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Mill-Worker Consciousness, Music, and the Birth of Revolt

> *As the song rang out, the workers on the side lines began to draw nearer to our group. Their lips began to move; soon they were singing. Then we started to march again, two by two, two by two, the line growing longer and longer. The timid ones had been swayed by the militants; the revival spirit again gripped the crowd. From a window of one of the mills a worker shouted that the bosses had locked them in until quitting time but that they were coming out to join us. We answered with a cheer and sang louder, more sincerely than ever, "For the Union makes us strong" . . . The strike was on.*
>
> —Fred Beal

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The year 1929 was a cornerstone in southern labor history, and a foreshadowing. Thousands of southern mill workers, often portrayed as lethargic or docile, walked off of their jobs in somewhat sporadic fashion, with little organizational resources, and in the face of powerful opposition from both mill owners and southern governors. The strikes themselves ended sometimes through very small concessions from owners, but, more often than not, through elite- and state-sponsored violence. Importantly, and despite the worker defeats that occurred, the 1929 strikes, particularly those in Gastonia and Marion, North Carolina, laid the groundwork, provided lessons, and aroused mill-worker consciousness throughout the region—a consciousness that would spread and intensify during the much larger General Textile Workers' Strike of 1934.

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Prior to the Gastonia and Marion uprisings, a strike occurred in Elizabethton, Tennessee, and smaller strikes followed those in Gastonia and Marion. Yet, the strikes in these two North Carolina towns stand out as especially important. Within each emerged a clear repertoire of, and a solidaristic strategy that entailed, music and song. Gastonia, on the outskirts of Charlotte and its WBT radio, was fertile ground for the recruitment of musicians in the South. In fact, many of the musicians about whom we have already spoken came from Gastonia. It should thus come as no surprise that within this one town song was used as the cohesive force and battle cry for workers' rights.[1]

Marion, nestled in the remote mountains of western North Carolina, had a long-standing tradition of Appalachian culture and music. For this reason, many early radio musicians, such as Bill Monroe, "Pappy" Sherrill, and J. E. Mainer and his Mountaineers, would congregate outside the mill villages of Marion from time to time to play together, and share songs with the local residents.[2] On clear nights, Marion workers could pick up Charlotte's WBT radio over the airwaves or programming out of weaker stations in Asheville and Spindale, North Carolina.[3]

The traditional tunes and mill-related songs that became important to the strikers in Gastonia and Marion, it appears, may have been picked up, disseminated, and used by mill workers throughout the region.[4] At the very least, oppositional themes were highlighted and the use of music in workers' protests was established. Simply put, these earlier strikes activated an oppositional cultural blueprint that would further unfold in 1934.

Notable as well is the fact that workers in both locations began organizing prior to any systematic or formal involvement of unions.[5] Indeed, it was eventually workers themselves and their desire to organize and strike that brought the union in, rather than the reverse scenario where unions came in and tried to mobilize workers. Such incidents, which have occurred in other industries as well, challenge assumptions regarding the class-conscious character of American workers, or the lack thereof. Instead, an indigenous radicalism, along with related oppositional cultural repertoires, can and often do arise even in the most extreme and controlled situations, regardless of whether there is formal social movement organizational presence or resources. Although in both cases a union was eventually drawn in, it was only after workers' grievances and their desire to strike were established.

In the case of Gastonia, the organization that came in took the form of the Communist-led National Textile Workers Union (NTWU). In Marion, in contrast, workers recruited in the AFL's United Textile Workers (UTW). This divide in union presence was characteristic of most southern mill work-

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ers at the time. About a third who struck in 1929 had no formal union leadership, another third were associated with the NTWU, and the final third with the UTW.[6]

Despite this division in union affiliation, or the lack of affiliation, the 1929 strikes tended to unfold with workers taking the lead, and receiving little in the way of organizational support or resources from unions. Moreover, workers in Marion and Gastonia employed similar strategies and faced the same elite countermobilization and violence. These two towns consequently became the most visible southern mill towns in 1929, as seven mill workers and a sheriff were killed and the state militia was used to quell worker insurgency. The sociological relevance of these initial strikes lies in the fact that resistance unfolded in each despite considerable mill-owner power. Resistance was also internally driven within each rather than being forged by a union. Finally, both instances were rich in terms of oppositional cultural creation and use.

Music and the Development of Oppositional Culture in Two North Carolina Mill Towns

Marion and Gastonia were steeped in both textile work and music tradition. Marion had three large textile mills: East Marion, owned by the Baldwin family of Baltimore, Maryland, and two others, the Clinchfield and Cross mills. Gastonia's most visible Loray Mill, owned by Manville-Jencks of Rhode Island, was the largest mill in the South. Beyond the Loray Mill, Gastonia also had more than fifty smaller mills and the highest concentration of spindles of any county in the South.

