

# The Anti-nuclear Movement in Mississippi: interview with an activist

*Since late last year, Sojourner Truth Organization has been involved in the anti-nuclear movement. STO members helped initiate the Committee Against Nuclear Imperialism in Denver. Although there was some initial resistance to the perspective, our general membership meeting last May affirmed the need for increased involvement in anti-nuclear work, placing special emphasis on building the anti-imperialist potential of the movement.*

*It is clear that the accident at Three Mile Island drastically changed the anti-nuke movement. Many people for the first time got to see on evening television the way power company and government officials "balanced" their health and safety against the financial costs, and determined public policy accordingly. The revelations of the high levels of cancer in southern Utah, where nuclear weapons were tested in the early fifties, also educated the public about how the reality of the nuclear threat has been deliberately concealed and covered up.*

*The visible result, the sudden swelling of the ranks of the protest movement, has been dramatic. Nevertheless, with a few exceptions, the most visible sector of the anti-nuke movement has been disproportionately white and middle class in its composition. The most notable exception has been the involvement of Native Americans, some from the very beginning. Black and other third world involvement has been growing recently. A number of Black people joined and built the anti-nuclear protest in southwest Mississippi on June 2.*

*Urgent Tasks contacted Ken Lawrence, a white activist in Mis-*

*issippi who helped organize that demonstration, to learn some of the details.*

UT: How long has there been anti-nuclear activity in Mississippi?

KL: As far as I know, the first stirrings were in 1973, when a few members of the Sierra Club got together to oppose the plan of the Mississippi Power and Light Company to erect a nuclear power facility at Grand Gulf near Port Gibson, Mississippi. This band of people were almost entirely environmentalists, all white.

UT: What happened after that?

KL: Not much in a mass way until recently. For one thing, there wasn't a lot of public interest in the issue. But for another thing, those who were interested in it specifically and vigorously attacked any leftists or liberals who sought to get involved, while they were willing to tolerate the most traditional white conservatives in their ranks. They limited their approach to making formal, legal protests to the reactor license at the various regulatory hearings and, like everyone else who has pursued that approach, they lost, and just fell apart.

UT: Now things have changed?

KL: Yes. There's been a growing popular awareness and opposition to all aspects of nuclear energy in Mississippi over the past year or so. The issue comes up in a number of different ways.

In southern Mississippi, in the 1960's, a series of atomic bomb tests were set off underground in geological formations called salt

domes, and in the past couple of years, despite assurances by the government that everything's all right and nobody could possibly be harmed by the results of those tests, the water supplies in the area have been found to contain higher than normal levels of tritium — radioactive water. Some of the animals — toads and salamanders in ponds at the surface — have been found to have severe deformities. Now the salt domes in that part of the state have been chosen by the government as the likeliest place for the disposal of high-level radioactive waste, which has prompted the organization of a group in Hattiesburg called Mississippians Against Disposal (MAD), which has been quite vocally opposed to the use of the salt domes for the high-level waste.

In northern Mississippi, the Tennessee Valley Authority has a permit to build a nuclear reactor at Yellow Creek, near Iuka, and the Sierra Club of North Mississippi, at least the more militant members of it, joined the Catfish Alliance and organized in their part of the state to build the Catfish Alliance in opposition to the Yellow Creek reactor.

Another issue that's come up more recently, which is also focused on the nuclear issue, was the discovery that in northern Mississippi and Alabama more than one hundred thousand houses are built on foundation blocks made from slag furnished by the TVA which has turned out to be radioactive, and there's concern that people can be harmed by the radiation from their own houses.

Then of course there's the continuing interest in the Grand Gulf reactor near Port Gibson.

UT: So actually the organized opposition did begin to pick up before the Three Mile Island incident?

KL: Yes, it did, and the largest manifestation of the organization was the demonstration that was held on March 24 at the site of the Yellow Creek reactor, which some of us who went from Jackson thought was a bad demonstration.

UT: How do you mean it was bad?

KL: Well, it attracted two hundred people, which is quite a lot for Mississippi and Alabama, but it was a demonstration that was hidden from view. No one who wasn't a participant in the demonstration could have been aware that it was going on. It was convened at J. P. Coleman State Park, and then there was a march from Coleman Park to the Yellow Creek reactor site, a mile which is in a remote area. It was done on a day when no one was working. So aside from ourselves and our police spies and escorts, no one else was there to take note. Very few press representatives came, and there was very little reporting of it.

Another thing that some of us were distressed about was that there were only two Black participants, and other aspects of the way it was conducted and the thought behind it were quite disturbing. For example, before the march began, the leaders conducted workshops in non-violence, including role-playing, and in those workshops, we, the demonstrators, were pitted against the local populace, especially the workers, who were automatically presumed to be (a) unanimously in favor of the nuclear reactor, (b) potentially violent antagonists, and (c) irrational and unwilling to listen to what we had to say, so our role-playing consisted of how we, the outsiders, the few who understood the problem of nuclear energy, would deal with these local citizens and workers.



