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REPORT OF COMRADE TOM JOHNSON TO POLITBURO, May 14, 1931  
ON WORK IN DISTRICT 17 (SOUTH).

In this report on the South I am going to divide it into three parts. The situation in the district can be characterised by the fact that we have an extremely wide influence, surprisingly wide influence among the workers and poor farmers throughout the entire district. We have developed a fair Party organisation. Our failure to develop any sustained actions of the workers flowing from that, our failure to develop stable mass organisation, these ~~are~~ are our outstanding weaknesses.

First of all, on the question of Party influence. The election results in the election last fall in Tennessee, where we had carried on a campaign concentrated around Chattanooga, and where we had reached the rest of the state with leaflets and agitational material hardly at all, nevertheless when the results were polled we received in Chattanooga 388 votes and in the State of Tennessee over 3½ thousand votes. Of course we received a good bit of publicity in the capitalist press, and almost the only way these people knew there were Communist candidates on the ballot in the outlying districts was through the capitalist press. The second point to show this wide influence, at our request the Central Committee printed for us 25,000 leaflets dealing with the farm situation, particularly with the drought. To date we distributed 25,000 leaflets throughout the district as far as we were able. The results were amazing. We have received to date over 100 letters in reply to these leaflets, from as far West as Kansas City, Mo. asking us to send organisers. This indicates something of our mass influence, and the ~~real~~ readiness of the workers and poor farmers to respond to our programme.

In Tampa, Florida, we have organised recently a unit of Cuban cigar workers of 13. Now, this was organised spontaneously by mail. Now, we have sent down a comrade to see how the situation is. Unquestionably among these Cuban cigar workers we have great influence. It appears to us that with a Spanish speaking organiser there we can accomplish a good deal there with comparative ease.

Now, on Party membership. A year ago when we first set up the district we had five shopkeepers in a unit in Atlanta, a Party of 8 in Chattanooga and 3 connections in Birmingham. Today we have in Birmingham ten units of 75 members, -- only 16 or 17 of these are white, three shop units and one mine unit. The mine unit has a membership of 6, 3 of whom are working in the mine. In Chattanooga we have 4 units, of 30 members. This shows our weakness, as we once had 60 members, which dropped to 30 after the terror. We have only 4 white proletarian members. In Atlanta we have 3 units, one a shop unit, in the American Woolen Company, with a total of 15 members. 6 of these are white. In Elizabethton, Tennessee we have three units of 16 members, one is a shop unit in the Grayson Mill. In New Orleans we still have about three or four members. In Tampa, we now have these 13 members, all of them Cuban sugar workers; in Rome, Georgia, we have 8 members, half Negro and half white; in Camp Hill, we have 4 members.

Now, as to composition. Birmingham is the most typical. We have not a single foreign born worker in the Party; and none one-generation removed. They are all white and Negro American workers, and not a single one that is not a worker, mainly steel and construction workers. We have also 12 Negro women, - no white women in Birmingham.

Now a word as to how the Party works. Again Birmingham is typical. We have an illegal situation and we are forced to work in the following manner: We have 10 units, the membership of which is kept small. They meet in private houses once a week and the house is changed each week. We have no functioning bureaus except in one unit. We maintain connections with the unit in the following manner; the units meet on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Every Tuesday night we have a meeting of the 10 unit organisers, where the problems of the units are taken up, and the tasks for the coming week are outlined. After an hour or so of this, we have a class for organisers which theoretically they are supposed to give the unit, but which they do not do. We have done some work in developing unit initiative, that is because we have had to develop it, based as we are on an illegal situation where the units have to take the responsibility. It refers particularly to unit leaflets, which we first organised on an extensive scale in connection with the election campaign last week. Of all of the leaflets, none were issued by the Party, but each unit issued two or three, tying up the campaign with the conditions in the shops and in the localities.

Then as to the recruitment of new members. We do not have mass meetings, and naturally we do not recruit members at mass meetings in Birmingham. The recruitment takes place entirely through the units which have themselves developed a system of what they have named recruiting meetings. A unit member will have contact with three or four fellows that he thinks might be Party material. He will take these up in the unit and the unit will set a certain night, and decide when this meeting will be held. Then they notify the District and one of our comrades goes out and speaks to the meeting of the three or four workers. Out of this group we may get one Party member, we may get four. We may decide that none of them are ready to come into the Party.

