing or otherwise performing its function as a labor union, the NAWU called a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[143] Walter P. Reuther to Ernesto Galarza, October 23, 1953, STFU, 69:1337b; See also photostat copy of the UAW check, \textit{ibid.}
\item[144] E. H. Williams to George Meany, November 6, 1953, STFU, 69:1338.
\item[145] H. L. Mitchell to Irving Ferman, November 6, 1953, \textit{ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
halt to the plantation workers' strike on November 10, 1953. In a forcefully-worded news release composed mainly by attorney C. Paul Barker, the NAWU urged its members to return to work: "Although we feel we have been betrayed by our courts, the strike has succeeded in unifying our people . . . . The Union will continue this fight. The organization of the plantation workers will go forward. The suffering and sacrifice of our people will not be in vain. We will organize and we will be recognized." Mitchell informed Norman Thomas of the strike's end and of the Justice Department's willingness to settle the anti-trust case against strawberry Local 312 if Hasiwar and others pleaded guilty. He told a former NAWU organizer in California that Galarza would return to the West Coast, that the sugar local would survive, and that Hasiwar would remain in Louisiana unless he was sent to jail for the strawberry suit. The National Agricultural Workers Union cane field strike had come to an ignominious end.

---

147 The Lafourche Comet, November 12, 1953; The Item, November 10, 1953; The Houma Courier, November 10, 1953; The Assumption Pioneer, November 13, 1953.


149 H. L. Mitchell to Norman Thomas, November 10, 1953, ibid.

150 H. L. Mitchell to William Becker, November 12, 1953, ibid.
CHAPTER VI

CAUGHT BETWEEN THE AFL AND THE CIO--A BEAR
BY THE TAIL AND CAN'T LET GO

For the National Agricultural Workers Union the days following the 1953 cane field strike afforded time for re-evaluation, readjustment, and introspective soul-searching to determine what prospects lay ahead for the union. What went wrong? Why had the strike failed? Since 1953, answers to such questions provided by union and church leaders who participated in the effort seem to emphasize plots and conspiracies of various kinds and to overlook salient economic and political points.

NAWU President H. L. Mitchell feels that perhaps the sugar local developed so quickly that there was insufficient time to mobilize public support for the plantation workers, but Father Vincent O'Connell marvels at the amount of support demonstrated by longshoremen and some of the other international unions. Both men feel that when Eddie Sutton, a CIO

---


-208-
Packinghouse Workers Union leader, crossed the NAWU picket line at the Godchaux plant in Raceland, all chances for success in the strike vanished. According to this version, Godchaux Sugars officials from New York had instructed its Louisiana plant managers to sign a contract with the NAWU before word of CIO men crossing the picket line caused the company to change its plans about signing a contract.3

This simplistic view ignores both the injunctions and the union's failure to halt the harvesting of cane and stymie the sugar operation. O'Connell feels that despite the injunctions the strike would have succeeded if the various union elements had worked together. He admits now what he has always been reluctant to say: that he would have been able to maintain the unity and prevent the CIO from crossing NAWU picket lines had he not been sent to a new assignment late in 1952. With Teamsters Union cooperation, he said, "... not a truck would have moved ...," and eventually the NAWU would have

3 Ibid.; H. L. Mitchell, interview, June 23, 1970; H. L. Mitchell to George Meany, November 10, 1953, Box 69, Folder 1339 of Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, Southern History Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Hereinafter cited as STFU, 69:1339; H. L. Mitchell, "The Strike of Sugar Cane Plantation Workers in Louisiana," memorandum, November, 1953, STFU, 69:1340; Henry Pelet, tape-recorded interview on February 29, 1972 in Thibodaux, Louisiana, feels that CIO workers crossed the NAWU picket line because they had not been told what the pickets were trying to accomplish.
Such action, had it been forthcoming, would have encountered the legal entanglements of the injunctions or the Taft-Hartley Act's restrictions against secondary boycotts, hence this explanation is less than satisfactory, also.

Other theories of politically-oriented conspiracy plots usually associate the strawberry indictment and the cane field injunctions with the aspirations of leaders such as J. P. Duhe, the Cane League president, who was a chairman of the Republican party in Louisiana. Mitchell and O'Connell thought that Republican Attorney General Herbert Brownell had played politics with influential former Dixiecrats, encouraging them to become Louisiana Republicans by dropping suits against big oil companies while prosecuting the strawberry local for anti-trust violations and securing injunctions against the cane workers local. This explanation, too, assumes considerable unity on the part of sugar growers and their friends in various branches of government, but it is at least believable.

Whether rationalizing or offering explanations that justified continued union efforts, the NAWU had to face serious

---

4 Vincent O'Connell, VPO interview, April 4, 1972.


and pressing financial, legal, and organizational problems at a time when it was still reeling from the cane field strike. Caring for union leaders who had been blacklisted and evicted as a result of the strike required immediate attention. The NAWU planned to utilize as part time organizers some members that the Catholic Church had been unable to place on jobs. By mid-November sugar growers had begun to fire workers, but the Catholic Church quickly took action to meet the challenge.

Father Louis J. Twomey, who headed the Industrial Relations Department at Loyola University, met on November 15 with leaders representing the Christian Family Movement, St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Commission on Human Rights of the Catholic Committee of the South, the Urban League, and leaders from the AFL and the CIO. Ernesto Galarza spoke to the gathering and explained that some ninety-seven men, mostly heads of families with over 600 dependents, had been fired as a result of the strike. Those who had not been blacklisted found jobs, but sixty or sixty-five heads of families required temporary refuge at union headquarters in Reserve. Some commuted


to jobs in New Orleans but needed help in locating new homes in the city. Frank Lapeyrolerie worked part time conducting a survey for the NAWU for over a year before he found a job in Reserve running a motion picture projector, and Paul Chaisson, with the assistance of Father Twomey, found an organizers' job with a large industrial union. Joe Guidry remained with the NAWU organizing rice mills, but when that failed, he had difficulty in returning to his former teaching position in the Lafayette area. In December Mitchell was still trying to locate common labor jobs with construction companies for blacklisted NAWU members.

Just as the NAWU's position in the cane field strike became untenable, the union faced a crisis with indictment proceedings against the strawberry local scheduled for settlement. NAWU attorneys acknowledged their weak case and, in order to settle the anti-trust suit against Local 312, proposed a consent agreement that amounted to a plea of guilty. Convinced by attorneys that the NAWU was a small and poor union, Justice Department officials at first agreed to a recommendation of fines of about $6,000 against the union and

---

9 Catholic Action of the South, November 19, 1953, in New Orleans Public Library.


no prison terms, but later balked, saying the union would have to take its chances in court. As these negotiations extended into the first quarter of 1954, the NAWU struggled to meet legal expenses.

H. L. Mitchell's publicity campaign, charging that the Department of Justice prosecuted small agricultural unions but not big oil companies, continued through the summer of 1953 and into the fall, but in moderation. The union ran a cartoon depicting Attorney General Brownell chasing small strawberry farmers running between the skyscraper-like legs of a figure called big business. Union lawyers felt that the Justice Department secretly desired to consummate the consent agreement but hated to set a precedent by allowing the cooperative union marketing arrangement to remain intact.

When union attorneys suggested modifications, Assistant Attorney General Stanley N. Barnes informed them that the Capper-Volstead Act did not permit the formation of a farmers' co-op by a labor organization. Mitchell told Norman Thomas that

---

12 The Agricultural Unionist, October, 1953, STFU, Microfilm, Roll 58.


14 Stanley Barnes to C. Paul Barker, October 14, 1953, STFU, 69:1336.
the NAWU would accept the consent agreement if it provided for fines only and not prison terms for union leaders.\textsuperscript{15}

One NAWU attorney, admitting the weak union position, told another: "Please keep this letter close to home, as I would not like the Department of Justice people to get hold of this unauthorized concession of weakness on our part." The latest word, he said, was that the Justice Department would agree to a fine of $5,000 on Hasiwar and the same amount on the union with no prison terms involved.\textsuperscript{16} But neither Hasiwar nor the union had $5,000, and Mitchell wanted Local 312 to use funds from other sources for fines and legal fees. "The important thing," he wrote Hasiwar, "is to get those tight-wads to agree to the rebate fund being thrown in now. Point out to them that the National Union and its attorney saved a number of them from going to jail . . . ."\textsuperscript{17} Later, when local leaders balked at this proposal, the NAWU removed them and placed the local's affairs directly in friendly hands.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} H. L. Mitchell to Norman Thomas, November 10, 1953, STFU, 69:1339.
\textsuperscript{16} Daniel Pollitt to C. Paul Barker, November 25, 1953, STFU, 69:1340.
\textsuperscript{17} H. L. Mitchell to Henry Hasiwar, December 31, 1953, STFU, 69:1342.
\textsuperscript{18} H. L. Mitchell to NAWU National Executive Board, June 8, 1954, STFU, 70:1363.
In January the Department of Justice seemed satisfied with a settlement calling for no prison terms and total fines of $6,600, but the judge who was to try the case proposed $10,000 in fines, suspended prison terms, and probation for union leaders. Mitchell felt the cane field strike had prompted this step, one designed to put Henry Hasiwar out of commission. "If we lose our most effective organizer," he asked Galarza, "what can we do?" After union attorneys learned that the Justice Department would recommend no further proposals to Judge Herbert Christenberry, who was scheduled to hear the case, they suggested stalling. The only alternatives were going to trial or entering a plea on Christenberry's terms.

Mitchell came to Louisiana to confer with his people involved in the strawberry case and spoke with Archbishop Rummel on the telephone. When the prelate said that he knew Judge Christenberry, Mitchell took this to mean that the church leader would put in a good word with the judge for the strawberry local. In mid-April Judge Christenberry told union

---


attorney C. Paul Barker that the local would have to make its plea and take its chances.  

On April 28, 1954, Christenberry heard the case against the strawberry local and handed out a $4,000 fine to the local, $1,000 fines to Henry Hasiwar, Louis Edwards, and Casel Jones, and sentenced the latter named three to nine-month jail terms but suspended their sentences and imposed a one-year probation period. Referring to the leaders' role in an earlier milk strike, Christenberry stated: "Those milk strikers might not have known any better and they were led into it by an unscrupulous person, a so-called organizer."  

The NAWU hoped to pursue the possibilities of setting aside the cane field injunctions in the higher courts. Mitchell expected to obtain funds from the industrial unions of the state by convincing them that injunctions threatened their well-being, also. His efforts did not impress the wealthier unions. Since the NAWU could not finance much of a legal struggle, the appeal became less vigorous than anticipated although union attorneys contributed considerable free legal time to the case.

---


Attorney C. Paul Barker complained to a CIO official that the court's view was "... that a labor dispute and picket line is permissible if not effective, but regardless of the nature of the dispute, if effective, it is unlawful." Mitchell sent Barker's law firm $500 in mid-November "as a token payment" and promised to send more for an appeal, the total cost of which Barker said would run between $3,500 and $5,000. Later in the month Mitchell sent $400 more so that Barker could proceed with the appeal of Godchaux Sugars, Inc. v. Paul Chaisson. By May, 1954, the NAWU still owed C. Paul Barker $500 for the balance of Hasiwar's fine that the attorney paid from his own pocket. Barker explained that the union could attempt to appeal a number of cases through the higher courts, but that the above mentioned case was like "... putting all our eggs in one basket ..." Other possibilities were Southdown Sugars v. Irving Picou, Southcoast v.

27 H. L. Mitchell to C. Paul Barker, November 23, 1953, ibid.
Paul Chaisson, and cases involving Welton Lestrick and Frank Lapcyrolerie.29

The National Sharecroppers' Fund finally dropped its case against the American Sugar Cane League for calling the NAWU benefactor a Communist-front organization. The case reflects the difficulties such McCarthy-like charges posed during the 1950's to those eager to exonerate themselves. In late November, 1953, New Orleans attorney Eberhard Deutsch informed the National Sharecroppers' Fund that it would not benefit from a suit against the Times Picayune for printing the Cane League charge.30 The next month the NSF heeded Deutsch's advice and dropped the whole matter since even a winning case sometimes generated bad publicity.31

The NAWU, in its original appeals to the Louisiana Supreme Court, failed to have the temporary injunctions issued by Judge Louis Watkins of the state's 17th Judicial District Court set aside. It then went ahead with plans to petition for a writ of certiorari to the United States Supreme Court. In upholding Watkins' injunction against


30 National Sharecroppers' Fund, Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting, November 24, 1953, ibid.

delaying the harvest, Justice A. L. Ponder of the state high court had ruled: "writs refused, not sufficient showing to warrant the exercise of our supervisory jurisdiction." Watkins stated: "So vital does the element of time appear to us to be in the joint harvesting and processing operations, that we are disposed to regard any affirmative act intended to disrupt, deter, or prevent such operations as wrongful."32 CIO attorney Arthur Goldberg promised to defray legal fees if the United States Supreme Court agreed to hear the case of Godchaux Sugars, Inc. V. Paul Chaisson et al.33 The American Sugar Cane League pledged to pay up to one-fourth the legal costs incurred by Godchaux Sugars if the high court agreed to hear the case.34 Mitchell emphasized that even a temporary ban could kill a strike and that the case was crucial for the union since planters did not need many workers during the off-season.35 Attorney Daniel Pollitt stressed to C. Paul Barker that the Supreme Court would agree to hear this case only if the union could demonstrate that the state court had ignored a federal

32 The Houma Courier, November 24, 1953.


34 American Sugar Cane League, Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, May 25, 1955, 3-4, The Sugar Archives, Microfilm roll 11.

