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Freedom to Resist: The Story of John Henry Sylvester and Strike City, Mississippi

By Robert L. Reece

The Mississippi Delta is the name given to the alluvial flood plain of the Mississippi River that extends from Memphis, Tennessee, to Vicksburg, Mississippi. Centuries of flooding provided the area with arguably the most fertile soil in the country, ripe for growing the cotton that through its slave economy made Mississippi one of the wealthiest and more powerful states in the Union in the antebellum era and has shaped social relations in the region since then.[1] In many ways, the history of Mississippi is a history of White Mississippians' struggle to reclaim that past glory against the ongoing resistance of Black Mississippians, who have consistently stood up against White power to demand racial justice.

After the Civil War, many Black Mississippians, faced with limited options for education and employment were forced into sharecropping. Sharecroppers operated much like indentured servants and arguably in many instances, like enslaved people. They lived on the plantations and worked the land for the plantation owners. However, sharecroppers were sold the dream that they would earn a profit, perhaps enough to start new lives for themselves and their families. They entered yearly contracts with plantation owners, in which the owner gave the sharecroppers the tools they needed to work, in addition to food, housing, and clothing, and after the harvest the workers would settle their debts with the owner. But profits, if there were any at all, were meager; many found themselves sinking deeper into debt year after year.[2] Challenges to the system were often met with swift and cruel violence[3]. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff describes one such incident, demonstrating the lengths White Mississippians would

[1] James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2.

[2] Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "African-American Struggles for Citizenship in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas in the Age of Jim Crow," *Radical History Review* 55 (1993), 35.

[3] Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth,* 103.

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resort to in order to maintain their control: "When small landowners and sharecroppers in Leflore County, Mississippi, joined the Colored Farmers' Alliance and Cooperative Union in 1889, the National Guard was sent in and killed at least twenty-five members."[4]

World War I provided new opportunities for Black southerners. The threat of Black workers leaving to join the military, or to fill industrial needs in cities, forced plantation owners to raise workers' wages in order to attract and retain labor. In some places, wages rose to as high as $1.50 per day for a field hand and $4.50 per day for a mechanic, but these wages did not change much over the next few decades, and by the 1960s, Black southerners were still suffering considerably.[5] In 1960, only about 20 percent of Black homes had hot and cold water and almost half had no running water at all. Moreover, 66 percent of Black homes used outdoor toilets or lacked toilet facilities completely. Black median annual income in 1959 was $1,444, significantly less than the White average of $4,209. The Black infant mortality rate in 1963 stood at 53.1 per 1,000, while the White infant mortality rate was 23.1 per 1,000. The following year, in 1964, Black mothers accounted for forty-eight of the total fifty-seven maternal deaths in the state, and 1,631 Black children died during their first year of life compared to 599 White children.[6]

Mississippi needed dramatic change, and in May 1965, about five miles to the southeast of the town of Leland, Mississippi (population then 7,000), tenant farmers struck. Against a backdrop of increasing industrialization and mechanization, the workers on one of the area's most prominent plantations (comprising 1,300 acres owned by the Andrews brothers) took a stand against the oppressive tenant farming system and went on strike. It constituted the first series of strikes in the area since the 1930s[7]. Led by John Henry Sylvester, the strikers went on to found a community called Strike City, where they sought to achieve economic independence by building a self-sustaining city. Although the project failed to reach the prominence that their founders

[4] Woodruff, "African-American Struggles for Citizenship," 35

[5] Ibid., 36.

[6] "Aid to Delta Negro Often Backfires," *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 1966, 4.

[7] Douglas A. Blackmon, "Strike City: A few determined African-Americans found they could change a way of life in Mississippi," *Slavery by Another Name* (blog), June 4, 1995, http://www.slaverybyanothername.com/other-writings/strike-city-a-few-determined-african-americans-found-they-could-change-a-way-of-life-in-mississippi/#sthash.AUSE9mry.dpuf.

envisioned, Strike City still contributed to important economic and political victories across the Mississippi Delta providing a beacon of hope and resistance for local people.