A word or two on the question of a Party apparatus. This is an extremely weak point. We have not got a single functioning department in the district apparatus. On paper we have a Negro department and a Trade Union department, which is beginning to function now, and holding meetings once a week. This is a development of the last three or four weeks since Comrade Guynn has been in the district. The difficulty here is the difficulty of meeting in an illegal situation, and in addition the many meetings that our comrades have. Also we have not succeeded in developing leading cadres.

As to the District leadership, we have not worked in many districts of the Party, but we have more of a collective leadership in District 1/ than in any district I have ever worked. There is no friction, every comrade supports the work of the district. Until recently most of our work had been confined to an illegal situation in Birmingham, to agitational work. It is a fault of the district leadership that we did not recognise this sooner, and that a recommendation that this must change had to come from the rank and file. At a unit organisers' meeting this question was raised by unit organisers themselves, and the proposal of one was that on May 1st we have an open demonstration in the centre of the city. We rejected this, but this raised the whole question of developing local struggles around concrete demands.

We took this question up in detail, and as a result of this we have had some interesting experiences. First of all most of these local struggles have centered around the units themselves. Some on the question of unemployment. In the Woodland unit -- we took up with

each unit just what are the most pressing demands of the workers in their particular shops -- in this particular unit they found out that in four houses in their territory, all owned by the same renting company, they had already shut off the water, and these people had been shut off from water for a couple of months. We took this up and held a meeting with these four families to discuss ways and means of changing this situation. A spy got hold of this meeting and it was raided by nine cops, but they did not find any white men there because I had not yet arrived, and they managed to pull the wool over their eyes by saying that it was an organisation of a Negro club. After this we called another meeting. We took up with them, the question of what we were going to do, and the next day the ~~it~~ line-men came around and they demanded that water be turned on. Then we called a third meeting, and went in and bridged over the pipe, and now they have water there. This has raised the prestige of the Party considerably. Just before I left we were organising a similar struggle around an eviction in a whole block where people living in company houses were going to be evicted. We have prevented two evictions by mobilising the workers around them. I could give you several other instances of these local struggles that we have tried to develop, but this is all I have time for.

The organisational form of our unemployed councils has caused us a good deal of difficulty. We have not yet solved it. What we have been working for is -- we have houses owned by renting companies, -- all in the same territory. We are trying to organise the occupants of the houses of one company for a struggle against evictions, for lower rents, etc. We have only begun on this form of organisation, however.

Now as to shop work and the development of struggles in the shop. We cannot record much progress. We have not led any strikes, and have not succeeded in initiating any struggles of the workers inside the shops. We have, however, developed the inside distribution of literature. This has been done because of necessity, since it is impossible to distribute it at shop gates. As a result we have developed an extremely widespread inside distribution. This covers shops also where we have no Party members, that is, Party members have sympathisers or friends working in their shops to whom leaflets are given, and we are covering at least two-thirds of the most important industrial plants in Birmingham with our leaflets. Meetings are being called in response to our leaflets. One of the mills has offered a reward to anybody who will turn in the name of the person who is passing out leaflets in the mill.

Since Comrade Guynn has been there, we have been able to let him devote his sole time to trade union work. We have made a beginning of building up shop groups on a wider basis within the Party which will be the beginning of our trade union work. To indicate the difficulties of trade union work there -- some time ago we started work in the Hampton Mine. At the first meeting we organised 8 miners, and in three meetings we had 50 miners organised, and at the last meeting, attended by 35 miners, -- we had not expected so many, -- the meeting was raided. Comrade Jackson had left about half an hour before. A couple of Negroes were arrested. One spy got in there, and out of 50 members that we have succeeded in drawing into the union, 35 were fired. This simply smashed our work there. We have two of these fired members into the Party, and most of the workers did not consider this the Party's fault, but it has been a blow to our work.

On the question of Scotfboro, in Birmingham, we have organised 4 LSNR groups, -- neighbourhood groups with a total membership in the



4 groups of 50 to 60. Each unit is responsible for getting resolutions into their organisations, and where possible of getting a speaker before the churches, lodges, etc. Our Party membership - our Negro members are very religious. This is going to be a weapon against these churches, because we tell our members if the preachers will not let them bring this issue there, this shows where they stand. Through this issue we will win some of them away from the church.

