

1992

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Recommended Citation

Shofner, Jerrell H. (1992) "Communists, Klansmen, and the CIO in the Florida Citrus Industry," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 71 : No. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol71/iss3/4>

COMMUNISTS, KLANSMEN, AND THE CIO IN THE FLORIDA CITRUS INDUSTRY

by JERRELL H. SHOFNER

WHEN the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America, with its CIO affiliation, its inter-racial membership policy, and its alleged and subsequently proven communist leadership began sending organizers into central Florida in 1937, citrus owners and operators reacted swiftly with anger and vigor. The UCAPAWA-CIO confirmed their suspicions that organized labor, communism, socialism, and what the American Legion called “the other isms” were essentially alike—un-American and things to be treated as any other disease. As Frank McCallister, a socialist member of the Workers Defense League, put it in 1938 when a legionnaire called him a “dangerous communist,” “it really is libellous and slanderous to call a man a communist in the south because you do irreparable damage to his reputation. The ideas these people have of a communist would give them complete justification for running anyone out of town who was so classed.”¹

Although the oldest permanent European settlement in North America—St. Augustine—lies within its boundaries, Florida was not far removed from frontier conditions in the 1930s. Without the ameliorating influences of an established society with common institutions, traditions, and beliefs, it was vulnerable to the many real and fancied threats that confounded rural America in the years between the world wars. Despite tremendous growth during the boom of the 1920s, Florida was still rural, agrarian, and southern in the 1930s. Northern Florida had been settled just before the Civil War by cotton-planting, slave-owning people from the older southern states. Central

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1. Frank McCallister to D. L. Clendenin, August 23, 1938, Box 26, Workers Defense League Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI (hereinafter, WDL Collection).

Florida— the citrus district— was settled only in the last third of the nineteenth century by Northerners seeking winter homes in a warm climate and Southerners wishing to escape what they called “Negro rule” after the Civil War. It became a bastion of defense for traditional American ideas of property rights, freedom of contract, and labor as a commodity to be purchased by employers from individual workers. Racial segregation and the belief that blacks were a natural laboring class were also widely accepted— and defended— ideas. The concepts of a minimum wage and full-time employment were also virtually unknown in a region where work was seasonal. Citrus workers and small farmers lived on a credit system, settling their debts when they could, but rarely having money in their pockets. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Floridians reacted with a vengeance to the changes that were transforming America from a people with rural, agrarian, individualistic values to one with urban, industrial, collective conditions whose value system had not yet emerged. When the so-called “Red Scare” erupted after World War I, Floridians launched a series of campaigns against alleged black radicalism, non-Protestant religions, and “un-American” conduct. The Ku Klux Klan was extremely aggressive in Florida in defending “Americanism” against communism, socialism, and “the other isms.” Outside the port cities, Tampa cigar factories, and phosphate mines of Polk and Hillsborough counties, organized labor was practically non-existent except for a few weak craft unions, but it was lumped with the other radical ideas in the lexicon of unacceptable things. Although the Klan declined in Florida, as in the rest of the nation, in the late 1920s it continued to exist and revived dramatically in the mid 1930s to do battle as before.

The indigenous United Citrus Workers began organizing activity in the early 1930s. By 1934 the Florida Klan, allegedly the largest in the nation at the time, had suppressed it swiftly and fiercely.² Night-riders in Orange and Polk counties beat several organizers, and at least one disappeared permanently. Frank Norman left his Lakeland home in early 1934 to attend a meeting and was never seen again.³

2. David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1981), 311.

3. George Clifton Edwards Memorandum, February 28, 1936, Box 142, and Frank McCallister, “Revival of the Ku Klux Klan,” undated manuscript, Box 246, WDL Collection.

