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Covering for the Bosses: Labor and the Southern Press

Joe Atkins

The Southern press has played a crucial role in keeping its region dependent on comparatively cheap, non-unionized labor to attract outside industry, a region that today is perhaps more racially enlightened than ever before but whose political, business, and media leaders remain as opposed to unions as their predecessors once were to civil rights activists.

In many ways, the same industrial enticements that attracted the textile industry from New England in the early decades of the twentieth century — low wages, tax incentives, limited regulation, a political and business culture hostile to unionization — are key to the region's new identity as the "Detroit South," home to a growing number of foreign and domestic automakers. Ironically, the automakers are arriving at the same time the textile industry is packing its bags and moving to China and other places where wages are even cheaper.

These developments are taking place in a south that is no longer the isolated backwater, a separate nation within the nation, that it was as recently as the 1960s. The South today is an economic and political bellwether whose native sons have occupied the White House for more than 12 years, whose conservative, pro-business, anti-union politics and policies have become the nation's and are now part of the global strategies of international corporations.

Veteran labor organizers like Ray Smithhart and Robert Bracken know firsthand the struggle for workers' rights in the South and the role the press played in that struggle. Smithhart fought beside Medgar Evers and other civil rights leaders during the 1960s and once had his car filled with bullet holes by anti-union goons. Bracken once had a shotgun shoved in his face with a warning to get out of town. Both said the local press fueled such hostility.

"They (the press) didn't treat us right at all," Smithhart said in a May 2004 interview. Called the dean of Mississippi labor organizers, he died at the age of 88 in March 2005. "You got the whole community against you, the supervisors,

the merchants, the newspapers. You can't get the message across. What we needed was at least some kind of debate. This would let the employees hear both sides of the issues."¹

Bracken, 67, recalled during the same interview a local union election in Neshoba County, Miss., in 1972, eight years after the infamous murder of three civil rights workers there. When he met with the editor of the local newspaper to complain about the paper's practice of running company propaganda, the editor's response was to call the police. "We told him what we thought about allowing the company to write that crap," he said, his voice stirring with old, unspent passions. "We let him know how we felt."

The union lost the election by 16 votes. "The newspapers just do whatever the local management tells them to do," Bracken said.

No place has waged a longer, bloodier or meaner fight against organized labor than the U.S. South. This is the region where labor battles left dozens dead in Kentucky and West Virginia in the 1920s and early 1930s; where more than 30 strikers were shot in Marion, N.C., in 1929; and where seven striking textile workers were shot to death in Honea Path, S.C., on Sept. 6, 1934; where Mississippi labor leader Claude Ramsay was so often threatened in the 1960s that he kept a shotgun in his car. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed when he came to Memphis to support a garbage collectors' strike in 1968. In January 2000, state troopers and local police used helicopters, armored vehicles, patrol boats and attack dogs against picketing dock workers with the International Longshoremen's union in Charleston, S.C. *Clamor* magazine called this the "first major labor battle of the twenty first century."²

This longstanding struggle and its warriors, both dead and alive, attest to a civil war in the South that never ended, and one of the major combatants in this war have been the Southern media. Newspapers — and they've been the role model for the broadcast media — have with few exceptions been decidedly on the side of management. They fought with the same weapons — fear, race-baiting, communist witch-hunting, patronizing appeals to "Southern" traditions — that business and corporate leaders used to quell union activity. Today they're the role model for the national media as well, and their weapon of choice is a blanket of silence

on labor and labor issues. As Mississippi AFL-CIO President Robert Shaffer once said, "You practically have to get out and march with a protest sign to get their attention."³

One of the effects of the ongoing civil war that has pitted the South's political, religious, and media elite against Southern workers has been to keep the region the least unionized part of the nation. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of workers in unions in the so-called "right to work" states (referring to the Taft-Hartley Act provision allowing prohibition of union closed shops and thus restricting organizing efforts) — and they include all of the South except for the border states of Kentucky and West Virginia — is 7.4 percent, compared to 15.6 percent in non—"right-to-work" states. The nation's lowest unionization rates are found in the South: North Carolina is the lowest with 3.2 percent, followed by South Carolina with 4.9 percent and Texas with 5.1 percent. Mississippi, where Smithhart and Bracken fought so long, has a unionization rate of 6.6 percent. These states also have the lowest wages: \$30,915 in annual pay, compared to \$36,205 in non—"right-to-work" states.

