

African American Resistance in the Rural South from the Great Depression to World War II

As Wall Street collapsed the United States was faced with the threat of yet another social and political crisis which could have prompted a national uprising against capitalism

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During October 1929, the United States economic system was plunged into an unprecedented depression where tens of millions were thrown out of work and their homes.

In the South, the African American people living in major cities, small towns and rural areas were impacted more than any other demographic inside the country.

The Great Depression began under the leadership of Republican President Herbert Hoover who refused to initiate any major policy reforms to seriously mitigate the rising tide of joblessness, foreclosures, evictions and food deficits. The lack of political will on the part of the Hoover administration led to the ascendancy of Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932-33.

Roosevelt realized that the failure to act decisively would prove far more disastrous in light of the mobilization by left wing forces which organized hunger marches, unemployed councils and leagues along with putting forward demands for the institutionalization of social safety nets to curb the level of homelessness and hunger.

Under the Roosevelt administration a New Deal was proclaimed which sought to recorrect the problems which arose prior to and after the Great Depression. An Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) was adopted and implemented through the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA).

However, the AAA exposed the contradictions within the policies of Roosevelt since it did not address the inherent class and national oppressive conditions prevailing among the African American people since the conclusion of the Civil War and the defeat of Federal Reconstruction. The concluding decades of the 19th century witnessed the rise of the Black Codes, lynching and the imposition of tenant agriculture production through sharecropping

and contract prison labor exploitation.

This process continued during the first three decades of the 20th century where African Americans who could not escape the plantations and penal institutions migrated into municipalities in the South, the North and the West. Despite the prosperity of the ruling class in the 1920s, most African Americans remained in poverty. Others who were able to secure incomes as successful commercial farmers, small business owners, professionals and industrial workers were consistently reminded of the institutional racism enshrined in the laws and mores of the U.S.

One source on the period described the AAA as follows:

“Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), in U.S. history, was a major New Deal program to restore agricultural prosperity during the Great Depression by curtailing farm production, reducing export surpluses, and raising prices. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (May 1933) was an omnibus farm-relief bill embodying the schemes of the major national farm organizations. It established the Agricultural Adjustment Administration under Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace to effect a “domestic allotment” plan that would subsidize producers of basic commodities for cutting their output. Its goal was the restoration of prices paid to farmers for their goods to a level equal in purchasing power to that of 1909–14, which was a period of comparative stability. In addition, the Commodity Credit Corporation, with a crop loan and storage program, was established to make price-supporting loans and purchases of specific commodities.” (See [this](#))

Nonetheless, this agricultural policy sparked efforts to organize African American toilers, white farmers and agricultural workers. The consequences of the AAA reinforced the already existing class and racial divisions in the Southern U.S.

The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Unemployed League

In the deep South the decision by the AAA to subsidize landowners to refrain from farming in order to artificially raise agricultural prices had negative consequences for sharecroppers. Although the owners were expected to divide a portion of their government subsidies with the tenant farmers, this was often not the case.



Southern Tenant Farmers Union rally reading the Sharecroppers Voice (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

To the contrary, plantation owners began to evict their tenant farmers both African American and white. The relatively low prices for crops had been blamed on overproduction beginning during World War I. However, it would be the declines experienced on Wall Street beginning in 1929 and the natural disasters such as floods and drought extending from 1927 to 1930-31 which made farming impossible in many areas.

It was the eviction by plantation owner Hiram Norcross of several tenant farm families in Poinsett County, Arkansas in 1934 which prompted the formation of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). The organization was founded by white and Black sharecroppers after extensive discussions. Many of the rallies and public meetings of the STFU were attended and addressed by African Americans and white organizers. Women played a critical role in the early efforts of the STFU through their participation in the Baptist churches which routinely hosted the organizational gatherings.

This character of the STFU and its alliance partner known as the Unemployment League made them targets for the white landowners seeking to maintain their political and economic authority in relationship to the resources supplied by the New Deal policies of the AAA. As the struggle unfolded, there were elements which emerged from the AAA bureaucracy that were frustrated with the apparent bias of the agency towards the large landowners who were segregationists and pro-business. These former AAA workers would join in with the organizing efforts of the STFU.

In a report published by the Arkansas Encyclopedia:

“Another critical factor in the formation of the STFU was the organization of an active socialist local in Tyronza (Poinsett County) by H. L. Mitchell and H. Clay East. Mitchell ran a drycleaning shop in Tyronza and was a former sharecropper from Halls, Tennessee. He became a socialist in Tennessee and later converted East to the cause. The two of them went to meetings in Memphis together, organized the local in Tyronza, and helped to organize the Tyronza Unemployment League in the spring of 1934. The

Unemployment League was an attempt to force the local agencies of the AAA to provide jobs for desperate tenants or croppers. At the instigation of Norman Thomas, the leader of the Socialist Party in the United States, the two men participated in the formation of the STFU.” (See [this](#))

The STFU would expand rapidly in Arkansas, Tennessee and other states between 1934-1938 when it claimed to have 35,000 members. However, factional disagreements would erupt over several important issues regarding the STFU and its relationship to the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), the Communist Party and the Democratic Party. During the course of its early years, STFU had joined the CIO only to withdraw at a later time. Although African American and white members made strides in uniting on major campaigns, tensions would arise with an important factional dispute involving leaders of the STFU such as African American Vice-President Rev. E.B. (Britt) McKinney and Mitchell who left the organization for a period.

Mitchell would return to the STFU in a leadership role in 1941. Nonetheless, the escalation in the production of armaments and the entering of World War II by the U.S. would further fuel the Great Migration to the northern urban areas. Mitchell would continue to serve in leadership positions of the STFU for decades to come.

Significance of the STFU in Shaping the Post-War Civil Rights Movement

Although the STFU would decline in membership and significance, it has been noted for its contribution to the character of the mass Civil Rights Movement which would emerge in the South after WWII during the 1950s and 1960s. The STFU, like the later organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), were heavily based in the African American churches.



Southern Tenant Farmers Union national conference in 1944 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

Moreover, as in the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans and whites who shared radical and liberal views would make strides in building inter-racial unity. As the intensity of the movements of the post-War period would develop, tensions would arise straining, and in

many instances, tearing asunder multinational organizations and coalitions.

In an upcoming article we will reexamine the role of African Americans in the Communist Party, the Sharecroppers Union and other Left formations along with the national campaigns to eliminate peonage during the Great Depression and the WWII era. These historical developments portend much for the current situation in the U.S. where the contradictions and failures within Reconstruction era, the Populist Movement, the New Deal and the Civil Rights legislative initiatives have resulted in the continuing necessity to wage a protracted struggle for complete liberation and social emancipation.

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Featured image: Southern Tenant Farmers Union meeting in Arkansas (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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