Marion's location at the base of the Appalachian Mountains drew many workers from the hills. Some noted an independent streak especially among workers from the mountains, and attributed the radicalism that unfolded in Marion to these "mountain" populations.[7] In their move from the mountains, these workers also brought along their traditional music. Their songs addressed their everyday lives and Appalachian history. Now in Marion, their music was adapted to address their new reality of working in a textile mill and living in a mill village.

Along with workers, local musicians and those from the Charlotte area who were willing to make the trip typically congregated and played at Greasy Corners, the local hamburger grill adjacent to the East Marion Mill.[8] The Baucomb brothers of the Tobacco Tags radio and recording group, previous mill workers themselves, were from Marion. They later moved to Gastonia and traveled throughout the southeast with the burgeoning number of radio stations seeking live music. The Tobacco Tags even played at strike events.

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The Monroe brothers likewise played in Marion, as did Jimmie Rodgers. Wade Mainer of the group J. E. Mainer and the Mountaineers noted that his brother, J. E., worked in the textile mills of Marion.[9]

Marion is on the main route between Hickory and Asheville and only eighty miles from Gastonia. It thus became a standard stop for musicians. Al Wall, who played with some of the earliest of southern radio figures, notes that Marion's location, jobs, and number of local musicians made it an ideal place for musicians to gather.[10] Along with worker grievances pertaining to paternalistic policies and the stretch-out, the deeply rooted Appalachian cultural tradition of many of those working in Marion and nearby towns, as well as the link to early, home-grown musicians, helped ensure that song would become a cohesive tool.

If Marion was geographically close to music and radio musicians, Gastonia was practically the core. Just outside of Charlotte, Gastonia was a hotbed of music and mountain migrants. With its high concentration of spindles, it also seemed to be a bastion of opportunity for job seekers. Recruiters for the mills often took advantage of this fact. Owners, however, quickly found out that with the implementation of the stretch-out their workers were not as compliant as they had hoped. Discontent was stirred, and it ran deep.

Many who migrated to Gastonia were steeped in traditional music and its thematic legacy of protest and the hard life, so song became the grievance outlet for many, and small musical groups within the Gastonia mill complex began to perform. These mill musicians of the 1920s were usually second-generation mill workers. Notable among them was Dave McCarn, who was born in Gaston County and worked in the mill as a young boy. In 1930, he wrote and recorded "Cotton Mill Colic," a song about the consequences of life in the mills. Malone (2002, 35) notes that "Performers who previously worked in the cotton mills, such as David McCarn and Howard and Dorsey Dixon, or who grew up in mill families, have in fact constituted the single largest body of occupational-derived performers in country music." The chorus to "Cotton Mill Colic" expresses McCarn's feelings about the cotton mill as a means to make a living:

> I'm a-gonna starve and everybody will
> You can't make a living in cotton mill.

The recording of "Cotton Mill Colic" sold out quickly in Gastonia and became popular throughout the textile belt. McCarn never took the pursuit of music as an occupation too seriously, although he did record a few songs

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with other Gastonia musicians called the Yellow Jackets.[11] He saw music largely as a diversion from the drudgery of mill work.

Other musicians came out of Gastonia and became famous within the region. "Whitey" Grant of the Briarhoppers was one such celebrity. He recollects the notoriety some of the music received and its reception in the village:

> Some good musicians come out of [mill towns] . . . I knew several of those [Tobacco Tags] . . . A lot of the boys that we knew, or heard of, after we came in formed bands and they would get together in the cotton mills and the first thing you know they would form bands . . . On Saturday or Sunday, when the mill wasn't running, they had a little band stand up there and draw a big crowd.
>
> Wilmer Watts and the Lonely Eagles of Gaston county recorded "Cotton Mill Blues" for Paramount. He "moved to Belmont in Gaston County seeking work after World War I. Watts spent his entire adult life in the mills, at times, a skilled loomfixer, but he left his mark as a spirited string-band musician rather than as a textile hand."[12]

Musicians like McCarn, Watts, and the members of the Tobacco Tags performed for mill-worker audiences, and often sang songs about life in the cotton mills. These songs did not praise the work, but rather pointed out its problems. Poor working conditions, the stretch-out, cotton dust, long hours, low pay, and unreasonable supervisors were key themes. Their songs resonated with other mill workers, partially because of these themes, but also because these musicians themselves were seen as mill workers, with credible claims, who often met workers face-to-face as they traveled.

The class-conscious character of the music appealed to mill worker's tastes, while at the same time speaking to their sense of discontent. Some from Marion and Gastonia, such as Watts, McCarn, and the Tobacco Tags, traveled throughout the region and had firsthand experiences as mill workers. Others, such as Ella May Wiggins and Sam Finley, had no professional experience as musicians but nevertheless sang songs of solidarity and resistance within their mill villages. In doing so, they became leaders to their fellow workers. An oppositional culture was no doubt already present in Gastonia and Marion, but the musicians who performed and created the new songs helped forge, if not legitimate, this protest repertoire, something that became important in the strikes and those that would follow in 1934.