The state and nation were aroused in 1935 when Joseph Shoemaker, a mild-mannered socialist residing in Tampa, began receiving attention for organizing a dissident political group called the Modern Democrats. Klansmen, with the apparent complicity of the Tampa police department, abducted and beat him and two of his associates. Castrated and tarred and feathered, Shoemaker died in a hospital after nearly two weeks of suffering, and his ordeal was depicted widely throughout the national press.⁴ The formation of the Committee for the Defense of Civil Liberties in Tampa and the Workers Defense League—both national groups—and the attendant publicity that they gave the Shoemaker incident put some Floridians on the defensive and raised the ire of the Ku Klux Klan. It was while that unsavory episode was in the headlines that the sensational secession of the United Mine Workers from the American Federation of Labor occurred. When John L. Lewis then set about forming the Congress of Industrial Organizations, many Americans regarded the new union as tainted and the American Federation of Labor as within the national mainstream. This belief was reinforced as it became clear that the CIO allowed membership to several communist-led unions.

From the 1880s until 1936 the AFL had been the recognized spokesman for American workers, but it only represented skilled craftsmen. By the latter date far more working people were employed in semi-skilled industrial jobs than were represented by the craft unions. Refusal of the AFL to extend membership to such workers had caused the 1936 break. Although the CIO organization was not perfected until 1938, a flurry of activity under its auspices began earlier. By July 1937 Donald Henderson's UCAPAWA was affiliated with the CIO and had allotted \$40 a week to support one organizer in central Florida. Because local workers were so hard-pressed, they were able to employ four organizers and divided the salary between them.⁵ Spurred by their new rival, the AFL also sent five organizers into the citrus district with a budget of about \$2,000 per month.⁶

4. Norman Thomas to Fred Cone, October 15, 1937, Box 144, WDL Collection; Robert P. Ingalls, "The Tampa Flogging Case, Urban Vigilantism," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 56 (July 1977), 13-27.
5. Apopka *Orange County Chief*, February 1, 1938; H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land* (Montclair, NJ, 1979), 220-22.
6. McCallister to Aron Gilmartin, February 16, 1938, Box 26, WDL Collection.

During the two years following Shoemaker's murder, six Tampa policemen and several Orlando Klansmen were tried for murder and kidnapping. Five policemen were convicted of the first charge, only to have the verdict overturned by the Florida Supreme Court. All were eventually acquitted of all charges, but the episode underscored Florida's intolerance of dissident ideas and its conviction that the CIO was a serious threat. Public pronouncements by several prominent Floridians emphasized the popular association of labor organizers, agitators, and disloyal persons. The Committee for Defense of Civil Rights in Tampa interviewed Governor Fred P. Cone who was in New York to launch a multi-million-dollar advertising campaign for Florida citrus in cooperation with Emily Post, the arbiter of social etiquette. When asked about the Shoemaker affair, Governor Cone replied, "A man ought to be hung on a tree if he advocates overthrow of the government."⁷ Addressing the national convention of Exchange Clubs in Tampa about the same time, Thomas Imeson of Jacksonville branded the CIO a "communistic organization seeking power for the Marxian government." He further declared that the organization would not be permitted in Florida.⁸ Orlando's sixty-eight-year-old mayor-elect, Samuel Way, was even more explicit. He would not tolerate "agitators and radicals," he said, "and CIO leadership . . . is radical." He added that "the AFL, which is sensible, reasonable, and patriotic, will be made welcome."⁹ Even the delegates to a Florida labor convention in 1938 applauded speakers as they condemned the CIO, "communism, fascism, and nazism," as if they were one and the same.¹⁰

In this charged atmosphere, Edward Norman, an impetuous twenty-three-year-old Polk County native, and a handful of associates launched the UCAPAWA-CIO organizing campaign in early 1937, about half-way through the 1937-1938 picking and shipping season. From Sanford on Lake Monroe southward to Frostproof workers signed up with the UCAPAWA, but opposition was strong. Some workers declined to join either because of personal hostility to unionism or fear that employers would retaliate. But even those reluctant persons agreed with the

7. *Tampa Tribune*, October 1, 1937.

8. *Ibid.*, October 22, 1937.

9. *Ibid.*, November 5, 1937.

