

Mountain Life & Work
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A SWEATSHOP DON'T EVER PAY ENOUGH

After leading a fourteen month strike against Levi-Strauss, manufacturer of blue-jeans, a group of women in Fannin County, Georgia organized a poor women's sewing factory. In 1967 McCaysville Industries became probably the first and only poor white owned and operated factory in the country. The following is an interview with one of the women who led the Levi strike and later helped organize McCaysville Industries.

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It we had a wonderful country over here, it would be because a lot of people worked hard for it. You gotta protect what's yours, I feel. I believe in protecting what's yours, whether it's your home, or your country or what not, I wouldn't feel a bit bad in the world. I don't think any person ought to let another person push him around, because we're born equal and no one person should ever be allowed to push another'n around. Well, you know, some people do want to push others around.

Over a period of years I've tried to figure it out...and so far I hadn't...but you do draw some kind of a idea. I think that a person that gets pleasure out of seeing other people suffer, that enjoys when something bad is happening to someone else besides them, I think they feel inferior, they want to boss people around, and this makes them feel better. Well, that's sort of a sickness.

"The whole world'd stop."

To use your head you got to have pay; to use your hands is a lowly job. That's how it ticks, the more education you got and the more you use your head, the more you're worth. Not really, though, cause there's so many people that uses their hands that the ones that uses their heads would be out of a job if the ones quit usin' their hands.

See, the whole world'd stop. So they ought to quit usin' their hands, they ought to stand up. They ought to fight, but we know they won't. Now, if you can figure a way to make them...I'll help you. I've give up. I shouldn't, I've always said you should never be a quitter. But there comes a time when you don't know nothing to do.

I just don't worry about it anymore...oh, I do, too. I look around at the world, I look at my own kids...you just have to kinda stand and watch it seems. Now if somehow the people'd get together, they's so many more of us than there is of them, we could stop the whole world, we could stop the whole country, and if you could get enough...

Well, I just don't know, I really don't know. I can remember when I used to be so proud I's American. And I think it's what I's told. I thought I ought to be that way, that in all of the other countries everything was bad, and I was so proud of the American flag, I felt like I ought to be so proud of that. Well, when little children right here in your own country starves to death day after day and nobody seems to care, I'm not very proud. And when I can go to jail for something I didn't do and prove it in court I didn't do it, I'm not very proud. I never went to jail. I run around in Blue Ridge barefooted once, hoping somebody'd say something to me, but they just let on like I had shoes on. Nothing I do accomplishes a thing.

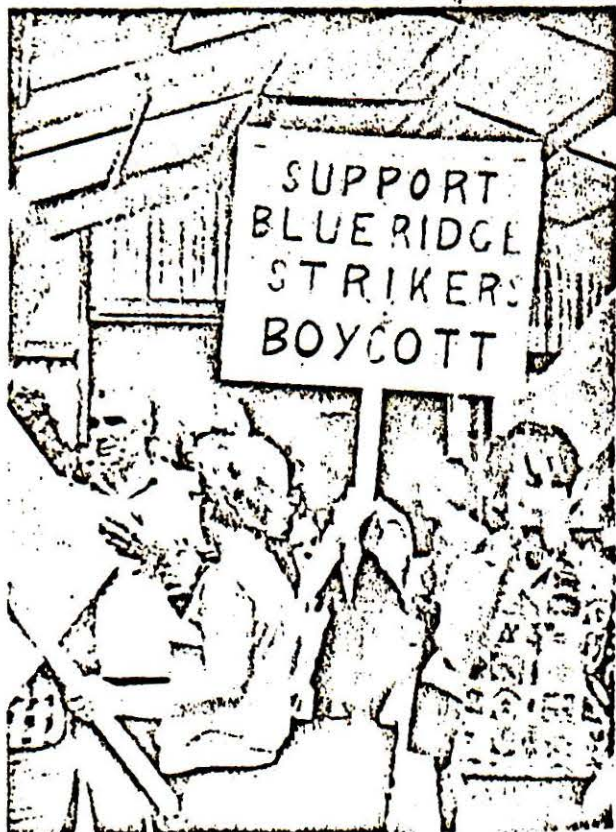
"There wasn't anything we could do but walk out."