The Gastonia Strike

Gastonia had the largest mill in the South, the Loray Mill, owned and operated by Manville-Jencks Corporation of Rhode Island. Many other nearby

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mills, including those in Bessemer City, were also involved in the strikes that unfolded in 1929. Conditions were much the same as those at other southern mills: twelve-hour shifts, five days a week, and half a day on Saturday. Paternalism prevailed, according to historian Thomas Tippett (1931, 68), who witnessed Gastonia firsthand in 1929:

> The company store and credit system kept most of the employees in debt to the mill. There were company boarding houses, company churches, and a company playground. The cotton mill dominated every phase of life in the village which it owned, body and soul.

The Manville-Jencks Corporation recruited the poorest people it could find for its Loray Mill. The hope was that lower wages could be paid, and that desperate workers would be the least likely to cause trouble.[13] Indeed, many were from elsewhere. Their families moved to Gaston County specifically to seek work. This recruitment from outside set up a situation whereby locals developed a clear sense of "us and them." Town folk, who often worked in service industries or held more supervisory jobs in the mills, saw the workers as "trash" or "lint heads," owing to the cotton dust that stuck in their hair. Many local farmers likewise saw those engaging in mill work as a lower order of worker and citizen, if not outright sellouts. Many of those working in Gastonia's mills felt torn about the move themselves, as many came from the blighted farms of the southern Piedmont.

The mill villages of Gastonia were much like Erving Goffman's total institution, with strict control in most facets of daily life, and where one might be expected to abide by the confines of a particular role (in this case, mill worker).[14] But, these mill workers were not like Goffman's mental patients. Despite significant constraint and control, they possessed a spirit of individualism that rivaled even that of the local middle class. Many had been small, yeoman farmers from the Piedmont and mountains, or their parents had been. The outsider's perspective on the mill worker as a docile and compliant laggard was a misconception—one that would soon fall by the wayside.

By the late 1920s, owners of the Loray Mill charged their managers with the task of increasing profits, even in the face of a downturned economy. The stretch-out system was consequently instituted, resulting in more work for some and no work for others; many workers were laid off. This policy also prevailed in other mills. Workers quickly came to resent the stretch-out system, with its oppressive supervisors, long hours, and low wages. The promise of a good life in the cotton mills had brought many of them from the hills and mountains adjacent to Gastonia. Yet, this promise remained

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unfulfilled. A disheartened and often angry workforce grew tired and began to organize and seek help. This led to social upheaval on a scale never before seen in this small southern town. As a precursor, fifty workers had already staged a wildcat strike a year earlier, in 1928.[15]

The bigger strike at the Loray Mill began on April 1, 1929. Workers went on strike over conditions in the mill and the villages that made their lives nearly unbearable at times. Although there was NTWU presence in the form of organizer Fred Beal, it was a local worker, Will Truet, who was "itching for action" and who organized workers initially for a meeting with Beal. Beal recounts mill workers' native radicalism:

> A capable fellow, this Will Truet; in one hour he somehow managed to notify all the membership of the day-shift about the meeting without going near the mill . . . I had spoken in a conversational manner, as one person to another, but the reply I received was more like a mass-meeting. The room turned into a bedlam of shouts and whoops. There were cries of "Strike Now! Strike Now! We've Suffered Enough!"[16]

NTWU involvement was moderate at best, and NTWU resources devoted to the unfolding Gastonia strike were minuscule given the size and importance of the campaign.[17] Beal himself notes these facts along with Gastonia workers' own desire for insurgent action in his recollections of what occurred. Efforts a decade earlier by the AFL-affiliated United Textile Workers in Gastonia focused more on negotiations with management than on strike action—a fact that workers remembered, and that lingered in their sense of betrayal and anger. Aside from their past experience with the UTW, the Gastonia workers did not really know what the differences were between the two unions. What they did know is that they wanted collective action and a walkout, and the NTWU and Fred Beal specifically assured them that their take on the situation, and their desire to strike, were legitimate.

Following the firing of several workers for attending an open meeting, workers began to congregate in the small union hall. Beal recollects what occurred:

> They got in the corner and sang hymns . . . They marched around the side of the hall singing whatever songs came to their minds. From experience I knew the tremendous value of singing the right songs on the picket line. These workers knew none of the union's strike songs. To overcome this, I typed a number of copies of Solidarity . . . Since the bosses had already fired a large number of workers, I asked the night workers, at the conclusion of my speech, for a strike vote. The vote was unanimous,

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many putting up both hands. There was great enthusiasm, whoops and mountaineers' yells, the like of which I had never heard.[18]

During the first strike day, all was quiet and orderly, with approximately 1,800 of 2,200 workers taking part in the strike. Strike demands included better working conditions, no more piecework, a five-day work week, an eight-hour workday, repairs to company-owned houses, and recognition of the union.[19] The relatively peaceful beginning of the strike changed as interactions between the strikers and law enforcement became less cordial. Soon, the atmosphere was highly charged and leaders on both sides became more determined—the strikers to change the mills and the mill owners and law enforcement to enforce the status quo. The atmosphere in Gastonia would only intensify as time wore on, and as red-scare rhetoric was increasingly espoused by the *Gastonia Gazette*.

