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THE LABOR LEAGUE OF JACKSONVILLE: A NEGRO UNION AND WHITE STRIKEBREAKERS

by JERRELL H. SHOFNER*

AFTER THE CIVIL WAR the Florida lumber industry quickly recovered and expanded until it became a major factor in the state's economy. Yellow pine lumber and heavy timber was being shipped from Florida to domestic, European, and Latin American ports in large quantities by 1873. In that year twenty sawmills near Jacksonville employed hundreds of laborers. Lumber was surpassed only by tourism in relative importance to the city's economy. City leaders were predicting prosperity and growth on the basis of an expanding lumber industry and tourist trade. In April, 6,660,000 superficial feet of lumber was loaded on schooners and a few steamers at the Jacksonville docks. About one-fifth of it went to foreign ports.¹ Because of the city's rapid growth, contractors also constituted a major market for Florida's lumber.² City and county taxes were high, however, and the tourist trade tended to drive living costs higher in Jacksonville than in other parts of the state.³

The Florida lumber mills paid better wages than the state's agricultural employers, but not enough to offset the frequent layoffs and the higher cost of living around the port city. Hours were long when the mills were operating and workers received no compensation during the frequent idle periods. Because of the open power saws and somewhat unreliable steam boilers, the work was hazardous. Although there were both black and white laborers, most of the skilled jobs were filled by whites and nearly all of the unskilled workers were Negroes. Blacks constituted a large majority of the entire work force.

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1. Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Republican*, April 15, 1873; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, May 13, 1873.

2. *Savannah Morning News*, July 31, 1873.

3. Jacksonville *Florida News*, May 4, 1873; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, March 25, 1873; William Watts to Menefie Huston, March 20, 1874, Menefie Huston Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

National labor organizing efforts and a series of Negro conventions in the late 1860s had attracted considerable attention from Florida Negro leaders. Partially political in nature and purpose, the conventions were concerned with improvement of labor conditions through collective action. Reluctance of white labor unions to accept blacks was duly noted, and Negro leaders realized that separate organizations were necessary. Black Floridians agreed with this policy and urged collective action for the economic advancement of their race. They were most successful in organizing stevedores and other workers in and around the port towns and least successful in the agricultural areas. The mill workers around Jacksonville formed the Labor League in the early 1870s to promote their mutual interest by common action.⁴

Unable to sustain themselves on the wages prevailing at Jacksonville in 1873 and dissatisfied by the long hours and hazardous working conditions, the Labor League members decided on an action program to redress "relations now existing between capital and labor in this vicinity" which they believed to be "unequally and unjustly balanced." Inadequate compensation and hours too long to "allow the laborer that recreation and rest the laws of his nature demand" were major causes for complaint. At a much publicized meeting, the League voted to demand a minimum wage of \$1.50 a day for unskilled labor, and a ten-hour day as a normal working day, and to do everything in its power to establish these standards in Duval County.⁵ An executive committee was appointed to meet with mill owners and try to negotiate satisfactory arrangements.

In reporting the meeting and its resolutions, the conservative Tallahassee *Floridian* commented that "capital will be able to hold its own in this country for many a day yet. And shall we say that it ought to be otherwise?"⁶ Mill owners insisted that the laborers' demands were unjustified. No one averaged ten hours a day, they argued; even though the work day began at six o'clock in the morning and lasted until nearly sunset, there was ample time for rest during the dinner hour and the almost

4. Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925* (New York, 1927), 161-87; Washington *New National Era*, January 13, 1870.

5. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, May 27, 1873.