35 The Houma Courier, December 4, 1953.
question that had been properly raised in the lower court.36

Not until January, 1955, more than a year after the cane field strike, did the Louisiana Supreme Court rule on the permanent injunction used against Local 317. Chief Justice John Fournet delivered the opinion of the court that picketing of sugar refineries violated the 'no strike during cane harvest' agreement of the factory workers union and was "illegal and consequently not secured to union under right of freedom of speech. Judgments affirmed."37 He stated further that "Injunction did not deprive ... unions of the right to organize and peacefully picket ... ."38 Local 317 complained of being denied rights guaranteed by the First, Fifth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth amendments to the Constitution. Godchaux charged the union with forming "a conspiracy or combination in restraint of trade" in picketing some plants and not others and with using "artifice, force, intimidation, as well as threats of force, intimidation and body injury, in order to induce the agricultural workers on the plantations to

37 Godchaux Sugars V. Chaisson, 78 So. 2d 673 (1955), at 673.
38 Ibid., 674.
cease work through the guise of a so-called 'strike'.'"
Fournet agreed with Watkins that work stoppage during
harvest was so vital that it "transcends the right of the
defendants to picket . . . and hence these rights . . .
must be restricted." That same year the United States
Supreme Court denied a writ of certiorari in a related case,
declaring it to be moot. Chief Justice Earl Warren and
Justice Hugo Black dissented.\(^4\)

The National Agricultural Workers Union's chronic
financial condition grew worse than usual following the cane
field strike in late 1953. Besides losing the strike and
having to pay anti-trust fines, the NAWU lost its AFL subsidy
in 1954, saw its membership drop to a mere 500 dues-payers,
and failed to renew a labor-supplying agreement with the
H. J. Heinz Company.\(^4\) The union had received about $16,000
in grants for the strike\(^4\) and proposed a budget of $87,000
for 1954 to organize the entire Louisiana sugar industry.\(^4\)

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 675.
\(^{40}\) Paul Chaisson Et Al. V. South Coast Corporation,
\(^{41}\) H. L. Mitchell to various union members, September
22, 1954, STFU, 70:1369.
\(^{42}\) H. L. Mitchell to E. J. Bourg, November 24, 1953,
STFU, 69:1340.
\(^{43}\) H. L. Mitchell, duplicate appeal letters to the
large industrial unions, December 4, 1953, STFU, 69:1341.
In 1953 the NAWU had an income of $78,000 of which $37,000 came from dues, $20,000 from grants, and $19,000 from its strike fund. The union spent $24,000 in salaries (Mitchell earned $4,600 plus travel and expenses compared to $12,000 the Cane League paid Gilbert Durbin), $17,000 in organizing expenses, and $16,000 on the strike for a total of $75,000.44

Starting in February, 1954, Mitchell's wife, who handled office affairs, painted a gloomy picture of prospects. She told the Mid-South director that dues had dropped off, that Hasiwar would probably be fined, and that Joe Guidry and George Forstall were working without salary now and could not keep up their car payments.45 "I haven't even told him yet that we will not be able to meet the payroll the first of the month unless a miracle happens . . ." she wrote later.46 The next month she reported that " . . . the Union's financial condition looked much better on paper than it actually was."47 At about that time Mitchell told Galarza that a group of dairy farmers in Pennsylvania had deserted


46 Ibid., February 23, 1954.

the NAWU and that Hasiwar, in a state of confusion and despair over the pending anti-trust case and the critical illness of his father, was likely to leave the union. "I feel like quitting too," he told Galarza, "but you and I have the bear by the tail so we can't let go." The next week he said: "As you know I try so many schemes to get us money to operate on that by the law of averages . . . one of them clicks occasionally. I'll keep at it as long as you, Hank and others hang on." The NAWU cut corners in an attempt to stay alive. Union dues fell to less than $1,000 a month, and the union sent Galarza to Louisiana to build up membership among rice, strawberry, and sugar cane workers. In September, 1954, Mitchell called the union's financial status the worst it had been in fifteen years. In October the union cut George Stith from the payroll, reduced the president's salary, and moved the union headquarters to a cheaper office ($75 a month)

50 H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, March 25, 1954, ibid.
52 Ibid., September 20, 1954, STFU, 70:1369.
in the same building in Washington, D. C. Mitchell reported early in 1955 that he had paid neither himself nor Joe Guidry in Louisiana. The NAWU, beset with crippling financial problems, struggled for survival.

During the economic doldrums of the summer of 1954 the Louisiana Legislature passed a right-to-work law. Partly because of the cane field strike, anti-labor forces in the state took advantage of section 14 (b) of the Taft-Hartley Act that allowed states to enact right-to-work laws which outlawed the closed shop and the union shop. The State Federation of Labor and the NAWU's staunch ally, the Catholic Church, opposed the move. Industrialists, the American Sugar Cane League, and the Louisiana Farm Bureau supported the new law. In January the Cane League's executive committee voted unanimously to support right-to-work legislation, and in April it passed a resolution pledging to contribute $2,500 toward that end. Not until the right-to-work proposal had cleared both houses of the legislature and had been signed by the governor did the NAWU express concern.


Proponents of right-to-work laws usually argued the right of a man to take a job without having to join a union. Opponents of such laws called them misnomers that made strikebreaking easy, encouraged company unions, and allowed non-union workers to enjoy the fruits of a union without contributing to the organization that made the benefits possible.

Even before the meeting of the Louisiana Legislature in the summer of 1954, talk of the proposed right-to-work law engendered controversial debate. In April the editor of the official journal for the Archdiocese of New Orleans wrote to Archbishop Rummel asking for clarification of the Church's stand on the legislation, after many readers inquired about it.56 Father Jerome Drolet, as usual, did not hesitate to express his opinion of the bill, calling it "a dangerous plot to overthrow the present public policy of Louisiana by deceit and trickery."57 He accused the American Sugar Cane League of running a closed shop with mandatory deductions of dues from the small cane farmers at the mills where they sent


57 The Times Picayune, April 24, 1954, in Drolet Scrapbook.
their cane to be ground. Calling right-to-work "immoral and sinful . . . class legislation," he demanded that Malcolm Daugherty, chairman of the Louisiana Right to Work Council, support the "right-to-grind-cane" instead of making membership in the Cane League a condition for use of sugar mills. T. M. Barker of the Cane League challenged Drolet directly on this point at the July wage hearings conducted by the Department of Agriculture. "There are," said Barker, "at least 700 Louisiana Sugar Cane Growers who are not members of this organization, but whose sugar cane is processed into sugar by Louisiana processors."

In May the Lafourche Parish Farm Bureau drew a crowd of over 350 people at its annual barbecue near Raceland where the major topics of discussion included pending legislation such as right-to-work, the right to sue unions, the right to evict tenants living in housing by virtue of their employment, and a measure to outlaw strikes during the harvesting of perishable crops. The American Sugar Cane League, the Lafourche Parish Farm Bureau, the Lafourche Cattlemen's Association, and a representative from the Lafourche Parish Police Jury all expressed

58 Unidentified clipping, n.d., in Drolet Scrapbook.
60 Unidentified clipping, n.d., in Drolet Scrapbook.
support for the pending legislation.\textsuperscript{61} The press in Louisiana generally supported right-to-work but printed criticisms of it by union leaders. On at least three different occasions in 1954 the \textit{Times Picayune} ran editorials supporting right-to-work laws.\textsuperscript{62} Labor leaders disseminated material critical of the measure to the press and to Catholic Church leaders.\textsuperscript{63}

On May 19, 1954, Senator W. M. Rainach of Summerfield introduced in the Louisiana Legislature Senate Bill 127, a right-to-work measure that became Act 252 which Governor Robert Kennon signed on July 2, 1954.\textsuperscript{64} During debate on the measure, senators Guy W. Sockrider, Jr., of Lake Charles and B. B. Rayburn of Bogalusa proposed amendments to Senate Bill 127 that would have made right-to-work apply to agricultural labor only, but the Senate, after defeating the amendments,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{61} The Lafourche Comet, May 6 and 13, 1954.

\textsuperscript{62} The \textit{Times Picayune}, May 23, June 7, and July 4, 1954.

\textsuperscript{63} E. J. Bourg to Charles J. Plauche, May 14, 1954, JFR Papers, "Right to Work."

\end{flushright}
passed the bill and sent it on to the House. A similar amendment introduced in the House by Representative D. Elmore Becnel of St. John the Baptist Parish failed by a forty to fifty-eight vote to alter Senate Bill 127 by making it apply to agricultural labor only. Becnel and several of his colleagues all from industrial parishes along the Mississippi River that produced sugar cane as well, favored right-to-work for agricultural workers only and felt that industrialists had elicited support of farmers selfishly by suggesting that more agricultural strikes would beset them unless they supported right-to-work. Becnel pointed out that agricultural products of Louisiana totaled $387 million in value for a year, while labor's payroll exceeded $2 billion. He voted against final passage of Senate Bill 127 on July 1, but the measure passed by a 58 to 41 margin.

The defeat of attempts to make Senate Bill 127 apply only to agricultural labor favored big sugar interests of the state. Soliciting support of small farmers for the measure

67 B. L. Krebs, Times Picayune, June 15, 1954.
caused the industrial unionists to blame farmers for the unpopular right-to-work that applied to all Louisiana working men. Two years later industrial unionists pushed through the Legislature a repeal of right-to-work, but not without making concessions to the sugar industry which kept a right-to-work on agricultural laborers and sugar mill workers as well. Murphy J. Foster of Franklin said that he supported Senate Bill 127 because he wanted to be sure that no "outside organizers" would come into the cane fields and use violence and "un-American" activities in the future.69 A senator from Lafourche Parish, who opposed the measure,70 said he did so because it did not afford "protective safeguards . . . for the man seeking employment who might express his desire to belong to a union, and . . . Section 7 of the act had the effect of outlawing the check-off system . . . ."71 More ominous for the NAWU were the remarks of E. H. Williams of the State Federation of Labor: "The Farm Bureau and the Sugar Cane League permitted themselves to be used as a front for this powerful special interest /industrial/ group . . . in order to use the influence of Louisiana's small farmer for

70 Senate Journal (1954), 452-59.
the passage of this anti-labor law." Williams felt that the lobby groups had proved this when they helped defeat the amendment that would have made Senate Bill 127 apply to agricultural workers only. Then, as if suggesting that the state federation abandon the agricultural workers, he said: "We trust they will soon realize the folly of joining causes that can only result in detrimental effects on them." Those who had advocated an agricultural right-to-work law blamed agricultural labor when industrialists astutely secured the farm vote to pass a more comprehensive right-to-work measure instead.

As they had done during the cane field strike and before, Catholics who opposed Archbishop Rummel's anti-right-to-work views often vigorously disagreed with their spiritual leader. "... I believe that every shoemaker should stick to his own last," one Catholic said in regard to the Archbishop's stand on right-to-work. Another asked if the prelate had ever joined a union, looked for a job, or had to work with "no-good bums." Archbishop Rummel sent a telegram to the Senate Industrial Relations Committee then conducting hearings on Senate Bill 127 saying that the bill "..."


74 Edwin Grant to Joseph Francis Rummel, May 28, 1954, *ibid.*
actively denies what it pretends to give, namely the right to work." He sent Father Louis Twomey as his personal spokesman to Baton Rouge to testify against the measure.75

Influential Catholic sugar growers conducted an extensive publicity campaign emphasizing that Archbishop Rummel expressed a Catholic viewpoint on right-to-work, not the Catholic position. On June 27, 1954, about 75 Catholic laymen endorsed right-to-work in a five-column advertisement in the *Times Picayune* that covered about two-thirds of an entire page. Claiming that Pope Pius XII had spoken against labor monopoly and the closed shop, they stated that the Archbishop's position was "... in direct conflict with other learned and holy men of the church." Well known Cane League and Farm Bureau leaders such as T. M. Barker of Lafourche Parish and F. A. Graugnard of St. James added their names to the advertisement.76 Father Twomey labeled the Catholic Laymen's Committee for Right to Work a phony front that tried to twist church doctrine and cast doubt on correct interpretation of papal encyclicals. According to Twomey, Church authorities in the Archdiocese of New Orleans sympathetic to the cause of working men, not the Catholic laymen, had correctly interpreted


Father Drolet dreaded seeing proponents of Senate Bill 127 quote a conservative Notre Dame University theologian to bolster their arguments. He thought that T. M. Barker had quoted a Presbyterian minister from Nashville, Tennessee, when he called the church's position on right-to-work socialist.

