



Photo courtesy Atlanta Division, October League.

Nanny Washburn.

Interview with Nanny Washburn

One woman's 60-year fight

Following is an interview reprinted from *The Red Worker*, political newspaper of the Atlanta District October League (Marxist-Leninist), Box 50321, Atlanta, Ga. 30302.

Nannie Leah Washburn was born in 1900 to a white sharecropper family in Douglas County, Georgia. They began working in textile mills—moving from one mill to another—when she was very young. She started working in the mill at the age of nine.

When the depression hit in the 1930's, Washburn had been married and had five children. She met Angelo Herndon and Otto Hall, two organizers with the Communist party U.S.A., worked with them, became a Communist and joined the party. She was arrested many times for her determination to bring communism and the hope of a better life to working people. When the CP went bad in the 1940s and dropped contact with Washburn, she continued to participate in the class struggle on her own.

She campaigned and petitioned for the Rosenbergs, who were finally executed on framed-up espionage charges. She participated in the peace movement of the 1950s, the civil rights struggle of the 1960s—Selma March, Poor People's Campaign—and the anti-Vietnam war movement.

Today at 72 her courage and commitment are undimmed.

"I'd like to say that nothing on earth will ever change me, not even the electric chair, the Ku Klux Klan, for no human being can ever change me from my beliefs. I'll die before any capitalist or anybody can change it."

Hard work at early age

Mrs. Washburn, how did you start working in the mill so young?

Nannie Washburn: Sometimes my sisters and my brothers would oversleep, and I'd carry their lunch at seven years old. I learned to work at seven and asked the boss to give me a job, you know. He says, "Aw, honey, you too little." I says, "Well, I can tell you right now I can work. I could learn that thing quick." 'Cause you know that's all I ever used, was my hands, never used my brain. I was running winders then, I'd help my sister. I could catch on quick, but she'd be particular 'cause she was afraid I might get hurt. Well, I can run any machine in a cottonmill but I never did run the cards in the card room. I spin, I spool, I run twisters, I run winders, I run drawing. And in Porterdale, Georgia, I run combers and I've run quillers. And most everything but weave and in the card room.

How did you become a Communist?

A beautiful man, Otto Hall, came from New York City and Angelo Herndon, I believe that was 1930. Otto Hall was a Communist. He and Angelo Herndon came to organize the unemployed here.

My brother Wille he got hold somehow of *The Daily Worker*. A white man sold him a *Daily Worker* and they seen we was a radical family and that started Otto and Angelo Herndon coming to our home. We were burning coal in the fireplace and was lucky to have that and was eating slop out of these soup kitchens, you know, where

they has rotten produce. Otto Hall would come in the home and he'd sit by my mother's bed—she was 75 years old and sick—and taught us our ABCs. He taught us all about the capitalist system and exploitation. And from that you see I read Karl Marx and Lenin and Stalin. And I thought that was the greatest thing in my life.

And I had five children and wasn't in too good health at that time. My mother had to take us in, cause their daddy was one of these runabout playboys and he deserted. He couldn't stand the pressure. So I was there at her house, she give me a place to keep my children and helped tend to them. And Otto Hall kept coming and kept coming until he just made life worth living.

You know I was timid, like all women is, beat down, young women, just for their husbands to tell them what to do, and to go to bed with them and sleep with them and go in the kitchen and cook and have babies and wash. You know, I never had no freedom and I was beginning to have a little freedom and Otto Hall and the Communist party taught me how to get free, how for women to get free. He talked to all of us, not just me.

Arrested for organizing

What happened when you were arrested for being a Communist?

My sister and I was arrested for organizing textile workers out at Exposition Cotton Mill in Atlanta during the National Textile Strike in 1934.

They had a police there and crooked organizers in the AFL. They got together and put a charge against us of insurrection, trying to overthrow the government. We was in jail under the law that was passed to hold the slave to the master. They told us we would be electrocuted. That's what they told us. And that's what they told Angelo Herndon. And that's what they meant to do—electrocute us organizers in the Communist party. Where was any other organization? The Communist party was the only one that stood up.

While we were in jail, the matron whipped my sister because she wanted to tell the prostitutes and girls that this society has made. . . . I have nothing against a prostitute. I have it against this sick society that has caused them to be one.

