

**“You get what they want to give you,  
and it ain’t a living. This association  
is the only chance we got,  
and it’s got to work!”**

# **Anger in the Southern Pines**

**The story of the**

**Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association**

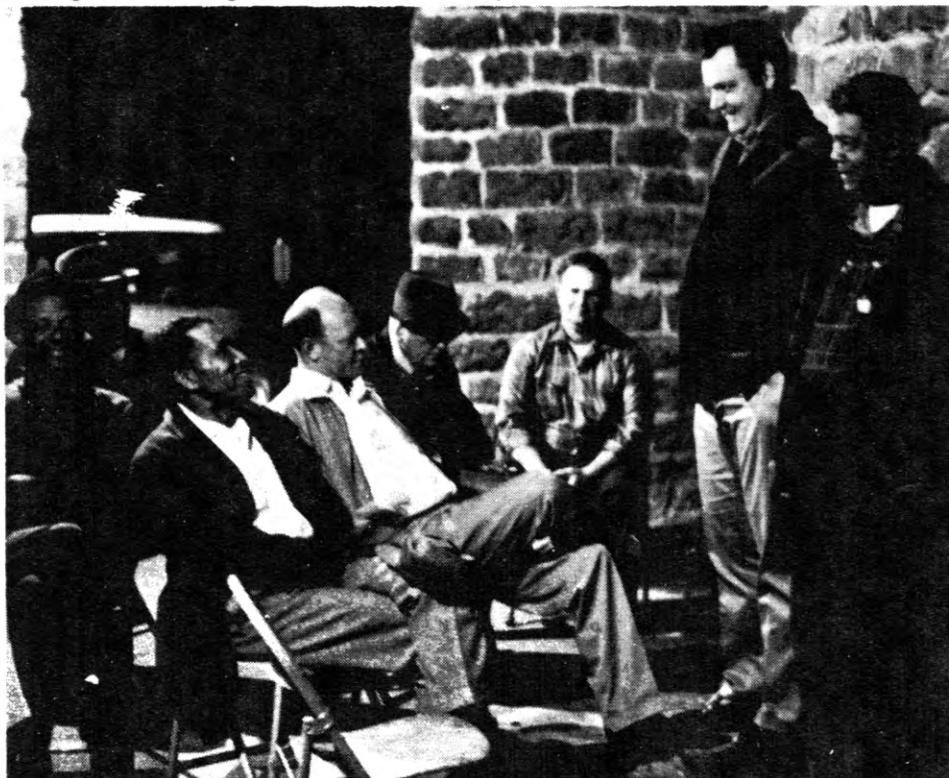
MOBILE, Ala.—Lights are burning extra late at meeting halls and state parks in out-of-the-way towns and rural outreaches in Mississippi and Alabama. Black and white victims of sharecropper-style corporate feudalism are joining in a new grass-roots movement.

In early 1968, pulpwood cutters and landowners in South Alabama organized the Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association to fight for economic survival in the South's mammoth paper industry. Since that time, the organization has built working relationships between black and white workers. They have remained strong through a general strike and three subsequent years of struggle.

Members of the association, mostly rural blacks and whites, have been lied to, threatened, and intimidated. The harassment is reminiscent of the early Sixties. It continues, but the movement has not been thwarted.

Instead the Association is growing—new chapters are springing up across Mississippi from the Delta, through Southeast Alabama's wiregrass country.

People are serious; they're angry, and their continuing struggle may rank among the most significant in the history of labor in the South.



## A Day in the Life . . . Cutting Wood in the Deep South

It was a cold and misty Alabama morning when Leroy Wilson climbed into his old Ford pickup. The sun, as usual, would not be up for another hour or so. He drove the six miles to his brother's small grocery store, where he was to meet two other woodcutters. He had come down with the flu two days before, but he couldn't afford to miss any time in the woods. Besides, today wouldn't be so bad—there was just some scrapping and hauling to do on a large tract of land leased by a paper company.

His son, who had been cutting wood since he was 15, and a man named Turner were waiting in the wood truck when Wilson got to the store. They each bought a ten- or 15-cent cake—staples in their diet—and headed for the woods.

