

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

Robert L. Reece
Department of Sociology
The University of Texas at Austin
305 E 23rd St, A1700
RLP 3.306
Austin, TX 78712-1086
Robert.L.Reece@gmail.com

Accepted for publication – Journal of Mississippi History

The Mississippi Delta is the name given to the alluvial flood plain of the Mississippi River that extends from Memphis, TN to Vicksburg, MS. 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 1800s 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 slaves. 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, where 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 were meager, if there were any profits at all; many found themselves sinking deeper into debt year after year.² Challenges to the system were often met with swift and cruel violence³. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff describes one such incident, demonstrating the lengths white Mississippians would go through 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

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 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).

³ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴ 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).

World War I provided new opportunities for black Southerners. The threat of black workers leaving to join the military or fill industrial needs in cities forced plantation owners to raise their wages to attract and maintain labor. In some places wages rose as high as \$1.50 per day for a field hand and \$4.50 per day for a mechanic, but these wages would not change much more 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 pipes 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 continued to lag behind their white counterparts at \$1444 relative to white people's \$4209, and the black infant mortality rate in 1963 stood at 53.1 per 1000, higher even than its reported low of 40 in 1946, while the white infant mortality rate was 23.1 per 1000. The following year, in 1964, black mothers accounted for 48 of the total 57 maternal deaths in the state and 1631 black children died during their first year of life, accounting for roughly 16 percent of the total black deaths, while the comparable 599 white children who died in 1964 only accounted for five percent of white total deaths that year.⁶

Mississippi demanded dramatic change, and in May 1965, about 5 miles to the southeast of the then 7,000 person town of Leland, Mississippi, against a backdrop of increasing industrialization and mechanization, the workers on one of the area's most prominent plantations, 1300 acres owned by the Andrews Brothers, took a stand against the oppressive tenant farming system and went on strike as a part of the first series of strikes in the area since the 1930s⁷. Led by John Henry Sylvester, they 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 their founders envisioned, Strike

⁵ Ibid

⁶ "Aid to Delta Negro Often Backfires," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 24, 1966.

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*, 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>>.

City still contributed to prominent economic and political victories across the Mississippi Delta and provided a beacon of hope and resistance to local people.

CIVIL RIGHTS COMES TO MISSISSIPPI

In 1961 and 1962, organizers from the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Confederate 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 and voter registration drives, preparing communities for the long fight that was ahead of them if they sought to peel back the power that white Mississippians had largely monopolized over the previous century. They were often met with violence by local white people but national organizations countered by sending even more organizers to the state and 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 the infamous 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 step up their 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

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

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)

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 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 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. And 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, 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 victory 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 gripes turned into organizing as a group of farm workers from Shaw, Mississippi presented their idea for a union to the

¹⁰ Charles Payne. *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2007)

¹¹ *ibid*

M FDP, the National Council of Churches' Delta Ministry, and the remaining SNCC organizers in the area.¹² In April 1965, the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU) was officially born when 45 Shaw farmworkers, with a newly drafted constitution and a set of specific economic demands voted unanimously to found the union and go on strike at the Seligmann plantation. In just two weeks, they had registered 1000 people and over 200 workers were on strike across the Delta.¹³ The union's platform called for a \$1.25 minimum wage, an 8-hour work day, free medical coverage, basic income for people unable to work, an end to working under the age of 16 and over the age of 65, accident insurance and social security benefits covered by their employer, and federal unemployment¹⁴.

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, and women and children who were used to chop cotton and pull weeds only received .30 an hour, which amounted to \$3 for a 10-hour work day¹⁵. The wages had changed little since WWI, and the work, especially the chopping and weed pulling, was seasonal, only available from May until September, often forcing workers who lived on plantations to take out loans from planters to survive the offseason, which ultimately drove them deeper into debt.¹⁶ In the non-growing season, the average black family only earned about \$12 per week, well below the federal

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

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

¹⁴ Donald Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted From Planation in Mississippi," *New York Times* (New York) Jun 4, 1965.

Michael Paul Siström, "'Authors of the Liberation': the Mississippi Freedom Democrats and the Redefinition of Politics." Doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002): 262

¹⁵ Donald Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted From Planation in Mississippi," *New York Times* (New York) Jun 4, 1965.

