

## Interview with Alzada Clark

### Organizing Black Women Workers

Between 1961 and 1965, the *Commercial Appeal* labeled Leroy and myself as Communists. Red Copeland said we would bear watching, but he never said anything of substance as to what we had done. The only thing we belonged to was the NAACP, the union, and my church! We had had a little strike at a broom or mop factory over on Third Street, and a lawyer for the company said we had Communist traits and branded us. The FBI started going through our files and tapping my phone, and all of those kind of nonsensical things. We had a nice headline in the press, and everyone called us to joke that we had made the paper again!

Later, when Leroy became president of the NAACP and I was working for the Tennessee State Labor Council, I found the letter from Red Copeland to [state labor council leader] Matt Lynch. The letter said we were "two smart cookies" and they should keep their eyes on us, because we were working for the communists. I found the letter in the waste basket in the office. I got laid off at the Tennessee State Labor Council because the whites complained so much about my being black. They just abolished my job, saying they didn't have enough money. So I went on staff with the furniture workers.

I came on board with the United Furniture Workers on February 27, 1967. There was a campaign on in Canton and Leland, Mississippi. They had lost the election prior to 1967 in Canton, north of Jackson. The union's district director, Auggie Barr, asked me to come down there because they had a lot of women to organize. He said, "Don't let those white folks scare you when you get down here!" When I got there, we talked about how to organize. Auggie said that the white guys were scared to breathe, their organizing wasn't very effective. I said I could win that election.

Leroy came down to help now and then. I had two security guards to go everywhere with me at night, because the Ku Klux Klan had made some threats. One black policeman told me that I was the top of the conversation every Monday morning, [and] they were afraid for me. Many police, even the police chief, were involved in the Klan, and sometimes they would follow me around in an unmarked car to intimidate me.

The Cullmer Company said they beat every union election in the state but one, until "that black woman came around." They had a lot of respect for me there in the union. They said they couldn't have organized the women without me.

Carl Scarborough and I and three others were organizing the Gilbert Manufacturing Company, called the DeSoto Company, which made furniture parts and employed over three hundred workers. We came in one morning to talk with the employer, Mr. Gill, and negotiate the contract. He said, "Good morning, Alzada!" His lawyers were filing in behind him. I said, "I beg your pardon! I didn't know that you and I were good enough friends to be talking on a first name basis. I reserve that right for my friends, and I don't think you and I are friends!" He said, "Well, how is Leroy—I mean, Mr. Clark?" I said, "Does that really concern

you?" and I walked around the table and sat down. He turned red as a beet. I told the blacks later that I considered us of equal status, and that he should treat us with respect.

I had the right written into the contract to allow me to go through the plant, and I did this so the workers knew they had power and representation. I wouldn't interrupt their work, but I'd talk to each of them, or whoever I needed to see. We got the contract, but Mr. Gill sold his interest out of DeSoto, and he bought another plant over across the field.

I had also organized No-Sag, a division of a spring [mattress] company out of New York. It had a plant in Canton and paid better than anybody in the area. But I managed to get three of their workers interested in starting a union while we were sharing a beer at a local tavern. (Leroy always taught me to go where the people are!)

So the people I met at the tavern got some other workers together, and we met using our car lights out by an old nightclub every week for a month. We didn't have any other place to meet. Leroy always taught me that eye contact was important, so I always sat in the center. They told me their problems, and I would write them down, and then I'd go visit each person who spoke later and get to know them so they'd trust me. We'd try to get people to sign cards for the union, and then we'd talk about better working conditions, facilities, and pay.

Then we'd work to get people to sign membership cards, but we had to talk with each person outside of company property. Some of them were afraid, but most of them came around. When they had 75 percent of the workers signed up, they petitioned for an election.

The thing that turned the election around for me at Gilbert was a black guy who had been working at the owner's house as a gardener, and he couldn't read or write. He said he didn't need a union. I spoke to him outside a window on the main street of Canton, [and] a superintendent was drinking up in the window, and he [the superintendent] said, "Those people don't know when they need help." The next Monday that black gardener came to me and apologized, and he signed up more people in that plant than I did!

Four white folks and a black man told me after we won that they were making more money than they'd ever made in their lives. One man said that his wife went to buy all of their children shoes, with leather soles, and now they could all go to school. We talked about how they could save a little money aside each week, maybe ten dollars or so, and find decent housing to rent, and take things slowly.

A third plant I organized, the Jackson shop, Milsap, was mostly men. They had a black guy who didn't like me. One night at a restaurant he took a lit cigarette right across my face, just missing my eyes. Another guy with me pulled out a razor, and I yelled at him to stop. He said to the guy with the cigarette, "I'll cut your throat if you don't stay away from her and leave her alone, or this town will eat you alive." I told him to put his razor in his pocket and leave it there!