Much of the textile industry that was once so central to the Southern economy, and its fiercest foe of unionization, has either shut down or moved to Mexico and China. In the summer of 2003, just four years after its workers voted in a union, textile giant Pillowtex shut down 16 plants and eliminated 7,650 jobs across the South.

The departure of textiles is part of an outmigration of manufacturing jobs across the South and also the nation. North Carolina lost 138,000 jobs between 1994 and 2003, more than a third of them since 2001 and 52 percent of them in the textile industry.⁴ Mississippi, perennially one of the poorest of all states, lost 260 manufacturing plants between 2002 and 2004. Despite such losses, millions of Latin American laborers, many undocumented, are arriving to work in the fields, on construction sites, and in the remaining factories in the South.

Like scalawags meeting carpetbaggers on the road out of Atlanta 140 years ago, the textile industry is leaving at the same time U.S. and foreign automakers are arriving to take advantage of huge state-sponsored tax incentives packages, proximity to U.S. markets, and, of course, what is for them cheap labor.

Detroit South

When the Nissan Corp. announced in November 2000 that it was coming to Mississippi, the news media led the cheering across the state. The *Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, the state's largest newspaper, proclaimed "Nissan Ushers In New Industry" on the front page of its Nov. 10, 2000 edition, accompanied by a photograph of Gov. Ronnie Musgrove and Nissan CEO Carlos Ghosn and sidebars with headlines such as this: "Resident: 'It's A Blessing From God'."⁵ The *Memphis Commercial-Appeal*, still the paper of choice with many readers in northern Mississippi, headlined its front-page story: "It's For Real: Nissan Tells Miss.: Plant, Prosperity Will Follow."⁶

Indeed, with Nissan's decision to build a \$1.4 billion, 5,300-employee plant in Canton, Miss., Mississippi joined what has been called "Detroit South," the auto-making corridor that now stretches from the BMW plant in Spartanburg, S.C., to the GM plant in Shreveport, La., and continues as far west as the Toyota plant in San Antonio, Texas. Mississippi paid dearly to be a part of the corridor: a \$363-million incentives package that included a host of state and federal tax breaks along with local, state, and federal commitments for road and highway construction, property acquisition, site preparation, water and sewer lines, training programs, and rail improvements. Tax revenues to the state aren't expected to exceed this investment before the year 2007.

Other states also paid dearly. Kentucky spent \$150 million to get its Toyota plant in 1988. South Carolina paid \$150 million for its BMW plant in 1992. Alabama upped the ante to \$250 million for its Mercedes plant in 1993 and then to \$234 million for a Hyundai plant in 2002. As in Mississippi, the newspaper press led the cheers. "Hyundai era begins" and "Hyundai finds a warm-weather home" were typical headlines in the *Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser* in April 2002.⁷

Yet, the incentives packages likely were not the key factor in the decision to move to the U.S. South. As the Chapel Hill, N.C.-based MDC organization states in its landmark 1986 study, *Shadows In The Sunbelt*: "There is substantial evidence that tax breaks do not significantly affect plant location decisions."⁸ The incentives packages are icing on the

cake. The cake is a region of low wages and low unionization that is also close to lucrative U.S. markets and thus allows corporations to save on shipping costs.

Foreign-owned plants like the BMW plant in South Carolina can pay their workers less than a third of what their workers at home earn. As the crusading North Carolina-based magazine *Southern Exposure* has reported, "Labor advocates on both sides of the border ... fear that foreign firms aim to make the low-wage, lean Southern workplace a model for all their operations, driving down the power and protection of workers world-wide."⁹

The "new era" ushered in by Nissan and other automakers shows all the markings of an old story in the South that has its roots in the post-Reconstruction era, when boosters such as Atlanta Constitution editor Henry Grady first touted the region to outside investors as a place with accommodating politicians, good climate, a capital-starved economy, and, above all, a "plentiful supply of cheap labor."¹⁰ Like Henry Grady, Mississippi in 2000 saw itself as part of yet another "New South" and its generous incentives package, the largest ever offered an automaker by a Southern state, as a necessary means to securing thousands of new, comparatively high-paying (for the South), skilled jobs that would prove to the world the state and region can compete on a global scale.