The *Gastonia Gazette* was instrumental in raising the pitch of the debate and creating a outside menace, fueled by red-scare fanaticism. Soon, all who struck were seen as being outside agitators, rather than locals who just wanted fair working conditions. That there was any NTWU presence only made the situation worse, as the paper charged that the strike was not about grievances felt by local workers, but rather reflected the manipulation of local workers by outside agitators and Communists. The paper's editorial page spewed forth foul accusations against anyone associated with the strike, and based its critique on ideologically slanted coverage presented in the Communist *Daily Worker*. Perhaps most well known in this regard were the *Gazette*'s editorials titled "A Deep Laid Scheme" and "Red Russianism Lifts Its Gory Hands Right Here in Gastonia."

Such editorials created public aggression toward strikers, caused workers to question their own national and religious loyalties, and had long-term consequences for southern attitudes toward organized labor.[20] The irony is that most workers were simply protesting unfair conditions rather than defending or fighting for a broader ideological stance,[21] a fact that Fred Beal was aware of and respected, but that nevertheless caused tension between him and Communist Party leaders.[22] Despite the red-scare strategy used by elites, letters poured into the Gastonia NTWU headquarters from nearby towns "begging" for someone to help organize their mills.[23] Within Gastonia, striking workers maintained solidarity through nightly meetings. The use of song, and the charismatic appeal of Ella May Wiggins, a worker, balladeer, and mother, undoubtedly helped in this regard and reinvigorated workers.[24]

They [nightly meetings] were interspersed with songs, reports from other strike areas, and tales of local incidents between strikers and the boss-

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> men. No evening passed without getting a new song from our Ella May, the minstrel of our strike. She would stand somewhere in the corner, chewing tobacco or snuff and fumbling over notes. Suddenly someone would call for her to sing and other voices would take up the suggestion . . . The crowd would join in with an old refrain and Ella May would add verse after verse to her song. From these singers would drift into spirituals or hymns and many a "praise the Lord" would resound through the quiet night.[25]

Ella May penned approximately ten songs that would be used throughout the strike. Along with songs by Gastonia mill children such as Odell Corley and previous Gastonia workers turned musician such as Dave McCarn and Wilmer Watts, the songs by Wiggins resonated with mill workers' experiences.[26] Particularly impressive was the interplay of exploitation themes and concerns for one's children—something that resonated with most and that came from Wiggins's own experience of losing four of her children to pellagra.

Not only was song used on the picket line and in mass meetings, but it was also used among those who were arrested and taken to jail. Vera Buch Weisbord recalls sitting in a Gastonia jail cell one night with other female strikers:

> We sang a lot: "Solidarity Forever," the "Passaic Battle" hymn, the words of which we told them had been adapted by our union leader, Albert Weisbord, "The Red Flag," and some Wobbly songs. The strikers sang their own beautiful plaintive ballads, "Barbry Allen" and many more. It was time for unburdening a lot of grievances, personal histories and confessions, all very revelatory and important for Amy and myself. I wish I could remember all that was told, for we became much closer to the Loray strikers during that long night.[27]

Within one week of the strike's beginning, Governor Gardner, a North Carolina mill owner himself, sent in five companies of state militia. Skirmishes erupted between picketers and militiamen on a regular basis, as troops patrolled the streets and attempted to end all forms of picketing. Strikers responded by holding meetings and setting up a relief depot on the outskirts of the village. Local courts attempted to forbid this, and any union meetings, by issuing injunctions against any union activity whatsoever. State militia and local police enforced these injunctions through violence and mass arrests. According to Tippett's (1931, 87) eyewitness account:

> Their reaction to this unwarranted brutality is one of the most outstanding phases of the struggle. Their parades were broken up by force every

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Figure 14. Two female strikers attempt to disarm National Guardsman sent to protect the Loray Mill. Courtesy Bettmann/Corbis.

> day, and just as consistently the strikers would form again the following day to march, with full knowledge of what they were doing, into the clubs and rifles.

A local owner-sponsored mob, known as the "Committee of One-Hundred," tore down the union hall where supplies were kept. They smashed the building to bits and spread the supplies on the ground, covering them with chemicals. National Guardsmen sleeping a short distance away did nothing to stop the destruction but showed up later and arrested some of the strikers who were on hand.[28] The viciousness of this raid helped the strikers gain some sympathy from outsider organizations and newspapers in Greensboro and Raleigh, North Carolina. The American Civil Liberties Union was brought in to defend workers' right to organize and protest. Mill-owner power nevertheless went relatively unchallenged when, on May 6, eighty-five families were evicted from their mill housing. In response, evicted strikers formed a tent city outside of town. The land, described by Vera Buch Weisbord (1974) as "free land," was not owned by the company.