Part of the June 2 demonstration.

Another thing that indicated this same political frame of mind is that we were issued trash bags and asked to pick up all the garbage along the side of the road as we marched, which communicated to anyone who might have noticed that the local people were the ones who threw trash by the side of the road, and we — the far more aware and insightful people — were more saintly as well, since we were the ones who picked up their garbage. There was a positive side, though, to that demonstration, and it's important.

UT: What was that?

KL: After the demonstration was the first statewide organizational meeting of the anti-nuclear movement in the state. There were representatives from Jackson, from Hattiesburg, from several places in north and central Mississippi, including some scattered and rural places, who otherwise, but for the demonstration, might never have been attracted to such a meeting. At that meeting we were able to get most of the disparate groups and individuals to agree to affiliate with a statewide Catfish Alliance, and we discussed a lot of these problems that were bothering many of us.

For example, both Jan Hillegas and I, from Jackson, raised the issue of the lack of Black involvement, and a significant number of people there immediately agreed with us that it was important and

something we'd have to deal with, and there was very little overt disagreement with us on that, so at least in spirit, we prevailed, which was an important gain. We argued that the best possibility for getting that involvement would come if substantial numbers of white anti-nuke activists got involved in Black protests such as the United League activities in a number of places.

Then, after that, we had a discussion of where we, in Mississippi, would conduct our demonstrations in conjunction with the international days of protest on June 2nd, 3rd and 4th. Many of the people, probably most of them who were at the meeting, originally were opposed to having the action include a mass demonstration at the Grand Gulf reactor in Port Gibson, arguing that construction is too far along, the plant is almost finished, we won't be able to stop it, and besides, the people in the local community, which is for the county 74% Black, are apathetic — they don't care about the issue or else they actually want the plant because of the jobs and the revenue it will bring into Claiborne County.

We argued against that. We argued, first of all, that if they were correct, though we doubted they were, that that was an argument for a demonstration there, not against it, since it was even more necessary, then, to educate people about the issue and try to win them to our position. Another point, though, was that we felt, first of all, that there probably was opposi-

tion in the community, and nobody had really bothered to check enough to find it and help organize it.

The second thing we offered as a reason why it was a good target for a demonstration was that in April 1978 there was a tornado that hit the plant under construction and cracked a large hole at the top of the cooling tower, and that since that time the contractor building the cooling tower had stated that the damage made the cooling tower unsafe — that it would need to be torn down and built again from scratch — whereas the power company, eager not to spend any more money than necessary, and eager to get the thing finished as quickly as possible, argued that the tower was not unsafe, and has gone to court to force the contractor to patch up the damage and finish it as quickly as possible. So this would be a good way of showing, better than most places provide as examples, the callous disregard that the power company really has for public safety.

The third issue that we thought would be useful is that the former police chief of Jackson, Lavell Tullus, who was notorious for repressive techniques of police management — for example, his attack on the Republic of New Afrika, which has become an international issue — and also his general tolerance and encouragement of police brutality, is now chief of security for the Grand Gulf nuclear plant. We felt that would help us raise concretely the issue of the threat to civil liberties that is posed by the nuclear industry.

Eventually, the meeting agreed that we should demonstrate at both of the nuclear reactor sites in the state on June 2, and that's what was done. I might add that by the time we left the meeting, people were quite enthusiastic about the possibilities, even though they had started out with other thoughts.

UT: How did Blacks get involved in the demonstration?

KL: The process was actually long and slow, but step by step. We set up an organization in Jackson, affiliated with the Catfish Alliance, called Jacksonians United for Livable Energy Policies (JULEP), and three meetings in Jackson each time affirmed the need to have Blacks involved in the demonstration, in the planning for it, and in the organizing, but nobody really did anything to make it happen.

So finally Jan, not quite knowing what to expect, talked with a professor at Jackson State University who had expressed his reservations about nuclear power. He recommended that she contact Evan Doss, who is the highest Black elected official in Claiborne County — he's the county Tax Assessor-Collector — and ask him what his attitude was about the nuclear power plant there. Doss told her he was 100% opposed to the plant, and he later agreed to be the main speaker at the demonstration, which of course was quite a boost for all of us. Doss put us in touch with a local NAACP leader who helped get the word out.

Shortly after that we received in the mail a notice that the United



Evan Doss, Claiborne County tax assessor-collector, addressed the anti-nuclear rally at Port Gibson on June 2.