Henry Grady's successors ultimately saw his dream foiled by Northern industrialists who drained the South of its resources and kept it, in effect, a colony within the nation. As the writers of *Who Built America?*, the mammoth 1992 work published as part of historian Herbert G. Gutman's American Social History Project, put it: "Outside investors called the shots in large southern enterprises, squeezing profits from the region as one might juice from an orange and leaving behind depleted resources, destitute people, and a dependent economy."¹¹

No one necessarily envisions such an end from the more recent investments by Nissan, Toyota, Mercedes, Hyundai and General Motors in the South. Thousands of jobs have been created, with better wages and benefits than Southerners have known in the past. Each new plant has resulted in spin-off investments. At the end of 2003, the Nissan plant in Canton had resulted in 32 Nissan suppliers constructing facilities in the state. Yet, hidden in the subtext

of this unfolding story are costs that don't get as much fanfare as the promise of jobs. For example, Alabama's \$250 million incentives package to Mercedes in 1993 included major tax loopholes — changes in the state tax code known as the “Mercedes Law” — that other companies subsequently demanded, leading to a loss of billions in state revenue.¹² The long-term implications of the tax and the incentives offered the automaker remain uncertain. However, the state faced such a huge budget deficit in 2003 that Republican Gov. Bob Riley tried unsuccessfully to eliminate with a proposed \$1.2 billion (the largest in state history) tax increase.

Job safety is another issue not getting much play in the Southern press. Injuries at Nissan in 2001 were twice the average at the Big Three automakers, and workers have complained that the line speeds are too fast and dangerous — a charge that invokes memories of the despised “stretch-out” in the Southern textile industry of the 1920s and 1930s.¹³ A “stretch out” — the Southern version of the “speed-up” started by Henry Ford in the first decades of the twentieth century — forced workers to double and sometimes triple or even quadruple their workload at often breakneck speeds.

Overriding these underplayed aspects of the story, however, is the simple fact that Nissan, as well as the other foreign and domestic automakers in Detroit South, invested in the region for the same reason as the outside investors of the late 1800s and early 1900s: cheap, non-unionized workers. In 1896, an adult mill worker in North Carolina earned half or at the most two-thirds what his Massachusetts counterpart earned. One of four North Carolina cotton mill workers that year was a child earning just 40 percent what a child laborer earned in Massachusetts.¹⁴ These kinds of disparities are why much of the textile industry had relocated to the South by the 1920s. This is again why the “Sunbelt” South gained more than a million manufacturing jobs in the 1970s while the North and Midwest lost two million.¹⁵

The South's deal to the automakers is the same “Faustian bargain,” a term used by *New York Times* writer Peter Applebome and others, that the region has always made with outside investors. This is how Applebome further describes it: “Ship us your jobs, any jobs, and we'll work for less than workers in the North would, and without unions.”¹⁶

Even granting the South's much-touted cost-of-living

advantages, the region continues to be the poorest and most underpaid in the nation. A recent study by the Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy showed that 30 percent of families in the rural South claimed the earned income tax credit (a refund of federal payroll taxes available to the working poor) in 2001.¹⁷ The sociologist, writer, and former labor organizer Stanley Aronowitz has noted that Nissan was paying its Smyrna, Tenn., workers \$3.50 less an hour than the industry's \$17.50 average wage in the mid-1990s, but "workers who had never seen a pay envelope much above legal minimum found \$14 an hour and plenty of overtime a fortune." And, he added, "they would not risk their jobs by joining a union."¹⁸

The Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* provided an update of Aronowitz's assertion in its interview with Nissan-Canton worker Anita Barnes in February 2004. The mother of two and former \$8.95-per-hour assembly line worker at Sanderson Farms' poultry company predicted she would be earning \$21 an hour at Nissan by 2005. "I don't have to worry about asking my mom for money anymore," Barnes told the newspaper. The article goes on to say that workers like Barnes are why "the United Auto Workers will have difficulty breaking through the virtual fence around foreign automakers' Southern operations."¹⁹

Nowhere is the "virtual fence" more evident than at Nissan, whose CEO Carlos Ghosn has made it clear that his Southern plants will not hire UAW members. In a speech that was required listening for Nissan employees on the day before a union vote at the company's plant in Smyrna, Tenn., Ghosn said, "I cannot emphasize enough how important your decision is to the future of our plant. ... It is without reservation to say that bringing a union into Smyrna could result in making Smyrna not competitive, which is not in your best interest or Nissan's. For this reason, I urge you to vote for your future and for your opportunities at Nissan."²⁰ Needless to say, the workers voted down the union.

