

# The Freedom Fight in the Black Belt South

An Interview with Dr. Howard Gunn  
of the United League

*In northern Mississippi, the capitalists' dream of peace and harmony was shattered this year when Blacks there began standing up for their rights. Using boycotts, picketing, demonstrations and armed self-defense, the United League of Mississippi put the country on notice, "We're not going to beg no more!"*

*Focused in Tupelo, the so-called All American Southern city, the mobilization of thousands of grassroots Blacks to fight for freedom has caught the eye of the country. Why? Because over the last decade, the TV, newspapers and magazines have been filled with the big lie of a "New South," where industrialization and Black political "participation" is supposed to have solved Black people's problems.*

*The explosions of struggle in places like Tupelo, Okolona and Lexington serve as examples of the revolutionary dynamism of the Afro-American people's condition. They are concrete expressions of the fight for self-determination. In the Black Belt South, their historic homeland, this condition is especially volatile because Afro-Americans exist as an oppressed nation and the remnants of the plantation system are particularly sharp there.*

*In just a matter of months the United League was able to muster support from far and wide. This culminated Nov. 25 in a "March for Freedom" of over 2,000 people in Tupelo. Progressive and freedom-loving people everywhere rallied to the UL's side because it is taking*



Some of 2,000 demonstrators who converged on Tupelo for Nov. 25 March for Freedom.

*up some of Black people's most basic problems in a militant way, contrary to the practice of the old-line civil rights organizations.*

*The reformists deny the truth that the Black liberation movement is in essence a revolutionary force aimed at the citadels of capitalism and the overthrow of those who rule this country.*

*The struggle in north Mississippi is a part of this revolutionary movement and should be supported. Although at present the struggle is still young, it has great potential for heightening the fight for liberation.*

*Many still have questions about the United League regarding its history, the current struggle, its program, organization, make-up, etc. For this reason, Class Struggle conducted an interview with Dr. Howard Gunn, head of the United League in Chicasaw County.*

*Just recently, Dr. Gunn and six companions were fired on by Klansmen while driving in his station wagon. His car was riddled with 16 bullet holes. Although no one was injured in his car, they returned the fire and injured two Klansmen.*

*This militant fighting spirit, which has won the United League the respect and support of thousands, is captured in Dr. Gunn's open and frank talk.*



**What kind of organization is the United League? What were the conditions and struggles that brought about its formation?**

The United League began in 1967 here, in northern Mississippi. Its founder was Skip Robinson and its cause grew out of the injustices and conflicts taking place in this area, especially in Marshall County. The Black community wanted an organization that would get involved in the struggle, since existing organizations, such as the NAACP, had not really gotten involved as the community wanted them to. They formed and called themselves the United League because they were people uniting from throughout Marshall County and other surrounding counties.

**What is the United League's program for the struggle today? What issues are you fighting around?**

We have a ten-point program that sums this up. First, we are working to provide land retention assistance to the poor and minorities. Most of our members live in rural areas and are being cheated out of their land, so this is a very important matter to them. Second is to improve the public school system. The form of integration they carried out here had a bad effect on Blacks, in that it did away with many Black administrators and teachers. Third, we fight for jobs, for employment opportunities for Black and poor people all over the U.S. Fourth, we want to improve local law enforcement. As Skip Robinson says, how can we tell people to respect the law when more than 60% of the policemen are in the Ku Klux Klan? Fifth, we conduct voter registration and education activities. Sixth, we assist in developing local leadership. Seventh, we carry out community educational activities. Eighth, we point out the need for health care, daycare and better housing for Black and poor people. Ninth, end racial and sexual discrimination throughout society. And tenth, we seek economic emancipation for Black people and all poor people.

**Exactly how is the United League organized? What kind of organization do you have at different levels?**

We have been growing very rapidly and many things are still being formed. We have a president, vice-president, treasurer, coordinator, and so forth, just like most other organizations. However, we are not legally chartered yet and are not necessarily interested in becoming so, since it can lead to too much control by white folks.

But right now, each county is like a chapter, with a central chapter in Holly Springs in Marshall County. Altogether, we have about 70,000 or 80,000 members. For instance, I am the chairman for the

chapter in Chicasaw county, then there is the vice-chairperson, treasurer, secretary and so forth.