By June, hunger and desperation had arrived in the tent colony. Many began crossing the picket line to return to work, although these workers

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Figure 15. The Howitzer Company of the 120th Infantry of the North Carolina National Guard, on duty on the grounds of the Loray Mill. Courtesy Bettmann/Corbis.

Figure 16. William Truitt and his family after eviction from their company-owned home by police deputies. Courtesy Bettmann/Corbis.

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also periodically staged scab walkouts to disrupt production. On June 7, a mass march on the union ground was disrupted by the throwing of eggs and rocks. Later that evening, during a skirmish between a few striking workers at union headquarters and a few deputies, the chief of police, Aderholt, was shot and killed. Sixteen strikers and leaders, including Fred Beal, were arrested on charges of murder and conspiracy to murder. None were ever indicted for firing the shot that killed Aderholt, although all of them, thirteen men and three women, spent the summer in prison awaiting what would become a sensational and nationally viewed trial. Charges against nine were eventually dropped, and, despite a weak case, the other seven were found guilty and sentenced to five to twenty years of hard labor.[29]

Figure 17. Cover of the September 1929 issue of Labor Defender. *Courtesy Bettmann/Corbis.*

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During the trial, the Committee of One-Hundred continued to terrorize the tent colony of striking mill workers, threatened, beat, and chased out of town any organizers, and threatened the lives of defense attorneys. The workers, in response, planned a massive rally on September 14 near the Loray Mill, which would include those from neighboring mill towns such as Bessemer City where conditions were described as even worse than those in Gastonia. An armed mob responded by blocking roads to Gastonia and targeted the truck carrying balladeer and mill mother Ella May Wiggins, who was subsequently shot and killed. A picture of her surviving five children was printed on the cover of the *Gastonia Gazette* the next morning. A mass funeral was held by striking workers in Bessemer City, at which her songs about the mill workers' plight, including "Toiling on Life's Pilgrim Pathway," "Chief Aderholt," "The Big Fat Boss and the Workers," and "Two Little Strikers," were sung. Perhaps the song that resonated most was "Mill Mother's Lament," sung by a fellow female striker standing next to her grave as others listened and sang along.[30]

Violence against strikers and organizers continued throughout the fall of 1929. The North Carolina supreme court upheld the convictions and sentences of the seven accused of killing chief Aderholt, while all of those put on trial for killing Ella May Wiggins were acquitted within two weeks. According to Tippet (1931, 108), the strike had been devastated and defeated by winter:

> There was no open activity of the National Textile Workers. The union had been driven completely underground. The huge Manville-Jencks mill was working its usual 12-hour shifts; the wages had been further reduced; the operatives were as undernourished and as miserable as before the strike. Ella May Wiggins was the only one at peace. The tent colony was no more; the old union hall remained. From an improvised flag pole nailed on its side the stars and stripes were flying in the breeze. The flag had been run up there by the Committee of 100 to indicate to the world that the Loray cotton mill and America had won.

The Marion Strike

Workers at the East Marion and Clinchfield mills were at their wit's end in the summer of 1929, much like their compatriots in mill towns like Gastonia and over the mountains in Elizabethton, Tennessee. Conditions at the mills and in the villages were poor. Both mills were controlled by outside owners from the North who cared little about the conditions, and whose presence in the mill village was a limited occurrence. This is in contrast to

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those working in the Cross Mill, a mill locally owned by the Cross family, who were perceived by workers as caring and as part of the mill workers' community.[31]

The conditions in Marion were some of the worst in the industry.[32] Author and journalist Sinclair Lewis was in Marion that summer and described the situation that workers faced, noting the dilapidated housing, poor nutrition, and an insurmountable cycle of debt to the company store. Sicknesses such as tuberculosis and pellagra were rampant.[33] Despite being much smaller than Gastonia, Marion grew as a focal point for the national press and media as nearly 25 percent of the city's population of eight thousand went on strike in the summer of 1929. Even more notable was the killing of six strikers by the local sheriff and his deputies.

As was the case in both Gastonia and Elizabethton, worker dissatisfaction and the stretch-out, rather than mere union presence, undergirded workers' desire to stage a walkout. In fact, Marion workers went out of their way to find an organizer who would help them plan the strike they desired. Radio and newspaper reports of what was occurring in both Elizabethton and Gastonia offered some sense to mill operatives in Marion that they could change their situation. Three operatives made their way over the mountains to Elizabethton seeking advice and help.