A sweatshop don't ever pay enough. Production is real high and they don't pay enough for the hours you put in. At Levi, if my supervisor thought you had to work, you needed the job, she rode you worse. I was there about three and a half years before we organized the union. The people that worked at the factory, we organized it. The union made contact, but we did the work. We was the ones that signed people up, did all the leg work, carried cards, worked at night, worked at lunch-time. It took nine months to get the union organized. Then we voted it in, voted it in two to one.

The union was in about two years before we struck. And that was the union's fault. Nothing was ever carried out. Levi could get away with anything. Not one grievance in two years was processed.

Finally Levi got to where they had leeway to fire anyone they wanted. Well, we was in contact with the union all the time. We told the business agent he better do something, that that was the last straw. We just couldn't be union and let them do that. Well, the union didn't move, they didn't do a thing. So we told the company we'd strike. Course you're real nervous about a thing like that. We all needed to work.

There wasn't anything we could do but walk out. Gollie. . . the whole factory walked out. The majority. They was five hundred, night shift and all. There was a hundred, hundred ten, hundred twenty-five that drove over our picket line for months. Now, that's good, right? Now that's working together, people sticking together and they could have won if they'd had help from the union. Blame the union that round, I do. This is the ILGW and I don't think nothing of them, cause they caused us to lose our jobs. As far as I'm concerned, the ILGW is as bad as Levi. They're worse. . . Levi's out to make money, the union's supposed to help people, but who do they help? It's kind of like the poverty program . . . who do they help?



I'm not saying I'm not union. I wish I could be one hundred per cent. But really the grievance should have been carried out by the union and not allowed to happen. Maybe up North they're doing something, but in the South, I don't think the unions are doing anything.

Well, it was discouraging. See, people don't stick together when their stomach's empty and their pocket's

empty, and they don't know which way to go.

We held a picket line fourteen months before the contract between the union and Levi was up. We knew we'd lost but we couldn't quit in midstream. I was on the picket line a lot of nights and on weekends. Most of us went other places to work, other sweatshops, and we'd give to the picket.

There was no violence during the wildcat. Oh, there was a lot of fights, window lights broke, cars shot into and like that. But there wasn't any real violence.

Then time came for the contract to run out and the workers at Levi had to vote. They voted the union out of Levi. . . they was twenty-eight out of two hundred fifty votes for the union.

Well, after we struck at Levi, and all lost our jobs, we started this dang thing. Some organizers came up from Atlanta and they wanted us to get a co-op started. At the time, it looked like something that would work. But we was misinformed. They took us to Crawfordville, to a black women's co-op (it's not open anymore) and we saw that and I just got carried away. So we started the dang thing. We did.

"Upper class helping peasants"

We started out right here in Mineral Bluff. In all honesty, the organizers that come up they all thought the co-op idea was a working idea. Those boys really thought they worked.

So what do you do? I just really got carried away. I's so stupid, man was I stupid. I knew it wasn't going to go all the time and I alibied and I alibied. I'd go home at night and I'd think, we have women out there in this factory that didn't even need the money, workin. They were trained sewers, see. And we had women with two, three kids paying rent, didn't have a dime. And the woman that spent her money on clothes didn't want the woman that needed the rent money to get a job.

I don't think it ever was a co-op. It tried to be, but it never was really a co-op. A few people worked hard, a few harder than others, they was willing to sacrifice. They're still out there in the factory and some that was not willing to sacrifice are still out there.