The matron gathered the prostitutes to get them to whip my sister, to kill us. She told them prostitutes and alcoholics, "Listen, I want to tell you these low-down bitches, these goddamn low-down Communist bitches. You know when they sent that so-and-so to Reidsville, you know, that bitch that was caught in bed with a nigger." She wanted to raise their morale up to fight and kill us. She wanted them to murder us. I talked back to her. Annie Mae, my sister, was sitting there and that matron came over and slapped her with all her strength and beat her terrible.

Angelo Herndon's case was pending in the United States supreme court and when that insurrection law was declared unconstitutional, Angelo Herndon came free and so did we.

Do you think that women are oppressed in this society?

I do want to say that we got to organize for the women to have their freedom from the men looking at them as a piece of property and a playpretty. I don't believe in being under slavery. I believe there ought to be a society where women wouldn't have to be legal prostitutes. If she has a family and her husband disagrees, there ought to be a means, and socialism is all that will ever take care of that.

You see we have that guilty feeling, that it's not right to go with a man without going up and giving the capitalist class at the courthouse some money. Signing up a paper to be married and then money to be divorced. So, I had to pay the money, it came out of my sweat and blood. I had to raise the children. He was the boss. My mother she didn't take foolishness like I did all of her life but she did some too. What kind of society do you think this? It's rotten.

Listen, the white capitalist has done everything on this earth. He's taught us to kill, he's taught us to steal, he's taught us to rob, he's taught us to prostitute. He's a prostitute himself right up in that courthouse. I know them crooks. And the white man. And you know what I mean—the ruling class. He's been low-down all of these years. And lying.

When they come over here they commenced taking the land away from the Indians. They commenced murdering the Indians and they been murdering the Indians and they been murdering ever since.

Exploitation of women

How do you see the different ways that working class women are exploited?

So many different ways. A woman is looked upon as a housekeeper and to raise the children and she don't have no freedom to get out and carry on activities. I was fortunate enough to leave my children with my mother and I went out to organize the working class people. Women had no say-so hardly at all, I didn't, outside the kitchen.

Under capitalism, women are discriminated against and always have been. They didn't even get to vote until about 1920. On the job, it's terrible discrimination. A woman is paid less even when she does the same work as a man. I know I never made very much when I was working in a textile mill. The men, they didn't make much but they made a little more than the women. The majority of the men didn't fight to help better the women's conditions. The men and women was divided. If we are together we can stand but divided we'll all fall. The ruling class, the capitalist, is in for business. We got to be in for business too!

How do you think freedom is going to be won for women? How should women fight for change?

Organize all the women

Women are going to have to organize all the women, the intellectuals and the grass roots. There are a lot of people that's trying to do that now.

Women can do a great deal to make progress toward freedom but they'll never be free under capitalism. They'll never be free as long as they have to sell their labor power. The capitalists make a high profit off women 'cause they work them for cheaper. I know women aren't ignorant but they have been beat down and have had to work so hard around the house. Then they go on the job so overworked it's a wonder they could hardly live through it.

It's a hard struggle. This is a class struggle. It's going to be hard but we must have faith and confidence enough in ourselves and our working class sisters and brothers to not give up and to keep a moving along.

You think that the women's movement in this country is important?

I do but it's got to go farther. The women's movement has opened up a lot of people's eyes. We can better our conditions under capitalism and fight for our freedom, but none of the working class people are going to be free under capitalism.

Capitalism is built up on profits of all the big monopolies. It does not serve the people. The factory owners are out for a profit. If they can't make a profit on your labor power, they don't want you. All they want is hands, they don't want no brains in the factories. They don't want you to understand nothing but how to operate a spooler, a loom, or whatever machine you're running.

We're going to have to get the working class women in this liberation movement. They were carrying on a struggle for childcare and different things like that.

I'm not going to knock the intellectuals. They have to be taught too. All the working class people that's not already organized have to be taught too. It's a big job. We mustn't give up. It's a class struggle and the working class will have to read and learn from different experiences. To organize with the intellectuals and the grass roots.

How would life be for women under socialism?

Under socialism women don't have to be under bondage. She can go to work and put the children in the nursery or school. I've known for years how much better that would be. With the experience I had raising my family, I know it can be hard on your nerves raising a big family by yourself. My mother cared for my children and loved them same as she did her own. There was so many things they lost. If I had my freedom and could have devoted my time to them, their lives would have been better.