In connection with the struggles around the units, and broader forms of struggle, just a word or two about two methods. It is impossible to hold a big unemployment demonstration. We tried that on September 1st. 700 to 800 Negroes were there, 110 whites. At the same time there were approximately 100 police, with rifles. These fellows are not quite ready to face rifles, and did not come into the Park. I was to speak at the meeting, and was picked up a block away from the Park, and carried 50 miles out into the country, before they let me go. Down in Birmingham when a cop comes around to break up a meeting, he does not come with a club in his hand, he comes with a rifle. So we had to devise new methods. We figured that the best way to have unemployment demonstrations, we must take advantage of situations which arise spontaneously and carry through a demonstration under our leadership before the police recognise and realise that this is a Communist demonstration. We had three or four cases that were pretty successful, one where Ted, a young Negro who is in the National School now, was looking for a job one morning. There were three or four thousand waiting for a job and the boss came out and hired 25. Ted succeeded in organising the crowd to make a rush on the boss, and finally pushed way into the lobby of the hotel where the boss was staying. Then Ted made a speech to the workers. This got into the capitalist press. Another case where we organised better. A steel corporation advertised that they were going to open up and take all old workers back, and perhaps hire new ones. The Birmingham paper carried headlines about this. We organised a group of five comrades, two of whom formerly worked at the steel company. We prepared a leaflet on the basis of conditions that were formerly in the shop. We knew that not more than 100 at most would be hired. These five went out to the workers gathered there - 2,000 of them. Of these two thousand, only one, a white man, was hired. Our comrades did not speak, but they distributed literature and circulated through the crowd. After that we distributed another leaflet in the neighbourhood where they lived. As a result we were able to draw 5 or 6 into the Party. It is our mistake that we were not able to set up there a stable unemployment committee of these workers, who would carry on a constant sustained fight.

A last word about the question of new methods, -- demonstrations. This came up in connection with May 1st. We ~~reorganised~~ recognised that we could not hold a central demonstration, and yet that the Party should come out openly. We worked out the following plans on Scottsboro, when the Scottsboro case first broke, also another fellow Dawes had been shot down and was in the hospital at the point of death. We held a recruiting meeting in this neighbourhood after distributing a leaflet on this case. So we organised a general demonstration, linking up Scottsboro with Dawes. We distributed two sorts of leaflets in this territory, one inside the shop, and then we announced that there would be a demonstration against this police attempt at murder, against the oppression of Negroes, against the lynching at Scottsboro, etc. Then we mobilised this one unit in that territory and a YCL



unit in the same territory to carry through the demonstration. The demonstration was held about a half mile away from the shop in the Negro quarters, where the Negro workers live in company houses, it was called for 6 o'clock. We figured the time element on the basis of the hours of the police, who make their rounds there at 4 and 8 o'clock. We had our unit and League mobilised to bring every sympathiser to this meeting at 6 o'clock. Then about 5.15 we had 4 comrades go out in that neighbourhood and hand out leaflets telling them that in a half hour there would be a meeting. As a result we had a crowd of 200 workers. Comrade Guynn got up and spoke for about 20 minutes and the comrades distributed Southern Workers. The crowd worked up enthusiasm, and shouted some of our slogans. Two carloads of cops arrived 10 minutes after the demonstration was over. On May Day we planned two demonstrations of the same kind. Only one was held. 150 workers attended, half white and half Negro. The demonstration was carried through in the same way with this difference. We selected this point because it was not near the centre of town and the police could only get in by two roads. On each road we stationed three pairs of comrades. The first pair were to signal if a police car came, then the second pair of comrades were to walk across the road; and they each had a large bucket of roofing nails with them, -- the third pair were to signal the demonstration that the police car had come. We figured they would get a couple of flat tires, and that would give the demonstration time to break up. The police did not come, however, and the meeting continued for an hour, passed a resolution sent to the Governor in Scottsboro, and four white workers joined the Party as a result of the meeting.

There is a third form of demonstration that we have not tried out yet, but which we are anxious to try out. We plan this, -- for instance the \_\_\_\_\_ Company pays off on Thursday. There is a crowd of 2,000 or 3,000 workers waiting to get their pay. We plan to send a group of 7 or 8 comrades there, well organised, some with literature under their coats. Suddenly these comrades go into the centre of this crowd, two of them raise a third on their shoulders and he shouts our slogans, the other comrades distribute leaflets, and when the dick comes we disperse. We think this will work, and will show the workers that the Party is on the job.

We are of the opinion that we will be able to overcome our main weaknesses and develop mass organisations, and this I consider our greatest problem.

Right now our most important point is Elizabethton, and it is quite probably that we will have another strike in Elizabethton late this spring.