You can join the United League by expressing an interest and paying a dollar, which is for a four-year membership, and you are expected to support the program. But if someone wants to join and doesn't have the money, then we don't really charge you.

**How broad is the base of support for the United League? What kind of people make it up?**

To tell you the truth, most of the people in these counties are with us. Maybe 80% to 85% or 90% of the Blacks are members of the United League.

We are comprised of people from all walks of life. We have medical doctors, PhDs, school teachers, lawyers, common people—all classes and in all financial categories. Still, we are mostly poor people and don't have much of a financial base.

We have people both in the cities and the rural areas. In fact, if you include these small towns, which I think are made up of basically rural people, then we have a higher percentage of members from the rural areas than from the cities.

People in rural Mississippi take to an organization like the United League better than people in the city. I think it's because people in the city are busier. Also, this is a farming section of the country and there are some Black landowners who are more independent than city dwellers, in that they are not so dependent on the factories for their jobs.

**The United League has been playing an important role in the revitalization of the Black liberation movement, especially since the ebb in the struggle since the rebellions of the 1960s. It has become widely known for building broad unity and taking a militant stand for armed self-defense. But what exactly have you done to grow in this way?**

Basically, the United League gets involved in the kind of things that the Black community *wants* to get involved in. That's most important. That certainly has been our selling point.

But another thing is that we have gotten involved *without fear*. You know that many activists, many leaders, have been killed in our struggle. Many others have been hurt or lost something in some way.

But the League has not let this hold us back, and this has helped us grow. There were times when the KKK was marching with machine guns and we marched right up in their faces and just kept going. We are not afraid to have a confrontation with the KKK should it come



to that.

We were not marching for trouble. We were marching because we were peaceful people. But at the same time, if the KKK gets in our way, we'll walk right over them. We aren't going to walk around them. The march in Tupelo over Labor Day proved the fact that we wouldn't try to walk around them—we were walking through them.

We adjust according to the situation. We will not be the aggressors. We will not impose upon anyone. But we damn sure won't stand for anyone to impose upon us. And I make it crystal clear—when I'm speaking to white folks, when I'm standing on the courthouse steps, or anywhere else—that we are not going to impose upon them. But I also say don't you take us marching peaceful to mean we are cowards, because we are not. And if you impose on us, we are going to retaliate with all force.

It's like when my car, my stationwagon, was fired into by the KKK. They fired upon us and we returned the fire. No one in my wagon was hit, but I understand one or two of them were shot up. So you see, we did not impose upon them, they imposed upon us. We were not the aggressors, we just retaliated.

#### **What victories have been won so far?**

We have had some court litigations and in several folks' cases, we have come out victorious. But I don't look for too many of our victories to be in court. I classify all these dadgum courts around here as being courts where it's already predetermined what's going to happen.

As for the day-to-day struggles, the marches have been just a matter of standing up against the oppressors. But even this is important and causes people to just really come to the League. Take Tupelo, for instance. It's been called the "All American City" that has never been involved, that was bypassed by the struggle of the 1960s. But I knew and others knew that Tupelo was not an ideal place. It's just that Blacks were afraid to do anything about it.

It's been this way for a long time. I remember back in 1936, when I was a young boy, the whites killed a young Black fellow. They didn't just kill him right off, they just buried him but left his head out of the ground. Just a few years ago, another young Black boy was shot down and nothing was done.

And last year a Black fellow on vacation in Lee County went into a store. His daughter went in with him. The store owner started cursing his daughter. He asked him not to, and the store owner shot at him. He ran out of the store and tried to get in his car. The white man was running out of the store still firing. He shot him down and killed him, and nothing was done about it.

But this is where the United League has stepped in. With marches, we break through this fear. We show that something will be done. And when we do this, we show that change does take place.

It's not just a matter of making demands and having them implemented. A lot of times when you submit demands to certain people, they don't just sit down and say, "Yes, we're going to deal with some demands, one, two, three." But you can still see some changes taking place. For the first time in the history of Tupelo, they have hired a Black man as a building inspector for the city. Now, we had asked that Black people be moved up from mediocre positions and put in positions of importance. But they didn't say, "OK, we're going to do this, to meet your demand by hiring this person here." But at the same time, they did hire him. And we know that this was a result, an accomplishment of the struggle of the United League.