In the meantime, I was also working on organizing a fourth company, the American Tent Company. They made cabinet parts, and had four hundred people. I started on the union, and they laid off two hundred workers. We won that election, but negotiated for almost a year to get a lousy nickel. The owner of that plant was Bob Yandell, I was told he was a member of the Klan by both whites and blacks. We

went into negotiations at American Tent with six women, but we lost two hundred workers. Finally, we called a strike. International supported me, and we settled that contract.

Then Milsap went out on strike. I was out on the picket line with them one day, when a big truck pulled in, knocked me over deliberately into the ditch, and I landed on a pile of red ants. I was bitten and burned by those ants, and my dress was torn. The constable was called, and he came and said I was interfering. I said I wasn't interfering with anything. He twisted my arm right out of the socket and carried me to jail. When we got there, I called the president of the union to call Leroy and tell him to come for me at the jailhouse. Then the jailer reached up to hit me, and I almost scratched him, but thought these two white men all alone with me would kill me, so I ducked instead.

The jailer handcuffed me and put me in the car, and I rolled down the window when we were coming through a little town. I yelled out, "Hey, they're taking me to the county jail! Call Memphis and call Leroy." He swore at me and rolled up the window, and pretty soon I rolled it down again and did the same thing. Then we got out of town, and I let it alone then, because there was no one around.

Just as we got to the county jail, Howard, the local president of the union, pulled up behind us and saved my hide. He said, "Miss Clark, we come to see about you." They locked me up, and Howard asked how much my bail was. They wouldn't tell him what the bail was. So he called Leroy in Memphis. When Leroy called, they said, "That n----- from Memphis called, and he sounds like he's white!" Leroy asked what the bail was, and they told him five hundred dollars. He said he was sending out a man with the money.

I slept on that iron for about five hours, and they hadn't done anything with my arms yet. When I got out, they took me to the doctor in Jackson, and when I told the doctor what had happened, he just jumped and said, "Well, I can't do anything about it, the police have to take you to the hospital." So I put it in a sling and slipped up to Memphis that night without anyone knowing, and the doctor there looked at it and gave me some pain medication. I saw Leroy there, he wanted to make sure I was all right. I slipped back by morning, and no one had missed me.

When they set my trial, the judge was the desk sergeant from the night I was arrested. We had everyone who looked like me [blacks] in town at the trial. They all took the day off from work, and they had Peace Street, the two side streets, and the street behind full of people, all pushing into the courthouse. There wasn't enough room in the courtroom, and they postponed my trial until January. When I came out in the courtyard, the crowd wanted to have a rally in the square. I got up on the steps and made a speech. Leroy said, "You turned Canton out today!" I was charged on five counts, including resisting arrest for saying ouch when he twisted my arm!

Leroy told the lawyer to get me off. I wanted to plead guilty and go to jail. Leroy was afraid I'd get sick staying in jail, he thought I was crazy.

Meanwhile, American Tent factory was still on strike. I kept them out on their strike, the international sent me fifty thousand dollars. Each week we got about eight or nine thousand dollars to pay rent, house notes [mortgage payments], food, and necessities for the workers on strike. Six women sat that

strike out with me whose husbands had other jobs. They never did get a nickel. The strike lasted a year, two months, and two days.

Then Gilbert sold out DeSoto to set up Gilbert and Rine, and I organized that. There was a woman who helped me in there. We boycotted a number of businesses as part of our strike strategies. Mr. Aikens, the white man who ran the motel, protected me more than once from angry people looking for me. One time I was being followed and I jumped out of the car and left it running, Mr. Aikens brought me the keys and checked on me all night long. The FBI came down once, and they followed me and asked questions about me. One night I passed by the FBI car, they got out, and I went around the corner and they missed me.

Al May [an international union organizer] and Leroy weren't served in a restaurant once, so they went to a black restaurant. I went to the restaurant where they were refused and asked to be served. After they served me, they splashed coffee all over me, and I walked out.

Whenever we went to [the union's] District 9 meetings. Canton always had the best reports. Leroy would straighten out the grammar, and May would type it. I sent pictures of the strikers to the international. When I closed that strike down, we had a union of about one thousand people in Canton. We had about fifteen thousand to sixteen thousand dollars in the local treasury.

The only shop still there is No-Sag, the rest of them went out of business. DeSoto, Gilbert and Rine, and American Tent went out of business. When President Reagan came in[to office in 1981], a lot of businesses went out.

We closed American Tent down ourselves. Everybody in Canton carried a pistol. One night they got tired of the white superintendent splashing water on them with his car. Four women got in the car with their husbands and took along a great big container of baking soda. They went to the white superintendent's plant where all of these beautiful Black Angus cows were. They dumped soda all over the grass for the cows to eat. When the cows ate that and drank some water, they fell over just like flies. It poisoned the cows. It wasn't until two years afterwards that I knew who did that. The black supervisor who kept working when the rest were on strike had his house riddled with bullets by some of the women workers. They never got caught. I didn't know that until a year later, either.