Archbishop Rummel sent copies of his right-to-work policy statement to all Catholic laymen whose names appeared on the right-to-work advertisement. T. M. Barker, inquiring why the prelate sent such material to him, admitted "... I am one of the exponents, as well as one of the proponents, of the Right to Work Law ... and expressed views in opposition to those expressed by some members of the clergy." The Archbishop replied that he had not responded directly to the Catholic Laymen's stand because "I felt a direct public answer might only cause additional controversy and disaffection ...." He continued: "At that time I considered it inopportune to issue any statement of resentment or criticism of what

---


79 T. M. Barker to Joseph Francis Rummel, December 30, 1954, JFR Papers.
many interpreted as an act of disloyalty."\textsuperscript{80} Father Drolet openly criticized legislators from Lafourche Parish who voted for right-to-work and Governor Robert Kennon for signing the bill. "The real bosses of the Cane League, the big Northern-dominated corporations, have shamelessly used our cane farmers," Drolet said, "and then left them holding the bag."\textsuperscript{81} Political supporters of Governor Kennon in the area said Drolet erred in criticizing these fine men.\textsuperscript{82}

The setback in the cane field strike demoralized union leaders momentarily and even produced several rare minor intra-union clashes but did not deter the NAWU triumvirate for very long. Mitchell and Galarza differed over the latter’s purchase of a share of stock in one of the large sugar corporations, in an attempt to obtain inside knowledge of Cane League tactics. Mitchell considered the gesture futile and did not reimburse Galarza for his expenditure. During the heat of the strike, when tempers grew short and bookkeeping slipshod, Galarza and Hasiwar argued over $100 in expense money, but no other flare-ups marred the usually peaceful relationship among the NAWU

\textsuperscript{80} Joseph Francis Rummel to T. M. Barker, January 10, 1955.

\textsuperscript{81} The Lafourche \textit{Comet}, July 8, 1954.

\textsuperscript{82} Donald Bollinger and Austin Stevens, "An Open Letter to Father Drolet," unidentified clipping, July 13, 1954, Drolet Scrapbook.
Twice in January, 1954, Mitchell wrote to Archbishop Rummel thanking him for past help and soliciting his advice and support for continued union activity in Louisiana. Corresponding from California, Galarza at that time suggested retiring from the union so that he could write his memoirs. Mitchell brushed aside his proposal with serious talk about the possibilities of keeping a campaign going in Louisiana. Mitchell suggested that the NAWU quit organizing agricultural workers and turn instead to small farmers, who were harder to organize, "... but we seem to have a formula at last," he said.

Monsignor Joseph Vath, Vice Chancellor of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, substituting for Archbishop Rummel, delivered the invocation at the eighteenth convention of the National Agricultural Workers Union meeting in New Orleans in February, 1954. Henry Hasiwar, whose future the union

---

83 Dorothy Dowe to Arthur Churchill, November 18, 1953, STFU, 69:1340.
84 H. L. Mitchell to Joseph Francis Rummel, January 7, 22, 1954, JFR Papers, "Farmers Union."
86 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, January 12, 1954, ibid.
discussed at the convention, lost his father the day before the gathering convened. Mitchell felt that the strike more than his father's death caused Hasiwar's depressed state of mind. The NAWU president disagreed with the absent vice president's pessimistic outlook for the union in Louisiana. Hasiwar's union career ended when he took a one-year leave from the union to work for Ohiolene Company in New York, his father's business.

In June, 1954, H. L. Mitchell told Ernesto Galarza that he and his wife had considered selling their house, closing the Washington office, and opening a new one in New Orleans. He said that Galarza could work with Guidry and Stith who needed leadership in Louisiana. With only token resistance possible in California, Galarza agreed that the union should concentrate its limited resources in Louisiana.

Mitchell noted in July that the right-to-work measure had become law and wondered about the fate of a bill prohibiting strikes during the harvest season. Union attorney Aubrey Hirsch wrote to Mitchell that an agricultural campaign would do well despite right-to-work because industrial unions, unhappy with planters for helping contractors pass the right-to-work law, would assist the NAWU. Hirsch thought that growers, who were miffed at the defeat of their measure to outlaw agricultural strikes, might be anxious to get even with industrialists who were responsible. His interest aroused, Mitchell suggested that attorneys check into the possibility of suits in behalf of union men who had lost their jobs on the basis of violation of the right-to-work law. Then he wrote to see if C. Paul Barker agreed with the optimistic report he had received from Hirsch.

When Mitchell blamed the failure of the cane field strike on the inability of AFL and CIO unions to coordinate their efforts, he seemed more interested in promoting future

---

95 Aubrey Hirsch to H. L. Mitchell, July 9, 1954, ibid.
cooperative action than in reviewing past failures. One CIO-sponsored organization, the Southern Sugar Council, which issued a statement denouncing the American Sugar Cane League during the strike, gave the NAWU cause for hope. Antoine Songy, a CIO leader who cooperated closely with Local 317 during the strike, issued a statement that, "What is now happening to the A. F. of L. in the cane industry may later happen to the C. I. O." The following month Ralph Helstein, an official of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (CIO) that had jurisdiction in a number of sugar refineries, suggested that his union and the NAWU combine forces to organize the Louisiana sugar industry. Mitchell liked the idea, but the assistant director of organization for the AFL saw many possible obstacles to organizing fifty-four sugar mills and the many plantation workers as well. The NAWU


99 Morning Advocate, November 14, 1953; The Donaldsonville Chief, November 20, 1953.


102 H. L. Mitchell to Ralph Helstein, December 3, 1953, ibid.

readily agreed to the AFL-CIO no-raiding agreement which served as a preliminary to the 1956 merger;\textsuperscript{104} but Mitchell admitted to Galarza that he sometimes complained to Meany about CIO raids on NAWU jurisdiction, hoping that the competition would cause AFL-CIO leaders to demand one joint committee to organize agricultural workers.\textsuperscript{105} His subtle scheme having failed, Mitchell sent to Meany his draft proposal for a joint AFL-CIO organizing campaign for agricultural and packinghouse workers.\textsuperscript{106} Periodically he mentioned the proposed joint effort, on which he based his future hopes.\textsuperscript{107}

While waiting for top leaders of the AFL and the CIO to negotiate the details of the hoped-for joint effort, the NAWU's Local 317 worked out tenuous agreements with CIO locals in the cane country. Frank Lapeyrolerie of Local 317 and CIO Packinghouse Workers pledged to consolidate the locals' efforts in sugar mills and in the cane fields. Mitchell would have preferred teaming up with Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America (AFL), whose leaders had

\textsuperscript{104} H. L. Mitchell to George Meany, January 4, 1954, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{105} H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, June 2, 1954, STFU, 70:1363.

\textsuperscript{106} H. L. Mitchell to members of NAWU Executive Board, August 4, 1954, STFU, 70:1368.

\textsuperscript{107} H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, September 15, \textit{ibid}, STFU, 70:1371.
worked well with the NAWU for a number of years. Nonetheless, the NAWU for a time considered joining the CIO,108 despite Mitchell's dislike for the Communist influence in Packinghouse.109 Mitchell hoped that the NAWU could win over from Packinghouse some sugar mills in Louisiana, and he knew that E. H. Williams of the State Federation of Labor would not try to stand in the way of such attempts.110

In early November, 1954, Henry Pelet, president of Sugar Workers Local 1422 at Supreme Sugars refinery in Labadieville, telephoned Ernesto Galarza in California to say that the men of Local 1420 at the South Coast refinery in Mathews were going on strike. The two CIO locals, nominally under the jurisdiction of Packinghouse, had become estranged from that group and had become CIO Local Industrial Unions (LIU).111 Both Pelet, who had helped the NAWU to organize field workers, and George Parr, the diminutive but pugnacious leader of Local 1420, realized the need for organizing both mill and field workers. The CIO had given jurisdiction over agricultural


workers to Packinghouse, but since that group had not orga-
ized field workers, it acknowledged the position of the AFL's
NAWU, or so Galarza thought. Once this modus vivendi had been
worked out, Galarza reminded Mitchell that Victor Reuther of
the CIO had promised to take the initiative in an organizing
campaign if the AFL did not. In the meantime Pelet and Parr
allowed Galarza to sit in on their strike strategy sessions.\footnote{112}
Local 1420 had decided to call a strike because South Coast
Corporation refused to follow the usual company policy of
granting contract terms similar to those negotiated by 1422
in Labadieville. Pelet hoped to capitalize on Galarza's wide
knowledge and experience in labor disputes and his expertise in
publicity campaigns.\footnote{113}

The NAWU and the two CIO local leaders played up the
AFL-CIO unity theme whenever possible. Galarza said that
since Locals 1420 and 1422 had come to the assistance of Local
317 in the cane field strike the year before, the NAWU was
returning the favor in an attempt to thwart the Sugar Cane
League's strategy of trying to destroy one union at a time.\footnote{114}
Galarza asked Mitchell to drum up more AFL support for the

\footnote{112} Ibid., November 6, 1954.
\footnote{113} Henry Pelet, interview, February 29, 1972.
\footnote{114} The Lafourche Comet, November 11, 1954.
Mathews strike and probably wrote the flyer circulated by Local 317 entitled "Don't Cut Scab Cane." The sheet stressed helping Local 1420 but did not actually call cane field workers to strike. Mitchell reminded Galarza to request E. H. Williams' support for the strike, but admitted: "We are caught between the AFL-CIO Unity moves and the C. I. O. foul up in turning over to UPWA jurisdiction over agricultural workers. None of these top guys in either AFL or C. I. O. is concerned about what happens to agricultural workers."

Even though he knew Mitchell's appraisal had accurately described the situation, Ernesto Galarza outlined detailed appeals to Victor Reuther and George Meany, hopeful that somehow the two leaders might sponsor a joint campaign in the sugar industry. He explained to Reuther that Mitchell had sent him to assist the CIO local on strike at Mathews specifically to check the tendency of small farmers to side with the American Sugar Cane League, which allegedly refused to grind their cane and imposed higher-than-usual penalties for trash content in their cane if they did not abide by Cane League


labor policies. He asked Reuther to send an expert on labor-farm relations to various high-level union meetings and to protest to the Department of Agriculture about trash content deductions. He volunteered to help draft a statement on the subject. 118 Then to George Meany he explained how the NAWU and Packinghouse had come to an agreement over field workers and how currently he was assisting the CIO local on strike by pressuring South Coast Corporation through NAWU influence with plantation workers. Hinting that the NAWU might join the CIO, Galarza pointedly inquired if the AFL was interested in a united effort in the sugar industry. 119 A week later the NAWU had received no word from either Meany or Reuther. 120 In Louisiana Galarza and Joe Guidry became disgusted with E. H. Williams' reluctance to act, and Galarza finally told him he no longer considered the AFL in the NAWU plans. 121

Not unexpectedly Father Jerome Drolet pitched into the Mathews fray with his usual abandon. The old feud with Chief Deputy Eddie Ste. Marie flared up again when Drolet accused

118 Ernesto Galarza, memorandum to Victor Reuther, November 16, 1954, ibid.

119 Ernesto Galarza, Memorandum to George Meany, November 18, 1954, ibid.

120 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, November 22, 1954, ibid.

121 Ernesto Galarza to H. L. Mitchell, November 28, 1954, ibid.
the Lafourche Parish sheriff's office of aiding South Coast against the workers and of harassing strikers instead of closing down notorious houses of prostitution operating in the parish. Ste. Marie complained that from the pulpit Father Drolet had criticized him for convoying scabs from neighboring Terrebonne Parish to work at Mathews. Said Ste. Marie: "I am escorting millworkers in a bus and a 6 or 7 car convoy because someone fired on a busload of workers during the 1953 sugar strike. I don't want anything like that to happen in this parish."\(^{122}\) Over Thibodaux radio station KTIB Drolet responded to Ste. Marie by saying that in crossing picket lines the chief deputy had taken sides against the working men and women of Lafourche Parish.\(^{123}\) Because finding skilled sugar boilers and evaporator pan operators was difficult, T. M. Barker felt Drolet exaggerated the importance of convoying workers. Barker said that his firm transported cane from Mathews and ground it at Valentine Sugars to keep farmers from losing their crop.\(^{124}\) Henry Pelet, who blames himself for miscalculating conditions and encouraging the strike at Mathews against unfavorable odds, agrees with Barker on this

\(^{122}\) The Lafourche *Comet*, November 18, 1954.