Civil Rights Comes to Mississippi

In 1961 and 1962, organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Confederated Organizations (COFO) set their sights on Mississippi as an important area to cultivate local leadership in the pursuit of civil rights. Organizers poured into the state, spending time making connections with local people, hosting mass meetings, leading voter registration drives, and preparing communities for the long fight that was ahead of them as they sought to peel back the power that White Mississippians had largely monopolized. Civil rights workers were often met with violence by local White people, but national organizations countered by sending even more organizers to the state. By 1963, roughly a third of SNCC field organizers in the Deep South were in Mississippi gearing up for their largest initiative yet – the 1964 Summer Project, which would come to be known as Freedom Summer.[8]

Headed into the fall of 1963, SNCC and COFO leadership debated the strategies for the upcoming summer project. They reflected on the violence and threats they had experienced over the past few years, and some in leadership sought to outflank local White people by bringing in White volunteers from the North. They argued that the White people would provide a layer of protection for local organizers by drawing national attention to the project and thus forcing the federal government to expand its protection of Black Mississippians. Others in leadership felt that bringing in even more White people would undermine their ultimate goal of developing local leadership.[9] The White volunteers would inevitably be more educated than the rural Black southerners and would gravitate towards leadership roles that SNCC and COFO had been hoping local people would assume themselves. An intense debate about the role of White people in the Summer Project raged for

[8] Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2007), 297.

[9] Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1850s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 178-195.

months, but it was ultimately settled when Louis Allen from Amite County was murdered in his driveway in January 1964. Louis had been a witness to a murder of a Black man by a White man a few years prior, and his murder was a stark reminder of the dangers that Black Mississippians faced. A talk with Louis's widow changed the tenor of the debates, and SNCC and COFO leadership became determined to protect local Black people as best they could, and they decided the best way to do that was by using White northern volunteers during the summer project.[10]

Leading up to the summer project, SNCC organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to counter the state Democrats' consistent refusal to allow Black people to participate in the party. While SNCC sought to empower local people to take charge, they did not anticipate or appreciate the friction that developed between SNCC field organizers and the MFDP following Freedom Summer. In particular, local people did not think the 1964 Civil Rights Act would mean much if they were unwilling to push for its enforcement at the local level. For the MFDP, this meant organizing boycotts of businesses that continued to refuse service to Black people, and in some cases, driving them out of business. Boycotts were not a preferred SNCC strategy, and towards the end of 1964, their organizers started to trickle out of the state, leaving more responsibility in the hands of local people.[11]

Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the increase in Black voter registration, and a slight softening of White attitudes on race and segregation, tenant farmers and sharecroppers across the Delta turned their attention to economic justice. The first rumblings of a union began during a Freedom School session in January 1965, when a group of farm workers began to gripe about how they did all of the work but the planters received all of the profit. Over the next few months, these complaints turned into organizing as a group of farm workers from Shaw, Mississippi, presented their idea for a union to the MFDP, the National Council of Churches' Delta Ministry, and the

[10] Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 299-300.
[11] Ibid., 319, 323.

remaining SNCC organizers in the area.[12] In April 1965, the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU) was officially born when forty-five Shaw farmworkers, with a newly drafted constitution and a set of specific economic demands, voted unanimously to found the union and to go on strike at the Seligmann plantation. In just two weeks, they registered one thousand people, and over two hundred workers were on strike across the Delta.[13] The union's platform called for a $1.25 minimum wage, an eight-hour work day, free medical coverage, basic income for people unable to work, an end to working under the age of sixteen and over the age of sixty-five, accident insurance, social security benefits covered by their employer, and federal unemployment insurance.[14]

At the time, minimum wage laws did not yet apply to farmworkers so men, who were fortunate enough to be mechanics and tractor operators, were paid $6 per day. Women and children, who chopped cotton and hoed weeds, only received .30 an hour, which amounted to $3 for a ten-hour workday.[15] The wages had changed little since World War I, and the work, especially the chopping and weed hoeing, was seasonal, only available from May until September. This limited time often forced workers, who lived on plantations, to take out loans from planters to survive the offseason driving them deeper into debt.[16] In the non-growing season, the average Black family only earned about $12 per week, well below the federal poverty threshold of $75 per week.[17] Although the federal government purported to offer poverty relief funds for Black Mississippians, to the great dismay of Black organizers, the government entrusted local White people to distribute the funds without discriminating, which they simply would not do. To qualify for the meager anti-poverty assistance, plantation workers were

[12] Michael Sistrom, "The Freedom Labor Union: Economic Justice and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi," in *Reconsidering Labor History: Race, Class, and Power*, eds. Mathew Hold and Keri Leigh Merritt (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2018), 191-204.

[13] Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 95.

[14] Donald Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted from Plantation in Mississippi," *New York Times*, June 4, 1965, 17; Michael Paul Sistrom, "'Authors of the Liberation': the Mississippi Freedom Democrats and the Redefinition of Politics," PhD diss., (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002), 262.

[15] Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted," 17; Paul Good, "Plantation Owners Losing Strike Cotton Pickers Cannot Win," *The Washington Post*, July 5, 1965, A8.

