

STRIKERS' COOP COMPETES

The following interview with three former Levi Workers, Joe Nichols, Irene Whittenbarger, and Beulah Mull discusses the struggles that these three and their fellow workers have had in Blue Ridge, Ga. over the last two years.

In August 1966 the Levi Strauss Blue Ridge plant was struck for better wages and working conditions. The strike was finally broken 56 weeks later. Rather than giving up the workers have now formed a co-op corporation called Appalachian Enterprises, which has contracted with a dress manufacturing company. A plant has been established in Mineral Bluff, Ga. The people associated with the co-op have also planned a cooperative grocery store, gas station, and housing project as well as a day care center for worker's children and a health clinic for the county, which at present has no hospital. (See the MOVEMENT, January, 1968).

The interview was conducted by Brian Heggen, and sent



to the MOVEMENT for publication. A slightly different version of the same interview has been distributed by Liberation News Service.

Brian: Why did Levi come into this area?
Irene: Well, I guess they figured they'd find some cheap labor. There's plenty of labor. They made a labor survey before they came in here.

Brian: Who invited them here?

Beulah: The businessmen, the lawyers and merchants.

Brian: What type of conditions did Levi set up; what type of conditions did you have to work under?

Beulah: Sweatshop conditions.

Brian: What's a sweatshop?

Beulah: Well, they set a high production you had to meet. If you didn't meet the high production you were fired or threatened and threatened and a dollar, the wage law, is all you can make . . . 80 cents an hour for the training period. Then you worked three months and you got a nickel raise then worked one more month and got the wage law, and if you ever got where you could make production they'd bring the company repairs in just bundle after bundle and causing it to lose your production.

Mike Lozoff: Why didn't they want you to make production?

Beulah: Well, they had production set and if you ever met production you'd get so much over per bundle. So they'd put something before you like you could make money, then they'd see to it that you couldn't ever make any money by not letting you make anything more than production. And they talked about us in every way - they said we were hillbillies, we'd work for nothing. The manager, went somewhere way out in the country and he brought this big bathtub in - a thing I'd never seen - I didn't know they made a bathtub like it - but that's what they said it was - and he hung it on the wall with a sign that said, "If you don't have a bathtub at home take this and use it." It had a bar of soap down in it. It was right out on the porch site place where everybody that came and went, big sign and all, could see it, which said "Why don't you bathe?"

Irene: And tell about having to clock out and stay there. You couldn't go home, they said you'd be fired if you went home. But you had to stay there and wait on work and later on the labor board made them pay a little of that back, but their records weren't found, you know, they didn't pay much of it back.

Beulah: You know my job when you went in - inspect was my job - was the last operation. So they tell you to come in the next morning, then we'd get in there wouldn't be any work. We didn't even get to clock in. We went as high as 10, 10:30, and 11 o'clock and if you asked to go home they said no. But you had a babysitter, you know, paying your babysitter bill all the time.

Community Feeling

Brian: Did people in this area have a feeling of togetherness, a feeling of community with each other before Levi came?

Irene: Yes, I think they did.

Brian: Did Levi try to break that?

Irene: Oh, they broke it.

Brian: How?

Irene: Well, the whole system in Levi was set up to where you had to act greedy to survive. You couldn't help your fellow man, you know, your fellow worker, or it just cost you. It took money out of your pocket. And the schedule was so tight that you didn't have a minute to lose. You couldn't talk. And they meant for it to be that way, they didn't want you to be together or have time to talk to each other.

girls got their job back through the labor board.

Irene: Some of the Tennessee Copper men helped.

Brian: Why did you decide to go for ILGWU?

Beulah: Well, the only thing I ever figured the reason that we went for the ILGWU, I thought maybe the Tennessee Copper Company men being chemical workers . . . I never really knew why the ILGWU came in. I know they did tell us they didn't want us after it was over and done and a mess of it. They told us they didn't want us to begin with. But how they ever really came in here I don't know. It was the only union I ever heard mentioned.