Paul Good, "Plantation Owners Losing Strike Cotton Pickers Cannot Win," *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), July 5, 1965.

¹⁶ Donald Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted From Planation in Mississippi," *New York Times* (New York) Jun 4, 1965.

Richard Corrigan, "Camp-Out in Park Ended, Miss. Negroes to Quit City," *The Washington Post* (Washington DC) April 8, 1966.

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 required to obtain the signature of every planter they had worked for over the course of the year. This 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 government for more funds and for them to have more control, if not complete control, over distribution, but the government dragged their 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 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 selected for their unwillingness to rock the boat too much.

Issac Foster, a resident of Greenville, Mississippi, who had recently begun working at Andrews’ Plantation with his mother after he was fired from his job at the Greenville Mill for participating in a picket, visited the MFLU in Shaw and brought the information to the Andrews’ workers. Soon after, they also voted unanimously to go on strike.¹⁹

The strike of workers from the Andrews Plantation and the founding of Strike City is often mentioned in passing in the literature, presented quickly among a list of examples of resistance in the

¹⁷ Michael Siström, “The Freedom Labor Union: Economic Justice and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.” Pp 191-204 in *Reconsidering Labor History: Race, Class, and Power* edited by Mathew Hold and Keri Leigh Merrit (Gainesville, FA: University of Florida Press, 2018).

¹⁸ Press conference transcript, Wisconsin Historical Society, Kaplow--Friends of SNCC - General, 1964-1967, undated (Alicia Kaplow papers, 1964-1968; Archives Main Stacks, Mss 507, Box 1, Folder 8)

¹⁹ Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

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, the goals and successes of the community, and the 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 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 like Fannie Lou Hamer²¹, John Henry is homegrown. He is from and of rural Mississippi; his politics were shaped by his experiences there and rather than leave the state and flee north like so many others, he was determined to make his stand in the place he considered home and create change for future generations of black Mississippians. I hope to elaborate on the local character of civil rights in Mississippi by focusing on the rise to prominence of Strike City, how the strikers endured, their long term goals for their community, how they sought to achieve those goals, and John Henry's leadership trajectory therein.

THE FOUNDING OF STRIKE CITY

John Henry Sylvester was one of 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 as 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 rehiring them in smaller numbers as seasonal laborers.²³ But John Henry recognized that his

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

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

²² "Winter Is Bitter Handicap For Plantation Strikers," *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago), Dec 4, 1965.

²³ Donald Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted From Planation in Mississippi," *New York Times* (New York) Jun 4, 1965.

relatively privileged place among sharecroppers fell well short of fair compensation and was likely on the verge of being phased out. He remained undeterred from participating 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, John Henry, his wife, and six children were the first to leave the plantation, accompanied by 6 other families, totaling about 80 people.²⁵ This initiative would represent only the first of many leadership roles that he would occupy 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, but the Andrews’ high status connections allowed them obtain an injunction from a local judge the next day to not only limit picketing to four people at a time but 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, and owners of

²⁴ Paul Good, “Strike of Cotton Workers Agitates Separate Strands of Delta Society” *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), July 6, 1965.

²⁵ Donald Janson, “Negro Walkouts in Delta Spurred: Rights Groups Turn Attention to Labor Activities,” *New York Times* (New York), Jun 7, 1965.

²⁶ Paul Good, “Plantation Owners Losing Strike Cotton Pickers Cannot Win,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), July 5, 1965.

²⁷ Paul Good, “Strike of Cotton Workers Agitates Separate Strands of Delta Society” *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), July 6, 1965.

²⁸ Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

neighboring plantations sent their own tenant farmers to tend to the Andrews Plantation.²⁹ The four picketers that stayed behind, John Henry included, camped on the land of Roosevelt Adams, the only black farmer in the area. They began their picketing at 4:30 every morning despite the violence they faced, including shots fired over their heads, an ammonia spray attack, their car tires being slashed, at least one attempt to run them over, and one of the strikers' elderly mother's house being burned to the ground.³⁰ The Andrews and other planters tried to circumvent the strike using other workers, but once they encountered the picket line and spoke to the Andrews' previous residents, they 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 to 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. They 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 9 hour work day. Nine tractor drivers in Glen Allen won a raise from \$6 per day to \$7.50 per day.³² And a few other workers around saw modest raises

²⁹ Donald Janson, "Negro Walkouts in Delta Spurred: Rights Groups Turn Attention to Labor Activities," *New York Times* (New York), Jun 7, 1965.