\(^{124}\) T. M. Barker, tape-recorded interview, May 10, 1972.
point—at least Pelet agrees that convoying was not a major factor in the strike's ultimate failure.\textsuperscript{125} 

Ste. Marie replied simply "no comment"\textsuperscript{126} to Drolet's questions about his refusing to testify before a Senate crime-investigating committee and his failure to enforce laws against "so-called night clubs" in Thibodaux. These must have been embarrassing questions for law enforcement personnel, for every high school boy in the area knew about the infamous "Jeanette's." Asked by the Chancellor of the Archdiocese if he could substantiate his charges carried by the local press, Drolet spelled out the names of people who managed Jeanette's and several other "disreputable places" whose names the local press usually deleted. Drolet also told the Chancellor that Ste. Marie had committed an act of brutality on Welton Lestrick during the cane field strike the year before.\textsuperscript{127}

When Ernesto Galarza reminded H. L. Mitchell that Deputy Sheriff Ste. Marie was the man who pistol-whipped Lestrick the year before, he had hopes of waging a publicity campaign against the anti-labor forces in Lafourche Parish. Galarza said that recently Ste. Marie had arrested Fred Wansley,

\footnotetext{125}{Henry Pelet, interview, February 29, 1972.}
\footnotetext{126}{Unidentified clipping, December 28, 1954, Drolet Scrapbook.}
\footnotetext{127}{Jerome Drolet to Charles J. Plauche, Thanksgiving, 1954, JFR Papers, "1954 Cane Strike--Mathews."}
a union worker at a local papermill owned in part by T. M. Barker's firm, and held him for seventeen days before releasing him. The union undoubtedly hoped to link Barker and the Cane League with Ste. Marie's actions, but it apparently did not have much of a case. 128

Ste. Marie arrested George Parr on November 24, 1954, for disturbing the peace and released him half an hour later. Local 1420 called the incident a police campaign against the union. 129 The Chief Deputy said that Parr had cursed deputies George Rebstock and Albert Duet and that he would not tolerate "uncalled for cursing by a union official of my men when they are simply doing their duty . . . ." 130

Members of Local 1420 welcomed the support of the fiery Father Drolet for their strike, but they loathed the actions of Monsignor Dominic Perino, pastor of the Holy Savior Church in Lockport, whose parish included the Mathews community. The union claimed that T. M. Barker and Roland Toups (a South Coast vice president) were "feeding him [Perino] a line of bull." Suggesting that Monsignor Perino should be replaced,


129 Local 1420 Strike Bulletin No. 5, November 25, and No. 6, November 25, 1954, ibid.

130 The Lafourche Comet, December 2, 1954.
union leaders accused him of being anti-labor and unsympathetic to the needs of the working man. A representative of Local 1420, asserting that Perino's statements contradicted Catholic labor policy, asked to meet with Archbishop Rummel or Chancellor Plauche to discuss the influence of the pastor's stand on Catholic strikers who considered him a spokesman for T. M. Barker and Roland Toups. The Correspondent said that workers wondered why their spiritual leader often visited the South Coast office but never union hall and implied to strikers' wives that praying would do no good. Father Drolet told the Archbishop that Monsignor Perino's statements hurt the union cause at Mathews and that the Lockport pastor's chief adviser on social matters, T. M. Barker, had used a Protestant document to support his right-to-work views the previous summer.

In late November H. L. Mitchell expressed concern about the possible formation of a Catholic independent union in the sugar country. Rumors of such a move, he told Galarza, originated because Father Louis Twomey did not get along well with

---


133 Jerome Drolet to Joseph Francis Rummel, November 30, 1954, ibid.
the boys in Packinghouse. "I don't know what the hell to say about all this," Mitchell wrote, "however it is now obvious to all of us that neither AFL or C. I. O. have any intention of spending money on an agricultural worker organization."\(^{134}\) Mitchell felt that the AFL and the CIO would merge soon, and he went to Louisiana to discourage talk of the Catholic independent union.\(^{135}\) He told attorney C. Paul Barker that in view of the coming AFL-CIO merger, using Local 1420 as the basis for an independent union, backed by the Catholic Church, would be misunderstood not only by bigots but by devout Catholics like George Meany. Mitchell inquired if Barker could ask Charles Logan to talk Archbishop Rummel into putting a damper on the independent union notion.\(^{136}\) Charles Logan's partner forwarded to Chancellor Plauche word of Mitchell's concern about the proposed new union.\(^{137}\) The Archbishop apparently received the information and agreed with Mitchell,

\(^{134}\) H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, November 30, 1954, STFU, 70:1372.

\(^{135}\) H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, November 30, 1954, ibid.

\(^{136}\) H. L. Mitchell to C. Paul Barker, November 30, 1954, ibid.

\(^{137}\) J. Michael Early to Charles J. Plauche, December 6, 1954, JFR Papers, "1953 Sugar Cane Strike."
for at the end of the year the NAWU leader wrote that he had been able to stop the movement.138

H. L. Mitchell's alternative proposal for a new union was a huge organizing campaign in the Louisiana sugar cane and rice industries supported by aid from the AFL and the international unions. To succeed the NAWU would, he said, need $5,000 per month for twenty-four months. The closing paragraph of Mitchell's organizing prospectus referred to Catholic Church support for the cane field strike and to Archbishop Rummel's role in the right-to-work controversy.139 Either the Archbishop or his advisers thought the specific references to the church's role should be omitted. Logan asked Mitchell to delete the final paragraph,140 and the NAWU leader readily agreed.141 Mitchell told a National Sharecroppers' Fund official he would move the NAWU headquarters to New Orleans if Charles Logan and E. H. Williams found ways to raise the $5,000


a month needed for an agricultural campaign. In the union's Mid-South region, where black and white Protestant preachers exerted considerable influence, some members feared that moving to New Orleans would give the Catholic Church too much influence in union affairs. "I don't want to think our office will be DOMINATED BY THE CATHOLICS, but I do have this feeling," a black NAWU vice president wrote to the Mid-South director who was himself a Protestant minister.

By mid-January Local 1420 was reduced to bargaining from a weakened position, unable even to insist that South Coast dismiss the twenty-five scabs it had hired during the Mathews strike. Mitchell wrote Twomey about union plans for financing a big organizing drive, but, in discussing NAWU prospects for the future, he told Galarza that "... we haven't a program for farm workers that appeals to them ..." He asked Galarza's opinion about some kind of welfare

142 H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, December 29, 1954, STFU, 70:1373.
144 May and George Parr to Ernesto Galarza, January 11, 1955, STFU, 71:1381.
fund for small farmers, which he later referred to in a letter to Father Twomey as his mutual benefit fund for agricultural workers.

The CIO's failure to support adequately the small union caused Local 1420 to make a weak showing in the Mathews strike. Galarza felt that Packinghouse had encouraged the local it once had jurisdiction over to strike and expend its resources, hoping to force it back into Packinghouse. "... CIO and PH have done an efficient job of breaking Parr and Pelet...," Galarza wrote. "I am almost sick over what has happened to those half dozen boys in Mathews and it's the same godamn complacency of those at the top," he said. Henry Pelet discussed the possibility of locals 1420 and 1422 raising dues to finance an organizing drive in the mills and in the fields. Mitchell thought that the CIO supported Packinghouse leaders because Victor Reuther feared that Packinghouse would merge with the Butchers before Meany and Reuther could consummate their "unity deal." The NAWU

leader sensed that Victor Reuther felt ashamed about the double cross CIO had pulled on Galarza at Mathews and refused to talk about it.150

Early in February, 1955, Local 1420 and South Coast Corporation signed a new two-year contract, which Galarza thought provided few real benefits to the union.151 Later after the CIO, thinking perhaps that Galarza had profited unduly, sent auditors to check the Mathews strike fund, the Mexican-American labor leader gave vent to his emotions: "So help me Mitch, do I have to take this kind of bull at my stage of life . . . . I'm remembering the week I turned over my salary check to the strike fund--the week I went six days with 27 cents in my pocket because I was able to get meals here and there and in striker's home and on the picket line and because I was likewise able to get free flops."152 Mitchell advised him to ignore these insulting accusations with his own memories: "I have been accused of everything from stealing money to selling sharecroppers clothes off their backs."153


151 The Lafourche Comet, February 3, 1955.


Mitchell was unable to heed his own sensible advice when he read with disbelief a statement made by George Meany at the AFL's Miami Beach convention. In suggesting campaigns to organize agribusiness, Meany said that the individual farm hand "... is the type of worker who will not benefit from unionizing." Mitchell complained in a telegram to Meany (which the AFL leader ignored) that the statement would hurt the NAWU. On first reading Meany's remarks, Mitchell grew so angry he could not eat his breakfast. The NAWU had indeed been caught in the AFL-CIO unity move—and neither side of the proposed merger had given the NAWU any indication of real interest in agricultural workers. Unless the AFL or the CIO acted soon, time would run out for the NAWU, whose leader indeed held a bear by the tail.

155 Dorothy Dow to Ernesto Galarza, February 24, 1955, STFU, 71:1382.
As the proposed merger of the two giant union conglomerates came closer to reality, the problems of the National Agricultural Workers Union, caught, its president said, between the AFL and the CIO, increased in frequency and in intensity. Ernesto Galarza, angry at the CIO for reneging on its promise to finance an agricultural organizing campaign and for implying that he had profited personally from the 1954 Mathews strike, wondered if being broke and in debt was not too great a price to pay for being affiliated with the AFL.\(^1\) George Meany's statement that farm laborers would not benefit from unionization caused Galarza and H. L. Mitchell to wonder about the NAWU's future in the new AFL-CIO.\(^2\)

Although Mitchell had not presented an optimistic view of prospects to the union's executive board, he emphasized that the union should continue to be the spokesman for defenseless

---


and unorganized workers. "If we fail," he said, "we must go
down fighting in the same manner in which we rose 21 years
ago."3

E. H. Williams of the State Federation of Labor
probably planned to bargain for the repeal of right-to-work
in 1956 by exempting agricultural unions from its provisions.
Maybe he thought doing so would be easier without the NAWU's
articulate spokesmen around publicizing his every move. The
NAWU, at least, thought Williams had that objective in mind.
In May, 1955, Joe Guidry telephoned president H. L. Mitchell
to report that Williams and E. J. Bourg wanted to bypass the
NAWU and organize agricultural workers. They planned to
employ Felix Dugas and Frank Lapeyrolerie to form an AFL fed­
eral union in the state.4 If Mitchell was unaware that
Williams had blamed the NAWU for the passage of the 1954
right-to-work law, he nonetheless recognized this threat to
the union and reacted quickly to it. He told his organizers
that Williams could hire them as long as the members they
recruited joined the NAWU. Mitchell said that Williams knew
that forming a federal labor union where international or

3 H. L. Mitchell, report to NAWU Executive Board,
April 3, 1955, ibid.

4 Joseph Guidry telegram to H. L. Mitchell, May 22,
1955, ibid.
national unions already operated was contrary to AFL policy. The same day that he complained to the Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL about the proposed federal labor union, Mitchell told E. H. Williams he could hire his organizers as long as they remained under the NAWU banner. Mitchell told Galarza that Williams spread a tale, which he obviously knew to be false, of Hasiwar's making $30,000 in Hammond on the strawberry dealings. Williams also told Father Louis Twomey that the NAWU had failed with dairy, strawberry, and cane and was a dying outfit that would be displaced by another international union unless conditions changed quickly. The federal union scheme fell through because of Mitchell's letters and disclosures, and Williams explained things by telling Mitchell that Joe Guidry had lied about the whole matter.

Mitchell attended the AFL-CIO merger convention in New York in December, 1955, and returned somewhat buoyed in spirit. He had asked Tony Songy, CIO leader in Reserve, to come to Washington prior to the convention to confer with Henry Pelet, George Parr, and the NAWU high command on plans to present to

6 H. L. Mitchell to William Schnitzler, ibid.
7 H. L. Mitchell telegram to E. H. Williams, ibid.
Walter Reuther for organizing sugar workers. As if to undermine the CIO's role to Songy, Mitchell said that Packinghouse would either merge with Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butcher Workmen of North America or be thrown out because of their Communist connections. At the convention Mitchell received some encouragement that eventually he would receive financial help from the AFL-CIO. "... we at least have the feeling," his wife said, "that we will not be left out in the cold completely."\(^\text{10}\)

The NAWU became alarmed about rumors that Packinghouse vice president A. T. "Tony" Stephens would launch a drive to organize field workers as soon as his union and the Butchers merged. Mitchell explained to his old friend Patrick Gorman, the secretary-treasurer of the Butchers, his understanding that the NAWU would have jurisdiction of agricultural workers in the AFL-CIO. The NAWU's seven top-flight organizers, Mitchell said, had many years of experience with agricultural workers.\(^\text{11}\)


\(^{10}\) Dorothy Dowe to Arthur Churchill, December 13, 1955, ibid.

\(^{11}\) H. L. Mitchell to Patrick Gorman, January 6, 1956, ibid.
To make certain the Butchers were posted on the latest charges against Packinghouse, Mitchell sent Gorman a copy of his notes detailing the Communist influences in the UPWA. He did not think that Packinghouse leader Ralph Helstein was a Communist, but Communists in the organization found him tractable and kept him in office. Vice president Stephens admitted he was once a Communist, Mitchell added, and in 1953 Packinghouse rejected an amendment which would have barred Communists from membership. Helstein once proposed that the NAWU and his UPWA match funds and organizers for a cane industry drive, but the NAWU did not have the matching funds, and the AFL refused to underwrite a campaign. Mitchell felt that if Gorman, who had promised never to raid NAWU territory, and other big unions supported the NAWU, the AFL-CIO would make concessions.  