[16] Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted", 17; Richard Corrigan, "Camp-Out in Park Ended, Miss. Negroes to Quit City," *The Washington Post*, April 8, 1966, B1.

[17] Sistrom, "The Freedom Labor Union," 191-204.

required to obtain the signature of every planter they had worked for over the course of the year. This requirement gave planters unilateral control over whether individual workers would receive assistance, and planters exercised this power in arbitrary and racist ways, often refusing to sign on behalf of workers, who they simply did not like or who they perceived as agitators. Local organizers petitioned the federal government for more funds and for Blacks to have more control (if not complete control) over distribution, but the government dragged its feet and ultimately refused. Moreover, civil rights activity was deemed "political" and thus a disqualifying factor for people seeking work with program distribution.[18] This decision meant that in the absence of the federal government handing control of the anti-poverty programs to the impoverished people, distribution of funds was determined by White people and a few Black people who were hand-picked for their unwillingness to rock the boat too much.

Isaac Foster, a resident of Greenville, Mississippi, was fired from his job at the Greenville Mill for participating in a picket at the facility. After his dismissal, he began working at the Andrews Plantation with his mother. Then he visited the MFLU in Shaw and brought the strike idea to the Andrews' workers. Soon after, they voted unanimously to go on strike.[19]

The workers' strike on the Andrews Plantation and the founding of Strike City are often mentioned in passing by historians, but are presented quickly among a list of examples of resistance in the Black South. In most cases, scholars offer a short account of the conditions that led to the strike and move on to other topics.[20] Historians and social scientists alike have neglected to provide a full account of the duration of resistance among Strike City residents, their goals, the successes of the community, or any account of their leaders. Strike City, although it was largely bereft of SNCC support, was emblematic of the type of leadership and agency SNCC and COFO set out to create when they entered Mississippi in 1961 and 1962. In particular, John Henry Sylvester, who played a central role in organizing the strike

[18] Press Conference Transcript, undated, FSKaplowB1F8000, Mss 507, Box 1, Folder 8, Kaplow—Friends of SNCC—General (Alicia Kaplow papers, 1964-1968), Wisconsin Historical Society, Archives Main Stacks.

[19] Newman, *Divine Agitators*, 95.

[20] Monica M. White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 90.

and advocating on behalf of the community, epitomized the leadership capability of rural Mississippians. Built in the mold of other organizers who have been canonized such as Fannie Lou Hamer,[21] Sylvester was homegrown. He was from, and of, rural Mississippi. His politics were shaped by his experiences there, and rather than leave the state for the North like so many others, he determined to make his stand in the place he considered home and to create change for future generations of Black Mississippians. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the local character of the civil rights movement in Mississippi by focusing on the rise to prominence of Strike City, the strikers' endurance, the long-term goals for their community, how they sought to achieve those goals, and Sylvester's leadership trajectory therein.

The Founding of Strike City

John Henry Sylvester was one of the lucky few to earn the coveted $6 per day and free housing that came with being a tractor driver and mechanic on a plantation.[22] The free housing was particularly special because it was becoming increasingly rare. As more and more farming processes became mechanized, planters realized that they could increase their profits by eliminating the money they spent on sharecroppers' housing and instead began to rehire them in smaller numbers as seasonal laborers.[23] But Sylvester recognized that his relatively privileged place among sharecroppers fell well short of fair compensation and that he was likely on the verge of being phased out. He participated in the strike, seeking to not only improve his own life in the present but the futures of his children. He said, "I don't want my children to grow up dumb like I did,"[24] although he was hardly "dumb" as he would demonstrate repeatedly over the course of the following few years. But with this spirit in mind, Sylvester, his wife, and six children were the first to leave the plantation, accompanied by six other

[21] Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 14.

[22] "Winter Is Bitter Handicap for Plantation Strikers," *The Chicago Defender*, December 4, 1965, 5.

[23] Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted," 17.

[24] Paul Good, "Strike of Cotton Workers Agitates Separate Strands of Delta Society," *The Washington Post*, July 6, 1965, A2.

families, totaling about eighty people.[25] His first initiative represented only the first of many leadership roles that he occupied throughout the founding and maintenance of Strike City.