League had planned a demonstration for the same day in Lexington, Miss., a continuation of a protest that's been going on since last year. I called Arnett Lewis, the leader of the United League in Lexington, explained to him that we had called a demonstration for that date, that our date was chosen in order to coincide with an international day of protest on this issue, that therefore there was no way we could postpone our demonstration. He immediately agreed that this was an important issue, and he later let us know that he had postponed the United League demonstration a week so that it would not conflict with ours, and so that members of the United League who wanted to come to Port Gibson would be able to participate without abandoning their own protest in Holmes County.

We had a concert in Jackson — an anti-nuclear music festival — to raise money for and call attention to the demonstration. That music festival was held on May 17, and several members of the United League attended and supported it.

Shortly after that, we received an invitation from members of the NAACP in Port Gibson to speak on the issue of nuclear energy and specifically the way in which the Grand Gulf plant was a threat to the people of Port Gibson, Claiborne County, and the surrounding area. I spoke there, and the meeting unanimously endorsed the demonstration. Probably a third of the people at the meeting signed up to publicize the demonstration in the community with posters and leaflets. The main Black newspaper in the state, the *Jackson Advocate*, carried a front-page story about the talk I gave and the NAACP's endorsement of the demonstration, together with a picture of the cooling tower cracked by the tornado. As it turned out, everyone I saw at the NAACP meeting came to the demonstration.

UT: What was the demonstration like?

KL: At any given time, there were probably up to four hundred people present, but given the format where people came and went all day long a lot more people took part overall. My estimate is that about a hundred Blacks took part. The demonstration began at the courthouse in Port Gibson with alternating speakers and musical entertainment, including several anti-nuclear songs (two of them were written and sung by Jan Hillegas).

Evan Doss' speech was well received. He spoke mainly about the fears of the local community and his own fears about the threat to public health and safety, and the fact that there seemed to be no evacuation plan that anyone had been able to learn about in case of an emergency, and that the power company officials didn't seem to be too concerned about keeping everyone in the community informed about what was going on.

My speech was mainly on the political repression related to nuclear power and weapons and about Mississippi Power and Light's racist and reactionary political record.

A full range of topics and politics were covered by the various speakers: one was a local farmer who lives downwind from the reactor site and was concerned about the safety not only of his family but of his livestock and therefore of his livelihood. Some of the people were long-time Sierra Club environmentalists. Wayne James, one of the Republic of New Afrika Eleven incarcerated at Parchman State Penitentiary, sent an anti-nuclear statement which was read. A speaker from Hattiesburg focused on the dangers of waste disposal. And so forth. So every aspect of the issue was touched on in the course of the demonstration.

After the speeches and entertainment at the courthouse, we went by motorcade to the reactor site, and there in front of the damaged cooling tower, with all the newspaper representatives and television cameras, we released helium-filled

balloons with tags on them giving the date and place of release, indicating to anyone who finds one of them downwind that the path of the balloon would be the path of radiation in the event of an accident.

UT: Is it possible that this was a one-shot thing and there won't be much in the way of follow-up?

KL: I don't think so. The movement is growing internationally. In Mississippi there are two interesting things that happened right after the demonstration that I'm personally aware of: First is that the week after, the power company held its own meeting at the Port Gibson courthouse and tried to give its refutation of what we had argued during the demonstration. Several of us in different places — Jackson, Hattiesburg, Natchez, and other places where there were anti-nuclear activists — got calls from the people at Port Gibson asking us to show up at that meeting, which we did. The power company representative tried to put down the objections from the community people, arguing that he was a nuclear engineer and knew how safe it was and there was no basis to their fears, saying they were too ignorant and uneducated to be able to state with any knowledge what the problems were.

That didn't satisfy the people. We also argued with him — we who had come from other places — and eventually he tried to shut us up by indicating that we were "outside agitators," but we and the local people responded that we had been asked by citizens of Port Gibson to come and provide this information. After the meeting it was very clear when almost everyone in the room thanked us for coming (it was a long drive in the rain that night) and virtually no one paid any attention to the power company representatives when they left.

The second indication, I think, that this is a matter of growing concern is that the week after the

Port Gibson demonstration was the demonstration that the United League in Lexington had postponed. I was welcomed as an anti-nuclear activist, and was introduced as a speaker at the demonstration as a member of the Mississippi Catfish Alliance, so it was clear that this issue was one of concern to the United League members at their own protest around quite a separate issue.

The movement seems to be growing spontaneously. Our first JULEP meeting after the demonstration was three or four times bigger than any previous one, but continued to suffer from the weakness of being all white, and we're not quite certain about how that situation will be resolved. It's not necessarily a weakness if decisions and activities are determined in close consultation with Black groups like the United League and the Port Gibson NAACP who are concerned, but so far the procedures for doing this have remained informal and personal. Obviously that will have to change. As yet only a few of us in the anti-nuclear movement have participated in United League demonstrations. That will have to change, too, if the Black groups are to have any reason to respect and trust the anti-nuclear organizations.