Known as "le cost killer" in France, Ghosn has held top executive positions with Michelin, Renault and now Nissan, slashing an estimated 25,000 jobs and shutting down four major plants along the way as he streamlined operations and revitalized ailing companies. Today in Mississippi, as

also in Japan, he is a corporate superhero, much like Bernie Ebbers of WorldCom before his fall from grace.

In its front-page story of the official dedication of the Nissan plant in Canton on May 28, 2003, the *Clarion-Ledger* ran a photograph of Ghosn's smiling face among hundreds of cheering Nissan employees — many of them black. The headline beneath the photograph read: "Plant opens with a roar."²¹ In all the coverage of Nissan, the *Clarion-Ledger* or other Mississippi media have rarely explored Ghosn's reputation as "le cost killer" or his anti-union attitudes. More typical has been this editorial from *The Mississippi Press* in Pascagoula: "A potentially golden new era for Mississippi dawned this week with the opening of the new Nissan plant in Canton ... The reasons for what amount to a fundamental change in American industry are simple. Most Southern states are right-to-work states. For strike-weary management, tired of the strongly unionized North, that's an attraction to be sure."²²

This editorial seemed totally oblivious of the fact that the number of labor strikes in the country reached a 50-year low in 1996 and has continued to decline since that year.

Labor's "Waterloo": The South

The *New York Times*' Applebome has called the South "American labor's Waterloo, the nut that never cracked."²³ The South's resistance to organized labor was born in its poverty and desperation after the Civil War, its plentiful labor supply as the region shifted from its agrarian roots toward industrialization, the feudalistic subservience of its masses to an economic and political elite, and a plantation mindset described eloquently by W.J. Cash, author of the landmark 1941 study, *The Mind of the South*.

First on the plantation and later in the mills, the Southern elite saw itself as "the saviors of the South," a manifestation "of the old amiable relationship between master and man," Cash wrote. "The men in control of the mills clung stoutly to the notion that merely by operating them on any terms they entitled themselves to the complete gratefulness of workman and public, and to be regarded as leading patriots of the South." Thus when textile mill workers struck in the Carolinas in 1929 and later in 1934, "the masters of the mills, businessmen in general, planters, the farmers in the fields, faced it with hot-eyed anger and determination to have none of it in Dixie."²⁴

As for the press, Cash wrote, the “most powerful newspaper in North Carolina” (he doesn’t identify the newspaper) editorialized, “since the Communists wanted to destroy the existing government, they were not entitled to protection under its laws. And immediately afterward, overt violence broke out in Gastonia.”²⁵

The mindset toward the Southern worker can be seen in this excerpt from a 1903 promotional booklet issued by the Southern Industrial Association of Sanford, N.C., and reprinted in a special edition of *The Sanford Herald* in 1986: “We have an abundance of labor ... of a very desirable kind. There are no labor agitators or labor organizations, and the labor here is of a peaceful, sober and industrious character, and on account of the low cost of living in the south, the mild climate, cheap fuel, vegetables, etc., labor can be had here of almost every class at about one-half the usual wages paid in the northern states. The industries here are inadequate to give employment to our abundance of labor.”²⁶

Who were these Southern workers? Let’s turn to legendary *Atlanta Constitution* editor Ralph McGill for a description of the typical “poor white trash” Southern mill worker in the early decades of the twentieth century. “One had to see them, the listless men and women, dozens of them for every job open, shabby and gaunt, their feet sometimes wrapped in guano sacks. Illiterate, ill-fed, and sick of hookworm or worse, they waited patiently, hopefully. It made a person’s mouth taste salty to see them, already degraded, being pushed down a bit deeper.”²⁷

No events are more significant in the history of labor in the South than the 1929 and 1934 strikes at textile mills in the Carolinas and neighboring Southern states. By the late 1920s this region had become the heart of the nation’s textile industry, employing 300,000 of the nation’s 1.1 million textile workers.²⁸ These workers were overwhelmingly white — the cotton mill was generally off-limits to black workers — and came from poor farms and rural backwaters.