The company's land was separated from the road by a three-foot ditch. Wilson, his son, and Turner had spent five hours earlier that month cutting, then lashing pine logs together to build a bridge across the ditch. They were not paid for constructing the bridge or for digging out a foundation to place it in.

The three men are defined by the government and by the paper companies as independent





businessmen; the 15 man-hours they spent putting the bridge together are defined as overhead absorbed in their exercise of free enterprise.

The bridge sagged and creaked as Wilson's son backed the huge wood truck across it. Most of the cutting had already been done, so Wilson chopped the branches off logs, while his son and Turner began loading the truck. Leroy said something about how little they would make that week. Turner replied with, "Yessir, I don't make much money, but I sure do have a lot of fun." Everyone laughed long and hard at the irony.

By 1 o'clock, the crew had finished loading and hauling the scrap wood. Although they had been in the woods seven hours, they were eager to cut more wood. But the company had refused to let them cut more until the mill agent inspected their scrapping work. So the job ended early that day and Leroy went home. He had worked seven hours in swampy South Alabama woods with the flu. He had made \$7.

Sitting on the front porch of his home, Leroy talked about the paper-wood business. There was a time, several years ago, when he had his own truck. He had a crew of three or four men, but he "didn't do much better" than he's doing now.

Having no established credit, he had accepted a dealer's offer to co-sign loans and finance equipment for him. He was to pay the dealer, who in turn paid the bank or finance company. When he cashed in his tickets at a dealer's office, there were deductions for equipment, gas, severance tax, and assorted other necessities which he had financed through the dealer.

By the time he received his check, he had enough to give every man on his crew between \$30 and \$50 for a week's work. (A week generally means 48-60 hours.) He seldom got that much himself.

He has never seen statements from banks or finance companies at which dealers co-signed loans for him. The dealers seemed to keep deducting. As he put it, "You'd have to be an expert bookkeeper to figure out how they charge you."

When Leroy realized that he'd never make a living by paying most of his earnings on an account every week, he decided to join his brother's crew. The one dealer to whom Leroy owed the greatest amount sued him. He had tried to persuade Leroy to sign his truck over to the company and keep cutting. But Wilson refused.

Other cutters around South Alabama told Leroy that this same dealer had told other dealers "not to accept any wood from Leroy Wilson." Finally, in an apparent last-ditch effort to keep Wilson on the company's debt book, in a final stab at his freedom, the dealer's attorney told him that he could probably "work off this account gradually provided you put on wood for him [the dealer]."

According to the corporations, Leroy Wilson is an independent businessman. His office is a pulpwood truck; his filing cabinet is his billfold stuffed with settlement sheets; his coffee breaks are irregular—they come when his truck breaks down or his chain saw jumps off its sprocket; his capital is his back; and his profits do not exist.

As he says: "You get what they want to give you, and it ain't a living. This association is the only chance we got, and it's got to work."

## “Worse than Sharecropping” . . . the Politics of Wood

It is no accident that Leroy Wilson and thousands like him are trapped in a cycle of sub-existence. When paper corporations began locating mills in the South decades ago, they set out to exploit the people and the resources to the fullest extent possible.

They have been granted tax exemptions, moratoriums on pollution legislation, and strong anti-union laws. They are still being dragged, kicking and screaming, into desegregation of jobs in their mills.

The dealership system for procuring wood ranks among the greatest of a long series of outrages. Paper mills designate certain independent businessmen, dealers, in “districts” across the South to buy their wood from. The dealer buys his wood (for resale to the mills) from woodcutters—who in turn buy it from landowners. The dealers also finance equipment and make loans to woodcutters. In actuality, the cutters are employees of the dealers, but they are defined as independent businessmen. This means they have no guaranteed wages, and no protection under labor law.

One particular cutter in Washington County, Ala., bought a truck from his dealer. Week after week, the dealer deducts enough from the cutter’s earnings to make it necessary for the



cutter to borrow money from him. He may spend the rest of his life on borrowed money.