Weak Contract

Brian: Your first contract was pretty weak and it was a long term contract that allowed the management to get away with

it (the contract) 'in the opinion of the management' - 'if qualified in the opinion of the management' - they'd say we don't have a leg to stand on and we'd rather take a case that we knew we could win. That was their excuse for not going to arbitration. First they talked us into the contract and then when you go to them with grievances they'd say the contract was so weak they couldn't win one so why bother with it.

Brian: You ended up worse with an ILGWU contract than without one?

Beulah: Yes, we sure did.

Irene: Made it against the law for us to walk out then.

Company Violations

Brian: Did the company violate the contract?

Irene: Oh, every day. As soon as the doors opened they violated the contract. You

quite a few things. Why did you decide to sign that?

Beulah: We were advised to. We held a meeting in the school house in Blue Ridge and the guy got up and he read the contract over very fast. It was hard to understand. And he advised us that we would get a foot in the door and later we would grow strong. And the contract was not explained to us in any way, it was just read over very fast. It was the first union - the only union - to ever be in Fannin county, and we knew very little about unions so we only took their word that any contract was better than none and settle it peacefully and then build from there. So we signed.

Brian: Why did ILGWU go along with that - they knew more than you did?

Beulah: Yeah, they should have known more than us, and they should have known that it was only a way for Levi to kick us out one by one, because the contract was so weak. Then as time went on and nothing happened it was worse working than ever, after the union. So when we'd have a case

could just bet on that every morning.

Brian: How?

Beulah: They paid no attention at all to seniority because in our contract every time you had a clause that give you seniority it would say at the bottom, "if, in the opinion of management . . ." So this left the union setting pretty you know, they had nothing . . . we can't fight that, they'd say, although they'd advised us to sign the contract.

Brian: So when you went on your "wildcat" strike the contract had already been broken?

Beulah: Over and over.

Brian: Did the International support you when you went out on strike?

Irene and Beulah: No.

Brian: Gave you no support at all?

Irene: No advice. Every time we'd ask them something they'd say "Well what does it matter; it's all illegal anyway."

SCABS

Brian: Where did the scabs come from, while you were out on the picket line?

Beulah: Well, they were local people that have never worked at Levi. Well, not everyone. Some of the scabs that scabbed in had been fired at Levi before. They had been tried, and the way Levi did, they would bring in and see if you was a real fast worker then if you didn't show that you could be one of these real fast workers they fired you. So this is where a lot of the scabs came from. They had already been fired at Levi at one time. They lots of them wasn't good enough to come in until the strike. And there just local people that had been fired. . .

Irene: Levi rejects . . .

Beulah: Untrained people mostly.

Brian: Why do you think they took the job and crossed your picket line?

Beulah: Well, because of poverty mostly. There's no jobs in Blue Ridge - there's one little factory that's been here thirty years. They work about 500 people and they never quit because it's the only job they have.