> They just kept tightening down on people. And Roy Price, and Lee and another fellow, Ashton, talked to a man over there at the labor camper. And he couldn't help us much, but he told us where to go to find this union organizer, Fred Hoffman. There was a strike at that time in Elizabethton, Tenn. We went over there to find out what to do, and he come back with us, and started to organize. Well, they took in anybody that wanted to join.[34]

Unlike those striking in Gastonia, Marion workers recruited into their town Alfred Hoffman, an organizer of the AFL's United Textile Workers, who warned workers about affiliating or associating with Communists as the Gastonia strikers had done.[35] Despite the difference in union presence, however, workers' desired strategy of walking out, their strike demands, and the elite countermobilization they experienced were strikingly similar.[36]

By mid-June, enough workers at the Clinchfield and East Marion plants had signed with the union and began to hold open meetings. Because a larger segment of the East Marion Mill was organized (nearly three-quarters versus about 20 percent at Clinchfield), initial attention and resources were devoted to the East Marion Mill. The two mill villages nevertheless shared information and took part in meetings and rallies throughout.[37] The re-

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sponse of R. W. Baldwin, a Baltimore lawyer and owner of the East Marion Mill, was swift. He called a meeting of all of his employees in which he made a speech with not so thinly veiled threats. Red Hall, a worker at the East Marion Mill, recalls:

> Well, Mr. Baldwin, he wanted to make a speech to all the mill. We knew he was gonna do it that day. And he shut the mill down. And they brought two big horses up there, and put boards on it. He was a short feller, a lawyer, like I said, a Baltimore lawyer. And they set him up on that. And people was standing in the mill grass and sitting in the mill grass. I got me a seat down on the bank, where I could hear it, every bit of it. He wouldn't speak till he sent and got Hoffman [UTW organizer]. He [Hoffman] was staying at the hotel. So, some of them, they brought him over there. And he [Hoffman] was standing up beside him [Baldwin] before he spoke. He [Baldwin] got to speaking and he told what all the company had done. He said, "We pay as good a wage as we can. We hope to pay more and we can sometime." But he said, "Things is tough right now." He said, "We built this building out here for people to use, a place for your kids to play, gotta place for them to go to church and school." Well, he made a good speech. But, then he said, "Why do you want to give this son of a bitch [Hoffman] your money?"

Baldwin's reaction to the union meetings was to hire company spies to create a list of those involved, and to fire them immediately. Sam Finley remembers the moment when he was told to leave the mill:

> When I come into work that evening, the supervisor met me at the door and had my pay. And he handed it to me. And I said: "What's this for?" "Oh," he says, "you know what it's for." "No," I said, "but I'd like to know." I says, "Is my work satisfactory?" "Absolutely perfect; there's nothing wrong with it." "Well," I says, "What did I do?" He says, "It's for joining that union and getting uppity too." I said: "Well, I admit to joining the union." I said: "But I have not been trying to get uppity." "Well," I says, "I've got nothing else to do now but . . . " "Oh, don't do that." I said, "Well, you've left me nothing else to do."

Union meetings continued nightly as more and more workers were laid off at the East Marion plant. In a futile effort to remedy the situation, mill workers attempted to meet with Baldwin, but were simply ridiculed. Such events precipitated the July 21 walkout by the East Marion workers, despite the direction and efforts of national AFL president McMahon and

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local organizer Hoffman to prevent the strike. Indeed, aside from Hoffman's presence, the AFL office of the United Textile Workers provided little, if any, support to the Marion strikers.[38]

Strikers in East Marion nevertheless drew strength and solidarity from both religion and song, much as their counterparts in Gastonia had done. The generation of a cohesive, oppositional culture expressed through song first became apparent at their nightly meetings:

> The people themselves were expressing the sensation of industrial freedom for the first time in their lives. Hymns from their churches were sung at the strike meetings, and were later transcribed into the songs of the strike. Religious emotions too were transferred into the labor struggle. A striker would rise to speak, and in his zeal for the brotherhood of unionism he used the very terms of a church revival meeting.[39]

The picket lines that formed around the mill gates were likewise situations where song was used to express unity and solidarity and, like Ella May in Gastonia, local leaders and balladeers such as Sam Finley emerged.

> Every evening, they'd meet down there at the mill and this old flat-bedded truck. They'd put some chairs up on it. Old Sam Finley, he'd get a guitar and he come up to our house and stop and sing. They'd sing some of them songs they made up. They'd say "Old Dory Wood" (that was Mrs. Wood, she was such a good woman), said "Old Dory Wood, she'd join us if she could. Old Mr. Yellowdog, take him away." And they talk about Jim Law and the boss Cautheron. They'd sing, "Old Man Loftin, he drinks his capedine, but we won't let him sit on the picket line. He just a yellow dog, take him away."[40]

Others sang for striking workers but, according to Red Hall, preferred not to be quite so visible to mill managers and owners.

> Now, they made a song about the stretch-out system. Seem like them Hall boys come out with it. Jay, Hugh, and Jerry and his other brother, they was together. They got them to singing up here at the café one night. We was up there. They said, "How about singing that song?" They said, "Well, shut the door." They couldn't let nobody hear it. They was . . . they worked at the mill. They talked about the old stretching out. They said, "the elevator, it won't stretch."