Meanwhile, in Louisiana, NAWU relations with E. H. Williams deteriorated rapidly. Mitchell searched for documented evidence of Williams' alleged insurance business connections in Lafourche Parish with businessman Harvey Peltier,  

---

13 Patrick Gorman to H. L. Mitchell, January 12, 1956, ibid.
14 H. L. Mitchell to Patrick Gorman, January 19, 1956, ibid.
which he hoped Murray Kempton could use for an exposé of Williams. Mitchell suspected that Williams had encouraged the Seafarer's International Union (SIU) to advance Joe Guidry $800 and to hire him as an organizer. "... I am convinced," Mitchell said, "it was to keep us from moving fast into the sugar cane areas where he personally has business and political connections." Later Williams attempted to entice Local 1420 president George Parr, whose brother worked for the Seafarers, into joining the SIU. Mitchell told Galarza he thought that Williams was involved with various welfare funds and "insurance rackets."

Disgusted with the inactivity of labor leaders in general, Mitchell lashed out verbally at important union officials and at the racial policies of unions in the South. He felt that AFL-CIO leaders were unaware of the propaganda value an organizational drive among the agricultural poor could generate. "Of course," Mitchell said, "that means nothing to George Meany, he is too stupid. But Walther Reuther knows its danger to him, therefore he is ready to help keep us quiet. The result—we get $5,000 from the Industrial Union

15 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, April 30, 1956, ibid.
16 H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, April 24, 1967, ibid.
17 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, July 2, 1956, ibid.
In July, 1956, Mitchell decided to use the threat of adverse publicity against Walter Reuther. The NAWU, he said, was undertaking a last-ditch stand in Louisiana on a shoestring, and if the AFL-CIO had no interest in the welfare of two million human beings, "... then the public should be told about it." His not-so-subtle threat produced the same silent treatment that his telegram to Meany had evoked.

The NAWU's chief benefactors, the members of the National Sharecroppers' Fund, disliked the idea of moving the union office to New Orleans. Unlike Protestant union members who worried about Catholic domination, the NSF people feared that closing the national office would not only limit NAWU operations to Louisiana alone but also would be an admission of defeat. Perhaps not fully realizing how much the union had already retrogressed, they recommended keeping a national office but cutting back operations in size. Mitchell nonetheless considered moving the union office to New Orleans to concentrate all its resources

18 H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, April 24, 1967, ibid.; The Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO was strongly influenced by former CIO leaders.


20 Fay Bennett to H. L. Mitchell, March 30, 1955, STFU, Roll 38.
on organizing rice mills. He informed executive board members that the union should not make a final decision on moving until the Packinghouse strike in Reserve was settled and the AFL completed its plans for an agricultural campaign in Louisiana.

The board approved a temporary move to New Orleans in April, 1955.

In June, 1955, sugar locals 1420 and 1422, that now included field workers in their membership, disaffiliated with Packinghouse, which had begun to organize field workers again. Unless the NAWU started its own drive soon, George Parr and Henry Pelet warned, Packinghouse would displace the weakened agricultural union. Rather than allow this to happen, they said that they would rejoin Packinghouse. Mitchell reminded the Butchers that the Catholic Church disliked the Communist tint of Packinghouse. Galarza saw little hope for the NAWU in the Packinghouse strike at the Godchaux plant in Reserve. If UPWA lost the strike, convincing sugar cane workers that

---


22 H. L. Mitchell to NAWU Executive Board members, April 14, 1955, ibid.

23 NAWU, Minutes of Executive Board Meeting, April 3, 1955, ibid.


25 H. L. Mitchell to Harry Poole, June 3, 1955, ibid.
the situation was not hopeless would be difficult. He felt that if the UPWA won, it would not need the NAWU.26

Disgusted with the AFL-CIO inactivity, Galarza several months later told Mitchell: "I want to get shed of that feeling that we are hanging around waiting for Lefty and he isn't coming."27 Mitchell did not feel that the NAWU could make progress in Louisiana against the active opposition of E. H. Williams, who, in the presence of Henry Pelet and George Parr, called Mitchell "the prostitute of the labor movement."28 In January, 1956, when the merger became a reality, Galarza knew that the NAWU did not "... figure in the plans . . . . I believe," he told Mitchell, "you ought to abandon Washington to the squirrels and set up in Louisiana to do what can be done with the sugar country."29

After Joe Guidry took a job with the Seafarers International Union at a salary of $750 a month in 1956,30 the NAWU's campaign in rice and sugar cane suffered;31 and

-------------------
28 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, January 16, 1956, ibid.
29 Ernesto Galarza to H. L. Mitchell, January, 1956, ibid.
30 H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, March 29, 1956, ibid.
31 Ernesto Galarza to H. L. Mitchell, May 9, 1956, ibid.
Mitchell's ulcer acted up again. Following the 1953 cane field strike, Joe Guidry had organized rice mills in southwest Louisiana. His usual procedure was to petition for National Labor Relations Board elections when he felt he had a chance of winning jurisdiction at a mill for the NAWU. Late in 1954 Mitchell urged a concentrated effort among his colleagues to win elections in several mills and secure a base of operations from which to make a union comeback in sugar cane and strawberries.

The NAWU campaign to organize rice mills faced so many problems that in retrospect failure seemed inevitable. Because of little progress in negotiating contracts, even after the union had won elections, Mitchell, who had been with Guidry for his first election, considered sending Galarza to help out in southwest Louisiana. The shortage of money became a big problem. In May, 1955, Mitchell asked Guidry to

---

32 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, May 28, 1956, ibid.

33 Ibid., November 8, 1954, Box 70, Folder 1372, Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, Southern History Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Hereinafter cited as STFU, 70:1372.


35 Ernesto Galarza to H. L. Mitchell, November 6, 1954, STFU, 70:1372.

36 Ibid., March 15, 1955, STFU, Roll 38.
remain silent about an NAWU appeal to John L. Lewis for funds to finance a campaign in rice mills\(^{37}\) at the same time that competing CIO unions, such as the Brewery Workers, claimed jurisdiction of the mills.\(^{38}\) An argument among organizers Guidry, George Stith, and Felix Dugas over who was in charge of the drive complicated matters to a point that Mitchell had to come in and soothe tempers.\(^{39}\) Even the usually dependable NAWU ally, the Catholic Church, had not provided the forceful backing in the Diocese of Lafayette that the union had received from Archbishop Rummel in New Orleans.\(^{40}\) After the union lost three consecutive rice mill elections, Mitchell cancelled others scheduled for the immediate future.\(^{41}\) Thus Guidry's move to the Seafarers Union was probably an effect of the setback in the union's rice campaign rather than a cause for it. Earlier, when a rice mill shut down after the union had won an election, Guidry pleaded with Mitchell:


\(^{38}\) See STFU, Roll 39, for many exchanges during July, 1955, in this jurisdictional dispute.


\(^{40}\) Joseph Guidry to H. L. Mitchell, September 18, 1955, \textit{ibid}.

\(^{41}\) H. L. Mitchell to Joseph Guidry, July 20, 1955, \textit{ibid}.
"Please, Mitch, don't let me down—blast man, blast!" At this stage the best Mitchell could produce was an ineffectual verbal retort.

In September, 1955, Mitchell asked Henry Pelet of Local 1422 to postpone returning to Packinghouse in view of the unsettled developments regarding the proposed AFL-CIO merger. The NAWU leader, who exchanged information with Father Louis Twomey about the Communist links to Packinghouse, also asked the priest to dissuade Pelet from leading his local back into the UPWA. Apparently the tactic worked; soon both Pelet and Parr expressed interest in joining the NAWU. In February, 1956, members of Local 1422 voted sixty-two to ten to join the agricultural union. Walter Reuther liked the idea:

---

44 H. L. Mitchell to Louis Twomey, September 6, 1955, ibid.
46 George Parr to Victor Reuther, August 26, 1955, ibid.
47 Local 1422, Minutes of Special Meeting, February 16, 1956, ibid.
and Mitchell promptly asked him for money for a sugar drive.\(^{49}\)
In March, after Parr's local applied for a charter,\(^{50}\) Mitchell had to go to Louisiana to convince Pelet's group not to reverse its decision to join the NAWU.\(^{51}\) Personality clashes caused leadership problems in the union's new Thibodaux office between Pelet and Parr over the influence of Mary Marse, the secretary.\(^{52}\)

The 1956 legislative session in Louisiana, though pre-occupied with measures to thwart racial integration of the public school system, found time to repeal the 1954 right-to-work law and to pass an agricultural right-to-work measure. Prior to the opening of the session Mitchell doubted that the Louisiana labor movement was strong enough to raise the issue of repeal of right-to-work.\(^{53}\) Governor Earl Long had declared his neutrality on the subject.\(^{54}\) The American Sugar Cane League hoped to retain the right-to-work law and rejected the

\(^{49}\) H. L. Mitchell to Walter Reuther, February 24, 1956, ibid.

\(^{50}\) George Parr and others, Charter Application to NAWU, March 12, 1956, ibid.

\(^{51}\) H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, March 19, 1956, ibid.


\(^{53}\) H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, April 16, 1956, ibid.

\(^{54}\) The Times Picayune, May 13, 1956.
proposed agricultural measure on the grounds that harvesting cane served no purpose if a strike prevented the mills from grinding it. 55 Perhaps this was the sugar lobby's way of letting industrial labor leaders know that if they wanted wider support for repeal of right-to-work, they would have to abandon their brethren in the agricultural labor movement. It also reflected the dominance of sugar manufacturers over small farmers in the Cane League.

Representative Bryan Lehmann of St. Charles Parish, who had opposed right-to-work in 1954, introduced the bill making right-to-work apply to agricultural workers only. Senator B. B. Rayburn introduced an identical bill in the Senate. 56 Mitchell asked leaders of the State Labor Council how the agricultural right-to-work measure came to be introduced by legislators considered friendly to organized labor. 57 Galarza more bluntly accused E. H. Williams of making a deal to repeal right-to-work at the expense of agricultural unions. 58 In June the NAWU criticized the AFL-CIO State Labor Council

55 Ibid., May 20, 1956.
58 Ernesto Galarza to H. L. Mitchell, June 5, 1956, ibid.
for sponsoring the agricultural right-to-work measure.\textsuperscript{59}

Senator Rayburn, a card-carrying member of the Pipefitters Union, justified his support for the measure by saying "we want the farmers to know we are their friends."\textsuperscript{60} After the labor package had cleared both houses of the legislature, Mitchell asked Governor Earl Long to sign the measure repealing right-to-work but to veto the agricultural right-to-work proposal.\textsuperscript{61} Long signed both bills.

Again Archbishop Rummel had opposed most sugar growers when he spoke against right-to-work. Louis Twomey acted as official representative of the Archbishop\textsuperscript{62} and denounced the Louisiana Free Enterprise Association, a group of right-to-work proponents. T. M. Barker, the group's president,\textsuperscript{63} faced the dilemma of opposing his spiritual leader on a moral question with serious economic consequences for the sugar industry. He and Roland Toups, manager of South Coast refinery at Mathews, consulted a high clergyman who advised them to continue their opposition as long as they could do so in

\textsuperscript{59} NAWU, Minutes of National Executive Board Meeting, June 16, 17, 1956, \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{60} The \textit{Times Picayune}, May 31, July 11, 1956.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}, June 20, 1956.

\textsuperscript{62} Charles J. Plauche, tape-recorded interview on March 22, 1972, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

\textsuperscript{63} Baton Rouge \textit{State Times}, March 2, 1959.
good conscience. The two Catholic laymen persisted in their opposition to Archbishop Rummel on the controversial measure. Toups, who had two sons in the seminary studying for the priesthood, disliked radicals in the labor movement and complained that Archbishop Rummel was the biggest radical around.

Being practical rather than vindictive, H. L. Mitchell hoped that exposing the Louisiana Labor Council's support for anti-labor legislation before a special investigating committee of the AFL-CIO would stir interest in an agricultural organizing campaign. In August, 1956, George Meany invited Mitchell to present his charges against the state labor council to the committee meeting at Unity House located at Forest Park, Pennsylvania, in the Poconos. Galarza prepared "Dateline for a Deal," a twenty-one page summary of events leading to the passage of the agricultural right-to-work law. Calling Act 397 the only right-to-work law in America sponsored by labor, he said that the NAWU in 1953 "... shook the workers out of a fearful lethargy ... and demanded that they be treated with
respect, and for the first time, they learned the lesson of labor's national solidarity."\(^68\) The Louisiana Council justified its support for Act 397 by calling the 1953 cane field strike "a direct challenge to a traditional system in one of Louisiana's oldest and most basic industries. And it was interpreted as a flagrant insult to the men of stature and influence who controlled the system." The investigating committee recommended that the AFL-CIO executive board support the Louisiana Labor Council's stand rather than the NAWU's.\(^69\)

Prior to the right-to-work debacle, financial troubles had caused even Mitchell to abandon his Macawber-like expectations that something would turn up. In July, 1955, he talked of having "to shut down" unless the union found new resources soon,\(^70\) and in March, 1956, he echoed the same sentiment. "I have never said that during all the 20 years I have spent in this field," he said, in discussing having to find a new line of work.\(^71\)

\(^68\) Ernesto Galarza, mimeographed "Dateline for a Deal," August 20, 1956, ibid.


\(^70\) H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, July 6, 1955, STFU, Roll 39.