10. *Ibid.*, April 5, 1938.

union's goals of better wages and working conditions. Employers, on the other hand, were incensed. After conferring with members of the Florida Citrus Exchange about a 1938 strike, Newcomb Barco of the United States Department of Labor reported that "their rage toward Edward Norman and all C.I.O. is terrific, and when I say terrific I mean terrific and and worse. . . . They swear by all Heaven that they won't meet with Norman or any other outsider." Norman was a Polk County native, but, as Barco explained, resentment toward him resulted from "Southern attitudes toward any so-called Labor Agitator."¹¹

In anticipation of difficulties with the United Citrus Workers Union in 1934, Lakeland city officials enacted an anti-picketing ordinance prohibiting picket lines within 400 feet of a citrus packing house. That ordinance became a model for similar provisions in other cities when UCAPAWA organizers began operation in the state.¹² Sanford enacted such a law in 1937 when employees of the Eckerson Fruit Cannery Company prepared to strike in December of that year. Aided by policemen enforcing the ordinance, C. H. Eckerson successfully broke the strike. At a party celebrating his victory at the end of the walkout, Eckerson declared that "breaking of a strike . . . will be of vital importance in preventing future labor troubles here," adding that "red or communistic tactics have no place in Sanford, Seminole County or Florida."¹³

While the UCAPAWA encountered hostile resistance, other labor groups scored small successes. A little-publicized strike at Wiersdale was successful when pickers there refused an offer of six cents a box for picking oranges, demanded eight, and sat down in the groves refusing either to work or to allow others to do so. They held out for several hours and reached an agreement giving them the higher compensation. There was no recognition of collective bargaining, however. Meanwhile, the AFL-affiliated citrus workers union was even more successful, albeit because of a unique circumstance. The national carpenter's union, headed by "Big Bill" Hutcheson, with whom Lewis had a fistfight at the time he withdrew the miner's union from the

11. Newcomb Barco to Director, November 30, 1938, United States Conciliation Service, Department of Labor, Record Group 199, National Archives, Washington, DC (hereinafter, USCS).

12. *Tampa Tribune*, September 1, 1937.

13. *Ibid.*, December 31, 1937.

AFL, established a retirement home for its members at Lakeland. Both the union and Hutcheson owned groves, and he was the owner of the Adams Packing Company at Auburndale. Its employers were members of the AFL citrus workers union. When they demanded union recognition, Hutcheson, as one of the most powerful members of the AFL governing board, was obliged to honor their demands. The union at Auburndale thus became the first in the state to win recognition as the bargaining agent for the employees of a citrus packing house. In his autobiography, H. L. Mitchell, of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, noted the irony of Hutcheson, as a member of the governing board of the AFL, being technically the national representative of the union with whom he had just contracted as their employer.¹⁴

There were few causes for humor elsewhere in the ridge district as the CIO continued signing up members. The Ku Klux Klan once again went public. For the first time in years it held a public funeral in St. Petersburg in October 1937 and placed a full-page advertisement for members in a Tampa newspaper. Klansmen threatened to meet the CIO organizers in the citrus country with violence.¹⁵

Although most of the UCAPAWA-CIO locals formed too late to have much effect on the 1937-1938 picking season, there were several confrontations and at least two strikes. When John A. Snively, president of the huge Polk Packing Association at Winter Haven, announced a reduction of the piece rate from eight to seven cents per box for picking oranges, and from five to four cents for grapefruit, seventy workers refused to work. Assisted by Newcomb Barco and Stanley White of the United States Conciliation Service, Snively and UCAPAWA Local 10 agreed to split the difference, and workers signed a contract for seven and one-half and four and one-half cents respectively. Snively also recognized the union's right to bargain, and he agreed to restore the striking workers to their jobs.¹⁶

The UCAPAWA local at Frostproof demanded and received a contract from W. J. Cody of the Producers Citrus Corporation,

14. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 222; *Tampa Tribune*, November 5, 1937.

15. *Tampa Tribune*, October 19, 1937; Thomas to Robert LaFollette, October 28, 1937, Box 143, WDL Collection.