6. *Ibid.*

daily changes of saws. The *Floridian* also pointed out that the “utility of strikes is doubtful. It is easy to replace mill workers whose skills are not advanced.”⁷

Despite the explanations and warnings, nearly all of the black mill workers walked off their jobs when the employers refused to accept the Labor League’s demands. By June 7, 1873, seventeen mills were idle and three remained open only with difficulty. One was using a small crew to complete an important order, one had a mixed crew at nearly full strength, and the other was operating with an all-white force.⁸

Picket lines were set up and excitement reached a high pitch in the town, but strike leaders cautioned their followers against violence. Several mill operators, nevertheless, called for police protection for workers who desired to cross the lines. City officials complied. The picket lines were only partially successful and, as the strike dragged on for several days, there were a few attempts to coerce workers who refused to support the strike. Several strikers were arrested for attacking a man and his family and damaging their home because he continued to work. They were brought to trial but acquitted of all charges by a mixed jury.⁹

Like most unions all over the country at the time, the Labor League had no strike fund and its members were unable to subsist long without employment. Many of them found jobs in the woods cutting railroad ties while others sought work in Fernandina where labor was needed. Because there was a backlog of lumber already awaiting shipment when the strike began, the dock workers remained busy loading schooners as they arrived. Meanwhile, the mill owners were hiring white laborers to replace the striking Negroes.¹⁰

By late June the strike was generally recognized as a failure. Most of the leaders had left Jacksonville and sought employment elsewhere, and most of the mills were back in operation. Gradually the strikers drifted back to work at the former pay rates and hours. But many were turned away because their jobs

7. *Ibid.*

8. Savannah *Morning News*, June 3, 1873; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, June 3, 10, 1873.

9. Savannah *Morning News*, June 27, 1873.

10. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, June 10, 1873.

had been filled by both black and white strikebreakers during their absence.¹¹

Comparatively little acrimony and violence accompanied the strike. The mill operators and the conservative press opposed it, but the latter repeatedly acknowledged the laborers' right to reasonable compensation. At the same time, strike leaders were careful to avoid violence against those who refused to respect the picket lines. The strike failed because there were many able men willing to fill the jobs which required little training to perform. There was little awareness in post-Civil War Florida of a rigid division of society between capitalists and laborers. The division along racial lines was much more prominent. Whites who heeded work had little regard for the Labor League which was composed of Negroes. But, blacks also violated the picket lines because of economic need as well as a disregard for the labor organization and its use of the strike to enforce its demands. Within a few months most of the mills were idled by the Panic of 1873 and ensuing depression which reduced demands for Florida lumber for a while. After that happened, people were happy to accept jobs at any wage and the Labor League was unable to continue.¹²

Despite its failure to achieve immediate goals, the Labor League strike of 1873 is still significant. It was undertaken by an organization of recently freed blacks who joined together at considerable economic risk to improve their situation by a method which was only beginning to be used by laborers caught up in industrial changes all over the United States. Laborers were having little success anywhere at the time and 1873 was an especially bad year for organized labor in the country. And, probably because Negroes were still able to vote, the strike attracted attention in the Florida legislature. An 1875 enactment declared that ten hours was to be regarded as a normal working day unless there was a specific contractual agreement

11. Fernandina *Observer*, June 28, 1873; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, July 1, 1873; Savannah *Morning News*, June 27, 1873.

12. J. C. Greeley to H. S. Sanford, October 15, 1873, microfilm of Henry S. Sanford Papers, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History; Aaron Marvin to Edward M. L'Engle, November 17, 1873, Edward M. L'Engle Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 30, 1873; St. Augustine *Examiner*, October 4, 1873; Savannah *Morning News*, July 31, 1873.

stating otherwise. Work beyond ten hours was to be rewarded by additional compensation.¹³

The activities of the Labor League furnished a good example of the recently freed slaves' willingness to help themselves as long as they enjoyed a measure of the rights of citizenship. The mill workers did not go hat-in-hand to a paternalistic employer for favors. With the self-respect and dignity of honestly-laboring free men, they undertook a collective action to obtain reasonable compensation for their labor just as other men were doing in other places and in other kinds of employment at the time. And, in a section of the country where Negroes have often been excoriated by white workers for acting as strikebreakers, the defeat of the Labor League provided at least one example of a Negro union's efforts being thwarted by white scabs.¹⁴

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13. *Laws of Florida*, 1875, 68-69. This was a modest provision since the eight hour day was a major goal of labor unions of the period.
 14. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States*, 160; F. Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge, 1967), 58-70; Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York, 1944), 178.