Although free space in which to assert grievances was harder to find in Marion than Gastonia, workers nevertheless found safe locations in which

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to do so. They also shared songs at Greasy Corners, the local hamburger joint, with traveling radio musicians, according to Al Wall, an early radio entertainer.[41] Perhaps this is why Marion strikers, along with singing their own ballads, sang more popular mill tunes such as "Factory Girl," "Cotton Mill Girl," and "Hard Times in Here."[42]

Historian Thomas Tippett (1931, 292) recalls that it was not only the balladeers that sang, but all workers on the picket line:

> Everyone who participated in the early part of the Marion strike will remember those days—the picket lines at night with their camp-fires burning; the women and men stationed there chanting re-written Negro spirituals across the darkness to inspire faith and courage; the mass meetings oftentimes in a downpour of rain, and the strikers singing.

In the early days of the strike, workers from the East Marion Mill would stage parades between their mill village and that of the Clinchfield Mill, with "thousands of singing workers in line."[43] Although Clinchfield supervisor Hart did not initially taunt or fire his union employees the way Baldwin did in East Marion, he began to lay off union employees by late July and, sensing a walkout, locked the doors to the plant. When he tried to reopen the plant on August 19, employees of the Clinchfield Mill staged a picket and joined the strikers of East Marion. While the AFL largely turned a cold shoulder to the strikers,[44] the strikers did receive some limited support from other organizations, such as Brookwood Labor College, the Federal Council of Churches, the Quakers, and the Young Women's Christian Association. Most pressing was food, for which strikers predominantly relied on sympathetic farmers on the outskirts of town.[45] Mill owners, in response, sought court injunctions against strikers and spurred the governor to send in the National Guard, which he did.

Strikers responded to the repressive presence of National Guardsmen, and efforts to halt their picketing, by trying to keep those crossing the picket line from sleeping. They did so by throwing dynamite on lawns and driving through the mill villages late into the night, singing and shouting from the back of trucks.[46] Eventually, the National Guard set up in the East Marion village, essentially suppressing all strike activity in what amounted to control by force and martial law. Officially, the strike was called off on September 11, when a settlement was reached. The settlement entailed a "gentlemen's agreement" to reemploy striking workers, except for twelve whom Baldwin did not want back, and a reduction from sixty-five to fifty-five hours a week (with a corresponding reduction in pay). Hoffman of the

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UTW left Marion that evening and left John Peel, a UTW organizer, to handle the aftermath. National Guard troops were likewise removed and Baldwin returned to Baltimore.[47]

Almost immediately following the agreement, Hart of the Clinchfield Mill and Hunt, superintendent of the East Marion Mill, disregarded the terms of the agreement or simply added names to their blacklist of people they would refuse to employ. More than a hundred strikers at the East Marion plant were refused reemployment. With Peel at a national UTW meeting in South Carolina and more union workers being denied work, Baldwin returned to Marion, met several times with the local sheriff, and stationed several deputies around the East Marion Mill. A spontaneous strike occurred in the middle of the night, when a weaver was reprimanded for union activity. Workers left the plant, marched through the village, and left some stationed outside to let the morning shift know another strike was on. The sheriff, in response, deputized and armed several mill supervisors.

By morning, workers were picketing the mill entrance against the sheriff's orders, while operatives for the morning shift refused to cross the picket line. What occurred next has been debated widely, although it appears that Sheriff Adkins released tear gas near the face of a sixty-five-year-old striker, who began to grapple with the sheriff. Deputies opened fire on the crowd, injuring twenty-five seriously and killing six, just two weeks after the murder of Ella May Wiggins in Gastonia.[48] Evictions from company-owned housing followed shortly thereafter.

National news reporters rushed to Marion from Gastonia. Union forces swore out warrants for the mill superintendent, the sheriff, and his fifteen deputies. During the trial, deputies claimed that they shot back in self-defense, although no gun was found among the workers and all of those killed were shot in the back. Not one mill official or deputy was hurt. At the first hearing, all were released, with the exception of seven deputies, who were later found not guilty. In a mass funeral on October 4, the slain workers were buried without the presence or participation of local ministers.[49]

Following the shooting of workers and the funerals that followed, union activity came to a standstill. Petitions to get the governor to undertake a special investigation fell on deaf ears. The union essentially divested itself from organizing more workers. Those who had participated in the strike had no protection whatsoever from the massive blacklist that was generated and that continued to be used against the children and grandchildren of the Marion strikers as late as the 1990s.[50] This is not to suggest that the insurgent spirit of Marion strikers was quelled, but rather that the union itself lost interest and hope. The mill community in Marion was certainly

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Figure 18. Community funeral for slain Marion strikers. Courtesy Bettmann/Corbis.

torn and in pain,[51] although many, according to Tippett (1931, 166–67), understood why they had to stand up against the mill barons and did not regret expressing themselves collectively.

> Never once did we hear a word of regret or bitterness because of their struggle. And we would talk of other things to remove the specter of their plight. But the strike always crept in. We might be swimming or rowing boats—way out into the lake under a cool moon. From another boat or on the shore some ex-striker would send across the water the opening bar of one of the old strike songs, it would be picked up by others in the water—and soon the old strike meetings, the old parades, the whole spirit of their lost struggle would animate the lake and live again. In their souls the Marion strikers still retain hope.