The strikers from the Andrews Plantation composed the plurality of the MFLU's efforts to organize a mass strike across the region.[26] Workers on other plantations often doubted the potential efficacy of the union's proposed strike and feared retaliation from local White people, but the Andrews' strikers were resolute.[27]

White Mississippians did not take kindly to what they perceived as insubordination. The strikers set up a picket line near the plantation to initiate their strike, but the Andrews' connections allowed them obtain an injunction from a local judge the next day that not only limited picketing to four people at a time, but also allowed the Andrews to evict the strikers.[28] In a show of local White solidarity (and a further demonstration of how Whites in government and private industry colluded to oppress Black Mississippians), the Washington County chief deputy sheriff used inmates to place the evicted strikers' belongings on the side of the road while owners of neighboring plantations sent their own tenant farmers to tend to the Andrews Plantation.[29] The four picketers who remained, Sylvester included, camped on the Roosevelt Adams's land, he being the only Black farmer in the area. They began their picketing at 4:30 every morning despite the violence they faced. Shots were fired over their heads, ammonia sprayed on them, their car tires were slashed, and at least one attempt was made to run them over. The house of one of the striker's elderly mother was burned to the ground.[30] The Andrews and other planters tried to circumvent the strike using other workers, but once the replacement workers encountered the picket line and spoke to the Andrews' previous residents, the replacements often decided to quit rather than work the Andrews' plantation. The picket line was so successful that few workers tended to the farm for six weeks, forcing the Andrews to turn to the labor of a disabled White man and White woman from Arkansas in order to

[25] Donald Janson, "Negro Walkouts in Delta Spurred: Rights Groups Turn Attention to Labor Activities," *New York Times*, June 7, 1965, 26.

[26] Good, "Plantation Owners Losing Strike," *The Washington Post*, July 5, 1965, A8

[27] Good, "Strike of Cotton Workers Agitates Separate Strands of Delta Society," A2.

[28] Newman, *Divine Agitators,* 96.

[29] Janson, "Negro Walkouts in Delta Spurred," 26.

[30] Newman, *Divine Agitators*, 96.

maintain their plantation.[31] Local White people saw the strike as an egregious violation of local customs and harmful to both their economic stability and the social health of local Black people. Whites blamed outside agitators for rattling their relationship with "their" Blacks, whom they characterized as relatively docile and content.

Although the strikers eventually abandoned the picket line at the Andrews Plantation, their nearly two-month stay was a sign that they were serious about organizing and would not quickly give in to defeat. Indeed, strikes across the area had achieved some early victories. Thirty-seven workers in Issaquena County won a wage increase to .50 an hour and a nine-hour workday. Nine tractor drivers in Glen Allen won a raise from $6 per day to $7.50 per day.[32] And a few other workers in the area saw modest raises from the typical .30 to .35 or .40 an hour.[33] Still, it was not enough. The plantation system was already undergoing major changes, and the strikes would only hasten them so that Black people could not rely on the plantation system for long-term economic stability.

The Andrews' strikers, who were not picketing, had been living at the Greenville Industrial College building, which was owned by the Black Mississippi Baptist State Educational Association. They were eventually evicted from there as well. The local health department demanded that they leave, citing sanitation concerns, but the strikers suspected it was political.[34] Soon after, with support from the Delta Ministry, the MFLU, and SNCC, the strikers obtained thirteen army tents and settled on five acres of Roosevelt Adams's land just outside of Leland, near the Andrews Plantation.[35] On August 30, the strikers moved into their tents, and eventually they were able to purchase

[31] Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted," 17; Newman, *Divine Agitators*; Good, "Plantation Owners Losing Strike," A8.

[32] Mississippi Freedom Labor Union report, undated, M368, Box 4, Folder 2, Miller (Michael J.) Civil Rights Collection, University of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections. https://usm.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_c4b6ff3a-9b23-4541-ac8b-53263a682341/.

[33] Mississippi Freedom Labor Union State Office report, September 24, 1965, Civil Rights Movement Archive. https://www.crmvet.org/docs/65_mflu_report.pdf.

[34] Newman, *Divine Agitators*, 96-97.

[35] Barnes Carr, "'Christmas Carpenters' Coming to Aid Tribbett Farm Strikers," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), December 22, 1965, 9; Newman, *Divine Agitators*; Betty Washington, "Tent Dwellers Ready to Return to Mississippi," *The Chicago Defender*, May 28, 1966, 3.

the land for $2,500.[36] Strike City was born. The site was originally dubbed "Tent City," and the residents endured the ever-present threat of violence as White people, both men and women, regularly fired gunshots through their camp at night.[37] They ate little more than rice and bread and pumped their water with a hand pump producing questionable fresh water. In an effort to produce income, they set up a small business handcrafting nativity scenes for sale.[38]

By this point, the MFLU, which initiated the local strikes, had started to dissipate. SNCC leadership questioned the efficacy of the strikes from the beginning and neglected to offer sufficient financial support to the tenants' union. National labor unions, save for the United Auto Workers, were reluctant to lend financial support as well.[39] The Delta Ministry did not think the strikes would yield long-term gains, but they nonetheless supported the union without the funding to feed, house, and clothe all of the out-of-work farmworkers.[40] In September, facing the threat of starvation, many union strikers were forced to return to the fields to help with the fall harvest.[41] The union was soon gone, but Strike City was just beginning.

