

February 26, 1979

TO THE POLITICAL COMMITTEE AND ORGANIZATION COMMITTEE

The attached two reports were prepared at my request in order to give comrades the facts regarding the party presence we've been able to establish in the Newport News-Norfolk area up until now. This is preparation for discussing what next steps we should take in this regard.

Doug

This report will concentrate on our experience with the two Newport News Steel Locals, 8888 and 8417. The Militant business office has compiled a report on the greater Tidewater area.

I. USWA Local 8888: represents the shipyard's 15,500 maintenance and production workers (2,000 have been laid off since the January, 1978 elections.) The local claims some 14,000 members and is receiving benefits for this number. No dues will be collected until the strike is won.

The union's executive committee (about 14 or so) is almost half Black, as is the shipyard. Also includes one Chicano and two women. The original president (Black) resigned and was replaced by Wayne Crosby (one of the first strikers to be arrested.) Most of our contact as the Militant has been with Jerry Kelly, editor of the local's paper ('The Voyager') and now editor of the weekly strike bulletin. He is 26 years old; this is his first union experience. He is interested in a wide range of social issues--the ERA, the environment, civil rights, etc. and wants these discussed in the labor press. He considers that unions have too narrowly defined workers' concerns and would like Local 8888 to speak out and take a stand on everything its members have a stake in. His own background and source of radicalization was the quasi-religious civil rights movement. He has been extremely friendly and helpful and will openly say that the Militant has given the strike its best coverage. The Spartacists--in the guise of their longshore front group--came to town and harassed him about 'government intervention in the trade unions.' (He once filed suit against the company union.) He did not dismiss them, however, but was eager to talk to me about the discussion they had--what our views are, etc. They raised the labor party with him; he is not yet convinced that the interests of capitalists and workers are irreconcilable.

(All executive committee members are full-time shipyard workers.)

Jerry is eager for outside union support and would be willing to speak at meetings. He is now a Militant subscriber.

In fact, most of the active strike leaders--those who take picket duty everyday--have either bought or subscribed to the Militant (on our pay-later plan.) Militant reporters and salespeople generally get a big welcome; people anxiously await each new issue. Most common is this response: "While I don't agree with what you're all about (socialism) I think your strike coverage is great." A smaller number have registered agreement with the rest of what we have to say, ie, on Weber, Malcolm X, Iran. All three union offices receive small bundles of the Militant.

Union comrades who have travelled down from other branches have also made a series of contacts and spoken with Local 8888 officers.

II. International reps

The strike is really run by the international organizers--Jack Hower, Bill Edwards (editor of Steel Labor-South), and Roosevelt Robinson--in consultation with local officers. Hower has been and remains stand-offish. Robinson arranged our interview with the in-yard organizers. Edwards has been our key contact on this level. Ever since I provided him with a transcript of a shipyard press conference (which the union was excluded from) he has been helpful. He freely says that Pittsburgh 'loves' our coverage. He pulled me aside to warn me that there are those in Pittsburgh that don't like the Militant because we backed Sadlowski and they're sure we'll back any anti-establishment contender. But that he and Russ Gibbons "appreciate what you've been doing down here." Edwards, who is in charge of all public relations, plays down union solidarity ("we've got plenty") and plays up getting support on Capitol Hill.

III. Local 8417: represents 1,200 designers and aides who have been on strike since April, 1977.

Local officers have been particularly appreciative of the Militant coverage because we've done some of the few stories on their strike. All visiting Militant reporters have gotten interviews with President Lee Johnson. He remembers us from Atlantic City but was friendly from the start

Conclusions

We are clearly the first socialist paper to circulate among shipyard workers in recent years and have run into very little red-baiting. * To our lasting advantage here we are identified as one of the first and most consistent supporters of their strike. This is a reputation we can build upon.

The composition, size, and democratic, fighting spirit of Local 8888 make it a place we want to be--the sooner, the better.

One factor we'd have to consider, however, in deciding about a future branch here is the future of the shipyard itself. It hasn't been doing well financially and is suffering from the general slump in the industry. Some 2,000 have been laid off in the last year although hiring seems to continue. Our skilled shipyard comrades would have an obvious advantage in seeking jobs.

* Opponents: The only grouping nearby is Workers World which surfaces as the perennial Center for United Labor Action. You never see their paper; only their 'Stop Union Busting in the South' buttons. The CP gave out the Daily World free at the 2/24 solidarity march. The Bulletin was on hand with Tom Henahan petitions.