\(^71\) Ibid., March 13, 1956.
outfit . . . ," he reminded Galarza before stating his current pessimistic outlook.\textsuperscript{72}

In an attempt to avert the inevitable collapse of his union, Mitchell appealed for help to his friend Patrick Gorman of the Butchers. In a forceful statement of purpose he said: "We are interested first, last and always in developing a sound program that will lead to the organization of the workers to whom all of us have devoted many years of our lives."\textsuperscript{73} Gorman did not refuse to find a place in his organization for the small NAWU but evasively suggested that working out the details of such mergers required time.\textsuperscript{74} While Mitchell waited for word from Gorman, he arranged for Galarza to receive dues from the members of the two sugar locals in Louisiana.\textsuperscript{75}

Meanwhile Archbishop Rummel and Charles Logan quietly completed arrangements with Walter Godchaux, Jr., for rehiring men who had gone on strike at the Reserve refinery.\textsuperscript{76} Between

\begin{itemize}
  \item H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, March 15, 1956, \textit{ibid.}
  \item H. L. Mitchell to Patrick Gorman, June 30, 1956, \textit{ibid.}
  \item Patrick Gorman to H. L. Mitchell, July 5, July 10, 1956, \textit{ibid.}
  \item H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, July 18, 1956, \textit{ibid.}
\end{itemize}
December, 1955, and September, 1956, the Archbishop and Logan exchanged many letters regarding the men of Packinghouse Local 1124 in Reserve. Only twenty-two of the 818 men who had gone on strike on April 14, 1955, were rehired at the end of the strike on December 14, 1955. Logan told the Archbishop that by August, 1956, all but forty-four had been rehired, and the company promised to dismiss eighteen strikebreakers.

Galarza, who opposed the planned NAWU merger with the Butcher Workmen, wanted assurances that funds would be available for an agricultural organizing drive and a commitment by Butchers to fight for repeal of Act 397. George Parr and Henry Pelet, who feuded again over Mary Marse's position in the Thibodaux office, knew about the NAWU negotiations with the Butchers and approved the proposed move. Mitchell informed Galarza that in October the NAWU would become a part of a special agricultural division created by the Butchers.

77 Ibid.  
78 Charles Logan to Joseph Francis Rummel, August 21, 1956, ibid.  
80 Ibid., September, 1956.  
81 Ibid., September 6, 1956.  
82 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, October 10, 1956, ibid.
Anticipating this move, the NAWU had arranged for the National Sharecroppers' Fund to set up a special fund, the Inter-American Education Association, to take care of NAWU insurance payments and the pension of retired vice president F. R. Betton. Late in 1956 Galarza again expressed doubts about joining the Butchers since the NAWU would have to change its approach to that of a business union; but he need not have concerned himself, since the merger with Packinghouse did not materialize. Gorman explained to Mitchell that even though jurisdictional disputes over field workers caused jealousy and prevented the merger, the NAWU could still join the Butchers' agricultural section.

By early 1957 Mitchell realized that the union could not last much longer and wanted to allow his colleagues time to prepare for new careers. "... I do not want to stand in your way any longer," he told Galarza. Mitchell said that the NAWU had run on a deficit for three consecutive years, and that he and his wife had spent, in addition to what they salvaged

83 H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, October 10, 1956, ibid.
84 Ernesto Galarza to H. L. Mitchell, November 6, 1956, ibid.
85 H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, November, 1956, ibid.
86 Patrick Gorman to H. L. Mitchell, November 30, 1956, ibid.
from the sale of their house in Washington, Mrs. Mitchell's inheritance as well. Galarza informed Victor Reuther that he had urged Mitchell "... to be prepared to fold and admit defeat." Mitchell told Pat Gorman that they would remain friends even if the Butchers rejected accepting the NAWU in their organization. Then, like the Mitchell of old, he asked Galarza what he thought of trying to get a grant from the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO for a final union drive in California. In June when the IUD agreed to send $2,000 a month for ten months, the union received a new lease on life.

Both in Louisiana and on the national level friction between the NAWU and Packinghouse grew. Pelet considered leading the sugar locals back into Packinghouse, whom Mitchell accused of "... ruining what they cannot rule."

87 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, February 5, 1957, ibid.
88 Ernesto Galarza to Victor Reuther, February 18, 1957, ibid.
89 H. L. Mitchell to Patrick Gorman, February 7, 1957, ibid.
90 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, February 12, 20, and March 4, 1957, ibid.
91 James Carey to H. L. Mitchell, June 11, 1957, ibid.
92 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, March 14, 1957, ibid.
The NAWU leader asked Father Louis Twomey to keep Pelet away from the Communist-dominated group.94 Twomey agreed but said that the sugar locals needed an organizer quickly.95 By mid-April, 1957, both George Parr and Henry Pelet had agreed to remain with the NAWU,96 which now hired Pelet as organizer. Pelet took a leave of absence from his factory job, and the union paid him with funds from the sugar locals.97 This arrangement did not work satisfactorily, and in August Mitchell came to Louisiana to attempt a reconciliation following the repudiation of Pelet by local members.98

The NAWU had often used anti-Communist charges against rival Packinghouse, especially in impressing Father Twomey and the Catholic Church, but the union's opposition to Communism was real. The agricultural union had felt the sting of charges against its own locals during the McCarthy Era and only reluctantly resorted to the standard anti-union

94 H. L. Mitchell to Louis Twomey, April 5, 1957, ibid.
95 Louis Twomey to H. L. Mitchell, April 10, 1957, ibid.
98 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, August 15, 1957, ibid.
tactic of red-baiting. "I will take the responsibility for being a red-baiter," Mitchell told Galarza in 1955; "you need not share it."99 In 1957 the NAWU leader cautioned Galarza: "We have everything in the world against us as is but let's sic don't get mixed up with the Commie outfits--joint programs or any other way."100 The Catholic newspaper Work claimed that the Butcher-Packinghouse merger had failed primarily because of the Communist influence problem,101 and Mitchell told George Meany that the Packinghouse racial policy inflamed racial hatred rather than encouraged harmony.102 Mitchell, who was an expert on the use of publicity and propaganda, thought that if the Communists had used the weekly newspapers in the agricultural South the way the Farm Bureau and the Chamber of Commerce did, "The Commies could have made hay in the rural areas ... ."103

The NAWU made a last-ditch attempt to build union strength among strawberry farmers in Louisiana before giving up as a union. A try in 1955 had ended in failure despite the

99 Ibid., April 26, 1955, STFU, Roll 38.
100 Ibid., March 18, 1957, STFU, Roll 40.
101 Ibid., March 19, 1957.
102 H. L. Mitchell to George Meany, June 18, 1957, ibid.
103 H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, September 16, 1957, ibid.
help to E. J. Bourg of the State Federation of Labor. Mitchell, with his ulcer acting up again, personally came to work among the strawberry farmers in June, 1957.\textsuperscript{104} He met with Archbishop Rummel, who suggested that the union contact Father Bartholemy, the Dominican pastor of Holy Ghost Parish in Hammond,\textsuperscript{105} a native of Minnesota, who was an expert on farm cooperatives.\textsuperscript{106} Mitchell soon complained that organizing part-time strawberry farmers was difficult\textsuperscript{107} and might take longer than he expected.\textsuperscript{108} Then abruptly in January, 1958, he ended his drive, declaring his inability to locate a selling agent for the union in Hammond.\textsuperscript{109}

Henry Pelet's personal problems and the death of George Parr in August, 1957, contributed to the locals' difficulty in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{104} H. L. Mitchell to C. Paul Barker, August 25, 1955, STFU, Roll 39; H. L. Mitchell to Fay Bennett, June 3, 1957, STFU, Roll 40; Fay Bennett to H. L. Mitchell, June 6, 1957, \textit{ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{105} H. L. Mitchell to Bob Sensor, July 29, 1957, STFU, Roll 40.
\item \textsuperscript{106} H. L. Mitchell to Joseph Francis Rummel, September 23, 1957, \textit{ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{107} H. L. Mitchell to Edwin Mitchell, September 16, 1957, \textit{ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{108} H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, \textit{ibid}.
\item \textsuperscript{109} H. L. Mitchell to George Stith, January 9, 1958, \textit{ibid}.
\end{itemize}
organizing sugar workers. In October Pelet returned to his job at the Supreme Sugars refinery, resigned from the NAWU executive board, and asked that Mitchell allow Local 1422 to return to Packinghouse without a fight. "I am too damn stubborn to quit in La. . . .," Mitchell said in announcing his intention of preventing the sugar locals from joining UPWA. The NAWU was waging another tough battle, the loss of which could mean the end of its existence as a labor union. George Stith thought that the sugar refineries, knowing that the feuding locals could not survive further combat, would attempt to force a strike. Galarza reminded Mitchell that Packinghouse members contributed per capita assessment to the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, which was keeping the NAWU going. Eventually Mitchell had to admit defeat in his bid to maintain control over Pelet's sugar

110 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, August 12, 1957, ibid.
111 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, October 3, 1957, ibid.
112 Henry Pelet to H. L. Mitchell, October 26, 1957, ibid.
113 H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, February 3, 1958, ibid.
114 George Stith to H. L. Mitchell, January 28, 1958, ibid.
local. The heated fight weakened the union and caused personal animosity between Mitchell and Pelet.\textsuperscript{116}

Perhaps sensing the final days of the NAWU, Mitchell became more philosophical than usual. He told Murray Kempton that in the final appraisal of his tenure on earth he hoped to be on the side of the angels rather than with the force having the largest battalions.\textsuperscript{117} When Packinghouse takes over the sugar locals, he told Galarza, "... the candles are out in the South."\textsuperscript{118} No longer able to control the locals, Mitchell finally conceded them to Patrick Gorman of the Butchers.\textsuperscript{119} Mitchell believed that his efforts in behalf of agricultural workers had instilled in them some measure of self-assertion. Would they be capable of moving ahead on their own volition? He paraphrased Eugene Debs who once said that he would not lead the working class to the Promised Land, since someone would only lead them out.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{116} See STFU, Roll 40 (September, 1957 to March, 1958) for hundreds of items dealing with the disputes over union dues, bank accounts, and charters of Local 1422 at Labadieville, Louisiana.

\textsuperscript{117} H. L. Mitchell to Murray Kempton, February 12, 1958, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{118} H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, March 11, 1958, \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{119} H. L. Mitchell to Patrick Gorman, April 1, 1958, STFU, Roll 41.

\textsuperscript{120} H. L. Mitchell to Ernesto Galarza, May 9, 1958, \textit{ibid}.
A SUMMARY VIEW

Today, in the 1970's, H. L. Mitchell is still actively organizing agricultural workers but only in a limited sense. Through his affiliation with the Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, he is carrying on a one-man operation. The old Socialist protester and reformer, who never functioned like a typical union organizer, joined the agricultural division of the Butcher Workmen after the National Agricultural Workers Union wilted in 1958. Patrick Gorman, whose union finally merged with the United Packinghouse Workers of America in 1968, found a place for Mitchell as head of the Agricultural and Allied Workers Union, the semi-autonomous Local 300. Mitchell has reached retirement age, but he claims that he cannot afford to quit working since the Butchers have not given him credit for his previous union experience.

Mentioned prominently in numerous books and articles dealing especially with his early career as leader of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union during the New Deal years, Mitchell has become a fairly well-known historical figure. Even in 1958, as the NAWU's Louisiana operation faded into oblivion, he was becoming conscious of his place in history as he participated in the Columbia University Oral History project. The following year, when the moribund NAWU celebrated its twenty-fifth
anniversary, Mitchell subitled the booklet he published: "The Story of a Union That Refused to Die." His final union utterances seem more philosophical than usual because he perhaps felt in writing the union's epitaph that he should attempt to reach the idealistic heights that characterized his union's finest hours. Today he is promoting the sale of the STFU papers which have been filmed by the Microfilm Corporation of America.

Early in his career Mitchell thought that agricultural unions could not rely indefinitely on the support of liberals and church groups. To succeed, he felt, they would have to employ trade union tactics and develop a self-sustaining dues-paying membership of locals in an international union arrangement. He realizes today that his management of the agricultural union like a trade union had been less than spectacular. Admitting that his record for forming new locals, winning strikes, and negotiating new contracts does not rank high by industrial union standards, Mitchell points out that he has operated under a different set of guidelines. He now feels that he could have used his knowledge and talents for publicity and fund-raising more effectively outside the organized labor movement.

Because Mitchell exposed AFL and CIO disregard for agricultural workers and generally made a nuisance of himself with his persistent requests for funds for organizing campaigns, he is considered a maverick in labor circles today. He sees
his past role as that of a precursor to current labor leaders such as Cesar Chavez. "Maybe I was kinda like a John the Baptist to Cesar Chavez, to sum it up," Mitchell said a few years ago. He thinks that publicizing the plight, if not the aspirations, of agricultural workers has been one of his most significant contributions. With the rapid mechanization of sugar plantations today, Mitchell believes that tractor drivers need a new type of organization. "Somewhere out there, there is a Cesar Chavez in the black belt," he said. "We want to find him." Henry Pelet, on the other hand, thinks that the only barrier to a successful cane organization today is sufficient money to wage a recognition strike.