Strike City Post-MFLU

Between the start of the strike and the founding of Strike City, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in Washington D.C. recognized Sylvester's leadership and invited him to a White House conference on Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.[42] Title VII banned employer discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin or association with another person of a certain race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Though he decided to send his

[36] "Winter Is Bitter Handicap For Plantation Strikers," *The Chicago Defender*, December 4, 1965, 5.

[37] "Negroes from 'Strike City' Wonder About Poverty Aid," *Associated Press*, April 1, 1966.

[38] "Winter Is Bitter Handicap For Plantation Strikers," *The Chicago Defender*, December 4, 1965, 5.

[39] Sistrom, "The Freedom Labor Union," 191-204.

[40] Newman, *Divine Agitators*, 96-96.

[41] Memo, Margaret Lauren to the northern offices, undated, M368, Box 4, Folder 2, Miller (Michael J.) Civil Rights Collection, University of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections. https://usm.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_db4f337b-ac3b-4b12-8fa3-d0f0d4e27d7c/.

[42] "Invitation Defended," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), August 4, 1965, 5.

son and another striker in his place, John Henry's transition from sharecropper to social movement leader was swift, as evidenced by the White House's rapid recognition of him as the spokesperson for the strikers. He eventually made a trip to Washington D.C. on behalf of Strike City, but at the time of this first invitation, he thought his leadership was needed more at home. The community had no permanent buildings yet and was staring down one of the harshest winters in state history. Strike City consisted of primarily army tents, barbed wire clotheslines, one single-hand water pump, wood or coal heaters, and a wood and concrete block structure that served as a community center and cafeteria. Hope, resilience, and a desire to inspire also radiated from the community as exemplified by a sign that marked the outer boundary of the property. The sign featured the words "Strike City" and "M.F.L.U. Local #4" and a painting of a Black fist holding a piece of a broken chain. The concrete block structure was constructed by a group from the University of Pennsylvania that included roughly twenty students, a professor, his wife, and their eight-month-old child, who sacrificed the latter part of their holiday breaks to raise money and build the structure.[43] But Sylvester epitomized the strikers' spirit by refusing to back down. He saw the difficult winter as an opportunity to demonstrate their resilience and inspire other workers to join the strikes – despite the considerable decline of the MFLU. He said, "If we can make it [through the winter] more people might walk off the farms at planting time. If we can't last it out, people going to think a long time before they strike."[44]

As winter approached, the strikers not only faced the weather but the hegemony of White solidarity. They had begun construction on homes for eight families, but they needed heaters. The strikers sought large butane gas tanks that would allow them to set up heating systems for the homes, but White dealers refused to sell them the tanks, citing an obscure regulation that the systems must be installed by a contractor licensed through their own program. Although the contractors the strikers used were licensed, the White butane sellers insisted it was the wrong license. Even when one seller finally agreed to a deal with the strikers, other White people convinced him to back

[43] "Vacationing Students Work in Miss. Freedom Village," *Afro-American* (Baltimore), January 8, 1966, 13; "Students Try Raising $10,000 Fund in Dixie," *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 27, 1965, 4.

[44] "Winter Is Bitter Handicap," *The Chicago Defender*, December 4, 1965, 5.

out of the deal.[45]

This combination of circumstances gave additional layers to Sylvester's determination to survive the winter and serve as an example for other people across the region. The weather alone was a formidable obstacle but when paired with the backlash from local White people, the odds became increasingly stacked against them. It became imperative that the strikers demonstrate to other potential strikers that Black communities could organize and become self-sufficient and survive even the harshest circumstances.

Unfortunately, a similar mass strike would be unlikely regardless of whether the strikers survived the winter or not. The industrialization that had begun twenty years prior was increasing every year, decreasing the planters' need for labor. Coupled with federal legislation that decreased the number of acres of cotton planted beginning in 1966, the system of sharecropping that Sylvester and his colleagues fought to improve was coming to an abrupt end. Estimates at the time predicted that between twenty thousand and seventy thousand Black famers would lose their jobs in Mississippi due to a combination of mechanization and federal cutbacks in cotton production[46]. Moreover, local political activity and rumblings in Congress about extending minimum wage laws to include farmworkers encouraged planters to mechanize and adopt chemical fertilizers even more rapidly than they had already planned.[47] So the strikers' demands continued to evolve.