When we found out that we couldn't make payroll on our first contract, we began to look around for another contract. We were making dresses, little shift dresses, seven dollars a dozen. Well, we began to look around and finally got a contract out of a paper cutters' exchange newspaper. We'd've done all right, but he kept sending little short dozens and changing the styles all the time, and we couldn't make it that way.

When we first started, they set this little rig up to have about sixty people working to do a certain quota. But even sixty people couldn't meet the quota, so that's where the catch was. We didn't understand until we got into it.

Well, we finally got a good contract and began doing



some better. Then the fall of the year came and work slowed, everywhere it slowed.

So this woman up in New York with the Sharecroppers, she got a idea to help us. She contacted this man, Mr. . . oh, great day, I forgot his name. Anyway, he's on the poverty program. . .and he'd like to help people. We was desperate for a contract so we decided we'd sew for him and make gowns, ladies' gowns.

The sample come in and I sent it down to Bill Gill, he's a real nice guy in Atlanta, and he costed the dress for us. Well, Bill said, "You can't do it, you needn't to start sewing, you'll only end up like you started before."

Well, I kept trying to get the cost of the garment from the man we had the contract with. . .to what he was going to give us for the garment. He never would tell us. And then everything come in, he unloaded lace, material, and everything in the world that was needed. But never the cost per garment. Finally, when what he was going to give us per dozen come, we just couldn't make it. And we had all that stuff hauled out. This from a guy who's workin for the poverty program, the friend of the lady in New York. . .and who wanted to help poor people! Some time later, when I went to New York, I found out they was neighbors, he lived three houses away from her. They're buddies, all upper class. Upper class helping peasants. . . "It started out for everybody. . ."

Well, we decided this lady from New York had no idea what a bunch of mountain people was like, and in her situation, if she was going to try to help them, she should have known what mountain people was like. Anyway, we

thoughtow funny to fool her up. And we did.

She was coming down from New York to visit our factory. So we pulled our shoes off and let our feet get real dirty. And I wore an old shirt that was a little red in front and completely faded in back, and cut off and old pair of pants and tore them up to here. Then we got tobacco and put it on the girls' machines. And I mean, we really looked like the Beverley Hillbillies. And I got some cigars.

In she walked. I opened up the cigars and I said, "Hey, would you like a cigar?"

"Oooh, nooo." I think it half scared her to death.

Then she goofed. She was starved and she said, "How about us going out to eat and we can talk." Then all at once she thought how I looked. I thought, what will I do, I'll just have to walk into Harry's Resturant looking like this. But, after shethought how I looked, she didn't go. She kept saying how famished she was, but she wouldn't talk about going out to eat again. Finally, she sent someone out to get her some food. Poor thing. She really thinks that's how we went and that this "co-op" has educated us that much to where we now wear shoes and don't chew tobacco. See, that's all she knew about mountain people, so how can she possibly help them? Don't you think you have to know a little bit about what you're working with? She still likes to call this a co-op.

I don't call it a co-op no more. It started out for everybody, to be everybody's factory. But we just kept havin to change the rules and change the rules. We did the best we could. It just wouldn't go.

You could see it happening, it was in little groups out there on the sewing room floor. This'un wanted to be the Big Daddy and tha'un wanted to be the Big Daddy and this'un wanted that'un fired and that'un was this'un's mother or aunt or so and so and there was no reason to fire her.

In a thing like this you got to have people that can produce. That's the sad thing. A girl can walk in here and look real, real pitiful and now and then you can afford to take a chance and hope to train her, but you lose money every day. And we don't have any money to lose. Right now, we're in better shape than we've ever been, but we still don't have any money to lose. Pitiful people that come in and can't sew, you can't help them by giving them a job sewing. But if the thing went, if people worked real hard together, you could help in other ways. There's something everybody can do, it's not hopeless.

When this factory first got a-going, I thought, oh boy, we can help somebody else. Places like Benton and all these little sweatshops, just walk in and start it and the factory'd be theirs and the people that run the sweatshops would be out of business. It could be, you know. You could really put them out of business. And everybody'd have a ball doing it. Well, why don't it work?