Another example is with the school teachers. Tupelo is now drawing up an affirmative action plan which will move some Black teachers into administrative positions. A Black attorney was involved in drawing up the plan and I am reasonably sure it will be approved. We also submitted a number of demands to the mayor and school board of Okolona. At this point we have not gotten those demands satisfied. I feel, however, that they will be, and if they aren't, then we're prepared to hold out until they are.

#### **The United League has used the tactic of the boycott as well as mass marches. How effective has it been?**

We have a very effective boycott going on in Okolona, both in the schools and with the merchants. It has been 95% effective with the merchants. Some stores have already begun to go out of business.

The boycott also is working in the schools. The school system gets its money, you see, based on the ADA, the "average daily attendance." But now the schools are not functioning normally. Okolona's schools are 56% Black, and of these Black students, between 60% and 80% have observed the boycott. Now anytime you have that number out, you have some serious problems. It's not the kind of money you make back within a year. So the boycott is certainly having its effect, no question about it.

#### **What role have women played, both in the United League and in the struggle in general?**

The women have been right out there with the men. To tell the truth, there were times when I even spoke against it because I was trying to protect them. We just had a march where there was more tension than at any other time when I had marched. I said that maybe we should leave our women at home, and that we should not bring



our children. But some women said to me that if something was going to happen to the men, then it was going to happen to the women, too. And they went ahead. No question about it. They've been very active. They make up about 50% of the United League membership. Actually, whole families participate. Husband, wife, children and all. It's a beautiful sight.

**The Black church played an important and complicated role in the struggle in the 1960s. Is the same thing true here today?**

That's a pretty important point. Heretofore, it's been pretty hard for the churches to open their doors for us to go in. One of the churches that I know that's been involved throughout the struggle is the Red Bud Church in Beachum, Miss. It opened its doors for the people to come in and have any kind of meeting they saw fit. Within the last few months, all of the churches in the rural areas completely opened their doors. This has been one of the best things that has happened to us.

Now as I said before, things are a little different in the cities than in the country. In the 1960s, these people in the rural areas were the ones who gave support to organizations like SNCC and the NAACP, too, even though it wasn't as militant.

**What kind of network does the United League have for communication, for getting the word out about meetings and actions?**

You know what one fellow told me? He said we have the strongest network of any organization he knew. I guess what is meant by that is we get on the telephone and call one person and that person calls another one, and so on, and they say we have to have a meeting. And when the word goes out like that, so many people turn out you can't even drive near the church, or wherever the meeting is held. And it isn't even an assigned duty to call this one or that one. People just know who to call. It's something that still exists from the early days of the struggle.

It's also a matter of staying on top of the issues. We don't wait or drag our feet. If something happened in Okolona tonight and the word is given to me, even if I'm out of town, by the time I get there the meeting will already be in progress. So we have a very spiraling network of people. That's just the way we operate.

**Many leaders of the United League were also active in the 1960s upsurge. What are some of the lessons, positive and negative, that you have drawn from this period?**

One of the negative things was this: when we were able to integrate, sleep where we want to, able to go to the lunch counters and eat, able to sit on the buses where we want to sit—well, we thought that was salvation. We became complacent; we were satisfied with it. We didn't know there were so many other things that we didn't have, that we needed and that we must fight for.

So in looking back, we can see the gains of the 1960s as both negative and positive. The negative was that we became complacent. Yet it was positive that we were now able to do these things. Still, at the same time, we became so complacent that we almost forgot from whence we came. The fire had just about died out from the 1960s until Skip Robinson came through with the United League.

Of course, segregation is still here today, too. Whites are still playing games with Black folks. In utilities like electric and gas, I believe they're charging us more than whites. I know whites in the same kind of businesses as Blacks cannot pay the electric bills we get. And it's the same with the land taxes. I know the white people are not paying the kind of land taxes that I'm paying. They couldn't afford to. So the United League is going to pull a march on City Hall and ask that the books be opened. Then we'll see what the story is.

**What can we do to support the United League and its struggle?**

You can give us all the support that we need. One of the things you can do is give us some publicity, let the people know what is happening here and what we are doing about it. And when we have our marches, if you could be physically present, that would be helpful to us. There are probably other things that you can do that I wouldn't know about, but you might do those, too.