Sylvester Goes to Washington

By February, the population of Strike City had nearly doubled, reaching about 150 people, but over the next few months the number decreased to about fifty and often fluctuated as many families moved to temporary housing elsewhere (including another tent city in Issaquena County and Mount Beulah College in Edwards, Mississippi).[48] Sylvester

[45] Letter from Frank Smith to Marion Fiore, Montgomery—Mississippi, Tribbett and Brick Factory, fsMontgomeryR2S25000, Micro 44, Reel 2, Segment 25, "Strike City" (Lucile Montgomery Papers, 1963-1967), Wisconsin Historical Society, Historical Society Library Microforms Room.

[46] "Tent City Rises Near White House," *Daily Independent* (Kannapolis, NC), April 4, 1966, 7.

[47] "Aid to Delta Negro Often Backfires," *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 1966, 4.

[48] ""Tent City' Becomes Home of Striking Delta Negroes," *The Sun* (Baltimore), February 21, 1966, A3.

was one of the few remaining mechanics in Strike City as most others had taken other jobs and/or moved out of state. He elected to continue to fight locally, assuming two formal leadership roles – vice president of Neighborhood Developers, Inc. based in Jackson, Mississippi, an organization dedicated to housing poor Blacks across the state where he would help secure funding to purchase land and construction materials for Strike City, and chairman of the Strike City workers.[49]

In his role as vice president of Neighborhood Developers, Inc., Sylvester finally made his first trip to Washington D.C. This time no invitation awaited him. John Henry and the president of the organization, Frank Smith, led a contingent of thirty Strike City strikers and about sixty other assorted Mississippi farm workers to check on an anti-poverty grant proposal, which they had submitted a few months prior and to protest the snail-like pace of the review.[50] The farmers grew tired of idly waiting for politicians and decided to take the fight to their doorstep. The set of proposals filed by Neighborhood Developers, Inc., Delta Opportunity Corporation of Greenville, Mississippi, and Poor People's Corporation of Jackson to the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) totaled about $1.4 million, which the workers intended to use to underwrite a "Freedom City" planned to cover about four hundred acres, primarily in Greenville. This Freedom City would include a variety of permanent houses and self-sustaining enterprises to ensure the economic freedom and sustainability of Mississippi's Black farm workers.[51] The group erected a set of tents in Lafayette Park, directly in front of the White House because Smith had rallied support from Democratic congressmen Adam Clayton Powell, William F. Ryan, and Jonathan B. Bingham, of New York, and Philip Burton of California.[52]

Smith spoke powerfully of the plight of the strikers to the congressmen, "We're here because Washington seems to run on a different schedule. We have to get started right away. When you live in a tent and people shoot at you at night and your kids can't take a

[49] "Tent City Rises Near White House," *Daily Independent*, April 4, 1966, 7.

[50] Al Kuettner, "Negro Migration from South is Result of Economic Displacement in Farming Revolution," *Statesville Record and Landmark* (Statesville, NC), April 27, 1966, 12; "Negroes from 'Strike City' Wonder About Poverty Aid," *Associated Press*, April 1, 1966.

[51] "Strike City Funds Stalled," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), May 25, 1966, 4.

[52] "Negroes from 'Strike City' Wonder About Poverty Aid," *Associated Press*, April 1, 1966.

bath and your wife has no privacy, a month can be a long time, even a day . . . Kids can't grow up in Strike City and have any kind of a chance."[53] Smith's words touched the congressmen. Burton expressed his discomfort with the situation, "I'm having a great difficulty keeping my stomach in order. Nothing we seem to do, no law, no program we pass, seems to be able to help the people who need it the most."[54] And Powell vowed to pressure the OEO to examine the farmers' requests, and although he called a special committee meeting to address their complaints and eventually sent a personal representative to assess the circumstances in the Mississippi Delta, the strikers returned to Mississippi for Easter with no more certainty about the standing of their grant proposals than when they embarked on their trip.[55] Government officials claimed they required more information before they could approve the proposals.[56] They said the grant proposals left too many unanswered questions about land ownership and land acquisition to hand money to the farmworkers even though the farmworkers claimed they had legitimate access to land acquisition and, in some cases, such as that of Strike City, already owned land.[57]

Later that year, on May 26, 1966, Sylvester, in his role as chairman of the Strike City workers, accompanied three other men—George Williams, Wallace Green, and Frank Smith—to Chicago for a two-day tent-in to bring attention to their plight in Mississippi and ask for financial assistance to construct a well to replace their water pump.[58] Sylvester emphasized the importance of the well for the health of the community. "[R]ight now we are getting our water supply from a pump and in order to purify the water now being used it would take so much chlorine that the people, along with the bugs, would be poisoned."[59]

The Strike City workers were already working with a Chicago organization that provided grants to build permanent homes, and they had already nearly completed construction on eight brick homes.