FACTS AND FIGURES ON THE NEWPORT NEWS-NORFOLK, VA AREA

POPULATION: (1970 Statistics)

Newport News: 140,000 30% Black
Hampton: 121,000 25% Black
Norfolk: 308,000 30% Black
Portsmouth: 111,000 40% Black

Source: US Statistical Abstract

EMPLOYMENT: The biggest is the Tenneco-owned Newport News Shipyard, with over 20,000 total. (includes 15,500 production, 1,200 designers, plus clerical); The Chesapeake and Ohio RR which has huge raiid yards and a big ship terminal in Newport News.,-it's a major coal exporting port and the biggest cigarette port in the country; Norfolk Shipbuilding and Drydock Co.; a division of Standard Brass Co. All these are listed as having more than 1,000 employees in the Industrial Directory. There are about 12 other manufacturing plants with 300-1,000 employees in the area. Others may exist in nearby towns that I didn't look up in the directory. Also a large Ford Assembly plant in Norfolk.

Government and Military bases are also large employers. There is the huge Norfolk Navy Base, with two different complexes; the NASA station and Langley Air Force Base; the US Army transportation center at Fort Eustasis (we saw a long line of cars going in there to work one morning at 7:30AM); and numerous smaller bases.

UNIONS: This is of course, the 'non-union South'; but there are still some unions there. Newport News has several construction and laborers locals, SIU-Inland Boatmen, Communications Workers of America, IBUE, Distributive Workers, OCAW, Textile Workers, AFGE, and of course, the two new Steelworkers locals. Norfolk has more, including several construction locals, Meatcutters, Amalgamated Transit Workers, two CWA locals, Hotel & Restaurant, two IAM locals, 4 Longshore (ILA) Locals, two IBEW locals, SIU, Boilermakers and the UAW at the Ford assembly plant.

Note: We met a lot of unionists while selling in the shopping centers, in downtown Norfolk and door-to-door. And more people who had been in unions elsewhere, or knew people who were. They would tell you why a victory for the USWA was important for them. A significant number of people had moved in from West Virginia and identified with the Mineworkers. Or even had been in the union there. Others came from other Northern cities and had had similar experiences. Most of these unionists that we met were Blacks.

CAMPUSES: College of William and Mary in Williamsburg. Private school, 3500 students. One YSAer there. Active South Africa divestment committee, beginnings of a strike-support group. About 100 Black students on campus, according to people we talked with. Dick Gregory spoke there while we were there. Drew 600 people, majority Black, the rest students from the College. Blacks came from all over the peninsula area, especially from Hampton Institute. We sold 40 papers.

Hampton Institute. Private, Black school. 2300 students. We have one YSAer there. People seem interested in politics, judging from those we met at the Dick Gregory meeting at the College of Wm. & Mary. The team before us tried to sell on campus, said sales were good, but were thrown off by campus security.

Thomas Nelson Community College in Hampton. 1200 students.

Tidewater Community College, just outside of Portsmouth.

Norfolk State College, Black school, state run. 4500 students. Two comrades sold there one day, report much interest, but students could't afford 50¢. Sold several YSs. Did good sales door-to-door in the neighboring Black community.

Old Dominion, Norfolk. 14,000 students. If we had known how big it was, we would have gone there to sell too.

Note: enrollment figures are from a 1970 Lovejoy's College Guide, so may be out of date.

There is a weekly Black paper published in Norfolk, the Journal and Guide. Carries some international especially African news, as well as all the community news such papers usually have. Shelley may know more about its circulation, attitude towards the strike. The issues I saw seemed ambiguous.

The whole area is rather spread out, clusters of houses here and there, many shopping centers spread all over instead of heavily built-up downtowns. There appears to have been a real population boom here since 1940.

Newport News has a downtown, with banks and a post office, but no concentration of shops. There is supposed to be a downtown mall, but I walked all around with a map and still couldn't find it. There are 20 shopping malls in the town, and we had good sales at the five that we got to, until we were thrown off by the management.

Norfolk seems similar, spread out with many malls, though it has a bonafide downtown with a long street that has been converted into a pedestrian shopping mall. There was little traffic when we were there one Thursday afternoon, but there must be a lot more on the weekend, or else the stores couldn't survive. Two of us sold about 15 papers in one hour there. The people there were mostly Blacks, as there are large Black residential areas near there.

Sales Statistics: Teams sent in by Raleigh, Baltimore and Washington D.C. before and at the start of the strike sold at least 155 Militants, though our figures are probably quite incomplete. The first national team sold 110 Militants and 22 subscriptions in five days. They spent most of their time on the picket lines, some going door to door. Our team sold 177 Militants and 5 subscriptions in three days. Spent most of the time at shopping centers and door-to-door sales. Pamphlet sales were very low, probably because we did not organize them very much. Left some Weber and Miners Strike pamphlets at the strike HQ, where people seemed to like them, and sold 6 women's liberation pamphlets at Hampton Institute.

Harvey M.
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Rough map of Newport News - Norfolk