That plant soon sold out at a complete loss to some place in Virginia. We closed them down. When they pulled the last piece out, I called the strike off. This was the really long strike of over a year, at American Tent Company. Bob Yandell, who was the head of the [local] KKK, and someone else were the owners. They were making tents for Vietnam. After we closed it down, we got complimentary and thank you letters from many people who were against the war. The six women who went on strike with me at American Tent Company found out that every Wednesday, Bob Yandell's secretary Patsy would go to Jackson. They trailed her to the Jacksonian motel every week, and they found out that Bob Yandell was meeting her there. They spread the news all over Canton! I said, "Lord, y'all are too much for me!"

The chief of police was killed in Louisiana, and the police who arrested me were later imprisoned as thieves. They were sneaking into peoples' houses and stealing. These were our police! [Yet] the chief of

police always said that they couldn't control the "n-----" in town after I arrived from Memphis! The attitudes of people started changing after we organized. Dr. King came in there once, but only briefly.

I stayed there from 1967 to 1976. I worked in Mississippi and in Little Rock and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, during those years, I was the business agent and the international representative, and everything else. I organized Brown Company in Pine Bluff, and helped to get the black women involved in the union. I worked on Little Rock Furniture Company in Little Rock, too, and then Dillingham Manufacturing in Leland, and Guthrie Furniture Company in Guthrie, Oklahoma. We had all of them organized, but we couldn't do anything with the Memphis Furniture Company.

In Natchez, Mississippi, they had a bombing, and they killed a union organizer down there. People phoned me at the hotel, thinking it was me when they heard the news. But it was a man from the automobile workers who was killed.

The workers at that company showed me how to check to make sure my car not rigged with a bomb, because they were worried about me. If you put a match under the hood and one under the trunk, if that match has moved when you come back, don't touch the car.

Then they told me how to tell if someone was following me in my car. I'd put the brakes on in the middle of the street block, and if they stopped too, they were following me. I was followed lots of times! Once Mr. Dan Thomas, chief of police, and Mr. Aikens, both of the KKK, were following me at night. But I made it back to the hotel anyway. That was after I exposed Bob Yandell. He went out of business, and they gave me some terrible times.

Yes, they assassinated my character over and over again down there. One time a friend told me that the white cafes had placed a fifty dollar bet to poison me. So I went to a particular cafe where the owner was my friend, and I just ate there. I left Canton [for good] on February 27, 1976.

Leroy worked in Mississippi and anywhere else that he was needed. Leroy always said the union was his religion. Leroy felt that he was able to make a difference in labor, so it was very important to him to be working for the union. He wanted to live to see the difference that his work made, and he did. He eventually became the international vice president of the furniture workers union, which was unheard of for a black person. He wanted to come to Memphis to see what he could do to build the union up. He wanted to bring both whites and blacks together in order to build the union, and help eradicate racism.

He saw the labor movement and the union as a way to do that, the civil rights and labor movements were interwoven. The police would try to control the blacks and the labor people, black, white, Jewish, whatever. [But] he wasn't worried about coming to the South or going anywhere. The labor movement and the civil rights movement went hand in hand absolutely, they've always been partners. Both had the same goals.

Leroy died of cancer in the end. He was in remission after 1979, so we knew it was coming for a long time ahead. You were here in '83, he was doing well then. He started going downhill in 1987, he got cancer in his leg, and there was nothing they could do for him. He just took his pain medication and did the best he could.

He slipped away from me on a Tuesday night. He began to lose his voice, his vocal chords became paralyzed. I told them to do everything they could for him, to help him and make him comfortable, but to ask him about any big decisions. He told them to give him no life support, only pain medication to the end. We never discussed it, but we respected his decision.

That night he died, when I came in he said in what little voice he had left, "Hi baby, how are you doing?" He told me to go home and get some rest. I asked him how he was doing, and he said, "I'm still here!" Later as I went home to get some rest, I held his hand and told him I was leaving for a bit. I kissed him and said, "Don't you be running any races all over the floor here, stay here until I get back." He said, "I'll try." Those were the last words he said to me.

The next day, December 22, a few days before Christmas Eve, he died about 11 A.M. They said he just quit breathing when they were bathing him, he never made a sound.

The state passed legislation to leave a memorial to Leroy Clark on February 2, 1989. I have it here. I have letters and telegrams from the governor and people all around.

He said quite clearly a couple days before he died that he felt he had lived a good life. He said he did what he wanted to do, helping people to help themselves, and helping some people in spite of themselves. He said he was so proud of me and loved me. so much for coming into the union and working with him all of those years, and for understanding what it was all about. He said we made a contribution and a difference in how people could live. He said that people were his religion.

After he died, people said I didn't seem as sad as they thought I would, and I said that Leroy had told me not to let anyone see me cry. There were lots of nights in this house alone that I cried my heart out because I miss him so much, but no one else saw me crying. I done my best.