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Richard Corrigan and Robert Greene, "Camp-Out in Park Ended, Miss, Negroes to Quit City," *The Washington Post*, April 8, 1966, B1; "Adam Clayton Powell to Send Staff Member to Strike City," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), April 3, 1966, 3.

[56] "Strike City Funds Stalled," *Delta Democrat Times*, May 25, 1966, 4.

[57] Ibid., 4.

[58] Washington, "Tent Dwellers Ready to Return to Mississippi," *The Chicago Defender*, May 28, 1966, 3.

[59] Ibid., 3.

They had plans to raise another $25,000 to build a brick factory, and eventually other businesses, to provide trade jobs and stem the tide of Black Mississippians fleeing north for jobs.[60] One of the eight $3,500 permanent homes was undoubtedly for the Sylvester family as John Henry reiterated his commitment to his home in Mississippi, "I don't see why people should have to leave their homes in the South. I'd rather stay here and fight than come North . . . Negroes still living on plantations see what we are accomplishing and are becoming less afraid of what will happen if they decide to leave or if they are forced to leave."[61] He continued to stand strong even in the face of their ongoing adversity. One of the other strikers described their conditions, "None of us has any leisure time. We are all, men, women and children, working, building, painting. When you have to get up in the middle of the night to wring out the rain-soaked blankets and try to get your kids warm, then get up the next morning and pump for the water you need, then you understand our needs."[62]

Despite the hardships, Strike City showed glimpses of thriving. Perhaps most importantly, since leaving the plantation, children were able to attend school full-time, and the community established literacy programs for adults. Previously, the children were forced to organize their school attendance around the planting schedule, only attending during the down time of the year and working during planting and harvesting season.[63] This educational gain was a significant victory. Black education had been beholden to the farming schedule ever since Black people were allowed to attend school, and even when the state implemented a universal public education system and mandated school attendance for minors, Black students were still often unable to attend.[64] The community also demonstrated a commitment to democratic processes and community welfare programs. They met often at the community center to make governing decisions; they developed their own tax system to pay the bills for the community center and the water pump; they developed their own welfare program and law enforcement; they secured a deal to sell cosmetics to raise money for the

[60] Ibid., 3.

[61] Ibid., 3.

[62] Ibid., 3.

[63] Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton House to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 124.

[64] Ibid., 124.

community; and they planned to start a community corporation where residents could buy stock and most of the profits would be reinvested in the community. They also sought to deepen their political education expertise by developing a series of committees to research certain areas and to learn ways to enrich the community. The committees included a housing committee that would seek an understanding of good housing policies, one that would help people acquire housing, an education committee that would develop community-centered education that focused on the best ways to educate rural children and adults, a welfare programs committee that would improve distribution infrastructure to encourage the federal government to release control of the welfare programs to the community, and a business committee that would explore feasible business ventures for the community.[65]

Unfortunately, capital continued to be a barrier against establishing a permanent community. The wheels of federal bureaucracy continued to turn slowly, denying the strikers ready access to government assistance, and although they received a fair amount of support from a wealthy benefactor through Neighborhood Developers, they continued to lack the funds to implement and maintain most of their ideas and programs.[66] Much of the community's long-term sustainability hinged on the construction of the brick factory, which would serve multiple functions for them. Bricks would provide materials they could use to construct their own houses and buildings, a site for them to provide trade training, and ultimately a source of profit as they could sell the surplus bricks.[67] But the $25,000, in addition to other funds the community needed, proved too much for them to raise. They continued to sell cosmetics and searched for other ventures to build the community around, but nothing materialized, and the people living there could only tread water for so long.[68]

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[65] Letter from Frank Smith to Marion Fiore, (Lucile Montgomery Papers, 1963-1967), Wisconsin Historical Society.

[66] Basil Talbott, Jr., "Civil Rights Angel: A Profile," *Chicago Sun Times*, August 7, 1966, 2.