³⁰ Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

³¹ Donald Janson, "Striking Negroes are Evicted From Planation in Mississippi," *New York Times* (New York) Jun 4, 1965.

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

Paul Good, "Plantation Owners Losing Strike Cotton Pickers Cannot Win," *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), July 5, 1965.

³² Mississippi Freedom Labor Union report, undated. University of Southern Mississippi Digital Collections. <https://usm.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_c4b6ff3a-9b23-4541-ac8b-53263a682341/>

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 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 13 army tents and settled on 5 acres of Roosevelt Adams' land just outside of Leland, near the Andrews' Plantation.³⁵ On August 30, the strikers moved into these tents, and eventually they were able to purchase the land for \$2500.³⁶ Strike City was born. The site was originally dubbed "Tent City," and the residents endured the ever-present threat of white 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 while pumping their water from a one-hand pump where the safety of the water was always in question, and set up a small business handcrafting nativity scenes for sale.³⁸

By this point, the MFLU who 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 union, and other national labor unions, save for the United Auto Workers, were reluctant to

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

³⁴ Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

³⁵ Barnes Carr, "'Christmas Carpenters' Coming to Aid Tribbett Farm Strikers," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), Dec 22, 1965.

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

Betty Washington, "Tent Dwellers Ready to Return to Mississippi," *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago), May 28, 1966.

³⁶ "Winter Is Bitter Handicap For Plantation Strikers," *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago), Dec 4, 1965.

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* (Chicago), Dec 4, 1965.

lend financial support as well. ³⁹The Delta Ministry did not think the strikes would yield long term gains, but they nonetheless supported the union even though they lacked 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 would soon be 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 John Henry'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 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 would eventually make 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 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

³⁹ Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

Michael Siström, "The Freedom Labor Union: Economic Justice and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi." Pp 191-204 in *Reconsidering Labor History: Race, Class, and Power* edited by Mathew Hold and Keri Leigh Merrit (Gainesville, FA: University of Florida Press, 2018).

⁴⁰ Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

⁴¹ Memo, Margaret Lauren to the northern offices, undated, 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.

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 20 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 structure⁴³. But John Henry epitomized the strikers’ spirit, again 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. They 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 out of the deal.⁴⁵

This combination of circumstances gave additional layers to John Henry’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

⁴³ “Vacationing Students Work in Miss. Freedom Village,” *Afro-American* (Baltimore), Jan 8, 1966.

“Student Try Raising \$10,000 Fund in Dixie,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, Dec 27, 1965

⁴⁴ “Winter Is Bitter Handicap For Plantation Strikers,” *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago), Dec 4, 1965.

⁴⁵ Letter from Frank Smith to Marion Fiore, Wisconsin Historical Society, Montgomery--Mississippi, Tribbett and Brick Factory; “Strike City” (Lucile Montgomery papers, 1963-1967; Historical Society Library Microforms Room, Micro 44, Reel 2, Segment 25),

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. The industrialization that began uncertainly 20 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 John Henry and his colleagues fought to improve, was coming to an abrupt end. Estimates predicted that between 20,000 and 70,000 black famers would lose their jobs in Mississippi due to a combination of mechanization and federal cutbacks in cotton production⁴⁶. 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.

JOHN HENRY GOES TO WASHINGTON

By February their numbers had nearly doubled, reaching about 150 people, but over the next few months the number decreased to about 50 and often fluctuated as many families moved to temporary housing elsewhere, including another tent city in Issaquena County and Mount Beulah College in Edwards, Mississippi⁴⁸. Sylvester 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, MS, 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

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

⁴⁷ "Aid to Delta Negro Often Backfires," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 24, 1966.

⁴⁸ "'Tent City' Becomes home of Striking Delta Negroes," *The Sun* (Baltimore), Feb 21, 1966.

⁴⁹ "Tent City Rises Near White House," *Daily Independent* (Kannapolis, NC), April 4, 1966.