In several respects Gordon McIntire of the Louisiana Farmers' Union, who invited Mitchell's STFU to come to Louisiana to organize sugar cane workers in the 1930's, presented the most sensible early labor approach to the sugar cane industry. At a time when radicals, such as the supposed-Communist Clyde Johnson of the Sharecroppers' Union, were demanding garden plots and free housing for workers, McIntire, who had seen the need for French-speaking organizers, advocated converting the paternalistic frills of the plantation system into tangible cash benefits. Although Mitchell expressed interest in the Louisiana sugar industry and benefitted later from McIntire's proposals, the STFU bypassed the opportunity to organize the cane fields in the late 1930's.
In 1939, after the STFU broke away from the CIO following a bitter clash with rival United Canning, Allied, and Packing and Agricultural Workers of America, the union was small and poor. But during World War II the STFU changed its name to the National Farm Labor Union and flourished by supplying laborers for harvesting operations in various areas. After the war the union joined the American Federation of Labor and attempted to organize agribusiness workers in California where the union clashed with the gigantic DiGiorgio Corporation in a long strike that became for the NFLU a war of attrition.

Without support from the Catholic Church, Mitchell's union probably would never have come to Louisiana. With active church encouragement and aid, the NAWU made Louisiana the center of its operation from 1951 to 1958. At every step of the Louisiana movement the Church provided not only institutional backing but such vital things as financial aid, advice, leadership, and contacts with workers.

During the 1930's Catholic Church involvement in labor matters in Louisiana was limited to isolated activity by priests such as Wilton Labbe and Joseph Coulombe in agricultural areas and Father Jerome Drolet with industrial and water-front workers in New Orleans. When Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel formed a social action group in the early 1940's and appointed Vincent O'Connell and Jerome Drolet to it, the Church's union involvement increased sharply. O'Connell first realized that a Cane
Curtain encircled the sugar country after displaced persons from war-torn eastern Europe walked off sugar plantations in disgust over low pay and poor living conditions. O'Connell and E. H. Williams of the State Federation of Labor invited H. L. Mitchell to organize the agricultural workers in the state. Impressed with the extent of Catholic Church support, Mitchell told his colleagues that priests did everything except sign up members and collect union dues.

Catholic laymen in the cane country who disagreed with their church's support for the NAWU often forcefully stated their views to Archbishop Rummel who refused to be pressured into changing his policies or into removing outspoken priests from their parishes. At one time or another the Church differed to some degree not only with the leaders of the American Sugar Cane League, the Louisiana Farm Bureau, and the biggest sugar corporations in the state, but also with T. M. Barker, Clarence Savoie, F. A. Graugnard, Etienne Caire, Joc Bokenfohr, Allen Ellender, Eddie Ste. Marie, Gilbert Durbin, Moise Hymel, Roland Toups, and many other influential laymen.

Sometimes even the smallest details of union activity received the careful scrutiny of the Catholic Church. Besides writing letters suggesting that sugar growers meet with the NAWU, clergymen studied the union oath for possible features contrary to Catholic doctrine, provided church halls for union meetings, supplied information on forming cooperatives, translated
union programs for Cajun farmers, assisted workers who had been fired, conducted the strike vote prior to the 1953 walk-out, appealed to big unions in behalf of the NAWU, and even suggested the name change that the union made just as its Louisiana campaign began. After Mitchell pointed out to Archbishop Rummel flaws in Father Twomey's proposed Catholic independent union in the sugar industry, the prelate successfully scotched the scheme. Church leaders, on the other hand, induced Mitchell to delete specific mention of Archbishop Rummel in an NAWU organizational prospectus. Knowing the church's aversion to Communism, Mitchell and his colleagues perhaps emphasized their own anti-Communist views more than they had in previous years. Church leaders opposed attempts by the Louisiana legislature to pass right-to-work laws in 1944, 1946, 1954, and 1956, at times when Mitchell's union was in no position to offer much resistance.

Most parish priests endorsed Archbishop Rummel's labor policies even if they personally had misgivings. Two older clergymen in the cane country, Monsignor Dominic Perino and Monsignor Jean Eyraud, experienced difficulty not only in reconciling their views with those of the prelate, but also with young assistant pastors assigned to their parishes. Father Roy Patterson probably left his position at Holy Savior in Lockport because of differences of opinion with Monsignor Perino. Father O'Connell, who as chairman of the social action committee
was relatively free from the type of pressure some parish priests felt, was undoubtedly reassigned in 1952 because of his union-organizing activity. The Archbishop turned down the request of angry parishioners to remove Father Jerome Drolet from St. Charles Parish. Drolet, who had received threatening telephone calls, required the services of a bodyguard at one time.

Archbishop Rummel's closest advisers considered him a great man. With Joseph Vath and Charles Plauche in the Chancery office, and Vincent O'Connell and later Louis Twomey and the layman Charles Logan advising him on matters of social justice, the late Archbishop emerged as a liberal reformer of the first magnitude. Josephite pastors such as Harry J. Maloney in Bertrandville and Joseph Turner in Reserve, along with parish priests such as Jerome Drolet, Roy Patterson, Roland Boudreaux, Alexander Sigur, and others in the Lafayette area, provided solid support for the Archbishop's policies. Even though efforts in behalf of the NAWU failed, Charles Plauche and Joseph Vath do not consider the attempt to have been in vain. Nor do they consider the work of the especially controversial priests such as Joseph Coulombe or Jerome Drolet wasted. They, like the two Berrigan priests today, were potentially the catalyst to a popular movement to ameliorate oppressive conditions.

When the NAWU came to Louisiana in the early 1950's, Mitchell had hopes of organizing dairy, strawberry, shallot, and potato farmers, and agricultural laborers in the sugar cane
and rice industries. In 1953 the union called a strike during the harvest season in the cane fields of Louisiana after failing to get growers to agree to bargain collectively even after Archbishop Rummel tried several times to bring together planters and union leaders. For about a month the union impeded but did not halt the cane harvest. During the strike the NAWU waged an active propaganda skirmish against the American Sugar Cane League that spoke for the industry. Because the NAWU threw up picket lines around sugar refineries and attempted to entice factory workers to join the field workers' strike, the large corporations obtained injunctions which ended the strike by virtually prohibiting the NAWU from performing as a labor union.

Conditions grew progressively worse for the STFU after the cane field strike. In 1954 the state legislature passed a right-to-work law despite strong opposition from organized labor and the Catholic Church. Two years later industrial union leaders and representatives of agribusiness combined forces to push through a repeal of right-to-work at the expense of agricultural workers who were excluded from its provisions. While the AFL and the CIO first discussed merger possibilities in 1954, the NAWU assisted sugar cane factory workers in a strike at Mathews, Louisiana. Perhaps Mitchell thought that by demonstrating NAWU involvement with factory workers also, the NAWU could establish a valid claim for jurisdiction in the entire sugar industry when the merger materialized. But the
Mathews strike not only ended in failure, it dashed hopes that the NAWU could get along with CIO leaders.

Mitchell's chances of heading an AFL-CIO agricultural organizing drive vanished when he lashed out at state and national labor leaders for their part in the right-to-work deal that penalized the NAWU and for the general union complacency in regard to agricultural workers. No doubt labor leaders remembered his biting criticisms when the AFL-CIO finally decided to organize agricultural workers and chose Cesar Chavez to head the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. No longer able to maintain control over the two sugar locals in Louisiana that vacillated between Packinghouse and the Butchers, Mitchell in 1958 folded his organization and joined the Butchers' special agricultural department created for him by Patrick Gorman.

While the NAWU still had aspirations of organizing the entire sugar industry in 1954, Ernesto Galarza wrote "The Louisiana Sugar Cane Plantation Worker Vs. The Sugar Corporations, U. S. Department of Agriculture, et al." For the first time a detailed study analyzed the industry from a labor point of view, and it brought out criticisms and features of the industry the American Sugar Cane League usually did not mention. The study, which was over one hundred pages long, was mimeographed and distributed by the NAWU to church leaders and interested supporters, but it never received the mass exposure and
publicity it deserved. In 1955 Galarza represented the NAWU at Congressional hearings to amend the 1948 Sugar Act and presented a copy of his study as part of his testimony. He attempted to emphasize the economic problems of cane field workers, the disadvantaged position of the small cane farmer, the union's support of subsidies for the industry, and the desire to provide more "bread" for the workers before "putting more icing on the cake" for growers and processors.

The NAWU attempt to align small cane farmers with union workers against the outside-owned giants of the industry was a throwback to the 1890's. Perhaps "neo-Populist" best describes the class appeal features of the effort to join the two groups against the big sugar corporations. Galarza claimed that the small growers paid to the American Sugar Cane League dues that were "all but compulsory" and were subject to arbitrary trash penalties, complicated purity tests, and unsupervised sucrose analyses. He said that agricultural co-ops, originally designed to help small farmers, benefitted wealthy processors in the sugar industry. Small cane growers paid higher wages than the big corporations, the NAWU said, in directing its sharpest barbs at the corporations. The union advocated a processing tax on sugar cane to finance programs beneficial to laborers and to small farmers. But the union appeal was doomed to fail since small growers could see in unionization few direct benefits and the possibility of demands for higher wages. Union
promises to help small farmers harvest their crops during the 1953 cane field strike had not impressed the small growers who knew that the strike was not directed solely against the big-four sugar corporations as the NAWU claimed.

The long NAWU list of complaints about the sugar industry range from the broad and general to the small and specific. Not only were wages low, the union said, but rates varied widely in different areas for the same type of work. The union claimed that the complicated price-wage escalator, which theoretically adjusted wages automatically when the price of sugar fluctuated, was deliberately too complicated to work or for laymen to comprehend. It tied wage increases to sugar price increases that would bring in millions to producers and slight increases for workers. Likewise, laborers benefitted little from pay increases due to them following the sale of molasses after the grinding season. By that time many workers had taken other jobs. The NAWU claimed that unionized sugar workers in Hawaii earned higher wages than non-union laborers in Louisiana, but neither group received unemployment compensation or had a pension system. He said that the USDA did not enforce the wage provisions of the Sugar Act, and growers dominated the local agricultural boards and commissions that handled worker complaints. Galarza wondered if the USDA endorsed the notion that agricultural workers did not have the right to join unions simply because they had been excluded from
some labor legislation. Before supporting continuation of the Sugar Act, he wanted the rights of workers spelled out clearly. In his long sugar report he complained about substandard housing on sugar plantations and included photographs of some particularly dilapidated examples.

The NAWU did not recommend cutting subsidies or altering the quota system which were so vital to the industry. Galarza hoped to expose glaring inequities in the system that could be eliminated. He anticipated growers' complaints of being unable to afford additional burdens by pointing out that any heavily subsidized industry which could not adequately compensate its work force must have been an uneconomic venture. High fixed costs, for example, are a major problem in the industry. Expensive mill and harvesting equipment is used for about nine weeks out of the entire year.

In May, 1972, Saturday Review ran a scathing feature-length indictment of the Louisiana sugar industry written by Peter Schuck, a young lawyer associated with Ralph Nader. According to Schuck, the sugar lobby has for years thwarted attempts by liberals in Congress to provide agricultural workers the benefits of National Labor Relations Board jurisdiction, unemployment compensation, and minimum wage coverage. Schuck pointed out that lobbyists hired by the sugar industry are often retired USDA bureaucrats who administered the Sugar Act during their tenure of government service. He showed that in
1970 American taxpayers spent $400 million to keep the domestic price of sugar higher than the world market price. Schuck pointed out that the USDA paid out an additional $93 million in benefit payments to limit production. He said that in 1969 South Coast Corporation received $297,000 and Southdown, $186,000 in benefit payments. But, according to Schuck, the average sugar worker with a family of six received only $2,635 a year, $1,900 less than the poverty level for a farm family, and $1,000 less than the average farm-worker family. Housing conditions, in Schuck's opinion, remain substandard in many cases, and welfare officials discriminate against blacks.

Surprisingly, Schuck sharply criticized the Catholic Church for its negative role in the cane country. He singled out Bishop Maurice Schexnayder of the Diocese of Lafayette, with the largest black Catholic population in the United States, for actually deterring efforts by young priests and nuns to assist the cane field laborers. Bishop Schexnayder, according to Schuck, called in Father Frank Ecimovich, who had been working among cane field laborers, for a meeting with irate sugar growers. The planters told Ecimovich to mind his own business and made his stay in the area uncomfortable. After Ecimovich left the diocese, Sister Anne Catherine, a Dominican nun, took over direction of the Southern Mutual Help Association, an organization dedicated to improving the life of poor workers through cooperative educational, welfare, health, and
consumer-orientated projects. Father Vincent O'Connell today heads a Thibodaux office of the SMHA that receives funds from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and from the National Sharecroppers' Fund.

Angry denials from the sugar industry of Schuck's charges concentrated on demonstrating that workers earned more than $2,600 per year and that housing was better than Schuck suggested. T. M. Barker showed the author evidence that field employees of Valentine Sugars earned considerably more than Schuck stated, but he admitted that his company probably hired more Cajuns and fewer blacks than most cane plantations. He defended his company's housing policy and suggested that Schuck had displayed anti-Catholic bias in his portrayal of Bishop Schexnayder.