In the Southern textile mill culture, whole families worked at the mill and lived in company houses — a plantation-style culture. The children went to mill-subsidized schools, and the family attended mill-subsidized churches. Labor historian, Irving Bernstein, notes that Southern textile

workers earned less than 30 cents an hour — or \$12.83 a week, compared to \$19.16 a week in New England — and worked 12-hour days in filthy, unsafe conditions “amid a terrible din of machinery in temperatures near 85 degrees.”²⁹

As a result of the efforts of the United Textile Workers, the communist National Textile Workers, and other organizations, the workers began major strikes in March 1929 at German-owned mills that had been granted 10-year tax exemptions in Elizabethton, Tenn. By April, the strikes had spread to giant Loray Mill in Gastonia, N.C., and later to Marion, N.C. Violent confrontations with state and local authorities led to the wounding of dozens of strikers and several deaths, including legendary labor minstrel Ella May Wiggins and Gastonia police chief O.F. Aderholt.

A full-page ad in the *Gastonia Gazette* at the time declared the purpose of the strike as “overthrowing this Government and destroying property and to kill, kill, kill.” The ad was bought by a group calling itself “citizens of Gaston County.”³⁰ The “inflammatory” editorials of the *Gastonia* paper were later cited in a trial on the shootings. As Bernstein wrote, “the Loray mill, the *Gastonia Gazette*, and the town authorities were determined to destroy the Communists, above all, (labor organizer Fred E.) Beal.”³¹

Five years later the textile industry was rocked again with a general strike that idled 180,000 workers in the South and 400,000 nationwide.³² Seven striking workers were shot to death in Honea Path, S.C., an event depicted vividly in the landmark documentary *The Uprising of '34* by George Stoney, Judith Helfand, and Susanne Rostock. As one female striker said in the film, “We began to feel we could be a part of a great movement.” But, as another striker put it, “They’d murder to kill a union,” and they did.³³

In his account of Honea Path in 1934 and today in the book *Dixie Rising*, Applebome notes how six decades after the strike South Carolina public television refused to air *The Uprising of '34* — in part due to opposition from Carlos Ghosn’s former company Michelin, which has a plant in South Carolina. He also interviewed Fred T. Moore, a veteran former state legislator who edited the *Honea Path Chronicle* from 1945 to 1981. Moore boasted of never making “a single mention” of the strike “in all the years I ran the paper, and I don’t see why anyone would mention it now. There are too many bad memories, too many people it could hurt. And there’s not a lot

of unions around here and there's not gonna be."³⁴

From the Depression-era textile strikes through the effort by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to unionize the South called "Operation Dixie" in the late 1940s to the civil rights era and even today, most Southern editors have shared Moore's views.

In his monograph *Anti-Communism, Race, and Structuration: Newspaper Coverage of the Labor and Desegregation Movements in the South, 1932-40 and 1953-61*, Frank D. Durham of the University of Iowa showed how newspapers across Tennessee waged war with the Christian socialist, pro-labor "Highlander" movement from the 1930s through the 1950s with typical headlines such as this one in the Oct. 15, 1939, issue of *The Nashville Tennessean*: "School Spreads Communist Doctrines in State."³⁵

When the CIO tried to organize a local plant in Grenada, Miss., in 1946, the local newspaper joined a phalanx of opposition. "City officials, church leaders, professional men, bankers, and the press set up a citizens' committee which identified the CIO with communism, world government, poll tax repeal and brutality," writes former University of Mississippi historian James W. Silver in his acclaimed book, *Mississippi: The Closed Society*. The Grenada *Sentinal-Star* warned in one editorial that if "the majority (of workers) favor surrendering their rights to the CIO, it is believed by many that the Industry will cease operation." The campaign succeeded in killing the union.³⁶

Ever since the 1930s, Peter Applebome has written, "it wasn't just race that had Southern Democrats worried. Much of the New Deal's pro-labor policies worried them even more."³⁷ The Republican takeover of Congress in 1946, coming the same year as "Operation Dixie," set the stage for the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. This allowed conservative Southern Democrats to push through "right-to-work" laws across the region, effectively killing many union efforts. When South Carolina Gov. Strom Thurmond and other Southern political leaders staged their "Dixiecrat" revolt against the national Democratic Party in 1948, they declared war on the CIO in the same breath they pledged to fight racial integration.