Strikebreaking Violence

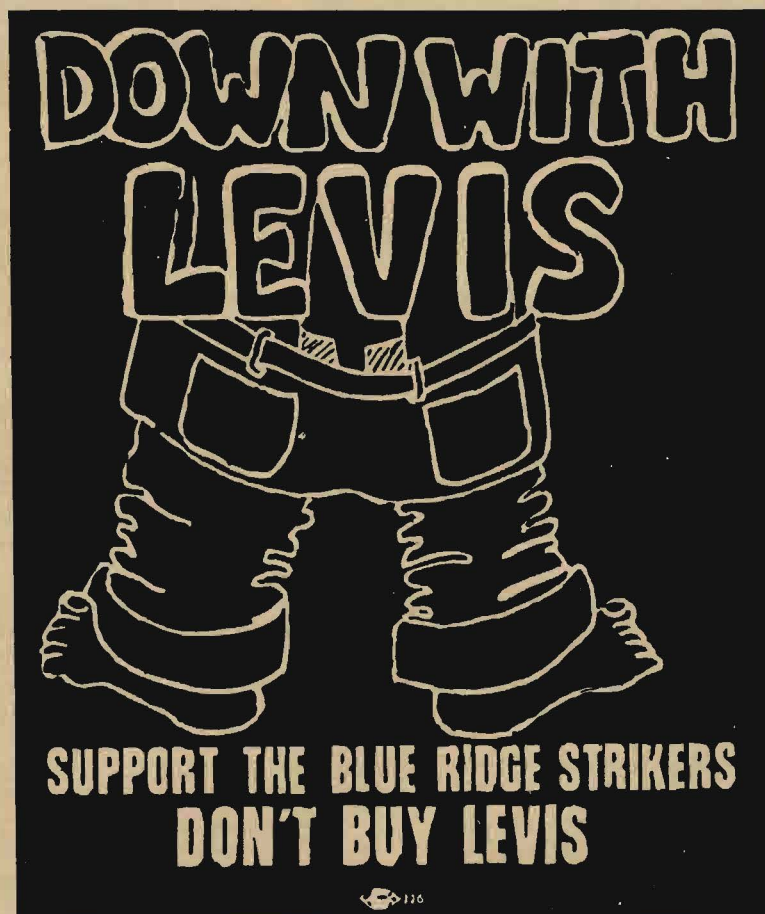
Brian: What sort of action was taken against you during the strike, with you being out there on the picket line? Did you get attacked, were there reprisals?

Irene: Our women were run over on the picket line and hospitalized and the grand jury didn't give us a bill. And they got a little midnight injunction fixed up in the judge's office and accused us of all sorts of things that . . . There wasn't anybody even there to deny those things, you know. And state patrol all over the place. The weekend right soon after we struck the weekend that he had about 30 patrolmen up here, there was thirty-four people killed on the highways that weekend.

Brian: With the strike and co-op, it's been over a year and a half, right?

Beulah: Yes.

Brian: How long did that strike last?



Starting a Union

Brian: Then generally people were being very badly treated. Who decided that they needed a union first?

Beulah: Well, a small group began talking the union. When we first began to have meetings they was a very small group and from there they kind of covered the whole territory. It took nine months. We organized the union ourselves. It took nine months for us to get the union in and several of the girls were fired. Two of the

to arbitrate they'd say "OK, OK, don't worry about this now, we'll settle it for you", and then you'd keep pushing and pushing and pushing and they never did anything for you. They never arbitrated one case in the two years they had the union, not one case. But we have a briefcase full of arbitration. They never arbitrated one.

Irene: Well, they talked the people into taking that contract and then when we'd go to them with a case, you know, with a grievance, they said, "Well, that clause in

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Beulah: Let's see, we struck August, the 10th, 1966 and let's see . . .

Irene: September the 13th, 1967, was the election and then we dropped the picket line. I believe we held it 56 weeks and one day, thinking the union would do something. Beulah: And we wanted to hold the union in regardless. We felt like once the union was lost in Fannon County it would hurt everybody. So we started even started talking to some of the people that were working in Levi. So we can't say it's the truth but it came out pretty good that Mr. Baum told the girls before the election, "Well, you can vote for the union if you want to but when you do those strikers will come back in and we'll have to let you go". So it wasn't a matter of the scabs not wanting the union - they knew they needed a union. It was a matter that the manager made them think that if we won the strike they'd lose their jobs so that's why they didn't vote for the union.

The Co-op

Brian: How are decisions made in the co-op - what type of structure do you have?

Irene: We made us up some bylaws and we have a board and the board can make decisions. But the membership can reverse those decisions if it doesn't suit them. You know, a majority. Its a membership, individual thing. Everybody has their rights.

Brian: Is it jointly owned by everybody within it?

Irene: Yes.

Brian: What type of trouble have you had since you formed the co-op? Have people given you fair contracts? Have you had trouble with getting contracts, trouble with the machinery?