A word or two on farm work. On farm work we have done something, not only agitationally, but also organisationally. We have three groups at Camp Hill, of 30 croppers. We have a group of 12 croppers near Rome. We intend to organise these croppers into the Agricultural Workers' Union, and our response has been very favourable there. In Elizabethton we are conducting a campaign against a tax increase. There is much misery among the farmers there, who are not croppers, but small owners. We are getting out agitation to decrease the tax rate and that the additional burden be placed on the mills. We are demanding that mills be taxed from 1925 to the present, and that the tax rate on the farmers be correspondingly decreased. We are also bringing out in this agitation the fact that if the mills are forced to accept this taxation that the farmers will fight against placing the burden

through wage-cuts and stretch out on the workers. It is easy to link up these two struggles because most of these farmers are black-listed workers from the mill.

Now, on the question of the YCL, which I cannot deal with in detail. It is not getting on as well as can be expected, in spite of the fact that Party is giving it all of the assistance it can. We had a ~~total~~ total membership of 48 in the District. One of the difficulties of the YCL is that young workers are strong for lighter features sports, baseball clubs, etc., and the question arises are you going to organise Jim Crow dances, baseball clubs, etc., because that is the only way this can be done in Birmingham. This is a very difficult problem for us.

Now, about the difficulties. One is the size of the district. We have heard today about Comrade Gebert's empire. Well, I can beat it. We have Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee and Florida, and there are proposals that we should take over Kentucky. This is quite a territory. What does this mean? We have had a strike of 5,000 longshoremen in New Orleans, and we could not send anyone down there. It means that in Elizabethton, -- as far in the other direction as New Orleans, -- we have a strike situation, and a leading comrade should be there, and it is almost impossible to send some one. It means that the Bradshaw plantation where we have 12 comrades organised, out of 150 croppers, -- we could organise them all if we could get there, but it is 145 miles away from Birmingham. We just cannot get there. This is the situation that handicaps us and holds us back, and we think it would be better for this district if it would be immediately split, and our budget cut in half, as well as our forces, and a new district set up in Tennessee. Let us too take care of the Southern portion of Alabama and Georgia. The workers and farmers are calling for organisation and we cannot fail them.

Then the question of illegality. I do not refer to the general problems of working in illegal situations. But take two questions. The development of cadres, - that is our weakest point. We should have had four or five workers, not two in the National Training School, but the cost was excessive. In a normal district you have a district office, and when an organiser needs help he comes to you and he gets that help. This helps to develop comrades. In our district, we don't see our leading comrades so often. You cannot give them the attention you would like to. As a result, great difficulties are placed in the way of training leading comrades. The same way with the holding of classes. Then there is the question of funds. We are almost dependent on the North, and the conception of the North seems to be that we should grow in independence, and as our Party develops we should get less funds. I think that is incorrect. We are unable to carry on activities to raise funds, in the way you can in the North. We can't have mass meetings, affairs, etc. The standard of living in the South is lower, the standard of wages is lower, and therefore dues payments are less.

I would like to say something about our prospects for struggle, but I won't have time. Just a last word on what we consider our main problems, - the development of cadres, the building of mass organisations to embrace these workers who are under our influence. These problems we have not successfully solved.

I wanted to raise two questions on Negro work and on agrarian work.

On Negro work I wanted to deal with two questions. First of all the question of partial demands, and second the question of our united front in the national struggle. On the question of partial demands, - here we have had sharp disagreements with the Central Committee. Some of them still exist, and some of them have been liquidated. First, there are three things that we must remember in raising partial demands for the South. 1. The difference between bourgeois democratic demands, suitable for the bourgeois-democratic revolution, and proletarian demands in the South. Both types of demands must be advanced, but the distinction must be kept clear. Second, that our demands must be understandable demands to the masses of workers, that they will accept their own. Third, that these demands must be linked up with our fundamental slogans. Some illustrations as to this thing, and as to the extreme importance of the very careful framing of our partial demands. First of all, the question of confiscation of land. I want to take up the formulation of this whole slogan under agrarian work, because we have to decide whose land is to be confiscated, and to whom does it go.

Now, comrades, in Jackson County, where Scottsboro is located, - there are 4700 farmers, 50% are owners of under 50 acres, and 80% own less than 100 acres. 75% of the farmers are small landowners, owning 40 to 100 acres. Many of these fellows are renting out 20 acres to their brother, or brother-in-law, etc., and let me tell you, if you come in there with a demand for confiscation of land, these fellows who are starving on their 40 acres, and renting the other half to their brother, will lynch you. We should frame our demand, as the confiscation of the land of the big landowners. I think also the question of confiscation of land raised in Scottsboro makes this an important question. It is a big slogan and if you just throw this at a man it does not mean much. It must be linked up with other slogans, so that it becomes clear what we mean by this, and therefore I think it is incorrect to advance this slogan in connection with Scottsboro, except when this slogan is explained, but not just as a slogan at the end of a leaflet. Only when it is explained in an article should it be raised, and then it is an entirely correct slogan.