Another cutter needed money to pay his wife's hospital bills. Having no credit, he asked a dealer to borrow the money from a local bank for him. He has been paying back the loan for years, and has not once seen a statement from the bank.

Time after time, woodcutters have worked all week and received nothing for their wood because the dealer deducted every cent for debts.

This constant reliance on the dealer is reminiscent of the sharecropper's dependence on "Mr. Charley." But as a cutter in Mississippi put it, "It's worse than sharecropping. A sharecropper could at least get a mess of greens or a piece of meat from his Man, but a woodcutter can't get nothing in a woodyard—not even a drink of water."

As long as there are people across the South who must depend on wood dealers for economic existence, there will be a pool of labor to harvest the pine forests of the South for the pulpwood companies. So the exploitation is not without purpose. It is designed to make huge profits for the people who control the pulpwood industry... at the expense of the lives of Southern working people across the Pine Belt.



## A History of Control

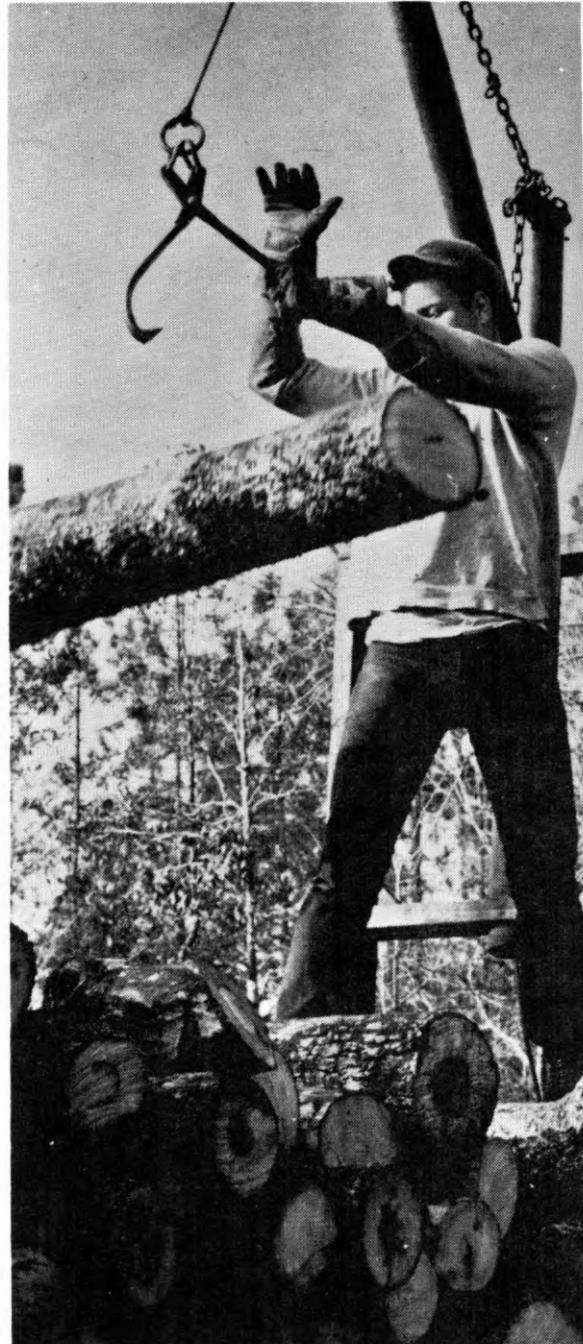
When the woodcutters began organizing, the paper magnates extended their economic control to include political and social control over them. In 1968, when the first work-stoppage meeting was held in an open field in Washington County, police, deputy sheriffs and game wardens ringed the field with their cars.

It was an old tactic, designed to scare the striking cutters into backing down—but it backfired completely. A worker from Mississippi described the results of the open intimidation that night:

“A lot of folks found themselves faced with a thing they thought only happened to somebody else. We came out there to fight for a decent living, and all those law-enforcement people just made us madder.”