Irene: Well the first contract we was cheated real badly. They were paying too low; we couldn't even meet the payroll on it.

Beulah: See we didn't know anything to do but sew. We were good sewers - that's all we knew . . . We found out that we were at least \$2 underpaid - from 2 to 4 dollars underpaid - on the dozen. So we couldn't make any money, any way we turned we couldn't make any money. And now we're having to get new machines because we can't buy the old machines; they're not even the man's that sold them to us.

Irene: If we'd payed for those machines it'd of been just like buying stolen goods. We'd of been out.

Brian: So people who know what they're doing have consistently been taken advantage of you . . .

Beulah: They certainly have . . .

Irene: But we're learning the hard way. We don't make the same mistakes twice is why we can survive. We're learning every day.

Brian: What's the most important things to you now - what are you trying to reach for?

Beulah: We're trying to build this co-op so people can have a decent place to work and not be pushed around. When people own the thing they take more interest and pride in it and the co-op has got to go because it's the only thing left for us around here. If it fails we don't have anything.

The Future

Brian: What do you see for the future? You think you're gonna make it?

Beulah: Yes. We think we'll make it if we can just survive until we can get on our feet. Money is our big problem now. We don't have any money and so far we haven't got very much help. We have some people that simply have to have some money to eat and pay their house rent. If we can just survive until we get a decent contract and the machine deal straightened

A Little Background on Levi-Strauss

Levi-Strauss is the world's largest producer of jeans and casual slacks in its price range. While this corporation consistently withholds information regarding its operations, profits have obviously been good since both its net worth and current assets continue to grow each year. Net worth has grown from almost \$32 million at the end of 1964 to over \$40 million at the end of 1966. During the same period current assets grew from over \$33 million to almost \$63 million.

The management of the corporation includes Walter A. Haas, who is also President of the Levi-Strauss Realty Co. and Iris Security Co., both real estate holding companies and each having a tangible net worth in excess of \$1 million. He is also a director of the Crocker-Citizens National Bank, Pacific Gas and Electric Co., Pacific Intermountain Express Co., Cal Title Insurance Co., and National Ice and Cold Storage Co.

Another Director, Daniel E. Koshland, is a director of the Wells Fargo Bank, and is an officer in both realty companies.

A third director, Walter Haas, Jr., son of the Chairman of the Board, is a director of the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Co., and the Bank of America (the largest bank in the world), as well as being an officer in the two realty companies.

The corporation employs about 13,500 persons in the U.S., mainly in branch offices in the South.

International operations include Levi Strauss International Inc., a wholly owned holding company. Its interests include 50% interest in the outstanding stock of Levi Strauss Far East, Ltd., Co., in Hong Kong. Within the last few months Levi-Strauss has acquired Firma Compernelle en Zoon, Belgium's largest producer of men's and boy's trousers. Walter Haas, Jr. said that the Belgian firm which will be owned and operated by Levi-Strauss Europe S.A. will be able to supply only a portion of Levi Strauss' European needs. The Bank of America International took care of the financing of this new venture.



THE MOVEMENT

ILGWU

Brian: Did you ever get together and take your case direct to the union people from the ILGWU?

Beulah: Well, the thing that we walked out on we had the business agent up there and the area manager, the plant manager, we sat in the office over four hours about two months before we struck trying to get this one seniority thing settled. And our business agent would not open his mouth, he would not defend us in any way. And we kept trying to show him where this was absolutely not fair, nor right. They were gonna push girls out the door; not only back, but out the door. Mr. Melton said this in so many words, and he said, "Well girls you can learn a new dog new tricks better than you can learn an old dog new tricks." That was his comment. Our business agent sat there. He heard all this.

Brian: You've been through this, through this strike and setting up the co-op for over a year and a half. There must have been a lot of times when people were asking you to make compromises, when people said, "well why don't you deal with us and we'll give you a bit and you give in on this . . ."

Beulah: Yes.