The 1953 cane field strike reveals more about general conditions in Louisiana than about labor expansion, since the strike itself was a failure and a setback for union organizing in agriculture. Like the sharecroppers in the 1930's who did not achieve collective bargaining concessions from the big agricultural corporations, the sugar workers failed because of legal restrictions and organic structural problems. Without the advantages of collective bargaining and the closed or union shop, the NAWU was forced to conduct the older type strike that was won only when a union exerted overwhelming economic pressure. Injunctions that ended the strike resembled those
described by Irving Bernstein as typical of the type used against unions during the lean years for organized labor before 1933.

The many similarities between the 1953 strike and those of the 1880's are another indication that the modern strike was typical of the older type encounter. In both eras growers either openly or subtly stirred up racial prejudices against the predominantly black unions and called union leaders Communists or said they were Communist-supported. Planters in both cases evicted the blacklisted workers to combat union influence, requested additional police protection, and charged the unions with violating property rights. The strikes are even similar in attempts by the unions to attract sympathy for their plight from a Republican president and a former president visiting in New Orleans--Grant in the nineteenth century, Eisenhower in the twentieth.

Catholic sugar growers apparently resolved the dilemma of deciding whether to accede to church-supported concessions or to resist union recognition by stressing economic self-interest at the expense of the spiritual. Many Catholics, who were not associated with the sugar industry, were unable to influence public opinion in favor of at least token concessions to the church-supported position. This probably confirms Mitchell's belief that the public in the cane country basically did not understand the labor movement. The American Sugar Cane
League enjoyed greater success in stirring fears of Communists and outside influence in union activity.

Nor was the union able to expose and to capitalize on the paradoxical and vulnerable economic position of the Louisiana sugar industry. Ernesto Galarza believed that if ever an industry offered an opportunity for the imposition of meaningful government minimum standards, it was the sugar industry, where adequate compensation to workers could be tied to the system of tariffs, quotas, acreage allotments, and benefit payments. The heavily subsidized industry, he felt, had spoken of the merits of the free enterprise system and criticized government-set wage rates and acreage allotments as mere restrictive procedures rather than conditions under which farmers qualified for benefits. The sugar lobby had spoken effectively of the importance of maintaining a valuable industry. The union had become the voice at the annual wage hearings of ignorant field workers of a handicapped minority race living on isolated rural plantations who could not compete effectively against the American Sugar Cane League's paid lobbyists and spokesmen.

Ironically, many middle class whites who criticized the union and indirectly helped to weaken the efforts of the predominantly black union would themselves have benefitted from membership in unions. Whether some of the destructive militancy that has swept the country in recent years could have been channeled into constructive programs for helping the poor
in the cane country offers fascinating speculation. Though obviously no panacea, the agricultural union provided an outlet into which potential leaders of the cane country might have channeled their energies. Those who are quick to dismiss the notion as untenable will recall that Rap Brown lived in Baton Rouge on the rim of the cane country.

Perhaps a militant such as Rap Brown could have become the Caesar Chavez of the black belt of Louisiana and produced broad support for the movement, which failed without it despite the efforts of the Catholic Church. The union man who came closest to being a leader with popular mass appeal was Joe Guidry, the white Cajun organizer who spoke also for the majority of union members, blacks who did not speak French or identify with Cajun culture. Perhaps stirring up apathetic blacks who did not understand what a united labor effort could mean would have overtaxed even the energies of a Rap Brown.

To rank the NAWU triumvirate of H. L. Mitchell, Henry Hasiwar, and Ernesto Galarza is to create a unique scale of measurement. They were not ordinary union organizers who operated under an ordinary set of ground rules. Though often called upon to face seemingly insurmountable obstacles, they did not hesitate to meet the challenge no matter what the odds against success were. Each possessed the leadership and dedication to become a charismatic leader of the masses had he the inclination or opportunity to work on furthering his public
image. Instead they became all things to the agricultural labor movement--its philosophers, financiers, liberal spokesmen and propagandists, links with the Catholic Church and other supporters, organizers, and strike leaders as well.

Each displayed an almost arrogant confidence in his own ability to withstand the hardships and privations necessary to work effectively among black, Mexican-American, and Cajun agricultural workers. The NAWU leaders felt confident their colleagues in the industrial unions could never match their perseverance. This inner confidence produced a reckless abandon that at times bordered on defeatism or fatalism. They sometimes plunged into tasks they knew required more than determination alone to win. But often the union benefitted from the drubbings it received in sympathetic support from liberal contributors. Even though they expressed disdain for more down-to-earth union organizers, they admired their business-like efficiency in financial matters.

All three NAWU leaders had turned down more rewarding job opportunities with other unions or in industry in order to remain with the agricultural union. They apparently preferred the freewheeling unorthodoxy and the individualism of the agricultural labor movement to that of being automatons in big industrial unions. Each enjoyed performing the demanding tasks of the agricultural organizer, who often had to improvise and make decisions on the spur of the moment without assistance or
advice. But the taxing schedule, the agonizing financial problems, and the frustrating defeats led to ulcers, exhaustion, and despair. The NAWU waged a good fight in Louisiana, and through the efforts of leaders such as Mitchell, Galarza, and Hasiwar, survived longer than expected, but the movement failed.

Although NAWU leaders demonstrated a strong sense of mission and a high level of idealism, they failed to articulate long-range plans for agricultural workers. Perhaps the precarious nature of the union's financial and legal status prevented them from lingering over esoteric dreams until they had developed a solid self-sustaining union that was the duly authorized bargaining agent of agricultural laborers.

Even with strong backing from the Catholic Church in Louisiana, Mitchell's union never enjoyed the type of success that would have produced realistic expectation of fulfilling the idealistic hopes leaders only hinted at. Despite setbacks in the early 1950's Mitchell pledged to continue working among unorganized farm workers but admitted that the NAWU did not have a program that appealed to them. At times he spoke of the propaganda value of a campaign among the agricultural poor as if doing more than publicizing their plight was not possible. When the union's Louisiana campaign was on the verge of collapse, Mitchell told Pat Gorman of the Meatcutters and Butcher Workmen that he needed help to develop a sound organization of workers. But to the very end Galarza disliked having
to temper the NAWU approach with the practices of "business unionism," which he sensed would never accommodate agricultural workers. The best Mitchell could expect for those among whom he had labored so long was a hope that they had developed a sense of independence. He did not want to lead them to the Promised Land only to have someone lead them out again.

Ernesto Galarza's hope that the sugar cane industry would provide more benefits for workers before increasing rewards to the big producers is the essence of present-day criticism of the sugar industry. Modern critics show that living and working conditions for field laborers are far inferior to what many people realized and in many cases little changed from the 1950's. Likewise, the advantages enjoyed by the subsidized industry through the quota system, the dual domestic-world pricing system, and the benefit payments to producers are more widely known and understood today.

Historian Clement Eaton thought that defenders of slavery in the ante-bellum South externalized their guilt feeling about the system by blaming outside agitators for the institution's problems. Perhaps the modern sugar cane industry, like the slavocracy, rationalized its guilt feeling about working and living conditions by accusing Communists and outside union organizers of causing labor unrest among the predominantly black workers. By its own admission, the American Sugar Cane League once admitted its indefensible wage policy. Because of
the impact of the sugar cane lobby on a generally sympathetic audience in the cane country, to criticize the industry today is to provoke the wrath not only of the Farm Bureau and the American Sugar Cane League but of many others, such as newspaper editors, business men, and political leaders.

Local governmental officials, enraged by Peter Schuck's recent criticism of governmental practices, threaten damage suits against the young lawyer. Even minor functionaries, not mentioned by name in his critical article, plan legal action, presumably to vindicate their damaged reputations. Bureaucrats pressing such cases would do well to look beyond the minor inaccuracies of Schuck's article and investigate the ramifications of channeling such a small percentage of the benefits to the highly subsidized industry to its working force. One government employee, apparently oblivious to the irony of his rage over what he considered unfair treatment by Schuck, announced: "You can have your goddamn niggers and liberals . . . ." If this view represents a typical reaction, the Cesar Chavez of the cane country H. L. Mitchell has been looking for may turn out to be, like some militants today--more Red than black.

In many ways the sugar industry has changed little over the years. Today the Southern Mutual Help Association employs non-union tactics in an attempt to better the living and working conditions of plantation workers. The effort is
an idealistic alternative to that of the greatly disadvantaged agricultural labor unions. The late Saul Alinsky would not have been impressed with the SMHA's bargaining position. Nonetheless, the effort goes on today, as usual, with benefit of clergy--at least some of the clergy, who have aspirations of one day smashing the remnants of the Cane Curtain that in some respects still encircles the cane country of Louisiana.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

American Sugar Cane League, Minutes of Executive Committee Meetings, 1930's-1960's, in The Sugar Archives, Microfilm, Reel 11, microfilm copy in Nicholls State University Library, Thibodaux, Louisiana.

________, "Questions and Answers for the Guidance of Louisiana Sugar Cane Farmers," October 5, 1953, and several miscellaneous pamphlets and handbills, in possession of E. J. Clement, Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Drolet, Jerome, a two-volume scrapbook containing letters, pamphlets, photographs, and many newspaper clippings, 1930's-1950's. In possession of its owner, 2908 S. Carrollton Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Rummel, Joseph Francis Papers, 1935-1958. Seven thick manila folders containing correspondence, clippings, and various information on labor relations in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Archives of Archdiocese, 7887 Walmsley Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana.


Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers, 1933-1972, Southern History Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and microfilm copy in Dillard University Library, New Orleans, Louisiana.

PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

Ayo, Donald, parishioner of Holy Savior Church, Lockport, February 23, 1972, in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Barker, T. M., manager of sugar mill and American Sugar Cane League official, May 10, 1972, at Valentine Sugars, Lockport, Louisiana.
Becnel, Lucille T., parishioner of Holy Savior Church, April 8, 1972, in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Boudreaux, Roland, pastor of Our Lady of Prompt Succor Church, April 4, 1972, in Lutcher, Louisiana.

Breaux, Charles, assistant manager of sugar mill, May 21, 1972, Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Clement, E. J., sugar grower and member of American Sugar Cane League, February 23, 1972, Labadieville, Louisiana.


Drolet, Jerome, labor priest, March 20, 1972, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Dugas, Francis, lawyer and former member of state legislature, February 15, 1972, Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Harang, Warren, sugar grower and American Sugar Cane League official, May 9, 1972, Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Mitchell, H. L., labor leader, June 23, October 23, and November 12, 1970 and March 6, 1971, and numerous informal meetings and telephone conversations, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Houma, Louisiana.


Pelet, Henry, factory worker and labor organizer, February 29, 1972, Thibodaux, Louisiana.


Portier, Abdon, manager of sugar mill, April 18, 1972, in Labadieville, Louisiana.

Todd, Wilbur, priest, March 5, 1972 and in many informal talks and telephone conversations, in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

PERSONAL LETTERS TO THE AUTHOR IN HIS POSSESSION

Drolet, Jerome to author, March 15, 1972.


Hasiwar, Henry to author, February 29, 1972.

Mitchell, H. L. to author, various dates since 1970.

Peltier, Harvey to author, July 20, 1970.

Vath, Joseph to author, April 4, 1972.

LETTERS


Hasiwar, Henry to E. J. Clement, October 2, 1953, in possession of E. J. Clement, Thibodaux, Louisiana.


Rummel, Joseph Francis to E. J. Clement, October 7, 1953, in possession of E. J. Clement, Thibodaux, Louisiana.

GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS--UNITED STATES


GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS--STATE OF LOUISIANA


NEWSPAPERS


Catholic Action of the South, May-December 1953.

The Donaldsonville Chief, May-December 1953.

The Houma Courier, May-December 1953.

The Lafayette Daily Advertiser, October-November 1953.

The New Orleans Item, October-November 1953.

The St. Charles Herald, October-November 1953.


OTHER PRIMARY SOURCES


___________. to Editor, Times Picayune, August 27, 1970.


SECONDARY WORKS

GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS


**BOOKS**


**ARTICLES**


Peoples, Morgan, "'Kansas Fever' in North Louisiana," Louisiana History, XI (Spring, 1970), 121-35.


OTHER SECONDARY MATERIALS

Singal, Daniel J. to Thomas Becnel, February 15, 1972.

Brou, Marguerite to Thomas Becnel, May 26, 1972.
VITA

Thomas A. Becnel was born near Baton Rouge in 1934, but spent most of his life in the cane country of Bayou Lafourche. After graduating from L. S. U. in 1956, he married Audrey Angelette of Golden Meadow and began teaching in the public school system. In 1966 he joined the history faculty at Nicholls State University. He is the father of Jeanne, Suzanne, Annette, Thomas Jr., and Emilie Becnel.
Candidate: Thomas A. Becnel

Major Field: History

Title of Thesis: With Benefit of Clergy: Catholic Church Support for the National Agricultural Workers Union in Louisiana, 1948-1958

Approved:

Date of Examination: December 2, 1972