The most important difference we had was on the question of this jury. We originally formulated the slogan of a Negro jury. The Central Committee immediately corrected this and advanced the slogan of a jury of workers at least half to be Negroes. I have a couple of objections. In the first place this is not correct. It is not a bourgeois-democratic demand. We do not demand equal rights for workers, we demand equal rights for Negroes. We should not bar from this proposed jury in Scottsboro the overwhelming masses of Negroes in the South who are not workers, but who are farmers. I do not think that in the struggle in the South the Negro bourgeoisie will play any part except to betray the Negroes. I think we might clarify the slogan to the extent that we say "a jury of toilers", or "a jury of workers and poor farmers. As to the question of a Negro jury, I think here we have made a mistake in the South, but I don't agree with the formulation of the Central Committee, but before I deal with that I would like to explain why I made this demand. We made it for this reason, for instance, if this case had occurred in Gastonburg, where the overwhelming majority of the pop-



ulation is Negro, where the only white people are exploiters, there we would have raised the slogan of a Negro jury. Scottsboro is not in the black belt, but the white farmers are completely under the influence of the bourgeoisie, and we felt that it would not be possible to carry on a struggle for equal rights for Negroes with a jury of half white chauvinists. Now I raise, not as a definite proposal, but as something for discussion, that we use a slogan of "a jury of ~~at least~~ at least 50% Negroes, - no white chauvinists on the jury". Certainly we should see to it that our slogan makes certain that no white chauvinists sit on the jury. I recognise more clearly than before now necessary it is to put some slogan forward to combat white chauvinism.

A word or two on the united front. On the independent role of the Party. We are putting so much emphasis on the united front on the one issue alone of saving the boys from death. I think this is correct, but I think there will be a tendency to more or less submerge the Party. The Party must not be submerged. Within the united front we Communists have to fight to broaden this struggle, and it becomes more than a struggle for these boys, it becomes a struggle for equal rights and self-determination.

The question of the formation of separate organisations of Negroes and whites. I do not agree with this. It means if we have mixed organisations they cannot be legal. It means we cannot reorganise social groups, cultural groups, etc., I think this is correct, that we should NOT organise independent organisations. First, if you organise independent organisations of the Negroes you have to raise the question, do we want full equality between white and black workers. We have white workers who formally accept our programme on the Negro question. They will welcome the decision to have separate Negro organisations 100%. For instance, if we organise a cultural club. It seems to me if we organise a Negro baseball team, how are we going to prevent white workers from organising? Then the reaction of the Negroes themselves will be very bad to this. Negro comrades have raised the question of why we never have a unit meeting in a white ~~man~~ comrade's house. All of our units are made up of a majority of Negroes. We do this because it is not so noticeable for whites to go to the homes of Negroes, as it would be the other way around. Whites do go into the Negro homes, to collect rent, insurance, etc., and it does not excite so much comment, and for this reason we meet in the Negro homes. But the Negro comrades immediately raised this question. They understand it now, but the doubt was raised. In this organisation we have to raise the slogan of social equality and full equality for Negroes, and how do we reconcile the slogan with our practice. Therefore, I do not think this can be a good form of organisation in the South. I think as a last resort this might be necessary, if separate sections of the Party had to hold separate meetings, these comrades would understand.

On the role of the LSNR. I wrote a letter to the Central Committee stating our opinion in the South. I think, for one thing, that the role in the South must be different than in the North, that in the South it is necessary to build up a permanent united front organisation on the question of equal rights. This cannot be such a loose organisation as the LSNR has been. We must have an organisation based on individual membership, perhaps establishment of a dues

payment system, etc. Just a word about the orientation of the paper. It is my opinion that the orientation is too much on the whole perspective should be to build up the organization in the South, with the gradual transference of the Liberator into a Southern paper, that the ISWR should orientate itself to struggle down there.

The agrarian crisis in the South is effected by certain Southern agriculture -- the one moneyed crop, cotton. The main systems of agriculture in the South. The plantation one. 63% of these are tenants. Half are Negroes. This is the plantation system. In some cases they employ 2,000 families. The other system is based on the small owner, the cash or share tenant. These are primarily whites, living on farms of from 20 to 100 acres and employing one to two tenants.

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