Levi "Compromise"

Brian: Have they ever offered you a compromise that's been worth making?

Beulah: No, so far we haven't compromised. Levi never did offer us anything except come back to work - when you come back to work we'll settle all this - but see we knew they wouldn't and the union wouldn't help us. So we knew that if we walked back in there all it might do is shake the faith of a lot of the girls that walked out with us. So we didn't dare walk back in the Levi plant because they knew they didn't intend to settle anything. Brian: Well what made you decide to form the co-op? That's a pretty unique thing. Most people if they lose a strike everything just dissolves, but you went on and did something else. Why?

Beulah: Well the strikers went at least 50 and 60 miles one way in order to find work. When we struck they had to work. Well, no matter where we go in our area we find the same thing: sweatshop conditions. When the wage law goes up, production goes up. And when production is so high you already can't make it, they still raise production every time there's a wage law. So the wage laws don't help people like us at all. The prices go up and by the time we work trying to get production, why, we're no better off.

Irene: And besides that, Levi's I guess it was would call all these places around in a hundred mile radius and tell them not to lure us - that we were agitators and troublemakers. And we had to get something.

Beulah: Some of us could not even get jobs in other sweatshops, because they had been called beforehand.

out, why, we think we can make it on our own easy enough.

Brian: You've got the story about your struggle around here to a lot of liberals, liberal organizations. Have they responded, have they come through, have they helped you?

Beulah: Well, no. \$4,000 is what we started this thing on, and we just payed what bills we had to pay and got it started and were behind on bills, we're behind in payroll. We could have made it probably with the \$4,000 if we hadn't got messed up about our machine contract and our sewing contract too. We could have took the \$4,000 and swung it. It would have been hard but we could have, but you see now we're messed up and having to shut the doors and get a new contract and new machines.

Brian: Where did you get the \$4,000 from?

Irene: It was the Southern Christian Leadership Fund.

Levi and the Poverty Commission

Brian: While you've been struggling down here against Levi for better conditions and just for the right to be human beings who can live well, what's the Levi management doing?

Irene: Well, Levi management, the President of Levi-Strauss has just been appointed on a board by LBJ to relieve unemployment and poverty. I don't know what he's going to do.

Mike Lozoff: The president says his commission, including men like Mr. Haas, the guy who owns Levi-Strauss, is set up to probe deep into the causes and to reach the people at the bottom who are really unemployed and lack skills and help them. What would you tell these people?

Beulah: When you can work 6 days a week for Levi-Strauss and you live in poverty - and we can prove this - 6 days a week you can't make a living at Levi-Strauss . . .

Brian: Then how are poor people gonna solve the problem of their being poor?

Beulah: Well, you know we're trying to solve our problem - through building a factory of our own . . . We're too new to know what will come of it. We know it's the only thing we've got to try.

Brian: Then the only solution you see is to build something to control?

Beulah: Yes.

Unions in the South

Brian: During this obviously the unions let you down a lot. What do you think about unions in America now?

Beulah: Well, we're all union, we're 100% union, but we sure don't approve of the way ILGWU does in the South because they don't fight for their people, they don't get good contracts for their people, they don't seem to be there when they're needed. They come in and they organize - or in our case we organized ourselves - then they came in and got union dues. And they did not help us. They didn't help us while we were in the plant. They didn't help us when we wildcatted. We wouldn't of wildcatted if we'd of had support from the union. Mike: Why would a union do things like that?

Irene: Well, they'll tell you that it's not for the dues, but that's the only thing I see they get from it.

Beulah: They're losing out in the South because people are becoming very distrustful of the unions because they do not fight hard enough, they do not come in and do what they say they'll do so in the end you're always worse off than you were before you fooled with the union.

Irene: I don't think unions ought to go into a place until they're ready to support them and back up the people; they do more harm than do good.

Beulah: And the South really needs unions. The South really needs unions worse than anybody because we really have sweatshop conditions. We need unions that will fight for us. ♦