It became obvious that intimidation would not stop the movement, so the dealers offered a \$1-per-cord pay raise. This effort to pacify the cutters was successful. Many of them went back to work under the same conditions and the work stoppage was ended.

Pacification had hurt the organizing and made 1969 a slow year for the association. But black and white



leaders in the movement were persistent and by the fall of 1970 new chapters began springing up. In the last nine months, association membership has climbed upwards of 6,000 in Mississippi, Alabama, and Northwest Florida. Black and white members of the GROW staff of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) have been travelling widely in these states, helping to build the membership.

It has been an uphill fight because of continuous repression and harassment.

James Simmons (president of the association) has been offered a job by an organization of wood dealers—they told him he could name his price. Paper companies have reportedly circulated pictures of Simmons among woodcutters, describing him as a communist, a troublemaker, and an out-and-out "bald-headed son-of-a-bitch."

Organizers have been followed and tires have been punctured.

All these specific kinds of harassment are just supplementary to the very basic and entrenched control that corporations have exercised and promoted among working people in the South. Since Reconstruction, the concept of organizing has been rejected, often violently, in the Deep South. The corporate bosses have consistently praised working people for being independent. The concept of self-interest still gives way to this entrenched independent attitude.

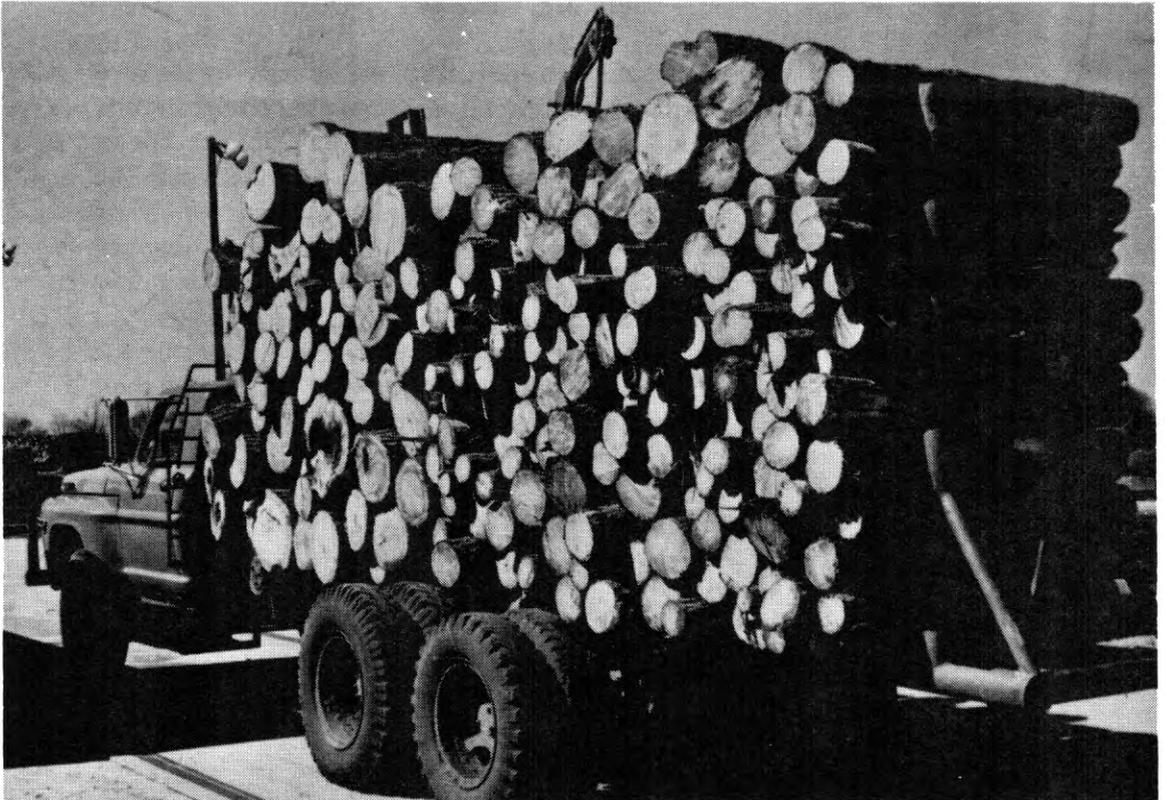
Recently, black and white woodcutters met together for the first time in the courthouse in Philadelphia, Miss.---Neshoba County. The fact that there could even *be* a meeting there seemed a miracle to many, considering the history of fierce opposition to organizing in that county.