In his role as vice president of Neighborhood Developers, Inc, John Henry finally made his 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 30 Strike City strikers and about 60 other assorted Mississippi farm workers to check on an anti-poverty grant proposal they 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 that the workers intended to use to underwrite a "Freedom City" which they planned to cover about 400 acres, primarily in Greenville, Mississippi. 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, as Smith was able to rally support from Democratic House Reps. 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 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 representatives. Rep. 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 Rep. Powell vowed to

⁵⁰ Al Kuettner, "Negro Migration from South is Result of Economic Displacement in Farming Revolution," *Statesville Record and Landmark* (Statesville, NC), April 27, 1966.

"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.

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

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

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 in building a well to replace their water pump.⁵⁸ John Henry 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

They 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. 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

⁵⁵ Richard Corrigan and Robert Greene, "Camp-Out in Park Ended, Miss, Negroes to Quit City," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C), April 8, 1966.

"Adam Clayton Powell to Send Staff Member to Strike City," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), April 3, 1966.

⁵⁶ "Strike City Funds Stalled," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), May 26, 1966.

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Betty Washington, "Tent Dwellers Ready to Return to Mississippi," *The Chicago Defender* (Chicago), May 28, 1966.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

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 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 community; and 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

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Ibid

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

to deepen their political education expertise by developing a series of committees to research certain areas and learn ways to enrich the community, including a housing committee that would seek an understanding of good housing policies and 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 for 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 programs⁶⁶. 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

⁶⁵ Letter from Frank Smith to Marion Fiore, Wisconsin Historical Society, Montgomery--Mississippi, Tribbett and Brick Factory; "Strike City" (Lucile Montgomery papers, 1963-1967; Historical Society Library Microforms Room, Micro 44, Reel 2, Segment 25)

⁶⁶ Basil Talbott, Jr. "Civil Rights Angel, a profile." *Chicago Sun Times*, August 7, 1966.

⁶⁷ Brick Factory Meeting, September 11, 1965, Wisconsin Historical Society, Montgomery--Mississippi, Tribbett and Brick Factory; "Strike City" (Lucile Montgomery papers, 1963-1967; Historical Society Library Microforms Room, Micro 44, Reel 2, Segment 25)

⁶⁸ Letter from Frank Smith to Marion Fiore, Wisconsin Historical Society, Montgomery--Mississippi, Tribbett and Brick Factory; "Strike City" (Lucile Montgomery papers, 1963-1967; Historical Society Library Microforms Room, Micro 44, Reel 2, Segment 25)

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.

They managed to draw sufficient attention to the plight of black farmworkers in The Delta that Congress extended federal minimum wage coverage to farmworkers in February 1967, guaranteeing a \$1.25/hr 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 mass 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, and mere rumors of a minimum wage cause 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

⁶⁹ John Carr, “The Mood of the Washington County Negro Seems to be One of Contentment,” *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), July 9, 1967.

⁷⁰ Gene Roberts, “In Mississippi Delta, More Pay Means Fewer Jobs,” *New York Times* (New York), Feb 13, 1967.

⁷¹ Michael Sstrom, “Economic Justice and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi,” in *Reconsidering Southern Labor History: Race, Class, and Power*, edited by Matthew Hild, and Keri Leigh Merritt, University Press of Florida Press (Gainesville, FL, 2018): 198

⁷² Gene Roberts, “In Mississippi Delta, More Pay Means Fewer Jobs,” *New York Times* (New York), Feb 13, 1967.

the food distribution, which had been a sticking point in the past, two statewide job training programs, and 18 adult literacy and vocational programs across the state.⁷³

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 shall we say 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 is 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 had no strike 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 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

⁷³ Michael Siström, “The Freedom Labor Union: Economic Justice and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.” Pp 191-204 in *Reconsidering Labor History: Race, Class, and Power* edited by Mathew Hold and Keri Leigh Merrit (Gainesville, FA: University of Florida Press, 2018).

⁷⁴ “Obituaries,” *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), August 21, 2008.

⁷⁵ Paul Good, “Plantation Owners Losing Strike Cotton Pickers Cannot Win,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), July 5, 1965.

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, Mississippi.