Seven years later, a virtual "Who's Who" of Southern politics — including Thurmond, U.S. Sen. James O. Eastland

of Mississippi, U.S. Rep. Mendel Rivers of South Carolina, former Mississippi Gov. Fielding Wright, and U.S. Rep. F. Edward Hebert of Louisiana — met at the posh Peabody Hotel in Memphis as the newly formed Federation for Constitutional Government to develop what Eastland later described as a strategy to “fight the Supreme Court, fight the CIO, fight the NAACP, and fight all conscienceless pressure groups who are attempting our destruction.”³⁸

Unions and racial integration were inextricably linked in the minds of segregationist journalists as well as segregationist politicians in the South during the civil rights era. In a 1964 column, arch-conservative Tom Ethridge of the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* railed against “the leftist line of Walter Reuther, top labor fuehrer” and noted that “a major objective of the Reuther-dominated AFL-CIO is an intensive drive to register as many negroes as possible in Southern states.”³⁹

The traditionally more moderate *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* in Tupelo had this to say in an Oct. 5, 1965, editorial:

Our area can keep up this growth record if we continue to turn back the frantic efforts of unions to move in and take over our plants. But if we turn to unionism and the tension and friction and violence which so often accompanies it, our area can quickly find itself losing jobs instead of gaining them. For all around us is clear and visible evidence of how the union takeover of a town can halt its industrial growth in spite of what previously had looked like unlimited community growth.⁴⁰

More recently, in August 2002, the Tupelo newspaper's coverage of unionization efforts at the local Cooper Tire plant showed the same antipathy toward organized labor. The coverage featured minimal input from union sources but plenty of prominent comments from management. On August 19, 2002, the newspaper ran a full-page advertisement paid for by “Concerned Citizens of Northeast Mississippi” that urged workers in huge, boldfaced print to “VOTE NO TO UNION AT COOPER TIRE.” The ad painted a picture of “absentee union bosses” who “run organizing campaigns, to call strikes, to pay for political activities, to finance elaborate meetings in plush resorts” yet who “have no place,

no ability and serve no useful purpose in the day-to-day lives of employees.”⁴¹

Labor sympathizers in the Southern press

Some Southern journalists have resisted the rabid anti-unionism that has generally characterized newspapers in the region. Frank Durham notes in his study of coverage of the Highlander movement that some non-Tennessee reporters and columnists such as Allen Rankin of the *Montgomery (Ala.) Journal* were critical of the “witch hunt” that Sen. James O. Eastland conducted against the organization in congressional hearings in 1954.⁴² W.J. Cash says the *Raleigh News and Observer* and the *Greensboro Daily News* in North Carolina “took up the cause of the strikers” after violence broke out in Gastonia in 1929, although he adds they did it “cautiously.”⁴³

Two of the best known Southern journalists during the civil rights era, Pulitzer Prize winners Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution* and Hodding Carter of the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville, Miss., wrote sympathetically about courageous women in the labor movement. In his 1959 book, *The South and the Southerner*, McGill devoted a chapter to “Industry and Labor’s Search for a New South” and focused on the career of Virginia aristocrat Lucy Randolph Mason, who became a CIO organizer in the South in the late 1930s. “Many a Southern newspaper editor, author of fiery anti-CIO editorials, found himself tongue-tied and humble as Miss Lucy corrected his published errors and exposed with carefully researched facts his ignorance of his own town’s economics.”⁴⁴

In 1937, Carter, then the editor of the *Delta Star* in Greenville, editorialized against a mob of women in Tupelo who had run International Ladies Garment Workers Union organizer Ida Sledge (a Memphis aristocrat) out of town. “Running people out of town is not only illegal, but it is downright stupid and ineffectual,” Carter wrote. Yet Carter, who came to Greenville after many pitched battles with the populist Long machine in Louisiana, made it clear that he was not a friend of unions or of the CIO, whose efforts would only “redouble ... in Mississippi” as a result of the Tupelo mob.⁴⁵

None of these journalists, however, approach the work of *Southern Exposure* magazine, which was established in 1973

by the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham, N.C. Driven by a strong sense of social justice, this crusading publication has provided more in-depth, investigative coverage of workers and the labor movement in the South than any other publication in the history of the region. Its work continues today under editor Chris Kromm, who talked about the challenges of labor in the South at a recent conference titled "Labor and the Southern Press" organized by the author at the University of Mississippi Oct. 4-7, 2003. Over the history of the South, "the press saw itself as an ally of the business structure," Kromm said. Despite "the myth of the outside agitator, labor is as Southern as kudzu and barbecue."⁴⁶

The Southernization of the nation and the world

In *Dixie Rising*, Peter Applebome described at length the South's growing shadow over the nation as a whole, to the point that "to understand America, you have to understand the South."⁴⁷ As evident in the global strategies of Nissan, Toyota, Mercedes, BMW and other foreign-owned companies today, that shadow indeed extends beyond American shores.