The meeting did not go well at all; the bosses were ready. Organizers were told that there were officials from three paper companies in the meeting.

When it came time to collect dues for membership (\$10 a year), two or three of the 43 people there started an uproar. They claimed organizers just wanted "to have a good time" with their money. They didn't want anything to do with a union. They were unalterably opposed to strikes.

The oppression of decades had left its mark; the organizers left Neshoba County in a hurry that night.

Despite the petty harassments, the attempts at pacification, and the tremendous historical burden of the oppression of Southern workers, the struggle continues. Three young Southern attorneys are preparing for legal action against paper companies, while association members are discussing the possibility of a work stoppage some time in the near future.



With upwards of 6,000 members and 30 chapters, a board of representatives with delegates elected from every chapter has been set up. Meetings are scheduled regularly. The board is about half white and half black.

The president of the board of representatives is Simmons, a chicken-farmer-turned-pulpwood-cutter who has been working for four years to build the organization. According to him, the group's major objective is to become a single body representing woodcutters in the South strong enough to deal in a forceful manner with the rank injustices in the paper industry.

In his own words, "We don't want yes men in our association. We want people who'll stand up and fight for a decent living in this paperwood business."

The fight has just begun. The repression will come harder, but so will the resistance to it. There has not been this kind of independent movement among grass-roots black and white people in the South for four decades. The earlier movement either died or were killed.

Those organizing the woodcutter movement are determined that it will be different this time. They will learn from the mistakes of the past—and they will continue to build a movement that cannot be destroyed.

But they will need help---from all over the Deep South, and from all across the country.

*(Turn to back cover to read how you can help.)*

**GULFCOAST PULPWOOD ASSOCIATION**  
c/o James Simmons  
Forest Home, Alabama 36030

*Except for James Simmons, the names of woodcutters used in this pamphlet are not their real ones. This is because the cutters who work in the organizing movement are subjected to constant harassment and threats.-*

*(This pamphlet was produced and printed by the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), 3210 W. Broadway, Louisville, Ky. 40211, as a public service and as a contribution to the woodcutters' movement. It was written by Steve Martin of SCEF's Deep South GROW project. Photos are by Martin and Don Soto.)*

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labor donated

# We need your help. . .

More than a quarter-million people in the Deep South are directly dependent on woodcutting for their living. Thus, although we now have 6,000 members, our work has just begun. About 60 per cent of the cutters are black, 40 per cent white; the possible organized strength is great.

Before this battle is over, we will need support in many forms from people everywhere. Right now the great need is for money.

Up until now, we have financed this movement entirely on our own---from \$10-a-year dues, which our members pay although their income is very low. And we will continue to raise money among ourselves. But now more and more woodcutters over a wide area are asking for our help in organizing. Therefore we must expand more rapidly than our own resources permit. We need money to finance travel for organizers to reach new areas and build new chapters, money to conduct workshops where new leaders can be trained, money to help those who are doing the organizing to survive while they do this work. And money to meet the legal costs that will be involved in court action.

As this movement becomes better known, sources of funds will no doubt increase. Right now you who receive this pamphlet can help at a time when you are needed most. Please make checks payable to Gulfcoast Pulpwood Association, and send as large a contribution as you can.

## **GULF COAST PULPWOOD ASSOCIATION**

**c/o James Simmons**

**Forest Home, Alabama 36030**

Enclosed is my contribution of \_\_\_\_\_ to assist in the work of the woodcutters in the Deep South.

( ) Please keep me informed so I can help later in other ways.

( ) Please send me more copies of this pamphlet so I can distribute them.

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