16. *Apopka Orange County Chief*, April 19, 1938; Memorandum of John A. Snively . . . and Stanley White, April 15, 1938, USGS.

but he soon changed his mind and fired the union spokesman. The workers struck and Cody began replacing them. When Conciliation Service representatives contacted Cody, he agreed to stop using non-union workers and to close the plant until an agreement was reached. But he also remarked that the season was almost over and that his company was about to be liquidated by its creditors. After negotiations led by Stanley White, all those concerned agreed that the plant would continue operating, the creditors would take no action for one year, and the employees would forego any demands for a like period.¹⁷

Cody's financial difficulties emphasized the overall problem that citrus workers and operators alike faced in Florida's ridge district. As a labor department official noted, "It is as gloomy an outlook as any group of people ever faced, growers, packers, and workers."¹⁸ He thought that if the growers could reach an agreement and stop shipping their lower grade fruit, the remainder would bring a price that would enable them to pay living wages and still earn profits. Florida's industrial commissioner, Wendell Heaton, concluded that the absence of some agreement among the producers made it almost impossible for packing houses to pay reasonable wages. "Conditions are turned around," he said. "Instead of the cost of production and processing controlling the market price, the market price is the controlling factor."¹⁹

In addition to the strong locals at Frostproof and Winter Haven, the UCAPAWA also organized workers at Lake Alfred and Auburndale. Their members worked in the packing houses and groves of the Florida Citrus Exchange, the Florence Citrus Growers Association, the Winter Haven Citrus Growers Association, the Winter Haven Fruit Sales Company, H. A. Pollard, Inc., the Coward Fruit Co., the Winter Haven Cooperative Growers, and Auburndale Growers, Inc., in addition to Snively's Polk Packing Association. There was also the AFL Local 21210 at Auburndale that had bargaining contracts with both the Adams Packing Company and the smaller McDonald Corporation.²⁰

17. Stanley White to Director, April 19, 1938, USCS; *Tampa Tribune*, April 19, 1938.

18. Barco to Director, October 7, 1938, USCS.

19. *Tampa Tribune*, December 6, 1938.

20. Barco to Director, November 30, 1938, USCS.

Notice of incipient labor difficulties came in the summer of 1938 when the McDonald Corporation notified J. M. Mackenzie, president of Local 21210, that it would exercise the sixty-day cancellation clause of their contract and reduce wages for the forthcoming picking season. When it appeared that the Adams Packing Company would follow suit, Mackenzie asked the United States Conciliation Service for assistance. Newcomb Barco was sent to assist in negotiations in early October.²¹

Since an AFL official owned it, the Adams Packing Company was perhaps more willing than other firms to recognize the union to which its members belonged. Its general manager, J. M. Morrow, agreed to call a meeting of the packing house managers and a delegation of the workers to "work out a wage rate for the season and be through with it." Morrow and Barco met with the managers of fifteen packing houses and found that an agreement was exceedingly difficult because of the prevailing low demand for citrus. Some managers preferred to close until prices improved, but Barco warned that such an action might be construed as a lockout. All parties then agreed that nothing would be done until November.²²

Negotiations finally broke down, and on November 17 the UCAPAWA called a strike at the Lake Alfred Citrus Growers Association packing house. Manager W. A. Stanford refused to recognize the strike and began employing replacements for the striking workers. Picket lines went up and several confrontations occurred. Stanford was absolutely unwilling to meet with the UCAPAWA secretary, Edward Norman, but Lake Alfred Mayor Burt Johnson, the local Chamber of Commerce, Citrus Commissioner Harvey Henderson, and Industrial Commissioner Wendell Heaton all tried to ameliorate the difficulties and bring the antagonists together.²³ While attempting to resolve the difficulty, Mayor Johnson also declared that no one who wished to continue working would be interfered with. Accordingly, he assigned the town marshal to see that the picket lines were peaceful. On November 29, UCAPAWA members walked off their jobs at five other packing houses near Winter Haven. About 600 men from the Polk Packing Association, Florence Citrus Grow-

21. Barco to Dr. Steelman, October 19, 1938, USCS.

22. Barco to Director, May 6, 1939, USCS.

23. *Ibid.*, November 30, December 5, 1938; *Tampa Tribune*, November 18, 1938.