Conclusion

Despite the defeats in Gastonia and Marion, the two strikes hold theoretical relevance for those interested in strike action and insurgency, while also providing practical implications for those wishing to understand the union organization and strike activity that would occur in the South into the early

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1930s. Indeed, many of the dynamics that played out in Gastonia and Marion in 1929, including the native radicalism of workers, the creation of their own oppositional cultural practices, limited union involvement and support, and the manipulation and use of state coercive apparatuses by local elites, would play out on a much grander scale in the years to come.

The desire of workers to take action was internally driven rather than being forged by a particular union. In Gastonia, workers were practically organized and most assuredly had discussed the possibility of a walkout before NTWU organizer Fred Beal even arrived. In Marion, workers similarly discussed the possibility among themselves and then sought the formal organizational advice of the United Textile Workers. These facts run counter to certain assumptions about American workers. Such assumptions include the view that unions radicalize workers and convince them to walk out. Another is that American workers, and particularly those from the South, are conservative, if not incapable of expressing, through words or action, their class character and interests. Marion and Gastonia workers, living in the relatively oppressive and controlled confines of the southern mill village, saw, for a moment in history, the possibility of collective revolt, even if that revolt was merely of the reformatory variety. The two quite ideologically distinct unions that were drawn into the fray generally followed the workers' lead, although, in the case of Marion, actually attempted to quell workers' desire to walk out. That southern workers were or are conservative, or that they somehow disliked or distrusted northern unions, is not supported by the evidence and firsthand accounts.

The radicalism that unfolded in each case was, interestingly enough, forged and expressed through preexisting cultural practices, most notably music and singing—practices that reach far back into Appalachian mountain culture, leisure-time activities, and political-economic expression. Some of this was spurred on by very early traveling mill musicians, such as Charlie Poole, and later by others such as Dave McCarn, the Tobacco Tags, and Wilmer Watts. By 1929, many of these musicians, beyond traveling for personal appearances, began to find a new outlet through records and the earliest radio stations at the time, which were just beginning to discover and disseminate "hillbilly" music. The interim period, between the 1929 strikes and the massive 1934 strike, would witness many more station foundings in the textile belt and more radio airtime being taken by ex-mill musicians, who would share and play traditional and mill-specific songs over the southern airwaves.

Music was part of everyday cultural practice and identity building among mill workers. This translated into grievance sharing while on the job and, as

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the cases of Gastonia and Marion demonstrate, into oppositional expression at mass meetings, while on the picket line, and even during periods of defeat and death. That a balladeer and mill mother would become the martyr and symbol of the Gastonia struggle, and that another singer and union leader would be specifically targeted by Marion deputies,[52] speaks not only to the centrality of song and the charismatic and emotional power of singers, but also to mill owners' awareness of those posing the greatest threat to their interests. The centrality of song would only intensify later, as more ex-mill musicians cut records and received airtime, and songs forged in these earlier struggles, including one called "The Marion Massacre," would become popular across mill communities.

Although one might expect that the violence occurring in Marion and Gastonia, and the media publicity surrounding it, would sway workers in the region from undertaking such action themselves, historical accounts suggest that this was not the case. Rather, the two campaigns and the grievances and demands that were shared, if anything, invoked further mill-worker identity and consciousness. For example, a strike broke out in Danville less than a year later, and that same year, other workers in Marion, Gastonia, and many other mill towns approached UTW organizers to start an organizing drive. The union however, having suffered defeats in Marion and Elizabethton and running low on resources, essentially turned the workers away.

> A committee from there came for a second time to request an organizer. A group had signed up and applied for a charter. The United Textile Workers, fearing a strike, did not send one. Thus various opportunities for useful union activity were allowed to slip by largely because of the lack of a union policy and leadership.[53]

That the courts, the state militia, local deputies, and mill-sponsored mobs suppressed the strikes speaks quite clearly to the strength of southern mill owners. The governor of North Carolina, a mill owner himself, not only provided national guardsmen for the defense of the mills and their property, but chose not to intervene or forge any form of investigation of what occurred. His rationale had to do with the power of mill owners statewide[54]—a power that would remain intact and that would be drawn upon again during the 1934 strike.[55]

Although this southern elite power dynamic did not change in the aftermath of the 1929 strikes, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and his use of radio in the interim period of 1933 and 1934, did seemingly alter the leverage of mill workers throughout the entire textile region. His radio fireside chats, which workers looked forward to hearing, gave them the sense that federal

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power and authority were now on their side. Many workers, increasingly connected through radio, political broadcasts, and a common music, now looked beyond the confines of their one mill village toward a broader southern community of textile workers and their friend in the White House. As one observer of the 1929 strikes forecast:

> A new labor renaissance is at hand. The American Federation of Labor can take it or leave it alone, but down underneath the southern unrest is a germ with a will to live that neither mobs nor massacres nor prisons can extinguish.[56]

In 1934, the spirit of the 1929 strikers would indeed be rekindled, and on a magnificent scale.

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