This was seen coming as early as 1981, when corporate consultant Richard A. Beaumont wrote in his essay *Working in the South*:

Because the South represents the last area where you can escape the so-called insidious union movement, foreign employers have it clearly in mind that the South is the place to move to. ... It's incredible but it's true that I will sit in the office of a large chemical company somewhere in Germany and the guy will tell me with a straight face the trouble with American employers is that they are antiunion and that they don't understand their social responsibilities. Five minutes later he's saying, "Now, when I go to the South, how do I operate on a nonunion basis?"⁴⁸

The flight toward low-wage, compliant, unorganized workers is a global phenomenon. The South has seen this in the emigration of its textile industry and the immigration of foreign automakers. At the Oct. 4-7, 2003 conference on "Labor and the Southern Press" at the University of Mississippi, Japanese journalist Takehiko Nomura noted that thousands of Japanese companies have shipped their

factories to China in recent years. Meanwhile, the Japanese press continues its role as cheerleaders for corporate Japan and corporate leaders like Nissan's Carlos Ghosn. "He made it easier for companies to get rid of the security base (of employees), promotions, lifelong employment," Nomura said. Yet "the Japanese cannot get enough of him. He's a comic-book hero."⁴⁹

It's no small irony that the automobile industry is at the heart of the South's new evolving role in the global economy. The automobile is a symbol of modern manufacturing, the impetus for the development of the assembly line, mass production, mass consumption, and post-war prosperity. It represented mobility and freedom for farm-bound Southerners and non-Southerners alike, but it often brought a new kind of servitude for the workers who produced it. The South's love affair with the automobile is obvious at the Daytona 500 and at Talladega, in the drag strips that have dotted the landscape since World War II, in movies like *Thunder Road* and *Smokey and the Bandit*.

By the same token, no labor organization has been more important to the rise of the worker movement and recognition of worker rights in the United States than the United Auto Workers, or any individual more than its legendary leader Walter Reuther, a man vilified as a "labor fuehrer" in the Southern press but praised by writer Stanley Aronowitz as "the last great figure of social unionism in America," a man whose impassioned speeches on behalf of workers "sounded like poetry."⁵⁰ At the height of Reuther's career in the 1950s, his archenemy was none other than U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater, the Arizona Republican whose 1964 presidential bid would help galvanize the rise of Republicanism in the South. Goldwater said Reuther and the UAW "are a more dangerous menace than the Sputnik or anything Soviet Russia might do to America."⁵¹

Reuther, whose organization is today in an uphill struggle to gain a foothold in "Detroit South," was a lifelong champion of civil rights who stood with Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Reuther also marched with King in Selma, Ala., in 1965.

King himself was to recognize the importance of and need for a strong labor movement in the South. His last battle

was for striking sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968, a battle bitterly opposed by the Memphis press. King believed the struggle for workers' rights — both black and white — would be the next stage of the civil rights movement. “We are tired of working our hands off and laboring every day and not even making a wage adequate with the daily basic necessities of life,” King said.⁵²

Back in 1946, Sidney Hillman, the longtime leader of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, described the South as a “venture into unplowed fields.”⁵³ In October 2003, Robert Shaffer of the Mississippi AFL-CIO said this about Mississippi, but he could have easily said it about the South as a whole: “It’s a fight every day of your life in the movement in this state.”⁵⁴

What is a union other than workers asserting their right as human beings to join together in search of a fair wage, decent working conditions, equitable treatment? How is it that a region whose leaders and whose press have fought so long and hard against that right should now be a model for the nation and beyond? Robert Shaffer’s daily struggle has become the daily struggle of workers everywhere, and their fight is as much with the press as it is with their bosses.

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- 6 “It’s for real, Nissan tells Miss.; plant, prosperity will follow,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 10 November 2000, sec. A, p. 1.
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