"So I know what it takes to get the most work out of me."

These girls know they've got it made. You can walk into the cutting room and light a cigarette. Nobody here cares, the members all do it themselves. But the girls realize so much has to go. It's a good little group out there working. And they're just as free to do all these things. They're not pushed, they're not even pushed for their quota cause I happen to know when a quota's too high.

Like, I used to work at Levi and at Levi, every hour. . . if you work real hard a hour you're tired. It helps to straighten up and take a draw off a cigarette, you know? Well, at Levi, you had to sneak out and go in the little stall where the commode was and blow your smoke sideways cause the supervisor was probably peepin'. See? All this I know and I know the way I work the best. Every hour, if I went to the bathroom, sneaked a draw or two off a cigarette, I was a hundred and fifty per cent operator. So I know what it takes to get the most work out of me, and I can watch a girl, I can pretty well tell the gaits, the habits they have. When they turn in a per cent I know whether it's good enough to pay us.

My little pocket girl, she's doing ten hours' work in eight hours. She's working eight hours and getting paid for ten cause her work's that much over production. Well, today, she said reckon she could get off the afternoon to go to the courthouse. Why, sure. But at Levi, great day, you shouldn't even ask.

In our factory, a girl walks out here over to the edge near the bathroom, she pulls her pack of cigarettes out and she lights one. Well, if you've got a minute and she's got a minute, you stand there and talk a minute and

both of you smoke. Why, that's unbelievable at Levi, Bartow. . .

Some sets at their machine all day with one gait, others works real fast and gets up more often. It's just a difference in people. There's thirty-one of us in all.

The children come and go. . . women's husbands comes in and tells them things. I've seen them sit there at their machines and talk maybe ten minutes. But nobody comes in here and just hangs around. There's got to be a certain amount of everything, but it certainly doesn't have to be like Levi. There's nothing in here that's sweatshop, to tell you the truth.

Our quality's good, cause we're afraid not to let it be good. Cause our good quality's all we got going for us. We don't get a lot for what we do. We're doing two hundred dozen a week now. It looks like right now we're stuck to that. Well, we sat down and figgered it up and it left one thousand dollars after payroll per week. So the two hundred dozen seems to be good. Course then we have overhead costs. Now, I need to stop and figger where it's going. Like, I say to myself, great day in the morning, it there's a thousand dollars left over each week they ought to be some money in a month. Well, when a month's up the bookkeeper, she'll show me where it went. We've really been chewing down our bills. And now maybe we'll be ahead to where we'll be all right. Up to now, we haven't had any money to give raises. The girls get \$1.60 and we go on piece work, so if a girl gets over production she gets paid for it.

But there's other work besides the cutting and sewing and managing the books. The goods come in in boxes and we bundle. They're too heavy for a woman to lift. And I was so sick yesterday, and having to lift those heavy bundles. I got so mad last night thinking about having to lift those heavy bundles and it ruining my health. And I got a long way to go before I can draw my Social Security—I'll be forty-nine in July. So I set down and I wrote them about sending heavy bundles like that. I'm not a horse, I'm a woman. Shet far. . . mountain women are just women. So I wrote them. He'll probably blow his stack, but maybe he'll cut the bundles down. They're making a pile of money off us and they can show that much respect for us.

If something happened to your health because you worked in a factory, the doctors around here would never open their mouths, they'd help keep it a secret. Because businesses is good for the town.

A doctor down in Copper Hill, he treated the women who worked at Levi. . . it's nerve pills, it's this or that. . . and he told one of the women that Levi was killing the women of Fannin County. Well, later on after he said that, I found out that one of my kin that does housework for this doctor—he's got a big, fine doctor's house—and I found out she was only getting \$1.75 a hour to clean his house. Well, I says, that doctor better quit talking about the factories killing folks. . .