ers, H. A. Pollard, Winter Haven Citrus Growers, and Winter Haven Cooperative Growers were involved.²⁴

When the strike spread to Winter Haven, several members of the Tampa seamen's union joined the picketers. As it contained some communist members, that union had long been in confrontation with the Ku Klux Klan in Tampa. At the same time, Klansmen had been watching the citrus district. The KKK held a large parade in Lakeland on August 31, and several smaller demonstrations subsequently occurred. A riot broke out at the Lake Alfred packing house on November 30 when about 300 people began throwing rocks at replacement workers entering the plant. Two people were badly beaten. Governor Cone asked the Polk County sheriff to assist local officials, and four deputies began patrolling at Lake Alfred.²⁵

By December 2, workers at three houses had returned to work, at their former wages, but Snively refused to allow his workers to return and used replacements to pick and pack his fruit. The situation at Lake Alfred remained deadlocked. None of the operator-members of the Lake Alfred firm were willing even to discuss a higher wage, and most were willing to close their plants until early 1939 when prices for fruit might be better. Snively would not cooperate with Department of Labor officials, arguing that his firm was exempt from national legislation. Barco reported laconically that "there has been quite a bit of rock throwing at Lake Alfred and W. A. Stanford . . . is still in a bad humor." He expressed hope that both would come around if given time to think things through.²⁶

While Barco, assisted by Harvey Henderson and Wendell Heaton, continued trying to get Snively and Stanford to submit to conciliation, the Klan rendered its special variety of assistance. In cars bearing license plates from Polk and Hillsborough counties as well as Georgia, about 400 Ku Klux Klansmen paraded through Winter Haven and Auburndale in the areas where most of the workers lived. They announced loudly that "strikers and radicals will not be tolerated," adding that they believed in "the

24. Barco to Dr. Steelman, November 29, 1938, USCS; *Tampa Tribune*, November 27, 28, 29, 1938.

25. McCallister to Dave, September 2, 1938, Box 26, and Dave Clendenin to Dear Friend, Box 88, WDL Collection: *Tampa Tribune*, November 30 and December 1, 1938.

26. Barco to Director, December 1, 6, 1938, USCS.

principles of Americanism, and do not intend to tolerate strikers and radicals." It was also asserted that they knew "who the radicals are, and would take care of them." Edward Norman called off the strike at Lake Alfred and removed the pickets on December 9. No agreement was reached. The wage cuts were not restored, and there was no agreement to reemploy the striking workers who had been replaced.²⁷

Because of internecine squabbling in the union, the UCAPAWA-CIO did not return to Florida the following year. During World War II laborers were in extremely short supply. Local law enforcement officials aided the packing houses and canneries by rounding up workers, sometimes using constitutionally questionable methods. Meanwhile, the Florida legislature enacted legislation—so-called right-to-work laws—making it more difficult for labor unions to operate in the state. The UCAPAWA was reorganized as the Food, Tobacco, and Allied Workers (FTAW), still under the leadership of Donald Henderson. It was one of ten Communist-led unions expelled from the CIO at its 1949 convention.²⁸

Although it is difficult to determine whether the nature of citrus labor, the extremely depressed conditions of the 1930s or regional animosity toward organized labor was most responsible, the abortive effort of the UCAPAWA-CIO to organize the central Florida citrus industry in the 1930s left a legacy that has made it exceedingly difficult for working people to try to improve their status. Given the combination of all three, neither the CIO nor the AFL had much chance of successfully organizing the citrus workers, but the activities of the UCAPAWA-CIO made labor leaders, regardless of their actual goals, much easier to categorize as "communists" or "outside agitators." That the UCAPAWA happened to be one of the CIO unions with communist leadership reinforced the already widespread belief that organized labor and communism were indistinguishable. Those who argued for needed labor reform were labelled disloyal and impractical; their suggestions were not taken seriously. Over the years economic and political conservatives have dominated the law-making process in Florida, and there has been no one to sponsor the cause of migratory agricultural workers.

27. *Tampa Tribune*, December 6, 9, 1938.

28. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, 181.