[67] Brick Factory Meeting, September 11, 1965, Montgomery—Mississippi, Tribbett and Brick Factory, fsMontgomeryR2S25000, Micro 44, Reel 2, Segment 25, "Stick City" (Lucile Montgomery Papers, 1963-1967), Wisconsin Historical Society, Historical Society Library Microforms Room.

[68] Letter from Frank Smith to Marion Fiore, (Lucile Montgomery Papers, 1963-1967), Wisconsin Historical Society.

Aftermath

By mid-1967, the tents were gone, and the remaining residents all had jobs and permanent housing in a variety of one and two-story houses and apartment structures.[69] However, their agitation and perseverance contributed to a number of legislative victories across the state.

The attention the strikers drew to the plight of Black farmworkers in the Delta helped move Congress to extend federal minimum wage coverage to farmworkers in February 1967, guaranteeing a $1.25 hourly wage.[70] But this wage increase proved to be the death knell for plantation labor across the state. Increasing agricultural industrialization had already decreased the need for massive numbers of workers on plantations. Machines and chemical weed killers displaced thousands of workers, who were forced to leave the South in search of industrial jobs in the Northeast and Midwest because the mere rumors of a minimum wage caused planters to contract their labor supply. The actual implementation of a minimum wage for farmworkers led planters to dramatically reconsider how they wanted to manage their plantations. One planter said, "[1967] was the first time we really found out what labor efficiency could mean. We knew we couldn't use any more casual labor because of the minimum wage and now we're finding we don't need as much specialized labor either."[71] That year, at least one part of the cotton growing system was completely mechanized as planters moved to machine-picking 100 percent of the cotton as opposed to 90 percent as in 1966, even outpacing previous estimates about the time to full mechanization.[72] Other concessions from the federal government included food grants that finally hired poor people to help with the food distribution (which had been a sticking point in the past), two statewide job training programs, and eighteen adult literacy and vocational programs across the state.[73]

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[69] John Carr, "The Mood of the Washington County Negro Seems to be One of Contentment," *Delta Democrat Times*, July 9, 1967, 8.

[70] Gene Roberts, "In Mississippi Delta, More Pay Means Fewer Jobs," *New York Times*, February 13, 1967, 1.

[71] Michael Sistrom, "Economic Justice and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi," in *Reconsidering Southern Labor History: Race, Class, and Power*, eds. Matthew Hild and Keri Leigh Merritt (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2018), 198.

[72] Gene Roberts, "In Mississippi Delta, More Pay Means Fewer Jobs," *New York Times*, February 13, 1967, 1.

[73] Sistrom, "The Freedom Labor Union," 191-204.

Over the years, the number of people living in Strike City continued to steadily decrease as the community fell into ruin and residents abandoned their houses. By the 1990s, almost all of the original strikers were gone, having moved or died, but Strike City and John Henry Sylvester were still there. Sylvester and his family remained in Strike City until his death in 2008.[74]

What is the legacy of John Henry Sylvester and Strike City? The Mississippi Delta in general, and Washington County in particular, remain among the poorest places in the country, and Strike City never became more than an unincorporated community, so small that one could drive through it and never realize it was there. Arguably, the strike failed to improve the living conditions of Black Mississippians. Although they were able to force Congress to expand the minimum wage law to include farmworkers, most strikers were still forced to leave in the face of mechanization just as they would have if no strike had ever occurred. Indeed, Paul Good reported in 1965, "This will mean still more Negroes coming off farms as fewer men do more work . . . This was inevitable but the strike will speed things up. Complete mechanization is believed to be possible within three to five years."[75] Even the other concessions from the federal government did little to alleviate the widespread suffering of Black Mississippians. But the residents of Strike City risked all they had to spit in the face of racialized economic oppression and continued to fight long after the civil rights workers and northern White liberals left the state. Sylvester, especially, showed an unmatched dedication to the Black South, refusing to yield to intimidation or to leave his home, even when facing the physical and political violence of local White people and the unrelenting ire of the weather. He chose to fight for the state at a time when so many others were understandably abandoning it, and resistance, especially in the face of almost certain defeat, is valuable regardless of whether it moves the heavy pendulum of oppression. Resistance has a humanizing effect on its participants and those around them. It is a reminder to those in power that, although they may remain in control, they will not effortlessly trample the humanity of those they see as underfoot. This spirit is archetypical of resistance in Mississippi and is exemplified by John Henry Sylvester and the founders and residents of Strike City.

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[74] "Obituaries," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), August 21, 2008, 9.

[75] Paul Good, "Plantation Owners Losing Strike," *The Washington Post*, July 5, 1965, A8.